

Revisiting Lepanto 1571: The “Other” Side of the Story

We are now going through “interesting times,” using the title of Eric Hobsbawm’s autobiographic book, times during which the discourse of “us versus them” is back in politics, supported by methods of disinformation or misinformation of the public. As we gathered here to speak about the construction of further peace, collaboration and cooperation in this beautiful geography, we are all too worried about the alarming voices of some politicians who speak to promote enmity. Once finger pointed as the sides of an eternal enmity, Greeks and Turks buried the hatchet and took effective steps to rebuild the friendship over many years. One can only hope that these two people will simply turn a deaf ear to the owners of those voices with the lessons drawn from their historical experiences of conflict. Another instance of conflict that awaits its regulars to draw some constructive lessons for a more peaceful region is Lepanto.

As an Ottomanist my research interest in Lepanto began when in 2004 I received an invitation to participate in a special conference that was organized at Alessandria (Italy) in honor of Pope Pious V’s election to the Papal throne. The conference entitled “Pio V nella societa e nella politica del suo tempo” was intended to cover a number of themes about the life and career of Pope Pius V, born Antonio Ghisleri, a native of the city of Bosco Marengo in the province of Alessandria in Piémont. One of the central themes of the meeting was predictably the Battle of Lepanto and the role played by His Holiness. Being the architect behind the organization of the coalition of powers to form the Holy League navy against the Ottomans, Pius V placed his mark in European history as the savior of Europe from the ‘Turkish peril’. Thus the defeat of the Ottoman navy at Lepanto on October 7, 1571 not only elevated the image of Pious V into

a hero across Europe but also helped the Papacy recover some of its eroded reputation at the time and gain some leverage vis-à-vis the rising reform movement across the continent. In the meantime, Lepanto became a hallmark event and the object of many statues, paintings and literary writings across the continent, involving artists and writers such as Andrea Vicentino, Paolo Veronese, Tiziano Vecellio (Titian) and Cervantes, among others. This is a story all too well-known. In this highly localized and overtly specialized gathering to which I had been invited my task had been prescribed so as to talk about the Ottoman side of the story and discuss the consequences of the defeat in a way to highlight indirectly the role of Pius V in halting the Turkish expansion and present the audience with the facts and figures of the event that might have contradicted or complemented from the opposite side the existing narrative of the European story of victory and success. Where was I to start from or how to start with?

As a historian trained in social and economic history of early modern period with little interest in the historical role of great men and the story of battles and treaties, I had by then barely had any interest in Lepanto and all I knew—which was admittedly superficial—was limited to an article penned by an American historian of early modern Ottoman history, namely, Andrew Hess and a certain section of the famous French historian Fernand Braudel's opus magnum on the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II.

In his article "The Battle of Lepanto and its Place in Mediterranean History" published in *Past and Present* in 1972, Hess sought to go beyond the existing clichés about the infamous battle—established and generated by a Western scholarship dictated by a proto-Huntingtonian conception of civilizations—and

set out to focus on the Ottoman side of the story which, in his view, has been characterized “until recently by the absence of information”. He listed those clichés which included, among others, that Lepanto “settled the old struggle that had broken out between Muslims and Christians after the fall of the Roman Empire”; it “began an epoch in which the Mediterranean no longer occupied a central position in the events that would mould Europe's future”; it caused the Turks enter “a long period of decline that appeared to break the close linkage between the rhythm of his affairs and those of western Europe.” And that it led European society to shift “the center of her creative activity north and east, relegating the Christian states of the Mediterranean to the periphery of a new European and global order”. Focusing his attention on the political developments in the Mediterranean and especially on the North African coast, Hess, centering his argument around the conquest of La Goletta near Tunis, which he considered “an ambitious undertaking,” wanted to make an argument that the Ottomans were hardly affected by the defeat at Lepanto and that they not only recovered very quickly but also restored their authority in the Mediterranean as it became evident with the conquest of Tunis and the other political and diplomatic developments at the time, including the treaties signed with the Venetians and the Spaniards shortly after the Battle. More strikingly Hess went on to argue that the defeat also had no effect on the Ottoman's perception of the West, situating himself in a way against the hypothesis that Fernand Braudel had put forward in his already classical work on the Mediterranean which preceded Hess’ article by several decades and in which he adopted a broader vision of the battle along his perspective of *longue durée* with due attention paid to the Ottoman side.

