

# **European Relations with the Ottoman World**

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The Ottoman Empire was one of the great powers of the early modern world, ruling large swathes of Eastern Europe along with much of the Middle East and North Africa, and it played a crucial role in European history. The Ottoman Empire pervaded early modern international relations, it supplied Western Europe with several valuable commodities, and it was a source of fascination for travel writers and their readers (Baer 2021). Christian Europeans often portrayed the Ottomans as quintessentially ‘other’: as exotic, barbarous and intimidating infidels. However, while the boundary between Christianity and Islam was rhetorically formidable, in practice it was surprisingly permeable, and many western Europeans found much to admire in their eastern neighbor (Malcolm 2019).

The territory the Ottomans ruled was very familiar to western European imaginations, encompassing regions many Christians considered rightfully their own: the Holy Land, the eastern and African provinces of the old Roman Empire and Constantinople. But while western Christians were expanding aggressively into the Americas and south and east Asia, their conflict with the Ottomans was primarily defensive. From its base in the Balkans and western Anatolia, the Ottoman Empire grew deeper into Eastern Europe for much of the early modern period. The sixteenth century saw the Ottomans conquer Belgrade, Buda and much of Hungary, while reducing Transylvania and Wallachia to vassalage. In the seventeenth century, they captured Crete from Venice and pushed into Poland-Lithuania north of the Black Sea. They even besieged the Habsburg capital Vienna twice: in 1529 and 1683.

Ottoman fortunes started to turn at the end of the seventeenth century. Their failed siege of Vienna in 1683 was followed by a long war with the Habsburgs that ended in defeat. The Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699 marked the first time the Ottomans had formally conceded territory to their Christian neighbors. The first half of the eighteenth century saw a stalemate, with the Ottomans winning and losing territory in several wars with Russia, Austria and Venice. In the second half Ottoman military decline accelerated rapidly, with particularly significant losses to Russia, and the century concluded with France’s occupation of the empire’s richest province, Egypt. But we should not read back into the early modern period signs of the Ottoman Empire’s eventual disintegration. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Ottoman Empire was one of the strongest powers in Europe. Ottoman–European relations did not consist only of war, however. Several Christian nations forged political alliances with the Ottomans and trade relations were strong even between the empire and its rivals.

## **Who were the Ottomans?**

The Ottoman Empire originated as a small principality on the Byzantine frontier in the late thirteenth century. The history of its expansion is complex, but two events in particular were crucial in transforming it into a major world empire.

The first was the conquest of Constantinople – the most prestigious city in Christendom, with a glorious imperial heritage – in 1453. To Christians, its fall was a tragedy; in the Muslim world, it was a propaganda coup for the Ottomans. After the conquest, Sultan Mehmed the

Conqueror presented himself as both a Muslim Sultan and a new Roman Emperor, claiming the title Kaysar (Caesar). The second event was Sultan Selim I's defeat of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517 and the acquisition of all its territory in Syria, Egypt and the Hijaz (western Arabia). This included the Muslim holy cities Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, and from this point on the Ottoman Sultans used the prestigious titles khadim al-haramayn (protector of the holy sanctuaries) and, less consistently, CALIPH. The Ottoman Empire united two heritages: it was a Mediterranean and a Muslim power.

Early modern Europeans called the Ottoman Empire 'Turkey' and its inhabitants 'Turks'. This was only partly accurate. The Ottoman dynasty were Turkish Muslims; the other members of the ruling class were of diverse origins. From its earliest days the Ottoman elite drew in Byzantine and Serbian as well as Turkish nobility. Later, it absorbed Albanians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Georgians, Circassians, Abkhazians, Kurds and Arabs, all of whom assimilated to Ottoman high culture. This culture's principal language was Ottoman Turkish. But to be fully literate meant also to read and write Persian, the language of poetry, and Arabic, the language of law and science. The ruling class referred to themselves not as Turks, but as Ottomans. To them, the term 'Turk' referred to a Muslim peasant or shepherd.

A significant source of recruitment for the Ottoman ruling elite in the sixteenth century was the empire's Christian population in the Balkans. A periodic levy of Christian boys from the villages of this region, known as the **DEVSHIRME**, enslaved selected youths. The boys were converted to Islam and educated at the palace in preparation for a lifetime of military or administrative service. Many joined the Janissaries, the empire's formidable infantry regiment that was the backbone of Ottoman military power. The most talented rose through the ranks to fill the highest positions in the imperial government: many of the Grand Viziers (prime ministers) of the sixteenth century were devshirme recruits (Imber 2009; Box 1). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the devshirme faded from prominence, and free-born Muslims increasingly dominated the ruling class (Tezcan 2010). But slaves of Christian origin – captured in the Caucasus and by Mediterranean privateers – always remained a significant component of the Ottoman ruling class.

