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CA18129 - Islamic Legacy: Narratives East, West, South, North of the Mediterranean (1350-1750)

***Islamic Legacy:
Narratives East, West, South, North of the Mediterranean (1350-1750).
A Thesaurus under Discussion.***

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***A Comparison of Conquests: The Fall of
Constantinople, Reconquista, and the Conquest of
the New World
Ömer Fatih Parlak***

**Scientific Coordinators: Sophia Abplanalp, University of Vienna, Ömer Fatih Parlak,
Cappadocia University, Turkey, Borja Franco Llopis, UNED, Spain.**

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A Comparison of Conquests: The Fall of Constantinople, Reconquista, and the Conquest of the New World.

Ömer Fatih Parlak

This paper investigates the early modern uses of the term conquest to legitimize the acquisition of land. It will compare especially the Conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and that of the New World in order to demonstrate the subjectivity of the usage of the term. The theoretical writings of Machiavelli about conquest will be the ground for my argument whether Constantinople and the New World to be counted as conquered land. I will provide examples from contemporary writers to compare their usage of the term conquest. Reconquista, Conquista, and Conquest of Constantinople will also be compared in terms of their legal justifications. In the last part of the paper, I will discuss the continuity of the Eurocentric point of view which is still dominant in calling historic events, such as the Fall of Constantinople. I will also discuss if we can come to a term with a more politically correct and neutral way of using the term.

Conquest was a term to define acquisition of a territory legitimately by a military force at least until its denial in the Enlightenment. It requires a break of order by force and restoration of a new order. However, not every acquisition is called a conquest. The use of the term in history has been subjective, as what is a conquest for one can be regarded as otherwise in partial compliance with the saying “history is written by the victors.” This point of view seems to be persisting in today’s historiography, as a set of prejudices we inherit from past historians. Reconquista and the Conquest of America are terms to be widely accepted and circulated within the scholarship, paying less attention to the vantage point. The Fall of Constantinople in 1453, on the other hand, is one of such events that still divides historians into two as those who call it a Fall and those who call it a Conquest.

Conquest, as Winter noted, requires a narrative to be celebrated in “political and legal memory”.¹ Like the narratives of Alexander the Great conquering Persia, William the Conqueror Britain, and Charlemagne Rome, conquests are embedded in our cultural memory, reproduced, and retold time and again by literary and other cultural methods, so that they are memorialized. However, although they are reproduced many times, the one-sidedness of the narrative persists. As Guha claims:

“there is no conquest that has only one story to it. It is made up of at least two-one narrated by the conquerors and the other by the conquered. Foil to the story of that steamship sailing into darkness, there is another being told beyond the point where the civilization of hunters, traders, explorers, and colonizers stops and the jungle begins. We have no clue to its content.”² (p.96)

¹ Winter, Yves. “Conquest” in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, 1, 2011.

² Ranajit Guha, “A Conquest Foretold,” in *Social Text*, Spring, 1998, No. 54 (Spring, 1998), pp. 85-99.



I would like to begin with the dynamics of conquest in Western Europe as it was outlined in Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *Discourses* in which he approached a state as a human being for practical purposes. As a result of this analogy, for Machiavelli, it is natural for states, as for man, to have a desire to acquire: "The acquisitive desire is certainly very natural and common; when men who can acquire do so, they will always be praised-or at least not blamed. But when they cannot, and seek to do so anyway, therein lies their mistake and their blame."³ This natural need of a state is, for him, one of the pivotal and dynamic elements in politics, for being glorious by way of a conquest necessitates a competitive political challenge after the military success. Conquest for Machiavelli is twofold: first the ruler should use his military force, and then re-establish the new order by way of politics. Only then acquisition is called a conquest. The second fold is advised to aim at gaining the love of the conquered people through some political tools. In Yves Winter's words "successful conquerors must find a way to represent their conquest without sanctioning the principle of violent change as a permissible way to transfer political authority."⁴ The legitimacy of the new order in a newly conquered land is achieved by speeches, symbols, signs, and ceremonies, such as erecting religious buildings, or converting them, followed by a religious ceremony. They were significant in forming a new authority established according to the tradition of the new ruler. According to Patricia Seed some of the practices of legitimacy might even include "measuring, counting, assessing, and mapping the territory, the population, and the geography."⁵

Conquest of the New World

One of such conquest ceremonies were the Spanish *Requerimiento*, which legitimized the Spanish claims on a conquered Moorish land during the *Reconquista* period. It required the addressee to accept the superiority of the Catholicism and to give consent to turn Christian. Otherwise, the Spanish soldiers had the right to use violence. However, *Requerimiento* created meaningless situations when it had been read to the natives of the New World who did not understand Spanish. It was also documented that the text was read to the Indians at night, which demonstrates this protocol that was supposed to establish the legitimacy of force already turned to a ceremonial monologue.