There, Braudel had produced a detailed account of this naval battle as an example of *histoire événementielle* where he formulated his thoughts closely

associated with some of the clichés that Hess would later identify and set out to revise. In his section on Lepanto, which constitutes probably one of the most boring parts of his opus magnum, where facts and figures of the battle prevail over analysis, Braudel delved into the diplomatic and military developments of the time and produced a picture associated with imperial history; the interactions of two civilizations, so to speak. Making a retrospective reading of the event and assessing its impact in long durée, he drew attention to the inhibiting effect of Lepanto on Ottoman expansion and alluded to its result in terms of ending Christian feelings of inferiority in their relations with the Turks. Here inferiority implied technological and strategical capacity than anything else which made Braudel to make a case, following the footsteps of military historians, who led the crowd of scholars writing about Lepanto until then, as to how this naval defeat came to contribute to the beginning of the age of Ottoman naval decline. There is no need to get into the details of this discussion here; but what was more important in his coverage of Lepanto was his final statement where he said “his ideas are waiting to be tested by historians of future.”

Much water has flown under the bridge, but historians of future, at least those who had direct access to Ottoman documents, have not thus far exposed the ideas of Braudel to any significant testing whatsoever. Hess remained an exception but his agenda was well beyond Lepanto; he used Lepanto only as a means to a different intellectual goal, that is, to move the attention away from the Balkans to the Mediterranean, especially to the shores of North Africa which was the subject of his dissertation at the time when he published that article. Hess’ dissertation called *The Forgotten Frontier: A History of the Sixteenth Century Ibero-African Frontier*, was a rebuttal of Braudel’s theses on the Mediterranean. He challenged Braudel on the ground that the battle and

the ensuing developments up to the consolidation of Ottoman power along the north African coast marked out the long frontier between the two civilizations; in his view, this frontier divided the Mediterranean not only between Islamic and Christian states, but also between the revolutionizing economic societies of western Europe and the successful but socially conservative Turco-Islamic world.

[Please accept my apologies for devoting so much space to the Braudel-Hess controversy but I still find it fascinating as it remains to be one of the rare debates in the Mediterranean historiography with significant ramifications for Ottoman historiography.]

My early ever-growing interest in Lepanto was dictated then as much by my observation on the poverty of scholarship on the subject as with my fascination with this debate. When I look back I seem to have taken side with Hess. But in the course of time my interest in Lepanto was subsided by my other interests such as the Greek-Turkish Exchange of Populations and Ottoman economic history. In the meantime, as I could not help following the emerging literature in multiple languages and collecting archival material on the event I found it disappointing to see that the scholarship operated through old assumptions and arguments that I thought, had long phased out. This is ever more pronounced in general histories of the battle. [Those histories offer nothing useful for the purpose of this conference] As I read narrative histories of Roger Crowley such "Empires of the Sea; the Siege of Malta, the Battle of Lepanto and the Contest for the Center of the World"; Christopher Check's "Lepanto: The Battle that Saved the West", Hugh Bicceno's "Crescent and Cross: The Battle of Lepanto," I was on the one hand disappointed with the clichés but also sensed the inclination on the part of all these authors to try to see the causes and

consequences of the event through the eyes of the Ottomans as on the other. But the main tendency remained, which was basically to reduce it down to the Muslim-Christian confrontation and frame it as a Christian victory over the Muslims.

I will walk little more around the topic of Lepanto so as to make my point in direct relevance to the special theme of this conference. From the Ottoman side of scholarly research on Lepanto, the controversy between Hess and Braudel was as scientific as it could get in terms of both documentation and analysis. A perusal of the Turkish scholarship on the subject presents a tragic and dramatic picture. As much as the traditional European historiography has seen the whole event through the prism of this binary perspective as the clash of religions and the triumph of Christianity over Islam, the Turkish scholarship, traditional and modern alike, from the academic publications to textbooks, has adopted more or less the same perspective, using the same conflictual framework, with the generous use of terms such as crusade, revenge, etc. Most of what has been written was all too dry and mostly factually without any base. It was in fact no more than the reproduction of a narrative crafted by Ottoman chroniclers as early the late sixteenth century with obviously no notion of scientific research and writing. As there was such a visible continuity between the Ottoman historical writings and modern Turkish history writing, I devoted a great portion of my research on Lepanto to the identification of pattern or patterns to its representation in narration over time. Ultimately I was also going to make a general case that the main narrative of Ottoman history has in fact been written by Ottoman chroniclers and then adopted by modern Turkish historians without much change. Despite the easy access of Turkish scholars to the Ottoman archives, to this date there is still no comprehensive scholarly study of the Battle of Lepanto based on the Ottoman

