

THE INEXISTENT BATTLE AT THE FIELD OF BLACKBIRDS (KOSOVO POLJE) IN 1389

The truth about the Battle at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389: It never took place

Modern Serb views on the Battle of Kosovo are closer to legend than history, the late Kosovo Albanian historian Muhamet Pirraku writes, following extensive research on the subject.

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A historical event in 1389, which has come to be known as the First Battle at the Field of Blackbirds (*Kosovo Polje*, in Serbian) has taken a life of its own mainly through how the story has been told. What is not widely known is that what took place in the Llap River Valley in the summer of 1389 did not, in fact, have an impact on the existing relations of the countries involved. In fact, there is historical evidence the battle never took place.

The science of history does not possess any document of the very day of the Incident, and the exact date of the Incident cannot be ascertained using available resources. The Serbian religious holiday "Vidovdan", first observed on 28 June 1389 (Gregorian Calendar) was a by-product of the Serbian church and politics by the end of the century XVIII and beginning of the century XIX, like the invention of the Cult of Lazar and the Myth of "*Kosovo Polje*" (the Field of Blackbirds). By scrutinizing the information communicated by the Ottoman and European chronicles, it can be said that surreptitious effort was made by Prince Lazar to form an alliance of Christians in Southeast Europe against the Ottoman occupier. At that time, Murad I and his army arrived at the Field of Blackbirds to control and strengthen the loyalty of his vassals in Albania, Serbia, and Bosnia.

The meticulous analysis of the facts exhibits that the incident was just a conspiracy of the commanders of both the Christian coalition and Ottoman army. From the aspects of both armies, the event happened within two hours at great secrecy and was executed by small groups of soldiers. The incident did not have any effect on the social relations of the region at that time, including the ties between vassals and the Ottoman invader. No trace of the battle was left behind, no graves or military artifacts.

Even so, the sources above exhibit unbelievable dimensions of the "Battle" regarding infantry, cavalry, gunnery, and human casualties: 100 thousand soldiers got killed and as many wounded, of whom most "did not overcome their injuries". The undamaged corpses of the Sultan Murad I and Prince Lazar buried with high religious and military honors: Murad I beside a mosque in Bursa (a city in Turkey) and Prince Lazar beside the Orthodox Church in Prishtina. Months after, the corpse of Prince Lazar was taken and reburied with religious and military honors in the monastery in Zhiça of Shumadia (central Serbia). Then, just after "the Battle", the new Sultan Bayezid I married the daughter Mileva of late Prince Lazar; and Stefan Lazarević, the brother of Mileva, joined the army of Sultan Bayezid I for the sake of his imperial conquests.

What followed that event were preserved in the early historical epic of the Albanian people of the region that includes the Field of Blackbirds during the Christian Orthodox period of Saint Sava. Its focus was on the tragic fate of the Sultan Murad I and Milosh Nikolla Kopilić, a local from Drenica. He was a vassal governing the region that included the Field of Blackbirds and intimately acquainted with the Sultan Murad I. It resonates with the early Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian historical epics, though those have been augmented by imaginary actors and religious, mystic, legendary and political motives, because those were with provenance from official versions of the imperial Ottoman court, the Serbian Orthodox church and Serbian royal courts between the centuries XV and XIX.

The Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 was merely a *coup d'état* (not a battle between armies) organized by Bayezid I, the son of the Sultan Murad I, and the Serbian lord Vuk Branković. Bayezid I became the new Sultan and Vuk Branković, after the death of Prince Lazar, became the most potent Serbian lord vassal to the Sultan. Purposely, the cohorts of the killer Vuk Branković later cleared the traces of the graves of the Albanian dignitaries, for example, Theodor Muzaka II, killed in that complot and took care of to preserve only the tomb of Prince Lazar. The many publications in different languages and folk beliefs of the so-called "Battle at the

Field of Blackbirds in 1389" have deliberately created the myth (the lie) for that event. The scientific evidence and analyses elucidate the truth and inform otherwise.

Serbs reaffirmed both their vassal behavior to the Sultan and not defenders of Christianity seven years later, on 25 September 1396, at the Battle of Nicopolis (in present-day northern Bulgaria). In that battle, with the help of Serbs, the Ottoman army of the Sultan Bayezid I crushed a vast Christian European army composed of Hungarian, Bulgarian, Wallachian, French, Burgundian, German and mixed troops, and backed by the Venetian navy. It was the last European crusade to drive the Ottomans out of Europe. In that battle, the Serbs did not stop their betrayal until they delivered the *coup de grace* to their "fellow" European Christians by beheading thousands of prisoners. The Battle at Nicopolis set the conditions for an Ottoman military presence in Europe for centuries afterward.

