



The Ottoman Empire: A Historical Overview

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Abstract

The Ottoman Empire, one of the most enduring and influential entities in world history, spanned over six centuries, leaving an indelible mark across three continents. Founded in 1299 by Osman I, it swiftly evolved into a formidable power defined by military brilliance, innovative governance, and a fusion of diverse cultures. This article examines the rise, golden era, and eventual decline of the Ottoman Empire, highlighting its critical role in shaping global history. During its Golden Age, particularly under the leadership of Mehmed II and Suleiman the Magnificent, the empire achieved remarkable feats in architecture, the arts, governance, and military conquests. Positioned as a nexus between East and West, the Ottomans played a crucial role in fostering intercultural exchanges, leaving a lasting influence on various regions' traditions and institutions. The article delves into the empire's challenges in its later centuries, including internal divisions, economic difficulties, and the growing dominance of European powers. Reformative movements, such as the Tanzimat period, sought to modernize the empire, yet these efforts revealed its deep-rooted structural weaknesses. The Ottoman Empire's involvement in World War I and the subsequent Treaty of Sèvres signalled its dissolution, paving the way for the formation of modern Turkey under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whose secular reforms marked a sharp departure from Ottoman customs. The legacy of the Ottoman Empire endures in its architectural achievements, its administrative frameworks, and its pivotal role in the preservation and dissemination of knowledge. The empire's inclusive governance, which embraced a wide range of ethnic and religious communities, stands as a historical example of pluralism and tolerance. This study underscores the Ottoman Empire's resilience, adaptability, and lasting impact, positioning it as a key chapter in world history. By exploring both its triumphs and trials, this article offers valuable insights into the intricacies of empire-building and the factors that contributed to the longevity and eventual downfall of such a vast, multi-ethnic entity.

Keywords:- Ottomanism, European powers, World War I, Golden Age, Governance, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Architecture

Introduction

The Ottoman Empire, founded in the late 13th century, evolved into one of history's most powerful and lasting empires, enduring until 1922. Its formidable strength and far-reaching influence established it as a dominant force spanning vast territories across Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Renowned for its military prowess, the empire built a robust and extensive network that enabled it to govern a diverse range of regions for centuries. More than its military successes, the empire's cultural diversity became one of its hallmark features, blending a variety of traditions, languages, and religions within its borders. The Ottomans were also celebrated for their contributions to the arts, architecture, and urban development, leaving

behind iconic structures such as mosques, palaces, and bridges, which remain enduring symbols of their artistic and engineering ingenuity (Kia 2008; Mardin 2018). Under the leadership of a sultan, who held both political and religious authority, the empire developed a unique governance system that maintained stability despite a turbulent geopolitical environment. However, despite its remarkable accomplishments, the empire was often perceived as a formidable threat by Western powers due to its extensive reach and considerable influence (Mardin 2018; Yildiz 2023).

The Ottoman Empire exhibited extraordinary resilience and adaptability, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This era was defined by a complex interaction between efforts at administrative modernization and the rise of nationalistic movements seeking independence. Faced with both internal turmoil and external pressures, the empire enacted a series of important reforms to address the shifting demands of a rapidly changing world. A significant turning point came in 1876 with the introduction of a diverse parliamentary system, signaling a move toward more inclusive governance (Keyder 2018). At the same time, the empire witnessed a cultural revival, particularly through its multilingual press, which flourished after the 1908 constitutional reforms. This dynamic media environment sparked vibrant political discourse, providing a platform for a wide range of voices. However, these freedoms were not absolute, as the press faced restrictions during wartime, reflecting the growing tensions of the period (Aksakal et al. 2023).

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century marked the end of its direct rule; however, its profound legacy continues to echo through the cultural and political landscapes of modern Turkey and many regions across Europe, Asia, and Africa. Over its centuries of dominance, the empire significantly influenced the development of administrative structures, legal systems, and cultural practices in these areas, leaving an enduring mark. This influence is especially noticeable in the Balkans and the Arab world, where the historical connections to the Ottoman period continue to shape societal and political frameworks, highlighting the lasting relevance of its contributions (Kia 2008).

