

# The Outline of the Turkish–Hungarian War between 1520 and 1526

FERENC SEBŐK



After the death of King Mathias (1458–1490) the Turkish–Hungarian frontier remained generally peaceful. But the word “peaceful” should not be taken literally. This only meant that large-scale military operations led by the sultan himself did not take place. János Hunyadi dealt an annihilating defeat to the Turkish army, which had been engaged in the siege of Belgrade in 1456, and since then the Turks had been reluctant to launch large-scale military operations against the Hungarian Kingdom. King Mathias had kept the situation along the border firmly in his hands, and Turkish raids aimed at the realm or her frontiers were heavily defeated at the hands of the king’s captains. During the reign of king Wladyslaw II (1490–1516) nothing seemed to have changed, Turkish raids were answered by similar Hungarian incursions into the territory of the Turkish Empire. In fact, the situation was steadily worsening for the Hungarians, the upkeep of the border fortresses and the salary of soldiers took up two-thirds of the king’s revenue.<sup>1</sup>

Following the death of Wladyslaw II, his son, the young king Louis II (1516–1526) sought to keep up the peace with the Turks. On 1 April 1519, the last Hungarian–Turkish cease-fire agreement was signed for the duration of three years with sultan Selim, who was engaged with the pacification of his empire after his large-scale conquests in the East.

The situation changed fundamentally in September 1520, when sultan Selim I died, and was succeeded by his son, Suleyman I (the Magnificent). According to Turkish tradition the peace treaty made by the former ruler became invalid, so

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<sup>1</sup> The period is dealt in detail in: F. Szakály, “A török–magyar küzdelem szakaszai a mohácsi csata előtt (1365–1526),” [Phases of Turco–Hungarian Warfare before the Battle of Mohács (1365–1526)] in *Mohács. Tanulmányok*. ed. L. Rúzsás and F. Szakály, Budapest 1986, 11–57, and also see the literature there.

one of the first things the new sultan did was to send his envoy, Chiaus Behram to Hungary to renew the treaty. At least that is what the sultan said later. In the light of subsequent developments we can safely state that the real aim of the envoy was on the one hand to find out how deep-rooted was the Hungarians' determination to withstand the Turks, on the other hand to lull the Hungarians into a false sense of security. The pretext for the declaration of war was the fact, that the Hungarian king did not give a definite answer to the peace offer of Chiaus Behram, but held him in a sort of respectable captivity in Buda, which was not at all an unusual practice in contemporary diplomacy. However, Suleyman considered this a *casus belli*, and in the spring of 1521, 65 years after the debacle of Belgrade, a Turkish army led by the sultan was heading towards Hungary.

The events of the 1521 campaign are well known: Belgrade, Šabac and Zimony (by now a part of Belgrade) fell, and with this the Hungarian defence system practically collapsed. King Louis II summarised the situation in one of his letters in these words: "Our realm is now open to the Turks on rivers and on dry land, and will not be peaceful and pleasant until Belgrade and Šabac are in the hands of the enemy."<sup>2</sup> In connection with this I still have to make the surprising contention, that from the Hungarian viewpoint the 1521 campaign should be considered as a partial success. My argument is based on the following. The objective of a war is the conquest of territories. To achieve this goal one must occupy certain fortresses of strategic importance, but occupation is not the goal, only a means to conquer the whole, or a large part of, the country. Consequently, the aim of the defensive party is to seek to prevent all this, in other words, to keep the fortresses of strategic importance to achieve the ultimate aim, the protection of territorial integrity.

If we apply this train of thought to the 1521 campaign, we find that the Hungarian military command managed to reach the ultimate goal, they succeeded in protecting the territorial integrity of the realm (with the exception of Szerémség, Sremska in present day Yugoslavia), but the fortresses of strategic importance fell victim to the war. Of course, this line of thought is only valid if I can prove that the Turks did not only want to occupy a few strongpoints, but wanted to break through deep into Hungary. That is, they did not only want a tactical, but meant to achieve a strategic breakthrough.

In relation to this Turkish sources are extant, according to which the definition of Turkish military objectives took place in a military conference held in Sofia. During the conference the sultan stated that he wanted to march towards Buda itself and intended to break Hungary with a single decisive blow. However, the older and more experienced pashas, especially Grand Vizier Piri drew Suleyman's attention to the fact, that it would be risky to lead the whole army against Buda without taking the border fortresses, primarily Belgrade.<sup>3</sup> The most vulnerable point of contemporary armies was the question of supply. If there were

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<sup>2</sup> *Acta Tomiciana*. Vol. VII, Posnan 1857, 306–307.

