

## How a Saint and a White Knight Saved Hungary (The Siege of Belgrade - 1456)

By Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

There are times when victories are not won by numerical superiority or the power of cannon but by forces far more subtle and inexplicable. The victory of the Hungarians at the Siege of Belgrade in 1456 was such an occasion. It is a story of how a Franciscan priest and a warrior of the Balkans saved Hungary against the overwhelming military forces of the Ottoman Empire. It is a story of bravery, resourcefulness and faith.

### **The Ottoman's Campaign against Hungary**

The fall of the city of Constantinople in 1453 sent shockwaves throughout Europe. The Byzantine Empire, which had stood for over 1000 years, was gone. The Ottoman Turks were now the major power in the East and Mehmet II was their Sultan and commander. The sack of Constantinople had merely whetted Mehmet's appetite for conquest and he was determined to subdue all of Eastern Europe. Once that goal had been accomplished, he could turn his attention to the Mediterranean Sea and Western Europe.

Mehmet II prepared for a campaign against Hungary in 1455-1456. His immediate objective was the fortress city of Belgrade, one of the key fortresses protecting southern Hungary. If taken, an Ottoman fleet would have open access to the Danube River. The Ottoman army could then take Buda, the capitol of Hungary, or even attack Vienna, the gateway to Western Europe. The garrison of Belgrade was commanded by Mihaly Szilagyi, the brother-in-law of Janos Hunyadi. It was poorly manned and couldn't stand against any major military force. During the winter of 1455, Mehmet II began assembling his armies. Thousands came from all corners of the Ottoman Empire. They were to be accompanied by a fleet traveling up the Danube River. Hearing of the assembly of these armies, Pope Callixtus III called for a Crusade against the Ottoman Empire and set February 6, 1565 as the departure date.

### **The Franciscan (St. John of Capistrano)**

Pope Callixtus III sent an unlikely but remarkable man to Eastern Europe to lead the campaign to save Hungary. He was neither general nor soldier. He was a Franciscan priest and his name was Fra Giovanni de Capistrano or John of Capistrano. He was the son of a German Knight and had been born in Capistrano, Italy in 1385. He had practiced law in the Courts of Naples and had been appointed as the Governor of Perugia, one of the Italian city-states. As Governor, he had enacted reforms against corruption and bribery. A war broke out between the cities of Perugia and Sigismondo Malatosta and John was sent as an ambassador to discuss peace. Unfortunately, the negotiations were unsuccessful and John was imprisoned in 1416. After his release, he renounced the world and joined the Franciscan Order in 1420. As a Franciscan, he traveled throughout Bohemia, Austria, Italy, Germany, Poland, and what would later become Russia, establishing numerous Franciscan communities along the way.

Fra Giovanni de Capistrano was seventy years old when he was sent by the Pope to lead this Crusade. He was a short man with an emaciated frame, hollow cheeks, and deep set eyes. He allegedly had the gift of healing but this was not the gift the Pope hoped that he would use in this assignment. Fra Giovanni was an incredible orator with the ability to deeply inspire those who heard him. He preached the Crusade throughout Germany, Austria, and Hungary. He gathered together some 8,000 students, merchants, peasants, and clergymen. They

were Hungarians, Germans, Poles, Bosnians, and Austrians. They were armed with pitchforks, scythes, cudgels, and farm tools. They had no military training. They didn't speak a common language. However, they had one thing in common: they were determined to keep the Ottomans from taking Hungary.

By June of 1456, Mehmet II and his army began moving northward to the city of Belgrade. His ultimate goal was the city of Buda, the capitol of Hungary. King Ladislaus V, the 16 year old King of Hungary, heard of the advance of Mehmet's army. He and his Court fled Hungary in the middle of the night of the safety of Vienna. The public reason for his swift and unexpected departure was his desire for a "hunting trip". The Ottomans were also planning a hunting trip and they brought with them over 300 siege guns, 27 cannons, and 7 mortars. Mehmet brought with him an army of some 60,000 to 90,000 men. Some historians have put the figure closer to 150,000 men. King Ladislaus V may have wanted to hunt wild game but the Ottomans were planning on hunting Hungarians. Against this overwhelming force, the Hungarian nobles refused to take the field and stayed safely on their estates. The King of Hungary left the defense of his country to the Captain General of Hungary. Without the assistance of the nobles (and their levies) and without the presence of the King to rally the country, the Captain General had few military or diplomatic assets. It was an extremely risky mission with little chance of success. Luckily for the Hungarians, the Captain General was Janos Hunyadi who was used to fighting against long odds.

