

# 1 Why study Ottoman history?

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## Introduction

This book owes its origins to an event that occurred in Vienna in the summer of 1983, when lines of schoolchildren wound their way through the sidewalks of the Austrian capital. The attraction they were lining up for was not a Disney movie or a theme park, but instead a museum exhibition, one of many celebrations held that year to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the second Ottoman siege of Vienna. In the minds of these children, their teachers, and the Austrian (and, for that matter, the general European) public, 1683 was a year in which they all were saved – from conquest by the alien Ottoman state, the “unspeakable Turk.”

The Ottoman state had emerged, c. 1300, in western Asia Minor, not far from the modern city of Istanbul. In a steady process of territorial accretion, this state had expanded both west and east, defeating Byzantine, Serb, and Bulgarian kingdoms as well as Turkish nomadic principalities in Anatolia (Asia Minor) and the Mamluk sultanate based in Egypt. By the seventeenth century it held vast lands in west Asia, North Africa, and southeast Europe. In 1529 and again in 1683, Ottoman armies pressed to conquer Habsburg Vienna.

The artifacts in the Vienna museum exhibit told much about the nature of the 1683 events. For example, the display of the captured tent and personal effects of the Ottoman grand vizier illustrated the panicky flight of the Ottoman forces from their camps that, just days before, had encircled Vienna. The timely arrival of the central and east European allies, notably King John (Jan) Sobieski of Poland, had put the encircling Ottoman armies to flight and turned the second Ottoman effort to seize the city into a full-blown disaster. For hundreds of years the Ottoman forces had been pressing northward, ever deeper into the Balkan peninsula and closer to Vienna and the German-speaking lands. These Ottomans literally were the terror of their enemies, seemingly invincible. Viennese

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mothers put their children to bed warning them to behave lest the “Turks” come and gobble them up. This world changed in 1683. Somewhat to the surprise of both sets of protagonists, the Ottoman forces besieging Vienna were catastrophically defeated, an event that marked the permanent reversal of power relations between the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires.

By “Turks,” these frightened mothers meant a more complex reality – the fighting forces, who may or may not have been ethnically Turkish, of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Ottoman empire. Thus, a word here about the terms “Turks” and “Ottomans” seems in order. West, central, and east Europeans referred to the “Turkish empire” and to the “Turks” when discussing the state led by the Ottoman dynasty. This was as true in the fourteenth as in the twentieth century. The appellation “Turk” has some basis since the Ottoman family was ethnically Turkish in its origins, as were some of its supporters and subjects. But, as we shall see, the dynasty immediately lost this “Turkish” quality through intermarriage with many different ethnicities. As for a “Turkish empire,” state power relied on a similarly heterogeneous mix of peoples. The Ottoman empire succeeded because it incorporated the energies of the vastly varied peoples it encountered, quickly transcending its roots in the Turkish nomadic migrations from central Asia into the Middle East (see chapter 2). Whatever ethnic meaning the word “Turk” may have held soon was lost and the term came to mean “Muslim.” To turn Turk meant converting to Islam. Throughout this work, the term Ottoman is preferred since it conjures up more accurate images of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious enterprise that relied on inclusion for its success.

In hindsight, we can see that after 1683 the Ottomans never again threatened central Europe. They did, however, stay in occupation of southeast Europe for 200 more years, dominating the modern-day states of Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, Rumania, and others. Finally, in the hardly unbiased words of the British politician, Gladstone, they were driven “bag and baggage” from their possessions. In its Asian and African provinces, the Ottoman Empire persisted even longer. Most parts of modern-day Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia remained part of the empire until World War I. During the last decades before it disappeared in 1922 the Ottoman Empire existed without the European provinces that for centuries had been its heart and soul. In its last days, but only then, it fairly could be called an Asiatic, Middle Eastern power. Until the 1878 Treaty of Berlin stripped away all but fragments of its Balkan holdings, the Ottoman Empire was a European power and was seen as such by its contemporaries, being deeply involved in European military and political affairs. Throughout nearly all of its 600-year

history, the Ottoman state was as much a part of the European political order as were its French or Habsburg rivals.

