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Lull Before the Storm or All Quiet on the Southern Front? The Ottoman-Hungarian War between 1522–1525

Summary: With the loss of Nándorfehérvár (today Belgrade, Serbia), the Hungarian defence system against the Ottomans was seriously weakened. The most important thing for the Hungarians to do was strengthen the border fortresses and a possible recapture of Nándorfehérvár. In order to achieve this, King Louis II appealed for military and financial aid to Christian rulers. In the meantime, military events on the southern front took several turns. In 1522, John Szapolyai, voivode of Transylvania, led two successful campaigns to Wallachia, the territory between the Carpathians and the River Danube, to reinstall the pro-Hungarian voivode on the throne of the principality. In 1523, the Ottomans led an incursion in the south of Hungary, which led to a catastrophic defeat of Pasha Ferhat in the Battle of Szávaszentdemeter (today Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia). On the other hand, the year 1524 brought about an Ottoman success with the capture of Szörény (today Turnu-Severin, Romania), the last formidable Hungarian fortress along the lower Danube. In 1525, yet another Christian military achievement is worth mentioning: the Hungarians managed to lift the siege of Jajca (today Jajce in Bosnia-Herzegovina), another important stronghold along the southern border, and Kristóf Frangepán, an experienced mercenary leader, supplied Jajca with provisions, thus it could withstand the Ottoman onslaught till December 1527.
Keywords: Ottoman-Hungarian war, campaigns, siege, battles

The strategic situation in Europe at the beginning of the 1520's was unfavourable for Hungary. Although King Louis II of Hungary and Bohemia agreed to a peace treaty with Sultan Selim in 1519, in which he acknowledged the loss of several border fortresses

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to the Ottoman Empire, but the treaty offered an opportunity to regain breath and prepare for future warfare, possibly with the aid of other Christian realms, if Hungarian diplomacy were successful in bringing about peace among the hostile powers of the continent. The Kingdom of France was deeply involved in the Italian wars with the Holy Roman Empire and Spain, while in eastern Europe the rise of Muscovy and the ever-present threat of the Ottomans and their vassals, the Crimean Tartars hindered effective cooperation of Christian powers to evade these dangers. To make matters worse, in September, Sultan Selim died, and according to Ottoman tradition, this effectively invalidated the peace treaty of 1519. The new sultan, Suleyman sent an envoi to Buda with an offer to renew its validity, but practically simultaneously began preparation for a campaign. At the end of the rule of the former sultan and at the beginning of the reign of the new ruler, counsellors from the Balkan peninsula were in majority in the Ottoman court, and they managed to convince Sultan Suleyman, that the aim of the new campaign should be Hungary, as the former ruler conquered huge territories in the East, which more than doubled the size of the Ottoman Empire. Now it was logical to turn towards Europe, which promised rich opportunities to pillage and it was in accordance with the idea of jihad, holy war against the infidels. The pretext for the attack was that the Hungarian court postponed giving an answer to the peace offer of Suleyman and even held his envoi in custody. In the spring of 1521, after putting down an uprising in Syria, the Ottoman forces started their march towards Hungary relatively late, only in May, which turned out to be a favourable circumstance for the Hungarians, because in case of an earlier start of the campaign, the consequences could have even been more disastrous.[1]

The year of 1521 brought about catastrophic events for Hungary. Sultan Suleyman led his first campaign against his north-western neighbour.[2] After a two month siege the most important stronghold of the Hungarian defence system, the fortress of Nándorfehérvár fell, causing irreparable damage to the whole defence line.[3] It was clear to everybody that the only way to counterbalance this loss would be the strengthening of other existing castles, or a possible recapture of Nándorfehérvár. In 1521 a Hungarian army assembled in the field of Mohács with a plan to lift the sieges of Nándorfehérvár, or if it is too late, to begin an immediate siege to retake the fortress before the Ottomans could rebuild the ruins after their long siege. The autumn of 1521 would have provided a good opportunity to achieve this aim, but in the camp of the Hungarian army an epidemic broke out, and the only way to save the army from complete destruction was to dissolve it as soon as possible after making a vow that next year they would assemble

1 Ágoston G. 2022, 147–148; Fodor P. 2023, 32–33.

2 Ágoston G. 2022, 148.

3 Szakály F. (ed.), 1980; Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 356.

again and retake the fortress of Nándorfehérvár.[4] But the idea was abandoned later due to financial difficulties. However, we can conclude, though it may sound strange, but the 1521 campaign can be regarded from the Hungarian point of view as a partial success.[5] The original plan of the Ottomans was a quick capture of the border castles and a strategic breakthrough to capture Buda, the capital of Hungary and a total subjugation of the country. Three factors prevented this in 1521, one is the prolonged resistance of several border castles, especially that of Nándorfehérvár, which lasted for two months, thus preventing major Ottoman forces from operating within the country. The second factor was the mobilisation of the Hungarian army, which was slow due to supply difficulties, and the army which finally assembled at Mohács by the end of August was much smaller than the Ottoman army, but still it was a force to reckon with. The third factor was that nature intervened on behalf of the Christians. The summer of 1521 was wetter than usual causing several floods, which made the movement of large military forces much more difficult than at other times. To make matters worse for the Ottomans, on 19th July 1521, the River Sava washed away the military bridge of the Ottomans making it practically impossible for the whole of the army to cross it even in case of a successful siege of Nándorfehérvár. Taking all this into consideration, the sultan decided to limit his aims and he got satisfied with the capture of Nándorfehérvár and several other border strongholds instead of heading towards Buda instantly, in which case the Ottoman occupation of Hungary would have started five years earlier than in reality.

