

Ottoman Empire

Concept: Ottoman Empire

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Date Entered: 2005-09-08

Description The largest of the pre-modern Muslim empires, the Ottoman Empire spanned six hundred years from c.1300-1918, and encompassed at its greatest extent today's Middle East, Hungary, the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia, Rumania, Greece, and Bulgaria), large parts of North Africa, and Saudi Arabia. The Ottoman sultans, named after Osman I (1281-1324), governed such a vast multi-ethnic and multi-religious landscape through the adroit application of sharia Islamic law, customary law, and sultanic decrees, called kanun. Constantinople, renamed Istanbul only in the twentieth century, became the capital of a cosmopolitan civilization, which has left an indelible stamp on the region. This accounts for much of the character of the present-day Middle East and the Balkans. Ottoman power was dominant in the global context from 1500-1800, when Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-66) and his successors contested the power of the Habsburgs of Spain and Austria on land and on sea. Because they ruled over Mecca and Medina, they could command the allegiance of much of the Muslim world. After 1800, Ottoman sovereignty was reduced to semi-colonial status in the face of European superior military and economic power. Ottoman elites struggled to maintain the autonomy of the empire by gradually reforming the military, and introducing new European-style legal and educational systems. A brutal and lengthy contest for the minds and souls of Ottoman subjects followed, in which nationalism, missionary zeal, despotism, and lopsided economic relationships all played a part. What emerged was a group of intellectuals and military leaders who engineered the downfall of Sultan Abdülhamit II (1876-1908). In 1914, after a coup by a triumvirate of these Young Turks, as they were known, joined forces with the Prussians, and declared war against the allies. By that time, Ottoman territories had effectively been reduced to present-day Turkey and Mesopotamia. Untold millions, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, were slaughtered, lost, or forcibly relocated in the dissolution and reorganization which followed. The modern Turkish republic, established in 1923, marked the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Official histories of the dynasty, which were first commissioned by the sultans after 1450, traced the origins of the house to a Central Asian Turkic tribal group known as the Oghuz. The story goes that the Oghuz, and particularly the Kayi tribe of Osman's father, Ertugrul, (d. 1280) emerged in Anatolia, or present-day Turkey, in the late thirteenth century. They were warrior bands who fought for both the Byzantine rulers of Constantinople and the Seljuk Turks, their predecessors in the region. Anatolia was also home to some of the earliest Armenian Christian communities, as well as Kurdish (Muslim) clans, and in the period under discussion, was widely

populated in the western Aegean area with Orthodox Greeks. The Turks arrived as Muslims, having converted from shamanism to Islam in Central Asia. In the pre-gunpowder era, Turkish soldiers were prized for their prowess as warriors. They were particularly effective as mounted archers, swordsmen, and because of their disciplined order of battle. By the time of Osman I, Seljuk Anatolia was largely breaking up into small pockets of Muslim Turkish power, called Emirates, or Principalities. By an adroit use of martial skills, and alliances with the Byzantines through marriage, the Ottomans began a steady, if hotly contested, rise to power over much of Anatolia and the Balkan Christian kingdoms. Notable landmark events, such as the battle of Kosovo in 1389, where a combined Balkan Christian army was soundly defeated by an Ottoman army, resonate even today as the Day of the Black Birds in Serbian history.

Constantinople became the imperial center of the dynasty after it was captured in 1453, by Mehmed II (1444-46 and 1451-81). The great Byzantine church of Saint Sophia, today a museum, was converted into a mosque. It served as a model to emulate when successive sultans and their imperial entourages undertook to build the great mosques such as that of Ahmed II (1691-95), known as the Blue Mosque, for its spectacular tile interior. The grandest mosque of all, Süleymaniye, was built by Süleyman the Magnificent, and is a complex of schools, libraries, hospices, and places of worship surpassed in size and grandeur only by the Mughal architecture of India.

By the reign of Süleyman, the Ottoman system was largely in place. The Ottoman victory at Mohacs in 1526, had signalled the submission of the proud Hungarian kingdom to Ottoman power for one hundred and fifty years. Under Selim I (1512-20), a series of remarkable victories added Syria and Egypt to Ottoman territories. This meant that the Ottomans assumed the status as protectors of the most sacred cities of Islam: Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina. Süleyman ruled as lord of three continents, and as Caliph of the Muslim populations of the world, making the Ottomans a truly global phenomenon until around 1750.

Ottoman power was based on a standing army called the Janissaries, who were initially Christian boys, either war captives, or conscripts, often part of the capitulatory agreements made with conquered territories. The Janissaries were an elite military force, loyal only to the sultan, and the source of many of the prominent leaders of the empire for its first two hundred years. The Ottomans are also known as a "gunpowder empire," credited with making adroit use of the new weapons emerging in Europe. In 1453, the walls of Constantinople fell to Ottoman artillery fire, from enormous cannons cast by a Hungarian. Ottoman military expertise also moved east, to Safavid Persia and Moghul India.

The imperial court never described itself as Turkish, a word which connoted "rube" or "hick" until the end of the nineteenth century. An Ottoman was an educated Muslim, theoretically fluent in Arabic, Persian,

and Turkish, and cognizant of the religious sciences and law. Converts were a ubiquitous part of the court. The imperial harem, where the mother of the sultan had absolute control, ruled over favoured women and concubines who were more likely to be of Caucasian or Balkan, rather than Turkic stock. It is a curiosity of history that British officials generally referred to the sultans as Turks, which remains a synonym for Muslim in the Europe of today.

