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## ASIA: THE MIDDLE EAST, INDIA, AND EAST ASIA

### THE RISE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The formation of new empires, or renewed empires in China's case, was a crucial development in key parts of Asia during the early modern period. Japan was also the scene of significant political change, though without an imperial government of the same sort. The following chapters focus on political trends and values and invite comparisons of different Asian regions.

Between 1300 and 1450, the Ottoman Turks, initially one of many groups of Muslim warriors based on the eastern frontier of the Byzantine Empire, conquered much of western Anatolia and the Balkan Peninsula. Their most dramatic victory came in 1453 when Turkish forces broke through the massive walls surrounding the Byzantine capital of Constantinople (now Istanbul) and captured it.

A major turning point in world history, the conquest of Constantinople put the Ottomans in charge of the city that had symbolized Christian teachings and the legacy of the Roman Empire for more than a millennium. But more than symbols were at stake. Control of the choke point between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean boosted the fortunes of the Turks in two key arenas: long-distance trade and military deployments.

For about a century following 1453, Ottoman soldiers and sailors continued to push their borders outward. Meanwhile, the sultans (sovereigns) established a system of administrative rule that compared favorably with regimes elsewhere in the early modern period—in Europe, Russia, India, and China—and lasted until after World War I.

One feature of the Ottoman system of governance that made it distinctive was the reliance upon a type of slavery. In the Ottoman lands, slavery was based on religion rather than on skin color and on service in the imperial administration and army rather than labor on sugar plantations. Each year, the Turks conscripted Christian boys from Balkan villages and elsewhere, a practice known as *devshirme* (collection), and took them to the capital where they were trained to become administrators, soldiers in the elite Janissary corps, and, sometimes, palace officials.

The two selections provide clues to the reasons for the success of the Ottomans during the reign of the greatest of the sultans, Suleyman "the Lawgiver" (reigned 1520–1566), famous for his codification of Ottoman law, as well as other policies. In the first document, an inscription from a frontier garrison built by the Turks at Bender near

Selection I from Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600*, translated by Norman Itzkowitz and Colin Imber (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 41; Selection II from *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq* (1972) by Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, ed. and trans. by Edward Seymour Foster. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press, UK.

the western border of Ukraine, Suleyman proclaims his vast power. The second document comes from letters written by Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, ambassador from the Holy Roman Empire (also known as the Habsburg Empire) to the Ottomans from 1554 to 1562. Busbecq's memory of the 1529 Ottoman siege and near conquest of Vienna, the Habsburg capital, forms the subtext of his letters. How do these documents help us see key features of the Ottoman regime? In what ways did the Ottoman state resemble other large polities during the early modern period?

## THE REIGN OF SULEYMAN

### I. SULEYMAN PROCLAIMS HIS POWER

I am God's slave and sultan of this world. By the grace of God I am head of Muhammad's community. God's might and Muhammad's miracles are my companions. I am Süleymân, in whose name the *hutbe* [Friday sermon] is read in Mecca and Medina. In Baghdad I am the shah, in Byzantine realms the Caesar, and in Egypt the sultan; who sends his fleets to the seas of Europe, the Maghrib [North Africa] and India. I am the sultan who took the crown and throne of Hungary and granted them to a humble slave. The voivoda [governor] Petru [in Romania] raised his head in revolt, but my horse's hoofs ground him into the dust, and I conquered the land of Moldavia [Romania].

