

JÁNOS HUNYADI: PREVENTING THE OTTOMANS FROM CONQUERING
WESTERN EUROPE IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

JÁNOS HUNYADI: PREVENTING THE OTTOMANS FROM CONQUERING WESTERN EUROPE IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY, by Major Barnabás Bartók, 124 pages.

The crusade of Nicopolis, in 1396, intended to expel the Turks from the Balkans, but it ended with the disastrous defeat. Sigismund of Luxemburg, the King of Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor, achieved much to fortify the southern border of Hungary and he had the power to mobilize the unwilling Hungarian nobility when it was needed. After his death none of his successors to the throne was able force his will upon the nobility to react on the growing Ottoman threat. In these critical times, János Hunyadi, born from low nobility, was the only person who was able to present the skills and capabilities which could balance the expansion efforts of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. By using his experiences gained in the condottiere wars in Italy and in the Hussite Wars in Bohemia, he was able to defend the Hungarian borders, and successfully attacked the Turks on their territory. For his outstanding performance on the frontier of Europe he earned the honorable “Defender of Christendom” title. Without the achievements of János Hunyadi between 1439 and 1456, Hungary could not have been the defensive Bastion of Europe.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
ILLUSTRATIONS	viii
TABLES	ix
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	7
The Ottoman Empire and its Expansion	10
The Battle of Nicopolis.....	14
CHAPTER 3 FROM THE ANONYMITY TO THE FAME	19
The Parentage and the Early Ages of János Hunyadi.....	19
The Early Years	22
In the Service of King Sigismund Mercenary Years in Italy.....	25
The Hussite Wars.....	30
CHAPTER 4 THE OPPOSING FORCES	38
The Armed Forces of Hungary in the Fifteenth Century.....	41
The Turkish Army	46
CHAPTER 4 THE FIRST VICTORIES.....	52
Fights on Hungarian soil.....	52
Victories against the Turks	58
The Battle of Marosszentimre, 18 March 1442	60
The Battle of Gyulaférvár, 25 March 1442.....	63
The Battle of Vaskapu (Iron Gate), July 1442.....	66
The Long Campaign, 1443	72
CHAPTER 5 THE LOST BATTLES	80
The Battle of Varna, 1444.....	82

The Battle of Rigómező (Kosovo Polje) 1448.....	89
CHAPTER 6 THE DEFENDER OF CHRISTENDOM.....	98
The Battle of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade).....	99
Conclusion	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	111
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST	115

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Figure 1. Europe in the fifteenth century	2
Figure 2. Hussite war wagon formations.....	34
Figure 3. Kingdom of Hungary	38
Figure 4. The Battle of Szegszárd around 10 September 1440	55
Figure 5. The Battle of Szentimre, 18 March 1442.....	62
Figure 6. The Battle of Vaskapu (Iron Gate), July 1442	68
Figure 7. The Battle of Varna 10 November 1444.....	85
Figure 8. The Battle of Nándorfehérvár	101

TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Conquering sequence of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and Europe.....	13

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every day, when the bells start to ring, they herald a message for the citizens of the countries all over Europe, but for the Hungarian people this message has a far deeper meaning, than indicating the time. For generations from school ages through the eldest population come the same thoughts in their minds. If only for a few seconds, these thoughts let the people look back to the glorious ages of their history, and they visualize a person, who models the pattern of heroism and patriotism for his nation.¹ These thoughts are centered on a person who not only set the basis of the last decades of the Golden Ages for the Kingdom of Hungary which lasted more than two centuries, but also influenced the history of Christian Europe in the fifteenth century.²

This person was John Hunyadi, or in his native language János Hunyadi, who left his heritage not only in the hearts and minds of the Hungarian people but also in the memories of many people in the countries of Europe. The story of the noon bells and the circumstances of the events around it, originated from the year 1456. By then the conquered and vassal countries of Serbia, Bosnia, Albania, Bulgaria, and the still resistant Hungary experienced the reality of Ottoman rule and threat through blood. Not only Hungary but also Pope Callixtus III, realized the danger and called the Western European nations into a crusade to mitigate this threat. To prove his commitment and his belief in

¹Dr Lajos Vécsey, *Hunyadi* (München: Ledermüller Olivér nyomdavállalata, 1956), 9.

²László Veszprémi and Béla K. Király, ed., *A Millenium of Hungarian Military History: War and Society in East Central Europe*, vol. 37 of *War and Society in East Central Europe* (Highland Lakes, NJ: Social Science Monographs, 2002), 26.

this matter, he removed many of the golden and silver buckles from the Vatican book collection. He sent them to the mint, to get money for equipping the crusading forces.³ Probably, the destiny of this collected money was to serve a more noble aim, because none of these soldiers fought against the Ottomans on the soil of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1456. Actually the lack of real physical threats on Western European countries' borders presented by the Eastern Ottoman forces, did not spur the powers toward intervention.



Figure 1. Europe in the fifteenth century

Source: Created by author, using data from János M. Bak and Béla K. Király, *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi: War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary*, vol. 3 of *War and Society in East Central Europe* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn College CUNY, 1982). Cover page.

³Kelly de Vries, "The Lack of a Western European Military Response to the Ottoman Invasion of Eastern Europe from Nicopolis (1396) to Mohacs (1526)," *The Journal of Military History* 63, no. 3 (July 1999): 544.

The Western European powers were more interested in their domestic issues and fighting other Christians. This left Hungary alone in the struggle with the Ottoman invading forces.⁴ As Pope Callixtus III, could not influence other nations to provide physical support, nor did he intend to involve his papal forces, he entrusted the destiny of the Hungarians to the power of prayer. On June 29, 1456, Callixtus, issued a bulla to all the religious hierarchs and ordered them to remember the danger threatening the Christendom during the daily mass. Additionally he ordered the bells to ring three times in every half hour between *nona* (three o'clock in the afternoon) and *vespera* (six o'clock in the evening).⁵ A few weeks later the Ottomans began preparations to besiege Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade, Serbia), the key for their expansion toward Western Europe. On July 22, 1456, the Hungarian forces led by János Hunyadi engaged in a decisive battle against Mehmed II "the Conqueror," whose army was superior in numbers. Callixtus and the contemporaries, certainly not those nations which were involved in the battle, assigned (ascribe) the victory to the power of the prayer. One year later on the anniversary of the victory, Callixtus instituted a fiesta, the Transfiguration of Jesus, as a remembrance for the defenders of Nándorfehérvár and as a consequence for the protection of Europe. Barely a half century later Pope Alexander VI affirmed Callixtus' bulla and ordered the bells to ring at noon forever.⁶

⁴Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 190.

⁵Géza Érszegi, "A déli harangszó" [The Noon Bells] *História* [History], no. 1, (2007), http://www.historia.hu/archivum/2007/0701_07.htm (accessed 31 October 2011). The bulla, recorded in the *Registri Vaticani*, ordered all prelates (churchman) to tell the "*Omnipotens sempiterna Deus*" anti-pagan prayer on a daily basis, during the masses.

⁶Renáta Skorka, "Beszámoló a Nándorfehérvár-konferenciáról" [Report on a conference on the siege of Belgrade] *Századok* [Centuries] 141, no. 2 (2007): 497.

More than a decade before this decisive battle, the Ottomans experienced Hunyadi's skills and quickly became aware of his military potential. They realized that he was the central character which made the Hungarians effective in fights and prevented the country from being subjugated. Neither the Turks nor his previous enemies were able to take Hunyadi's life on the battlefields of Italy, Moravia, Poland, or the Balkan Peninsula. He was always in the most dangerous locations of the battles and generally led the main effort of his army in the decisive maneuvers.⁷ The Ottomans made attempts to attack him directly to gain the initiative and break the resistance by killing him. This happened in 1442, in the battle of Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, Romania), where Meziđ Bey focused his main effort on capturing or killing Hunyadi. His intelligence sources identified the color and style of Hunyadi's armament. His importance and respect can be measured with the decision of one of his subordinate commanders in this battle. When the Hungarians became aware of the enemy's intent, Simon of Kamonya, one of Hunyadi's lieutenants volunteered to change armor and clothes with him and sacrificed his life for Hunyadi, who gained the victory through this artifice.⁸ Unfortunately Hunyadi could not avoid his destiny. Enemy weapons could not take his life, however the black death epidemic which broke out after the battle of Nándorfehérvár (1456), put the end to his outstanding life. After his death, his son Mátyás Hunyadi (Mathias Corvinus), future

⁷Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977), 85-86. "Hunyadi, . . . whom the Turks nicknamed Yanko, . . . to the Hungarians and Serbs he became the romantic 'White Knight,' leading his cavalry charges in shining silver armour, whose heroic feats of arms offered a timely hope for Eastern Christendom."

⁸Joseph Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 87.

King of Hungary maintained the unity of the country for only a few decades. After Mátyás' death the wars and battles of Hungary were not characterized by any more expansion or the maintenance of its great power status. The uncontrolled internal conflicts assisted by weak and negligent royal power led to the disastrous end of the golden era in Hungarian history.

In the centuries followed by the battle of Mohács (1526), the fights for independence determined the life of the Hungarian nation. Right after the disastrous defeat of the Hungarian Army in 1526, the Turks occupied one third of the kingdom for one and a half centuries. After the Ottoman subjection, the Habsburgs ruled the Hungarian nation from the eighteenth century until the end of World War I. The Habsburgs decisively beat both Hungarian attempts at independence, from 1703 to 1711, and from 1848 to 1849. After World War II, the Soviet liberator efforts left their benchmark on the Hungarian society for more than five decades, and violently suppressed the revolution in 1956. In these times which carried the message of hopelessness the Hungarian nation required encouragement and bolstering. The figure of János Hunyadi provided a source of light, which led the way out of the darkness. Of course it does not mean that after the time of Hunyadi, Hungary had no more great soldiers or outstanding statesmen but his name and his heroic acts engraved themselves onto the minds and the history of Hungarians.

In a significant proportion of the fifteenth century, the struggles with the expanding Ottoman Empire featured the military actions of Hungary. Hunyadi sacrificed a great part of his adult life fighting against the Turks. He played an important role in Hungary's achievement of shielding Western European Christianity from the Ottoman

conquerors. The stages of Hunyadi's military development and the way he applied the experiences gained from these stages are the central theme of this study.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From the occupation of the Carpathian Basin in the ninth century, the Magyars (Hungarians) played an important role in European history. Following the conquest of the new lands, the appearance of the Magyars meant a threat for Western Europe. This brought new tactics to the battlefields, which the nations had not seen for centuries (The Huns used similar tactics in the fifth century). As the Magyars were steppe people, their everyday life was based on horses. This lifestyle determined their warfare, which success was based on the application of horseback archery and their deadly weapon, the recurved composite bow. The Magyars exploited the effective range of their reflex bow which was close to 200-250 meters, and their capability to release three arrows in seven-eight seconds.⁹ Generally the Magyars tried to avoid the traditional face-to-face ferocious charges, which characterized the Western European way of battlefield tactics. Magyars preferred long distance fights, imitating withdrawal after the first volleys of arrows to disorganize the enemy formations and they would turn back to disperse the enemy units. The Western European powers could not decisively challenge these new tactics. The prayer "*A sagittis Hungarorum, libera nos Domine*" [in a rough translation: "Lord, save us from the arrows of the Hungarians!" Modena, 924 A.D.] was frequently heard in many towns of Western Europe and displayed unambiguously the significance of a new nation

⁹István Kiszely, "A magyar nép őstörténete" [Ancient History of the Hungarian Nation], http://www.kiszely.hu/istvan_dr/037.html (accessed 31 October 2011).

in Europe which required attention.¹⁰ The fact that the Magyars did not settle in the Western European territories, where they achieved victories, depicts that the intent of those campaigns were the initiation of the financial conditions of the tribes and not the occupation of new territories. The Western European powers realized that they needed to unite their nation's military power to stop the Magyar threat which lasted more than five decades. Out of the ordinary traditions Bavarian, Frank, Saxon, and Bohemian legions did not turn their weapons against each other, but they unified them in favor of the common goal.¹¹ As a result they defeated the Magyars in the battle of Augsburg (Lechfeld, 955), which led to the change of the characteristics and the organization of the Magyar's tribal society. However, the victory annihilated only a small proportion of their overall fighting power, the Magyars realized that the age of campaigns was close to its end, and forced the tribal alliance to transform into a new political and national identity.¹² After laying down the basis of the first kingdom, Hungary became an organic element of Christian Europe with the coronation of King István (Stephen) I in 1000. The nations which brought the threat to Western Europe soon became the frontier and the eastern defensive bastion of the continent. Of course the primary intent of Hungary was self-

¹⁰György Szabó, "A Recent Chronicle of Hungarian–Italian Connections," *The Hungarian Quarterly* 39, no. 150 (1998), <http://www.hungarianquarterly.com/no150/145.shtml> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹¹Lajos Négyesi, "Az Augsburgi Csata" [The Battle of Augsburg], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 116, no. 1 (March 2003), <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00018/00023/17.htm> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹²József Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* [The military history of the Hungarian nation] (Budapest: Atheneum, 1928), ed. Arcanum Adatbázis Kft., (2001) <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0002/126.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

protection. However the self-defense mechanism of the Hungarian nation, ministered to a broader effect, which also provided protection for Western Europe from eastern threats.

Two centuries after the coronation of István, and the solidification of the new state, the first significant threat appeared on the eastern edge of Europe presented by the Mongols. The invasion (1241-42) destroyed a significant proportion of the Hungarian Army led by King Béla IV and devastated the country by causing the loss of more than one third of its population. The irony of the events was that the Mongols used the same techniques which made the Magyars so significant and fearsome in the tenth century, but less than three hundred years later the army of the Kingdom of Hungary was unable to act decisively against the tactic, which created the basis of the Hungarian settlement in the Carpathian Basin. The Mongol invasion devastated Hungary for more than a year. The withdrawal of the Mongol Army commanded by Batu Khan was not the primary consequence of the Hungarian resistance (Ögedi Khan's death launched a contest for the throne in Mongolia), however it played a significant role in slowing down the Mongols and preventing them from reaching the heart of Western Europe. The experiences of this invasion demonstrated that the reinforced areas could offer dominant outcome of the resistance. The upcoming era provided opportunity for fortifications efforts and redevelopment of the army. When the Mongol invasion reached Hungary in 1241, there were only a few, ten or so stone castles that could be characterized as modern by contemporary standards of the era. By the end of the thirteenth century this number increased to almost three hundred, as the consequence of the country's rebuilding program after the Mongol invasion launched by King Béla IV, who got the "the second

founder of the country” title for his achievements.¹³ This era of development led to the importance and acceptance of the Hungarian Kingdom in Europe. An indicator for the improvement was the achievements of the Anjou dynasty of Naples, which declared its claim to the throne of Hungary from the beginning of the fourteenth century, and consolidated its presents for decades. This period, followed by the rule of King Matthias Corvinus, (the son of János Hunyadi), until the Ottoman occupation after the battle of Mohács in 1526, was Hungary’s Golden Age.

The kings of this era (Anjou Louis I, or Sigismund of Luxemburg) expended their power over the borders of Hungary both in the political and military context. Unfortunately these military expeditions, in most cases served the interests of the actual ruler and not the nation. The attempts to strengthen their power in various countries in Europe, or to maintain the unity of the Holy Roman Empire drained and squandered Hungarian military power and weakened its defensive capability.¹⁴ Louis I, the “Great,” the last Anjou king of Hungary, and his successor Sigismund made mistakes when they turned their focus to the expansion of their rein, and underestimated the threat of the new emerging power from southeast Europe. This new threat was the expansion of the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire and its Expansion

The events that fostered the Ottoman expansion in Europe connected to the decline of the Byzantine Empire. The Bezan Civil War, in the middle of the fourteenth

¹³Veszprémi and Király, *A Millenium of Hungarian Military History*, 17-19.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 28.

century, led to the devastation of the already shrunken empire. To strengthen its military power in the struggle, the opponent of the heir of the Byzantine throne entered into an alliance with the Ottomans and under this coalition Orhan Bey's troops crossed the Bosphorus in 1345.¹⁵ The rightful heir's coalition partner was Serbia, so the frequent struggles exhausted both the Byzantine and the Serbian forces, weakening the dominant powers on the European side of the Bosphorus. This condition favored the Ottoman's expansion plan. Until 1354, the Ottoman troops did not leave significant forces behind and returned back to the Anatolian Peninsula. In 1354 Suleiman Pasha (the Son of Orhan Bey), took the fortress of Gallipoli on the European continent and set the basis for the first colonies from Asia and further expansion toward Europe.¹⁶ In the following decades, after the death of Suleiman (1359), Murad I the younger son of Orhan exploited the results of his ancestors and occupied more and more lands in the Balkans.¹⁷ In 1389, an alliance came into existence among the Balkan nations supported by troops from Wallachia and Hungary in order to drive the Turks out of Europe. Their attempt failed and the Ottoman troops achieved victory on the "Field of Blackbirds," (Kosovo Polje, in the fourteenth century located in Serbian territory; today it belongs to Kosovo) As a result of the defeat, Serbia as an independent nation ceased to exist. Four years later Bulgaria fell to the same destiny, in spite of the campaigns led by Sigismund, the Hungarian King to mitigate the Turkish threat in the region. At the beginning of the 1390s smaller scale raids reached the Hungarian borderlands. Essentially this was the time when Europe began to

¹⁵Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 39-40.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 43, 57.

¹⁷Veszprémi and Király, *A Millennium of Hungarian Military History*, 29-31.

pay attention to the Ottoman conquerors, because with their advance they more frequently started to attacks the Venetian merchants too.

The Ottoman's success was not due to mere luck. Masses of martial and fanatic Turkish tribes arrived in Asia Minor with the desire of enrichment through western expansion. These tribes provided significant manpower for the Anatolian campaigns of the empire, and as a compensation for their services, the sultan had to guarantee the opportunity to fight and plunder from enemy territory. This continuous need for offensive military actions was not the only factor, which led to the Ottoman success in the Balkans. The political and military problems in Europe, especially in the affected regions in South Eastern, and Middle Eastern Europe, facilitated the Ottoman's efforts. The internal struggles of the countries weakened their defensive capabilities. The differing interests among the ruling classes denied these nations to provide adequate force projection, when the Ottoman armies threatened their sovereignty. The religious oppositions between nations further sharpened the situation. Sigismund attacked Bosnia several times, to convert the local population to Christianity.¹⁸ The Orthodox and heretic population in the Balkans welcomed the Ottomans as liberators, who were opened for less radical solutions for religious conversion. The Ottoman policy to support these nations had military benefits in the future, like the case of Serbia which became a feoff (vassal) of the Ottoman Empire and Serbian heavy cavalry became an elite unit of the Turkish army.¹⁹

¹⁸Gyula Rázsó, "A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437)" [Hungary at the time of Sigismund and the Turkish danger (1393-1437)], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* [Military History Announcements] 20, no. 3 (1973): 404.

¹⁹Rázsó, "A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437)," 404-405.

Temporary peace treaties as diplomatic tools played a distinguishing role in the Turkish political and strategic planning.

Maybe some of the cases happened by coincidence, but the available data underpins that almost each European state, which shared a border with the Turks, had to face similar stages during their conflicts against them. The following table describes the sequence of these stages:

	Serbia	Wallachia	Bulgaria	Hungary
Small scale Turkish raids	1360s–1389	1380s–1390s	1365–1393	1390–1526
Conquering attempts by regular army	1389	1394	1393	1456, 1526
Feoff (fief) dependence	1389–1459	1398–1711	Immediate Turkish supremacy	1526–1540
Total subjection	1459 - 1820	1711–1858 (Romania at that time)	1393–1878	1541–1686

Source: Rázsó, Gyula, “A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437)” [Hungary at the time of Sigismund and the Turkish danger (1393-1437)], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* [Military History Publications] 20, no. 3 (1973): 404.

Generally the Turks launched smaller raids (outroads) first, in order to fix the attacked nations forces on the borders and achieve attrition of the moral and physical power of the armies and the population. The next step was the major conquering attempt, executed by the regular army. Having no dominant staging city for the Turkish forces in the Balkans, before the occupation of Constantinople in 1453, the main body of the

armies returned back to Anatolia after fall. Thus generally, before the total subjection of the conquered nations, they became feoffs (vassals) of the Ottoman Empire.²⁰

These events underpinned that the Turkish leadership considered alliances only as a temporary solution. The sources of the conquered territories were never enough to keep the balance of the empire, so the only solution to ease the inner tension was the extension and the occupation of new territories. This is the reason why the Ottoman Empire started to decline when it reached the limits of its military capabilities.²¹

According to these facts, King Sigismund made the right decision about not starting negotiations with the Turks when Serbia was conquered and the gates were opened toward the Kingdom of Hungary. The only question was how to stop the raid of the Ottomans by force, when negotiation was not an option.

