



The end of everything

THE BATTLE OF MOHÁCS, 29 AUGUST 1526

Hungary's devastating defeat by the armies of Suleiman the Magnificent signalled the country's demise as a unified independent kingdom. **Andrew Southam** describes the action.

LEFT *The Battle of Mohács, 1526.* Detail from a painting by Bertalan Székely (1835–1910). The defeat was a catastrophe for Hungary, ending 500 years of sovereignty in just a few hours.

OTTOMAN ADVANCES

Following the occupation of Constantinople in 1453, Ottoman power had been in the ascendancy. The Turkish empire boasted 14 million inhabitants, with tributes from vassal lands outmatching those of Spain; a standing army of 60,000 (swelling threefold with conscription during campaigns); and a navy larger than the combined French-Venetian fleet that won the first battle of Lepanto in 1499. And it could fight on varied fronts, taking on the Saffavid dynasty of Persia while expanding into Christian Europe.

Suleiman's predecessor, Sultan Mehmed II (r.1444-1446 and 1451-1481), had consolidated the empire's proficiency when reforming the military and civil administrations with professional warriors and bureaucrats, cleverly assimilating the ruling families upon whom sultans previously depended to produce an army structure of four units.

First, there were the cavalry, or *sipahi*, who were themselves divided into two distinct social groups: Timariots and Kapikulu *sipahis*. Timariots were the provincial cavalry, performing annual military service under a semi-feudal system granting them non-hereditary land tenure; they brought their own equipment, including men-at-arms in proportion to the size of the lands they managed, and performed most of the mounted fighting, usually from a position on the flanks. Kapikulu *sipahis* were the regular professional cavalry, organised into six divisions, known as Men of the Six regiments. In addition, the *akinci* (raiders) were mounted irregulars, made up of mercenaries and adventurers, and used as advance troops. Lightly armed, they used speed and agility to disrupt and harass, and bore a maniacal reputation for their daring, if not suicidal, forays into the midst of the enemy.

Next came the infantry, including among them the elite Janissaries, distinguished by their white bonnets and characteristic *yagatan* (single-edged short sabres designed for wearing at the waist when marching). Disciplined and well-schooled, these professional foot warriors were proficient in modern tactics and skilled in musketry. They were products of the *devshirme*, or tribute system: the forced recruitment from among Christian Balkan subjects of boys aged eight to ten, who were taken to Constantinople, circumcised, and converted to Islam, with the best being trained to serve the sultan in arms or in civil office (girls went to the harem).

Although this white slavery practice was controversial in sharia law, Balkan families acquiesced because it offered their children the chance of social advancement, and even high office. Alongside the Janissaries were the more lightly armed irregular infantry, the *yaya*, mostly made up of peasant Christians conscripted from south-east Europe.

Artillery and irregular auxiliaries formed the remaining two units. The Turks were renowned for their cannon technology, which had been instrumental in the taking of Constantinople, and were masters with mortars, being possibly the first to introduce them into European inventories alongside bombs and mines. The various types of irregulars included the *azabs* (literally 'bachelors'), a strange band of peasant Anatolian Turks, who though partly paid were a type of mercenary serving as light infantry, sometimes on horseback, and used as expendable front-line troops absorbing enemy charges. *Derbendcis* were the locally recruited troops carrying out guard duties at forts and roads across Hungary and along the Danube.

Together, these four units formed a two-part military system comprising, on the one hand, the regular forces of the sultan (more or less representing the Anatolians, from the large peninsula that constitutes the major part of modern-day Turkey), and, on the other, provincials like the Timariot *sipahis*, *akincis*, and *derbendcis* (loosely comprising the Rumelian forces, from the Balkans). On coming to power as the tenth sultan in 1520, Suleiman I inherited this machinery from his father, Selim I (r.1512-1520), and it would propel him to the greatest of all Ottoman expansions.

