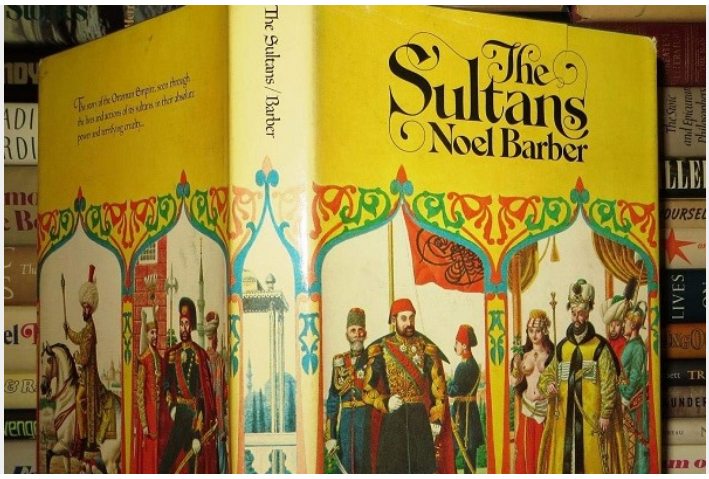
SULEIMAN, THE UNMAGNIFICENT

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Category: Opinions

Adapted from "The Sultans" by Noel Barber, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1973

"Magnificent" means splendid, striking, spectacular, superb, stately, and skillful. Ottoman Empire's "greatest" ruler had none of these attributes and yet five centuries after his death he is still identified as "Magnificent". Sultan Suleiman was "magnificent" if brutality, infanticide, licentiousness, corruption, greed, nepotism, sloth, and over-the-top extravagance are magnificent qualities.

Suleiman was "magnificent" only in his luck. He was the only male offspring thus he inherited the Ottoman throne (1520) without resorting to fratricide or becoming a victim to one: fratricide among sultans' sons was the traditional Ottoman way of succession. As soon as he rose to the throne, Suleiman banished all of his predecessor's odalisques (the women in the harem) to an old palace, in effect a boarding-house for compulsorily retired females and nicknamed "The Palace of Tears". Immediately after exiling the old harem, Suleiman launched his own harem which eventually had 300 odalisques living in its bewildering assortment of rooms. Odalisque is the French corruption of "odaliq", the Turkish-Arabic word meaning homebound.

Although the lord of scores of inherited major cities around the Mediterranean (Alexandria, Adrianople, Algiers, Athens, Baghdad, Basra, Beirut, Belgrade, Cairo, Carthage, Constantinople, Mecca, Medina, Memphis, Damascus…) and millions of people, the "magnificent" sultan was the play thing of Roxelana, a Russian slave who had become his lover. Roxelana had such a hold on the besotted Suleiman that he had his eldest son Mustafa (from his first wife) killed so that Selim, his son from Roxelana, would inherit the throne. While five deaf mutes executioners attacked and finally killed Mustafa, Suleiman listened from behind a curtain to the death throes. When the deed was done, Suleiman appeared without a sign of pity or remorse. Mustafa's "crime" was that he was the legal heir to the throne and thus an obstacle to his younger brother whose mother was the ambitious shrew Roxelana.

Mustafa wasn't the only intimate Suleiman betrayed. Grand Vizier Ibrahim, who was his inseparable friend and "soul mate", was his other major betrayal. Suleiman and Ibrahim were "soul mates" for years. They ate their meals together, went boating and hunting together, and in times of war shared a tent—or even the same bed, thus raising the possibility that they had a sexual attachment. Suleiman and Ibrahim spent the summer months at the sultan's Adrianople resort. Every evening Ibrahim provided the musical entertainment and was at hand when Suleiman felt the inspiration to write a poem. After years of loyal service, Ibrahim was strangled following their dinner because Ibrahim had boasted about his influence over the sultan.

Suleiman, like other Ottoman sultans, surrounded himself with venal yes-men. On top of the corrupt pile was his son-in-law Rustem. When Rustem died, he left a staggering fortune for a man who had been a slave: 815 farms, 476 watermills, 1,700 slaves, 2,900 coats of mail, 8,000 turbans, 760 sabers, 600 copies of the Koran, helmets plated in gold, scores of pairs of gold-worked stirrups and two million ducats.