archival documents and sources. When one looks at what has been said on Lepanto, the general tendency in this scholarship is to push it behind the other developments as it would cast a doubt on the rhetoric of golden age. It would be not wrong to argue that the whole literature is characterized by an inclination to demean or de-signify the event. More specifically, apart from the general inclination to see the defeat as a result of Chief Admiral Muezzinzade Ali's decision to conduct the war with the land army and thus committing a technical mistake, this literature had no interest in contextualizing the defeat and even asking the question why it was carried out with the land army. The emphasis was placed time and again on the upcoming developments (e.g. recent successes like the conquest of Cyprus) with a view to highlighting the resilience of the Ottoman state; arguing vehemently how it managed to reconstruct its fleet in such a short time and set out to complete the conquest of Tunis. And where the causes of the defeat are concerned as far the Ottoman and Turkish writers are concerned, the whole story revolves around the wrongs of Admiral Muezzinzade. This is important for the simple reason that it points to a general characteristic of the whole literature on Lepanto regardless of which side it is about, be it the side of the victors or the vanquished. It boils down to the rights and wrongs of certain names. On the Ottoman side, it revolves around Muezzinzade and his likes; Uluç Ali, Sokullu Mehmed and Selim II, and Don Juan and Andre Doria, Marcantonio, and Pius V on the side of the Holy League. And there you also have the names of Philip II, King James of Scotland and then Cervantes. It was important not to forget that Cervantes' left hand was rendered useless due to the wounds in the Battle; and King James composed a series of Latin epigrams in its honor. It was also imperative to remark that Philip II ordered a hymn to be sung to celebrate the Christian victory over the Turks and Papal and venetian authorities ordered frescos

painted in their halls of power. It was especially important for the narrators of the Ottoman side of the story to mention that the Ottoman Sultan Selim II and his Grand Vizier Sokullu ordered the speedy reconstruction of the fleet to resume their ambitions plans and projects of expansion on the sea as on the land. Some also did not hesitate to place the mythical words into the mouth of Sokullu “The Ottoman beard had grown again at lightning speed, but was stronger.” So the names of admirals, emperors, sultans, viziers, and celebrities commonly decorate the story of Lepanto on both sides and what is missing in this picture is the presence of the ordinary people, which I call “the other side of the story”, as imperial histories as well as national histories have literally denied them a place in this story, an agency, so to speak; these are the ordinary people; people who fought, people whose taxes paid for the battle, and people who bore the brunt of the financial burdens once the war was over. In his famous poem “Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters“ [Questions from a Worker who reads] Bertold Brecht wrote the line “Philipp von Spanien weinte, als seine Flotte, Untergegangen war. Weinte sonst niemand? [Philip of Spain wept when his armada Went down. Was he the only one to weep?], pointing to the absence of people in the picture. I ask more or less the same question: Where are the people in the story of Lepanto?

A thorough perusal of Lepanto literature in multiple languages reveals that there is in fact no human face or content to the battle. One is tempted to analyze the very few paintings there is on the battle and see how those people fighting on the decks of ships were portrayed; if they have any real human appearance. When one looks at the narrative or narratives of Lepanto, it would not be an overstatement to say that there is no human face to the battle. People get represented in numbers for sure. Sources speak of 25000 Ottoman soldiers getting killed, 5000 of them being captured, and 7500 soldiers of the

Holy League vanishing into the waters of the Mediterranean. So the people enter the narrative of the war in immense numbers only when they are dead. But then one really wonders who these dead were and what happened to those 5000 captives. According to the terms of the agreement between the Ottomans and Venetians in 1573 those prisoners were to be returned. But what did they do in these two years and how many of them were eventually returned and what these people took back with them are questions one could only ask. Obviously all these questions sound a bit naïve to pose; but as I was working on the first paper on Lepanto on the Ottoman side of the story; one of the questions came to my mind was who these soldiers and oarsmen were on both sides. After all there was a number of 30000 dead and captive on one side and 7500 dead on the other. As I sought to answer the question on the Ottoman side I was also problematizing one of the clichés in Turkish historiography which revolved around the assumption that the Ottoman authorities failed to recruit sufficient number of levends (seamen) and oarsmen. Accordingly, they had to rely on the land army and many slaves in order to substitute those they failed to recruit. In fact, eventually, a great majority of the people they succeeded in bringing together either lost their lives or fell captive. But the key question was how come the Ottomans failed to recruit sufficient levends and oarsmen to man their fleet? After all this was the mightiest state which, until then, had hardly any problem about manning or provisioning its armies on the land or on the seas. The answer was not so difficult to figure out, albeit with no solid documentation.

