

# A CHRISTIAN VICTORY

by

ANDREW HARSANYI, Ph.D.  
MEMBER, HUNGARIAN HELICON



---

PUBLISHED BY THE HUNGARIAN HELICON, TORONTO, ONT.

A CHRISTIAN VICTORY



**A CHRISTIAN VICTORY**

500th ANNIVERSARY OF WESTERN RESISTANCE

AT NÁNDORFEJÉRVÁR-BELGRADE

A lecture delivered at the Hungarian Helicon, Toronto

by

ANDREW HARSANYI

PUBLISHED  
BY  
HUNGARIAN HELICON  
•  
PRINTED  
BY  
CENTRUM PRESS  
TORONTO, ONT., CANADA

## SIEGE AND VICTORY OF BELGRADE

Five hundred years ago on an early Summer day a royal hunting party changed its plans. Instead of hunting in the woods near Buda, in the heart of the Hungarian Kingdom, with the view of returning to court at the day's end, the party turned toward the West and moved on in the direction of Vienna. There was the king, Ladislas V, a youngster just past sixteen, and his uncle and chief counsellor, the Austrian Count Ulrich Cillei.

This episode, not a fiction but a historical fact, may serve to the interested student of history as a tragic symbol of those times. The hunting party of King Ladislas and their move to Vienna showed the unconcern of the King — and of his counsellors — for the war against the Turks.

For at the very same time the Turkish Sultan Mohammed II, both talented and powerful, already held the fort of Nándorfejevár (Belgrade) under siege in order to take this last gate to Hungary and to the Western Christian World.\* He had some 150 thousand well armed soldiers, 200 vessels on the river Danube, and 300 cannons. The cannons were the Sultan's real strength. Since Urban

\*The location of the fort of Nándorfejevár is identical with that of the present Belgrade, capital of Yugoslavia. In the following presentation we shall call it Belgrade because this will sound more familiar with English-speaking readers. Let us note, however, that in continental historical literature it is more frequently called by other, not Serbian, names; like in German Griechisch Weissenburg (that is Greek Whiteborough), and in Hungarian Nándorfejevár. After all, in the 15th Century it was a Hungarian fort.

the Christian renegade had been working for Sultan Mohammed, the Turkish artillery developed into the best in the whole world. These were the cannons which gained for Sultan Mohammed just three years earlier, in 1453, the great victory over Constantinople. Now these cannons were meant to open the road to the West, the road to final victory over Christianity, the road to world domination.

They were mighty instruments, these cannons. 135 feet long was the gun-barrel, hundred oxen were needed to haul such a gun, and wherever they were taken hundreds of men were building special roads for them.

And what stood against this mighty artillery? What against the fanatically disciplined Turkish army, what against the combined zeal and talent of Sultan Mohammed? A standard size and standard quality fortress, manned with a garrison of 7,000, an additional army of some 40 thousand, not very well trained, just recently recruited; and 200 small boats.

But their leader was the champion of Christian resistance against the Turkish invasion, the hero of 25 years of Turkish wars: *John Hunyadi*. And to Hunyadi's inspiration and spiritual aid there was one of the most fervent preachers of the 15th Century: *Johannes de Capistrano*, a Minorite — later a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. And somehow, around them and within, in the air and in their hearts there was the power of Christian faith and the power of prayer.

At the time the youthful king Ladislas of Habsburg left Hungary — openly and shamefully indicating that he did not care what Hunyadi was doing, or was able to do — Hunyadi was on his way to the fort of Belgrade. The fort and its garrison of seven thousand

was commanded by Hunyadi's brother-in-law, Michael Szilágyi. They were desperately waiting for Hunyadi's relief army as they viewed Sultan Mohammed's preparations. Things seemed to go from bad to worse. When, on July 14th Hunyadi at last arrived, Mohammed had already completed the preparation of the siege; the fort was encircled from both the river and the dryland. There was no way open through which Hunyadi could get into the fort. And Mohammed's mighty artillery was working on the walls of the fort since July 4th.

The situation seemed to be hopeless. Nothing, however, is hopeless if ingenuity is paired with faith for the sake of a just cause. Hunyadi's small boats — less in number and much smaller in size than Mohammed's ships — sprang the chain of the Turkish navy, sank the majority of them and thus opened the way into the fort.

