

## Historical Turning Point: the Battle of Zigetvar a Turning Point in Ottoman Military and Political History: The Siege of Szigetvar (1566)

Hacı Beytullah Mutlu 

**Abstract.** *The Siege of Szigetvar in 1566 was the closing move of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent's 46-year reign and one of the peak points of the Ottoman Empire's military strategies towards Western Europe in the 16th century. Historians examine the military, logistical, socio-economic, and political dimensions of the campaign with an interdisciplinary approach. This study provides a multifaceted investigation of the Siege of Szigetvár, comparing the defensive strategy of the fortress commander Nikola Šubić Zrinski with the siege, fortification, and artillery techniques of the Ottoman army. The death of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent on the night of September 6-7, and the secrecy surrounding this eventual concealment by Grand Vizier Sokullu Mehmed Pasha to maintain army morale and discipline, constitutes one of the most successful examples of early modern military crisis management. The magnificent Turk died, changing world history. The short- and long-term impacts of the Szigetvár Campaign on Central European geopolitics are detailed in light of contemporary Ottoman chronicles, Habsburg archival documents, and analyses by modern historians.*

**Keywords:** *Siege of Szigetvár, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, Ottoman Empire, Nikola Šubić Zrinski, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, military crisis management, Central European geopolitics, 16th century Ottoman history*

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## Tarixi dönüm nöqtəsi: Ziqetvar döyüşü Osmanlı hərbi və siyasi tarixində dönüş nöqtəsi: Ziqetvar mühasirəsi (1566)

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**Xülasə.** *1566-cı ildəki Ziqetvar mühasirəsi Sultan Süleyman Qanununin 46 illik hakimiyyətinin yekun gedişi və Osmanlı İmperiyasının XVI əsrdə Qərbi Avropaya yönəlmiş hərbi strategiyalarının zirvə nöqtələrindən biri olmuşdur. Tarixçilər bu yürüşün hərbi, loqistik, sosial-iqtisadi və siyasi aspektlərini fənlərarası yanaşma ilə tədqiq edirlər. Bu tədqiqat qalalar komandanı Nikola Šubić Zrinskinin müdafiə strategiyası ilə Osmanlı ordusunun mühasirə, istehkam və artilleriya üsullarını müqayisə edərək Ziqetvar mühasirəsinin çoxşaxəli təhlilini təqdim edir. Sultan Süleyman Qanununin sentyabrın 6-dan 7-nə keçən gecə vəfat etməsi və ordunun mənəvi ruhunu, nizam-intizamını qorumaq üçün Sədrəzəm Söküllü Mehmed Paşa tərəfindən ölümünün gizli saxlanması erkən müasir dövr*

*hərbi böhran idarəçiliyinin ən uğurlu nümunələrindən birini təşkil edir. Möhtəşəm türk vəfat edərək dünya tarixini dəyişdi. Ziqetvar yürüşünün Mərkəzi Avropa geo-siyasətinə qısamüddətli və uzunmüddətli təsirləri dövrün Osmanlı salnamələri, Habsburq arxiv sənədləri və müasir tarixçilərin təhlilləri işığında ətraflı şəkildə işıqlandırılır.*

**Açar sözlər:** Ziqetvar mühasirəsi, Sultan Süleyman Qanuni, Osmanlı İmperiyası, Nikola Şubiç Zrinski, Sököllü Mehmed Paşa, hərbi böhran idarəçiliyi, Mərkəzi Avropa geosiyasəti, XVI əsr Osmanlı tarixi

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## Introduction

The 16th century marks the peak of the "Classical Age" or "Golden Age" of the Ottoman Empire, during which it established its political and military hegemony over a vast geographical area stretching from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, from the Persian Gulf to Central Europe. The Battle of Mohács in 1526, which destroyed the Kingdom of Hungary, brought the Ottoman State and the Holy Roman Empire directly to the border. From this date onwards, the lands of Hungary entered world history as a constant battleground for influence and wars of attrition between two global powers. During the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566), westward campaigns formed the main military concept of the state. With the Siege of Vienna in 1529 and the German Campaign in 1532, pressure on the Habsburgs increased, and with the establishment of the Buda Province (1541), Hungary was directly integrated into the Ottoman administrative structure and became Ottoman territory.



