

NUOVA **ANTOLOGIA** 
MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

N. 3
2022

Fascicolo Speciale 1. Luglio 2022
Venetian-Ottoman Wars

EDITED BY STATHIS BIRTACHAS



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare
Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020



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Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma
info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma
www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 978-88-9295-532-5

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On the cover: lantern of an Ottoman galley captured at Lepanto.
Venice, Armory rooms of the Council of Ten at the Doge's Palace.
Topwar.ru website of Vjačeslav Špakovsky.



Venice and the Ottoman Empire as warriors. Source: [Roger PALMER, Earl of Castlemaine], *Das von den Türcken außs äusserst bedrangte, aber: Durch die christliche Waffen der heroischen Republic Venedig außs tapfferst beschützte Candia* [...], Frankfurt, Wilhelm Serlin, 1669.

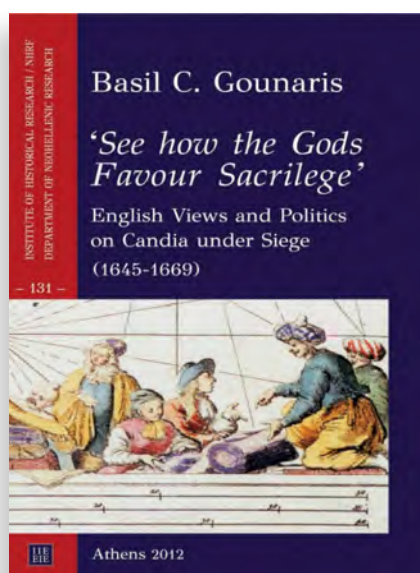


“Oltremarini” (Overseas) Regiments in Venetian service, nicknamed ‘Schiavoni’
(Vinkhuzen Collection, NYPL)

BASIL C. GOUNARIS,

*'See how the Gods Favour Sacrilege'.
English Views and Politics on Candia under Siege
(1645–1669)*

Athens, Institute of History Research / NHRF, Department of Neohellenic Research, 2012, pp. 136.



The author of the book, Basil C. Gounaris, is a Professor of Modern History at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Department of History and Archaeology. His research interests include British policy in the South-eastern Mediterranean from the 17th to the 19th century. A mature researcher of the British historical archives, Gounaris attempts a new approach to the Cretan War (1645–1669), an issue that is long-examined by a number of scholars in various disciplines. Indeed, leaving aside the military operations and the relative literary and historiographical production, as well as the study of the relationship between the two warring powers, Venice and the Ottoman Empire,

or the effects of war on local societies, the book fills an existing research gap: the study of the English views on the Cretan War, based mainly on evidence derived from British diplomatic records.

Thus, the author focuses on the political, economic and diplomatic history of the English monarchy, as well as on its relationship with the Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire during the Cretan War. He analyses the wider political, economic, social, ideological, and religious background of the involved parties, including the way European thought, public opinion and the diplomacy of the era perceived the Ottoman/Islamic image. He emphasizes the fundamental importance of the mercantile and economic conditions prevailing in the Eastern Mediterranean at that time in shaping the policies of the European powers.

The book consists of six chapters. The first chapter («Currants and Malmsey») presents the trade relations between Venice and England during the first decades of the 17th century. The main product that interested the English market was the famous wine of Crete (Malmsey). At the same time, the raisin trade in the Ionian Islands was booming. This commercial activity proved particularly lucrative for the Levant Company, which managed to gain a significant share of the Eastern trade market from the Venetian merchants. The contribution of England to the transport and circulation of these goods in the Mediterranean was also decisive to the detriment of Venetian interests. As for the reception of the Venetians by the English public opinion, it was undoubtedly positive. The *Serenissima* was, in fact, treated with admiration by the English, as it sought to reduce Spanish predominance in the Italian peninsula, and was generally welcomed in Protestant Europe because of its opposition to the Holy See during the Interdict controversy (1605–1607). The translations of Paolo Sarpi's works into English increased Venetian prestige dramatically. Furthermore, the majority of English society considered Venice as the stronghold of Europe in the struggle against the Ottomans. Nevertheless, due to the English activity in the Eastern Mediterranean (for the most part under Ottoman rule), many English merchants formed relations with the Ottomans Empire and traded favorably with them. According to the author, the possibility of making high profits and the multiculturalism of the Mediterranean fascinated and frightened these English merchants at the same time.

