Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to the last episode, if you’re a listener, and the penultimate episode, if you’re a patron, of our examination of the LW in 2017. In 2018 we will of course continue on this tale with the aftermath of the failed siege in the mid-1680s, and analyse the different players involved to explain how Europe proceeded to fight for a further 15 years. That of course, is still to come, but for now, we have a very important story to tell. Last time we saw how the different relief armies linked up at the end of August 1683, and how they pushed ever onwards to the top of the Wienerwald, the Vienna Woods, where they got a great panoramic view of the siege and the tent city established by Kara Mustafa. That was 11th September, and the following day the commanders Charles of Lorraine, Count Waldeck and Jan Sobieski would all ride forward, in the name of relieving the city of Vienna from its terrible nightmare. With that background established in the last episode, here we detail precisely what that terrible nightmare would have been like; we work our way through the months of July, August and September from the perspective of the defenders, and having explained how and where the relief army had come, we’ll then jump to that incredible story in the second half of the episode. In a sense this episode here gives us a great conclusion to a whole load of disparate threads in our story, so I hope you’re ready to begin listening to my take on one of the most famous reliefs in history. I will now take you to 14th July 1683, where the defenders first appreciated that Kara Mustafa, the GV of the Ottoman Empire and vested with the powers of a Sultan, had established his glorious tent city next to their home.

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*On 14th July the whole army of the Turks, with an incredible number of horses, wagons, buffalos and camels, appeared moving towards Vienna over the hill by St Mark’s Church, their main body marching on the side of the hill from whence they could not be so well discovered from the walls of the town. They immediately spread themselves from the bank of the Danube throughout which circuit they continued encamping themselves till late at night, where they were observed to begin their works before the Emperor’s Gate, where our men that were posted upon the counterscarp, fired upon them continually from behind palisades to hinder the approaches which they had already begun in such a manner that we soon found ourselves formally besieged.*  
Johan Peter Vaelckeren, English subject resident in Vienna, writing in his diary on 15th July 1683.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Turk was finally at the gates. After so many years of ignorance, so many months of rumour and so many weeks of panic, the Ottoman Empire had reached its destination. Kara Mustafa’s great and glorious aim was now achieved, but it remained to be seen how the garrison within the city would react. Having enjoyed reinforcement from a series of desperate, last minute sources over the previous days, this garrison of 15k men was tasked with holding back the greatest attempt by the Ottomans to seize Vienna in history. Never before had the Turk been so drive, so singularly focused, towards acquiring its end at Vienna. Never before had the season, the weather, the resources and the plan all been so well established. There had no been no slowdown of the Turks in the countless fortresses dotted along the route to Vienna; there had been no great victory as seen 20 years before at St Gotthard; there had not even been significant foreign interest in the plight of the HRE’s capital city. The defenders of Vienna had watched in the days before, as frantic preparations for siege had begun fully in earnest, the clouds of smoke rising from the different corners of the realm. Fitful appearances from Charles of Lorraine didn’t exactly buoy the garrison with confidence, but by the 14th July 1683, no single member of that military garrison was under any illusions about what was about to occur.

Although the response thus far had been apathetic, although Kara Mustafa thought very little of the Habsburg capabilities to resist, and although there remained work to be done on the defences, the 15 thousand men under Starhemberg were adamant that they would stand and fight; that they would make the Turk pay for every piece of wall, for every small victory, and if it came to it, for every house or suburb within Vienna itself. They would leave Mustafa not with Vienna, but with a smouldering ruin; if it was not to be the site of their triumph, then it would be the site of their triumphant martyrdom. No quarter would be given, and nothing would be spared. This was a fight between mortal foes, between two world systems, between two great competing claims and between Jesus and Muhammad. In his account of the siege, Andrew Wheatcroft noted that:

There was no enemy within, no group willing to compromise. An implacable sense of resistance united the soldiers, the citizens who remained and many thousands from the countryside who had taken refuge within the city.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Waiting was undoubtedly the most painful part of the experienced. Those days between when Emperor Leopold left the city on 7th July and when the GV’s tent arrived on 14th; this was a week of feverish activity for sure, but also of gradually building impatience and drama. Much work was at least needed, which did keep the men occupied. Nobody would be spared – the only way a high townsperson could avoid picking up the spade and helping to dig a deeper moat or add to the earthen mounds was if he paid someone to dig in his stead. While Lorraine remained on the other side of the Danube, segments of his infantry periodically aided with the garrison’s defences, and many stayed behind after acquiring permission from Lorraine, who anxiously awaited the arrived either of Ottoman forces or of a relief army. The problem with these allied reinforcements was that they tended to arrive after following the routes through the difficult swamp and marshlands, where diseases such as the bloody flux were rife. These diseases were then brought into the city, the bloody flux or severe forms of dysentery foremost among them. Dysentery would take its toll on both the besieged and the besiegers though; the exemplary style and efficiency which seemed to accompany Kara Mustafa’s establishment of the tent city on 14th July seemed to suggest that the Ottomans were invulnerable to the trials of war. By the time of the relief two months later though, warfare had definitively taken its toll on Mustafa’s camp, and the kind of order which Ottoman military bureaucrats always prided themselves on would have all but evaporated.

The unnerving ability of the Ottomans to surround Vienna and cut it off from the outside world pointed to their extensive analysis of the intelligence available on the city’s defences and the surrounding countryside. Every element of the army had a role to play, and the heavy cavalry, the Ottoman sipahis, had already begun to approach the watery eastern flank of Vienna, which opened out onto the Danube. Long since closed up thanks to the impending siege, allied soldiers had established themselves on what was called Prater’s Island and the fortress of Leopoldstadt which resulted from the erosion and force of the Danube River. In two days the sipahis chased the allied cavalry off, seized Leopoldstadt and began piling up huge mounds of earth from the surrounding areas. From this point, with gun emplacements fixed, the Turks could actually bombard Vienna and lob shells over the walls from a position once believed critically important for the allies. Starhemberg had to console himself with the fact that not all positions could be held, but that the most important points would be.

Such optimism appeared misplaced when Mustafa’s tent appeared parallel to the Hofburg Palace. The symbolism aside, the facts were clearly inferred by this act. The GV was making plain his intention to establish the main thrust of the attack at this point, where he knew, from the previous study of maps and plans of the region, that the Hofburg and the wall it rested against represented one of the weakest defensive points of the city’s walls. Indeed we saw last time how the different bastions at this point in the walls, the burg bastion and lobl bastion, had both been built at different times, and joined together unevenly, leaving gaps in the visibility of the defenders. Ottoman scouts and spies had long since reported these weaknesses to Mustafa over the previous months, and while the GV may well have been irritated to denote that the defenders had noticed the weaknesses as well, he would not have been too fussed. The improvements which the garrison had worked on appeared on the surface to be crude and hasty – this is because, as we know, most aspects of Vienna’s defence were crude and hasty. Yet Mustafa demonstrated his penchant for arrogance when he ordered several unsuccessful and costly assaults on this portion of the defences, before setting his tent city there for the remainder of the siege. Crude and hasty though the defences had been, the earthen mounds, wooden palisades, fields of interlocking fire, deep moats, covered trenches and high vantage points proved murderously effective in the early stages.

This murderous efficiency had been possible because of the last minute actions by the citizenry, the advice of George Rimpler, and the morale boost provided by Starhemberg’s defiance. Even as the city was being surrounded, one could hear the continuous hammering of nails, the reinforcement of palisades and the digging of further trenches. Large chains were brought from the armoury and prepared to be used should the attackers break into the city, while the 317 guns, manned by experienced gunners and artillery regiments brought in at the last minute from northern garrisons, provided a strong answer to the Turkish artillery. With the plan of Mustafa plainly apparent by 18th July, pressure was taken off the other portions of the city’s defences, and sallies would be launched repeatedly from these areas. After enduring constant casualties once they had arrived, Mustafa began the process of getting trenches dug, and began to follow a familiar pattern to those who had seen previous sieges. With trenches advancing in a criss-cross pattern the defenders could not get as accurate a shot off on the attackers, while from these trenches huge mounds of earth could be built up to rival those of the makeshift earthen walls already in place. From the cover of these huge mounds, a more insidious tactic would be pushed ever onward by the Turks, the one tactic for which no clear remedy existed – the digging of mines under the very defences of Vienna.

