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## The Ottomans: from Statehood to Empire, 1300–1789

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE HOUSE OF OTTOMAN

The Turkic tribes, under the leadership of the Seljuks, established their foothold in Anatolia in 1071, five years after the Norman invasion of England. Alparslan defeated the Byzantine emperor Diogenes at the battle of Manzikert and laid the foundations of the Seljuk Empire, the Seljuks of Rum, with their capital at Konya. Rum was the term used by early Muslims to describe the Byzantines as ‘Romans’ and their empire was called the ‘land of Rum’. Later the term was applied to Asia Minor or Anatolia and, until the present, to the Greeks of Turkey. The Seljuk Empire was a federation of Turkish tribes, each led by its own bey, or leader, who recognized the sovereignty of the Seljuk dynasty. But when the Seljuks were defeated by the Mongols in 1243 and became their tribute-paying vassals, the beys began to break away from the Seljuks and declared independence for their principalities or *beyliks*.

The Ottomans had their origins in a clan that was loyal to the Seljuks, who rewarded their leader, Ertuğrul, with lands near Ankara which were extended further west to the region of Söğüt near modern Eskişehir. Ertuğrul is said to have died in 1288 at the age of 90 and was succeeded by his son Osman, whose name was adopted by his followers who called themselves *Osmanlı*, anglicized to Ottoman. As most vassals seized the opportunity to

declare their independence as the Seljuks declined, Osman remained loyal until the death of Sultan Kaikobad II in 1298. Osman then declared his independence, marking the beginnings of the Ottoman state. Osman's principality abutted the Byzantine empire and he was able to wage religious war, or *gaza*, against the Christians, enabling him and his successors to become religious warriors (*gazis*) par excellence and attracting followers from all over Anatolia. This was a great advantage that the Ottomans had over most of the other principalities. Osman Gazi died in 1326 and was succeeded by his son Orhan Gazi (r.1326–59), who captured the strategic city of Bursa in the same year, making it the first capital of the Ottoman state. At this stage the leaders enjoyed the title of *gazi* which made them little more than first amongst equals. They had yet to become sultans.

By 1326, there were a number of successor states to the Seljuks in Anatolia, although Karaman claimed recognition as the true successor to the Seljuks. The other beys – of such principalities as Aydın, Saruhan, Menteşe, Kermiyan, Hamid, Tekke, Karesi and Kastamonu – refused to grant such recognition. For the time being, the Ottomans were too small and weak and therefore preferred not to join the struggle for Seljuk succession. Orhan had the good fortune of being located adjacent to a rapidly declining Byzantine Empire and of capturing some of its territory while other Muslim emirs fought against each other. He extended his state along the southern coast of the Sea of Marmara and in 1345 captured Karesi from its Muslim ruler, thereby opening a way to cross the Dardanelles and begin expansion into Europe.

In 1341 Orhan intervened in the affairs of Byzantium, answering Cantacuzenus's appeal for help against his rival. Orhan saved the throne for Cantacuzenus and was rewarded with the hand of his daughter, Theodora, in marriage. Thereafter, it became almost a tradition for Ottoman sultans to take Christian wives, at least until the reign of Murad III (r.1574–1595). Orhan had already captured the strategic fortress of Gallipoli on the Dardanelles straits and secured his hold on the northern shore of the Marmara, capturing Tekirdağ. The Ottomans were poised to cross the straits and raid into the Balkans. When Orhan died in 1359, he had laid not only the territorial foundations of the state, but he had also begun to lay its institutional foundations by

creating the institution of the *Yeniçeri*, or ‘new troops’, better known in the West as the janissaries.

The world of Islam was familiar with slave armies, but not the innovation of collecting (*devşirme*) youths from Christian communities and training them to become an elite of soldiers and administrators. Hitherto, the Ottomans had had no regular or standing army and had relied on tribal levies loyal to their own leaders. As the Ottomans were a federation of clans, each with its own leader, the sultan was still little more than the first among equals, dependent on his personal qualities and his success as a conqueror. Orhan tried to overcome this shortcoming by recruiting a regular army of his own from among Turkoman tribesmen. But his experiment failed because the Turkomans were essentially horsemen and did not take to the discipline of fighting in the infantry.

## GROWTH OF THE MILITARY

Around 1330 Orhan began to take Christian youths aged between twelve and twenty from their families, converting them to Islam, and then training them as his ‘new troops’. They were apprenticed to Turkish farms where they learned the language and the religion before being given a rigorous education in the palace school where they joined the state’s ruling elite. Haji Bektaş (1242–1337), the founder of the Bektaşî order of dervishes, blessed the first janissary corps and became the patron saint of the janissaries until their dissolution in 1826.

This military innovation took generations to mature and, in time, the recruits of the *devşirme*, both as soldiers and administrators, strengthened the power of the sultan at the expense of the chieftains of the clans. These men recognized only one loyalty, to the ruling sultan, who was their master and they his *kul* or servitors, though the term *kul* is often rendered ‘slave’. The sultan had the power of life and death over them. In theory, they were cut off from their origins and therefore from loyalty to their original community. In practice, such ties were not always forgotten and there are cases of men of the *devşirme* who rose up to become provincial governors and grand viziers, and who rewarded the communities from whence they came with mosques, libraries and

bridges. The privilege of being a janissary could not be inherited by an heir, who would be a free-born Muslim.

