

PROBLEMATICAL MILITARY-POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE TURKISH QUESTION IN THE 15TH CENTURY

Hans-Joachim Kießling

The question whether and to what extent geopolitical factors affected the advance of the Turks into Southeastern Europe has heretofore been examined just as little as the question whether systematic strategic-political features can be found in the spreading of Ottoman rule in Europe. Both questions are to be answered in the affirmative. Various circumstances as well as evidence from Old Ottoman literature show that the early Ottoman sultans were fully aware of the importance of geographical factors. It was especially the course of the Danube which exercised, in spite of the low economic importance of this river, a strong influence on Turkish strategy and policy. The holding of the Danube line and the control over the river crossings were one of the most important concerns of the early Ottoman sultans. A second important factor was the control of the Trans-Balkan military road from Saloniki to Belgrade and the so-called Via Egnatia. Decisively dependent on this were not only economic factors, but also the political attitude of the Ottoman satellites of Moldavia and Walachia as well as of the Serbian despots. Crucial here was the possession, or at least the keeping under control, of the two ends of the Trans-Balkan road — the fortresses of Belgrade and Saloniki — as well as of the passes over the Albanian mountains. These points explain the attitude of both early Ottoman sultans and the Byzantines and Venetians.

The superiority of the Turkish army was by no means based least on the uniformity of the supreme command, the uniformity of language, and the lack of prejudice with respect to new inventions. Compared with these positive factors, the antagonisms which could be traced back to domestic political conditions were only of secondary importance. The „pro memoria“ of Bishop Alexius Celadonius mercilessly exposed the weaknesses of the Occidental position and made impressive proposals for combatting the Turkish threat. They were, however, not only not followed, but, for the most part, not even understood. The flagging of the crusade idea led to illusory „thaw ideas“ and made it possible for the sultan to appear as a partner in the same terms in the diplomatic game. As a result of the misunderstanding of the ideological nature of the Turkish wars, there developed also an overestimation of the allegiance of the Islamic opponents of the Turkish sultan.