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# The Means of Destruction: How the Ottoman Empire Finally Ended the Byzantine Empire

Benjamin Donovan

The year 1453 brought with its passing two of the most important historical events of the early modern period: the end of the 100 Years War, and the Conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks. While both events had a drastic effect on Europe, the Ottoman's conquest arguably had a greater effect in Eastern Europe, since the Ottoman Turks dominated the diplomatic efforts of the states there for the greater part of the next 200 years. However, no European had any reason to believe that the Ottomans would capture Constantinople, since they had tried two times previously and had failed in both of those attempts. Despite those failures, many factors contributed to significant changes within the Ottoman State that put them in a position to effectively assault the city, and thus establish themselves as an empire worthy of recognition by Europeans. The Ottomans conquered Constantinople and ended the Byzantine Empire by military conquests and diplomatic treaties by Mehmet II's predecessors Bayezid I and Murat II. In addition, Mehmet II's desire to prove himself an adequate leader plus western influences on Ottoman military technology and improvements on more traditional Ottoman tactics meant that the Byzantine Empire was brought to its knees.

Bayezid I (r. 1389-1402) and his military actions had a profound impact on the later Ottoman conquest of Constantinople since he launched the first Ottoman siege of the city. Bayezid made an earnest attempt to conquer the city, instigating both an eight-year siege and an eight-year blockade of Constantinople in an attempt to bring the rebellious Emperor Manuel II back into submission.<sup>1</sup> Although the Ottoman Empire under Bayezid did not have the proper means to capture the city his siege still has relevance because it instilled a general desire in succeeding Ottoman sultans to conquer the city and make good on Bayezid's adoption of the title Sultan of Rum, or Rome and hence overlord of Byzantium. Bayezid's siege also failed because he advanced so rapidly into Europe and then to Constantinople that, "King Sigismund of

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<sup>1</sup> John Norwich, *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall*, (New York, United States: Penguin Group, 1995), 353.

Hungary led the call for a crusade against the Turks. A Christian army of nearly 100,000 mustered at Buda in July 1396 under the leadership of Sigismund... headed down along the Danube valley to Nicopolis, where they put the Turkish-occupied fortress under siege.”<sup>2</sup> This displays another problem for Ottoman sultans before Mehmet II. Powerful foreign entities drew the Sultan’s attention from the main siege effort by their actions. While Bayezid did manage to defeat Sigismund’s army at Nicopolis, the invasion seriously hindered his siege of Constantinople. However, the intrusions of foreign powers continually distracted Bayezid from the siege and ultimately forced him to abandon it.<sup>3</sup> Bayezid’s efforts against his European enemies directly influenced Mehmet II’s decisions when he attacked Constantinople. The siege established the belief Constantinople constituted part of the Sultan’s birthright and also highlighted important Ottoman weaknesses.

In addition to the many military threats in Europe that Bayezid had to address, he also had to deal with military issues on the Asian side of his empire. One of Bayezid’s projects involved the construction of a new fortress complex on the Asian side of the Bosphorus Strait, called Anadolu Hisari that restricted Constantinople’s traditional Black Sea grain supply.<sup>4</sup> While this extra restriction did not lead to starving Constantinople, it proved an essential tool for Mehmet II when he conquered the city later. When Mehmet II used the same restriction in conjunction with the building of the Rumeli Hisari fortress, he successfully prevented all passage of grain through the Bosphorus Strait, cutting off Constantinople’s food supply.<sup>5</sup>

Bayezid again fell victim to the invasion of a foreign power when “the siege of Constantinople was lifted in the spring of 1402, and Bayezid was forced to march all of his

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<sup>2</sup> John Freely, *Istanbul: The Imperial City*, (New York, United States: Penguin Group, 1996), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Norwich, *Byzantium*, 366-67.

<sup>4</sup> Freely, *Istanbul*, 167.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

forces to Asia Minor to meet an invasion by the Mongols under Tamerlane.”<sup>6</sup> While Tamerlane defeated and captured Bayezid at the Battle of Ankara, Bayezid’s actions still had an important impact on Mehmet II’s later efforts. Since Tamerlane considered his victory so complete that he left the Ottoman Empire never to return, and died a few years later, no major power existed in the east to challenge Mehmet II. This also taught succeeding sultans an important lesson in governing. Throwing all efforts into one continent at a time involved a great deal of risk.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the fortress built by Bayezid I in Asia as well as his tactics ensured that Mehmet II would have the necessary infrastructure to attack Constantinople and that no eastern power would challenge a siege of the city.