A few days later, on July 21st, the Sultan launched his general attack. Two attacks were thrust back. The third, however, proved to be successful for the Turks. Through the huge holes punched by their artillery in the walls they were able to penetrate into the fort. It was a day of bitter fight and it was only with the help of hot pitch and burning sulphur that the defenders were able to drive the Turks out.

Hunyadi believed that his troubles, at least for the time being, were over. It had apparently been the main attack. Now the Turks would have to reorganize, they might even give up their plan to take the fort at this time. At any rate, Turkish artillery activity stopped.

But the mysterious force of gravity of war could not be stopped. The defenders, liberated from the tension of permanent alertness, feeling easy and also feeling strong

after their successful resistance began to hop out through the cannon-ball struck holes. There they not only enjoyed the freedom of the plains but also hit the Turks as they were gathering their dead and wounded. Soon there were more and larger groups of Christians and Turks engaged in battle. So much so, that on the afternoon of July 22nd Hunyadi was compelled to sally forth from the fort with his main regiment. At this time a full-fledged battle was already raging on the plain before the fort. A battle which often looked as if only very few of the adventurous Christians might be able to save their skins. But the appearance of Hunyadi and Capistrano, the help they brought and the encouragement of their personal appearance changed the course of the battle. What started as a kind of teasing adventure and developed into a very dangerous expedition resulted in the total victory of Hunyadi's forces. Hunyadi captured all the Turks' equipment, seized their precious guns while the beaten, demoralized, and confused Turkish army ran southeastward in the direction of Sophia.

The Christian victory was a complete one. Not only the fort of Belgrade was relieved but, at least for a while, the Western Christian world was free from the Turkish menace. The fighting genius of John Hunyadi and his predominantly Hungarian army — called by Western historians "*among the bravest and most stalwart of the fighting races of Europe*" — once more saved Western Europe.

Once more Christian Europe had a wonderful chance to summon her forces and finish, once and for all, with the Eastern enemy. With the enemy which wasn't after just a little spoil, a few cities, a bunch of slaves, a ransom



THE SIEGE OF NÁNDORFEJÉRVÁR (BELGRADE) IN 1456

of gold, or just the fun of war like the other fighting parties of Europe, countries, cities, dynasties, and armed bands — friends today, enemies tomorrow, allies again the day after — no, this enemy was different: this enemy was out for everything, for all the cities, all the lands, all the spoil; this enemy wanted all people to be made their slaves, *this enemy wanted to rule the entire world.*

John Hunyadi, his Hungarian forces, his blessed old spiritual helper Johannes de Capistrano were fighting *this* enemy. And it was *this* enemy they stopped at Belgrade. It was *this* enemy against which Christian Europe gained one more chance to build up an annihilating resistance.

But they did not. Europe, Christian Europe continued her course. The same as before Belgrade: sometimes little help, sometimes big words, other times not even that. *How can I spare ten thousand soldiers against the Turks when I need twenty thousand against my rival Christian neighbor?* — this was a kind of motto of the Western rulers while Hungary fought a century old war of life and death against the Turks.

As I said, the victory of Belgrade offered a new chance to do away with the Turkish menace. As the subsequent events showed it was, in fact, the last chance. But Europe failed to realize that, and failed to grasp at this last chance. It did not happen for the first time. It was not the first chance Europe missed, it was not for the first time that Christian Europe failed her defender on the Eastern marches.

## CRIME DOES NOT PAY

As I shall now try to give a brief account of the events preceding and leading up to the siege, battle and victory of Belgrade, the reader should think of the old proverb we all have been taught in school about history being the master of life, "*Historia est magistra vitae*". A proverb being old does not mean it is obsolete. We study history — in the classroom, at the scholar's desk, or at a popular lecture — in order to learn for ourselves. The simple truth is that man can learn, consequently nations and generations can learn, not only at their own cost but also at the cost of other people, other nations and preceding generations.

We are told that history repeats itself. It certainly does. Because human actions and attitudes repeat themselves. Human sins and human virtues alike. Therefore the study of history should teach us, moreover it should force, compel, and constrain us to turn away from sinful actions and attitudes. This may well sound a little bit too pious. It is not as much as it seems to be. So many of our modern "entertainments" of dubious literary value on film, radio and television, the Western, the murder and gangster stories, and the like claim to be justified by their proving that crime does not pay. Well, history is a big show which convincingly tells us that crime and sin does not pay.