The second chapter («Venice between King and Parliament») examines the diplomatic relations between Venice, on the one hand, and the monarch and the

Parliament of England, on the other; relations that had a determinant influence on economic transactions and trade agreements during the English Civil War (1642–1651) and the early years of the Cretan War. In particular, in 1642 the Levant Company Directors sought to persuade Parliament to vote in favor of ceasing raisin imports from the Ionian Sea, as the embargo would force Venice to reduce tariffs and benefit the English economy. If Venice did not bow to pressure, English traders would turn to the Ottoman Peloponnese, which at the time had begun to produce and export raisins. When the resolution was passed by the British Parliament, the Venetian ambassador in London, Giovanni Giustiniani, reacted by trying to convince those involved that England itself would suffer, as its trade with the East would be drastically reduced. Moreover, he turned to the rising Member of Parliament and Trade Commissioner Sir Henry Vane and tried to persuade him to cancel the above Parliamentary procedures. All these efforts were fruitless. Venice's sole hope was the king's veto. The Company Directors, however, wishing to avert any possibility of a veto, determined that the ordinance would be in force for only three years. This was accomplished due to the vulnerability of the central government at that time amidst the turmoil of the English Civil War. Notwithstanding, raisin imports from Venetian territory continued in Royal Bristol in 1643. As noted by Gounaris, despite Venice's support for the English monarch after the Royalists defeat at the Battle of Marston Moore, with the outbreak of the Cretan War (1645) his concern was to secure English ships against Ottoman aggression. He also raised the Ottomans' concerns about a potential partnership between Venice and the English Parliament, promoting the role and the activity of the Company as a clandestine supplier of the *Serenissima*. The king's aim was to further tax the Company's merchants operating in the Ottoman Empire and influencing the revolting Parliament. At the same time, the Parliament rejected Venice's request for the provision of troops and ships. Ultimately, English politics refrained from a direct involvement in the Cretan War, even when Chania and Rethymno were occupied by the Ottomans.

In the third chapter («For Christianity, trade and liberty»), the analysis shifts to the turbulent decade of the “English Republic”, when Oliver Cromwell (1653–1658) and his son Richard (1658–1659) were in power. At the time, the *Serenissima* was trying to promote an anachronistic argument to rally European forces, and of course to draw England into the common struggle against the “infidel” Ottomans: religious identities as a cause of rivalry. However, conditions in Europe after

the Thirty Years' War, the First Anglo–Dutch War (1652–1654) and the Anglo–Spanish War (1654–1660), gave prominence to a kind of English diplomacy, based primarily on its economic interests, which dictated the adoption of a neutral stance on the Eastern Mediterranean front. Although English diplomacy expressed its favor and kinship towards Venice at the first opportunity, both the Company's merchants and the English administration furtively negotiated with the Ottomans. The British were therefore primarily interested in securing their highly lucrative trading activities and free navigation – without the harassment of pirates – in the already war-torn waters of the Eastern Mediterranean. The author points out that of course, for their part, the Venetians always hoped for a diplomatic incident to arise as a consequence of the activity of the Algerian and Tunisian pirates – tacitly tolerated by the Ottomans – to the detriment of English interests in the region, a fact that would force the English to join in the conflict against the Ottomans.