Bayezid I also instigated important diplomatic treaties that directly contributed to Mehmet II’s later successful conquest of Constantinople. Bayezid had concluded a vassalization agreement with John V, where the Byzantine emperor officially proclaimed his subordination and service to the Ottoman sultan.<sup>8</sup> This agreement helped to further the Sultan of Rum idea first established by Bayezid, framing the Byzantines as inferior and weaker than the Ottomans, and thus requiring their protection. This idea eventually shifted from protection to outright annexation since, as Sultan of Rum, Mehmet II saw the city as rightfully his. Bayezid also used the Byzantines own resources to weaken them. He summoned the Byzantine co-emperors to, “take part in the siege of Philadelphia. And so it was that not one but two emperors of the Romans found themselves directly instrumental in enforcing the capitulation of the last surviving Byzantine stronghold in Asia Minor.”<sup>9</sup> This helped to limit Byzantine resources and power. It not only eliminated another Asian threat that could have potentially hindered Mehmet II’s

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>7</sup> Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire*, (New York, United States: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1998), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Norwich, *Byzantium*, 348.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 346-47.

efforts, but also involved using Byzantine effort to reduce its manpower and money, weakening Byzantium and making it easier for Mehmet II to conquer Constantinople. The other major diplomatic action taken by Bayezid centers on his vassalization and eventual diplomatic annexation of Bulgaria, effectively ending all Bulgarian resistance to the Ottomans and bringing their lands under direct Ottoman control. This removed another threat to Ottoman sovereignty and added valuable resources and manpower that Mehmet II would later use as Sultan.<sup>10</sup> Bayezid I's efforts as Sultan helped to set up a favorable and unthreatened situation for Mehmet II to conquer Constantinople.

Mehmet II's direct predecessor, Murat II (r. 1421-1444, 1446-1451) also had a very profound effect on his ability to effectively engage and capture Constantinople. Murat II also besieged Constantinople; however, he chose to expand the scope of his war effort by simultaneously sieging Thessalonica. The Byzantines handed the city over to the Venetians after less than a year, forcing Murat II to abandon his siege of Constantinople to focus on the much more powerful Venetians.<sup>11</sup> This displays the continuing problem of interventionist foreign powers. Since the Battle of Nicopolis, the Venetians had managed to rebuild their forces to a sufficient enough level to challenge Ottoman power in the Balkans. This situation of revived powers continued to worsen. When a Christian alliance, again under the King of Hungary, Ladislas, responded to Byzantine appeals and, "the Crusade started off... and despite sporadic resistance somehow managed to make its way across Bulgaria to the Black Sea near Varna."<sup>12</sup> This was significant because the Crusade of Varna prompted Murat II to start drawing up plans for a final assault on Constantinople and the Byzantines, who, with the defeat of the Hungarian

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<sup>10</sup> Colin Imbur, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power*, (New York, United States: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Freely, *Istanbul*, 169.

<sup>12</sup> Norwich, *Byzantium*, 405.

King and the allied army, had no more help to call for from the west. This meant that Murat II provided Mehmet II with what a successful assault always needed, complete isolation from foreign powers. Murat II spent the rest of his rule after the Crusade of Varna fighting with various rebellious vassals in the Balkans, particularly in southern Greece, and bringing them into submission, setting up Mehmet II with a very stable vassal system he did not have to worry about maintaining, again allowing him to focus exclusively on Constantinople.<sup>13</sup> Murat II set up most of the foundation for Mehmet II's successful siege, making sure that he had no distractions from his efforts in Europe.

Murat II also ensured that Mehmet II had the same type of situation in the Asian half of the empire, using the Ottoman military machine to effectively eliminate all potential Anatolian rebels. Before Murat II's rule, many of the Ottoman vassals in Anatolia still maintained a great degree of autonomy and would often openly revolt against Ottoman rule when a new sultan came to the throne.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that despite the power and influence of the Ottomans, their policy of setting up vassal rulers to govern the more remote parts of their empire created its own weakness since sultans would have to spend the first part of their rule establishing their authority over these generally rebellious vassals, and not focusing on outside conquests. Murat II however, changed that situation drastically. When Murat II ascended the throne he, "directed his forces against the remaining emirates of western Anatolia... bringing all the Aegean coastline of Anatolia under his rule... annexing the thickly wooded and mountainous areas along the Black Sea coast to the east of Samsun, and...occupying Germiyan after the death of its last dynastic lord."<sup>15</sup> This highlighted Murat II's most important contribution to the Asian side of the empire.

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<sup>13</sup> Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire; The Classical Age, 1300-1600*, (New York, United States: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1973), 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Imbur, *The Ottoman Empire*, 23.