The adoption and furthering of such tactics made the outer portions of Vienna seem more like something out of the FWW than the 17th century, yet this was standard Ottoman and European practice by the second half of the 1600s. Trenches, strategically plotted with sharp curves and punctuated with steady bastions from which point heavy guns could be positioned; these all gave the attacker a kind of fortress of his own where he could attack from or retreat to should the defender sally forth, which was a favourite tactic. For those that have listened to our Patreon miniseries on Louis’ Arms & Armies, such facts of warfare will be familiar to you, but for those that haven’t, try to imagine a honeycomb system of trenches edging ever closer to the first set of palisades. By building up the mounds of earth in front of them and organising a complex series of choke points and staging areas, the Ottomans, much like the armies of Louis XIV, were able to turn what appeared to be an impregnable fortress into just another puzzle to work out. Taking the advantage of sight away from the defender, and advancing under the cover of darkness, granted the Turk a reprieve from the garrison’s murderous sniper and artillery fire. Experienced Ottoman engineers, though preciously few in number and largely thrown away by Mustafa in the weeks to come, offered invaluable advice over the perceived blind spots of the fortifications and the best means for exploiting its central weaknesses.

Throughout the first week of the siege, and up until the end of July when the Turks began to make some significant headway against the outer defences, Andrew Wheatcroft described how the outer portion of defences, the mounds of earthen fortifications accompanied by palisades, appeared less daunting to the attacker than the larger stone ravelines or tall bastions set behind them.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet, it was these earthen mounds, with their evenly placed wooden stakes and deceptively difficult challenge to the attacker, that turned out to be the most effective of all defences provided by the Viennese. Manning such defences was another issue. The affair looked very much like a stoic and rehearsed battle order for the first week as well, because the same tactics was repeated time and again by the Ottoman shock troops, who largely threw down their muskets and sought to rush the palisades in front of them. When they crossed the small portion of no man’s land before reaching the bottom of the man-made earthen slope, rank after rank of Habsburg musketmen rose up to fire down at the attacker while he scrambled to overcome the glaringly simple but strikingly effective wooden barrier. However, the impersonal nature of the fighting quickly degenerated as the number of Turks who managed to make it over the palisades were met with sword points, spears and often grenadiers, who lobbed their parcels down in front of the attackers and into their trenches, a tactic which the Ottomans had used in previous sieges such as Crete. When the Turks were beaten back, the Habsburg cannons could fire on the attackers without risk of hitting their own men; roundshot was common, as were the larger cannon balls which bounced and careened into any man or structure. As the Turks also discovered, cannon balls were significantly deadened in their impact by earthen structures, and so several began growing in front of the garrison’s own palisades in an effort to provide additional cover fire and advantage for the attackers.

When breeches began to appear in the garrison’s palisades, or when zealous Turks managed to scramble over the pointed stakes and meet the garrison at the top of the earthen mounds, more desperate weapons began to be employed. The use of large bill hooks to grab and ensnare Turks, and pull them down into the trench with the garrison on the other side were especially fearful devices; some of these enemy soldiers were torn to pieces, beaten or stamped to death by the desperate garrison, while others were seized and brought inside the walls for interrogation before meeting a similarly grizzly end. An unwritten rule had it that no prisoners would be taken or quarter given, and as the battles increased in intensity and the most forward of defensive positions became overwhelmed, the savagery only increased to match the desperation. On 19th July Ottoman trenches reached the outer palisade wall, but ten days later there was still no breakthrough. This was when mines were implemented, from roughly 29th July onwards, yet the means by which they were used was somewhat ineffective and crude, and the exploded mines buried under the earthen mounds merely created large pits which the garrison could turn to their advantage. After an especially brutal encounter, one garrison commander ordered that all killed Turks be beheaded and their heads placed on the tops of the palisade. The message of savagery was unmistakable, and set the tone for the rest of the siege. Neither side seemed daunted, but as July turned to August, the constant pressure on the garrison began to take a toll. Such defensive measures could not be kept up forever.

On 5th August, using their own large earthen mounds which they used to fire upon the defenders, the Turks leapt and scrambled over the palisades, using their grenadiers to blast through the garrison’s line, even if the palisade was still standing. Reaching the other side of the first earthen mound on 7th August, which the Turks had fought so hard to seize, the next obstacle came quickly into view. Another set of earthen mounds fortified with palisades greeted the Turks; this one was reinforced with tall angular permanent structures perfect for sniping down at the attacker and placing heavy artillery. To defeat this formidable line the Turk would first have to move down into the deep dry moat ahead before clambering back up to battle against the palisades once more, and in this portion of time it took to awkwardly run down and scale back up again, horrific casualties were inflicted by the defensive batteries surrounding them. From 7th August then, the Ottomans had officially taken the first rung of defences, but the great challenge still loomed ahead.