References to the event—publications, folkloristic records, annals, and chronicles—compile many volumes, but they are controversial. Some are baseless. The literature records and histories of Slavic, Ottoman, Persian, Greek, Latin, Albanian, Hungarian, French, etc. origins later recovered for political purposes by those who were so inclined. One drive was to affirm steps toward imperial Ottoman and Islamic occupation of the West and Christian East; the other was to confirm the challenge of establishing and consolidating a pan-Christian curtain wall against the Ottomans.

Christian motives against the Ottomans in the recorded European chronicles became stronger after the 16th century, because of new cultural movements in the names of humanism, renaissance, reformation, and counter-reformation. At that time, a massive conversion of Orthodox Saint Sava and Saint Clementine Albanians to Islam happened in the Roman and Byzantine ex-provinces of Dardania and Macedonia; the result of which was the penetration of Islamic views into the historical memory of Albanians about the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389.

The data found in oriental and occidental chronicles created from the late 1380s to the early 1670s prove that the so-called "Battle at *Kosovo Polje*" in 1389, in fact, did not take place.

The first known source of Ottoman origin, from which the official Ottoman version about the Battle at the Field of Blackbirds originated, is the poem "*Iskender-name*" by the poet Ahmedie of Anatolia, written on 13 March 1390. However, the chronological treatment of the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 began with the publication in 1398, in Persian, of the work "*Bāzm u rāzm*" by *Aziz ibn Ardāshira Astrābādīja*, who lived in the court of an independent emir and consequently had no constraints of revealing the existence of a military coup d'état in the army of the Sultan Murad I. According to *Astrābādīja*, the Sultan Murad I and his son Jakub were liquidated because of a conspiracy involving the Sultan's son, Bayezid I. That information would later be fogged up by official versions about the murder of Murad I written by courtier historians, the first of which was the work "*Menakib-name*" by Jahshi Fakih who lived at the time of the Incident. Fakih was the son of Ilias, imam of the future Sultan Bayezid I, and he passed away before the year 1413.

The work of Fakih became a reliable reference for other claims of the Ottoman historiography about the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389. Then the publication of "*Behxhet-ut Tevarih*" by Mulla Shukrullah came out on November 2, 1459.

The official Ottoman version conveyed further by a chronicle recorder named Enver in his work, "*Düstür-name*," published in 1464.

Three years later, the great historical work "*Tevarih-i al-i Osman*" was completed by Urukh, who mostly cited the work by Fakih. As well, the renowned historian Ahmed Ashik-pasha Zade referred to the work of Fakih in his publication in 1484 known as "*Menakib*" or "*Tevarih-i al-i Osman*". Pasha Zade lived in Skopje during the 1430s - 1450s and thus supplemented his work with information from historical memories near the Field of Blackbirds. However, the work "*Kitâb-i Cihan-nümâ*" by Mehmet Neshri, written during the years 1484-1493 and inflated with implausible records, would become influential primarily in world historiography.

The historical memory of Southeast Europe concerning the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 can be found in the work “Turkish Janissary Chronicles”, written in 1491-1492 by Mihail Constantine Ostrovica on demand of the Hungarian King and followed by the important historical works of “Hesht behisht” by *Idris Husam ed-Din-Bitlis*, written in 1505, and “*Tevârih-i âl-i Osman*” by Kemal Pashazade, written in 1502-1510.

In the years 1490-1512, an anonymous author from Edrenea adapted the history “*Tevarih-i al-i Osman*” by Uruhx, expanded it with new motives and somehow embroidered it. It was followed up by a few other Ottoman historical works, namely “*Târih-i Nisancî*” by Ramazan zade Mehmet Çelebi - Nishanxhi, written before the year of 1561, and the major work “*Tac-ut-tevârih*” by Saaduddin Mehmet Hoxha Efendi, written in 1575. In that same year, Ahmed Ferîdûn published the work “*Mejmûah-i nunshâât-i Salâtîn*”, which consisted of the letters of sultans, including the “Ferman of the Sultan Bayezid I”, sent from the Field of Blackbirds to the Cadiz of Bursa in respect to the burying of the corpse of Murad I. According to that document, Sultan Murad I was sacrificed for Islam, as a fulfillment of his wish, in the middle of the grandiose month of Shaban of the Hixhri 791, that is of the [Gregorian] year of 1389. The month of Shaban of that year began on Monday, 26 July and consisted of 29 days, ending on 23 August. Thus, it appears evident that the tragic comedy in “the place called the Field of Blackbirds” occurred on 8 or 9 August 1389. That date has not been found in any early Ottoman chronicles, and it has furthermore been neglected by the Turkish historiography which holds the age of 20 June 1389 as the date for the First Battle at the Field of Blackbirds.

