Hello and welcome history friends, patrons all to the twelfth instalment of WDF’s look at the LW. Last time we finalised our diplomatic details in the Habsburg-Ottoman camp, and saw how the two parties slid towards war at different times. While the Habsburgs declared through Herman of Baden that they considered themselves in a state of war with the Turks from 12th May 1683 onwards, in Sultan Mehmed IV’s mind, the date could very well be set back half a year, and in his GV’s mind, it could possibly be set back a full year. What we also learned last time was that we simply do not know what was going on in either Mustafa or Mehmed’s head at this point in time. We believe that they acted against the Habsburgs for several reasons; gradually departing from Belgrade in early May 1683. Yet, we cannot point to one particular insult or actor that was responsible. Certainly Mustafa and his master sponsored the campaign which was to come, but they only pushed for it because they believed in its success. They believed in its success because, in their view, the Habsburgs had never appeared so weak, while the House of Osman had never seemed so strong.

In this episode we continue our coverage of the approach towards Vienna. As the Ottomans prepared to enter the sodden Hungarian marshes, hundreds of miles to the northwest, the garrison of Vienna and its commanders were developing strategies to defend their homes from the invader. Such actions were recommended in the course of a war, but they were not necessarily an admission that the city was under danger. Although undoubtedly given pause for thought by late 1682 as to the security of his domains, there is additionally no evidence to suggest that the HR Emperor or his subjects, nor his new Polish ally King Sobieski, knew what the next Ottoman move would be, or that Vienna was the primary target in the crosshairs. If you’re ready then, let’s take you to that very city in Vienna, where a strange kind or eerie calm seemed to be descending…

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*The ministers of kings should learn to moderate their ambition. The higher they elevate themselves above their proper sphere, the greater the danger that they will fall.* Louis XIV of France.

The preparations for war had not commenced with Herman of Baden’s letter to Kara Mustafa on 12th May 1683. Mercifully for the Habsburgs, certain officials and military personnel within their establishment had the foresight to anticipate the unthinkable. Unlike their masters in Vienna, who remained naively convinced of the Ottoman Empire’s incoming capitulation or of the Hungarian reconciliation, several high-ranking military officials of the Habsburg administration were doing their best to reinforce the military defences right across the Empire. Diplomacy had been one element of this policy, yet as we have seen it wasn’t rousingly successful among the other German princes and potentates. From August 1682 onwards, a plan to refurbish the defences of Vienna had been gradually implemented, as had large increases in taxation of the nobility and peasantry for the sake of supporting an effective doubling in size of Leopold’s personal household army, to over 40k men. In February 1683, Quartermaster-General Halsingen was instructed to calculate the available manpower and military units available at Leopold’s disposal. To put it in perspective, a full company of foot was held to be 200 men, while a full company of cavalry was held to be 80.

Sweeping across the hereditary lands, Halsingen counted 70 companies in Bohemia, 45 in Moravia and 48 in Silesia. Several of these companies would be paid for by local nobles and magnates, as well as by Leopold’s household where a deficit hampered proceedings, and they amounted to a ring of defence surrounding the inner Austrian heartland, of 7.6k infantry and 10k cavalry. Further afield, in Hungary 108 companies were counted, in the inner heartlands of Styria, Carinthia and Carniola, 43 companies were found, in Upper and Lower Austria Halsingen counted 40 companies. From Austria alone then, Halsingen could estimate that he possessed nearly 10k infantry and nearly 3k horse.

When it came to calculating the Hungarian companies, the Quartermaster-General was informed by local Habsburg officials that Hungarian militias could not be counted upon, and that it was believed many had deliberately fudged their numbers to acquire greater resources than they needed. Looking to the Empire itself, Halsingen was told to expect 16.4k infantry. He would then have looked at his final figures and scratched his head – somehow the final number for the defence of the Habsburgs’ lands came to 44k infantry and 17.6k cavalry.

