

THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE



Letter to the People:

Dear Honorable Delegates,

Welcome to the fifth annual Freeman Model United Nations Conference! It is a privilege to introduce you to one of the most chaotic and convoluted crisis committees: The Siege of Constantinople.

Our names are Anaya Kaul and Jomana Morkous, and we are glad to serve as your chairs for this committee. Anaya is a sophomore at Freeman's Center for Leadership, Government, and Global Economics. She has participated in 15 Model UN conferences since 7th grade and is excited to supervise delegates' debates and schemes. Jomana is a sophomore attending Freeman High School and has participated in a whopping three Model UN conferences since halfway through last year. She enjoys gardening and expert use of memes. Although she doesn't have much experience in Model UN, she is more than excited to be able to welcome the committee to FREEMUN V. We hope this committee is an exciting experience for all delegates to rewrite history as we know it. The Siege of Constantinople was a pivotal conflict marked by the tragic fall of the Byzantine city to the Ottoman Empire and is generally limited to a discussion of the Ottoman perspective. Hence, this committee is an excellent opportunity for you to understand what the losing party, the Byzantines, were encountering. This committee will commence in **late March 1453**, a few weeks before the first day of the siege. Your perspective should be based on your delegate's position on the topic instead of your personal beliefs. As this is a crisis committee, its nature is fast-paced and requires impromptu problem-solving. Furthermore, it is highly recommended that you research and gain an in-depth understanding of all views on the fall of Constantinople, as this committee is centered around the siege. Position papers are not mandatory, but they are required if delegates want to be considered for an award. Furthermore, sources used to write position papers should be referenced using MLA citations or footnotes. We wish you luck in rescuing Constantinople from its downfall. If you have any questions, feel free to contact us at constantinoplefreemunv@gmail.com.

Your Chairs,

Anaya Kaul and Jomana Morkous

The Siege of Constantinople

Historical Crisis Committee

Topic I: *Disruption of Trade*

Topic II: *Defense Against Foreign Attack*

Introduction

The Roman Empire was one of the largest empires in the world. Eventually, though, it became so large that the government couldn't maintain its vast territory. As a result, the empire was split into the Western Empire, with Rome as its capital, and the Eastern Empire, also known as the Byzantine Empire, with Constantinople as its capital. The Eastern Empire managed to survive for almost 1,000 years more until it fell in 1453 after being taken over by the Ottomans.

Figure I: Western and Eastern Roman Empires



During the Fourth Crusades, the second-biggest sack of Constantinople took place around 1202. In 1204, the Byzantines, who had previously withstood a multitude of foreign attacks, fell; France's Crusader armies crushed them in the sacking of Constantinople to take revenge on the emperor of the Byzantines at the time. The Crusader Attack in 1204 earned a reputation for having the most destructive impact on the Byzantine Empire until the siege of Brusa, approximately 113 years later, which marked the beginning of the Ottoman occupation of the Byzantines.

In 1394, following the first siege and around nine subsequent battles, the Ottomans and the leading Christian religious powers, including the Byzantine Empire, benefited greatly from the Treaty of Gallipoli, which helped protect them from crusader attacks by granting them strategically located territories. The treaty had come about from Süleyman Çelebi, the ruler of the Ottoman territories, and the main Christian powers, which at the time included the Byzantines. However, peace between the Byzantine and Ottoman empires was merely temporary due to the rise of Sultan Mehmed II, who came to power 48 years after the treaty was signed with the goal of

conquering the Byzantines. At this point in the committee, Ottoman troops, led by Sultan Mehmed II, are approaching the walls of Constantinople and are ready to attack. The fall of this wealthy, flourishing city could lead to the downfall of the Byzantine Empire as a whole. Delegates must protect and defend the luxury and honor of the Byzantine Empire by defeating the foreign enemy.

Topic I: Disruption of Trade

Background

Trade and commerce were among the most critical components of the success and expansion of the Byzantine Empire. In particular, on land, the ancient Roman road system was utilized effectively, allowing goods to travel from one end of the empire to another, as well as from distant regions, including modern-day Afghanistan, Russia, and Ethiopia. Bigger cities within the empire were characterized by thriving cosmopolitan markets. Most notably, Constantinople was one of the largest global trading centers, selling a variety of goods ranging from Bulgarian linen to Arabian perfumes.

