

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Vienna, the Second Siege of

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The rise and fall of societies, nations and civilizations does not take place overnight. Barring natural calamities or invasions, the process takes place over generations. Critical events are like flashes in the panorama of history that show up the stresses built up in societies over a period of time. An observer living in Istanbul in the year 1683 would have been awed by the expanse of the Ottoman Empire. Extending over three continents, it was by far the largest land empire in the world. In Europe, it extended to the very gates of Vienna, and included Hungary, Romania, Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece, and parts of Poland, Ukraine and Russia. In Asia, it included Anatolia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iraq, the Persian Gulf region, Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Israel and Lebanon. From the Suez area, it extended over North Africa through Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. The eastern Mediterranean was an Ottoman preserve. Only Sa'adid Morocco, with its capital at Marrakesh, separated the Ottoman Empire from the Atlantic Ocean and America. The world of Islam-with the exception of Safavid Persia-recognized its claim to the Caliphate. Its embassies were honored in Moghul India and in the Emirates of the Sudan and of East Africa. European monarchs eagerly sought trade and commerce with the realm of the Sultan. Ottoman ships plied the Indian Ocean, and carried goods and guns to places as far away as the Straits of Malacca. Its capital, Istanbul, was the largest cosmopolitan city in the world with a population approaching a million. Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Armenians lived peacefully together, each governed by their own religious code. Freedom of religion was guaranteed. The Empire, with extensive agricultural lands in Rumilia (European Turkey), Iraq, Syria and Egypt, was divided into 32 provinces, each with an appointed governor (*pasha* or *bayg*), with a rank commensurate with his position. Some of the provinces were grouped under a governor-general (beglerbeg). In turn, each province was divided into districts (*sanjaks*) administered by a sanjakkbey who had the additional responsibility of supplying a prescribed number of troops to the governor in times of war. Administrative and military functions were thus combined at the local level, leading to efficient governance. The empire lay across the main east-west and north-south trade routes. External trade with Persia and India to the east, and the Italian city-states to the west was brisk. In North Africa, caravan routes cut across the Sahara and carried on a thriving trade with the states of the Sudan. Istanbul, Alexandria, Algiers, Smyrna, Aleppo, Adrianopole, Basra and Yemen were thriving trade centers. Tax revenues were derived from agriculture and trade. Land was owned by the state and was leased to peasants and officers of the army who were required to raise horses and supply soldiers (*sipahis*) in proportion to the land allocated to them. Crafts were organized into guilds. Members of the guilds were often associated with local Sufi *zawiyas*. The system ensured that the craftsmen were represented both in the economic and the social milieu of society.

The Ottoman Empire was an Islamic State governed by the *Shariah*. Although the Ottomans followed the Hanafi Fiqh, all four of the Sunni Schools of Fiqh enjoyed equal weight before the law. Even with their adversaries, the Safavids of Persia, who practiced the Ithna Ashari Fiqh, the Ottomans agreed on the principles of *adl* (justice) and *ihsan* (noble work). The Grand Mufti of Istanbul carried the title of *Shaykh ul Islam*, and was a powerful man in the Empire, although he held that position only at the pleasure of the Sultan. The mufti's consent was required on important matters of legislation, including a declaration of war. The *kadis* performed the administration of justice at the local levels. Religious endowments, known as *awqaf*, maintained schools, roads, canals and other public works. In this function, the role of the *awqaf* was supplemented by the work of the Sufi *zawiyas*.

The Empire was held together by the army, an institution that had enjoyed the highest prestige since the early days of the *ghazis* of Rum. Since the reign of Bayazid I (d.1402), the standing army was composed of young men who were requisitioned from the conquered territories. These men, brought into Ottoman territories as boys, were trained in the arts of war, exposed to Islamic teachings, and inducted into the army. These were the *janissars*, who constituted the most efficient fighting machine in Europe for over three centuries. In 1683, the core of the standing army of *janissars* had approximately 120,000 men. This standing army was supplemented at times of war by *sipahis* provided by the provincial governors. Each *sipahi* was obligated to provide his own horse and armament, the expenses for which were offset from revenues derived from land allocated to him. There were more than 100,000 *sipahis* in the empire. In addition, the Tatars of Crimea supplied 30,000 troops when called upon to do so.

