

Constantinople in Habsburg Foreign Policy, 1453-1739. Dynastic, Strategic, and Geopolitical Aspects

Although the rulers of the Habsburg Monarchy, through the imperial crown of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, had the right to be considered the »supreme potentates of Christendom«, until 1453 they had to share this honor with the »Basileus« of the Byzantine Empire, who also claimed the »Roman heritage« for himself. The monarchs in Constantinople had the better cards: their imperial crown was hereditary and did not depend on the good will of the electors, as in the case of the Habsburgs. Moreover, the Byzantine emperors ruled in an imperial city that had been declared the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire since ancient times. The Habsburgs, on the other hand, were merely »elected Roman Emperors (of the German Nation)« and, moreover, did not reside in Rome – in other words, their Empire didn't have even an »imperial capital«¹.

The Byzantine rulers internalized Orthodox Christianity since 1054 as one of the main pillars of their state ideology, which, coupled with the Greek-Byzantine cultural heritage, could only reinforce the civilizational dichotomy between »the Catholic West and the Orthodox East.« The Byzantine emperors, who called and understood themselves as »Romaioi« (i.e., »Romans«), however, never forgot that they were the actual heirs of the »Roman Empire«, which had possessed territories not only in Italy, but also in North Africa, as well as in Palestine and Jerusalem, the symbolic center of Christianity and of the ancient world.

When on May 29, 1453, the Ottomans, led by the young and very ambitious Sultan Mehmed II, conquered Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine empire, this abruptly changed the understanding of the epoch and history of the contemporaries of that time – this was true for Christians as well as for Muslims. For the former, a world collapsed, as both the Orthodox and the Catholics were convinced that the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Mother of God, the patron saint of Constantinople, would not allow the enemies of Christianity (i.e., the Muslims) to rule in that imperial city. For the faithful Muslims, on the other hand, a centuries-long dream came true, which had already been longed for in the times of the

Prophet Mohammed – for the still young religious community, the Christian Byzantine empire (with its capital!) was the target of their »Holy War« par excellence. The mighty Empire of the Christian infidels, from which Palestine had been wrested in the 7th century, was indeed able to withstand the pressure of the Arab Caliphate. But the dream lived on – that one day the Muslims themselves would conquer Constantinople.

The Muslim Arabs had repeatedly tried to attack Constantinople since the 8th century, but the Byzantine empire was too powerful for them and so the Caliphs had to come to terms with it as a neighbor. On the other hand, this allowed the Arabs to build their own empire in North Africa and the western Mediterranean – Spain, for example, was conquered in 711. It was not until the Ottoman expansion in the Balkans, which began in the mid-fourteenth century, that the Byzantine empire and its capital Constantinople again became the target of the resurgent Muslim wave of conquest – in the understanding of Islam it was a »Jihad« against the infidels. It took nearly a hundred years, however, for the Ottomans to succeed in taking Constantinople by storm – the first two attempts (at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and that of 1422) famously failed.

From the point of view of the Christian West, the loss of Constantinople was undoubtedly an event that could not (or perhaps did not want to) be foreseen. The Byzantine emperors' requests for help were heard in principle, and after the Christian Church Union of Florence (1439), there were no ideological-religious divisions between Catholics and Orthodox Christians anymore, at least in theory. So, the West could well provide military aid against the expansive world of the Muslims. However, it was secretly hoped that the fortress walls of Constantinople would be strong enough to withstand once again the storm of the infidels even in 1453. For so many centuries the Byzantine capital, despite many dangers, remained in the hands of Christians – why should it be different in 1453?!

The news of the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by Mehmed II spread rapidly in the Christian world. In Rome,

¹ This study is financed by the European Union-NextGenerationEU, through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, project No BG-RRP-2.004-0008.

people were horrified – they suspected the raging of the Antichrist in the great Turkish victory. Fear was further fueled by the fact that the Ottoman sultan was publicly proclaiming his next great goal – it was the conquest of Rome. The namesake of the Prophet Mohammed was only 21 at the time, which meant he would have enough time to storm the Roman walls with his army as well.

The Habsburg emperor Frederick III, who will wear the imperial crown for more than half a century (a world record, by the way, as far as elected imperial rule in the Holy Roman Empire is concerned), is said to have, upon hearing the news of the conquest of Constantinople, retreated to his chambers in tears for three days. I believe that this was by no means a mere actor's play, but that in fact Frederick III was very much affected emotionally by this event. However, after the emotions had settled down to some extent, Frederick III had to face the new reality, where from now on there will be only one emperor – the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Byzantium with its imperial crown no longer existed².