The legality of the *devşirme* was raised under the Sharia or Islamic law. The Sharia granted non-Muslims who had submitted to Islamic rule and paid the poll tax, or *jizya*, the status of *dhimmi*, or protected people. They were allowed to practice their faith and live according to the rules of their communities. The sultan was forbidden to persecute them in any way, and taking away their male children was illegal. However, some parents understood that their children were destined for a comfortable and bright future and gave them up willingly. Sinan, the great Ottoman architect who was himself a *devşirme* recruit, is said to have used his influence to have his brother taken into the system. But the sultan, bound by the Sharia, could not violate it unless the *ülema*, the doctors of Islamic jurisprudence, found a loophole and legalized the practice. To do so, the ulema invented the fiction that if the sultan returned the poll tax to the community, the community would no longer be protected and the sultan could then legally take ‘prisoners of war’, and that is what the sultans did. The practice may sound harsh and even barbarous to our modern sensibilities, but the idea of being recruited into the *devşirme* was so attractive to some that an occasional Muslim family would even ask their Christian neighbours to pass off their Muslim children as Christians so that they could be recruited!

The *devşirme* operated in Anatolia, but the Balkans and Albania, Bosnia, and Bulgaria were the preferred provinces. The recruits were also taught a craft: for example, Sinan (1490–1588) learned about construction as a janissary, and served in the army building roads and bridges before becoming architect to the sultans. Janissaries were taught according to a very strict discipline: to obey their officers, to be totally loyal to each other, and to abstain from all practices that might undermine their ability as soldiers. That is why they were such a formidable force at a time when they were fighting against feudal levies and were therefore superior to armies of Western Europe.

The *devşirme* introduced the principle of ‘meritocracy’ into the Ottoman system. *Devşirme* recruits were taken purely for their abilities and usually came from modest, rural backgrounds, unlike feudal Europe where birth determined one’s status in life. The *devşirme* proved to be a method of integrating the conquered

Christian communities into the imperial system, especially during the early centuries of expansion when Ottoman rule was usually lighter than the one it replaced.

## EARLY OTTOMAN CONQUESTS AND EXPANSION

According to contemporary accounts, the Ottomans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had a well-organized and disciplined force consisting of about 12,000 janissaries, who constituted the infantry, about 8000 *sipahis* or well-trained cavalry, 40,000 troops, feudal in character, supplied and led by rural notables and tribal clans, as well as many thousands of irregulars. European soldiers captured in battle and mercenaries tended to form the artillery. From the time of Orhan's reign, Christian vassals also supplied troops to fight both in Anatolia and Europe. As late as 1683, during the second siege of Vienna, a Wallachian corps was given the task of bridging the Danube. A Muslim Ottoman army, supposedly waging 'holy war' was willing to use Christian troops!

The Ottoman conquests continued under Murad I (r.1359–89). He fought on two fronts: in Anatolia, where he took advantage of the divisions among the Muslim principalities, and in the Balkans against the Christians – Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Bosnians, and Albanians – who were equally divided. The Ottomans entered the Balkans at the invitation of the Christian rulers who were fighting against each other and sought Ottoman help. In 1361, Murad captured Ankara from the Turkomans and Adrianople (Edirne) from the Byzantines, making it second capital of the Ottoman state in 1367. The Ottoman victory at the battle on the River Maritza in Bulgaria in 1371, where Murad defeated a Serbian coalition, opened the road to the conquest of the Balkans just as the battle of Manzikert in 1071 had prepared the way for expansion into Anatolia. The Byzantine emperor and the Christian princes in the Balkans agreed to accept Ottoman suzerainty and to serve in the Ottoman armies as the sultan's vassals.

Murad also acquired territory by forming matrimonial alliances as, for example, when his son married into the Germiyan family and the Ottomans were given Kütahya and its six provinces as dowry. He also purchased lands from the principality of Hamid, but, in principle, conquest remained the main method of

expansion. However, the two-front campaign was difficult to maintain and occasionally a Muslim-Christian alliance (as between Karaman and Bosnia) was capable of inflicting defeat on the Ottomans. Sensing weakness, Ottoman vassals in the Balkans rebelled and forced Murad to confront them in battle. The Balkans, and not Anatolia, had become the Ottoman's heartland and Murad took the challenge very seriously. On 15 June 1389, Murad, with an army of 60,000, met a force of Serbs, Bosnians, Wallachians, Moldavians, and Albanians, estimated at 100,000, and defeated them at the battle of Kosovo. His army was a mixed force of Muslims and Christians and included Bulgarian and Serbian princes, as well as levies for Turkoman principalities. The Serbian King Lazarus was killed in battle and Murad was assassinated by a Serb who came to pay homage as he reviewed his victorious army. The defeat of the Serbs acquired mythical proportions in Serbian poetry and folklore; in the nineteenth century, the battle became a source of nationalist inspiration and was put to political use, as it is today. The battle of Kosovo secured Ottoman power in the Balkans, and Kosovo acquired an important place in the Ottoman economy for it held vast deposits of minerals and was a major supplier of lead and zinc, necessary for the artillery. That is why the Ottomans and Hapsburgs fought over it for many years.