The coastal towns and villages along the Anatolian and Greek terrains had been subjected to various fiscal adjustments during the sixteenth century; the recruitment of oarsmen had been an *avariz* obligation, an emergency tax, for many settlements especially along the Greek coast. It is not an easy task to trail

how the state administered the execution of these obligations but it was clear that it had come to a point where this system of recruitment was no longer sustainable. In fact, very sources that exist for the period around Lepanto tell us that the state growingly failed to draw man power from these locations. It is a puzzle how the Ottoman navy was sufficiently manned to capture Cyprus. As I continued to contextualize Lepanto, the picture becomes more dramatic for the months and years following Lepanto as it was not only the populations of coastal settlements but also the subjects of the Sultan across the empire had also begun to feel acutely the burdens of the Ottoman war machine. The ability of the Ottoman state to recuperate the lost fleet by the construction of more ships in such a short time and even set out to conduct further expeditions in the Mediterranean let alone organizing the land army for further land campaigns in the east and the west galvanized the fiscal burdens on the shoulders of the ordinary Ottomans. The late Halil Inalcik stated in one of his early writings that “the extraordinary taxes levied to finance the fleet caused widespread discontent and unrest; and after Lepanto the provincial military forces did everything in their power to participating in naval campaigns. The empire had in fact exceeded its material capabilities”. Those of you who are familiar with early modern Ottoman history know that this is exactly the time when the peasants, especially those in Anatolia, got involved in a massive revolt against the state.

So those people, the ordinary people of the invincible Ottoman war machine become visible only when one scratches the surface to find them. And I think this is really important and it has direct relevance to the theme of this special gathering we have here. Yes, the Battle was important for the future of Mediterranean, Europe, the globe and for each and every political entity that was involved. It was important for Christianity, for Islam, and yes it was

important for the future of shipping technologies, for science and technology and what have you. But as long as the narrative of Lepanto continues to revolve around those broad categories, there is no way that it will be possible to strip it of its conflictual binary content and frame it as an historical occurrence with some constructive lessons for the people of the Mediterranean, and for the people of the world for that matter. Using Howard Zinn's title, it would be a great accomplishment to write a people's history of Lepanto, a history where people could find themselves there; a history in which people would get to realize that there were in fact so many Italian masters employed in Ottoman imperial dockyard and that there were so many Christians manning the Ottoman ships, and the Ottoman Muslim merchants continued to operate their businesses in Venice as the Venetian merchants did the same. if we are to use history for a laudable goal, it has to be the history of the people, a history to which people can relate themselves; make them remember their past; and see what role they played in there; where their fates seemed collided on the battle ground but converged in reality with those of the others, something that those imperial histories which are geared to cater to the demands of the nation state tend to overlook. Now there is a growing scholarship with interest in the life histories of the people of the early Modern Mediterranean who were denied representation in the traditional imperial histories; Nathalie Rothman for example explores the intersecting worlds of those who regularly traversed the early modern Venetian-Ottoman frontier, including colonial migrants, redeemed slaves, merchants, commercial brokers, religious converts, and diplomatic interpreters. She explores how in their sustained interactions across linguistic, religious, and political lines these trans-imperial subjects helped to shape shifting imperial and cultural boundaries, including the emerging distinction between Europe and the Levant. Eric Dursteler did the same for the

Venetians in Istanbul and more recently Stephen Ortega turned the attention to the Ottoman side and focused on Ottoman Muslims who came to Venice and its outlying territories. He shows in his book how Christian and Muslim exchange in the pre-modern period involved integrated cultural, economic, political and social practices. With the increased volume of this scholarship it is clear that the Mediterranean people will have their own history crossing imperial, national, religious, cultural and all the other boundaries. Within the framework of this history one could only hope that Lepanto will also have a human face to it; or its real human content will finally surface. I guess it is only then we will read and interpret Cervantes' statement on the event differently. We will perhaps realize then, when the poor man said "the greatest event witnessed by ages past, present and to come" he might have written it out of frustration just to express his agony as he lost the use of his left hand. Perhaps only then, with that kind of perspective we will move on to attribute less significance to the "brilliant" thoughts of the Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire who called Lepanto "an empty achievement," pointing to the abortive nature of coalition between the states involved. In his view, should they have not dissolved the coalition shortly after Lepanto, they would have ripped the benefits of the victory more effectively and driven out the Ottomans from the Mediterranean once and for all. This is the violence-promoting language that we need to rid our histories of, if we want to have further cooperation and collaboration, and definitely lasting peace in the region. Ironically, this is the exact language that recently begin to surface in the speeches of politicians in one corner of the Mediterranean, albeit for different historical events.