

INTRODUCTION

A year ago, while delving among some of the dustiest bookshelves of the Foreign Office library, I happened on a row of ancient books on Turkey bound for the most part in decrepit leather bindings with a faded, but illustrious, coat-of-arms stamped on their covers. They proved on closer inspection to belong to a collection bequeathed some time in the last century by a noble diplomat who, when attached to the Constantinople embassy, had made a hobby of collecting books on Turkish travel of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Having been myself a sojourner and traveller in Turkey, my curiosity was roused by these time-worn records from an earlier age and I dipped into them with an idle interest, to find myself rapidly engrossed in a quite fascinating study.

The authors were a cosmopolitan and heterogeneous lot, including among others such diverse characters as a Flemish diplomat, a French artist, a Polish soldier, a Venetian dragoman and an English man of science. Their stories of how they travelled, painted, plotted or fought according to their several capacities are full of colour and romance and worthy products of the age of adventure in which the actors lived. The old-fashioned letterpress and quaint woodcuts which adorn their pages opened the door, moreover, into what was to me—as I venture to think it will be to most of my readers—an almost unexplored subject, the “Golden Age” of Turkey. No writer has given us a Rise and Fall of the *Ottoman* Empire, or painted the life of Constantinople in the

great days of the Turk as Gibbon painted it under the Byzantine emperors. Modern histories of Turkey rarely descend to picturesque detail and even the homely, discursive works of old Richard Knollys and Sir Paul Rycout penetrate but seldom beyond the regions of affairs of state. These old travel-books, on the other hand, raise the curtain on the Turkish life of their day in all its intimate aspects. The stage is crowded with picturesque figures—the proud and petulant Janissary, the naked, screaming dervish, the “three-tail” Pasha with his train of “catamites” and extravagant suite, the wild, undisciplined Tartar, the Grand Vizir risen from a swineherd to the highest post in the Empire and the “Grand Turke” himself challenging Christendom, with a sublime contempt for all brother kings and emperors. The scenes among which the actors play are besides of infinite variety, ranging the scale from the dazzling splendours of the Grand Signior’s court to the unspeakable horrors of life in the slave-galleys.

I have tried, by a process of selection and compression, to fit the most interesting parts of these old narratives into the pages of the present book, and have aimed at doing so in such a way as to give as general a picture as possible of the unique military and political system which the Turks had developed when they reached the summit of their power. It is easy to forget how great that power was and what an immense menace the Turks, with their incomparable military organization, laid upon the rest of Europe during the period with which we have to deal. One need only look at the many references to the Turks in Shakespeare’s plays to realize how much the Turkish peril obsessed the minds of our Elizabethan ancestors. A couple of

Introduction

3

instances taken from contemporary publications may not be out of place.

In the preface of Knollys's *Historie of the Turkes* published in 1610, we come on the following dirge "The Long and still declining state of the Christian Commonwealth with the dishonour done unto the blessed name of Oure Savioure, the desolation of the Church militant here on Earth, the dreadfull dangers daily threatened unto the poor remainder thereof, the millions of souls cast headlong into eternal destruction, the infinity of woefull Christians whose grievous groans under the heavy yoke of Infidelity no tongue is able to express, might worthily move even a stonie heart to ruth and give just cause to any good Christian to sit downe and, with the heavie prophet, to say 'Oh, how hath the Lord darkened the Daughter of Zion in His wrath and cast downe from Heaven unto Earth the beautie of Israel!'" Even allowing that Knollys—a Fellow of Lincoln College and, generally speaking, a well-balanced writer—may have been something of an alarmist, one can hardly doubt that his dismal forebodings of the overwhelming of Christendom by the oncoming Turk reflected to a great extent the current feeling of his day.

The second instance may help to explain how this fear of the Turk came to be deeply implanted by showing us the astonishing attitude which the Sultan of Turkey felt able to adopt in his dealings with Christian monarchs. It is taken from a pamphlet published in London "at the Sign of the White Swan" in 1606, giving an English translation of "A letter of the Great Turke recently sent to all the Kings and Princes of Christendom." The letter is too long to quote in full, but the tenor of it is as follows:

I—2

4

Introduction

Sultan Ahmed, “Shadow of God upon Earth, Barron of Turkie, Lord of the Upper and Lower Seas, Beloved in Heaven”—with a dozen more titles in a similar strain—calls upon the Great Champion of Rome (*alias* the Pope) and his Confederates, the Princes of Christendom, to submit themselves to his will and manifest their surrender by homages and tribute.

