

ABSTRACT

G.K. Chesterton's *Lepanto* and the First World War

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This thesis examines G.K. Chesterton's poem *Lepanto* in relation to World War I. Chesterton wrote the poem in 1911, depicting the famous naval battle of Lepanto between the Christian-European Holy League and the Islamic Ottoman Empire that took place in 1571. The forces that Chesterton depicts in the poem can be seen as parallels to contemporary forces in Europe with an understanding of Europe's position on the brink of war at the time of its writing in 1911. Examining books and journal articles that he was writing concurrently, we can see that *Lepanto* reflected Chesterton's own political views. The poem *Lepanto* is especially significant not only for its depictions of Christian Europe's internal and external threats, but for its strong emphasis on supernatural spiritual warfare corresponding to the human military action. Chesterton evokes Crusade imagery and stresses the impact of holy war in *Lepanto*, anticipating a similar situation in pre-WWI Europe. The thesis includes an examination of the historical battle of Lepanto, Chesterton's understanding of war, and a commentary on the poem's text.

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G.K. CHESTERTON'S *LEPANTO* AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When Chesterton published *Lepanto* in 1911, Europe was on the eve of World War I. In just three years, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir of Austro-Hungary, would trigger the global catastrophe later to be called the Great War. The European system of government was changing rapidly and irreversibly: one year before Chesterton wrote *Lepanto*, in May of 1910, there was one of the largest ever gatherings of European royalty for the funeral of King Edward VII of the United Kingdom. This was to be the last such gathering of royalty and, in retrospect, would mark the end of an era.¹ The volatile political climate in Europe had been building in hostility for years, exacerbated by complex secret alliances and growing nationalism and militarism. War appeared inevitable. But the actual length, scope, and devastation of the war would be far more profound than anyone could have predicted at the time Chesterton was writing *Lepanto*.

¹ See the first chapter of Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* (1962): 15-30 for a fuller, and more theatrical, treatment of the funeral of Edward VII and its significance in the building tension in Europe. See Sidney Fay's *The Origins of the World War* (1928) for a more analytical approach to determining the causes of World War I.

There is no shortage of speculation and analysis of the events that led to World War I, and it is impossible as well as unnecessary to fully treat the causes of the war in this paper. The poem *Lepanto* tells of the end of an era in Europe. It shows us sixteenth century Europe facing a system of complex national alliances, a military threat that is part of a larger cultural and spiritual war being waged, and calls for a rallying of Christian Europe to war against seemingly insurmountable odds. Although he was writing about the events of his own day, Chesterton achieves a timelessness or universality in his vision that makes it accessible and relevant today, and allows him to connect the events of his day to the battle of Lepanto nearly three centuries prior. Most importantly, Chesterton provides not only a depiction of the historical battle, but a vision of the broader spiritual war that he saw as ongoing in his own time. The poem is a call to arms and to renewed hope as Chesterton's own Europe prepares for war.

CHAPTER TWO

Chesterton and War

G. K. Chesterton spent the years leading up to the war working as a journalist in Britain, and was an outspoken political commentator. Over the course of his career, he wrote for *The Daily News*, *Illustrated London News*, and *New Witness* (which would later become *G.K.'s Weekly*) and his articles from this period of time give deep insight into his beliefs and are crucial to understanding his views on war. In the years preceding World War I, Chesterton often warns in his journal articles of the dangers of German militarism, which he called Prussianism, and the false ideals and underlying racism that accompanied it. The idea of Prussia, to Chesterton, was inextricably linked to the Northern European strain of Protestantism, Lutheranism specifically, which he so strongly detested. Prussia's union of flawed idealism with martial zeal made Prussia a clear danger not just militarily but ideologically.

Chesterton also warns against the widespread Pacifism among European intellectuals and progressives, which he thought was naïve and willful folly. Being a Liberal, he pushed against the concentration of peace in the hands of a few, and believed that "Europe's peace depended on the larger democracies helping protect the smaller nations," especially in the face of increased

antagonism from Germany.² Chesterton leaned politically towards Socialism, later modified as Distributism under the influence of Hillaire Belloc, in formulating a political philosophy which corresponded with his opposition to over-industrialization and imperialism. Chesterton was not alone in his outspoken warnings against the dangers of Pacifism for Christians: even though the conditions were different, it is worth mentioning that C.S. Lewis would similarly condemn Pacifism in the face of the Second World War.³

Chesterton's understanding of the root causes of World War I was eccentric, and he expresses them in his book on Fascist Italy, *The Resurrection of Rome*. For all his journalistic fervor, he was not an expert on international politics, and the only people that shared his view were his friend Hillaire Belloc and his brother Cecil Chesterton.⁴ Margaret Canovan, in her book *G. K. Chesterton: Radical Populist*, examines the statements he makes in *The Resurrection of Rome*, and summarizes his idea of the cause World War I as an inevitable clash

² Perry 2008: 11.

³ For a succinct account of Lewis' views, including a discussion of Christ's admonition to "turn the other cheek," see Lewis "Why I Am Not a Pacifist" in *The Weight of Glory* 63-89.

⁴ Canovan 1977: 110.

between civilization and barbarism, with an overly romantic defense of local patriotism that casts “a spurious glamor over the horrors of the trenches.”⁵

This is not to say that Chesterton necessarily equated civilization with Britain or valued patriotism to such a degree that he would blindly take Britain’s side in the case of war. In fact, he made a name for himself in England by opposing the Second Boer War in his journalism. The Second Boer War of 1899-1902 was fought in South Africa, between the British Empire and two Afrikaner republics for largely commercial reasons.⁶ Chesterton did not reflexively side with Britain, but rather opposed Britain’s involvement in the war:

The negotiations just before the Boer War were really a network of mystery and hypocrisy on both sides; therefore, I waited to make up my mind until I heard the moral arguments. And I decided; because I found the moral arguments on our side were immoral arguments.⁷

Ultimately, Chesterton the Liberal opposed Britain’s role in the Boer War outspokenly, arguing from a moral standpoint against the spread of Imperialism

⁵ Canovan 1977: 111.

⁶ Murray 2013: 81.

⁷ Chesterton, “The Importance of Why” (August 15, 1908), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 47.

that suppressed smaller coherent cultures.⁸ Maisie Ward, friend of Chesterton and author of his biography, explained the distinction in his mind and, significantly, relates it to his views regarding Germany:

Patriotism appeared to him not akin to Imperialism but its very opposite. The patriot loves his own country, the imperialist wants to swallow other countries. He opposed in the Boer War the imperialism of England and was entirely logical in opposing in the first world war the imperialism of Germany. He was never a pacifist but always an anti-imperialist patriot.⁹

Chesterton's opposition to the Boer War spurred his career in journalism, and his views on the Boer War are not far from the ones he would hold just a few years later at the onset of World War I. It forced him to define the difference between patriotism and imperialism, and this distinction became crucial for Chesterton: patriotism meant willingness to fight for home and way of life; imperialism meant fighting to extend power greedily.¹⁰ His opposition to the Boer War also allied him with Hillaire Belloc, who would become a close friend and major political and religious influence as he began moving towards Catholicism.

⁸ Nichols 2009: 17.

⁹ Ward 1952: 54-55.

¹⁰ Canovan 1977: 12.

Canovan examines Chesterton's political views while noting that he conceived of human life in a deeply personal, individual way. He resisted speaking of "humanity" as a broad generalization and thinking of politics as a game between abstract social classes. He opposed the growing reliance on statist welfare and its imposition of laws regarding education and healthcare because he saw it as a form of condescension and de-personalization to the poor.