Because of widely-held prejudices that the trade profession was a less respectable industry in the empire, the state monarchy was responsible for controlling trade within the Byzantine Empire. The state played a large role in supervising the flow of goods and general commerce in major cities, resulting in a lack of private traders and

markets.¹ Hence, a direct attack or disruption of the entire empire had the potential to wreak havoc on the trading industry of Eurasia as a whole, as market forces had little effect on the Byzantine economy.

Territorial loss and foreign conquest have proven to disrupt Byzantine trade and economy in previous centuries. For instance, in the 7th century, Arab invaders captured the Levant, Egypt, and North Africa as part of the first Muslim conquests, the Lombards invaded Italy, and the Balkans were seized by the Slavic peoples. The territorial loss ultimately led to significant repercussions in the economy, including contributing to sudden disruptions in trade. Later, in the 13th century, crusaders brutally sacked Constantinople in April 1204, stealing much of the wealth the empire had accumulated over centuries. Subsequent emperors attempted to restore the empire's wealth to its former glory and retrieve back the land they had lost. However, they failed in their attempts due to a shattered economy, leading to hasty solutions and public outrage.² Thus, history has proven that foreign invasion can easily wreak havoc over the Byzantine industry, trade, and economy.

Current Status

While the potential Siege of Constantinople would have an immense

¹ Mark Cartwright, "Trade in The Byzantine Empire," *World History Encyclopedia*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1179/trade-in-the-byzantine-empire/> (accessed June 21, 2024).

² Jack Crawford, "Understanding Byzantine Economy: The Collapse of a Medieval Powerhouse," *The Collector*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.thecollector.com/byzantine-economy-collapse-medieval-times/> (accessed June 21, 2024).

impact on the ability to trade across the Silk Road trade network, it is bound to have a more significant impact on two of the most prominent Italian city-states, Venice and Genoa, crucial maritime powers located just west of the of the Byzantine, or Eastern Roman, Empire along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Their trading network is far-reaching and highly profitable not only for their local economies but also for the success of trade in Constantinople and across the globe, considering the states' roles as key allies and trading partners of the Byzantine Empire.³

For instance, Genoa set up a privileged deal with Constantinople, which provided the city-state with valuable access to the Byzantine capital and its land route connecting Europe and Asia. Hence, European traders must communicate with Genoese merchants to gain trading access to Asia through Constantinople. Consequently, a destructive foreign attack on Constantinople, especially by a powerful and merciless group such as the Ottomans and their allies, would affect regions well beyond the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire, leaving the entire global trading network and economy in shambles.⁴

³ "How did the Fall of Constantinople Change the Renaissance in Italy," *Saint Sophia*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.saintsophiadc.org/how-did-the-fall-of-constantinople-change-the-renaissance-in-italy/> (accessed Jul. 25, 2024).

⁴ Abhinav Dholepat, "The Fall Of Constantinople Led To The 'Discovery' Of The Americas," *Medium*, March 29, 2020, <https://adholepa.medium.com/the-fall-of-constantinople-led-to-the-discovery-of-the-americas-a0efeb287d14> (accessed Jul. 25, 2024).

While the Italian city-states played a crucial role in contributing to the success of Byzantine and global trade networks, the Silk Road was equally important in protecting the empire from steep economic decline. In particular, the Byzantine Empire was such an immense supplier of silk textiles that regulations were required to prevent the creation of monopolies on the items. Furthermore, Constantinople served as a Western anchor to the Silk Road trade network, allowing for direct commercial contact with merchants in Central Asia, Russia, Northern Europe, as well as lands in the Black and Mediterranean Sea. Hence, the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Empire and Constantinople would result in the loss of a key export and valuable trade routes.⁵