An artist’s impression of the siege; note the Wienerwald on the left, the Danube to the north and the immense network of Ottoman trenches directly in front of the southern portion of Vienna’s defences.

As the Ottomans sought to devise more effective means to defend themselves against the terrible fire of the garrison’s interlocking defences, a series of solutions were organically developed. Vast mounds of earth had been thrown up by the digging of the trench system, and these mounds were added on top of the original first line of defence, to increase its height and give the Turk a better field of vision over even the stone ravelines themselves, which were connected by the second earthen wall that the Turks now had to tackle. Starhemberg watched this pock marked hell unfold from the old walls of the city. Thoroughly racked by dysentery, Starhemberg had to be carried across the different defences while he kept a keen eye on each of the lines. He wore a thick cavalryman’s coat to protect his person from shrapnel, and he yelled obscenities at the Turks from his position atop the walls. Constant efforts to plug or reinforce any potential gaps in the defences were always underway, and the garrison had begun to dig their own mines to counteract those of the Turks. Daring and costly sallies were launched over the first and second week of August, to bring home to the Turk how determined this garrison was to hold its position.

In one of the most successful sorties, launched on the left hand side of the Ottoman’s attack structure in mid-August, a nightly raid against the enemy destroyed his carefully constructed mines, killed the most qualified of the enemy’s sappers and set a series of fires among the trenches which had to be dealt with, setting the Ottoman advance back by about a fortnight.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet, as was becoming the pattern by mid-August, any success the garrison enjoyed was paid for dearly in human lives lost. 100 men died in that sortie, and while the Ottomans could replace most of their own men with the huge reserves they had, the 15k men were becoming thinned out to half that number by the second half of August. By now the underground battle was becoming as important and horrendous as the war above ground – sappers and miners from both sides sought to destroy one another’s tunnels and nerves, by pre-emptively detonating mines which would rupture the other’s siegeworks. It was a time-consuming and dangerous business, but the momentary successes made such efforts worth the risk. On 15th August it was recorded that:

…at about 8 in the evening, we sprang a mine that was carried from the Lobl bastion to the enemy’s works, so that a great many of them were blown up and torn to pieces, we perceiving from the walls several arms and legs in the air, mingled with the smoke and rubbish.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As the siege wore on, the horrific day to day experience of the defenders was matched only by the grim realisation, becoming ever more accepted by the second half of August, that relief was impossible, and that Vienna would be their grave. Starhemberg, it seemed, would have his opportunity to demonstrate his bravery and loyalty to his Emperor in this place, by making it the Stalingrad of the Ottoman Empire. Considering the fact that the brutality of 1683 was arguably matched only by that siege in 1942-43, the comparison feels accurate. It is difficult to imagine or portray what life would have been like in Vienna by the third week of August. Certainly food had all but run dry by this point, and the hardened garrison were increasingly coming under the effects of dysentery, for which there could be no cure as starvation and exhaustion induced-weakness enabled that disease to find an easy victim. The one silver lining for the defenders, is that because they were forced to eat rats by this point, the fearful bubonic plague had far less opportunities to spread. Small mercies indeed, yet by the 40th Day of the siege on 23rd August, the Turks had unquestionably established themselves in the outer perimeter of the defences; the once defiant first line of earthen wall and palisade defences now resembled an Ottoman platform from which the enemy could launch daring assaults, while he continued to undermine the defences by digging deeper, and throwing dirt into the moats in order to fill them up and provide easier means of access.

The daily grind of the siege would certainly have become unbearable for some. There was simply no escape from the ever present gunfire and horrific scenes of human desperation and despair. As the raiding parties made less and less progress, and as Lorraine’s reports back to the city brought less and less positive news, an air of resignation must have set in amongst the defenders, who by now had seen the worst side of humanity every day for a whole month. We don’t know how many individuals broke down from the impact of this sheer horror on their individual psyche, what we do know is that no question or mention of surrender was ever put forward. Yet just because they occupied the apparently stronger position, the GV’s camp was no rosier in outlook. Several pashas and figures in the camp had been critical of Mustafa’s decision to attack Vienna, and the surprising level of resistance encountered – surprising at least to Kara Mustafa – seemed to vindicate their views. Yet Mustafa believed that he was winning the battle, and that anything in between the onset of campaign and the resulting victory was immaterial. In a sense he was correct – the Turks were winning, ever so gradually, as the garrison was slowly thinned out from combat or disease, and their attacking tactics wore the defences of the city down.