### **The White Knight of Hungary (Janos Hunyadi)**

Janos Hunyadi is known as the "White Knight" of Hungary. At the time of the siege, he had been fighting the forces of the Ottoman Empire for over 15 years. He was born the son of minor nobility in either Wallachia or Transylvania in 1386 or 1387. Despite the lack of any formal education, he spoke Serb, Italian, Hungarian, Croat, and Romanian. He spent two years in the service of the Duke of Milan and received his military training under the mercenary Flippo Visconti. He became a Knight in the Court of King Sigismund of Hungary and married Erzsebet Szilagy, a Hungarian noblewoman, in 1432. They had two sons, Laszlo and Matthias.

Janos' military exploits against the Ottoman Empire were legendary. He was one of the first eastern European commanders to utilize a regular army instead of untrained peasant levies. He was a brilliant soldier and an ambitious man. He had fought in the Hussite Wars and began fighting the advance of the Ottomans into Eastern Europe as early as 1437. He defeated Mezid Bey and his army in 1441. He then defeated second Ottoman army led by the Beglerbey of Rumalia, the Commander-in-Chief of the Ottoman forces in Europe, in September of 1442. In 1443-1444, he led a multinational force of Hungarians, Transylvanians, Poles, and Moldavians during the "long campaign" leading up to the battle of Varna. Under his leadership, the Crusaders took the cities of Nish and Sofia and defeated multiple Ottoman armies in the field. They marched upon the Ottoman capitol before being forced to retire due to cold weather and the lack of supplies. No eastern European army had ever penetrated so deeply into Ottoman territory. For the first time, the Ottomans had been fought to a standstill. Unfortunately, the subsequent battle of Varna in November of 1444 was a disaster. Wladyslaw III, Hunyadi's King, lost both his life and his head at Varna. Hunyadi was the only Crusader leader to survive the battle and led the remains of the armies in retreat back to Hungary through Wallachia and Moldavia.

In 1445, Hunyadi led another attack against segments of the Ottoman army and recaptured a castle at Giurgiu with the aid of Vlad Dracul, Vlad Dracula's father. He was elected Regent for Ladislaus Posthumous, the young King of Hungary, in 1446 and served as Governor of Hungary from 1446 to 1452. In 1448, he led the combined Hungarian and Wallachian armies through Ottoman-controlled Serbia to meet up with an Albanian army led by George Skanderbeg, one of Albania's national heroes in its struggle against Ottoman domination. Unfortunately, the Albanians arrived two days too late and missed the rendezvous. Janos Hunyadi led his forces south to the city of Kosovo alone. On October 18-19, 1448, they fought Ottomans at Kosovo Polje. They were outnumbered and outgunned. They lost the battle but refused to surrender and continued to fight their way back to Hungary through hostile Serbian territory. Hunyadi's armies lost over 17,000 men but had inflicted almost double these losses upon the Ottomans.

The losses at Varna and Kosovo darkened Hunyadi's military reputation. King Ladislaus removed Janos from his position as Governor of Transylvania and Hungary. Janos soon returned at the head of his army to continue to fight against the Ottoman Empire. From 1451 to 1456, he conducted a series of successful raids against the Ottomans with the aid of a man whose name would later become infamous. Vlad Dracula became one of Hunyadi's military pupils and protégés. Janos introduced Dracula to the Hungarian Court of Ladislaus V and Dracula became the official Hungarian-supported heir to the throne of Walachia.

Janos Hunyadi paid for the re-supply and re-arming of the garrison of Belgrade from his own pocket. He then assembled his personal army which consisted of approximately 10,000 well armed and well trained veterans whom he merged with the 8,000 volunteers led by John of Capistrano. Belgrade's garrison had only 5,000 to 6,000 men. Hunyadi's forces were outnumbered by at least 3 to 1 and they were outgunned by the Ottoman's cannon and artillery. All conventional military wisdom called for the abandonment of the city of Belgrade. John of Capistrano did not believe in conventional wisdom. He simply believed and he convinced Janos Hunyadi to believe as well.

### **The Siege of Belgrade (1456)**

The combined forces of Janos Hunyadi and Fra Giovanni de Capistrano marched to defend the city of Belgrade only to find it already encircled by the Ottoman army. Mehmet the Conqueror had attacked the city by land and water. In order to ensure that there would be no reinforcements coming by the Danube River, Mehmet had placed a line of ships fastened together by chains on the Danube in the spot where the Sava and Danube rivers met just above the fortress of Belgrade.