Suleiman's practice of allowing favorites to amass great wealth, together with the sale of high offices, spread like a canker through the empire; but worse was the start of the rule of the harem, a rule in which the harem became the centre of intrigue, with nearly fatal results to the empire.

Another of his favorites was Admiral Barbarossa. But more than an admiral, the red-bearded and hooked-nosed Barbarossa was a pirate. The murderous admiral ravaged the coasts of Africa and Europe in search of slaves. Over the years, Barbarossa "harvested" hundreds of thousand slaves for Suleiman and the slave markets of Constantinople.

The sybarite sultan never wore the same clothes twice—they were always perfumed with aloe wood. He dined on a silver table of jewel-encrusted silver plates. He drank wine from a goblet cut out of one piece of turquoise. Even his four barges were sumptuously appointed, with curtained pavilions at the stern inlaid with mother of pearl, the roof edged with marquetry of rubies and turquoises.

Suleiman was an indolent ruler. He was given far more to ease than to business. Thus his friend Grand Vizier Ibrahim ran the empire: Suleiman and his court never undertook an important deliberation without consulting Ibrahim.

Although he ruled a vast empire, Suleiman had his eye on larger slices of Europe. After conquering Hungary he turned his sights on the final gateway to Europe: Vienna, at the time a small city. There was no reason why the city should not fall quickly. Suleiman had nearly a quarter of a million troops and 300 guns. Vienna was defended by only 16,000 troops and 72 guns behind an encircling wall five feet thick and without bastions. For miles around the city the tents of Suleiman filled the plain while his cavalry ravaged the country with unmentionable ferocity and cruelty. Four hundred small Turkish boats were ferried up the Danube. But Suleiman's siege guns had been left half-way along the route, bogged down in a storm. Three weeks later Suleiman realized he couldn't take the city. The countryside had been so denuded that he had no food to feed his men. Suleiman had no choice but to raise the siege. On the eve of his army's retreat, the enormous amount of booty taken was burned below the walls of Vienna. The best-looking women were selected for the slave markets, and the rest of the prisoners—mostly peasants—were hurled into the raging fire in full view of the Viennese.

Failing in the west, Suleiman turned his eyes southeast to the island of Rhodes which was ruled by the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. He succeeded in capturing the Knights' main fortress after a siege of 145 days. But the victory was earned at fearful cost to the Turks, who lost ten times as many men as the heroic defenders, and not for three years did Suleiman go to war again.

A cruel man, he demonstrated his bloodthirsty nature at the Battle of Mohacs in Hungary. His soldiers were told not to take no prisoners, enabling Suleiman to note on August 31, 1526 diary (using the third person as he always did): "The Emperor, seated on a golden throne received the homage of the viziers and the beys: massacre of 2,000 prisoners," adding the laconic homely touch, "The rain

falls in torrents." In all 200,000 Hungarians were massacred and 100,000 slaves were taken to Constantinople.

Years later Suleiman again marched on Europe. This time, against Emperor Maximilian II. He was seventy-two and the invasion was to be his last. He died in his tent while his troops were in the midst of a fierce battle on the night of Sept. 5, 1566. His death was kept secret for three weeks. His physician was strangled to make sure there would be no leak until Roxelana's son Selim had reached Constantinople from somewhere in Asia Minor.

For days Suleiman's corpse, the eyes opened, the cheeks reddened, hair tinted black, was propped up on the throne in his tent. Meals were served, the food hidden later; messages were received and answered. But eventually the news of his death leaked when the funeral cortege reached Belgrade. The "greatest" Ottoman sultan was seventy-two-years-old. The unMagnificent Soleiman was succeeded by his son Selim.

Some historians believe Suleiman gained his reputation as a great legislator and builder because his achievements were set in contrast to the absence of any law-makers among his immediate predecessors. The empire began a sharp decline soon after Suleiman's death. Of the twenty-seven sultans who succeeded him, two were murdered and twelve were deposed. Most of the sultans were drunkards, suffered from mental illness, spent far too much time in their harems, making peace among their competing concubines, eating Turkish Delight and gossiping with their African eunuchs.

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