Therefore I beg and require you as best I can ... [that] you recognize the church as lord and superior of the universal world, and the most elevated Pope ... in its name, and His Majesty in his place as superior and lord and king ... and consent that these religious fathers declare and preach ... and His Majesty and I in his name will receive you ... and will leave your women and children free, without servitude so that with them and with yourselves you can freely do what you wish

³ Machiavelli, Niccolò, and James B. Atkinson. 2008. *The Prince*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co. p. 121.

⁴ Winter, Yves. "Conquest". In *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, 1 2011.

⁵ Quotation from: Winter, Yves. (?) Conquest. In *Political Concepts*, issue: 1. For more, see: Seed, P. (2006). *Ceremonies of possession in Europe's conquest of the New World, 1492-1640*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.



... and we will not compel you to turn Christians. But if you do not do it... with the help of God, I will enter forcefully against you, and I will make war everywhere and however I can, and I will subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and His Majesty, and I will take your wives and children, and I will make them slaves... and I will take your goods, and I will do to you all the evil and damages that a lord may do to vassals who do not obey or receive him. And I solemnly declare that the deaths and damages received from such will be your fault and not that of His Majesty, nor mine, nor of the gentlemen who came with me.⁶ (p. 69)

Not all Spanish people who ventured into the New World was comfortable with the new spirit of the conquest. Reporting from America, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1566) was an ardent criticizer of the Spanish conquest of the New World. He even did not use the term conquest to define what he was witnessing with his own eyes. He was aware of the fact that the just and righteous motivation behind the Reconquista was not a fit in this new land with new peoples. Conquest, for him, was to be done “against the Moors from Africa, Turks and heretics who seize our lands, persecute Christians and work for the destruction of our faith.”⁷ Therefore, the legislative background of the idea of Reconquista was a misfit against those “innocent” Indians who could only fight with weapons that reminded jousting, or European children’s games, thus, a joke. Moreover, those Spanish soldiers who acted as if they had been the legendary El Cid upon their arrival to the New World, were not Medieval Knights but men of blood. Under such circumstances, what the Conquistadors called “victories” in the New World, were nothing but “massacres.”

The Spanish claims of right to rule in America was not idiosyncratic. The French, English, and Dutch ways of legitimacy in the New World, as Seed observed, were as well radically incommensurable with the intra-European legislative custom that Machiavelli stated. However, patterns of the conquest were rooted in that of the homeland.

“Frenchmen reproduced the grandeur of royal processions wherever possible, always ending in dialogue with the indigenous peoples. Spaniards made solemn speeches before launching military attacks. Dutchmen drew intensely detailed maps, scrutinizing harbors and coastlines as they disembarked. The Portuguese superimposed the grid of latitudes upon lands they were later to take by the sword. The English calmly laid out fences and hedges in the manner of their native shires.”⁸ (p. 1)

⁶ Quoted in: Seed, P. (2006). *Ceremonies of possession in Europe's conquest of the New World, 1492-1640*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Casas, B., & Griffin, N. (1992). *A short account of the destruction of the Indies*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

⁸ Seed, P. (2006). *Ceremonies of possession in Europe's conquest of the New World, 1492-1640*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.



The Fall of Constantinople (1453)

I would like to continue with a short introduction about the concept of conquest in Islam. Some of the legal procedures of conquest in the Islamic context (fetih—to open) are rooted in the 48th chapter of Qur'an, Surah al-Fath. As in Christianity, it is done by an overall desire to spread the religion. This motivation paves the way for justifying the war and makes it a just war from the point of the religion. Islamic rulers, therefore, required to take the confirmation of the religious authority (in the Ottoman context titled as Sheyh-ul Islam) to justify their campaigns. This justification is sought even in wars against other Muslim countries. Fetih, as opposed to conquest, still provides a motivation in modern-time wars as a subtext.⁹

Writing in 1513, one can easily see in *The Prince* that Machiavelli was partly influenced by the Ottoman way of acquiring territory and holding the power of rule in newly conquered lands.¹⁰ As Giuseppe Marocci noted “One may, indeed, suppose that, if the circulation of Machiavelli’s work already had a global reach in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this was largely due to his observations on the “Turk” and their application to the other great Islamic empires of the time.”¹¹ The Fall of Constantinople is a great example, as it was for Machiavelli while forming his analysis, to the Ottoman style of conquest and needs to be unfolded here very briefly.

