

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST – THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

THE ROLE OF THE CRIMEAN TATARS IN THE OTTOMAN-SAFAVI WAR (1578 – 1639)

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In the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had long-opposed the development of any powerful state on its eastern and western flank. Thus it became involved in a drawn-out war first in the Persian theatre (1578-90) and then in the border zone between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires (1593-1606), gaining little land and suffering heavy losses both financially and in terms of human lives. The ordered, large-scale participation of the Tatars in these late sixteenth century Ottoman wars was directly linked with the Turkish army's decrease in quality and quantity. And so it was also in the Hungarian and Persian theatres that the Turkish command was forced to use Crimean Tatar auxiliaries due to military losses and lack of financial resources. At the same time, the Crimean Khanate's influence area was the step of the Black Sea which extends to Hungary to the west and to Kazan to the East until the middle of the century.¹ But later on it gradually lost its influence in the east region as a result of Muscovy's advance to the south and advancement in trade and diplomatic relations between the West and Persia.² Thus the Porte encouraged the personal involvement of the Crimean Khans in the Turkish east campaigns in the late sixteenth century, and even demanded them to remain in the winter quarters at the theatre. As a result of these closer co-operation between the Ottoman state and the Crimean Tatars, the latter became more dependent on the Ottomans. It was also in the interest of the Khan to assure the Tatar troops' permanent employment and the opportunities for plundering which the Turkish campaigns afforded them³.

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Although the Crimean Tatar troops had been invited to participate in the east campaigns since 1554⁴, large numbers of Tatar troops were deployed only as late

¹ The Crimean Tatars had sacked Moscow in the past. Moreover when the Poles sought to break through the Ottoman and Crimean barrier that blocked their access to the Black Sea, Ghazis and Tatar horsemen raided deep into Podolia and Galicia in 1498. It can be seen from their cruelty that the Tatars were to loom large during the next two centuries in the history of the Black Sea step region that provided thousands of captives for Ottoman slave markets. Norman İtzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition*, Chicago, 1972, p. 30.

² Halil İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire*, London, 1995, p. 39.

³ Alan Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars*, Paris, 2000, pp. 12-13.

⁴ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Ali Emiri, no 335 Also see Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, *Osmanlıların Kafkas-elleri'ni Fethi (1451-1590)*, Ankara, 1993, pp. 218-20.

as 1578. The reason for the late deployment of the Tatar troops was the success of the tsardom of Muscovy, which spread its influence into Ottoman domains in Caucasia and the Black Sea region after the advancement to Terek river in 1560. The other reason was the invasion of the Safavis in Georgia in 1568. As a result of these developments, the Ottoman east-west trade monopoly was undermined by these hostile powers. So much so that in the winter of 1568 the Tsar sent an envoy to Iran proposing an alliance against the Ottomans, and at the same time Pope Gregory XIII included the Tsar and the Shah in his plans for a crusade against the Ottomans. Thus, the Persian war became strategically important as a means of control over the Muscovite and Safavid economic links with Central Asia and, lastly as a confirmation of Ottoman rights on the shores of the Black Sea and in the Caucasus. Apart from these developments, the discontent of the semi-independent Georgian, Şirvanian, and Dagestanian Emirates in the Caucasus and their bitter rivalries over the choice of a successor to the Persian throne after the death of Shah Tahmasp provided an ample excuse and opportunity for the onset of hostilities. In addition to these factors, internal problems in the Safavi state made the announcement of the war against Safavi easy. Thus the twelve years war, which grew out of a series of clashes, began at the end of 1577 between Beglerbeği of Van and his Safavi counterpart.⁵