The Papacy, led by Nicholas V and later by Pius II, called for a war against the Ottomans – a perfectly understandable reaction in view of the events of 1453. One might think that Emperor Frederick III would seize the opportunity to prove himself worthy of his high office and possibly follow in the footsteps of his namesake, Emperor Frederick II Barbarossa. One should expect this from an emperor of the West, besides he was even crowned as emperor by the Pope in Rome³.

Should anyone of the contemporaries of the fifteenth century expect this from Frederick III, this someone would have to have been very disappointed by the political inactivity of the emperor. After the failed Ottoman attempt to conquer Belgrade in 1456, the immediate Ottoman danger to the hereditary lands of the Habsburgs was averted. Geopolitically, Hungary could be counted on as a buffer zone against the Ottomans, so that nothing more had to be done – only a few people seriously thought about driving the Turks out of Europe in the 1450s and 1460s, and Emperor Frederick III was certainly not one of these few⁴.

The Ottoman policy of the Habsburgs after 1453 was conceived in a very sober and rational manner, despite the high position of the emperors within the »Christian Family of Rulers«. If the Turks merely dominated the Balkans and only directly threatened Hungary, there was no need, from the Habsburg point of view, to do anything particular against the Sublime Porte. As emperor of the Holy Empire, one could

not officially oppose the initiatives of the popes if appeals for a crusade against the Turks were publicly declared. However, Frederick III, as well as his imperial successors at the beginning of the sixteenth century, left it to the immediate neighbors of the Ottoman Empire (i.e., Hungary, Poland and Venice, or Albania or the Danubian principalities) to shoulder the »Turkish defense of Europe«. When in 1517 Emperor Maximilian I supported Pope Leo X's idea of organizing a joint European military campaign against the Ottomans, the Habsburgs were indeed prepared to participate in the planned enterprise, albeit not as a leading power, but rather according to the principle of »si omnes« – in other words, if everyone cooperates, we also participate⁵.

The Habsburgs' geopolitical distancing from the Ottoman Empire after 1453 is not difficult to explain. In the period between 1453 and 1520, that is, from the conquest of Constantinople to the beginning of the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566), the political map of the Balkans and East-Central Europe changed little. Hungary had managed somehow to resist Turkish pressure, Venice blocked Ottoman expansion in the eastern Mediterranean and the Adriatic with its fleet, which also benefited the Habsburg hereditary lands, since they very rarely became the target of Turkish raids. Neither dynastically nor confessionally (emotionally even less!) did the Habsburgs consider it their duty to constantly take initiatives to expel the Ottomans from Europe. In terms of security policy, this was not necessary for the Austrian monarchy, there is also no evidence that the Habsburgs were striving to get the vacant Byzantine imperial crown. By the way, this is quite surprising keeping in mind that a »fundamental component of the prophetic tradition held that the messianic emperor would assume control of Constantinople, thus joining the empires of East and West«⁶.

In the 1520s, however, considerable geopolitical changes occurred – both in the Balkans, East-Central Europe, and in the Mediterranean. Since 1518, the Ottomans had controlled Algiers (today's Algeria), which symbolically proved that the sultan was willing to follow in the expansionist footsteps of the Arab Caliphate. Speaking of geostrategy, this could be interpreted as an extension of Ottoman rule toward the western Mediterranean, which in turn should have set alarm bells ringing in Spain. Madrid believed that the Reconquista of 1492 had brought about the end of Muslim rule in the Pyrenees – whether they might have been mistaken⁷?

2 The studies on the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 are numerous though their quality differs considerable. Two books from the second half of the 20th c. can be regarded as »classical works« – Franz Babinger's biography on Mehmed II and Steven Runciman's study: Babinger, Mehmed II; Runciman, Fall. Among the recent publications, who are dedicated to this important turning point in Balkan, Mediterranean and European history, one can list the following studies: Bisaha, Christians; Eimer, Mehmet the Conqueror; Vaiou, Byzantine Churches; Pilat/Cristea, Ottoman threat; Angold, Fall of Constantinople; Philippides/Hanak, Siege; Crowley, 1453; Stacton, World (German edition: Der schwarze Dienstag).

3 On the political reaction in the Holy Roman empire after the fall of Constantinople see Bacsóka/Blank/Woelki, Europa. Cf. also the interesting article DeVries, Lack.

4 On the European rulers' policy vis-à-vis the Ottomans after 1453 see the general study of Dorothy M. Vaughan (Vaughan, Europe). Cf. also the comprehensive work on the topic by Kenneth M. Setton (Setton, Papacy).