The Battle of Nicopolis

As the Ottoman victory at the “Fields of Blackbirds,” against the Serbs in 1389, opened the gates for the advances toward the Kingdom of Hungary, Sultan Bayezid I did not hesitate. The first attacks of his troops were recorded into Hungarian territory in 1390. The military forces of the *bánságs* along the affected segment of the border were not able to react effectively to the attacks and failed to prevent the populace from being robbed, enslaved, and killed.²² King Sigismund got wise to the fact that the border

²⁰Rázsó, “A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437),” 404.

²¹Ibid., 409-410.

²²Pál Engel, “A török-magyar háborúk első évei, 1389-1392” [The First Years of the Ottoman-Hungarian Wars, 1389-1392], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* [Military History Publications] 111, no. 3 (1998), <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00018/00006/pdf/> (accessed 31 October 2011); Hungarian Ethnographic Lexicon, s.v. “Bánság,”

fortress system needed strengthening and the southern neighbors needed support to resist the Turkish pressure. After numerous smaller campaigns against the Ottomans outside the territory of Hungary, Sigismund conceded that without outside support, especially from the western European powers, no lasting result could be achieved.

For the sake of an alliance against the Ottomans, he sent delegates to Italy and France. As the first act of the Hundred Years' War ended with French success, the idea to fight again eastward was favorable for France. The call of Pope Boniface IX for a new crusade also fostered the possibility of a great alliance. The French offered the majority of the heavy cavalry, which consisted of approximately 3,000-6,000 troops, but this force alone was not powerful enough to expel the Ottomans out of Europe.²³ The Italians, especially Venice, did not present much willingness toward the cause. But without the active support of Venice and its fleet the success of the campaign became doubtful. Venice did not share a border with the Ottomans so it did not have to face with the threat of occupation, like Hungary.

Additionally, the debates and conflicts about the territorial affiliation of Dalmatia in the last two centuries did not foster a friendly relationship between Venice and the Kingdom of Hungary. But despite all the difficulties, the alliance came into existence in 1396. In April the army of Burgundy led by the young Jean de Nevers assembled in Dijon. Two months later they reached Buda, the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary and

<http://mek.oszk.hu/02100/02115/html/1-549.html> (accessed 31 October 2011). *bánság*: [banat]: military-prefectural provinces on the frontier of southern border of medieval Hungary; *bán*: office-bearer who reported directly to the king. The *bans* were the rulers of the *bánságs*.

²³Rázsó, "A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437),"415.

met with Sigismund's Hungarians, the German contingent from Bavaria, and the knights from Poland and Bohemia.²⁴

The size of the crusader army is still a subject of debates because the records preserved conflicting data. The contemporary chronicles of the era estimated the strength of the combined forces at 100,000 troops.²⁵ Modern researchers determined that these numbers were highly overestimated. It was more probable that the Hungarians contributed to the force generation with 12,000 troops and the strength of western forces was not higher than 8-10,000 either. The Wallachians also joined the crusader army on their way to Nicopolis with approximately 8,000 troops. This 25-30,000 strength force was closer to the reality and still presented a significant power.²⁶

The main effort of the army was the 8-10,000 strong heavy cavalry which, consisted of western and Hungarian knights with their squires.²⁷ The main body of the Hungarian army was the light cavalry and smaller number of infantry. The plan of the crusader army was to march south to Byzantium and liberate Constantinople. The lack of strong leadership and control of the western knights, especially the Burgundies who held the majority of the heavy cavalry, determined the final destiny of the whole campaign. Instead of focusing the activity of the forces on the decisive operation, the crusader army

²⁴“A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437),” 411-415.

²⁵László Veszprémi, “A nikápolyi hadjárat értékelése az újabb hadtörténetírásban” [The evaluation of the Battle of Nicopolis in the recent military historiography], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* [Military History Announcements] vol. 111 (1998): 60.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Rázsó, “A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437),” 417.

spent more than six weeks to besiege smaller fortresses along its avenue of approach. This force demonstration wasted manpower and supplies.

In September 1396, Sigismund's forces set up positions around the significant fortress of Nicopolis and began to besiege it. In the meantime Sultan Bayezid who deserved his nickname "Thunderbolt," received word of the situation at Nicopolis. He gave up besieging Constantinople and led his forces to liberate the fortress. The Venetians who finally contributed a part of their fleet to the campaign were not capable of preventing him from crossing the Dardanelles. Sigismund was precautious and his scouts warned him about the arrival of Bayezid. Based on the reconnaissance reports, the king intended to start the fight from a defensive position, instead of directly attacking the Turks. However Sigismund was not powerful enough to convince the French knights, who were contemptuous of the king and his plan. As it happened many times before in history, the knights considered the battles as a bigger and bloodier tournament.²⁸

Sigismund, based on his battlefield experiences against the Turks intended to use his Hungarian and Wallachian light cavalry to absorb the Ottoman initial cavalry charges. He planned to stop the main attack at the prepared defenses by the heavy and light infantry and crush the Turks by a charge of the elite French, German and Hungarian knights. The French did not want to leave the chance of the first charge to others, and despite Sigismund's last attempt to convince them during the night before the battle, they launched the attack before the whole crusader army could settle into battle formation. The intrepid French charge swept the Turkish light cavalry and *sipahi* formations, but the

²⁸Rázsó, "A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437)," 405. The undisciplined behavior of the knights led to significant losses in the battles of Crecy (1346), Agincourt (1415).

barriers and obstacles that were used to protect the Turkish infantry against cavalry's charges forced the knights to continue their fight dismounted. After initial success, their dismounted charge got stuck in the middle of the Bayezid's army, without the support of the rest of the crusade army. By the time Sigismund redeployed his army which became disorganized by the unexpected charge, the French became surrounded by the janissaries. The second cavalry charge also had some initial success, but the janissaries stopped this advance like the previous one, and prevented the king from relieving the French knights.

The decisive momentum of the defeat was the Serbian heavy cavalry counterattack against the right flank of the crusade army. Sigismund lost control of his troops and he could hardly escape from the battlefield. The losses were catastrophic just like the consequences. This disastrous defeat made it unambiguous that the superiority of the Ottomans both in numbers and in tactics had seriously to be considered. Byzantium remained besieged.

Sigismund's offensive failed and the western powers experienced enough to avoid further decisive engagements with the Ottoman Empire for one and a half centuries. The Turks unmistakably expressed their intent to continue the conquest. After the battle of Nikopolis, the Kingdom of Hungary remained the last defensive "stronghold" to stop their advance toward Western Europe.

CHAPTER 3

FROM THE ANONYMITY TO THE FAME

The Parentage and the Early Ages of János Hunyadi

The origins of János Hunyadi and the past of his family is one of the most controversial cases in Hungarian history. Historians cannot reassuringly clarify this mystery. The lack of written evidences has different reasons. Hunyad's ancestors did not have direct ties to the Hungarian peerage, and as a result their data and activities were not recorded in significant documents of the era. Additionally, the internal domestic conflicts, which were characteristic after the era of Hunyadi family's domination and during the Ottoman occupation of Hungary, further increased the myth around him and his ancestor's origins. The expendability of the rare, short-spoken, and ambiguous historical data available, led to the numerous adverse, misty and sometimes bold results of the family's origin reconstructions.²⁹ Some historians and Hunyadi-researchers have come to the conclusion that János Hunyadi's ancestors were *Cumans*, whose tribes were settled back to Hungary after the Mongol invasion in the 1240s, during King Béla IV's country rebuilding program.³⁰ Other researches point to Hunyadi's Slavic origin that he was the son of Stepan Lazarević, the Serbian despot.³¹ A contemporary chronicler from the sixteenth century stated that Hunyadi was born as a result of an illicit affair between King

²⁹Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 18-19.

³⁰Veszprémi and Király, *A Millenium of Hungarian Military History*, 18.

³¹Oxford Dictionary, s.v. "despot," <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/despot?region=us> (accessed 31 October 2011). A *despot* is a ruler or other person who holds absolute power, typically one who exercises it in a cruel or oppressive way.

Sigismund and a Transylvanian woman, but there is no evidence.³² There was also a conceivable option that Hunyadi's father moved from Transylvania to Wallachia, which became his place of birth.³³

The complexity of the origin question resides on the absence of reliable documents, because only official certificates can be accepted as evidences. The oldest official document regarding to the family of Hunyadi was issued in 1409 by the chancellery of Sigismund of Luxemburg, King of Hungary. This patent was a gift-deed, which stated that Sigismund donated the estates of Hunyadvár (Hunedoara, Romania) in Transylvania for the son of Serbe, Vajk (Wojk) as a compensation for his merits in the service of the king.³⁴ The patent also mentioned relatives from Vajk's family by name, like his brothers and his son János, as the personnel who had the right to live on the estates.

Another important source from the fifteenth century is the *Chronica Hungarorum*, in which the contemporary chronicler János Thuróczi explained that King Sigismund picked up on Vajk, by his personal commitment and reputation and brought him to Hungary from Wallachia. He made Vajk a citizen of his country and donated Hunyadvár as an appreciation for his services. In the same chronicle Thuróczi wrote about János

³²József Gróf Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon* [The age of the Hunyadis in Hungary] (Pest: Emich és Eisenfels Könyvnyomdája, 1852), http://www.google.com/books?id=QMEAAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=hu&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed 31 October 2011), 32.

³³Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 46.

³⁴Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 8.

Hunyadi as a descendant of a noble and famous family.³⁵ However these documents do not prove the origins unequivocally of the Hunyadi family, but it underpinned the assumption that Vajk, the father of Hunyadi joined Sigismund retinue (entourage) in 1395, when the king travelled through Wallachia and led the Crusader Army against the Turks. After the battle of Nikopolis, there were limited occasions to prove his military skills. It was probable that Vajk fought in close proximity with the king in this battle and earned his reputation.

The date of Hunyadi's birth was not mentioned in any of the documents of the era, but according to Sigismund's patent where Hunyadi was mentioned by his first name he was probably born shortly before 1409.³⁶ The years of 1407 or 1408 as the predicted dates of Hunyadi's year of birth are also underpinned by Thuróczi in his *Chronica Hungarorum*. He stated that Hunyadi was a relatively young man, when he died in 1456. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini³⁷ also helped the determination of the approximate date of

³⁵János Thuróczi, *Chronica Hungarorum* (Augsburg, 1488), ed. János Horváth, (Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1978), 373. János Thuróczi wrote his history of Hungary in 1487. The work was printed in 1488 in Brünn and again in the same year in Augsburg. The publisher of the Augsburg edition dedicated the work to King Matthias and used gold paint for the dedication of this luxury copy printed on parchment. Today this is the first known book printed with gold paint. Today, we know of ten copies of the print; there are two in Hungary. <http://www.corvina.oszk.hu/corvinas-html/hub1inc1143.htm> (accessed 31 October 2011)

³⁶Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 28-29.

³⁷Thomas A. Fudge, "Aeneas Sylvius and the Hussite Heretics Aeneas," *Histories of Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (November 2005), <http://www.ched.uq.edu.au/index.html?page=39823&pid=0> (accessed 31 October 2011). Sylvius Piccolomini, famed humanist of the Renaissance, conciliar activist and later pope, Pope Pius II, was the first historian of the Hussite heresy. He wrote the *Historia Bohemica* in 1458 on the basis of some first-hand knowledge.

birth, by emphasizing the difference between Hunyadi's and John of Capistrano's³⁸ age in his significant contemporary document, the *Historia Bohemica*.³⁹

The story of Vajk and his family shows that social and political prominence did not entirely depend on ethnic or social origins. Unflinching loyalty to the sovereign, the ability to provide mercenaries to the king for service and of course valor in battle were absolutely necessary for being a member of the royal retinue. Vajk had all these required elements, which lifted him to a higher social level, and helped him to solidify the future of his family in the Kingdom of Hungary.

The Early Years

The honorable acts of his father in Sigismund's service provided a background, which certainly determined the early ages of János Hunyadi. The traditions of the era required that the son followed the path of the father. The estate of Hunyadvár, with its stronghold, was an appropriate location for the children, both named János, to learn the warrior values. The father definitely was a good trainer of his sons and shared his experiences that he gained during his battles against the hostile tribes in Wallachia or against the Turks, alongside Sigismund. This learning period surely became a solid foundation for the brothers in their preparation for the *familiaris* years.⁴⁰ Probably the

³⁸Hungarian Saints, "John of Capistrano," <http://www.katolikus.hu/hun-saints/john.html> (accessed 31 October 2011). St. John of Capistrano, Franciscan monk, was born in 1386 in Naples, Italy. He was famous of his radical belief in conversion of heretics. Pope Callixtus III sent him to Hungary after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to recruit a crusade army. He fought against the Ottomans in 1456 together with Hunyadi.

³⁹Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 180.

⁴⁰János M. Bak and Béla K. Király, *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi: War and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Hungary*, vol. 3 of *War and Society in East Central*

formal education of the Hunyadi boys was incomplete, but there could be no doubt about the thoroughness of the military training they received. Their instruction in the use of arms included harsh physical exercises. According to Thuróczi, “János Hunyadi became accustomed to all extremes of weather in his early life and consciously practiced exposure to all sorts of hardships.”⁴¹

It was easier to abide all these circumstances in Hunyadvár, but the time to leave the family nest and prove his own capabilities came soon for Hunyadi with the early death of his father. In 1419, the family requested the confirmation of their possession of Hunyadvár on their own names, which would have been unthinkable if Vajk was still alive.⁴² The loss of his father brought hardship to Hunyadi’s life. Because of the foreign origins and the lack of good family connections among the Hungarian aristocracy, and without his father’s support, János had to prove his skills to the nobility and the king. He had to rely on his own abilities. The sources about the stages of his early years in service of noble families are deficient and are differing from each other, as a consequence of Hunyadi’s presumed origin and year of birth.

Europe (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn College CUNY, 1982), 8. *Familiaris*: lower nobility male personnel took service in the families of a greater lord for a limited time (rarely over a generation, like in western Europe) without losing their personal liberty and noble privileges. This service assured additional, mostly monetary income, political influence for the benefit of his noble clan and social advancement.

⁴¹Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 9.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 8-9.

In the most probable variation, his first patron was György Csáki, a Székely (Szekler) count that Hunyadi served as a page.⁴³ A letter to Pope Callixtus III from John Capistrano, who probably got the information personally from Hunyadi, gave further guidance about his services. According to this letter, Hunyadi served the Újlaki family with five or six horses.⁴⁴ According to the Cillei-Chronicle, the contemporary documentation of the Cillei family's history, he served as a squire in their court. Unfortunately the sequence of the events and his stages in his early military development are unknown, but it is very likely that the first episode of his life ended in the court of Stefan Lazarevic, Serbian despot. This frequent change of his stations in his early military service in Hungarian, Székely, and Serbian territories, significantly expended his military skills. He studied tactics, training and procedures of different nationalities against enemies from several nations. But the knowledge he gained was not only military related.

⁴³Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. "Szekler," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/579333/Szekler> (accessed 31 October 2011). *Szekler* (in Hungarian Székely): member of a people inhabiting the upper valleys of the Mureş and Olt rivers in what was eastern Transylvania and is now Romania; Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. "Count," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/140173/count> (accessed 31 October 2011). Count: an aristocratic nobleman in European countries; historical, equivalent of Prince and Duke. Page: in medieval Europe, a youth of noble birth who left his home at an early age to serve an apprenticeship in the duties of chivalry in the family of some prince or man of rank. Beginning as assistants to squires who attended knights and their ladies, pages were trained in arms and in the art of heraldry and received instruction in hunting, music, dancing, and such other accomplishments as befitted their social status. Later, pages were promoted to be squires and from that status were frequently advanced to knights.

⁴⁴Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 28. "Substituit tamen nobis imparem sibi virum Nicolaum de Ujlak, sub cuius dominatu valido, et potenti ipseidem Joannes (de Hunyad) cum quinque, vel sex equis suam militiam inchoavit."

Staying in distinguished courts he met influential personalities of the society and built important relationships and learned the importance of the soft power as well.⁴⁵

In the Service of King Sigismund
Mercenary Years in Italy

As many stages in the first period of Hunyadi's life, the exact date of his affiliation with the royal court is also based on assumptions. It is very likely that he joined the royal retinue in 1428, when Sigismund spent a significant portion of the year along the Danube River on the border of Serbia and the Kingdom of Hungary.⁴⁶ Pursuant to a treaty, which passed in 1426 in Tata (Hungary), the Kingdom of Hungary gained seventeen Serbian fortresses along the border.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, some of the Serbian captains disagreed with their despot's decision and turned their fortresses over to the Turks instead of fighting against them. One of the fortresses was Galambóc, which played an important role in control of the shipping on the Danube.⁴⁸ However, Sigismund had to lead his army to regain the control upon the entire border-fortress system. Probably during this fight Sigismund made his decision to select János Hunyadi as a member of his retinue. This step had a profound impact on the life of the young Hunyadi. From this moment he only served the King of Hungary.

⁴⁵Ibid., 28-29.

⁴⁶Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 29.

⁴⁷Rázsó, "A Zsigmond-kori Magyarország és a török veszély (1393-1437)," 437-438. The most important fortress among the seventeen was Belgrade, which stronghold was the key to Europe for the Turks and the key nod for the Hungarian Border defense system.

⁴⁸Ibid., 438.

The first significant event in his new assignment was his sovereign's visit to Italy, 1431-1433. Sigismund had multiple purposes to travel to Italy. The main reason was his recognition and coronation as the Holy Roman Emperor, although he already possessed two nations' crowns, including the Hungarian symbol of power. This ceremony had personal meaning for him, due to the memory of his father's coronation as Holy Roman Emperor. As a requirement, Sigismund had to possess an Italian crown. Filippo Maria Visconti, the Duke of Milan, a former ally of the Hungarian king, offered him the metal crown of Lombardy. Sigismund offered military support for Visconti against Venice in return. On the other hand the coalition with Milan supported Sigismund's achievements against Venice to regain control over Dalmatia. As assurance of the coalition and compensation for the coronation ceremony, Sigismund left a part of his retinue in Milan to support Visconti in his fights against Venice, for annual payment in return.⁴⁹ This was the time when Hunyadi became separated from his king for two years from 1431 to 1433 because he became a member of this compensation force, and thereby had the chance to learn the culture which influenced not only his military mindset, but also affected his future life.⁵⁰ As a mercenary officer, he had the opportunity to experience and practice the Italian way of war, the *condottiere* warfare.

The term *condottiere* literally translates as 'contractor' and derives from the *condotta* or contract that was signed between the condottiere and his employer. This arranged for the provision of a certain number of troops for a set period in return for

⁴⁹Lajos Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege" [Hunyadi's Army], *Századok* [Centuries] 1, no. 1-4 (1950): 98.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

payment, primarily in cash.⁵¹ The *condottiere* was a military professional, who served his employer for financial compensation without considerations of nationality, ideology, or deeper political allegiances.

The contracts included insurance clauses and compensation for serious injury or loss of limbs.⁵² The agreements also covered the issue of captured plunder during campaigns. The *condottiere* could keep all plunder taken from enemy territory included all arms, armor, and equipment of the adversary troops. After a while when a *condottiere* earned a reputation by serving his state or principality in accordance with the acceptations, the *condotta* also included a final payment, in return for which he agreed not to work for his employer's adversaries for a certain period, at the expiration of the contract. These benefits lifted the *condottiere* warfare to a financially productive career model, so numerous foreign warriors and military leaders sought this opportunity.⁵³ The organization of the Italian mercenary companies varied from state to state. Generally the basic unit was the "lance" which consisted of four to five persons, included the leader, his squire and pages.⁵⁴ Five of these lances were grouped together to form a "post" and five posts formed a squadron. The more successful *condottieres*, especially in the fifteenth

⁵¹Michael Malett, *Mercenaries and Their Masters: Warfare in Renaissance Italy* (Tottowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), 79.

⁵²David Murphy, *Condottiere 1300–1500: Infamous Medieval Mercenaries* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2007), 9.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 26.

century invested significant energy in the training of the employed, and they generally made their subcontracts with trained and experienced mercenary officers and leaders.⁵⁵

Accordingly Francesco Sforza, the general-captain of Filippo Visconti, probably did not base his decision to contract Hunyadi only on assumptions, so the hired forces had to be well trained enough to meet his requirements. On the other hand, Sigismund had to prove the worth of his retinue and presented the prime of his forces. He did not want to be seen badly in the eyes of his coalition partner and supporter.

