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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE OTTOMAN CONQUEST OF THE BALKAN IN THE 14<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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#### Abstract

The Ottomans first made an appearance in the Balkan region after John Kantakouzenos requested Sultan Orhan I's assistance to win the Byzantine throne. During their later assistance, the Ottomans acquired Fort of Tzympe in Gallipoli as their base in the Balkan region. After the annexation of Gallipoli city, the Ottomans affirmed their intention to expand their territory westward that, in less than half of a century, they subjugated almost the entire Balkan region. The objective of this study is to analyse contributory factors for the achievement of the Ottoman conquest and expansion in the Balkans in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This study applied historical approach and content-analysis method. This study discovered that the factors contributing to the achievement of the Ottoman rapid conquest and expansion in the Balkan in the 14<sup>th</sup> century are complex in that the weakening state of Balkan kingdoms, which has often been pointed out, is not the exclusive reason. Apart from the weakness of the Balkan's political state, other factors include the absence of military assistance from the neighbouring kingdom to the Balkan rulers in fighting the Ottoman Empire, the strategic location of the Ottoman Empire providing abundant human resources close to the Balkans, the Ottoman military prowess including the high morale of the Ottoman army, the ingenuity of the Ottoman sultans who acted as military commanders in devising conquest and expansion strategy, the Ottoman method of conquest which ensured the continuous obedience of the Balkan region under Ottoman rule and the inclination of the Balkan people towards the Ottoman-Islamic rule rather than the Western-Catholic rule.

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#### Introduction:-

According to Filiposki (2016), "The fourteenth century is the time of many important developments in Balkan history. But One can rightfully say that the century was foremost marked by the Ottoman conquest." The emergence of the Ottomans in the Balkan region emanated from John Kantakouzenos' request to Sultan Orhan I (r. 1324-1362) to aid him in his civil war against John V Palaiologos. Hence, in 1345, the Ottomans crossed to Europe for the first time (Wittek, 2012). In the summer of 1346, John Kantakouzenos confirmed his alliance with the Ottoman Empire

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by marrying his daughter, Theodora, to Sultan Orhan I to fortify the agreement for further assistance. Since then, the Ottoman frequently crossed over to the Balkan region assisting John Kantakouzenos even after he was crowned as the senior emperor of the Byzantine Empire in 1347. Following their assistance in 1352, the Ottomans acquired the Fort of Tzympe. This acquisition affirmed their resolution to conquer the Balkan region. Nevertheless, it was during the annexation of Gallipoli city fortress in 1354 that the Ottomans determine to stay and expands their empire in the Balkan region. Thenceforward, in less than 50 years, the Ottoman expanded their territory starting with the Byzantine territory then advancing to the Bulgarian Kingdom and the Serbian Kingdom territories until the Balkan region almost came completely under their rule by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The wide spread of the Ottoman domination in the Balkans in the 14<sup>th</sup> century inspired this study to analyse factors contributing to their achievement in the realm of conquest and expansion in the region during the said period.

### **Historical Background: The Ottoman Conquest and Expansion in the Balkans throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> Century**

The Ottoman conquest and expansion in the Balkans in the 14<sup>th</sup> century began during the reign of Sultan Orhan I (r. 1324-1362) in 1354 after the occupation of Gallipoli and continued under the rule of Sultan Murad I (r. 1362-1389) and lasted until the reign of Sultan Bayezid I (r. 1389-1403) rule. In the beginning, the Ottoman conquest and expansion activity focusing on legitimizing their previously conquered lands in Thrace to strengthen their foothold in the Balkan region. After a treaty was sealed by the Byzantine emperor in 1356, recognizing the previously captured Thracian lands under the Ottoman dominion, a military action penetrated deeper into eastern Thrace led by Prince Sulayman. Yet this action ceased prematurely in 1357 according to Inalcik (1978). In 1359, the Ottoman conquest and expansion activity resumed under the leadership Prince Murad where the Ottoman conquered Demotika (March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1361) and Adrianople (later known as Edirne) in November 1361 (Inalcik, 1978; Babinger 1991).

