REVIEW ARTICLES

THE OTTOMAN CONFLICT IN EUROPEAN HISTORY

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The imminence of the Thirty Years’ War, and the internal confessional rivalries and constitutional conflicts within the Habsburg Lands and the Holy Roman Empire, have drawn attention away from the “Lange Türkennkrieg,” the war fought in the borderlands of Hungary between 1593 and 1606 which involved, militarily or diplomatically, almost all of the European powers. While it has frequently been remarked that the Christian victory at the 1571 battle of Lepanto had a modest impact on the military capacity and resilience of the Ottoman Empire, the land struggle against the Turks which began in 1593 coincided with, and certainly aggravated, the first unmistakable cracks in the Ottoman system. A sequence of three weak sultans and the increasing problems of meeting heavy military burdens in multiple campaign theatres from a system of military service based upon the declining effectiveness of the timar, combined with a failure to bring the eastern and southern frontiers of the Empire under permanent control and the destabilizing effects of monetary inflation, led many European diplomats at the Porte to conclude that Ottoman power had peaked and was perceptibly in decline by 1606. Yet despite the contemporary perception of the war as in some respects a turning point in the relations between east and west, the wearisome length of the struggle and the absence of decisive victories or defeats in the field has subsequently led to the assumption that the struggle in Hungary was a border conflict of a familiar, nasty but low-intensity type—simply a worsening of the normal state of affairs in such a frontier society. Niederkorn’s book does not rectify this misconception with any detailed account of the military events of the war. The
main events in the conflict are examined in a summary chronology, and while an accompanying survey of published works reveals that there is no basic, detailed account of the conflict, this book is certainly not intended to be such a gap-filling work of military history. The author's challenge to the marginalizing of the war is based upon an extraordinary and wide-ranging examination of the diplomatic archives of both first- and second-rank European states. Diplomatic activity, and the provision of funds and troops for the Emperor's struggle, leaves no doubt about the importance attached to the war in contemporary eyes. The German princes of the Empire contributed more tax to one year of the Rudolfine war (80 Römermontane in 1594) than they had paid for all of Charles V's campaigns against the Turks. Providing at least one million gulden per annum during the war, the German states' final contribution to the struggle in Hungary stood at around twenty million gulden, to which could be added the very substantial contributions in money and troops from the Habsburgs' central European lands, some 3,750,000 gulden from the Spanish monarchy and 2,850,000 from the Papacy: this was war on the scale of the Dutch Revolt, not a series of border skirmishes.

Why did the war excite such intense diplomatic interest and activity outside the Austrian Habsburg lands, and why was the level of financial commitment disproportionate to any immediate benefit to be gained from driving the Turks back from the borders of Royal Hungary? The Ottoman threat was a real one, obviously, and the events of both 1529 and 1683 show the dangers of failing to respond vigorously and forcefully to Turkish military initiatives. But Niederkorn also stresses the extraordinary vitality of both the crusading ideal as a force in late sixteenth-century European politics, and a deep-seated fear and hatred of the Turks amongst both Catholic and Protestant Europeans. It was the Papacy, above all, which recognized in the Hungarian conflict the possibility of turning the tide against the Ottomans if the Emperor could be given the support of a Christian League, and especially if this League could be strengthened by the addition of an offensive alliance with the Persians—an alliance consistently sought through papal diplomacy. In this context Clement VIII stands firmly in the line of Pius V, returning the Papacy to a medieval crusading tradition and prepared to look outward from the struggles within Christendom to lend diplomatic and moral authority, organization and money to the struggle with the traditional enemy. By returning to the archival sources, Niederkorn offers a direct and highly effective challenge to the notion that the "crusade"