5 cf. Zinkeisen, Denkschriften; Djuvara, Cent projets.

6 Freiberg, Bramante's Tempietto 152.

7 A special problem for Spain were the moriscos, who could join forces with the Turks, should the Ottomans pursue their expansion north of Algier. Cf. Hess, Moriscos.

In 1519 Charles V was elected emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, but he was also king of Spain – and this union of the two crowns created an entirely new geopolitical situation for the Habsburg dynasty. Until 1519, the Habsburg power structure had been concentrated in Central Europe – an area relatively safe from Ottoman incursions. With Spain now part of the global Habsburg geostrategy, Ottoman expansion in the western Mediterranean was no longer a theoretical but a real threat to the dynasty. The situation worsened visibly when the Ottomans captured the Hungarian fortress of Belgrade in 1521 and, after the Battle of Mohács (1526)⁸, when the Hungarian army was annihilated, Suleyman's troops entered the Hungarian capital of Buda in the fall of the same year⁹. Thus, the Kingdom of Hungary, which since 1453 had acted as a protective wall for the Habsburgs against the Ottoman expansionist drive towards Central Europe, quite unexpectedly ceased to exist as a security buffer. Very quickly, the Habsburgs had to realize that the Ottomans were threatening them from two sides in an unexpected pincer movement – via East-Central Europe, i.e., Hungary, and via the maritime vector in the western Mediterranean, which was oriented toward Spain.

It got worse when in 1529 the Ottomans besieged Vienna. This military action of the Sultan was not very well planned, also had rather the purpose to show the Habsburgs who was the real »master of Hungary« (namely the Turks and not Ferdinand, the Emperor's brother)¹⁰. Nevertheless – the very fact that the Turks wanted to conquer the capital of the Archduchy of Austria and for the first time invaded the lands of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation with a regular army showed more than clearly how powerful the Ottoman Empire had become in the meantime. For the Habsburgs, the Turkish threat had thus become a double geopolitical reality that Charles V had to deal with, willy-nilly.

In summary, the emperor was able to act relatively successfully against the Ottoman Empire until the voluntary end of his reign in 1555-56. He also had no qualms about leading an army against the Turks in North Africa himself in the 1530s – compared to his war-shy grandfather, Emperor Frederick III, this was quite a feat worthy of the most powerful Christian prince. Charles V failed in defeating the Ottomans, let alone ousting them from their possessions in the Balkans or in the Mediterranean, but he did succeed in geopolitically containing the expansion of Suleiman the Magnificent. The

Habsburgs were being doing this both in east-central Europe and in the western Mediterranean.

Of course, it can be argued that Charles V was not able to form a pan-European alliance against the Ottomans in order to put an end to the Sultan's empire, as was often demanded by the Papacy – not to mention the many projects for the expulsion of the Turks from Europe in that era¹¹. This is also true as a statement, but it is important to ask whether this was even possible in the sixteenth century and whether Emperor Charles V had set such a geostrategic goal in principle¹². I would answer both in the negative – because of France's special position vis-à-vis the Ottoman expansion of that time, on the one hand, and because of the emperor's fundamental misgivings, on the other, about taking radical geopolitical steps that involved an uncertain outcome for his own rule and for the position of the Habsburgs in the political world¹³.

With the separation of the dynasty into a Spanish and an Austrian branch in the mid-sixteenth century, Habsburg-Ottoman relations returned to their traditional geopolitical space in Central Europe. Madrid and Vienna continued to coordinate their Turkish policies, but the military conflict against the Ottomans was primarily fought on land¹⁴. Dynastically and territorially, the military clash was really about the rule in Hungary, whose crown was claimed by the Viennese monarchs. Of course, this Ottoman policy of the Habsburgs had no expansive geostrategic connection to the Balkans, let alone Constantinople – all these territories were seen as an integral part of the Turkish Empire and no one in the Habsburg monarchy seriously questioned that to the end of the seventeenth century. So powerful and invincible did the Sublime Porte appear in the eyes of its Christian neighbors.

The above-mentioned geopolitical hard facts, however, were not an obstacle for Orthodox Russia, for example, to seek and find an ideological-confessional reference to the destroyed Byzantine empire already in the fifteenth century. As early as 1472, Tsar Ivan III married Zoe Palaiologos (Sophia Palaiologina), a niece of the last Byzantine emperor – strangely enough, a marriage project inspired by Pope Pius II. Since the 1520s, the Russian tsars increasingly saw themselves as the legitimate successors of Orthodox Byzantium, and Moscow was proclaimed the »Third Rome« – the »Last Rome«, since, as the people of that time firmly believed, there could be no fourth Rome¹⁵.