At this point Count Marsigli, that nobleman from Bologna who had advised greater defences be provided around the Raba River all those months before, was a prisoner of the GV. He had noted in the past how amazed he was by the Ottoman sanitation and medical treatment; the provision of latrines in particular struck him as better organised than the sanitation in European cities. Yet Marsigli’s accounts of these advancements in technology gradually disappear after the third or fourth week of grinding siege. The abandonment of old tested procedures and the lax discipline which accompanied it, while Mustafa kept all eyes on the assault, exacerbated the prevalence of disease in the Turkish camp. Any wounds became infected and gangrenous, while the abundance of flies in the height of summer played havoc with the rations and the sanity of the soldiers. By the end of August the Turks were reduced to a diet of weak soup and rice, hardly sufficient for a soldier expending as much mental and physical energy as the Turks were by this point. This the Turks became more susceptible to disease as the siege wore on; the only difference between them and the garrison was that they had on hand the manpower to make good any such losses, while the garrison did not. Mustafa may have appreciated the importance of keeping the army well motivated, yet his only concern seemed to have been the maintenance of the siege – he was feared rather than respected, loathed rather than loved. He did not seem to care for the traditional expectations of the soldiery, who required their commander to regularly buoy their morale with pep talks and promises of morale, not to mention the holiness of their cause.

On 25th August an ill-advised sortie killed several high ranking Turks and damaged some of their heavy guns, but achieved little else. Starhemberg lost over 200 men, numbers he could far from afford to throw away on such a hare-brained scheme. The next day two huge mines were detonated by the Turks, further undermining the integrity of the ravelines leading up to the final defensive line. The next day a French cavalry officer led his men on a doomed charge, which cost him his life but which also killed several Ottoman sappers hard at work. Both sides had come to expect and appreciate the pattern of the siege – as soon as a new mine exploded, the Turks would rush forward to exploit the hole, the defenders would repel them with cost, but some damage would have been done to the defences in the process. Then the defenders were obliged to respond with a sortie of varying sizes, before the retreat back to the defences and the mine was awaited again. As the ravelines became more precarious, and surrounded by the creeping advance of the Turks, efforts were made to push further against the Lobl and Burg Bastion curtain wall, which was again protected and reinforced by a fresh line of earthen defences and palisades, not to mention the traditional approach trench to slow the advance. As September approached then, the garrison was being pushed ever backwards to their final line of defence, which would require every last ounce of skilful defiance to hold.

Since the Burg and Lobl bastions were not in line with one another, with the Lobl positioned further back, it was harder for one side of the defences to be mutually supportive, as normal European fortifications would have dictated. What was more, the crumbling ravelines in alternative structures would not have normally represented a decisive blow, as several would normally have been constructed to take the place of support when one or another fell. Yet at Vienna these tall stone platforms, built sometimes generations apart, were neither well designed to be supportive, nor numerous enough to make the most of the defensive positions available. So it was that when a raveline fell, it marked a significant shift in the fortunes of the defenders, as affairs became more desperate and the attackers came under less direct fire. Within the city in the first days of September, Starhemberg knew that the end was drawing near. With the enemy threatening to final bastions on both sides of the wall, as well as the wall itself along the centre, there was little standing in the way of Ottoman breaches save a repetition of the original defensive tactics seen on the first outer line. It must have seemed like years ago since the Turks first met and battled with that line of earthen mounds and palisades, yet here again, on the final line of defences, the practice was repeated with a desperate tenacity.