When Mehmet II (later called Fatih—the Conqueror) decided to attack on Constantinople, it had already been in the agenda of the Ottomans. His father Murad II already tried once to take the city with no avail. With the ongoing wars in Mehmet’s time, Byzantium shrunk only within the vicinity of its fortification, in modern day Fatih District. The Ottomans besieged the city as best as they could for about two months. Before and during the war, in compliance with the customs, the Ottomans offered Constantin XI Palaiologos, the last Byzantine Emperor, to surrender the city with peace, otherwise it was the right of the Ottomans to plunder the city, enslave its citizens, and take their possessions as war booty. Constantin refused the offers, fought until the end to defend his city in this just war.

When the Ottoman soldiers managed to enter the city through the rubbles caused by cannon balls, a violent stage begun in the war. Kritovulos, a contemporary chronicler, writes that once the Ottoman soldiers entered the city, they started killing everyone they came across, including children and those who refuted into churches. Killings and plunder were so great that Kritovulos mentions nearly four thousand civilians, including children and women, who

⁹ Turkish military operation against Cypriot Greeks in 1974 is one of such events that are framed in this archaic term. The president of Turkey in 1974, Bülent Ecevit, was called Conqueror of Cyprus (Kıbrıs Fatih) in his political campaigns.

¹⁰ For more about the Eastern influence in Machiavelli and how his writings influenced the East in return, see: Biasiori, L., & Marocci, G. (2018). *Machiavelli, Islam and the East: Reorienting the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Palgrave. In his systematic approach to the Ottoman conquests, Halil İnalcık mentions four methods of establishing power used by the Ottomans: the method of gradual conquest (mainly by politics with the neighbors), statistical survey of the conquered lands (by documenting everything including the population), assimilation (through encouraging converting to Islam or recruiting by *devshirme* system), and deportation and emigration (either through exiles or encouraging people by giving incentives to move to the conquered lands). For more, see: İnalcık, H. (1954). “Ottoman Methods of Conquest” in *Studia Islamica*, No. 2 (1954), pp. 103- 129.

¹¹ Biasiori, L., & Marocci, G. (2018). *Machiavelli, Islam and the East: Reorienting the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Palgrave, p. 132.



lost their lives during the sack of the city. Seeing the city in such a condition, according to Kritovulos, Mehmet cried and regret all these violence. Kritovulos continues his account by comparing the damage to that of other notorious invasions in history: Troy by Greeks, Babylon by Cyrus, Carthage by two Scipios, Rome by Celts, Gauls and Goths, Jerusalem by Assyrians, Antiokhos and Romans. However, for him, what had Constantinople experienced had been unprecedented. Both Kritovulos and Doukas, another chronicler, claims that the violence was necessary to spread the fear to force the Byzantine soldiers to surrender. Galata, a Genovese colony nearby where merchants, ambassadors and their families lived, was not sacked by the Ottomans as they surrendered by their will.

Following Mehmet's entry into the city and his investigation on the monumental buildings, another phase started for Constantinople. A new order had to be established. The method Mehmet (now Mehmet Fatih) employed was rather peaceful, but at times required force. The city was planned to be the new capital of the Ottomans and thus it needed to look glorious. First the city was divided into the Sultan's viziers to be rebuilt. He ordered the construction of a new palace for himself to serve rather symbolically. Hagia Sophia was to be converted to a mosque. People from all over the country, as noted by Kritovulos, regardless of their religion, were brought to people the city. Tax privileges were issued to encourage people. If not by their will, then by force, the city was repopulated. He appointed Georgios Kurtosis Scholarius (Gennadios) as the new leader of the Orthodox church. Gennadios was known for being an ardent protester of Orthodox and Catholic churches' unification idea.

