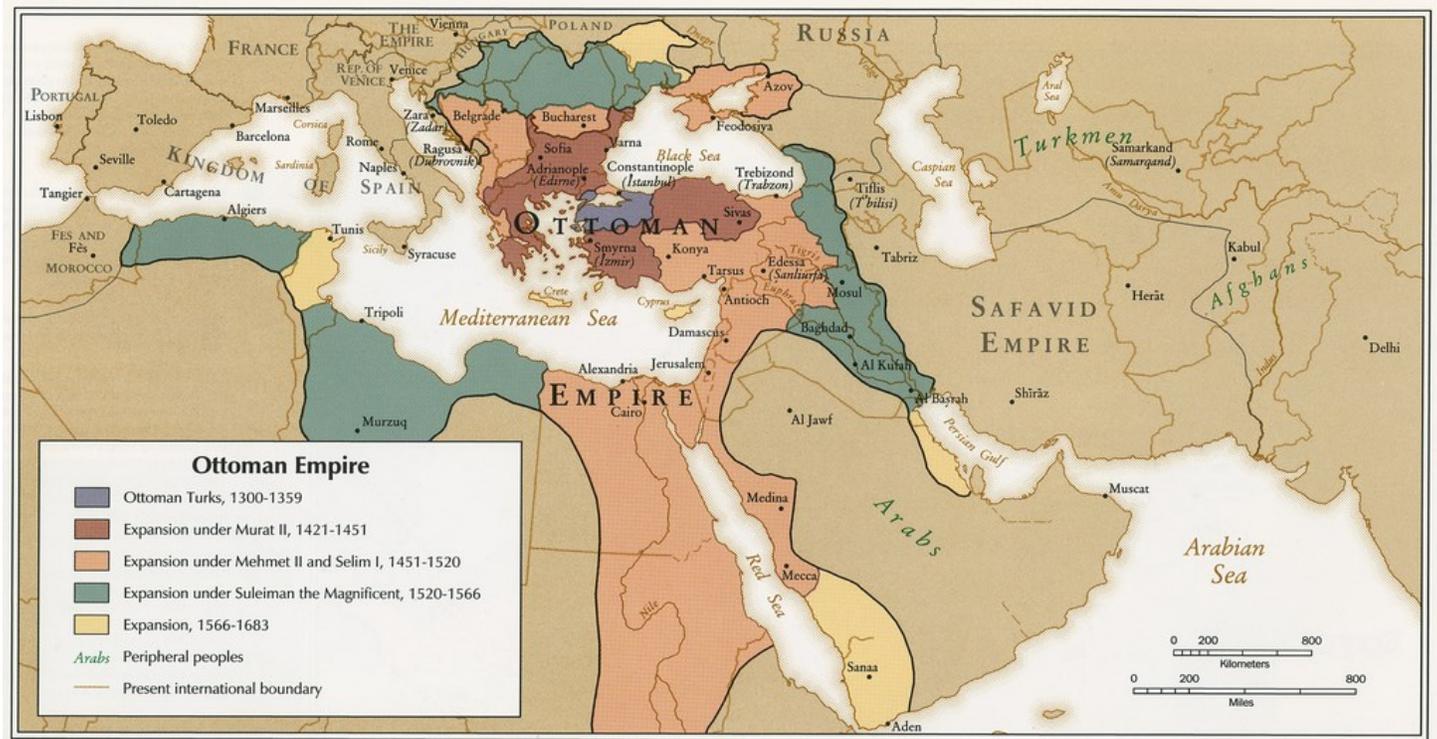


# Introduction to the Ottoman Empire (1301-1922)



- ∞ The Ottoman Empire was the one of the largest and longest lasting empires in history. The empire is named after its founder, Osman I (reigned ?-1324?).
- ∞ A key date in the history of the Ottoman Empire was May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1493, when the Ottomans captured the Byzantine Empire's last bastion (and capital) of Constantinople (renamed Istanbul in 1930 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire).
  - By 1520, the Ottoman Empire was the principal military and naval power in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea.
- ∞ 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.
  - By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Ottoman sultan ruled Eastern Europe, western Asia and most of North Africa, "*... and held together lands with very different political traditions, many ethnic groups – Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, Armenians, Turks and Arabs – and various religious communities – Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, Christians of all historic churches, and Jewish People.*"

*It maintained its rule over most of them for 400 years or so, and over some of them for as many as 600 years.”<sup>1</sup>*

- Marc David Baer’s book *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars, and Caliphs* reminds its readers: *“Like its language, the Ottoman Empire was not simply Turkish. Nor was it made up only of Muslims. It was not a Turkish Empire. Like the Roman Empire, it was a multiethnic, multilingual, multiracial, multireligious empire that stretched across Europe, Africa and Asia. It incorporated part of the territory the Romans had ruled. As early as 1352 and as late as the dawn of the First World War, the Ottoman dynasty controlled parts of Southwestern Europe, and at its height it governed almost a quarter of Europe’s land area.”<sup>2</sup>*
- Baer goes on to say *“Both the Ottoman Empire and the Byzantine Empire – whose legacy the Ottoman dynasty inherited and whose capital city it made its own – were long-lasting, centralised empires that to this day stand outside the standard Western narratives about the formation of Europe . . . [in fact] the Ottomans have been depicted predominantly in the negative as the antithesis of the West.”<sup>3</sup>*

