

War between Turks and Venice



In Act 1 of *Othello*, the threat of a Turkish fleet invading the island of Cyprus draws Othello and Desdemona away from Venice. Shakespeare's depiction of this conflict is based in history, but by no means historically accurate. Begun in the thirteenth century, by Shakespeare's time, the Ottoman Empire (the Turks of the play) was one of the most powerful forces in Europe. Based in what today is Turkey, the empire eventually reached as far west as Hungary and included Egypt and Syria. The empire had a large Christian population (until the second half of the fifteenth century Christians had been the majority) but the ruling class and government was Islamic.

Unsurprisingly, the Christian nations of Western Europe were deeply suspicious of an Islamic empire which regularly attempted to increase its holdings and there was a great deal of tension between the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe.

Venice and the Ottoman Empire fought several wars over holdings in the Adriatic Sea, starting as early as 1423. In 1570, Turks launched a full scale invasion of Cyprus, a large, strategically important island which the Venetians had ruled since 1489. The invasion was a complete success; Cyprus became part of the Ottoman Empire and 20,000 citizens in Nicosia—one of Cyprus' largest cities—were massacred.

The loss of Cyprus and the massacre of civilians occurred within living memory of Shakespeare's original audience and knowledge of the outcome would have made the scattering of the Turkish fleet in between Act 1 and Act 2 a surprise to that audience. Shakespeare had a habit of ignoring history when it suited him; this change is necessary because Shakespeare needs a big external threat to move Othello and Desdemona away from the civilized world of Venice. But once they set sail, he had no further interest in the actual historical war and so he dismisses it with a miraculous storm that damages only Turkish ships and allows everyone else to arrive safely in Cyprus—where they will face much more deadly, because much more personal, threats.