The Ottoman conquest and expansion activity escalated after Prince Murad was crowned as sultan in 1362. According to Agoston (2009), during the reign of Sultan Murad I, the Ottoman Empire had almost tripled its territories from 29,000 square miles to 100,000 square miles during his rule. During his reign, the Ottoman continued dominating the entire Thrace gradually through military expeditions from 1363 until 1369. Some of the cities surrendered peacefully to the Ottomans. By 1370, the Ottomans almost conquered eastern Thrace and cities around Constantinople completely.

The Ottoman faced their first resistance from the Balkan states during the reign of Sultan Murad I. In 1371, Despot Ugljesa, the Lord of Serres and his brother, Despot Vukasin, the Lord of Prilep and co-ruler of the Serbian Kingdom marched with 60,000 men to siege Edirne (Gulen, 2010). This huge force successfully was defeated by a small group of *akincis* (raiders or light cavalry unit) led by Hacı İlbeği near the river of Maritsa where the Serbian force camped. This resulted in the mass submission of the Balkan magnates to the Ottoman Empire especially Marko, the son of Despot Vukasin who submitted shortly after his father's death, and the Byzantine Emperor John V who became an Ottoman vassal around 1372 or 1373. In 1372, the Ottomans continued their conquest towards Vardar and advanced to raid Bosnia, Albania, and Greece.

The Ottoman advanced deeper into Bulgarian territory forcing the Bulgarian new emperor of Tarnovo, Tsar Ivan Shishman, to accept Ottoman vassalage in 1374. In 1383 while marching to siege Thessaloniki, who then surrendered in 1387, the Ottoman conquered Serres under the commander of Çandarlı Kara Halil Hayreddin Pasha (Agoston, 2009). In the same year, Sultan Murad I subdued Sofia. After that, he advanced to Nis and conquered the city which compelled Prince Lazar to accept the Ottoman vassalage. Prince Lazar later retaliated by disregarding his vassal obligations therefore the Battle of Plocnik broke in 1387 where the Ottoman faced their first defeat at the hand of Serbian force. In 1388, the Ottoman faced another defeat at the hand of the Kingdom of Bosnia but they successfully brought Danubian Plains into submission as well as enforced its ruler, Ivan Stratsimir as a vassal. The Ottomans' defeat inspired Christian kingdoms to form a Christian coalition participated by the Moravian Serbian Kingdom, Kingdom of Bosnia, Bulgaria, Albania, Hungary, and Bohemia in repelling the Ottomans from the Balkan region (Sugar, 1996; Uyar & Erickson, 2009). Hence, Sultan Murad I mobilized his army, and marched towards the coalition army base camp. A fierce battle broke out in Kosovo Polje on June 15, 1389, which cost the life of Sultan Murad I and Prince Lazar.

After the battle of Kosovo concluded, Prince Bayazid, now crowned as Sultan Bayazid I, resumed the conquest and expansion in the Balkan region. Although his reign was brief; from 1389 until 1402; and filled with numerous obstacles, his swiftness in politics and military action made him known as *Yıldırım* (the lightning). By 1392, the

Serbian Kingdom fell completely under the Ottoman supremacy except Bosnia after Prince Stephan Lazar and Vuk Bronkivic submitted to the Ottoman Empire. The Principality of Zeta fell in 1393 after George II Balsic of Zeta became the Ottoman vassal while the invasion of the Ottoman raiders from 1392 into southern Albania effectively with the gradual submission of the southern Albanian lords accepting the Ottoman suzerainty until the land of south Albania came completely under the Ottoman suzerainty in 1398 except the towns along the Adriatic, the Bojana River, and Lake Skadar which was under the domination of Venice (Fine Jr., 1996). Due to Tsar Ivan Shishman treason, Sultan Bayezid enforced direct rule of the Bulgarian Empire of Turnovo in July 1393.