On July 14, 1456, the Ottomans began a tremendous bombardment of the city with their artillery. The artillery barrage pounded at the city's outer walls. The Ottoman cavalry laid waste to the countryside around the city in order to feed the army during the siege. Janos Hunyadi and his men gathered together some 40 barges. The barges were soon packed with crusaders and members of Hunyadi's personal army. Under the cover of darkness, they mounted almost suicidal attacks upon the Ottoman blockade. The battle on the Danube River lasted for over five hours and legend has it that the Danube river ran red with blood. By the morning light, the crusaders had broken the Ottoman naval blockade.

Janos Hunyadi moved his troops and much needed supplies into the city via the Danube River. Belgrade's outer fortifications were continuing to be pulverized by the unceasing cannon fire. Many within the garrison believed that the city was lost. Hunyadi's army quickly began rebuilding the fortifications while John of Capistrano rebuilt their demoralized spirits.

On July 21, 1456, Mehmet ordered a full assault on the city to begin in the late afternoon. The battle lasted all night. The Janissaries, Mehmet's elite troops, managed to break into Belgrade's inner defenses. The defenders threw tarred wood, sulfur-saturated blankets and other flammables into the moat and then set it on fire. The flames separated the Janissaries fighting in the city from the rest of their army which was outside of the walls. After intensive fighting, the Janissaries were finally defeated. During the morning of July 22, 1456, there was a lull in the fighting which allowed Janos to bring in more reinforcements across the Danube River into the city.

By the afternoon of July 22, 1456, small groups of Crusaders began to leave the city and attack individual units of the Ottoman army. The small trickle of men soon became a flood as more and more Crusaders joined the fighting. The Ottoman commanders were completely shocked at this turn of events. They had the numerical advantage. They had artillery and cavalry. They had destroyed the city's outer defenses. They had the superior position on the field, and yet this rag-tag army was insanely engaging them on their own ground rather than hiding behind the remaining walls of the city. After several attempts to bring his forces back into the city failed, John of Capistrano took command of the Crusaders. Janos Hunyadi's small professional army quickly joined in the counter-assault. The Crusaders overran the siege guns and artillery and then began to attack portions of the Ottoman's camp. Mehmet was enraged and personally joined the fray. During the vicious hand to hand fighting, Mehmet was wounded in the thigh with either an arrow or a javelin and lapsed into unconsciousness. The Ottoman cavalry managed to turn back the crusaders who finally returned to the city and waited for a counter-attack that would never come.

With their Sultan unconscious and their morale severely shaken, the Ottoman army retreated under the cover of darkness taking only what they could carry. Mehmet despaired when he awoke in the city of Sarona. He ordered his forces to return to Ottoman-held territories. The siege of Belgrade was one of the worst defeats of his career.

### **The End of the Saint and the Death of a Warrior**

Janos Hunyadi and Fra Giovanni de Capistrano had saved the city of Belgrade. The Ottomans would not return to Hungary for another 65 years. The news of the victory reached Rome on August 6, 1456 and Pope

Callixtus III ordered the ringing of church bells at noon to celebrate the victory. Rome and Western Europe erupted in celebration. The siege was repeatedly cited as evidence of the ability of Europeans to beat the Ottoman army. Unfortunately, the leaders of this victory never lived to see the celebrations. Plague swept through Janos Hunyadi's army and he died on August 11, 1456. His courage and valor had impressed even his enemies. Upon hearing of his death, Mehmet II exclaimed "so dies the lion of Hungary!" Mehmet's official message was "although he was my enemy, I feel grief over his death because the world has never seen such a man". King Ladislaus V died in Prague on November 23, 1457 under mysterious circumstances and Matthias Corvinus, Hunyadi's younger son, was crowned as King of Hungary on January 24, 1458. King Matthias would later become known as one of the most famous of the Renaissance Kings of Hungary.

John of Capistrano passed away from plague on October 23, 1456 at Illok, Hungary. He was later beatified in 1650 and canonized in 1690 by Pope Alexander VIII. He is considered the patron saint of Jurists and his feast date is October 23. He is also the name-sake for the Spanish Mission of San Juan Capistrano in Southern California.

**Sources:** Norman Housley, *The Latter Crusades, From Lyons to Alcazar, 1274-1580* (Oxford Press, 1992), John Freely, *The Grand Turk, Sultan Mehmet II-Conqueror of Constantinople and Master of an Empire* (Overlook Press, 2009), Christopher Tyerman, *God's War, a New History of the Crusades* (Harvard Press, 2006); Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and his Time* (Princeton University Press, 1978); Laszlo Kontler, *A History of Hungary* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

