

Habsburgs, Ottomans and Venetians on the Frontiers of Dalmatia: The Capture of Clissa in 1596

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Introduction

The fortress of Clissa (Klis) is located at the confluence of the political boundaries that divided the Ottoman, Venetian and Habsburg empires, in the frontier region between northern Croatia, Dalmatia and Bosnia.¹ It perches atop a 360 metre outcropping of rock that dominates the mouth of the best pass through the Dinaric Alps into the Croatian hinterland. The great seventeenth-century Ottoman traveller, Evliya Çelebi, evocatively described it as seeming “like a cone of pilaf in a bowl”.² The fortress was located “a vigorous stone’s throw” (about 10 km) from the coast, where the chief town of the region, Spalato (Split), was located.³ Spalato was at this time developing into an important Venetian commercial entrepôt for the overland caravan trade with Istanbul. Initially founded in Roman times, the fortress had been a lynchpin in controlling the region since the Middle Ages. Indeed, it was the last stronghold to fall to the Ottomans in 1537, following repeated failed attempts.⁴ For the next century, Clissa played a central role in the projection of Ottoman power in Dalmatia, as it was considered the strongest fortress of the empire’s “entire western frontier”.⁵ It was garrisoned by a *disdar*

¹ Wendy Bracewell, “The Historiography of the Triplex Confinium: Conflict and Community on a Triple Frontier, 16th–18th Centuries”, in *Frontiers and the Writing of History, 1500–1850*, eds. Steven G. Ellis and Raingard Esser (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2006), 211. All translations are the author’s.

² Cemal Kafadar, “Evliya Çelebi in Dalmatia: An Ottoman Gentleman’s Encounter with the Arts of the Franks”, *Dalmatia and the Mediterranean: Portable Archeology and the Poetics of Influence*, ed. Alina Payne (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 73.

³ The British Library, London (BL), MS 8605, fol. 7v, *Relazione di Nicolo Donado*.

⁴ Catherine Wendy Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj: Piracy, Banditry and Holy War in the Sixteenth-Century Adriatic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 20, 48–49; Angelo de Benvenuti, “Fortezze e castelli di Dalmazia: la fortezza di Clissa”, *La rivista dalmatica* 16, no. 4 (1935): 28, 37–39; 17, no. 1 (1936): 16; Fred Singleton, *A Short History of the Yugoslav Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 5, 60–61; Biblioteca del Museo Civico Correr di Venezia (BMCV), Cicogna 3098, *Compendio di varie revolutioni della famosa fortezza di Clissa*.

⁵ Rita Tolomeo, “La fortezza di Clissa”, *Atti e memorie della Società dalmata di storia patria* 34 (2012): 47.

(castellan), several cannons and as many as 250 men, who kept watch over the two hundred houses and resident Ottoman *kadi*, or judge, in the town at the foot of the bluff.⁶ The fortress was, as one contemporary observer noted “surrounded by deep valleys, and enclosed by inaccessible, alpine mountains”, and located on “a precipitous outcropping of stone between mountains, but so distant that it cannot be defeated, and only with difficulty assaulted”.⁷ Contemporaries were unanimous in describing the fortress as “impregnable”, though given the fact that it had changed hands several times in the century from 1537 to 1648, including twice in 1596, it was not an impossible nut to crack.⁸



Fig. III.1: *Clissa: Chief Fortress of the Turk in Dalmatia and Key to the Kingdom of Bosnia. 5 miles Distant from Spalato, c.1605.* Newberry Library, Novacco 2F 205, sheet 3 of 3.

⁶ “Relazione di Nicolo Correr”, in *Commissiones et Relationes Venetae*, ed. Grga Novak, vol. 4 (Zagreb: Academia Scientiarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1964), 338; “Revisti Dalmati confini del dragoman Salvago”, in *Commissiones et Relationes Venetae*, ed. Grga Novak, vol. 7 (Zagreb: Academia Scientiarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1972), 32; “Relazione di Pietro Basadonna”, in *Commissiones et Relationes Venetae*, ed. Simeon Ljubić, vol. 2 (Zagreb: Academia Scientiarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1877), 224–25.

⁷ Tolomeo, “La fortezza di Clissa”, 53.

⁸ Biblioteca Marciana, Venice (BM), It VI 105 (5728), *Viaggio da Venezia a Costantinopoli*, fol. 5r; “Itinerario di Giovanni Battista Giustinian”, in *Commissiones et Relationes Venetae*, vol. 2, 211; Evlija Čelebi, *Putopis: Odlomci o jügoslavenskim zemljama*, ed. Hazim Šabanović (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1967), 152–53.

The strategic importance of Clissa is illustrated in the hybrid map and view entitled *Clissa principal fortezza del Turcho nella dalmacia et Chiave dil Reg° di Bosna Lontano da Spallato miglia 5*, now located in the Newberry Library (fig. III.1). Christofaro Tarnowskij created or at least signed the image in the summer of 1605, near the end of the gruelling and ruinous Long War (1593–1606) between the Ottomans and the Austrian Habsburgs. Little is known about Tarnowskij, except that he was a knight of Malta, and may have been from Bosnia. The map of Clissa, along with two others depicting Castelnuovo (Herceg Novi, Montenegro) and Scutari (Shkodër, Albania), was part of a set of maps by Tarnowskij that seem to have been produced as part of a broader effort to reinvigorate support for military action against the Ottomans in the region. The hope was that the seizure of these three key defensive points along the Veneto-Ottoman frontier might trigger a broader popular uprising. The maps were intended to provide a reasonably accurate, and at the same time aesthetically satisfying, representation of the frontier. Each contains a “detailed network of roads and tracks” and indications of defended river crossings. No political boundaries are sketched out, rather religious symbols—“crosses for Christians [...] stars and half-moons for Muslims”—are intended to delineate political allegiance, but do not necessarily correspond to communal religious identity.⁹ The fortress of Clissa is depicted in exaggerated scale in comparison to Spalato, which is actually the larger of the two towns, most likely to emphasize to potential imperial and papal supporters the threat it presented to Christians in the region. The strategic and symbolic significance of Clissa for the Habsburgs, Ottomans and Venetians, which Tarnowskij’s map conveys, were key factors in the celebrated capture of the fortress in 1596.