If they obey “and open their Townes and Gates,” the Sultan will of his clemency suffer them to retain their faith and “accustomed ceremonies,” but if they resist, then let them expect “nought else but mortall warres and firing of cities, with greate occision and deathe both of olde and young.” The Christian Princes are advised “to take example by the Great Souldan of Babylon, whom we spoiled of his dignitie and pursued unto deathe” (a bit of quite gratuitous perversion this, as the Turks had, as a matter of fact, just suffered a notable disaster at Bagdad at the hands of Shah Abbas and his Persians), and are warned that presently the whole world will bow down to Sultan Ahmed, whose armies “are even now marching through Hungarie to invade all Germanie and the noble countrie of France” and will shortly capture Rome, “whose gorgeous temples shall be used as was the temple of the Holy Sophie.”

This wild braggadocio of the nineteen-year-old Sultan strikes absurdly enough on modern ears, but we can be sure that it held little of mirth for a generation to whom the Turk was a veritable bogy and who could never forget that thousands of their fellow-Christians were labouring and dying as slaves in the Turkish galleys.

In the various stories reproduced in this book one can hardly fail to be struck by the two leading charac-

Introduction

5

teristics which marked the Turk in the days of his prime—his inordinate love of display and his inherent “militarism.” The first of these was, I think one may safely say, a borrowed characteristic. The Turk was a simple primitive creature when he first emerged on to the Anatolian plains to conquer a powerful empire. But his victory over the Greeks contained the seeds of his own ruin. The national failings which had weakened the Greek defence infected their conquerors, who soon acquired the true Byzantine taste for lavish show and voluptuous luxury. This, with its inevitable accompaniment of bribery and corruption, slowly undermined the government of Turkey in the succeeding centuries, sapping the virility of her leaders and changing the character of her sultans from hardy tribal chiefs to the most contemptible of debauched despots. The process of the disease is easily traceable in the series of narratives embodied in the present volume.

Militarism, on the contrary, was inbred from the start. The Turk has never regarded war as the devastating interlude which we are wont to consider it, but rather as a natural, and by no means undesirable, state. Until recent times the administration of Turkey was purely military and the usual distinctions between civil and military authority did not exist. To quote from Sir Charles Eliot’s classical book on Turkey, “every Turk is born a soldier”; in fact the Ottoman race is essentially a race of fighters. The course of history has done much to abet their natural aptitude. Their early career was passed in tribal warfare. Before they had fairly subdued their primitive rivals, they embarked on a David and Goliath struggle against the Western Empire, and on finally capturing Constantinople they found themselves

6

Introduction

faced by enemies in every direction. A Christian confederacy opposed them on one side, the Persians threatened on the other, while at sea they were at constant warfare with the Italian maritime states. For nearly three centuries they fought endless campaigns against Austria and Venice, their hereditary enemies, till with the consolidation of Russia a fresh and even deadlier enemy entered the field. Their struggle with Russia led on to the gradual disintegration of their vast empire, resulting in the wars of liberation which have lasted into the present century, only to be eclipsed in our own time by the general Armageddon. Turkish history, indeed, is one endless record of war—a fact reflected in the very large part which military topics occupy in the following pages.

The military “genius” and moral decadence which this book thus illustrates have been the two great factors in Turkey’s existence, and the fate of the empire has largely depended on the balance between them. On the whole the latter has triumphed in spite of such brilliant exceptions even in modern times as the defence of Plevna or the holding of San-i-yat and Achi Baba. The disease contracted by the conquerors of Byzantium sapped the strength of the race and hastened the close of the brilliant epoch of Turkish history which it is my object to present to the reader; but it has left the Anatolian peasant, the backbone of Turkey, almost untouched. “*Baluk bashdan kokar*” says the Turkish proverb, “the fish rots from the head”; we have yet to see if the Turk will succeed in arresting the process downwards.

CHAPTER I

A LITTLE CONDENSED HISTORY

The stories of Turkish travels in the pages of this book all fall within a period beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century and lasting some 150 years.

This century and a half saw the acme of the Turks' power, the beginning of their downward course and the brief recovery which, like a St Luke's summer, broke with a short-lived burst of sunshine into the autumn of their decline. It also covered the fiercest phases of the struggle between Turkey and Christendom, including the two occasions when Europe was seriously threatened with a wholesale Ottoman invasion. It is, indeed, as dramatic a period of history as you well could find, besides playing an important part in the development of the whole of Eastern Europe.

The present chapter by no means aims at giving a serious *résumé* of the times—anything of the sort, even were it within the writer's compass, would be out of place in the conception of this book as a collection of picturesque sketches. But the sketches will be better for being fitted into place, so for the sake of such of my readers as are not familiar with von Hammer or Creasy, I will attempt to reconstruct a slight historical background for the events of the chapters which follow.

