

Excerpt from Battle Report #17: Vienna 1683 – Last Ottoman Tide

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CAUSES OF STAGNATION & MILITARY TRANSFORMATION

Before looking into the changing Ottoman army we look at the factors that caused this transformation:

Political: The seeds of political weakness were sown during the rule of Ahmed I (1603-1617). The sultan was the centre of the Ottoman state – sultans oversaw governmental meetings, hired and fired officials, and personally led military campaigns. But the question of succession remained vague and often led to destructive internal wars. Seeking to solve this problem, Sultan Ahmed I instituted a new system for choosing sultans. Instead of a sultan's sons being governors within the empire until their father died, they would stay at the palace in Istanbul until their time came. In most cases, they actually were not even allowed to leave the palace. This essentially made them prisoners until they became sultans. The effects of his policy were disastrous. Instead of sultans coming to the throne with experience in governance and policy, they were usually ignorant of anything but the pleasures of palace life. The result was a series of weak and incompetent rulers under the influence of the Janissaries and the harem. The slide was partly arrested by the rise of the Grand Viziers as the power behind the throne, but still this divided the centralized authority of the Ottoman state. Only one sultan led his armies in person after Ahmed I's rule (Murad IV in 1638).

This political instability also led to increasing decentralization of power to the provincial officials – a trend the first Grand Viziers slowed but couldn't eradicate. Also, since experience and talent were no longer seen as necessary by the Ottoman sultan himself, those hoping to advance in civil service were not promoted based on skill. Instead, bribery and favoritism wreaked havoc on the Ottoman government.

Economic: Three main factors caused the economic crisis of the Ottomans – the loss of trade, inflation and population pressure. These would result in the collapse of the Timariot system. The primary sources of revenue for the Ottoman state were land revenue, taxation on trade and riches from conquest.

The Portuguese circumnavigation around Africa to India had opened a new spice route to Asia. Therefore, the Turks lost their monopoly on the spice trade going to Europe. By the late 16th century, the Dutch and British completely closed the old international trade routes through the Middle East. As a result, the prosperity of the Middle Eastern provinces declined.

The cause of inflation was the influx of silver from the New World to Europe and the Middle East. The Ottoman economy was based on silver. Coins were minted in silver, taxes collected in silver, and salaries to government officials paid in silver. The huge influx of silver coming from America drastically devalued the Ottoman currency according to the economic laws of supply and demand. The devaluation of silver devastated the Ottoman economy. In 1580, 1 gold coin could be bought for 60 silver ones. In 1640 it required 250!

A result of central unity, stability and prolonged peace during the 16th century led to a population boom. The eastern Mediterranean under Ottoman rule from 1530-1580 saw a 60% average increase in population. Inflation and rising prices hurt the common people badly. There was little scope to release the pressure with new conquests. The empire had reached its logistical limits and stabilized its frontiers by 1560s. So booty from war had also dried up. Loss of revenue from war and trade, made the central treasury heavily dependent on land revenue which was now under a triple vise grip of more people to support, corruption of decentralized provincial officials and rising prices due to inflation.

Internal trade also suffered due to shortsighted policy. The Ottoman sultans allowed European merchants of friendly nations trade privileges under a series of treaties called capitulations, starting with the French in 1535 by Suleiman I for example. Europe was in a state of transition to a capitalist proto industrial society, and flush with wealth from the new world. Functioning under strict price regulations, the Ottoman

guilds were unable to provide quality goods at prices low enough to compete with the cheap European manufactured goods that entered the empire without restriction because of the capitulations agreements. In consequence, traditional Ottoman industry fell into rapid decline though this process was still at a modest stage in 1683 and would reach its climax in the next two centuries as more capitulation treaties were signed.

Technological: While the technology of the printing press was known to the Ottomans since 1493, it would not be adopted until 1726. Meanwhile the European nations had spread their technological ideas amongst the populations via this medium. In the military field the Europeans since the start of the 17th century were re-employing Roman tactical systems and a lively debate went on about military doctrine and battle employment. The Ottoman military thinkers had no such scope even if an enlightened captain did make an effort, his ideas didn't generally spread beyond his immediate unit. And any reform efforts generally died out with him. Long-term structural changes needed exchange of ideas, which the printing press enabled. The Ottoman army operated largely on oral tradition and older military texts.

Another technological change brought on by warfare were massed gunpowder based armies. This led to a revival of infantry on the battlefield. Also to resist firepower, newer and stronger designs of fortresses came into being. The warfare of the day devolved from field battles to siege and countersieges with rare occasional field encounters. The siege warfare led to decline in importance of cavalry.

