

CHAPTER
2

PRIMARY SOURCE

Suleyman the Magnificent

by Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq

Section 1

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq was the Austrian ambassador in Constantinople from 1554 to 1562. In the following excerpts from his letters, Busbecq describes his impressions of Suleyman I, the Turkish sultan who ruled the Ottoman Empire at its peak. What do you learn about Suleyman's appearance and behavior? What do you learn about the organization of the Turkish army?

The Sultan was seated on a rather low sofa, not more than a foot from the ground and spread with many costly coverlets and cushions embroidered with exquisite work. Near him were his bow and arrows. His expression, as I have said, is anything but smiling, and has a sternness which, though sad, is full of majesty. On our arrival we were introduced into his presence by his chamberlains, who held our arms—a practice which has always been observed since a Croatian sought an interview and murdered the Sultan . . . in revenge for the slaughter of his master, Marcus the Despot of Serbia. After going through the pretence of kissing his hand, we were led to the wall facing him backwards, so as not to turn our backs or any part of them towards him. He then listened to the recital of my message, but, as it did not correspond with his expectations (for the demands of my imperial master were full of dignity and independence, and, therefore, far from acceptable to one who thought that his slightest wishes ought to be obeyed), he assumed an expression of disdain, and merely answered 'Giusel, Giusel', that is, 'Well, Well'. We were then dismissed to our lodging.

You will probably wish me to describe the impression which . . . [Suleyman] made upon me. He is beginning to feel the weight of years, but his dignity of demeanour and his general physical appearance are worthy of the ruler of so vast an empire. He has always been frugal and temperate, and was so even in his youth, when he might have erred without incurring blame in the eyes of the Turks. Even in his earlier years he did not indulge in wine or in those unnatural vices to which the Turks are often addicted . . . He is a strict guardian of his religion and its ceremonies, being not less desirous of upholding his faith than of extending

his dominions. For his age—he has almost reached his sixtieth year—he enjoys quite good health, though his bad complexion may be due to some hidden malady; and indeed it is generally believed that he has an incurable ulcer or gangrene on his leg. This defect of complexion he remedies by painting his face with a coating of red powder, when he wishes departing ambassadors to take with them a strong impression of his good health; for he fancies that it contributes to inspire greater fear in foreign potentates if they think that he is well and strong. . . .

The Sultan, when he sets out on a campaign, takes as many as 40,000 camels with him, and almost as many baggage-mules, most of whom, if his destination is Persia, are loaded with cereals of every kind, especially rice. Mules and camels are also employed to carry tents and arms and warlike machines and implements of every kind. The territories called Persia which are ruled by the Sophi, as we call him (the Turkish name being Kizilbash), are much less fertile than our country; and, further, it is the custom of the inhabi-

The Sultan, when he sets out on a campaign, takes as many as 40,000 camels with him, and almost as many baggage-mules.

tants, when their land is invaded, to lay waste and burn everything, and so force the enemy to retire through lack of food. The latter, therefore, are faced with serious peril, unless they bring an abundance of food with them. They are careful, however, to avoid touching the supplies which they carry with them as long as they are marching against their foes, but reserve them, as far as possible, for their return journey, when the moment for retirement comes and they are forced to retrace their steps through regions which the enemy has laid waste, or which the immense multitude of men and baggage animals has, as it were, scraped bare, like a swarm of locusts. It is only then that the Sultan's

store of provisions is opened, and just enough food to sustain life is weighed out each day to the Janissaries and the other troops in attendance upon him. The other soldiers are badly off, if they have not provided food for their own use; most of them, having often experienced such difficulties during their campaigns—and this is particularly true of the cavalry—take a horse on a leading-rein loaded with many of the necessities of life. These include a small piece of canvas to use as a tent, which may protect them from the sun or a shower of rain, also some clothing and bedding and a private store of provisions, consisting of a leather sack or two of the finest flour, a small jar of butter, and some spices and salt; on these they support life when they are reduced to the extremes of hunger. They take a few spoonfuls of flour and place them in water, adding a little butter, and then flavour the mixture with salt and spices. This, when it is put on the fire, boils and swells up so as to fill a large bowl. They eat of it once or twice a day, according to the quantity, without any bread, unless they have with them some toasted bread or biscuit. They thus contrive to live on short rations for a month or even longer, if necessary. . . .

The Turkish horseman presents a very elegant spectacle, mounted on a horse of Cappadocian or Syrian or some other good breed, with trappings and horsecloths of silver spangled with gold and precious stones. He is resplendent in raiment of cloth of gold and silver, or else of silk or satin, or at any rate of the finest scarlet, or violet, or dark green cloth. At either side is a fine sheath, one to hold the bow, the other full of bright-coloured arrows, both of wonderful Babylonian workmanship, as also is the ornamented shield which is attached to the left arm and which is only suited to ward off arrows and the blows dealt by a club or sword. His right hand is encumbered by a light spear, usually painted green, unless he prefers to keep that hand free; and he is girt with a scimitar studded with gems, while a steel club hangs from his horsecloth or saddle. "Why so many weapons?" you will ask. My answer is that he is practised in the use of all of them. "But how," you ask, "can any one use both a bow and a spear? Will he seize his bow only when he has thrown or broken his spear?" No: he keeps his spear in his possession as long as possible, and, when circumstances demand the use

of the bow in its turn, he puts the spear, which is light and therefore easily handled, between the saddle and his thigh, in such a position that the point projects a long way behind and the pressure of the knee holds it firm as long as he thinks fit. When circumstances make it necessary for him to fight with the spear, he puts the bow into the quiver or else fixes it across the shield on his left arm. I do not propose, however, to spend more words in explaining the skill in arms which they have acquired by long practice in warfare and continual exercise. On their heads they wear turbans made of the whitest and finest cotton stuff, in the middle of which rises a fluted peak of purple silk. This head-dress is often adorned with black feathers.

After the cavalry had passed, there followed a long column of Janissaries, scarcely any of whom carried any other arms except their muskets. . . . Behind them followed their captains and colonels, each with their distinguishing marks of rank. Last came their commander-in-chief, riding by himself. Next followed the chief officials, including the Pashas; then the infantry forming the royal body-guard in their special uniform and equipment, and carrying their bows, for they are all archers. Next came the Sultan's own chargers, remarkable for their fine appearance and trappings, led by grooms. The Sultan himself was mounted on a splendid horse. His expression was severe and frowning, and he was obviously in an angry mood. Behind him were three young pages, one carrying a flask of water, another a cloak, and the third a casket. . . . The rear of the procession was formed by a squadron of about two hundred horsemen.

from Edward Seymour Froster, trans., *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin Le Busbecq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 58–59, 65–66, 109–14, 145–47. Reprinted in Peter N. Stearns, ed., *Documents in World History*, Vol. II (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 74–77.

Discussion Questions

Recognizing Facts and Details

1. According to Busbecq, what did Suleyman look like?
2. What different soldiers in the Turkish army did Busbecq describe?
3. ***Drawing Conclusions*** From reading Busbecq's letters, what conclusions can you draw about the Ottoman Empire under Suleyman?