Fate was fickle with both sides. In the first year, the Ottoman army led by Mustafa Pasha crossed the border into Georgia and overcame the Safavi army in Çıldır and Koyungeçid Battle, after which they captured Georgia and Şirvan in Caucasia. The conquered lands were divided into four governerships: Şirvan, Tiflis (Kartli), Gürcistan (Kakheti), and Sukum (Abkhazia). Osman Pasha, the hero of the two prior engagements of the army, was appointed governor of Şirvan. Moreover the force numbering about ten thousands, which was made up of Ottoman provincial troops and local volunteers, remained in this region. Other official functionaries such as *defterdar* and *kadis* were appointed.⁶ Thus, Mustafa Pasha set the long-established administrative measures which the Ottomans considered necessary for the pacification of the new territories and their incorporation into the structure of the Ottoman Empire. In spite of all these administrative measures, Mustafa Pasha must have realized that the loss of Şirvan would not be taken lightly by the Safavids, for the Shah's yearly income from the silk production, the salt works, the rice fields, and the petroleum of this province alone was estimated at 25,200,000 aspers, all of which was directed now to the sultan's coffers⁷. Despite his concerns, Lala Mustafa Pasha found it necessary to deploy his army on

⁵ For the reasons of the war between the Safavis and the Ottomans, see Mustafa H. Eravcı, *Mustafa 'Âli's Nusret-nâme* (unpublished Phd), vol. I, Edinburgh, 1998, pp. 65-77.

⁶ Bekir Kütükoğlu, *Osmanlı İnan Siyasi Münasebetleri*, İstanbul, 1993, pp. 66-70.

⁷ Joseph v. Hammer-Purgstall, *Osmanlı Devleti Tarihi*, trans. by M. Ata, İstanbul, 1985, vol. 7, pp. 1985-2000; see also Gelibolulu Mustafa 'Âli, *Kühü'l-ahbâr*, ed. by Faris Çerçi, vol. II, Kayseri, 2000, p. 306.

Erzurum territory, to deal with a Safavid attack in the winter. He returned the main army to that place.⁸

It was still quite evident that it would be extremely difficult for Osman Pasha to conquer the rest of Şirvan with the small number of troops under his command; consequently, Mustafa Pasha continued to seek support from the Crimean Khan. But in the following year, the tide turned and Osman Pasha's forces were thoroughly defeated by the troops of the Prince of Safavi, and he lost Şemahi, Ereş and Şirvan's most significant defensive fortresses as well⁹. By 1583 the administration in Caucasia continued to change hands. However in spite of suffering heavy losses, with the Crimean forces' help and Osman Pasha's great endeavour, major Ottoman triumphs took place at that time. This practically closed the first phase of the war in favour of the Ottomans, and this situation continued until 1590.

It can be seen from the Mühimme registers that when the war was declared to the Safavi there were three steps of Ottoman military action against them. According to the plan, the attacks were to be launched by Mustafa Pasha from north east Anatolia, Sinan Pasha from south east Anatolia, and the Crimean Khan from Derbent, but this plan was changed because of several reasons.¹⁰ However, from a military perspective, the Tatar participation in the Ottoman-Safavi war can be divided into two parts. Firstly, until the end of the sixteenth century, a large Tatar army of 10-25 thousand men who fought under the leadership of the Khan or the Kalgay, were going to be alongside the holding Turkish army in fortress sieges and field battles in Caucasia. Secondly, the small troops of Tatars spent the winter in the theatre of war with Ottoman forces. Now, I shall examine these aspects one by one.

In the first type of participation stated above, the Tatars were used to occupy the relief troops, cut supply lines, break up the Safavi camps and help holding Ottoman force which were surrounded by Safavi army. This happened on two occasions. Firstly, the Crimean force under Mehmed Giray received the sultan's order to help Osman Pasha's force, and marched to Şirvan after peace was concluded between Crimea and Poland in September 1578.¹¹ According to Ottoman sources, the Khan of Crimea's forces, which varied between twenty and thirty thousand including the forces of the Şirvan Shah Ebubekir Mirza and the beg

⁸ Ebubekir bin Abdullah, *Şark Seferlerinde Sürhser ile Vâki Olan Ahvalleri ve Şirvan'da Osman Paşa ile Sürhser'in Muharebelerinin Beyan Eder (Şarkseferleri)*, Ali Emiri Library, Tarih Kitapları, no 366, f. 4a.

