

# The causes to the decline of the ottoman empire essay example

[History](#), [Empires](#)



## **The Causes to the Decline of the Ottoman Empire**

In ancient history, two Empires can be considered the foundations of two of the most practiced religions in the globe – the Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Both Empires dominated their respective domains, enlarged their empires, and supported their choice religion – Catholicism for the Byzantine Empire and Islam for the Ottoman Empire. While many are familiar with the history of the Byzantine Empire's rise and fall, others only know the Ottoman Empire briefly as one of the prominent Empires in the Middle East. Like the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire can be considered its Middle Eastern counterpart as it has developed from a broken independent states and grew into one of the longest empires to exist in history.

However, for an Empire that has won countless battles in the West and establishing a lasting tradition in its own shores, it was unable to sustain its dominance due to various factors that caused the Empire to fall apart. What has led to the demise of one of the longest Empires to have existed and what made the decline significant in world history? This essay focuses on the causes that led to the demise of an otherwise powerful Empire which became the foundations of the Middle East's religious background. In order to achieve the existing objectives, this study precedes as follows - the rise of the Ottomans, the great Expansion, and finally, the factors that have led to its demise. A short summary would also be included to explain the aftermath of the Empire's demise, shedding light to the Empire's legacy.

## **History of the Ottoman Empire**

The beginnings of the Ottoman Empire can be learned through collections of reference books and translated historical documents available for viewing.

For those who would like to have a concise and general overview of the Empire's background, Stephen Turnbull's *The Ottoman Empire 1326-1699* comes to mind. Turnbull divided his discussion into nine parts; covering the wars that had separated the Seljuk Turks, the establishment of the Ottoman government, the beginnings of the Ottoman Expansion to Europe in 1365-1402, its success in expansion in 1422-1606; which also covers the various advancement and traditions settled in the period, the major wars the Empire partook through the times of Osman the II to Murad the IV, and finally, how the decline slowly began in 1683. Turnbull also noted several faces from the Ottoman Empire such as Serbian Janissary or Soldier Konstantin Mihailovic and Grand Vizier Mehmet Koprulu. Mihailovic wrote several memoirs that explained his life in the Ottoman Army, its structure and function, and how it could be defeated by those who understand the inner workings of the Ottoman Empire. Grand Vizier Koprulu, on the other hand, founded the Koprulu noble family and was the chief adviser of Mehmed IV, leading to several sieges in the Balkan region and Europe such as Venice, Crete, and the Aegean islands<sup>1</sup>.

However, M. Sukru Hanioglu's *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* provides an in-depth discussion of the Ottoman century, providing readers a complete background of the Empire's political, social, cultural, economic, and religious standpoint from the time of its creation up to its demise. While Turnbull's summary of the Ottoman Empire identified the Empire's greatest

achievements and war efforts, Hanioglu utilized several historical documents to digress the struggle of the Empire to thwart possible opposition from local officials, and foreign powers and how they have struggled to allow the Ottoman Empire modernize itself to the socioeconomic stance its surrounding nations have already applied. He had also contrasted Turkish history to that of the histories of Europe and the world. The book also contains a breakdown of the life of an Ottoman society, from its cultural to its political facet; incorporating narratives from archives<sup>2</sup>. The book also focuses on the Tanzimat and Hamidian Regime: the Tanzimat was the restructuring of the Ottoman Empire in periods of Mahmud II and Abdulmecid I to allow non-Muslims and non-Turks to join in society with equal bounds; the Hamidian era prominently became known to the 300, 000 Armenian massacres ordered by Abdul Hamid II, believing that the problems of his Empire is due to the influence of the Europeans in the form of the Armenians<sup>3</sup>.

