Ottoman Souvenir

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Ottoman Empire

Turkish empire which endured from c. 1300 to 1922. Centered on the region of modern Turkey, it spanned three continents at its greatest territorial extent, covering the area from Hungary in the north to Aden in the south and from Algeria in the west to the Iranian frontier in the east. Through its vassal state of the Khanate of the Crimea, Ottoman power also extended into the Ukraine and southern Russia. Its name derives from its founder, the Turkish Muslim warrior, Osman, who established the dynasty which ruled over the empire throughout its history.

Ottoman Expansion

The early Ottoman state was a small principality in north-west Anatolia, one of many such petty states which grew out of the wreckage of the former Seljuk state of Rum. Historians differ about the relative importance of its two main characteristics, which were the tribal traditions of the Turko-Mongol warriors who dominated the state, and the influence of Islam. The scholar Paul Wittek, who emphasized Islam, claimed that the rise of the Ottoman state was due to its attraction to ghazis, or fighters of the holy war (jihad), who joined the Ottomans because they were positioned to play the leading role in the struggle against the Christian Byzantine Empire to the west.

Incessant warfare and judicious alliances brought the Ottomans success. In about 1325 they captured Bursa, which became their capital, and by 1338 the Byzantines had been expelled from Anatolia. At the same time the Ottomans extended their territories southwards and eastwards at the expense of other Turkish princedoms, and in 1354 took Ankara in central Anatolia. In the same year the Ottomans occupied Gallipoli (Gelibolu) on the European side of the strait of the Dardanelle, which became the base for their subsequent drive into south-eastern Europe. In 1361 the Ottomans took Adrianople (Edirne) which became their new capital and by 1389, when Murad I defeated the Serbs at the Battle of Kosovo, the Ottomans held Thrace, Macedonia, and much of Bulgaria and Serbia.

The Ottoman defeat at the hands of the Central Asian conqueror Timur Lang (Tamerlane) in 1402 proved to be only a temporary setback to the Ottomans who quickly rebuilt, consolidated, and extended their power. In 1453 Sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople (Istanbul) and made it the third and last Ottoman capital city. The tide of conquest continued to flow throughout the 16th

century. Under Sultan Selim I (the Grim) first the Safavids of Iran were defeated (Chaldiran, 1514) and eastern Anatolia added to the empire and then in 1516-1517 the Mamelukes of Syria and Egypt were beaten and their territories also annexed. With the Mameluke possessions came the Muslim holy places in Arabia, and the Ottomans also inherited the Mameluke interest in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Selim's son and successor, Suleiman I the Magnificent (also called the Lawgiver), is commonly regarded as the greatest of the Ottoman rulers. During his reign Iraq was added to the empire (1534), Ottoman control was established in the eastern Mediterranean, and, via the annexation of Algiers and the activities of the Barbary Coast corsairs, Ottoman power was thrust into the western Mediterranean. Also Suleiman carried Ottoman arms far into Europe: Belgrade was captured in 1521 and the Hungarians defeated at the Battle of Mohacs in 1526. In 1529 Suleiman unsuccessfully laid a siege of Vienna.

Ottoman Institutions

The main business of the Ottoman state was war, as the foregoing recital of its conquests suggests, and its most important institution was its army. The early Ottoman forces had consisted of Turkish cavalry (sipahis) paid by grants of government revenues (usually land revenues) known as timars. The more land that was conquered the more income for Turkish Muslim ghazis. But the ghazi light horsemen were not sufficient for regular warfare, and from the mid-14th century the Ottomans began to recruit separate salaried troops from mercenaries, slaves, prisoners of war, and (from the mid-15th century) by a levy of Balkan Christian youths (the devshirme). From these new forces (the kapikulli) emerged the celebrated, highly disciplined Ottoman infantry known as the Janissaries, who were the main factor in the Ottoman military successes from the later 15th century onwards. The Ottomans also created specialist corps of artillery and engineers.

Ottoman administration was shaped by the needs of these forces. Provincial administration was essentially a system of military districts ruled by officials whose primary duty was to summon the timariots to campaigns. Much of the work of the central administration was devoted to raising the money and supplies necessary for the kapikulli forces. Roads and bridges were constructed to facilitate the movement of troops. In its heyday the administration was very efficient. The central administration consisted of three main parts: (1) the Sultan's extensive household; (2) the departments of government grouped under the control of the Grand Vizier who was the Sultan's deputy in all state matters; (3) the Muslim religious institution which consisted of Muslim functionaries concerned with education and law grouped under the overlordship of the Shaykh al-Islam. Most important of these were the qadis, who looked after some local administration and criminal law. Before the 17th century freeborn Muslims served principally as sipahis or in the religious institution; the rest of the state administration as well as the kapikulli forces was composed primarily

of Christian converts to Islam who were recruited in the manner of the kapikulli military forces. Their legal status was that of slaves of the sultan, although the word slave did not have the connotations of domestic or plantation slavery which it has in the West. To contemporary Europeans it seemed that the Ottoman state was unique in that it lacked an aristocracy and was run by men chosen by merit and wholly loyal to the sultan. The administration employed a language (the Ottoman Turkish language) which was Turkish in grammar and largely Arabic in vocabulary, and written in the Arabic script.

