

Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was a transcontinental empire based out of modern-day Turkey, which covered much of Southeastern Europe, Western Asia and North Africa between the 14th and early 20th centuries.

It was one of the three 'Gunpowder Empires' of the late medieval period. The other two being the Safavid Empire of Iran and the Mughal Empire of India.

The Ottoman Empire is covered in the World History segment of the UPSC Mains Exam.

History of the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Turks, named after the Turkish ruler Osman I who founded the empire in 1299, began a rapid expansion into the territories of the erstwhile Byzantine Empire in the mid 14th century. Eventually it led to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, ending the Byzantine Empire. This marked the beginning of a Turkish golden age. Indirectly, the capture of Constantinople was one of the events that set the Renaissance in motion.

Further conquests would be made during the rule of Suleiman I, also known as Suleiman the Magnificent. During his rule, the Ottomans invaded Persia, captured Baghdad, took control of the island of Rhodes and crossed the river Danube into Hungary where they won the battle of Mohacs in 1526.

By 1529, the Turkish army was outside the walls of Vienna, poised to burst into western Europe. However the siege of Vienna was lifted and Europe breathed a sigh of relief. Ottoman Sea power was virtually unchallenged in the Mediterranean basin until the battle of Lepanto in 1571 ended Turkish threat to Europe by sea.

Suleiman I also sought to expand his Empire's borders or at least its influence in the Indian subcontinent. This put them at odds with the Portuguese. However, this venture was permanently put to a stop following the Siege of Diu in 1538 which ended in a Portuguese victory and permanently stopped Ottoman forays into Indian territory.

The Ottoman Empire was always in a perpetual rivalry with the Safavid Empire of Persia. Thrice did Suleiman try to conquer it with various results. But Europe benefited from the Ottoman-Safavid Wars as it stopped the empire's advancing into Europe. Following the death of the Suleiman I in 1566, the empire still maintained a flexible economy and military through the 16th century. But the Ottoman military system began to stagnate in contrast to those of its European rivals, Habsburg and Russian empires. A series of military defeats at their hands prompted the

Ottoman administration to modernise and reform itself. The empire became relatively stable despite the loss of its Eastern European territories.

Hoping to escape diplomatic isolation and further territorial losses the Ottoman Empire allied itself with German and eventually, the Central Powers when World War I broke out in 1914. To its credit, it held on to its territories despite internal dissent.

The Empire did end up on the losing side of World War I. Subjected to the Treaty of Versailles, parts of its territories were occupied by the Allied Powers resulting in its partitioning and the loss of its Middle Eastern territories, which were divided between the United Kingdom and France. One result of this territorial division was the drawing up of the Sykes-Picot agreement

The successful Turkish War of Independence led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk against the occupying Allies led to the emergence of the Republic of Turkey in the Anatolian heartland and the abolition of the Ottoman monarch in 1922.

Administration and Economy of the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman administration system consisted of two main dimensions : civilian and military. The Sultan was the highest authority. The civil system was based on local administrative units based on the region's characteristics.

- Though the sultan was the supreme monarch, the sultan's political and executive authority was delegated. The politics of the state had advisors and ministers part of council know as Divan
- The Divan in the initial years of the Ottoman state was composed of the elders of the various Turkish tribes. It's composition was modified to include military officers and local elites
- In 1320m a Grand Vizier was appointed to assume certain responsibilities.
- The Grand Vizier wielded considerable power, independent from that of the sultan.
- Beginning with the late 16th century, sultans withdrew from politics and the Grand Vizier became the de facto head of state.

The Ottoman legal system accepted the religious law over its subjects. At the same time the *Qanun* (or *Kanun*), a secular legal system, co-existed with religious law. The Ottoman Empire was always organized around a system of local jurisprudence. Legal administration in the Ottoman Empire was part of a larger scheme of balancing central and local authority.

Economic System

The Ottoman economic system closely resembled the basic concepts of state and society of the Middle-East in which the basic idea was that it was the state's duty to consolidate and extend the ruler's power in getting rich resources of revenues. It believed that a productive and prosperous population was the key to a robust economy.

The Ottoman economy greatly expanded during the early modern period, with particularly high growth rates during the first half of the eighteenth century.

By developing commercial centres and routes, encouraging people to extend the area of cultivated land in the country and international trade through its dominions, the state performed basic economic functions in the Empire. But in all this, the financial and political interests of the state were dominant.

Legacy of the Ottoman Empire

After ruling for more than 600 years, the Ottoman Empire is remembered for its powerful military, ethnic diversity, artistic ventures, religious tolerance and architectural marvels.

The great empire's influence is still very much alive in the present-day Turkish Republic, a modern, mostly secular nation thought of by many scholars as a continuation of the Ottoman Empire.

But the other legacies it left behind still continues to affect the Middle-East in a different way particularly from the fallout of the Sykes Picot agreement, which resulted in the division of the region based more on European lines rather than ethnic and religious ones.. But the ultimate outcome was the foundation laid for decolonisation of the Middle East, as the absence of a central authority and the presence of foreign powers gave way to many nationalist movements in the Middle-East.