### II. FROM BUSBECQ'S LETTERS

#### A. *The Turkish Army (1560)*

The Sultan, when he sets out on a campaign, takes as many as 40,000 camels with him, and almost as many baggage-mules, most of whom, if his destination is Persia, are loaded with cereals of every kind, especially rice. Mules and camels are also employed to carry tents and arms and warlike machines and implements of every kind. The territories called Persia which are ruled by the Sophi, as we call him (the Turkish name being Kizilbash), are much less fertile than our country; and, further, it is the custom of the inhabitants, when their land is invaded, to lay waste and burn everything, and so force the enemy to retire through lack of food. The latter, therefore, are faced with serious peril, unless they bring an abundance of food with them. They are careful, however, to avoid touching the supplies which they carry with them as long as they are marching against their foes, but reserve them, as far as possible, for their return journey, when the moment for retirement comes and they are forced to retrace their steps through regions which the enemy has laid waste, or which the immense multitude of men and baggage animals has, as it were, scraped bare, like a swarm of locusts. It is only then that the Sultan's store of provisions is opened, and just enough food to sustain life is weighed out each day to the Janissaries and the other troops in attendance upon him. The other soldiers are badly off, if they have not provided food for their own use; most of them, having often experienced such difficulties during their campaigns—and this is particularly true of the cavalry—take a horse on a leading-rein loaded with many of the necessities

of life. These include a small piece of canvas to use as a tent, which may protect them from the sun or a shower of rain, also some clothing and bedding and a private store of provisions, consisting of a leather sack or two of the finest flour, a small jar of butter, and some spices and salt; on these they support life when they are reduced to the extremes of hunger. They take a few spoonfuls of flour and place them in water, adding a little butter, and then flavour the mixture with salt and spices. This, when it is put on the fire, boils and swells up so as to fill a large bowl. They eat of it once or twice a day, according to the quantity, without any bread, unless they have with them some toasted bread or biscuit. They thus contrive to live on short rations for a month or even longer, if necessary. Some soldiers take with them a little sack full of beef dried and reduced to a powder, which they employ in the same manner as the flour, and which is of great benefit as a more solid form of nourishment. Sometimes, too, they have recourse to horseflesh; for in a great army a large number of horses necessarily dies, and any that die in good condition furnish a welcome meal to men who are starving. I may add that men whose horses have died, when the Sultan moves his camp, stand in a long row on the road by which he is to pass with their harness or saddles on their heads, as a sign that they have lost their horses, and implore his help to purchase others. The Sultan then assists them with whatever gift he thinks fit. . . .

I mentioned that baggage animals are employed on campaign to carry the arms and tents, which mainly belong to the Janissaries. The Turks take the utmost care to keep their soldiers in good health and protected from the inclemency of the weather; against the foe they must protect themselves, but their health is a matter for which the State must provide. Hence one sees the Turk better clothed than armed. He is particularly afraid of the cold, against which, even in the summer, he guards himself by wearing three garments, of which the innermost—call it shirt or what you will—is woven of coarse thread and provides much warmth. As a further protection against cold and rain tents are always carried, in which each man is given just enough space to lie down, so that one tent holds twenty-five or thirty Janissaries. The material for the garments to which I have referred is provided at the public expense. To prevent any disputes or suspicion of favour, it is distributed in the following manner. The soldiers are summoned by companies in the darkness to a place chosen for the purpose—the balloting station or whatever name you like to give it—where are laid out ready as many portions of cloth as there are soldiers in the company; they enter and take whatever chance offers them in the darkness, and they can only ascribe it to chance whether they get a good or a bad piece of cloth. For the same reason their pay is not counted out to them but weighed, so that no one can complain that he has received light or chipped coins. Also their pay is given them not on the day on which it falls due but on the day previous.

The armour which is carried is chiefly for the use of the household cavalry, for the Janissaries are lightly armed and do not usually fight at close quarters, but use muskets. When the enemy is at hand and a battle is expected, the armour is brought out, but it consists mostly of old pieces picked up in various battlefields, the spoil of former victories. These are distributed to the household cavalry, who are otherwise protected by only a light shield. You can image how badly the armour, thus hurriedly given out, fits its wearers. One man's breastplate is too small,

another's helmet is too large, another's coat of mail is too heavy for him to bear. There is something wrong everywhere; but they bear it with equanimity and think that only a coward finds fault with his arms, and vow to distinguish themselves in the fight, whatever their equipment may be; such is the confidence inspired by repeated victories and constant experience of warfare. Hence also they do not hesitate to re-enlist a veteran infantryman in the cavalry, though he has never fought on horseback, since they are convinced that one who has warlike experience and long service will acquit himself well in any kind of fighting. . . .

