

**GREANEY, Michael D. *Ten Battles Every Catholic Should Know*.
Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2018, xiii+262p. ISBN: 978-1-5051-1020-3.**

Military historian Michael D. Greaney's new book aims "to tell the story of the struggle between the Ottoman Turks and the forces of Christendom" (xii), by narrating ten important – albeit some, lesser known – battles in Central and Eastern Europe that had a profound impact on the history of the region, and the future of Europe.

In his well-researched and detailed narrations of these ten battles the author clearly points out the aggressive expansionist impetus of the Ottoman Empire and the great threat it posed to the existence of Christian Civilization in Europe throughout the period.

The author dedicates one chapter, respectively, to eight of these ten battles, each representing turning points in the conflict, and two chapters to two of the most famous: Malta and Lepanto.

He introduces each battle by giving some historical context regarding the political and military state of the region under attack, and the goal of the invading Turks, and at the end of his colourful narrative of each battle, he provides additional historical notes to facilitate further understanding of the significance of the conflict, the ensuing consequences and the development of military warfare.

The battles are dealt with in chronological order, starting with

Manzikert in Armenia, in 1071, and ending with the siege of Khotin in 1621, covering 550 years of history.

In the limited space of this 262-page book, Greaney manages to provide an overview of each engagement, along with interesting details explaining the difficulties faced by the opposing forces, and the military, socio-political and religious factors that weighed in the outcome.

At first glance, one might be led to think that this book would be only of interest to those drawn to military history, and certainly it is, but in fact, as the introduction points out, the book fills a need to provide some historical understanding for present generations.

Quoting the twentieth century philosopher Georges Santayana: "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it", the publisher then points out that few "even learn enough of the past to remember anything in the first place; cultural illiteracy is almost universal in the West. Consequently, many people are stuck in what Santayana called the 'perpetual infancy' of failing to know either where they came from or where they are going" (ix).

Much of the blame for this "cultural illiteracy" is placed squarely on the shoulders of academia, and is cited as a major reason for the declining interest in

history among Americans. The latter is then posited as one of the main reasons for an underappreciation of what took place in Central and Eastern Europe, and Asia Minor over the course of centuries, leaving a profound impact on these same regions, which have been in the news so much in recent years.

Thus, the argument is made that the book should be of interest to even those outside the “obvious target audience of Catholics Who Want to Know about Famous Battles” (xi). For it provides a socio-political, military and historical overview of a region that was “crucial to preserve Christendom” (xii), and is still relevant today.

The author provides logistical numbers for all of the battles, clearly demonstrating that the defending Christian forces were always outnumbered, often heavily, both in fighting men and ordnance.

However, Greaney makes it clear that their courage was unmatched, particularly evident in the sieges where the losses for the invading Turks were tremendous, even if they managed to prevail. “Neither the Turks nor the Christians, however, counted on the bravado, self-sacrifice and sheer raw courage of one Count Miklós Zrinyi... When Count Zrinyi learned that Süleyman the Magnificent had arrived in camp, he raised a giant crucifix on the highest point of the fortress, where the entire Turkish army could see it...

He also raised a black flag, letting the besiegers know that he and all his men expected to die to the last man before letting the Turks set one foot inside the fortress” (p. 146.148).

One of Greaney’s aims is to provide a more objective view of an epoch and a prolonged conflict often misrepresented in contemporary historical scholarship. “When, after all, was the last time you read anything good about the Crusades?” (p. 52).

Just as the truth about the Crusades has been so distorted in much of contemporary history, so too has the threat posed by the Ottoman Empire to Christian Civilization. “At stake was the survival of Western civilization” (p. 203).

One of the interesting anecdotes provided within the narrative of the second battle at Wallachia, is the truth about the real-life “Dracula”, Count Vlad III of Transylvania, so different from the mythical figure that has come down in history, a creation of “early mass media” (p. 47) as Greaney points out, and later completely fictionalized by means of modern popular culture and cinema.

He ably demonstrates how the use of defamatory propaganda pamphlets were likely used to distort the truth about the Romanian national hero, who himself was “a master of psychological warfare” (p. 44), and who, “unlike other contemporary rulers, seems to have realized the seriousness of the Ottoman

threat and was prepared to take any and all measures to resist it” (p. 35).

As a military historian, Greaney shows how the development of artillery and firearms changed the way wars were fought, and how many of the elements present in the battles narrated, would later become obsolete and ineffective because of these innovations.

As an example, he speaks about the *hussaria*, formed by young nobles. “These ‘Winged Horsemen of the Steppes,’ while they may seem weird or fantastic to modern eyes, were an extremely mobile and devastatingly effective fighting force until the early eighteenth century. This was when improvements in personal firearms, such as the flintlock and rifled barrels, began to give infantry more mobility and greater offensive capability” (p. 262).

Often at the root of the Christian defeats, as Greaney points out throughout the course of his work, is not so much the overwhelming numerical superiority of the invading forces, but rather a lack of unity among the Christian princes, whether due to personal interests, or more often, the discord sown first by the Great Western Schism, and later the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Nevertheless, he clearly shows that even in defeat, the Christian forces demonstrated incredible valour, looking to Christ, as their model and reward. “One professional soldier remarked later

that he had never seen courage to equal it by the men of any nation” (p. 112).

On the other hand, he shows how the Ottoman warriors were “set to die and attain paradise in the arms of beautiful *houris* or live in an orgy of slaughter, looting and rapine” (p. 124).

The Turks also had little regard for human life, whether it be the enemy, or their own forces, willingly sacrificing thousands of lives, “as cannon fodder” to achieve success in their sieges, something unheard of among the Christian armies.

Greaney himself speaks about the difficulty in ascertaining the veracity of all the details of these historical events, due to conflicting or differing accounts, or scarcity of documents. Perhaps, a greater use of historical accounts in original source languages might be of some use to alleviate this problem; although the author does make mention of these original sources in his writing, the selected bibliography cites exclusively English language works.

What stands out in the reading of Greaney’s lively and engrossing account of these battles is the evident religious nature of this centuries-long conflict, so crucial to the survival of Western civilization.

He is not reticent to make reference to such facts as the ending of the siege of Malta on September 8, Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Or the important role of the praying of the Rosary in the victory at the battle of

Lepanto, encouraged by Pope St. Pius V, who remained kneeling in prayer on the day of the battle until he suddenly rose at about four o'clock in the afternoon and ordered the *Te Deum* to be sung in all the Churches of Rome. "Official word only reached Rome by way of Venice two weeks later... and yet the pope knew somehow that his prayers had been answered" (p. 231-232).

He goes on to speak of the role of the praying of the Rosary in other theatres of war right up until Austria after the Second World War, and acknowledges that "such belief is not exactly something conducive to scientific verification" (p. 235). Nevertheless, "every Catholic" should know that, as Judas Maccabeus proclaimed: "victory in war does not depend upon the size of the army, but on strength that comes from Heaven" (3:19).

The author makes passing reference at the end of his work to several battles

that followed Khotin, and suggests they may be the subject of a future volume. It will most certainly be well received by military historians, as well as "every Catholic" and all those "with even a passing interest in history or current events. *For this is a story that continues to unfold today*" (xiii).

This well-researched volume, while appealing to scholars and amateurs of military history, is written in a popular style, with a captivating narrative that is sure to appeal to a much wider audience. It provides a balanced and objective perspective so often lacking in much of the contemporary work in this field, and Catholics are sure to draw much inspiration by the examples of heroes who were willing to sacrifice their lives for the Faith they held dear. It will certainly prompt many to want to read and learn more about a centuries-old conflict whose final chapter is yet to be written.

Brian Murphy