

Ottoman Sources Concerning the Military Operations Led by Grand Vizier Fazil Ahmed Pasha in 1664

Balázs Sudár

Hungarian written records discuss the 1664 campaign led by Köprülüade Fazil Ahmed Pasha primarily in the light of the siege of Zrínyi-Újvár and the Battle of Szentgotthárd, as if the Ottomans would have launched the campaign merely for capturing the besieged Kanizsa and Zrínyi-Újvár, which represented an enormous problem for them.¹ However, Ottoman sources reveal a completely different picture. In the following, I would like to present the morals of this, with special regard to the decisions the Grand Vizier had to make and the role Miklós Zrínyi played in them.²

The fights in 1663 resulted in a long-awaited breakthrough from the Ottoman point of view: they succeeded in capturing Érsekújvár (today Nové Zámky, Slovakia) and its surroundings, Léva, Nyitra and Surány (today Levice, Nitra, and Šurany, Slovakia). As a result of this, the immediate sphere of influence of Ottoman Hungary was expanded to the Vág River (today Váh River, Slovakia). Pressburg, the capital of Royal Hungary, was now only a few hours away, within a distance of fifty kilometres. The regions of Nógrád and Gömör fell into Ottoman hands again. The border of the Kingdom of Hungary was thus pushed back to the southern foothills of the Carpathians, and communication between the area of Western Hungary and the counties of Upper Hungary became extremely difficult. The territory of the country almost split into two, which, in the long run, would have helped the separatist aspirations encouraged by the Ottomans and the formation of a Kingdom of Upper Hungary (comprising mostly of today's Slovakia). Things did not change much when Péter Zrínyi defeated the troops of Chengizade Ali Pasha on the southern frontline, near Otocsác (today Otočac, Slovakia), in the late autumn of 1663. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that Grand Vizier Fazil Ahmed Pasha did not retreat with his troops. Instead, he wintered his army in the region of the Northern Balkans and Ottoman Hungary.³ His own headquarters were set up in Belgrade. With this, he made it clear that he wanted to spend the military season of 1664 in Ottoman Hungary, and that he intended to start military operations early. This was not a good sign for the Hungarians, at all.

The winter campaign led by Miklós Zrínyi and Count Julius Hohenlohe, with the support of the Viennese War Council, was a response to this situation. On the one hand, Zrínyi tightened the blockade around Kanizsa: by capturing Berzence, Segesd and Babócsa,

¹ This question is discussed by a large number of scholarly publications. Here are a few examples: *Rónai Horváth* 1891; *Perjés* 1965; *Perjés* 1989. Most recently: *Kelenik* 2012.

² I have published the short biographies of Ottoman historians that are relevant to the history of the campaign and analysed the relationship between their works: *Sudár* 2012b.

³ On the wintering: *Fekete* 1993. 251; *Gökçek* 2006. 185.

he almost transformed it into a ring. On the other hand, by destroying Ottoman territories, he certainly caused sensible losses to the Ottomans,⁴ and by burning the bridge of Eszék (today Osijek, Croatia) he gave considerable work to their military leaders. Of course, he could hardly have expected that by destroying the crossing, he would seriously hinder the advance of the Grand Vizier's army (he rather meant to cover his own campaign with it),⁵ but based on the spring events, he must have put the Ottoman military leaders in an awkward position. The slow construction of the bridge, in reality, limited the options for action available for Fazil Ahmed. At the same time, the destruction of South Transdanubia was probably not against the Grand Vizier, who was expected to move northwards. In my view, the real message was intended for the Pasha of Kanizsa. By the summer of 1664, the centre of the province had come to a very difficult position. Zrínyi's strategy slowly started to work. The border defence system against Kanizsa, Kiskomárom and Zrínyi-Újvár effectively isolated the main Ottoman fortress, the supply of which became increasingly difficult. From this point of view, South Transdanubia was not the foreground, a staging area of the Grand Vizier, but rather the hinterland of Kanizsa. (It is true, though, that in the event of a siege, the destroyed area could also slow down the relief troops.)