Analysis

Since the trade industry was such a valuable source of income and prosperity for the Byzantine Empire, there were several measures taken—prior to the onset of the siege—to ensure that the goods navigated the border safely from assailants and smugglers. For instance, customs stations were established along the major ports and frontiers of the empire, including Abydos and Hieron, which controlled the straits between the Black Sea and Dardanelles. Furthermore, records were meticulously kept to supervise the status and location of items at certain times, such as the *Book of the Prefect*, which listed the rules for trade and trade guilds in Constantinople. Several

⁵ Seth, Hoist, "Byzantine Economic Systems," *Byzantine Empire*, <https://chapter12byzantine.weebly.com/conflicts-and-economy.html> (accessed Jul. 28, 2024).

measures were fundamental for establishing rudimentary protection against the disruption of the trade industry and paving the way for policies in favor of directly fending off foreign attacks. In particular, in the 7th or 8th century, the state created the Rhodian Sea Law, which ensured that no goods useful to an enemy or potential attacker—including gold, salt, timber for ships, iron for weapons, and Greek Fire (a secret Byzantine weapon of highly inflammable liquid)—was to be exported.

Moreover, following the Arab conquest of the 7th century, their trade outreach extended well beyond the confines of their empire, creating a vibrant market that spread across nations in the Eurasia continent. Venetian aid and the cosmopolitan environment of the Byzantine Empire enabled it to successfully bounce back from adversity, demonstrating how a strategic selection of allies and a diversified population can maintain prosperity and socioeconomic stability.⁶ Thus, Byzantine authorities recommend that future solutions include some sort of foreign assistance as well as further and strengthen previous initiatives to ensure success. In particular, while the measures listed above enhanced the security of the trade industry, there were minuscule holes in those solutions that allowed foreigners to infiltrate and break through established barriers. By working efficiently and productively with the Empire's most valuable allies, including Italy, the Byzantines could close the gaps in

previous economic solutions to establish a robust defense of the market.

Therefore, the trade industry could only be saved if the Byzantines and their allies learned from their past mistakes and devised unconventional, imperceptible strategies that could steer the Ottomans in a misleading direction.

Questions to Consider:

1. What was weak in the measures taken during the 7th and 8th centuries that led the Arabs to easily carry out their conquest of the empire? What sort of measures are strong but innovative enough to throw a curveball?
2. What roles should foreign regions or empires actively trading with the Byzantine Empire play to further fortify their borders and protect ships carrying valuable goods?
3. Is Constantinople too small of a city to carry the burden of being at the center of an entire bustling global market of trade?
4. How might the Byzantines be able to transfer the trading power of Constantinople evenly throughout the Byzantine Empire to encourage uniformity?

⁶ Mark Cartwright, "Trade in The Byzantine Empire," *World History Encyclopedia*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1179/trade-in-the-byzantine-empire/> (accessed June 21, 2024).

Topic II: Defense Against Foreign Attack

Background

The city of Constantinople was attacked many times by a multitude of empires over the course of hundreds of years. Yet the enemy that finally extinguished Byzantine control was the Ottoman Empire, which captured Constantinople in 1453 after decades of offensives, leading to the downfall of the Byzantines.

The primary cause of the 1422 Sack of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade was the actions of Prince Alexios IV Angelos. He promised financial and military support and to reunify Christianity to the Crusaders in the Fourth Crusades in exchange for reclaiming the throne held by his uncle, Alexios III, the then Byzantine emperor. The Crusades were a series of religious wars initiated by the Catholic Church in the 11th - 13th century to reclaim Jerusalem and other holy lands that were held under Muslim rule. The Crusaders had derived from European powers, and specifically, in the context of the fourth crusades, France was the main sender of Crusaders. The Crusaders were able to throw Prince Alexios IV Angelos's uncle off the throne for him, and once he did not deliver awaited their promised reward, the Crusaders launched a full-on attack on Constantinople. In the process, they stormed the city and sacked everything. This was the

start of many attacks that weakened the city militarily, financially, and diplomatically.⁷

The empire had been limited to a few major cities and territories by this time. Due to territorial rivalries, Sultan Murad II wanted to destroy the Byzantine Empire once and for all. In 1422, the Ottomans surrounded the city, cut off supply lines, and prepared for an offensive. Despite having limited resources left, the Byzantine emperor managed to fortify the city's defenses. The Byzantines asked Western Europe for help, but little help arrived. Only the Republic of Venice offered some naval support and around 700 soldiers.⁸ One advantage for the Byzantines was ongoing internal rebellions that depleted the Ottoman resources and relieved pressure on Byzantine forces.

