

Introduction

On Being Osman

In 1688, in the tumultuous aftermath of the failed Ottoman siege of Vienna, a Muslim soldier surrendered to the Habsburg army and became a prisoner of war. Young and from a well-connected family, he expected to be quickly ransomed and reunited with his loved ones. Instead, Osman of Timișoara would spend twelve long years in captivity, finally regaining his freedom only after a daring cross-border escape that could easily have cost his life. By that time, although still a comparatively young man, Osman had faced enough adversity to last many lifetimes: torture by a sadistic master, brutal confinement in a dungeon, the hunger and contagion of an army camp in winter, and worse. But Osman persevered, and as the years of his captivity wore on, he managed gradually to improve his condition and even to win the esteem of his captors.

Eventually, Osman became a household servant of one of the highest-ranking noblemen of Habsburg Vienna, a position of relative privilege from which a range of completely unforeseen opportunities were opened to him. Through his master's patronage, he learned a most unexpected trade, apprenticing with a Parisian chef to become an expert *pâtissier*. In his master's service, he traveled throughout the Habsburg realms and well beyond, even to distant lands in Germany and Italy barely known to his Ottoman contemporaries. Thanks to his master's connections, he also became a man of influence among Vienna's many Ottoman Muslims, intervening on behalf of some of them both with the authorities and with their captors. And repeatedly, as a

charming, exotic man with a mysterious past and experience beyond his years, he tasted the flames of love, dangerously exciting the passions of both women and men with whom he crossed paths.

Remarkably, all of this is recorded by Osman himself in *Prisoner of the Infidels*, a vivid and unvarnished memoir he composed several decades later, as an older man living in Istanbul. Today, this priceless text survives as the most detailed account of life in early modern Europe from the perspective of an Ottoman captive. Just as important, it also stands as a major literary milestone, the first book-length autobiography ever to be written in the Ottoman Turkish language.

Yet paradoxically, many aspects of Osman and his text remain shrouded in mystery. Beyond what Osman himself reveals in his memoir, surprisingly little has been corroborated about his time as a captive from other sources. And curiously, although Osman is known to have pursued a long and successful career as a diplomat after returning to Ottoman territory, his account seems not to have attracted any significant attention from his contemporaries. Instead, *Prisoner of the Infidels* was virtually forgotten, only gaining general recognition for its historical and literary importance over the past few decades.

As a result, many questions linger about Osman the author and the text he produced. What inspired him to write, and by whom did he hope to be read? To what extent was he conscious, as he composed the first autobiography ever written in his language, of creating something truly new? Was he inspired, directly or indirectly, by literary models encountered during his long years in Christian Europe? And what kind of reaction to his work did he hope to provoke from his readers? For the moment, these are all questions without definitive answers. But if, as argued by the celebrated memoirist and memoir scholar Jill Ker Conway, “every biography is a prisoner of history”—a comment perhaps more applicable to *Prisoner of the Infidels* than to any other memoir—an obvious first step to a deeper understanding of the story of Osman’s life is to describe more fully the time and place in which he lived.¹

GROWING UP IN A “SILVER AGE”

Osman of Timișoara was a child of the seventeenth century, a period of world history rarely remembered as a happy one. On the contrary, in both Christian Europe and the Ottoman empire, it was a century of

political turmoil, sectarian conflict, economic and demographic malaise, and above all, unprecedented military violence.² But in the midst of all this turbulence—and in stark contrast to more recent periods of history—Osman's home region, the Ottoman Balkans, was an island of comparative tranquility in this wider sea of troubles.³

Admittedly, this would have been hard to predict from the way the century began: with a bloody conflict between the Ottomans and Habsburgs (the so-called Long War) that ravaged the northern Balkans for more than a decade before ending inconclusively in 1606.⁴ But thereafter, for almost seventy-five years, peace, only rarely interrupted, reigned across the long border between Christian and Ottoman Europe.

