

POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

**Life under the shadow of the Ottoman
Empire's Expansion (15th–16th centuries)**

Proceedings of the 3rd international conference
3th-5th October 2019, Timișoara

Editor
Zsuzsanna Kopeczny

Editura Mega
Cluj-Napoca
2021



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DTP and Cover:
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On the cover: Ottoman miniature depicting the siege led by Kara Ahmed Pasha against the fortress of Timișoara
(after Jancsó Árpád – Balla Lóránd, *Temesvár régi ábrázolásai. 16-18. század*, Marosvásárhely, 2005, p. 50.)

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României
Politics and society in Central and South-East Europe: life under the shadow of the Ottoman Empire's expansion (15th-16th centuries): 3-5th October 2019, Timișoara / ed.: Zsuzsanna Kopeczny. – Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2021
Conține bibliografie
ISBN 978-606-020-359-9
I. Kopeczny, Zsuzsanna (ed.)
94



EDITURA MEGA | www.edituramega.ro
e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro

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THE 1596 DRAFT ON A FUTURE FLEET ON DNEIPEP

*Zoltán Péter Bagi**

Keywords: *cossacks, hit-and-run raid, fleet, Dnieper, Aulic War Council, Rzeczpospolita, Habsburg Empire, Ottoman Empire*

Abstract: *Popes, monarchs, diplomats, politicians, scholars, and monks were creating plans in the 16th and 17th centuries, to capture the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Laurenzius Reuttenberger, a less known mercenary of much self-admitted experience handed in a proposal to the war council at Prague to set up a Cossack fleet on the Dnieper. The paper discusses the details of this proposal and assesses the rationality of his idea.*

During the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, popes, monarchs, diplomats, politicians, scholars, and monks were creating plans to capture the capital of the Ottoman Empire, with the intention of driving out the heathen from Europe¹. A plan of attack against Constantinople, along with a cost assessment of the offensive was summarized in a report by Laurenzius Reuttenberger, submitted to the Aulic War Council in Prague on the final day of July 1596².

Laurentius Reuttenberger

Unfortunately, the identity of the document's writer can only be inferred from the proposal itself. According to his own claim, he had spent many years in Eastern Europe and knew its lands well, including Lithuania, Prussia, Poland, and Muscovy. In addition, he was familiar with the Wild Fields (Dikoye Polye) that spread between the Southern borders of these lands and the Black Sea. As we will, see, his writings prove the truth of these claims, as he had accurate knowledge about the political, geographical, and hydrological situation of the region. He also stated that he had served as a soldier, which can explain how he got to know these far-away countries. It was not uncommon in this period that mercenaries, in hopes of the stable income and potential loot, enlisted in the armies of rulers far away from their homeland. During his stay in Prague and at the time when he submitted his proposal, Reuttenberger must have been an experienced man, as his profound knowledge of Eastern Europe had surely accumulated over many years. On the other hand, he also claims that his grandfather had served Frederic III, the great-grandfather of Rudolf II, who died more than a century before, in 1493. He travelled to Prague driven by his love to the emperor and by his own German origins, but he also found it important to state that his proposal was not written in the local German dialect; he was able to explain it orally first then wrote it down on the emperor's orders.

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¹ Éva Bóka, *Európa és törökök*, in *Világtörténet*, 5/1983/2, pp. 83–104., Ilona Sz. Jónás, *François de La Noue „Politikai és katonai értekezései”-ről*, in *Világtörténet*, 5/1983/2, pp. 105–112., Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (= ÖStA) Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Allgemeine Akten Hungarica Fasc.: 127. fol.: 47r–48v.

² Signate of the document: ÖStA Kriegsarchiv Prager Hofkriegsratsakten No. 4.

Based on a word used in the text and on the assumption that he had spent years of military service in the region, it is probable that he spoke Polish as well.

The plan

The author of the document suggested that a fleet of 100 vessels should be built on the Dnyester, using it to transport 50 000 men to Constantinople to attack, torch, and ransack the city, thus raising a major upheaval in the Ottoman Empire. When the deed is done, the armada could continue to navigate up the Danube. His proposal goes into details in explaining how this fleet could be set up. First and foremost, he asked the emperor to provide a wise and reliable man to him, possibly learned in the ways of the world and in matters of engineering as well. This person could be introduced by him to all the secret information necessary for the clandestine organizing of the fleet. He planned to design the vessels large enough to carry 500 men each. According to his calculations, each vessel should be 260 feet long, 30 feet wide and 20 feet high, so that they could feature 30 rows on both sides.