The Capture of Clissa

During the night of 6 to 7 April, a group of 40-50 men “holding onto each other with great difficulty, ascended the mount by way of [a] steep cliff face. At two hours before daybreak they were let into the most important upper part of the [fortress] through an opening on the south, from which the garbage of the city was dumped”. On the night in question, “the fortress was almost empty of soldiers”: some “had gone to a fair in the interior of the land, others [were] with the *kadi* in Spalato, others [were] in Almissa (Omiš) and Suzuraz (Sučurac), a castle in the jurisdiction of Spalato”. The few guards who remained in the upper

⁹ James P. Krokav, “New Means to an Old End: Early Modern Maps in the Service of an Anti-Ottoman Crusade”, *Imago Mundi* 60 (2008): 23–25.

fortress “were found slumbering”, which allowed the infiltrators to slip in without detection.¹⁰

They lay in wait quietly until just before daybreak, and then “after first invoking the help of Jesus three times” they burst out of their hiding places and their leader “planted their standard with a crucifix in the middle of the fortress”. They then “began to run through the upper city with great ardour, killing everyone they came in contact with, including those who were still in their houses half-asleep and others who were preparing to flee. And they pushed forward so forcefully that they very quickly took control of the most important part of the fortress”.¹¹

Encouraged by their initial success, the invaders broke into the house of the *disdar*, “whose head they cut off, and they took his keys along with his head”, and threw open the doors to the lower fortress and turned their fury on the small borgo there, “cutting to pieces everyone that they found in the houses”. And so, as a contemporary chronicler records seemingly with neither contrition nor irony, “on the 7th of April, Palm Sunday, this fortress came into the hands of the Christians almost without any spilling of blood”.¹²

The day following the capture, a group of Uskok reinforcements from Habsburg Segna (Senj) joined the fray, and a small force of Ottomans made several vain attempts to regain the fortress, with significant loss of both lives and captives. When word of this second victory spread, 200 Ottoman Christian subjects and “almost all the priests” from Polizza (Poljica) in Ottoman territory, as well as “many” Venetian subjects “from the territory of Spalato and also Trau [Trogir]” flocked to Clissa. In preparation for the inevitable Ottoman response, the new masters of the citadel “flattened” the small town outside the fortress and “knocked down all the houses up to the walls”, to deny eventual besiegers any “accommodation”. They carved out passageways along the interior of the fortifications to allow them to move about “comfortably” during a siege, gathered food and weapons, and filled every possible container with water. Finally, “in a sign of victory and to strike fear in their foes”, the new lords of Clissa “adorned” the fortress walls with numerous decapitated heads.¹³

¹⁰ “Relatione del’infelice avvenimento dell’impresa di Clissa fatta l’anno della nostra salute M.D.XC.VI.”, in *Spomenici hrvatske Krajine*, ed. Radoslav Lopašić, vol. 1 (Zagreb: Hartman, 1884), 242.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*; Carolus Horvat, ed., *Monumenta historiam Uscochorum illustrantia ex Archivis Romanis, praecipue e secreto Vaticano desumpta*, 2 vols. (Zagreb: Ex officina societatis typographicae, 1910–1913), vol. 1, 101, letter from Hieronimo Pavon to Nicola Alberti, 20 April 1596.

¹³ “Relatione del’infelice avvenimento”, 242–43.

On its surface, the celebrated capture of Clissa seems one of many examples of the sort of religious rivalry and violence that was endemic to the *triplex confinium* of the Veneto-Ottoman-Habsburg frontier in Dalmatia.¹⁴ Contemporaries often portrayed the region as the tectonic fault line between Islam and Christendom, and this depiction has been long perpetuated by scholars of the region, including most recently James Tracy in his fine book, *Balkan Wars: Habsburg Croatia, Ottoman Bosnia, and Venetian Dalmatia, 1499–1617*.¹⁵ As I will argue, however, the actual conditions on the ground were much more ambiguous and equivocal, which therefore requires a more fine-grained analysis.

Life on the Habsburg, Ottoman and Venetian Frontier in Dalmatia

The lack of a clear-cut border in Dalmatia produced a situation in which Venetian, Ottoman and Habsburg subjects intermingled freely.¹⁶ Venetians worked Ottoman fields and ground their wheat in Ottoman mills, while Ottomans worked and even rented Venetian lands. Men who fought on behalf of Venice lived in Ottoman lands and the *vlachs*, as the Orthodox, transhumant cattle herder subjects of the sultan from inland Dalmatia were called,¹⁷ moved freely throughout the region and proffered their military services to both Ottomans and Venetians.¹⁸ Families straddled political and religious frontiers,¹⁹ and cross-border friendship and marriages were commonplace.²⁰ Migration and resettlement between Venetian,

¹⁴ Bracewell, “Historiography of the Triplex Confinium”, 21–27.

