

DEFENDING EUROPE: THE LEGACY OF LEPANTO

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October 7, 1571 dawned as a bright autumn morning. Ships glided silently across the water, the blue Holy League banner billowing from their masts. On the ships, oarsmen clutched the rosaries that had been issued to each one of them, their lips moving soundlessly as they prayed for strength and victory. They were sailing straight toward the seemingly invincible fleet of the Ottoman Empire, which was anchored in the port of Lepanto. This would not be a typical territorial skirmish, however. It would be the ultimate clash of culture against culture, religion against religion, and values against values as the two great forces battled for control of Europe. In the end, the Battle of Lepanto would go down in history as one of Europe's most consequential moments. Because of this battle, Ottoman expansion into the Mediterranean was thwarted and the decline of the Ottoman Empire began, ensuring that Europe would remain Christian and thereby defining the world to come.

Leading up to the Battle of Lepanto was a lengthy period of Ottoman conquest and expansion. For centuries, the Ottoman Empire had been motivated by both ambition for political and economic power and desire to spread their Islamic culture throughout the world. By the time the 16th century rolled around, the Ottoman Empire had conquered a vast expanse of land, stretching across Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Africa. There was one region that the Ottoman Empire desperately wanted, however, and had yet failed to gain control over: the Mediterranean, which would grant them access to greater trade opportunities and give them a starting point from which to stretch their arm and influence deeper into Europe. The Venetians controlled the Mediterranean at the time, and in a series of Ottoman-Venetian wars, the two powers fought for dominance over the Mediterranean ports and islands, particularly the strategic island of Cyprus. Over the course of the wars, the Ottoman Empire gained control of most of the ports in the Eastern Mediterranean... except Cyprus. Around that time, in 1566, a new, more ambitious Sultan came to power in the Ottoman Empire: Sultan Selim II.<sup>1</sup> Intent on “transform[ing] the

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<sup>1</sup> Brotton, Jerry. “The Battle of Lepanto: When Ottoman Forces Clashed with Christians.” *HistoryExtra*, November 26, 2020, [www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/lepanto-naval-battle-ottoman-christians-1571/](http://www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/lepanto-naval-battle-ottoman-christians-1571/).

Mediterranean basin into one vast Turkish naval port”,<sup>2</sup> Selim II considerably increased the expansionism efforts of the Empire. When the Protestant Reformation hit Europe and divided its countries, he saw his chance to once and for all take the Mediterranean for Ottoman control. In 1570, the Ottomans declared war on Venice and once more set their sights on Cyprus, the key to the Mediterranean.

Venice, which had been forced to surrender to the Ottoman Empire in the previous Ottoman-Venetian war due to a lack of support and finances, panicked at the prospect of yet another war. Knowing that it had no hope of keeping the Ottomans out of the Mediterranean by itself, Venice appealed to the other European countries for help. However, Europe, shattered by the Protestant Reformation, wanted nothing to do with the battle against the Ottomans. Preoccupied with their own problems, major Catholic powers like France and the Holy Roman Empire, which in other times would have taken up arms to defend Christian Europe from Islamic influences, turned down Venice’s plea for help. Venice had no choice but to appeal to Pope Pius V, the Catholic Pope at the time and the leader of the Papal States. Pius V immediately understood the urgency of the situation; if the Ottomans were allowed control of Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean, they would be in an ideal position to expand into Rome and Europe, thus destroying the Christian Europe that had existed for centuries and constructing in its place a vast Islamic empire. With the Protestant Reformation at large, an Islamic conquest was one more blow that Catholicism did not need. Alarmed by this looming war that had the potential to make or break the future of Europe and the Catholic Church, Pius V agreed to help.

