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**'Defending the Christian Faith with Our Blood'.
The Battle of Lepanto (1571) and the Venetian Eastern
Adriatic: Impact of a Global Conflict on the
Mediterranean Periphery**

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Abstract

The Battle of Lepanto in 1571 was the greatest naval battle of oar driven vessels in the history of the Mediterranean and the first defeat of the Ottoman navy in a direct confrontation with Christian forces. It represents the peak of a global conflict that involved vast opposing empires. An important part in this victory was played by 8 galleys, equipped and manned by Venetian owned towns in the Eastern Adriatic. Besides that the sailors from Venetian province of Dalmatia were present on no less than 19 Venetian galleys. On the basis of recently discovered archival material it is now possible to establish that up to 15 000 soldiers, sailors and oarsmen originated from the Eastern Adriatic, which represents around 40% of the entire Christian forces. Furthermore, in April of 1571 the Ottoman navy penetrated into the Adriatic itself, where it managed to operate without any major Venetian resistance. The extremely grim situation was particularly hard felt by the population because of the outburst of plague and subsequently of famine. The measures taken by the Venetian authorities were not sufficient and as a result social tumult and upheaval started, which later spread throughout Dalmatia. These uprisings became a political form of opposition against the Venetian power in the Eastern Adriatic and it took *Signoria* quite some time, money and effort before it could finally crush them.

Keywords: Battle of Lepanto, 1571, Eastern Adriatic, Venetian, Ottoman

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Introduction

The battle of Lepanto, which took place on the 7th of October 1571, was the greatest naval battle of oar driven vessels in the history of the Mediterranean¹. It was then that the mighty Ottoman navy suffered its first and utter defeat in a direct confrontation with Christian forces, joined in the Holy League. Its purpose was to help Venice in the defence of Cyprus, stormed by the Ottoman troops in July of 1570, but to no avail, as on the 3rd of August 1571 the island was taken by the Ottomans. The convincing naval victory over the Ottomans echoed throughout the Christian world, however its main effect was of predominantly propagandistic and political nature. The Holy League failed to exploit the military and strategic implications of its success. The Venetian Republic could not sustain enormous costs and was forced to conclude a separate peace treaty with the Ottomans, granting them Bar (Antivari) and Ulcinj (Dulzigno) in Venetian Albania, as well as the hinterland of important Dalmatian towns Zadar (Zara), Šibenik (Sebenico) and Split (Spalato). Ottoman authorities took full advantage of thus acquired peace and in only a year succeeded to entirely rebuild their navy, mostly due to the Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Paşa. However, the Ottomans failed to substitute great casualties among expert and experienced crew (Guilmartin, 2003, pp. 247-248; Novak, 2004).

The Ottoman losses were catastrophic (Table 1). Beside 30 000 casualties at least 3 486 were taken prisoner, although realistically this figure should also be put at around 30 000, while 12 000 enslaved Christian oarsmen were freed. Only 40 Ottoman ships managed to escape, while 130 were captured, and at least 84 were destroyed, out of 364 vessels, of which 230 were galleys². Venetian ships carried some 30 550 people, however only 21 000 to 26 000 originated from the Venetian territories. From the 15 440 casualties that Holy League forces suffered, about a quarter originated from the Eastern Adriatic, while Venetian casualties combined made up for as much as 63.5 % of the total number. The number of dead aboard Venetian galleys thus reached one third of all the crew members (Guglielmotti, 1862, p. 7; Peričić, 1974, p. 80; Šišević, 1974, pp. 40-41; Guilmartin, 2003, pp. 254-257, 266-268; Bicheno, 2004, pp. 287-296; Novak, 2004, p. 258; Čoralić, 2005, p. 128).

