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A damn close-run thing

by [Daniel Johnson](#)

On Niccolo Capponi's *Victory of the West: The Story of the Battle of Lepanto*.

Niccolo Capponi

Victory of the West: The Story of the Battle of Lepanto.

Da Capo, 412 pages, \$27.50

“Lepanto” is a word that has only lost its symbolic power in the last generation. In our parish church in Kensington, there is a stained glass window that depicts the battle. As the church was bombed in the Blitz, this window dates only from the post-war period. There is nothing unusual about this. Lepanto is there to remind the faithful that their civilization is under constant threat, whether from the Ottomans or the Nazis, and must be defended by force of arms. Not for nothing is the church dedicated to Our Lady of Victories.

Yet this spirit of the crusade is a stranger to contemporary culture. Lepanto left its mark on literature from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries. But these works, which exulted in the triumph of Christianity over Islam, have been driven into obscurity by the institutionalized secularism and relativism of intellectual life.

They include G. K. Chesterton’s “Lepanto,” once his best-known and probably his best poem, which culminates in the image of Christian slaves on the Ottoman galleys breaking their fetters, rising up against their Muslim masters, and emerging from below decks to join in the battle. As Niccolò Capponi shows, Chesterton was not making this up: indeed, the Turkish commander was so worried about such a slave uprising that he promised the oarsmen their freedom if the battle was won—a freedom which, however, they chose to take for themselves rather than trust his promises.

Above all, there is Cervantes, an eyewitness and participant in the battle, who was seriously wounded by an arquebus shot. In later years, after he had been enslaved by corsairs, ransomed by monks, and achieved fame as the author of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes would show visitors his crippled left hand, saying: “For the glory of the right one.” Spain’s greatest son had no doubt about what was at stake at Lepanto.

It is, accordingly, with Cervantes that Capponi begins his grand narrative: “The most noble and memorable event that past centuries have seen,” he wrote proudly, adding pointedly “or future generations can ever hope to witness.”

But was Cervantes right? Was this the ultimate clash of civilizations? Two centuries after the event, Capponi tells us, Voltaire was so unimpressed by the consequences of the battle that he scoffed at Lepanto. Within a few years the Turks had rebuilt their navy and even recaptured Tunis, symbol of

the new Habsburg *reconquista* of Africa that Charles V had bequeathed to Philip II, but which ultimately came to nothing. It seemed to Voltaire that the Turks had been the real victors.

Fast forward another two centuries to the Second World War, and the perspective had reverted to that of Cervantes. Voltaire's compatriot, the historian Fernand Braudel, had no doubt about Lepanto's significance. It was, he thought, the end of an era, the last crusade. The threat to the whole of southern Europe and its way of life had been lifted; the battle marked a decisive shift in control of the "watery plains" of the Mediterranean. Thereafter, both Christian and Islamic civilizations turned to internal wars.

More recent historians have tended to confirm this judgment. Capponi is right to remind us that the Ottoman Empire continued to pose a threat to Europe for another century at least, until the second siege of Vienna in 1683. But modern academics lean towards Islamic civilizations, as if to compensate for the Christian bias of earlier generations. To take one example: the major exhibition at the Royal Academy in London about the Ottoman Empire a few years ago barely mentioned the horrific methods by which the sultans preserved and extended their rule. Hence a new mythology has begun to surround events such as Lepanto, overlaying the old one.

Even the name of the battle is dubious. It actually took place some forty nautical miles away from Lepanto. Capponi prefers to call it "the battle of the Curzolaris," after the archipelago off the Ionian coast where the galleys fought in waters so shallow that some fleeing Turks were able to wade ashore. Over the intervening centuries, all but one of the Curzolaris islands, Oxia, has vanished; Capponi tells us that it is still visible on the route of the Brindisi ferry to Greece.

Apart, perhaps, from this quibble about the battle's name, there is nothing tendentious about Capponi's interpretation of events. He tells the story straightforwardly and well, paying equal attention to both sides, as far as the paucity of the Ottoman sources allows. But Capponi's title—*Victory of the West*—is, he says, "chosen with provocation in mind." He does not spell out the lessons of Lepanto for our time, but they are implied nonetheless.

Sultan Selim II, "the Sallow," intended to transform the Mediterranean—the "White Sea," as Turks would have called it—into as much of a Muslim lake as the Black and Red Seas then were. To this end, he had assembled the largest navy the world had ever seen, broken the truce that his father Suleiman the Magnificent had preserved for many years, and resumed the jihad which shariah law defined, then as now, as the normal relationship between the House of Islam and the infidel House of War.

In 1570, Selim unleashed a terrifying onslaught on Cyprus, then the most important Christian outpost in the Eastern Mediterranean, and a Venetian stronghold. Unlike Malta, where the Knights of St. John had withstood such a siege five years before, the fortified ports of Cyprus fell one after the other, amid bloody scenes that sent shock waves throughout Christendom. Having captured the New Rome, Constantinople, in the previous century, the Ottoman caliphate seemed on the brink of replacing the Catholic papacy by seizing Rome itself.

Europe, then as now, was adamant that it would not pay new taxes to fund even a defensive war against Islamic theocracy. The West, then as now, was bitterly divided: between Catholic and Protestant, between Spanish Habsburg and French Valois, between those (such as the bellicose Venetians) who wanted an all-out crusade, and those—the great majority of Europeans—who preferred to appease the Turk rather than risk his unwelcome attentions.