8 cf. Recently Forod/Varga/Szöts, Mohács. See the classical study of Fraknói, Ungarn.

9 cf. Mordtmann, Kapitulation. On the expansion of the Ottomans in Central Europe during the 16th c. see Baramova, Evropa.

10 On the siege cf. Hummelberger, Belagerung; Mattl-Wurm, Berichte.

11 cf. Djuvara, Cent projets 46-79.

12 cf. recently Pellegrini, Guerra.

13 The attitude of France towards the Turks in the 16th c. is discussed quite controversial in historiography. The actual problem is whether the French kings of that time were allies of the Sultan against the Habsburgs, something which was condemned as a betrayal of the Christian cause according to the moral

standards of the period. Recent studies clearly show that this was not the case and that the supposed »unholy alliance« was actually part of the Habsburg anti-French propaganda, but some scholars still support the opposite view – see for example Garnier, L'alliance impie; Isom-Verhaaren, Allies.

14 The relations between the two branches of the Habsburg dynasty vis-à-vis the Turks was one of the topics, to which Leopold von Ranke paid attention in his early and later studies. Cf. Ranke, Fürsten und Völker; Ranke, Osmanen.

15 cf. Poe, Moscow; N. Sinitsyna, Tretij Rim; Majeska, Coronation; Hellmann, Moskau und Byzanz; Lee Wolff, Three Romes; Tourmanoff, Moscow the Third Rome.

Interestingly, even the French kings had no qualms about making dynastic claims to the vacant Byzantine crown at a time when Ottoman power was looming large. In Paris, however, they chose a simpler path than the Russians – instead of marrying a Byzantine princess or establishing an ideological reference point to, say, the Latin Empire at the Bosphorus, in 1494 the French king Charles VIII simply bought this right and could henceforth bear the title »Emperor of Constantinople«. In this way, Paris apparently believed that it could claim certain rights to the »Ottoman inheritance« in the event of the collapse of Ottoman power. Whether the French kings simply wanted to live up to their reputation as the »roi très chrétien« (»rex christianissimus«) or whether they were in fact aiming at Constantinople with the straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles as a French sphere of power and influence, as some sixteenth-century plans for the expulsion of the Turks from Europe envisaged, remains a topic for academic debate¹⁶.

As already mentioned, the Habsburgs as emperors had made neither dynastic nor power-political claims to the Byzantine legacy since the mid-fifteenth century. In geopolitical or geostrategic terms, too, the Straits between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, with Constantinople as a focal point, were not considered a foreign policy goal to be pursued by the rulers in Vienna or Madrid. That Russia and France, on their part, could – at least theoretically – claim the crown of the Eastern Roman Empire was known to the Habsburgs. The emperors of the seventeenth century were, however, quite content with the heraldic-dynastic honor of titling themselves »Kings of Jerusalem«. Whether this imaginary crown, with which the Habsburgs adorned themselves, would be sufficient in the event of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire to be able to dynastically justify territorial claims beyond Hungary along the Roman *Via Diagonalis* or along the Danube is a matter of debate. Perhaps the Habsburgs were also aware that even the best dynastic arguments for expansion would be useless if no powerful army would stand behind them. From the Habsburgs' point of view, relations with the Ottoman Empire were always decided on the military and not on the dynastic battlefield.

It was not until the Lega Sacra war of 1683-1699 that Constantinople clearly moved into the political sights of the Austrian Habsburgs. The Ottoman siege of Vienna (1683) had shown that the Turks' expansive drive toward Central Europe had not abated. After much hesitation, Emperor Leopold I had finally decided to wage a full-scale war against the Ottomans, and the Papacy could only welcome this initiative. Finally, Austria, Poland, Venice and Russia agreed to join forces against the Turks. The war ended with an Ottoman defeat,

which set back the realm of the Sublime Court in the Balkans territorially by about 180 years¹⁷.

At first, it did not seem that the Habsburg monarchy could achieve an easy victory against the Turks. Military coordination between the allies also left much to be desired, but slowly the imperial troops gained the upper hand – in 1686 Buda, the old capital of Hungary, was taken, and in 1687 the Austrians moved into Transylvania. In the fall of 1687, when the military objectives for the next year's campaign were discussed in Vienna, the logical decision was made to attack Belgrade, conquer this strategically important fortress, and then advance along the *Via Diagonalis* deep into the Balkans. A great geostrategic and geopolitical goal was also envisaged – the imperial army was to defeat the weakened Ottoman troops, expel the Turks from Europe, and after that all the Ottoman provinces south of the Danube would become Austrian crown lands. The symbolic »reward of the enterprise« was the conquest of Constantinople itself, since this famous imperial city deserved to be ruled by a Christian emperor – a concise, but nevertheless logical argumentation.

