

Through the eyes of the 'Polish Janissary'

The fall of the Old World

The *«Turkish Chronicle»*, erroneously called the *«Memoirs of a Polish Janissary»*, was written by a Serb, Konstantin Mihailovic of Ostrovica, around 1499. Its own history is very complicated – only its Polish and Czech versions have survived to this day; another known version in the Cyrillic alphabet was lost. Even now, scholars are not certain about the work's original language or where it was written. However, no matter its history, this source gives us a unique insight into the life of a soldier from Europe fighting on behalf of the Ottoman invaders, during a time when, to the Christian world, the Turks seemed unstoppable.

By **Lukasz Różycki**

What little we know about the author is found in the pages of his memoirs. He began his Turkish service in 1453, during the siege of Constantinople, as a soldier of the Serbian auxiliary units, and continued serving until 1463, when he deserted and ran away to Hungary. Mihailovic served in the cavalry (in the army of the Serbian despot), as well as the infantry, most probably in a Janissary unit (he identified himself as one).

The *Chronicle* is a unique historical source. It describes the fall of Christian states neighbouring Turkey, ruled at that time by Mehmed the Conqueror. The source was not created by a great humanist, but rather someone who was forced to serve the Turks and hated them with a passion. The events are seen through the eyes of a rank-and-file soldier, and although Mihailovic attempted to include information on the political situation or the history of the area, such attempts were sometimes lacking. The work can be divided into three parts. The first part is devoted to the history of the Turks and the neighbouring peoples; additionally, it includes some brief and negative comments

on Turkish culture. The second part describes events that happened during Mihailovic's life, most of which he personally took part in. The final part talks about the political and military organization of Mehmed's state, and ends with a call to unite in the fight against the heathen Turks.

In this article, I will attempt to present to a wider audience Mihailovic's take on the fate of the Christian states described in the pages of the *Turkish Chronicle*, mainly the Empire of Trebizond and the Despotate of the Morea. Any translations are made by the author himself.

Conflict and the Roman Empire

The author begins his account with the rule of John VI Kantakouzenos. This was a narrative device, used to familiarize the readers with the origins of the Byzantine-Turkish conflict in Europe (*Chronicle* IV). Mihailovic briefly describes the death of the Emperor Andronikos III, who placed the under-age heir to the throne in the care of the trusted *mehtar* Kantakouzenos. The chronicle presents the Turkish expansion into Europe and the fall of Gallipoli, supposedly taken in battle, in the context of a dynastic dispute. In reality, the Turks took the city following a major earthquake and, despite their negotiations with Kantakouzenos,

Typical Turkish sabre, used ubiquitously in the army of Mehmed the Conqueror. With the end of the Middle Ages in the Balkans and Eastern Europe also slowly came the end of the widespread use of the traditional medieval sword. Armour, affording no protection against firearms, became largely useless, which gave rise to the prominence of the sabre as a handy slashing weapon, excellent against lightly armoured foes. This piece is now in the collection of the Askeri Museum Istanbul.

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fallen if the city wasn't so vast; as it was, the defenders could not man the entire length of the walls. When the Janissaries attacked a breach made by artillery, the Emperor could not intervene in time, because his forces were too far away. Once the Byzantine reserve finally made it to the breach, the Janissaries had already occupied a section of the walls. Mihailovic believes that the city fell because of Ottoman treachery. He also mentions that most of the residents were put to the sword, and the churches sacked and burned.

The fall of Morea

After taking Constantinople, Mehmed turned against Serbia. The author of the chronicle describes these events in great detail, as they were close to his heart and involved him directly. Following that, Mehmed decided to eliminate the remaining Byzantine holdings in Europe. The author begins this account by describing the Morea, stating that the peninsula had fertile lands protected only by a minor wall, and that all its cities were located by the sea, as it was surrounded on three sides by water. Next, the *Chronicle* provides a brief sketch of the political situation and the Greek ruler. Mihailovic writes about Demetrios II Palaiologos, being the brother of the heroic last ruler of Constantinople, not without a certain dose of fondness.

