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Contarini, Giovanni Pietro. *From Cyprus to Lepanto*. Trans. Kiril Petkov. New York, NY: Italica Press, 2019. ISBN-13: 978-1599103815. Xxvi+162pp. 3 b/w images. \$35.00 (Hardcover); \$17.00 (Paperback); \$9.99 (Kindle).

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The armadas of the Holy League and the Ottoman Empire fought an epic battle in the Gulf of Lepanto on 7 October 1571, involving over 450 warships with at least 150,000 crew members—representing one of the largest naval battles in world history. This dramatic naval engagement during the Ottoman-Venetian War of 1570-1573 is often interpreted as an important Christian victory that slowed the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean.

This book provides an English translation of the first edition of Giovanni Pietro Contarini's *History of the Events, Which Occurred from the Beginning of the War Brought against the Venetians by Selim the Ottoman, to the Day of the Great and Victorious Battle against the Turks*, which was written in Italian and published in Venice in 1572. Contarini dedicated his work to Giovanni Grimani (1506-1593), Patriarch of Aquileia, and provides a Venetian perspective on the Ottoman-Venetian War and the Lepanto campaign. The book was widely disseminated and seems to have been very successful, since it was reprinted twice and then translated into Latin and German. Petkov explores the hybrid nature of the text, which borrows from other contemporary accounts of the sieges of Nicosia and Famagusta and the battle of Lepanto (xviii-xix). Petkov refers to Contarini's *History of the Events* as "a 'chronohistory,' a carefully compiled factual narrative governed by a distinct philosophical agenda" (xxi).

Contarini claims that it was his "duty to put to scrutiny all that happened so that it is better understood, and to account for the war's cause and origins" (7). Contarini blames Sultan Selim II, who had just ascended to the throne following the unexpected death of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1566, for starting the war and argues that it was entirely "unjust" (7). Contarini contrasts Selim II with his father Suleiman, who was "feared, revered, and loved by everyone for his valor and prudence" (7). Following this brief discussion of the origins of the war, the *History of the Events* provides a narrative of the preparations of fleets, Ottoman conquest of Cyprus, and the battle of Lepanto.

Contarini describes the Ottoman expeditionary force's amphibious landings on Cyprus in 1570 and its military campaign to conquer the island. He offers a detailed account of the siege of Nicosia, relating the Ottoman forces' encirclement, construction of forts, approach trenches, and bombardment of the city's bastions. After receiving reinforcements, the besieging Ottoman army

launched an assault, breaking through the city's final defenses and engaging in "a most cruel slaughtering of the poor defenders, soldiers and nobles, who fought back courageously" (36).

The *History of the Events* discusses the negotiation of the Holy League alliance between the Papal States, Spain, Venice, and other Catholic states in May 1571. The Holy League organized its fleet under the command of Don Juan of Austria, brother of King Philip II of Spain. Meanwhile, the Ottomans deployed additional forces to besiege Famagusta and complete the conquest of Cyprus. Contarini provides a detailed narrative of the siege of Famagusta, essentially a verbatim copy of Nestor Martinengo's account of the siege. After sustaining bombardment and an assault, the Christian garrison of Famagusta capitulated. Martinengo's description of the fall of Famagusta stresses the cruel executions of 300 defenders.

Contarini then amplifies this bloody account in describing how Christians reacted to the news of the fall of Famagusta: "Assailed from all sides, Christendom was thrown in terror and confusion, hearing every hour of the carnage and destruction that the cruel beast, thirsty for human blood, wrought on the faithful, of the continuing advance of the savage enemy of Christ, who deployed every method and trick to scourge and destroy the Venetian Republic" (81). The text frequently portrays the Ottomans as cruel enemies of God. The Ottoman military commanders and soldiers are described as brutal at the sieges of Nicosia and Famagusta. Ottoman forces at Lepanto are depicted as having "orgies and celebrations" the night before the battle (113). Yet, the admirals and naval commanders are described as wise and brave.

The *History of the Events* describes the organization of the Holy League and Ottoman fleets that would meet in the Gulf of Lepanto (present-day Gulf of Patras), listing all the warships and their commanders. Contarini narrates the movements of the opposing fleets and their attempts to discover their enemies during the course of the naval campaign. As both fleets converge on the Gulf of Lepanto, the action moves to the fleets' final preparations and their war councils. Contarini recounts the debate in the Ottoman council of war, as Hassan Pasha gives a dramatic speech advocating sailing out to find and destroy the Christian fleet. Mehmet Bey councils caution, suggesting the Ottoman fleet wait in their protected harbors for the Christian armada to disperse. In the end the "impatient" Ottoman admirals "resolved unanimously to go out and seek the Christian armada and engage it in battle" (104).