During the winter of 1393-1394, Sultan Bayazid I held a meeting in Serres to settle the matter which arose in Morea. According to Hupchick (2004), in this meeting, Sultan Bayazid I claimed possession of all disputed territories and demanded all the participants to reaffirm their submission. On top of that, the Sultan also enforced Theodore, Lord of Morea, to serve on an expedition with him in Thessaly (Venning, 2006). Hence, Theodore was forced to submit to Sultan Bayazid I and sign over the disputed territories including Argos and Monemvasia, as a proof to reaffirm his vassalage. Theodore however left Sultan Bayezid I in the middle of the expedition to Thessaly and returned to Morea hastily seeking Venetian help in May 1394 to prevent Ottoman's access to the sea with Argos as a compensation (Fine Jr., 1996). The enraged sultan then blockaded Constantinople in the fall of 1394 and launched an attack on Morea (Hupchick, 2004). The Ottoman army marched through Thessaly and annexed the cities along the way to Morea. Some of the city's magnates accepted Ottoman overlordship peacefully. In 1395, the Ottomans under Ghazi Evrenos' leadership began entering Morea. They met Theodore who was invading Corinth, hence the Ottomans defeated Theodore.

Because a battle at Rovine against Wallachians broke out simultaneously, the Ottoman conquest expedition in Morea halted. After the battle concluded, the Ottomans yielded the regions of Constantine (Kumanovo) and Marko (Prilep) whom both got killed in the battle and successfully annexed Dobrudja. Hence, they had full control of eastern Macedonia, Thrace, and Bulgaria except for Vidin province that was a vassal state at that time. Vidin ultimately fell to the Ottoman Empire after the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396 making the Bulgarian territory an Ottoman strategic border in the west. In 1397, when the Ottomans returned to Morea, the expedition was aborted again. The conquest of Morea failed because of the increased tension between Bayezid I and Timur in Asia Minor. It was the final military operation in the Balkans in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Factors Contributing to the Success of the Ottoman Conquest and Expansion**

Historians expressed different opinions on the factors contributing to the success of the Ottoman Empire's conquest and expansion in the Balkans throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> century. While some historians believed that the success of the Ottoman conquest and expansion in the Balkan region was on account of the weakness of the enemies, the factor behind the achievement was manifold. Indeed, right before the emergence of the Ottomans in the Balkans, the political situation in the region was crumbling. After the installation of the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople following the fall of the Latin Empire in 1261, the Byzantine Empire failed to recuperate and experienced a consecutive decline due to the frequent civil wars (Schevill, 1991). The Bulgarian kingdom suffered from political fragmentation through disputes among their nobles (*bolyars*) (Hupchick, 2004). At that time, the Serbian Kingdom rose to become the dominant power in the Balkans surpassing the Byzantine Empire and the Bulgarian Kingdom. Although the Bulgarian political situation recovered later after the enthronement of Ivan Alexander, the civil war in the Byzantine Empire intensified. Next in 1355, Stefan Dushan of Serbia died which extremely weakened the kingdom hence petty states and principalities grew, divided among the nobles. The division of the Bulgarian Kingdom following the death of Ivan Alexander of Bulgaria in 1371 into three political entities (Bulgarian kingdom of Turnovo, Vidin and the state of Dobrudza) also reduced the power of the kingdom. Now both kingdoms "became the scene of prolonged internal conflict" (Sugar, 1996). Due to the deteriorating political situation in the Balkans prevented the formation of anti-Ottoman alliance between these three kingdoms and empire. Thus, this situation was advantageous for the Ottoman conquest and expansion activity throughout the region.