Eastern Adriatic presence at the Battle of Lepanto

An important part in the Christian victory at Lepanto was contributed by 8 galleys, equipped and manned at the very brim of the Mediterranean. The crew and necessary equipment was namely provided by the Eastern Adriatic Venetian towns (Šišević, 1974, p. 42; Bicheno, 2004, pp. 287-296; Novak, 2004, pp. 261-262; Čoralić, 2005, pp. 128-129). Apart from this 28 to 30 merchant ships from the Republic of Dubrovnik (Ragusa) were present, but did not engage in actual fighting, as Dubrovnik maintained its official neutrality (Cvjetković, 1922, p. 143; Foretić, 1965, p. 55; *ibid.*, 1974, pp. 165-166, 174-177; Lučić, 1974, pp. 205-206; Šišević, 1974, pp. 40, 45; cf. Tadić, 1932).

¹ There is an extensive bibliography on the battle of Lepanto (Cogo, 1899; Serrano, 1918-1919; Bacchion, 1943; Anderson, 1952; Braudel, 1972; Hess, 1972; Renier, 1972; Benzoni, 1974; Manousakas, 1974; Guilmartin, 1981; *ibid.*, 2003; Morin, 1985; Caetani & Diedo, 1995; Dumont, 1997; Vargas-Hidalgo, 1998; Canosa, 2000; Cacciavillani, 2003; Stouraiti, 2003; Bicheno, 2004; Yıldırım, 2007; Rodríguez, 2008).

² Šišević (1974, p. 47) mentions 238 Ottoman galleys present at Lepanto.

The structure of the Venetian navy in general consisted of three main parts: the first part were the oarsmen from the Venetian Dalmatia, the second part was constituted by the Greeks, and the third part consisted of both the Venetians from the capital and its *Terraferma*, as well as oarsmen from Venetian Istria (Ljubić, 1880, pp. 109-110). Crew members from the Eastern Adriatic that took part in the battle of Lepanto numbered approximately 10 000-15 000. This is hardly surprising as Dalmatia itself contributed crew members for no less than 19 Venetian galleys, present at Lepanto (Madirazza, 1911, pp. 100-101). According to findings from new archival sources their share in the entire Venetian navy reached around 40%, whereas 60% originated from other Venetian regions and foreign countries. The seamen from Venetian Dalmatia, including Kotor (Cattaro) and Boka Kotorska (Golfo di Cattaro) in what is nowadays the territory of Montenegro, accounted for 25.87%, while the Greeks contributed 27.84%, and those from Venice and the *Terraferma* 24.31% (RR, 41-43). This represents the proof of a systematically proportioned presence at Lepanto of crew members from all three largest and most important regions of the Venetian Republic.

Dalmatia, as the biggest pool of oarsmen for the *Signoria* in the Eastern Adriatic, enjoyed a stable ratio between the number of the entire population and share of adult males, capable of serving on galleys (Peričić, 1974, p. 69; Ljubić, 1880, pp. 28, 31). However, in just 10 years leading to 1575, the population rate diminished drastically, for over one third, which caused the demographic decline of the entire region (Tables 2 & 3) (Ljubić, 1880, p. 111; Solitro, 1989, p. 122). From the territory of the Dalmatian capital Zadar alone 1 000 men died at Lepanto and the same was true for Venetian Istria, while in Venetian Albania every fifth inhabitant was under arms (Foretić, 1974, p. 173; Peričić, 1974, p. 88). In 1572 the islands of the Zadar and Šibenik territory were stripped bare of adult male population, who for the most part perished at Lepanto or fled to the mainland (Novak, 1964, pp. 12-13, 37-38; RR, 40). Thus the Senate in 1574 ordered the population of Zadar be spared the galley service, because of grave casualties they suffered (RR, 42).