Suleiman personally led 13 campaigns, nearly doubling the territories under his command. Tall, robust, and with thin, bony features, he was sophisticated, speaking languages including Arabic, Serbian, Farsi, and Urdu, and educated in military tactics, with a liking for Alexander the Great. He became an accomplished poet, and, like his father, a goldsmith, going on to sponsor education, philosophy, and the arts, and to establish a legal code giving protection to Jews and Christians. But he was also brutal, with a ruthlessness that extended even to having his own son, Şehzade Mustafa, strangled for supposed rebellion.

By Suleiman's side was his principal adviser, Ibrahim Pasha, a figure of curiosity. The son of a fisherman, he had been captured and enslaved as a child, before being offered to the young Suleiman, who was attracted by his intellect. The two would become close friends, and in 1523 Ibrahim was awarded the privileged role of Grand Vizier, or chief adviser. But his story would also have no happy ending: despite their »

On the partly cloudy summer's day of 29 August 1526, 30,000 troops led by Louis II, the king of Hungary and of Bohemia, waited near Mohács, a hamlet in southern Hungary. Spread out over six kilometres on a riverside plain of the Danube, they stood ready to prevent the armies of Suleiman I – the Ottoman Sultan commonly known as Suleiman the Magnificent (r.1520-1566) – from reaching the ancient capital of Buda, about 200km further north. At stake was nothing less than the future of the independent Kingdom of Hungary.

What Louis' troops couldn't appreciate was the sheer scale of the Turkish forces taking up position to the south of them: two or three times their size, with 300 cannons to their own 50 to 80. Together, Ottoman efficiency in organisation, discipline, command, and technology would destroy Louis' forces that day in a battle from which the already much-diminished Hungarians would never fully recover.

Image: Alamy



childhood bonds and his part in aiding the sultan's victories, Ibrahim would later be suffocated in his sleep on Suleiman's orders.

AMBITIOUS OBJECTIVES

Suleiman began expanding his empire almost immediately after his father's death. Egypt was subjugated in 1517; a revolt in Damascus was suppressed in 1521; Belgrade (which Mehmed II had failed to capture) was taken in 1521; and the Knights Hospitaller were expelled from Rhodes after a five-month siege in 1522. His intentions towards Hungary remain a matter of debate, however: was he, as some historians claim, intent on expanding his imperial reach? Or, as others suggest, simply trying to protect Ottoman gains in south-east Europe?

Mehmed II had stopped short of invading Hungary, possibly as a result of his failure to take Belgrade in 1456 or because he wanted it to remain a reliable defence to protect Balkan positions against the Habsburgs. Mehmed and Selim both managed peace treaties with Hungary in return for tribute. Though not obliged under Ottoman legal tradition to continue these, Suleiman twice offered to renegotiate. King Louis' subsequent rejection – combined with other factors, including the weakened state of Hungary and a new Turkish alliance with France – gave Suleiman cause and opportunity to invade.

When Hungary's long-serving ruler, King Matthias Corvinus, had died in 1490, his barons had seized power, installing the feeble King Vladislaus II, of the Polish Jagiellonian dynasty, as his successor. Under their control, Vladislaus dismantled the kingdom's military and administrative apparatus, including the formidable standing 'Black Army', instead endowing the barons with lands and grants, and squandering state revenues. This aristocratic coercion earned Vladislaus the nickname of King Dobře, meaning 'all right', for his habit of agreeing to their requests. Such economic despoliation was compounded by a diminished peasant work

Suleiman personally led 13 campaigns, nearly doubling the territories under his command.

Louis II, the king of Hungary and of Bohemia [ABOVE LEFT], and Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I, more commonly known as 'the Magnificent' [ABOVE].

force, following the brutal suppression of a peasant uprising in 1514, in which thousands were captured or tortured.

