

Hungarian participation in the First Battle of Kosovo 1389

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Abstract

The threat of Ottoman penetration in Europe urged Balkan feudal lords already disrupted and dissented among themselves to temporarily leave conflicts aside and form a wide anti-ottoman coalition. In this coalition, as opposed to dynastic succession problems, Hungary was an active participant also due to the fact that it was directly threatened by the Ottoman invasion. Based on sources of the time, an active participation in this battle of Hungarians was observed which ended up with the defeat of the Balkan coalition.

The effects of the Battle of Kosovo, in addition to the fact that they were directly reflected in the political position of Kosovo itself, were expressed even in Hungarian areas, since the Ottomans opened their way towards middle Danube and Sava valley, a route they would use in upcoming years in case of attacks on Hungary and Central Europe.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Balkan, Kosovo, Hungary, Albanians, Serbs.

Introduction

The Hungarian Kingdom, precisely on the verge of the first Battle of Kosovo, that took place on 15 June 1389 was shocked by internal political ferment which was triggered by the death of King Ludwig I. King Ludwig I did not leave a male heir, so that fighting to inherit the throne destroyed the strong system of central power until then. Domestic fighting to the throne enabled the neighboring countries of Hungary, namely Bosnia and Serbia to intervene in internal affairs. The arrival in power of Sigismund changed the situation and Hungary partially politically stabilised, achieved to dispatch troops in the anti-ottoman coalition in the First Battle of Kosovo, but it lost the primacy of anti-ottoman war, which was conveyed to the Balkan princes.

Hungary had followed an active policy in the case of Bosnia, Croatia and even Serbia, thereby giving these countries the opportunity to get involved in fighting for the throne. Thus, the King Tvrtko of Bosnia was engaged in conquering territories in Croatia and Dalmatia that were under Hungarian sovereignty. A turning point in such an activity of neighboring countries interfering in wars for the Hungarian throne was the capture in 1386 of the heir to the Hungary throne, Mary by Horvat brothers near Gjakovo in Slavonia (Šišić, 1962, 216) who enjoyed Bosnian support. But, supporters of Queen Mary crowned Sigismund as the king (future Mary's husband) with the help of Venice and upon this event, the situation changed in favor of the central power. Sigismund allowed the release of Mary and achieved success in the struggle against opponent contenders, respectively Anjou of the Naples party represented by Horvat brothers and Ivan Palizhna. They were forced as losers to take shelter at King Tvrtko of Bosnia and with his help, they wanted to restore their positions lost in Hungary. Polarization between noblemen went on, so that Tvrtko