Furthermore, during the fall of Cyprus the Ottomans killed and enslaved many soldiers, originating from the Eastern Adriatic. One of them was Giovanni de Giovanni, captain from Koper (Capodistria), who later served at Crete (Cherini, 1992, p. 11). Venetian military, merchants and administration, stationed at Crete, were mostly composed of Italians, and to a lesser extent also of newcomers from Dalmatia and Istria. Between 1574 and 1645 as much as 4 500 Venetian mercenaries served there (Baroutsos, 2007, p. 647). On the other hand, there were many immigrants from Greece, who came to Istria and Dalmatia, where they were called *Greghi* or *Greci*. They mostly originated from Napoli di Romania (Navplion), Malvasia, Crete and Cyprus. Main reasons for migrating to the Eastern Adriatic were Ottoman raids and the Venetian-Ottoman wars. Upward social mobility of Greeks in their new homeland was quite high, so they often held important positions in urban administrative and military structures, but mostly they served in Venetian cavalry, called the *Stratioti*, as they were trained and experienced in fighting the Ottomans.

General conditions in the Venetian navy around 1571

Situation in the Venetian *Armata* was extremely bad, as is clearly visible from the decree of the Senate, passed on the 5th of May 1571, stating that war galleys are ill equipped, undermanned and in need of repair (RR, 40). However, the biggest problem was widespread mass desertion that left the majority of Venetian vessels inoperable.

This was not limited only to the period immediately prior to the battle of Lepanto. One of the supreme commanders of the Venetian navy, *Provveditor dell'Armata* Cristoforo da Canal, complained in 1558 over the lack of population and especially oarsmen in Venetian Dalmatia. Every year, with the disarmament of the galleys during the winter and their rearmament in the spring, as much as one third of oarsmen deserted the Venetian navy and fled, mostly to the Ottoman territory. Besides that, the Venetian Dalmatia was lacking men who could be recruited (Ljubić, 1880, pp. 109-110). The problem of deserters from Venetian galleys who sought refuge on the Ottoman territory was already very worrying for the Venetian authorities in the first half of the sixteenth century. Those who declined to serve on the galleys as oarsmen, where they lived a harsh and dangerous life, were banned from the Venetian territory and had all their belongings confiscated, so they started fleeing to the Ottoman side of the border (CCD, 280).

Desertion and insubordination were direct consequences of harsh conditions of service upon galleys. In fact, epidemics posed an even bigger threat than the Ottomans. Venetian authorities on the 15th of March and 7th of April 1571 concluded that in the initial stages of the Cyprus war majority of oarsmen on galleys in Dalmatia and the Levant have either fallen ill or died, and ordered the mistreatment to stop, by strict adherence to hygiene (RR, 40). The Senate informed the supreme navy commander, *Capitano Generale da Mar* Sebastiano Venier, that galleys disarmed at Corfu and brought to Venice were so filthy those who were sent to clean them nearly suffocated. The blame was put on bad management and indifference of the Venetian naval commanders (RR, 40). The oarsmen were completely aware of what they were getting into and before embarking draw wills, leaving their earthly belongings to their closest family members, as well as to the Church and guilds. Furthermore, even the chaplains, serving on galleys, failed to perform their ecclesiastical duties because of the plague, thus leaving many to die without confession and holy sacrament (RR, 40). After Lepanto numerous oarsmen were left crippled or otherwise inadequate for service and landed in poverty. For their merits they were granted certain financial compensation by the Venetian authorities (RR, 40). However, the lack of oarsmen in Venetian navy, acute even before Lepanto, intensified as the day after the battle Venetian Republic officially liberated all convict rowers. Nevertheless, their role constantly increased and in a decree from the 30th of January 1574 the Senate declared them the 'main force of our navy' (RR, 41).

In a desperate attempt to solve the problem Venetians forced the subjects from other Holy League members to serve as oarsmen upon their galleys, while the Senate decided to enlist Christians who fled to Venetian territory from the Ottoman Empire. However, following the complaint by the Pope, the Senate on the 21st of December 1571 ordered their release (RR, 40). Thus, much more attention was put on the enslaved Ottomans, who represented an important resource of forced labour, although such unilateral actions were strictly forbidden by former Venetian-Ottoman peace agreements (Pust, 2010a, p. 335; *ibid.*, 2010b, pp. 128-129; Lo Basso, 2003). Influx of Ottoman slaves was especially high after the battle of Lepanto, but constant supply was achieved by enslaving Ottoman merchants, who were supposed to be granted immunity. Furthermore, by the authorisation of the Senate inquisitorial procedure was introduced to prevent any possible withholding of Ottoman slaves by private owners (RR, 40).