Most of the other functions which are performed by modern states were left to non-governmental institutions. The population of the Ottoman empire was mixed linguistically, culturally, and by religion. The majority of the population of the European provinces were Christians of the Orthodox Church many of whom accepted the Ottoman rule because it was less burdensome than Roman Catholic domination. In Thrace, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Albania there was extensive Muslim settlement, and in Bosnia there was mass conversion to Islam. Muslims also predominated in some towns. In the Asian provinces the reverse was true: the majority of the population was Muslim but there were many Christians in the towns; there were also Greek Christians in western Anatolia, Armenians in eastern Anatolia, and substantial groups of Christians in Syria and Egypt. The people were organized in two ways. For economic purposes they were grouped in tribes, villages, and guilds in towns. The greatest number were peasants, perhaps 15 per cent were town dwellers and a rather larger proportion nomadic or seminomadic. For social purposes (education, personal law, and most ordinary life) the population was organized into religious communities which later came to be called millets. Many Muslims belonged to mystical orders of Sufism. The government dealt with the heads of the various religious communities rather than with individuals, and otherwise left the communities to manage their own affairs. The heads of the religious communities therefore came to constitute a class of middlemen between government and people. Big landowners, tribal chiefs, and others acted in a similar way, and came to be known as notables (a yan). During its first three centuries the Ottoman empire was prosperous, and this prosperity was reflected in the development of a brilliant culture: Turkish music, literature (especially history, geography, and poetry), painting, and, above all, architecture, perhaps the best represented in the Suleimaniye Mosque in Istanbul, built by Suleiman s great architect, Sinan Pasha.

Ottoman Decline

During most of the 17th century the Ottoman empire remained territorially stable but from the last years of the century, beginning with the Ottoman repulse at the second siege of Vienna (1683), the empire suffered a succession of military defeats, first at the hands of Austria and subsequently of Russia in the Russo-Turkish Wars. By the

time of the treaty of Jassy (1792), the Ottomans had lost their territory north of the Danube, and abandoned the Crimea and all the territory east of Dniester to Russia. Within their other European territories, and in Asia and Africa, were many more or less autonomous rulers over whom the central government had little control.

There were two responses to this decline by the Ottomans. One group held that the root of the problem was that the Ottoman institutions, beginning with the army, had been allowed to decline from the state of excellence which had prevailed in the 15th century and the answer was to return to the old situation. Another group, powerfully represented in the civil bureaucracy, believed that the problem was that the European states had made military advances which it was necessary for the Ottomans to match. During the 19th century this second group triumphed and the result was the Ottoman reform movement which began during the reign of Mahmud II. It was discovered, however, that military reform required much more farreaching changes in government and ultimately in society at large.

Ottoman Reform

Mahmud II sought to abolish the old army and replace it with a new European-style force. In 1826 he destroyed the Janissaries; the sipahi army was allowed to decay and the timars were all resumed by the state by 1831. In their place he raised a paid, disciplined, conscript force which became the main instrument of political centralization during the last century of the Ottoman empire and also the main inspiration for the modernization of other Ottoman institutions. A modern army was expensive; taxes were needed to pay for it and a larger, more efficient bureaucracy was required to collect the taxes. Furthermore, a modern educational system was needed to supply the officers for the army and the officials for the state. There were also important reforms in law and significant development of communications (telegraph and railways). All these reforms cost money, and more resources had to be transferred from non-governmental institutions to the state. Opposition was beaten down by the new army. Still there was not enough money and from the middle of the 19th century the Ottomans began to borrow heavily from abroad. Eventually (1875) the empire could not pay the interest on its debts and had to accept some degree of European financial control (1881).

Centralization was thus the main theme of the Tanzimat, the name given to the reform movement between 1839 and 1878. There was also a second, contradictory theme enshrined in two famous edicts (the Noble Edict of the Rose Chamber in 1839 and the Imperial edict of 1856). This was the concept of liberalization, giving citizens greater rights and freedoms, and in particular giving to non-Muslims the same rights and duties as Muslims. To a considerable extent this second theme was imposed on the Ottomans by pressure from the great

European powers exerted on behalf on Ottoman Christians as part of the so-called Eastern Question.

