

The Ottoman Empire

For decades since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, historians taught that the empire was the “sick man of Europe” throughout the nineteenth century, and that defeat in the war merely put the empire out of its misery. In recent years, however, some historians have begun to revise this argument. These historians dispute whether the Ottoman Empire declined at all; rather, they argue that the empire was in a period of strong renewal and reinvention at the outbreak of the First World War. The collapse of the empire in 1918, moreover, was not inevitable at all. This section argues that while the Ottoman Empire had undergone a long period of political decline, it experienced a strong cultural flourishing in the nineteenth century. That cultural flourishing and the Young Turks’ reform-inspired revolt in 1908 were not enough to save the empire after the First World War.

Political Decline

After its founding in the fourteenth century, the Ottoman Empire quickly proved to be an efficient, successful fighting machine. In that century, they conquered modern-day Turkey, which was ruled by a number of feuding warlords. In the fifteenth century, they began to take territory from the Byzantine Empire, and in 1453 began a successful seven-week siege of its capital, Constantinople. In the ensuing two centuries, the Ottomans spread their empire in all directions. They conquered territory in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans, and in the 1500s conquered as far north as Budapest. Their advance reached its greatest extent in 1683, when they besieged Vienna, which was the capital of the Habsburg Empire. The siege was defeated when Polish reinforcements arrived, however, and after this point the Ottomans stopped advancing. From that point until the end of the First World War, the Ottomans hemorrhaged many of the territories they had conquered.

The story of the Ottoman decline argues that the Ottoman Empire suffered from a serious lack of good leadership over this period. A long string of short-lived, incompetent sultans (sixteen of them, traditionally) were unable to extend the empire’s prowess. Strong factions arose in the empire, and the divisions this created allowed outside powers to claim or reclaim territory. Internally, corruption became a hallmark of Ottoman rule. The sultans also proved unwilling to pursue technological modernization at the same time as their European rivals.

The Ottomans lost territory to European countries throughout the nineteenth century. The Austrian Empire had already forced the Ottomans out of Hungary in the eighteenth century, and the Austrian armies continued to threaten the Ottomans for the rest of the century. The Ottoman Empire eventually lost control of almost all of their provinces in the Balkans because of nationalist movements that forced them out of Greece and Serbia. In 1912 the Italians even took Libya from the Ottomans, marking a further degree of European penetration into Ottoman territory.

The greatest threat to the Ottomans came from Russia, however. Russian armies advanced steadily south throughout the nineteenth century and captured many Ottoman lands in the Caucasus. The Russians advanced so surely that other European powers,

chiefly Britain, worried that Russian conquests would make it a major power in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. These worries led to the Crimean War of 1854–56, in which Britain and France allied with the Ottoman Empire to repulse Russian armies in the Crimea. Russia continued to threaten the Ottoman Empire for the rest of the century, but various European powers sided with the Ottomans, which helped to prevent a Russian attack. Paradoxically, at the end of the century European advance was both the greatest threat to Ottoman survival and the best guarantee of that survival.

Social Revival and Political Reform

While the Ottoman Empire declined as a political entity throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is incorrect to assume that the entire society also declined. Rather, it was defined by numerous instances of revival and reform. The impetus for these changes varied; in many cases, European advances served as the model for reforms within the empire. In others, however, the inspiration was entirely Ottoman.

Political reforms within the Ottoman Empire began in the 1820s with the ouster of the powerful Janissary Corps. The Janissaries were the most powerful faction in the Ottoman military and had resisted change in the past. The new Sultan, Mehmed II, arranged for the Janissaries to mutiny, and then slaughtered them and their families. This was a particularly brutal way to sideline his opponents, but it helped him as he continued to stifle opposition.

For the rest of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state brought about many Western-style reforms. The telegraph was introduced, the postal service organized, and rail lines built. University education was remodeled on the Western example, and in 1876 a constitution was enacted. The reforms, however, created much opposition. Mahmud II's successor, Abdul Hamid, sought to return to the absolutist rule of his predecessors. He persecuted those who wished Mahmud's reforms had gone further. While this helped Abdul Hamid to rule until 1908, it did not stop many Western-style modernizations like railroads and educational reforms. Moreover, it provided the impetus for his overthrow.

Abdul Hamid's repression drove many liberal-minded Ottoman citizens underground or into exile. One such group, the Ottoman Society for Union and Progress, was founded by exiles in Paris in 1889. The Young Turks, as they came to be called, published many pamphlets advocating their belief that the reforms of Mahmud II should be resumed and extended. In 1908, after several attempts, a group of Young Turks successfully assassinated Abdul Hamid, albeit with the complicity of the military.

The Young Turks' tenure was promising but short. While they did not come to power – a group of officers took control of the empire – their ideas did govern much of what happened in the empire's last ten years. The officers restored Mahmud's constitution and liberated the press once again. They also promised reforms in administration, education, and even women's rights, but these were never carried out. The period from 1908 to 1914 was characterized by political infighting, as various factions jockeyed for position, and the onset of the First World War stalled any further reforms.

The Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary). The Ottomans had close ties with Germany, who had sent military advisors many times over the preceding decades in an attempt to modernize the Ottoman army. The Ottoman armies lost significant territory to the Russians over the course of the war, although their retreat ended after the Russian Revolution.

The British also fought the Ottomans in the Mediterranean with mixed results. Sir Winston Churchill engineered a disastrous British offensive on Gallipoli in 1915; British troops, especially the Australian units, suffered heavy casualties. Later in the war, however, the Ottoman Empire began to crumble. The British army, under General Allenby, captured Jerusalem in early December 1917; this was the first major victory of any consequence for the British during the war, and the chance to spend Christmas in Jerusalem was also a major propaganda victory. In the meantime, a British officer named T. E. Lawrence spent the last two years of the war trying to win Arabian leaders to the British side. His promises of independence after the war convinced them to fight against the Ottomans, but the British government did not honor the agreements that the self-styled “Lawrence of Arabia” had made without authorization. Lawrence’s contributions were important, however, and helped the British to win several victories in 1918 and to control much of the Middle East when the war ended. The Ottoman Empire was declared dead at the end of the war, but by that point little of it remained.

Summary

- The Ottoman Empire lost much of its territory in the nineteenth century. Nationalist uprisings in the Balkans and Russian conquest in the Caucasus and the Crimea resulted in most of the losses.
- Nonetheless, the empire also witnessed sustained attempts at political reforms throughout the century. These reforms showed promise but were ultimately never implemented fully.
- The Ottomans held off the British for much of the First World War, but lost ground to the Russians. The British finally made some gains in 1918, however; they were partly assisted by Lawrence of Arabia, who assured local leaders that they would have independence after the war. Once the war ended, however, Lawrence’s superiors cancelled the offer, and the people of the former Ottoman lands exchanged one imperial ruler for another – either Britain or France.