It can be assumed that the intelligence services of the French king Louis XIV were aware of these far-reaching Austrian geostrategic visions. That the imperial troops could conquer the Ottoman capital was by no means considered a pipe dream at the end of the 1680s, but something quite feasible. After all, there was no Ottoman fortress behind Belgrade that could hold off an invading Christian army. Moreover, the Ottoman troops were already showing signs of disintegration by 1688. From this point of view, the imperials would have a relatively easy game, for they merely needed to conquer Belgrade (which they did in September 1688) to continue their swift triumphal march toward Constantinople.

The history of the Lega Sacra's war against the Ottomans in 1688-90 is well known. After the imperial troops captured Belgrade, France deemed it opportune to abandon its benevolent neutrality and instead attack the Habsburgs from the west. Officially, the French were not allies of the Ottomans, but the Sun King's intrusion offered clear though indirect military support for the sultan, who was in a real difficult situation. Eventually, the Turks managed to withstand Austrian pressure; moreover, they recaptured Belgrade in 1690, which put the great imperial visions regarding Constantinople on hold for the time being.

Whether the French had reacted in this way because the Habsburgs suddenly laid claim to Constantinople and indirectly to the Byzantine crown, which had belonged to France since the end of the fifteenth century to the 1560s, at least in theory, is rather unlikely. Rather, it was the fear that the Habsburg monarchy could become too powerful due to the

16 According to a study of Liviu Pilat and Ovidiu Cristea the ruler Charles VIII has crowned himself as emperor of Constantinople and King of Jerusalem (cf. Pilat/Cristea, *Ottoman Threat* 242). The French king Charles IX dropped the title »Emperor of Constantinople« in 1566 at the end. On the topic of the »Imperial idea« as a phenomenon in European history see the PhD-thesis defended

in 2013 by Russel Foster (*Tabulae Imperii Europaei. Mapping European Empire*) at the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University, which was later published as a book. Cf. Foster, *Mapping*.

17 On the war against the Ottoman empire and its outcome at the end of the 17th c. see recently Heywood/Parvev, *Treaties*.

considerable land gains in the Balkans, which, coupled with (still) Habsburg Spain, which could threaten France from the south, was considered a »worst case scenario« in Paris. And this had to be thwarted, whatever the cost¹⁸.

It may sound strange, but even after the French entry into the war, the Habsburgs held on to their expansion plans in the direction of Constantinople. Count Quintin Jörger, who wrote an expert opinion for the emperor in November 1689, was convinced that Austria could very well win a two-front war and did not need to abandon the conquest of the Ottoman capital as a strategic goal. After all, Emperor Leopold I deserved the honor of driving the Turks out of Constantinople in order to go down in history as »Leopold the Great«. This opinion was apparently shared by the emperor and the war against the Ottomans and the French continued¹⁹. The end of the Lega Sacra war showed, however, that the Austrian Habsburgs have overestimated their capacity in fighting a victorious war both against the French and the Turks. According to the Peace of Carlowitz of 26 January 1699 the former Ottoman dependencies or territories in Southeastern Europe that came under Austrian rule constituted surely an impressive gain. However, the demarcation line between imperial and Ottoman troops in 1689 was quite more impressive for Vienna – with Belgrade, Walachia, parts of Serbia and Bulgaria under imperial control, encircling even Bosnia through a military intrusion in the direction of the Adriatic coast.

The military successes of the Habsburgs against the Ottomans continued well into the eighteenth century. Austria was able to annex Serbia with Belgrade, Temesvar and Little Walachia according to the Peace of Passarowitz (1718). In Paris, meanwhile, there were fewer reservations about Habsburg expansion toward the Balkans, since Spain, as a result of the War of Spanish succession, was now ruled by the Bourbons. Therefore, the Habsburgs could continue to pursue their visions for future geopolitical power regarding Constantinople, at least in theory, without encountering serious French resistance.

Emperor Charles VI (1711-1739) had never been much enthusiastic about a powerful expansion of his monarchy in the Balkans, especially since this would in no way solve the acute problem of Austrian succession in Vienna. Vienna's involvement in a Turkish war in the 1730s was due to its alliance with Russia, signed in 1726, which provided for assistance in the event of an Ottoman attack²⁰. Instead of creating facts in Southeastern Europe itself, as the Habsburgs had been able to do since the 1680s, Vienna was now running after political events.