¹⁵ James D. Tracy, *Balkan Wars: Habsburg Croatia, Ottoman Bosnia, and Venetian Dalmatia, 1499–1617* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

¹⁶ Maria Pia Pedani, *Dalla frontiera al confine* (Rome: Herder, 2002), 39–55.

¹⁷ Cristian Luca, “The Vlachs/Morlaks in the Hinterlands of Traù (Trogir) and Sevenico (Šibenik), Towns of the Venetian Dalmatia, During the 16th Century”, in *Miscellanea Historica et Archaeologica in Honorem Professoris Ionel Cădea*, eds. Valeriu Sîrbu and Cristian Luca (Brăila: Editura Istros, 2009), 315–21.

¹⁸ Krešimir Kužić, “Prilog biografiji nekih Kačićevih vitezova te podrijetlu stanovništva njihova kraja”, *Radovi Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Zadru* 47 (2005): 223–24; BM, It VII 1217 (9448), #18, fol. 249r, *Relatione di Dalmatia*; BL, MS 8613, fol. 81r–88r, *Relatione sopra i Morlacchi*.

¹⁹ Ivan Vitezić, *La prima visita apostolica postridentina in Dalmazia (nell'anno 1579)* (Rome: Pontificia universitas gregoriana, 1957), 19, 31–34.

²⁰ “Relazione di Marco Barbarigo”, in *Commissiones et Relationes Venetae*, vol. 4, 342; BL, MS 8605, fol. 9r-v, *Relazione di Nicolo Donado*; “Relazione di Andrea Rhenier”, in *Commissiones et Relationes Venetae*, ed. Grga Novak, vol. 6 (Zagreb: Academia Scientiarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1970), 67; “Relazione di Marino Mudazzo”, in *ibid.*, 202–03; Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Collegio, Risposte di fuori, b. 352, 12 July 1599; Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj*, 35–36; Maria Pia Pedani, “Beyond the Frontier: The Ottoman-

Ottoman and Habsburg lands also occurred frequently among desperate or ambitious people from across the region.²¹ There was also a significant cross-border trade in Dalmatia's urban centres and its regional fairs, which approached 400,000 ducats in value annually in the mid-sixteenth century.²²

Because of the porosity of the frontier, a shared culture that transcended the region's ephemeral political and religious borders persisted.²³ Shared popular beliefs and practices blurred these religious lines, evidenced in many common holy sites and popular religious practices. Religious nomadism, what Palmira Brummett has described as "strategic syncretism", was also common.²⁴ On his visit, Evliya Çelebi was "astonished and bemused" by the common frontier custom of "swapping religions". Christian and Muslim soldiers befriended each other and in a ceremony swore to "take the religion of the other," thus becoming "brothers-in-religion".²⁵ The shared frontier culture and identity trumped official efforts to delineate clear borders and the persistent tension between "necessity and ideology"²⁶ resulted at times in a sort of Dalmatian *convivencia* that has some parallels with the complex state of "social and confessional pluralism" that scholars have cautiously used to describe medieval Iberia.²⁷

This latter point should not be exaggerated, as the Dalmatian frontier was also the site of considerable friction: in addition to the occasional murder, animals were rustled, contraband goods circulated surreptitiously and individuals were kidnapped

Venetian Border in the Adriatic Context from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries", in *Zones of Fracture in Modern Europe: the Baltic Countries, the Balkans and Northern Italy*, ed. Almut Bues (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 46.

²¹ Alberto Marani, ed., *Atti pastorali di Minuccio Minucci arcivescovo di Zara (1596–1604)* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1970), 50, 52–53; Karlo Horvat, 'Glagolaši u Dalmaciji početkom 17. Vijeka t. J. godine 1602-1603', *Starine* 33 (1911): 557–59.

²² Pedani, "Beyond the Frontier", 46; Seid M. Traljić, "Zadar i turska pozadina od XV do potkraj XIX stoljeća", *Radovi* 11–12 (1965): 226; Marani, *Atti pastorali di Minuccio Minucci*, 60–61.

²³ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper, 1972), vol. 2, 759, 889; Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (New York: Anchor, 2002), 121.

²⁴ Brummett, *Mapping the Ottomans*, 161.

²⁵ Kafadar, "Evliya Çelebi in Dalmatia", 66.

²⁶ Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj*, 174.

²⁷ Bruce Taylor, "The Enemy Within and Without: An Anatomy of Fear on the Spanish Mediterranean Littoral", in *Fear in Early Modern Society*, eds. William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 80. There is an extensive debate on Spanish *convivencia*: for a recent discussion see, Darío Fernández-Morera, *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2016).

for ransom.²⁸ The reality on the Dalmatian frontier was that, despite attempts to centralize power, the centre had relatively little control over commanders on the periphery. They often ignored diplomatically negotiated “periods of peace” and had limited control over their men, who acted more like “frontier freebooters” and raided across the borders with impunity. Their objective was booty and prisoners for ransom or sale, rather than the destruction of their adversaries, who quite often came from the same lineages and villages.²⁹ Conflict did not, however, define Veneto-Ottoman relations. Both Ottoman and Venetian officials were regularly directed to preserve the “*bona pace*” (good peace)³⁰ and they often collaborated in dealing with border issues, in particular the disruptions of the piratical Uskoks who swarmed the Adriatic coast, as well as the actions of their own restive subjects.³¹