### **Ottoman history in world history**

The Ottoman Empire was one of the greatest, most extensive, and longest-lasting empires in the history of the world. It included most of the territories of the eastern Roman Empire and held portions of the northern Balkans and north Black Sea coast, areas that Byzantium had never ruled. Nor were these holdings ephemeral – the Ottoman Empire was born before 1300 and endured until after World War I. Thus, it began in the same century the powerful Sung state in China ended, in the era when Genghis Khan swept across the Euro-Asiatic world and built an empire from China to Poland while, in Europe, France and England were about to embark on their Hundred Years War. In west Africa the great Benin state was emerging while, in the Americas, the Aztec state in the valley of Mexico began its expansion, both events being nearly contemporaneous with the Ottomans' emergence in Asia Minor. Born in medieval times, this empire of the Ottomans disappeared only very recently, within the memory of many people still living today. My own father was nine years old and my mother five years old when the Ottoman Empire finally disappeared from the face of the earth. Large numbers of present-day citizens of the Ottoman successor states – such as Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq – bear Ottoman personal names given to them by their parents and were educated and grew up in an Ottoman world. Thus, for many, this empire is a living legacy (see chapter 10).

In the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire shared the world stage with a cluster of other powerful and wealthy states. To their far west lay distant Elizabethan England, Habsburg Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire as well as Valois France and the Dutch Republic. More closely at hand and of greater significance to the Ottomans in the short run, the city states of Venice and Genoa exerted enormous political and economic power, thanks to their far-flung fleets and commercial networks linking India, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and west European worlds. To the east were two great empires, then at their peak of power and wealth: the Safevid state based in Iran and the Moghul Empire in the Indian subcontinent. The Ottoman, Safevid, and Moghul empires reached from Vienna in the west to the borders of China in the east and, in the sixteenth century, all prospered under careful administrators, enriched by the trade between Asia and Europe. The three together likely held the balance of economic and political global power, at the very moment when Spain and Portugal were conquering the New World and its treasure. But China,

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in the midst of Ming rule, certainly was the most powerful and wealthy single state in the world at the time.

The Ottomans, in 1453, had destroyed the second Rome, Byzantium, that had endured for one thousand years, from the fourth through the fifteenth centuries. Through this act, the Ottoman state changed in status from regional power to world empire. As destroyer, the Ottoman Empire in some ways also was the inheritor of the Roman heritage in its eastern Byzantine form. Indeed, Sultan Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople, explicitly laid down the claim that he was a caesar, a latter-day emperor, and his sixteenth-century successor, Süleyman the Magnificent, sought Rome as the capstone of his career. Moreover, the Ottoman rulers, having conquered the second Rome, for the next four hundred-plus years honored its Roman founder in the name of the capital city. Until the end of the empire, the city's name – the city of Constantine – Konstantiniyye/Constantinople – remained in the Ottomans' official correspondence, their coins, and on their postage stamps, after these came into use in the nineteenth century. In some respects, the Ottomans followed certain Byzantine administrative models. Like the Byzantines, the Ottomans practiced a kind of caesaro-papism, the system in which the state controlled the clergy. In the Ottoman judiciary the courts were run by judges, members of the religious class, the ulema. The Ottoman sultans appointed these judges and thus, like their Byzantine imperial predecessors, exercised a direct control over members of the religious establishment. In addition, to give another example of Byzantine–Ottoman continuities, Byzantine forms of land tenure carried over into the Ottoman era. While the Ottomans forged their own unique synthesis and were no mere imitators of their predecessors, their debt to the Byzantines was real.

Other powerful influences shaped the Ottoman polity besides the Byzantine. As we shall see, the Ottoman Empire emerged out of the anarchy surrounding the Turkish nomadic movements into the Middle East after 1000 CE, population movements triggered by uncertain causes in their central Asiatic homelands. It was the last great Turco-Islamic state, following those of the Seljuks and of Tamerlane, born of the migration of the Turkish peoples out of central Asia westward into the Middle East and the Balkans (see chapter 2). The shamanist beliefs of those nomads remained deeply embedded in the spiritual practices and world view of the Ottoman dynasty. Similarly, pre-Islamic Turkish usages remained important in Ottoman administrative circles, despite the later influx of administrative and legal practices from the Islamic world of Iran and the eastern Mediterranean. Ultimately, the Ottoman system should be seen as a highly effective blend of influences deriving from Byzantium, the Turkish nomads, and the Balkan states, as well as the Islamic world.