Halsingen scratched his head because he would have known full well that the Habsburgs could not ever have afforded to maintain so many men under arms, and that the numbers he had received definitely surpassed the true number of effective soldiers he had at his command. On closer inspection he denoted that several companies had been counted twice, less than half of the companies listed were up to full strength, and the Hungarian element remained a morass of contradictions. As technical and statistical as Halsingen’s number crunching may have seemed, when it was considered that an Ottoman host of well over 100k was heading to the west, the Habsburg response appeared at best, completely underwhelming and at worse, dangerously inadequate. Halsingen continued to press for more men, and his ordeal continued for the next six months.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Halsingen’s experience of the total shortcomings of the Habsburg administration to provide a proper defensive barrier to Ottoman advancement was symptomatic of a regime in the aftermath of a great war. What did states generally do after a great war? They disarmed, and in the aftermath of the treaty of Nijmegen Leopold saw 10 of his 21 regiments of foot, 10 out of his 21 cavalry, 2 out of his 4 dragoon regiments and most of his mounted Croat troops all be dismissed. To reverse this trend, in April 1681 an expansion for Leopold’s army was ordered, as the HR Emperor claimed he wished to raise 20k more troops. The reasoning was not, incidentally, to combat the newly freed up Turks. Instead, Leopold and his Spanish faction were utterly focused on combatting Louis XIV’s France. Less than six months after Leopold had requested the new increases, accompanied by desperately unpopular taxation amounting to 2mn extra florins a year, Louis seized Strasbourg. In the past efforts to economise saw companies not quite disband, but filter remnants of older companies into similar ones to make up numbers lost over the years. Thus, Leopold had to specify when he declared he wanted 20k new men in his army – simply declaring a wish to see 20 new companies would probably have enabled the Habsburg administration to filter the old replacements back out of their adopted companies, and leave them as now standalone companies of infantry.

What this meant for the Habsburgs was that when an official claimed he had done a good day’s work and managed to create a new company for his master’s defence, what he often did was simply take Karl and his dragoons from where they had been making up the numbers in Jan’s company, and give them back their old colours. Jan’s company was still as depleted as it had been before Karl and his dragoons had come along, and Karl’s dragoons themselves were hardly large enough to be considered a full unit, as they were not even half the 200 man strength normally considered a company, but to the Habsburg official making up the numbers of companies under his superior’s orders, on paper at least, Leopold had just gained a new company in Karl’s dragoons. This example is pretty much indicative of how the Habsburg rearmament progressed – to prevent wastage and cutting corners, constant vigilance had to be applied to ensure that the force on paper was actually received in kind, lest a disastrous situation could greet the commander who called his expected companies together at a desperate moment.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Responsible for gathering the unpopular taxes and getting Leopold’s circle focused on what he believed was the true threat in the east, rather than in Louis’s France, was the president of the treasury, Christopher Abele. Abele argued from autumn 1682 that the Ottomans were planning a new campaign and that the Habsburgs were urgently required to prepare for this threat. It was perhaps because he so believed in the urgency of this cause that he enthusiastically organised Leopold’s finances, and managed to push through the tax increases which would enable Leopold to field the army necessary to beat the Turk back. Without Abele’s efforts, Leopold would never have possessed the manpower which later proved so vital to Habsburg integrity. He is thus a forgotten hero of the last siege of Vienna, as was George Rimpler, the pioneering military engineer from Saxony, who had served along the Rhine in his efforts to beef up the defences against the French, and who would now be tasked with shoring these defences up along the Danube and with the Hungarian frontier. It was quite a task, but Rimpler at least enjoyed the support of Herman of Baden, who, in perhaps the wisest decision of his career, pushed for Rimpler’s appointment at just the right moment. Knowing what we know of Herman of Baden though, it was probably because of his service against France that Herman believed Rimpler came to recommended, considering his demonstrated obsession with France by this point. Whatever the reason, Herman of Baden approved of Rimpler, and Christopher Abele was on hand to provide the funds.

