

Cross and Crescent in the Balkans: The Ottoman Conquest of South Eastern Europe (14th-15th Centuries)

David Nicolle,

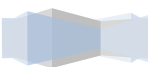
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The rise of the Ottoman Empire, from an obscure small political entity, is without doubt one of the most important phenomena of the late medieval period. Unfortunately written accounts about early Ottomans from this, as in the words of Dr. Nicolle “*dramatic and many ways mysterious*”, period are either completely lacking or consist of occasional entries –most of which present more questions than solving the original ones. In terms of military history the situation is far worse. The available information consists of bits and pieces that were heavily contaminated with sagas and legends. Moreover nationalist interpretations of the Ottoman history by the modern successor states’ historians played important role in turning this dread of information into a quagmire by their highly biased theories.

Dr. Nicolle, a well-known author of Osprey books and some other popular military history books, attempts to cover this vital years, “*the century between the first Ottoman troops*

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taking control of a small part of the Gallipoli Peninsula and the fall of the final remnants of the age-old Romano-Byzantine Empire”, from the perspectives of nearly all participants. He starts his ambitious project by a short cultural and chronological entry about the origins of the Turks, how some of them ended up in Anatolia, how the first Turkish states were founded including the *Seljukids* of Rum and the complexities of Byzantine Empire and Balkan states. These two introductory chapters are successful in terms of increasing the curiosity of readers but sound military information is limited and important militant events – such as Manzikert (Malazgirt) battle of 1071- or military institutions –such as *pronoia* and *akritoi*- are only mentioned passingly. The following third chapter presents introductory information about another set of important actors, Crusaders, albeit similarly in a passing way. Readers only manage to get glimpse of various warring states and actors under the leadership of various kings, sultans and notables with bewildering names.

Chapter 4 deals with the relation of religion and war. The author draws a different picture than the commonly accepted version of religious hatreds and holy wars. He is not denying the importance of religious identity and religious elements within conflicts. However he puts emphasis on realist understanding of political and economic interests and extremely complex relations between actors of various sizes and power. In chapters 5 and 6 Dr. Nicolle deals with Turkish, Byzantine and Balkans political, social and cultural lives with occasional entries about military developments. The author suddenly returns back to his chronology and begin to explain the importance of Ottoman crossing to Europe and early conquests. However he continues to pay more attention to social and cultural issues at the expense of military developments. With another sudden move the author begins to describe the rise of Serbia at the cost of the Byzantine Empire but interestingly instead of focusing on the dynamics and developments behind the rise of the Serbian kingdom the author prefers to write about various aspects of life in Byzantium.

The focus of Chapter 9, in opposition to its title, is the development of Ottoman political and military institutions. The author provides a brief summary of the foundation of Ottoman slave-based standing army, *Kapıkulu* corps. He also mentions various bits and pieces of Ottoman system including architecture and lawmaking. Chapters 10 and 11 are allocated for the crusade of Nicopolis (1396). These two chapters are, in comparison to others, are focused on the military aspects of the crusade. Chapter 12 is dealing with the nadir of the Ottoman Empire, namely the Ankara battle of 1402. The Ottoman expansion towards east was instrumental in creation of a strong opposition from the former Turcoman emirs and Anatolian population. Timur (Tamarlane) was the self-made sultan of a great Central Asian Turcoman state, who had just finished the conquest of Iran becoming the

neighbour of the Ottomans. He was more than happy to enlist the support and cooperation of the disenfranchised Turcoman emirs. The author presents the sudden appearance of Timur and how he founded his empire in a colorful prose. Alas he allocates relatively limited space for the catastrophe of the Ottoman military at the hands of Timur. The following three chapters seem to deal with the following 13-year long interregnum and Ottoman recovery. The author instead of focusing on wide scale revolts and wars pays more attention to social and cultural life such as Ottoman understanding of Sharia and secular laws, education, art, music and literature. Dr. Nicolle briefly mentions some important battles from time to time. Chapter 16 promptly explains how the remaining Balkan small states became part of the empire as vassals. Chapter 17 seems to deal with the Ottomanization of Anatolia after the disappearance of Timurids. However the author allocates only two pages for this political development instead pots to describe Ottoman-Islamic social institutions and life.

Dr. Nicolle, clearly pays much attention to the siege and conquest of Constantinople by allocating three relatively long chapters. According to him *“the true importance of 1453 was not in marking the end of something ancient but in marking the start of something new”*. Unlike most western writers he is very sympathetic to Ottoman cause and effort. He is not only appreciative of *“massive undertaking”* but also Sultan Mehmed’s control on his troops after the conquest by comparing Constantinople’s fate with the crusaders’ capture in 1204. As customarily he provides various snippets of social and cultural life during this huge military operation. Chapter 22 deals with Venetian-Ottoman relations very briefly and explains various aspects of Venetians. The last chapter promptly describes how the Ottomans secured their borders by fortifications and garrisons.

This is a popular history book. There is no footnote and the bibliography that is provided at the end is thin. The book includes a black and white photo essay. Most photos were taken by the author and they show some interesting pieces of military architecture, personal armour and weapons. Even though the book looks like a military history, it is not. It certainly contains many bits and pieces of military history and tries to explain a turbulent era with high level of military activity. However Dr. Nicolle just like a European informed gentleman and connoisseur of the 19th century prefers to cover his subject selectively but with colour. He combines his intimate knowledge of geography, culture and art skilfully and presents it in a highly readable prose. He is adamant to show social and cultural lives of the people as much as he can. Therefore it is not surprising to see colourful description of life in late Medieval Balkans and Anatolia within the flow of a military campaign. However his selective and disjoint writing style makes life difficult for readers to grasp the military history of the region. He pays attention to some of the important military events like the

crusade and battle of Nicopolis in 1396 or the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and allocates space accordingly – two chapters for Nicopolis and three chapters for Constantinople. Nevertheless the other important military events like Černomen battle of 1371, the first battle of Kosovo in 1389 which played important role in foundation of Serbian nationalism, the crusades of Varna (1444) and Kosovo (1448) either get passing references or skipped altogether. It certainly lacks in-depth analysis. This selective way of writing and skipping some of the important events and developments also effects the composition and unity of the book. Nearly all of the chapters have stand-alone character therefore giving the impression of a collection of articles.

Dr. Nicolle apparently is not literate in Turkish and Balkan languages but he is not in command of the secondary sources in English also. Surprisingly he does not make use of current scholarship which is a serious shortcoming of the book. Since the beginning of 1990s there have been important developments both among the Ottomanists and the military historians specialized on the Ottoman Empire and the region. The Ottoman Empire and the Balkans-Middle East region are no longer treated as *sui generis* but as a part of global history. So the history of the empire and the region as whole is more integrated into global military history than ever before. The new generation of historians are not only making use of central and local archives more and skilfully but also employing comparative approaches better.

As a conclusion this is a good old style book for spare time reading only.