In her consideration of Chesterton's emphasis on the individual person, Canovan treats his views on local patriotism similarly. She points out that Chesterton's focus on individualism and his "stress on the human inclination to be loyal to nations and commonwealths"¹¹ plays into his romanticizing of battle. Chesterton celebrated heroism in war and delighted in the idea of fighting and bloodshed for glory and honor. This attitude stems from his intensely individualistic view of human nature, and his own personal bellicosity and unwillingness to back down from a fight. In an article from 1908, he writes:

There are some things more important than peace, and one of them is the dignity of human nature. It is a humiliation of humanity that humanity should ever give up war solely through fear.¹²

¹¹ Canovan 1977: 109.

¹² Chesterton "Giving Up War" (April 25, 1908), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 43.

That human dignity is more important than peace marks the limits of Chesterton's thought. There is no indication of any similar glory to be found in giving up war to preserve human dignity. In his violent reaction against the growing threat of Pacifism and passivity, perhaps Chesterton takes his bellicosity too far. Even in 1908, before anyone could have predicted the unprecedented destruction of World War I, Chesterton does not consider the atrocities against human dignity that occur in war. Wars, in Chesterton's mind, were always primarily of ideological and spiritual significance.

In 1911, Chesterton took a train with Father O'Connor, a Roman Catholic priest and friend who would play a significant role in Chesterton's later conversion to Catholicism, after a debate they had both participated in, "at which Chesterton had spoken in favour of the motion that all wars are religious wars."¹³ On the train, O'Connor dramatically told Chesterton the story of the battle of Lepanto, a post-Reformation Christian naval victory over the Ottoman Turks against great odds. This battle was a lasting symbol of Christian spiritual warfare combined with actual war. According to Father O'Connor, this affected Chesterton profoundly enough to prompt him to write *Lepanto* that year, a

¹³ Ker 2011: 294.

shorter and more intense battle poem than *The Ballad of the White Horse*, which he had written not long before.¹⁴

The text of the poem focuses on spiritual and martial preparation for battle between a tenuously collected fleet of European Christians, led by Don John of Austria, and a unified and expanding Ottoman Empire that took place off the coast of Greece in 1571. Chesterton's concerns in the poem reflect his own concerns in the face of the oncoming war in Europe, and the timing of the poem's publication in 1911 allowed it to serve as a rousing call to arms in Chesterton's own day: "On 21 June 1915 Chesterton was to receive a gratifying note from John Buchan saying 'The other day in the trenches we shouted your *Lepanto*.'" ¹⁵

At the turn of the 20th century, attention had been brought to the remnants of the Ottoman Empire during the Balkan crisis in 1908-1909, and the ensuing Balkan Wars that would begin in 1912. For Chesterton, the legacy of the Ottoman Empire was still alive. He mentions what he saw as the inherent dangers of Turkish government and culture in his articles:

Turkish government not only originated in a raid: it is a raid. It is a raid in its ferocity, in its military machinery, in its rigid division between friends and foes, in its refusal to tolerate or to mix. Century after century, in

¹⁴ Ker 2011: 266.

¹⁵ quoted in Ker 2011: 294.

district after district, this ancient and extraordinary empire still breaks out again and again, behaving as only the wildest soldiers can in the sudden sacking of a town.¹⁶

Chesterton repeatedly in his articles compares the historical Ottoman Empire with the Prussia of his day. In an article from June 1915, he asserts that the war with Germany was, at its heart, a religious war more than a racial war (religious in that the war was being fought over ideas and beliefs, rather than merely a territorial war). In speaking of the dangers of Prussianism to Europe and Christianity as a whole, Chesterton compares their situation to that of the Turks, with the key distinction that whereas the Turks believed in a supernatural superiority, the Prussians believed in a natural superiority:

They [both the Prussians and the Turks] are exceptions for this vital reason, that they do not reciprocate a nationalist toleration. They will not place their community inside the European community; they are always outside it, whether as outcasts or invaders. The Turks put themselves above all national affections upon a supposed supernatural right, now a thousand years old and only now beginning to wear thin. The Prussians put themselves above all natural affectations upon a supposed natural

¹⁶ Chesterton "Excuses with Distant Parallelism (October 21, 1911), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 71.

right, which is now only fifty years old. The natural right is more unnatural than the mystic one.¹⁷

This is the crux for understanding the tie that Chesterton sees between the Prussians of his day and the Turks in *Lepanto*. This connection to their shared status as superior outsiders is crucial. In the poem, this haughtiness is characteristic of Mohammed as well as the Sultan and the Turkish fleet as a whole.

In writing of the Prussians, Chesterton also asserts that there is an element of spiritual warfare involved. In 1914, on the cusp of the war, he writes the following about Prussian culture:

It does not matter much who is civilised or savage: both civilisation and savagery have their good points. But if there be something that behaves like savagery and boasts of civilisation, than there is the devil in it.¹⁸

He reiterates this danger in Prussian culture that same year, reminding readers that the war is primarily a spiritual battle:

¹⁷ Chesterton "Casting Down Idols" (June 19 1915), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 140.

¹⁸ Chesterton "Prussian Pride" (August 22, 1914), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 97.

The Prussian is sincere and wrong...our work with the Prussians is not so much a pulling down of thrones as a casting out of devils; not only out of the land, but out of the enemy.¹⁹

Similarly, in a letter to E. C. Bentley dated from July of 1915, Chesterton writes of people unable to understand the gravity of the situation, and compares Islam to Prussia: "By the way I see the Germans have actually done what I described as a wild fancy in the *Flying Inn*; combined the Cross and the Crescent in one ornamental symbol."²⁰

In *Lepanto*, the central battle is framed as a primarily spiritual battle, pitting St. Michael against Mohammed and the Sultan against the Pope. The connection that Chesterton makes between Islam and demonic activity is not one that he limits merely to the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire: to him, they represent a spiritual and ideological enemy that returns again and again through the centuries, and he mentions the growing dangers of the Turks in his articles repeatedly. Chesterton was not wrong to warn against Ottoman threats in his own day: for example, between 1915 and 1923, the Ottoman government and its successor the Republic of Turkey would systematically exterminate nearly 2 million Armenians citizens in the first true genocide of the twentieth century as

¹⁹ Chesterton "Casting Out Devils" (September 12, 1914), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 113.

²⁰ Ward, 1944: 340.

part of a direct attempt to exterminate Armenian Catholics. Chesterton saw the battle of Lepanto as a battle in a greater spiritual war over the centuries.

This connection that Chesterton draws between Islam and supernatural demonic forces is a strong parallel to the one he draws with the Prussians. It is important to remember that Chesterton saw every war as a religious war at heart, including the war during which he wrote. "This is a religious war," he said outright, speaking of the way that racial motivations for the war stemmed from fundamental spiritual differences.²¹ Later in his life, Chesterton would connect Hitler directly to this Prussianism and, by extension, Protestantism. He expresses this most explicitly in one of his last published essays:

Prussianism came from Protestantism; not, of course, in the sense that it came to infect all Protestants, or that there are not millions of good Protestants free from this error, or suffering from other errors. But it was a historical fruit of Protestantism; and that is not merely a historical fact; it can also be clearly traced as a philosophical truth. The racial pride of Hitlerism is of the Reformation by twenty tests; because it divides Christendom and makes all such divisions deeper; because it is fatalistic, like Calvinism, and makes superiority depend not upon choice but only on being of the chosen; because it is Caesaro-Papist, putting the State above the Church, as in the claim of Henry VIII; because it is immoral, being an innovator of morals touching things like Eugenics and Sterility;

²¹ Chesterton "Casting Down Idols" (June 19 1915), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 140.

because it is subjective, in suiting the primal fact to the personal fancy, as in asking for a German God, or saying that the Catholic revelation does not suit the German temper; as if I were to say that the Solar System does not suit the Chestertonian taste. I do not apologise, therefore, for saying that this catastrophe in history has been due to heresy; and I cannot see that even an Anglo-Catholic supports his own claim to orthodoxy by denying it.²²

By the time he wrote *Lepanto*, Chesterton had essentially converted to Catholicism (although he would not actually enter the Catholic Church until years later when his wife Frances would willingly follow), and his newfound enthusiasm for orthodox Christianity permeated his thoughts and works. He really did see every war as religious as heart.

