

The Ottoman Empire - The Eastern Question

In the 1600s The Ottoman Empire was one of the most feared and respected in the world. By the early 1900s the Empire had practically diminished. Greed and incompetent rulers were two reasons why the empire began to collapse.

In 1683 the Turks, in a conquest for power, nearly captured the city of Vienna, the capital of the Austrian Hapsburg family. The Turkish armies were pushed back by a Christian coalition army. To ensure that the Ottoman's would not attack again, the Austrians continued to fight for another thirty five years. The Ottomans lost battle after battle. They were forced to sign two treaties, Karlowitz in 1699 and Passarowitz in 1718. Part of the treaties stated that the Ottomans would be stripped of a large area of territory. **Hungary** and **Transylvania** were returned to Austrian rule.

The Ottoman Empire also had periodic wars against Russia. In 1710 they fought against **Peter the Great** and then in the late 1700s they again challenged Russia, only this time they came up against **Catherine the Great** who was determined to see Russia grow. The Ottoman Turks lost both wars and had to concede a vast area along the **Black Sea coast** to Russia. This also meant that they lost their naval superiority in the region.

Beginning in the 1600s and continuing into the 1700s the Ottomans had a series of mediocre rulers and a great deal of corruption within the government. The political structure within Turkey was split into two factions. There were several **sultans** who saw that the Empire was failing and believed that internal improvements and modernization of the present system would revive the Empire back to the power it once was. Unfortunately for these sultans they were strongly opposed by influential groups and officials within the government that demanded that Turkey, and the Ottoman Empire, keep their old, traditional ways.

Perhaps the best example of this scenario was seen with the Ottoman military. The army was run by the **Janissary** – people of the upper classes who became military leaders. Their methods of warfare during the 1500s and 1600s had been innovative and effective. However, in the 1700s and the 1800s, the janissaries refused to use new military weapons and technology and remain an **“old fashioned fighting force.”** The janissaries were powerful enough to prevent any changes until the late 1820s. Between 1790 and the early 1800s, **Sultan Selim III** attempted to reform the government bureaucracy, modernize the army and navy and make internal improvements to better the empire. The Janissaries, fearing that their old ways would change, had the sultan assassinated in 1807.

The 1820s saw a political change in Turkey which consequently lead to improvements in the nation's economy and a more modern army. During this decade, Turkey was a nation off two separate rulers. The **sultans** allowed Western educational principles to be used in the universities. Scientific knowledge and technological expertise was brought into Turkey from the West. Opposition to these advancements came from the **traditional Islamic clergy**. Any modern changes were strongly opposed. The Islamic leaders truly believed that Turkey should revert back to the old, traditional customs and ways of Islam.

In the 1820s a powerful ruler, **Sultan Mehmed III** began to train a new, European style army and navy. He arrested those janissaries that were reluctant to change. This led to a larger set of changes that became known as the **Tanzimat Reforms (1839 to 1876)**. Part of these reforms was that there was now more **religious tolerance to non-Muslims** living in the Empire. There was a complete overhaul of the legal system within the Empire and modern infrastructure such as a national telegraph and postal system. Schools were built solely to teach Western science and technology.

The Tanzimat Reforms allowed **education for women**. New public schools were built just for women and some were allowed to enter public life in various capacities by the late 1800s. There was even talk in Turkey that a constitution was to be made, one that would totally change the rules and regulations of the nation.

The Tanzimat Reforms met with much opposition in Turkey. Conservatives and traditionalists saw the reforms as too extreme. The younger politicians and military officers saw these changes as too little and demanded even more changes, more than the sultan wanted to make. By the 1900s, this new generation of aggressive politicians and military leaders formed a political party called the **Young Turks**. Over time they would play a major role in the removal of the sultan from being the ruler of the Empire.

Problems in Eastern Europe

In the countries under Ottoman rule in Eastern Europe, nationalism movements began to take hold and became a threat to the Turks. In 1807 **Serbia** began a revolt. It was put down by the Ottoman troops but Serbia remained a restless nation and future rebellions were planned. In 1821 **Greece** began a war of independence against the Turks. This war turned out to be a religious battle between the **Eastern Orthodox Christians** of Greece and the **Muslims** of the Ottoman Empire. By 1827 both France and Britain had come to the aid of Greece as Christians throughout Europe strongly supported Greece. In 1828, Russia, another Eastern Orthodox country, joined the war against the Ottomans. The coalition of Christian forces was too strong for the Turks and in 1829 the Ottoman Empire was forced to recognize Greece's Independence.



Problems in North Africa

At its peak, the Ottoman Empire controlled most of **Islamic North Africa**. In the 1700s, the Empire's control over this region was weakening due to the distance that it was from Turkey and the fact that local rulers wanted more autonomy (self-rule). During the Napoleonic Wars, Napoleon captured **Egypt and the Suez isthmus**. He easily defeated the Turkish and local Egyptian armies ruled by the **Mamluks** who were put into power by the Ottomans. When the British defeated Napoleon in the early 1800s they put the Mamluks back into power, but not for long.