Clissa Reconsidered

When considered in the light of Dalmatia’s fuzzy and entangled boundaries, the events set in motion on Palm Sunday 1596, take on a decidedly different hue. Accounts make clear that the seizure of the seemingly impregnable fortress was carried out by a politically and religiously diverse group. The genesis of the plan likely traced to Francesco Antonio Bertucci, a Venetian subject and knight of Malta from Lesina (Hvar), who from 1594 bombarded both Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II and Pope Clement VIII for their support of his scheme with missives and in person.³² Another key conspirator and the leader on the ground, was Giovanni Alberti, a Spalatine and Venetian subject, whose brother, Nicola, was archdeacon of Split. Knowing full well that “his natural prince [Venice] was at peace with the Great Turk and that no matter how great the enterprise, would never break its treaty”, in the months leading up to the incident, Alberti and his co-conspirators enlisted promises of Habsburg and papal assistance.³³ Although they

²⁸ ASV, Commemoriali, r. 25; ASV, Lettere e scritture turchesche, b. 5; ASV, Senato deliberazioni Costantinopoli, b. 5, 24 February 1581 (*more veneto*).

²⁹ David Nicolle, *Ottoman Fortifications 1300–1710* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010), 32, 40.

³⁰ ASV, Senato deliberazioni Costantinopoli, b. 9, 8 August 1598; ASV, Bailo a Costantinopoli, b. 252, fol. 7v–8r, 12 April 1593.

³¹ Angelo de Benvenuti, *Storia di Zara dal 1409 al 1797* (Milan: Bocca, 1944), 131; Gunther E. Rothenberg, “Christian Insurrections in Turkish Dalmatia 1580–96”, *Slavonic and East European Review* 40, no. 94 (1961): 136–47. Cf. Alexander Koller’s chapter in this volume, 79–96.

³² Malcolm, *Agents of Empire*, 410–11; Krokav, “New Means to an Old End”, 30.

³³ “Relatione del’infelice avvenimento”, 239; Zdenko Zlatar, *Between the Double Eagle and the Crescent: The Republic of Dubrovnik and the Origins of the Eastern Question* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1992), 91–92.

draped their actions in a veil of religion, desiring to perform “a feat that would be pleasing to the Divine Majesty and to the Christian republic” and to throw off the “arduous tyranny” and the “bitter yoke” of the Ottomans, subjects of the sultan also played a decisive role in the conspiracy’s success. Alberti bought the favour of several Ottoman Christians in Clissa, and the support of Paolo Pavich, the Grand Prince of Polizza and an Ottoman Christian subject. The conspiracy was not a strictly Christian affair either: Four Muslim brothers and a deputy of the *disdar* of Clissa, played a decisive role in the capture of the fortress.³⁴ Two women enslaved in the initial attack reported that these men became involved, in part at least, because of strained relations with local Ottoman officials.³⁵ In addition, as this motley crew of Venetian, Ottoman, Habsburg, Muslim and Christian conspirators suggests, rather than primarily religious in motivation, the capture of Clissa was much more a product of economic despair and political frustration with Venetian and Ottoman rule.

While both militarily and commercially Dalmatia held a central place in Venice’s *stato da mar*, its maritime state that stretched from Istria in the northeastern Adriatic to the Greek islands of the eastern Mediterranean, during much of the sixteenth century its subjects “simmered with revolt at [Venice’s] indifference to their welfare”.³⁶ The peace of 1573 only exacerbated already deep-rooted problems: The coastal cities, known as the *Sottovento*, were reduced to isolated outposts with almost no hinterland.³⁷ As a result, urban populations plummeted, many rural villages were abandoned, infrastructure collapsed, trade was diminished and these enclaves struggled to provision themselves.³⁸ Spalato in this time was characterized as full of “unhappiness and misery”.³⁹ Poverty was widespread, beggars filled the streets, Venice had to send food and clothing to the city and civic and ecclesiastical officials “distribute[d] bread and broth, vegetables and rice to the poor, who come

³⁴ Horvat, *Monumenta historiam Usocchorum*, vol. 1, 100, Hieronimo Pavon to Nicola Alberti, 20 April 1596.

³⁵ ASV, Cariche da mar, Processi, b. 8, 13–17 April 1596.

³⁶ Rothenberg, “Christian Insurrections in Turkish Dalmatia”, 138.

³⁷ Benjamin Arbel, “Venice’s Maritime Empire in the Early Modern Period”, in *A Companion to Venetian History, 1400–1797*, ed. Eric R. Dursteler (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 226.

³⁸ Vera Graovac, “Populacijski razvoj Zadra”, *Geoadria* 9 (2004): 54–55; ASV, Collegio – Relazioni, b. 72, *Relatione de Lunardo Zulian*, 4 July 1596; BMCV, Cicogna, b. 2854, fol. 107r–v, 123r–25r, *La discretion delle anime nella Città de Zara et suo Territorio, fatta li 24 Dec 1579*; Benvenuti, *Storia di Zara*, 128–29.