Sulaiman the Magnificent (d.1565) had endowed the Empire with the institutions that were to serve the Ottomans well into the following century. Under his successors these institutions had been allowed to decay, so that by 1683 the vast Empire was like an old oak tree, which was rotted from within. Under the façade of its outward expanse there were structural and technological weaknesses that were soon to surface and cause a galactic regression of its boundaries. The principal reason for this weakness lay in the structure of the Ottoman enterprise. The empire was like an inverted pyramid standing on its head. The efficiency of this structure depended on the capability of the Sultan. Under capable and far-sighted Sultans, such as Sulaiman, the Empire prospered. When the Sultan was incompetent, or had no inclination to govern, corruption set in.

In the hundred years following the death of Sulaiman the Magnificent, few Sultans, with the possible exception of Murad IV (1623-1640), demonstrated effective skills and capabilities. They spent more time in the harem than paying attention to affairs of the state. The harem itself emerged as a center of power wherein the mother of the Sultan and the Sultan's consorts jockeyed for power. The chief eunuch of the harem became an intermediary between the harem and the court. Appointments to high posts were often made based on influence rather than merit. Neglect from the highest levels bred corruption. Under the circumstances, the burden of administering the Empire fell on the Grand Vizier, a position of high risk in the Empire. If the Grand Vizier was successful, he was rewarded with the highest honor and riches. If he failed, he faced execution. The process carried with it a ruthless logic. Only the most capable aspired to the office. The potential rewards were so great that the council of viziers themselves became a focus of intrigue and influence peddling.

The most important change in the Empire was a transformation of the standing army as a result of prolonged warfare with Persia and the Christian powers of Europe. Naval warfare in the eastern Mediterranean against the combined navies of Venice, Spain and the Vatican took a heavy toll at the Battle of Lepanto (1571). Naval engagements against the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean were ongoing and inconclusive. The campaigns in North Africa (1572-1578) against the armies of Charles V were prolonged and arduous. The intermittent war with Safavid Persia over the control of Azerbaijan and Iraq

(1585-1610) was bloody. To the north, the Russians started a new front on the River Volga. The 13-year war with Austria (1593-1606) for control of Hungary brought no additional gains. These conflicts imposed an enormous strain on resources of men and material. The supply of young men from Albania and the conquered territories for induction into the *janissars* was insufficient to meet this demand. Up until that time, young men who were born into Muslim families were precluded from entry into the *janissary* corps. The strain of continued war and the losses sustained therein made the Ottomans change this policy. Native born Muslims were inducted into the *janissary* corps for the first time. This had a two-fold impact. First, it increased the size of the standing army, adding to the burden on the treasury. Second, the old guard resented the introduction of the new recruits, and morale suffered.

The financial strain of enlarging and maintaining the army was compounded by the influx of silver from America. Starting with the year 1519, the Spanish transported enormous quantities of the metal from Mexico to Madrid. From there, the silver found its way into France, England, Italy and the Ottoman Empire. Simultaneous discoveries (1518) of silver mines in Germany added to the flood of this precious metal on the continent. As the currencies of Europe were based on silver, the infusion of so much silver lowered the value of the currencies. Inflation became endemic. The Ottoman soldiers and administrative personnel, unable to feed their families on fixed incomes, demanded an increase in pay. In 1589, the *janissars* rose in rebellion. The Ottomans responded by devaluing their currency and increasing taxation on the peasants. The increased taxation, in turn, caused an increase in migration from the villages to the urban centers, with resultant widespread dislocation in agriculture. A large number of these vagrants joined the auxiliary troops of the Sultan where their lack of discipline caused additional problems. The breakdown in the morale of the *janissars* reduced their fighting efficiency. Often, they made up for their reduced purchasing power by imposing themselves on the peasants and helping themselves to their granary and their fodder. A breakdown in discipline made them pawns in the competing centers of power in the harem and the council of viziers.