Ten-year-old King Louis II inherited this weakened nation following Vladislaus' death in 1516, and similarly became hostage to squabbling nobles. Why he rejected Suleiman's renewed terms for tribute eight years later also remains unclear – though fractious aristocrats keen to stop their lands falling piecemeal to Turkish raids, the prospect of paying increased tribute to Suleiman, and the false hope given by a Papal offer to finance a campaign against Muslim armies all played a part. At the same time, the intemperate act of detaining Suleiman's emissary, in violation of recognised diplomatic codes, was a show of bluster not power. Even though Louis had married Mary of Austria in 1515, uniting the Polish and Habsburg houses, Mary's brother, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, was preoccupied with religious turmoil from Martin Luther and threats from France, and would offer no help.

In the end, it was the Kingdom of France that precipitated Ottoman action. The French king, Francis I, wanted to

reverse his defeat to Charles V at the Battle of Pavia in 1525 by offering Suleiman an alliance against the Habsburgs – a union that endured for 300 years. Suleiman consequently marched his armies out from the Ottoman Porte in April 1526.

CRUCIAL MISTAKES

Hungary mustered credible but smaller forces. Heavy cavalry, the strike force on which European kingdoms placed emphasis, was combined with Hungarian and Serbian Hussars, agile horsemen who were skilled in border skirmishes. Infantry comprised Hungarians, Croatians, a small number of Polish mercenaries, and German-speaking mercenaries known as Landsknechte. The latter were famed as pikemen, skilled users of the early modern gun, the arquebus, and the double-handed sword, the *Zweihänder*, and were noted for fighting in square formations. Landsknechte had their equivalent of *akinci* crazies, the *Doppelsöldner*, who volunteered for the first line of the square for double pay. Complementing these troops were some 50 to 80 cannon, a reasonable number for contemporary European battles.

Hamstrung by divided nobles, however, the Hungarian court made crucial mistakes. The aristocrats of the now 20-year-old king were at first slow to assemble, and then later refused Louis' order to serve under his deputy, Count Stephan Báthory, and stop Suleiman's forces from crossing the nearby River Drava (the major tributary of the Danube that forms most of the border between Croatia and Hungary), claiming their right to fight only under the king's banner. (Suleiman was surprised not to find the enemy taking sensible advantage of the strategic spot at which the Drava and Danube rivers converged.) Despite having the advantage of time, Louis made no defensive positions. And in a further error, a decision was made not to wait for reinforcement from a 10,000-strong Transylvanian force under John Szapolyai – a rival to Louis and a future Hungarian king – and a 5,000-strong Croatian force under Count Christoph Frankopan.

When all of Louis' Hungarian forces united in early August between the towns of Osijek, on the Drava, and Tolna, 100km further north, a dysfunctional war council selected Archbishop Pál Tomori and Hungarian nobleman Count George Zápolya

de Szepes, brother of the future John I of Hungary, as joint army commanders. Pál Tomori was another figure of historical curiosity. A former professional soldier who became a Franciscan monk and crusading archbishop of Kolocsa, he had protected the borderland as Captain-General of southern Hungary since the fall of Belgrade, defeating 15,000 *akincis* at Sremska Mitrovica in 1523, and despatching the Ottoman commander's severed head back to Buda. To the Ottomans, he was the 'accursed priest', but popular Christian romanticised imaginings had this warrior bishop wearing only gleaming armour and a monk's cowl. It was Tomori and the larger faction of restive nobles who swung the final decision to fight on the nearby plain at Mohács rather than withdraw until reinforced; a verdict which one prelate, the Bishop of Varad, »

Elite Janissaries, distinguished by their white bonnets, formed a key part of the Ottoman infantry [BELOW LEFT]. Hungary mustered smaller but still credible forces, supported by mercenaries such as the German-speaking Landsknechte [BELOW].



RIGHT *The Discovery of the Corpse of King Louis II*, detail from another painting by Bertalan Székely. It is said that the king drowned under the weight of his own armour in the aftermath of Mohács.

mocked by declaring that since Hungary would end up with 20,000 martyrs, the Pope had better get ready to canonise all of them.