The tensions caused by the Tanzimat reforms provoked criticism both from those who disliked change, seeing it as un-Islamic, and from those who thought that the reforms did not go far enough and should be accompanied by greater popular participation in government. In the 1860s a group of young men known as the Young Ottomans called for a variety of reforms, including a constitution. In 1876, reforming ministers introduced a constitution, although this was suspended in 1878. There followed a number of revolutionary conspiracies by groups known generally as the Young Turks, culminating in a military revolt in 1908 which overthrew the despotic rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II and brought about the reintroduction of the constitution. The military conspirators were linked to an opposition group called the Committee of Union and Progress which in 1913 took control of the empire and began to introduce new, more radical reforms.

Ottoman Collapse

During the last century of its existence the question before the Ottoman empire was whether by coercion and conciliation it could hold itself together until the fruits of modernization would make its non-Muslim citizens content to remain within the empire. In its European provinces it failed because the Christians would not be conciliated and the European powers would not allow the Ottomans to coerce them. Gradually the provinces became autonomous: Greece (1829), Serbia (1830), and the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (modern Romania) which were unified in 1859. Greece became independent in 1832, Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro in 1878 as well as part of Bulgaria. By 1885 the Ottoman territories in Europe were reduced to Macedonia, Albania, and Thrace, and all of these except eastern Thrace were lost as a result of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. The Ottomans also lost control of North Africa: Algiers was taken by France in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881. Britain occupied Egypt in 1882 and Italy annexed Libya in 1912. But in the Asian provinces the Ottomans held on and even extended their power in Arabia. Although there was some evidence of nationalist opposition in the Arab provinces, it was confined to a small minority, and in 1914 there seemed no reason why Ottoman power might not endure in Asia.

The collapse and extinction of the Ottoman empire was a consequence of World War I. The government made the mistake of entering the war on the side of the Central Powers, and the defeat of Germany meant the end for the Ottomans. The Ottomans fought well during the first two years of the war although they suffered defeats at the hands of Russia in eastern Asia Minor. But in 1917-1918 when new British offensives began in Iraq and Syria, the Ottoman forces began to decline and by the time of the Armistice of Mudros (October 1918) the Ottomans had lost everything but Anatolia. The Ottomans were forced to sign the Treaty of S&#65533;vres (1920), by which they lost not only the

Arab provinces but suffered a partition of Anatolia. In opposition to Allied plans, and in particular to the invasion of Smyrna by Greece in May 1919, a nationalist movement had grown up under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atat�rk, and this movement carried on armed resistance until in 1922 the Greeks were defeated and driven out of Anatolia and eastern Thrace. The sultan had been compromised by his acquiescence in Allied policies, and on November 1, 1922 the Ottoman dynasty was abolished and the empire came to an end. A year later there stood in its place the Republic of Turkey.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the fall of the Ottoman empire no one had a good word to say for it. The Balkan states remembered it as a brutal oppressor, European liberals had long denounced it as the government of an alien horde, Arab nationalists claimed it had frustrated Arab potential for centuries, and Turkish nationalists saw it as a dangerous memory which threatened the forward movement of the new republic. Its ideologies of Islam and Ottomanism were discredited. Yet a political system which endured for 600 years, longer than the empire of Rome in the West or the British Empire, and maintained itself over so large an area, must have had some merits. To Muslims it was a matter of pride and comfort: pride in its early victories, and comfort that it stood as a defence against the non-Muslim world. To non-Muslims it was until the 19th century better than any obvious alternative. To men of ability it represented an arena through which they could and did move with ease in search of a better life. And it enabled a great variety of peoples (in 1914 still 25 million) of different languages, cultures, and religions to live together in some degree of harmony. It was an empire with a talent for war and government and also had grasped one great imperial secret: empires depend on minimal government for their survival; once they begin to interfere too much with the lives of their citizens, people begin to think they could run their own affairs better. The reform movement which was intended to ensure the survival of the empire may have been a main cause of its destruction. But the new states which succeeded the empire were to find that the ideologies of nationalism, with which they had opposed Ottomanism were difficult instruments with which to rule multinational states.

The Ottoman legacy was important during the following years. It was men educated in the Ottoman system and brought up on the ideas of the reform movement who ran the affairs of the Turkish republic and were the political leaders in the Arab states. The movements of population and the conversions which had taken place under the empire left considerable problems for the successor states, notably with regard to the Muslims living in Balkan states. But the empire has been little studied or understood principally because its language was abandoned. Ottoman Turkish, for those who read it, remains a key, like Latin and Ancient Greek, to the study not only of an empire but of a distinctive civilization.

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