Shaped by others, the Ottomans in their turn affected the evolution and formation of many central, east, and west European states and the shaping of their popular imagination. If there is such a thing as the paranoid style in twentieth-century Soviet Russian politics, we have the Ottomans to thank, in large measure. For the Czarist Russian state based in Moscow the presence of a powerful Ottoman state long blocked the way to Black Sea and Mediterranean warm water ports. For centuries, the Ottomans were the single most important foreign enemies of the Russian state; czars and sultans fought against each other in a seemingly endless series of wars between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, until both disappeared. These wars had a powerful impact on the evolution and shaping of the emerging Russian power: the Muscovite state's deep fears of powerful enemies on its southern (and western) flanks permanently marked its polity with a need to seek safety in expansion and domination. The Habsburg state on the Danube, for its part, came into existence amid profound regional confusion in order to check further Ottoman expansion northwards. The Vienna-based state became a center of resistance and, over time, acquired the role and identity as the first line of defense for central Europe because the various kingdoms further south in the Balkan peninsula all had failed to check the Ottomans. Without question, the Ottomans played a decisive role in the formation and subsequent evolution of the Habsburg state, defining its very nature.

Its geopolitical position, at the crossroads of the Asian, European, and African continents, thus gave the Ottoman state an important role to play in world history. This importance did not vanish after the military catastrophe of 1683 and the failing ability of the Ottomans to defend their territorial integrity. Indeed, Ottoman weakness prompted international instability among expanding neighbors jealous to lop off Ottoman lands or, at the least, prevent them from falling into the hands of rivals. This "Eastern Question" – who would inherit which territories once the Ottoman state vanished – provoked strife among the Great Powers of the age and became a leading issue of international diplomacy in the nineteenth century. In 1914, the failure to resolve the Eastern Question helped bring on the first great catastrophe of the contemporary age, World War I.

A far more positive reason to study the Ottoman empire and assign it an important place in world history concerns the tolerant model of administration that it offered during most of its existence. For a contemporary world in which transportation and communication technologies and the migrations of peoples have brought about an unparalleled confrontation with difference, the Ottoman case warrants careful study. For centuries the Ottoman hand rested lightly on its subject populations. The Ottoman political system required its administrators and military

officers to protect subjects in the exercise of their religion, whether Islam, Judaism, or Christianity in whatever variation – e.g. Sunni, Shii, Greek or Armenian or Syriac Orthodox or Catholic. This requirement was based on the Islamic principle of toleration of the “People of the Book,” meaning Jews and Christians. These “people” had received God’s revelation, even if incompletely and imperfectly; therefore, the Ottoman Islamic state had the responsibility to protect them in the exercise of their religions. Without question, these legal protections did fail. Christian and Jewish subjects sometimes were persecuted or killed because they did not share the Islamic faith of the state apparatus. But such actions were violations of the bedrock principle of toleration – a high standard to which the state expected and required adherence. Such principles of toleration governed inter-communal relations in the Ottoman empire for centuries. But, in the final years, there was mounting disharmony and inter-communal strife (see chapter 9). For most of its history, however, the Ottoman Empire offered an effective model of a multi-religious political system to the rest of the world.

### **The Ottoman Empire in European culture**

Let us begin with a word of caution about the significance of the following pages, that outline the place of the Ottoman Empire in the history, imagination, and culture of western Europe. This discussion is not intended to imply that the Ottomans are important only to the extent they contributed to west European development. Instead, the discussion has this focus because the intended primary audience is those from the west European cultural tradition. The goal is to demonstrate for those readers the manner in which the Ottoman Empire affected the course of their own history and culture.

Because the Ottomans, by chance, were physically the most proximate to the west European states that came to dominate the globe in the modern era, they long bore the brunt of Europe’s military, political, and ideological expansion. This proximity had a profound impact on the formation of identity, both of the Ottomans and of the Europeans. On each side proximity structured a complex identity formation process of repulsion and attraction. After all, a people comes to perceive of itself as distinct and separate, with particular and unique characteristics, often through using the “other” as a means of defining what it is and, equally, what it is not. Confronting the Byzantine, Balkan, east, and west European states, the Ottomans sometimes emphasized (perhaps like the Moghuls facing a Hindu enemy in the Indian subcontinent) their identity as Muslim warriors for the faith. This did not prevent the Ottoman rulers from