While Bayezid removed the major threat from the east, Murat II removed all of the minor threats, meaning that Mehmet II would have no problems from the Asian half of his empire when he ascended to the throne. Murat II also conquered lands beyond Anatolia, bringing his brother-in-law Ibrahim Bey under his direct rule when he conquered the Turkish principality of Karaman. This ended another foreign threat to the Asian half of the Ottoman Empire, and accommodated Mehmet II's easy conquest of Constantinople.<sup>16</sup> Murat II's efforts in Asia ensured that Mehmet II would not have any distractions from his focus on Constantinople in that half of the empire.

Murat II also concluded many important vassalization treaties with minor powers, not only eliminating enemies, but turning them around and making allies out of them. Murat II's first major diplomatic victory came when he married the daughter of the Serbian Despot George Brankovic, establishing him and thus the Kingdom of Serbia, as Murat's subordinate vassal and ally.<sup>17</sup> This represents an especially important event, because prior to the marriage Serbia had swapped sides multiple times between the Ottomans and the Hungarians, creating a sense of internal insecurity for Murat II. This treaty paid off when, after the Second Battle of Kosovo in October 1448, the leader of the defeated Hungarian army, John Hunyadi tried to escape, "fighting his way through hostile Serbia, he... almost reach[ing] the Danube and safety when he fell into the hands of George Brankovic... it was only toward the end of the year, after he had concluded an extremely unfavorable treaty... that he was allowed to resume his journey to Szeged."<sup>18</sup> The significance of this capture by Serbians centers on the fact that now, a mere four years before the Conquest of Constantinople, Murat II's vassalic ties had assisted in the elimination of the immediate threat of the Ottoman's most powerful enemy, the Kingdom of

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<sup>16</sup> Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 34-37.

<sup>17</sup> Imbur, *The Ottoman Empire*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Babinger, *Mehmed*, 55.



Hungary. To further add to the security of this situation, Murat II vassalized and eventually occupied most of Albania in an attempt to control the rebellious Albanian leader Skanderbeg. Although Murat died before he could gain firm control over Albania, he still managed to reduce Skanderbeg to the point of irrelevance for the next few years.<sup>19</sup> Through all of these actions, Mehmet II's predecessors played a large role in setting up a situation for a successful siege.

Besides the prime position for conquest set up by his predecessors, Mehmet II also had a personal interest in conquering Constantinople. Mehmet II's first period of rule came to an abrupt end when he had to recall his father Murat II to the throne because he could not handle the administrative stress of caring for victims of a fire in Edirne and the crisis situation after a janissary revolt.<sup>20</sup> This motivated him to consider conquering Constantinople because an accomplishment as grand as the conquest of such a significant city would help to erase his subjects' memories of his first reign as sultan, and thus stabilize his current position as ruler. Mehmet II's upbringing also plays in to this because, "his father made no secret of his preference for his two elder half-brothers Ahmet and Ali, both children of well-born mothers, whereas Mehmet's own mother had been merely a slave-girl in the harem, and probably (though we cannot be sure) a Christian to boot."<sup>21</sup> This may have provided even more incentive for Mehmet II to conquer Constantinople so that he could increase his legitimacy to the throne and erase the fact that he did not have entirely royal blood and only became heir with the mysterious deaths of both of his older half-brothers. This all led to fervent opposition to the siege, spearheaded by the grand vizier Halil Pasha; however this served only to motivate Mehmet II since he knew that Halil Pasha had never had a high opinion of him and wanted to prove him wrong.<sup>22</sup> Since

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<sup>19</sup> Imbur, *The Ottoman Empire*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Norwich, *Byzantium*, 413.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 417.

Mehmet II required a monumental event to cement the support for him as a new sultan, he had the motivation to capture Constantinople, to ensure his security on the throne.

Mehmet II also had other factors beside his personal interest in capturing Constantinople. In the decades prior to his rule, the Ottomans had adopted gunpowder from the west, and made it a standard part of their military equipment. The use of gunpowder-based siege engines and firearms played an instrumental role in the Ottoman army at the time, with cannons helping to weaken the walls of Thessalonica during the city's capture, and firearms playing a crucial role at the Battle of Varna.<sup>23</sup> This adoption of western firearms represents an especially crucial occurrence, since no army had ever managed to breach Constantinople's double tiered land walls, and artillery provided a means with which to achieve this. A western dissident by the name of Urban helped to hasten the fall of the city with his casting of a cannon that, "[was] 28 feet long, the bronze of the barrel 8 inches thick, firing balls which weighed 12 cwt., which had to be dragged, attended by seven hundred men, on a special carriage drawn by thirty oxen."<sup>24</sup> This represented a great reversal for the west and Byzantium. Instead of foreign powers working to assist and prolong the life of Constantinople and the Empire, the Ottoman Empire adopted western technology against the Byzantines, making the city's downfall that much easier to achieve. This gun proved pivotal in the Turks' conquest of Constantinople, since one of its shots produced the breach in the walls that Mehmed II's janissary troops entered through, routing the defenders and sealing Constantinople's fate.<sup>25</sup> Through the adoption of western artillery, the Ottomans gained an important advantage in siege warfare, one that proved too much for Constantinople's thousand year old walls.