Just a little more study will also teach that crime or sin are not necessarily straight murder or armed robbery — although these acts are beloved crimes so often committed on the international scene. However, history teaches us well that there are other crimes which do not pay either. On the international level, I mean. Hatred between nations does not pay. Greediness of nations does not pay. National egotism does not pay. Jealousy and vindictiveness between nations do not pay. And, stupidity and shortsightedness do not pay either. All these are grave crimes of nations, of individual leaders, of national leadership. Grave crimes with just as fatal and disastrous results as premeditated murder in the operation of a 20th Century crime syndicate.

Therefore as we are now reviewing events that happened many thousand miles away from the Western Hemisphere, and 500 years ago, we are not doing so out of sheer pious remembrance. We do it rather in order to gain some more insight into the present world situation which — tragically enough — is similarly characterized by the menace of a ruthless but frightfully ingenious system we have to face; also in order to learn what chances and resources human freedom and good-will have against such a menace.

## THE RISE OF THE OTTOMANS

The events that led up to the battle and victory of Belgrade in 1456 had their start about a century and a half earlier. It was around 1300 that the Ottoman Turks descended from their Bythinian hills in Asia Minor, and turned from peaceful shepherds into a missionary people. I say missionary because the goal of this people became to conquer the entire world for Islam. From the time the Ottoman sultans had established their first real capital in Brussa in Asia Minor they consciously worked toward world conquest. These sultans were not like so many of the ancient conquerors — like Alexander the Great or Attila or Genghis Khan — whose goal had been to conquer as much land and as many people as possible, and whose mighty empires had been based upon the genius and suggestiveness of one great leader. The way of the Ottoman sultans was different. Their empire was founded upon an idea, and their goal was to conquer the world for that idea. For an idea that made them fanatic, zealous, that had the power to put the idea in the center of the ordinary man's life in place of the man himself.

The Ottoman sultans were not only fanatic, they were also clever. Most probably, they could have run through the then known world like a tempest, within a short few



years, just like Alexander the Great or like Attila had done. But then they surely would have lost as fast as they had conquered, like the successors of Alexander or Attila after the death of these great leaders. The sultans wanted a lasting conquest. So, instead of a "Blitzkrieg" of their age they moved forward slowly. They organized the territory they won and they conditioned their people for the world conquest. They spent generations to train them so what they would take they should be able to hold. Not surface occupation but deep-rooted conquest was their goal; total change of life and soul.

Strangely enough it took more than fifty years that the Empire of Byzantium realized that a new power had arisen in its neighborhood. By then the new power had become too powerful to be easily destroyed (1307—1359). Subsequently the Ottomans have set foot on the Balkans, on European soil, and in 1389 they were as far West as Serbia after destroying the Serbian state on the plains of Kossovo (Rigómező).

Serbia was Hungary's next door neighbor, and it did not take long that the Hungarian king, Sigismund, had to face these new invaders in an open battle at Nicapolis (Nikápoly), in 1396. Sigismund's army was a real international one. There were French and English and Italian and German soldiers beside Hungarians and Serbians and Wallachians. Nicapolis turned out to be a great defeat for the Western forces. An army of the medieval knight system clashed with an entirely new art of fighting. Also, a seemingly tired system clashed with one which was feeding unto blasting vigor upon an — idea.

History may well criticize King Sigismund for many things done or undone; in the Turkish problem, however,

he saw clear. When the until then existing Hungarian-Neopolitan-Polish political triangle broke up by Poland turning into an unfriendly neighbor, Naples into an open enemy, King Sigismund sought for a new alliance which might provide a strong background for his struggle against the Turkish menace. This new orientation was Austria-Bohemia-Germany. It was a sound policy. Only, in his new orientation King Sigismund got so much involved in the intricate problems of Western politics that, after having been elected Emperor, he seemed to have more important things to do than bothering with the Turks.