Even with Pius V’s support, however, Venice had difficulty gathering support and allies for the war. After numerous difficulties, failed negotiations, and hours of deliberation, Pius V finally struck a deal with Phillip II, the Catholic King of Spain. Spain would fund an armada to combat the Turks, Venice would supply the ships, and an alliance for the good of a Catholic Europe would be made. Pius V then appointed a commander for the fleet - the young, headstrong Don Juan of Austria, half-brother of Phillip

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<sup>2</sup> Brotton, Jerry. “The Battle of Lepanto: When Ottoman Forces Clashed with Christians.” *HistoryExtra*, November 26, 2020, [www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/lepanto-naval-battle-ottoman-christians-1571/](http://www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/lepanto-naval-battle-ottoman-christians-1571/).

II - and christened the new force the 'Holy League'. Together, Don Juan and Pius V worked tirelessly to prepare the quickly-assembled men for war. Troops were mobilized and weapons were gathered, sending an unmistakable message to the Ottoman Empire: the Holy League was ready, and it would not give up Europe without a fight.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire continued its relentless conquest of the Mediterranean. Admiral Ali Pasha, commander of the Ottoman fleet and son-in-law of Sultan Selim II, did not bat an eye at the news of the Holy League's formation. He believed that the Holy League army was much smaller than rumored and that the Christians would be too afraid to stand between the mighty, massive Ottoman army and its goal. When the overly confident Ottomans mercilessly slaughtered soldiers and civilians alike at the Venetian cities of Nicolia and Fagamusta, however, Don Juan was enraged and decided it was time to take action. The Ottoman fleet was, at the time, anchored right off the Greek port of Lepanto, a port esteemed by Ali Pasha because of its strategic location in the Gulf of Patras. If the Holy League could capture Lepanto and thereby the Gulf of Patras, the Ottomans would be forced to retreat out of the Eastern Mediterranean and would not be able to capture Cyprus or invade the Papal States. The twenty-four year-old Don Juan mobilized his troops, consisting of around "6 large Venetian 44-gun galleasses (much larger than galleys), 207 oar-propelled galleys carrying 30,000 soldiers [total], and some auxiliary vessels".<sup>3</sup> Countless priests and monks accompanied the armada, along with the papal blessing and banner, relics, and the rosaries that were distributed to every oarsman. It was clear to the sailors and soldiers that this would be no ordinary attack; it would be the ultimate battle for the life and future of their Catholic faith.

Ottoman spies spotted the Christian fleet approaching Lepanto early Sunday morning on October 7, 1571. Ali Pasha, however, saw no reason to fear; he remained confident in his far larger fleet of around

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<sup>3</sup> "Battle of Lepanto." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Accessed March 12, 2021, [www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Lepanto](http://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Lepanto).

“300 war galleys, 100,000 men, and 14,000 Christian galley slaves”.<sup>4</sup> He gave the order to mobilize the Ottoman fleet in the Gulf of Patras in preparation to meet the Holy League. Miles away, Don Juan was assembling his fleets for battle. He moved his ships into a cross-shape as a reminder of their true intention - to protect a Catholic Europe - and attempted to embolden them, reportedly crying, “You have come to fight the battle of the Cross - to conquer or die. But whether you die or conquer, do your duty this day, and you will secure a glorious immortality”.<sup>5</sup> Ali Pasha arrayed his fleets in a crescent shape, both symbolic of the Islamic faith and an effective war formation, and ordered his ships to move forward. In his mind was surely the Imperial Decree from Sultan Selim II regarding the Holy League: “[It is] most proper and necessary to find and immediately attack the infidels’ fleet in order to save the honor of our religion and state”.<sup>6</sup> Both fleets saw themselves as fighting for the very future of their religion and culture, and both were aware of the significance of the moment. Shortly before noon, the Holy League moved its ships into position and fired; the Battle of Lepanto had begun.