More significant to both defense and provincial stability were the timariots, or sipahis, soldiers who were granted fiefs in return for campaigning. The Ottomans could rely on 50,000-70,000 infantry and cavalymen from the countryside for the largest campaigns. Having captured the northern Black Sea coast in the fifteenth century, the Ottomans established a clientage relationship with Christian Romania and Moldavia — important territories which supplied much of the grain for Constantinople. They established a similar relationship with the Muslim Tatar Khans, descendants of the Mongols, who controlled the Crimea. The Khan could command as many as 80,000 horsemen for campaigns. With their neighbours to the east, the Shiite dynasty of the Safavids (1501-1722), the Ottomans first fought and then established what proved to be an enduring boundary after the recapture of Baghdad in 1638 by Murad IV (1623-40).

As lords of the Muslim world, the Ottomans were responsible for the pilgrimage routes through Syria and the Hijaz, and maintained tenuous control over Egypt through the use of provincial governors. Early sultans found it expedient to adopt the tax systems and urban alliances in place, allowing for considerable autonomy for local elites, and an extraordinary variety of governing cultures. Non-Muslim communities were largely left intact, although subject to special taxes and lower status. The cement was the system of religious courts, where kadis presided over the dispensation of sultanic justice imagined as radiating from the Gate of Felicity (as Constantinople was known). An elaborate educational system, which could take as many as sixteen years to complete, produced an enormous class of tax exempt religious officials, or ulema. The Ottomans early on made them employees of the empire, and used the office of the Seyhülislam, or Chief Religious Officer, as moral bellwether of the dynasty.

Early economic agreements with European powers, called capitulations, always favoured imports over exports, largely because of the exceptional demands of Constantinople, at 500,000 the largest city of Europe in the seventeenth century. Ottoman rulers encouraged and patronized trade, but were neither collaborative nor mercantilist as in Europe. The economy was subject to global forces such as the influx of silver from the Americas in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and the grain and cotton crises during the American Civil War in the nineteenth century.

While they maintained a fleet in the Mediterranean, which was systematically destroyed, and just as systematically rebuilt on three occasions (1571, 1770 and 1827), the Ottomans here as elsewhere relied

on their clientage arrangements. This gave the edge to Ottoman non-Muslim communities, such as Greeks and Jews, who established trading networks all around the Mediterranean coastline, and dominated shipping by 1800. The arduous conquest of Crete, which ended in 1669 after years of intermittent warfare, was as far as they extended their naval domain in the Mediterranean. It was that conquest, as part of the protracted conflict with the Habsburgs, which broke the spine of the classical system. The Ottomans relied thereafter on their corsairs and Janissary garrison in Algiers as a buffer zone. The Danube River and Black Sea were similarly patrolled and conceived of as commercial waterways, until Ottoman dominion there was truly challenged by the Russian unilateral occupation of the Crimea in 1783. Until 1800, the Ottomans were acknowledged as masters of three continents, and they styled themselves lords of the universe.

After 1750, the vulnerability of this loosely confederative system became apparent. Coinciding with the rise of British and French power, Ottoman indifference to changing global economic realities, and renewed and constant warfare (and defeat) with Russia (four wars from 1768-1831), led to the disaffection of large segments of the Ottoman population. Religious conflicts (Catholic, Orthodox, Uniate, latterly Protestant) as well as national, ethnic sentiments, fostered by European powers, contributed to the erosion of the sense of allegiance to Ottomanism. Global Muslim communities were in turmoil, stimulated not just by the economic crisis of foreign conquest, but equally by inchoate, and often violent indigenous reform movements. Mahmud II (1808-39), the great modernizer of much of the Ottoman system, was equally excoriated by his Muslim subjects as the great infidel sultan. The contest was actually over by 1839, when Sultan Abdülmecid I (1839-61) declared universality of citizenship, taxation, and military service, signalling the end of the Ottoman way, and imposing unrealizable ideals on populations accustomed to privilege and exemptions based on religious distinctions. The Crimean War, 1853-56, was yet another indication of the loss of Ottoman status and power, as it was engineered and commanded largely by Britain and France against Russia. In 1856, the Ottomans were allowed into the Concert of Europe, having recommitted the empire to a liberal and constitutional agenda. In 1876, the Ottomans convened the first parliament of the Middle East in the middle of the Balkan crisis. By 1881, with the establishment of the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, argued as a predecessor to the International Monetary Fund by some, the submission of the once formidable empire to foreign (French and English) financial oversight was complete.

Turkish nationalism arose as subjects of the empire failed to coalesce around "Ottomanism" as a national identity. Refugee populations from the Balkans and the Caucasus raised a cacophony of Turkic alternatives to the Ottoman house. Between 1878 and 1918, the Ottoman Empire was reduced by seventy-five percent of its territory and eighty-five percent of its population. A coup by secularized military officers in 1908 removed the sultan. Although envisioned as a constitutional monarchy, the new

administration rapidly became a dictatorship of three. This Committee of Union and Progress, as it was called, led the remaining Ottoman populations into World War I with its German allies. Following collapse, capitulation, and occupation by Britain in 1918, surviving officers regrouped, reorganized the provincial armies, and fought to establish the Turkish Republic as a modern, secular nation-state. Turkey presently has a population close to one hundred percent Muslim. Celebrated by European powers since 1923 as the great symbol of Middle Eastern modernity, Turkey is ironically still knocking on the door of Europe, for entrance into the modern concert of Europe, the European Union.

Suggested
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