King Sigismund's — but also the West's — shortsightedness and historical sin was a twofold one. First, they failed to realize the gravity of the Turkish menace. Second, they failed to recognize the great chance to destroy this menace. This is what happened: after their victory at Nicapolis the Turks, as it was their custom, drew back to prepare themselves for the next big blow. During this preparation they were attacked by Tamurlane and his Mongolians storming forth from the heart of Asia. Sultan Bajazed himself was captured and taken before Tamurlane in a cage. Nicapolis was in 1396; in 1400 the Turks were threatening Constantinople; in 1402 after having been struck by Tamurlane it looked as if the Turks had been wiped off the stage of history.

## THE VICTORY OF 1443

But it was not so. People who believe in an idea know that if they are defeated only the carriers of the idea, not the idea itself is defeated. After the Mongolian destruction the new Turkish sultan began to reorganize his people. He transferred his capital from Asia Minor to the Southeastern corner of the Balkans. Adrianople became his new capital. Here he set up not only his governmental quarters but also a group of the most efficient military training schools.

Within a quarter of a century the Turks were again a powerful people and had a mighty army. The Christian world missed her great chance after 1402 when the Turks were but a scattered, beaten flock. Was it indifference, indolence, or sheer political stupidity? Maybe all the three. Undoubtedly the division of Christianity into West and East, Rome and Byzantium, was also an important factor among the causes of inactivity.

At any rate the West missed her chance and the Sultan used his. So much that in 1424 the emperor of Byzantium, John Palaiologos VIII was compelled to make peace with Sultan Murad acknowledging the Sultan's protectorate over his empire. The "empire" at this time was no more than Constantinople, its vicinity — a narrow strip of land —, further some cities and islands in the

Mediterranean as well as the province of Morca on the Peloponnesos. Constantinople, really, was nothing more but a symbol of Christianity.

Emperor John sought for help from the West. He was even willing to acknowledge the supremacy of Rome. At the Council of Florence Emperor John solemnly turned Roman Catholic.

There were promising signs that the Christian world would now unite and offer a united resistance. Pope Eugene IV preached a crusade. In 1443 an army clashed with the Turks in Serbia and in subsequent battles during the Summer and the Fall in the Morava river valley beat the Turks. The Turks retreated and the Western leaders were considering to follow them to their capital, Adrianople. It was only because of the cold season that they stopped. But the Turks were definitely beaten and the Sultan, for the first time in many years, pleaded for peace.

The army that gained this brilliant victory of 1443 was an international one. Beside the many Hungarians there were Polish mercenaries, Serbians, Wallachians, Bosnians; also Germans, Burgundians and Italians from Genoa and Venice. Most important of all, however, was their leader, the star of the war: John Hunyadi.

## JOHN HUNYADI

Some historians call Hunyadi the comet of the 15th Century. And right so as Hunyadi stepped into the limelight of history without a family tradition of leadership, even without exactly known ancestors. According to a never definitely proved rumor Hunyadi was the natural son of the Emperor Sigismund (King Sigismund of Hungary), the mother being a Hungarian noble lady who later married one of the local voivodes in Transylvania. This was not a rumor spread in later centuries; it circulated already during Hunyadi's lifetime. Did Sigismund favor his natural son or did he just promote a nameless young man of brilliant talents? — there are no exact historical data by which it could be judged. But it is a fact that Hunyadi rose like a comet. Out of an unknown page he became almost in a flash the richest landowner, the keenest politician, and the greatest military leader of Hungary. Recent historical research tried to establish Hunyadi's descent from Cumanian (*kun*, in Hungarian) chieftains — but this is just as conjectural as the imperial origin.

One thing was certain: in the eyes of other peers of the realm Hunyadi had come from nowhere. There was a very potential group of peers and courtlings in the country who disliked him to the extent of trying to



JÁNOS HUNYADI, REGENT OF HUNGARY  
DEFENDER OF CHRISTIAN EUROPE

destroy him. Not so much by direct assassination but by leaving him alone in his struggle against the Turks. It happened more than once that Hunyadi barely saved his life.

It was not so much Hunyadi's obscure ancestry that turned some powerful peers against him. It was rather his character. The oligarchy of that age, with few exceptions, had only one interest: their very own. They were ready to fight against any enemy if the fight promised to bring advantage or benefit to their family. They formed groups and alliances to promote such family or dynastical interests, and if such interest happened to demand a fight against the Turks they were ready for it. It seems that this was the situation on every level: peerage of the realm, second-rate princes and voivodes of the borderlands, or kings and emperors of greater Europe.