In 1805, Egypt started a rebellion to break away from Ottoman rule. Their new leader was **Muhammad Ali** and he had little difficulty in capturing and ruling Egypt. Once in power, Ali began to industrialize and modernize Egypt. He created a Western-style military, trained by European military officers. He also used European skill and technology to improve Egyptian agriculture. It was Ali who is credited for increasing the production of cotton that would, during the American Civil War, be bought by the British.

Once Muhammad Ali had full control over Egypt, he began to expand his empire. His first military conquest was to move south and capture **Sudan**. His next campaign headed east. He quickly took control of the **Sinai, Syria, parts of Arabia** and then **Northern Iraq**. Muhammad Ali's next step was to invade and capture the Ottoman capital city of Istanbul.

As Ali moved northward, Britain and France were afraid that he would take over the entire Ottoman Empire, resulting in a massive imbalance of power in the Middle East. Instead of using military force, the **British and French used diplomacy** to halt Ali's expansion. They convinced him to return to Egypt as they affirmed that he was a **heredity prince (khedive)** of an independent Egypt. If he returned back to Egypt then the British and French would ensure that the Ottoman's recognized his status as a ruler and would not take any actions, politically or militarily, against him. Please at this recognition of power, Ali returned to Egypt. Britain and France had saved the Ottoman Empire from collapse.

Once Ali returned to power in Egypt, the French began to imperialize the western portions of North Africa. In 1830 they seized **Algeria**. It was to become as important to the French as India was to the British. By the mid 1850s, over 150,000 French men and women had settled in Algeria. By 1900, France had established a protectorate in **Tunisia** and had joint control over **Morocco** with Spain.

The Crimean War

Britain and France once again came to the aid of the Ottoman Empire. In 1853, the first major conflict since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 took place. **Tsar Nicholas I of Russia** invaded the principalities of **Wallachia and Moldavia**, regions on the **eastern Danube River** that were controlled by the Ottomans. In 1854, Britain and France joined the Turks in the Crimean War against Russia. **The Crimea** is a peninsula in Eastern Europe that is on the Black Sea. The war was to last three years. The largest battle of the war was when the Allies attacked the Russian naval headquarters at **Sevastopol**. The battle cost the Allies over 250,000 lives but finally, in 1856, the Russian army was defeated.

The Suez Canal

Muhammad Ali's grandson, **Isma'il** wanted to build a **canal across the Suez land bridge** and link the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. He believed that Egypt would become wealthy if they could link Europe with Asia by not sailing around the tip of Africa. Even though Isma'il had improved schools and hospitals in Egypt, his dreams of wealth from the Suez Canal ended quickly.

In order to build the canal, Isma'il hired the best engineer for the job, the **Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps**. To finance the canal he allowed British and French companies to supervise the construction. The building of the Suez Canal began in **1854** and was finally finished in **1869**. It was a marvel of modern construction and revolutionized international shipping. It was however, a costly venture in human lives for Isma'il. Thousands of Egyptian lives were lost in building the canal due to industrial accidents. Isma'il was not a good businessman. He allowed most of the shares in the company that officially owned the canal to be bought by the British and French.

In 1875 the French company that built the canal went into economic difficulties. The British quickly bought out their shares. In the same year the British had also acquired all of Egypt's shares in the canal. Britain was now the sole owner of the Suez Canal. Once Britain took control over the canal, it began to interfere with the local politics of Egypt. In 1881, the Egyptian military started a revolt to unseat the khedive (hereditary family). With the excuse that they had to protect the Suez Canal, the **British assumed control over Egypt**. They established a protectorate called the **Anglo-Egyptian Administration**. Although the khedive (ruling family) was technically the rulers of Egypt, the British and the Anglo-Egyptian Administration now controlled the government.

The British extended the rule of the Anglo-Egyptian Administration by bringing **Sudan** under its control. The war in Sudan was a long one. In 1881 the British were opposed by a religious Islamic leader called **Mahdi** (Arabic for the “one who is rightly guided”). The British army was led by **Charles Gordon**. At the **siege of Khartoum** in 1885, Gordon and his army were massacred by Mahdi and his followers. In 1898, the British set out to revenge the death of Gordon of Khartoum. The British General **Horatio Kitchener** (the same that would win the Boer War) defeated Mahdi and his armies at the **Battle of Omdurman**. Despite Kitchener’s army being outnumbered, they had machine guns and modern rifles. They quickly defeated a poorly armed Egyptian and Sudanese army. The defeat now brought Sudan under British control.



Charles Gordon



Mahdi



Battle of Omdurman

The Balkan Crisis of 1876-1878

The Balkan Crisis was another event that showed the delicate nature of the powers in Eastern Europe. Again the question was, in a time of rebellion, how far were the Western European powers going to allow the Ottoman Turks to defend their territories? Would Western involvement in these areas drastically upset the fragile balance of power within Western Europe and lead to another large scale war?