According to Mihailovic, when the Turkish army appeared before Thessalonica, Demetrios supposedly sent envoys with the annual tribute

(which isn't true – the Despot was unable to pay as much). The Sultan did not receive the diplomats and, during negotiations, sent a force to besiege the wall guarding the peninsula. Once they were already in the lands of the unsuspecting Despot, Mehmed finally spoke to the envoys, saying: "I wish no tribute from your lord, and now I am coming for his lands, so let him defend himself" (*Pamiztnik Janczara Polaka* XXX). In the following years, conflict ensued, during which, according to the author, the Turkish soldiers displayed their cruel character: "people were killed, or had their bones broken, or were subjected to bizarre acts, and all so that none would dare oppose this dog" (*Pamiztnik Janczara Polaka* XXX). The author states with admiration that their army was actually hard-pressed until the Greeks finally surrendered. Although the *Chronicle* gives no information about the stubborn defence of Monemvasia, the author does mention that Corinth only surrendered after the ruler's capitulation.

The fall of the Empire of Trebizond

Another campaign described in the *Chronicle* is the invasion of the Christian Empire of Trebizond (*Chronicle* XXXI). The author does not directly specify the reasons for the Turkish expedition, but when describing the geography of the region, he states the following: "The land is mountainous and vast, surrounded on all sides by heathens; Tartars one and all (...) Despite everything, the Tartars would still rather have the Emperor of Trebizond as neighbour

Two Janissaries admiring the panorama of Constantinople from the direction of the Land Walls. Although the city was already past its prime, it must still have been a sight to behold, and its walls, despite their age, were still a major obstacle to attackers.

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A Turkish reflexive bow, now in the collection of the Askeri Museum Istanbul, a main weapon of the Janissaries. Although the bow slowly became obsolete due to an increased use of gunpowder weapons, it remained a deadly weapon in the hands of the Turkish infantry and cavalry for quite some time in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Its high rate of fire and superior accuracy gave it an advantage over early firearms.

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The walls of Trebizond were not as awe-inspiring as the fortifications of Constantinople, but thanks to its location, the city was equally difficult to conquer. The capital of the Komnenos was heavily fortified and could be held against invaders for many months. However, without outside aid, it had little choice but to surrender.

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than the Turkish Emperor Mahomet: although they were of one faith with the Turks". This passage obviously refers to the military alliance between the Az Qoyunlu Turkish tribal federation and Trebizond against Mehmed. The alliance was, however, unstable and the actions of ruler David Komnenos only served to provoke the Turkish Sultan.

Most of the historical accounts in the *Chronicle* are merely general notes, but the campaign against Trebizond was described in detail. Interestingly enough, this time the author focused on the road to the shores of the Black Sea. The Turkish army had to cross the mountains, where it faced Greek and Tartar raids.

It is possible that the author describes clashes with David's allies, although these were likely local inhabitants and not organized forces. The weather made the march even more difficult. Heavy rains softened the soil to the point where horses would trudge through mud reaching up to their stomachs, and the wagons were impossible to move. To make matters worse, on the borders of Trebizond, the Turks fought several engagements with the imperial forces, which employed guerilla tactics. This forced Mehmed to leave part of his baggage train and redistribute the supplies among the animals (the army brought 800 camels, precisely for this purpose).

Here, the author includes an anecdote from the journey. During the crossing, a camel carrying a portion of Mehmed's treasury fell down the slope. The place was immediately cordoned off by the Janissaries to guard the gold while it was collected. But Mehmed, troubled by the delay, ordered that the gold be given to the soldiers and the march continued. Mihailovic noted with sadness: "Happy were those who found themselves close. For some, this was a very lucrative event. I finally got to the spot, but too late; all the gold had already been taken; only bare soil remained, as the gold was snatched together with grass and mud by anyone close enough".