∞ At its peak it included:

- ❖ Turkey
- ❖ Hungary
- ❖ Greece
- ❖ Bulgaria
- ❖ Romania
- ❖ Moldova
- ❖ Crimea and parts of Ukraine and Russia
- ❖ Macedonia
- ❖ Bosnia
- ❖ Serbia
- ❖ Croatia
- ❖ Montenegro
- ❖ Palestine
- ❖ Jordan
- ❖ Iraq
- ❖ Lebanon
- ❖ Syria



*Flag of the Ottoman Empire (look familiar?)*

<sup>1</sup> Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber, 1991), 211.

<sup>2</sup> Baer, Marc David. *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars, and Khans* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

- ❖ Parts of Arabia
- ❖ Georgia
- ❖ Egypt
- ❖ Tunisia
- ❖ Libya
- ❖ Algeria



There were many reasons why the Ottoman Empire was so successful:

- ∞ Highly centralised.
- ∞ Power was always transferred to a single person, and not split between rival princes.
- ∞ The Ottoman Empire was successfully ruled by a single family for 7 centuries.
- ∞ State-run education system.
- ∞ Religion was incorporated in the state structure, and the Sultan was regarded as "the protector of Islam." Religious difference, although not celebrated, was tolerated. This religious toleration eroded as the empire declined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Marc David Baer writes *"In the Ottoman Empire, certain groups – women, Christians and Jewish People, slaves – were legally subordinate to others – men, Muslims, the free. All religions were not deemed equally valid. Some groups were proscribed, such as Shi'I Muslims, dissident Muslim groups, and Buddhists. Ottoman society was plural, and individuals could at times change groups or positions of power, yet each group had a fixed place within the hierarchy based on class, gender, and religion.*

*In practice, tolerance of diversity meant creating an empire that was built on the maintenance of difference. The Ottomans did not seek to make all subjects into Muslims or even into Ottomans . . .*

*Rather, they fostered institutions . . . that allowed Christians and Jewish People to go about their personal lives, enjoying cultural, religious, and linguistic rights without much interference or limitation.”<sup>4</sup>*

- ∞ State-run judicial system.
- ∞ Ruthless in dealing with local leaders.
- ∞ Promotion to positions of power depended on merit and required conversion to Islam.
  - Marc David Baer writes *“The empire recruited its elite from the cream of the crop of conquered peoples, especially their youth and women, thereby ensuring the dynasty’s greatness and the subject peoples’ subordination. Conquered Christian and Muslim royalty, military and religious leaders, and commoners were all incorporated into the imperial project from the beginning . . .*

*As cruel, unjust, and violent as it was, especially for women, slavery allowed individuals to be incorporated into the elite levels of society when women joined harem and boys were inducted into the administration and military. Christians were made into members of the Ottoman ruling elite through cooperation, subordination, or conversion.”<sup>5</sup>*

- ∞ Created alliances across political and racial groups.
- ∞ United by organisational and administrative structures (a bureaucracy).
  - *“While Christian Europeans have laid claim to originating the institutions of secularism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans had for centuries been subordinating religious authority to imperial authority and had made secular law equivalent in force to religious law, surpassing any other European or Islamic polity in this regard. **They even institutionalized practices that clearly violated Islamic law and custom in favour of secular law**” – Marc David Baer<sup>6</sup>*
- ∞ Highly pragmatic, took the best ideas from other cultures and made them their own.

---

<sup>4</sup> Marc David Baer, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Marc David Baer

- ∞ Private power and wealth were controlled.
- ∞ Very strong military (including enslaved soldiers from conquered lands).
- ∞ The enslavement of conquered peoples.<sup>7</sup>
  - The most intensive use of enslaved people occurred between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, although the practice remained legal in imperial territories in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Slaves were acquired through conquest in Europe, around the Black Sea, and on the Mediterranean. Later, the enslavement of Sub-Saharan Africans was practiced. In the later centuries commerce rather than warfare accounted for the bulk of slave imports.
    - In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Constantinople (Istanbul) was the largest city in Europe and West Asia, enslaved and formerly enslaved people made up 1/5 of its population.
  - Ottoman slavery was complex, configuring along religious and geographic lines. By law, no Muslim, regardless of his or her country of origin, could be enslaved . . . Slaves could be of virtually any origin, race, or ethnicity provided that they were not Ottoman subjects . . . For most of the history of the empire, “white” captives of various ethnicities were arguably in greater demand than sub-Saharan Africans.
  - The Ottoman practice of slavery, adhering to Islamic precepts, was also distinguished from many other slave-owning cultures by the imposition of legal restraints on slave owner’s rights. Islamic law’s recognition of the dual nature of slaves as human beings as well as property denied to owner’s life-and-death authority over their slaves and put strict limits on corporal punishment. Enslaved people had legal rights, and could appeal to the Ottoman courts for justice.
- ∞ Expert in developing gunpowder as a military tool.



<sup>7</sup> This section’s information taken from Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, (New York: Facts on File, 2009), 530-531.