When in the spring of 1737 the Aulic War Council (*Hofkriegsrat*) in Vienna discussed what war aims Austria should pursue as a Russian ally in the Balkans, the emperor and his advisers did not know what Anna Ioannovna, the

ruler in St Petersburg, wanted to claim for herself. Moreover, Charles VI was quite uncertain about how long the monarchy should fight against the Sublime Porte. In principle, the decision was made that new land gains could be sought west of the line running from Rousse on the Danube to Kavalla on the Aegean. But if circumstances demanded, one could be content with a more modest expansion along the *Via Diagonalis* (such as with Nish, Vidin or, perhaps, Sofia). Constantinople was no longer mentioned as a strategic objective, which was also difficult to argue militarily²¹.

It seems, however, that in the 1730s the Habsburgs did not want to completely rule out the possibility that the imperials might one day conquer Constantinople. After all, the end of the seventeenth century was not very far back in history. However, this was not a topic that could have been seriously discussed in diplomatic circles – given the existing Austrian alliance with Russia, this was surely not appropriate, since it could bring problems with St Peterburg. Instead, another way was chosen, namely the detour via the periodical press.

At the beginning of the 1730s the readers of German newspapers and political journals could discover something very exciting. A fifteenth century Byzantine scribe had made a prediction that 285 years after the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks, the ancient capital of Christendom would again be ruled by a Christian prince. The end of the Ottoman power in Europe would therefore take place in 1738. The big question, however, who this prince could be, remained unanswered. On the other hand, the readers of the German periodicals could ponder about it themselves – Austria and Russia were allies in the war against the Turks; but Anna Ioannovna was a woman, so only Emperor Charles VI could come into question²². Moreover, the Austrians wanted to conquer Constantinople already at the end of the seventeenth century – and now this prophecy! Perhaps the good God really wanted to give the old imperial city to the Habsburgs, why not?

Of course, a public discussion about the geopolitical future of Constantinople during an Austro-Russian-Ottoman war could also be a mere coincidence. After all, the publishers wanted not only to inform their readers, but also to make profits. But the very fact that the information about said prophecy was published several times – the last time with the pessimistic comment that the imperial troops would probably not be able to achieve this goal, at least in this war – is a proof that the imperial censorship authorities did not intervene. In other words, the emperor and his political advisers had considered it politically opportune not to drop the idea of a Habsburg conquest of Constantinople completely, at least as a theoretical construct.

With the signing of the Peace of Belgrade of 1739, which was by no means very praiseworthy for Austria, and which was

18 cf. for more details Parvev, War.

19 cf. Parvev, Pax Austriaca.

20 On the Austrian-Russian relations during the reign of Tsar Peter the Great see Parvev, Südosteuropa.

21 cf. on the stand of the Hofkriegsrat cf. Roeder, Eastern question 66.

22 cf. Parvev, Land in Sicht 105-106.

bought with the return of the strategically important Danube fortress of Belgrade and Little Wallachia to the Ottomans, Constantinople was finally removed from the list of foreign policy goals of the Habsburgs²³. In the meantime, the old capital of the Byzantine empire had become too remote for Austria in geopolitical terms. Dynastically and ideologically, Byzantium had never been an important pillar for the imperial self-awareness of the Habsburgs. Sure, the Austrians would have gladly conquered Constantinople by force of arms, if the situation permitted it, as the end of the seventeenth century had shown very clearly. However, there was never any emotional or ideological-confessional attitude towards the Byzantine heritage among the Habsburgs – that was and remained the domain of the Orthodox Russian Empire²⁴.

Some final remarks at the end, which I would like to quote as a conclusion:

Following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Austrian Habsburgs did indeed entertain various plans and aspirations regarding the city and its surrounding region. The Habsburg rulers, particularly those who held the title of Holy Roman Emperors, saw themselves as the defenders of Christendom and expressed a desire to challenge Ottoman control over Constantinople.

One notable instance of Austrian involvement in the region occurred during the Great Turkish War (1683-1699), when the Ottoman Empire was pushed back from the gates of Vienna by a coalition of European powers, including the Habsburgs. The Austrian Habsburgs, under Emperor Leopold I, played a significant role in this conflict, which aimed to roll back Ottoman expansion in Europe and potentially regain control of territories lost to the Ottomans, including Constantinople.

However, while there were strategic and political discussions regarding the potential conquest of Constantinople, these plans were often overshadowed by other priorities and challenges facing the Habsburg Empire. The Ottoman Empire remained a formidable military power, and the Habsburgs had to contend with other European rivals, such as France and the various German states, as well as internal tensions within their own realm.