Although our pieces of information are somewhat contradictory, it seems that the region was controlled by Yakovali Hasan Pasha at that time.⁶ The region was perfectly familiar to him, as it was probably his birthplace, and by the 1630s, he had been the Pasha of Kanizsa for nearly ten years. But more importantly, he was not a leader living in isolation in the border fortress district. In the 1640s, Hasan disappeared from Ottoman Hungary. In the late 1650s, he is reported to have been in Istanbul as a trusted man of the distressed Köprülü Party. (There is a tendency to regard the coming to power of Köprülü Mehmed in September 1656 as an event that changed the history of the Ottoman Empire at once. In reality, however, it was not like that. Until the summer of 1659, Mehmed had to fight hard to keep his position. He was often merely a hair's breadth away from dismissal or death.)⁷ He remained loyal to the Grand Vizier even when he was close to the fall: in 1658, during the revolt of Abaza Hasan. With his effective countermissions – the taking of Ankara – he contributed to the suppression of the revolt in the end.⁸ Although Köprülü Mehmed heavily retaliated against the rebellion, he remembered those who were loyal to him. It was during the crisis of 1658 that a new party who were loyal to Köprülü came together: Yakovali Hasan Pasha belonged to them. His loyalty was rewarded. First, he became the Bey of Ankara, and then the Pasha of Adana, in the east.⁹ It was from there that he was called for war to Ottoman Hungary in 1660. In the summer of 1663, he became the Beylerbey of Kanizsa, and he could certainly count on the support of the younger Köprülü, Fazil Ahmed, as well.

⁴ Pálffy 2004.

⁵ Perjés 1989. 81–83.

⁶ According to Mehmed Halife, on 1 July 1663 (25 Zilkade), Grand Vizier Fazil Ahmed Pasha appointed him as the Pasha of Kanizsa in the Eszék camp, and immediately sent him off with 12,000 men to his seat. *Oral* 2000. 89. For his biography, see *Sudár* 2006. 27–34. On the identification of Yakovali and Yentür Hasan: *Sudár* 2012c. 109.

⁷ Concerning this: B. Szabó – *Sudár* 2012. 972–991.

⁸ Ottoman chronicles referred to him as Neyzen Hasan Pasha: *Evliyâ* 2006, 343. He became the Bey of Ankara in 1658: *Silahdâr* 1928. 139, 144, 145; *Gökçek* 2006. 88.

⁹ *Evliyâ* 2002. 33, 35, 40, 43, 48.

(And, indeed, upon the first alarming reports in the middle of winter, the Ottoman forces of Ottoman Hungary were mobilised to liberate the besieged Pécs.)

Although the attacks launched by Zrínyi¹⁰ were annoying, they little influenced the actions of the Grand Vizier who was about to head north along the Danube. According to Ottoman chronicle literature, Fazil Ahmed wanted to seize Győr and Mosonmagyaróvár.¹¹ However, more importantly, the preparations for the campaign and the organisation of logistics also pointed northwards. (It is common knowledge that the Ottomans carefully prepared for their military operations. The construction of the supply system indicated well the direction of the planned campaign, as research results by Szabolcs Hadnagy have recently demonstrated.¹²) The orders given by Grand Vizier Fazil Ahmed Pasha were clearly concerned with securing the route leading to Buda, and he also sent materiel there. It makes one wonder that he ordered the construction and guarding of the bridge of Esztergom as early as March, and then the transfer of grain stock from there to Újvár.¹³ Újvár was not only defended by its own Pasha (Kurd), but Sari Hüseyin (the Beylerbey of Buda) was also seconded to there, certainly because of the major threat to the area, but perhaps also for preparing another campaign. It is possible, therefore, that the Grand Vizier regarded Érsekújvár (today Nové Zámky, Slovakia) as a base of operations and wanted to move on from there.

In this troubled situation, the imperial military leaders decided to employ a strategy operating with shared forces.¹⁴ With the main forces, Montecuccoli was in position at Mosonmagyaróvár and defended the foreground of Vienna. De Souches was ready to attack from the north, while Zrínyi and Hohenlohe were to attack from the south. The Grand Vizier still did not cross the Drava when de Souches had already besieged and taken Nyitra (15 April – 3 May), while Zrínyi and Hohenlohe started to lay siege to Kanizsa – with considerable delay (beginning with 30 April). Although Fazil Ahmed constantly received alarming reports,¹⁵ he took his time leaving his camp in Belgrade. On the one hand, he announced the rally for a later date (6 May),¹⁶ so his troops were still on their way, and the Christians were ahead of the Grand Vizier. On the other hand, the reconstruction of the bridge of Eszék had not yet been completed despite the increasingly serious menace.¹⁷ Thus, Zrínyi's winter action had already produced results.

