

## “Islamic Empires before Imperialism”

Malissa Taylor, ABD History, UC Berkeley.

<http://orias.berkeley.edu/summer2010/Summer2010Home.htm>

Summarized by Timothy Doran

By the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire presented itself as an empire with a core nation and race that of the Turks – that was bringing the light of civilization and progress to the backwards regions of western Asia and southwestern Europe. In other words, the Ottoman Empire strongly resembled the model of empire embraced in Western Europe, Russia and Meiji Japan. Was it always like this? Most definitely not. Prior to the nineteenth century, dynasties such as the Ottomans, Safavids and Qajars built sprawling, administratively complex states in the Middle East. From the fourteenth century to the eighteenth century, how did the peoples of the Middle East understand legitimacy, good governance, and the relationship between the subjects and the state? How do the developments of this period impact the future of the region?

For this presentation, Ms. Taylor uses as a foil a set of high school class notes for the Gunpowder Empires from West Hills High School that she found at this web address: <http://www.slideshare.net/dmcdowell/gunpowder-empires>. She utilizes it in order to show the changes in scholarship after the 1990s which have not yet filtered into primary school.

### Section A: Overview

The Ottoman (1299 – 1922), Safavid (1501 – 1736) and Mughal (1526 – 1858) empires, all Islamic, are called “**gunpowder empires**” because their armed forces used firearms, marking a transition from saber-wielding cavalry to rifle-bearing infantry. This is a global phenomenon: the Ching dynasty in China and Portuguese in Atlantic are also gunpowder empires. Although the Ottoman Empire predated the other two Islamic empires by some 200 years, they still had many features in common. All were established by minor warrior princes in places with weak central authority. Each vassalized other leaders.

The **Ottoman empire** (1299 – 1922) started in Anatolia and jumped into Europe quickly. By 1517 it existed in Yemen, Algiers, and Baghdad and pushed into Crimea, Hungary, and Poland. In 1299, Anatolia was full of small principalities, confederations of tribesmen principally concerned with sheep-herding. The Byzantine Empire still held some territory around Constantinople. The Ottoman Empire’s father, Osman, was at first one of several minor princes vying for territorial expansion. Its explosive growth occurred in the sixteenth century. Some of its European holdings were lost in the eighteenth century, but its borders remained stable until its last years in the twentieth century.

The **Safavid Empire** (1501 – 1736) arose in today’s border region between Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan in a political context similar to the Ottoman empire. It was established by a group of radical Shi’ite Sufi mystics whose leader Ismail claimed to be an incarnation of the spirit of Ali, an important Shi’ite figure and the son-in-law of Mohammed. The backbone of the Safavid military was tribesmen enthused by Ismail’s messianism. Its capital was established at Isfahan. The Safavids fought the Ottomans frequently over territory in Iraq and the Caucasus, and the Mughals for territory in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The **Mughal Empire** (1526 – 1858) was founded in present-day Afghanistan by a provincial prince claiming Timurid ancestry. It took most of northern India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan by the middle of the sixteenth century. It expanded greatly south into central India in 1681 to try to dislodge the Marathas, a warrior dynasty. Its territorial height occurred around 1700.

### **Section B: Broad Characterization and Thematic Question for classroom unit.**

West Hills High School calls their unit “Rise and Decline of the Gunpowder Empires” and asks as a broad thematic question “what accounts for the rise of the Gunpowder empires and why aren’t they able to keep up with Europe?” Many implications dwell in their phrasing. The ‘decline’ implies weakness which helped the British and French gain control of them. And the focal point in West Hills’ larger narrative seems to be the rise of European hegemony. But the study of early modern era historical change no longer focuses so tightly on Europe as imperialist aggressor and the Middle East and the Orient as innocent victims, nor on the Rise of the West. The study of world history is now comparative and concerns itself with the new ways of organizing the world. There are not as many differences as we once thought between state formation in e.g. India and Europe.

A better thematic question to replace this would be “What are the key developments in the early modern period that give shape to these empires’ successor states and societies?”

### **Section C: The Military**

By the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire and the Hapsburg Empire were the two most powerful states in Europe. By the eighteenth century, France and Great Britain had become the strongest states in Europe, along with the rising stars Russia and Prussia. In the First World War, the Axis Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were defeated by the alliance of Great Britain, France and Russia.

To explain the rise of the Ottoman Empire, West Hills High School notes the ready adoption of firearms, domination of cavalry and Janissaries, conquest of Istanbul and formation of a capital there, that they were “considered the terror of Europe,” initially possessed superior technology, and in the 15<sup>th</sup> century built a navy to ward off Europeans and acquire control of the Mediterranean. To explain Ottoman decline, West Hills concludes that the Ottomans “did not have the resources or forethought to modernize the army.”

Taylor thinks a better question would be “How did the Ottomans remain competitive long enough to survive to World War I?”

### **Section D: The Economy**

West Hills High School explained Ottoman economic difficulties by asserting that the middle class was heavily taxed and there was a trade imbalance, presumably meaning the import of manufactured goods and export of raw materials. They explained Mughal economic difficulties by citing expensive public works (e.g. Taj Mahal), “wars to conquer Southern India depleted reserves, distracted emperor from internal problems like uprisings and revolts, and incursions from Persian and Afghan warrior bands,” and harsh taxation.

