

MEMOIRS OF A JANISSARY

Konstantin of Ostrovica (Konstantin Mihailović)

• CHAPTER XVI •
HOW IT WENT IN THE SERBIAN
OR RASCIAN KINGDOM

THE SERBIAN KINGDOM, after King Uroš, became a principality. They chose for themselves as ruler Prince Lazar, who had [as wife] the niece of King Uroš, named Milica. Therefore some were for Prince Lazar and others were against him, as it unfortunately happens everywhere, not only among the laity but also among the clergy. And wherever there is no unity, it cannot be good for anything in this world; as faith without deeds is dead. Emperor Morat, having heard that Prince Lazar was the successor of his ruler in the Serbian kingdom; having assembled an army, Emperor Morat marched to the Serbian land, to the Plain of Kosovo. And Prince Lazar, without delaying, also having assembled an army, marched to the Plain of Kosovo and took up a position opposite the Emperor on the other side, at Smagovo beside a stream called the Lab.

And it was on Wednesday; on St. Vitus' Day a pitched battle began, and lasted until Friday. The nobles who favored Prince Lazar fought alongside him bravely, loyally and truly; but the others, looking through their fingers, watched. And through such disloyalty and envy and the discord of evil and disloyal men this battle was lost. On Friday at noon, Miloš Obilić killed Emperor Morat. His son Mustaffa was also killed on that day, and his other son, named Ildrin Bayezid, was left on the imperial throne. Also on that day Prince Lazar was taken near a church of the Mother of God called Samodreža. On that spot was placed a tall marble column as a sign of the capture of Prince Lazar. Beside him was taken Krajmir the duke of Toplica. And many other nobles were killed in this place. And the disloyal ones, having watched their fill of the battle, remained traitors; which in fact later did not come out well for any of them. After a good while, choosing little by little he ordered them beheaded, speaking thus: "You behaved falsely and disloyally toward your ruler in such a necessity; you could do the same to me in my need."

Here they had brought Prince Lazar and duke Krajmir before Emperor Bayezid. Emperor Morat his father and also his brother both lay on biers. And Emperor Bayezid said to Prince Lazar: "Now you see lying on biers my father and brother; how did you dare try this and oppose my father?" Prince Lazar was silent, and duke Krajmir said, "Dear Prince, answer the Emperor. A head is not like a willow

stump that it will grow a second time." And Prince Lazar said, "Emperor, it is an even greater wonder that your father dared attack the Serbian kingdom." And he said, "Emperor Bayezid, had I known earlier what I now see with my eyes, you would lie on a third bier. But perhaps the Lord God has deigned to have it so for our transgressions. May God's will be done this day." And with that the Emperor ordered that Prince Lazar be decapitated. And Krajmir, having asked permission of the Emperor, kneeling, held the skirt of his tunic under the head of Prince Lazar so that it would not fall to the earth; and when the head had fallen into the skirt, then duke Krajmir, having placed his head next to the head of Prince Lazar, said, "I have sworn to the Lord God, 'Where Prince Lazar's, there mine also.' Both heads fell to the ground. And a Janissary brought the head of Miloš Obilić and threw it before the Emperor together with those two heads, saying "Emperor, here now are the three heads of your fiercest enemies."

Later the Serbs or Rascians who were with Emperor Bayezid asked for the body of Prince Lazar and carried it to a monastery called Ravanica and there he was buried and was elevated to sainthood. Emperor Bayezid, having won, remained on the Plain of Kosovo on the same battlefield, having built a monument there where his father was killed. On four columns a vault was built, covered with lead, and it stands there to this day. And having prepared his father and brother for their coffins, he sent them to a city called Brusa, where they were buried. Thus ended that unfortunate battle: through the disloyalty of evil men, two rulers, Emperor Uroš and Prince Lazar of the Serbian kingdom, fighting loyally for the Christian faith, in a short time left this world at the hands of the heathens.