At first, this was largely the result of both sides being preoccupied with affairs on other fronts: the Habsburgs with the all-consuming brutality of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) and the Ottomans with their own religious conflict (from 1623 to 1639) with Iran's Safavids, a dynasty professing the rival Shi'ite version of Islam.⁵ Throughout these years of conflict, however, and for many decades after they concluded, peace prevailed along the Ottoman-Habsburg frontier, the two sides preferring to accept each other as neighbors rather than disrupt the status quo. The only real exception was a brief outbreak of hostilities in the early 1660s, resolved quickly with the signing of a twenty-year truce. For the rest, while religious wars and epidemics ravaged the Latin West, and bandits and Safavid armies plagued the Ottoman East, the people of the Balkans lived in a kind of "silver age" of stability and relative prosperity—indeed, one of the longest periods of uninterrupted peace in the recorded history of this frequently troubled part of the world.⁶

Osman of Timșoara was born toward the tail end of this "silver age," probably in 1658 although his exact date of birth is not known with certainty (a problem to which we shall return in the pages below). His native city, Timișoara, today in far western Romania, was at the time a major economic and administrative hub in the vital heart of the Ottoman Balkans, the kind of place to which ambitious, upwardly mobile subjects of the empire would naturally gravitate to seek their fortunes. This profile, in fact, seems to fit both of Osman's parents: his father, a middle-ranking officer in the Ottoman army, moved to Timișoara from his native Belgrade, while Osman's mother hailed from a much smaller town about fifty kilometers further up the

Danube (also in what is today Serbia). Osman gives few additional details about his family origins and his early childhood, but everything he does reveal suggests that he grew up in comfortable circumstances, although unremarkably so. In short, his family was composed of just the sort of people best positioned to benefit from the peace and stability of the Ottoman Balkans in the middle decades of the seventeenth century.

This is not to say that Osman's early years were without hardship. In truth, he suffered his first tragedy at the tender age of nine, when his mother passed away from illness and, only two months later, was followed to the grave by his father. Sadly, for Osman, this was only the first, cruel installment in a long succession of loved ones lost too early. But for the time being, Osman was at least lucky in that his father had made provision for him before his death, leaving each of his children with a healthy inheritance and arranging for Osman and his two younger siblings to be raised by their older sister and brother-in-law (a fellow military officer and protégé of Osman's father's). As a result, despite being orphaned before his tenth birthday, Osman's financial and social circumstances seem not to have changed for the worse in the years that followed.

Meanwhile, in the wider world beyond Timișoara, one would have searched in vain for signs that the Balkan "silver age" was on the verge of coming to an end. On the contrary, under the capable leadership of Fazıl Ahmed Pasha (Ottoman grand vizier, 1661–76), the Ottoman state seemed to be entering a resurgent new era of expansion. In 1669, for instance, Fazıl Ahmed negotiated a successful end to the most protracted and frustrating military operation in Ottoman history, the twenty-one-year siege of the Venetian fortress of Chania. Under the terms of the settlement, Venetian forces were completely evacuated from the city, leaving the largest and wealthiest Venetian possession in the Mediterranean, the island of Crete, completely in Ottoman control.⁷ Then, in 1672, the grand vizier turned his attention to the north, leading a large army into the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian confederacy. The result, formalized in a treaty in 1676, was that Poland-Lithuania ceded the regions of Ukraine under its control to the sultan.⁸ At this point, Ottoman holdings in continental Europe reached their greatest extent in history, with every expectation that there would be even more significant conquests in the near future.

COMING OF AGE IN A GREAT WAR

In 1676, Osman of Timișoara was on the cusp of manhood, a young warrior-in-training ready to make his mark on the world. And in November of that year, Osman's coming of age was matched by a changing of the guard in Istanbul, when the elderly Fazıl Ahmed died in office and was replaced as grand vizier by his younger brother-in-law, Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha.