Christian indiscipline contrasted starkly with Ottoman order. A feat of organisation saw somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000 of Suleiman's troops cross 1,000 kilometres of Balkan river valleys swollen by continuous bad weather in under 80 days, with the Rumelians travelling five days ahead of the Anatolians to avoid congestion. Bridges were engineered, while camel trains and 800 ships along the crucial Danube provided supplies and reinforcements. Discipline was unbending; death followed any infraction of the sultan's directive not to pillage or damage local crops.

Ibrahim Pasha secured the road with advance forces. He took the fortress at Petrovaradin (now a part of Novi Sad, the Serbian city on the banks of the Danube) on 15 July after a two-week siege, storming it with a Janissary strike force and losing only 25 men. On reaching Osijek, on 14 August, the grand vizier built a bridge of ships in just five days, forming a 300m pontoon across the Drava. When all the Turks were across, Suleiman destroyed it to dispel any thought of retreat.

On the night of 28 August, stirring music played as the Ottoman army camped over a nine-kilometre strip amid marshy ground to the north of the Karasso River. Deployment was after morning prayers at five, with the army reaching the battle ground at Mohács sometime in the early afternoon.

THE BATTLE

Fighting took place over 57 square kilometres. The flood plain appeared flat enough for cavalry manoeuvrability but was actually punctuated by uneven, boggy areas rolling into swampy woodland on the east, with harder ground in the west moving into partly wooded hills stretching around to the south.

The Hungarians configured their army facing south in a standard two-line formation, the first commanded by Tomori and the second by Zápolya. Much of the cavalry formed the first line, with Peter Perenyi, bailiff of the county of Temes and brother to the Bishop of Varad, commanding the smaller eastern division, and the Hungarian magnate Ferenc Batthyány commanding the larger western one. Gabor Raskay commanded a separate attachment to fight off expected encirclement by Ottomans from the south-west hills. The eastern line



was naturally defended by swamp and wet woodland. The main body of troops, with artillery and infantry, and including King Louis, formed the second line.

While Louis' forces had the advantage of rest, Suleiman's army arrived amid this unfamiliar landscape after a ten-kilometre march, keeping formation as they deployed in three defensive lines over slopes across the south and west of the plain, the thickness of their lines designed to absorb cavalry charges. Ibrahim Pasha commanded the first line of mostly Rumelian cavalry, cannon, and 4,000 Janissaries, with *akincis* and *sipahis* in the raised areas in the west near the villages of Majs and Foldvar. Behrem Pasha commanded the second, also of Rumelian and Anatolian troops, while the Sultan himself commanded the third, with 15,000 Janissaries, much of the artillery, and *sipahis* either side. *Azabs* provided a light advance screen, while further Anatolian cavalry and more *azabs* protected the rear. In the far west, Bali Bey and Korsev Bey commanded *akinci* for the encircling move anticipated by the Hungarians.

Battle commenced with a Hungarian artillery volley in the growing afternoon. Bishop Tomori moved first, leading a charge of the heavy cavalry on the Hungarian right. Why is not clear. It's possible he might have taken advantage of the Rumelians in the west still pitching tents and awaiting the remaining Turkish forces. Alternatively, Bali Bey and Korsev Bey's encircling manoeuvre might have looked like the Turkish line was breaking up, affording the chance to attack.