A combination of these adverse circumstances explains the Ottoman losses to the Safavids in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and Iraq (1593-1640). Sultan Murad IV, who demonstrated an exceptional zeal for affairs of state, and a capability, intelligence and dedication unmatched since Sultan Sulaiman, arrested the slide towards disintegration. The first nine years of his reign were spent in consolidating his position within the court and eliminating competing centers of power. Taking personal charge of state affairs in 1632, he moved decisively, first to eliminate rebellious elements in the provinces, and then to recapture Tabriz (1635) and Baghdad (1638), which had fallen to the Safavids. A prolonged war with Persia ensued, at the end of which Baghdad remained in Ottomans hands but Tabriz reverted to Safavid (1639) control. By the Treaty of Zuhab (1639), the border between Anatolia and Persia was demarcated, and it corresponds roughly to the present boundaries between Turkey and Persia. To protect the peasants and the merchants from brigands, Sultan Murad issued the *Adalat Nameh* (Code of Justice), which served as a blueprint for justice in the Ottoman empire until the 19th century. Sultan Murad passed away in 1640.

There were no major hostilities with the European powers during the reign of Sultan Murad IV. The Europeans were fighting among themselves during the thirty-year war (1618-1648), and had neither the will nor the resources to start a conflict with the Ottomans. However, the situation changed soon after the death of Murad. The Knights of St. John, based in Malta, regularly raided the coasts of Syria and North Africa. The island of Crete, controlled by Venice, served as their base. In 1645, an Ottoman fleet set sail for Crete to drive them out. It was to be the start of a long war in which the two most powerful navies of the eastern Mediterranean, those of the Ottomans and the Venetians, tested their mettle against each other. The war lasted until 1669 when Venice finally ceded Crete to the Ottomans.

In Istanbul, meanwhile, the process of disintegration that was evident before Murad IV was set in motion again after his death. His successor, Ibrahim (1640-1648), was weak, vacillating, and showed little inclination to govern. Intrigues in the harem and the court surfaced again. The Grand Vizier, Mustafa Pasha, tried to arrest the centrifugal forces. He reduced the size of the standing army, paid soldiers and bureaucrats alike on time, reduced taxes on peasants, and put the currency on a solid footing. His reforms evoked the jealousy of the harem and the court alike. Mustafa Pasha was framed, deposed and executed in 1644. The situation in the capital went from bad to worse, and in 1648, the *janissars* rebelled, dethroned and executed Sultan Ibrahim. Mehmet IV, then a boy of seven, ascended the throne. Since he was too young to rule, the Grand Vizier, Mehmet Pasha, managed the affairs of state. The job was always a precarious one and tenure depended on performance. In 1649, when the Turkish navy suffered reverses in their naval engagements against the Venetians in the Aegean Sea, Mehmet Pasha was dismissed and executed. His successor, Grand Vizier Ibshir Pasha was equally frustrated by palace intrigue from reforming the administration. He too was executed in 1655 and Kurpulu Mehmet Pasha was appointed the Grand Vizier. Mehmet Pasha was an able, intelligent, determined and experienced administrator. It was he who guided the ship of state while Sultan Mehmet IV was busy with the harem and hunting. Mehmet purged the administration of incompetent personnel, fostered discipline in the army, eliminated extortion, punished greedy tax collectors, and ruthlessly put down any rebellion. He reorganized the navy and ordered it to lift the blockade of Istanbul that the Venetians had imposed. One by one, the islands of the Aegean that had been lost to Venice were won back, and Venice was forced to sue for peace. Mehmet Pasha died in 1661 and was succeeded as Grand Vizier by his son Fazil Ahmed Pasha. Fazil, a cultivated, urbane man, continued the reforms of his father. He is known in history for his encouragement of art and literature and his policy of tolerance towards Christians, Jews and other minorities. The combined period of the two Kurpulus, Mehmet Pasha and Fazil Ahmed (1655-1676), is known as the golden age for Turkish arts. Under the two Kurpulus, the old Ottoman institutions regained their former vitality, and the empire regained its former military muscle.