Ultimately, the Habsburgs were unable to realize their ambitions of conquering Constantinople. The city remained under Ottoman control until the early twentieth century, when it was captured by the Allies during World War I and later became part of the modern Republic of Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

I am not the author of these four paragraphs, but this was the answer, which I received from ChatGPT²⁵ when I asked re-

cently, »Are there Austrian plans for conquering Constantinople after 1453?«. On my other question »Do the Habsburgs have had any political ambitions towards Constantinople since 1453?«, the answer sounded like this:

The Habsburgs, a prominent European royal family, did indeed harbor political ambitions towards Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) following the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks. Constantinople had been the capital of the Byzantine Empire and held significant symbolic and strategic importance as the gateway between Europe and Asia.

After the fall of Constantinople, the Habsburgs, particularly the Holy Roman Emperors who were often members of the Habsburg dynasty, saw themselves as the natural successors to the Byzantine Empire's legacy in the Eastern Mediterranean. They viewed themselves as the defenders of Christendom against the expanding Ottoman Empire and saw the recapture of Constantinople as a way to assert their power and influence in the region.

Throughout the centuries, various Habsburg rulers, including Charles V and his successors, expressed interest in challenging Ottoman control over Constantinople. However, their efforts were often hindered by political and military realities, including conflicts with other European powers, internal struggles within the Habsburg territories, and the strength of the Ottoman Empire.

Despite these ambitions, the Habsburgs were unable to realize their goal of recapturing Constantinople. The city remained under Ottoman control until the early 20th century when it was captured by the Allies during World War I and later became part of the modern Republic of Turkey following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The neural network that generated the above paragraphs had made a really good job, some may say. At first glance, even professional historians, and elderly university teachers, can really be impressed. However, if these professional academics would read these sentences several times, they should easily discover that they are communicating with a chatbot. If they don't, then maybe they have chosen the wrong profession.

I don't know how technology would develop in the next decades, but for the moment in *Artificial Intelligence* (AI) digital systems like Open AI only one half of the »magic word« AI is real – and this is surely not *Intelligence*.

23 On the Habsburg-Ottoman treaties and their reflections in ideology and propaganda cf. Baramova, Translaciya; Baramova, Waffensteinstand.

24 cf. Baehr, History.

25 <https://openai.com/gpt-4>.

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Summary / Zusammenfassung / Résumé

Constantinople and Habsburg Ottoman Policy, 1453-1739. Ideological, Geostrategic, and Military Aspects

In the era between the fall of Constantinople to Mehmed II in 1453 and the signing of the Peace of Belgrade in 1739, the development of Habsburg-Ottoman relations underwent a remarkable metamorphosis. With few exceptions, until the end of the seventeenth century the Habsburgs preferred not to challenge their powerful Muslim neighbour – rather they tried to pursue a »policy of containment« towards the Turks. After the Second Siege of Vienna (1683), however, Emperor Leopold I and his advisers did not hesitate to radically change their Ottoman policy. The »policy of containment« was replaced by a »policy of expulsion« of the Turks from the Balkans.

During the period under consideration, Constantinople was certainly not a vital cornerstone in the Ottoman policy of the Habsburgs. At the same time, from the point of view of state ideology, dynastic authority, and also considerations of geopolitics and military necessity, Vienna never neglected the former Byzantine capital. It was this ambiguity that allowed the Habsburgs to easily name the conquest of Constantinople as important strategic goal of the monarchy in the late seventeenth century. In fact, the idea that the emperors in Vienna were the true heirs of the »Roman Empire« and that they were also entitled to be the legitimate successors of Byzantium persisted until the 1730s.

Ironically, Constantinople did not become an Austrian possession because of the »Byzantine claims« of two other powerful European powers. In the first place it was France, whose monarchs regarded themselves as legitimate heirs to the »Byzantine crown«. In 1688 it was the French who by military force prevented Austria from conquering the Ottoman capital. In the eighteenth century, Orthodox Russia, which from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards was aware of its connection with old Byzantium at the level of »state ideology«, increased its influence in the Balkan and Black Sea area. Naturally, with such serious competition, the idea of a »Habsburg Constantinople« had little chance to become reality.

Die osmanische Politik von Konstantinopel und Habsburg, 1453-1739. Ideologische, geostrategische und militärische Aspekte

In der Zeit zwischen der Eroberung Konstantinopels durch Mehmed II. im Jahr 1453 und der Unterzeichnung des Friedens von Belgrad im Jahr 1739 erlebte die Entwicklung der habsburgisch-osmanischen Beziehungen eine bemerkenswerte Metamorphose. Bis zum Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts zogen es die Habsburger mit wenigen Ausnahmen vor, ihren mächtigen muslimischen Nachbarn nicht herauszufordern – vielmehr versuchten sie, eine »Politik der Eindämmung« gegenüber den Türken zu verfolgen.