Thessalonica was a city located on the Aegean Coast. It was gifted by the Byzantine Empire to Venice to handle the city's defense and was a vital city for Venetian trade. During the 1422 Siege of Constantinople, city residents were starved by Ottomans. Consequently, Venice directed its entire budget to defense. Venice is one of Constantinople's most critical allies, and this may cause issues in Venice to face battle since it would take away from Constantinople's resources.

Overall, the 1422 Ottoman offensive weakened every aspect of the city the same

⁷ Matthews, Rupert. "Sack of Constantinople | Summary." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 6 Oct. 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Sack-of-Constantinople-1204.

⁸ Cartwright, Mark. "1453: The Fall of Constantinople." *World History Encyclopedia*, 23 Jan. 2018, www.worldhistory.org/article/1180/1453-the-fall-of-constantinople/.

way its sack in the Fourth Crusades did. The Byzantines not only became weaker financially but also lost more and more of their territories and military power. They became more vulnerable targets for the expansionist Ottomans, which implemented a blockade around the Byzantine Empire around late March 1453. The blockade controlled the Bosphorus Strait, cutting off all incoming aid and supplies through their sea routes and preventing the Byzantines from finding external resources to support themselves. This blockade eventually led to the downfall of the Byzantine Empire under siege, for they were isolated and short of supplies.

In 1452, the Ottoman Empire constructed and finished the Rumeli Hisari fortress on the European side of the Bosphorus. This significantly aided in the Ottomans gaining control of the naval passage through the fortress.⁹

Meanwhile, Byzantine emperor Constantine XI was begging Western Europe for support and even agreed to the union of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, which most Byzantine people did not support. His pleas were ignored, and caused an uproar from the Byzantine people, who took pride in the difference between their two branches of Christianity.

Current Status

The Byzantine Empire currently teeters on the brink of collapse. Sultan Mehmed II of the Ottoman Empire has

prepared for the attack on Constantinople but has not yet launched anything. The Sultan's troops are all on standby surrounding Constantinople's borders, ready to attack on order.

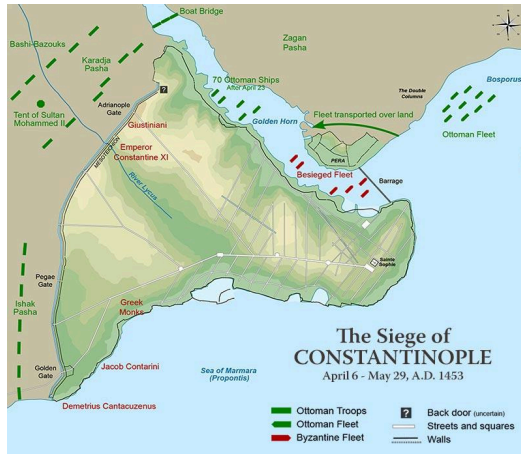
The attackers consist of the navy, presiding in the Bosphorus Strait while actively preparing to enter Goldenhorn, a navy port. The army is positioned around the land walls, including the Theodosian walls around the west, which is the Byzantine Empire's strongest defense in the face of Ottoman troops. They have withstood years and wars. The artillery primarily occupies the walls around specific points as they prepare for bombardment. It is known from past battles that although Ottomans artillery is ruthless, they have a clear disadvantage when transporting locations and reloading.

The Ottomans used Goldenhorn as their navy's main port for transporting ships by land and into the water. It is assumed that they have all of the Bosphorus Strait under siege and are entering through the leghorn to take it.

They are mainly concentrated around areas around the walls, like the Blachernae sector near the Theodosian wall and the Rumeli fortress, which comes from the east. It is also an extremely vulnerable spot in the case that Ottomans arrive from Anatolia in the East.