The most famous example of the sixteenth century was Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, a Serb from Bosnia who was taken into the devshirme at the age of sixteen. He served as commander of the fleet, led military campaigns to Transylvania and Persia and served as governor of Rumelia (the Balkans), before becoming the last Grand Vizier of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent in 1565. Sokollu Mehmed Pasha assimilated into the Ottoman-Muslim ruling elite, becoming a patron of Islamic religious institutions. He also remained closely connected with his family and homeland. Some of his family followed him and converted to Islam, others remained Christian. Mehmed was generous in his patronage of all of them, securing relatives appointments in the palace and in the Orthodox Church. Much of Mehmed's extensive philanthropy was directed at Bosnia: the most famous example is the bridge he built across the Drina River in his hometown Visegrad. His Serbian heritage could be helpful in the complex politics of the frontier: during the Transylvania campaign, he played on his background to negotiate the defection of Serbian garrisons to the Ottoman side.

#### Box 1

'No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the deference to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service... Those who receive the highest

offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth; for they do not believe that high qualities are either natural or hereditary, nor do they think that they can be handed down from father to son, but that they are partly the gift of God, and partly the result of good training, great industry, and unwearied zeal.’

(Busbecq 1881, I: 154)

In this letter, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Habsburg ambassador to Constantinople (1554–62), contrasted the Ottoman Empire’s meritocracy favourably with his own society. As Sokollu Mehmed Pasha’s career shows, however, the Ottoman Empire was not free of nepotism.

The Ottoman Empire’s subject population was also diverse. Accurate figures are not available, but Christians were a substantial proportion and may have been a majority before 1517; the Orthodox, Armenian, Coptic, Syriac and Catholic Churches were all represented. Jews made up a much smaller proportion, but were a significant presence in important cities including Constantinople, Aleppo, Baghdad and, in particular, Salonica. The Ottoman Empire was one of the main destinations for the Sephardi Jews expelled from Spain: Sultan Bayezid II issued a proclamation in 1493 inviting them to settle there. These immigrants joined long-established communities of Greek-speaking Romaniote Jews in the Balkans and Anatolia, alongside Arabic-speaking Mizrahi Jews in Egypt, Syria and Iraq (Goldish 2008). Lastly, the Muslim population in the empire was equally differentiated. The largest ethnic groups were Turks, concentrated in Anatolia and the Balkans, Arabs in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and North Africa, and Kurds in eastern Anatolia and Iraq. There were also immigrant Muslim groups such as Circassians from the Caucasus, and indigenous communities that had converted from Christianity en masse, such as Bosnians and Albanians.

Despite western European claims of forced conversion, with the notable exception of the devshirme, religious toleration was the norm: a striking contrast to most of early modern Europe. The Ottomans placed restrictions on non-Muslim religious practice, limiting the size and number of churches and synagogues, and prohibiting public processions and the ringing of church bells. But within these parameters, Christians and Jews enjoyed freedom of worship; and for most of our period, the restrictions were not zealously enforced. The Ottomans did not compel conversion to Islam, but during the seventeenth century the Sultans increasingly encouraged conversion, paying a one-off benefit in cash or clothing and holding conversion ceremonies (Baer 2008; Box 2).

#### Box 2

‘Your Majesty, my Illustrious and Prosperous Sultan, may you be healthy!

Your insignificant, humble servant is a Christian girl from among the inhabitants of Kadıköy, from the Greek people. I attained the divine truth and wish to be honored with the Holy Islam because my parents want to marry me to an unbeliever. I want to be honored with the Holy Islam in your imperial presence. My request is the following:

I plead that, because I accepted the Islamic faith, I be kindly granted my new clothes. The rest is left to the decree of my Illustrious Sultan.'

(Minkov 2004, 214–15)

#### Petition from an Ottoman woman written in 1712.

The Ottoman Empire defined itself as an Islamic state, but Islam was not its only identity. In the mid-sixteenth century, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent's main antagonist in Europe was Charles V. Their conflict was primarily territorial, with the Ottomans expanding into Habsburg lands in Hungary, but it was accompanied by much ideological rhetoric. Christian–Muslim holy war was only one dimension of these exchanges. Suleyman and Charles were also competing for recognition as universal emperor, in the context of shared millenarian expectations. Both identified with common imperial symbols: most obviously Rome, represented by Suleyman's capital and Charles's title as Holy Roman Emperor, but also Alexander the Great, the model of a world conqueror for both Muslims and Christians (Ágoston 2007; Necipoğlu 1989). Although the Ottomans are often portrayed as an alien intrusion into Europe, they were in many ways products of the same cultural universe, despite religious differences.