⁹ Bekir Kütükoğlu, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹⁰ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter BOA), Mühimme Defteri (hereafter MD), vol. 32, p. 127, no 236. There was an open enmity between Lala Mustafa and Sinan Pasha. Moreover, the Crimean army still stalled in Lehistan at the time, see MD, vol. 31, p. 176, no 198.

¹¹ Carl Max. Kortepeter, *Ottoman Imperialism During the Reformation: Europe and the Caucasus*, London, 1973, p. 57.

of Azak,¹² arrived in Şirvan (October 1578). When the Ottoman troops were informed by Abdi Çavuş, the Battle of Şemahi had already commenced on the afternoon of 9 Ramazan 986 (3 November 1578) and continued for three days at the end of which the Tatar force under the Crimean khan's brothers – Adil Giray, Gazi Giray, Saadet Giray – and the Khan's son Hacı Mustafa including Ebubekir Mirza appeared on the theatre of war. Thus the Safavi forces were caught between the Crimean and the Ottoman forces¹³, and in the afternoon of the third day of the battle, they broke the Persian resistance. When the conflict had subsided, the Tatar leaders and their troops were warmly thanked and greatly honoured by the Ottomans for their timely arrival. But although Osman Pasha urged the Tatars to protect the lives and property of the Muslim inhabitants, the Tatars quickly overrun the position and acquired more booty and slaves than they could carry off. As a result, this generally mobile force incautiously loaded itself with an excess of pack animals.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the main Persian army numbering thirty to forty thousand men had successfully sacked Aresh and then moved in the direction of Shemakha under the command of Selman Khan, the vezir of Shah Hodabende. In the evening of 24 Ramazan 986 (24 November 1578) the Kızılbaş army began its siege of Shemakha and led the bulk of the army against the Tatars. On the last day of Ramazan 986 (30 November 1578) the Tatars and Safavis clashed on the plain near Mahmudabad (Molla Hasan). Fierce fighting followed for three days between the Tatars and the superior Safavi forces.

According to Ali, the Tatars had gained a considerable advantage over their adversary until a terrible rain storm swept over the battlefield. This storm greatly hampered the Tatars, who relied heavily on their bows and arrows and the manoeuvrability of their mounts. Their horses also became mired in a sea of mud.¹⁵ The Tatars disengaged and retreated in the direction of Derbent, Adil Giray become a prisoner of the Safavids and Kızılbaş moved off toward the Kura River. Meanwhile, having heard of the results of this latest clash, Osman Pasha decided to withdraw from Shemakla to Derbent, before Selman Khan could concentrate his forces around Shemakha.¹⁶

The entire efforts ended in failure in the first year of the war. At the beginning of 1579, Osman Pasha and his exhausted forces only delayed to preserve their position in Derbent, in order to provide supply from the surrounding region. In spite of their bad situation, Mustafa Pasha and the main Ottoman army spent the year (1579) rebuilding the fortress of Kars, instead of giving military support to

¹² For the number of Turkish troops, see Bekir Kütükoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-106; Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

¹³ Ebubekir bin Abdullah, *Şark Seferleri*, f. 5b.

¹⁴ Âsafî Dal Mehmed Çelebi, *Şecâat-nâme*, Revan Köşkü Library, no 1301, f. 63; Yunus Zeyrek, *Tarih-i Osman Paşa*, Ankara, 2001, pp. 31-8.

¹⁵ Mustafa 'Âlî, *Nusret-name*, TS Hazine, no 1365, f. 162.

¹⁶ Bekir Kütükoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-102.

Osman Pasha in Derbent.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Mustafa Pasha convinced the Porte to make pressure on the Crimean Tatars to fill in the gap.