The result of the 1521 campaign left the Hungarian military and politic leadership in a precarious situation. The king was thoroughly aware of the danger threatening his realm and was willing to take active steps to attempt to withstand complete destruction at the hands of the Ottomans. Circumstances seemed to be favourable to strengthen his position. The Habsburg and Jagiello families had come to a double marriage agreement in 1515 in Vienna[6] according to which in 1522 King Louis II married Mary of Habsburg and became an ally of the powerful Habsburg family, whose possible aid in defending Hungary against the Ottomans would be indispensable. The royal pair travelled to Bohemia in 1522 to stabilise their power there (King Louis II was king of Bohemia as well since 1516).[7] He also initiated diplomatic moves to bring about peace among Christian rulers, so that they could focus on the anti-Ottoman war, but he could only achieve partial successes in this respect. From the military point of view, the year of 1522 was favourable for Hungary, because Sultan Suleyman decided to capture the island of Rhodes, the seat of the Knights of Saint John, and the siege lasted for a long time and the Ottomans suffered heavy losses, which they could

4 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 355.

5 Sebők F. 2002, 58.

6 Hermann Z. 1961, 28–38.

7 Engel P., Kristó G., Kubinyi A. 2001, 371.

counter only in years.[8] However, the Ottomans could also achieve success on the Hungarian front, as they managed to capture the fortresses of Knin (today Croatia) and Scardona (today Skradin in Croatia), but they besieged Klissza (today Klis in Croatia) without success.[9] During the summer, the troops of archduke of Austria, Ferdinand helped provide Jajca with provisions and lift the siege of Klissza.[10]

This year, John Szapolyai, voivode of Transylvania led two successful campaigns into Wallachia, a Romanian principality, which had to balance between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. In the spring the first Hungarian campaign managed to achieve success and reinstall the pro-Hungarian voivode on his throne. In the summer the Ottomans led a counterstrike, and the voivode had to flee to Hungary. In October 1522, John Szapolyai led a second campaign there and again evicted the pro-Ottoman voivode from his rule, and reinstalled the pro-Hungarian one.[11] However, it was a serious setback that pasha Ali managed to capture yet another important Hungarian border fortress, Orsova (today Orşova, Romania) and the castle of Pét[12] (today a ruin in Romania) at the lower Danube in March in the same year.

As a backlash to the Hungarian successes in Wallachia in 1522, the Ottomans led an incursion into the south of Hungary called Szerémség (today Sremska, Serbia) in 1523. In March beg Bali of Nándorfehérvár unsuccessfully besieged Pétervárad[13] (today part of Novi Sad in Serbia), while in May Ottoman troops from Bosnia laid sieges to Klissza and Kruppa (today Krupa in Bosnia-Hercegovina), but to no avail.[14] In August the sultan's son-in-law, pasha Ferhat led the campaign, which aimed at destruction of the still remaining Hungarian border fortresses in the district as well as pillage and looting of the mixed Hungarian and Serbian population. Pál Tomori, archbishop of Kalocsa was responsible for the defence of this area, and he was just the right person for this job. He used to be a soldier himself, but due to private life crises decided to become a monk. However, the pope managed to convince him to accept the appointment to be archbishop of Kalocsa, and leader of the southern defence system. He was a conscientious prelate and a capable military leader, who took every measure in his capability to perform his tasks flawlessly. In his hands, the border defence system was stabilised and could withstand the Ottoman threat until the disastrous year of 1526. The Ottomans occupied an important border fortress, Osztrovica (today Ostrovica, Croatia).[15]

8 Ágoston G. 2022, 152.; Sarnowsky J. 2025, 83–101.