This strong sense of spiritual warfare being tied to physical warfare was also affected by the way Chesterton saw Christianity. For Chesterton, the Church was deeply tied to Europe. He believed strongly in an ideal Christendom: "People cannot love Europe, because Europe is either a map or else a mythical lady who was carried off by a bull. But men can love Christendom, because it was an idea."²³ By this, he refers to Christianity's

²² Chesterton "Where is the Paradox?," in *The Well and the Shallows* (1935): 148.

²³ Chesterton "A War Of Men Not Ships" (March 27, 1909), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 54.

transcendence of geographical and temporal barriers, as a unifying tradition of belief. Chesterton was a scholar of Europe before he was a scholar of the Church. Much like that earlier Anglican-turned-Catholic, Bl. John Henry Newman, who said that “to be steeped in history is to cease to be Protestant,” Chesterton’s conversion was enhanced by his scholarly interest in the Church.²⁴

One of the major theological influences on Chesterton, even before becoming Catholic, was St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas enjoyed a popular revival in interest at the end of the nineteenth century, and Chesterton himself went on to write a biography of Aquinas. Although Chesterton was no scholar of Thomism, Aquinas certainly affected his own theological ideas to some degree. For example, Chesterton embraced Aquinas’ idea of evil as privation. Borrowing from Augustine, Aquinas defined evil as the absence or negation of goodness, not a positive force or being in nature.²⁵ Chesterton’s understanding of evil as *privatio boni* was similar, and he went so far as to apply this idea of privation to war and peace.²⁶

²⁴ Newman, 1845: Introduction, Part 5

²⁵ *Summa Theologica* 1.49.1

²⁶ For an examination of the effects of Aquinas’ conception of evil in Chesterton’s thought, especially as expressed in his Father Brown stories, see Knight “The 1890s, Detective Fiction, and the Nature of Evil,” in *Chesterton and Evil* (New York, 2004); 29-58.

It is puzzling that Chesterton would read St. Thomas Aquinas but not adhere to his precepts of just war. Perhaps Chesterton's knowledge of the *Summa Theologica* was simply too cursory for him to have encountered it. Aquinas is one of the greatest influences on the modern Christian notion of The Just War Theory. The question of the legitimacy of violence runs through all of Christian history, all the way back to the Old Testament, and countless saints and scholars have tried to reconcile Christ's teachings with inevitable human violence, most notably St. Augustine. Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* from the late thirteenth century lays out the qualifications for a "just war," or how a war can be fought without moral culpability.²⁷ Just War Theory has been a concern for the Church since the time of St. Augustine, but Aquinas was the first to treat it so systematically. Some of the components of Just War Theory stipulate, for example, that a war must have a just cause (like defense), the warfare must use just means, the intention must be fundamentally good instead of evil, among other such conditions. The conclusion is that, under these guidelines, it is not always a sin to go to war. Just War Theory has been refined and endorsed over the centuries, even to the point that the Catholic Catechism includes a section on Just War Doctrine: the Catechism gives very strict rules for dealing properly with

²⁷ *Summa Theologica* 2.2.40

*“legitimate defense by military force.”*²⁸ These strict limitations emphasize the limitations of war, and that war can only be employed by Christians as an absolute last resort.

Despite his familiarity with Aquinas and his increasingly Catholic views, Chesterton does not hold to this idea of limitations on war, at least as they are defined in the *Summa* or in the Catechism. He takes a more romanticized, abstracted view of war that ultimately lets him be far more bellicose, and even flippant, than other contemporary writers or poets would dare to be in the face of the Great War. His focus on heroism and glory in battle downplays the evils of war. Ralph Wood calls attention to Chesterton’s worrisome tendency to downplay the horrors of war, pointing out *Lepanto* as Chesterton’s most belligerent tribute to his idea of holy war.²⁹ Chesterton frames everything in the terms of a Crusade, and the concept of honor in battle is glorified and romanticized.

Although he was surrounded by its tragic consequences and even lost his brother Cecil to the war, Chesterton personally never fought in the War. He never witnessed the horrors of the trenches firsthand, unlike many writers and poets of his generation. Even contemporary Christian writers with similar

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2309

²⁹ Wood 2011: Chapter 3.

stances, like Lewis and Tolkien, were more hesitant about glorifying war because they had fought in the trenches. Perhaps Chesterton's attitude would have been different if he had.

In the end, it is important to remember that, despite Chesterton's strident bellicosity and often bombastic opinions, he does not endorse war, nor does he pretend to understand the deeper problem of evil. Chesterton wrestled with the concepts of free will in much of his writing, and never lost track of his knowledge that the world is fallen. Things like war remind us that we live in a world distorted by sin. It might be fitting to end this look at Chesterton's ideas on war with a quote from *Orthodoxy*, where he reminds his readers that "[t]he real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite."³⁰

³⁰Chesterton *Orthodoxy* 1908: 80.

CHAPTER THREE

The Historical Lepanto

The Battle of Lepanto was a significant naval battle between Hapsburg and Ottoman forces for hegemony in the Mediterranean Sea. Since the battle itself, Lepanto has been a symbol for the clash between East and West, Turk and Christian. It not only halted the imperialistic spread of the Ottoman Empire into Europe, but captured the imagination of artists and poets ever since. G.K. Chesterton's poem *Lepanto* is less about historical fact and more about the battle's mythos and mystery. Chesterton understood that the value of the battle lay not so much in its historical legacy but in its capacity to be a metaphor for a larger struggle. In this way, his poem transcends the particular battle and becomes more universally relevant. This chapter examines the historical Battle of Lepanto in order to see the ways that Chesterton both follows and departs from history in the poem.

As noted in the previous chapter, Chesterton believed that all wars are, at heart, religious in nature.¹ This is especially the case with regard to Lepanto,

¹ See Michael Perry's compilation of Chesterton's articles on War (*Chesterton on War and Peace: Battling the Ideas and Movements That Led to Nazism and World War II*. Seattle, WA: Inkling Books, 2008).

where Muslim Turks were pitted against Christian Europeans, because the element of spiritual and cultural warfare is clear and extremely significant to both sides. The battle's legacy is an odd mix of myth and miracle and history. The religious aspect to the battle was undoubtedly attractive to Chesterton when he chose it as the subject of his poem. Renaissance Europe was deeply embroiled in religious wars and conflicts at the end of the 16th century. In the midst of this, the Battle of Lepanto united disparate European forces and repelled an invading Ottoman force. Its historical significance was enormous, but because of the profound religious elements involved, the battle is always assigned a great spiritual significance when it is depicted in art.² Chesterton's poem focuses on the supernatural nature of the battle, writing on the eve of the First World War.