¹⁰ *Perjés* 1965. 362–366.

¹¹ Nihadi: Győr. See *Özkasap* 2004. 53. Silahdar Mehmed: Győr and Óvár. See *Silahdâr* 1928. 338.

¹² *Hadnagy* 2016.

¹³ Order, 17–26 April 1664: From the storehouses in Esztergom, the grain of the Treasury has to be transferred to Újvár. *Fekete* 1993. 275, 277.

¹⁴ On the possibility of multi-front fights: *B. Szabó* 2011.

¹⁵ Kaplan Mustafa, based in Pozsega (today Požega, Croatia), sent the Grand Vizier news of Zrínyi and Hohenlohe preparing for Kanizsa as early as 14 April. *Silahdâr* 1928. 321. Two days later, grim news came from Gurdzhi Mehmed who spent the winter in Szigetvár. *Ibid.* 322. On 2 May, Yakovali Hasan Pasha, the defender of Kanizsa, had already written a letter reporting that the siege began, and he appealed for help. *Ibid.* 327. The first reports of the siege of Nyitra also came in mid-April. *Fekete* 1993. 276–277.

¹⁶ The Grand Vizier intended to leave the Zimony (today Zemun, part of Belgrade, Serbia) camp on the day of Hizir, that is, on 6 May: *Fekete* 1993. 275.

¹⁷ Order, 19–27 March 1664: The bridge has to be ready by 11 April. *Fekete* 1993. 266. Later (between 7 and 16 April), the date was postponed to 27 April, and those causing delays were threatened with execution. *Ibid.* 272. On 16 April 1664, Kibleli Mustafa Pasha, who was charged with defending and completing the bridge, reported that the bridge was half-finished. *Silahdâr* 1928. 322. The work was finally completed under the supervision of Ismail Pasha and lasted for a total of 75 days: *Özkasap* 2004. 53.

When the siege of Kanizsa began, Yakovali Hasan called for help, and he repeated it two weeks later.¹⁸ Fazil Ahmed held a military council at Eszék sometime between 14 and 16 May. He had two choices to make: either to support Kanizsa or Újvár with his army. The former was outside the route of the planned campaign, but the latter was right on the way. Nevertheless, while Újvár had plenty of food and soldiers, and the Pasha of Buda defended it himself, Kanizsa had been in short of supply for years, and its surroundings had suffered a series of attacks. Furthermore, after the recapture of Kanizsa, the Christians would have had an open way to the Danube, which represented the backbone of Ottoman Hungary. Moreover, as winter events had clearly demonstrated, after the possible retake of Kanizsa, the Christians could have destroyed the bridge of Eszék, which would have endangered the retreat of the Muslim troops.¹⁹ In these circumstances, the Grand Vizier decided to march speedily on Kanizsa, with the proviso that, after defeating the Christian army in the south, he would turn northwards and approach his original military targets. In the meantime, the local forces gathering in Buda were present in the northern theatre of war. Between 17 and 26 April, Grand Vizier Ahmed Pasha had already ordered the troops from Eger, Temesvár (today Timișoara, Romania), Várad (Nagyvárad, today Oradea, Romania), and Fehérvár, as well as some of the Tartars together with the Yali Agha to move to Újvár. (For various reasons, this concentration was not realised until months later.)²⁰ Nevertheless, the Grand Vizier did not consider changing the course of the campaign: he left his heavy equipment on ships on the Danube, and his army turned westwards with the essential impedimenta.²¹ This marked a turning point in the history of the campaign: the Ottoman army deviated from their planned route leaving behind a logistical system that could have secured their supplies. In other words, the Christians took the lead, and it was no longer the Ottoman Grand Vizier who defined the course of events, but simply responded to the challenges facing him. This made an enormous difference in quality and determined the whole campaign season. So eventually, Zrínyi – probably without his deliberate intent – derailed the campaign of the Grand Vizier with his strong action against Kanizsa.

