Suleiman the Magnificent

Suleiman I

Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Suleiman I, "The Magnificent," conquered Iraq and parts of Christian eastern and central Europe, as well as parts of the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Suleiman was born in about 1494, the only son of Selim I, who had conquered Syria and Egypt. Selim I had strangled his brothers (as required by law) in order to avoid wars of succession; Suleiman, as the only son, was spared this ceremony when he took over the title of caliph (successor to Mohammed) at age 26. The young Suleiman had already helped run his father's government for 16 years, and he continued his father's warrior tradition. But first he had to suppress revolts in Syria, Egypt, and Anatolia from his palace in Istanbul.

Belgrade

Suleiman's first military campaign was against Belgrade. Sitting where the Danube and Sava rivers meet, Belgrade was the key to Christian defense of Europe. Suleiman (a devout Muslim) marched in with an army of 100,000 in 1521 and captured the Christian city in three weeks. Most people had fled, and the 400 who surrendered were either killed or enslaved.

Siege of Rhodes

Suleiman next turned his attention to the Island of Rhodes, just six miles off the coast of Turkey and the last outpost of Christian Crusader knights. The knights survived by attacking Turkish trading ships between Istanbul and Egypt. Suleiman laid siege to the island, firing 85,000 cannonballs at the fortress' walls. Magnanimously, Suleiman allowed the knights to surrender with honor, keeping their arms, a few days before Christmas 1522. Suleiman also spared the citizenry of Rhodes, a move that would earn him the title "The Magnificent" among European Christians.

Siege of Vienna

Suleiman stayed away from war for three years, but his highly trained soldiers grew restless. In 1526, he invaded Hungary. During the First Battle of Mohacs (1526), his army of 100,000 killed 20,000 Hungarians in only two hours. Suleiman put John Zapolya in place as a vassal king of Hungary. The Ottoman Empire now stretched from Egypt in the south, to the eastern reaches of Turkey, and to Hungary in the west. Later, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria defeated Zapolya in a civil war, and Suleiman laid siege to Vienna from September 27 to October 15, 1529. Suleiman's army withdrew before it was able to overtake the city, but it was the greatest threat to Christian Europe since the eighth century.

In 1530, infuriated that the pope had crowned Charles V as Holy Roman emperor (Suleiman was the only true emperor, he believed), Suleiman tried to lure Charles into war in Austria. His effort was unsuccessful, but his army did pillage Austria. Next, he turned his attention to Persia in the east. His brother-in-law and grand vizier, Ibrahim, led the army against Tabriz and Baghdad, overtaking those cities. Unfortunately for Ibrahim, he also began to take on titles he did not deserve. He soon discovered that while Suleiman wasn't forced to strangle any brothers upon his accession to the throne, he was not above strangling an uppity brother-in-law. Ibrahim's body was found outside the palace on May 15, 1536.

Control of the Sea

Through cooperation with the pirate Barbarossa brothers, Suleiman was able to gain control of the Mediterranean Sea in 1538. Suleiman's forces, under command of Piri Reis, also gained control of the Red Sea and successfully protected the Middle Eastern caravan routes essential to the spice trade. In 1540, Zapolya died, and Suleiman was drawn again into war in Europe. He recaptured Buda (now Budapest) and occupied Albania and Moldavia.
In 1547, Suleiman made a truce with Archduke Ferdinand under which Ferdinand paid an annual tribute to the Turkish sultan.

**Empire Expands – Family Shrinks**

Back in Istanbul, Suleiman was increasingly influenced by Roxelana, a Russian woman who had been a member of his harem and later became his wife. Hungry for power, Roxelana arranged for Suleiman's eldest son to be strangled in 1553, leaving her sons as the only eligible heirs to the throne. At the same time, Suleiman was again warring in Persia, finally settling the border dispute in 1555. The Ottoman Empire absorbed half of Georgia and Azerbaijan and all of Kurdistan and Iraq. Roxelana died in 1558, and her sons Selim and Bayezid went to war against Suleiman, trying to overthrow him. A defeated Bayezid fled to Persia, where the shah traded him back to Suleiman. Suleiman executed Bayezid and his four sons in 1561.

All through his reign, Suleiman was an active legislator, establishing laws governing criminal punishments, inheritance rights, and regulations regarding feudal grants. For this reason, he is known as Suleiman "The Lawgiver" in the Muslim world. He was also a poet and a patron of the arts. He commissioned many mosques to be built and many other buildings that today give Istanbul its domed and minaretted architectural flavor.

In 1560, the Turkish fleet defeated the Spanish Navy off Tunisia. Suleiman turned his attention to the island of Malta, being held by the same knights he had allowed to go free off Rhodes 40 years earlier. In 1565, 40,000 Turks laid siege to the island. The Christian knights held them off but suffered terrible casualties. Suleiman himself, now 72 and ailing, did not travel to Malta, but he did make one final assault on Hungary. He died outside the Hungarian town of Szigeth on September 5 or 6, 1566. His grand vizier pretended Suleiman was still alive, propping up the body until his son, Selim, could reach Istanbul and gain the throne. Suleiman's heart was buried at Szigeth and his body returned to Istanbul, where it is interred in the Suleiman Mosque. Selim II would become known as Selim "The Drunkard," and with him, the downfall of the Ottoman Empire began.

**MLA Citation**