After this event, the tiresome march continued. At one point, the Janissaries had to carry their ruler, for which they were awarded an additional 50,000 gold pieces and an increase in their pay. Having finally reached the lowlands, the army made camp for the men to rest and recover their strength. Mehmed only sent out a 2000-strong raiding party. This unit must have engaged the Greeks in battle, as none of the Ottomans returned. Their corpses were only discovered by the main force moving towards Trebizond. This seems even more puzzling, as the Sultan's fleet had already reached Trebizond, which the *Chronicle* doesn't mention. Since the city was already surrounded, it is interesting to speculate who could have defeated a strong detachment of 2000 soldiers. Possibly some Greek units were still operating in the area, or perhaps some allied forces took part in the battle and then retreated back to their own lands. According to Mihailovic, the Emperor of Trebizond's surrender was due to his trusted advisor, George Amiroutzes, who convinced the ruler that further bloodshed was pointless. Mihailovic did not describe the whole siege, being probably removed from the main theatre of operations or lacking more



detailed information. As with the previous campaign, the author's perspective is limited to the section of the walls where his unit was stationed.

Concluding his account, he only mentions that Mehmed, having at his disposal a strong land army supported by the fleet, intended to continue his conquest of the East by attacking Georgia. However, word about the power of its Christian ruler made him abandon his plans and return west. The former emperor was promised a comfortable allowance, but in March 1463, he was arrested for contacting his former ally Uzun Hassan (information about their correspondence was supposedly revealed by George Amiroutzes). David and most of his family were killed. His last remaining son, George, was to convert to Islam, but during Uzun Hassan's visit to the court, he betrayed his new masters and fled to Georgia, where he returned to the Christian faith and married a princess of the powerful family of Gurieli.

The Trebizond campaign is thus shown through the eyes of a simple soldier, who had to rely on those pieces of information which filtered down through the ranks. The author completely omits certain facts and events. There is no mention of the pacification of Sinop or the capitulation of Ahmed the Red, which took place before the siege itself. Also, nothing is said about clashes with the men of Uzun Hassan, who is not referred to by name, but rather by the title of Great Khan. This proves that the author was aware of the broader context of his situation – he was reluctant to take part in the Sultan's wars, especially against Christians. But, admittedly enough, whenever Mehmed shows generosity towards his forces, granting them gifts, the voice of the narrative becomes neutral, or downright positive.

The *Turkish Chronicle* is not easy to interpret. It was written from the point of view of a regular trooper, who often did not fully understand the events around him. Another obstacle is the character of the work, having been created by a tormented slave who hated his masters. The anti-Turkish propaganda in the work is unquestionable and makes it even harder to interpret. Despite that, the *Turkish*



Chronicle is an immensely important source on the fall of Constantinople and the Empire of Trebizond. Mihailovic records many facts that are not mentioned in any other sources. The work of the 'Polish Janissary' perfectly illustrates the final days of the Byzantine State and is one of the few pieces written from the perspective of a regular soldier serving under Mehmed's banners. **MW**

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Further reading

- Konstanty z Ostrowicy, *Pamiętnik Janczara Polaka*, ed. E. Winkler. Warsaw 1913.
- S. Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*. Cambridge 1965.
- F. Babinger, *Mehmed der Eroberer und seine Zeit: Weltenstürmer einer Zeitenwende*. Munich 1953.
- S. Karpov, *A history of the empire of Trebizond* (in Russian). St Petersburg 2007.

Turkish horse armour, employed by heavy cavalry formations and placed on the animal's chest. In later times, it was mostly used as parade armour. Askeri Museum, Istanbul.

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Typical Turkish infantry helmet used in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. This piece lacks the characteristic cheek-guards and nasal, which protected the face against slashing blows. It is now in the collection of the Baltimore Museum.

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