Unfortunately, there are no sources from the era, about the size of Hunyadi's force and the battles in which he was involved. It is very likely that both the Italian and Hungarian chronicles paid more attention to Sigismund's coronation as Holy Roman Emperor, than the achievements of the support troops which remained in Milan. Hunyadi in the early 1430s was not a significant element in the Hungarian aristocracy, but the fact that contemporary Italian chroniclers of the era mentioned him in their memoirs means that he probably earned his reputation.

As it happened later, Sigismondo came to Italy at the instance of Duke Filippo Visconti in order to take possession of the imperial crown in 1430. Therefore, Giovanni, desirous to make his virtue known, accompanied him to Lombardy, and after obtaining his [Sigismondo's] consent, he took to the service of Duke Filippo—who at this time was being accosted by the Venetians and the Florentines. Corvino continued for two entire years in the pay of this prince.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Ibid., 12.

⁵⁶Florio Banfi, "Hunyadi János itáliei tartózkodása" [Hunyadi in Italy], *Erdélyi szemle* [Transylvanian Review] 5, no. 7-12 (1934): 265. http://dspace.eme.ro/bitstream/10598/4731/1/1934_39_07-12_261-272.pdf (accessed 31 October 2011). Translated by Dr. Prisco Hernandez ["Accade dipoi, che Sigismondo venne in Italia a'preghi del Duca Filippo Visconte a pigliar la corona imperial nel 1430. Onde Giovanni desideroso di far conoscere la virtù sua, l'accompagnò infino in Lombardia, e dipoi di suo consentimento prese soldo dal Duca Filippo, che in quell tempo era infestato da I Veneziani, e da i

When Sigismund returned from Rome after the successful coronation ceremony in the fall of 1433, Hunyadi left Visconti's army to rejoin his king and escort him to Basel.⁵⁷

The fifteenth century brought change to the tactics and the Italians brought smaller, more combined armies into practice and developed the tradition of attritional warfare which produced an emphasis on maneuver and strategy.⁵⁸ In the era when Hunyadi served Visconti, two different tactics dominated the battlefields of northern Italy. One of them was developed by his master's father, Muzio Attendolo Sforza, who preferred to use a combination of cavalry and infantry assaults and attacked only after carefully planning. The other tactical thought developed by Braccio da Montone was in contrast to those of Sforza. He had a preference of using a large cavalry formation, using each squadron on a specific maneuver. He also developed the concept of reserve, to have fresh troops available as his enemies became gradually exhausted.⁵⁹

Hunyadi had the chance to study new tactics which differed in some degree from the ones he experienced before. In his later campaigns he placed more emphasis on coordination and cooperation between the cavalry, both light and heavy, and the infantry. In *condottieri* warfare an understanding of the enemy's intent and the best choice of the battlefield were important elements of the fight, which Hunyadi successfully fused into

Fiorentini. Continuò due anni interi il Corvino il suo soldo sottoquel Principe;”] The Italians mentioned Hunyadi as Corvino.

⁵⁷Elekes, “Hunyadi Hadserege,” 98.

⁵⁸Malett, *Mercenaries and Their Masters*, 259-260.

⁵⁹Murphy, *Condottiere 1300–1500: Infamous Medieval Mercenaries*, 28-29. The two main schools of tactical thoughts which characterized the fifteenth century Italian battlefields were developed by Muzio Attendolo (1369-1426) who earned the “Sforza” nickname which literally means “Force,” and Braccio da Monte (1368-1424).

his tactics. The other decisive lesson he learned was the use of mercenaries as a dominating power in the commander's possession. Hiring mercenaries was not an unknown tool in the force generation of the Hungarian Army, but the continuous struggle with the money prevented the system from becoming a permanent solution. Presumably based on his Italian experiences, Hunyadi brought a significant change in developing a significant mercenary core in the army. He realized that the key for the mercenary force development was money. To get this money, he had to have more and more land in his possession. The proper exploitation of human and natural resources of the estates could finance his new approach to generate forces.

The Coronation ceremony in Rome consumed Sigismund's budget, so when Hunyadi rejoined his retinue he lent 1200 golden Forints to his King. He asked for estates in return and in a debenture-letter (mortgage) signed by Sigismund in Basel in 1434, he got possession of a county town, named Papi. The next year he turned this estate back and for an additional 300 Florins he became the owner of another, more rich territory.⁶⁰ This process depicted that beside his tactical development, Hunyadi understood the importance of the money and the influential relationships as well. The next theater of his fights in the service of his king was also a significant stage in his development as a tactician and as an organizer.

The Hussite Wars

The Hussite Wars were a series of conflicts fought between the followers of Jan (John) Hus of Bohemia, and Sigismund's forces starting in 1419. The decisions, made by

⁶⁰Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 98.

the Council of Constance led by Sigismund between 1414 and 1418, led to the escalation of the events. The main purpose to call the council was to end the western schism that divided the Catholic Church for more than four decades. Besides solving the problem of the three-papal controversy, the synod was active in religious matters too.⁶¹ Jan Hus a Bohemian priest, religious thinker, and reformer agreed to go to Constance and defend his religious teachings, under Sigismund's promise of safe passage. Despite of Sigismund's safe-conduct, the council convicted Hus and committed him to flames in 1415. The execution of Jan Hus brought public indignation to the Kingdom of Bohemia and as a consequence, all of his followers were declared heretics and excommunicated from the Church.⁶² After the death of Wenceslaus IV (King of Bohemia), in 1419 the events spun out of control and escalated into a military revolution. To challenge the Hussite warfare, set an invincible hurdle for Sigismund and his western supporters for almost two decades. They were unable to win battles by using their traditional heavy cavalry tactics. Thus the Hussite war beside its revolutionary role in mobilizing the

⁶¹Árpád Fa, "Zsigmond király huszita harcai és hatásaik a magyar hadügyekre" [King Sigismund's Hussite Wars and their effects on the Hungarian military], *Hadtudományi Szemle* [Military History Review] 3, no. 2 (2010): 77. <http://hadtudomanyiszemle.zmne.hu/?q=hu/2010/3-%C3%A9vfolyam-2-sz%C3%A1m> (accessed 31 October 2011). Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. "Synod," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578481/synod> (accessed 31 October 2011). Synod: (from Greek *synodos*, "assembly"), in the Christian church, a local or provincial assembly of bishops and other church officials meeting to resolve questions of discipline or administration.

⁶²Fa, "Zsigmond király huszita harcai és hatásaik a magyar hadügyekre," 77.

armies and the artillery, became one of the indicators for the decline of the use of knights.⁶³

The Hussite movement had followers from all castes of the society. Because of the early death of Jan Hus, the movement quickly broke up into several sects. The two main opposing parties were the moderate Utraquists or Calixtines and the more extreme wing that soon became known as the *Taborites*, named after the city of Tábor (present day Tábor, Czech Republic). As a result of the priests' orations, more and more peasants joined this radical wing and became the permanent core of the Hussite armies. The available human resources determined the structure and the development of Hussite fighting forces. The majority of the troops came from poverty and had no horses, so the characteristic ratio between the cavalry and the infantry was 1:10.⁶⁴ The lack of horse mounted forces determined the cavalry's tasks, which was limited to reconnaissance and securing the flanks. This constraint brought the Hussite commanders to the dilemma how to solve the protection and mobilization of their infantry. Jan Žižka was the leader and general of Taborites.⁶⁵ He developed a perfect solution to protect his infantry from the enemy arrows and firearms by upgrading and up-arming the common wagons that were available in each peasant farm and household. The war wagons were the basic element of

⁶³Matthew Bennett et al., *Fighting Techniques of the Medieval World: AD 500~1500: Equipment, Combat Skills, and Tactics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 65.

⁶⁴Fa, 79.

⁶⁵Mór Bán, *Hunyadi-A Csillagösvény Hídja* [Hunyadi-The Bridge of the Star Track] (Debrecen, Kinizsi Nyomda Kft., 2010), 388. Jan Žižka was blind in one eye from his childhood and in 1420 he lost the other one during the battle of Raby. Until his death in 1424 he led his armies blindly. He could visualize the battlefields based on merely explanations.

the laagers that constituted a kind of mobile fortress. The laager generally was set up on a high ground in square formation, but certainly the terrain and the situation always determined the location and formation of the wagon units. The subordinate Hussite commanders could develop the laager from column movement which required planned and trained execution. Žižka developed a procedure that consisted of four parallel wagon columns, where the two outer columns were one and a half sizes longer than the inner columns. These overhanging parts were known as flanks, and in case of attack or during deployment of the laager, these flanks were turned in and closed the two inner columns in.⁶⁶ The inner columns executed the same maneuver with their flanks and finally the four columns created a double laager as a result. The Hussites organized the strengthened war wagons only in the outer columns, and the supply and sustainment carts composed inner lines. The wagons in the outer line were anchored to each other by chains after deployment, so without the destruction of a few carts the defensive line was impenetrable.

⁶⁶Fa, “Zsigmond király huszita harcai és hatásaik a magyar hadügyekre,” 81.

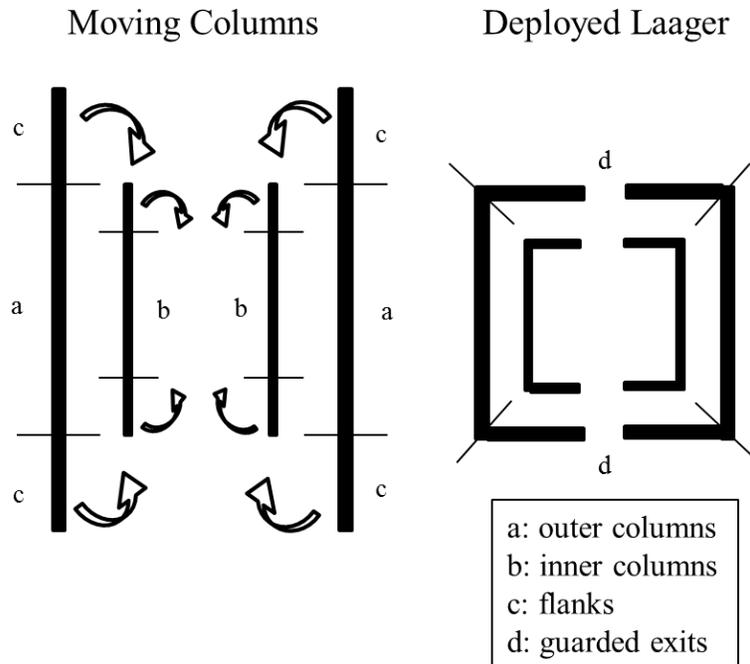


Figure 2. Hussite war wagon formations

Source: Created by author, using data from Fa, Árpád. “Zsigmond király huszita harcai és hatásaik a magyar hadügyekre” [King Sigismund’s Hussite Wars and their effects on the Hungarian military], *Hadtudományi Szemle* [Military History Review] 3, no. 2 (2010), <http://hadtudomanyiszemle.zmne.hu/?q=hu/2010/3-%C3%A9vfolyam-2-sz%C3%A1m> (accessed 31 October 2011), 81.

To be able to resist the enemy charges the wagons were strengthened and heightened by deck-planks with sights for the gunners and the archers, which made excellent rest for their weapons and fostered more accurate aiming. The height of the sidewalls prevented the enemy from throwing incendiary items inside the carts. These walls also provided effective protection against the enemy volleys of bolts. In the opening period of the war only bows and crossbows were available for the Hussite armies, based on the poverty level of their troops. Later the increasing number of civic involvement

from the bigger cities brought more money into the fight which facilitated the purchase of a higher number of firearms.⁶⁷

The type and the caliber of the firearms and the artillery pieces were varied. The revolutionary innovation in the use of artillery was to mount the different caliber cannons on the wagons and gain mobile firepower as an organic element of the armies or the smaller fighting units. The column commanders assigned one smaller caliber mounted *taranisce* for every five wagons and one bigger caliber *haufnice* for every twenty-five carts.⁶⁸ The elements of infantry, the pikemen, and the halberdiers were assigned to the wagons, sheltered behind the carts and ready to make their charge when the advancing enemy was halted and disordered by gunfire and archery.⁶⁹ Beside this assigned infantry troops the rest of the army was organized into company sized elements. The wagon laager could be successfully attacked before it was completely deployed. In this stage a heavy cavalry unit could break into the fortress and was able to prevent the defenders to close with the wagons into formation. The heavily armored knights moved uneasily and could hardly surprise and counterplot the Hussite scouts.

Generally the cavalry dismounted in the vicinity of the wagon fortress and attacked the carts on foot, but during their charge the Hussite firearms caused attrition in their lines and the prepared infantry streamed out of the laager, counterattacking the disorganized and weakened enemy. The other way to penetrate the outer defensive line of

⁶⁷Fa, "Zsigmond király huszita harcai és hatásaik a magyar hadügyekre," 79-81.

⁶⁸Ibid., 80. The *taranisce* had a barrel diameter of 20-30 mm, the *haufnice* had above 30 mm.

⁶⁹Maurice Keen, ed., *Medieval Warfare: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 279.

the deployed wagon fortress was the use of bombardars and other siege equipment as the ballista or trebuchet.

The successful application of the new style of warfare denied Sigismund and his allies to gain victory in an opened battle. Sigismund realized that the only way to break the Hussites power was to exploit the internal conflict between the two major sects. By using his diplomatic skills, Sigismund turned against them by supporting the moderate Utraquist party and finally the renewed civil war ended with the defeat of the Taborit main army in 1434. Although one of the main enemy parties was annihilated, the Hussite issue remained active, and Sigismund could become the King of Bohemia only in 1436.⁷⁰ The fights did not end in Bohemia. After Sigismund's death Albert II (his son-in-law) ascended to the Hungarian throne and like his predecessor, he also declared his claim to the Bohemian crown. In August 1438, he began the siege of fortress Tábor, to put an end of the Hussite opposition. Hunyadi led the Hungarian forces of the army, which consisted of Bavarian, Saxon, and Brandenburger troops as well.⁷¹

The Hussite wars provided new possibilities for Hunyadi to gain experiences from another nations' fighting technique. Although he took part in the war from 1434 to 1436, and in 1438, this period was a great chance for him to study new approaches to warfare. His future army development highlighted his understanding of Hussite warfare. The use of the carts (war wagons) in defensive means was known in Hungarian history from the era when the Mongols invaded the kingdom. But mounting firearms and artillery pieces

⁷⁰Fa, "Zsigmond király huszita harcai és hatásaik a magyar hadügyekre," 82.

⁷¹Mór Bán, *Hunyadi-A Hadak Villáma* [Hunyadi-The Thunderbolt of the Army] (Debrecen, Kinizsi Nyomda Kft., 2010), 388.

on them was a new approach to use firepower, and Hunyadi did not hesitate to turn this experience to his advantage. Being a horse nation, to develop an army based only on the use of the wagon laager system could never be an option in Hungary. However, he adapted the system on a smaller scale. He also realized that the gun mounted carts could effectively support cavalry maneuvers. In defensive posture, the wagons remained a protective element for the reserve and the supplies. He also learned how effectively simple untrained people could fight under a charismatic leadership. By understanding the nature of this power, he became the first army leader who could mobilize the poor population in his fights against the Turks without the fear that they turn their weapons against him.⁷²

Hunyadi's exploited his participation in Sigismund's Bohemian tours in financial means as well. In 1437 the king issued another debenture-letter for more land estates in return of the payment for fifty armored knights led by Hunyadi in the fights.⁷³ This new land provided him more resources to increase the size of his own force.

The draw of the fighting forces from the southern border, established Sigismund's and Albert's dominance in the northern part of Hungary and in different western countries. This supported the Ottoman achievements to continue their expansion with their regained power. The reemerged power of the Turks on the south frontier of the Kingdom of Hungary brought new a chapter in Hunyadi's life and also in the approach of the Hungarian warfare against the Ottoman Empire.

⁷²Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 114-15.

⁷³Ibid., 98.

CHAPTER 4

THE OPPOSING FORCES

Sultan Murad II, leading the strengthened Turkish army, planned to take the opportunity that King Sigismund presented by turning his focus and a significant portion of his troops, onto Bohemia. As a first step, the sultan envisaged occupying Szendrő (Smederevo, Serbia), an important fortress along the Danube, on the way to Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade,) the key to Europe in 1437.



Figure 3. Kingdom of Hungary

Source: Colin Imber, *The Crusade of Varna, 1443-45* (Cornwall: MPG Books Ltd., 2006), xi.

But Murad underestimated the valor of the opposing forces and the Hungarian King as well, who sent Czech mercenaries south to reinforce the defenders, and as a consequence Murad failed to seize the important stronghold of Szendrő.⁷⁴

One year later, in 1438 Albert became the leader, who neglected the threat from the Balkans and drew a significant power, along with their leaders, from the southern border to Bohemia, in order to solidify his position as the new king of Hungary and Bohemia.⁷⁵ But the future events depicted that he was less successful in influencing the forces of his empire than Sigismund. Sultan Murad tried to exploit the weakness of the Hungarian leadership again and in 1438, his army devastated and looted a significant portion of Transylvania. A Turkish chronicler from the era recorded that there were more captives than Ottoman attackers.⁷⁶ In order to calm the exaggerated mood of the region, Albert dispatched Hunyadi to the south border with the task to defend Szörény (Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Romania) and three other fortresses.⁷⁷ Hunyadi assumed the task with one hundred heavy and two hundred light cavalry in his possession, beside the guarding forces in the strongholds. In summer of 1439 Sultan Murad attacked the fortress of Szendrő again. In response to the closing Ottoman attack, Albert called the nobility to arms, and he established a camp at Titel (Titel, Serbia) in close vicinity of a ford on the Danube. But until the king's forces gathered in the camp, Hunyadi accomplished more,

⁷⁴Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 39.

⁷⁵Bán, *Hunyadi, a Hadak Villáma*, 387.

⁷⁶Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 39.

⁷⁷Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 99. Hunyadi assumed the task of defending the fortresses Szörény, Orsova and Mihályd. He also received estates in Bodrog County, for three months payment of 100 heavy cavalry (2757 golden florints).

than he was expected to do. Since he did not have a sufficient number of troops to challenge the sultan in open battle, Hunyadi led a series of raids to disorganize and disrupt the Ottoman forces.⁷⁸ These series of small raids were the “heralds” of Hunyadi’s virtue and tactical genius. He was aware of his strength, but he also realized that waiting for the unification of the army strengthened the Turk’s position. He understood that looking for the enemy, analyzing their strengths, and attacking them at the appropriate time, could foster future operations of the main effort, the unifying army in the camp of Titel.

Unfortunately, the rest of the nobility did not share this consensus and by early August, only twenty thousand troops got together, without proper command and control. This undisciplined force was not capable for standing-up against the Sultan’s army. During the period of the Hungarian hesitation, Szendrő fell and epidemic dysentery broke out in the camp and totally disorganized the weak alliance. Finally, only six thousand troops remained in the camp of Titel. Fortunately the sultan decided to attack Bosnia instead of advancing toward Hungary. He intended to develop a firm rear area before engaging the Kingdom of Hungary. The king fell sick and died in the fall of the same year. Before his death, as an acknowledgement, he appointed the Hunyadi brothers to the *bans* of *Banat* of Szörény and lifted them among the barons of the realm.⁷⁹

Before continuing the analysis of Hunyadi’s emerging power and achievements to defend the country, it is necessary to understand why the kings of Hungary were unsuccessful in unifying the nobility in adequate numbers throughout the centuries of the

⁷⁸Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 15.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

medieval era. The development and the composition of the Hungarian army in the fifteenth century can reflect on these factors, which led to the malfunction of the system.

The Armed Forces of Hungary in the Fifteenth Century

Three elementary force generation systems were to determine the strength and the development of the Hungarian Army in the fifteenth century. The balance of these elements framed the actual king's or leader's possibilities during wars. The three systems from where the manpower originated, were the *banderias* of the nobility, the *insurrection* or *generalis exercitus* (general levy of lesser nobles) and the *militia portalis*.

The heavy armored, knight style armed *banderias* composed the main striking power of the army, whose strength was in proportion to the ruling class' annual incomes. The king, the queen, and the ruling class of the realm secured the right--and the obligation--to appear in the king's retinue with their own troops. The size of the *banderia* was also determined, so only those privileged order members could own such units that were able to call a minimum of fifty heavy cavalry and the necessary auxiliaries under their own flag. Before the dominance of Sigismund this number reached four hundred.⁸⁰ Many from the lower nobility did not have the background to enjoy the privileges of having their own flag. They had a compromised solution: without losing their personal liberty and noble privileges, they took service in the *familia* of a greater lord and became his *familiars*. Nobles' privileges included the right to pass on landed property in the male line within their families.⁸¹ Many *familiares* received a small estate or part of a land for

⁸⁰A Pallas Nagy Lexikona [Pallas's Great Lexicon] s.v. "Bandérium" [banderia] <http://mek.oszk.hu/00000/00060/html/010/pc001009.html#2> (accessed 31 October 2011).

