



The Greater Ottoman Empire, 1600–1800

by Ernest Tucker

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Secondary Source:

Ottoman Consolidation, 1606 to 1699

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Ottoman territorial expansion had ended as the empire entered a period of consolidation. Soon after the French had established a competitive advantage through their capitulations agreement with Istanbul, the English and Dutch negotiated similar treaties. European competition took the form of merchant companies such as the English Levant Company, whose members were drawn from the same class of people who would later build similar enterprises in the New World. One such merchant/adventurer was Captain John Smith (c. 1580–1631), founder of the Virginia Company, who had spent considerable time as a merchant in Ottoman ports before his move across the Atlantic.

These merchant companies initially focused on importing cloth, cotton, spices, and silk from Ottoman ports, but their trading activities were overshadowed during the seventeenth century by the rise of New World sources of such raw materials. The burgeoning supply of silver from new mines in Latin America and Central Europe led to the virtual collapse of the Ottoman monetary system in the 1580s. This period also saw the establishment of colonial plantations producing goods traditionally imported from the Ottomans, particularly sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton. More and more, the Ottoman Empire came to be perceived as a market for European finished goods, as well as a strategic transit point for more attractive commodities coming from farther east. Egypt in particular became important as a conduit for goods from India and South Asia to Europe.

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The late seventeenth century also saw rivalry between two major British overseas trading companies, the East India Company and the Levant Company, in which trade through Ottoman territory played an important part. The East India Company was criticized for exporting too much silver to India, and the British government demanded that it ship more English cloth there. With low demand in India for English woolens, the East India Company tried to comply by marketing its goods more aggressively in Iran. This tactic brought it into conflict with the Levant Company, which had already established its own textile trade through Aleppo to Iran via networks of Armenian merchants. In the eighteenth century, when the Levant Company reduced its activities in Aleppo due to political unrest, the East India Company still had not displaced the Armenian trading networks that linked Iran with Aleppo, because the Armenians simply began working with French textile merchants from Marseilles instead of with the English who had been there before.

Further Adjustments in the Eighteenth Century, 1699 to 1798

The Ottomans perceived a decline in their international standing as early as the mid-seventeenth century, when various commentators began to explore the causes of the military and financial problems that had started to affect them. The steady Austrian advance into the Balkans, culminating in the Long War (1683–1699), further exacerbated Ottoman concerns. The Treaty of Karlowitz, signed after that war, marked the first permanent and substantial Ottoman loss of territory to a European power. This encroachment was soon followed by further capitulations agreements with Austria's European rivals. Another factor that weakened the Ottoman central authority at that time was the rise of independent local hereditary landlords, particularly in such places as Lebanon that were no longer under the full control of the central government.

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At the same time, there was a new drive to modernize Ottoman society in various ways. The “Tulip Period” of the 1720s was a time when the Ottoman elite became enamored with Western tastes and fashions. The cultivation of rare tulip gardens became a way for the Ottoman elite to display wealth and sophistication. Over the next few decades more substantial changes were introduced, such as the first attempts to modernize the Ottoman military. This began in the 1730s and eventually culminated in the remaking of the Ottoman army into a modern European army by the middle of the nineteenth century.

The impact of Western global expansion was also felt gradually in Ottoman domains during the eighteenth century through an increasing European presence in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean. One traditional economic system that began to be challenged by European powers was maritime piracy, which for centuries had functioned in the Mediterranean, particularly off the coast of North Africa, as an unorganized method of collecting revenue from maritime commerce. Beginning in the late eighteenth century European navies took steps to suppress it as they tried to establish more regular systems of international maritime law.

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