*B. Bows and Arrows and Other Matters (1560)*

In many streets of Constantinople and at cross-roads there are shooting-grounds where not only boys and young men but even men of more advanced years congregate. An official is put in charge of the target and looks after it, watering the butt every day, since otherwise it would dry up and the arrows would not stick in it; for in



**The Janissaries in European art.** Woodcut by Melchior Lorich, 1576, British Museum, London, from "The World of Islam" ed. Bernard Lewis, (Thames & Hudson Ltd.)



**The Janissaries in Ottoman art.** (Sonia Halliday Photographs)



the shooting-grounds they only use blunt arrows. The custodian of the target is always present and extracts the arrows from the earth, and after cleaning them throws them back to the archers. This entitles him to a fixed payment from every one, which provides him with a livelihood. The front of the target looks like a small door, which may perhaps have given rise to the proverb about 'shooting against the door,' which the Greeks applied to any one who altogether missed the target. For I believe that the Greeks formerly used the same kind of target, and that the Turks adopted it from them. I know, of course, that the use of the bow by the Turks is very ancient, but there is no reason why, when they came as conquerors to the Greek cities, they should not have continued the use of the target and butt which they found there. For no nation has shown less reluctance to adopt the useful inventions of others; for example, they have appropriated to their own use large and small cannons and many other of our discoveries. They have, however, never been able to bring themselves to print books and set up public clocks. They hold that their scriptures, that is, their sacred books, would no longer be scriptures if they were printed; and if they established public clocks, they think that the authority of their muezzins and their ancient rites would suffer diminution. In other matters they pay great respect to the time-honoured customs of foreign nations, even to the detriment of their own religious scruples. This, however, is only true of the lower classes. Every one knows how far they are from sympathizing with the rites of the Christian Church. The Greek priests, however, have a custom of, as it were, opening the closed sea by blessing the waters at a fixed date in the spring, before which the sailors do not readily entrust themselves to the waves. This ceremony the Turks do not altogether disregard. And so, when their preparations for a voyage have been made, they come to the Greeks and ask whether the waters have been blessed; and if they say that they have not been blessed, they put off the sailing, but, if they are told that the ceremony has been performed, they embark and set sail. . . .

There is one point about Turkish military manoeuvres which I must not omit, namely, the old custom which goes back to the Parthians of pretending to flee on horseback and then shooting with their arms at the enemy when he rashly pursues. They practise the rapid execution of this device in the following manner. They fix a brazen ball on the top of a very high pole, or mast, erected on level ground, and urge their horses at full speed towards the mast; and then, when they have almost passed it, they suddenly turn round and, leaning back, discharge an arrow at the ball, while the horse continues its course. By frequent practice they become able without any difficulty to hit their enemy unawares by shooting backwards as they fly. . . .

### *C. Christian Slaves (1555)*

After remaining about a fortnight at Constantinople in order to regain my strength, I started on my journey to Vienna, the beginning of which may be said to have been ill omened. Just as we were leaving the city, we were met by wagon-loads of boys and girls who were being brought from Hungary to be sold in Constantinople. There is no commoner kind of merchandise than this in Turkey; and, just as on the roads out of Antwerp one meets loads of various kinds of goods, so from time to time we were met by gangs of wretched Christian slaves of every kind who were being led to

horrible servitude. Youths and men of advanced years were driven along in herds or else were tied together with chains, as horses with us are taken to market, and trailed along in a long line. At the sight I could scarcely restrain my tears in pity for the wretched plight of the Christian population.