³⁹ ASV, Collegio, Risposte di dentro, b. 10, #131, 11 July 1597; Maren Frejdenberg, “Venetian Jews and Ottoman Authorities on the Balkans (16th Century)”, *Etudes Balkaniques* 30 (1994): 56.

to beg". A Venetian official reported that Spalato's inhabitants "cry out that they are abandoned" and as a result "have various seditious ballads always in their mouth [...] which they sing at night, under our very palace windows".⁴⁰

Venice's Dalmatian subjects at the end of the sixteenth century were also deeply exasperated by "Venice's careful relations with the Ottomans" and with its failure to defend and preserve the well-being of the region. This was exacerbated by perceptions of Venetian mismanagement and administrative abuses, which many held responsible for the region's decline and collective despair.⁴¹ The Dalmatian nobility, particularly in Spalato, were sympathetic toward the Austrian Habsburgs because they "had been divested of their former political power and economic fortunes" and saw their opportunities blocked by Venice.⁴² In short, to many Dalmatians Venice seemed more interested in keeping the peace with the Ottomans and profiting from commerce, rather than addressing its own subjects' difficult circumstances.⁴³

On the Ottoman side there were parallel frustrations. The barren hinterland beyond the coastal regions "was incapable of supporting its population and economic pressures" gave rise to widespread and generalized banditry on the frontier.⁴⁴ Following Lepanto, the area was divided into two *sanjaks*, which were local administrative subdivisions of a larger Ottoman province, or *eyalet*, of Bosnia. The result of this reorganization, as Ottoman officials themselves complained, was that the region "began to decline, and to deteriorate", which created "a thousand bad effects, where before there was no problem whatsoever". No longer able to support themselves on the income from the divided region, the *sanjakkbegs* became more aggressive in their extractions. This led to a chain reaction: "Unable to tolerate or put up with the tyranny of these *sanjakkbegs*, the inhabitants either rebelled or fled the sultan's lands", which resulted in tax collection plummeting. The officials imposed heavier burdens on those who remained, going "from villa to villa" seizing large quantities of wheat, animals, butter and honey with no payment, which they in turn sold, and holding peasants prisoner to extort money from them. The situation reached such a low point that several minor Ottoman officials wrote to the Venetian Senate requesting its intervention on their behalf, otherwise "this land will descend into

⁴⁰ John G. Wilkinson, *Dalmatia and Montenegro* (London: John Murray, 1848), vol. 2, 335–37.

⁴¹ Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj*, 26–29, 77.

⁴² Zlatar, *Between the Double Eagle and the Crescent*, 91–92; Michael Knapton, "Tra Dominante e dominio (1517–1630)", in *La Repubblica di Venezia nell'età moderna*, eds. Gaetano Cozzi and Michael Knapton, vol. 2 (Turin: UTET, 1992), 382.

⁴³ Tolomeo, "La fortezza di Clissa", 46.

⁴⁴ Rothenberg, "Christian Insurrections in Turkish Dalmatia", 138.

complete misfortune [...] and all the inhabitants of the [sultan] will abandon the region, and will move elsewhere”.⁴⁵ This local discontentment fit into a wider pattern of dissatisfaction and resentment throughout the empire towards what were broadly perceived as increasingly distant sovereigns, evidenced in the recurring uprisings throughout the Balkans,⁴⁶ and most notably in the Celali revolts that raged in the Anatolian heartland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁴⁷

Against this troubled backdrop, Dalmatia’s inhabitants, regardless of religion or ruler, articulated their dissatisfaction through various “languages of the unheard”, from open revolt to attempts to elicit outside intervention.⁴⁸ In 1544, for example, a Franciscan from Spalato claiming connections with Ottoman guards garrisoned in Clissa, contacted the Habsburg ambassador in Venice, but before anything developed, the soldiers were removed.⁴⁹ In 1580, and again in 1586, a Franciscan from Trau, “claiming to represent a dissident group in Dalmatia”, sought assistance from the emperor in return for delivering Clissa to imperial control. In 1583 Clissa was attacked by Venetian subjects, which generated “much anxiety” among Venice’s ruling elite, who sent “reinforcements to Dalmatia and decreed heavy penalties against Venetian subjects implicated in the raid”.⁵⁰ Much more frequently, however, misery, desperation and rage were manifested through acts of theft, violence and flight, forms of what James Scott has described as “weapons of the weak”, which were endemic on the frontier.⁵¹

The most notable expression of this was the Uskok phenomenon. Deriving from the from a Slavic verb meaning to jump over or to cross, Uskoks were refugees or exiles who traversed the region’s boundaries.⁵² Rather than a distinct ethnicity, they

⁴⁵ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 609 (ex. 922), 4 January 1598 (*more veneto*).

⁴⁶ Dorothy M. Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk: A Pattern of Alliances, 1350–1700* (New York: AMS Press, 1976 [1954]), 218.

⁴⁷ Kemal Karpat, “The Stages of Ottoman History: A Structural Comparative Approach”, in *The Ottoman State and its Place in World History*, ed. Kemal Karpat (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 97–98.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 119.

⁴⁹ Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Efficacy of Ottoman Counter-Intelligence in the 16th Century”, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 65 (2012): 11.

⁵⁰ Rothenberg, “Christian Insurrections in Turkish Dalmatia”, 139–41.

⁵¹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁵² Maria Pia Pedani, *In nome del Gran Signore: inviati ottomani a Venezia dalla caduta di Costantinopoli alla guerra di Candia* (Venice: Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Venezia, 1994), 179; Gunther E. Rothenberg, “Venice and the Uskoks of Senj, 1537–1618”, *Journal of Modern History* 33 (1961): 148; Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj*, 51–88.

were a disparate and fluid community of people who came from across the Venetian, Ottoman and Habsburg Balkans.⁵³ Their base was in Segna, in Habsburg territory, and while nominally in the service of the emperors in Vienna, they primarily served their own ends. For several decades the Uskoks seriously disrupted trade and shipping in the Adriatic quite indiscriminately, and were heavily involved in the slave trade. Ottomans (including Christians) were their primary target, but Venetians and Ragusans were also considered fair game because of their close relations with the sultans. The Uskoks “enjoyed great popularity” and support from the Christian population throughout the region.⁵⁴ For Venice, the Uskoks were “thieves by nature”, to the Ottomans they represented the most “detested of the ‘infidel bandits’”.⁵⁵