<sup>3</sup> J. Thury, *Török történetírók*. [Turkish Scriptoris] Vol. II, Budapest 1896, 6–9, 42–46, 119–145.

strongpoints in Hungarian hands along the supply lines of the Turkish army, these garrisons would make it impossible to supply the army with ammunition, food and fodder, which could have led to catastrophic defeat. Accordingly, the pashas advised the sultan to take the border fortresses first, and then, to march on towards the heart of the country.

The sultan chose a combination of the two plans, and divided the troops into two army groups: Grand Vizier Piri surrounded Belgrade in the first days of July and started the siege, while the other army group launched the siege of Šabac, with the aim of taking it quickly, which would be followed by throwing a bridge over the river Sava, and intrusion into Hungary proper. The Turks managed to achieve only 50 percent of their plan. Although they took Šabac with a single attack, and built the bridge over the river, Belgrade remained firmly Hungarian during the course of July. To make matters worse, the swollen river Sava swept away the bridge, causing supply problems for the troops, who had already broken into Sremska. The Turkish command received bad news from the reconnaissance units too: in the heart of the country at several points troops were massed with the aim of relieving Belgrade from the siege.

The troops of Palatine István Báthory consisting of border defence units and battalions from southern Hungary were deployed between the rivers Danube and Tisza. János Szapolyai, voivode of Transylvania, who had originally prepared for the defence of Transylvania proper, now having discovered the real Turkish intentions, lined up his forces along the river Tisza. The king left Buda in the middle of July, but marched slowly to make it possible for more soldiers to join his army. There were two factors, which made the centralisation of all forces nearly impossible. One of them was the huge extent of the territory to be defended. When the Turks began their march, it was not clear, whether they would go for the west through the valley of the river Sava, or towards the heart of Hungary, or towards Transylvania. It meant that troops should be held in reserve for the defence of all these territories. By the time it became clear where the Turks would strike, it was too late to concentrate the forces garrisoned along the long border.

The other factor was the question of supply. Food and fodder were quite expensive before harvest. Most of the Hungarian army consisted of cavalry; horses needed an enormous amount of fodder, which was partly transported by the army itself, partly obtained in the vicinity of the theatre of war. Before harvest prices were higher, then they were considerably lower. Therefore a large part of the Hungarian army could only be mobilised in full force now and also in 1526 at the turn of July and August.

The Turkish command being aware of these facts, decided to take Zimony after destroying smaller castles in Sremska, and then to concentrate their forces and to take Belgrade, which would be the prime achievement of the 1521 campaign. This decision was not made because they were afraid of the Hungarian army, which was anyway quite small (although it would be a mistake to underestimate its deterrent value), but because the river Sava had swept away the military

bridge, and because Belgrade was withstanding the siege even at the beginning of August.

At this point, with all the Turkish forces concentrated around Belgrade, a systematic siege began, which consisted of round the clock bombardment of the battlements, attempts at scaling and sapping the walls. The defenders repelled all the attempts at scaling, repaired the destroyed bastions and towers, but their situation grew steadily worse and worse, first they had to give up the city, then the Turks managed to undermine and blow up the strongest bastion, so they had to withdraw to a tower. As their number fell to under seventy, and they were all wounded, and the food and water supply and the ammunition ran out, on 29 August they gave up the fortress when free withdrawal was granted. Now the once proud stronghold of great fame resembled a heap of rubble and debris.

The defenders cannot be blamed for the loss of the fortress; they did everything they could to preserve it. But a successful defence cannot be guaranteed without a relieving force, in the absence of which static defence can fulfil its task for only a limited period of time. Why did the Hungarian army not relieve Belgrade? I have already referred to the problems of concentration of forces. At the moment Belgrade fell the Hungarian forces having grown to several ten thousands were in camp at Mohács, which is about 130 miles from Belgrade. To cover this distance by forced marches an army would need at least 10 days, but in this case soldiers and horses would be exhausted. If they did not cover the distance at forced marches, 20 days would be needed. So the relieving army was simply unable to reach Belgrade in time to prevent its fall! According to some views the Hungarian command was reluctant to engage the Turks in pitched battle. This could really have been the case, but the underlying principle was not necessarily cowardice, but realistic calculation. Contemporary strategy was based on the tradition of Vegetius (*De Re Militari*), according to whom one must avoid pitched battles because of their uncertain outcome. It would have been mere irresponsibility to expose the only existing army of the country to almost certain defeat.