Foundation and Early Expansion (1299–1453)

The founding and early growth of the Ottoman Empire, established in 1299, marked a critical shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Near East and Europe. Its rise paralleled the decline of the Byzantine Empire, presenting an opportune moment for its founder, Osman I, to consolidate his power and secure a strong presence in Anatolia. Osman's vision was continued by his successors, especially Orhan, who reached a significant milestone by crossing into Europe in 1354. This expansion signaled the start of a series of conquests that would shape the empire's future, extending its reach into the Balkans and beyond (Foss 2022; Gibbons 2004). The empire's growth was not just a result of military conquest; it was closely linked to the establishment of strong social institutions grounded in Islamic values. Among the most important of these were waqfs, or charitable foundations, which played a vital role in providing social welfare and fostering community cohesion. These institutions supported education, healthcare, and infrastructure, ensuring that the empire's expansion was accompanied by the integration and well-being of its diverse populations. The Ottomans' focus on community-building and social responsibility became a defining feature of their governance, contributing to the empire's stability and widespread appeal in newly conquered territories (Güpgüpoğlu 2018).

By the late 15th century, under the reign of Mehmed II, the Ottomans recognized the critical importance of naval power for ensuring the empire's long-term dominance. Mehmed II, renowned as "the Conqueror" for his capture of Constantinople in 1453, shifted his focus to the Mediterranean. The empire's growing naval strength allowed it to secure control over crucial maritime routes, which facilitated both trade and military operations. This strategic emphasis on naval supremacy complemented the Ottomans' territorial gains on land, enabling them to extend their reach into North Africa and challenge European naval powers like Venice (Fleet 2012).

The Ottoman Empire's approach to governance and expansion was multifaceted, blending military conquest, strategic diplomacy, and the creation of institutions that promoted unity among its varied populations. This comprehensive strategy not only allowed the Ottomans to maintain control over vast territories but also ensured their continued influence as a global power. By integrating newly acquired regions through infrastructure improvements, legal reforms, and cultural exchanges, the empire fortified its position as a dominant force in both the East and West. As a result, the early Ottoman Empire became a paradigm of resilience and adaptability. Its ability to combine military strength with governance strategies that honored local traditions and addressed diverse needs enabled it to prosper in a complex, ever-evolving world. The foundations established during its early years set the stage for an empire that would shape the history and political landscapes of three continents, leaving a legacy that remains the subject of ongoing study and admiration (Doğa 2022).

The Golden Age (1453–1566)

The Golden Age of the Ottoman Empire, lasting from 1453 to 1566, is regarded as a period of remarkable cultural, artistic, and intellectual growth. This era commenced with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by

Sultan Mehmed II, an event that marked a pivotal moment in world history. Renamed Istanbul, the city transformed into a dynamic center of art, learning, and trade, where Byzantine heritage was seamlessly intertwined with Islamic cultural influences. Under Mehmed's patronage, Istanbul experienced a renaissance in artistic practices, particularly in architecture, painting, and textiles, with silk weaving emerging as a notable craft. The empire's production of exquisite silk fabrics, meticulously regulated by state-imposed quality standards, not only boosted its reputation but also made silk one of its principal exports, further enhancing its economic and cultural prominence (ÖZMEN 2023).

The Ottoman Golden Age extended its influence far beyond the realms of art, as it was deeply entrenched in intellectual endeavors. Under the reign of Mehmed II, a meticulously organized bureaucratic framework was put into place—this not only enhanced the effectiveness of governance but also nurtured a flourishing of scholarly pursuits. Such a system birthed an erudite class, comprised of theologians, historians, and scientists, whose contributions became cornerstone elements of the empire's intellectual fabric. The creation of libraries, madrasas, and academies provided vital hubs of enlightenment, drawing thinkers from every corner of the Islamic world and even further afield (Perez 2023).