A man of outsized ambition, the new grand vizier was widely believed to be planning a direct confrontation with the Habsburgs, for which he was said to be anxiously awaiting the expiration of the twenty-year peace the two sides had concluded in 1664. Such suspicions were confirmed in 1682, when negotiators for the Habsburg emperor Leopold I, hoping to renew this agreement, were turned away and sent home from Istanbul empty-handed. Preparations for war then began in earnest, and by the following spring Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa headed for Belgrade, where he formally took command of the armies led there by the sultan. From there, he began the long march north into Habsburg territory, reaching the outskirts of Vienna by mid July 1683. The great war had begun.

The story of what followed—the epic siege of Vienna—has been told and retold many times, and need not be recounted here in any detail. Suffice to say that by early September, after a grueling two months of fighting, Ottoman forces had undermined a significant portion of Vienna's defenses, and appeared close to victory. But on 12 September 1683, a relief force headed by King Jan Sobieski of Poland, who had signed a defensive treaty with the Habsburg emperor a few months earlier, reached Vienna. Attacking the besiegers from the rear, in what is remembered as the largest cavalry charge in European history, Sobieski routed them and forced a disorderly retreat that left the Ottoman frontier almost completely defenseless.⁹

The situation then spun quickly out of control, with Ottoman forces in disarray and the strength of their enemies increasing steadily. In December, Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa, the architect of the war, was executed on the sultan's orders. But by this point, neither the grand vizier's death nor the temporary end to hostilities brought about by the onset of winter could reverse the war's course. On the contrary, by the early months of the following year, a nightmare scenario had unfolded for

the Ottomans: on 5 March 1684, representatives of the Habsburg empire, the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, and the Republic of Venice formed the “Holy League,” a three-way anti-Ottoman alliance, subsequently joined by Russia. The powers agreed to wage war together, to coordinate their forces for as long as the war should last, and to remain in a permanent defensive alliance thereafter.¹⁰

Thus, by the summer of 1684, the besiegers had become the besieged, as the armies of the newly formed Holy League marched into Hungary and surrounded Buda (modern Budapest). The city was heroically defended by the Ottoman garrison, which turned the allies back. But they could not save Peşt, on the opposite side of the river, and during the campaigns of the following summer, Nové Zámky and Košice, the most important Ottoman cities in Slovakia, also fell to Habsburg forces. Then, in 1686, the allies returned to Buda, this time conquering the city decisively. A general slaughter of its population followed, and from there Habsburg forces penetrated ever deeper into Ottoman territory.

In the early pages of his memoir, Osman tells us that both his older brother and his brother-in-law were sent north at this time, and were direct participants in some of the bloodiest fighting in Slovakia and Hungary. For his part, Osman stayed behind in Timișoara to serve in a local cavalry unit, and there faced a different but equally brutal side of the war: the complete breakdown of the existing social order. According to his account, the Habsburg army began supplying weapons to local Christians, encouraging them to become what Osman calls “haid-uks” (“bandits” in Turkish, but, in a measure of the war’s complexity, something closer to “freedom fighters” in modern Serbian, Romanian, and Hungarian).¹¹ Unable to prevent the depredations of these outlaws, Osman and his companions were instead ordered to carry out retaliatory raids into the areas under their control—raids during which, in Osman’s words, he and his men “plundered everything.”

Then, in August 1687, the war entered its darkest hour when Ottoman and Habsburg forces met outside the Hungarian city of Mohács. This was a battlefield drenched with symbolism: the site, one hundred and sixty-one years earlier, of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent’s glorious victory over the Hungarian King Louis II, which had ushered in the era of Ottoman hegemony over much of central Europe.¹² But this time, in the second battle of Mohács, the outcome was almost exactly the opposite. Outmaneuvered and outgunned, some 10,000 Ottoman

troops lost their lives, while as few as 600 died on the Habsburg side. The unprecedented defeat prompted a mutiny of the remaining Ottoman soldiers, and the grand vizier, Sarı Süleyman Paşa, abandoned his post and fled back to the capital. Like his predecessor, he too faced summary execution shortly after his arrival in Istanbul.