Proposed costs of the fleet

The woodlands by the Dnieper could be the source of timber for the vessels. Thus the emperor should negotiate with the king of Poland to provide the building materials for free. Everything else necessary could be obtained from Danzig, Riga, or Moscow. Reuttenberger drafted a list of painstaking detail about the required goods and their prices. Accordingly, each vessel needed 200 oaken boards, 40 for both sides and 60 for the floor. For the latter and the cabin at the stern, along with the preparatory work, an additional 60 boards would be needed. Planks had to be 65 feet long and 2 feet wide. Their price was 27 apiece, resulting in 9000 Forints for the 100 vessels. Each of the ships needed 90 curved timbers, costing 15 Kreuzers each, which meant 2250 Forints. An additional 30 beams were needed for under-deck use, one of these cost of 30 Kreuzers, with a total of 1500 Forints for the 100 vessels. Each vessel required a mast, costing 2 Forints, which meant 200 more Forints in expense. To move the ships, 60 oars per ship were needed, 6000 altogether. Reuttenberger recommended to have a further 2000 spare oars. One oar cost 25 Kreuzers, with a total of 3333 Forints and 20 Kreuzers. All the timber and oars for the fleet would cost the imperial court 16 083 Forints and 20 Kreuzers. The author was similarly meticulous about the necessary metal parts as well. He calculated that the construction of one vessel needed 445 iron staples, the total cost of which was 17 800 Forints. He estimated the cost of nails for the masts and everything else to be around 3000 Forints. To securely anchor the vessels, he proposed 200 anchors, whose price would amount to 6000 Forints. All these expenses would be joined by the price of the lines, sails, and the hemp used as sealing, another 18 000 Forints for the 100 vessels. Reuttenberger also noted that the last two materials, along with the necessary food, could be provided by Muscovy, which might mean a saving of 18 000 Forints. For sealing the vessels' hull, each would need 20 Forints worth of tar, a total of 2 000 Forints. Therefore the construction of the 100 vessels would cost 62 883 Forints and 20 Kreuzers. Reuttenberger argued that 25 weeks' work of 600 carpenters and circa 1000 day labourers could be sufficient. The first should be recruited in Danzig, Königsberg, Hamburg, Lübeck and Riga, as the region had ship-building craftsmen in these cities. He would pay 2 Forints per week to each carpenter and 1 Forint to the laborers. Thus the work expenses would amount to 55 000 Forints in total. Raising the whole fleet would require a total sum of 117 863 Forints and 20 Kreuzers; even with the 50 000 soldiers included, the author argued that this would be cheaper than the cost of the campaign in Hungary each year. It would be wisest, he suggested to the emperor, to authorize a god-fearing man with the construction money, who would pay up for the goods and workers on time. If these conditions were met, the hundred vessels could be built in two years: the first year would be enough

for the preliminary arrangements and obtaining the construction materials, the armada would be constructed in the second year.

Equipment and army of the fleet

The author had concrete ideas about the equipment of the fleet as well. In his opinion, 7 cannons, 3 on the front and 2 on both sides, should be placed on each vessel. To acquire these, he proposed some rather adventurous ideas. He assumed that the cossacks had 200 cast-iron cannons ready at their disposal, which they would be willing to provide. The Moscowians were also good friends of the emperors and had many artillery pieces also in Livonia; many of these were of iron and were never actually used, thus they were surely able to grant a hundred of them. The Polish king Sigismund III had many iron cannons in Sweden, too. These could be put to good use on the vessels, as he did not need them, he opined, so they were likely to lend one hundred. Similarly, the Prussians possessed large amounts of cannons, which had been used even against the Christian king of Poland, István Báthory. Apart from these, they could borrow cannons from merchants as well, for the one year that the campaign would last – the triumph of the victory alone might be a sufficient payment for them.

The author also considered the possibility that the targeted amount of metal cannons could not be obtained. In this case, iron-hooped wooden cannons could be used as a last resort, in his opinion these might be fired 8 or 10 times. Gunpowder and cannonballs should be secured from the cossack loots, or also bought from Poland. In Reuttenberger's view, the cossacks would be the most suitable soldiers manning the fleet, a valiant people unrivalled by anyone else. More than 20 000 of them served the ruler of Moscow, in close familiarity with the Zaporizhians, they would be likely to enter the emperor's service. He also presumed that the czar himself would be willing to grant another 7 or 8 thousand men. Similarly, the Lithuanians and the Polish could also provide 20 000 soldiers who were of commensurable combat value and content with less payment. However, the experienced, tried and tested cossacks would require somewhat more money. 500 men would be enlisted on each vessel, divided into two equal units. These would mean 240 common soldiers and 10 captains. According to the proposal, each oar would be manned by four men, with the two units rowing in rotation. Reuttenberg also noted, however, that not only soldiers and cossacks would be needed, but also shipworthy men recruited from Danzig, Königsberg, and Riga.