Hunyadi was different. He was the richest man of Hungary. He was proud of it and he wanted the best for his family, first of all for his two sons, Ladislas and Matthias. But he also considered his wealth as a trust. A trust in the ancient knightly sense of Hungarian nobility: what he received from the crown he felt he had to use to serve the crown; also, he felt it impossible that the crown's interest be other than that of the country. In brief, Hunyadi felt that he should use all his wealth to defend Hungary against the Turks. So much so that, when the rest of the peerage, or the king, or the rest of Europe did not help him, Hunyadi bore the burden of this defense alone. No wonder that egotistic oligarchs, many of them of other than Hungarian origin, did not feel Hunyadi to be of their kind.

In contrast to this peerage the lesser nobility of the

country stood firmly behind Hunyadi. They followed him on his dangerous expeditions, and they were chiefly responsible that after the death of King Ulászló Hunyadi was elected Regent of Hungary for the period of the childhood of King Ladislas of Habsburg.

This is what happened after the great victory of 1443. Here was again a chance — you see how many chances there were! — to finish with the Turks. Hunyadi and his party, also the papal legate, Julian Cesarini, were for the continuance of the war. However, the borderland princes — like Voivod Vlad Dracul, or George Brankovich of Serbia — were satisfied with the result that their territories had been liberated. The Pope's legate, Cesarini, wanted a European coalition — but Europe was just as shortsighted as the borderland princes. So the Peace of Szeged was made and signed.

Shortly after this news arrived to Legate Cesarini that Christian naval forces were on their way to the Hellespont. King Ulászló hurriedly set off — against the advice of Hunyadi who was ready to keep the peace if once signed. The result of this expedition was the battle at Várna (1444) where both King Ulászló and the papal legate found their death. It was a total defeat of the Christian forces. Typical of the situation was that the Sultan's army crossed the Hellespont before the very nose of the Christian navy. But more than that: it were Genoan, "Christian" galleys that transported the Turkish forces to Várna. Gold was more important than the Christian cause, and, after all, Genoan trade flourished in Turkish controlled territory and Genoan galleys freely sailed on Turkish controlled seas. The Christian cause? Fine — if it does not hurt trade interests.

After Várna, the new king was just a baby — Ladislas of Habsburg, as king: Ladislas V — and he was in the hands of the Austrian Frederick III together with the Holy Crown of St. Stephen, the symbol of royal power in the eyes of Hungarians. Hungary, instead, had Hunyadi with all the vigor to act. Hunyadi, first, turned to the Western rulers asking them to assist him in setting up a new army. Beside the Pope it was only French King Charles VII from whom Hunyadi got an answer. And a very typical one: Charles promised Hunyadi to help as soon as he finished with his English enemy. So Hunyadi, once again, was left alone. But he did not stop and his successful drive to become governor of Hungary for the time of King Ladislas' childhood was but with one aim: to organize the active defense of the country against the Turks.

By 1448 Hunyadi had a not too big but fine new army. The scene of the new battle with the Turks — who had, too, reorganized their forces — was again the plain at Kossovo (Rigómező) where some 60 years earlier the Turks gained their first decisive victory over Serbia. Unfortunately it was again the Sultan who won the battle. Hunyadi's position was good but in the course of the battle the Wallachians, who fought in Hunyadi's army, deserted him, joined the Sultan, and the new balance of power worked for the Sultan's advantage; Hunyadi lost the battle. For years Hunyadi and his Hungarian army did not count as a potential weapon against the Turks.

The question may here be raised: were the Wallachians traitors? From Hunyadi's point of view they certainly were. From their own point of view, however, they were not. And they followed the pattern of that age by being

faithful only to one interest: their own. It is obvious that the Wallachians did not care for Hunyadi or Hungary or the West. They hoped that by the Sultan's advance their land would come beyond the permanent battle-line. And the Sultan did not hesitate to promise them just that. For people who believe in the given word, in contracts and alliances this attitude of the Wallachians may be shocking. In that age of fast changing loyalties and self-interest governed sympathies there was nothing extraordinary to it.

#### THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

During all this time the Sultan had been fortifying his position on the lower Balkans. The last flare-up of the Byzantine Empire was when Constantine Palaiologos attempted to establish a new empire on Greek soil, transplanting the imperial idea from Constantinople to Greece proper. Constantine failed. Not only because at Várna the Sultan beat the Christian forces thus gaining free hand against Byzantium but also because the sea-powers — Genoa, Ragusa, Venice — wanted the Sultan's peace and favor instead of fighting him. Indeed, the voice of gold was louder than the voice of the Christian idea in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Constantine's only choice was to become a vassal of Sultan Murad. When Emperor John Palaiologos died and Constantine succeeded him as emperor he was confirmed by his overlord, Sultan Murad.

Constantine was the last of the Eastern Roman emperors. A talented man and a fine leader. But also a tragic

leader. When he ascended the throne of Byzantium Constantinople, this last bastion of Christianity in the East, was still standing. For more than 150 years it had been bypassed by the Turks and never taken. So it was believed that it *cannot* be taken. Cities, however, cannot be defeated and held by faith alone. With the help of a Western army, or even with the help of Genoa's and Venice's naval forces Constantinople could have been saved. But these powers preferred to enter into an agreement with the Sultan.

Sultan Murad was succeeded by Mohammed II. This new Sultan was not satisfied with the overlord-vassal relationship between him and the Emperor. He was so fanatically antichristian that he saw only one way: to destroy Constantinople as a Christian city.

In his despair Emperor Constantine once more turned to the Pope for help, asking for a real crusade against the Turks. The condition of the help was the fulfillment of the Florence agreement, that is the recognition of Rome's supremacy. Constantine was willing to comply. Not so the Eastern Church. The Greek monks turned passionately against the Emperor. There were many who preferred the heathen Turks to the "heretical" Romanists. The result: no crusade to relieve Constantinople.

Ironically, when the siege and battle began Spaniards, Germans and Italians were fighting in the city's defense while the Greek watched the Emperor's effort with jealousy and hatred. On the other side, not only Turks fought in the Sultan's army. Several of the Sultan's Christian vassals from the Balkans joined his forces — like, for instance, the Serbian George Brankovich. On May 29, 1453 Constantinople fell, the Emperor was killed. In the

ransacked city Latins and Greek, Papists and Orthodox, Venetians and Genoese still hated each other — but the Eastern Roman Empire was no more. The Turkish flood had covered the last island and reached out to the Southern border of Hungary. Nándorfejérvár (Belgrade) became the gate to Christian Europe.

### THE BULWARK OF CHRISTIANITY

Rome was profoundly shaken from the news of Constantinople's fall. After the defeat of 1448 (Kosovo - Rigómező) the Pope himself advised Hunyadi to stay in peace and keep within the borders of Hungary. But now, in September 1453, Pope Nicholas V proclaimed a crusade against the Turks. All Christian princes and rulers were asked to unite. Hungary as the most threatened country — but also because of the outstanding leadership of John Hunyadi — was the natural leader. Hungary became the "*antemurale Christianitatis*", the bulwark of Christianity.