assumed leadership of the party that favored the arrival on the Hungarian throne of the Wladyslaw of Naples the son of Karl Durrsaku already killed. Bosniaks, led by Tvrtko, taking advantage of that opportunity, embarked on invasion of Croatia and Dalmatian fortresses. This situation in southern areas bordering with Hungary had allowed the strengthening of Serbian feudal lords who ruled independently and also claimed implications to the Hungarian throne. In this situation Balkan forces, and especially Tvrtko and Serbian prince Lazar, had disrupted to himself support in Europe. The territory to be defended from Ottomans in the west had been stirred up in the wars for the throne mentioned above, where Bosnian and Croat interests were intermingled, while in the east Ottomans took care to maintain control over their vassal states established since the time of the Battle of Maritsa in 1371. In such a situation even the Southern Italy, which should have been an ally that could provide assistance to the Balkans against the Ottomans, remained without influence because of the murder of the heir to the throne, Karl Durrsaku. In such a situation, the danger of the Ottoman penetration was evident, so that only strengthening of Sigismund to the throne of Hungary could offer the appropriate support that would resist the Ottoman penetration. However, since his position was not stabilized as yet, this task was entrusted to Balkan feudal lords, who for a moment found a common interest whereby to resist the Ottoman assault in the form of a united Balkan coalition. Indeed, by early 1389 with the help of Stefan Lazar's son-in-law, Nicolas Gara, who at the same time was one of the most prominent militaries of Sigismund, prince Lazar improved relations with Hungary, giving to the Hungarians the possibility to participate in the ensuing battle. A special warning regarding the Ottoman danger threatening the Balkans was the penetration of Turkish forces in 1386 at the valley of Neretva in Bosnia. This situation alarmed Dubrovnikans and Bosnians. Hum population was housed in Ston of Dubrovnik. Tvrtko sent 1000 warriors in Dubrovnik, several Ragusan emissaries were sent to the Ottoman commander Shahini for negotiations, while another delegation headed to the Arber feudal lord Gjergj Strazimir Balsha, to the Bosnian King Tvrtko and to Sigismund. The Hungarian King Sigismund cautiously conveyed the development of events, but at the same time feared whether Serbs would attack Hungary and insisted in these moments to make an accord with them, which as noted above, was concluded with the mediation of Nikola Gara a Hungarian feudal lord who became son-in-law of the Serbian prince Lazar Hrebeljanovic. Given the common interest of defense from Ottomans and the accord with the Serbs, participation of Hungarians in the Battle of Kosovo appears to be uncontested. Additionally, sources of the time unequivocally evidence their participation in this battle. The Ottoman chronicler Neshri, among participants in the Balkan coalition mentions Hungarians, who according to him, were invited by Lazar to help him. "...Lazar sent people to all infidels and called for help. In response to his request, Vlachs, Hungarians, Czechs, Serbs, Albanians, Bosnians and Franks went to help him" (Pulaha, 1968, 80). Similarly, another Ottoman chronicler called Shukrullahu states that armies of Vlachs, Hungarians, Czechs, Serbs, Albanians, Bulgarians and Venetians were dispatched in the Battle of Kosovo (Pulaha, 1968, 31). Another chronicler called Enver is added to the list of Ottoman chroniclers referring to the Battle of Kosovo and mentioning Hungarians as participants in the Battle of Kosovo.

He, referring to this battle, among others, points out: "On the other hand the culprit king Zhekomín (Sigismund – M.M.) of Hungarians... sent to Lazar 70000 lion-like troops..." (Pulaha, 1968, 34). Even the other chronicler Uruçi, who was a contemporary of Mehmet II the Conqueror, among others, emphasizes the participation of Hungarians in the Battle of Kosovo. (Pulaha, 1968, 43). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the Ottoman chronicler Tursumi, by the mid 15th century, who had also participated in the conquest of Constantinople, calls the Hungarians participating in the Battle of Kosovo as yellow people, certainly alluding to their origin from Central Asia, what actually were the Turks themselves. Other sources of western provenances refer to participation of Hungarians in the Battle of Kosovo. The scholar Braun (1937), having drafted a chronological register of sources had enumerated more than 22 Hungarian sources (Braun, 1937, 81). Anonymous Florentine makes numerous references of Hungarians participating in a large army (Molti Baroni Ungheri con grandissimo gente d'arne) (Fejić, 1990 37). As a matter of fact, Hungarians as participants in the Battle of Kosovo are less mentioned in Christian sources of the time than in Ottoman sources. Although Hungarians are evidenced as participants in the Battle of Kosovo, the Hungarian crown was less concerned about territories south of the Danube than Croatian coastal territories, so that their participation in the Battle of Kosovo emerges as an attempt for resistance against a common threat, but also as an opportunity that in case of victory they were to extend their power in these territories. From a letter that the Serbian feudal lord Vuk Brankovic sent to the Republic of Ragusa, we understand that he was afraid of Hungarians that they could drive him out from the lands he was ruling. Among others, seeking refuge in Ragusa, V. Brankovic stated: "...if Hungarians, Turks or anyone else drive me out from Serbia..., then I will seek refuge in Ragusa together with my wife and children" (Jirečk, 1984, 330). Therefore, based on the documentary aspect and developments in the field, we understand the necessity of Hungarians' participation in this battle. Since dilemma about Hungarians' participation in the Battle of Kosovo is not source-supported recently the British historian N. Malcolm raised the theory of the assassination of the Sultan Murat I not from Millosh Kopili, as widely acknowledged, but from a Hungarian fighter. (Malcolm, 1998, 72). Actually, this theory was earlier recorded in Jakup Çelebi's theory, but N. Malcolm elaborated it further by favoring and popularizing it. Jakup Çelebi, referring to the murder of Sultan Murat I, states that a Hungarian horseman, while not sparing his men, separated from the others and rode his horse towards where he thought Murat was standing on a hill. Murat, who was on horseback, saw the fighter and tried to shoot him by an arrow, but the assaulter was too swift and fatally wounded the Sultan by an arrow. After a while, Lazar died on the other side of the field (Pacheco, 1964, 13). The work speaking about this event is a romanized biography of Jakup Bey, the son of Murat I killed by his brother Bayezid in the Battle of Kosovo. According to Malcolm, who was mainly based on this work for his statement on Hungarian origin of the murderer, this is attributed to an anonymous Catalan author, who must have written it until prior to the year 1402 (Malcolm, 1998, 72). Malcolm, considering this work as one of the most valuable sources for the Battle of Kosovo, stresses the fact that identification of the murderer of Murat with a Hungarian horseman should be taken as real (Malcolm, 1998, 73). While