## **The Great Expansion**

The expansion continued on through the successors of Murad I, beginning with Bayazid I (1389-1402) who advanced towards Bulgaria and France. Mehmet II captured Constantinople after his control over the Dardanelles and Bosphorus territories, enabling him to stop all allies of the Byzantine emperor from aiding the falling city. Not long after the fall of Constantinople, the Ottomans travelled on to the Shi'ite kingdom in Persia who constantly called for rebellion against the Ottomans. The Ottomans were able to defeat the Safavids in 1314, subsequently turned to Mamluks, Egypt. Under the reign of

Selim I (1512-1520), the Ottomans defeated the Mamluks in 1516, while Cairo fell in 1517. Selim's victories in claiming the holy cities of Islam subsequently got him hailed as Muhammad's successor. The Ottomans then continued on to Tripoli, Tunis, and Algeria in the African region, enabling them to gain access to the Strait of Gibraltar. North Africa then became a link of the Ottomans to other regions in Europe and in the Mediterranean. However, the power of the Ottomans gradually weakened by the 17th century as the local elites slowly gained the power to dethrone their pashas. The Mamluks even returned to power in the 18th century. Nevertheless, the Ottomans continued to push forward to Europe, especially under the reign of Suleiman I the Magnificent. Quataert even added that the Ottoman system throughout its expansion became a blend of systems influenced by the Byzantine, Turkish, Balkan and Islamic factors, which was true due to the territories it had claimed. They can also be considered the first world powers alongside the Safavids, and the Moghuls as they ensured the balance of economic and political power in the region. However, the Ottoman Empire was incomparable to the Ming-led Chinese Dynasty as they were the most powerful and wealthy nation present at the period. Quataert's narration had also concentrated with the political system of the Ottoman Empire, which in comparison with the Duiker and Spielvogel narration, enabled him to note how the political system contributed to the demise of the Ottoman Empire<sup>5</sup>.

## **The Demise of an Empire**

With the many wars and conquests won by the Ottoman Empire, it would have seemed that the Ottomans were unstoppable in continuing its

expansion throughout the European and Asian regions. However, like any other nation, the Ottoman Empire was vulnerable to internal strife that ultimately caused their demise. For Bernard Lewis' article entitled The Ottoman Empire and Its Aftermath, he noted that the competing ideologies inside the Ottoman Empire contributed to the decline of the Empire. He identified three ideologies - Islamic, Ottoman, and Turkish, which not only clashed in their visions of the ideal Ottoman society, but also clashed with the idea of identity. Islam provided the foundations of authority and identity that ensures continuous preservation of Prophet Muhammad's laws and ideologies. However, its power over the Ottoman Empire dwindled during the Turkish War of Independence in 1919-1922 when the Kemal supporters ordered for the secularization of the Turkish state and disestablish Islam's customs and laws<sup>6</sup>. The Ottoman idealism, on the other hand, concentrates on the political loyalty of its subjects from all religions, surmising nationalism from all subjects. This concept of Ottoman identity could be considered a form of liberal reformism that was similar to Europe's reform age. However, the Ottoman outlook became contested by the Muslims and some of the non-Muslims as their rulers were mostly pro-Islamic and others already grew a separatist stance which changed their idea of people and authority<sup>7</sup>. The Turkish standpoint or Turkism involved the acknowledgement of all Turks and the creation of a pan-Turkish state that would transform into a republican Turkey.

However for Rohan D'Souza's Crisis before the Fall: Some Speculations on the Decline of the Ottomans, Safavids and the Mughals, he noted that military and political decline caused the demise of the empire, not just the

ideological demise of the Ottoman society. First, D'Souza listed that although the Ottoman army's capacity to deploy hundreds of skilled archers and fighters to win each conflict, their firepower became hindered due to long acquisition of new armament and logistics. Since the Empire continued to dominate the European and Asian continents with cavalry type of warfare, their cavalry had to be tied down by their political agenda, causing them to have issues in developing their own type of weaponry<sup>8</sup>. With the Empire depending on the power of its military, the Ottomans had to ensure that revenue and income generates to its land-based troops. D'Souza noted that the Ottomans used a timar system that would consist of a revenue assignment to a sipahi or cavalryman that would collect the tax in exchange for his services in the war. He also explains to his readers that the term "decline" is a dangerous term to discuss the fall of the three nations he had covered. In the case of the OSM, their declines are due to the decentralized and ineffectiveness of their state policies, limiting its power to sustain the Empire. He cited Murad IV's reforms which caused sipahis to lose their timars in favour of the Janissaries or soldiers. The reforms eventually caused Ottoman polity to become stuck in a standstill due to its constant reconfiguration of its rules and warfare. D'Souza even noted that the Ottoman Empire in the late 17th and 18th centuries had lost their grip over their pre-eminence due to these constant reforms, becoming the "sick man" of Europe until 1923.