The entire coastline of Europe, as far north as the Arctic, was prey to Muslim corsairs, and countless Christians languished as slaves, hoping (usually in vain) to be ransomed. Forced conversion or massacre was commonplace on both sides. The Turks had cultivated a reputation for atrocities as a matter of policy, to encourage Christians to surrender without a fight.

Having survived the literally murderous sibling rivalry that was standard practice at the Ottoman court, Selim the Sallow never doubted that it was his religious duty and dynastic destiny to complete the conquest of Christendom. Suleiman too had dedicated his long reign to the jihad, dying while campaigning in Hungary against the Emperor at the head of a vast host that menaced Austria and Germany.

As if by a miracle, the squabbling Europeans formed an ad hoc alliance to halt Selim's advance. This second Holy League, like its predecessor a generation before, was a coalition of the unwilling that held together only just long enough to serve its purpose. While it lasted, however, it mustered a fleet large enough to match the Ottomans at sea, under the capable leadership of Don John (Juan) of Austria, the Emperor Charles V's favorite bastard, behind whom stood his half-brother, Philip II of Spain. (Unlike the Ottomans, the Habsburgs did not routinely slaughter their siblings.)

Though Spain was the only superpower of the day, with a global empire that dwarfed all others, there were two other western powers that could and did challenge Habsburg supremacy: the Venetians and the papacy. These were the years when Venice stood at the zenith of its fortunes—a maritime republic which had captured the commerce and the imagination of the West. This was the Venice of Shylock, whose real-life contemporaries had created the archetype of all future financial capitals, from Manhattan to the City of London. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the main opposition to an Islamic Europe, then as now, was represented by a coalition of Catholicism and capitalism.

If Spain and Venice provided the military leadership of the Holy League, its inspiration came directly from the Vicar of Christ. Pope Pius V was a deeply spiritual pontiff, typical of the Counter Reformation in his unbending determination to overcome Machiavellian secularism and to restore both clergy and laity to the orthodoxy which the Council of Trent had only recently redefined. But the Pope realized that his hopes for a less pagan renaissance of Christendom under Catholic aegis stood no chance unless this new and dangerous phase of jihad could be repulsed. It was Pius who did most to unite the league.

Capponi deftly evokes the scene when the Pope had a premonition of the great victory at sea that he could only pray was taking place many hundreds of miles away. "Suddenly Pius walked towards a window, opened it, and stood for some time looking at the sky. At length closing the shutters, he turned towards his treasurer Bartolomeo Busotti. 'It is no time for business,' he exclaimed, his face lit with joy. 'Let us go and thank God, for this very moment our fleet has defeated the Turks.'" Not even the most advanced satellite technology could keep up with this miraculous telepathy.

A new western technology was, however, in part responsible for the triumph. While the Ottoman janissaries were acknowledged to be supreme in hand-to-hand combat, the West had the advantage in firepower. The galleys whose basic design had endured since classical times now came up against a much more heavily armed Venetian warship: the galleass. Its large scale revealed its origin as a merchantman intended for transport rather than warfare. This hybrid of the ocean-going galleon and the oar-driven galley may be seen as the sixteenth-century equivalent of the *Dreadnought*: a floating battery that could out-gun any Turkish vessel and that ultimately rendered the galley obsolete. The Ottomans had more ships and men at Lepanto, but the league had a two-to-one preponderance in artillery.

The galleass alone would not have sufficed to win the battle, however, had the league's admirals and captains not also proved that their superior seamanship could turn the tables on the Turks. In effect, Don John accomplished the maneuver later known as "crossing the T," using his galleasses to rake the central Turkish squadrons with a devastating and demoralizing bombardment before they could board the Christian ships. Like Nelson, Don John and his captains grasped the importance of

breaking the enemy line while not permitting their own to be broken, though a bold attempt by the Turks to outflank the league came perilously close to success.

Of the Turkish fleet of some 300 ships, perhaps 90 were sunk and 130 captured; only 50 are known to have escaped. More than 35,000 men were killed, including most of the Ottoman officer corps. For three days, nobody dared to tell Selim the news, until the sounds of mourning reached his ears. Then, in a sinister and very modern touch, the Sultan sighed and said: “So, these treacherous Jews have deceived me!” This almost set off a general massacre of Jews, with mobs chanting: “Death to the Jews!” Capponi speculates that Selim was referring to his Jewish adviser, Joseph Nassi, the duke of Naxos, but the truth is that Islamic anti-Semitism has a long pedigree.

The Christians, too, took heavy casualties—nearly 8,000 dead and as many wounded—but mourning the dead was forbidden in Venice amid the general rejoicing. Though the victors inevitably quarrelled over the spoils, it was a rare moment of western unity.

History has long since ceased to be seen as a sanguinary catalogue of battles, so it is easy to overlook those that really did change everything. Lepanto was one of these battles, and Capponi is the right man to explain why. As an Italian, he has an instinctive grasp of the complexities of the plot, never losing his way in the feuds that so nearly doomed Christendom. Nor does Capponi yield to the manifold temptations to push the historical parallels too far, or to speculate beyond what the fragmentary evidence will bear. The tale he has to tell needs no overblown rhetoric to make its impact. Capponi does his awe-inspiring subject full justice.

The reader is left with the impression that, like Waterloo, Lepanto was a damn close-run thing. How easily Michelangelo’s great new domed basilica of St. Peter’s might have suffered the same fate as Hagia Sophia in Constantinople! How easily the Latin West might have been reduced to the *dhimmi* status of the Byzantine East—but for the creative destruction of those ninety minutes one October day more than four centuries ago, in which the fate of the West was decided forever.

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