However, by the 1560s, the incursions of Archduke Maximilian II of Austria into Hungarian territories under Ottoman control and the banditry activities in border fortresses had disrupted the peace and become a factor in the war. By 1566, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, at the age of 72, was known as a magnificent ruler suffering from serious health problems due to gout. Nevertheless, he decided

to embark on his 13th and final campaign to re-establish the authority of the state, ensure border security, and once again prove military superiority against the West. Although centers such as Erlau (Eger) Castle or Esztergom were considered as the initial targets, Szigetvár Castle was determined as the main target due to its strategic location on the border and Nikola Šubić Zrinski's attacks targeting Ottoman supply lines.

## Methods

Historical-critical analysis and comparative source research methods were applied. The research is based on the following methodological framework:

### *Analysis of Ottoman Chronicles*

The works written by the court historians of the period and the bureaucrats who directly participated in the campaign were examined. Among these are:

- Celâlzâde Mustafa Çelebi: Presents the official perspective of the Ottoman bureaucracy and the preparations for the campaign.
- Peçevî İbrahim Efendi: Due to his proximity to the region and events, he recounts the details of the siege, the climate and terrain conditions.
- Feridun Ahmed Bey: As the private secretary of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, he describes the moment of the siege and the process of concealing the death of Suleiman the Magnificent from a first-hand perspective.

### *Habsburg and Hungarian Archival Documents*

The correspondence of Nikola Šubić Zrinski, who witnessed the siege from within, records from the Austrian Military Archives (Kriegsarchiv), and contemporary Italian/German embassy reports (Relazioni) were compared with the available data.

### *Military and Logistical Assessment*

The siege warfare was subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis in terms of the caliber of cannons used, the depth of the sewer tunnels, the engineering characteristics of the wooden bridges built for swamp reclamation, and the army's supply mechanisms.

### *Expedition Preparations and the Army's March*

In the early months of 1566, massive preparations for an expedition began in Istanbul. Due to the Sultan's illness, a special carriage was designed for him, and the positions where the army would encamp along the route were arranged in advance by bridge-building and passenger units.

### *Logistics and Provisioning Organization*

The Ottoman logistics system is considered the most advanced mechanism of the Early Modern period. Stocks of wheat, barley, hardtack, and meat were established at staging posts along the expedition route. The Danube River was used as the main waterway for transporting heavy artillery ammunition, provisions, and siege equipment.

### *March Route*

The army departed from Istanbul on May 1, 1566. Upon reaching Belgrade, Prince János Zsigmond II of Transylvania was received and shown respect. With the strategic decision made here, it was confirmed that the main direction of the operation was Szigetvár. Heavy rains and muddy terrain slowed the army's progress, but on August 5, 1566, they reached the Szigetvár Fortress and established their camp.

## Results

### *Siege Strategy and Operational Process*

The Szigetvár Fortress was an extremely difficult target, fortified by natural geographical obstacles. The fortress consisted of three main sections: the New City, the Old City (Inner City), and the central Inner Citadel. The fortress was surrounded by deep swamps and ponds fed by the Almaš River. (Finkel, 2005; Imber, 2002; İnalçık, 1973).

### *Terrain Architecture and Fortification Moves*

The first major technical stage in solving the siege was controlling the body of water that isolated the fortress.

1. Draining the Swamps: Ottoman architects and engineers lowered the pond level by altering the course of the Almaš River, and constructed dams with thousands of tons of earth, bushes, and wooden logs to prevent cannons from sinking into the mud.
2. Trench and Battery Installation: Heavy cannons were placed on three sides of the fortress, and the artillery began to bombard the walls relentlessly. (Setton, 1984; Sugar, 1977; Zürcher, 2004)

### *Phased Attack and Tunnel Warfare*

- Fall of the Outer City (August 9): On the fourth day of the siege, the Outer City was captured by intense artillery fire and a Janissary charge, forcing the defenders to retreat to the Inner City.
- Capture of the Inner City (August 19): With the draining of the swampy areas, the tunnels leading to the Inner City walls were detonated, and thanks to the resulting fires and breaches in the walls, the Inner City was also brought under control.
- Siege of the Inner Citadel: Zrinski and his remaining core force of approximately 800 men closed themselves off in the Inner Citadel with unwavering resistance. While the Ottoman artillery continued to bombard the Inner Citadel walls, sappers, along with artillery variants, placed massive barrels of gunpowder under the walls (Aksan, 2007; Faroghi, 2004).