While the situation in the Balkan region was undoubtedly favourable to the Ottoman Empire, Jankovic (1988) added that the desertion of the surrounding Christian kingdoms in support of the Balkans especially the Byzantine Empire who according to Toni Filiposki (2016), "... most responsible for the start of Turkish penetration into the European Continent", who requested for an anti-Ottoman alliance in expelling the Ottoman from the region, allowed the Ottoman conquest and expansion activity to progress steadily in the Balkan region. The Balkan region was surrounded by powerful kingdoms such as Wallachia and the Kingdom of Hungary. Apart from that, the Byzantine Empire held a diplomatic connection with western European kingdoms especially Rome, Italy, with the papacy

hence an aid should be received in repelling the Ottomans in the Balkans as a common enemy. Yet, the Balkans were left alone facing the Ottomans by themselves. Two of several reasons for their abandonment highlighted by Jankovic (1988) were, the other European kingdoms were either preoccupied with their own internal affairs or sought political advantage from the Ottoman-Balkan conflict. The disunity between the Roman Catholic church and the Balkan Orthodox church due to the difference of their doctrine and the failure of seeing the Ottomans as a serious threat sooner because of being blinded by their own personal political interest were among other reasons for the abandonment of the nearby Christian kingdoms leading to the lack of military assistance to the Balkans in their struggle against the Ottomans. Later, when the call for a Christian coalition against the Ottomans in the Balkan region was propagated in 1389 by Prince Lazar and in 1396 by the papacy, it was too late and failed to offset their loss as the Ottomans foundation in the Balkan grew stronger. After the disaster of the 1396 crusade, according to Uyar and Erickson (2009), the call for a crusade against Ottoman halted. This was another factor contributed to the success of the Ottoman conquest expeditions especially from 1354 until 1371.

Fine Jr. (1996) described that the success of the Ottoman conquest and expansion in the region owed to not only the weakness of the opponents but also the geographical location of the Ottoman state itself. The location of the Ottoman state in north-western Anatolia provided two advantages to them. The first advantage was the location was strategic in facilitating the recruitment of new troops especially from amongst Central Asian refugees who migrated into Anatolia after their land was invaded by the Mongol. The second advantage was their location neighbouring the Christian Byzantine territory where holy war often called by the Ottomans against the Christian Byzantine had attracted members of Turkish states who were nomad or semi-nomad warriors that survived through new conquered lands and booty. As most of the Turkish states were neighbouring other Muslim principalities, attacks and looting of other Muslims were loathed as the acts in Islam are sinful. Hence, by joining the Ottoman military service, it permitted them to participate in the Ottoman holy war in Christian territory where they could be bestowed with land and loot the region profusely. As holy war can only be found in northwestern Anatolia against the Byzantine Christians, it enhanced the Ottoman army's fighting spirit as a holy war "promise that those who died in the effort received the immediate reward of everlasting paradise" (Hupchick, 2004). Thus, the geographical location of the Ottoman state as well as the instigation of the holy war which raised their fighting spirit were the main reason for the success of the Ottoman conquest and expansion in the Balkans.

Hupchick (2004) agreed that the spirit of holy war was the vital key in the Ottoman success in conquering and expanding their territory in the Balkan region in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. According to him, "...the Turk warriors' commitment to both holy war and their Ottoman commanders consistently gave them the combat advantage in terms of morale and unity of command (which military experts regard as utterly crucial for battlefield success)" (Hupchick, 2004). He came to this conclusion by comparing to the European army which was composed of the nobles who fought for the compensation they might get, and of the unskilled peasants who fought with unclear reasons. Consequently, he added that given such composition of the European army, it was difficult for the commander in the battlefield to maintain them, to guard or heighten their fighting spirit thus causing the European army to either perish, retreat, or concede to the Ottoman army and lose their territory to the Ottoman Empire. This occurrence could be observed in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. In this battle, both Sultan Murad I and Prince Lazar of the Moravian Serbian Kingdom was killed. According to Filiposki (2016), there are three findings on the outcome of this battle. Filiposki (2016) stated that, "Some of the contemporary sources state that the Serbs won, while the later sources state that it was the Turks who won. However, it is possible that in this battle both sides had significant losses and that the battle remained undecided." By analysing the state of the battlefield, the victory leaned towards the Ottoman army because as Uyar and Erickson (2009) stated that the coalition army retreated from the battlefield "in a disorganized fashion" after the assassination of Prince Lazar while the Ottoman army was still holding the ground. This shown the toughness of the spirit of holy war among the Ottoman army in achieving their goal. Thus, the spirit of holy war became one of the factors of the Ottoman success in conquering and expanding their territory in the Balkans.