In this situation the Hungarian command made the only possible decision: to wait until the main Turkish forces withdrew and then to attempt to recapture Belgrade. Accordingly, the army stayed in camp at Mohács and waited for the withdrawal of the Turks, which took place in the middle of September, as they did not intend to be caught up in further military operations in Hungary in this part of the year. Suleyman had Belgrade rebuilt, left a garrison of 3,000 there and began his long march home. Now the time was ripe to launch a campaign with the limited objective of retaking Belgrade. However, an epidemic broke out in the Hungarian camp, against which the only solution was to disband the army as soon as possible, but before that everybody made a vow to return the following year to attempt the recapture of Belgrade.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> These events are discussed in detail in F. Szakály, "Nándorfehérvár, 1521: a vég kezdete," [Belgrade, 1521: The Beginning of the End] in F. Zay, *Az Lándorfejeirvár elveszésének oka e vót és így esött*. Budapest 1980, 85–153.

In 1522 the Turks were engaged in the siege of Rhodos, which could have offered a good opportunity to try and achieve this plan. However, the country was paralysed by lack of financial resources. After the loss of Belgrade the king convened the diet, which seemed to have realised how dangerous the situation was and an unprecedented high tax was offered, but people were reluctant to pay it the following year. To make matters worse, the king, in order to meet his short-term financial needs, resorted to debasing of the currency, which totally ruined the country's economy. The king spent a greater part of 1522 in Bohemia to stabilise his power there and to convince the estates to support his efforts against the Turks.

Along the border open warfare began, fortunately the main Turkish forces were occupied elsewhere, so the Hungarians had to face only local Turkish units. Both sides managed to achieve successes in this struggle. In 1522 János Szapolyai, voivode of Transylvania broke into Wallachia, expelled the pro-Turkish voivode, and helped to crown a pro-Hungarian voivode. The most spectacular Hungarian victory was accomplished in 1523, as a result of the appointment of Pál Tomori as archbishop of Kalocsa. Tomori had been an excellent soldier before he entered the Order of Saint Francis. Now he became responsible for the organisation of the defence of Lower-Hungary. Shortly after his accession to his see, in two battles in Sremska he defeated the army of Pasha Ferhat, who had been looting and pillaging the country there.<sup>5</sup>

Next year, however, the Turks gained an important victory by capturing the fortress of Szörény (now Turnu-Severin in Romania), the last Hungarian-held strongpoint on the Lower-Danube. With this, the first line of defence totally collapsed, the only exception being Jajca (Jajce) in Bosnia, which held out until 1527. The lack of financial resources made it impossible to launch the offensive aimed at recapturing Belgrade, still, efforts were made to strengthen the line of defence. As a result of Tomori's resolution Titel, Szalánkemén and Pétervárad (now all in Yugoslavia) were strengthened to withstand gunfire. The latter could be counted as the main stronghold after the fall of Belgrade.

In 1525 Jajca, which had been under nearly continuous siege, was on the verge of collapse. It was only at the last moment, when Kristóf Frangepán, a former condottiere in Italy managed to relieve it and supply into it with great difficulty. This feat of arms was the last success of the Hungarians before the battle of Mohács.

At the beginning of 1526 reliable information arrived in Buda about the sultan's determination to launch a decisive campaign against Hungary. Pál Bakics Serbian voivode, who had participated in the sultan's military conference, in which they discussed the ways and means to launch a campaign against Hungary, fled to the Hungarian court. He informed the king about what was to be expected. Louis II established contact with all the rulers of Europe in order to

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<sup>5</sup> A. Kubinyi, "A szávaszentdemeter-nagyolaszi győzelem 1523-ban (Adatok Mohács előzményeihez)," [The Victory Of Szávaszentdemeter-Nagyolaszi in 1523 (Data on the Precedents of Mohács)] *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* (1978), 194-222.

obtain substantial help against the infidel.<sup>6</sup> Because of the Habsburg–Valois antagonism, which divided contemporary Europe no substantial aid could be given to Louis II. The king could rely only on Hungary's military force, but the mobilisation and concentration was hindered by the same factors as in 1521: the prelates and noblemen had to wait until the end of the harvest to deploy their units, and those units, which had been garrisoned along the border, were scattered and difficult to concentrate, as the Turks were careful enough to keep their military objectives in secret. Hungarian military command was hesitant, e. g. János Szapolyai, voivode of Transylvania at first got an order to break into Wallachia and catch the Turks off balance, and then he received another, which instructed him to join the king's forces in Hungary. By the time he managed to find out that the latter order was correct and he managed to mobilise the Transylvanian troops (which faced the same problems as the ones in the rest of Hungary), it was too late. By that time the Turks were closer to the point of concentration than Szapolyai's forces.