But monetized economies and the need for revenue to support war were global phenomena. And Ottomans were wealthy folk. India had a huge textile industry. Taxes were indeed a

bigger burden on subject population than previously, but the whole world suffered a cash crunch at this juncture, largely because of military expenditure.

Taylor suggests as a revised question “Taking a global perspective, what stands out about economic development in these years?”

### **Section E: The Organization of Rule.**

West Hills High characterized the administration in the Gunpowder empires as “centralized power” that was “controlled by large administrative and economic systems” with “excessive bureaucracy [that] allowed large-scale corruption.” However, these empires were only centralized by the standards of the states that preceded them, not by the standards that prevail today, or even that prevailed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the sixteenth century, common features of these empires included land revenue grants in return for military service and a highly detailed bureaucracy with scheduled promotions. After the sixteenth century, the ability of the sultans to command their subjects decreased; compromises were necessary to secure their compliance.

Decentralization itself did not lead to the downfall of these states. For decentralization has some advantages, depending on the circumstances.

In Mughal India, little principalities became *de facto* independent in their little statelets. They ceased to be vassals of an emperor. There was a “collective action problem.” The Safavid empire became prey to small rebellions, but not Hindu-Muslim rebellions. The vassal who dethroned the Afghans was an Afghan named Mahmud but he rebelled for reasons of resource allocation and taxation, not over ethnic matters. Mahmud did not start rebelling to bring down the empire, but found himself in a situation where he could defeat the empire.

The Ottoman story is quite different from Mughals and Safavids. They maintained their empire’s independence because they made concessions to their elites coupled with many demands such as one for more reliable service. The Ottoman Empire wasn’t trying to be a nation-state. The officials in the provinces don’t want to serve, but they did it anyway, and the Ottoman Empire survived into the twentieth century.

### **Section F: Religious Groups and their Integration.**

A tradeoff is visible in the Islamic empires: in the early modern period, these empires did not offer equality to their subjects, but on the other hand they did not press conformity to a national identity, either. The diversity of the empires was made socially cohesive through hierarchy. For example, the Ottoman Empire let everyone in, except Shi’ites.

West Hills High School asks “how religious factors explain the decline of the Ottoman Empire.” Their answers are “conservative Islam focused on tradition, spirituality.” And they gave examples of early tolerance in the Mughal Empire, contrasted with later intolerance: “Akbar solidified power, made social change,” “created a new religion with elements of Hinduism and Islam – unsuccessful,” “eliminated jizya tax on Hindus,” “allowed Hindus to build temples again,” “promoted Hindus in the government,” “outlawed sati and discouraged child marriage,” and “later emperors refused to integrate Hindus into the gov’t (80% of population.”

Taylor suggests asking instead “How much does religious policy or integration change in the Early Modern period? Does it make these empires weaker?” Religion was a part of the hierarchy of those empires, and later policies were not a major shift from earlier ones. Sultans and officials promoted conventional or conservative piety in later years because they needed to cultivate a favorable public image. Iran’s conversion played an important part in its rivalry with the Ottomans and Mughals and then help form an Iranian national identity. When political doctrines propounding equality started to gain ascendance, the diversity of the empires (ethnic as well as religious) became a liability rather than an asset.

As time went by, more public acts of piety were engaged in and there was a cultivation of an image of piety in all three of these empires as time goes by. A serious commitment to ethics and justice became *de rigueur*. This rarely translated into new or innovative forms of discrimination against non-Muslims. Losing wars made them go on the offensive. Tax rates were raised, such as the reinstatement of poll tax on non-Muslims; but the reasons were more fiscal than prejudicial. Tax rates rose in the seventeenth century because tax was collected in cash, and that is what these empires needed at that time.

In the nineteenth century, identity politics movements arose in these empires, and people began to think that perhaps the job of Government should be to represent the interests of the People. These ideas made people doubt that multi-ethnic empires could be a legitimate form of government since Hindus and Muslims, being different, have different interests and thus should not rule each other. In the Ottoman Empire, Arabs and Turks shared the same religion, but in the late eighteenth century, asked whether they could represent each other.

In 1680, the Ottoman Empire viewed itself as run by faithful sultan families and obedient folk. Its Arab families were treated well. But in 1880, the Ottomans began to view the core of the Empire as a place called “Turkey,” a new word never used before 1820, and those in the ruling class identified themselves as Turks. Before 1820, the term “Turk” referred to a nomad running around in the desert; but now, these Turks wrote about how they were the superior civilizing force in the Empire. They thought of Arabs as inferior folk who need to be civilized. And Arabs began seeing Turks as a foreign force. Taylor argues that these ideas came from manuals from France and England which were read by these people, and thus the idea of a nation came to them.

### **Section G: Summary**

Taylor suggests as a revised thematic question: “What are the key developments in the early modern period that give shape to these empires’ successor states and societies?” These empires faced a common obstacle in trying to maintain internal order as well as face external enemies. Economic productivity fared well in this period, though in the nineteenth century production would increasingly focus on agriculture rather than manufactured items. While the Ottoman Empire’s balance of power allowed it to remain more independent from foreign intervention, the modern states of India and Iran are thought to have profited from a tradition of greater flexibility and indirect central rule in the early modern period. Ethnicity and religion became fault-lines in modern polities in the way that they are not in empires. This prompted a good deal of Ottoman nostalgia in many parts of the Middle East today.