Apart from that, Hupchick (2004) uncovered that, the Ottoman achievement on conquest and expansion in the Balkan region without a doubt was connected to the war strategy and tactic of the Ottoman sultans. Antov (2017) supported that by expressing, "That expansion was made possible on account of both the political and territorial fragmentation in the Balkans and specific Ottoman methods of conquest characterized by the careful use and distribution of various military resources, diplomatic skill, and accommodationist policies in the newly conquered territories." Asikpasazade's record on the conquest of Edirne which was analyzed by Inalcik (1978) shows the

capability of Sultan Murad I who was a prince at that time in developing a well-thought-out strategy such as the two-phase assault of Edirne to ensure the conquest of the city.

Inalcik (1954) extensive study on the method of conquest of the Ottoman Empire found that the Ottoman method of conquest was another factor which contributed to the Ottoman success, not only in conquering the Balkan region but also in sustaining the Balkan region under the Ottoman rule. This method of conquest was conducted in two stages. First, the Ottoman would establish some sort of suzerainty over the Balkan states. Papademetriou (2020) explained this method further by stating, "First, they attempted to make the leaders of neighbouring states their vassals, who paid tribute and provided fighting forces. In effect, they reduced the local rulers to tributary subjects, who were thus able to preserve their autonomy and even political and religious identity. If these leaders refused, their territory would be subdued and annexed. After the success of such conquests, which could take years, a few soldiers would be assigned to key garrisons in the conquered territory." This method was mostly seen during the reign of Sultan Murad I where he imposed the title of vassalage to numerous Balkan lords and rulers such as the Byzantine Emperor, the new Despot of Prilep, and the new ruler of the Bulgarian Kingdom of Turnovo. This first stage of conquest was deemed as a traditional method of conquest according to Jefferson (2012).

The second stage was seizing direct control over the vassalage states by eliminating the former ruler (Inalcik, 1954). This stage of conquest is noticeable during the rule of Sultan Bayezid I in the case of Tsar Ivan Shishman's treason against the Ottoman Empire in 1393 where the Ottoman army marched and annexed the Bulgarian Kingdom of Turnovo and executed direct rule over the kingdom. Papademetriou (2020) added, the Ottoman also established direct control by relying on the state's former ruler through the distribution of *timar* holding. Inalcik (1954) explained that the distribution of *timar* holding was in fact another expansion method applied by the Ottoman Empire to secure the conquered territory hence preventing them from breaking away from Ottoman control. The distribution of *timar* holding was to attract and facilitate the gradual process of assimilation of Christian subjects into the Ottoman culture. Hence, the conquest and expansion of the Ottoman Empire were effective and everlasting. Another method used by the Ottomans uncovered by Inalcik (1954) in ensuring the successful conquest and expansion of the Balkan region was by securing the newly conquered territory via deporting the local Christian subjects to Anatolia and emigrating the Muslim Turks into the Balkans through the policy of resettlement. This method is used to reduce and balance the local power and authority thus revolts can be prevented. These two methods described by Inalcik (1954) can be accepted as the third stage of conquest that is incorporating the conquered territory under the Ottoman Empire to sustain the Ottoman authority in the region.