elaborating participation of Hungarians in the First Battle of Kosovo and highlighting the features of epic tradition, the scholar Malcolm explains the connection between Sultan's murderers of Hungarian origin. Some of the earlier epic songs emphasize brave deeds and participation of Nine Jugovic people in the Battle of Kosovo, who, according to the tradition, were brothers of Stefan Lazar's wife, Milica, but given that history does not know their existence, then N. Malcolm sees Hungarians in the term "Jugovic", more specifically he identifies the name "Ugroviq", "Ugrariq" with the term "sons of Hungarians" and that murderer of Sultan Murat, referred to in documents as Bilesh Kyble or Millosh Kyble, is a nobleman of Hungarian origin. While the Albanian historiography, based on relevant sources, has created a real basis that identifies Millosh Kopili as Albanian and as the murderer of Sultan Murati I (Drançolli, 1995, 14), theory of N. Malcolm claims to explain the Hungarian origin of Millosh Kopili, among others, relying on the fact that the name Kopili identify first with the Serbian name kobilla which means mare, thus the son of Mare; meanwhile the name of the participant mentioned in defter as Dhimitri the son of Jund (Yund Ogly) this theory claims to present as the son of Mare, and the term Jund and Kobilla which have the same meaning, according to Malcolm, constitute the key leading to the opinion on the Hungarian origin of Millosh Kopili. In fact, the earlier Hungarian Shamanic tradition regards the horse as a powerful and popular symbol and Hungary more than any other country in this part of the world had a culture which linked the fighter's fame with the magical impact that mare or horse have in his personality (Malcolm, 1998, 56). Actually, in this analysis we should not circumvent the territory where the battle was fought, a territory northwest of Kosovo, named Kopilic, so that identification of the Sultan's murderer is much closer to the surname Kopilic, based on its vicinity, than the theory of linking the mare with Hungarian shamanic culture. Several Albanian families as well, carry the name Kopilic even to this day and the word kopil (cunning) can be more easily explained in Albanian language than by words kobilla or jund as Malcolm claims. Moreover, Millosh was not called Millosh Kobilla, but Millosh Kopili and only later the Serbian historiography converted this surname into Millosh Obilic. Whatever the determination of Millosh Kopili's as Albanian or according to Malcolm as Hungarian, this fact does not diminish the role of Hungarians in the Battle of Kosovo; instead, Hungarian presence is increasingly strengthened.