It was about this time that the struggle between the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs for control of Central Europe heated up again, and was to climax with the siege of Vienna in 1683. The Grand Vizier demanded that the Hapsburgs cease their intervention in Hungary, demolish the fortresses they had built while the Ottomans had been preoccupied with internal turmoil, and resume the payment of annual tribute to the Sultan. When the demands were refused, Fazil Ahmed advanced from Buda-Pest towards Vienna (1663), and captured several key forts. The demonstration of renewed Turkish strength alarmed the Europeans. The Hapsburgs of Austria were Catholic, and they appealed to the Vatican for help. Pope Alexander VII formed a "Holy League" against the Ottomans. Venice, Genoa and the German principalities signed on. Louis XIV of France sent a contingent. Additional troops were dispatched from as far away as Portugal and Spain. The two armies met at the Battle of St. Gotthard (1664). The contest was a draw, and it ended with the Treaty of Vasvar, which reconfirmed Ottoman control of Hungary. But it also demonstrated to the Europeans that the Turks could be held at bay. To the north, Turkish armies advanced deep into the Ukraine and Poland (1672), and forced the Poles to pay tribute. Thus, for a while in the 17th century, the principal powers of eastern and central Europe, including Austria, and Poland paid tribute to the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul or to his vassals.

The battle for Hungary started again when the Treaty of Vasvar expired in 1682. Ahmed Pasha passed away in 1676, and Kara Mustafa Pasha was appointed the Grand Vizier. Capable, determined, and ambitious, he saw the manifest destiny of the Ottomans as the principal power dominating Christian Europe. The Hungarians preferred Ottoman rule to the Hapsburgs because the Protestants as well as the Orthodox Christians of Hungary enjoyed greater freedom under the Muslim Turks than they did under the Catholic Austrians. So, when Austria made a move into Hungary, Thokoly, King of Hungary, appealed to the Ottomans for help. A contingent of Turkish troops arrived, and with their help, Thokoly

managed to extend his realm in western Hungary. Trying to avoid renewed war, the Hapsburgs sent an envoy to Istanbul to negotiate an extension of the treaty of Vasvar. Mustafa Pasha demanded the surrender of Gyor, a strong Austrian fortress located between Buda-Pest and Vienna. War became inevitable when the Austrians refused, and Mustafa Pasha advanced towards Hungary with a powerful army of over a hundred thousand, backed by a corps of artillery units. This formidable army was joined by 30,000 troops from the Crimean Tatars. The year was 1683.

Ottoman historians have debated to this day whether Grand Vizier Mustafa Pasha had Vienna as the target of this mission or whether he moved in that direction to exploit a military opportunity. They are also divided as to whether Sultan Mehmet IV knew in advance of the march on Vienna. There is general agreement only that the approved target was the great fortress of Gyor. Against the advice of some of his generals, and of his Tatar allies, Mustafa bypassed the fort of Gyor and advanced towards Vienna. He arrived at the Hapsburg capital on July 14, 1683.

Much had changed since Sulaiman the Magnificent stood at the gates of Vienna in September 1526. At that time, the Turks enjoyed overwhelming superiority in field guns and in tactics. Their cavalry was the fiercest in the world. By 1683, the Europeans had caught up with the Ottomans in metallurgy and ballistics, and their field guns were a match for the Ottomans. In tactics and discipline too, the Hapsburgs and the Germans could successfully challenge the Turks. Sultan Sulaiman had withdrawn at the early onset of winter in Central Europe after forcing the Hapsburgs to pay tribute. Grand Vizier Mustafa Pasha was determined to succeed where Sulaiman the Magnificent had failed, and to make a name for himself in history. He had arrived at the capital in mid-summer, allowing himself plenty of time for a successful siege.