The historical Battle of Lepanto took place off the coast of Greece on October 7, 1571. It took its name Lepanto from the town on the coast near where the engagement took place, modern Naupaktos, though the Venetians named the battle after Curzolaris, a nearby group of islands. Ottoman forces under Selim II had been growing in influence and power in the Mediterranean. They had most recently besieged and conquered the Venetian outpost on Cyprus. Now, their

² For the battle's place in European art, see E. H. Gombrich "Celebrations in Venice of the Holy League and of the Victory of Lepanto", in *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art*, ed. Jeanne Coultard (London, 1967): 62-8.

formidable and confident fleet was poised to attack Venice, led by Müezzinzade Ali Pasha.³

On the other side, the Holy League was a tenuous conglomeration of Spanish, Neapolitan, Papal, and Venetian troops, called together by Pope Pius V. This group had assembled a unified fleet, led by Don John of Austria, the illegitimate son of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and half-brother of the powerful King Philip II of Spain. This Holy League fleet by no means was representative of all Christian Europe: no aid came from England under Elizabeth I, Germany divided by the Protestant Reformation, or Valois France that was allied with the Ottomans.

At Lepanto, the Ottoman fleet outnumbered the Holy League fleet, but against the odds was beaten in a dramatic victory for Don John and the Holy League. That is the summary of what happened on October 7, 1571. To better understand how it came about, we can look at the economic, political, and military situation that led to the battle.

The Battle of Lepanto was not the first Mediterranean invasion attempt by the Ottomans. Tension had been building in the Mediterranean for a long time, mainly centered around the control of trade routes to the East. Spain had

³ For a fuller account of the Ottoman developments in the Mediterranean, see Crowley *Empires of the Sea* (2009): 204-230, and the first chapter of Capponi *Victory of the West* (Cambridge, 2006): 7-46.

expelled the Muslim Moors only a few decades prior, in the Reconquista of 1492, and, like Portugal, was exploring to the West in hopes of alternate trade routes. Not all of Europe was at odds with the Ottomans in the East: Valois France was firmly allied with the Ottoman Empire for economic reasons, and even Tudor England and Sweden traded and cooperated with Turkish powers.⁴ These geographically distant Western European nations could enjoy such economic relations as they did not face the same proximate threat as the Holy League nations who were directly threatened by the Ottoman Empire. During this time, the Ottomans were confident and expanding, especially under Süleyman the Magnificent. In 1567, the Turks nearly captured the island of Malta, which would have been for the purpose of establishing a base from which they could launch attacks on the Tyrrhenian coast.⁵

The final catalyst that led to Lepanto was the fall of Cyprus. In 1570, the Turks successfully besieged and captured the Venetian colony of Famagusta on Cyprus, and flayed the defeated Venetian commander alive.⁶ Until then, Venice had not been willing to enter into a military alliance with the Neapolitans and

⁴ Kortepeter 1980: ix-2.

⁵ Cochrane 1988: 166.

⁶ For more on the siege on Cyprus, see the chapter "Famagusta" in Crowley *Empires of the Sea* (New York, 2008): 221-230, and the chapter "Famagusta" in Beeching *The Galleys at Lepanto* (New York, 1982): 161-183.

Spaniards; the outrage that ensued after the capture of Cyprus was the impetus that allowed Pope Pius V to persuade Venice to join the Holy League.

Ottoman imperialist expansion had been ongoing for centuries now, both on land and sea.⁷ The Turks had successfully conquered territory in the Balkans and Adriatic from Venice before: in the late 15th century, several Venetian fleets and settlements in Greece were taken by the Ottomans, disrupting the Levantine trade that was the mainstay of their economy and their source of wealth, and threatening greater invasions to come.

Sultan Selim II, the “Soldan” that Chesterton refers to in the first lines of *Lepanto*, had succeeded Süleyman the Magnificent in 1566.⁸ Süleyman had overseen great Westward expansion, even to the point of crossing the Danube and defeating the Hungarian army in 1526. The Ottoman Empire rivaled both the Spanish-Hapsburg Empire and the Republic of Venice in the West as ideologically opposite contenders for universal rule. They were arguably more advanced than their Western counterparts, they represented a dominance of

⁷ For fuller treatment of the historical tensions and alliances between Venice and the Turks that led to Lepanto, see Kortepeter *Ottoman Imperialism During the Reformation* (New York, 1972) and the third chapter of Capponi *Victory of the West* (Cambridge, 2006): 60-90.

⁸ Alquist notes that Chesterton uses “Soldan” in place of “Sultan” because although the terms are synonymous, “Soldan” is the more archaic and poetic form (*Lepanto*, 18).

Sunni Islam over Shiite Safavids to their East, and they had expanded and developed enormously:

The Ottoman sixteenth century is widely accepted as a formative stage in the empire's organization and cultural production. Apologetic approaches portray the regime of Selim and Süleyman as the culmination of a march from tribe to empire.⁹

No background history of the Ottoman Empire is present in Chesterton's poem, as he writes from a purely Western and Christian perspective. Even if Chesterton had been familiar with historical accounts from the perspective of the Ottomans, that perspective would have been irrelevant to him. Chesterton's poem is not an attempt at an unbiased historical account. He is more concerned with writing an epic that captures the legends and ideologies at play.

His depiction of the Ottoman enemies is limited and vague: at the beginning of the poem, we see a brief portrait of the Sultan plotting from afar, and near the end, during the battle, we see impersonal faces peeking between prison bars at Christian galley slaves. The poem's fullest characterization of the enemy is not in the Ottomans, but in Muhammad, whose character parallels Satan. He is a supernatural, demonic force driven by fear and hatred of Christianity, which he couples with crusade imagery to motivate the assembled demons.

⁹ Şahin 2013: 4.

Muhammad and the demons, then, are the real agents behind the Ottoman forces. In the poem, the human enemy is impersonal: the vagueness of the enemy allows the reader to fill in the gaps imaginatively. It is especially significant to remember that Chesterton intended his poem's readers to connect the sixteenth century Ottomans with his contemporary Prussians.

In *Lepanto*, the narrative appears to place the formation of the Holy League immediately before the battle of Lepanto, as if the troops are being martialled specifically for this battle. In the poem, Pius V calls for help, an unknown hero and his ragtag army answer the call, and they seem to scrape together a fleet just in time to fend off the Ottoman Turks at Lepanto.

Although this storyline increases the dramatic effect, historically, it is simplistic. The Holy League had been formed after the catastrophe at Cyprus. Even where troops were being mobilized, the divergence of objectives among the respective members of the Holy League became a danger to unity. Italy at this time was far from a unified country, so even trying to assemble a single fleet among Neapolitan and Venetian and Papal forces was a feat.

Maritime historian John Guilmartin, in examining the social, economic, and political factors behind the tactical mechanics of the battle, observes that the Republic of Venice was the most invested in fighting the Ottomans of all the

European forces, because, especially after losing their outpost on Cyprus, Venice had the most at stake economically:

War with the Turk had cut Venice's commercial lifeline to the East and fleet mobilization had gutted her workforce. With her fishermen, farmers, and merchant sailors serving afloat as oarsmen, mariners, and fighting men, Venetian commerce ground to a halt—and Venice lived on commerce.¹⁰

The driving force behind the assembly of the Holy League was Pope Pius V, who is another central character in Chesterton's poem. Pope Pius V is indeed a crucial figure historically, which is reflected in the poem, but the force of his influence is not fully captured. He ascended to the papacy in 1566, just after the conclusion of the Council of Trent: his focus was on "repression of heresy, resistance to the Turk, and the actual reformation of those who needed it."¹¹ As Pope, he was orthodox and fervent. He ushered in a period of reform within the Catholic Church in hopes of counteracting the effects of the Protestant Reformation, part of the movement often called the Counter Reformation or the Catholic Revival, and it was he who called for the formation of the Holy League.

¹⁰ Guilmartin, "The Tactics of the Battle of Lepanto Clarified: The Impact of Social, Economic, and Political Factors on Sixteenth Century Galley Warfare" (1981): 46.

¹¹ Kidd 1980: 175.