Proposals for overcoming the difficulties of the fleet

Due to his own experience, Reuttenberger was probably aware of the obstacles of navigating the Dnieper. He primarily mentioned the violent rapids on the river (interestingly, he repeatedly uses the Polish term *progi* for these in the text), and the rocks in the riverbed. He feared that these would serve as a reason for declining his proposal, the argument being that the vessel would not be able to fare safely due to them. But he assumed that clearing the riverbed in a low-water period can circumvent this difficulty. When the waters were high again, the emptied ships can pass these places as well. He thought the task of clearing the riverbed could be assigned to the cossacks or cirkassians. According to his calculations, this would cost the emperor 7 or 8 thousand Forints, as he knew about a mere 12 rapids, which could be taken care of in the course of two months, when water levels are low. It was also possible that the Polish king would not consent, the rapids being considered as natural defenses that prevented Ottoman raiders from navigating the Dnieper. The author argued that the riverbeds were not intended to be cleared entirely, only to the extent that the emptied vessels could pass once, and they would not even make a return trip, moving up the Danube instead. Another difficulty for navigation that he considered was that the Ottoman army might entrench themselves along the banks or send a fleet against them. As a solution, he proposed that the vessels should be built with the greatest secrecy possible, and beginning the campaign before Easter would

prevent the enemy from a timely preparation and resistance. A third obstacle was the potential intervention of the Tatars, who had already made use of conflicts between Christian rulers, bringing much misery to Volynia, Podolia and the state of Moscow. To his knowledge, the raiding campaigns against Hungary, Poland and Moscow were the deeds of two hordes, the Nogays and Crimean Tatars, able to raise 160 000 men altogether.³ He envisioned that they could be neutralized through the czar's soldiers attacking the first and Sigismund III's army attacking the latter; he even thought it possible that, following their defeat, they could be employed in the war against the Ottoman Empire.

Feasibility of the plan from the perspective of the cossacks

Reading the document, one might wonder how realistic it was that a fleet navigating the Dnieper could attack Constantinople. The Zaporozhian or free Cossacks who lived by the Southern tract of the river usually launched their sea attacks in autumn, mostly as revenge for Ottoman and Tatar raids. Their barges were around 60 feet long, 12 feet wide and 8 feet deep with 20–30 oars, they were said to cross the Black Sea in 36–40 hours, to harass the vicinity of Sinope or Constantinople. Their linden or willow boats were almost undetectable on open waters, as they emerged only 2.5 feet above the waterline. 80–100 boats participated in one attack and each carried 50–70 Cossacks, who had gunpowder, firearms and some food in their gear.⁴ In fact, these (successful) Cossack attacks might have given Reuttenberger the idea that a Dnieper fleet could successfully attack the capital of the Ottoman Empire. It is also possible that he not only heard of these, but also took part in some: he knew the Southern tract of the river, the woods and rapids of the region, even was aware of the number of the latter. These natural obstacles were central to the Cossack life, indicated by the fact that 'Zaporozye' means "land behind the rapids."⁵

To raise the Dnieper fleet, the emperor needed to win the support of the cossacks, the Rzeczpospolita, and the czar as well. The question arises: would this be realistic? Let us address the cossacks first. The relation between Rudolf II's court and the free-raiding soldier community of the Wild Fields was formed in the early 1594. One Stanislaus Khlopicki, claiming to be the leader of the cossacks, arrived to Prague in this year, offering a support of 8–10 000 men. Rudolf II accepted, sending Erich Lassota as envoy to the Zaporozhian Sich to learn the possibilities and enlist the cossacks by means of the 8000 Gulden that he was given. The envoy did talk with the ataman of the Zaporozhian cossacks, Bohdan Mochosinsky, about leading a campaign to Moldavia and support the voivode there against the Ottoman Empire. This never came to be, however, even though they indicated to the imperial envoy that the cossacks are willing to enter the service of Rudolf II for a larger sum. Erich Lassota's negotiations brought significant results to the Prague court. They realized that Khlopicki was never a hetman and he had taken the journey to Prague on his own accord, not by assignment. It also became clear that only about the half of the promised 8–10 000 men were at disposal. However, Lassota's report listed four reasons for the cossacks being enlisted; first, the war with the Ottoman Empire would surely be prolonged, and such experienced soldiers would always come handy. Second, most cossacks were skilled in the use of firearms and cannons. Third, they

³ Mária Ivanics, *A Krími Kánság a tizenöt éves háborúban*, (Budapest: Körösi Csoma Kiskönyvtár, 1994), pp. passim.

