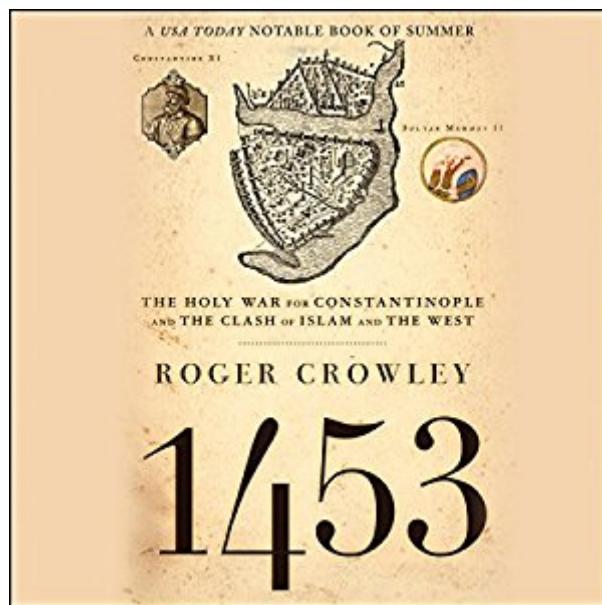


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1453: The Holy War For Constantinople And The Clash Of Islam And The West



Synopsis

Now in audiobook format, a gripping exploration of the fall of Constantinople and its connection to the world we live in today. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 signaled a shift in history and the end of the Byzantium Empire. Roger Crowley's listenable and comprehensive account of the battle between Mehmed II, sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and Constantine XI, the 57th emperor of Byzantium, illuminates the period in history that was a precursor to the current jihad between the West and the Middle East.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Byzantium. Constantinople. Istanbul. Intellectually, it is easy enough to remember that these three cities are in fact the same, sitting on the Bosphorus, straddling the border between Europe and the East. However, it is difficult to get a visceral feel for the fact that the current city of mosques and minarets was for over a millennia one of the centers of the Christian world. Fortunately, there is a book like 1453 to take us back and let us experience how such a transformation takes place. In his book, Mr. Crowley takes us back to the year of the title, when Sultan Mehmet II, a man barely out of his teens but who has survived the intrigues that barred his way to the throne, lays siege to Constantinople. Despite the fact that the city has resisted sieges many times before thanks to its natural water defenses and ancient western wall, Mehmet is willing to take the risk. Constantine XI, the aging emperor who guards the city, is weak and his city and empire is only a shadow of its former glory. So, Mehmet gathers his armies and vassals and heads to the walls. Overall, Mr. Crowley's descriptions of the siege are absorbing. He points out the very important advantages that

Mehmet had over previous would-be conquerors: he brings cannon and a navy. The walls of Constantinople were impregnable to a classic mediaeval attack but the arrival of gunpowder to the West and the development of cannon made the walls vulnerable. Plus, no attacker had ever brought a navy to bear on the city before and its very existence cut off the possibility of resupplying the city, making a successful siege a possibility. But Mehmet's victory was by no means assured and, in fact, he could have easily failed. His guns could only fire a few salvos a day and his navy was basically outclassed had his enemies ever been willing to meet him directly in battle. The lengthening siege made it difficult to manage his vast armies. Plus, the city was defended. Mr. Crowley shows great respect for the defenders of the city, their strategies and valor. As Mehmet's guns brought down sections of the wall, the citizens of Constantinople would sneak out at night and rebuild. Down to the last battle, the people of Constantinople seemed to believe their city could not fall. Of course, fall it did. Mr. Crowley quickly gives us the final successful push into the city which, be it through luck or valor, went to the Turks in hours once the walls were breached. As Mehmet enters the city we get to see both the good and bad of a city defeated in the Middle Ages, mercy and spoils, revenge and glory. And we get a brief account of the spread of the news through the West and its effect on subsequent history. All in all, this account of an important moment in the history of the Western world is a great read. It is informative and insightful, managing to build tension and excitement despite the fact that the reader knows the outcome. And Mr. Crowley's fairness to both the Christian defenders and the Turkish conquerors makes it palatable and not strident. There is no doubt that this defeat after 1000 years of successful defense was a tragic time but this fading star of the Christian world rises to become the center of the Muslim world, maintaining its glory for centuries more. This city deserves its story to be told.

When I was a young Infantry officer, I recall a tactical instructor telling us that, "The best defence is only as good as the willingness of an enemy to make the necessary sacrifices to overcome it." I can think of few better examples of this principle than the Ottoman siege of Constantinople. I have read many books about this event and in my opinion "1453" by Roger Crowley is far-and-away the best. The book is chock-full of interesting facts about the siege and where the facts are unclear, Crowley (like Herodotus) gives us the opposing stories and lets us decide. In addition "1453" is a very readable, fast-paced history. It's one of the few history books I've read where I can honestly say I wished it was much longer. It's like an excellent novel but it's all true and a heartbreakingly tragic story to boot. I just wish I'd been able to read it before my visit to Istanbul earlier this year. I'd have kept it at my side.

The historian brings people to life by telling the story of their historical times - illuminating them and their deeds, judiciously treating that which he is not certain of. The novelist brings history to life by telling the stories of the people who lived it - real and imagined, creatively (and judiciously, one hopes) filling in history's voids. Further, as Napoleon said, "history is the agreed version of events by the victors." Before photographs and sound/picture recording, much of what is taken as historical fact can be disputed. With all that in mind, Roger Crowley has done a commendable job. What gives me the right to say so? Well, I have encountered the very same task! I am a novelist and my first book, "The Lion of St. Mark (St. Martin's Press, 2005), was written before I read Roger Crowley's 1453. I only wish I had had it by my side when I was toiling over disputing sources as I wrote my fictional (but historically accurate, I trust) account of the great siege of Constantinople and what happened afterwards. I appreciate his decision to go with his gut when versions of what happened irreconcilably collide and avoid the use "perhaps", "possibly", and "might have", which can drag historical story-telling to a crawl. Crowley's style is highly readable and skillfully blends history with many illustrative anecdotes to bring the siege to life. Who could not feel the courage and fears of the Christians and the Ottomans as they fought and bled in the fosse and on the walls in their supreme struggle? Like the old Mad Magazine's Spy vs. Spy, their contest presaged the modern-day technological battle in the Battle of the North Atlantic that saw the Allies and Germans constantly one-up each other as each strove to gain supremacy. Traditional histories suffer from the readers' knowledge of how things end. Only first-rate historians are able to "make it read like a novel" to maintain the suspense and show, as Wellington said after Waterloo, that it really was, "a near run thing." I understand from his website that Crowley's next work will detail the continuing struggle between the Ottomans and the West that culminated in the epic battle of Lepanto in 1571 and a decisive Christian victory. I'll definitely buy it before beginning my third novel in my Venetians series.

Thank you, Roger!

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