Given the persistently volatile situation in Dalmatia, it is no surprise that the Venetian *Signoria* viewed the taking of Clissa as a revolt against itself as much as an attack on the Ottomans. Venice was well aware of both its own subjects’ discontent and the interest of the papacy and the Habsburgs in fomenting dissent and disruption in the hope that this would lead to a general Christian revolt in the Balkans.⁵⁶ Pope Clement VIII was full of crusading zeal and entertained hopes that the Balkans might be the tinder box where Christian passions might be enflamed to mobilize collective action against the sultans. Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II entertained a sense of mission vis-à-vis the Ottomans and hoped to weaken their position on his southern borders, but realized that he was not powerful enough to accomplish this on his own.⁵⁷ Venetian officials thus actively worked to neutralize the imperial and papal machinations, to assuage the angry Ottomans and to reassert authority among their restive subjects.

⁵³ John V. A. Fine Jr., *When Ethnicity Did Not Matter in the Balkans: A Study of Identity in Pre-Nationalist Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slavonia in the Medieval and Early-Modern Periods* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 216–19.

⁵⁴ Tea Perinčić, “The Slave Trade on the Adriatic in the 17th Century”, *Miscellanea Hadriatica et Mediterranea* 1 (2013): 112.

⁵⁵ ASV, Proveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 27 May 1596; Kafadar, “Evilya Çelebi in Dalmatia”, 65.

⁵⁶ Rothenberg, “Christian Insurrections in Turkish Dalmatia”, 136.

⁵⁷ Zlatar, *Between the Double Eagle and the Crescent*, 81–89; Robert J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World: A Study in Intellectual History 1576–1612* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 24, 75–78; Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Austrian Military Border in Croatia, 1522–1747* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), 58–59; Jan P. Niederkorn, *Die europäischen Mächte und der Lange Türkenkrieg Kaiser Rudolfs II. (1593–1606)* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1993), 85–86.

Habsburg and Venetian Manoeuvres

It only took a few days for the news of Clissa's capture to reach Venice, where the Senate and *Signoria* responded immediately with a flurry of correspondence to key officials. The newly elected *Provveditore Generale in Dalmazia ed Albania*, Benetto Moro, was ordered to depart "immediately" for Dalmatia to supervise the Venetian response and to ensure "the security of public affairs in that province".⁵⁸

When he arrived in Zara on 23 April, Moro was warned that his presence in Spalato might exacerbate the volatile situation there, and so he delayed his transfer for several days. When he did finally take up residence, he and other top Venetian officials were deeply uncertain about the course of action to pursue, particularly in relation to Venice's own subjects, whom they feared might revolt, flee, or join the imperial forces gathering to relieve Clissa. Moro reported that the region was "greatly distanced from the faith and love that used to exist towards" Venice, and that now almost everyone favoured the Habsburgs. Many subjects had fled to the mountains upon his arrival and he was convinced that "the whole province would rise up" if he were too aggressive or heavy-handed. Anonymous placards posted in Zara declaring "Viva, Viva, Viva Clissa and those who hold it" underlined the challenge Moro faced.⁵⁹

As rumors of an imminent Habsburg intervention grew, Venetian subjects continued to lend their support to the besieged defenders of Clissa. For instance, the cook from a monastery in Trau removed his tunic and joined several Venetian sailors and a soldier, while the "greater part" of a relief force that broke through to the fortress with provisions were Venetian subjects led by a captain formerly in Venetian service.⁶⁰ According to Moro, "everyone" in the region felt "enormous happiness" at the success of this mission: the churches were open all night, "crowded with all the *popolo*, who pray with bare knees on the ground [...] that the Clissa affair turns out favorably".⁶¹

Paralleling suspicions about their subjects, Venetian officials also harboured doubts about the loyalty of their own military forces, which included numerous Albanians, Croats and Italians. A majority were from Polizza and thus Ottoman subjects, although they were in Venetian service. To further complicate matters, many men from the region of Polizza played an important early role in defending

⁵⁸ ASV, Senato deliberazioni, Costantinopoli, b. 9, 13 April 1596.

⁵⁹ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 24 April 1596, 27–28 April 1596, 27 May 1596.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1596, 26 May 1596.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1596.

Clissa against their Ottoman lords, following the initial seizure of the fortress in April. As a result, Moro preferred not to entrust them with any “very important” duties. The many Venetian “Croat” subjects serving in the fleet were similarly suspect, “because of the relationship that they have with the Uskoks”, which convinced Moro that he could not “trust them, or utilize them”.⁶² Thus, Venice’s military strength was deeply compromised because of the disrupted situation on the frontier.

Part of the fear of a popular uprising was due to the fact that from the outset of the crisis Venetian officials worked closely with the Ottomans to resolve the situation quickly and cleanly. This fit squarely with the longstanding Veneto-Ottoman policy of working together to preserve the *bona pace* in Dalmatia. So for example, the Venetians provided critical logistical assistance. When the Ottomans initially besieged Clissa, they suffered from a severe shortage of provisions. In order “to be good neighbors with the Turks, and so that they know that in all things [Venice] had no knowledge of the taking of Clissa”, Moro permitted them to buy “wine, figs, carob and rice” in Spalato. He also provided an armed escort to accompany them back to their camps.⁶³ It was also whispered that Venice had secretly supplied the Ottomans “with a great quantity of barrels of powder”.⁶⁴ When the Clissa affair was finally resolved, the Ottoman military leaders openly acknowledged that Venetian officials had done everything necessary to “faithfully preserve the good peace” with the sultan.⁶⁵