One of the most striking features of this epoch was the empire's pivotal role in facilitating the transfer of knowledge from the Islamic Golden Age to the heart of Europe. Ottoman scholars not only preserved but also enriched the intellectual achievements of earlier Islamic thinkers across diverse domains, including astronomy, medicine, and mathematics. Through an intricate web of trade, diplomacy, and cultural interchange, the Ottomans acted as a conduit, ushering this wealth of knowledge into the vibrant intellectual currents of Renaissance Europe. This contribution effectively challenged the conventional, often Eurocentric, historical perspectives that had long neglected the profound impact of Islamic civilizations on global progress. Far from merely safeguarding the intellectual legacy of the Islamic world, the Ottomans transformed and reimaged it, thus shaping future technological strides and scientific paradigms (Hans 2023).

The architectural triumphs of this era stand as further testament to its profound historical significance. Under the stewardship of genius architects such as Mimar Sinan, the Ottomans brought to life monumental masterpieces, including the awe-inspiring Süleymaniye Mosque and the grand Selimiye Mosque. These architectural marvels seamlessly fused Islamic traditions with Byzantine influences, creating structures that transcended mere religious function to become enduring symbols of the empire's cultural amalgamation and sovereign might. Additionally, public works like bridges, aqueducts, and marketplaces embodied a commitment not only to infrastructural development but also to the collective welfare of the empire's populace, thereby solidifying the enduring legacy of this golden era.

The epoch underscored the empire's remarkable achievements in cultivating intercultural dialogues. Positioned at the confluence of Europe and Asia, the Ottoman Empire emerged as a vital nexus for a multitude of cultures, faiths, and philosophies. Its approach to fostering religious plurality, embracing Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, facilitated a harmonious coexistence that invigorated the empire's social, cultural, and economic spheres. This mosaic of beliefs and traditions imbued Ottoman society with a dynamic spirit, transforming it into a fertile ground for artistic ingenuity and intellectual expansion. The zenith of the Ottoman Empire stood as a testament to a seamless fusion of artistic brilliance, administrative reforms, and cross-cultural exchange. From the thriving craft of silk weaving to the grandeur of its architectural feats, alongside the flourishing of intellectual thought, this era etched an indelible mark on the world's historical canvas. Through the amalgamation of disparate influences and its exceptional governance, the Ottomans not only moulded the contours of their empire but also made a lasting contribution to the global historical narrative, affirming their stature as a formidable world power during a pivotal era (Yildiz 2023; Harahap et al. 2022).

Challenges and Reforms (1566–1800)

Between 1566 and 1800, the Ottoman Empire grappled with an array of formidable obstacles and transformative reforms, as both internal discord and external forces impelled its rulers to confront the empire's gradual decay. This period signified the transition from the empire's zenith to a time marked by stagnation, paving the way for its eventual metamorphosis. Sultan Mehmed II initiated pivotal reforms, particularly in legal frameworks and territorial management, with the aim of consolidating centralized power and addressing administrative shortcomings. Yet, these ambitious efforts met with fierce opposition from entrenched aristocracy and, following his death, were largely dismantled, underscoring the complexities of effectuating enduring systemic changes within an empire as vast and diverse as the Ottomans (Lee 2022).

The empire's military prowess gradually eroded, becoming starkly apparent as its once-mighty forces endured humiliating setbacks at the hands of European adversaries. The empire's territorial losses and economic stagnation highlighted a dire necessity for transformation. In response, successive rulers like Sultan Selim III and Sultan Mahmud II grasped the critical urgency for sweeping reforms, endeavouring to revitalize the empire

through military and educational innovation. Sultan Selim III, for example, spearheaded the Nizam-ı Cedid (New Order) reforms, which included a thorough overhaul of the military, reorienting it in line with European models and establishing novel training programs for soldiers. These initiatives were designed to bridge the growing technological and tactical gap between the empire's forces and those of Europe. Likewise, Mahmud II pursued far-reaching reforms in the early 1800s, dismantling the once-venerated Janissary corps and transforming the military to better conform to the evolving military standards of Europe (Ürün and Zahal 2024; Acer 2009).