In his memoir, Osman does not mention whether his older brother or brother-in-law fought at Mohács, but it is likely that they did, and possible that they had a hand in the subsequent mutiny. In any event, following this debacle, Ottoman resistance all but collapsed, leaving the Habsburgs to seize full control of Slovenia and Hungary, with the door open to Serbia. Meanwhile, far to the south, in what is now Greece, the allied forces of the Republic of Venice completed their conquest of the Peloponnese, where they had first landed troops two years earlier, and from there besieged Athens (badly damaging the Parthenon in the process). By November, the situation had become so dire that Sultan Mehmed IV was deposed in a palace coup, after a reign of thirty-nine years, and replaced on the throne by his younger brother Süleiman II (r. 1687–91). But this desperate act brought no relief to the beleaguered Ottoman defenses. Instead, Habsburg forces crossed the Danube and Sava rivers as soon as the spring rains permitted and penetrated into the heart of Serbia. By the end of the summer of 1688, just two years after the fall of Budapest, Belgrade, the crown jewel of the Ottoman Balkans (and Osman's father's ancestral home) fell to the Holy League. The complete expulsion of the Ottomans from continental Europe—something almost unimaginable just a few years before—was now a serious possibility.¹³

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

Osman of Timișoara was captured by the enemy at precisely this moment of deep imperial crisis, the circumstances of his surrender directly reflecting the panic and confusion of the long, hot summer of 1688. Ordered to escort a shipment of currency to Lipova, a garrison town a day's ride to the north of Timișoara, Osman arrived just before an ambush by a huge Habsburg army, not even suspected to be in the area. Worse still, Lipova's defenses were dangerously depleted, its garrison having sustained heavy casualties in skirmishes over the previous weeks—a fact initially hidden from Osman by local officials. Surrounded

and hopelessly outnumbered, he and his men put up the best resistance they could. But the outcome of the siege, and Osman's eventual capture, were foregone conclusions from the beginning.

Then, ever so briefly, it appeared that Osman's ordeal might end as quickly as it had begun. Together with several of his comrades, he was allowed to return home and collect a ransom payment for himself and another soldier from his unit. But instead of his freedom, this perilous trip gave him only a new perspective—that of a victim—on the lawlessness and complete social disintegration of the lands left behind by the retreating Ottoman armies. While crossing a deserted forest with payment in hand, and despite carrying travel papers from the Habsburg authorities, Osman was attacked by Hungarian bandits, men who only a few years before had been loyal Ottoman subjects. He was despoiled of everything, barely escaping with his life.

Thereafter, Osman's experiences would continue to be inseparable from the war unfolding around him, but from the vantage point of an observer perpetually "behind enemy lines." First, he was reunited with his captor, the venal and sadistic Lieutenant Fischer, in the midst of the great Habsburg military crossing of the Danube at Erdut. He then accompanied a large army led by Ludwig Wilhelm von Baden-Baden, a.k.a. Prince Louis—a hero of the siege of Vienna—on a rampage through Serbia and Bosnia, at one point spending a surreal, sleepless night listening to the sound of "friendly fire" from a nearby Ottoman battery of guns. Conditions deteriorated thereafter: Osman was locked up as an enemy combatant, offered for sale to a Venetian slave merchant, and eventually sent far from the front with a contingent of invalid Habsburg soldiers, witnessing horrible mortality as they died from dysentery—a disease to which he, too, eventually fell victim.

Quite unexpectedly, however, this nearly fatal illness is the great turning point of Osman's narrative, a symbolic death caused by his captors' shocking disregard for humanity, but followed by a rebirth enabled by the first genuine acts of kindness shown to Osman since his captivity began. With no small measure of poetic justice, Osman's miraculous recovery also coincided with Osman's captor, Lieutenant Fischer, taking a blade to the belly and very nearly dying. And here, without doubting the veracity of Osman's account, it is difficult not also to give an allegorical reading to his narrative. For, as it turned out,

the Ottoman empire—also recently left for dead on the war front—was simultaneously on the verge of its own improbable recovery. During the campaign season of 1690, in fact, Ottoman forces not only halted the Habsburg advance but counterattacked, regaining control of most of Bosnia and Serbia, including Belgrade. Meanwhile, in a separate campaign in the south, they similarly reversed Venetian gains in the Peloponnesus, Montenegro, and Albania.