⁸¹Bak and Király, *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi*, 7.

the duration of their service. The retainers fulfilled all sorts of functions. They were soldiers first of all, but they also acted as managers of estates, collectors of serf obligations, and judges of the peasants living on their lord's land. A noble *familiars* lived on his own estate, and this was the base from which he performed the tasks assigned to him by his superior. His lord had the right to call him to arms whenever he needed, but not to tax him.⁸²

Those nobles, who did not belong to any of the greater lord's *familia*, were responsible to assemble under command of the county official, the *Zupan*, in case of a general levy of lesser nobles (*insurrection* or *generalis exercitus*.) The combat power of the *insurrectio* was significantly weaker than the *banderia*'s strength through their lack of training and poorer quality of equipment. Throughout the feudal warfare, the armor and the armament became more complex. By the early fifteenth century, very few lesser nobles could afford to go to war with proper equipment because a large majority of them were impoverished and unable to buy the necessary expensive armor and charger horses. The majority of these lesser nobles kept their light cavalry equipment, but they did not practice the pertinent tactics. Hence the *banderias* and the general levy of the lesser nobles composed a fighting force with mixed fighting value, but still remained a significant strength.⁸³ The problem was that the kings never were able to call them together as a whole. The reason, behind their absence or their late arrival to the battlefield was their general behavior. The nobility always looked for the monopoly of the "right to fight" and the privileges inherent, like compensation in cash or salt. But after getting

⁸²Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 18.

⁸³Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 87-88.

access for these privileges, they generally tried to avoid the obligations which were assigned. According to the law, the king could call the *insurrecto* together for a limited time, to a designated location and in homeland defense matters only. The lesser nobility counted a significant number of troops, but their lack of training and their continuous resistant toward the king, created difficulties around their implementation into the fighting force. This resistant was based on The Golden Bull of King Andrew II of 1222, which ratified the above limitation in use of the general levy.⁸⁴

After the disastrous defeat at Nicopolis in 1396, Sigismund realized the need for an increased number of troops in preparation of Hungary's defense. To strengthen the nobility's fighting force in case of *insurrecto*, the diet decreed in 1397 that the barons and nobles shall equip one archer for every twenty serfs, in order to fight against the Turks or the pagans. This force became known as the *militia portalis*, referring to the lords' holdings of lands, the *portae*.⁸⁵ The next legal reference to the *militia portalis* occurred in 1435, when Sigismund restated the conditions of the regulation. The increased Ottoman threat on Hungary's borders forced Sigismund to favor the nobility and he reduced the required numbers. In the new decree the king and the diet determined that the nobles and powerful officials had to supply three mounted archers for every hundred serfs, equipped with bow, quiver, sword and lance.⁸⁶

Sigismund planned to use this significant light cavalry force of horse archers to counter the Turkish light cavalry. Unfortunately, he could not force his will and the

⁸⁴Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 20.

⁸⁵Bak and Király, *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi*, 63.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 64.

paragraphs of the law on the nobility. Until the domination of King Matthias Corvinus, from 1458-1490 (Matthias Hunyadi, the son of János Hunyadi) this force existed only on paper. In 1459 the diet which was summoned by the king determined similar regulations, as Sigismund did at the end of the fourteenth century. The law stipulated that the serfs of every royal town and estate were subjects of conscriptions. One conscript out of twenty had to join the king and fight wherever he commanded.⁸⁷

The reason that the kings before Mathias were unable to apply the rule of the *militia portalis* was the behavior of the Hungarian nobility again. They wanted to avoid further financial expenses, and actually they feared training and arming their serfs, who could easily turn this new capability against their lords.⁸⁸

Based on the above mentioned facts, the *banderias* became the best equipped and tactically trained element of the army, but most of these forces were in the possession of the ruling class. Certainly the king and queen had their own *banderias*, based on their members of their entourage. They had the obligation to call a designated number of troops under the king's or the queen's flag when needed. The entourage was a flexibly framed organization which allowed the king to extend its size, in order to have an efficient number of armed troops in his possession. Although the royal *banderia* were the most powerful force, which overwhelmed the individual baron *banderias* by size, it

⁸⁷Bak and Király, *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi*, 64-65. The name hussar [*huszár*] dates from this time, derived from the Hungarian word of twenty [*húsz*].

⁸⁸Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 92.

doubtlessly remained in the minority for the total number of the nobility's fighting power.⁸⁹

The conditions of the army reflected the characteristics of the feudal states that the sovereign was more powerful than any of his vassals. But the only way for the rulers to practice their power was to cooperate closely with their vassals and favor their interests. When their goals did not meet each other, the sovereign had to be hard-minded and had to stand by his principles, otherwise he had to deal with a joint resistance of the higher nobility, who actually were the source of his power.⁹⁰

The *banderia* and *insurrectio*, the two main components determined the warfare in the army of the Kingdom of Hungary in the fifteenth century, with all their deficiencies and weaknesses. They could not have been used outside the borders of the kingdom, except when the army had to face a weaker enemy and success was predestinated with conditions that favored the nobility. When the enemy was tactically prepared with significant manpower and its defeat required sacrifices, the organization of a powerful army was almost impossible, even in the case of defending the homeland.⁹¹ King Albert II had to face this dilemma in the camp, near the Titel Ford. The memories of Nicopolis still were alive in the minds of the older generations and Albert was not powerful enough to unify and control the great lords against a significant enemy like Sultan Murad II's army. However the simple generalization is mistaken, because not all the nobles were negligent in these matters. The activities of Hunyadi and some other nobles, who

⁸⁹Ibid., 88.

⁹⁰Ibid., 87-88.

⁹¹Ibid., 89.

understood the severity of the situation in 1439, depicted that the term of nobility meant more than simply material wealth.

To better understand the seriousness of the situation it is necessary to highlight and analyze what kind of enemy the Hungarians had to face. The introduction of the Ottoman force, which presence and expansion significantly determined the history of Europe, intends to underpin the importance of Hunyadi's future achievements.

The Turkish Army

The enemy which threatened the borders and the sovereignty of Hungary was probably the most significant military power in the world at that time.⁹² As a result of its conqueror policy and the extended borders of its territory, the Ottoman Empire became a very diverse compositional power. To maintain law and order, and to consolidate the power west of the Bosphorus, in Rumelia, and east in Anatolia, created significant challenges for the head of the empire. To organize and govern this wide spectrum of tribal and cultural ethnicities required high a level of situational and cultural awareness and understanding from the ruler. The ruler of the empire was the sultan. Beside his unquestionable political status, he was also the religious leader of his empire, which title gave him almost unlimited power in his reign.⁹³ Just like in the feudal states in the middle ages, the most significant tool of the sovereign was his armed forces. There were similarities in the development of the armies of the Ottoman Empire and Hungary. But on

⁹²Gyula Rázsó, "Hunyadi Mátyás Török Politikája" [Turkish policies of Matthias Corvinus], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* [Military History Publications] 22, no. 2 (1975): 311.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 309-310.

the other hand there were also significant differences, which led to the revolving outcome of the struggles and campaigns between the Turks and the Hungarians throughout the decades in the fifteenth century. Three major components determined the development and the structure of the Ottoman's ground forces. The cavalry was developed by the *sipahis* and the *akincis*, and the major part of the infantry consisted of the *janissaries*.

The institution of the *sipahis* was very similar to the role that the nobles played in medieval feudal states. Unlike the other two major elements of the Ottoman ground forces, the *sipahis* were exclusively ethnic Turks. They provided the Turkish type of heavy cavalry, although it was not equal with the European, knight style force. These Ottoman horse mounted troops were armed with bows, swords, lances, maces, shields, and chain mail as body armor.⁹⁴ Their mobilization happened a similar way to the Hungarian general levy. They had to be ready at all times to call their retainers to arms in specified numbers at the orders of their larger domain. In return for their services they got estates, and they had the authority by the state to collect certain specified taxes from the peasants. But the land remained in the government's possession and unlike in the feudal system, it could not be inherited.⁹⁵ Although the *sipahis* served an administrative function, according to the land owning regulations, they had only few opportunities to develop ties to their regions and play a significant role in the political life. Likewise the

⁹⁴Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 152.

⁹⁵Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and the Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 81.

Hungarian lesser nobility, their primary functions were military, and by the fifteenth century their squadrons formed the bulk of the military force of the Ottoman Empire.⁹⁶

Although the *sipahis* formed the major part of the army, the *janissary* force provided the main strength of the Ottoman military. Sultan Murad I established this infantry corps, based on his observations, that a rein needed a foot based force which could countervail the Ottoman cavalry. Previously, the sultans used the vassal states' forces to fill that gap, or hired mercenaries for the same reasons. Murad gathered the corps by taking one out of every five young male slaves from the Christian population, who got Turkish language orientation first in the provinces, empire wide. After a few years, these selected slaves got special training, and the government made them janissaries, giving them the name *yeni çeri* (new troops).⁹⁷ Later, at the end of the fourteenth century, the janissaries became a member of the corps by levy, from the Christian households, which were under Turkish rule. This new approach for a volunteer system, provided more manpower, and also served governing interests, because the extinction of Christianity became easier from the conquered territories.⁹⁸ The janissaries lived together in barracks and received salaries for their military service both during war and peacetime. Their strict religious education and military training fused them into a unique, highly disciplined community, which based on an almost unparalleled sense of camaraderie in the medieval era.⁹⁹ Their weaponry consisted of bows and arrows, and for

⁹⁶Kinross, 153.

⁹⁷Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and the Early Modern Europe*, 47-48.

⁹⁸Bennett, *Fighting Techniques of the Medieval World*, 63.

⁹⁹Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and the Early Modern Europe*, 82

close combat they used spears, swords, and axes. The janissaries wore combined mail and plate armor, but it was much lighter, than the European standard of the heavy infantry.¹⁰⁰ Those janissary corps which had their garrisons outside the capital were not under control of any provincial authority, and they took their orders directly from the Sultan. To continuously maintain the control on the janissaries, the ruler of the empire personally appointed their commanders. The Sultan had his own independent force which could effectively counter any opposition against the central government.¹⁰¹

During wartime, which generally characterized the centuries of the Ottoman Empire, the regular forces (*sipahies* and janissaries) of the High Porte had supplemental forces. The irregular light cavalry, the *akinci* were gathered from the mass of the population. As a compensation for their services, they had the right to pillage the lands which they occupied. Generally they were the light cavalry forces that provided the scout and advance troops for the Ottoman Empire's military. Because of their mobility, the *akincis* were also used for reconnaissance and as a vanguard force to terrorize the local population before the advance of the main Ottoman forces.¹⁰²

Despite the size of the military forces, and the purposefully and unified command of them, the Ottoman Army had its weaknesses. Tactical, organizational, and geopolitical factors limited the capabilities and strength of the army. In tactical means, the Ottoman Army lacked the European style of heavy cavalry, and the lighter armored *sipahi* and

¹⁰⁰Bennett, *Fighting Techniques of the Medieval World*, 62.

¹⁰¹Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 153.

¹⁰²Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 39.

akinci units could not take the same role. The sultans intended to counterbalance this weakness with the use of the janissary forces.

The Ottoman expansion policy to the west through the Balkans, and the struggles to maintain the power eastward of Anatolia, divided the military forces of the empire. There were examples when the sultans could not always exploit their success, because of the necessary redeployment of their forces. This happened after the battle of Nicopolis in 1396, when Sultan Bayezid I, had to turn back to Anatolia to stop the Mongol invasion led by Timur.

The sustainment of the invading forces was another serious issue that the Sultan had to take into consideration. Until the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Empire had no significant permanent staging area in the Balkans. The majority of the *sipahi* private estates and the janissary units' permanent garrisons were in Anatolia, far from the imperial borders, therefore the main body of the force had to turn back and reach the heart of their country before the beginning of the winter. The remaining forces in Europe had less manpower, so they became more vulnerable for the attacks of the opposing forces, like the Hungarians or the Wallachians.

By analyzing these strengths and weaknesses of the enemy, Hunyadi concluded that the Ottomans were not undefeatable in the Balkans and the achievement, to roll back the Turks to Anatolia permanently, became a feasible alternative. Being a member of the royal council from 1436, Hunyadi had the chance to share his ideas with the kings, and many times he could convince them about his intents.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, having situational awareness about the enemy's strengths and weaknesses was not enough to

¹⁰³Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 98.

understand the situation as a whole. Hunyadi had to examine the same factors on the Hungarian side as well, and take his own nation's capabilities into consideration.

Right after the death of King Albert, during the fight for the Hungarian throne, the struggle between the families of the ruling classes re-emerged, and determined the further activities of Hunyadi from 1440.¹⁰⁴ Although these fights between the Hungarian forces further weakened the nation's defensive power, at the same time it provided a chance for Hunyadi to strengthen his position by supporting the future king (Wladislaw I) in consolidating his domination on the throne.

¹⁰⁴József Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* [The military History of the Hungarian Nation] (Budapest: Atheneum, 1928) ed. Arcanum Adatbázis Kft. (2001), <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/731.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

CHAPTER 4
THE FIRST VICTORIES

Fights on Hungarian soil

After the death of King Albert II, the fights of two major parties determined events in Hungary. The first group of nobles supported Queen Erzsébet (Elisabeth), the widow of Albert. The queen, who actually was the daughter of Sigismund, was pregnant at that time and self-candidated herself as regent of the country. If her child turned out to be a boy, she intended to crown him King of Hungary.¹⁰⁵ She enjoyed the support of her two cousins Ulrich Cillei and László Garai, who were among the most powerful counts of the Kingdom.¹⁰⁶ Having several followers of these two powerful nobles, the group which supported the queen, became a significant party.

The opposing side consisted of the majority of the so called “soldier like” nobility, whose candidate for the Hungarian throne was Wladislaw III, the King of Poland. There are debates about the reason of the opposition to Queen Erzsébet. It is doubtless that both party had their own interests in support of their power growth.¹⁰⁷ On one side, the family ties provided the chance for the Cillei and Garai families to control the queen and through this, gain more power over the country. The opposing party,

¹⁰⁵Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 81.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 172-73. Ulrich Cillei and László Garai, these two nobles played a significant role in hampering Hunyadi’s achievements and his rise in power. Their intrigues and adversary behavior continued after Hunyadi’s death, which led to the execution of his elder sun László Hunyadi, ordered by the misguided king, László V (Ladislaus V).

¹⁰⁷Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 82.

having Hunyadi as a member, probably had similar intents by influencing the sixteen year old Polish king. But if we take it as a consideration, that the “soldier like” nobility provided the majority of the forces, which really fought the fights during the wars, there were other factors that influenced their decisions. By electing Wladislaw to the King of Hungary, they expected significant fighting power from Poland to balance of the Ottoman threat on the southern border of Hungary.¹⁰⁸

During the negotiations between the parties, Erzsébet gave birth to a son. Having not enough power to get into consensus with King Wladislaw, she organized and successfully executed the stealing of the Holy Crown from Visegrád (Visegrád, Hungary) the fortress where it was guarded. Before the arrival of Wladislaw, she crowned the infant as László V of Hungary. Although the ceremony met all the legal requirements, it was against the wish of the powerful opposition. As a result, the queen had to flee and prepare for defense in some of the northern fortresses in Hungary, which were in her possession. Additionally she put her son, the infant king, under the protection of Frederick of Habsburg (future Holy Roman Emperor as Friedrich III.)¹⁰⁹

Having no official crown in the opposing party’s possession, the nobility from the ruling class, the hierarchs, and other religious and political dignitaries issued a document on 17 July 1440. The document stated that they transferred all the mystery, power, meaning and effects of the Holy Crown (of King Saint István) to another temporary

¹⁰⁸Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 47.

¹⁰⁹Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 83.

crown.¹¹⁰ This crown intended to serve as the official coronation jewel, until the official one returned to Hungary. Through this act, they put Wladislaw III on the throne, and crowned him as Wladislaw I of Hungary.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, this event did not bring the opposing parties closer to each other, and solutions for the problem remained in the use of force. Both groups had their foreign reinforcements during this civil war in Hungary. Wladislaw got Polish support from his previous kingdom, while Erzsébet used Czech mercenaries to compensate for her weakness in manpower.¹¹²

Unfortunately, Hunyadi had to prove his military skills on Hungarian soil, against Hungarian soldiers. Right after the coronation ceremony King Wladislaw ordered his supporters to besiege and take back the fortresses in the northern part of the country occupied by the queen's followers. But these strongholds, reinforced with Czech mercenaries, resisted effectively and many nobles, among others Hunyadi, failed to accomplish their missions. The failure of these offensive attempts against fortified installations proved, that the Hungarian forces were used to the open field battles. Based on these experiences, Hunyadi looked for the opportunity to meet the other party's armed formations in opened battle. He did not have to wait for long for the occasion, because he received word that palatine Garai had gathered a significant number of troops in the

¹¹⁰Vécsey, *Hunyadi* 52. The ruler class of the nobility stated the following: "As the coronation of the kings always depends on the intent of the dignities, thus the power of the crown resides in the approval of the dignities." Translated by the author.

¹¹¹Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 52.

¹¹²Thuróczi, *Chronica Hungarorum*, 378. The commander of the Czech mercenary troops was Jan Jiskra (John Giskra), who exploited the struggles between the Hungarian nobility and gained power upon a significant portion of Upper Hungary (approx. the territory of modern Slovakia.) Hunyadi had several struggles in the future with Jiskra, during his governance.

southwest part of the country and advanced toward the north, to join with the queen's forces in order to occupy the capital city, Buda.¹¹³

In September 1440, Hunyadi met the opposing forces near Szegszárd (Szekszárd, Hungary), along the right bank of the Danube. Hunyadi placed the Polish reinforcement troops in the center, and he personally led the main effort on the right flank, which consisted of heavy cavalry. Additionally he created a heavy reserve, placed behind the main effort. The enemy commander, Garai, led his attack on the left flank of his armed forces, facing Hunyadi's heavy cavalry.

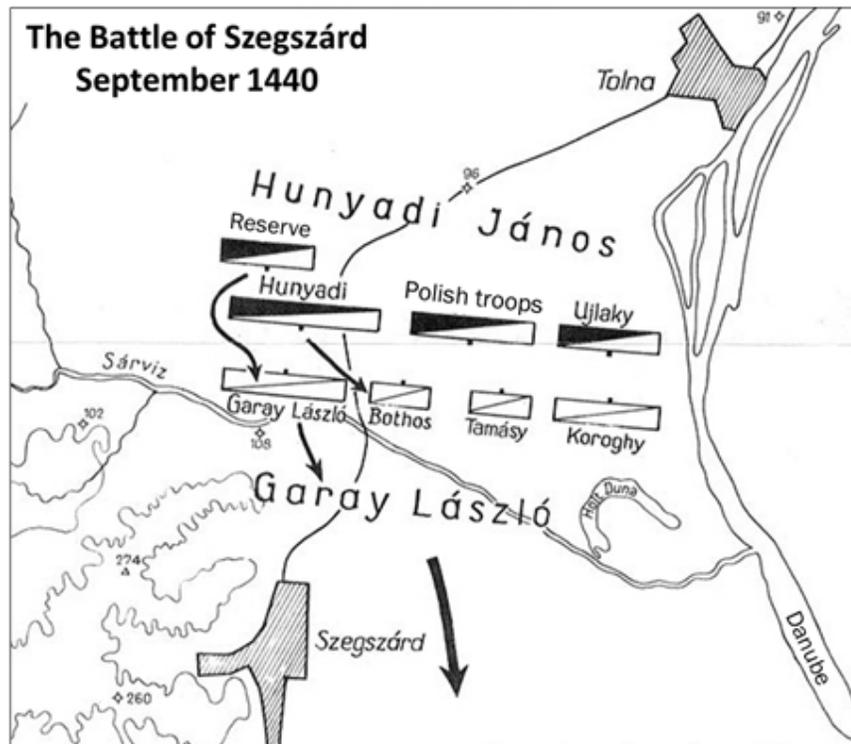


Figure 4. The Battle of Szegszárd around 10 September 1440

Source: Created by the author using József Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* [The military History of the Hungarian Nation] (Budapest: Atheneum, 1928) ed. Arcanum Adatbázis Kft. (2001), 10.IV/3. App. X/1, http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/images/banlaky-big_hadtortpic_1001.jpg (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹¹³Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 56.