The Caucasus. From the military standpoint, it made sense to secure the Caucasian flank before undertaking any adventures on the Tabriz plain. In this respect, first of all, the Khan was officially appointed commander-in-chief of the Ottoman army in Dagestan (987/1579). The Sultan hoped that the khan would send as much assistance as in the previous year.¹⁸ Thereupon the central government rewarded Mehmed bey by giving him the honorary title of kapudan of 800,000 akçe. Mehmed Khan and about 20,000 Tatars departed for Derbent from Bahçesaray on 26 July 1579 and completed the journey in thirty days.¹⁹ Neither the Ottomans nor the Tatars remained in Derbent. Both of them moved to Şabiran, where a large force was detached and sent ahead. This scout army defeated Mohammed Halife, the Persian general and governor of Şirvan, in two separate clashes, made him a prisoner and sent the remainder of the Persian forces scurrying across the Kura river to Karabag and Mugan. After Şirvan had once again been conquered by the Ottoman forces, special combat forces were sent against Baku and other important cities. Thereafter, the Tatars spread out and collected booty and slaves throughout the countryside.²⁰

Osman Pasha and the Tatar Khan expected the arrival of Lala Mustafa Pasha in Şirvan, but they learned that the main army in Erzurum would not return to Şirvan that year.²¹ Therefore, the Tatar Khan held council with his brothers and the other Tatar dignitaries, and together they resolved to return to Crimea. Osman Pasha was able to dissuade them for a while, by suggesting a raid into the provinces south of the Kura. Thus the Khan and his horsemen crossed the river and concentrated on the province of Genje where they plundered.²² In fact, after gathering booty for an entire month, as winter was approaching and as the Serdar was withdrawing forces from Kars to Erzurum, the Tatars left Genje, rested for a few days in Aresh, and then set out for Crimea. The Khan only consented that his brother Gazi Giray and his son Saadet Giray should spend the winter in the Caucasus with a few thousand Tatars.²³

Apart from these two examples for the first type of participation, the main Crimean army was used in the Ottoman-Safavi war, in the last stage of the Persian campaign (1617). The Crimean Khan Canbey Giray, with an important army, joined the Ottoman army under Halil Pasha. Although they attacked Shah Abbas's

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 75-104.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 107.

¹⁹ BOA, MD, vol. 38, p. 332, Gelibolulu Mustafa 'Âlî, *Künhü'l-ahbar*, vol. III, p. 359.

²⁰ Dal Mehmed Çelebi, *Şecâatname*, ff. 98a-99b.

²¹ Ebubekir bin Abdullah, *Şarkseferleri*, f. 18a.

²² Dal Mehmed Çelebi, *Şecâatname*, ff. 99b-103a; Rahimizade İbrahim Çavuş, *Zafername-i Sultan Murad Han*, İstanbul Üniversitesi Library, TY, no 2372, f. 41b.

²³ Dal Mehmed Çelebi, *Şecâatname*, f. 108b.

troops from Tebriz, they were defeated in the Serav Ovası by Safavi combat forces.²⁴ Moreover, 20,000 Tatar soldiers were shipped from Kefe to Samsun to be used in the Baghdad campaign in 1634.²⁵

The troops of the Tatars spent the winter in the theatre of war, which is more significant than direct military participation, because the Turkish command could not leave behind a sufficient number of garrisons with ample supplies in the fortresses to maintain possession of the newly occupied territories in the dead of winter. Therefore, the Tatars were posted in the Caucasus to provide them with military support and supplies. It is common knowledge that the Turkish army required at least two months to reach the Caucasus from İstanbul, so the task of the Tatars wintering there was to support the united forces of the Turkish garrisons in the Caucasus when necessary and prevent the enemy from initiating major operations prior to the arrival of the Turkish main army. Thus, because of these conditions and continuing heavy pressure of Safavi forces, Osman Pasha requested Mehmed Giray to spend the winter in Şirvan.²⁶