Invasion of the Ottoman navy in the Adriatic and its consequences

The Venetian Republic introduced its main axes of economic communication by establishing merchant outposts in the Levant already from the Middle Ages onward, thus securing leading position in the Mediterranean trade until the fifteenth century and gaining enormous riches (Lane, 1973; Hocquet, 1999). For the Venetians the Eastern coast of the Adriatic constituted a gateway to their main sources of income (Novak, 2004, p. 92). Therefore, its Adriatic policy consisted of two reciprocal goals: winning strongholds on the strategically important Eastern Adriatic coast, thus creating a naval-commercial empire, stretching from the Adriatic to Constantinople and the Levant, while at the same time enforcing its political and economic domination over the Adriatic, considered to be their territorial sea and known simply as the 'Gulf of Venice' (Golfo di Venezia) (Raukar, 1977, pp. 208-209; Novak, 2004, p. 38). Because of its total control of the Adriatic the *Signoria* was obliged to ensure the safety of travel. For this purpose the Venetian Republic concluded numerous treaties with foreign powers, pledging itself to protect the vessels and population from naval attacks and guaranteeing safe passage.

However, it proved helpless against numerous Ottoman incursions in the Adriatic, carried out both by corsairs and the Ottoman imperial navy. The largest invasion of the Ottoman fleet in the Adriatic occurred during the Cyprus war in 1571. Big Ottoman fleet, since April operating from its base in Valona (Vlorë), actively assisted land troops in occupying Ulcinj, Bar and Budva. Afterwards a smaller group of around 70 ships under the command of the Italian renegade Uluj Ali parted and sailed north, attacking Korčula (Curzola) and Hvar (Lesina), where they looted and burned the towns of Hvar, Stari Grad, Jelsa and Vrboska, but failed to seize Gvozd (Samotvor), where most of the islands' population fled.

The main intention of the Ottoman attack in the Adriatic was to pin down the Venetian naval forces and compel them to defend in their backyard, so the Ottoman Empire would have greater chances of winning the war. However, the entire Ottoman naval operation was misguided, as the Ottoman fleet preferred corsair tactics of attacking smaller, less important Venetian forts, instead of engaging the Holy League itself, thus missing the opportunity to weaken the Christian forces before they could assemble in Messina and head for Corfu, towards Lepanto (Praga, 1954, p. 169; Maštrović, 1974, p. 25).

Signoria was well aware of the threat, posed by the Ottoman fleet and committed itself above all to defend Zadar, the capital of Dalmatia and the most important military and naval center of the entire Eastern Adriatic, from where Venetian troops and ships were sent across Dalmatia and Venetian Albania. However, the majority of the Venetian navy already left Adriatic and headed towards the meeting point at Messina. Efficient defence was therefore not an option for weakened Venetian forces (Pust, 2010b, 127). Chronic deficiency of fighting power forced the Venetians to accept the help of clerics, who were mostly of local origin, and keen on fighting the Ottomans, as was the case in Split (Frangeš, 1996, pp. 526-529).

The harshness of the situation is clearly evident from lamentations that the local population directed towards the Venetian authorities. In one such document they claimed that they are 'defending Christian faith with our own blood'. The main impact of the Ottoman fleet in the Adriatic was directed towards the islands, above all Hvar and Korčula. At Korčula, abandoned by the Venetian *comes* Antonio Balbi and its male inhabitants, the Ottomans pillaged the countryside, but failed to capture the town itself. There are several versions as to why Korčula managed to resist, however

the main reason was that the Ottomans never intended to conquer Venetian strongholds but were rather interested in looting, thus weakening the enemy³.