As the power of the Ottomans grew, the Byzantines tried to maintain cordial relations with Murad. Emperor John Palaeologos gave one of his daughters in marriage to Murad, and two other daughters to his sons, Bayezid and Yakub Çelebi. These beys were sent as governors to Germiyan and Karesi, with their own janisseries, where they gained experience of warfare and administration. The youngest son, Savcı Bey, who ruled over Bursa during Murad's absence, plotted with Andronicus, the Byzantine emperor's son, to overthrow their fathers and seize power. The plot was discovered and Savcı Bey was executed while Andronicus was blinded, following the Byzantine tradition.

Bayezid I (r.1389–1403) was proclaimed sultan at Kosovo; his first task was to execute his brother Yakub Çelebi, in order to guarantee his own succession, thereby establishing the tradition of fratricide within Ottoman politics. This practice violated the Sharia and it was legitimized only during the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror. He pronounced that if God had bequeathed the

sultanate to one of his sons, that son could put his brothers to death for the sake of the order of the realm. The *ülema* legitimized the practice by issuing a *fetva* – legal opinion – arguing that fratricide was justified by *raison d'état* as the practice produced stability and therefore strengthened the state. Savcı Bey was executed because he had conspired against the sultan; Yakub Çelebi and other fratricides over the years were carried out as preventive measures!

Ottoman expansion continued under Bayezid's brilliant command and he consolidated his rule in Anatolia, subduing the *beyliks* of Aydın, Mentеше, Saruhan, Germiyan and Karaman. He laid siege to Constantinople in 1391 on the death of Emperor Palaeologos and defeated a European crusade, launched to save Constantinople, at Nicopolis in 1396. Having captured Salonika, he resumed the siege of Constantinople until he was bribed into raising it.

During the fourteenth century the Ottomans had begun to weaken tribal power by instituting the *devşirme* system, thereby recruiting Christian youths from outside the tribes and converting and training them so that they were totally loyal to the house of Osman. Therefore, by the fifteenth century, there was no unified sentiment in Anatolia, no sense of political unity or what would later be described as 'national' cohesion that inspired the various tribes. In fact, they were jealous of each other's growing power, and especially alarmed by the growing power of the Ottoman dynasty. Anatolia was divided into rival and conflicting tribal confederations, struggling to survive against the expansion of a neighbour.

The defeated and dispossessed beys of Anatolia appealed to the Mongol leader Timur – known in the West as Tamerlane – to stop Bayezid waging war against Muslim rulers and to reinstate them. Timur, the most powerful Mongol ruler since Genghis Khan and one of the greatest conquerors of world history, had subdued Central Asia and the Golden Horde in southern Russia, invaded India in 1398 and overran Iran, Iraq and Syria. He then advanced into Anatolia and defeated the Ottomans at the battle of Ankara in 1402. Bayezid was captured and died in captivity eight months later.

Timur's intervention in the affairs of Anatolia was brief but had the most momentous consequences. He had destroyed Ottoman

power, given a temporary lease of life to the Anatolian beys and prolonged the life of Byzantium for a further fifty years. Timur died in 1405, leaving the Anatolian *beyliks* to fend for themselves while the Ottomans regrouped. Ottoman succession was disputed by Bayezid's sons and Mehmed I (r.1413–21) was finally recognized as the new sultan in 1413. By the time of his death in 1421, he had recovered most of the lands lost to Timur, and even organized a small navy to protect his domain from Venetian raids.

Murad II (r.1421–51), who had served as governor of Amasya, succeeded Mehmed. But before he could consolidate his power, he had to deal with two pretenders to the throne, supported by the Byzantines and the beys of Germiyan and Karaman. By 1426, both of them had become Murad's suzerains and paid tribute to him. Thereafter, Murad advanced into Macedonia and captured the strategic port city of Salonika from Venice in 1428. Murad was forced to fight a double-fronted war, against the Europeans, who organized an army led by the Hungarian Janos Hunyadi (c.1387–1456), as well as Karaman, which rose up in rebellion. Murad defeated Karaman in July 1444 but was forced to sign a ten-year truce with Hungary. He then abdicated in favour of his son, Mehmed, and retired to Manisa. The Hungarians, sensing Ottoman weakness, broke the truce and advanced into Ottoman territory. The janissaries brought Murad out of retirement to lead his army and the Christian force was routed at Varna in 1444. The war with Hungary continued until Hunyadi, at the head of a large army, was defeated at Kosovo in 1448. Murad died at Edirne and Mehmed II, known as the Conqueror (r.1451–81), finally came to the throne.

## MEHMED THE CONQUEROR AND HIS INFLUENCE

Mehmed's fame rests on the conquest of Constantinople on 29 May 1453. Important though that was, his reign is more significant in Ottoman history for his decision finally to break the power of the Anatolian beys in his entourage and to establish the hegemony of the men of the *devşirme* who, unlike the beys, were his servitors and totally loyal to him, and over whom he had the power of life and death. As a result, the Ottoman Empire became more autocratic and bureaucratic, with the sultan relying on his



grand vizier to conduct day-to-day business and even lead the army. The notables whose power was based on their tribal affiliation lost much of their political influence, their lands and property, and became dependent on the state. Perhaps it was this that ended any possibility of an independent landed aristocracy as a counter-force to the Palace emerging in the Ottoman Empire as it did in Europe. The sultan became an absolute autocrat, supported by loyal servants who in time became kingmakers. However, Islamic ideology required that he remain accountable to the Sharia and therefore the *ülema* of freeborn Muslims remained an autonomous political force in the empire.