Figure II: Ottoman and Byzantine Troops around Constantinople in May, 1453

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/thoughtcodotcom>. "End of an Era: The Fall of Constantinople." *ThoughtCo*, 2018, www.thoughtco.com/byzantine-ottoman-wars-fall-of-constantinople-2360739.



Note: This map was made after the start of the committee.

Now, the Byzantine Empire faces a formidable foe. The Great Wall surrounding Constantinople has been severely weakened. The Byzantines have 7,000 to 10,000 trained soldiers ready to fight and a total population of 50 to 70 thousand Byzantine civilians standing idle as the attackers prepare for a full invasion. There have not been any messages from Europe offering support for the Byzantines. Their artillery, although mighty, is not comparable to the cannons of the Ottomans. The Ottoman blockade severely damaged trade and left Constantinople with scarce resources. Close informants to the Byzantines say that the Ottomans are estimated to have 80 to 100 thousand soldiers on all sides.¹⁰

The fears of the Byzantines only grow more prominent by the day. They know they have not allied themselves with the Venetians, but if any Venetian opportunist groups decided to attack, the Ottomans would now be receiving help in

their invasions and no longer be limited in materials or soldiers during their efforts. There was a large fear of Genoa since their location is directly across the Golden Horn. Constantinople's fear stemmed from the fact that they had been neutral this far, but if they had decided to lean on either side, it could be a detrimental boost to whichever side they decide on.

Analysis

It is known from previous attacks led by the Ottomans that they are not invincible. They have weaknesses that the Byzantines can use to their advantage during an attack. Their cannons are slow to reload. The ships' transportation through the Golden Horn is strategic since the ships being transported on land are extremely vulnerable to interceptions, and their immense size limits Ottoman maneuverability.¹¹ The Ottoman Empire also had extremely lengthy supply lines, which they used to support their soldiers, and the siege could not be fully protected due to how long it was. The supply lines were delivered through a large trade route and, as a result, were not properly protected. The Byzantines' low number of soldiers and limited space allows them to coordinate and establish rules within the areas of their city properly. Meanwhile, the enormous armies of the Ottomans leave space for misinformation, confusion, miscoordination, and low morale from any failed attempts to conquer the city.

¹⁰ Hudson, Myles. "Fall of Constantinople | Summary." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 22 May 2018, www.britannica.com/event/Fall-of-Constantinople-1453.

¹¹ "“Unchaining History”: Golden Horn’s Key Role in Istanbul’s Conquest - Türkiye Today." *Türkiye Today*, July 2024, www.turkiyetoday.com/culture/unchaining-history-golden-horns-key-role-in-istanbuls-conquest-13343/.

It will take many resources and much time for the Ottomans to fully take down the Theosian walls. Still, with enough support from inside the walls, they could be even more potent against Ottoman forces, draining all of their resources and hopefully providing the Byzantines with a larger defense.

However, the Byzantines no longer had the advantage of the Ottomans not knowing the landscape well, had they been occupying Byzian land long enough to understand how it worked. However, the Byzantines could still use natural resources to their advantage regarding moats and other natural barriers that could hopefully slow them down.

Although, with that, we cannot ignore the weaknesses of the Byzantines. The empire has much to prepare before it is forced into battle. The Theodosian walls require repair in many areas. The Byzantine's artillery, compared to the Ottoman's cannons, as well as their large numbers of coordinated artillery, do not do us much favor in this battle; for every defender the Byzantines have, it is estimated that there are 8-14 Ottoman attackers. The

Byzantines are in a complete shortage of food and anything that our troops and people need to survive. Europe has no plans to help them. Constantinople is completely isolated, surrounded by a foreign blockade, and full of panicked citizens. The unification of Christianity also caused many divisions among the people and reduced faith in the empire.

Questions to Consider:

1. Are there any ways to strengthen the points most vulnerable to attack from the Ottomans?
2. What can your delegation do to ensure safety and calmness for the people of Constantinople?
3. What plans should the committee prioritize in preparation for the Ottoman attack?
4. How do you think that the geography and nature of the Byzantine Empire can be an advantage in defending the city?

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