Running low on manpower, no sorties took place from the end of August, granting the attacker a new security which he took full advantage of. The Turks were certainly wounded, scarred and much depleted, and it is certainly debateable if a breach were made, they would have possessed the force necessary to capture Vienna. What was certain was the fact that Starhemberg was determined to make them fight through every single street and through every building, again echoing the scene at Stalingrad which would play out roughly 250 years later. They would retreat into the inner reaches of the city and turn every building into a death trap, while hulking chains would slow down the enemy as the remaining garrison’s cannon was turned in on the city. It was a grim and deeply depressing plan, made all the more overbearing due to the approaching weight of desperation upon the garrison, now reduced to roughly 5k men of varying capabilities and combat readiness. Citizens had long since been employed to fight and support the garrison, and those that could not fight were tasked with carrying or transporting vital supplied between the different sections of the wall, a long journey considering the fact that some 4 miles of walls extended around Vienna in 1683. One such courier, a Polish merchant, was able to disguise himself as a swarthy Turk without much effort and make his way to salvation – this man’s instructions were fundamentally vital to Starhemberg’s war effort; he had to locate Lorraine and his allies and inform him of the desperate nature of the garrison’s resolve, and the impending loss of Vienna which crept ever forward. Reaching the relief army by 5th September, the message was received and spurred the unlikely allies onwards.

On 27th August, the first series of rockets were launched from the tower of St Stephen’s cathedral in an effort to entice the relief armies ever onwards. Within Vienna, little to no information was even known about where the relief army was or who composed it, yet this exercise would be repeated every day, until, on 7th September a few days after that spy successfully passed the message on to the allies, a rocket was fired in response. The message was clear – we are on the way, but could they make it in time? On 3rd September a well organised defence of the final raveline before the third wall cost the Turks a great deal of men, while at nightfall the defenders retreated and set fire to everything they could get their hands on. The smoke choke proceedings, and only added to the chaos in the first week of September, yet with this raveline gone it was certain that the Turks would push ever onwards. With no additional outer defences to protect them, and with the Turks encouraged to push harder at this pivotal time, the garrison after 3rd September couldn’t be expected to last longer than a fortnight at best. Yet, it was also on 3rd September at 2PM that the most devastating mine yet exploded under the Burg Bastion, carving a hole thirty feet wide and throwing up all manner of defensive materials with its force. The guard had been changing at that precise moment, as the plan of the Ottomans had been to attack when the guard changed to maximise casualties. However, a small mercy for the garrison was that the explosion proved devastating to the infrastructure, but not so impactful on the soldiers themselves. When the dust cleared, twice as many soldiers as normal were prepared on the top of this, the final wall of Vienna, for the assault which was to come. Like something out of the Battle of Somme, the great explosion signified that the attack was due to begin.

The greatest explosion yet was followed by the most ferocious and sustained attack yet seen by the defenders; Turks, janissaries and auxiliaries of every kind surged forward over loose earth and wood to push through the defences, meeting along the way the desperate fire of the garrison, who raised the alarm in other sections of the city. Reinforcements rushed forward not merely with weapons and shot, but with sandbags and wooden beams to repair the breach. From his position Starhemberg could see that the situation was grave – the mine had cleaved out a great deal of earthen and wooden defences, but it had also destroyed a portion of the Burg Bastion’s wall. This first solid breach in the defences of the actual city itself may have come as a shock to him, but Starhemberg did not falter at the sight of this breakthrough – he ordered men on to plug the gaps and maintained a withering intensity of fire on the excited attackers, who seemed assured that this was their great chance to invade the infidel’s city at last. In the desperation cannons were lugged up to the area and loaded with canister shot to fire into the approaching Turks, while grenades, boiling water and heavy stones were lobbed in a blood-soaked battle for the breach. With the entire platform of the bastion eventually filled with men all fighting the Turks; everyone was packed so tightly together along this section of the wall that small explosions wrought horrific injuries on those present; one soldier recalled that:

While I was holding a soldier by his scarf, his head was knocked off by a cannonball. Blood and brains were spattered on to my nose and right into my mouth, which was open because of the day’s great heat. This incident caused me great suffering afterward, above all violent palpitations and vomiting.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For over two hours the battle raged with a distinct ferocity. Starhemberg eventually sallied forth to the gap to rouse his men. Meanwhile mortars and shells dropped on to the area, as the Ottoman artillery let loose regardless of friendly fire. Hundreds of men were killed in the garrison. By the end of the battle, the traumatised survivors were left to fill in the gaps, as the mangled corpses of friend and foe alike remained to taunt their sanity. Stakes were hammered into the ground in front of the breech, and sandbags positioned to create new choke points, while wooden beams covered the rest. It was a hasty and crude set of measures, but hasty and crude was by now all Starhemberg could call on. He only possessed some 3,500 men, with no more soldiers in reserve and the extent of Vienna’s walls to man. This evident breach in Vienna’s defences would require still more troops to defend, and it was clear that a watershed moment in the siege had arrived. The garrison’s position would soon become untenable, as the rudimentary measures could not hold forever. Three days later, a simultaneous mining attack commenced, as the undisturbed Turks below ground had a frenzy in their mining and sapping activities. There was nothing to stop the Turks destroying the entire city with mines, or tunnelling right into the city under its walls if given enough time. Constantly on edge for news of such schemes, Starhemberg was jarred into yet more desperate action with this aforementioned mine attack on 6th September, which saw 3 mines all but obliterate the section of wall running between the Burg and Lobl bastions.

With the Lobl bastion’s artillery destroyed in the previous days, the garrison leapt into action with a delirious sense of sacrificial duty, standing shoulder to shoulder and joined by a cabal of different civilians in their defence. Swords, spears, bill hooks and even scythes were brought to bear, and as if further anticipating the FWW, primitive barbed wire was brought up and put across the breach in a series of patterns. The process would at least ensnare the attacker as he moved through the now gaping hole in the defences, but the plainly depleted garrison was rapidly running out of measures such as these. Recalling the mines on 6th September one resident noted:

What we feared came to pass. About one in the afternoon the enemy springing several mines made such a breach that a great part of the bastion, at least twenty feet thick being of brick and stone, was quite thrown down from the top to the very bottom leaving a gap of 36 feet broad, and our men quite uncovered. Whereupon the enemy made a furious assault, but retired by reason of the difficulty of the passage occasioned by the heaps and pieces of the ruins that lay in their way.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This assault on 6th September lasted until nightfall, whereupon the garrison took up tools and began repairing the positions yet again. It was clear that a third, and perhaps final assault, was to come on this position. Every defensive measure was thus taken. Admitting that it had indeed come to this, Starhemberg ordered the heavy chains be strung across the streets, that the houses, the churches, the hospitals and markets be reinforced and made defensible with wooden planks and timbers and that stockpiles of firearms, bombs and melee weapons be brought into such buildings. The old stone structure of the Hofburg would serve as a fall back line from the breach in the wall. Once retreating to this point, the Turks would be made fight for every bit of ground in the city, while the sharp turns and high rise buildings would choke off any possibility of a quick and easy assault. With his 3k or so military men remaining, Starhemberg prepared for the final chapter in this doomed struggle. Over 7th September, buoyed by news of the rockets returned by some distant relief army, Starhemberg urged his men to remember their promises to God and themselves, and that, whether they were too late or not, all would know of their sacrifice and struggle inside the city’s walls. A mine detonated at 2PM the next day, just in front of the Lobl bastion.

The entire region in front of Vienna’s southern flank resembled an apocalypse – the ground had been utterly destroyed from the last two months, and the countryside was barely recognisable. The apparently endless supply of manpower forever troubled Starhemberg – he did not know if Kara Mustafa was nearing the end of his reserves of just getting started, but either way, he was determined to go down fighting with his city, and bury himself beneath its rubble if necessary. The 8th September brought the celebration of the nativity of the blessed Virgin Mary – an event celebrated not merely in the sombre surroundings of St Stephen’s Cathedral, with the several holes forced through by Ottoman artillery, but also a few miles to the north-west, on the other side of the Vienna Wood, where the relief army gathered to begin its climb up the daunting tangle of hills and forest, from which the final relief of the city could be launched. With much on the line, they began their climb ever upwards.