Constantinople, which the Ottomans continued to call Konstantiyye until 1915, as well as Istanbul and *Dersaadet* (the abode of felicity), gave them an imperial mission as they believed that they had acquired the mantle of Rome. Though the city fell after a difficult siege, many Greek Orthodox subjects welcomed the Ottomans as they allowed them to practise their faith, unlike the Catholics who had wanted to restore papal hegemony by reuniting the two Churches. Mehmed granted the Orthodox Church a charter that gave the patriarch total jurisdiction over his community in return for the payment of a poll tax. The Armenian Church was also brought to the new capital and granted religious and cultural autonomy. Within a short time, a relationship was established between the state and the religious communities that developed by the eighteenth century into the *millet* system, or virtually autonomous religious communities. In pre-secular Ottoman society, religious allegiance was not a private matter but a matter of communal concern. People were organized according to the Church into which they had been born, regardless of the language they spoke or the ethnic group they belonged to. The religious and social life of each community was organized according to its traditions and individuals were bound by its laws. The Muslim *millet* included all Muslims (Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and converts) regardless of their ethnicity or language; the same was true for the Greek Orthodox *millet* that included not only Greeks but Slavic peoples of the Balkans and, later on, the Arab world. The same was true for the Jewish and Armenian communities. Only in the nineteenth century, with the advent of nationalism, did the *millets* begin to acquire an ethnic colouring and Serbs,

Bulgarians, Catholics, and Protestants acquired their own communal organizations. However, even in 1919, Greek Catholics felt more akin to Italian Catholics than to the Greek Orthodox army that invaded Anatolia! The *millet* system suggests that the Ottomans made no attempt at assimilation, only a pragmatic integration that allowed the empire to function smoothly.

Istanbul was refurbished after the conquest of 1453 as befitting the capital of a world empire. Mehmed imported craftsmen from all over the empire and settled them in the city in order to rebuild it. Its population increased substantially, especially after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, when they were invited to settle in the empire and many chose the capital. Between 1500 and 1600, Istanbul became one of the most important cities of Europe; around 1600 it was still one of the most populous cities until it was overtaken before the end of the seventeenth century, first by Paris and then London.

The imperatives of empire also led Mehmed to extend his territories in all directions. He conquered southern Serbia and extended Ottoman influence in Wallachia. Commerce had been important to the Ottomans ever since their rise to power in the fourteenth century, but with the acquisition of Istanbul, sea power and international trade became crucial for Ottoman security and economy. Venice had become a rival and the Ottomans were forced to pay attention to their fleet and the defence of the city. Mehmed therefore captured the island of Mytilene (Midilli) and fortified the straits. He pressured Venice in the Mediterranean until she was forced to sign a treaty in 1478. He then conquered the Crimea making the Crimean Tatars his vassals and the Black Sea an Ottoman lake. Ottoman expansion continued until Mehmed's death in 1481, with attacks on Rhodes and even southern Italy, where the Ottomans seized Otranto.

Bayezid II (r.1481–1512) was forced to contest the throne with his brother Cem Sultan (1459–1495). First, he had to bribe the janissaries by granting an 'accession present' in order to win their loyalty; thereafter it became a tradition with which every sultan complied at the beginning of his reign. Cem was defeated and sought asylum with the Knights of Rhodes, who were paid in gold to keep him hostage. Cem went on to Naples where he died as a captive of the Pope, who was also able to blackmail Bayezid and

force him to pay to keep Cem in captivity. Scholars have speculated as to what Bayezid might have achieved had he not been distracted by Cem's challenge to the Ottoman throne and the manipulation of the Christian powers. Given the anarchy ruling in Italy at the time and the ease with which the French conquered Italy in 1494, the Ottomans might have subjugated Italy, altering the course of world history. In Rome, it was feared that that city might share the fate of Constantinople.

## EXPANDING OTTOMAN POSSESSIONS

By the fifteenth century, the Ottomans had reinvented themselves from being a tribute-levying empire to one dependent on world trade. Recent research in the Genoese and Venetian archives shows that the Ottomans took trade in the region seriously. From the early fourteenth century their conquests were based largely on the capture of strategic points, such as Gallipoli and the Dardanelles, which provided revenues from trade in the region. After inflicting a defeat on Venice in July 1496, they not only exempted the Venetians from paying an annual tribute, but agreed that Venice pay a four per cent tax on its exports to the Ottoman empire; trade had become as important as tribute.

Apart from waging war in Europe, the Ottomans were faced with the threat of such rivals as the Mamluks in Egypt and Syria, and the Safavids in Iran. The struggle with the Safavids assumed an ideological character, as a contest between the Sunni or orthodox Islam of the Ottomans and the heterodox, Shia Islam of the Safavids. This long-drawn-out conflict sapped the energies of both empires and was responsible for the relative decline of both in comparison with the rise of European power.