Antony Black's "The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present" further discussed the problem of the government to sustain its military arm from the time of the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, supporting

D'Souza's argument on military decline. The Battle could be considered the greatest battle fought in the Mediterranean and the most crucial battle for the Ottomans. Soon after, the Ottomans met on a stalemate with the Balkans in 1596-1606, gradually decreasing their fighting capacity. The Ottomans also found themselves locked into continuous conflicts against the Habsburgs, Iran, Russia, Poland and Venice. Although they have succeeded in some fronts, the Ottoman Empire sustained heavy defeats in Vienna, Hungary, Greece and Serbia. Since the Ottoman Empire depended on the military, the reverses caused trauma to the collective power of the Ottoman army. For winning many wars and skirmishes, the Ottoman society had basked in the glory of its leaders, ensuring they would follow the military leaders assigned to them. Black wrote in his narrative that as the Ottoman government tried to improve the military arm of the Empire, it only resulted in the rebellion of the jannisaries and ulama. Other reformers such as the Koprulu family, and the Sunni group were also discussed by Black in understanding the other groups that have contributed to the decline of political reform in the Ottoman. This was only briefly discussed in D'Souza's article, as it would have explained why there were Janissaries who rebelled against the Empire. 10

The demise of the Ottoman hold in the Balkan region explained by Traian Stoianovich's article " Factors in the Decline of Ottoman Society in the Balkans" was not discussed in other articles, despite the Balkan region's importance in the Ottoman Empire. Like the decline of the Empire in its other territories, the Balkans also found itself in a conflict due to the definition of a class society, and identity; as well as the capacity of their economic stability



and growth. Stoianovich noted that with the devaluation of Ottoman money and the continuous economic decline of the Empire, many groups such as a merchant and artisan classes rebelled to force sumptuary laws that would sustain their living. The article also discussed the ciftlik regime or the casa-grande e senzala, a type of regime that enclosed the entire region under strict monitoring<sup>11</sup>. Sevket Pamuk's *The Ottoman Empire in the "Great Depression"* of 1873-1896 summarized the effect of the Great Depression to the dwindling Ottoman Empire, covering the Late Ottoman Period only referenced in Hanioglu's book. He noted that as the economic constrains in the Empire made its trading power smaller than those of the European nations. Several charts and tables were used by Pamuk to explain how the Ottoman Empire's trading power increases or decreases, including the effect of the Depression to the Empire<sup>12</sup>.

Robert Johnson supported D'Souza's and Lewis' arguments as to why the Ottoman Empire slowly lost its power, however, he added several events that influenced its downfall. In his article, *The Decline of the Ottoman Empire, c . 1798-1913: The Unpredictable Past*, Johnson summarized that although the Empire has managed to sustain a military-bureaucratic structure throughout its regime, the Ottoman Empire slowly succumbed into a spiral as it was unable to resolve economic and intellectual stagnation. Corruption of its political and military leaders slowly caused internal strife to enter the conflict. The West slowly became a commercial and financial leader, disabling the Ottoman economy to catch up and compete against the West. The government was also in shambles as sultans who succeed in the throne were either weak, or unskilled. Reform was unable to prosper

especially in provinces as officials tend to buy their way into power. Johnson even takes into consideration the effects of German intervention and the Balkan Wars to the Ottoman decline, which were only discussed briefly in the previous articles. He cites that when the Germans slowly entered the race in founding their own Empire, it threatened the Ottoman control over the Middle East and in the Balkan region. He concluded that the decline of the Ottoman Empire not only caused Europe to succumb into war, but it ultimately led them to begin the first few skirmishes of the First World War.

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## **Conclusion**

The demise of the Ottoman Empire can be directed in both internal and external forces which influenced the grip hold of the Empire to its subjects, territories, and officials. With these sources noted, readers can digress which of these internal and external factors had most influence over the Empire's slow demise. On the one hand, it could have been the cause of the clashing ideologies in the Ottoman society as they create their own identity. It could also have been caused by incompetent leaders who wish to gain more power as their foes continued to flourish. On the other hand, it could have been the mixture of all these possibilities that have led to the Empire's demise.

Nevertheless, these identified factors could be related to the present situation of the ever changing society as ideologies, political agendas and conflict continue to ravage certain parts of the globe. These readings would help in further understanding the root nature of political, social, and external

conflicts which has constantly changed past and present societies such as the Ottoman Empire.

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