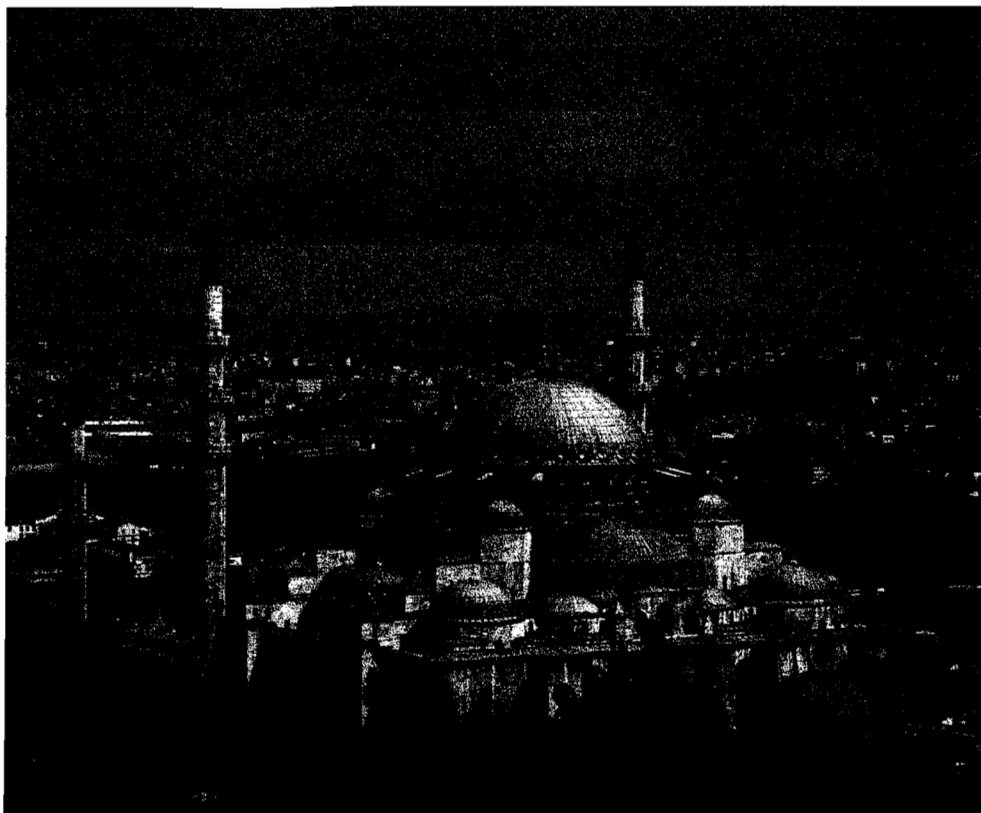
### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does the inscription reveal about Suleyman? For whom do you think it was intended?
2. What impressed Busbecq about the Ottoman army?
3. In what ways do the Ottomans seem to have been selective borrowers of cutting-edge technologies from Europe? How do you explain the selectivity?
4. What is Busbecq's reaction to the *devshirme*? Can you tell whether he is opposed to coerced labor in general or merely to the enslavement of Christians?

## THE SULEYMANIYE MOSQUE IN ISTANBUL

After the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, they converted the famed Church of Saint Sophia into a mosque and then sponsored the construction of hundreds of new mosques and other religious buildings throughout their realm. Sinan the Great (1489–1588), the architect in charge of these projects from the 1530s onward, was a product of the *devshirme* system, having been born to a Christian family in central Anatolia.

Architectural historians consider the mosque Sinan designed for Suleyman to be one of his greatest triumphs. Featuring a massive central dome and many smaller ones, the mosque is surrounded by a complex of buildings (*kulliye*) that includes five madrasas (colleges), a medical school, a hospital, numerous courtyards and baths, and the mausoleums of Suleyman and his wife Haseki Hurrem.



**The Suleymaniye Mosque complex with the Golden Horn in the background.**  
(Purepix / Alamy)