



News from the Nations— In A.D. 1453

CONSTANTINOPLE FALLS TO THE TURKS

The city of Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Roman Empire for over a thousand years, has fallen to the Ottoman Turks after a six-week siege. The Turkish army greatly outnumbered the forces available to the Emperor Constantine XI Palaeologus, who could only muster about 7,000 men, whereas the Turkish army is estimated to have numbered anything between 100,000 and 150,000. The city did not fall easily, however, for it was defended by massive walls first constructed in the fifth century and regarded as impregnable. The Turks were in the end enabled to capture the city by the carelessness of the defenders who, having unblocked a long-disused sally-port in order to raid the Turkish camp, failed to block it up again or guard it, enabling a contingent of crack Turkish troops to enter the city unknown to the defenders.

Famous names

When he saw that the Turks had gained entry into the city, the Emperor Constantine bravely rushed into the fray on his horse and was killed. He was the eleventh emperor to bear the name Constantine, the first being Constantine the Great, the Roman emperor who founded the city in the year 330. Like the first Constantine, Constantine Palaeologus' mother was named Helena, and the superstitious said that just as the Eastern Roman Emperor began with a Constantine son of Helena so it would end, and so it was. Likewise the Turkish sultan bore a famous name, Mohammed, the name of the seventh-century founder of the religion of Islam which the Turks embraced centuries ago. It was the companions of Mohammed who assembled armies and erupted out of Arabia on a course of conquest that began the process of weakening the Eastern Roman Empire. Now another Mohammed has brought it to an end.

The rise of the Ottomans

The Ottoman Empire began as a small principality in north-west Asia Minor, established by a branch of the nomadic Turks from Central Asia, who were driven to move there from further east by the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. The empire is reckoned to have begun with the rule of a chieftain called Osman or Othman (the origin of the name 'Ottoman') and it steadily expanded from its original small territory both eastwards and westwards. It first expanded into Europe in 1354 by moving across the Dardanelle Straits and taking Gallipolis, which became the base for taking over the entire Balkan area during the next century, leaving Constantinople as a mere city state. The conquest of Constantinople was inevitable, and students of the book of Revelation have long looked to the Ottomans as being the power spoken of in the sixth trumpet judgement of Revelation 9, the Turkic peoples originating from the east, beyond the river Euphrates. The question is, where will these conquests stop? Eastern Europe is divided, and with no strong power to resist them the Turks could soon become a threat to the Holy Roman Empire. Looking in the other direction, expansion east and south into Syria, Palestine and Egypt also seems likely.

The Turks' decisive weapon

Despite the overwhelming numerical supremacy of the Turks, they were expected to have a lot more difficulty in capturing Constantinople than they did, because of the strength of the city's immense fortifications. Although in the end they got into the city because of the carelessness of the defenders, the decisive factor in their success was their use of the relatively new weapon of gunpowder. Gunpowder seems to have been brought into the Middle East and Europe from China, and was first used in weapons over a hundred years ago. The siege of Constantinople was the first occasion when it played a decisive part in achieving victory. The Turks had no fewer than sixty-two cannons lined up against the city, one so big that it took fifty oxen to pull it into place; the Byzantines had only limited armaments. Cannonballs weighing up to 200 pounds were hurled at the walls. The constant need to repair the walls wore the defenders down, too few in any case to man the walls properly. The cannon are being seen as the fulfilment of the enigmatic reference in the sixth trumpet prophecy to horses from whose mouths issue fire, smoke and brimstone.

Idols no help

Apart from a period of about fifty years in the eighth century, images of the saints have been widely revered and worshipped in Constantinople. Whenever the city has been under threat, it has appealed to the saints for help, especially the Virgin Mary, whose image has more than once been paraded on the walls. However, the saints failed to stop the city from being captured, not surprisingly since they are dead in their graves. A few days before the city was taken, the most precious icon of the Virgin Mary was carried through the streets. When it slipped from the platform on which it was carried, this was widely regarded as an evil omen, and this was reinforced by the outbreak of a violent thunderstorm, causing the procession to be abandoned. The next day the streets of the city were shrouded in thick fog, unprecedented for the end of May. Nevertheless on the Sunday before the city was captured two days later, the people paraded through the city, carrying every image they could lay hands on, and offered prayers for deliverance, while the church bells rang out. It was, of course, all to no avail; God had decreed that this last vestige of the Roman Empire should come to an end, its saint worship and veneration of icons being stated in Revelation 9:20 as being a major cause of God's judgements coming upon it. Thus ended an empire that had dominated the area of the Eastern Mediterranean for centuries.

End to hope of church unity

The fall of Constantinople has put an end to hopes of reuniting the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches. The two churches officially split in 1054 over the question of whether the Holy Ghost proceeded from both the Father and the Son (the Catholic view) or from the Father only (the Orthodox view). In practice the two churches were already divided over the authority of the pope, with the pope being accepted as supreme by Roman Catholics, and church councils as supreme by the Orthodox. Other issues have divided the two churches; for example, married men cannot become Roman Catholic priests whereas they can become Orthodox priests. Talks between the two churches were commenced some years ago at Ferrara in Italy, ending in the signing of a Decree of Union in 1438, accepted by all the Orthodox prelates attending except the Archbishop of Ephesus. However, the lower ranks of clergy were not happy with it and to all intents and purposes the attempt at union failed. Now that the headquarters of the Orthodox Church has been taken over by a Moslem power, it is felt there is little prospect of resuming talks. The Orthodox Church itself has in any case effectively split, for five years ago the Russian Orthodox believers declared themselves to be a separate church, with Moscow as the 'third Rome' (Constantinople, of course, being the second). This is part of moves by this immense country to develop itself into an important power.

What's going on at Mainz?

Stories are coming out of the German city of Mainz that a revolutionary new invention is soon to be launched upon the world by Johann Gutenberg, a goldsmith by trade. Gutenberg, and his assistant Peter Schoeffer, are working on what is believed to be a device for producing manuscripts in quantities, rather than having to be copied one at a time by hand. The device is understood to involve producing the letters of the alphabet in metal so that when soaked with ink they can be impressed upon paper to produce copies of the letters. Whole books can be set up in this way, page by page, and many copies then produced. Gutenberg is believed to be intending to produce copies of the Latin Bible by this means, thus enabling people to read the Bible for themselves, though this is something the Church is understood not to be keen on. We wonder why. Is it because there is fear that people will then be able to see for themselves that much of its teaching and practice is not found in the Bible?

PROBLEMS FOR THE JEWS IN SPAIN

When Spain was largely ruled by Moslems, the Jews tended to do quite well, often rising to important positions. Now that Moslem rule is restricted to the small kingdom of Granada in the south, things are not so rosy. In the largest Christian kingdom in Spain, Castile, things remained favourable for the Jews under the king's chamberlain, Alvaro de Luna, until four years ago riots broke out in Toledo over his policy of tolerance. King John II, a weak monarch, arrested de Luna and put him on trial. He has now been executed. In the meantime prominent Jews have had their houses burnt down and their possessions looted. Others have been brought to court and executed, even in cases where they have embraced Christianity. All this does not augur well for the many thousands of Jews still residing in Spain.