The Ottomans quickly retaliated, and as the fleets moved closer together, the great naval battle quickly turned into a chaotic mess of hand-to-hand fighting aboard the decks of the ships. In spite of the Ottoman fleet’s confidence and greater numbers, the Holy League had one crucial advantage: galleasses, the newest technology in naval warfare. These massive ships were stationary and did not require oarsmen; the extra room on the ship decks that oarsmen would usually occupy was instead filled with cannons facing every direction, enabling the Holy League to take out ship after ship in the Ottoman’s fleet. The battle raged on into the afternoon and took a decisive turn when Ali Pasha’s ship was invaded; Pasha himself was killed, and the Ottomans were left leaderless. In disarray, the Ottomans were quickly

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<sup>4</sup> Weidenkopf, Steve. “The Great Reform.” *Timeless: A History of the Catholic Church*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2019, pp. 461-465.

<sup>5</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Lepanto*, ed. Dale Ahlquist (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 62. Quoted in Weidenkopf, Steve. “The Great Reform.” *Timeless: A History of the Catholic Church*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2019, pp. 461-465.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Brotton, Jerry. “The Battle of Lepanto: When Ottoman Forces Clashed with Christians.” *HistoryExtra*, November 26, 2020, [www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/lepanto-naval-battle-ottoman-christians-1571/](http://www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/lepanto-naval-battle-ottoman-christians-1571/).

overcome and forced to retreat, leaving the Holy League victorious. In total, 117 Ottoman galleys had been captured, with many more destroyed and thousands of troops dead. By contrast, the Holy League lost only 12 ships.<sup>7</sup>

Back in Rome, before the battle, churches opened their doors day and night, and the faithful were asked to pray the rosary on the Holy League's behalf. The people in Rome more than fulfilled this request; crowds gathered in the streets and the churches at all hours of the day, chanting rosaries and desperately petitioning Mary's intercession for the armada's victory at Lepanto. It is said that Pius V was in a meeting with his treasurers when he suddenly had a vision of the battle. He stood up and announced to the room, "This is not a moment for business; make haste to thank God, because our fleet this moment has won a victory over the Turks".<sup>8</sup> News reached Rome around two weeks afterwards: the Holy League had, in fact, won; Europe was safe. Pius V attributed the victory to the intercession of Mary and declared the day to be the feast of Our Lady of Victory, later renamed the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, in honor of the role that Mary played in the victory at Lepanto.

Ultimately, the Battle of Lepanto marked the beginning of the end of Ottoman control in Europe. It is true that the Ottomans rebuilt their fleet after the devastating losses at Lepanto and captured Cyprus later that year. However, from the Battle of Lepanto onward, the Ottoman Empire entered a downward spiral. The Ottoman plan was to take control of the Mediterranean, invade Rome to take out the papacy, and advance from there into Europe. Not only was that plan thwarted when the Holy League won the Battle of Lepanto and gained temporary control of the Mediterranean, but it also faced its extinction; never again would the Ottoman Empire come so close to taking complete control over Europe. In addition, Lepanto was a turning point for European morale; it was proof that the powerful, near-legendary Ottoman empire could be beaten. This, combined with the implementation of the new galleasse

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<sup>7</sup> "Battle of Lepanto." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Accessed March 12, 2021, [www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Lepanto](http://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Lepanto).

<sup>8</sup> Moczar, *Islam at the Gates*, 192. Quoted in Weidenkopf, Steve. "The Great Reform." *Timeless: A History of the Catholic Church*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2019, pp. 461-465.

technology used during the battle into standard European warfare, lent new strength to the European resistance and gave European forces an advantage over the traditional Ottomans. In the end, it was the Battle of Lepanto that enabled the Europeans to eventually fend off the Ottomans and keep control of their land. As a result, Rome was left unharmed, and Europe remained Christian. The very culture and values of Europe at the time were safeguarded rather than radically altered, allowing them to continue to grow and evolve as the world grew and evolved. Even subsequent world-shaping events, such as the colonization of the Americas or World War I, were determined by the fact that the Christianity of Europe endured and European leadership remained unaltered by an Ottoman victory. Ultimately, modern society - and the world as it is known today - owes its existence to that fateful day in 1571, when the Holy League prevailed over the Ottoman Empire.

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