Having deposed his father Bayezid, Selim I (1512–20) was forced to turn his attention to the east and meet the rising power of Shah İsmail. In 1514, Selim defeated the Safavids at Chaldiran and acquired Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Two years later, Selim advanced against the Mamluks and conquered Syria in 1516 and Egypt the following year. Egypt's agriculture and commerce provided Istanbul with considerable wealth as well as revenues from trade with India and Asia. The Ottomans also became the guardians of the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina and were elevated to the status of the

most powerful Muslim state in the world. Jerusalem, or Kudus, became the third holy city of Islam; the Ottomans built great bazaars to enliven commercial life and Selim's successor, Süleyman, built the city's distinct white walls. Jerusalem did not become a major regional capital such as Damascus or Aleppo, but it was one of the three Holy Places of Islam and enjoyed great religious significance. The empire had doubled in size and its Islamic element was strengthened by the addition of the Arab provinces. Moreover, Egypt brought the Ottomans into direct contact with the Portuguese in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

In the sixteenth century, the balance in the world had shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Christopher Columbus's discovery of America in 1492 and Vasco da Gama's voyage around southern Africa to reach India in 1498 diminished but did not end the importance of the Islamic world. Trade with Asia did not dry up as a result, but the Ottoman treasury received less revenue. The empire also became too large and unwieldy to be ruled by the sultan alone and he was forced to rely more and more on his bureaucracy. The men who rose through the *devşirme* became more influential, as did the women in the Palace.

## SÜLEYMAN THE MAGNIFICENT

Süleyman I (r.1520–66) is perhaps the most famous of the Ottoman sultans. He is known as *Kanuni* (the lawgiver) to the Turks, and 'Süleyman the Magnificent' in the West. He continued to expand and consolidate his empire in the tradition of his predecessors, capturing Belgrade in 1521 and besieging Vienna in 1529. The Ottomans actively participated in the European conflict between the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Francis I of France; the Ottoman role was partially responsible for Charles's failure to crush Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation. Wars in Europe continued until Süleyman's death in 1566, when he died leading the campaign into Hungary. He also fought against the Safavids, capturing Baghdad in 1534.

Commerce had become an important part of the Ottoman economy and Ottoman merchants – Muslim and non-Muslim – traded in Europe, especially Italy, and Asia. As a result of this, in 1535, Süleyman granted certain privileges, known as 'capitula-

tions', to French merchants. They were permitted to live according to their own laws and customs while they resided in the empire, so long as Ottoman law was not violated. Over time, these capitulations were extended to other European states, leading to an expansion of commerce between Europe and the Ottomans.

The expansion of the Ottoman navy may also be explained as a measure to control the Mediterranean in order to secure commerce in the region. Thus Süleyman used Barbarosa Hayrettin to seize control of the North African coast from Charles V, establishing Ottoman rule over Algiers, Tunis and Libya. A serious attempt was also made to destroy Portuguese power in the Arabian Sea, but the Ottoman fleet was destroyed at the battle of Dui in 1538. Ottoman ships were constructed for the calmer waters of the Mediterranean and were no match for Portuguese galleons. Perhaps that is why the Ottomans made no attempt to sail in the Atlantic, though they mapped it and knew much about it. Like the Chinese in East Asia, the Ottomans were content with their empire in the eastern Mediterranean.

By Süleyman's reign, the Ottoman Empire had developed into a stable form with a military-bureaucratic ruling class, tempered by the free-born *ülema*, that ruled over a multi-religious population of peasants, merchants, and artisans, organized into virtually autonomous religious communities. Executive and legislative power resided in the sultan, who was aided by ministers who assumed more of the sultan's prerogatives as the empire expanded and became more bureaucratic. After Süleyman's reign, the grand vizier began to assume many of the sultan's duties and the sultan became more palace-bound. The patriarchs, as leaders of the non-Muslim communities who tended to the religious and communal needs of their flocks, enjoyed the protection of the sultan. No attempt was made to assimilate the various communities; they were integrated to the extent that day-to-day interactions were normalized and provided a social context for cultural exchange. The system worked well until the introduction of nationalism in the nineteenth century, enabling each community to go its separate way, something that they could not have achieved had they been assimilated.

Ottoman administration was advanced for the time in comparison with contemporary Europe, and Christian peasants found Ottoman

rule to be lighter than that of their feudal co-religionists. Martin Luther (1483–1546), who had no sympathy for the ‘Turks’ whom he considered barbarous, agreed that the peasants yielded to the Ottomans because their taxes were lighter. Ottoman taxation continued to be light while the sultan conquered prosperous lands, but became heavier when the conquests ended.

With the conquest of Constantinople, the Ottomans acquired some Byzantine administrative practices. The sultan became increasingly distant, leaving day-to-day affairs to his imperial *divan* which was presided over by his grand vizier and was composed of other ministers. His principal ministers were the military judges (*kadiasker*) of Rumelia and Anatolia, the judge of Istanbul, the minister of finance, the keeper of the seal and the chief of the janissaries. Later, the offices of *Şeyhülislam*, the supreme religious authority, the *reis-ül kuttub*, the minister in charge of foreign relations, and *kapudan* pasha, admiral of the fleet, were added to the *divan*. A military officer, a pasha with two horsetails designating rank, was appointed governor of a province, which was subdivided into *sanjaks* governed by a pasha with one horsetail. Below him there were districts, or *kazas*, governed by a *kadı* and landlords who represented the local people.

