

Not so friendly fire- The Battle of Karánsebes

War - what is it good for? Turns out, it's good for producing moments that make you think "What the hell were they thinking?" or, probably more accurately, "What the hell! Were they thinking?" This article will run you through perhaps one of the most mind-boggling of all military blunders, The Battle of Karánsebes.

The context to this event is that, in 1788, Austria was, for lack of a better word, beefy. It comprised of the rough modern-day territories of Austria, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, Southern Poland, Croatia, parts of Northern Italy, parts of western Ukraine and parts of western Romania. So, it's fair to say that it was quite a multicultural Empire. This came with some obvious problems, like the fact that, alongside the official language of German, there were also people who exclusively spoke: Czech, Hungarian, Croatian, Polish, Romanian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, Italian, Romani and Yiddish amongst other more remote languages. So, when it came to communication, it wasn't always easy and pain free. This is especially a problem when it comes to an army, in which, usually, soldiers must understand each other and their commanding officers to function properly. To help overcome this issue, the Austrian Empire ordered that everyone in the military had to be at least proficient in all major languages in the count- oh wait, no they didn't, they just blindly kept insisting that everything be done in German. This of course was a terrible policy and came to a bloody head in 1788, at the start of the Austro-Turkish war, a war between the Austrian and Ottoman Empires, with Russia also fighting the Ottomans. This war was actually the Second (or sixth, historians

can't quite agree) war between the two nations, with the Ottomans previously being able to sweep into the Balkans. At the height of their power, the Ottoman's European holdings included Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Eastern Romania, Parts of Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, as well as other small Balkan territories. So, the conflict between the two would have been a cacophonous, messy blend of languages, and herein lies the problem. See, a German Austrian probably couldn't tell the difference between the language of allied hussars (Balkan and Eastern European Cavalrymen) and those of the enemy. So, during the night of 21–22 September 1788, Austrian Hussar scouts came across a group of Romani people, who offered to sell them schnapps. When the rest of the army came across them and asked for some of the schnapps, the Hussars refused to provide them with some and even set up fortifications around it (they were, to put it lightly, sozzled.)

Now, somewhere amongst the argument, a Hussar fired a shot and then all hell broke loose. The two sides (who, in the wider conflict, were on the same side) started fighting each other, and one infantryman shouted "Turks! Turks!" which sounds pretty much the same in all the constituent languages of the Austrian army. This, unsurprisingly, caused even more panic, the army started retreating from itself, running in panic from an enemy that didn't exist. You'd be forgiven for thinking it couldn't get any worse, but you'd also be wrong. As the army was running away from itself, the German officers yelled "Halt! Halt!" (Stop! Stop!), which the non-German soldiers heard as "Allah! Allah!" and panicked even more,

running even faster away from an enemy that, just to recap, didn't exist. To top this chaos off, as the army was running, an artillery officer mistook the fleeing mounted hussars for a Turkish cavalry charge, and promptly ordered the artillery to open fire... on his own men.

There are varying estimates as to how many men were lost in this friendly fire incident. Conservative guesses say 150 men were lost, more liberal guesses go from anywhere between 538 – over 600. What isn't up for debate is that the incident was so embarrassing that all the men completely lost their will to fight, and Holy Roman (and Austrian) Emperor Joseph II ordered an actual withdrawal from the area. This withdrawal was fairly successful, no more cases of friendly fire. However, to put the cherry on the rather unsavoury cake that had just been made, during the withdrawal, the Austrians did not take the war-chest that contained the soldiers' wages, so after all of that chaos, blood and panic, the soldiers didn't even get paid, which I'm sure filled them with a warm fuzzy feeling of patriotic pride.

The Austrians, along with the Russian Empire, would eventually go on to win the war, gaining territories from the Ottoman Empire. However, despite a knock on effect on the independence movement of Serbia (which is, in itself, an interesting topic, and too complex to discuss here) this is not what is remembered. Instead, the war will forever be associated with that time that the Austrian army had and lost a fight against itself, forcing itself to retreat, and losing its gold in the process. I hope you've enjoyed this tale if nothing else there's two morals to the story:

- 1- Communication and understanding are vital in any successful power structure.
- 2- Never EVER try to take a Hussar's Schnapps.



The Austrian Empire in 1780



The Ottoman Empire in 1780



The Age-Old Question