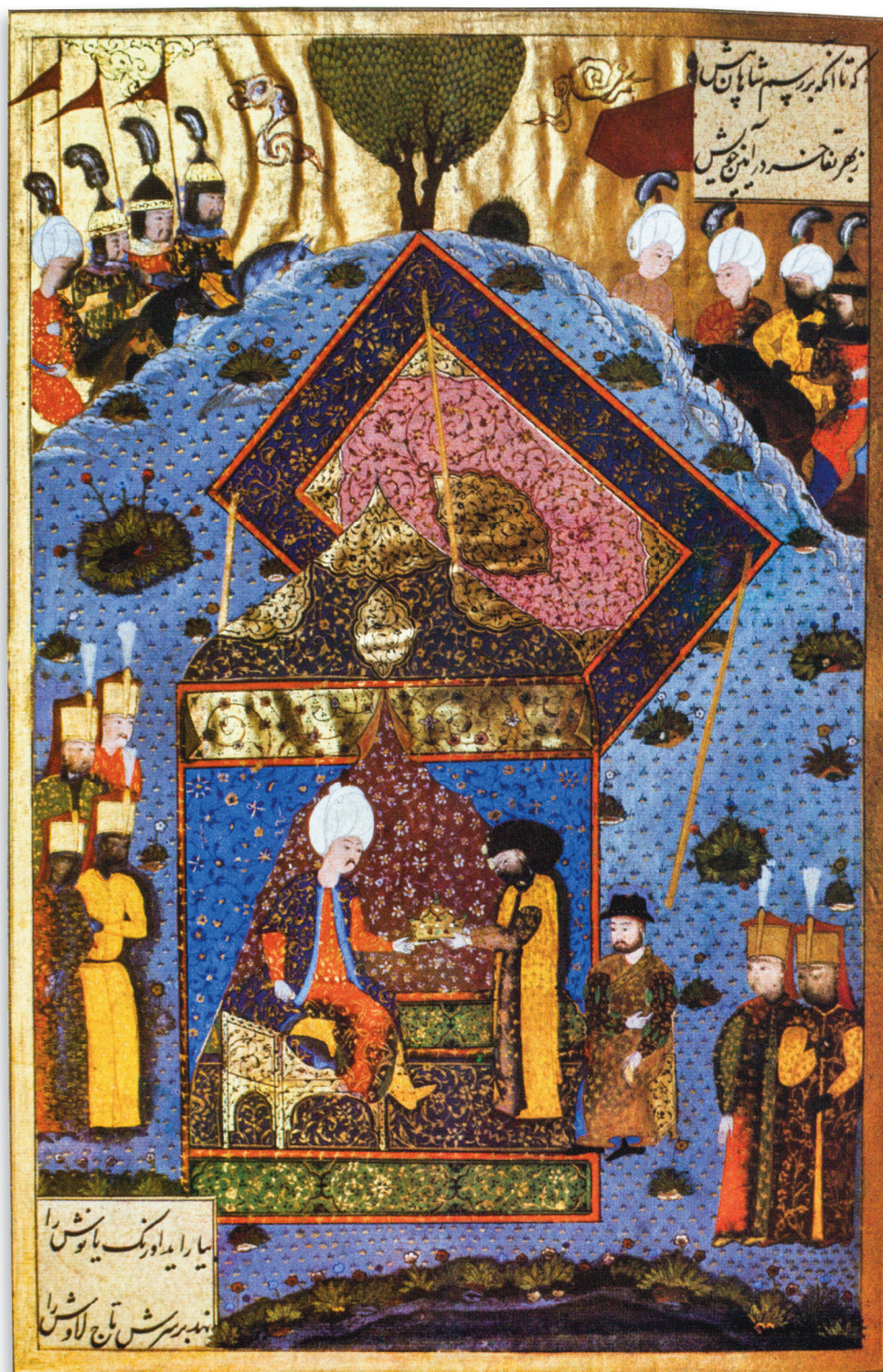
Whatever the reason, the power of Tomori's cavalry assault tore through the front two Turkish lines in the west,

spreading confusion and pushing them back towards the reserve lines of Anatolian troops at the heights of Majs. Gabor Raskay likewise broke up the *akinci* effort to flank them, but crucially he failed to follow up the advantage. Then Tomori, building on his own advantage, wheeled his forces leftwards to outflank Suleiman's centre. Watching his commander's apparent dislocation of Suleiman's left wing, King Louis rushed forward, while the rest of the army advanced on the Turkish front line.

But as Tomori swivelled into the Ottoman heart, Hungarian forces reached a morale-corrupting turning point as they saw, for the first time, the size of Suleiman's armies and the chained ranks of his cannon staring straight at them. They may even have fallen for Suleiman's plan to lure them in.