The battle itself was tactical and technologically significant too. Famously, it was the last major naval battle ever fought between rowing galleys. But other tactical details made the battle noteworthy in its own right. This tactical aspect is not reflected in the poem, although it does allude to the legend that Pius miraculously sees the fleets in symbolic cross and crescent shaped formations:

*He sees as in a mirror on the monstrous twilight sea
The crescent of his cruel ships whose name is mystery;
They fling great shadows foe-wards, making Cross and Castle dark,
They veil the plumèd lions on the galleys of St. Mark.*

Aside from a fascination with the symbolic aspect of the fleet formations, Chesterton does not dwell on the technical details of the battle. In fact, the battle itself is almost of no consequence in the poem: it is focused far more on the suspense and build-up to the battle, and on the figures taking part in it. Chesterton is, after all, more concerned with the legendary aspects of battle than the historical event.

The poem does, however, portray the commonly held belief that the Holy League was hopelessly outnumbered and outclassed: this is not quite factual. The narrative of the underdog miraculously overcoming overwhelming odds is appealing, but modern scholarship agrees that this was not really the case. The battle's strategy was carefully orchestrated, but, as Guilmartin notes, Don John of Austria actually had the technological advantage at Lepanto and Muezzinzade

Ali Pasha's "only real hope for victory was in bringing about a loss of tactical cohesion on the Christian side."¹² For example, the Spanish and Italian galleys were built in such a way as to be more effective in a head-on clash while remaining protected from Ottoman archery. In another article on the subject, Guilmartin's analysis sums up the ultimate irony of the battle well:

If the Ottoman fleet was defeated at Lepanto in 1571, the Christian victory was, in a sense, an empty one, for the Turks had already conquered Cyprus just as they had seized Chios from Genoa in 1566. Ottoman forces successfully opposed the Portuguese in the east and, in the Mediterranean, gave nothing to the Spanish.¹³

Indeed, only two years after the battle, in 1573, Venice would sign an independent peace with the Ottoman Empire: despite their victory at Lepanto, the Republic of Venice had suffered heavy losses to the Ottomans, and had to make peace with them for economic reasons. This in turn prevented Pope Gregory XII, Pius' successor, from ever reassembling the Holy League as he had hoped.¹⁴

¹² Guilmartin, "The Tactics of the Battle of Lepanto Clarified: The Impact of Social, Economic, and Political Factors on Sixteenth Century Galley Warfare" (1981): 56.

¹³ Guilmartin, "Ideology and Conflict: The Wars of the Ottoman Empire, 1453-1606" (1988): 741.

¹⁴ Kortepeter, 1980: 2.

It is purely speculative to wonder if Chesterton ever reflected on this element of ineffectuality in the battle's outcome. The Battle of Lepanto unmistakably prevented an invading Ottoman fleet from expanding into the West, and Europe would look very different today if the Holy League had lost. The Ottomans never again mounted such an attack. But Don John of Austria and the Holy League did not capitalize on this opportunity to press the Turks farther back. The Ottomans rebuilt the fleet. Cyprus was not regained. The Holy League dissipated. Venice signed a peace with the Ottomans. Europe was not reunified under the Catholic Church.

Looking at the Battle of Lepanto in this more negative light does not reflect the way Chesterton intended in comparing it to World War I. Lepanto was supposedly a grand final battle, the last crusade that forever halted the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and Islam. World War I was supposed to be the War to End All Wars. When he wrote the poem in 1911, Chesterton could not have foreseen the outcome of the War, but there is an interesting parallel to be made with the outcome of the victory at Lepanto and the aftermath of World War I. Although it saved Europe for the time, Lepanto did not stop the expansion of the Ottoman Empire; in fact, the Ottoman Empire of Chesterton's day would enter a secret alliance with Germany in 1914 and begin the genocide of Armenians in Turkey in 1915. World War I, catastrophic in its own right, laid

the foundation for the most violently destructive war in history just 21 years after. If nothing else, reflecting on Lepanto ought to give us pause in our own time to reflect soberly on the unforeseeable consequences of war and the sanctimonious rhetoric that often accompanies it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Commentary on the Poem

*White founts falling in the courts of the sun,
And the Soldan of Byzantium is smiling as they run;
There is laughter like the fountains in that face of all men feared,
It stirs the forest darkness, the darkness of his beard,
It curls the blood-red crescent, the crescent of his lips,
For the inmost sea of all the earth is shaken with his ships.*

The Sultan's foreboding smile opens the poem, directly contrasted at the end with Cervantes' smile ("And he smiles, but not as Sultans smile" ll. 142). He has "laughter like the fountains:" His laughter is lilting but cold and inanimate, like the fountains. His smiling mouth is a "blood-red crescent," foreshadowing the battle's bloodshed, and is part of the vivid color imagery throughout the poem, and also refers to the crescent symbol of the Turkish Empire, which was adopted after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The Sultan smiles as he surveys the progress the Ottoman Empire has made into the "inmost sea of all the earth:" the Mediterranean Sea. Control of the Mediterranean Sea was vital for trade and transportation, and fighting between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Venice had been escalating prior to Lepanto. Chesterton uses the

image of an arrogant smile several years later, in an article against Pacifism, referring to the smug attitude of the Prussians of his day:

This self-satisfaction is the sole spring of all the more showy and sensational evils. And it needs neither malice nor bitterness to see that the only possible cure for it is ruinous military defeat. In short, we are fighting against the Smile that Won't Come Off by any other process.¹

The “white republics” are the Italian city-states threatened by Ottoman invasion. “White” not only accentuates the ethnic/cultural difference between the Italians and the Ottomans (to whom he refers as “brown, black-bearded chiefs”), but also stresses that Italy is divided and cannot unite itself into anything more than a collection of republics. It is interesting that Chesterton calls attention to the ethnic differences between the Europeans and the Ottomans, as he was writing at the turn of the twentieth century and witnessing the rising influence of eugenics and racial discrimination that would feed into the gas chambers and death camps.

Chesterton’s use of the word “republic,” too, is noteworthy. The word calls to mind the bygone glory days of the Roman Republic, as well as the contemporary Republic of Venice. If the reader thinks of the Roman Republic,

¹ Chesterton “Seizing the Pen” (May 22 1915), in *Chesterton on War and Peace*, ed. Perry (Seattle, 2008): 126.

the threat of an Empire, here the Ottoman Empire, to an Italian republic would be familiar.

The other figure we meet in the first stanza, in apposition to the Sultan, is Pope Pius V. Casting his “arms abroad for agony and loss,” the Pope’s stance becomes similar to Christ as his arms are stretched out on the cross. It indicates the martyr-like state of Pius V and what is left of the once-unified Christendom he stands for. Pope Pius’ call to the kings of Christendom is ironic: this is the late 16th century and Europe has been split by the Reformation and ensuing religious wars. A cohesive Christendom is no longer a reality. The glory days of the Holy Roman Empire, as it once was, are over, even though it is Don John of Austria, the bastard son of Emperor Charles V who will respond to the Pope’s call in the next stanza.

The rest of Europe, we see, is in chaos. In France, the Valois house would not be in power for much longer: there is ongoing conflict between the Huguenots and the Catholics in France, and the house of Valois is soon to be decimated by the War of the Three Henrys. Spiritual laziness or apathy is suggested by “yawning at the Mass,” perhaps as indicated by the struggle between the encroaching Calvinism in what had once been a firmly Catholic country. The Valois was also at this time in a long standing trade alliance with

the Porte², so their participation in joining arms against the Ottomans was out of the question.