To gain a connected idea of the relations between Turkey and the countries of Europe, it is well to go back nearly a century before the beginning of our period

8 *A Little Condensed History*

to the years immediately after the Fall of Constantinople. That impressive event raised a thorough panic throughout Europe and seemed likely for a time to revive the old Crusading spirit. The most extraordinary scenes resulted from the efforts of various princes to rouse the enthusiasm of Christian chivalry and raise volunteers for fresh crusades. Michaud describes, for instance, in his history of the Crusades, a *fête* which took place in the course of a congress at Lille which Philip of Burgundy had convoked to set on foot an expedition. The proceedings began with *tableaux vivants* representing stirring classical scenes such as the Labours of Hercules and the Quest of the Golden Fleece, followed by a pageant in which a herald-at-arms carrying a pheasant (the emblem of bravery) ushered in an elephant led by a Saracen, with a "tower" on its back containing a lady in black (a type of the Christian Church) who recited inspiring verses. The knights who were present were so fired by the spectacle that they one and all swore by the lady never to rest again till they had met the Turk in mortal combat and performed some prodigy of valour against the foe of Christendom. Their ardour was rewarded by a lady in white with "Grâce dieu" in golden letters on her back who presented to them seven lovely damsels representing the cardinal virtues, whereupon the whole assembly went off together to sup and dance!

But such-like fantastic attempts to resuscitate the crusades had little effect. The old spirit had been too effectually smothered by the pagan influences of the Renaissance, and the chronic state of discord in Europe made co-operative action almost impossible. Pius II made a brave attempt to organise and lead an army

Popes and Sultans

9

against Constantinople, but only a moderate host of poor and badly equipped crusaders collected at the meeting-place at Ancona. The knights and barons had ignored his summons and the disappointed Pope died before the crusade could start. From this time forward it was left to the Knights of St John to champion the Cross against the Crescent.

It was symptomatic of the change of mind which had come over Europe that when Charles VIII invaded Italy the King of Naples appealed for help simultaneously to the Pope and the Sultan!

Leo X tried, it is true, to continue the work of Pius and again preached a crusade; but his calls to the faithful remained unheeded. The wars between Francis and Charles were absorbing the energies of Europe, the Reformation spirit was already abroad and Luther himself was preaching that the Turk was the Scourge of God and that it was impious to resist him.

Turkey's Christian neighbours had meanwhile enjoyed a breathing space since the whirlwind campaign of Mohammed the Conqueror and his predecessors, thanks to the diversion of Ottoman enterprise in other directions. Selim the First, the cruel warrior-poet, spent his reigning years in leading the Turkish armies to new fields of conquest in the South and East. He had added huge tracts of Asia and Northern Africa to the empire, had forced the Persians back beyond Tabriz, and had conquered Syria, Arabia and Egypt. His taking of Cairo had, incidentally, resulted in an event of prime importance to the future history of Turkey, the last of the line of Abbaside caliphs—a creature at that time in the hands of the Mameluke rulers of Egypt—having been “persuaded” to transfer his hereditary office, to-

gether with the treasured standard and other relics of the Prophet, to the Sultan of Turkey who henceforward became Caliph of Islam.

Such was broadly the position in 1520 when the Sultanate passed to Suleyman the Second, surnamed "the Magnificent," in whose reign the period covered by this book begins. It is noteworthy that the half-century during which he governed Turkey was one of the most prolific of famous monarchs that history can show. His contemporaries on the thrones of Europe and Asia include Queen Elizabeth, François Premier, the Emperor Charles the Fifth, Shah Ismail the restorer of Persia, and Akbar, the greatest of the Great Moguls. Suleyman can claim an honourable place among these historic figures. He was a man of most versatile talents, a fine general, a great administrator and a legislator of such note that he won the title of "*Canuni*" (the "Lawgiver"). Besides his sterner qualities he was a generous patron of the arts, a student and writer of history and in philosophy a disciple of Aristotle. He was also a very great builder, and it is to him that Constantinople owes its most splendid edifice of post-conquest date, the great Suleymanieh mosque.

In the chapter dealing with the travels of Busbequius the reader will find a sketch of Suleyman in his old age; in his earlier years he has been described by an Italian writer as a tall, thin man with a complexion "as if smoked," prominent brow, fine black eyes "più tosto pietosi che crudeli," aquiline nose and a thin mouth adorned by long moustaches and a forked beard. It is the picture of a proud and unrelentless man, and this Suleyman certainly was. He placed himself high above all other crowned heads, refused to correspond