The Ottomans, who had consolidated their middle to thwart the Hungarian attack, felled the enemy with cannon shell and fusillades from Janissary muskets, with 2,000 of the elite infantry firing in kneeling and standing positions in nine consecutive rows. Although a few knights of Tomori's right-wing attack did get near to the Sultan before being mown down by Suleiman's guard, the charge had faltered, ground down by solid Ottoman defences. By now, the Hungarian right was dispersing, leaving Suleiman free to counter-attack.

Overwhelmed, the main body of Hungarian cavalry was also forced to retreat in ineffective pockets. Tomori died while trying to rally his men, his courage praised by Muslim chroniclers: 'Covered with wounds like a mad dog he recovered himself,' wrote one. 'When he rushed into the attack,



Images: Wikimedia Commons

LEFT A 16th-century Turkish miniature shows Suleiman giving the Holy Crown of Hungary to Louis' rival János Szapolyai, who was elected one of two new kings of the fractured country.

decapitated, with 2,000 of their heads laid out in a pyramid before Suleiman's tent. Tomori's head was placed on a pike. Only five prisoners were spared for ransom.

Louis' fate put the final seal on the devastation. Fleeing under cover of darkness, it is said that he was thrown from his horse while attempting to cross the river Csele, and drowned under the weight of his own armour. True or not (an alternative version has Louis' horse falling on him when climbing a steep bank), the story provides a cruel metaphor for the defeat of heavy cavalry tactics by a modern and organised force of superior numbers. (For his part, Suleiman is supposed to have stood over the king's corpse, saying, 'I came indeed in arms against him; but it was not my wish that he should be thus cut off before he scarcely tasted the sweets of life and royalty.')

A cautious Suleiman waited for three days after his victory before moving on Buda, still fearing that the once-powerful kingdom had more to throw at him. When no further opposition came to light, his troops entered the city, defying orders not to ransack and pillage, but retreating again soon afterwards. Suleiman decided against possessing Buda in the aftermath of the battle, and it was not until 1541 that his forces finally captured and occupied the city. Nonetheless, here was the pinnacle of Ottoman power, with control of central Europe and the limits of entry into Christian Europe.

Mohács also marked a decisive turning point for Hungary, signalling the country's demise as a unified independent kingdom. In the ensuing chaos, factions of the remaining elite split Hungary further apart by electing not one but two replacement kings: Ferdinand I of Austria (brother to Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor) and John Szapolyai (Louis' rival, who fortuitously missed the battle and subsequently offered his services to the Sultan).

For Hungarians, five hundred years of sovereignty had been lost in just a few hours, and was followed by 150 years of Hungarian and Ottoman internecine warfare. Uninterrupted independence was finally recovered only in 1989, and then without all of the land enjoyed before 1526. Even today, a common saying that resonates with Hungarians is that 'we lost more at Mohács'.

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impetuous as the Nile, he uttered screams like the trumpeting of elephants when tigers and lions flee before them.'

Those Hungarians who made it back to camp found Ottoman soldiers already there slaying its defenders. And, by now, the Rumelian forces that Tomori had initially routed had recomposed themselves, reinforced by cavalry reserves, and struck out from Majs in two units, one attacking the flanks of retreating knights and the other moving to strangle the Hungarian centre.

Without mounted support, the Hungarian infantry squares were dreadfully exposed, pounded by cannon and muskets, encircled

by Rumelian *sipahis* on their right, and with Anatolian forces advancing on their left. Besieged by unrelenting assault, there was nothing left to do but to fight and die, and they were remorselessly cut down. By early evening, the battle was over. Suleiman had won.

THE AFTERMATH

Mohács was a decisive engagement. It broke Hungary's military capability and political leadership. Many of the ruling nobles, warrior bishops, and crown officials perished along with some 10,000 infantrymen and 4,000 of the cavalry. Those taken prisoner were