This Ottoman resurgence did not last long. Just one year later, its principal architect, the new grand vizier Fazıl Mustafa Pasha (younger brother of the late Fazıl Ahmed), was killed at the battle of Slankamen, a disastrous defeat for the Ottomans. But by this time, the Ottomans' enemies were also tiring of the conflict and preoccupied by the outbreak of the so-called Nine Years War, which would quickly draw in almost all the major powers of Christian Europe (as well as their overseas colonies), in what has sometimes been referred to as the "first global war."¹⁴ As a result, although the Great Turkish War would officially continue for the rest of the decade, for several years after 1691, there was in reality very little active fighting, as the Habsburgs and their allies turned their attention to the new war in western Europe, and the Ottomans waited to see if events there might strengthen their bargaining position.

All of this is palpably, if indirectly, reflected in Osman's narrative, beginning with the long convalescence of Osman's captor and perennial tormentor, Lieutenant Fischer. Once fully recovered from his wound, Fischer abruptly decided to resign his commission and take another job in Vienna, presumably related to the Habsburgs' new war to the west. Fischer also announced an intention to bring Osman with him to the capital, a fate he only narrowly avoided by hiding with some locals in Ivanić, a provincial town outside of Zagreb, just long enough for Fischer to leave him behind. There he would remain for the better part of two years, working as a menial laborer in the custody of General Otto von Stubenberg, the local commanding officer. Eventually, in early 1691, Stubenberg noticed Osman working in the stables and offered to hire him as a private groom. Osman accepted, and although unclear to him at the time, this was a momentous decision that, within a few months, would mean leaving behind the Balkans, the region that had always been Osman's home, and traveling with the general into the exotic and unfamiliar world of Austria proper.

CROSSING BORDERS

Osman's first steps on this grand journey were to Graz and then to Kapfenberg, the home territory of his new master. Here Osman found that he had very little work, and in his new life of comparative ease, he quickly won the hearts of both his master's wife, Countess von Lamberg, and the staff of her household. In fact, Osman intimates that the countess, who was widowed shortly after his arrival, became emotionally dependent on him and in her grief pressured him to become a Christian, so that he would be unable ever to leave her service. Osman resisted, all too aware that conversion could forever close the door to returning home. Instead, at some personal risk, he asked—and eventually received—permission to transfer to a new master in the Habsburg capital.

In this way, Osman passed into the service of Count Christoph Dietmar von Schallenberg, a relative of the countess's and one of the bluest-blooded aristocrats in Habsburg Vienna. As a new arrival with no previous experience in the capital, Osman began working for Schallenberg in the humblest possible capacity: he and another man from Timișoara were charged with carrying the count through town in a litter mounted on their shoulders. But in short order, from this lowest of entry points, Osman quickly rose in the count's esteem, while the count, for his part, was busy ascending the upper echelons of Viennese high society, marrying a woman close to the palace and becoming Emperor Leopold's high war commissioner (*Kriegshauptkommissär*).

From this point forward, although technically still a captive, Osman's developing association with this powerful, well-connected household would become the basis for his social identity and even his sense of self. This was particularly true with regard to his relations with Vienna's surprisingly large community of Muslims, who recognized in Osman a means to access the corridors of elite power, which would otherwise be closed to them.¹⁵ But Osman's service to the count likewise enhanced his status in the eyes of Vienna's Christian inhabitants, enabling him to integrate into the larger social fabric of the city. As such, the sections of his narrative about his years in the capital are populated with a cast of colorful characters that reveal Osman's full immersion in Viennese society. Filled with earthy anecdotes that Osman clearly took pleasure in retelling, they also provide tantalizing

glimpses of the seedier aspects of life in the capital, to which he was certainly no stranger.