Land belonged to the state and the empire’s economy depended on the state’s control of both the land and agricultural production, the principal sources of revenue. Land was divided into a variety of fiefs (*timars*) whose revenues were allotted to the administrators – the beys and viziers – as their salaries. These fiefs were not hereditary and could be confiscated on the holder’s death. As they could not be passed on to the landholder’s beneficiaries, it was not possible to create a landowning class as in Europe. In theory, peasants could not be evicted from the land they cultivated so long as they paid the tithe to the landlord. That measure gave peasants security of tenure and may explain the general absence of peasant rebellions in Ottoman history.

The reign of Süleyman the Magnificent is traditionally described as the ‘high noon’ of the Ottoman Empire. He was described as the last of the great first ten rulers who had established and laid the foundation of a world empire. These rulers were not only great conquerors but wise and talented administrators, who ruled over their territories with ruthless sagacity. After Süleyman, it was said,

the sultans were often incompetent, mediocre and corrupt men who were more given to the pleasure of the harem than the battlefield; a sultan such as Murad IV (1623–40) was the exception rather than the rule. Incompetent rulers lacked the initiative and drive of such great sultans as Mehmed the Conqueror, and therefore tended to paralyse the administration and weaken the empire. But despite this shortcoming, the empire was able to rely on the exceptional talents of such grand viziers as Sokullu Mehmed Pasha and the Köprülü dynasty of grand viziers which controlled the empire for almost half a century, as well as the occasionally competent sultan, such as Murad IV.

As an explanation for Ottoman decline relative to the rise of Western Europe, this is only partially true and modern scholarship has sought other explanations. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was operating in a totally different environment, both internally and overseas. The empire had been transformed from a state whose primary goal was territorial expansion, which therefore created the need for an active sultan-general to lead the armies, to a bureaucratic state that had to deal with such economic factors as commerce and relations with an expanding Europe. The Ottomans had created a world empire that was far too complex to be ruled by an individual, however gifted. Power had to be delegated and the sultans were forced to create a *divan*, an early cabinet, with a grand vizier and other ministers. During Süleyman's reign, the situation remained ambiguous and he executed his grand vizier, İbrahim Pasha, because he had become jealous of the growth in the latter's power. But his successor, Selim II, came to depend on his grand vizier and his bureaucracy, which then acquired its own residence known as Babiali or the Sublime Porte (similar to Number Ten Downing Street, the residence of the British prime minister).

For the same reason, the imperial harem also emerged as a focus of political power in the sixteenth century. The grand vizier was often related to the sultan by marriage and therefore directly connected to the harem and its powerful women, such as the *valide sultan*, the sultan's mother or the sultan's favourite concubine. Sometimes the sultan was a minor and therefore a regency headed by the sultan's mother had to be established until he came of age.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, the empire had reached the limits of expansion, especially of lands that could be profitably exploited to bring economic benefit. That was the difference between Ottoman imperialism and the imperialisms of such European powers as Spain, England, and Holland: their motives for expansion were largely economic and they plundered their colonies for all they were worth. The Ottomans presented a classic case of what has been described as 'imperial over-extension'. They had to maintain large armies in central Europe, North Africa, and Cyprus, as well as powerful naval forces in the Mediterranean, the Aegean, and the Red Sea. In addition to the Holy Roman emperor and his allies, the Ottomans began to face the threat of the growing power of Russia in the Crimea. In Anatolia, the Safavids posed a threat with their religious propaganda among the nomadic Turkoman tribes. All this was a great burden on the treasury, forcing the Ottomans to find new ways to meet their fiscal obligations.

Overseas, a great transformation was marked by a shift from the Mediterranean sphere to the world of the Atlantic. With the age of discovery, the former trade routes upon which the Ottomans had depended for centuries lost their prominence and the empire's revenues from commerce declined. But this was a gradual process and did not affect the empire immediately; however, due to the political and social structure of the empire, there was no obvious solution. The Ottoman economic system was incapable of withstanding the challenge of Western mercantalism and industrialization.

## AN AGE OF REVOLUTION

In the Western world, the transition from feudalism to commercial capitalism was marked by revolution – the rising middle classes, the bourgeoisie, had to fight for political power. That was accomplished in England between 1640 and 1688, culminating in the 'glorious revolution'; in France, the revolution took place between 1789 and 1815. Where there was no bourgeoisie strong enough to challenge the power of the feudal class – as in Spain or Russia – there was no revolution and the old classes remained in power. That was the case with the Ottomans. While they maintained a government strong enough to preserve order and allow merchants



and manufacturers to make their fortunes, they did not permit these merchants to emerge as a political force capable of promoting their own interests. This was made more difficult by the fact that the merchants were divided by religious affiliation – Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian, Jew and Muslim – and could not act together as a class to protect their economic interests. The Ottomans, while aware of the importance of commerce for the economy, were never solely concerned with the interests of the commercial classes, nor did they take a conscious interest in the rapid growth of the economy. However, they were committed to defending the interests of the consumer, and one of the most important officials was the *muhtesib*, the inspector of the market place, who supervised prices and the quality of goods and weights and measures to see that consumers were not cheated. That in itself stifled the growth of capitalism and a market economy.