The end of the Battle of Kosovo was followed by the rapid withdrawal of Ottomans conditioned by the need of Bayezid to strengthen his position as an heir to the throne. Hungarians took advantage of this occasion, namely Sigismund, who had not personally participated in the battle. He availed himself of the opportunity to reconstitute territories south of the Danube which he had previously had in his possession. On the other hand, Serbs accepted the Ottoman vassalage, but this was rejected by Sigismund, who called Rasha also "Regnum nostrum Rascie", i.e. our kingdom of Rasha; thus we have to do with a direct conflict of interest regarding the area equally claimed by both Turks and Hungarians. In this case, the struggle for primacy between Hungary and Turkey concerning this part of the Balkans had just started. Sigismund personally attacked Serbia by occupying towns like Boraç and Çestinë southwest of Kragujevac (Jirečk, 1984, 328). However, Ottomans settled in Golubac fortress on Danube which

Sigismund called Taubesburg (in German language: rock pigeon) and from there, attacks on Hungary were launched. Considering that in a certain part of the territory south of Danube, Sigismund managed by force of his arms, to strengthen his own power further in southern areas, more specifically in Kosovo he tried to extend his power through diplomacy. On July 7, 1389 the Hungarian King dispatched his faithful military Nikolla Gara (Bani i Maçva) to come to terms with Vuk Brankovic (Klajić, 1982, 291). Appointment of Nikolla Gara as a diplomat to mediate in the question of cooperation of Hungarians with Vuk Brankovic was sustained by the fact that Gara and Vuk Brankovic was each husband of his wife's sister, namely son-in-law of the now dead prince Lazar. We are unable to conclude as to what they both agreed on, but certainly the agreement dealt with actions against Milica, Lazar's widow. Arguably, Sigismund of Hungary recognized Vuk as Lazar's heir, while the latter accepted his right in any territories that had once belonged to prince Lazar. Tradition on participation of Hungarians in the Battle of Kosovo remained alive still long after the battle. Thus, a document of the Austrian Emperor Leopold I, dated 27 October 1688, speaks about how Sigismund, Roman emperor and king of Hungary, had gone to the aid of Lazar and had fought against Murat, whom Millosh Kopili had strangled (Radonić, 1919, 41). It is comprehensible that this information does not correspond to reality, because Sigismund did not take part in the Battle of Kosovo, but, nevertheless the strong tradition related to the Battle of Kosovo continued to be still alive at that time.

In addition to the First Battle of Kosovo and the second one 59 years later as well, we encounter Hungarians in Kosovo even in 1409. Actually, in dynastic conflicts between Stefan Lazar and Gjergj Brankovic, in a clash that broke out in 1409, Hungarian troops already helping despot Stefan, burned down Pristina (Kosovo, 1972, 120). Based on the content of the document, dated 13 March 1409, it is found that Ragusans had complained to the King Sigismund that during the assault on Pristina, the Hungarian Army had caused many Ragusan people suffer, who at that time operated and lived in this city (Božić, 1952, 27).

Conclusions

Dynastic wars for the inheritance of Hungarian throne, after the death of King Ludovik I Anjouin, in the end of 14th century, caused the interference of neighbouring countries such as Serbia and Bosnia. These interferences weakened the possibility of the creation of an anti-ottoman coalition headed by Hungary, as the greatest regional Power. Sigismund, the newly elected king in the Hungarian throne, was not sufficiently stabilised in throne to participate himself or to lead the Balkan coalition in the important Battle of Kosovo, but instead, he sent his representative, Prince Nikolla Gara. The feudal lord Gara was son-in-law of Serbian Prince Lazar, hence despite the political instability in Hungary, their participation in the first Battle of Kosovo, according to the sources of the period, is undisputable.

The Sources of the period, particularly the Ottoman ones, mention Hungarians as warriors in this battle. The Ottoman chronicler Tursun, who lived in the middle of the 15th century and participated in the Occupation of Constantinople in 1453,

calls Hungarians the yellow people who participated in the Battle of Kosovo thus alluding to their Central Asia origin. Christian sources also mention the participation of Hungarians in the anti-ottoman coalition but these sources are less in number. It can be concluded that despite the emphasized political difficulties in the Hungarian throne, they were not willing to remain out of participation in the First Battle of Kosovo, also because they hoped that in case of Ottoman loss they would rule in the territory of Serbia and Kosovo, thus substituting the Ottoman impact with the Hungarian one.

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