In the initial phase of the battle, the opposing forces fought with equal success, but having no reserve, Garai could not counter the charges of Hunyadi's fresh heavy troops for long. By this pressure, the Garai led left flank began to flee, so Hunyadi could attack the left wing of the enemy's center troops. These forces could not resist for long, because they did not have friendly forces on their left. So they not only had to face the Polish troops in the front, but they also had to counter Hunyadi's attack from the left. This envelopment totally disorganized the enemy forces. Garai was unable to reorganize them for defense, south of the initial battle positions. To prevent further bloodshed, Hunyadi stopped pursuing the defeated enemy troops and reorganized his own forces to regain control on the territories, which became occupied and influenced by the queen's party.¹¹⁴

This was the first battle that Hunyadi exploited his skills as a leader of a significant force, although there is no exact data about the size of the enemy formations. The significant difference between the two leaders was that Hunyadi put more emphasis on organization of his troops. Both parties used the regular formations, which consisted of a center group and two flanks, but Garai failed to unite his center and right wing forces under one commander. This lack of control upon the forces led to the faster disorganization of the center, when the left flank began to withdraw.¹¹⁵ The reason behind Hunyadi's successful feat of arms was the unusual use and composition of his reserve. In the medieval ages there were examples where the Hungarians did not

¹¹⁴Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.IV/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/731.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹¹⁵Ibid.

developed a reserve at all. In 1241, when the Hungarian Army failed to stop the Mongol invasion in the battle of Muhi, King Béla IV did not have forces in reserve. At the end of the fourteenth century, Sigismund did not plan to develop a reserve in the battle of Nikopolis, although the defeat of his army was a consequence of different factors.¹¹⁶ If the commanders considered the use of such force, it generally consisted of light cavalry. The army leaders usually used them for shaping operations, like attacking the enemy flanks, or the enemy rear. In the battle near Szegszárd, Hunyadi's opponent, Garai followed the Hungarian medieval traditions and did not detached troops, to form a reserve. But Hunyadi analyzed the situation in a different manner. Having a similar size opposing forces he had to defeat, and based on the limited space for bigger scaled turning maneuvers, constrained by the River Danube on the east and the hills west of Szegszárd, he decided to break with the tactics of the traditional heavy cavalry charge.

During his service of the Duke of Milan, he had the chance to study the teachings of Braccio da Monte's school, who was the founder of the reserve concept in the *condottiere* era in Italy. The application and the composition of the reserve were also unique, because Hunyadi organized it from the elements of his heavy forces. He applied the reserve as it is used in the current doctrines, namely he used it to relieve his exhausted first line troops. Having heavy cavalry troops in the relieving force, which had the same armament and weaponry, than the forward units, he could maintain the level of their initial performance. Garai could not counterbalance this tactical advantage, and his offensive maneuver turned to a withdrawal, which finally disorganized his force, and led to the loss of the battle.

¹¹⁶Bennett, *Fighting Techniques of the Medieval World*, 126, 138.

Although this battle was not so significant by scale, it was a very important stage in the rise of Hunyadi's position in the ruling class. Additionally it had effects on the safety of the southern border of Hungary. With this victory Hunyadi displayed his loyalty toward his new king and proved his military skill, so King Wladislaw appointed him to the Voivode of Transylvania as a reward.¹¹⁷ At the same time he became the captain of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade), the key for both the Ottoman advance and the Hungarian defense. With this decision, the king put the faith of Hungary into the hands of a man who was able to exploit the given power in order to paralyze the Ottoman expansion in the Balkans.

Victories against the Turks

The appointment of Hunyadi to Voivode of Transylvania and the captain of Nándorfehérvár brought a new chapter in the warfare of Hungary to defend its southern borders against the Turks. The defensive concept depended upon the fortress system in the southern part of the country, in which Sigismund had invested a significant amount of financial and human resources. But Hunyadi recognized that without adequate strength of mobile forces, the defenders could not effectively cover the gaps between the strongholds, along the protracted border. Hunyadi realized that the best solution to mitigate the Turkish pressure was, to take the fight into the enemy's territory.¹¹⁸ Hunyadi

¹¹⁷Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 58. For his participation in the battle of Szekszárd, the king also appointed Miklós (Michael) Újlaki to the Voivode of Transilvania, so Hunyadi and he shared the title and the responsibilities.

¹¹⁸Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 99.

had the valor for this offensive mindset, and his new estates provided him better financial basis to develop his mercenary forces and counter military power of the High Porte.

The confrontation did not consolidate the rift between Wladislaw and Erzsébet, but the external threat became more significant. The Turks realized that the internal struggles for the Hungarian domination drew the attention, and certainly significant fighting power, from the avenue of their expansion. The Sultan Murad did not hesitate to exploit the chance and in April 1440 he began the siege of Nándorfehérvár. Thanks to the heroic actions of the defenders, led by János Thallóczy, the stronghold resisted and the Sultan had to give up the siege after six months of futile achievements.¹¹⁹

In the following year the Turkish commander of the fortress Szendrő, Ishak Pasha, decided to attack Nándorfehérvár, probably in the belief that the stronghold was still under construction, as a consequence of the Sultan Murad's previous year siege. But he miscalculated, as Nándorfehérvár had a new captain. Hunyadi receiving word of Ishak's intent, decided not to prepare for defense, but attack the approaching enemy on the open field. The Turkish troops did not expect such a fierce reaction. According to histories from the era, the Ottomans outnumbered the Hungarian force, but their lighter cavalry could not counter the charges of Hunyadi's trained and experienced heavy cavalry. Finally Ishak had to withdraw his remaining forces to Szendrő.¹²⁰ Hunyadi effectively exploited the capabilities of his heavy troops and he now had firsthand

¹¹⁹Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.III., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/724.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹²⁰Thuróczi, *Chronica Hungarorum*, 382-83. Unfortunately not any of the contemporary sources mentioned specific numbers. The only fact, which they highlighted, was the Turkish numerical advance.

experiences on how to fight against a larger sized Turkish force, and what were their weaknesses. This was the battle, which validated his faith in the offensive concept to counterbalance the Ottoman threat.

The Battle of Marosszentimre, 18 March 1442

The year of 1442 set a series of challenges for Hunyadi. In the beginning of the spring, Sultan Murad sent Mezd Bey to Transylvania with the intent to plunder this south east region of Hungary and cause as much damage as they could. In order to accomplish his sultan's order, Mezd avoided all fortified cities and attacked only those areas where he accepted less resistance.¹²¹

Hunyadi, who was stationed in Nándorfehérvár at this time, received word about the Ottoman sweep from Transylvania. Hunyadi enacted the levy in the region and immediately moved to Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, Romania), to the designated rally point of the gathering troops. But the *banderias* of the alerted nobles came together very slowly, which hampered Hunyadi's intent to deny Mezd *Bey*'s looting and demolishing activities. This slow mobilization of the Hungarian army had different reasons. One of them was the huge distances which the arriving troops needed to overcome. The other most significant issue was the presence of the overwhelming size of the Ottoman army, which denied the maneuvers of the mobilized troops, or in the worst cases defeated them on their way to Gyulafehérvár.¹²² The sultan provided 17,000 European *sipahis* from

¹²¹Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 86.

¹²²Bánlaci, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/2.a., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/743.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

Anatolia, to strengthen invading forces.¹²³ This cavalry based army, had the mobility to counter smaller sized Hungarian movements, even in multiple locations. It had no counteraction from the Hungarian side, so Mező could further devastate Transylvanian territories.

Hunyadi's self-confidence, based upon the previous victories was among the factors that affected him to make his first mistake in his fights against the Turks. On the other hand, maybe the martial Bishop of Transylvania convinced Hunyadi to act immediately.

¹²³Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 86.



Figure 5. The Battle of Szentimre, 18 March 1442

Source: Created by the author using József Bánlaky, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/2/a. App. X/2, http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/images/banlaky-big_hadtortpic_1002.jpg (accessed 31 October 2011).

The generally precautionous Hunyadi, despite the numerical superiority of the enemy, decided to attack the main body of Mezid's army on 18 March 1442. The enemy forces deployed nearby the village of Maroszentimre (Sântimbru, Alba, Romania), about ten kilometers from the Hungarian camp.

As a result of the hasty attack, Hunyadi did not send his scouts deep enough, so he did not have relevant information about the enemy's disposition. Actually, the bishop and

Hunyadi acted according the plans of Mezd *Bey*, and directly walked into his ambush. After initial success upon the enemy's advance guard, the Hungarian troops followed the retreating troops, along the only avenue of approach, which was a valley girdled with high grounds favorable for ambushes. When Hunyadi's troops were deep enough in the valley, Mezd ordered his troops to attack the Hungarian flanks from the high grounds. Understanding his hopeless situation, Hunyadi intended to preserve his fighting force and ordered his troops to withdraw.¹²⁴

In this battle, Hunyadi acted contrary to all the skills which characterized his previous missions and which raised him to the current status and position. The events of the following days proved that defeat was not decisive, but probably this lost battle gave him a lifelong lesson about the importance of the preparation of the battlefield and the enemy analysis.

The Battle of Gyulafehérvár, 25 March 1442

As the enemy was still present and continued the depredation of Transylvania, Hunyadi sent urgent messages to the nobles and the people of the neighboring counties. In the following weeks, he assembled an adequate number of troops to launch a counter offensive. Finally, many of the *banderias* arrived from the farther counties, and the increasing threat also motivated the peasants to respond to the calls.¹²⁵ Unfortunately, the histories from the fifteenth century did not mention any numerical data about the size of

¹²⁴Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/2.a., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/743.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹²⁵Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 87.

Hunyadi's troops, but based on his previous failure, he certainly gathered an adequate responsive force.

His pre-emptive actions, to send his reconnaissance elements out, depicted that Hunyadi reverted to his customary caution. As a result, he received word from his spies that Mezd *Bey* became aware of the characteristics of his armament and dress, and he offered a reward for Hunyadi's head. Moreover, the Turkish commander developed his order for the battle to capture or kill the Hungarian leader.¹²⁶ Hunyadi recognized the opportunity in the enemy's plan and responded with a ruse. One of his lieutenants, Simon of Kamonya, whose physique was similar to his commander's, volunteered to take Hunyadi's equipment and horse during the battle. With this conversion of personalities, Hunyadi intended to present a decoy to the Ottoman forces.¹²⁷

One week after his defeat, on 25 March 1442, Hunyadi was ready to attack Mezd's forces again, which set up along the road between Gyulafehérvár and Marosszentimre.¹²⁸ But at this time, Hunyadi divided his forces to two. The main body moved to the vicinity of Borbánd, north of Gyulafehérvár, led by Simon of Kamonya who wore the colors and the armament of his commander, to deceive the Turks. In the meantime, Hunyadi made a turning maneuver with the smaller part of the army in the west, concealed by the high ground of Bilag. Kamonya's light cavalry, which consisted of Szekler warriors, initiated the attack against the Turkish advance guard. They drew the

¹²⁶Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 287.

¹²⁷Thuróczi, *Chronica Hungarorum*, 385-86.

¹²⁸Károly Veszely, "Hol verte meg Hunyadi János 1442-ben Mezd Bégét?" [Where Did János Hunyadi Defeat Mezd Bey in 1442?], *Századok* [Centuries] 1, no. 8 (1879): 134.

enemy's attention away from the turning maneuver. The tactics worked, mainly due to Mezid *Bey*'s order for his forces to attack the false Hunyadi. As soon as the Turkish main body moved forward to attack, the Szekler light cavalry turned back and prepared for a defense of the flanks of Kamonya's center troops.¹²⁹ Despite Hunyadi's preventive acts that ordered five hundred of his best warriors to protect his loyal retainer, the Turks finally outnumbered the troops, who guarded Simon of Kamonya and killed him.¹³⁰ While Mezid *Bey* concentrated on the decoy with all his main effort, Hunyadi engaged the rear of the Ottoman forces. This totally confused them, because they were in the belief that the Hungarian commander was already dead. This maneuver totally disorganized the Ottomans and by exploiting his cavalry's mobility, Hunyadi ordered his troops to pursue the fleeing enemy. According to the historical chronicles, in the second engagement between the two armies, near Gyulaférvár, Hunyadi's troops killed 20,000 Turks, Mezid *Bey* and his son among them, while the Hungarian costs numbered only 3,000.¹³¹ But this victory had its prize, because Hunyadi's brother, the younger János, died in one of the battles around Gyulaférvár.¹³²

The battle of Gyulaférvár clearly depicted Hunyadi's ability to apply the lessons he learned and proved his resolve not to give up, if any chance for success remained. After the sharp lesson he got during the battle at Marosszentimre, he never acted so heedlessly during his future battles. The brilliant feint which turned the enemy's

¹²⁹Veszely, "Hol verte meg Hunyadi János 1442-ben Mezid Béget?" 128.

¹³⁰Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 63.

¹³¹Veszely, "Hol verte meg Hunyadi János 1442-ben Mezid Béget?" 129.

¹³²Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 221.

plan against them, underpinned his tactical brightness and he proved that he deserved the king's confidence in him by laying the fate of the Hungarian nation into his hands.

The Battle of Vaskapu (Iron Gate), July 1442

The victory upon the army of Mezid did not mean the end of the woes in 1442 for the Hungarian population, especially for the Transylvanians. After the battle of Gyulaféhérvár, Hunyadi convinced the voivods and rulers of Wallachia and Moldova to change their loyalty back to the Hungarian King and deny supporting the Ottoman Empire.¹³³ To reestablish his supremacy both in these countries and gain territories in Transylvania, Sultan Murad II sent another army to Europe. The sultan appointed Sahebaddin *Beylerbey* to the command of the army.¹³⁴ To reinforce the Rumeli division, the sultan attached the troops of six military districts from Anatolia, which consisted of both *sipahis* and janissaries.¹³⁵ According to the concurrent estimate of the historians of the era, the strength of the invading army was around 80,000 troops.¹³⁶

In June 1442 the Sahebaddin entered Wallachia by crossing the Danube and began devastating the country. The Ottoman forces had to face only limited resistance,

¹³³Thuróczi, *Chronica Hungarorum*, 387.

¹³⁴Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 151. The ottoman territory was divided into two halves: Anatolia east of the Bosphorus and Rumelia, west. The governor-generals who controlled Anatolia and Rumeli were the *beylerbeys*.

¹³⁵Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/2.c., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/747.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹³⁶Johann Wilhelm Zinkeisen, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches in Europa* Erster teil *Urgeschichte und Wachstum des Reiches bis zum Jahre 1453* [The History of the Ottoman Empire in Europe vol 1. of Prehistory and Expansion of the Empire until 1453] (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1840), 602. <http://www.archive.org/details/geschichtedesosm01zinkuoft> (accessed 31 October 2011).

because the population fled into the forests and the mountains. This easy success in Wallachia gave Sahedaddin *Beylerbey* much self-confidence that he stated to his soldiers: “When the enemy catches sight of my peaked turban, they will start running away many day’s distance.”¹³⁷ Having no significant losses after the depredation of Wallachia, the Turkish Army began its movement toward Transylvania in the belief of their absolute superiority.

When Hunyadi received word about the arrival of the Ottoman forces to Wallachia, he immediately ordered the ‘bloody sword’ across Transylvania. This was the accepted sign of the *insurrection*, or general levy. By the beginning of July, Hunyadi gathered about 15,000 troops, but the five to one force ratio still presented a Turkish superiority in numbers.¹³⁸ Hunyadi chose a location of the fight near to the entrance of the Iron Gate Pass, where his enemy could not exploit the advantage of its numerical superiority, and had limited space for turning maneuvers. Sahedabbin *Beylerbey* used the traditional Turkish formation, and he placed the janissaries into the middle in a solid block around the commander, with the *sipahis* and the *akinjis* on the flanks.¹³⁹ To counterbalance the force ratio, Hunyadi used an articulated disposition of his troops. He also placed his infantry in the center, the heavy troops at front, the archers and the lancers behind them. In front of and on both side of the infantry, the heavy cavalry formed the

¹³⁷Thúry, József, *Török Történetírók* [Turkish Chroniclers] (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1893), 57, <http://www.archive.org/details/trktrtne01thuruoft> (accessed 31 October 2011). “Az ellenség, ha csak a sapkáját meglátja is, több napi járóföldre fut.” Translated by the author.

¹³⁸Bánlaki, 1 *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 0.VI/2.c., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/748.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹³⁹Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 88.

striking power of Hunyadi's army in three blocks. He placed his light cavalry on the flanks. This was the first battle, where the war wagons appeared as an organic element of his army in battle formations.¹⁴⁰ He placed them on both sides of the main body, behind the light cavalry, with crossbowmen and light troops with pikes on them.

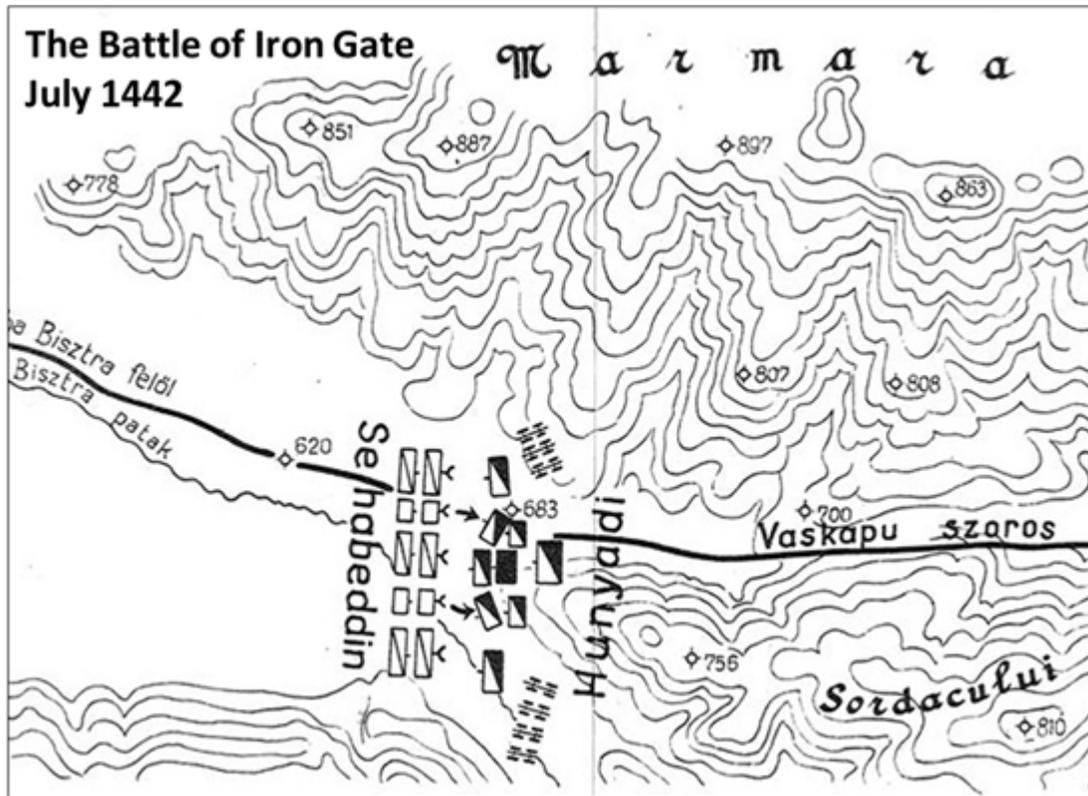


Figure 6. The Battle of Vaskapu (Iron Gate), July 1442

Source: Created by the author using József Bánlaky, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/2/c. App. X/4, http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/images/banlaky-big_hadtortpic_1004.jpg (accessed 31 October 2011).

Probably he also mounted firearms on the wagons, according to the description of the contemporary chronicler Antonio Bonfini. Bonfini stated that he collected his

¹⁴⁰Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 116.

information from the warriors of this battle, who told stories about missiles and bullets hurled into the Turkish rear.¹⁴¹ These bullets could come only from the war wagons, because Hunyadi did not deploy firearms elsewhere in his formations during this battle.

Hunyadi initiated the attack against Sahedabbin's center, with his heavy cavalry in the lead, in the belief that he could penetrate the Turkish infantry. The janissaries lived up to their reputation and held the formation, although they suffered significant losses. In the meantime the *sipahis* pushed back Hunyadi's light cavalry on the flanks. Sahedabbin ordered the janissaries to attack the engaged heavy cavalry's flanks, in order to cut them off from the rest of the Hungarian army. Realizing the threat of the encirclement, he ordered his heavy cavalry to withdraw for reorganization in a narrower part of the valley, where the enemy had to canalize its pursuing forces. Exploiting the terrain, Hunyadi shouldered his flanks in the valley and ordered his light infantry, which he deployed on the high ground, to attack Sahedaddin's wings in close coordination with the war wagons.¹⁴² The Turkish troops were not experienced with weapons like the war wagon, which in fact led to the withdrawal of the affected elements of Sahedaddin troops. Hunyadi exploited the growing chaos among the enemy formations and ordered his reorganized heavy cavalry and infantry to charge again into the middle. The Ottomans could not handle the Hungarian charges from multiple directions and began to flee en masse from the battlefield. The valley hindered their chaotic withdrawal, thus Hunyadi's light cavalry effectively pursued and devastated the retreating enemy. As a result, only

¹⁴¹Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 116.