⁴ Sándor Gebei, *A lengyel végek katonaparasztsága a 16–17. században*, in *Emlékkönyv Rácz István 70. születésnapjára*, Ed.: Ágnes Kovács, Debrecen, 1999, pp. 69–82.; Mihail Heller, *Orosz történelem*, Vol. I., *Az Orosz Birodalom története*, Budapest, 2000, pp. 166.; Serhii Ploky, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine*, Oxford, 2001, pp. 19–20.; Sándor Gebei, *Hajdú kiváltságolás – kozák kiváltságolás*, in „Frigy és békeség legyen...” *A bécsi és zsitvatoroki béke, A Bocskai-szabadságharc 400. évfordulója*, Ed.: Klára Papp and Erzsébet Jeney-Tóth, Debrecen, 2006, pp. 153–168.; Sándor Gebei, *Az erdélyi fejedelmek és a lengyel királyválasztások*, Szeged, 2007, pp. 96–97.; Cristoph Witzernath, *Cossacks and the Russian Empire, 1598–1725, Manipulation, Rebellion and Expansion into Siberia. Routledge studies in the history of Russia and Eastern Europe*, London and New York, 2007, pp. 36–37.

⁵ Jan Paul Niederkorn, *Die europäischen Mächte und der „Lange Turkenkrieg“ Kaiser Rudolfs II. (1593–1606)*, Wien, 1993, pp. 476.; Heller, *Orosz történelem*, pp. 166.; Ploky, *The Cossacks*, pp. 16–20.; Gebei, *Az erdélyi fejedelmek*, pp. 96.

could be a means for Moscow to grant actual military support to the emperor more easily. Finally, their enlistment could prevent them from taking the side of the Polish councillor Jan Zamoyski who pursued an anti-Habsburg policy.⁶

The Cossacks also played a significant role in Pope Clemens VIII's plans of an anti-Ottoman league. Like the Prague court, the Holy See considered them as a separate military entity. Around the time of Khlopicki's trip to Prague, Dalmatian papal legate Aleksander Komulović agreed with Mikolaj Jazlowiecki, the starosta of Snityn and leader of the registered Cossacks, that for 10000 gold coins their troops would keep pillaging Tatar territories and putting pressure on the voivodes of Moldavia and Wallachia so that they never forget their oath given to the emperor.

The imperial military management intended a dual role for the cossacks in the Long Turkish War. On the one hand, they were to hinder the movements of the Crimean Tatars, also to continuously harass the Turkish ports by the Dniester. On the other hand, smaller units were to be deployed to the Hungarian war theater; as revealed by Bálint Prépostváry's (*Obrist* in Eger) proposal to archduke Matthias written in January 1595, their similar combat style made the cossacks the ideal troops against the Tatar cavalry.⁷ Their first units were involved as early as in the siege of Esztergom in 1595, and their troops continued to serve the emperor in the early 17th century on the battlefields of Upper Hungary, Transylvania and around Kanizsa.⁸ We can state that Reuttenberger's plan to hire the cossacks was not only a figment of his imagination; he actually proposed the more efficient utilization of an already established and continuous relationship in the course of the war. However, this ambitious plan never became reality.