simultaneously admiring and employing Byzantine, Bulgarian, Serb, west European, and other Christians as soldiers, artists, and technicians. For Europeans, including their descendants in the United States and elsewhere, the Ottomans were a vital means by which European culture defined itself as such. Sometimes the Ottoman served as a model for qualities the Europeans wished to possess. Thus Machiavelli and later European political thinkers such as Bodin and Montesquieu praised the Ottoman military and administrators' incorruptibility, discipline, and obedience in order to chastise Europeans. All of them, different political thinkers in different eras, wrote about the need for effective administrators and an effective state. In an age when direct criticism of a king might be dangerous, they used the example of the Ottomans to inspire European monarchs and their soldiers and statesmen to better behavior. These are the qualities, such writers were saying, which we in the West should possess. Further, as Europeans sought to define themselves, they did so in part by describing what they were not. Many European writers made the Ottomans the repository of evil; they identified the characteristics which they wished to have by attributing the opposite to their enemy. Thus, cruelty vs humaneness, barbarism vs civilization, infidels vs true believers. You could know who you were by defining who and what you were not. (In the places that we now know as England, France, and Germany, authors had assigned this role of "other" to the Muslims of Arab lands during the earliest days of Islam, back in the seventh century CE). In the imagination of these writers and their readers whose identity as Europeans was still in the making, the Ottomans (them) were described as possessing qualities which civilized persons (we) did/could not possess. In the world of the European mind, the Ottomans alternately were terrible, savage, and "unspeakable" and at the same time sex-crazed, harem-driven, and debauched. Even in the nineteenth century, European imaginings marked the Ottoman East as the degenerate site of pleasures supposedly absent or forbidden in the civilized and vigorous West, where Europeans by contrast allegedly were restrained, sober, just, sexually controlled, moderate, and rational.

In a truly intimate way the Ottomans became part and parcel of everyday European life, usually in ways that today are overlooked or forgotten. For example, most west Europeans or Americans surely would fail to acknowledge their debt to the Ottomans for the coffee and tulips they enjoy or the smallpox inoculations that protect their lives. But indeed, these are Ottoman contributions, arriving in western Europe between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. From early times the Ottoman Empire has been intertwined in the daily lives, religion, and politics of what became Europe. Usually, as a rule of thumb, the extent of

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the intertwining is in inverse correlation to the distance. Hence, probably, the Ottoman legacy is greater in present day Austria than in Denmark. And yet, everywhere, including the United States where so many western European values have been maintained, the Ottoman presence is felt.

The Ottoman Empire played an important role in the European wars of religion, serving a didactic function. During the Reformation era, the Ottomans were the veritable scourge of God on earth for many of the contesting parties. Some radical reformers, called Anabaptists, held that the Ottomans were God's sign, about to conquer the world. The Anti-Christ then would come; the Elect would destroy the godless and bring about the Second Coming of Christ. Martin Luther, for his part, wrote that the Ottomans were God's punishment for a corrupt papacy, an instrument of God's anger. Catholics, from their side, considered these "Turks" divine punishment for allowing Luther and his followers to flourish.

The Ottomans similarly are embedded in European popular culture. In the seventeenth century, French imaginative literature frequently focused on the sultans, for example in the story of Sultan Bayezit I (1389–1402) in his cage and his captor, Timur (Tamerlane), which was published in 1648. Most stories, however, related the cruelty of these "Turks," such as that of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent towards his favorite, the Grand Vizier Ibrahim. Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, who actually was a cosmopolitan, sophisticated, multilingual Renaissance prince, instead was portrayed as a cruel and brutal tyrant in a 1612 French play that depicted his mother drinking the blood of a victim. Other, equally bizarre and inaccurate tales related stories of Ottoman soldiers making sacrifices to the Roman god of war, Mars. The receding of the Ottoman threat after the 1683 failure before Vienna, however, modified the image of the Ottomans.

And so, in the eighteenth century, west, central, and east Europeans felt safe enough to begin borrowing overtly, actively, from their Ottoman neighbor. During this period the Ottomans made important contributions in the realm of European classical music, adding to it the percussion sections of the modern orchestra. From the 1720s until the 1850s, so called "Turkish music" – a term once used for the percussion instruments in the orchestra – became the rage in Europe. European courts vied with one another to produce the Ottoman percussion sounds – cymbals, the single kettle drum, the side drum, and the bass drum, plus triangles, tambourines, and the "Jingling Johnny," a pavilion-shaped instrument of bells. This music had originated with the Janissary band that marched with the Ottoman armies to inspire the troops and strike terror into enemies' hearts. King Augustus II of Poland (1697–1733) so



admired Janissary music that a sultan gifted him with a band of twelve to fifteen players. The king's neighbor, Empress Anne of Russia, enviously determined she needed one as well, and in 1725 sent to Istanbul for a similar group. By 1741, the Vienna Habsburgs had their own and, somewhat later, so did the Prussian king in Berlin. In each of these, the band members were Ottomans, whose careers abroad in these strange lands certainly deserve telling. In 1782, London received its own band but, in this instance, Africans were employed on the drums, cymbals, and tambourines, probably to further promote the sense of the exotic. One survival of this Janissary band craze is the mace throwing by drum majors. Over time, the mace became ceremonial, carried by the head of the Janissary band to keep time. This finally evolved into the baton of the drum majorettes, thrown into the air in parades and at football games everywhere in the United States.