¹⁴²Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/2.c., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/747.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

half of Sahedaddin's invading force could cross the Danube and escape. A Turkish chronicler, called Nesri, stated that "the army of Islam ran away, and suffered such a defeat, which was hard to describe."¹⁴³

The victory in the Battle of Iron Gate was a good example of Hunyadi's tactical and leadership development. As a leader, he was able to influence the population and the nobility more successfully, than his predecessors. This was especially true among that population, which suffered from the attacks of the Ottoman forces. The battles of 1442 illustrated, that he became victorious with little significant royal support. This fact highlighted that he was able to exploit the resources of his estates and finance a growing number of personal armed forces. The significance of this fact was that unlike the nobility in general, he did not exceed the limitations of the inhabitants on his properties. He also made a great effort, to provide physical security for the peasants and set as predictable living conditions for them as possible. It meant that he assured fair legal treatment for the lower classes also. These leadership skills were among the reasons why the common people and the lesser nobility were more willing to join and support his military adventures.¹⁴⁴

He also displayed his improvement in tactics, by introducing unusual disposition of the troops and applying warfighting techniques and equipment of other nations. He always had numerical disadvantage in his battles, which he generally counterbalanced with the deliberated articulation of his forces. This deployment of troops, led by trusted

¹⁴³Thúry, *Török Történetírók*, 57. "Az iszlám serege megfutott, és olyan vereséget szenvedett, hogy azt mondani sem kell." Translated by the author.

¹⁴⁴Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 114.

subordinate commanders, gave him flexibility to react on the enemy maneuvers in time. On the other hand, the application of his battlefield experiences, like the use of war wagons at the Iron Gate, gave him the opportunity to surprise the enemy by introducing something unexpected. But the surprise was not enough on its own to defeat the enemy. Hunyadi planned to generate adequate forces in reserve to exploit the surprise. In the Battle of Iron Gate, the separated heavy cavalry troops on the flanks, gave him the chance to reorganize and refresh the center striking force after the withdrawal. Their second charge against the enemy, which became shocked and disorganized by the attack of the war wagons on their wings, determined the outcome of the battle.

Hunyadi's successes and acts, by which he challenged the Ottoman Empire in 1442, made him feared and led the Turks to refer to him as "god-damned Jankó."¹⁴⁵ Not only had the Turks paid attention to him, he earned a reputation with western powers. German chroniclers commemorated his achievements in the Battle of Iron Gate. "The battle that was fought here is one of the most curious moments in the campaigns of the Ottomans against Hungary and is one of the highlights in the heroic career of Johann Hunyades."¹⁴⁶

Hunyadi's activities in Transylvania and in the Balkans renewed the hope for Pope Eugene IV to dispel the Turks from Europe. These efforts highly contributed to the

¹⁴⁵Thúry, *Török Történetírók*, 65.

¹⁴⁶Zinkeisen, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches in Europa*, Translated by Alexandra Adorjan ["Die Schlacht, welche hier geliefert wurde, gehört zu den merkwürdigsten Momenten in den Feldzügen der Osmanen gegen Ungarn und ist einer der Glanzpunkte in der Heldenlaufbahn des Johann Hunyades"], 602.

events of 1443, when King Wladislaw also joined the operations, which turned to the offensive and did not wait until the enemy broke into Hungarian territory.

The Long Campaign, 1443

The internal struggles in Hungary, between Wladislaws I and Queen Erzsébet, divided the nobility of Hungary to two parts. Pope Eugene IV sent his delegate, Cardinal Julian Ceasarini, to Hungary with two objectives. He received the order to conciliate the opposing parties and to convince the Hungarian King to lead an offensive against the Ottomans, with the desired end state to force them out of Europe. His other task was to recruit and organize a crusader army for this cause.¹⁴⁷ The Pope, being aware that Wladislaw was the owner of the Polish crown as well, counted on the king to support his plans with significant forces.¹⁴⁸ In the beginning of 1443, the king finally called for a diet, where the Serbian Despot, Đurađ (George) Branković was also present. He offered his support for the offensive, because he realized the opportunity to free his nation from the Ottoman subjugation, based on Hunyadi's past year successes. He also ensured Wladislaw and the diet that Sultan Murad II had issues with revolts in Anatolia and the war renewed against the Greeks in Morea.¹⁴⁹

Based on the Branković's information and support and the pressure of the pope through Cardinal Ceasarini, the diet agreed to launch an offensive operation against the

¹⁴⁷Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 91.

¹⁴⁸Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/749.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁴⁹Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 319. Morea was the medieval name of the Peloponnese Peninsula, in the south part of Greece.

Turks. But as the law ratified that the king could not order the nobility to fight outside the borders of Hungary, the diet did not call for a general levy. To support the operation they voted for the collection of an emergency tax, from which they could hire mercenaries.¹⁵⁰ Wladislaw assigned Hunyadi to organize and recruit the invading force, from the income of the additional tax. Although Wladislaw led the campaign, he lifted Hunyadi to *capitaneus exercitus generalis* [the general of the Hungarian Army]. With this act, he became responsible for recruiting and organizing the army.¹⁵¹

The papal legate, Cardinal Cesarini, made significant efforts to call up men crusaders mainly from Bohemia. Finally, he recruited a few thousand Czech and Austrian mercenaries on papal expenses.¹⁵² Despite Pope Eugene IV's order for a crusade, the western powers remained unwilling to take part in the campaign. Friedrich of Habsburg denied involvement referring to the threat from Bohemia and Switzerland against his empire. The Pope considered the campaign so important, that he also planned a maritime maneuver parallel with the ground operations. This was to prevent the Turkish reinforcement transportations to Europe through the Hellespont. He based this maneuver on the Venetian fleet, but finally, because of the lack of financial support this shaping operation never came to reality.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/749.html> (accessed 31 October 2011). The sum of the emergency tax exceeded 10,000 golden Forints.

¹⁵¹Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 72.

¹⁵²Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 95.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, 94. The funds were enough to equip only six galleys.

On 22 July 1443, King Wladislaw decided to begin the campaign and left Buda, the Hungarian capital, with an army of approximately 35,000 troops. This number consisted of 10,000 men from the private force of Hunyadi and Miklós Újlaki and another 15,000 mercenaries who were hired from Branković's money.¹⁵⁴ Cardinal Ceasarini recruited around 5,000 crusaders into the army. The royal and other Hungarian noble *banderías* counted only 3000 troops. This number effectively highlighted the unwillingness of the ruling class. The rest of the forces from Wallachia and Serbia joined the army on its way to the south after crossing the Danube. Hunyadi led a significant advance guard of 12,000 from his and Újlaki's forces reinforced with elements of the main army.¹⁵⁵ Hunyadi paid attention to logistical issues as well and from the available money he developed a carriage fleet which consisted of 3000 assets.¹⁵⁶ This precautionary planning supported the transportation of the reserve forces and the sustainment materials and Hunyadi probably kept empty cargo place for the plunder that he expected to get during the campaign.¹⁵⁷

Hunyadi, with that remarkably heavy advance guard, moved one day's march distance ahead of the king and ensured the freedom of movement for the main body of the army. After occupying the city of Nis (Niš, Serbia), Hunyadi received word from his

¹⁵⁴Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/749.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁵⁵Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 341. Újlaki was not present in the beginning of the campaign due to his illness, so Hunyadi commanded his troops along with his forces.

¹⁵⁶Veszprémi and Király, *A Millenium of Hungarian Military History*, 61.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*

reconnaissance elements that enemy forces approached from three different directions, with notable strength. One of the Turkish forces arrived from the north led by Ishak Pasha, who fought against Hunyadi before, in the vicinity of Szendrő, in 1441. The second Turkish column approached toward Nis from the direction of Sofia (Bulgaria) and the third one from the south through the city of Leskovac (Serbia). Unfortunately the sources from the fifteenth century did not mention the strength of the Ottoman forces, but it is probable that they wanted to unite their power somewhere in the vicinity of Nis, to delay the Hungarian advance.¹⁵⁸ Instead of preparing a defense and waiting for reinforcement from the main body of the army, Hunyadi remained in an offensive mindset and decided to attack the approaching enemy forces one by one. First he attacked the troops coming from north-west, and Ishak Pasha had to face his destiny again. After an easy victory, Hunyadi turned against the eastern enemy formations and soon they also had to withdraw. Eventually, he defeated the third Turkish unit, which headed to the rally point from south.¹⁵⁹

But Hunyadi could not enjoy the fruit of his victory for long, because his scouts reported that another enemy formation from the east, with more significant manpower were on their way. In his later letter to Újlaki, Hunyadi estimated the strength of the enemy around 30,000.¹⁶⁰ Probably the Sultan expected that the first three columns could unite at Nis and defeat or fix the Hungarian advance force, while the Turkish advance

¹⁵⁸Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 344

¹⁵⁹Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/749.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁶⁰Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 97.

guard could attack the main body dividing the two Hungarian groups from each other. These two shaping operations set favorable conditions for the Ottoman army's main body, to defeat the Wladislaw's invading force.¹⁶¹

Hunyadi, despite the fact that his force fought three battles one after another, intended to prevent the king and the main body from an unexpected attack and turned his forces toward the new enemy. Hunyadi probably had losses during the previous three battles and the dispersed Turkish troops joined the new unit, so the force ratio could be one to four in favor of the Turks. Kasim Pasha, did not expect the Hungarian advance guard to attack, so Hunyadi could exploit both the surprise and the power of the heavy cavalry's charge. The Hungarian attack soon broke the Turkish resistance and made the whole force flee. Now Hunyadi could reunite with the king and the rest of the army again in the vicinity of Nis.¹⁶² Some of the chronicles of the battle stated that Hunyadi fought the first three battles in one day. Considering the distances and the exhaustion rate, which generally characterized the medieval battles those assumptions were very unlikely. The events probably happened in a two to three day period.¹⁶³

Despite Hunyadi's achievements as the leader of the advance guard, he could not compel the rest of the army to advance faster. They favored the situation that Hunyadi and the nobles loyal to him fought the battle instead of them, as it generally happened in the past. Hunyadi won the fourth battle on 3 November 1443, but the army reached the

¹⁶¹Bánlaki, 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/749.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁶²Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/749.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁶³Ibid.

passes through the mountains toward Edirne, the heart of the Ottoman Empire in Rumelia, only in the middle of December. The distance between Nis and the passes was only two hundred kilometers. This delay gave enough time for the Sultan to transport additional troops to Europe and set up his camp in the vicinity of Philippopolis (Plovdiv, Serbia). Sultan Murad exploited the available time and sent his infantry troops to occupy the passes and prepare them for a defense, approximately in half way between Sofia and Philippopolis. The Hungarian army initially attacked along multiple avenues of approaches but the road blocks and the slippery paths favored the defender's activities and prevented the attacking forces from achieving success.¹⁶⁴ Hunyadi's attempt to unite the majority of his forces and concentrate their attack along one pass failed too. The limited maneuver space denied the Hungarians the ability to exploit the capability of their heavy cavalry and the rough weather conditions hampered the sustainment of the army. These uncomfortable fighting and living conditions exhausted the troops and the majority of their leaders as well, and despite Hunyadi's will, King Wladislaw decided to give up with breaking through the passes and ordered the army to withdraw.¹⁶⁵

Hunyadi was aware that the Sultan had forces to exploit the Ottoman success and pursue the Hungarian army during their withdrawal, so he prepared for a counterattack. He left a rear guard led by Branković, with the task to draw the Ottoman forces to the prepared battlefield. The sultan sent Kasin Pasha to pursue the enemy, and according to Hunyadi's plan he followed Branković's troops, which continuously kept contact with the

¹⁶⁴Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 348.

¹⁶⁵Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 98.

enemy.¹⁶⁶ On both sides of the avenue of approach dense forests belted the battlefield. This was where Hunyadi placed the Polish cavalry. Hunyadi positioned the rest of his forces in front of the enemy advance. When the rear guard showed up, Hunyadi let them go through his lines and he initiated a counter-attack against the Turkish forces. On order the Polish cavalry charged the surprised enemy from two directions. This action further disoriented the Turks and finally they fled back to the mountains. The Battle of Kunovica ended with a Hungarian victory, but by that time the army was no longer able to sustain further combat and the king, who was also slightly injured, ordered the forces back home. He arrived in Hungary in February 1444.¹⁶⁷

The Long Campaign did not get this label because of its length in time. It became “long” because of the distance that the Hungarian army had to march through the Balkans. Despite its short period, the campaign counted several victorious battles and caused serious losses for the Ottoman forces in Rumelia. Hunyadi proved his valor and leadership skills by winning four of the five decisive battles of the campaign, without the support of the army’s main body. His offensive approach prevented the Ottomans from unifying their forces and decisively engaging the Hungarian army. The failure to fight through the passes in the mountains was a result of the slow movement of the main body, because they reached the area by December and the winter supported the defenders activities. Additionally, the sultan had enough time to develop an effective defensive system in the Balkan Mountains. The chroniclers do not mention the use of war wagons

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

¹⁶⁷Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/749.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

during the battles. Probably the terrain and the offensive approach of Hunyadi, which he based on the mobility of his cavalry, did not favor the deployment of the wagons. He left them with the main body where the army could use them for protection and transportation tasks. Hunyadi learned his lesson from the battle of Marosszentimre, where he neglected to send scouts deep enough into the enemy territory. During the Long Campaign, his reconnaissance system worked properly and provided an efficient early warning system, which fostered Hunyadi's decision making process.

From Serbian Despot Branković's perspective the campaign did not accomplish the desired end state. He invested a huge sum of money and effort to gain back control of the Serbian strongholds, but by the end of the campaign they remained in Turkish hands. Despite this failure, the operation had positive results. The offensive approach toward the Ottoman threat proved its worth and Sultan Murad II, in the summer of 1444, offered peace to Wladislaws. However, it remained short-lived and determined the future events, which led to Hunyadi's first decisive loss in battles.

CHAPTER 5

THE LOST BATTLES

The Long Campaign in 1443, despite the fact that it did not reach its desired operational end state, drew Western Europe's attention to Hungary. The joint Hungarian and Serbian achievements could not neutralize the Turkish threat in Europe, but they broke the myth of Ottoman invincibility.¹⁶⁸ Delegates from Spain, England, France, and the Italian states visited King Wladislaw in Buda to express their appreciation for the multiple victories. Pope Eugene IV ensured that the joint navies of the Italian states and Burgundy provided financial and maritime support in case of a renewed campaign, in order to put an end to the Ottoman dominion in Europe. The rulers of Byzantine, Greece, and Skanderbeg of Albania offered their armies to the Hungarian King in his next campaign against the common enemy.¹⁶⁹ There was however opposition against a new war. The Polish nobility had concerns about their King's absence from Poland and some of the Hungarian nobles argued that this new campaign was too early and the country was not prepared to support new offensive operations.¹⁷⁰ Despite concerns, King Wladislaw called together the diet in Buda in April 1444. Influenced by the papal envoy Cardinal Caesarini and the promises of multinational support, he decided to launch another campaign against the Ottomans in the same year. Based on the fact that the theater of the renewed war was outside the borders of Hungary, the nobility remained true to their

¹⁶⁸Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 98.

¹⁶⁹Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme* 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/752.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁷⁰Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 384.

previous unwillingness and most of them refused to risk their lives and troops in battles against the Turks. Only Hunyadi and three other nobles offered their *banderias* for the King. Based on his successful performance as *capitaneus exercitus generalis*, during the previous campaign, Wladislaw put Hunyadi in charge of organizing the new crusade army.¹⁷¹

In the meantime an unexpected event occurred, that significantly influenced the future of the upcoming campaign. Sultan Murad II offered a truce to Hungary with very favorable conditions. The reason behind this decision was a renewed struggle for power in Anatolia with his brother-in-law, Karamanid Ibrahim Bey.¹⁷² Before concentrating his forces on the fight in Anatolia, Murad intended to neutralize the threat of the Hungarian forces, which became significant under the leadership of Hunyadi during the last few years. King Wladislaw consolidated the treaty as the “Peace of Szeged” with his oath (Szeged, Hungary). In the treaty the Ottoman delegate stated that the Sultan would return the occupied territory and fortresses, in Wallachia and Serbia, if the Hungarian Forces did not intervene in Ottoman territory.¹⁷³ With this truce, Branković got back his desired territory and Hungary regained a solid buffer zone on its southern border. This offered Hungary a chance to stabilize the internal conflicts and regenerate after the continuous fights against the Turks.

But unfortunately, events played out differently. While the Sultan began to hand over the fifteen fortresses and released Branković’s imprisoned sons, Wladislaw received

¹⁷¹Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 100.

¹⁷²Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 387.

¹⁷³*Ibid.*, 395.

word that the papal fleet reached the Hellespont (Dardanelles, Turkey) and was able to prevent the Sultan and his forces to transport troops into Europe. The fleet commander stated that he expected a further twelve galleys, four from the Duke of Burgundy and eight from Venice, in a few days. Cardinal Caesarini, who still represented Pope Eugene IV's will, exploited the occasion and convinced the King to step back from his oath. As the legate of the Pope, Caesarini absolved Wladislaw of his oath in the name of the Christian cause.¹⁷⁴ Wladislaw ordered Hunyadi to continue preparing for the campaign. With this decision, the Hungarian King lost the support of Branković, who got back the occupied Serbian territories and fortresses from the Sultan without a fight. He not only refused to provide manpower and financial support, but later he denied Skanderbeg and his Albanian troops to join the crusader army.¹⁷⁵ Despite the loss of a significant ally, Branković, and the lack of knowledge about the promised supporting forces' status, King Wladislaw crossed the Danube and began to move southward in September 1444.

The Battle of Varna, 1444

The army which crossed the Danube at Orsova (Orşova, Mehedinti, Romania) in September consisted of 6,000 Hungarian, 4,000 Polish troops and 1,000 crusaders recruited by Caesarini. In October, Hunyadi joined Wladislaw with 5,000 soldiers, Vlad Dracul, from Wallachia, brought 4,000 men.¹⁷⁶ The plan of the operation was to meet the

¹⁷⁴Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/752.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁷⁵Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 105.

¹⁷⁶Bánlaki, 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/752.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

promised reinforcements of the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. Based on the experiences of the previous year, Wladislaw decided to avoid the narrow passes of the Balkan Mountains and proceeded along the Danube to Varna (Varna, Bulgaria) and from there moved south along the coast of the Black Sea.¹⁷⁷ As usual, Hunyadi led the advance guard and secured the passage of the 20,000 strong army, the 2,000 war wagons, and carriages.¹⁷⁸ The crusader army besieged and occupied several small castles and fortresses along its avenue of approach. On 6 November 1444, during a small scale skirmish approximately thirty kilometers west of Varna, Wladislaw received a shocking message. Cardinal Francesco Condolmieri, the commander of the Papal and Burgundian naval forces, failed to prevent Sultan Murad II from crossing the Straits and transporting his army to Europe. Some sources stated that the Sultan fought through the Straits and the fleet could not balance the overwhelming Ottoman power.¹⁷⁹ There were theories about bribed captains of the coalition fleet who supported the Sultan during the crossing.¹⁸⁰

Despite the failure of the naval phase of the operation, Hunyadi advised Wladislaw to stay near Varna in prepared positions, in the belief of the arrival of the expected reinforcements from Byzantium and Greece. Unfortunately, history repeated itself and just like in the previous campaigns against the Ottomans, the promises about support never materialized. The Rumelian troops joined the main army of Sultan Murad,

¹⁷⁷Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 105.

¹⁷⁸Veszprémi and Király, *A Millenium of Hungarian Military History*, 61.

¹⁷⁹Held, 105.

¹⁸⁰Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 424.

who approached from the south through Pravadi (Provadia, Bulgaria) and set a camp west of Varna.¹⁸¹

On 10 November, Hunyadi convinced King Wladislaw to prepare troops for the battle. Based on the fact that the Rumelian and the Anatolian armies counted for approximately 80,000 men, Hunyadi intended to balance the 4:1 numerical disadvantage with the exploitation of the terrain and the defensive array of his forces.¹⁸² He set up a defensive perimeter west of the city of Varna, in an arch formation, shouldering with the Lake of Varna on the left flank and with the high ground on his right flank. He recognized the danger of a possible attack from the high ground against his right flank. So he shaped the arch of the line to be able to counter a turning maneuver or envelopment, which was a favored form of the Turkish shaping operations.¹⁸³ The Varna Lake and its swampy coast limited the Turkish maneuver space on the left flank, thus Hunyadi deployed his artillery and the war wagons behind the right flank for support. The infantry took position in the wagon fortress. The King's *banderia* and his 500 elite guards took position in the center, while Hunyadi put the Hungarian, the Szekler, and Caesarini's cavalry forces on the flanks. Hunyadi did not trust the Wallachians, so he did not the risk putting them into the defensive perimeter. They became the reserve of the Christian army.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹Dávid Angyal, "Murad útja Várna felé 1444" [Murad's Route to Varna, 1444], *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* vol. 23 (1910): 253.