There were however a number of wealthy merchants who, in theory, might have played the role of carrying out a bourgeoisie transformation had they been given the opportunity. For example, a Greek merchant, known as Sheytanoglu, from a prominent Byzantine family, made a fortune from the fur trade and the imperial salt monopoly and, as a result, was able to fit sixty galleys for the Ottoman navy. But Murad II became suspicious of his increasing wealth and power and executed him in 1578. There were other prominent rich bankers and merchants, but the Ottoman ruling class never permitted them to alter the character of the state or economy. Even in Europe such change required a revolution, and the Ottoman state was too strong to allow any such radical political and social transformation. Thus there were rebellions and insurrections, but there was no single violent transformation of the political order and its supporting social system that would replace the existing ruling class with another, giving the empire a new look and direction.

It was not as though the Ottomans did not understand what was going on in the world around them; they were aware of the developments taking place in Europe. There was always a constant stream of visitors from Europe and some of these visitors stayed on and served the empire, especially as military experts. There were commercial contacts with the Italian city-states such as Genoa and Venice from the earliest days of the Ottomans, and

Muslim merchants resided in Italian cities. Mehmed the Conqueror had sent students to Italy to study the arts, and corresponded with the Pope. As a result, the Ottomans were well aware of developments in the world around them but were unable to absorb these developments into their own complex, multi-religious society. Nor did they realize how the changes in Europe were beginning to affect their own society, but that was the nature of empire and an imperial ruling class. They were conservative and bound to the status quo and would not permit the rise of a mercantile class that might transform the state and overwhelm the old ruling elites. The Ottomans had three principles that guided the state's economic policy: to provision the urban economy, especially that of Istanbul, and to keep the army, the bureaucracy, and the Palace well supplied; to provide the necessary revenues from taxation, urban and rural; and to preserve the status quo by maintaining strict controls in the towns and the countryside. The Spanish empire pursued a similar policy in the sixteenth century and later; despite her empire and her great wealth, Spain too failed to make the transformation to a bourgeois society, remaining a society dominated by the commercial classes, and therefore lagging behind such European states as Holland and England. It was not a question of religion (Islam or Catholicism), as some have suggested, but was rooted in the very nature of pre-Enlightenment imperialism.

But Ottoman decline was not precipitous. The empire was powerful enough to defend itself throughout the seventeenth century and was even able to launch a campaign that took Ottoman armies to the walls of Vienna in 1683 for the second time. In 1570–71 the Ottomans captured Tunis and Cyprus and the European power took the threat seriously enough to join forces and inflict a crushing defeat on the Ottoman navy at Lepanto in 1571. Such was the empire's wealth in the latter sixteenth century that Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, the grand vizier, informed Sultan Selim II that the fleet destroyed at Lepanto could easily be replaced with new and better galleys. However, as a result of the defeat, Selim was forced to make peace with Venice and the emperor.

By the reign of Selim II (1566–74) power had passed into the hands of other men, such as Sokullu Mehmed Pasha (1506–79),

though they were not all as outstanding a statesman as he was. Born in the town of Sokolovic in Bosnia, he was recruited and trained in the *devşirme* system. He rose through the ranks until he was appointed grand vizier in 1564, having already married Süleyman's daughter and Selim II's sister. It was he, not the sultan, who administered the empire until he died in 1579.

Apart from the regular wars (with Iran, 1578–90, and Austria, 1593), the Ottomans had to cope with a situation that is described as the 'crisis of the seventeenth century'. This was marked by a number of factors that worked together and created a difficult situation that the Ottoman state found itself confronted with. Earlier scholarship argued that it was primarily the influx of American gold and silver that came into the Mediterranean world via its commercial connections with the West that created inflation and the pressure on the Ottoman economy. The treasury was forced to find more money to pay the salaries of its armies and administration. Recent research suggests that a cash economy had already penetrated large parts of the Balkans and Anatolia along the coast and the process was accelerated in the sixteenth century with the influx of New World silver, resulting in increased commercialization. Thus taxes were now collected in cash rather than kind, altering the method of landholding in parts of the empire. Inflationary pressures were aggravated by the growth in population, urbanization, and monetization of the economy that increased the demand for money and pressure on the empire's limited resources. The state was forced to finance larger armies to fight exhausting wars against the Hapsburgs and the Safavids, and one quick solution was to debase and devalue the currency, putting more brass than silver in the coins. The result was social turmoil and in 1589 the janissaries in Istanbul revolted in protest against their lower pay and declining standard of living. These revolts continued into 1592 before they were quelled. In the 1590s, central Anatolia began to witness social disorder with peasant unrest known as the *Celali* rebellions, named after the religious leader who began the first revolt. Serious dissatisfaction continued until the 1650s, undermining the authority of the state.