The fourth chapter («A royal arbitration of peace») focuses on the complex and changing diplomatic relations of the tripartite group of England, the Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire, during the period of the restoration of the English monarchy. As mentioned above, although England was sympathetic to Venice, it was not in position to disrupt the policy of neutrality and to openly express a favorable attitude towards it and actively assist it. England's main concern was to protect the English merchant ships from Venetian intrusion (inspections), on the one hand, and from the pirate raids. Consequently, English diplomacy reached an agreement with both powers. The replacement of the English Ambassador at the Sublime Porte Sir Thomas Bendysh by Sir Heneage Finch, Earl of Winchilsea, which was due to the restoration of the English monarchy, affected relations with the Venetian *bailo* in Constantinople. By seeking to mediate between the rival powers, Venice and the Ottoman Empire, and by competing with the latter, Finch jeopardized the English diplomatic policy mentioned earlier and strained the relations of the English Crown with the Venetian *bailo* as well as with the Ottoman authorities. Thus, the already fragile neutrality was at risk of being broken at the first opportunity.

In the fifth chapter («Long rigmaroles of words») Gounaris explains the reasons that eventually led to de-escalation. English diplomatic policy, realistic as it was, became aware of the impasse of the Cretan War and its impending negative outcome for the Venetians; therefore, it sought to negotiate and mediate between

the two long-warring parties at the request of the *Serenissima*. On the other hand, of course, the vague promises made by the English monarch for immediate intervention on the Cretan front in support of the Venetians were unfounded and were merely an effort to impress or even to reassure the monarch's own fears of possible Dutch involvement, which in turn could bring about the involvement of other European forces, such as France. In any case, the end of the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665–1667) combined with pressure from the Levant Company, which was interested in securing its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean basin, forced English diplomacy to remain neutral and conciliatory. This policy was maintained until the fall of Chandax (Candia) and the end of the Cretan War. After the war, England renewed its capitulations with the Ottoman Empire, as well as its intention to maintain good relations with Venice.

The sixth chapter («Religion and state interests»), which essentially summarizes the main argument developed in the previous chapters, emphasizes the interdependence between the religious element and state interests (diplomatic and economic). It is clarified at this point that England, mainly for religious, cultural, and ideological reasons, was unable to proceed to a direct and official partnership with the Ottoman Empire; at the same time, however, its state and commercial interests (namely those of the Levant Company) did not allow England to openly and actively align itself with the Venetian camp. In short, it seems that the economic reasons and conditions that prevailed in the European political scene after the religious wars and the overseas European expansion – practices in which the English were already directly engaged – imposed a more lucid and realistic approach on English diplomacy, free from religious zeal and ideological enthusiasm: from then on, it would not be possible to revive the old crusade of Western Christianity against the “infidels”. On the contrary, a new era of complex, changing and pragmatic diplomatic ventures begun to emerge for the dynastic states of Europe.

The work is accompanied by an extensive bibliography, a summary in Greek and a detailed index of names and thematic terms.

Undoubtedly, the book is a unique contribution and helps to broaden the European perspective on the Cretan War, whose significance for international relations was multifaceted. The primary diplomatic sources from the British state archives (official decrees, committee records, correspondence with the consular



This view of Candia was published by Nicolaes Visscher I (1618–1679). Visscher may have based the print on work by Jan Janssonius (1588–1664).
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

authorities, calendars, etc.), widely used by the author, shed light on the diplomatic processes among London, Venice and Constantinople during the Cretan War, in the context of the english stormy political scene. In addition, attempting to delve into the ideological background and stereotypes related to the religious scope of the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean, which directly or indirectly influenced the policies of the parties involved, the author also examines printed sources that resonated with European public opinion, such as newspapers, novels and literary works in general, etc.

THEOFANIS STOLTIDIS



Icon of the naval Battle of Curzolari (Echinades in Greek) islands, by the Cretan painter Georgios Klontzas, last decades of the 16th century; one of the most famous depictions of the naval Battle of Lepanto in post-Byzantine art. Courtesy of the National Historical Museum, Athens (cat. n. 3578).

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