¹⁸²Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/754.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁸³Ibid.

¹⁸⁴Ibid.

The Sultan placed the regular Rumelian cavalry on his right flank and the cavalry from Anatolia on his left flank. As usual the *janissaries* composed the center of the Turkish force, with the task of protecting the sultan. As a reserve, Murad used Anatolian *sipahis* behind the *janissarie* formation. Murad also analyzed the battlefield and by using the terrain to conceal his plan, he ordered the light cavalry and light infantry from Anatolia, consisted of the *akinjis* and the *asabs*, to take the high ground northwest of Varna.¹⁸⁵

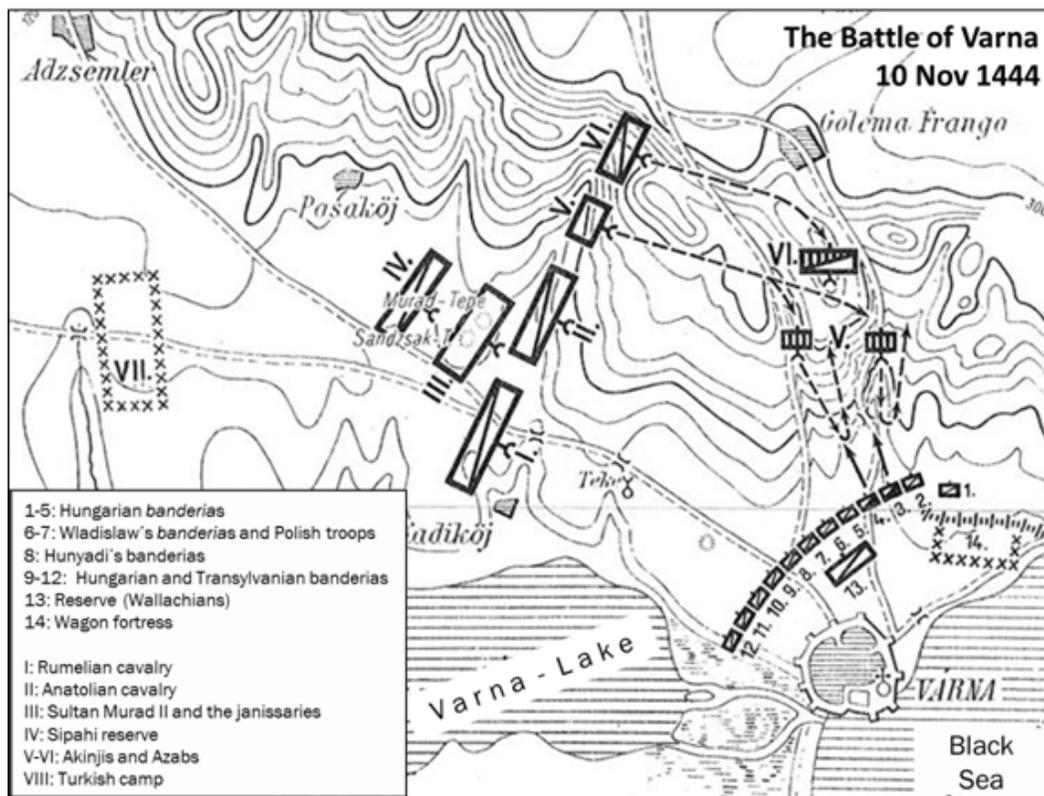


Figure 7. The Battle of Varna 10 November 1444

Source: Created by the author using József Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/4.b. App. X/6.a, http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/images/banlaky-big_hadtortpic_1006.jpg (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁸⁵Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 109.

As Hunyadi expected, the Ottoman forces initiated the attack from the slopes of the high ground against the Hungarian right flank. The defending Hungarian troops waited until the Turkish troops got closer into the plain area and until initiated the charge of their heavy cavalry forces. The enemy's light forces could not counter the heavy charge. The Hungarian right flank repulsed the first attack. Sultan Murad sent the Anatolian regular *sipahi* formation from his left flank to reinforce the disorganized *akinci* forces. At the same time, the Turkish right flank began to engage the Christian army's left flank, where Hunyadi deployed his own *banderias*. This attack was also opposed successfully and the left wing held. After analyzing the situation Hunyadi ordered the Wallachian reserve, reinforced with royal *banderias*, to consolidate the conditions on the Hungarian's right flank, where the Ottoman forces already attacked the wagon fortress. The effort became successful, and after the death of the Anatolian commander, the Turkish left flank began to flee. The pursuing forces stopped when they reached the depth of the *janissaries*, except the Wallachians who disobeyed orders, bypassed the Turkish infantry, and left the battlefield.¹⁸⁶

After the reorganization of the army, Hunyadi had to reinforce the left flank, because Murad launched his reserve to break the Hungarian resistance. Hunyadi arrived in time to balance the strength of the fighting forces and slowly gained advantage through the use of heavy cavalry. According to the chronicles, from both sides, this was the time

¹⁸⁶Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/754.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

when Sultan Murad II was ready to give up.¹⁸⁷ But unfortunately, King Wladislaw's decision changed the course of the events.

The young king did not want to stay out of the battle and according to his own decision, or maybe influenced by the Polish nobility of his retinue, he decided to charge the *janissary* formation and attack the Sultan with his force of 500 guards.¹⁸⁸ He did this without coordinating the action with Hunyadi. The heavy cavalry charge could break through the fortifications and the first few lines of the Turkish infantry, but soon the king's horse fell and the janissaries killed Wladislaw. Receiving word about the death of the crusader army's king, the fleeing Ottoman forces turned back to the fight. On the other side, the loss of their king led to the disorganization of the overstretched and exhausted troops. Hunyadi who just returned from the pursuit of the *sipahis* on the Turkish right flank was not able to prevent the spreading panic among the troops. Hunyadi failed to control the events and he had to flee from the battlefield with the remnants of his forces.¹⁸⁹

The histories of the battle have had different data about the losses of the belligerent forces. According to the most probable calculation, the Turks lost 30,000 soldiers and on the other side, half of the crusade army did not return to Hungary.¹⁹⁰ The political consequences however were more serious. As the Ottomans ensured their

¹⁸⁷Thúry, *Török Történetírók*, 60.

¹⁸⁸Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 110.

¹⁸⁹Ibid.

¹⁹⁰Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/754.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

domination on the Balkan Peninsula, this diminished the crusaders' opportunity to free Constantinople in the near future. Constantinople stood up to Ottoman attack for nine more years.

The historians have developed numerous critiques about the whole campaign and especially about Hunyadi's activities before and during the battle of Varna. Many of these critics came from those nobles who did not dare to participate in the fight. The decision to launch the campaign was a logical outcome of the future events and Hunyadi's previous actions. The previous campaigns proved that the army had a competent commander in Hunyadi. He proved that the Ottomans were not invincible and after the Long Campaign, their strength weakened on the Balkan Peninsula. Additionally, the blockade of the Papal fleet along the Dardanelles ensured that Murad could not reinforce his Rumelian forces from Anatolia. The Greek, Byzantine, and Albanian promises of additional forces, gave Wladislaw and his military advisors the belief that they could put an end to the Ottoman dominance in south-eastern Europe. In the end, none of these conditions came true, but Hunyadi almost led the crusader army to victory. With an additional 20-30,000 soldiers, the Sultan could not defeat Hunyadi on the same battlefield.

The moral side of the decision, about launching the campaign, called for another interesting analysis. Backing out from an oath, when destinies of nations were at stake, was not a question of morality. The changing circumstances determined the decision. But one could question the morality of those religious officials (such as Cardinal Caesarini) who influenced King Wladislaw to back out of his oath and additionally absolved him of his commitments. There were also several nobles in Hungary to blame. Many did not

participate in any of the campaigns against the Ottomans and did not contribute to eliminate Hungary's internal struggles either. However they immediately criticized Hunyadi after the defeat.

In a tactical sense, Hunyadi performed outstandingly in the Battle of Varna where the force ratio was one to four, in the enemy's advantage. Following the Italian pattern, he analyzed the terrain soundly and understood the enemy commander's intent as well. He deployed the available forces according to this analysis. The chronicles do not mention the role of the artillery during the fight, only during the preparation. According to the Greek chronicler Callimachus, Hunyadi placed some guns outside the wagon fortress, in order to attack by fire the avenue of approaches at the right flank.¹⁹¹ Until Wladislaws's individual charge, Hunyadi continuously redeployed the forces to balance the emerging Ottoman advantages on the flanks. Based on the available sources, Hunyadi acted according to the expectations. The events which led to disaster were not his fault in any way.

The Battle of Rigómező (Kosovo Polje) 1448

Hunyadi did not give up after Varna, but he had to wait four years to be able to turn all of his focus on the Ottoman threat again. He sought conditions which favored the initiation of another significant campaign to fight beyond the borders of Hungary.

After the battle of Varna the Hungarian ruling class and the Diet had to find a successor to Wladislaw. To avoid the civil war that occurred after the death of King Albert of Hungary in 1439, both parties agreed to bring the child László V (Ladislaus V)

¹⁹¹Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VI/3., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/754.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

back to Hungary from the court of Frederick of Habsburg. Frederick did not accept the determined conditions and refused to release the child. Therefore, in order to maintain law and order in the various regions of the country, the responsibility fell to the seven appointed captains.¹⁹² Hunyadi was among these seven captains. This was due to his increasing influence and power. Two years later, on 5 June 1446, the Diet elected him as the regent of Hungary. Despite tasks to control the internal struggles and the external threats of the realm, he also had to run the economic system of Hungary as well. During his regency, he attempted to support the lesser nobles and organize them as counterweights of the barons. This made him popular among the lower classes. He brought reforms to the salt and mining monopolies also, which provided more income to the national treasury.¹⁹³ Before he could prepare for his primary mission, to expel the Turks from the Balkan Peninsula, he had to lead forces to Wallachia, Moldavia, Croatia, and into Habsburg territory to extend and solidify his political interests.¹⁹⁴

Hunyadi decided in 1448 to lead another campaign against Sultan Murad II, who was busy fighting against Skanderbeg in Albania. He saw the opportunity to unite his efforts with Skanderbeg and together with these forces they could defeat the Sultan in Europe. Unfortunately, Branković the Serbian Despot informed Murad about the purpose of the Hungarian preparations and he initiated countermeasures.¹⁹⁵ There were

¹⁹²Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 103, 106.

¹⁹³Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 121-122.

¹⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 118, 122, 123, 125. In 1447, Hunyadi defeated and beheaded Vlad Dracul in Transylvania. Author's comment: Vlad Dracul was the father of Vlad the Impaler, who was identified as the historical Dracula.

¹⁹⁵Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 80.

assumptions that Count Ulrich Cillei, Hunyadi's greatest opponent, provided information to the Sultan as well.¹⁹⁶

As Hunyadi planned for an offensive operation, the theatre of the campaign was outside the boundaries of the country, so he could not mobilize all the nobles for the cause. Despite the restraints and the losses of the previous year's battles, Hunyadi gathered 24,000 soldiers, including 8,000 men provided by the new Wallachian Voivode.¹⁹⁷ The army gathered in a camp in the vicinity of Keve (Kovin, Serbia) in July and August, east of Belgrade. Hunyadi joined the troops in the beginning of September, when he received the Pope's response for his request for support.¹⁹⁸ Hunyadi did not get what he expected. Pope Nicolas V instead of sending financial or physical support, advised Hunyadi to postpone the "hastily" organized campaign and wait one more year.¹⁹⁹ But Hunyadi did not intend to quit and he forwarded his concerns to the Pope.

We [The Hungarian nation] awaited your holiness with hope to take the chair of Pope Eugene and double the zeal of his achievements in humiliating the enemies of Christendom...I [Hunyadi] would gladly accept the advice of my patron and comply the demand of the head of the Christianity; but the enormous preparation of the Turks do not let me do so...Your [Pope Nicolas V] warning got to me late; the decision about war was made, the army gathered and moved toward its destination...and there is the big question: is the army going to gather next year, and if does, will it have the same enthusiasm than it has now?...we [Christianity] have to endeavor to humiliate the enemy by force and continue the war until we

¹⁹⁶Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VIII/4., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/774.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

¹⁹⁷Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 79.

¹⁹⁸Pál Engel, "Hunyadi János Kormányzó Itineráriuma (1446-1452)" [The itinerary of Regent John Hunyadi (1446-52)], *Századok* [Centuries] 118, no. 5 (1984): 983, 988.

¹⁹⁹Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VIII/5.a., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/777.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

bring it to its heels. But it [enemy, Turks] is enormous and one nation is too weak to defeat it on its own, and to pay the costs of the adequate army for that. This is the cause of the Christianity and not that of the Hungarian nation's only.²⁰⁰

In his letters Hunyadi also expressed his hope that the Pope could find a solution to support the cause in some way. The army crossed the Danube on 28 September.

Thanks to Hunyadi's efforts to control the money of the treasury, he equipped the troops with mounted and towed artillery. Before the main body moved, he ordered the artillery and the war wagons to prepare to support of the river crossing.²⁰¹ This preparation demonstrated a good understanding and adaptation of the Hussite tactics, where the wagons had a role in the offensive maneuvers as well.

On receiving word about the Hungarian plan and who the commander was, Sultan Murad broke off the siege of Kroja (Krujë, Albania), which was the main fortress of Skanderbeg. The Sultan directed his forces to the north, against his main enemy. At the same time, the Murad ordered all his remaining forces in Rumelia to gather in Sofia and move westward.²⁰²

When Hunyadi arrived to Rigómező (Kosovo Polje, Kosovo) he did not have information about the Turkish forces approaching toward him from the south and from the east. He decided to set up a fortified camp in the vicinity of Pristina (Pristina, Kosovo) and wait for the arrival of Skanderbeg's reinforcing troops.²⁰³ But instead of

²⁰⁰Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 75, 78. Translated by the author, based on the Hungarian translation of the original letters of Hunyadi, dated on 8 and 17 September 1448.

²⁰¹Elekes, "Hunyadi Hadserege," 116.

²⁰²Thúry, *Török Történetírók*, 62.

²⁰³Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 132.

Skanderbeg, the already united Turkish army arrived to Rigómező. The chroniclers recorded different data about the size of Murad's army, which numbers varied from 60,000 to 200,000.²⁰⁴ Some sources mentioned 6:1 force-ratio for Turkish advantage, which was probably the closest assumption.²⁰⁵

Hunyadi set up his forces around the fortified wagon fortress on the hill and expected Murad to initiate the fight. In the meantime, the Sultan conducted deception operations to force Hunyadi to attack. This hesitation clearly depicted that the belligerent commanders respected each other's skills. The Turks conducted a faint withdrawal and began to devastate the populated areas nearby the battlefield to emphasize their intent to leave. Finally, after a few days of waiting, Hunyadi could not stay in a defensive position any longer and initiated the attack. He placed heavy cavalry troops in his center and on the flanks, reinforced by light cavalry. Hunyadi remained with the reserve in the second line.²⁰⁶ In the rear he set up the war wagon and he placed his artillery and the few infantry in the gaps to be able to support the maneuver of the flanks.

The Hungarian light cavalry attacked the Ottoman left flank and reinforced by heavy cavalry, they pushed the enemy back. But as they got closer to the enemy center line, the Turkish artillery effectively engaged them with coordinated and accurate fire. That surprised the Hungarian force, because the Ottomans did not use artillery in open

²⁰⁴Ibid., 234.

²⁰⁵Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VIII/5.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/779.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

²⁰⁶Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 86.

battlefield in this way before.²⁰⁷ The Rumelian *sipahis* exploited the success of their artillery and now they pushed back the Hungarians' right flank, but Hunyadi's cavalry from the reserve blocked their further sweep. The advantage changed sides a couple of times. The end of the day did not bring a clear outcome for the battle. During the night, Hunyadi led an attack against the Ottoman camp, but Murad quickly mobilized the *janissaries* who repulsed the charge with artillery support.²⁰⁸

The next morning Hunyadi ordered his left flank to attack the Anatolian cavalry on the Turkish right. The flank could not hold against the heavier Hungarian cavalry, so the Turks began to retrograde. In the meantime, Hunyadi led a concentrated charge with the center heavy troops, reinforced with the reserve. After initial success, the *janissaries* reorganized their lines and held. At this point Murad sent fresh *sipahi* troops to envelop the Hungarian left wing. Being involved in the fights with the Turkish army's center, Hunyadi was not able to get a picture about the events on his left and rear. He could not act to reorganize his troops. Hunyadi's army soon lost the momentum and the Sultan easily outran the isolated small Hungarian groups.²⁰⁹

The battle was over with a horrific outcome. Hunyadi lost 17,000 soldiers and he barely survived. Additionally, on his way back to Hungary he went into Branković's custody in Serbia and the Hungarian Diet had to pay a ransom for him. The Turkish also suffered heavy casualties, which were close to 30,000. Probably this was the reason that

²⁰⁷Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VIII/5.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/779.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

²⁰⁸Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.VIII/5.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/779.html> (accessed 31 October 2011)

²⁰⁹Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 133.

the Sultan did not order his troops to pursue the remains of the Hungarian army and this prevented its total annihilation.²¹⁰

The defeat in the Battle of Rigómező had significant consequences in both Hunyadi's political status and within the internal stability of Hungary. Although he remained the regent of the country, the battle cost him many of his noble supporters. His opponents immediately exploited this weakness. The loss of his influence had an effect on the country's military potential as well, because Hunyadi was not able to gather and organize the necessary force for another large scale offensive campaign in the Balkan Peninsula against.²¹¹

Hunyadi's decision to continue the war against the Turks was appropriate at the strategic level. He understood that the best interest of the country and the population along the southern border was to bring the war to the enemy's territory. During the respective era of King Sigismund and King Albert, Hunyadi experienced how the villagers were vulnerable during the defensive fights of the realm. Strategically, he made a mistake by putting too much emphasis on the expected support of the allies and coalition partners, who consistently disappointed him. There was no difference during the Battle of Rigómező either, where the Pope let Hunyadi down.

From an operational perspective Hunyadi correctly identified the opportunity to attack the Ottomans. The Turks focused their attention and resources on the fight against the Albanians. The fact that the Sultan personally led the campaign gave him the chance

²¹⁰Bánlaki, 10.VIII/5.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/779.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

²¹¹Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 135.

to kill or capture the head of the Ottoman Empire at the same time. The mistake he made was that he gave up the fortified defensive position and attacked on a battlefield where the Hungarian army's flank could not shoulder significant natural obstacles. It is possible that Murad's actions to disturb his line of communication prevented Hunyadi from supplying his forces for a long period. Perhaps this was the reason, why he did not send scouts to clarify the location and the intent of Skanderbeg and his reinforcing troops. On the other hand, Hunyadi always fought his battles at a significant numerical disadvantage, so his self-confidence was a determining factor in his decision to accept the fight.

Tactically, his decision to involve himself in the fights on the second day made him unable to act as the commander of the army and take preventive measures against the envelopment on his left flank. Actually, he always took his part in the fight, through which he earned a reputation among his soldiers and subordinate commanders. Hunyadi, like great warrior kings like Alexander the Great or Leonidas acted in the same way. Unfortunately in the Battle of Rigómező he went too far and probably put too much confidence on his commander on the left wing. In tactical terms, he expected the Rumelian and Anatolian *akinji* and *sipahi* units to flee by the sight of the Hungarian heavy cavalry. However, the Sultan made preventive steps by placing obstacles behind his light cavalry troops.²¹² Hunyadi's analysis was correct, because on the first day the Ottoman cavalry tried to withdraw, but he did not expect Sultan Murad to apply the lessons that he learned in Varna.

²¹²Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 133.

Although the defeat at Rigómező curtailed Hunyadi's strength and the influence in Hungary and in the Balkans, he recovered and played a significant role in the future to maintain security against the rising power of the Ottoman Empire.