Another contributory factor as noted by Nicolle (2010) was the preference of the majority of Balkan citizens for Ottoman-Islamic authority due to their tolerance and leniency in contrast to Western-Catholic control. Stavrianos (2000) supported that by stating "The atrocities of Hungarian soldiers and the forceful proselytism of Franciscan missionaries prepared many Bulgarians for willing submission to the Turks as the lesser of two evils." The willingness stemmed from the traumatic event experienced by the Bulgarians during the Hungarian occupation. During the Hungarian occupation in Vidin until 1369, King Louis I imposed Catholicism towards the Orthodox Bulgarian population. He requested eight friars of Franciscan missionaries from the monastery of Olovo, Bosnia, to organize this mission (Vasileva 2017). The Franciscan missionaries, according to Vasileva (2017), considered that the Orthodox as a more dangerous enemy than the Muslims. They held a negative and hostile attitude towards the Orthodox believers. As a result, this forced conversion had left a scar in Bulgarian memories thus they inclined to submit to the Ottoman Empire which assisted the Ottoman conquest and expansion in the Balkan region.

The Ottoman military strength, either the size or the armament often associated to the victor of the Ottoman over the enemies, resulted in the acquisition of a new land. This fact was, however, not always relevant during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The Ottoman military strength during this period depended on the ingenious and efficacy of the Ottoman generals and marcher lords in commandeering their army as well as the well experienced army recruits. The size of the Ottoman army did not influence the outcome of the battle, for example as previously mentioned, in the Battle of Maritsa, the Ottoman army who, according to LaonikosChalkokondyles (Kaldellis, 2015), amounted to 800 men successfully defeated the Serbian army of 30, 000 to 60, 000 men during the night attack. While in the battle of Plocnik, although the Ottoman army strength almost equalled the Serbian and Bosnian army, they were heavily assaulted by the Christian alliance and barely able to retreat. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, according to Uyar and Erickson (2009), "... the numerical equality of *Timarli Sipahis* and *Akincis* shows clearly that the *Timarli Sipahi* system was not fully established and that the march lords were still very powerful". Thus, although in the Battle of Maritsa the Ottoman army was far inferior in number than the Serbian army, they successfully neutralized the Serbian army.

Based on Uyar and Erickson (2009) analysis on the Battle of Kosovo, in term of the armament, the Balkan army far superior to the Ottoman army. Referring to the Ottoman expansion history throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman army was defeated only in two major battles which is the Battle of Plocnik and the Battle of Bileca during the Balkan expansion. Hence the Ottoman military strength was not a conclusive factor contributing to the success of the Ottoman expansion in the Balkans in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

### Conclusion:-

The Ottoman conquest and expansion in the Balkan region began after the Ottomans, under Prince Sulayman's command, annexed Gallipoli in 1354. After Prince Murad was enthroned as Sultan Murad I, the Ottoman conquest and expansion activity gained momentum where the Ottoman Empire expanded triple-fold in 27 years but stopped at the Moravian Serbian frontier after his death in the Battle of Kosovo. Through the quick action of Sultan Bayazid I in expanding to the Balkan region during his reign, by 1400, the Ottoman extended its territory to the Danube periphery.

The successful Ottoman conquest and expansion are commonly associated with the weakness of the enemies. The analysis of the Ottoman and Balkan scholars, however, uncovered that the rapid conquest and expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan region in the 14<sup>th</sup> century were due to various factors. First was the abandonment of the neighbouring kingdoms in absence of military assistance by neighboring powers to the Balkan kingdoms. Second was the strategic location of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia with abundant human resources to fill their ranks. The third factor was the high morale of their army due to the spirit of holy war and the ingenuity of the Ottoman sultans as well as the Ottoman army commanders in devising conquest and expansion strategy became the fourth factor contributing to the success of the Ottoman conquest and expansion. The fifth factor would be the Ottoman method of conquest which ensured the continuous obedience of the conquered region under Ottoman sovereignty. Finally, the willingness of the Balkan people themselves to accept the Islamic-Ottoman rule rather than Western-Catholic rule was also instrumental thus illustrating that there were various factors for the success of the Ottoman military campaigns in the Balkan region. While Ottoman military strength—both in terms of manpower and weapons—often contributed to gaining the upper hand over the opposition, it was sporadic at this time of the 14th century.

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