While this triangle of support worked to resuscitate the dire Habsburg situation in the east, another appointment was made in Vienna. In February 1680 Rudiger Starhemberg, the son of a high ranking military governor in Lower Austria, was appointed commandant in Vienna and colonel of the city guard. The appointment proved critical – Starhemberg was an energetic and passionate soldier who injected a new productivity into proceedings at the Habsburg capital. He quickly sent out requests to Abele and Rimpler to come and pay for new military improvements on the city’s defences, while he also argued for sharp increases in Vienna’s garrison. Fast forwarding to 11th January 1683, and a committee was set up to discuss military defence in Hungary; by that point negotiations with the Commonwealth had reached a fever pitch, and affairs in the HRE remained troublingly uncertain. The committee focused on the different lynchpins of the Habsburg defence in Hungary, fortress towns we’ve probably heard of before – Gyor, Pressburg and Komarom – all of which served as the de facto capitals of defence in the different portions of Hungary that they occupied.

If we can remember back to that mind map square of marshy land to the east of Vienna, then the process of explaining which rivers hosted what fortresses becomes far easier. To put it simply, Gyor was roughly in the top left corner of the square, and formed a critical barrier to any hostile force looking to cross the River Raab, a south flowing tributary of the Danube, which created a convenient fork in the river, where the fortress of Komarom lay, literally smack bang in the top left corner of the square – this was the quintessential anchor of Habsburg defence, before it guarded the fork of the rivers Danube and Raab, and also provided advance notice of any force coming from the east along the Danube’s banks. If you were to turn back around out of Komarom and follow the Danube west towards Vienna, effectively going out of our square mind map, you would soon reach Pressburg, which is actually the modern day capital of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava.

If you’re still confused as to where everything is, just remember our square of marshes, bordered by the important rivers of the region, which the Ottomans will have to make it through before they can reach Vienna. South of the Danube is a load of marshes and swamps, north of the Danube there’s plenty of marshland, but a great deal more rivers and tributaries, many of which flow north into the Carpathian mountains. I don’t want to bombard you guys with too many more names, so I’ll do my best to leave out new place names unless they’re really important. As long as you can grasp roughly where the different forces are, it doesn’t matter all that much what the name of yet another poorly defended Habsburg river fort is. So let’s continue…

Habsburg officials, including those at that committee meeting in January 1683, placed much of their hopes in the natural defences provided by the rivers; unsurprising considering the number of rivers, the extent to which they dominated and moulded the Hungarian plains, and the relative poverty of the Habsburg administration to deal effectively with the man-made structures necessary for military defence. The wishful thinking returned then, as many present at the meeting, including Starhemberg who was on loan from Vienna, believed that the fortifications already in place would be enough to stall or even halt the Ottomans if they marched. As we have seen, Herman of Baden was so confident in Imre Thokoly’s reconciliation that he made very few contingency plans for Hungary if the region remained hostile, which of course it did. To be fair to the Habsburgs, past experience had shown that the Ottomans were foiled or outmanoeuvred thanks to the geography of the region and the natural barriers it provided, but this time would be different.

If Abele’s taxes enabled Leopold to build an army that saved his lands, so too did Starhemberg’s determination to bring Vienna’s defences up to scratch save it during the long and arduous siege to come. From the beginning of October 1682 various orders for supplies and infrastructural work on the city’s defences were undertaken on a wide scale; the moats were cleared, palisades were added to portions of the walls and workers were to the task of improving the city’s defences. Certain walls were demolished to make the defence more effective and remove places where the enemy could find cover, while additional earthen reinforcement of the walls enabled the counterscarp, the fancy word for a place for a soldier to shelter and fire out from in his defences, to take shape. By appealing to the grumbling estates of Austria, contingents of labourers as much as 4.5k strong soon arrived to work all day long in rotating shifts to shore up the defences of the city. The freezing winter of 1682-83 complicated matters, as it froze the Danube and prevented supplies reaching other fortresses along the river, as well as in the city itself. Yet, the work kept going right up till the last moment – Starhemberg was still ordering shipments of timber to reinforce his palisades and beef up the counterscarp defences in late June 1683.