Veneto-Ottoman collaboration also involved information sharing. When rumours of a conspiracy against Clissa began circulating in 1595, Venetian officials in Dalmatia warned their Ottoman counterparts.⁶⁶ During the siege, when Moro was informed that several Uskok ships “loaded with provisions to succor Clissa” had landed near Spalato, he “decided immediately to send a person directly to Salona [Solin] to warn the Turks to be vigilant”.⁶⁷ The collaboration also carried over to the Ottoman capital: in Istanbul Bailo Marco Venier worked closely with Grand Vizier Damat İbrahim Pasha to resolve the thorny situation in Dalmatia with minimal harm to Veneto-Ottoman relations. To accomplish this, the two

⁶² Ibid., 2 May 1596; Tolomeo, “La fortezza di Clissa”, 48.

⁶³ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 23 Apr 1596, 2 May 1596.

⁶⁴ ASV, Senato dispacci, Roma, b. 37, fol. 216r–18v, 8 June 1596.

⁶⁵ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 6 May 1596.

⁶⁶ ASV, Cariche da mar, Processi, b. 8, 13–17 April 1596.

⁶⁷ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 26 April 1596.

consulted an Ottoman “image of the gulf badly painted by hand” to get a sense of the situation in the region.⁶⁸

The most consequential Venetian effort was establishing a blockade to prevent any attempts to reinforce or re-provision the rebels at Clissa. As soon as word of Clissa’s fall reached Rome, the crusading pope, Clement VIII, ordered provisions and munitions sent from Ancona, and Giovanni Alberti requested that the pope intervene so that Venice would not “impede the assistance and provisions” coming by sea.⁶⁹ Instead, the Venetian Senate “explicitly ordered” that no assistance be given to the defenders and directed Moro to blockade the coastal areas around Spalato “to impede the navigation of the Uskoks” and prevent anyone coming by sea from relieving or joining the defenders of Clissa.⁷⁰ Some in “influential quarters” in Venice even advocated direct military intervention to restore the fortress to Ottoman rule, leading to familiar and not entirely inaccurate accusations that Venice, “the Turk’s Courtesan”,⁷¹ as the Republic was widely known, was guilty “of outright collaboration with the common enemy of Christendom”.⁷² Indeed, in the early stages of the siege the grand vizier offered to put the Ottoman fleet under Venetian control in order to expand the blockade and strengthen Venice’s ability to control navigation in the Adriatic.⁷³

While not watertight, the blockade ultimately proved effective. When the viceroy of Naples, for example, dispatched a “royal frigate” with letters regarding provisions he intended to send to Clissa, it “was taken by a galley of the Republic” and all its men “put to the oar”.⁷⁴ When Georg Lenkovich, the Habsburg commander of Croatia, set out to relieve Clissa on 19 May, he was delayed almost an entire week by “disasters on the sea” and the Venetian blockade.⁷⁵ In

⁶⁸ ASV, Senato dispacci, Costantinopoli, b. 43, fol. 271r–72v, 13 June 1596; *ibid.*, fol. 204r–v, 19 May 1596; ASV, Senato dispacci, Roma, b. 37, fol. 143v–44v, 27 April 1596.

⁶⁹ ASV, Senato deliberazioni, Roma, ordinaria, r. 11, fol. 16r, 20 April 1596; Horvat, *Monumenta historiam Usocchorum*, vol. 1, 94, letter from Giovanni Alberti to Clement VIII, 10 April 1596.

⁷⁰ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 6 May 1596; ASV, Senato deliberazioni, Roma, ordinaria, r. 11, fol. 22r–v, 10 May 1596.

⁷¹ Lucette Valensi, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 20.

⁷² Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj*, 28, 48, 107; Rothenberg, “Christian Insurrections in Turkish Dalmatia”, 144–46; Horvat, *Monumenta historiam Usocchorum*, vol. 1, 102, Hieronimo Pavon to Nicola Alberti, 20 April 1596.

⁷³ ASV, Senato dispacci, Costantinopoli, b. 43, fol. 271r–72v, 13 June 1596.

⁷⁴ ASV, Senato dispacci, Roma, b. 37, fol. 216r–18v, 8 June 1596.

⁷⁵ Vjekoslav Klaić, *Povijest Hrvatâ od najstarijih vremena de svršetka XIX stoljeća* (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1981), vol. 5, 525.

the aftermath of the recapture of the fortress, Lenkovich claimed that his relief effort was doomed when the Venetian *Capitano del Golfo* warned the Ottomans of his coming with three cannon shots.⁷⁶ While this was publicly denied by the Venetians, in private, the Ottoman commander acknowledged that the recovery of the fortress had been made possible, at least in part, by unspecified Venetian “actions”.⁷⁷ In his own analysis, the Venetian commander Moro contended that the blockade both hindered relief from reaching Clissa and prevented the Dalmatian revolt against Venice from spreading. Indeed, he believed that “without a doubt” the people of Spalato would have rebelled and “plant[ed] the imperial standards on the city’s towers”, were it not for Venice’s decisive actions.⁷⁸

The popular uprising *manqué* was central to the ultimate failure of the conspirators to hold Clissa. They assumed that the capture of the most important Ottoman fortress on the frontier would encourage oppressed Christians to revolt and drive off their Ottoman and Venetian overlords and that this would quickly spread throughout the Balkans and perhaps into the heartland of the empire itself.⁷⁹ While many in the region supported the capture of Clissa and even joined the fray, others “vehemently criticized” the conspirators’ actions as being disruptive to the social and political order or to the fragile economies of the region, while many others simply lay low waiting to see how the situation would play out. The end result was that the hoped-for general uprising never materialized.⁸⁰