However, from a military point of view, the Tatars were no match for the royal troops of the Safavi. The Tatars were operating in the border fortresses in late autumn or early spring, and they did manage to disrupt Safavi's manoeuvres and cause delays with their destruction. The Turks were forced to maintain a permanent force of two or three thousand Tatars in strategic locations to supply the garrison of the fortresses. For example, after Adil Giray fell captive to the Safavids in the Molla Hasan battle of 1578, the main Tatar army returned to Crimea, but Gazi Giray remained, with about two or three thousand Tatar soldiers in the Caucasus until the summer of 1581. In addition to this, Saadet Giray, son of Mehmed Giray, and Murad Giray spent winter with Osman Pasha and Gazi Giray in the theatre of war, after Mehmed Giray had returned to his homeland (1579). In fact, the defeat of the Tatars had decided the fate of the Ottoman and the Şirvan troops who were besieged in Shemakha. Gazi Giray gained political and military experience under the tutelage of the brilliant commander Osman Pasha, who had the important role of acting as rear guard for the eight to ten thousand Ottomans and Şirvan troops with their equipment. Moreover, in 1579, apart from the major raid across the Kura and the garrisoning of Shemakha and Baku, after the Tatar khan had returned to his homeland²⁷, Osman Pasha, with the aid of Gazi Giray, spent his time consolidating his position in Dagestan.

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Towards the end of 1580, a large Safavi force under the leadership of the vezir Selman khan had begun to concentrate on the Mugan Steppe, the most appropriate assembly area from which an attack on the Ottoman-held strong points

²⁴ İ. Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, vol. II, Ankara, 1988, p. 68.

²⁵ İ. Hami Danişmend, *İzahlı Osmanlı Tarihi Kronolojisi*, vol. IV, İstanbul, 1965, p. 350.

²⁶ BOA, MD, vol. 45, p. 123, no 150.

²⁷ Harimi İbrahim Çavuş, *Zafername*, f. 45; Ebubekir bin Abdullah, *Şark Seferleri*, f. 14; Hüseyin, *Gazavetname-i Osman Paşa*, İstanbul Belediye Library, f. 28.

of Baku and Derbent could be launched. Contrary to this Safavi pressure, Osman Pasha and Gazi Giray conceived a plan which would delay and harass the Safavid preparations for the expected offensive. A mixed force of Tatar and Ottoman cavalry was sent against the Safavid kışlak in a night raid. In order to take the enemy by complete surprise, this force of two or three thousands would have to attack the position from an unexpected quarter. Gazi Giray effectively carried out this raid with the assistance of his cousins Murad Giray and Safa Giray, the Khan's sons. The Safavid camp was thrown into great disorder and Selman Khan only barely managed to escape capture by galloping away on a draft horse. As a result of this victory of the Tatars on the Safavids, Gazi Giray received a personal commendation (*hükme-i Şerif*) from the sultan on 28 February 1581, in which Hanzade was informed of a 50,000 akçe increase in his annual subsidy.²⁸

In the spring of 1581, Gazi Giray and Dal Mehmed Çelebi, former defterdar of Şirvan and author of the Şecaat-nâme, were decisively defeated, and the two commanders could only just escape from the theatre. After this Ottoman and Tatar force's defeat, Osman Pasha left a garrison at Baku and withdrew to Derbent. Persian forces led by Piri Muhammed Beg and Imam Kulu Khan harassed their withdrawal along the Caspian shore to the ramparts of Derbent and advanced to the Ottoman strong points. Therefore, Gazi Giray, selected by Osman Pasha, led a diversionary action against the Safavid forces with the Tatar Prince, who held up somewhere between Şhabiran and Semakhi. According to Ottoman sources, at the end of the first day, the two forces disengaged, and after posting a night watch, Gazi Giray took his repose, and during the night Ebubekir Mirza suddenly left the Ottoman side.²⁹ Taking advantage of the confusion, the Safavids moved into the melee. Gazi Giray, put into prison by the Safavids, was sent to the castle of Alamut where he languished in prison for much of the next four years.³⁰