Orders for demolition of certain walls and districts to disadvantage the enemy had been ordered on 22nd April 1683, yet by June many of the unhappy citizens had prevented such work from being done. While the labourers continued to dig and set palisades, heavier cannon were mounted on different portions of the walls, though the Vienna arsenal had been tasked with supplying the Hungarian army as well, so much of its reserves in cannon and shot were emptied at such an inopportune time. As the work continued and the tensions built up, by the beginning of May 1683, even as Herman of Baden made the unofficial war official between the Habsburgs and Ottomans, Starhemberg remained in desperate need of supplies. Sections of critical weakness remained. The wall beside Leopold’s palace at the Hofburg was a large straight section of wall in the old medieval style – great for keeping out medieval armies, but prone to collapse when struck with cannon.

To reinforce this wall, as well as other portions of the defences, strange activities were going on around the city. To a modern observer it might appear odd that the best defence against gunpowder was the erection of wooden stakes and the building up of earth against the city’s walls. Within this build-up of earth, levels could be set with wood and trenches could be dug to create ideal defensive positions. Connecting these positions together, fields of interlocking fire complemented by heavy cannons would be created, and organised by the military engineers like Rimpler.

The walls of Vienna themselves were mostly untouched – there was clearly no time to start building new walls for the city. What was done instead was the act of making getting to those walls far more difficult. Before the Turk could reach the walls of Vienna proper, he would first be faced with a steep wall of wooden stakes, the palisades. These would peak over the top, and the garrison would stand on the other side of them on elevated walkways and fire down at the enemy. As the first line of defence, it was expected that the garrison would then retreat across the available makeshift bridges which spanned the moat, before taking cover behind a second near carbon copy of the first set-up. As the Turks scrambled up the steep palisades and dropped into the moat, often merely a ditch as it was never properly filled in time, they were shot at incessantly by the defenders behind this second line. When that was compromised, the process was repeated.

The defenders retreated over a second moat on another set of planks or makeshift bridges, which were again destroyed, and defensive positions behind what was now the city wall took shape. At this third line of defence, sandbags, additional palisades and further desperate tactics would be employed, while the Turks again had to scramble up the abandoned second line and push through the second moat, under incessant fire from cannon and soldier alike. The system, if done effectively, was the most sophisticated method of defending a fortified position in late 17th century Europe. The tactics confounded the use of artillery, as the cannons simply couldn’t make an indent on the steep palisades and earthworks. Even if the palisades were blown apart and shattered the earthworks, this left additional obstacles for the Turks to overcome.

Yet the Ottomans themselves had long since been outpaced technologically by western forms of artillery; the guns they brought with them to Vienna were a far cry from the once terrifying pieces which Mehmed the conqueror had used to batter down the three walls of Constantinople. Ottoman guns in 1683 were smaller, less effective and their handlers less sure of themselves when it came to battering through defences. Thanks mostly to revolutions in how the Turks conducted their sieges though, these shortcomings didn’t necessarily matter. This is because the standard Ottoman tactics were not to batter the walls down from a distance – instead the common strategy involved the digging of concentric trenches where the men could take shelter, while the true work went on under cover of shelter from these trenches and darkness. It was not with artillery, but with mining, that the Ottomans excelled. By digging under the defences and placing large collections of combustible materials together, the defences could be undermined once the very ground below them fell away under deafening explosions. The Ottomans tactics are striking because they appear to have been taken straight out of the handbook of a soldier on the western front in the FWW. Where else would you have had such a wasteland of trenches, and where else would you have seen such terrifying underground work mining take place in the name of destroying the enemy’s defences from below?

You may have answered the Somme, Messines Ridge or somewhere else in the wasteland of the Western Front, but in actual fact these tactics were used on a smaller, more methodical scale at the last siege of Vienna. The similarity between both era’s use of the tactic, aside from the fact that very little changed between the arduous digging, the dangerous act of setting the charge and the terrifying spectacle of fighting the enemy within those same mines, were the devastating results such tactics produced. The only way to combat such tactics, as soldiers on the Western Front came to accept, was to dig your own trenches and place your own mines, leading to the kind of claustrophobic confrontations beneath thousands of tons of earth that don’t bear thinking about.