Grand Vizier Köprülüzade Fazil Ahmed was already at Szigetvár on 25 May, and he reached Kanizsa on 3 June. On hearing his approach, the Christian army fell back to Zrínyi-Újvár and beyond the Mura River on 2 June. The formerly recaptured fortresses – Babócsa, Berzence and Segesd – had already been vacated and burnt down between 29 May and 1 June. The Grand Vizier thus achieved his main objective, the relief of Kanizsa, but the Christian army retreated practically without loss. Fazil Ahmed, therefore, could not turn back, and he could not march to the north, either. He was not supposed to leave Christian forces behind him. Moreover, the imperial army was growing, as Montecuccoli was also ordered to join them. This corps slowly became the main force of the Habsburg army operating in Hungary: defeating them would have forced the Habsburgs to make peace. Fazil Ahmed could hardly do anything else but try to force the imperial forces into battle. On 5 June, he was already present in the Ottoman camp by the River Mura. At Zrínyi-Újvár, his primary goal was not the siege of the stronghold,

¹⁸ A letter from Yentür Hasan about the attack got to the camp of the Grand Vizier on 2 May. *Silahdâr* 1928. 327. Another messenger of the pasha arrived at the Siklós camp on 17 May. *Ibid.* 331.

¹⁹ A potential new attack of the bridge and the repulse of the attack sill engaged the attention of the Ottoman military leaders in the spring of 1664. News of this subject arrived at the camp on 14 April. Kibeleli Mustafa Pasha was charged with the defence of the bridge under construction. *Silahdâr* 1928. 321.

²⁰ *Fekete* 1993. 277.

²¹ *Silahdâr* 1928. 330.

but to cross the river and unleash an open battle. The establishment of the first Ottoman camp served this purpose, and the first artillery units were emplaced against the Christian camps across the river. The Grand Vizier was not interested in Zrínyi-Újvár itself, he did not care about its siege. (Of course, the occupation of the area beyond the river would have entailed the fall of the fort, as well.) To reach his objectives, Fazil Ahmed tried to build a bridgehead on the south bank of the Mura, but this was destroyed by the Christians, and the defence of the riverbank was strengthened (between 7–8 June). This made it clear for the Grand Vizier that there was no way for him to cross the river. It was then that he decided to start a regular siege. The camp was partially relocated, and the Janissaries began digging communication trenches on 10 June. In the beginning, they fired at the fortress with only seven cannons suddenly brought from Kanizsa. Although three weeks later the stronghold fell (on 30 June),²² its seizure did not solve the basic problem of the Grand Vizier. The Christian army was still not entirely defeated, and their attempt at crossing the Mura River failed again (the Ottomans kept trying until 5 July). After capturing the castle, Fazil Ahmed spent one week in his camp. During this time, the high command decided that they did not want keep the fort, and immediately demolished it. However, in the meantime, the Christian army – now led by Montecuccoli – began to withdraw.

The Grand Vizier could take credit for new successes, but he still could not get rid of the imperial forces. Additionally, he could not remain in the region of Kanizsa much longer, as this area had already suffered a lot and was unable to supply the Ottoman army with provisions.²³ The results of Zrínyi's earlier activities, therefore, put the Grand Vizier under pressure again, and he decided to follow the Christian army and advance northwards. First, he retreated to Kanizsa, destroyed Kiskomárom (on 13 July), and then continued his way to the north. The fortresses of the border defence system facing Kanizsa fell one after the other,²⁴ but the River Rába halted the advance. On 25 July, Ahmed was not able to cross the river at Körmend. Seeking a ford, he started to move south-westwards along the river, in the opposite direction of his intended course. However, the Christian party could not just stand by and watch this move, either. The loss of the defensive line along the Rába would have had serious consequences. Therefore, they tried to hold it, to prevent the crossing of the Ottomans. The attempt of Köprülü Ahmed to cross the river led to the battle of Szentgotthárd (on 1 August), which was not a defeat for the Grand Vizier, but the loss of an opportunity to fight the decisive battle.²⁵ Despite their obvious and significant losses, the Ottoman army remained in an orderly state and was still capable of fighting. They did not leave their camp, either. It was only on 6 August (after the Christians had already left) that they started to move towards Körmend, and the ceasefire was signed at the Vasvár camp on 10 August.

If we look at this phase of the campaign, we can see that after the relief of Kanizsa the only serious aim of Fazil Ahmed was to force the Christian army in the south into battle and to expel them from the region of Kanizsa. In short, he wanted to secure Kanizsa. He fully achieved his goal, and, by the way, he finally destroyed Kiskomárom and Zrínyi-Újvár, the two

²² For Ottoman narrative sources related to the siege see pages 301–323 of the present volume.