EFFECTS OF STAGNATION ON THE OTTOMAN MILITARY

Breakdown of the Timariot System: The most important consequence of these technological and financial changes was the slow collapse of the Timariot system. The number of recipients increased but with the empire's boundaries having stopped expanding, land was becoming limited. The government resorted to joint holdings which limited the financial independence of the individual Sipahis. Moreover, sons of holders hereditarily received a part of their father's holdings. The system began to crumble with concurrent massive inflation – with rising prices and smaller and smaller individual holdings the Timarli Sipahis could no longer financially support themselves out of their land grants. They overtaxed the peasantry leading to unrest and engaged in corruption. Moreover the central government itself suffering from a financial crisis due to above factors and long wars with Iran and Austria in the late 16th century, began to seize Timariot holdings after the death of owners and convert them into profitable tax farms.

Turkish cavalry that had been the backbone of the army in the mobile wars of conquest were less useful to the sultans who now needed professional garrisons to run the frontier forts. The Sipahis were also increasingly vulnerable to massed firearms of European infantry on the battlefield and useless in sieges. The Sipahis were also unwilling to take part in long campaigns away from home as they had to return to govern their provinces. The government expanded the numbers of gunpowder infantry at the expense of the Sipahi cavalry – infantry being much cheaper than horsemen. As a consequence we see whereas in 1574 the empire had 40,000 Timarli Sipahis and another 50,000 light cavalry retainers (Cebeli) and 15,000 Akincis. In 1670s we see number of Timarli Sipahis dwindle to 20,000 and the Cebelis to 30,000. Akincis had been disbanded.

Rise of the Janissaries: The Janissaries, as musket-bearing light infantry with long established regimental structures and built-in combat support arms, were an ideal corps for the new battle environment. The government understandably increased their personnel strength and tasked them with additional duties. More and more Janissaries were trained and sent to provinces for policing due to the increased unreliability and ineffectiveness of the Sipahis as well as to frontier regions because of the changing nature of wars from those of pitched battles to those of siege and countersiege operations. In 1685, there were 13,793 Janissaries. This figure would rise to 40,000 by 1683.

Concurrent with the expansion of the Janissary numbers came other changes. From the late 16th century the norm of not having children was removed and the children of Janissaries were permitted to enter the

corps. By 1620 it had become a hereditary system. Moreover taking advantage of weak sultans and collapse of Timariots, the Janissaries dominated political life in Istanbul and also rewarded themselves with several large estates.

The training standards had also begun fall off. The deviserme graduation system was stopped in 1648, which was a serious decline in discipline. The Janissaries were slowly transforming themselves into a line infantry force rather than an elite corps. Meanwhile the Kapikulu light cavalry suffered cutbacks, to accommodate financial pressures. The Kapikulu Sipahis however remained a disciplined heavy mounted elite.

Mass Recruitment of Mercenaries: One development of the financial crunch of the Ottoman government and need for mass gunpowder troops was large scale recruitment of mercenaries. Mercenaries had always been part of the Ottoman system, but their numbers exploded during the 1590s war with the Habsburgs. Mercenaries were cheap to recruit, paid occasionally and could be laid off once the campaign was over. They could be recruited quickly and needed no training. They served as excellent cannon fodder and were brave, as gallant service could be rewarded with a permanent posting in the army. On the bad side they were not as disciplined as regulars, had second-rate equipment and resorted to banditry roaming the countryside in between campaigns.

Provincial governors were encouraged by the central government to hire ever larger number of mercenary warbands (largely from peasant backgrounds from Syria, Anatolia, Balkans). By the early 17th century mercenaries called by various names – largely musket armed militia like *Levants* or *Sekebans* (not Janissary Sekebans) had replaced the earlier Azaps. By 1683 perhaps half of the provincial military forces comprised of mercenaries.

Thus Ottoman forces by first decade of the 17th century (end of long war with Austria 1593-1606) had undergone a drastic transformation from its classical structure, from a cavalry-dominated force of largely provincial horse archers and heavy cavalry supported by small elite band of Janissaries and large numbers of irregulars to a more infantry oriented force – a standing army supported by lower numbers of provincial cavalry, but large numbers of provincial mercenaries.

¹ Commentary & Citation: It was incredibly difficult to find a good tactical or hour-by-hour description of the 1683 Battle of Vienna on the internet. I am thankful to have found user Austerlitz' holistic and complete treatment of the campaign and battle on the Pakistan Defense Forums. The only movie, *Day of the Siege* (2012), whose video clips are popular on YouTube and in music videos, such as Sabaton's 2016 song "Winged Hussars," is a poorly-rated film that – while it does have some interesting social milieu elements and shows parts of the siege – focuses on the logistically impossible story of an Italian monk and entirely short-circuits any decent depiction of the battle.