#### **Military and diplomatic relations**

Given the Ottomans' spectacular conquests during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Christian Europeans often viewed them with fear. Propaganda portrayed the 'Turks' as cruel fanatics determined to enslave Christians or convert them at sword-point. War was indeed common. In addition to the Habsburgs, the Ottomans fought Venice on numerous occasions; they faced the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century; confronted the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth frequently during the seventeenth; and in the eighteenth century Russia became their principal enemy. The Ottomans' enemies often drew support from other Christian rulers by using religious rhetoric. The ideal of Christian unity against the Turkish menace was represented in numerous HOLY LEAGUES formed with the blessing of the Pope. The precise make-up differed, but members were typically drawn from among the papal states, Venice, various Italian and German principalities, the Knights of Malta, Austria, Russia and Poland-Lithuania (Ágoston 2021).

Even when not actively at war, Ottoman relations with their Christian rivals were characterized by low-level violence. Raiding across land frontiers was common, while in the Mediterranean Muslim and Christian privateers preyed on the commercial shipping of the other side. Raiding was often carried out by smaller actors who were subjects of the major powers. The 'Barbary corsairs' of Algiers seized ships flying the flags of the Ottomans' enemies; the Tatars of the Crimea raided for slaves in the Polish and Russian Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Knights of Malta, a crusading order under the authority of the Pope, and the Uskoks, Habsburg subjects based on the Dalmatian coast, attacked Ottoman shipping and sold the sailors and passengers into slavery (Bracewell 1992; White 2018). It was not until the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699 that the concept of a peace precluding all violence, rather than simply a cessation of active warfare, was agreed by the Ottomans and their enemies. Both sides found this difficult to sell to the frontier populations that made their living through raiding (Abou-el-Haj 1969).

To characterize Ottoman-European relations as one long series of wars would obscure a great deal, however ('Ottoman History Podcast' and 'Tozsuz Evrak' in web resources). For a

start, some European countries ignored the rhetoric of holy war and allied with the Ottomans against common Christian enemies. To the French king Francis I, the Ottomans were far less threatening than Charles V, whose territories in Spain, the Netherlands and northern Italy encircled his own. Diplomatic contacts between Francis and Suleyman in the 1520s led to the establishment of a French embassy in Constantinople in 1536 and the basing of an Ottoman fleet in Marseille. The Franco-Ottoman alliance endured as long as the French monarchy; Napoleon reversed course when he invaded Egypt in 1798 (Isom-Verhaaren 2013). Both England and the Dutch Republic befriended the Ottoman Empire from the late sixteenth century, when they were in conflict with Spain (Brotton 2016; Groot 2012). Pragmatic self-interest frequently trumped religious idealism in early modern Europe.

### Trading links

Venice offers a striking example of how pragmatism was compatible with the fevered rhetoric of holy war. As the two leading naval powers in the eastern Mediterranean, the Ottoman and Venetian empires fought six major wars between 1499 and 1718. Nevertheless, Venice was one of the Ottoman Empire's closest trading partners, having dominated trans-Mediterranean trade since the Middle Ages. The Serenissima was the only city in Christian Europe with a resident community of Ottoman Muslims, who were all merchants. Many Venetian subjects from its Aegean possessions had family connections within the Ottoman Empire; these people were crucial in lubricating diplomatic and commercial connections (Rothman 2012).

In many ways, trade – rather than religious tension – was the key dynamic in Ottoman-European relations. The Ottoman Empire was the main source for many commodities that were in great demand in Western Europe. Some (like silk, cotton, opium, coffee and carpets) were produced within the Empire; others passed through it from further east. Aleppo was one of the termini of the Silk Road from China, while spices from India were shipped to Europe via Egypt. Most important of all was coffee. Grown in the province of Yemen in southern Arabia, it became embedded in Ottoman urban culture in the sixteenth century, despite a legal controversy about whether it should be prohibited as an intoxicating drink like wine (the jurists ultimately concluded that, as it stimulated rather than disoriented the mind, it was permissible). In the seventeenth century, the practice of coffee-drinking spread to western Europe, where it proved equally controversial and popular (Box 3). The coffee trade became incredibly lucrative for Ottoman merchants and officials, especially those in Egypt, the key transit point. The Empire's hold on the European coffee market was only undermined in the middle of the eighteenth century, when coffee plantations were established in the French Caribbean.