As with so many other critical twists and turns of Contarini's narrative, however, this decision is not really up to the Ottoman admirals. Contarini stresses that "it was the will of the divine Majesty to initiate the destruction of these people" (104). Throughout the *History of the Events*, the Hand of God moves humans to act. This is a Providential history that portrays God's direct agency in human events. As the Ottoman and Christian fleets sail toward each other on 6 October 1571, God keeps them from sighting each other until they are close together (113-114). As the Christian fleet advances, God "miraculously worked the sea" to calm the swells, giving the Christians a crucial advantage (119).

The battle of Lepanto opened as the Christian vanguard of six galleasses opened fire with artillery barrages against the center of the Ottoman fleet, causing enormous damage. Contarini exclaims: "our men could now see the terrible mess of masts and yardarms, galleys split in the middle, many

sinking to the bottom, others burning, still others immobilized having lost their tack, capsized, and an infinite number of men floating in the water” (120).

After this initial devastating bombardment, the fleets closed and engaged in intense firefights using arquebus shots, arrow volleys, and incendiaries. Eventually the galleys closed for boarding actions and ferocious mêlées. Contarini relates the dramatic clash as arquebusiers from Don Juan of Austria’s flagship boarded the flagship of Ali Pasha, admiral of the Ottoman fleet, and seized it (123-124).

The Christian galleasses played a crucial role in the battle of Lepanto, according to Contarini: “it was an incredible thing that just six galleasses, not tested in naval warfare before, wreaked such destruction. They swerved continually, showing now starboard, now port, now prow, now stern, and unleashing such a continuous and terrible tempest of artillery fire” (120). Nonetheless, Contarini proclaims the providential nature of the victory in his dedication: “The holy victory is more of a powerful and miraculous mystery of Christ in favor of His Christians than a feat of human progress, even though the valor of so many illustrious men will be hallowed for eternity” (4).

Contarini’s narrative ends with the news of the great victory of the Holy League arriving in Venice: “All over the City nothing else was heard but the jubilating shouts of victory and the tolling of bells, and people were seen embracing each other spontaneously and displaying all other signs of joy, through which everyone praised the Creator for His excessive and most generous grace” (132). Contarini stresses Lepanto’s importance in terms of the size of naval forces and the number of combatants, but also stresses the “perfection” of the art of naval warfare (4). Contarini describes Lepanto as a “holy victory” that was brought about by the “valor stirred by overflowing Christian piety” (4).

Kiril Petkov’s English translation of Contarini’s *History of the Events* is readable and accessible, offering a fascinating account of the battle of Lepanto and a window into Mediterranean warfare. The translation is supported by useful footnotes and a glossary to explain Ottoman and Italian terms, such as *beylerbey*, *fanò*, *fusta*, *maona*, *mufti*, *sanjakkbey*, and *sultanini*. This scholarly apparatus enhances the accessibility of this translation, which was supported by a grant from the American Philosophical Society. The book could have been strengthened by an expanded critical introduction to situate Contarini’s work in historiographical and theoretical debates about religion, conflict, slavery, and empire in the Mediterranean World. A close reading of Contarini’s text suggests the complexities of coalition-building, naval maneuvers, and galley warfare in the early modern Mediterranean, problematizing the notion that Christian-Muslim conflict can be explained by a “Clash of Civilizations.” Petkov might have considered whether Contarini’s writings contributed to Orientalist depictions of the Ottoman Empire.

Contarini’s *History of the Events* presents an excellent example of early modern war news, which was communicated through oral accounts, *avvisi* (manuscript newsletters), and printed pamphlets. Petkov stresses that “Contarini used both the defeat of Cyprus and the triumph at Lepanto to paint an optimistic picture of Western ascendancy. Readers would turn to the story of Lepanto because it gave hope to the embattled Christian West, crushed so many times by the irresistible Ottomans”

(xxiv-xxv). This book could potentially serve as a course text for classes on Renaissance history, Mediterranean history, History of War, History of News, or History of the Book.

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