Machiavelli observes in *The Prince* methods employed by Mehmet II in his newly conquered Constantinople:

"But difficulties arise when one acquires states in a region where the language, customs, and institutions are heterogeneous; here great good fortune and diligence are required to hold on to them. One of the greatest, most effective remedies would be for the conqueror to go to them and live there in person. This move would bring about a more secure and a more permanent occupation-as it has done for the Turks in the Balkan Peninsula. With all the other methods they practiced to hold on to that area, had they not gone there to live they would not possibly have held on to it."¹² (pp. 107-108)

Although the Fall of Constantinople is usually known in historiography as ending the Eastern Roman Empire, Mehmet II would have had a different approach. In his royal decrees, it is known that he had used "Kayzer-i Rûm" (Roman Caesar). Obviously, for him, Roman Empire was alive under a different flag, culture, and belief system and he was the ruler of the Roman Empire. This vision of him is also evident considering one of his next targets was the Italian Peninsula. For this purpose, he managed to capture Otranto in Italy, but only to hold on to it for a few years. Such claims of Mehmet II demonstrate his carefully applied politics

¹² Machiavelli, Niccolò, and James B. Atkinson. 2008. *The Prince*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co.



of legitimacy as the ruler of the “Anatolia and Balkans, and the Mediterranean and the Black Seas” (Sultanü’l-barrayn ve hakanü’l-bahrayn).

Fall or Conquest?

I would like to discuss how current historiography calls the Conquest of America and the Fall of Constantinople. By this, I aim to show that calling these historical events as Fall or Conquest depends very much on the historical position that countries have taken, either willingly or unwillingly. For example, when I google the phrase “fall of the Inca Empire,” the first hit is a Wikipedia page titled “Spanish Conquest of the Inca Empire.” However, I get more relevant results when I search the same phrase in google books, which demonstrates that once the general knowledge barrier is passed, the history writing for the event is multi-centered, accommodating both terms, Fall and Conquest.¹³

The case of Constantinople has a different pattern. Deriving from the data gathered from the Wikipedia pages in different languages, there seems to be three different ways of calling the 1453 event. Muslim countries, including Israel, predominantly call it “Conquest” while Christian countries call it “Fall.” Far Eastern countries like China, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia also prefer “Fall.” Some countries, like Belarus, Estonia, and Finland, as well as in Esperanto, use a rather neutral term “Siege” which is found insufficient in explaining the event in full capacity. In Balkan countries, most of which gained their independence from the Ottoman Empire, the term used for the event is “Fall” (pad). In Bosnia, both “Fall” (pad) and “Conquest” (osvajanja) are in use. It is observed that the way of naming the event follows a parallelism with the current politics between Turkey and other countries. For example, while the event is called “Fall” (وط —suqut) in Egypt, with which Turkey has suspended political contact since 2014 after the military coup leader (El-Sisi) became president, rest of the Arabic countries call it “Feth” (conquest). In Germany, where around seven million Turkish immigrants and Germans with Turkish descendant live, page reads as “Eroberung” (conquest).

Conclusion

In this short position paper, I demonstrated how we differently use the term conquest in current historiography by comparing three examples, Reconquista, Conquest of America, and the Fall of Constantinople. I discuss that the usage of the word is one-sided, which circumstance mostly disregards the point of view of different side(s). The multi-sidedness of the usage of this term seems to derive mainly from how the events have been called since they occurred. This follows a historiographical model set by previous writers. I tried to discuss the three events by framing their legal context in the time they occurred. Accordingly, the legal context of Reconquista caused many colonial problems when it was applied during

¹³ Fall or Conquest question is a vivid discussion in the context of South America and Spain. For more, see: “500 años de la caída de Tenochtitlán, entre la conmemoración y la polémica.” (<https://www.dw.com/es/500-a%C3%B1os-de-la-ca%C3%ADda-de-tenochtitl%C3%A1n-entre-la-conmemoraci%C3%B3n-y-la-pol%C3%A9mica/a-57569477>)



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the Conquest of America. The Fall of Constantinople, on the other hand, was fully fit to the legal context, yet the naming of the event projects another problem. Keeping in mind what Ranajit Guha referred as “the two narratives” (the one narrated by the conquerors and the one by the conquered), the Fall of Constantinople has been re-narrated from the point of view of the conquered. I would like to further discuss if there could be a neutral approach and ask if we can ever talk beyond Euro- centric history writing.