



The Ottoman Empire

By Eman M. Elshaikh

The Ottoman Empire stretched across Asia, Europe, and Africa beginning in the late thirteenth century. Centuries later, its growth slowed and it transformed in many ways.

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Transformations and new directions

The Ottoman Empire was founded in 1299 by a Turkish leader. The Ottomans conquered many cities and towns in modern-day Turkey and the Balkan peninsula (modern-day Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia, among others).

The empire began to expand and gain power in the fifteenth century. In 1453, the Ottomans conquered Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). It had served as the capital of the Byzantine Empire and became the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

Much of this success was a result of the Ottoman military, including an elite fighting force called the Janissaries. They were young male Christian slaves captured during wars. The Janissaries were raised in the Islamic faith. From an early age they were trained as soldiers. When they grew up they became administrators, bodyguards to the Ottoman leader—called a sultan—or part of the military. The Ottomans also had advanced weapons that used gunpowder, which allowed them to overpower their enemies.

The Ottoman Empire reached its greatest size in the late seventeenth century and lasted until 1922. It was one of the largest and most long-lasting empires in world history. At its greatest extent, the empire extended to three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Transformations and new directions

The eighteenth century was a period of transformation for the Ottoman Empire. After losing (and gaining back) some important territories, Ottoman leaders began to focus on consolidating territories.

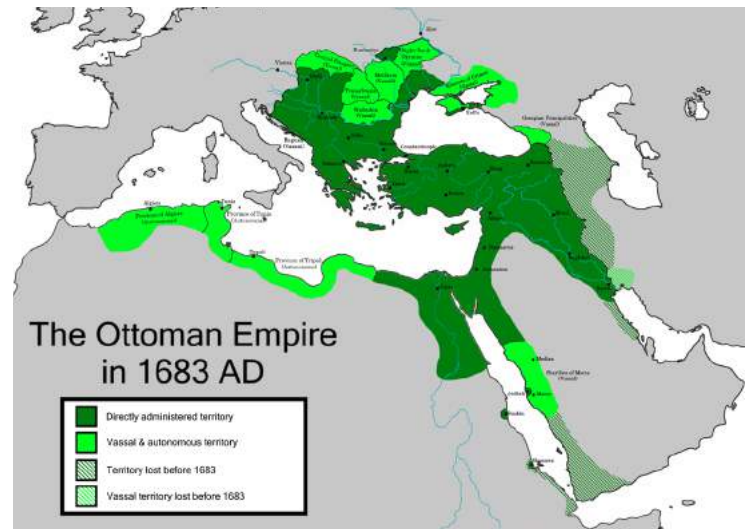
The political structure started to shift around this time, too. The Ottoman sultans lost some of their power as many were overthrown after only ruling for a short period of time. These short reigns were the result of political rivalries, military revolts, and resistance from elites.

The empire's civilian bureaucracy (an organized system of state officials) became stronger as power became less centralized. This stood in contrast to Europe at the time. Most European monarchs had absolute power over their territories and subjects.

Central authority still mattered, but the balance had shifted. Local leaders worked with the sultan to manage the vast empire. They collected taxes to send to the capital and recruited soldiers for the empire's wars.

An empire of nations

Due to its massive size, the Ottoman Empire did not have a single identity unifying all of its peoples. It was multi-ethnic and multi-religious.



The Ottoman Empire at its greatest extent. By Chamboz, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Islam did play a central role in the empire, however. The Ottoman state based its authority on religion. The first Ottoman sultans expanded the empire in the name of Islam. They claimed to be successors to the prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. The sultans claimed the title of Caliph and acted as Islamic religious leaders.

For the most part, Christians and Jews had relatively lower social status than Muslims. The empire did allow them to maintain their own communities, called millets, where they could control their own religious and civil affairs.

Ottoman hierarchies

Generally, bureaucrats, religious scholars, and military officials had the greatest social power in the empire. The lower classes included merchants, farmers, herdsmen, manufacturers, and seafarers. Though they had the least official power, they powered the engine of the empire. They produced much of the empire's goods and revenues (through taxes).



Left: [Depiction of a janissary from a book about costumes](#) from the late seventeenth century. Public domain.

Right: [Illustration of recruitment of Christian boys for the devşirme](#). Ottoman miniature painting, 1558. By Ali Amir Beg, public domain.

Religious, gender, and economic differences could affect a person's social status. People also were able to move up in class on their own merit. In fact, even enslaved people in the Ottoman military could rise through the ranks and reach a high social status.

Women were dependent on the men in their families for money and social position. Islamic law granted women certain rights, like the ability to divorce and inherit money. Women were allowed to start institutions like schools and mosques. Religion was also used to limit women's power. Some interpretations of Islam were used to justify keeping women at home.

The Ottomans and the world

The Ottoman Empire bordered numerous states and other empires in multiple continents. It had tense relationships with some of them, such as the Safavid Empire. It was another Islamic empire located to the east in modern-day Iran.

At the same time, the Ottoman state often collaborated with other European powers. They also wanted to imitate European models. For example, Ottomans enlisted European military advisors to modernize their military. Ottoman leaders felt that recent military defeats were due to their less technically advanced militaries.

Ottoman elites also became more connected to global cultural movements, particularly the Enlightenment. Translations became more widely available with the Ottoman adoption of the printing press in the 1720s. Together, these trends of military and technological innovation and cultural worldliness gave rise to a series of reforms of education, the military, and finance beginning in the 1830s. Called the Tanzimat, these reforms were also a response to the diversity of the empire. They gave civil rights to minorities. For example, guarantees were made to Armenian and Syrian Christians, Jews, and other millets (communities of different religious and ethnic minorities) to practice their religion. However, religious conservatives challenged these trends. They insisted that the rise of secular education and other reforms were harming Ottoman society.

In a parallel development, elites brought in more foreign goods such as art and food. This was also a time where the Ottoman Empire began to lose some of its power and influence. For centuries, it had been at the center of trade between Europe and Asia. It grew wealthy as goods passed along trade routes known as the Silk Road. New sea routes made it possible for goods to bypass the Silk Road. With less trade passing through its territory, Ottoman power faded.

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