The Hapsburgs were ill prepared for this invasion, believing that the Ottomans would confine their campaigns to western Hungary and retreat. Vienna was defended by only 15,000 troops. Once it became obvious that Mustafa was headed for their capital, Leopold I of Austria appealed to the European powers for help. Pope Innocent XI sent a large amount of cash, and organized a Catholic alliance. Louis XIV of France stayed aloof, but the Dukes of Bavaria and Saxony in Germany sent troops. King Sobiesky of Poland formed an alliance with the Hapsburgs and marched forth with 40,000 troops. Portugal and Spain sent contingents. The Venetians offered help as well.

What followed were a series of missteps and miscalculations on the part of the Turks, and a confluence of circumstances favorable to the Europeans. The Ottoman army arrived at the gates of Vienna in July 1683 and laid siege to it. The Crimean Tatars, together with some Turkish contingents, continued their westward advance and raided territories deep into Austria and Central Germany. Mustafa Pasha was in such a great hurry to reach the capital that he had left behind the heavy guns in the Ottoman arsenal, believing that mining would accomplish a breach of the fort. This proved to be a serious miscalculation. The walls of Vienna were too well constructed to yield to light cannon, and mining was a time consuming process. Meanwhile, King Sobiesky of Poland arrived with his troops and was joined by German contingents from Bavaria, Saxony, as well as a contingent from Lorraine. Together, this host of over 70,000 marched towards Vienna. The situation in the capital was desperate. The Ottomans had succeeded in mining the walls, and their light artillery had demolished sections of the fort. The city might have fallen to a determined assault. At this critical juncture the Ottomans made a grave tactical error in permitting the Catholic armies to cross the River Danube towards the fort. Turkish historians maintain that Mustafa Pasha had asked the Tatar Khan to guard the river, but the latter had stood by as the European troops crossed because of his personal animosity towards the Grand Vizier. Even so, Mustafa made another tactical error in trying to stem the advance of the enemy using his cavalry. The European armies were well disciplined, well led, used cannon effectively, and were fighting a holy war

to defend a capital city. The battle was fought on September 12, 1683. When it was over, more than 10,000 Turkish soldiers had perished against half that number for the Christians. The Ottomans retreated, having lost their tents, their treasures, and their field guns.

This was the first major defeat suffered by the Ottoman armies at the hands of the Europeans. It proved to be as much of a disaster to the Ottomans as was the defeat at Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) for the Al Muhaddith in Spain. The Austrians followed up on their victory, advanced deep into Hungary, and pushed the Ottoman armies south of the River Danube. Sultan Mehmet IV who had idled away his time in hunting, blamed the defeat on Kara Mustafa, and had him strangled at Belgrade (1683). There was deep dissatisfaction in the court and among the general population with Mehmet IV, and his preoccupation with hunting, in the face of the grave crisis facing the empire. Even the Shaykh ul Islam, Mufti Ali Effendi of Istanbul joined in the demand that the Emperor put his house in order (1684). When there was no response, the army marched into Istanbul, deposed and imprisoned Mehmet (1687), and installed his brother Sulaiman II on the throne.

The second siege of Vienna marks the high point of Muslim expansion in Europe. Its failure highlights the incipient weakness of Muslim armies in technology, tactics and discipline in comparison to those of the Europeans. The Ottoman retreat began about the same time as the Moghul reverses at the hands of the Marathas in India, and the Safavid losses in northern Persia to the Russians. After Vienna, the Ottomans ceased to be a threat to Europe, although the resilient Turks made recurrent efforts to reform and revitalize their institutions. A sustained counter thrust from Europe began, which was aimed initially at the Balkans and the Caucasus, but expanded over the years to North Africa and Egypt, and resulted ultimately in the destruction of the Ottoman Empire in the Great War of 1914-1918. Muslim power had passed its zenith. The hour of Europe had arrived.

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