Nach der Zweiten Türkenbelagerung Wiens (1683) zögerten Kaiser Leopold I. und seine Berater jedoch nicht, ihre Osmanenpolitik radikal zu ändern. Die »Politik der Eindämmung« wurde durch eine »Politik der Vertreibung« der Türken vom Balkan ersetzt. Konstantinopel war im betrachteten Zeitraum sicherlich kein wesentlicher Eckpfeiler der osmanischen Politik der Habsburger. Gleichzeitig vernachlässigte Wien aus staatsideologischer, dynastischer, aber auch geopolitischer und militärischer Notwendigkeit die ehemalige byzantinische Hauptstadt nie. Diese Ambiguität ermöglichte es den Habsburgern, die Eroberung Konstantinopels im späten 17. Jahrhundert als wichtiges strategisches Ziel der Monarchie zu bezeichnen. Tatsächlich hielt sich die Vorstellung, dass die Kaiser in Wien die wahren Erben des »Römischen Reiches« und auch die legitimen Nachfolger von Byzanz seien, bis in die 1730er Jahre.

Ironischerweise gelangte Konstantinopel aufgrund der »byzantinischen Ansprüche« zweier anderer mächtiger europäischer Mächte nicht in österreichischen Besitz. An erster Stelle stand Frankreich, dessen Monarchen sich als legitime Erben der »byzantinischen Krone« betrachteten. Im Jahr 1688 waren es die Franzosen, die Österreich mit militärischer Gewalt daran hinderten, die osmanische Hauptstadt zu erobern. Im 18. Jahrhundert verstärkte das orthodoxe Russland, das sich seit der zweiten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts auf der Ebene der »Staatsideologie« seiner Verbindung mit dem

alten Byzanz bewusst war, seinen Einfluss im Balkan- und Schwarzmeerraum. Bei einer so starken Konkurrenz hatte die Idee eines »habsburgischen Konstantinopels« natürlich wenig Chancen, Wirklichkeit zu werden.

Constantinople et la politique ottomane des Habsbourg, 1453-1739. Aspects idéologiques, géostratégiques et militaires

Entre la chute de Constantinople aux mains de Mehmed II en 1453 et la signature de la paix de Belgrade en 1739, les relations entre les Habsbourg et les Ottomans ont connu une métamorphose remarquable. À quelques exceptions près, jusqu'à la fin du XVII^e siècle, les Habsbourg ont préféré ne pas défier leur puissant voisin musulman, préférant plutôt mener une »politique d'endiguement« à l'égard des Turcs. Après le deuxième siège de Vienne (1683), cependant, l'empereur Léopold I^{er} et ses conseillers n'ont pas hésité à changer radicalement leur politique ottomane. La »politique d'endiguement« a été remplacée par une »politique d'expulsion« des Turcs des Balkans.

Pendant la période considérée, Constantinople n'était certainement pas une pierre angulaire de la politique ottomane des Habsbourg. Dans le même temps, du point de vue de l'idéologie d'État, de l'autorité dynastique, ainsi que

des considérations géopolitiques et militaires, Vienne n'a jamais négligé l'ancienne capitale byzantine. C'est cette ambiguïté qui a permis aux Habsbourg de désigner facilement la conquête de Constantinople comme un objectif stratégique important de la monarchie à la fin du XVII^e siècle. En fait, l'idée que les empereurs de Vienne étaient les véritables héritiers de l'»Empire romain« et qu'ils avaient également le droit d'être les successeurs légitimes de Byzance a persisté jusque dans les années 1730.

Ironiquement, ce sont les »revendications byzantines« de deux autres puissances européennes qui ont empêché Constantinople de devenir une possession autrichienne. En premier lieu, il y a eu la France, dont les monarques se considéraient comme les héritiers légitimes de la »couronne byzantine«. En 1688, ce sont les Français qui ont empêché l'Autriche de conquérir la capitale ottomane par la force militaire. Au XVIII^e siècle, la Russie orthodoxe, qui, à partir de la seconde moitié du XV^e siècle, était consciente de son lien avec l'ancienne Byzance au niveau de »l'idéologie d'État«, a accru son influence dans la région des Balkans et de la mer Noire. Naturellement, avec une concurrence aussi sérieuse, l'idée d'une »Constantinople des Habsbourg« avait peu de chances de se concrétiser.