

Music of the American Revolution

THE TURKS MARCH

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The annals of history may scrutinize a song by virtue of its mass appeal or musical attributes. Other times, a song may obtain historic relevance due to its association with a notable event. The song “The Turks March” falls into the latter category with its role in the capitulation of the American forces at Charleston, South Carolina in 1780. (N.B. The Turks March is not to be confused with The Turkish March composed by Mozart in 1783, or Beethoven in 1809.)

Eighteenth century European warfare adhered to a code of conduct that seems peculiar from a contemporary point of view. One such tradition was to grant a vanquished foe “Honors of War” when surrendering by allowing the defeated to march out with colors flying and drums beating a march.¹ The Honors of War might also include the sounding of trumpets and allowing the defeated army to march with muskets loaded and sabers drawn to demonstrate that though defeated, the defenders were not entirely impotent. (i.e. They could still defend themselves against “insult” and march to the beat of their drums.)² Another important aspect of providing the Honors of War is that this rite of submission provided the defeated with a sense of security that they would not be harmed when surrendering.³ This controlled environment, which equipped each faction with expectations concerning the conduct of the other, was established by respecting flags of truce, honoring surrenders, and sparing the wounded.⁴

According to one historian the march played during an 18th century capitulation ceremony was to be that of the victor.⁵ For the vanquished to play a tune of their own would be construed as a faux pas. The necessity of playing a march related to the victor has not been found in any of the military manuals of the time but appears to have been a generally accepted practice at least in North America. It has been postulated that playing a march of the victor served three purposes: 1) it was intended as a tribute to the victor for having granted the Honors of War, 2) it was a symbolic act that the surrendering army had put up a good fight and was therefore surrendering with honor, and 3) acknowledgement of the victor’s superiority and demonstrated a level of deference.⁶

However, occasions did arise where the traditional civilities were set aside by the victorious commander. Typically, this would occur when it was felt the defeated force failed to provide an adequate defense as in the British surrender of Fort Oswego in August 1756. Parts, or all, of the honors could be denied as a consequence of poor performance in warfare should the defeated force be perceived as having lacked courage in their defense.⁷ The May 1780 surrender of the American forces defending Charleston was one such occasion where the British were apparently intent on denying honors to the Americans

Charleston fell after a 45-day siege. Instead of providing the Honors of War to the Americans, British General Clinton resolved that certain provisions should be denied the Americans in the articles of capitulation. It has been speculated that Clinton took this stance as castigation for the multiple failed attempts and difficulties experienced in negotiating a surrender with American General Benjamin Lincoln. While the defending commander would be expected to reject the initial offer to surrender, it may be that General Lincoln’s aborted offer to capitulate on 21 April, and the subsequent drawn out process in May, were perceived by Clinton as an intolerable deviation from the generally accepted code of warfare.

In the Articles of Capitulation offered by Clinton on 8 May, no British march was to be played by the Americans, and the colors were to remain cased.⁸ In these negotiations, Clinton initiated the topic of what tune may or may not be played which supports the notion that there was significance in the music performed during a surrender. American General Lincoln responded the same day with alternatives which included “Art. 7. This article to stand as first proposed: the drums beating a British march.”⁹ The fact Lincoln would specifically request the Americans be allowed to play a British tune further denotes the significance of the music.

Ultimately, General Lincoln was unsuccessful in his effort to restore any of the denied honors. In the final version, Article 7 of the Articles of Capitulation at Charleston read as follows:

“Article 7, The whole garrison, shall at an hour to be appointed, march out of the town, to the ground between the works of the place and the canal, where they will deposit their arms. The drums not to beat a British march, or the colors to be uncased.”¹⁰

Being confronted with a dilemma designed to embarrass them, the Americans settled upon a shrewd solution to avoid the humiliation should they play an American tune. As the Turks March was viewed as neither an American tune nor a British tune, it was a safe and neutral option.¹¹ It is not known who made the suggestion to play “The Turks March”, but it seems logical to assume the fifers and drummers were consulted at some point as they would be the ones playing the tune. Verification of The Turks March being played during the surrender ceremony is provided by written accounts of three participants in the ceremony: an American officer, an American enlisted infantryman, and the last, a Hessian officer with the British.^{12,13,14}

Various versions of “The Turks March” appear in the music books and fife tutors leading up to and during the American Revolution. So there is the question as to which version was played at Charleston. There appears to have been a single, or at least dominant, version of the song in Britain as four fife tutors printed during the period of 1756 to 1770 and subsequent fife tutors printed towards the end of the war contain the same tune.^{15,16,17,18,19} On the other hand, in America, two personal hand written song books of the period not only contain a tune different from the British, but also each other.^{20,21} Though it is unknown which version was played at Charleston, it must have been a very well-known rendition as two Americans and a German furnished the same name for the tune independent from one another.

The Turks March is of unknown origin leaving the original composer and inspiration for its name a mystery. What is known is the song was popular in Europe well before the American Revolution as it appeared in several fife tutors by 1756. As European countries in the 18th century were enamored with the military music of the Ottoman Empire, it was common during this time for European composers to produce “exotic” pieces simulating the distinct sound of Ottoman music. The most plausible explanation for the name is related to the musical style of the song which mimics the lively and energetic military music of the Ottoman Empire. The song is not an authentic replication of Ottoman music, but rather a European interpretation of the Ottoman style. Though the origins of The Turks March are unknown, it does conform to the style of the European mimics of Ottoman music. No lyrics have been identified for this tune. It is likely that, as a march in the Ottoman fashion it was intended to be an instrumental piece.

The Turks March would, in all probability, have passed into obscurity as just another 18th century fife tune had it not been played at the capitulation ceremony at Charleston. While it highlights the influence of Ottoman music in 18th century Europe, its role in the American Revolution brings to

light one of the more unique rituals of 18th century martial conduct, namely the relevance of the Honors of War. However, the historical pertinence of this tune runs much deeper, for Clinton's denial of the Americans to play a British march would come back to haunt the British seventeen months later when the roles of victor and vanquished were reversed at the surrender of Yorktown. But that is a story for another time.

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