On 9th September several more mines exploded in front of the defenders’ positions. By this time it seemed impossible that anyone could live within this forsaken city, just as it seemed impossible that any soldier could continue on. Starhemberg expected the next attack to come at any moment, and with it the final phase of the ordeal to begin. He and his men could not be expected to hold the walls any longer – it would make far more sense, once the defences were again breaches, to concentrate their efforts on the interior of the city, and force the enemy to come to them. This next phase of the plan was, above all, a defeat, must have struck Starhemberg as especially bitter, considering all that he and his men had been through. Yet, for all that, he was confident that wherever the relief army was, they would be able to achieve some measure of revenge against the Turk. With this in mind Starhemberg hoped to destroy all feasibly defensive positions within Vienna, so that once the Turks seized it they would find it immensely difficult to hold it against a counter-siege. Yet all this would surely have been wishful thinking – neither Starhemberg nor his remaining officers knew much about the size or disposition of the relief army, or of the remaining powers of the GV’s force. All they knew as that they were trapped here inside this once glittering capital of the Habsburg family and that, after two months of brave and noble resistance, their time on earth was soon to come to an end. 10th September was spent in sombre and desperate prayer, as all attempted to make peace with their God, as hell itself seemed to build up outside their shrinking sanctuary. The final preparations were solemnly made, as Starhemberg ensured that the different points of the city were ready for the storm which was to come. The soldiers that remained, somehow still psychologically in one piece, affirmed their intentions to fight to the end. This could now come at any moment.

The following morning, on 11th September, 1683 calls were heard from the tower atop St Stephen’s Cathedral. Preparing for the end, Starhemberg sought to implement the grimly rehearsed measures which had been discussed. Yet the call did not signify a breach or an enemy’s triumph – it signified hope. In the distant Woods atop the hills of the Wienerwald, columns of men and horses had been spotted. Over the course of 11th September, gunfire could be heard and battle cries distantly made out. The observers in St Stephen’s tower may have convinced themselves that they could hear German, or that they could see highborn Imperial officers and allies from other lands in the hills, but they would certainly have to double take. Starhemberg could hardly bring himself to believe the news – as 10th September progressed, it became clear that the numbers atop of the hills to the west were filling with great numbers of men. These were Germans, they had to be! Simultaneously, as if answering their pleas, the Ottoman focus seemed to sag. Was Kara Mustafa beginning to pay attention to the men on the hill as well? By the afternoon it was soon clear. The GV himself, with his ostentatious insignia and household guard, had galloped towards the foot of the hills, and preparations seemed to be hastily undertaken by the Turks to fortify portions of the approaches to the city from the west. There could be no mistaking it; the lessening bombardment of the city accompanied the slow rise in spirits among Starhemberg’s battered garrison. The situation was not quite hopeless – all was not quite lost.

Over the course of 11th September, signals were made and received with the men atop the Wienerwald, as soldiers armed with telescopes atop the Viennese hills encouraged their comrades to look into the smouldering ruin of a settlement once known as Vienna. From this point the relief army could see the waving observers atop the tower of St Stephen’s Cathedral. Once destined to serve as Kara Mustafa’s victory mosque, it now served to connect the besieged to the relief army, the beleaguered to the free. As the trenches before Vienna were observed to empty, with men being pulled to man new defensive lines to the west to combat the relieving force, a great buzzing of activity could be seen in Kara Mustafa’s camp. Reinforcements of his own had been brought up from Hungary, while the Tartars were definitively established on the GV’s eastern flank, having previously been permitted to run roughshod over the entirety of Austria. As the sun set on 11th September, the pressure on Vienna was maintained. Yet, as they peered through the gaps in their somehow still standing city, as they conferred joyfully with their somehow still alive comrades, there was a feeling that the siege of Vienna had indeed entered a new phase. Somehow, this garrison of savagely tenacious, necessarily vicious and utterly relentless men had managed to withstand the greatest test of their lives. The siege of Vienna was over, but the battle for Vienna was only just beginning.

Well history friends, after that mammoth episode I will bid you good day. Since it was such an important moment in our narrative, I felt it was only right to take an extended look at it, so I hope you all don’t mind. Next time, if you’re a listener, we’ll resume our coverage of this incredible story, as the relief army, arriving in the nick of time, charges with all its might at the great Turkish foe. However, if you’re a patron, you guys won’t have to wait until 2018, since our story resumes next week, so I hope you’ll join me then. Do let me know through the usual channels what you think of my coverage of the last siege of Vienna, I’d love to hear your thoughts. Until then though, my name is Zack, you have been listening to a whopper examination of the two months of hell experienced by Vienna’s garrison’s in the summer of 1683. A huge thanks for listening to this mammoth instalment history friends, and if I don’t see you soon, then I will see you all in 2018. Take care, and have a happy Christmas and great new year – thanks!

1. Cited in Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Enemy at the Gate*, pp. 137-138. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wheatcroft, *Enemy*, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wheatcroft, *Enemy*, pp. 141-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wheatcroft, *Enemy*, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)