As for Osman's personal relationship with Count von Schallenberg, this became one of deep trust, to the extent that the count frequently insisted on keeping Osman with him even when traveling abroad. Osman tells us that he accompanied Schallenberg on a sensitive military tour through occupied Ottoman territory in Hungary, traveled with him on visits to the count's mother and sister in the German cities of Augsburg and Regensburg, and most ambitiously, crossed the Alps from Austria to Italy, visiting Trent and Brescia and staying in Milan for a full five months. This last trip, probably undertaken in late 1696, was of a sensitive diplomatic nature, directly connected to Habsburg maneuverings to end the Nine Years' War after Louis XIV of France (the Habsburgs' principal enemy) and Amadeo of Savoy (a Habsburg ally) made peace in the Treaty of Turin. Given the delicate nature of this mission, it is fascinating to imagine it as a precursor to Osman's later career as a diplomat (on which more below). But, unfortunately, his experience in Italy is a topic about which he is uncharacteristically reserved.

Osman is equally circumspect about two other international developments of the following year, although given their potential impact on his own future, there is no doubt that he followed both with extreme interest. The first of these was the Ottomans' final major military offensive in their war against the Holy League, a campaign that began hopefully with an attack on Szeged in southern Hungary, and ended in disaster when retreating Ottoman forces were ambushed while recrossing the Tisza river back into Serbia on 11 September 1697—an attack masterminded by Eugene of Savoy, the rising star of the Habsburg army. Here, in just a few hours of fighting, over ten thousand Ottoman soldiers (and by some accounts many times more) lost their lives, those who drowned in the river possibly outnumbering those who fell in combat. Tragically for Osman, his younger brother Suleyman was among those killed, although Osman did not learn of his death until several years later.

This defeat, known as the battle of Zenta, was a crushing blow for the Ottomans, particularly as it came after two promising years in which an energetic new sultan, Mustafa II (r. 1695–1703), had personally led his armies to several small but meaningful battlefield victories. Moreover, its significance was dramatically compounded when, in the

weeks immediately following the battle, the Nine Years' War, between Louis XIV's France and a coalition of the Habsburg emperor and several allies, officially came to an end with the Peace of Rijswijk. Thus, humiliated on the battlefield, and with no other conflicts to distract the attention of their enemies, the Ottomans finally came to the negotiating table in earnest.

The outcome, the Treaty of Karlowitz, was a four-way agreement between the Ottomans, Venice, Poland, and the Habsburgs, signed on 26 January 1699 (Russia made a separate peace a year later). It was an unprecedented event in Ottoman history, marking the first time that an Ottoman sultan agreed, in writing, to permanently surrender significant territory to European powers, ceding all Ottoman holdings in Hungary, Croatia, and Slavonia to the Habsburgs, Podolia and western Ukraine to Poland, and the Peloponnesus and the island of Lefkada to Venice. And yet, as steep as these losses were, the treaty also preserved for the Ottomans substantial territories that they might easily have been obliged to surrender, including most of Serbia (the birthplace of both of Osman's parents), and even Timișoara, besieged and nearly captured as recently as 1696.¹⁶

Just as important, the end of the war opened the door for Muslim captives in Habsburg territory to return home, although for Osman, the question of his release was more complicated than for many of his countrymen. Ironically, the source of his elevated status during his years in Vienna—his connection to a prestigious noble household—now became an obstacle to his freedom, since both the Count and his wife were so keen to keep Osman in their service that he could not risk asking for emancipation papers. Instead, he hatched an intricate, dangerous plan to forge the necessary documents and sneak across the border incognito.

Adding to the drama of this decision, Osman agreed to make the journey with several fellow captives in tow: a young family (composed of Osman's friend Mehmed Sipahi, his wife, and their four-year-old daughter) and a mysterious female companion, a countrywoman from his native Timișoara. Without ever revealing her name, Osman makes clear that this woman of elegance and singular beauty had lived through an adventure every bit equal to his own: after surviving a bullet to the head, she had been taken by force to distant Lorraine in the Franco-German borderlands and then escaped, somehow crossing all