

# TURKIC GOVERNMENT

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## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

### The Ottoman Empire

**Overview** The Ottoman empire took shape in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, as Ottoman Turks established leadership and expanded a network of conquests in the Balkans and present-day Turkey, ultimately, in 1453, seizing Constantinople and effectively destroying the Byzantine Empire. Conquests continued for many decades, expanding the empire to Egypt and North Africa, the Mediterranean coast, and the entire Balkan region. Safavid conquests pressed into Iran in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, creating another major Middle Eastern empire and a tense border with the Ottomans that gave rise to recurrent warfare. The Ottoman empire survived far longer than the Safavids, who faded by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century; Ottoman rule, ultimately outlasting the duration of the Roman empire, extended into the 20<sup>th</sup> century though amid increasing constraints.

**Military recruitment** The Ottoman empire came to depend heavily on military forces raised from Christian territories. The Ottomans raised a significant military force, the Janissaries, by enslaving and converting young men from the Balkans – some of whom also rose to positions of considerable political power. Both empires depended considerably on military expansion. For the Safavids this came to a rather abrupt halt after a major defeat by Ottoman forces. Ottoman expansion continued into the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, when two efforts to capture Vienna failed – leading to a prolonged period when Austrian and particularly Russian forces began to cut into Ottoman territory. Ottomans found it difficult to adjust to the end of military growth.

**Palace culture** Both empires generated an elaborate palace culture, with a large harem of wives and concubines, who often contributed to an atmosphere of considerable intrigue. Both empires sponsored considerable artistic and cultural activity. Under the Ottomans, though Arabic and Persian were widely used, Turkish gradually gained ground.

**Religion** For their part the Ottomans were Sunnis, and the conflict with the Safavids was in part a religious dispute. Ottoman sultans claimed the title of Caliph. Here too, religious minorities were tolerated, including an important Orthodox Christian group, but the Shia minority was persecuted. Religious goals, around the distinct versions of Islam, loomed large for both empires.

**Ottoman administration** The Ottoman state defined its purposes as the expansion of Islam through conquest, internal security, and application of Islamic law (however, minority communities administered their own courts and laws). The Sultan was in charge of the state, and the office remained in a single dynasty, the House of Osman, throughout the empire's existence – an unusual dynastic span, with new sultans chosen from among the previous sultan's sons. Palace schools trained future administrators. A variety of offices served under the Sultan, with officials selected and supervised by the Grand Vizier, the chief officer with considerable powers independent of the Sultan. Provincial governors had great authority, and occasionally rebelled against central control. Local authority was considerable, even in law, and the empire frequently accommodated special local administrative traditions. The Ottomans paid more attention to the organization of the treasury and bureaucratic record-keeping than other Islamic regimes, and effectiveness in this category contributed greatly to the overall success of the empire. The government played a direct role in organizing settlers to underpopulated territories, expanding cultivation,

and it also operated extensive public works. It did not, however, widely encourage large-scale capitalism, seeing the economy in terms of the financial and political interests of the state.

**Limitations: a debate** Some historians argue that despite great success, particularly for the Ottomans, the Middle Eastern Islamic empires must be faulted for failing to take adequate account of the growing dynamism of the neighboring European powers. Their empires traded actively with Europeans, giving their merchants special legal privileges in an atmosphere of free trade (a contrast with East Asian policy at the same time). But little account was taken of innovations in commercial practice or the rise of science. The Ottoman regime did not even allow a printing press to be set up in the empire for fear of its impact on Islamic orthodoxy (the first press was in fact for Christians). Sultans did import some European doctors, which was ironic since their knowledge was not noticeably superior to that of local physicians, but otherwise there was no significant cultural interchange. Whether this was a crucial failure, given the success of the regime, can be debated, but it would obviously weaken the empire's ability to respond to industrial Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Study questions

1. What were the religious policies of the Ottomans? How did the empire help politicize the dispute between the Shia and Sunni versions of Islam?
2. What were the major functions of the state besides religion?
3. Should the empire be faulted for their failure to import more Western ideas and practices (as Russia was doing in this period)?

### Further reading

Martin Sicker, *The Islamic World in Decline: from the Treaty of Karlowitz to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire* (Greenwood, 2001)

Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: the structure of power* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

## 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### Late Ottoman Empire

**Overview** Efforts by the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century deserve close comparison with patterns in Russia. Pressed by Russia as well as the West, the Ottomans actually began a long series of reform moves earlier than Russia did. And, as in Russia, some of the moves were significant. But the Ottomans were on the whole less successful in using the government to promote major change; most obviously, industrialization proved elusive. Like Russia, however, the Ottoman effort also came to a halt in favor of renewed autocracy, a move that began to fail even before the empire became involved in World War I. Here are two important cases, in sum, where government proved incapable of introducing the changes necessary to preserve the regime.