Spain is focused on internal problems and conquest in the New World in 1571, so Philip II's attention and resources are only half-focused on the Turkish threat in the Mediterranean. Spain had dealt with Muslim intruders for much of its history, and the Reconquista of Spain against the Moors was in 1492 was comparatively recent. In the late 1560s, Spain was preoccupied with a revolt in Flanders, linked to increased tension between Catholic and Calvinists, which drained Spain's finances enormously. Pope Pius V helped finance Spain's efforts in Flanders, hoping to fight heresy and gain Spanish support with the Holy League.³ Spain would, in fact, provide the majority of resources and men for the Battle of Lepanto. As we see later in the poem, Philip II would delegate the leading of the troops to his half-brother Don John of Austria.

The first stanza closes, as it began, with the image of Sultan Selim II laughing in the sun. The grouping of words with long "o" sounds here—"Lord ... upon ... Golden ... Horn"—combined with the strong meter, makes for an ominous auditory effect. This first stanza builds a menacing image of the Sultan,

² The Porte refers to the central government of the Ottoman Empire, used mainly when speaking of diplomacy with Western countries.

³ For a more thorough explanation of the politics at play, see Capponi's *Victory in the West*, 108-112.

as he towers over a Europe that is spiritually scattered, forced into complex political alliances, and seemingly without hope. Already, Chesterton's pre-World War I audience would have felt parallels to the situation of 1911 Europe, similarly caught up in complex political alliances, shaken by philosophical and religious shifts, and facing an uncertain future.

This second stanza introduces hope as Don John of Austria begins his march to the sea. This "crownless prince" is "risen from a doubtful seat and half-attainted stall," referring to his status as an illegitimate son of Charles V, so he is an unlikely hero coming onto the scene. Most notable is that Don John is deliberately presented as a new Crusader, an image reinforced by Mohammed in the next stanza. This bold underdog is "the last knight of Europe," the "last and lingering troubadour." Dale Ahlquist rightly calls attention to the significance in the way that Chesterton calls Don John of Austria the last troubadour:

Chesterton calls him a troubadour, just as he calls all his heroes troubadours. St. Francis of Assisi is a troubadour. The Pickwickians are troubadours. Robert Browning is a troubadour. Gabriel Syme is a troubadour. A troubadour is a romantic, someone who is inspired, someone who lives out his art, someone who *is* a poem.⁴

This stanza showcases the poem's sharp alliteration and pounding ballad meter as Chesterton dramatically builds tension, and also introduces the way

⁴ Ahlquist 2004: 83.

that the poem is a call to arms. The subject matter is clearly a call to arms: this is Don John of Austria answering the Pope's call and beginning his march to the sea. On another level, the poem itself by its marching meter is a call to arms for Chesterton's own day as Europe begins to brace itself for war. Chesterton's 1911 Britain is not unlike Don John rising up for battle "in that enormous silence, tiny and unafraid." This is the exhilarating, rousing stage of anticipation before the actual fighting begins, and now that Don John of Austria has risen as the hero of the poem, "holding his head up as a flag of all the free," the real action can begin.

But as Don John gathers his forces, Mohammed summons the demons. Chesterton introduces here the spiritual warfare that is at play. In the poem, Mohammed is not merely a historical figure or even a false prophet, but personifies the infernal forces at hand. Mohammed is clearly tied to Satan, a connection reinforced in the coming stanza where his counterpart is shown to be the archangel St. Michael. Mohammed appears in a Paradise that evokes the paradise promised in Islam, but is deeply troubled by the rising resistance in Europe. Chesterton revisits this idea of the underdog faithful on earth revolting against hell that he expressed in *Orthodoxy*: "In the upper world hell once rebelled against heaven. But in this world heaven is always rebelling against hell."⁵

⁵ Chesterton *Orthodoxy* 1908: 110.

*They rush in red and purple from the red clouds of the morn,
From temples where the yellow gods shut up their eyes in scorn;
They rise in green robes roaring from the green hells of the sea
Where fallen skies and evil hues and eyeless creatures be;
On them the sea-valves cluster and the grey sea-forests curl,
Splashed with a splendid sickness, the sickness of the pearl;
They swell in sapphire smoke out of the blue cracks of the ground, —
They gather and they wonder and give worship to Mahound.*

The extended image of Mohammed summoning the “giants and the genii” recalls Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* summoning the demons when they have been expelled from heaven, heightening the element of cosmic, spiritual warfare. Chesterton is naturally conscious of the broad literary tradition in which he is writing. *Paradise Lost* is one of the most important poems in the English language, similarly religious in tone, and its epic, martial quality is something Chesterton emulates and references deliberately.

At a time when Modernism was revolutionizing art and poetry, Chesterton writes in rhyme and meter and draws from the great literature of the past. Take for comparison a passage from a long sequence of Milton’s Satan summoning the demons:

*Awake, arise, or be for ever fallen.
They heard, and were abashed, and up they sprung
Upon the wing, as when men wont to watch*

On duty, sleeping found by whom they dread,
Rouse and bestir themselves ere well awake.
Nor did they not perceive the evil plight
In which they were, or the fierce pains not feel;
Yet to their general's voice they soon obeyed
Innumerable. As when the potent rod
Of Amrams son in Egypt's evil day
Waved round the coast, up called a pitchy cloud
Of locusts, warping on the eastern wind,
That ore the realm of impious Pharaoh hung
Like night, and darkened all the land of Nile:
So numberless were those bad angels seen
Hovering on wing under the cope of Hell
edwixt upper, nether, and surrounding fires⁶

So too do the demons in *Lepanto* gather around Mohammed. Chesterton's focus on vivid color and imagery is apparent here too: the demons "swell in sapphire smoke," and "rise in green robes roaring from the green hells of the sea." The demons are characterized by their "evil hues," in contrast to the "red and silver sands" of the hermits and the Crusades. Red and silver, or white, were the colors of the St. George's Cross carried by Crusaders. These images are on Mohammed's mind: a few lines later, he warns against "The voice that shook our palaces—four hundred years ago: It is he that saith not 'Kismet'; it is he that

⁶ Milton, *Paradise Lost*: Book 1; 330-346.

knows not Fate; It is Richard, it is Raymond, it is Godfrey in the gate!"

Mohammed's forceful, repetitive cry is the climactic moment of his speech to the demons. The "voice" from four hundred years ago is the voice of the Crusades of the 12th century. Richard I the Lion-Hearted, Raymond of Toulouse, and Godfrey of Bouillon are among the most famous and recognizable Crusaders. Their characterizing quality is that they "know not Fate." Don John of Austria, too, knows not Fate, and his radical defiance of fate and submission to loss, springing from his Christian faith, is what makes him so dangerous to Mohammed and the advancing Ottoman Empire.

Mohammed's speech here mentions the significance of hermits and relics to the Church, ordering his demons to "break up the mountains where the hermit folk may hide," and "sift the red and silver sand lest bone of saint abide." This is an endorsement of the Christian emphasis on the importance of the penitential, ascetic hermit to the life of the Church, as well as the sacramental significance of relics. The first step of Mohammed's attack is to get rid of these hermits and relics. He knows that the coming battle is more spiritual than it is physical, so his first order of business is getting rid of spiritual weapons.

St. Michael's on his mountain in the sea-roads of the north

(Don John of Austria is girt and going forth.)

Where the grey seas glitter and the sharp tides shift

And the sea folk labour and the red sails lift.

*He shakes his lance of iron and he claps his wings of stone;
The noise is gone through Normandy; the noise is gone alone.*

Pope Pius' first failed rallying cry to the kings and queens of Europe is echoed here by St. Michael's failed attempt to reunite Europe. Having just seen Mohammed and the demons working alongside the Sultan and Turks on earth, here we see St. Michael acting out supernaturally Pope Pius V's actions. The deeds of humans are part of a grander supernatural scheme, and saints and devils fight spiritually where humans fight materially. Not only does it tie his poem into the epic tradition where gods fought alongside men, it points to a multivalence of human action. Linking human actions to the spiritual, analogically and typographically, is a very sacramental approach to the material world.