CHAPTER 6

THE DEFENDER OF CHRISTENDOM

The years following the Battle of Rigómező brought significant changes both in Hungary and in the Turkish Empire. In 1451 Mehmed II became the successor to Sultan Murad II. The Christian powers handled him as an inexperienced young emperor, who could not follow or extend his father's achievements.²¹³ They were mistaken in their judgments, because Sultan Mehmed II captured Constantinople on 29 May 1453, and put an end to the more than a thousand year old Byzantine Empire.²¹⁴ In February of the same year, the Hungarian nobility took back László V from the court of Frederick of Habsburg. László became the next King of Hungary. Hunyadi was not a regent any more, but had control of the armed forces. Being responsible for the security of the kingdom, he made efforts to strengthen the border fortress system and maintain alliances with Albania and Macedonia in the Balkans. These steps provided an early warning system for Hungary. The expansion of Sultan Mehmed's power did not slip Hunyadi's notice. In 1454, he defeated a smaller army of Mehmed in vicinity of Kruševac in Serbia and this victory prevented the Sultan from capturing the fortress of Szendrő (Smederevo, Serbia).²¹⁵ This feat of arms proved that Hunyadi was still a determining element in the Hungarian realm. Mehmed learned that without the elimination of significant elements of the Hungarian border fortress system, such as Szendrő, Galambóc (Golubac, Serbia) and

²¹³Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 93, 95.

²¹⁴Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 147.

²¹⁵Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.X/2., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/792.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

Nándorfehérvár, he could not cement his domination in the Balkans and set conditions for further expansions.²¹⁶

The Battle of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade)

In the beginning of the year 1456, Sultan Mehmed II began the preparation for a large scale campaign against Hungary. According to one of his *beys*, the Sultan stated that Nándorfehérvár was the key to the conquest of Hungary.²¹⁷ Although the Hungarians did not know the objective of the Sultan's campaign, they were aware of the threat. László V called upon the Diet to meet in January in Buda. However the king showed up in February. It took until April for the nobles, in the Diet, to meet again and vote. This manner characterized the approach of the nobility and depicted the weakness of the young king as well. Finally, László ordered the general levy but as usual, only a few from the higher nobility were willing to respond to the order. Certainly, Hunyadi was among them.²¹⁸ László V ordered the general levy to defend the country on the soil of the realm, but the king, influenced by Count Cillei, was incapable of imposing his will on the nobility.

Cardinal Carvajal, the delegate of Pope Callixtus III, forwarded the urgent request of the Diet for support from Rome. At the same time, he ordered John of Capistarno (a Franciscan monk) to start recruiting a crusader army from the peasants and the

²¹⁶Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 151.

²¹⁷Thúry, *Török Történetírók*, 77.

²¹⁸Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 156.

citizens.²¹⁹ Pope Callixtus III became the new head of the church after the death of Pope Nicolas V in 1455. He also realized the importance of the cohesion against the raising Ottoman threat. He also urged a crusade, but he could not get more than verbal support from the Western European Christian nations.²²⁰ Thus, the task to stop the invading army of Sultan Mehmed remained for Hungary alone. The unexpected cowardly behavior of King László V further aggravated the situation. By receiving word about the approach of the Turkish army, the king, escorted by Count Cillei, escaped from Hungary to go to Vienna to participate in a hunt.²²¹

As usual, Hunyadi took the responsibility for coordinating and controlling the defensive operations along the southern borders of Hungary. In May Hunyadi left 7,000 of his soldiers in Nándorfehérvár to strengthen its defensive capabilities. The captain of the fortress was Mihály (Michael) Szilágyi, his brother in law. The second in command was his elder son László Hunyadi.²²² To buy time for John of Capistrano to recruit as many troops as it was possible, Hunyadi crossed the Danube with a small contingent in the middle of June to delay the Turkish army's advance guard.²²³ His retrograde

²¹⁹Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.X/4.a., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/797.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

²²⁰Vécsey, *Hunyadi*, 189, and 191.

²²¹József Held, "Nándorfehérvár (Belgrád) védeleme 1456-ban (Ellentétes nézetek vitája)" [The defense of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade) in 1456 (Discussion, based on opposing views)], *Történelmi szemle* [Historical Review] 26, no. 1 (1983): 93-94.

²²²Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.X/4.a., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/797.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

²²³Bánlaki, 10.X/4.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/799.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

operation ensured the safe arrival of Capistrano's crusader force in early July, which consisted of volunteers from Bohemia, Moravia, and Poland, in addition to the Hungarian troops.²²⁴

One of the most important strengths of the Nándorfehérvár was its location. On two sides of its high walls flanked the Danube and the Sava Rivers. It sat in the confluence of these rivers.²²⁵

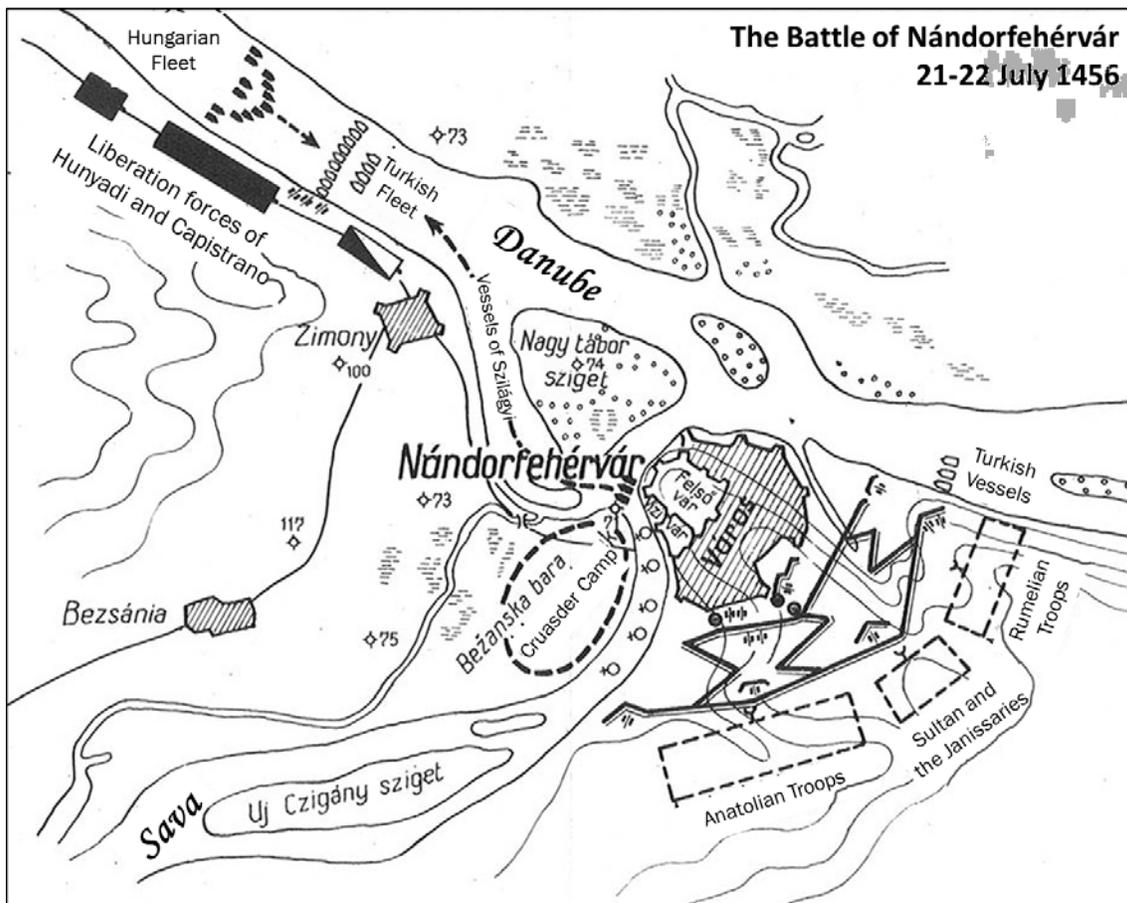


Figure 8. The Battle of Nándorfehérvár

Source: Created by the author using József Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*,

²²⁴Thuróczi, *Chronica Hungarorum*, 415.

²²⁵Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 159.

10.VI/4.b. App. X/9., http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/images/banlaky-big_hadtortpic_1009.jpg (accessed 31 October 2011).

Sultan Mehmed II therefore developed a significant fleet to attack the stronghold from the rivers. This was to prevent the Hungarian attempts to reinforce the defenders from the land. The fleet consisted of 200 vessels and galleys which transported a significant portion of the siege guns and cannons.²²⁶ Mehmed ordered his subordinates to establish foundries in Serbia for canon manufacture, using the bells from Constantinople as base material.²²⁷ Approximately 300 guns and cannons were to support the army of 80,000-100,000.²²⁸ To seal Nándorfehérvár, the sultan ordered his fleet to tie the vessels together with heavy chains and block the Danube north and east of the fortress. To complete the circle Mehmed deployed the ground forces in siege formation southeast of the stronghold and immediately began the bombardment of the walls.²²⁹

The Sultan's tactical decisions did not surprise Hunyadi. He also analyzed the battlefield and the enemy's possible courses of actions. Therefore in the preparation phase he ordered Szilágyi, the commander of Nándorfehérvár, to summon all available civilian vessels from the area and upgrade them for combat.²³⁰ At the same time Hunyadi designated trainers from his *banderías* to prepare Capistrano's troops, which mainly

²²⁶Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 413-414.

²²⁷Bánlaci, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.X/4.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/799.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

²²⁸József Held, "Nándorfehérvár (Belgrád) védeleme 1456-ban," 88. According to the chronicles, the data about the size of the Ottoman army at Nándorfehérvár varied between 80,000 and 400,000, but the new researches support lower numbers.

²²⁹Bánlaci, 10.X/4.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/799.html> (accessed October 31, 2001).

²³⁰*Ibid.*

consisted of peasants, who had no military background. Beside Hunyadi's 15,000 private forces he had to rely on the inexperienced 20,000-30,000 crusaders, which troops however proved their worth during the battle.²³¹

On 13 July 1456, Hunyadi was ready to launch his liberation attack by the call of the fortress commander. The Hungarian fleet and the rest of the army, which was outside the stronghold, assembled about thirty kilometers north of Nándorfehérvár. The battle started with the attack of the Hungarian vessels, which broke the line of the tied Turkish fleet. Simultaneously the fortress commander ordered his vessels to attack the rear of the Ottoman fleet. These river units which were anchored on the Sava River west of Nándorfehérvár were out of the sultan's control. Hunyadi attached artillery units to the crusader forces, so they provided fire support for the Hungarian vessels, which led to the defeat of the Ottoman river armada. To prevent the Mehmed from intervening, Hunyadi deployed his own troops in the vicinity of Zimony (Zemun, Serbia.) When the Sultan received word about the Hungarian victory, he ordered his fleet commander to set the remaining vessels on fire to avoid their acquisition by the enemy. The coordination between the Hungarian fleet and the artillery on the ground underpinned Hunyadi's ability in combining arms and in their coordination.²³²

With the defeat of the Ottoman fleet, the Hungarians had control of the Danube which provided freedom of movement between the stronghold and rear areas. Hunyadi joined Sziálgyi and took the trained troops within, to increase the defense capability of

²³¹Veszprémi and Király, *A Millenium of Hungarian Military History*, 62.

²³²Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.X/4.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/799.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

the fortress. The less trained and disciplined recruits were more willing to take orders from their religious leaders, so Hunyadi ordered them to set up their camp in front of the Turkish left flank on the near side of the Sava.²³³

The Sultan continued the siege of the fortress with his ground forces. The defenders had to fight during daytime and rebuilt the ruins at night. This effort made it possible to maintain the fortress' defensive capability. Hunyadi fought a defensive fight, because he lacked enough trained cavalry forces, which would have attacked the Ottoman forces at the open areas. After almost ten days of unsuccessful sieges, on 21 July the Sultan ordered an all-out attack on the fortress led by the *janissaries*. By the night so many attackers assembled around the main gate that they filled the moat around the wall. The defenders used almost everything flammable to throw on the attackers. The unexpected casualty rate by the fire created chaos among the Ottoman forces and the defenders massacred those who were stuck inside the fortress.²³⁴ The next morning (22 July 1456) despite Hunyadi's order, the crusaders initiated a small scale attack and soon, Capistrano lost control of his troops. Seeing their peers fighting, more and more crusaders streamed out of their camp. To support the crusaders, Hunyadi rode out of the stronghold and entered into the hand to hand fighting. The Sultan sent 6,000 *sipahis* into the combat, but these fresh troops could not sway the fight. While the Christian army could transport fresh manpower to the battlefield from the crusader camp, Mehmed's army was exhausted from the previous night's unsuccessful attack. Soon, the Sultan

²³³Bánlaki, *A Magyar Nemzet Hadtörténelme*, 10.X/4.b., <http://mek.oszk.hu/09400/09477/html/0010/799.html> (accessed 31 October 2011).

²³⁴Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 162.

became wounded and the Ottoman forces began to withdraw. During the night Mehmed ordered a general retreat.²³⁵

The battle was over and ended with a Hungarian victory, which started with the undisciplined act of the crusaders, but Hunyadi was able to take control and turn the events into a victory. After the Ottoman retreat, he did not risk pursuing the enemy and exposing his troops to a possible deception. With this victory the Pope and Christian powers could heave a sigh of relief that the conqueror of Constantinople could not place an Ottoman stronghold at the gates of Western Europe.

Conclusion

The Hungarian victory at Nándorfehérvár brought the possibility of a new attempt to expel the Ottomans out of the Balkan Peninsula and free its populations from the more than hundred years of enslavement. Hunyadi proved again that under his strong leadership, the Hungarians could prevent the Ottoman expansion. However, without external support, one nation was not strong enough to complete the desired liberation of Southeastern Europe. In 22 July 1456, he brought back the hope that Christianity lost with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Unfortunately, the future events did not follow suit. Less than one month after the victorious battle, on 11 August 1456, a plague broke out in the vicinity of the battlefield and killed Hunyadi. A disease did what no man could. With his death, Hungary, Europe and the Christianity lost a significant warrior of the common cause.

²³⁵Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 163.

During the last two decades of his life, Hunyadi's acts determined the fate of a great portion of the Balkans. His achievements prevented the Ottoman Empire from expanding its territory toward Western Europe. Through his father's example, he understood that he could rely only on himself. He realized that without outstanding personal achievements, he could not reach too far. Being a member of King Sigismund's retinue, Hunyadi had a chance to prove his valor and military skills for his sovereign. By his performance, Sigismund selected him as a member of a force which represented his interests in Italy. This selection brought Hunyadi to a place where he was able to expand his view about tactics and force development. The different approaches of the *condottieres* to fight the wars between the Italian states, created a forge of warfare, which became the best learning environment of the era.

This two year period in Italy gave Hunyadi a chance to understand the art of war and allowed him to break out from the stereotypes of the feudal Hungarian approach to war. Hunyadi was aware of the unreliable willingness of the nobility in providing manpower for armed conflicts. In Italy he learned to respect the importance of the mercenary forces. He also realized that maintaining such a significant force required a solid financial background. The key to wealth was the possession of estates and Hunyadi understood that dynamic. He exploited the kings' constant struggle with the emptiness of their treasuries, so he continuously asked for lands in return of his loans or the salary of his troops.

In Italy, Hunyadi learned the importance of reserve forces and the combination of the available arms in the battles. This knowledge became more effective when he could study a new application of artillery and firearms in the Hussite Wars. Unlike the military

leaders of other nations, who also suffered significant losses to break the resistance of the Hussite wagon fortresses, Hunyadi led Hungary to learn the lessons and adapt some elements of the new warfare. The offensive application of the war wagons proved its worth during his campaign in 1442 and in the future. The wagon fortress became an organic element of his armies. The use of war wagons was not Hunyadi's invention, but he used them first in Hungary as mobile fortresses equipped with artillery and with upgraded protection. His son, Mátyás Hunyadi (Matthias Corvinus), the future King of Hungary still used the wagon fortress as an organic element of his dreadful Black Army.²³⁶

The Hussite Wars provided another instructive lesson about the worth of the population. If they fought for a common goal or for their own interest, they were a potent asset. Hunyadi realized it and possibly this influence caused him to treat his serfs differently from the average noble. They received no exemption from paying taxes or providing extra labor for Hunyadi and his *familiaris*, but they received fair treatment by their lords and they could practice their rights in front of the courts. Hunyadi, therefore, earned the respect of these people and he dared to arm them without any fear. Hunyadi was one of the few nobles whose serfs never turned against their lord. Hunyadi could harvest the benefits of this approach during his campaigns in 1442, 1443, and especially in the Battle of Nándorfehérvár.

His strategic approach was also different from those which determined the fights of medieval Hungary. After the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396, Hunyadi was the only one who chose to fight on the enemy's territory. He realized the importance not to expose his

²³⁶Bak and Király, *From Hunyadi to Rákóczi*, 140.

country's territory to the horrific effects of war. This approach provided better security for the population. The southern border defense system proved its vulnerability during the Sigismund and the Albert era. It could not prevent the border regions from the smaller scale Ottoman raids and looting campaigns. He highlighted this opinion in one of his letters to Pope Nicolas V, before the Battle of Rigómező in 1448. "The fighting force is more effective if used in offensively, and the victory favors those who seek the enemy on its own territory."²³⁷ On the other hand he knew that the offensive strategy provided resources and financial compensation which the army could acquire during the campaign from other nations. In defensive operations the army had to consume the resources of its own country.

Based on his experiences and the lessons he learned on the different battlefields of Europe, Hunyadi developed his capability to understand war from the tactical to strategic levels. Unlike the majority of the lords and higher nobles, Hunyadi used this talent on behalf of his country. Certainly when he defended the districts of the southern border of Hungary, he protected his own estates as well. He probably also had financial interests when he planned his campaigns, but his main motivation was to expel the Ottomans from the Balkan Peninsula. Unfortunately, his campaigns could never accomplish the desired end state because of the lack of manpower. This was a consequence of two factors. The first and most sorrowful was the fact that the majority of the Hungarian nobility was unwilling to fight outside the country or in their homeland. The other factor was the negligence of those western countries and powers, which ensured Hungary about their

²³⁷Teleki, *Hunyadiak Kora Magyarországon*, 76. The citation was translated by the author, based on the Hungarian translation of the original letters of Hunyadi, dated on 8 September 1448.

overall support for almost every upcoming campaign. Hunyadi always believed them and relied on their soldiers. However, each time Hunyadi requested support, they had excuses, as to why they could not contribute. The only time when the Italian states and the Prince of Burgundy sent a fleet to the Hellespont was in 1444, but in this case they failed, or they did not want to intervene to prevent Sultan Murad II from crossing the straits at the Hellespont. As Hunyadi stated in his letter to Pope Callixtus III, the Ottoman threat was to all of Christendom, not just Hungary. Perhaps the other nations remembered their defeat at Nicopolis and wanted to stay away from a powerful enemy.

Without significant external support Hungary remained the eastern bastion of Christendom.²³⁸ Certainly, if Hungary was the bastion, then János Hunyadi was the defender of Christendom. Pope Callixtus III confirmed this in a requiem held in St. Peter's Basilica, where he posthumously bestowed on him the title *Christianae fidei defensor*.²³⁹

After Hunyadi's death his sons continued their father's accomplishments. László Hunyadi took over the responsibilities first, but in the following year King László V ordered his execution with the charge of Count Cillei's murder.²⁴⁰ After the king's death,

²³⁸Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1987), 10.

²³⁹Sisa Stephen, "The Spirit of Hungary: János Hunyadi: The Defender of Christendom," Corvinus Library, <http://www.hungarianhistory.com/lib/hunspir/hsp16.htm> (accessed 31 October 2011), 55.

²⁴⁰Held, *Hunyadi: Legend and Reality*, 172. László Hunyadi intercepted a letter of Cillei in which he ensured Branković about the murder of the two Hunyadi sons. King László made his oath that he would not harm László Hunyadi, but Count Garai (the other major opponent of János Hunyadi) convinced the king to behead the elder son of Hunyadi.

the nobility crowned the younger son, Mátyás Hunyadi as King of Hungary. Walking along his father's footsteps, he further strengthened Hungary's position in Europe until his death in 1490.

The role of Hungary and János Hunyadi was inappreciable in preventing the Ottoman Empire in its expansive efforts into the Balkan Peninsula. He sacrificed his life for this cause and his son continued the fight despite the constant numerical superiority of the enemy. Despite their importance, the Hungarian achievements did not get an illustrious place in western chronicles. Historians often ask the questions that what would have happened if the Athenians did not stop the Persian Army at Marathon or what would have happened if the Spartans did not delay Xerxes at Thermopylae. They should also ask what would have happened if the Hungarian armies did not attrite the Turkish armies for more than a century and prevent the Ottoman Empire from expanding its borders into Western Europe. And if they do so, they have to find an illustrious place for János Hunyadi as well, who created the conditions and the will to fight these battles and led a nation to success against the era's most powerful empire for decades.

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