

Pálosfalvi, Tamás. *From Nicopolis to Mohács: A History of Ottoman-Hungarian Warfare, 1389-1526*. Leiden: Brill. 2018. 504 pp. (ISBN-13: 978-90-04-36584-1 [hardback]; ISBN-13: 978-90-04-37565-9 [e-book])

Hungary has always occupied a unique position in Europe. Despite being known as the “Heart of Europe,” there has often seemed to be something of the “other” about the country. From its unique language to its popular association with the Huns to its modern position as the problem child of the EU, the country has often seemed to be not quite European, to be somehow on the outside looking in. Hungary’s latest troubles with its European neighbors stem from a familiar source, the encroachment of peoples from the east, this time in the form of refugees from Syria and other countries in the region. Viktor Orbán’s closing of the eastern borders of the country and his trenchant appeals to Hungarian nationalism echo a centuries-old tradition of resistance to the East. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the resistance an independent Hungary put up in the face of the Ottoman threat for nigh on 150 years. *From Nicopolis to Mohács: A History of Ottoman-Hungarian Warfare, 1389-1526* deals with the earlier history of Ottoman-Hungarian conflict in a departure from the more common focus on “Hungary in the Ottoman era.” This is the period when Hungary remained an independent state, when it had not been torn asunder with one part integrated into the Habsburg Empire, another into the Ottoman Empire, and another a vassal state of said empire.

Tamás Pálosfalvi’s goals in the book are twofold. In the first place, he seeks to provide an accurate chronology of the events that took place over this century and a half, using a wealth of contemporary sources. In the second place, he aims to publicize the latest Hungarian research on Ottoman-Hungarian warfare and the politico-military background to the conflict in Hungary, much of which has not yet become available to the wider academic community. In the book, he portrays the struggle as taking on something of a religious imperative from the point of view of the Hungarians, as a fight for their very existence. At the same time, he seeks to explore the social and political consequences of the struggle, while paying more attention than much scholarship has to the role of the two famous Jagiellonian kings, Wladislas II and Louis II, seeking to reevaluate the accepted view of them as being largely responsible for Hungary’s downfall.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first deals with Hungarian military organization from 1387-1526. The chapter gives detailed information on the administrative makeup of the Hungarian Kingdom and the traditional constitution of military forces within it. It delineates the organization of these forces, how they were raised, and the enormous financial burden this placed on the kingdom. It further provides a thorough depiction of all the pressures on Hungary up to the Battle of Mohács.

The next chapter deals with the period 1389-1429 and takes the reader back to the first contacts with the Turks. Pálosfalvi provides a detailed account of the build up to the Battle of Nicopolis and the allied “crusade” and follows this by recounting the events that led to the siege and loss of the fortress of Golubac. In an interesting departure from more accepted scholarship, the author portrays Sigismund’s role in the Battle of Nicopolis in a more positive light, placing a fair share of the blame for the loss on the Franco-Burgundians. Similarly, his decision to avoid an open fight with the Turks at Golubac is seen as a reasonable decision.

Chapter three begins with a treatment of the last years of Sigismund and the confusion that followed his death and the accession of Albert of Habsburg in 1437. It deals with the decisive changes in the Hungarian approach to the Ottoman problem at this time and the attendant rise of the offensively-minded Hunyadi. This chapter of over 100 pages goes on to chronicle the Long March, the Battle of Varna, and the disastrous defeat at the Battle of Kosovo Polje and the consequent end of Hungarian offensive strategies and culminates with the Ottoman defeat at the siege of Belgrade. Pálosfalvi also questions quite a bit of “orthodox Hungarian historiography” relating to this period.

The fourth chapter focuses on the years 1458 to 1483, separating the period into two parts, “Securing the Borders, 1458-1466” and “Turning West, 1467-1483.” The first part charts the early years of the reign of the great King Matthias, beginning with the loss of Serbia to the Ottomans and moving through Matthias’ campaigns in Bosnia and Serbia. The second deals with Matthias’ preoccupation with expanding his realm to the west rather than at the expense of the Ottomans, the motivations surrounding the siege of Šabac, and Matthias’ final major counteroffensive following the victory at the Battle of Kenyérmező.

The following chapter is entitled “The Wars of the ‘Long Peace’, 1483-1520,” referring to the period in which the Turks undertook no major direct offenses against Hungary. It deals with the final years of Matthias’ reign and the succession of Wladislas II. It details the myriad internal and external issues that beset the king throughout his reign, as well as the massive financial millstone the military increasingly became. It also investigates the domestic political strife that followed the accession of his son, Louis II.

Chapter six explains how the accession of the new sultan, Süleyman resulted in a renewed focus of the Ottoman Empire on westward expansion. The Ottoman motivations in the campaign of 1521 are investigated, as are the enormous repercussions of the fall of Belgrade. The Hungarian attempts to muster a response to this defeat are detailed as are the increasingly deep incursions of the Ottomans into Hungary. The chapter also provides a critical analysis of how the Hungarian government attempted to respond to this irresistible Ottoman pressure, calling into question some traditional criticisms of this response, and of the events that led up to the disastrous Battle of Mohács.

In the final chapter, Pálosfalvi attempts to weave the various strands of the narrative together to account for the fall of the Hungarian Kingdom. While delineating the military failings that ultimately doomed the Hungarian resistance, he focuses major attention on economic realities as the primary cause of the eventual fall of the country. He highlights the constant Ottoman military pressure financed by the massive tax and other financial resources provided by their eastern conquests. This forced Hungary into an almost permanent state of military readiness, something that was economically unsustainable given a much depleted tax base and massive indebtedness as a result of decades of campaigns against the Ottomans.

From Nicopolis to Mohács: A History of Ottoman-Hungarian Warfare, 1389-1526 is an exceptionally detailed look at a period in Hungarian history that has been in some ways overlooked by scholars. It also seeks to challenge certain elements of the received historiography of the period and uses a combination of contemporary sources and modern scholarship to do so. In addition, it personalizes the period through an exhaustive documenting of the personalities involved in the events of the time. It is further complemented by extensive footnotes as well as by the judicious use of maps and images from the period. The book does presuppose more than a passing familiarity with Hungarian history of the period, and some may find the endless lists of names to be excessive. In addition, the volume perhaps suffers from one of its main aims, that of providing an accurate chronology of events, attempting to exhaustively chronicle events rather than providing a more judicious focus on a more limited selection. However, on the whole, the book is a thorough chronology and an up-to-date reading of the events that led to the dissolution of Hungary. It will be of interest to students and scholars of both medieval European history and the early Ottoman period.

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