

The Ottoman Empire  
AP World History  
Kienast

The Ottoman Empire was the one of the largest and longest lasting Empires in history. It was an empire inspired and sustained by Islam, and Islamic institutions. It replaced the Byzantine Empire as the major power in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Ottoman Empire reached its height under Suleiman the Magnificent (reigned 1520-66), when it expanded to cover the Balkans and Hungary, and reached the gates of Vienna. The Empire began to decline after being defeated at the Battle of Lepanto (1571) and losing almost its entire navy. It declined further during the next centuries, and was effectively finished off by the First World War and the Balkan Wars. One legacy of the Islamic Ottoman Empire is the robust secularism of modern Turkey.

There were many reasons why the Ottoman Empire was so successful over such a long period. The empire was highly centralized with power that was always transferred to a single person, and not split between rival princes. Promotion to positions of power largely depended on merit. The empire was united by Islamic ideology, but took ideas from other cultures as well. The Ottoman Empire had a strong military that was backed by gunpowder. It was one of three “gunpowder empires” of the day: the Ottoman, Safavid (in modern Iran) and Mughal in India. Istanbul became not only a political and military capital, but because of its position at the junction of Europe, Africa, and Asia, one of the great trade centers of the world. The Ottomans traded with the Venetians and ended up controlling much of the Eastern Mediterranean trade network as a result.

The rule of Ottoman leaders was absolute, much like European leaders of the same period. All the “gunpowder empires” favored absolute rule as a way to create political stability among diverse populations. Ottoman leaders built monumental architecture, emphasized divine right, and patronized artists as a way to glorify their rule and the accomplishments of the empire. Patronage of the arts and commissioning glorified paintings of leaders was a common tactic that Ottoman leaders learned from their Venetian trading partners. Many Italian Renaissance leaders and elites glorified themselves through paintings. Typical Ottoman paintings were different than Italian art, focusing more on miniature type paintings favored by the nearby Safavid Empire in modern day Iran. These miniature paintings were smaller and less detailed than Italian Renaissance art. Both the Savafids and the Ottomans may have learned to use miniature paintings from the Mongols who favored that particular artistic style when ruling the Persian Empire.

So, how was the Ottoman Empire different than the other Asian empires of the day? Most notably, while the empire was distinctly Islamic, the government did not try to force Islam on its citizens. The government was a secular one (separated religion and state) and did not promote Islam. The empire was ethnically and religiously diverse and its leaders feared both rebellion and disruption of trade if religion was forced.

One controversial aspect of the empire that also differentiated it from other Asian empires was the devshirme system. Non-Muslims in parts of the empire had to hand over some of their

children as a tax under the devshirme ('gathering') system introduced in the 14th century. Conquered Christian communities, especially in the Balkans, had to surrender twenty percent of their male children to the state. To the horror of their parents, and Western commentators, these children were converted to Islam and served as slaves. Although the forced removal from their families and conversion was certainly traumatic and out of line with modern ideas of human rights, the devshirme system was a rather privileged form of slavery for some (although others were undoubtedly ill-used). Some of the children were trained for government service, where they were able to reach very high ranks. Many of the others served in the elite military corps of the Ottoman Empire, called the Janissaries, which was almost exclusively made up of forced converts from Christianity. This system created a well-educated meritocracy in the Ottoman Empire.

The power of the empire was waning by 1683 when the second and last attempt was made to conquer Vienna. It failed. Without the conquest of Europe and the acquisition of significant new wealth the empire lost momentum and went into a slow decline. The empire was also weakened by the age of exploration. Cheap American silver led to price increases within the empire as silver was much more abundant. The development of trade routes to easier sources of raw materials hurt as well. The Janissaries also began to rebel in the 1600's, influenced by the rights afforded to European gentry as part of the Enlightenment, a period of calls for freedom of thought and more rights that began to impact Europe. Eventually the Christian and Arab parts of the Empire began to rebel.

The empire officially ended on the 1st November 1922, when the Ottoman sultanate was abolished and Turkey was declared a republic. The Ottoman caliphate continued as an institution, with greatly reduced authority, until it too was abolished on the 3rd March 1924.