Signoria was afraid of a possible repeated attack by the Ottoman navy directed towards Venice itself. To prevent this it approved great expenses for the reconstruction of the Dalmatian forts and replenishment of their armories, while at the same time appointing new officials in the administration of local towns, in order to prevent future disobedience and desertion (RR, 40).

Corsairs of the Adriatic

The invasion of the Ottoman navy in the Adriatic was facilitated by corsairs or *levends* from the local Ottoman naval centers, who continuously pestered the Venetian possessions. This was not an ephemeral phenomenon in the Mediterranean, but was rather directly linked with the everyday life, revealing different nuances of a permanent arrangement, supported by infrastructure and commercial outposts of major merchants, thus gaining enormous profits from the booming slave and stolen goods markets (De Nicolo, 2001, p. 88)⁴.

Ottoman corsairs from Neretva (Narenta) and Hercegnovi (Castelnuovo) raided Venetian ships and territory across the entire Eastern Adriatic. *Signoria* was struggling to preserve control over the situation and on the 26th of May 1573 the Senate ordered war galleys to protect ports and islands, while at the same time preventing desertions (RR, 41). Such provisions had rather limited success, also due to corruption of the Venetian local officials. Nevertheless, Venetian war ships actually seized a number of Ottoman vessels and forts, the most important among them being Skradin (Scardona), which was burned to the ground. This was only possible because of the cooperation and great initiative from the local population.

During their raids the Ottoman corsairs captured many noble Venetians from distinguished families. Thus, the ships sent by the *sançak bey* of Valona Caracozza, who was later killed at Lepanto, managed to capture Nadal Donado. His brothers immediately proposed he be exchanged for Caracozza's brother, who was also a corsair, at that time imprisoned on the island of Crete. Their motion was approved by the Senate on the 1st of September 1571 (RR, 40).

The Ottoman corsairs raided the Venetian lagoon as well and even threatened Venice itself. In June 1573 they operated in the vicinity of Chiozza (RR, 41), while in May 1577 they operated in the area between Malamocco and Istria (RR, 43). Panic reactions of the Venetian authorities and their desperate attempts to at least contain the unhindered movement of the Ottoman ships across the entire Adriatic clearly demonstrate the impotence of *Signoria* in its struggle against the Ottoman naval power at the very doorstep of Venice.

Social unrest on the islands

The ferociousness of the Cyprus war left the Eastern Adriatic and particularly Dalmatian towns in deep economic, social and demographic crisis. The consequences were most severe on Dalmatian islands, especially on Korčula and Hvar, which

³ According to the official version of a Venetian chronicler Korčula was supposed to be saved by its women, who dressed themselves in men's clothing and repelled the Ottoman attack. However, this version has been discarded by Grga Novak (2004, pp. 21-22; cf. Foretić, 1958).

⁴ Corsair activities have been regarded as a form of resistance against the Venetian rule even before the arrival of the Ottomans in the Adriatic (Šunjić, 1965).

experienced the full force of the Ottoman navy. The citizens of Korčula were even commended by the Senate on the 3rd of September 1571 for their loyalty and valorous defence during the Ottoman attack (RR, 40). To strengthen the loyalty of its people and to mitigate economic and social problems *Signoria* allotted the merited individuals various privileges (RR, 40). However, only a few years later the Venetian authorities ceased with the distribution of free grain, despite the appalling poverty of the population. To make things worse, plague broke out on the island and throughout the Venetian Republic itself (RR, 41).

Circumstances were almost identical on Hvar, also ravaged by the plague epidemic (RR, 43), causing great famine already in 1571 (RR, 41). Hinterland and majority of the forts were burned down, and the Senate, after the departure of the Ottoman navy from the Adriatic, took great concern in renovation of the local Arsenal, crucial for the maintenance of the Venetian fleet (RR, 40). Ecclesiastical buildings and possessions were also badly damaged, among them the *Santa Maria delle Grazie* convent and the domenicant convent of *Santo Pietro Martire*. *Signoria* granted both financial aid and instructed its ambassadors to Rome to solicit additional support from the Pope himself (RR, 40). Supply has not improved in the years following the battle of Lepanto, so the local population was left with little alternative but to turn to banditism out of necessity and need. Venetian authorities reacted promptly and on the 14th of November 1577 ordered strict punishment of all those responsible for plundering the Ottoman merchants (RR, 43).