During this transformative era, education became a central pillar of the reform agenda. Acknowledging the pivotal role of knowledge in ensuring the empire's survival and relevance, the ruling elite expanded educational policies to prioritize the advancement of scientific learning and the foundation of new institutions of higher learning. This period also saw the rise of Ottomanism, a philosophical movement designed to forge a sense of unity across the empire's myriad ethnic and religious groups by promoting a collective identity rooted in loyalty to the state. Under the banner of Ottomanism, educational reforms aimed to establish a shared curriculum for all citizens, irrespective of their faith or ethnicity, and extended certain privileges to non-Muslim communities. While these reforms sought to cultivate a spirit of unity, they inadvertently ignited nationalist aspirations among the empire's minority groups, who began to demand greater self-determination and independence (Nevhiz and Tarih 2010).

Economically, the empire grappled with intensifying difficulties, largely driven by the evolving patterns of global commerce and the ascendance of European colonial powers. The opening of new maritime trade routes, bypassing Ottoman-controlled regions, drastically diminished the empire's income from its once-thriving trade networks. This financial decline was exacerbated by an increasing dependence on European imports and mounting national debt, both of which further undermined the empire's economic stability. Despite various reform initiatives, including efforts to overhaul the tax system and stimulate local production, these measures failed to halt the ongoing economic deterioration (Pamuk 2009).

Despite the Ottoman Empire's reformist efforts, it found itself increasingly unable to preserve both unity and sovereignty amid a growing array of internal discord and external pressures. The rising dominance of European powers frequently led to interference in the empire's internal affairs, further eroding its authority. Treaties and diplomatic agreements with European nations steadily chipped away at Ottoman control over vital territories, signalling the shifting tides of power. While the reforms of this period laid the foundation for future modernization, they fell short of reversing the empire's downward trajectory. The interplay of resistance from conservative factions, insufficient resources, and the burgeoning nationalist movements among minority groups severely restricted the impact of these reforms (Acer 2009). The years spanning from 1566 to 1800 marked an era of profound transformation and adversity for the Ottoman Empire. The attempts to streamline administrative functions, modernize the military, and revamp the education system highlighted the rulers' growing awareness of the empire's precarious position. However, the complexities inherent in governing a vast and diverse empire, combined with the mounting external challenges posed by an ascendant Europe, ultimately curtailed the success of these efforts. This period laid the groundwork for continued struggles in the 19th century as the Ottoman Empire navigated a rapidly evolving, competitive, and interconnected global landscape.

Decline and Dissolution (1800–1922)

The decline and eventual dissolution of the Ottoman Empire between 1800 and 1922 was a complex and multifaceted process, driven by a combination of internal strife and external pressures. This era witnessed the gradual disintegration of one of the world's most enduring empires, transitioning from a vast, multi-ethnic entity to the modern nation-state of Turkey. The challenges the empire faced during this time reflect the intricacies of governing a sprawling and diverse realm amid the rise of nationalism, colonial expansion, and rapid military innovation. These shifting forces reshaped not only the geopolitical landscape but also the very social fabric of the empire, marking the end of an era and the beginning of a new chapter in history.

Throughout the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire suffered substantial territorial losses that severely eroded its power and prestige. Once a dominant force, the empire, often dubbed the "Sick Man of Europe," found itself increasingly vulnerable to European powers eager to capitalize on its weakening hold over its lands. The most significant losses occurred in the Balkans, a region of great strategic and economic value. The rise of nationalist movements, fuelled by internal dissatisfaction and external influences, posed a direct threat to Ottoman sovereignty. The Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 proved particularly devastating, as the empire was stripped of almost all its European territories, retaining only Eastern Thrace. This dramatic shrinkage of its territorial holdings not only undermined the Ottoman economy but also destabilized its political system, revealing the empire's failure to meet the growing aspirations of its diverse peoples.

Internally, the Ottoman Empire confronted growing pressure to modernize both its administrative and military structures in order to remain competitive with the rising European powers. The Tanzimat reforms,

introduced in the 1830s, represented a significant effort to centralize governance, streamline taxation, and restructure the military. Although these reforms achieved some degree of progress, they were unable to resolve the deep-seated ethnic and religious tensions that plagued the empire. Moreover, the reforms encountered fierce opposition from conservative factions, who saw them as a challenge to traditional Islamic values. This ongoing struggle between modernization and adherence to tradition became a defining feature of the empire's gradual decline (Giunchi and Melis 2024).