That the key supernatural figure on the Christian side is St. Michael and not Christ himself is not surprising: Chesterton knew as well as anyone that to pit Christ against Mohammed would be to equate them in a sense. The archangel St. Michael is a far better counterpart. He serves as an appropriately aggressive and militant figure, and is the traditional vanquisher of Satan. It is interesting that Chesterton chooses to invoke St. Michael instead of the Virgin Mary, as she is the traditional patron of the battle of Lepanto as Our Lady of Victory, later Our Lady of the Rosary. In fact, Chesterton makes no mention of

Our Lady in reference to the battle, despite the battle's intimate connection to the promulgation of the Rosary and Marian devotion.

Although one might be tempted to read the poem *Lepanto* exclusively as an expression of Chesterton's enthusiasm for Catholicism, it is useful to remember that when he wrote the poem in 1911 he was not yet Catholic. Still, he was certainly progressing toward conversion: in 1909, he wrote *The Ball and the Cross*, which expresses many deep Catholic views of his, and similarly includes a final confrontation between the evil character Professor Lucifer and a monk named Michael. By 1911 he had surely made up his mind to become Catholic, even though he would not officially convert until 1922. He wrote *Lepanto* on the anniversary of the Battle of Lepanto, October 7, 1911, and it was published within the week in *The Eye-Witness*, of which Hilaire Belloc was the editor.

Although he would not be confirmed Catholic for years to come, Chesterton criticizes the Reformation scathingly in this stanza. As an Anglican with increasingly Catholic tendencies, Chesterton had no affinity for other strains of Protestantism, such as the Lutheranism and Calvinism that developed out of the Reformation. He stresses here the negative aftermath of the schism within Christianity: "The North is full of tangled things," and Christians have divided against each other, so help does not come to St. Michael from Northern Europe. This "Christ that hath a newer face of Doom" is the Christ of Calvinist

predestination, which flies in the face of the Fate-defying, free-willed celebrating Christianity of Don John of Austria. But final and worst, "Christian hateth Mary that God kissed in Galilee," referring to the Protestant rejection of Marian devotion. This is the only mention Chesterton makes of the Virgin Mary, but it stands in contrast to the historical emphasis that Pope Pius V and Don John of Austria made of the Rosary before and after the battle of Lepanto as a dedication and plea for intercession to the Virgin Mary.

Clearly, Chesterton is warning against not only the external threats of the Ottomans, but the internal threats of the Reformation as well. With the enormous political implications of religious disagreements in 16th century Europe, which is still mired in Religious Wars and territorial disputes, a unified European Christendom is no more. Europe is splintering apart just as it is about to be faced with the threat of Turkish invasion. The complex system of political alliances and family ties that had been in place for generations was changing fast, not unlike the Europe of Chesterton's day.

The Protestant Reformation is not the only internal threat that Don John and the Christian forces face. In the next stanza, his half-brother King Philip II of Spain is depicted as an evil character, scheming and plotting. The crystal vial of poison that he holds and trembles at is a reference to theories that Philip himself

was responsible for Don John's untimely death by typhus just a few years after Lepanto.

King Philip II was an important figure of the Counter-Reformation, or Catholic Revival, the aggressive counter-reform that began to intensify in the 1560s and 1570s after Church authority defined parameters of Catholic teaching at the Council of Trent. He was the only legitimate son of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, held influence all through Europe, and was perhaps the most powerful monarch of his time. Philip was a major force in the political intrigue of the day, deeply involved in Europe's negotiations and alliances and wars for decades. The sixteenth century is the historical period most associated with the Black Legend: propaganda intended to demonize Spain's reputation, most notably concerning its involvement in the New World, which lasted into the twentieth century. Philip II was often depicted as the villain of this skewed historiography, especially prevalent in England and therefore among English historians, and it would appear that Chesterton's historical knowledge had been affected by this anti-Spanish sentiment. Regardless, it is commonly agreed that King Philip was jealous of his half-brother, and history shows that before and after Lepanto he made Don John's life difficult. Whether he actually had him poisoned is a debated question, but clearly Protestant Europe is not the only source of strife within Christendom. In this short stanza, Chesterton emphasizes

the chaotic state of European internal affairs, among both Protestants and Catholics, while Don John of Austria rallies forces and rides to the sea.

The battle begins at the end of this stanza when Don John of Austria looses the cannonade. Most of the battle appears in the poem only secondarily: the poem follows Philip II, Pope Pius V, and finally the Christian galley slaves while the action of the battle takes place. For Chesterton, the battle itself clearly is not the point. Consistent with his attitude toward war, the actual fighting is unimportant compared to the overarching spiritual and thematic elements.

The reader watches the battle begin through the eyes of Pope Pius V, who observed it by means of a miraculous vision as he prayed in a church in Rome. Readers, like the Pope who assembled the Holy League for this purpose, see the battle “as in a mirror,” watching the Ottoman fleet advance in the formation of a crescent, flinging shadows “foe-wards.” After building excitement and suspense, the poem does not show the actual battle. The spectacle of the two great fleets battling is not depicted at all. We are not introduced to Ali Pasha, the brilliant leader of the Ottoman fleet who is traditionally depicted as the counterpart to Don John. We do not see portraits of the other Christian commanders, or watch the battle’s complex strategic plans unfold. The poem’s focus rather shifts to the galley-slaves on the Ottoman ships.

And above the ships are palaces of brown, black-bearded chiefs,

*And below the ships are prisons, where with multitudinous griefs,
Christian captives sick and sunless, all a labouring race repines
Like a race in sunken cities, like a nation in the mines.
They are lost like slaves that sweat, and in the skies of morning hung
The stair-ways of the tallest gods when tyranny was young.
They are countless, voiceless, hopeless as those fallen or fleeing on
Before the high Kings' horses in the granite of Babylon.
And many a one grows witless in his quiet room in hell
Where a yellow face looks inward through the lattice of his cell,
And he finds his God forgotten, and he seeks no more a sign—
(But Don John of Austria has burst the battle-line!)*

Most of these galley-slaves were indeed Christian captives, taken in war from such countries as Greece, Albania, and Armenia. As it was not permissible to enslave fellow Muslims, Christians were the preferred slaves. The Holy League too was powered by slave rowers, mostly convicts. The Holy League's slaves were unchained and given weapons, being promised general amnesty with victory. The Ottoman fleet's slaves were chained to their oars.⁷

While the battle rages on, Chesterton's focus is on the slaves' despair. The slaves are "countless, voiceless, hopeless" in what amounts to a vision of hell. This hell is characterized by complete loss of hope and faith. Chesterton

⁷ Capponi, 2006: 255.

analogizes their captivity and hopelessness to the Israelites' Biblical exile in Babylon and, as Chesterton often does in his stories, links this despair to insanity.

The Ottoman Turks entered the battle confident of victory. Not only had they enjoyed unimpeded success in Mediterranean expansion until this point, but their fleet outnumbered the Europeans and had the wind in its favor. The Christians, however, had superior technological advantages, and the wind changed directions as they began to advance, attributed commonly to the Virgin Mary's miraculous intercession. The battle was a dramatic scene, but as Chesterton depicts it, the real victory is when Don John of Austria, the savior-hero, bursts the battle line and frees the galley slaves.