#### Box 3

'When it is dried and thoroughly boyled, it ... is good against the small poxe and measles, and bloody pimples; yet causeth vertiginous headheach... occasioneth waking, and asswageth lust, and sometimes breeds melancholly. He that would drink it for liveness sake, and to discusse slothfulness ... let him use much sweet meates with it, and oyle of pistachios, and butter. Some drink it with milk, but it is an error, and such as may bring in danger of the leprosy.'

(Nature of the drink Kauhi 1659)

Translation of an Arabic treatise on the medicinal use of coffee, published in England in 1659.]

While western Europeans sought many products available in the Ottoman Empire, they had little to offer in return. Exports consisted largely of paper, tin and cloth, along with a few specialist manufactured products such as clocks. The bulk of Ottoman imports had to be paid for with hard currency, leaving Western Europe with a persistent negative balance of trade. Large chartered companies such as England's Levant Company, granted monopolies in line with the MERCANTILE SYSTEM, consolidated control over Ottoman–European trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Masters 1988). This paved the way towards Western Europe's economic dominance over the Ottoman Empire, but this was only secured after the INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, which flooded Ottoman markets with cheap mass-produced goods, causing the deindustrialization of the Ottoman economy.

Most of this trade was conducted by European merchants who travelled to the Ottoman Empire: many resided for lengthy periods in the main commercial cities such as Constantinople, Smyrna and Aleppo. Apart from the Turkish community in Venice, very few Ottoman Muslims ventured to Western Europe in search of commercial opportunities, chiefly because the bulk of Ottoman trade was internal: the Empire ruled a range of geological and climatic zones, and different regions supplied different needs. The Ottomans' external commerce was mainly with countries to the east such as India and China. The Ottoman Empire was also a relatively hospitable place for foreign visitors. The government welcomed foreign merchants as a lucrative source of customs revenue. It granted those of favoured European nations CAPITULATIONS, guaranteeing the terms of their residence and trade (Box 4). Merchants found churches to attend in Ottoman cities, and many intermarried with local Christian communities. It was thus much easier for them to reside in the Ottoman Empire than it was for Ottoman Muslims to do the reverse. Some settled permanently, forming a cosmopolitan community of people of mixed western European and Ottoman Christian heritage known as 'Levantines' in cities on the Mediterranean coast.

#### Box 4

'I, who am sultan of the chiefs of sultans and of the grand Khans, who distributes the crowns of ruling Chosroeses, who curtails the defects of Caesars, who breaks the multitude of Great Kings, I who am hero of water and earth, the shadow of God (may He be exalted) upon the earths, ... Sultan Ahmed Khan [pronounce:]

You have requested ... that the merchants [and] servants ... from the places belonging to [the Netherlands] may come and go with their merchandise in safety and protection to our well-guarded dominions to trade, and that there also be given to them the aforementioned capitulation ... After this request for benevolence was ... submitted at the foot of our sultan's throne of felicity, the petitions were met with acceptance ... The community of merchants of the countries and places belonging to the Dutch provinces may come and go, buy and sell, in our well-guarded dominions.'

(Groot 2012, 148–50)

Capitulation granted to the Dutch Republic in 1612.

## **Assessment**

Relations between the Ottoman Empire and Europe were close throughout the early modern period. The rhetoric of a titanic struggle between Islam and Christianity was prominent in the politics of both sides, but the actual situation was much more complex. Religious prejudice and hostility were real, but often subordinate to geopolitical and commercial interests. While the Holy Leagues demonstrated Christian solidarity against the Ottomans, European powers that had antagonistic relations with the Habsburgs or the Papacy often befriended the Ottomans, and all parties were keen to maintain profitable trading relations during peacetime. Trade formed a more important dynamic of Ottoman–European relations than war: the Empire was a source of many desirable goods, and European diplomacy sought to secure favorable terms for merchants. Only in the second half of the eighteenth century did it become clear to contemporaries that the balance of power, military and economic, was shifting in Western Europe’s favor.

## **Discussion Themes**

Was there a ‘clash of civilizations’ between the Ottoman Empire and western Europe?

To what extent was European culture transformed by contact with the Ottomans?

How accurate were early modern European portrayals of the Ottoman Empire?

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### **(C) Web Resources**

'Ottoman History Podcast: interviews with historians of the Ottoman Empire': [www.ottomanhistoricalpodcast.com](http://www.ottomanhistoricalpodcast.com)

'Stambouline: blog on Ottoman art and architecture': [www.stambouline.info/](http://www.stambouline.info/)

'Tozsuz Evrak: commentaries on fascinating and unusual primary sources': [www.docblog.ottomanhistoricalpodcast.com](http://www.docblog.ottomanhistoricalpodcast.com)