A defining moment in the Ottoman Empire's decline came with the Young Turks' Revolution of 1908. Led by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), this movement aimed to restore the 1876 constitution and implement a series of political and social reforms. While the revolution initially promised a fresh era of modernization and constitutional governance, it simultaneously exposed profound divisions within the empire. Nationalist aspirations from various ethnic groups clashed with the CUP's vision of a unified, Turkic identity, intensifying internal tensions. The struggle to balance the preservation of the empire's Islamic traditions with the demands for secular modernization further complicated governance, deepening the challenges the empire faced during this turbulent period (Permana and Munandar 2024).

The Ottoman Empire's involvement in World War I marked the beginning of its final downfall. Aligning itself with the Central Powers, including Germany and Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman leadership sought to reclaim lost territories and reassert its fading influence. However, the war proved catastrophic for the empire. The costly campaigns, such as the Gallipoli Campaign and the battles on the Mesopotamian front, drained the empire's resources and manpower. Ultimately, the empire's defeat led to the signing of the Mudros Armistice in 1918, which effectively ended its participation in the war and set the stage for its dissolution. The subsequent Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 aimed to partition the remains of the Ottoman Empire among the Allied powers, stripping it of its sovereignty and leaving it reduced to little more than a shadow of its former grandeur (Ülker 2023; Giunchi and Melis 2024).

The period following World War I saw the rise of nationalist movements that rejected the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres and sought to establish a new political order. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk emerged as the leader of the Turkish nationalist movement, orchestrating a successful War of Independence against occupying Allied forces. This struggle culminated in the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, officially ending the Ottoman Empire's six-century rule. Atatürk's vision for the new Turkish state emphasized secularism, modernization, and a decisive break from the Ottoman past. His reforms, which included adopting a secular legal code, modernizing education, and promoting industrial development, laid the foundation for Turkey's transition into a modern nation-state (Chalyi 2022).

The waning influence of the Ottoman Empire mirrors broader patterns discernible in other empires of its time. The surge of nationalist ideologies, intertwined with the relentless drive of colonial expansion and the intensifying rivalries of military powers, eroded the longstanding imperial frameworks that had shaped global governance for centuries. The Ottoman Empire's gradual transition from a diverse, multiethnic dominion to a consolidated nation-state reflects the intricate dynamics of military setbacks, colonial ambitions, and the burgeoning force of nationalism that defined the 19th and early 20th centuries. This transformation encapsulates the profound shifts that redefined the geopolitical landscape of the modern era (Kennedy 2024).

The decline and ultimate dissolution of the Ottoman Empire were not the product of a singular event but rather a complex convergence of internal frailties, external adversities, and the shifting currents of a rapidly modernizing world. A tapestry of contributing factors—ranging from territorial fragmentation and unsuccessful reform efforts to the ascendancy of nationalist ideologies and the catastrophic toll of World War I—wove together to precipitate the empire's fall. This protracted collapse did more than close a pivotal chapter in global history; it laid the foundation for the rise of modern Turkey and redefined the geopolitical contours of both the Middle East and Europe.

Legacy

The Ottoman Empire left an indelible mark on world history through its contributions to art, architecture, culture, and governance. Its complex administrative system and diverse population fostered a unique blend of cultures that influenced regions far beyond its borders. The remnants of Ottoman rule can still be seen today in various aspects of life across southeastern Europe and parts of the Middle East.

The legacy of the Ottoman Empire remains a layered and intricate phenomenon, continuing to shape the cultural, political, and social fabric of the regions it once governed. This lasting imprint is particularly prominent in literature, where narratives unravel the delicate interweaving of memory, identity, and historical continuity. Modern Greek novels, for example, frequently delve into themes tied to the Ottoman past, portraying both the tensions and the cultural symbiosis that arose over centuries of shared existence. These literary works illuminate

the subtle ways in which the empire's legacy endures, shaping contemporary reflections on identity, cultural heritage, and the intertwined histories of the diverse populations it once encompassed.