The sultan began crossing the River Sava at the beginning of July; then he marched towards Buda, following the line of the River Danube. He took all the castles in his way. The small fortifications did their best to slow down the enemy, but after a few days of resistance they had to be abandoned. Pétervárad (today part of Novi Sad, Yugoslavia) put up the strongest resistance, which lasted for two weeks. Pál Tomori, with his troops numbering about 4,000, had to watch passively the fall of Pétervárad from the other side of the River Danube, as they were too few to hinder it in any way.

Meanwhile the main Hungarian forces were gathering in Tolna, then they marched to Bába, and finally to Mohács. A few days before a military conference was held, where they decided to engage the enemy in pitched battle, even in spite of the great numerical superiority of the Turks. Together with those reinforcements, which arrived on the last day, there were about 24–25,000 troops with the king. Cautious estimates put the number of the Turkish army at 54–55,000, Pál Tomori estimated the combatant forces at 75,000. Contemporaries and military historians of later centuries agree that the Turkish army was followed by a huge number of secondary, auxiliary troops, whom Tomori called "a miserable rabble".

If we take only the main forces into consideration, there was a two- or three-fold numerical superiority. In such a situation the defensive party might have a fair chance of success. But due to its composition, the Hungarian army, consisting mainly of cavalry, was not apt for defence. In these circumstances there was only a very small chance of victory. The only factor the Hungarian army could rely on was the element of surprise.

Because of the relative scarcity of sources we do not know much about the actual battle. In a study I made a new attempt at reconstructing the engagement

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<sup>6</sup> See, e. g. F. Sebők, "Angol-magyar kapcsolatok a mohácsi vész időszakában," [English-Hungarian Relations at the Time of the Battle of Mohács] *Acta Historica. Különszám* (1991), 33–39.

by putting together the pieces of information we possess.<sup>7</sup> What we know for sure is that the battle began with the attack of the Hungarian cavalry, which took the Turks by surprise, because they had thought that the engagement would take place the following day and had set about making camp. But by the time Tomori could deploy the second battle formation, the Turks had already managed to overpower the Hungarians and make them flee from the battlefield leaving about 15,000 casualties behind. Subsequently the sultan could march on and take Buda without any serious resistance, then he crossed the Great Hungarian Plain between the rivers Danube and Tisza, and in October he left a devastated country behind. The withdrawing Turks were harassed by Szapolyai's Transylvanian troops, but they were unable to cause serious loss to the enemy.

Summing up this phase of Turco-Hungarian warfare we can come to the conclusion that now the characteristics of the struggle have changed substantially. During the time of king Mathias seemingly equal forces faced each other, and the Hungarians were able to keep the Turks at bay. Now the overpowering military potential of the Turkish Empire began to make itself felt. Suleyman's father, Selim nearly doubled his realm, and he left a legacy to his son: to expand towards the west. Suleyman appeared in the European theatre of war and diplomacy as an opponent of the Habsburg dynasty (which meant that he was practically an ally of the Valois), and his main military objective was the capture of Vienna. In order to achieve this goal Hungary's resistance had to be destroyed first. By 1526 Suleyman succeeded in breaking down Hungary, and he was confident, that the next step would be the siege and capture of Vienna. So the first great phase of Turco-Hungarian warfare ended in an unprecedented Turkish victory, and several more decades were to pass, before it became clear that the Turkish Empire was unable to wipe out Hungary. The Turkish occupation, though it lasted for a long time, also marked the beginning of the long decay of the empire of the sultans.

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<sup>7</sup> F. Sebők, "Újabb szempontok a mohácsi csata megítéléséhez," [The Battle of Mohács from a new perspective] in *"Magyaroknak eleiről". Ünnepi tanulmányok a hatvan esztendő Makk Ferenc tiszteletére.* ed. F. Piti, Szeged 2000, 457–471.