**New challenges** The first three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought a number of new crises, besides the increasingly unfavorable military balance with Russia. Serbian nationalists (inspired by French revolutionary principles) rebelled in 1804, and ultimately the Ottomans had to acknowledge an independent state. Greece rose up in 1820, and again won out with some support from the European powers. Egypt (already briefly conquered by the French in 1798) became increasingly independent, while the Wahabi Muslim kingdom (precursor of Saudi Arabia) seized territory to the south. The sultan still assumed his traditional powers, recurrently issuing edicts reminding his subjects of his compassion as a servant of God. But the traditional system was beginning to collapse amid the various pressures of new nationalism and religious diversity. In European circles, the fragile empire was increasingly referred to as the "sick man" of Europe.

**Reforms** The first moves, understandably, focused on modernizing the military. The old Janissary system of recruitment was abolished, in 1826, more modern forms of conscription introduced, while European advisors were brought in to help with training and restructuring. Then in 1839 the Tanzimat reform era

began in earnest. The government reorganized the banking system. Support for traditional guilds gave way to promotion of new kinds of factories. New types of public works included building a telegraph network, and a new Ministry of Post was set up in 1840. The government established several new schools, including an unprecedented training program for female teachers. And an Academy of Sciences was set up, in 1861. On the other hand, only .2% of public funds were being devoted to education in 1860, which suggested no real functional redefinition had occurred. A great deal of effort went into the law code and judicial system. Many laws and punishments were revised, along more Western norms. While religious matters were still referred to traditional courts, a new secular network was set up alongside this, open to subjects of any religion. The goal was to reduce religious distinctions and establish a common citizenry. Finally a new constitution was issued in the 1870s, creating a representative parliament for the first time. (No major social reforms were attempted, in contrast to Russia; for example, the situation of women was left essentially unchanged. It is also important to note that the Ottomans, unlike the Russians, were saddled with massive debts, and frequently subject to manipulation by Western banks.)

**Retreat** Reform efforts came to a screeching halt in 1878, though a few changes (particularly in law) persisted and would contribute to the much more ambitious reforms introduced in Turkey after 1923. As in Russia a few years later, conservative resistance, in this case including a sense by some Muslims that the state was failing its religious duties, plus the difficulty of abandoning autocratic power, led to a decisive end of the reform era in 1878. The new parliament stopped meeting after two years. The regime turned to a policy of repression, highlights by recurrent and brutal attacks on ethnic minorities such as Bulgarians and Armenians. As the situation deteriorated – with further Balkan territory lost, and a major defeat by Russia – a group of Turkish nationalists (Young Turks), backed by elements in the military took charge in 1908. The sultan was reduced to a figurehead in what was essentially a constitutional monarchy, but the new regime itself became entangled in additional military conflicts and ultimately decided to take the gamble of entering World War I on the side of Germany. In the wake of further military defeat the empire formally came to an end in 1923, and the Middle East was further fragmented. Here was a major case in which, among other things, the forces of nationalism undermined one of the classic multinational empires.

### Study questions

1. What were the major reforms? How do they compare to Russia's reform efforts?
2. Why did the reform era end?
3. What was the role of nationalisms in undoing the Ottoman state?

### Further reading

Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: the story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923* (Basic Books, 2005)

Evgeny Finkel and Scott Gehlbach, *Reform and Rebellion in Weak States* (Cambridge University Press, 2020)

James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: a history* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford University Press, 2008)

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### Turkish State

**Important markers** Western powers had planned to carve up Turkey after World War I along with the rest of the defunct Ottoman Empire, but this was thwarted by a powerful Turkish military movement under Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk). Turkish majority rule was established, amid some bitter strife with Greek and other minorities and considerable forced population relocation. Ataturk then proceeded to set up a strong authoritarian government bent on "revolution from above". Under government leadership, a secular school system expanded rapidly; the Turkish language was shifted to a Latin alphabet; decrees altered styles of dress, with men required to wear Western-style hats; and the state sponsored a number of new factories while setting tariffs to protect national industry. Ataturk set up a parliament and introduced women's suffrage, in 1927, but a single People's Party effectively excluded any opposition. Islamic influence was curtailed, though not suppressed. Over time, Turkey would evolve toward greater political

openness, with competitive elections in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century alternating with periods of secular military rule; but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Islamic influence began to increase and a new leader introduced more authoritarian measures – one of several examples of this trend in the world at large.

### **Study questions**

How did Ataturk's Turkey represent a revolution from above?

### **Further reading**

James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: a history* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., Oxford University Press, 2014)

Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: revolution, nationalism, colonialism and the Arab middle class* (Princeton University Press, 2007)

Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (Routledge, 1993)