In his league plans, Clemens VIII assumed both the Rzechpospolita's and the czar's support on the eastern flank of an alliance that would cover the entire Christian Europe. However, the first was never realised, while the second only intermittently and as a mere symbolic act. The man defining the internal and external politics of the Polish Kingdom, Chancellor Jan Zamoyski, and his followers in the nobility were considered the biggest inhibitor of a Habsburg-led anti-Ottoman alliance. At the 1595 Krakow and 1596 Warsaw sejms, he and the king seemed ready to support a military alliance against the Ottomans. But the papal nuncios and Habsburg emissaries were eventually let down at the Polish court; on the one hand, Zamoyski had no intentions to break the peace with the Sublime Porte that had been reaffirmed in 1591 via English mediation. On the other hand, Zamoyski was not in favour of continuing Sigismund III's Habsburg-friendly politics (married Anne of Austria in 1592): in 1589, the Ottoman Empire's reaction to the Bytom-Będzin peace with archduke Maximilian had been quick and intense. The chancellor had his own ideas of using the tax that was voted by the nobles in 1595 to raise an army against the Crimean Tatars (and thus the Ottomans), and positioned his own candidate Jeremias Movilă in the strategically crucial Moldavia. Next year, he influenced the sejm to demand so unrealistic conditions to joining the league that neither the pope nor the Prague court was willing to comply. He was not affected by the final result of the negotiations, in the end: following the battle of Cecora, in 1595 November he made an agreement with the Crimean Khanate's representatives about the Moldavian sphere of interest, thus disrupting the Transylvanian-Wallachian-Moldavian anti-Ottoman alliance.⁹

⁶ About the easter travelling of Erich Lassota: *Habsburgs and Zaporozhian Cossacks. The Diary of Erich Lassota von Steblau 1594*. Edited and with an Introduction by Lubomyr R. Wynar. Translated by Orest Subtelny. (Littleton: Ukrainian Academic Press, 1975).

⁷ Mária Ivanics, *Kozák segédcsapatok Habsburg-szolgálatban (1593–1606)*. in *Az értelem bátorsága, Tanulmányok Perjés Géza emlékére*, Ed. Gábor Hausner, Budapest, 2005, 293.

⁸ Ivanics, *Kozák segédcsapatok*, 293–295.

⁹ Niederkorn, *Die europäischen Mächte*, pp. 470–487.; Jan Paul Niederkorn, *Die Verhandlungen über den Beitritt Polens zu einer antiosmanischen Liga in den Jahren 1595 bis 1597*, in *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego MCXCV. Prace Historyczne, Zeszyt 121*. (Krakow: Studia Austro-Polonica 5, 1996) pp. 81–95. 1996. 81–95.; Sándor László Tóth, *A mezőkeresztesi csata és a tizenöt éves háború*, Szeged, 2000, pp. 53–54.; Gábor Várkonyi, *A konstantinápolyi angol politika a tizenöt éves háború időszakában (Edward Barton angol portai követ jelentései Konstantinápolyból, 1593–1597)*, in *Aetas*

For Moscow, joining a potential Habsburg alliance was made more attractive by the incursions of the Crimean Tatars on the one hand (just like for the Rzechospolita), and the power shifts¹⁰ in the Caucasus on the other hand. Boris Godunov, ruling in the stead of the feeble Fyodor Ivanovich, intended to realize his own political agenda meanwhile, similarly to Zamoyski. The opportunity could consolidate his own power position (i.e. in internal politics), but the governor also saw the Habsburgs as a certain partner against the other arch-enemy, the Polish Kingdom. Diplomatic talks started as early as 1592–1593. Nikolaus Warkotsch's visits to Moscow brought actual success only once, in August 1595, when the czar's emissaries arrived to Prague – with 24 carriages and 52 wagons. According to contemporaries, the sum value of the furs brought in the latter was over 800000 and their selling proved to be quite a problem.¹¹

It can be said that at the time when Reuttenberger submitted his proposals, there was a serious chance that both the Rzechospolita and Moscow would actively participate in a war against the Ottomans. As it turned out to be, both parties saw this important only until their own internal and external political agendas were fulfilled.

To conclude, though the proposals submitted by Reuttenberger were bold and never realised in the end, they were more than a random collection of outlandish ideas. The ex-soldier did prove his experience not only in technical and military matters, but also in his knowledge of the land, his observation skills, and his political information as well.

15/4/2000, pp. 106–123.; Ildikó Horn, *Báthory András*, Budapest, 2002, pp. 156–157.; Gábor Várkonyi, *Angol békekötés és a lengyel–török tárgyalások a tizenöt éves háború időszakában (1593–1598)*, in *Aetas* 18/2/2003, pp. 51–52.

¹⁰ Niederkorn, *Die europäischen Mächte*, pp. 451.; Heller, *Orosz történelem*, pp. 173.

¹¹ Niederkorn, *Die europäischen Mächte*, pp. 449–457.; Hyeronimus Augustinus Ortelius, *Chronologia oder Historische Beschreibung aller Kriegsempörungen und Belagerungen in Ungarn auch in Siebenburgen von 1395*, Nürnberg, 1602, pp. 91v–92r.