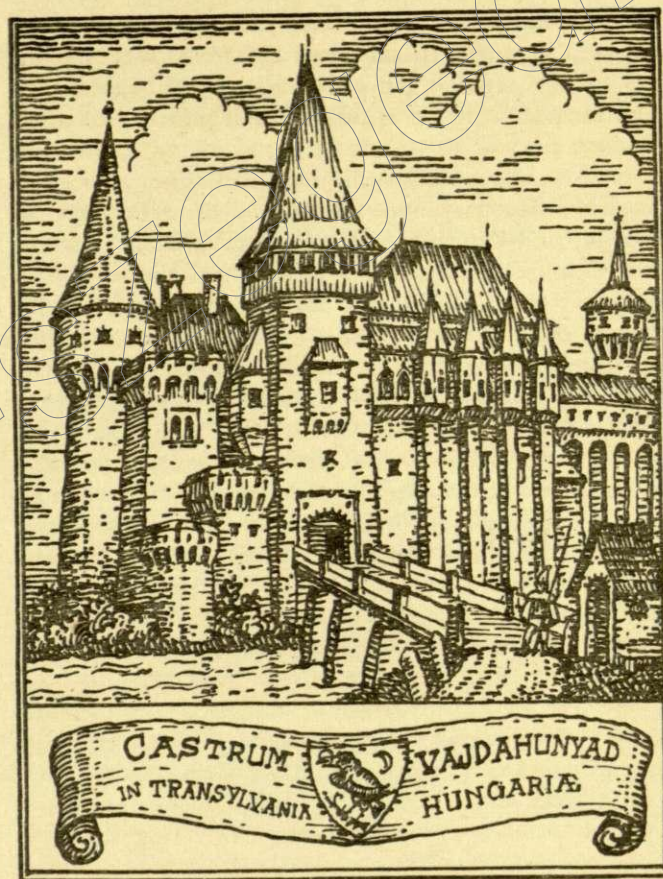
Following the Pope's appeal the Imperial Diets of Frankfort (1454) and Wienerneustadt (1455) discussed the possibility of a crusade. Much talk, nice promises — no action. Emperor Frederick III should have led all actions of European defense against the Turks. However, he saw it more important to fight his brothers. The Diet of Wienerneustadt began to discuss the crusade but it soon turned into the usual fight of power-balance among the German princes, and the Turks were forgotten. The only resolution passed by the Diet in this respect was that no crusade would be started in 1455 but the matter should be taken up again in 1456. The papal

legate, Aenea Sylvio Piccolomini (the future Pope Pius II) sent word to Hunyadi: there will be a crusade next year; until then Hunyadi should defend himself and Hungary as he can but — it was added — he should by no means make peace with the Turks.

In this perfidious atmosphere of the Imperial Diet the only heartening event was the arrival of the almost 70 years old Minorite friar, Johannes de Capistrano, a most effective preacher of the Cross, a Christian and a saint in the true sense of the word. Capistrano proceeded from Wienerneustadt to Hungary. The help Hunyadi was denied in armed forces by the Diet Capistrano supplemented with the spiritual forces of his inspiring personality.

Hunyadi and Capistrano figured that an army of 100 thousand should be sufficient not only to drive out the Turks from Europe but also to liberate Constantinople and the Holy Land as well. They were to ask 20 thousand from the Pope, 10 from King Alfonzo of Naples, 10 from Good Philipp, 10 from the smaller Italian states and 10 from the Serbian Brankovich. The Hungarian royal forces would amount to 20 thousand and Hunyadi himself would be responsible for 10 thousand. The figuring was correct but it remained only figuring and wishful thinking. When the Turks threatened Wallachia Hunyadi had to go alone.

By this time the new crusade was already proclaimed and its start was set for March 1st, 1456. This was done by the new Pope, Callixt III. He was the former Alfonso Borgia, a Spaniard from the classical soil of fight against Islam. Callixt publicly swore to drive out the Turks from Constantinople. He also swore to use for this purpose all the treasures of the Church and even to give up his



VAJDAHUNYAD CASTLE (15TH CENTURY)  
HOME OF THE HUNYADI'S

life if necessary. His papal bull "*Ad summi apostolatus apicem*", promulgated on May 15, 1455, was the one that set the crusade for March 1st, 1456. The Pope's plans included a union of all Christian princes and rulers to which purpose he appointed papal legates to go forth on missions of reconciliation. Juan Carvajal was to go to Germany, Hungary and Poland, Nicolaus de Cuso to Germany and England, Cardinal Alain to France. At the same time he also appointed preachers of the cross with a twofold task: to collect money for the benefit of the crusade and to recruit soldiers from the lower classes. Capistrano was the best among these preachers.

However, intentions and results are two different things. Contemporary chronicles say that princes and lords did not care much for the crusade. If there were any foreigners, any from the Christian West in the victorious army of Hunyadi at Belgrade, they were poor people, students and friars. The plan of reconciliation between the princes failed, too. The Pope got so disappointed that he recalled his legate, Nicolaus de Cuso from his appointed mission to mediate between France and England.