The popularity of the Janissary sound spilled over from the orchestra and entered the mainstream of what we now call Western classical music. There is a wonderful passage in the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, first published in 1824, that conjures up images of marching Janissaries. "Turkish music" can also be heard in the Fourth Symphony of Brahms and in Haydn's Military Symphony as well as in Rossini's *William Tell* overture and in the march of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. Mozart's A major piano sonata K. 331 contains a marvellous *rondo alla turca*, a theme that carried over into American jazz and the repertoires of musicians such as Dave Brubeck and Ahmad Jamal. In opera, not only Ottoman music but Ottoman settings became popular, the first being a three-act opera in 1686 produced in Hamburg, on the fate of Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa Pasha after the siege of Vienna (he was executed). Handel's opera *Tamerlane* (1724) portrayed the defeat, capture, and imprisonment of Sultan Bayezit I (1389–1402) by the central Asian world conqueror. The *Escape from the Seraglio* by Mozart in 1782 was preceded by several operas with similar plot lines and characters. Rossini's *The Turk in Italy* and to some extent *The Italian Girl in Algiers* carried on this tradition of Ottoman operatic themes.

As European music borrowed Ottoman musical themes and settings, "Turkish" fashions became the rage of late eighteenth-century Europe. Pseudo-Ottoman sultans and sultanas appeared everywhere, a fad started by Madame de Pompadour in the court of King Louis XV. During the Sarmation movement in Poland, for example, nobles wore Ottoman costumes and rode "Arab" horses. Ottoman-style coffee houses across Europe became populated with Europeans wearing bright silks, billowing trousers, and upturned "Turkish slippers," smoking "Turkish" pipes and eating "Turkish" sweets.

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In the nineteenth century this “Turkomania” faded, to be replaced by yet other expressions of the Ottoman presence in European popular culture. The common motifs of cruelty, intrigue, jealousy and savagery continued, hence the ready reception accorded to the powerful British politician Gladstone’s rantings against the “Bulgarian horrors.” Alongside this old, ruthless image emerged that of the amorous or the buffoon Turk. The silly Turk already had become a stock figure, as we see in Molière’s *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1670), where a major character babbled gibberish which the audience was meant to understand as Ottoman Turkish. Now, in the nineteenth century, lustful Turks with enormous sex organs became an important feature of Victorian pornographic literature. Further, many Europeans, from Lord Byron to the novelist Pierre Loti to Lawrence of Arabia, came to consider the Ottoman Empire as the land of dreams where sexual or other fantasies could be realized. These three individuals and thousands of others sought escape from the tedium and monotony of modern industrial life in the imagined East – whether or not they traveled to the Ottoman realms. The paintings of Delacroix, Gérôme, and others abound in images of the exotic and erotic, the primitive, the savage, and the noble.

Thanks to the Ottoman artifacts displayed at the various world’s fairs of the nineteenth century, including the 1876 American Centennial Exposition, a “Turkish corner” became commonplace in European and American homes. In the parlors of the wealthier classes, overstuffed armchairs with deep fringes and tassels appeared, often set off with a copper tray and always “Oriental” carpets. In 1900 Paris, for example, the designer Poiret was famed for his “Oriental” fantasies. In the homes of the less-well-off, a single piece of overstuffed furniture – a sofa, ottoman, or divan – often conjured up the exotic East. The great German novelist Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924) depicts a “Turkish corner,” and also a figure who used a “Turkish” coffee mill and “Turkish” coffee for socializing. The grandfather of one of the main characters had “a funny little Turk in flowing silk robes, under which was a hard body with a mechanism inside. Once, when you wound him up, he had been able to leap about all over the table, but he was long since out of repair.” In the United States, for example, in New York City, Portland, Oregon, and Chicago, architects built scores of motion picture theaters that borrowed very heavily from Islamic and Ottoman architectural details (as well as from other cultures, including the ancient Near East).

In sum, as is clear from the above examples, the Ottomans supplied much grist for the imaginative mill of the Europeans. The Anti-Christ and enemy of the Reformation and of the French imaginative literature of the seventeenth century had given way to more innocent images in the