## THE JANISSARY-ÜLEMA ALLIANCE

Despite all these problems and military setbacks, the Ottomans held their own throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of the most serious consequences of this prolonged crisis was the emergence of an alliance between the *ülema* and the janissaries that prevented the possibility of any structural reform in the state and society. The military provided the power, literally from the barrels of their guns, while the *ülema* provided ideological legitimacy. For example, the Ottomans were unable to follow the example of the Greek community which established a printing press in 1627, because the *ülema* objected that the printing press was a violation of the Sharia. When İbrahim Müteferrika, a Hungarian convert, set up the first Ottoman printing press a hundred years later, it survived only until 1742, when it was again shut down because of strong opposition from the reactionaries. The press was finally able to reopen in 1784! Even reformers who often diagnosed the problems of the empire correctly generally proposed a solution that asked the sultan to restore the practices of Süleyman the Magnificent, during whose reign the empire was thought to be at its peak.

When the situation seemed critical, such as during the reign of Murad IV (1623–40), a strong ruler was able to restore order but could not carry out fundamental reform. He ended fratricide in 1623 because his brother İbrahim was the last surviving Ottoman apart from Murad, and killing him would put the dynasty at risk. İbrahim was therefore isolated in the Palace and allowed to lead a passive and degenerate life away from political power. By 1632, Murad had established control over the state and continued a policy of conquest, capturing Baghdad from the Safavids in 1638.

The stability proved temporary for, in 1648, when Mehmed IV, a minor, came to the throne, the capital was in a state of anarchy, dominated by the janissaries, while rebel pashas controlled much of central Anatolia and the Venetians blockaded the Dardanelles. But in 1656, Mehmed Köprülü (d.1661) was appointed grand vizier and given absolute power. He is an example of Ottoman meritocracy, an illiterate rising from the sultan's kitchen to the rank of provincial governor and grand vizier, thanks to his own talent and patronage in the Palace. He remained in power for only

five years until his death in 1661. During his brief tenure, he restored control over the janissaries and the rebels in Anatolia, lifted the Venetian blockade at the Dardanelles and restored Ottoman control over Transylvania and Wallachia. Mehmed Köprülü's aggressive policies were continued by his son, Fazıl Ahmed Köprülü (1635–76) and Kara Mustafa Pasha (1676–83). But the political stability of these years did not survive long and the long exhausting wars with the Hapsburgs, marked by the second siege of Vienna in 1683, hastened Ottoman decline.

### GROWING EUROPEAN INFLUENCE

The Treaty of Carlowitz, signed in January 1699, was a turning point in Ottoman–Hapsburg relations. From being the aggressors, the Ottomans were forced to go on the defensive, and they began to take the European example seriously. Sultan Ahmed III (1703–30) led the reform drive during what is known as the ‘Tulip Period’. But his attempts to introduce European methods into the army were thwarted by the *ülema*–janissary alliance. In 1729, faced with the threat of Austrian and Russian armies, the Ottomans invited Western experts to introduce modern methods of warfare. Count Alexander de Bonneval, a French officer, came to Istanbul to modernize the engineer and bombardier corps. Possibly to facilitate his work, he converted to Islam so that a Muslim, not a Christian, might be responsible for the reforms. Known as Ahmed Bey, he entered Ottoman service in 1731 and established a school of military engineering in 1734. He was given the rank of pasha and the title ‘Bombadier’ (*Humbaracı*) the following year. But his reforms did not take root and when another European reformer, Baron de Tott, arrived in Istanbul in 1768, he found hardly any evidence of *Humbaracı*'s efforts, as though he had failed totally to reform the army.

Baron de Tott arrived to carry out military reform while the empire was at war with Russia. The Russian fleet dominated the Aegean Sea by 1770, defeated the Ottoman army on the Danube and invaded the Crimea. The Ottomans suffered such crushing defeats that they were forced to sign a humiliating treaty with Catherine the Great in 1774. The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca made the Crimea and northern coast of the Black Sea independent of Ottoman rule.

Catherine was also given the right to protect the Orthodox Church in Istanbul, thereby giving Russia the excuse to intervene in Ottoman affairs. The treaty marked the beginning of what has come to be known as the 'Eastern Question', the attempts by the Great Powers to exploit the multi-religious character of the Ottoman Empire by acting on behalf of the Christian communities. In return, Sultan Abdülhamid I (1774–89) was recognized by Russia – and soon after by other European powers – as the Caliph of all Muslims. According to Article 3 of the Treaty, the Sultan retained his spiritual authority over Muslims in the Crimea, by now ceded to Russia. The Sultan's claim to the caliphate was confirmed under subsequent treaties with the Powers.

The claim to the caliphate was an important innovation and had considerable influence on the future policy of the empire, strengthening the conservatives and enabling them to manipulate Islam in order to forestall reform. After the fall of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258, a number of independent sultans had assumed the title, and even Murad I had used it as early as 1326. However, the Ottomans began to attach importance to both the title and its prerogatives after 1774, in order to counter Tsarina Catherine's claim to be the protector of Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. The sultans in turn claimed spiritual authority over Muslim communities under Christian rule and found that this was a useful tool to use in their relations with Europe.

Piecemeal reform during the eighteenth century, obstructed by the reactionaries, had failed to improve the situation of the empire against the growing power of the European states. The treaty with Catherine did not bring peace or satisfy Russia's appetite for expansion. In 1783, she annexed the Khanate of Crimea, and three years later the Ottomans were again at war with Russia. When Selim III came to the throne of the troubled empire in 1789, his reign began the empire's longest century of continuous reform, culminating in 1908 with revolution.

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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