In 1876 the countries of **Montenegro**, **Romania**, **Bulgaria** and once again **Serbia** rose up against Ottoman rule. Again the Turks brutally suppressed these rebellions. In 1877, in an attempt to help the Balkan nations achieve their independence, Russia again declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The Turks were easily defeated within a year by the Russians and were the subject of a very harsh treaty to be enforced by the Russians.

At the **Congress of Berlin in 1878**, led by the German Chancellor **Otto von Bismarck**, the European nations intervened on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. They did not want too much power to be given to Russia. Bismarck and the Western European nations gave Montenegro, Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia their independence as promised but forced Russia into a more generous set of peace terms for the Turks. The interaction of the Western nations in defense of the Ottomans meant that there was once again a balance of power in Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire remained intact for the interim years.



The Decline and Partition of Persia

The collapse of the **Persian/Safavid Empire** also caused several problems for the Ottoman Empire. Similar to the Ottomans, the Persian Empire had remained strong in the 1700s but Western European interference and hostilities caused its demise.



The Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Empires prior to the 1700s

Persia's greatest enemy was Russia. The new, modernized Russia in the late 1700s and early 1880s began to systematically seize area after area of the **Caucasus Mountains** that divided the two regions. By the early 1800s, the Russians had taken over the Caucasian states of **Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan**.

Armenia and Georgia were Christian states and had originally asked Russia to liberate them from Persia's Islamic rulers. They did not expect to become part of the Russian Empire, but they did. Armenia was now partially ruled by Russia and partly by the Ottoman Empire. The tensions between the Turks and the Russians would increase because of this geographical area.

During the 1800s, Russia and Britain overpowered the **Qajar Dynasty** that ruled Persia and split the nation into two parts, Russia controlling the northern zone, Britain controlling the south. The partition of Persia now balanced the rivalry of Russia and Britain in the region. It also meant that the Ottoman Empire was now surrounded by Western European nations.

The Russian Conquest of Central Asia

Any ideas that the Ottoman Empire had of expanding toward Central Asia was changed once the Russians began their conquest to colonize regions of Central Asia. Russia began to capture regions that had once been a major part of the Silk Road, connecting the Middle East with India and China. The goal of the Russians to take over this vast area was fourfold:

1. **Nationalistic Pride** urged the Russian leaders to venture farther East and become more powerful
2. **Natural Resources** were abundant in this area, especially cotton which was part of an industrial plan to allow Russia to compete with other Industrialized European powers.
3. **Strategic Policy** played a major role in Russia's plan for more territory. By taking over Central Asia, Russia could use natural barriers to fortify its long, open, southern frontier in case of attack The Ottoman Empire was one such enemy that the Russians needed to protect themselves from.
4. **A Warm-Water Port** was needed by Russia. Their goal was to occupy the areas all the way to the Indian Ocean and capture several ports. Unfortunately, this goal was never achieved

Russia was successful in its Central Asian campaigns. They effectively overran **Tashkent** in 1865, **Samarkand** in 1868, **Bukhara, Khiva and Khokand** in 1868, and their outermost boundary then became the **Afghan border**.

These Russian campaigns now threatened Britain's lines of communication and transport to India and its other Asian colonies. What developed was a rivalry between Britain and Russia, one that could very quickly include the attack upon and occupation of what remained of the Ottoman Empire.

As the 1800s came to an end, the internal difficulties within the Ottoman Empire were changing. The Young Turks became more and more dissatisfied with the sultan's failures to reform and strengthen the empire. The losses to Russia and Britain were enough to lead them to a rebellion. The emergence of these pro-Western army officers, with a desire for a more modern empire, changed the Ottoman Empire into a secular nation.

The Young Turks, led by **Enver Pasha** seized control of the empire in 1908. The last sultan, **Abdulhamid II was deposed** and a new, parliamentary government was created. Pasha made it a priority to modernize his military, seeking financial aid from Germany. As a series of social, economic and political reforms was taking place internally, the Ottoman Empire was become a strong ally of the emerging nation of Germany.

Despite the internal reforms and aid from Germany, the Young Turks were unable to save the Ottoman Empire. When Italy attacked and occupied the North African country of **Libya** in 1911, the last nation in Africa controlled by the Turks was lost. In 1912, **The First Balkan War** took place. The nations of Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria joined forces to defeat the Turks. During the **Second Balkan War** in 1913, the Ottoman's did gain back some of their losses from the first war but the result was not a major victory for the Turks.



Enver Pasha

When **World War I** began in 1914, the Ottomans joined in on the side of the **Triple Alliance**, namely Germany and Austria. During the war their territories were constantly under attack from the **Triple Entente**, Russia, Britain and France. When the war ended, the Ottoman Empire collapsed altogether. All of its Middle Eastern possessions would then be divided up between the British and the French.

The ending for the Ottoman Empire would be that as it no longer had any territories it had to change its leadership. In the 1920s the empire would be replaced by a modern Turkish state.