The failure of the uprising to materialize was crucial to Lenkovich’s unsuccessful attempt to relieve the fortress on 27 May. He had been convinced that the Ottoman Christian *vlachs* would turn on their Muslim masters, and thus made the fatal decision to immediately attack the besieging Ottoman forces head on, despite a fifteen to one disparity in numbers. For a time the *vlachs* did in fact hold back, waiting to see “which direction the victory swung”. But seeing the tide turning against the small imperial force and being unwilling to imperil their status with the Ottomans, the *vlachs* began rolling stones onto the imperial force, and with their arquebuses made “a horrible massacre”. This proved pivotal in what quickly turned into an Habsburg rout.⁸¹

⁷⁶ ASV, Senato dispacci, Roma, b. 37, 8 June 1596, fol. 216r–18v.

⁷⁷ ASV, Senato dispacci, Costantinopoli, b. 43, fol. 310r, 21 June 1596.

⁷⁸ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 3 June 1596.

⁷⁹ Zlatar, *Between the Double Eagle and the Crescent*, 92.

⁸⁰ Knapton, “Tra Dominante e dominio”, 382; Rothenberg, *The Austrian Military Border*, 60–61.

⁸¹ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 27 May 1596; Lazzaro Soranzo, *L’Ottomanno*, 4th ed. (Naples: Stamperia Porta Reale, 1600), 108–81; Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, 5.

In the final stages and aftermath of the siege, the leader of the conspiracy, Giovanni Alberti, was killed in battle trying to rally his hunger-weakened troops.⁸² The Venetians punished some of their subjects and the clergy who had participated in the affair, largely as a show to mollify the Ottomans when they discovered how important the involvement of Venetian subjects had been to the whole enterprise.⁸³ In general, however, Moro thought it wise “to correct [the people] as a pious father, rather than castigate them as a severe judge”, given the still volatile situation in Dalmatia.⁸⁴ For the Ottomans, the successful recapture of Clissa unsurprisingly was not celebrated publicly in any fashion.⁸⁵ They too settled a number of scores: the *sanjak* of Clissa was sacked and the Polizza region was raided to punish the families of the men who had participated in the conspiracy.⁸⁶ These Venetian and Ottoman actions, combined with the unresolved issues that had inspired the uprising in the first place, not unexpectedly served to radicalize many more people in the region, who fled to join the Uskoks in Segna, intent on seeking revenge. This ensured that many of the same issues that produced the Clissa affair would continue to plague the region.⁸⁷ Indeed, less than a year later, another plan to recapture Clissa materialized, but was cut short when a local Venetian official warned an Ottoman counterpart.⁸⁸

Conclusion

The famed capture, siege and ultimate loss of the fortress of Clissa at the confluence of the Habsburg, Venetian and Ottoman Mediterranean in the spring of 1596 is usually portrayed as a minor, but symbolically potent event in the age-old ‘clash of civilizations’, often cloaked in heavily proto-nationalist garb.⁸⁹ There is ample documentary evidence of the ways in which contemporaries availed themselves of religious rhetoric and imagery in representing the recurring conflicts along the Dalmatian frontier, the *triplex confinium*, where the political boundaries of the three major eastern Mediterranean empires intersected. The actual situation

⁸² “Relatione del’infelice avvenimento”, vol. 1, 251–52; Minuccio Minucci, *Historia Degli Uscochi Scritta da Minvicio Minvici Arcivescovo di Zara* (Venice: Roberto Meietti, 1683), 60.

⁸³ ASV, Senato deliberazioni, Costantinopoli, b. 9, 6 July 1596.

⁸⁴ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 27 June 1596; *ibid.*, 30 May 1596.

⁸⁵ ASV, Senato dispacci, Costantinopoli, b. 43, fol. 302v–3r, 15 June 1596.

⁸⁶ ASV, Provveditori di terra e mar, b. 266 (ex. 417), 4 July 1596; ASV, Senato mar, b. 56, fol. 67v–68r, 19 July 1596.

⁸⁷ Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, vol. 5, 526; Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 340.

⁸⁸ Malcolm, *Agents of Empire*, 411.

⁸⁹ See for example, Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 2–3; Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, vol. 5, 523.

on the ground, however, was much more subtly shaded than allowed for by the stark *chiaroscuro* of this traditional representation. The actual borders were ill-defined and widely ignored by the region's inhabitants, who shared a fluid cross-border culture that withstood all attempts to sketch out clear cut political or religious lines of demarcation. This is evident in the mix-and-match composition of Muslim, Christian, Ottoman, Habsburg and Venetian conspirators who initially captured Clissa, as well as the equally grab-bag character of the several military forces involved in the siege, from the nominally Habsburg Uskoks to the Ottoman *vlachs* to the Venetian subjects of the *Sottovento*. It is similarly manifest in the collaboration between Venetian and Ottoman officials in Dalmatia, Venice and Istanbul, to return the frontier to the desired peaceful status quo. The roots of the Clissa affair are better understood not as primarily religious in nature, the opening salvo in a new crusade as the conspirators and their allies attempted to depict the event, but rather as another in a long series of revolts and frontier disruptions growing out of the deeply-rooted economic and political tensions between imperial centres and the distant peripheries of the Venetian and Ottoman composite states, linked to the significant political, economic and social changes that affected the Mediterranean and the Adriatic during the latter part of the sixteenth century.