### THE BULL OF PRAYERS

So, a month before the battle of Belgrade, the Pope — as an old Church historian describes the situation — "*bereft of all human aid, had sought divine assistance*". Just after having failed in all his efforts to bring unity among the European leaders the Pope received news that Sultan Mohammed was marching toward Belgrade. Now the Pope turned to the mystical power of repentance and prayer. On June 20 (according to other versions on June 29), 1456 he issued his bull "*Cum his superioribus annis*". Callixt sang the solemn mass himself in St. Peter's, and on the day of the bull's promulgation the church bells rung for the first time in a new fashion.

For the bull not only exhorted the world's Christians that "by prayers, fasting and penance they return to the Lord that the Lord may return to us", but also ordered that in every church, between noon and vespers, one or more bells should be rung three times in order to call the attention of the faithful to their prayers. The people should say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys while all priests — even Cardinals — should say this special prayer: "*Almighty and Eternal God, in whose hands are all the powers of the earth and the rights of all countries, look upon the Christians, aiding them that the heathens, who trust in their own power, should be shattered by the might of Thy right hand*".



A fine prayer, biblical and evangelical. If you forget about the processions and indulgences connected to it a Protestant can read it with the same spiritual benefit as a devout Roman Catholic. For it points at the basic Christian principle: trust in God's infinite mercy.

A month later Hunyadi won a miraculous victory at Belgrade. How much, for this victory, can we attribute to the prayers incited by this papal bull called "*Bulla Oratorium*", the bull of prayers? The Pope himself ascribed the victory fully to the prayers of the faithful.

This is not the place to go into detailed discussion of the theology of prayer. Let me state, however, that I, in my Reformed-Presbyterian fashion believe in it. No matter how we try to reason and how we try to explain it the fact will always remain that prayer is an extraordinary, mystical power. Of course, we may try to investigate how many prayers have been offered as the result of the papal bull prior to the victory of Belgrade. Considering the speed of communication in that age it could not have spread in too wide a circle within a month's time. But it certainly must have reached Hunyadi, and he passed it on to his men. We cannot doubt that it had a tremendous spiritual impact upon Hunyadi himself and his fighting men as well: the entire Christian world was praying for them. A spiritual impulse strong enough to win the battle of Belgrade.

## MOHÁCS AND THE NEW VISION

And what after Belgrade? The Sultan ran and Hungary and the West was safe again for a while. The entire Christian world rejoiced upon the victory — but that was all. German chronicles are the witnesses that the crusade's enthusiasm has soon let off. And no subsequent action whatever. Hunyadi himself died within three months after the battle. So did Capistrano. As the result of a shameful and bloody political intrigue the elder son of John Hunyadi, László, died on the scaffold. King Ladislas V died shortly after — most probably murdered — and Hunyadi's younger son, Matthias was proclaimed King of Hungary.

His people called him *Matthias the Just*. He was the last great national king of the Hungarians, maybe the greatest of all. He was decided to follow in the footsteps of his father. He certainly knew that Hungary will never be able to fight the Turks alone. But he also considered it a futile attempt to unite the West. His idea was to reign the West and bring about unity under his own sceptre. Matthias failed, too. Although the Turks never really attacked him, Matthias died a mighty but disappointed king, without a strong heir and in pangs of anxiety for the future of his country.

It is a tragedy that instead of the leader of a Hungarian-Czech-Polish alliance Matthias had to die as a lonely

king with his neighbors feuding with each other while the rest of Europe simply did not care. At a time when the new Sultan, Selim, more ferocious than any of his predecessors was about to become stronger than any of them all. The dark shadow of the catastrophe of Mohács was already spreading over unfortunate Hungary, the never fully appreciated shield and bulwark of Western Christianity.

The battle of Mohács, in 1526, was the catastrophic defeat of Hungary and the shame of Western Christianity. Through Mohács, however, Hungary received a new gift from God: *the new vision how a nation can fight for survival under the most brutal oppression; not with, or not only with the might of the sword but with the power of the spirit. Hungary bravely beholds this vision unto the present day.*

#### RING THE BELLS

In the churches of the Continent, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, the bells are rung at noon every day. May they be rung not only reminding the Christian world of a past crusade, but also calling our present generations to Christian life. To repentance, to prayer, to trust in God's love and mercy and power, but also to reconciliation, to understanding, to unity, to vigorous Christian action.

Thus ringing toward a new Christian victory.



ekonyvtar.sk-szeged.hu