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire has left an indelible mark on Turkey's approach to foreign policy in the Middle East, embedding a legacy of resilience and a refined awareness of historical connections. This deep-rooted perspective equips Turkey to navigate the region's intricate dynamics, blending its imperial heritage with the demands of contemporary geopolitics. As new challenges emerge, Turkey's foreign policy continues to adapt, drawing on its historical ties to forge strategic partnerships and solidify its influence within the region's evolving political framework ([Post-Ottoman Legacy in the Middle East 2023](#)).

The cultural contributions of the Ottoman era, particularly in the realms of Sufism and music, reflect a profound and enduring heritage. Institutions like the Mevlevi Order have played a crucial role in preserving and reinterpreting these traditions, weaving together spirituality and artistic creativity. Their music and ceremonial practices, deeply rooted in the Ottoman cultural synthesis, continue to captivate audiences worldwide, underscoring the enduring resonance of Ottoman spiritual and cultural legacies ([Ilchi 2022](#)). Beyond its artistic influence, the Ottoman legacy remains a defining force in shaping modern identities and geopolitical landscapes across the regions once under its rule. Its historical, cultural, and political imprints persist, creating both bonds and tensions within contemporary societies and nations. This multifaceted legacy continues to inform the dynamics of connection and conflict in a rapidly evolving world. ([Temizer 2015](#)).

Conclusion

The Ottoman Empire endures as one of history's most awe-inspiring political and cultural forces, its legacy continuing to reverberate across three continents. Emerging from humble origins under Osman I in 1299, the empire's trajectory unfolded with an enduring spirit, showcasing both its fortitude and its ability to evolve. Spanning more than six centuries, its eventual disintegration in 1922 marks the end of an era but not its influence. As a powerful link between the East and the West, the Ottomans nurtured a fertile ground for cross-cultural dialogues that profoundly shaped the art, architecture, governance, and customs of countless societies. During its zenith, particularly under the reign of visionaries such as Mehmed II and Suleiman the Magnificent, the empire exhibited an exceptional synthesis of military might and intellectual flourishing, standing as a paragon of governance, artistic exploration, and innovation.

The empire, despite its historic preeminence, grappled with a constellation of adversities in its later epochs, marked by schisms within, mounting external encroachments, and the ascendancy of fervent nationalist ideologies. Efforts to rejuvenate the state, embodied in the Tanzimat reforms and subsequent modernization campaigns, illustrated a resolute endeavor to synchronize with a rapidly transforming global milieu. However, these ventures frequently encountered staunch opposition, unveiling entrenched systemic frailties that hindered their full fruition. The twilight of the Ottoman realm was vividly illustrated by its entanglement in World War I, culminating in the Treaty of Sèvres—a pact that sounded the death knell for the empire. This epochal moment heralded the birth of modern Turkey, a nation forged under the resolute guidance of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. His ambitious vision for a secular and contemporary state constituted a radical departure from Ottoman traditions, even as it selectively preserved elements of its administrative heritage and cultural ethos.

The indelible imprint of the Ottoman legacy reverberates across myriad dimensions. Its awe-inspiring architectural creations—monumental mosques and grandiose palaces—continue to evoke admiration and awe. Meanwhile, the empire's governance and legal frameworks have bequeathed enduring influences on present-day administrative structures. Notably, its pivotal role in safeguarding and disseminating the intellectual treasures of the Islamic Golden Age to Europe underscores its monumental contribution to global scholarly advancement. Furthermore, the Ottoman model of relative pluralism and its approach to accommodating a mosaic of religious and ethnic communities impart timeless insights, serving as a touchstone for modern societies navigating the complexities of multicultural coexistence.

The six-century reign of the Ottoman Empire was a tapestry of both monumental victories and grave challenges, illustrating the intricacies involved in governing an expansive, diverse realm amidst a shifting global order. Its saga unfolds as one of tenacity, metamorphosis, and lasting influence, firmly embedding it as a defining episode in the annals of history. The empire's remarkable capacity to adapt to the ever-evolving trials of its era, while imbuing the world with profound cultural and political legacies, secures its enduring role as a subject of continuous intrigue and academic exploration.

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