Approximately near the mid-70s of the century XVI, the works “*Badâ’i ‘ul-waqâ’i*” by Hoxha Hussein and “*Nuhbet-üt-tevarih ve ‘L-abar*” by Mehmed bin Mehmed were published. Also, interesting data about the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 were left behind by Mustafa Ahmed – Ali, who served in Bosnia in 1577 and wrote an important chronicle “*Künh-ül-ahbâr*” between 1591 and 1599. As well, “*Tâhih-i Sollakzâde*” by Mehmet Handami – *Solakzade*, written before the year of 1657, is an extensive historical chronicle work with significant claims on the event.

Meanwhile, compelling data from the historical memory of Southeast Europe about the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 were perpetuated into Ottoman memory and historiography by the famous traveler Evlie Çelebi in his major work, “*Sijaset-name*”. From 1660-1662, he visited the Albanian lands, including the Field of Blackbirds. The local Albanian tradition not far from the Field of Blackbirds about the incident there in 1389 has also been covered by the Dervish of Thessalonica *Ahmet Dede Lutfullah-Mynexhimbash* in his work “*Müneccimbaşi Sahâif-ul-ahbar*”, written after the year of 1672. Herewith, the official Ottoman historiography of literature and chronicles ends.

Parallel to the Ottoman chronicles, annals and chronicles appeared relating to the Southeast European origins for the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389. Because there are no known records of the oriental provenience before those of the Ottoman chronicles, the European histories and chronicles about that incident appeared later than pieces of information written by specific individuals.

The first piece of information came from the assistant-priest Ignatie on 27 June 1389, who accompanied the Russian metropolitan Pimen on his travels throughout the East. Ignatie wrote about rumors surrounding the murder of Murad I, but he mentioned neither the killer nor the date. On 1 August 1389, the King of Bosnia, Tvrtko I, informed the Communes of Trogir and Florentia that his army had defeated the Ottoman army of Murad I. From the reply of Florentia’s Council on 20 October 1389, known as the Letter to King Tvrtko I, it appears that the Council of Florentia had also gathered information about “the Battle at the Field of Blackbirds” from other sources. In Florentia's reply, King Tvrtko I was greeted with victory and the murder of Murad I was credited to twelve vowed knights, of whom “one of them slaughtered him by the sword”.

As to documents with Serbian origin, the Russian government, and church created by the end of the century XVI the Cult of Lazar and the Serbian Myth of “*Kosovo Polje*”(the Field of Blackbirds). The Serbian church in the Ottoman Empire dealt with the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds more than two months after it occurred. The

priest Pahomie, probably from the church of Saint Onufri of Shumica, a locality near Ravanica in Shumadie, wrote: “....

In that year, Knez Lazar was murdered by Turks whereas Murad by Serbs”. And only ten years later, by the end of the century XIV, there was a memo from the Serbian church reporting, without mention of any names, “What a calamity happened in the country when the Knez and the great Turkish king were murdered”. After that, this church did not mention the tragedy of Lazar and Murad for about 100 years, until the end of the century XV. In a note written at that time, it the murders of Murad I and Lazar and the defeat of a Christian army “due to the desertion of some Serbs” was recalled. The name of Murad’s killer was not mentioned in any documents of the Serbian church relating to centuries XIV and XV. The name of Murad’s killer was not mentioned even by Constantine the Philosopher in his “Biography of Stefan Lazar” in 1431 or by the author of the annual “*Cetinski letopis*” (1516-1572). In both records, the killer of Murad I was referred only to as “...such-and-such a noble man”, despite the fact that up to that time the Ottoman and European chronicles cited as the killer Milosh Nikola Kopiliç, a native close to the Field of Blackbirds and a vassal well known by Murad I. Gjergj Brankoviç II in his work “*Cronica Serbica*” published in 1704 ignored the role of Milosh Nikola Kopiliq in the tragedy at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 and did not give any sign of the existence of the Serbian Cult of Lazar nor of the Serbian Myth of the Field of Blackbirds.

