

SERBIA'S GREATEST BATTLE

Sir Arthur Evans

HISTORICALLY the battle of Kosovo was essentially a drawn battle. Nay, in many respects the balance seemed to incline to the Christian side. If one of the Confederate Princes, Prince Lazar, of Danubian Serbia, met his death, the Ottomans lost, in their Sultan Amurath, the head of their whole empire. The Ottoman host, under the new Sultan Bajazet, withdrew to Adrianople. The most valuable prizes that in case of victory might have fallen into Ottoman hands were left in Serbian possession.

The thriving towns of Novo Brdo, in the very neighborhood of Kosovo, and Kratovo, nearer to the Macedonian border the centers of the important silver-mining industry remained untouched. No attempt was made to occupy the Imperial cities of Prizren and Skoplje. It was not without reason that the commander of the Bosnian and Primorian contingent, Vlatko Hranić, who drew off his own forces from the field in good order, sent tidings of victory to his master, King Tvrtko, passed on by him to the citizens of Trail and Florence. In the Cathedral of Notre Dame *Te Deums* of thanksgiving for the success of the Christian arms were actually celebrated in the presence of the King of France.

Contemporaries were impressed by the great forces engaged the Ottomans actually magnified the Christian hosts to half a million men! The dramatic incidents of the battle inspired poetic commemoration among the Turks as well as the Serbs. "The Turkish histories," as the English historian, Richard Knolles, records, "to express the day, vainly say that the angels in Heaven, amazed with that hideous noise, for that time forgot the heavenly hymns wherewith they always glorify God." It is possible, indeed, that for the first time in Balkan war cannon may have contributed to the din of battle, since the Venetians had shortly before presented a "falcons" to the King of Bosnia.

Last United Efforts of the Serbs

Thus the first impression of the fight was that of an heroic combat between equals. The bards who carried on the Court poetry that had already existed in the days of Tzar Dušan and earlier kings, dramatized the incidents of the battle without any particular reference to historic consequences. It was only the later realization of its far-reaching effects that made the Lay of Kosovo an epic record of what proved to have been the last united effort of

the Serbian race to resist the Asiatic invader. It was itself an inheritance from days when the spirit of the Serb people as a whole was still unbroken, and it was from this quality indeed that it drew its inspiration in the dark days that were to come.

In reality the apparently even fortunes of the opposing hosts the superficial point that impressed contemporaries were profoundly misleading. The Serbian Prince Lazar was only one of several Confederate champions, the most important of whom, at least, the Bosnian King, would hardly have recognized him as even *primus inter pares*. The combination of so many Christian forces was itself a mighty effort. But even the most decisive victory could have hardly given a permanent value to what in reality was a loosely compacted alliance of princes and chieftains standing in various feudal relations of different races and of opposing creeds, and scattered over a physically divided geographical area extending from North Macedonia to the Danube and the Adriatic.

On the other hand, the fall of Amurath did not seriously affect the centralized Ottoman organization. The "lightning" Bajazet flashed at once into his father's place. The Serbs, too, it should be remembered, had barely recovered from the terrible slaughter on the banks of the Marica some 25 years earlier. Lazar himself had already suffered the loss of Niš, and had been reduced to the position of a tributary and dependent. From their European capital of Adrianople the Ottomans already dominated most of the eastern half of the Peninsula. They were astride of the Balkans, and had subjugated Danubian Bulgaria, while, on the other side, the possession of Seres was a threat to Salonika itself.

Looseness of the Christian Alliance

Apart from the particularist tendencies of the great feudatories and the personal jealousies of which we have the echo in the legendary treason of Vuk Branković on the field of Kosovo itself, it is hard to discover any firm elements of cohesion among the various units represented in the great alliance. Islam was a reality; Christendom less than a name. What real sympathy is it possible to detect between the militant Catholicism of Hungary and its Bosnian vassals and the Orthodox Serbian princes?

The seeds of still worse discord lay in Bosnia itself, where the Catholic persecution of the puritan and quasi-Manichaeian Bogomili was to bear fruit in the wholesale conversion of the latter to Mahomedanism. Regional interests and religious jealousies were thus for over five centuries to rivet the bondage of the Serbian people and to bar the way to any political union between the kindred members of the South Slav race.

But, through all this, the epic Lay of Kosovo, sung from generation to generation by peasant bards to the strains of the one-stringed "gusle" in the remotest mountain glens

and the busiest market-places, has still been a common heirloom of the whole people. It has perpetuated the tradition of national unity and kept green the memory of heroic deeds. It held up withal the traitors of the past to lasting obloquy. The lesson brought home by it is one which all members of the South Slav race take to heart to-day. It is summed up in the Serbian motto, *Samo Sloga Srbina Spasava*—"Union only saves the Serbs."

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The Patriarchate of Peć, Mary Edith Durham, 1903