Procurement of oarsmen and other crew members for the Venetian fleet, present at Lepanto, as well as the attack of the Ottoman navy, caused great shortage of adult males, capable for rowing and fighting. *Signoria* answered with a ban on any further enlistment on Hvar and other islands (RR, 41). Nevertheless, at the end of the Cyprus war the community of Hvar was completely exhausted, and traditional conflicts have evoked among different social groups on the island. Social unrest reached its climax on the 27th of March 1574, when a long dispute ensued in the Senate between the representatives of both the aristocracy and the populace. It is therefore not surprising that the contrasts escalated into an open mutiny, dubbed 'scandalous' by the Venetian authorities and the Venetian navy was immediately dispatched to crush the rebellion (RR, 42). However, the tensions between upper and lower social classes were not pacified, as in February 1576 Venetian authorities were once again informed about new feuds among the local population that spread throughout Dalmatia (RR, 43).

Conclusion

The impact of the battle of Lepanto in 1571 was particularly destructive for the Venetian possessions of the Eastern Adriatic. The direct consequences were clearly manifested in the lack of the local male population, either recruited for galley service and killed in action or deserted to foreign lands, which facilitated the demographic decline of the entire region. This however was only part of the problem, as the parallel invasion of the Ottoman navy in the Adriatic caused great destruction, famine and outburst of epidemics, which in turn contributed to popular uprising that had an inherent social background.

Could we claim that all this has only been triggered by Lepanto? Definitely not, the scene has already been laid years before. However, the effects of Lepanto and the Cyprus war combined have worsened the situation substantially, making it impossible for the Eastern Adriatic population to sustain the demands and mistreatment imposed

upon them by the Venetian empire, engaged in a deadly struggle with the superior Ottoman power. Thus, a Venetian borderland region in the Mediterranean periphery has been forced to contribute beyond its capabilities in order to ensure the Christian coalition to prevail in what was really a 'mere' power struggle for the domination over the Mediterranean, even though official propaganda strived desperately to turn it into a clash of civilisations and a religious war. The effects of such actions and manipulations by the competing superpowers have been felt in the Eastern Adriatic at least until the eighteenth century, and reveal a distinct imperial subordination of the region, thus making it a zone with fascinating research possibilities for contemporary post-colonial studies. Therefore, it also represents a privileged area for the research of border history and coexistence, intercultural exchange, religious dialogue and intertwining of different civilizational patterns, as well as of specific local contexts to be found underneath multiple layers of official myth-making and state policy.

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Table 1. Ratio of Christian and Ottoman forces at the battle of Lepanto

Category	Troops	Casualties	Captured	Galleys
Holy League	80.000	15.440		213
Venetian Republic	30.550	9.804		113
Ottoman Empire	88.000	30.000	3.486	230
Total	168.000	45.440	3.486?	446

Table 2. Fluctuation of population in the Eastern Adriatic area in the 16th century

Date	1553	1559	1572	1573	1575	1576	1577
Quarner	20.500		12.860			5.932	
Dalmatia	94.100	99.560			60.524	61.594	
Zadar	23.829	21.500		14.660		13.901	
Kotor	13.300	8.816					3.262

Table 3. Fluctuation of adult male population in the Eastern Adriatic area in the 16th century

Date	1553	1554	1559	1572	1575	1576	1577
Quarner	4.540			2.300		1.411	
Dalmatia	20.000		21.240		13.067	13.068	
Zadar	4.500	3.710	4.300			2.446	
Kotor	2.540		1.850	520			994