Regarding European sources for the "Battle" at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389, before October 1389 the French officer and governor of Cyprus, Filip Mezière, somehow informed France that the incident in which Murad I and his son were killed “together with other prominent Ottoman leaders happened in the regions of Albania”. Some insight also comes from the Letter of Dimitrie Kidoni sent to King Mihail II Paleolog in prison days after the Christian coalition "confronted" the Ottoman army.

Then for more than five years, there was no reference to the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds till the chronicle of the monk of Saint-Denis in 1395, in which the name of the killer of Murad I was not mentioned. In 1396-1397, Filip Mezière again raised the topic of the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds, adding that Sultan and Lazar had each suffered the loss of 20 thousand soldiers. That was followed by the chronicles of both an anonymous Greek writer published by Zoras and an anonymous writer from Ragusa in 1402 who traced the Bosnian memory.

The Anonymous of Ragusa put forth that the Field of Blackbirds, in the middle of June 1389, there were the Bosnians, Vuk Brankoviç and Vojvoda Vlatko Vukoviç [of Croatia] standing by Lazar, whom he called King of Bosnia. He did not mention the name of the person who “delivered heart wound” to Murad I. The Anonymous Chronicler of Florentine (The Chronicle of Friuli), in the second decade of the century XV, covered the events from the murder of Karl of Durrës in 1385 till the year 1409. According to him, Murad suffered 70 thousand victims while the Christian count was about 30 thousand.

The work “*De Origine et rebus gestis Turcorum...*” by Laonici Chalcondyle Atheniensis, written before the year 1435 and published in 1556 was influential to European written history. In his account, the names of the killer varied from Milo to Miloen and Michale. Meanwhile, according to information available to the Hungarian King Albrecht in 1438, “Murad and Lazar were killed in a duel”. Information also came from armory tutor Jerga of Nurnberg, who served on the court of Stefan Vukçiq - Kosaç before the year 1466. However, the chronicle by Johan Mihail Duka, published in Italian at the beginning of the century XVI would become much more influential to the European written history. Both the Catholic historian Marin Barleti and a group of monks in a Letter to Pope in 1598 and the Archbishops of Antivari (today, the town of Bar in Montenegro) Marin Bici in 1610 and Pjetër Mazreku in 1623-1624 referred to that publication by Johan Mihail Duka. Marin Bici and Pjetër Mazreku also affirmed the Albanian historical memory about the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in respect to the murder of Murad and Milosh Kopiliq. At the beginning of the century XVI, relevant pieces of information were documented by the priest Martin Segoni of Ulcinium in his work “*De itineribus in Turciam Libellus*”, performed on behalf of the Hungarian King in 1502; later in 1522, the work reemerged with the traveler Filice Petantio.

Detailed information on the participation of Albanians in the Christian coalition against the Ottomans come from the chronicle “Historia e generalogia della casa Musachia” by Gjon Muzaka, written in 1510. That was cited by Ludovik Cerva Tubero of Ragusa in his work “Comentario de rebus quae temporibus eius...gestae funt” written before the year of 1515 but published in 1590 under the title of “...De Turcorum origine...”. Benedikt Kuripeshiq covered the incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 in his work “*Itinerarium der Botschaftstreise...*” published in 1530, which was followed in 1550 by the Ottoman chronicle entitled “Girabi Tevarichi”, published in German. Then, the work “Gli Annali overo le vite de’principi et singnori della casa Othomana” by Francesco Sansouino came in 1571. The traveler Jean Palerne Forensien visited the region of Dardania throughout the 90s of century XVI and recorded the Albanian historical memory of both Scanderbeg and Milo Komnen (Milosh Nikola Kopiliq).

The European humanist and historical treatment of the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 commenced at the beginning of the century XVII. The works “*Il Regno de gli Slavi...*” by Mavro Orbini, published in 1601, and “Ristretto de gli anali di Ragusa” by Petro Lukar, published in 1604, became influential. Those, along with some other Ottoman chronicles, were mentioned by British historian Richard Knolles in his work “General History of the Turks...” published in 1610 and 1710. It was followed by Joanne Cuspiniano with his work “*De Turcorum origine...*” published in 1673. Those publications marked the advent of scientific knowledge about the Incident at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389 based upon Ottoman and European chronicles. Also, they had significant effects upon the written history of Southeast Europeans, at the expense of Albanian presence in the broad region that includes the Field of Blackbirds.

This article was written in August 2006. The views represented in it are those of Prof. Dr. Muhamet Pirraku, a Kosovo historian who lived from 1944 to 2014.

The article has been translated by Saimir Lolja.