*Cervantes on his galley sets the sword back in the sheath
(Don John of Austria rides homeward with a wreath.)
And he sees across a weary land a stragglng road in Spain,
Up which a lean and foolish knight forever rides in vain,
And he smiles, but not as Sultans smile, and settles back the blade....
(But Don John of Austria rides home from the Crusade.)*

The poem ends with shift from the battle to a portrait of a young Cervantes as the fleet sails home victorious. Chesterton references Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote* here, his great work of satire that follows the eponymous "lean and foolish knight." With *Don Quixote*, in his silly way, Cervantes embodies what Chesterton saw as the nostalgic romanticism for the Crusades

and his ideal of the chivalry of the Middle Ages. In fact, Chesterton's last novel would be *Return to Don Quixote*, which depicts a literal revolution to return England to a romanticized idealistic state.⁸ Chesterton never lost his longing for a return to the chivalric ideal, even to the point of conflating it with war. *Lepanto* captures this vision in a rousing poem.

The poem closes on the same image with which it opened: a smile. In contrast to the Sultan at the beginning, Cervantes is neither smug nor presumptuous. His smile is content. In a poem written to rally a broken Europe in the face of looming war that is just as relevant today as it was in 1911, Chesterton reminds us that good conquers evil in the end.

⁸ Chesterton *Return to Don Quixote* 1927.

APPENDIX

Lepanto

By G.K. Chesterton

White founts falling in the courts of the sun,
And the Soldan of Byzantium is smiling as they run;
There is laughter like the fountains in that face of all men feared,
It stirs the forest darkness, the darkness of his beard,
It curls the blood-red crescent, the crescent of his lips,
For the inmost sea of all the earth is shaken with his ships.
They have dared the white republics up the capes of Italy,
They have dashed the Adriatic round the Lion of the Sea,
And the Pope has cast his arms abroad for agony and loss,
And called the kings of Christendom for swords about the Cross,
The cold queen of England is looking in the glass;
The shadow of the Valois is yawning at the Mass;
From evening isles fantastical rings faint the Spanish gun,
And the Lord upon the Golden Horn is laughing in the sun.

Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half heard,
Where only on a nameless throne a crownless prince has stirred,
Where, risen from a doubtful seat and half attained stall,
The last knight of Europe takes weapons from the wall,
The last and lingering troubadour to whom the bird has sung,

That once went singing southward when all the world was young,
In that enormous silence, tiny and unafraid,
Comes up along a winding road the noise of the Crusade.
Strong gongs groaning as the guns boom far,
Don John of Austria is going to the war,
Stiff flags straining in the night-blasts cold
In the gloom black-purple, in the glint old-gold,
Torchlight crimson on the copper kettle-drums,
Then the tuckets, then the trumpets, then the cannon, and he comes.
Don John laughing in the brave beard curled,
Spurning of his stirrups like the thrones of all the world,
Holding his head up for a flag of all the free.
Love-light of Spain—hurrah!
Death-light of Africa!
Don John of Austria
Is riding to the sea.

Mahound is in his paradise above the evening star,
(Don John of Austria is going to the war.)
He moves a mighty turban on the timeless houri's knees,
His turban that is woven of the sunset and the seas.
He shakes the peacock gardens as he rises from his ease,
And he strides among the tree-tops and is taller than the trees,
And his voice through all the garden is a thunder sent to bring
Black Azrael and Ariel and Ammon on the wing.
Giants and the Genii,
Multiplex of wing and eye,

Whose strong obedience broke the sky
When Solomon was king.

They rush in red and purple from the red clouds of the morn,
From temples where the yellow gods shut up their eyes in scorn;
They rise in green robes roaring from the green hells of the sea
Where fallen skies and evil hues and eyeless creatures be;
On them the sea-valves cluster and the grey sea-forests curl,
Splashed with a splendid sickness, the sickness of the pearl;
They swell in sapphire smoke out of the blue cracks of the ground,—
They gather and they wonder and give worship to Mahound.
And he saith, “Break up the mountains where the hermit-folk can hide,
And sift the red and silver sands lest bone of saint abide,
And chase the Giaours flying night and day, not giving rest,
For that which was our trouble comes again out of the west.
We have set the seal of Solomon on all things under sun,
Of knowledge and of sorrow and endurance of things done,
But a noise is in the mountains, in the mountains, and I know
The voice that shook our palaces—four hundred years ago:
It is he that saith not ‘Kismet’; it is he that knows not Fate ;
It is Richard, it is Raymond, it is Godfrey in the gate!
It is he whose loss is laughter when he counts the wager worth,
Put down your feet upon him, that our peace be on the earth.”
For he heard drums groaning and he heard guns jar,
(*Don John of Austria is going to the war.*)

Sudden and still—hurrah!

Bolt from Iberia!

Don John of Austria
Is gone by Alcalar.

St. Michael's on his mountain in the sea-roads of the north
(*Don John of Austria is girt and going forth.*)

Where the grey seas glitter and the sharp tides shift
And the sea folk labour and the red sails lift.
He shakes his lance of iron and he claps his wings of stone;
The noise is gone through Normandy; the noise is gone alone;
The North is full of tangled things and texts and aching eyes
And dead is all the innocence of anger and surprise,
And Christian killeth Christian in a narrow dusty room,
And Christian dreadeth Christ that hath a newer face of doom,
And Christian hateth Mary that God kissed in Galilee,
But Don John of Austria is riding to the sea.
Don John calling through the blast and the eclipse
Crying with the trumpet, with the trumpet of his lips,
Trumpet that sayeth ha!

Domino gloria!

Don John of Austria
Is shouting to the ships.

King Philip's in his closet with the Fleece about his neck
(*Don John of Austria is armed upon the deck.*)

The walls are hung with velvet that is black and soft as sin,
And little dwarfs creep out of it and little dwarfs creep in.
He holds a crystal phial that has colours like the moon,

He touches, and it tingles, and he trembles very soon,
And his face is as a fungus of a leprous white and grey
Like plants in the high houses that are shuttered from the day,
And death is in the phial, and the end of noble work,
But Don John of Austria has fired upon the Turk.
Don John's hunting, and his hounds have bayed—
Booms away past Italy the rumour of his raid
Gun upon gun, ha! ha!
Gun upon gun, hurrah!
Don John of Austria
Has loosed the cannonade.

The Pope was in his chapel before day or battle broke,
(Don John of Austria is hidden in the smoke.)
The hidden room in man's house where God sits all the year,
The secret window whence the world looks small and very dear.
He sees as in a mirror on the monstrous twilight sea
The crescent of his cruel ships whose name is mystery;
They fling great shadows foe-wards, making Cross and Castle dark,
They veil the plumèd lions on the galleys of St. Mark;
And above the ships are palaces of brown, black-bearded chiefs,
And below the ships are prisons, where with multitudinous griefs,
Christian captives sick and sunless, all a labouring race repines
Like a race in sunken cities, like a nation in the mines.
They are lost like slaves that sweat, and in the skies of morning hung
The stair-ways of the tallest gods when tyranny was young.
They are countless, voiceless, hopeless as those fallen or fleeing on

Before the high Kings' horses in the granite of Babylon.
And many a one grows witless in his quiet room in hell
Where a yellow face looks inward through the lattice of his cell,
And he finds his God forgotten, and he seeks no more a sign—
(But Don John of Austria has burst the battle-line!)

Don John pounding from the slaughter-painted poop,
Purpling all the ocean like a bloody pirate's sloop,
Scarlet running over on the silvers and the golds,
Breaking of the hatches up and bursting of the holds,
Thronging of the thousands up that labour under sea
White for bliss and blind for sun and stunned for liberty.

Vivat Hispania!

Domino Gloria!

Don John of Austria

Has set his people free!

Cervantes on his galley sets the sword back in the sheath
(Don John of Austria rides homeward with a wreath.)

And he sees across a weary land a straggling road in Spain,
Up which a lean and foolish knight forever rides in vain,
And he smiles, but not as Sultans smile, and settles back the blade....

(But Don John of Austria rides home from the Crusade.)

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