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<sup>23</sup> Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizons*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Babinger, *Mehmed*, 91-92.

The other big influence from the west on the Ottomans centers on the navy, and in particular the kind of ships the Ottomans constructed to wage war. The Ottomans had maintained a fleet since their first foothold in Europe. However, it only really served to ferry the army between the two parts of the empire and did not serve any other function as the Sultans did not expect to use the navy in warfare and instead relied on the army.<sup>26</sup> This posed problems since not only could a well-equipped navy block the army's passage between the two continents, but since Constantinople received almost all of its supplies by sea the Ottomans could not effectively besiege it without a substantial naval presence to block supplies going into the city. However, after years of war with maritime powers like Venice, it became, "clear that, in building them [the ships], Ottoman shipwrights simply adopted the types of vessel that were common throughout the Mediterranean."<sup>27</sup> This shows a marked improvement on their previous naval force. Now the Ottomans could not only effectively siege Constantinople, but if any other foreign power like Venice tried to assist the city or block the Ottoman army from crossing between the halves of their empire, the Ottoman navy could effectively combat them. This militarization played an important role in the siege since the Ottomans managed to field a navy so large and battle ready that it surprised Mehmet II's advisors and generals almost as much as it surprised the Byzantines, and effectively blockaded the city.<sup>28</sup> Here western influences again led to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, providing them with the means to effectively siege the city and capture it.

However, these new methods used by the Ottomans would have served absolutely no use without the introduction of new tactics in order to accommodate them. In order to overcome the massive chain blocking the entrance to Constantinople's harbor, the Golden Horn, Mehmet II ordered his navy to construct platforms and drag boats across the heights of Pera and into the

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<sup>26</sup> Imbur, *The Ottoman Empire*, 287.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 288.

<sup>28</sup> Norwich, *Byzantium*, 418.

back of the harbor. Because the navy had let four supply ships fight their way through the blockade the Ottomans had to gain control over the harbor in order to effectively besiege the city.<sup>29</sup> This proved revolutionary. Since the Ottomans had never performed a feat like this before it carried some risks, but by bypassing the chain and cutting off the city's sea access the navy sealed the city's fate. The city could no longer resupply, and any ships that did fight their way into the harbor met Turkish vessels. Another new Ottoman tactic involved an improvement in army defense. When Mehmet II arrived at Constantinople the Byzantines, "found that the sultan had drawn up his ranks behind a 'castle-like' fortification of carts and spiked shields, which the janissaries defended with guns."<sup>30</sup> This fortification, called the wagenburg, provided many benefits to the Ottoman army; however its main purpose served as a defensive bastion with which to defend the artillery, an all too important aspect of the Ottoman's siege of Constantinople. The final tactical improvement the Ottomans made centers on their assault structure with the army attacking the city in three waves; first the ghazis, or religious soldiers, to tire out the defenders; then the professional Turkish troops from Anatolia to try to pummel the defenders into submission; and if they failed the janissaries went in to finish the job. This tactic ultimately prevailed at Constantinople, breaking the city's defense and allowing the Ottomans to enter the city victorious.<sup>31</sup> All of these tactics proved instrumental in the Ottoman's conquest.

The prime conditions established for Mehmet II by his predecessors, while merely the result of many symbiotic coincidences, nevertheless proved influential in his effort to finally conquer Constantinople. The personal motivations of Mehmet II, western weapons, and new tactics of the Ottoman army all played their part in the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople as well, and continued to define Ottoman policy. Mehmet II's personal motivations led him to drive

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<sup>29</sup> Freely, *Istanbul*, 174.

<sup>30</sup> Imbur, *The Ottoman Empire*, 269.

<sup>31</sup> Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizons*, 42.

towards the west in an attempt to re-establish the Roman Empire under the Sultan of Rum. The new weapons and tactics would help to make the Ottoman army the most efficient fighting force in Europe for the next century. Thanks to the conditions and changes outlined, the Ottoman Empire managed to become a force powerful enough to end the Byzantine Empire, a task countless other people and nations before them had failed to achieve.

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