On the other hand, Gazi Giray escaped from Tebriz, crossing the border dressed as a dervish. He took refuge in Van, and from there he was sent to Erzurum by Çıgalazade Sinan Pasha, the beylerbey of Van. After mutual rejoicing, Osman Pasha gave Gazi Giray the command over all of the Tatar and Circassian troops in his army and ordered the advance to Tebriz. They followed this order and participated in the Tebriz siege (1585).³¹

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In addition to their contribution to the campaigns and wintering, the Tatars carried out certain tasks in the areas of supply and logistics as well. In the course of

²⁸ BOA, MD, vol. 44, p. 231, no 255.

²⁹ Harimi İbrahim Çavuş, *Zafername*, f. 45; Ebubekir bin Abdullah, *Şark Seferleri*, f. 14; Hüseyin, *Gazavetname-i Osman Paşa*, İstanbul Belediye Library, f. 28.

³⁰ İskender Münşî Türkmen, *Târîh-i Âlem-ârâ-yı 'Abbâsî*, trans. by R. Savory, Boulder, 1978, p. 334.

³¹ Rahimizade İbrahim Çavuş, *Gonca- i Bağ-ı Murad*, İstanbul Üniversitesi Library, TY, no 2372, ff. 74b-75b.

a campaign, the Tatars provided the supply service not only for themselves but also for the Turks, particularly in the areas where the Turkish command was unable to cope. For example, when the Tatar forces moved to Derbent, they transported cannon, supply and ammunition, which were necessary for the Ottoman army, and stocked them in Derbent.³² The Khan, long before his departure to Derbent from Bahçesaray on 26 July 1579, had furnished Mehmed bey, sancak bey of Azak with 10,000 Tatars. This advance party and supply train reached Derbent in exactly 74 days.

Apart from the military service, the Tatars played an important diplomatic role as well. The Safavis conducted Adil Giray and Gazi Giray to Qazvin, where they received particularly good treatment. During this troubled period, they offered the young Tatar princes great opportunities for intrigue. It soon became rumoured that Adil Giray had intimate relations with the Begum Hayru'n Nesa, the Shah's wife, who controlled the Safavi state. With the help of these relations the Safavis were aiming to advance the political relations with the Tatars.³³ Moreover, in connection with these diplomatic attacks, the Safavis used Adil Giray as a peacemaker between the Ottomans and the Safavis, by forcing him to send letters to Istanbul.³⁴ In addition to all these diplomatic functions, the Tatars were also used as messengers. According to an Ottoman source called *Tarih-i Osman Paşa*, whilst the Ottoman army was staying in Derbent, the Sultan's hüküm was delivered to Derbent by a few Tatar messengers (*ulak*) before Mehmed had come to Derbent (1579). Moreover, messengers sent from Istanbul were escorted by Tatar combat forces from Kefe to Derbent.³⁵

Apart from the above stated roles, the Tatars controlled the trade relations among Iran, Moscow and the West. For example, during the summer of 1580, they traded with English merchants and prevented their actions with Persia.³⁶ Moreover they helped the Ottoman holding force to order the customs at the ports in the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

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If a conclusion is to be drawn, it can be said that the Tatars were one of the important parameters of the Ottoman-Safavi wars because of their important role in military operations, diplomatic relations and trade, as stated above.

³² Bekir Kütükoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-2.

³³ Peçevi İbrahim, *Tarih-i Peçevi*, vol. II, İstanbul, 1866, p. 233; İskender Münşi, *Târih-i Âlem-ârâ-yı 'Abbâsî*, p. 355.

³⁴ Mustafa H. Eravcı, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 175.

³⁵ *Tarih-i Osman Paşa*, p. 62.

³⁶ Anthony Jenkinson, *The Travels of Anthony Jenkinson. Early Voyages and Travels. Russia and Persia*, ed. by E. D. Morgan and C. H. Coote, vol. I, London, 1885, pp. 130-150.