### *Crisis Management: The Sultan's Death and Information Control*

The most critical point of the siege occurred on the night of September 6th to 7th. Sultan Suleiman, who had been ill for a long time, died in his tent just before the announcement of victory (Agoston, 2014). Grand Vizier Sokullu Mehmet Pasha displayed extraordinary crisis management to prevent the chaos and demoralization that this death would create in the army:

- The Sultan's death was known only to a few trusted physicians and private secretaries.
- The Sultan's body was embalmed after his internal organs were removed and placed on his throne in the tent.
- Rumors were spread among the soldiers that the Sultan was in good health and resting on the advice of doctors.
- The Sultan's seal was affixed to the decrees written after the victory, ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of the administrative mechanism. This secret was kept until Selim II arrived in Belgrade and met with the army (for 48 days).

### *The End of the Siege and Zrinski's Breakout Operation*

On the morning of September 8, 1566, a large part of the Inner Citadel walls was destroyed, and the defense line collapsed with the explosion of the arsenal. Having lost all hope of escape, Nikola Šubić Zrinski, instead of surrendering with his remaining soldiers, launched a desperate breakout. As a result of fierce hand-to-hand combat, Zrinski lost his life, and the Szigetvár Fortress fell completely under Ottoman control.

## Discussion

The Szigetvár Campaign is a multifaceted area of debate in both Ottoman and Western historiography.

### *Tactical Victory or Strategic Attrition?*

Some military historians consider Szigetvár a tactical success for the Ottomans, while others see it as a sign of a strategic setback in terms of its long-term effects (Ágoston, 2005).

- Positive View: The fortress was captured, the Habsburgs' border violations were punished, and Southern Hungary was completely secured.
- Critical View: The loss of a massive imperial army for more than a month in front of a single medium-sized fortress, the serious loss of soldiers, and the loss of a charismatic leader like Suleiman the Magnificent, led to the breaking of the final pressure on Vienna.

### *Szigetvar from the Perspective of Early Modern Military Revolution Theory*

According to Geoffrey Parker's "Military Revolution" thesis, the development of Italian-style fortifications (Trace Italienne) in the 16th century prolonged siege wars and provided an advantage to the defending side. Szigetvar bears the transitional characteristics of this period. Zrinski's defense demonstrated that the effective use of firearms and geographical elements could slow down the advance of the Ottoman army (Murphey, 1999; Parker, 1996).

## Conclusions

The Szigetvar Campaign created a new era in 16th-century world history, producing multifaceted consequences.

1. The End of the Reign of Suleiman the Magnificent: With the death of Suleiman the Magnificent, who brought the Ottoman Empire to the peak of its borders and institutional structure, an era ended; and with the reign of Selim II, a new bureaucratic phase began in which the role of the Grand Viziers (especially Sokullu Mehmed Pasha) in the administrative mechanism increased.
2. Military and Strategic Balance: The capture of Szigetvár consolidated Ottoman dominance in Southern Hungary and Slavonia. However, the attrition of the Ottoman army also demonstrated that its absolute offensive capability against the Habsburgs had reached its limits.
3. Diplomatic Balance: Following the campaign, the Treaty of Edirne was signed in 1568 between Selim II and Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II, lasting for eight years. With this treaty, the Habsburgs agreed to continue paying an annual tax of 30,000 ducats, and the borders were relatively stable for a long time (until the Long Wars of 1593).
4. Crisis Management Literature: Sokullu Mehmed Pasha's concealment of the Sultan's death for 48 days, ensuring the completion of the victory without disrupting the command and control of the army, is an example of tactical brilliance written in golden letters in the history of world military crisis management.

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