Despite the devastating Ottoman strategy, the work of Rimpler, Starhemberg and the thousands of labourers were to create a defensive system around Vienna which was formidable, if inconsistent. Much work had been done to reinforce the wall next to the Hofburg along the Burg bastion – this was where the best defences were placed; that three tiered line of defences we looked at earlier was used on a lesser scale in other sections of the wall, but was used to its full effect here. This was just as well, because this section of the wall would serve as the primary point of attack once the Turks arrived. When that occurred, all the previous years’ of work would be put to the ultimate test.

What continued to occupy Starhemberg was the activity of commissioning as many supplies as was humanly possible should Vienna be cut off. This was easier said than done, as centres like Amsterdam and Hamburg upped their prices opportunistically to take advantage of the Habsburg lack of preparation. Starhemberg was in constant contact with the treasurer, Christopher Abele, as both men sought to persuade the other of the need to save, spend or acquire a certain commodity. Fortunately for Vienna, both formed a fair working relationship, and Abele mostly managed to organise payment for what Starhemberg required. By June 1683, it was noted that over 500k florins had been spent on munitions alone, while costly contracts with independent suppliers had given Leopold’s treasurer the run around.

The Habsburg administration tended to hire individuals to acquire the goods for them, yet these contractors often ran into difficulty themselves, as cash was always demanded up front, and Vienna’s distance from the major production centres made everything far more expensive. Starhemberg managed, just about, to commission the necessary goods, but their entry into Vienna must have been a sight to behold for the garrison and citizenry alike, who by April 1683 would have suspected that their homes were soon to be the centre of a warzone, judging from the sheer influx of materials and the incessant improvement works. On 22nd April 1683 a resident in Vienna noted that:

Last Monday the Dieppental battalion, 500 strong, was inspected by the imperial commissaries. 900 horses and 169 wagons for the artillery, and 19 large anchors for warships, also arrived; while on the same day the foot marched along the road to the suburbs and went down the Danube the next morning. On Tuesday 3 craft from Steyr came in, with 2k cannon ball, and many thousands of smaller shot. Half the Scherffenberg regiment with 1,200 men also arrived and marched through the city…When the Emperor went out of town to hunt, he took the opportunity to inspect them. They were glad in grey, with blue facings.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A problem which still plagued the war council, and Herman of Baden in particular, was the issue of the Rhine. Was it safe, especially after Louis XIV’s ultimatum expired in November, to begin moving soldiers away from the western front? Even with the stern warning given by Albert Caprara in September 1682, as we have seen it would take Herman of Baden until the following May before he would issue what amounted to a declaration of war on the Ottomans. By that point, of course, much of the Ottoman cogs of war were whirring into life, and even the Habsburgs had been acting, as we have seen in this episode, as though peace was not guaranteed. The act of shoring up Vienna’s defences and expanding the country’s military capabilities looked impressive on paper, but in the grand scheme of things, it is worth considering that Herman of Baden approved the former to justify using the latter against the French. In the period between September and May, Herman would certainly have had reason to flip flop in his commitments. Louis XIV remained as mysterious as ever, in a deliberate policy of bluff designed to slow the Habsburg reaction to Ottoman moves. It worked.

What had been overlooked when the new army for Leopold was being raised was the fact that several of those new companies that had been counted were actually in the west along the Rhine, and would thus have to march back across the HRE to get to Vienna and link up with Charles of Lorraine, the new commander in chief of Habsburg forces. The plan had originally been to launch a counterattack into Ottoman lands and perhaps seize a significant fortress before the Ottomans, with their very gradual speed, reached Habsburg territory. Yet this opportunity was denied, and Herman of Baden had to wait uselessly as three weeks passed before, in the first week of May 1683, a significant amount of soldiers were actually in place to embark with Charles of Lorraine on campaign.