9 Thallóczy L., Hodinka A. 1903, 138, 151; Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 356.

10 Thallóczy L., Hodinka A. 1903, 172–180, 182–187; Bárány A. 2014, 68, 77.

11 Tóth N.C. 2012, 987–1014.

12 Szakály F. 1986, 1986, 51.

13 Kubinyi A. 1978, 213.

14 Kubinyi A. 1978, 209.

15 Szakály F. 1986, 51.

In 1523, Pál Tomori organised a relatively small but capable army consisting of mercenaries and *banderia* of local barons and counties of southern Hungary. This army led by István Bárdi, a capable leader of court hussars of King Louis II, defeated the Ottoman forces in two battles at Szávaszentdemeter (today Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia) and Nagyolaszi (today Manđelos, Serbia) with the help of local peasants and Serbian boatmen, who served on the River Danube and Sava as border patrols. The Ottoman defeat was a serious one. According to contemporary sources, they lost about 8,000 warriors, many of them drowned in the River Sava when trying to flee from the battle. Pasha Ferhat managed to survive the battle, but as a result of his defeat, the sultan had him suffocated. However, the Hungarians also had to pay heavily for victory; about 600 of the best warriors were killed in action, and they were difficult to replace. But the Turks had to face the fact that in spite of the loss of Nándorfehérvár, the Hungarians were still capable of dealing a heavy blow at them, and the defence system was headed by the right person to fulfil his tasks.[16]

In the same year, Hungarian diplomatic efforts achieved one of its aims to organise a conference where the steps to be taken against the Ottoman threat were discussed. Hungary offered a 60,000 strong army in case of an all-out Christian effort to recapture Nándorfehérvár and stabilise the southern frontier would be taken. But the discussions ended without a concrete plan due to financial difficulties and unwillingness on behalf of some of the parties. Some negotiators voiced their opinion that if the Hungarians could field a 60,000 strong army, they would not need any aid, so finally the discussions ended inconclusively.[17]

In the year of 1524 the Ottomans managed to achieve one of their strategic aims. They occupied the castle of Szörény (today Turnu-Severin, Romania), which was the last important Hungarian border fortress beside the River Danube. As the Ottomans used the river as their most important supply line, where they transported ammunition, victuals, and all sorts of provisions necessary for successful warfare on ships, it was evident that the river Danube should be secured and firmly in Ottoman hands. This is why Hungarian leadership considered it of utmost importance to retain this castle, and after its fall some voiced their opinion that its loss was even worse than the fall of Nándorfehérvár, which is obviously an exaggeration, but it clearly signified the importance of this castle.

In 1525 it was obvious that the strategic clash between the Ottoman Empire and Christianity is unavoidable. As a preparatory movement, the Turks wanted to break down the last remaining important Hungarian stronghold, Jajca (today Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina). With the occupation of this castle, the Ottomans would have been in a position to launch a major-scale campaign against Hungary without any serious threat from the Hungarian border defence system. The castle had already been

16 Kubinyi A. 1978, 194–222.

17 Zombori I. (ed.), 2004, 274–284; Lakatos B. (ed.), 2024, 793–802.

besieged by them in earlier periods, for example during the time of King Matthias, and they managed to take it then, but King Matthias immediately recaptured it,[18] and it was firmly in Christian hands during the Jagiello era of Hungary (1490–1526). The Ottomans laid a heavy siege of the castle in 1525, but King Louis II hired the services of Kristóf Frangepán, a mercenary leader of Croatian origin, who had been in the service of King Francis I of France, but as a result of the French defeat in the battle of Pavia[19] in 1525, Frangepán became unemployed. As I mentioned, he was a capable military leader and managed to organise a relieving army of about 8,000 soldiers to lift the siege of Jajca. The army consisted of mercenaries paid by the pope and *banderia* of Hungarian and Croatian barons. It could count on artillery, cavalry and infantry. He led his men skilfully; he paid special attention to reconnaissance and wing cover. As the train of carts carrying provisions was quite a long one, Frangepán ordered *pixidarii* (riflemen) to the head, middle and end of the convoy as well in order to withstand a surprise attack on behalf of the Ottomans. He directed his troops with such a brilliant timing and coordination, that they forced the Ottomans to give up the siege and withdraw, while he could also transport supplies to Jajca, which as a result could be held until well after the debacle of Mohács.[20]

To sum up the political and military situation of Hungary between the fall of Nándorfehérvár in 1521 and the battle of Mohács in 1526, we can conclude that because of the disproportion of financial means and military resources of Hungary and that of the Ottoman Empire, it was only a question of time when the fall of independent Hungary would happen. As events of the period in focus prove Hungarian military leaders and politicians, including the still teenager ruler, were aware of the danger that threatened the kingdom and they did everything they were capable of doing to alter the strategic situation. They attempted to bring about peace among the leaders of Christianity, to unite their forces against the common foe, but the political situation in Europe was too complex to make an all-European effort to stop the Ottomans. As regards military capabilities, Hungarian leaders performed relatively well in smaller scale campaigns, some of them, eg. Kristóf Frangepán performed especially well on the battlefield, but as it turned out in the battle of Mohács, they were incapable of leading a larger scale army in a field battle, where several tens of thousands of men would be fighting.

As the 500th anniversary of the battle of Mohács will be remembered, countless studies, articles and books will deal with this topic, I deemed it necessary to shed light on the military events that led up to this battle, which decided the fate of Central Europe for centuries. I hope that my short summary of these events will help the reader better understand the circumstances of this decisive defeat of Christianity.

18 Hermann R. (ed.), 2017, 277–278.

19 Konstam A. 1996, 55–76.

20 Thallóczy L. 1915, 241–254; Pálosfalvi T. 2018, 419–420.

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