• CHAPTER XXVII •
HOW EMPEROR MACHOMET DECEIVED
DESPOT DJURADJ UNDER TRUCE

The Turkish emperor, Machomet, made a truce with the Despot never to bother him before his death and that of his son Lazar and to support him faithfully and truly, as was mentioned previously about this. For Emperor Machomet made the truce with the Despot in order that he might take Constantinople or Stambol more easily. This turned out indeed to be so. And as soon as Constantinople was taken, immediately the next year, without having denounced the truce with the Despot, the Turkish emperor marched up-



on the Serbian or Rascian land against the Despot with all his might. The Rascians [i.e., Serbs], having heard this, gave the Despot to know that: “the Turkish emperor is marching upon us with all his might. What have we to do? Earlier we told you that the Turkish dog would deceive us; know, therefore, Your Highness, this is our view: Rather than give up our wives and children before the eyes of our brothers to be distributed among the heathens, we want to venture our necks and fight them. Therefore, Your Grace, march to our aid with as much might as you can. We have one army in Sitnica and another in Dubočica or Kislina. Therefore, Your Grace, knowing this, do not delay.”

The Despot answered them: “I cannot raise troops so quickly, for there is no King Vladislav in the Hungarian land who would gladly help me in this; therefore leave it all as it is. If you surrender to the Turkish emperor I will, by God, free you with God’s help.”

The Emperor, having arrived in Constantine’s land at a plain called Žegligovo, on the border of the Rascian land, hearing about the troops who were in Sitnica and Dubočica (Kislina), encamped here four weeks not knowing what to do nor which army to turn against. The army that was in Dubočica attacked his army bravely and fought and killed many Turks and also some famous Turkish leaders. Then the Emperor himself, having arrived with all his might, attacked them beside a mountain called Trepanja. The Turks say that as long as they have lived it is unheard of that from

so few men there was such a battle with such a large force. And they say that if that above-mentioned army had all been together with them, it would have decisively defeated the Turkish Emperor. And thus the poor wretches were defeated. Some were killed and others escaped. And one lord named Nikola Škobalić was impaled with his uncle.

And from there the Emperor marched and surrounded a city which they call Novo Brdo, “Mountain of Silver and Gold,” and having attacked it, conquered it, but by means of an agreement: he promised to let them keep their possessions and also not to enslave their young women and boys. And when the city of Novo Brdo had surrendered, the Emperor ordered that the gates be closed and that one small gate be left open. Having arrived in the city the Turks ordered all the householders with their families, both males and females, to go out of the city through the small gate to a ditch, leaving their possessions in the houses. And so it happened that they went one after another, and the Emperor himself standing before the small gate sorted out the boys on one side and the females on the other, and the men along the ditch on one side and the women on the other side. All those among the men who were the most important and distinguished he ordered decapitated. The remainder he ordered released to the city. As for their possessions, nothing of theirs was harmed. The boys were 320 in number and the females 74. The females he distributed among the heathens, but he took the boys for himself into the Janissaries, and sent them beyond the sea to Anatolia, where their preserve is.

I was also taken in that city with my two brothers, and wherever the Turks to whom we were entrusted drove us in a band, and wherever we came to forests or mountains, there we always thought about killing the Turks and running away by ourselves among the mountains, but our youth did not permit us to do that; for I myself with nineteen others ran away from them in the night from a village called Samokovo. Then the whole region pursued us, and having caught and bound us, they beat us and tortured us and dragged us behind horses. It is a wonder that our soul remained in us. Then others vouched for us, and my two brothers, that we would not permit this anymore, and so they peacefully led us across the sea.

And the Turkish Emperor Machomet took from the Despot all the Raškan land as far as the Morava, and left him [the land] from the Morava to Smederevo.

Konstantin Mihailović, also known as Constantine of Ostrovica, born in 1430, was a Serbian soldier and author of a memoir of his time as a Janissary in the army of the Ottoman Empire. Mihailović was born in the village of Ostrovica, near Rudnik in the Serbian Despotate. His book, *Memoirs of a Janissary* was written at the end of 15th century, probably between 1490 and 1501, and provides a unique insight into life in the Ottoman Army of the time. Mihailović’s stated motivation in writing the book was to provide a detailed account of the Ottoman state and its military structure in order to assist the Christian powers in their struggle against the Ottomans.