Up to the last minute, as we saw, Herman of Baden awaited news of Thokoly’s reconciliation and the pacification of Hungary, and only when this proved totally illusory did Herman seem to accept that the major threat came from the east, rather than the west. Yet this realisation came far too late for a man in charge of Habsburg defences. Mercifully for both Charles of Lorraine and the Habsburgs themselves, the act of funnelling soldiers eastward to where Charles of Lorraine’s camp was based had continued without the president of the war council’s tacit approval. Another unfortunate fact about the Habsburg defence in summer 1683 – the president of the Habsburg war council, Herman of Baden, and the new commander in chief of Habsburg forces, Charles of Lorraine, really did not like each other.

By the 6th May 1683 it was inconceivable that the soldiers would then be turned around – in spite of Herman of Baden’s misplaced Hungarian optimism, Leopold had already been advised that for the sake of morale, it was necessary to reinforce the region around Vienna with the strongest contingents of the Habsburg army. It should be added that at least 15k men were by this stage permanently languishing along the Rhine to forestall any French attack – a gift from the King of France to the Ottoman Sultan, which Louis XIV knew Leopold would willingly give. Content to wait and see while the Rhine princes and the rest of Europe seemed unwilling to act either way, Louis anticipated the arrival of a large Ottoman host along the Danube, and the exhaustion of the Habsburgs as they attempted to repulse it. While waiting to the east, a few miles downriver from Vienna, Lorraine welcomed with some relief the loyal Hungarian troops into the fold. To his consternation only 2k, rather than 6k men had arrived in support of their Emperor, yet beggars couldn’t be choosers.

On 6th May 1683, at Pressburg alongside a force of men 32k strong, the HR Emperor inspected the troops and engaged on a vast parade designed to shore up morale in the region. In a nine hour procession complete with three sayings of Mass and a state banquet, Charles of Lorraine was warmly thanked by Leopold for taking what arguably would have been the Emperor’s traditional place at the head of an army in defence of Christendom. It was to Leopold’s good fortune that he did not decide to lead the army which was planning to throw itself at one of many Ottoman fortresses further down the Danube River. On a conference held between the major military leaders on 7th May, where Herman of Baden and Charles of Lorraine awkwardly exchanged unpleasantries, Lorraine’s old idea of attacking before the Ottomans came into view was repeated. Finally, it was decided to move towards the fortress of Komarom further down the Danube, where the situation would be assessed and the plan of attack revised according to the circumstances.

Lorraine seemed confident to make a play for Esztergom, which Leopold approved of for its symbolic value as the base of the Ottoman Empire’s Danubian presence second only to Buda. Pushing ever eastward from 19th May, Lorraine reached Gyor and kept moving, refusing to heed the protests of his subordinates in a meeting held on 26th May. They claimed that Lorraine was moving too far from the Ottoman danger and leaving their force open to being cut off and surrounded, but Lorraine continued to press for the advance. On the way to Esztergom on 31st May, Lorraine received some devastating news which seemed to confirm his subordinates’ fears – far to the south east, in the bottom right corner of our Hungarian mind map square, the Ottomans had already taken the initiative and crossed the bridges at Osijek. This news hit Lorraine like a bomb. Since he was now at a point now roughly halfway between the Ottoman host and Vienna, it was imperative that Lorraine did not get caught out and lose the Habsburgs’ only field army in the region.

Would he press forward and seize an Ottoman base, or would he withdraw and aim to defend the river crossings with his force? These questions as well as so many others, swirled through Charles of Lorraine’s head in late May 1683. Several miles to the south east, Kara Mustafa marched at the head of his grand military host. There was no doubt or second guessing present in his *war* strategy – already he imagined the arrival outside the walls of the Golden Apple. Next time, we’ll examine the scene, as the Habsburg errors pile up, leading to the Habsburg court to confront the terrifying fact – the enemy, within days, were destined to be at the gates: the end game had begun. Until then though, my name is Zack, thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Figures cited in John Stoye, *The Siege of Vienna*, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stoye, *The Siege*, pp. 67-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cited in Stoye, *The Siege*, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)