²³ Evliya Çelebi gave a detailed picture of the famine striking the Ottoman army: *Evliyâ* 2003. 11.

²⁴ On the border fortress district facing Kanizsa: *Kelenik* 1995a. 5–51; *Kelenik* 1995c. 23–43; *Kelenik* 2005a. 311–357. The campaign of 1664 through the eyes of the Ottomans: *Sudár* 2012. 103–120.

²⁵ The significance of the Battle of Szentgotthárd was enormous from the psychological and propagandistic points of view, but it should not be overestimated from the military aspect. In reality, the Christian army was faced only with a minor part of the Grand Vizier's forces. For the evaluation of this: *Perjés* 1981. 117–174.

ends of the ‘pincers’ applying pressure on the provincial centre. He recaptured the fortifications lost during the winter campaign (Segesd, Babócsa and Berzence), and shattered the border defence system facing Kanizsa. That is, he secured the position of Kanizsa in the long term, which is by no means an insignificant result compared to the previous circumstances that placed the main fort in South Transdanubia in an almost untenable situation, and it was only a matter of time until the ‘blockade’ set up by Zrínyi’s hard work would reach its purpose.

Nevertheless, Fazil Ahmed must have been far from satisfied. He failed to defeat the Christian armies and even suffered heavy losses. In fact, Zrínyi’s winter campaign really showed its true impact in August: the Ottoman army was completely exhausted, suffered from chronic food shortages, and was not in a position to continue the campaign with success. Contemporary sources – e.g. accounts of the famine by Evliya Çelebi – clearly demonstrate this, and so do the subsequent events. Fazil Ahmed made his way towards Fehérvár and Esztergom as quickly as possible, where plentiful supplies awaited him, including the large amount of food that was originally accumulated for his campaign. In lack of this, the Ottoman army got into a position where they could not make use of their temporary advantage. They could have seized some of the North Transdanubian fortresses without any difficulty, but they did not even consider seriously the siege of Sümeg. In reality, they ran for food.

However, Köprülüzaade Ahmed had plenty of time. Although the relief of Kanizsa and the siege of Zrínyi-Újvár took a long time, the delay was not serious because of the early start of the campaign season. Two and a half months passed between setting up their camp in Eszék and the battle of Szentgotthárd, but, during this time, the Muslim army got far in western direction. The actual loss of time was perhaps one and a half months. The fact that the Ottoman army was in Western Hungary in early August can be regarded as a remarkable achievement. Sultan Süleyman arrived in Mohács one month later, on 29 August 1526. Siklós fell on 7 July 1543. The siege of Esztergom began on 23 July 1543, and the siege of Fehérvár started in late August. The advance guard of Sinan Pasha arrived under Győr on 31 July 1594, and Damad Ibrahim began besieging Eger around 20 September 1596. Fazil Ahmed himself arrived under Érsekújvár (today Nové Zámky, Slovakia) on 16 August 1663. After Szentgotthárd, the Grand Vizier arrived in the north in time; August was the beginning of operations in the target area. The detour he made in South Transdanubia, therefore, had no fatal consequences for the Ottoman army in terms of time.

It weakened the morale and physical condition of the Muslim army all the more – and that was what turned out to be a determining factor in the end. The ruthless, consistent strategy of Miklós Zrínyi against Kanizsa yielded a strange fruit. It forced the Grand Vizier off his original course, made him face difficult supply problems, and eventually put him in an unsustainable situation. With this, he prevented a direct and well-prepared attack on Pressburg, Győr, or even Vienna. The campaign of Fazil Ahmed was derailed. When compared to its size, the campaign was completely fruitless. The only benefit for the Ottomans was the consolidation of the region of Kanizsa, while valuable areas were lost in the north. In other words, when Zrínyi ‘pulled on himself’ the main Ottoman army, he saved the country: the Grand Vizier could not beat deeper the wedge he had already hit into the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom at Érsekújvár (today Nové Zámky, Slovakia). However, Zrínyi paid a heavy price: he inflicted great suffering on Western Hungary, and got further than ever from his cherished plan of capturing Kanizsa. Paradoxically enough, that was probably how he saved Hungary from complete fragmentation and destruction.