The Muslim Gunpowder Empires

Summary

The Mongol invasions of the 13th and 14th centuries destroyed the Muslim unity of the Abbasids and many regional dynasties were crushed. Three new Muslim dynasties arose to bring a new flowering to Islamic civilization. The greatest, the Ottoman Empire, reached its peak in the 17th century; to the east the Safavids ruled in Persia and Afghanistan, and the Mughals ruled much of India. Together the three empires possessed great military and political power; they also produced an artistic and cultural renaissance within Islam. They contributed to the spread of Islam to new regions. All three dynasties originated from Turkic nomadic cultures; each possessed religious fervor and zeal for conversion. They built empires through military conquest based upon the effective use of firearms. Each was ruled by an absolute monarch and drew revenues from taxation of agrarian populations. There were differences. The Mughals ruled mostly non-Muslim peoples, the Safavids mostly Muslims, and the Ottomans a mixture of Muslims and Christians. The Safavids were Shi'a Muslims; the others were Sunni.

The Ottomans

The Turkic peoples entered Anatolia after the Mongols defeated the Seljuks of eastern Anatolia in the mid-13th century. After a period of turmoil a tribe led by Osman secured dominance. They would become the Ottomans. During the 14th and 15th centuries they moved into the Balkans. Under Mehmed II they captured Constantinople in 1453 and ended the Byzantine Empire. They spread into Syrai, Egypt, North Africa, and even temporarily laid siege to the city of Vienna. During the next two centuries they brought their rule to the Islamic heartlands. Their navy dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Even though the Ottomans failed to capture Vienna in 16th and 17th century sieges, they continued as a serious threat to Western Europe.Military leaders had a dominant role in the Ottoman state, a polity geared to war and expansion. The Turkic horsemen became a warrior aristocracy supported by control of conquered land and peasants. When their power shrank before that of an expanding central bureaucracy, they built up regional power bases. From mid-15th century imperial armies were dominated by Janissary infantry divisions composed of conscripted youths from conquered lands. Their control of artillery and firearms gave them great power; by the mid-16th century they intervened in dynastic succession disputes. Ottoman rulers survived by playing off the competing factions within their state. The groups included religious and legal scholars. Muslim, Christian, and Jewish merchants were important. The latter two were "peoples of the book" who often were satisfied with the sound administration of their Muslim rulers. As the empire grew, the sultans lost contact with their subjects. A large bureaucracy headed by a vizier had great power in the state. Early rulers and their sons participated in the administration. Like most Muslim dynasties, there were no rules for dynastic secession,which led to heated struggles for the position of the Sultan. The imperial capital at Constantinople combined the disparate cultures under Ottoman rule. The new rulers restored the city after 1453; the church of Hagia Sophia became one of Islam's grandest mosques. Most sultans tried to add to the city's splendor: Suleyman the Magnificent built the great Suleymaniye mosque in the 16th century. Constantinople became the commercial center dealing in products from Asia, Africa, and Europe. Many urban inhabitants belonged to merchant and artisan classes. The government closely regulated both activities. Artisan guilds were very important. By the 17th century the Turkish language became the preferred vehicle for literature and the government. The Ottomans left a significant artistic legacy in poetry, ceramics, carpet manufacturing, and architecture.

 The Problem of Ottoman Decline

The empire continued vigorous until the late 17th century. By then the empire was too extensive to be maintained from its available resource base and transport system. As a conquest state, the Ottomans began to decline once acquisition of new territory ceased. The bureaucracy became corrupt, and regional officials used revenues for their own purposes. Oppressed peasants and laborers fled the land or rebelled. Problems at the center of the state added to the decline. Sultans and their sons were confined to the palace; they became weak and indolent rulers managed by court factions. Civil strife increased and military efficiency deteriorated. Some of the primary reasons for Ottoman decline were:

1) The conservatisms of the Janissaries. The Janissaries rejected any new advancement in military control that would jeopardize their rule. For example, being specialists in the large siege cannons, they were against the integration of European light field artillery, which did not require specific knowledge. These guns, however, gave Europeans an advantage in battle.

2) The voyage of Vasco da Gama This opened up trade routes that did not include the Ottomans as middlemen between the Far East and Europe. As a result, their revenues declined. The Ottomans did nothing as the Portuguese broke into the Indian Ocean trade network.

3) Their rejection of non-Muslim culture and knowledge. This prevented them from benefiting from European advancements in science and technology, which they considered infidel.

 The Shi’ite Challenge of the Safavids

The Safavids also profited from the struggles of rival Turkic groups following Mongol invasions. The Safavids were Shi'a Muslims from a family of Sufi preachers and mystics. In the early 14th century under Sail al-Din they fought to purify and spread Islam among Turkic peoples. After long struggles in 1501 Ismâ'il seized Tabriz and was proclaimed shah. His followers conquered most of Persia and fought against the Ottomans who defeated them at the important battle of Chaldiran in 1514. The loss meant that Shi'ism was blocked from further westward advance.

In Depth: The Gunpowder Empires and the Shifting Balance of Global History

Each of the three great Muslim dynasties gained power with the support on nomadic warriors. But past conditions had changed. The battle of Chaldiran demonstrated that firearms were decisive factor in warfare. Global history had entered a new phase. States utilized technology to reorganize their land and naval forces, and the changes influenced both social and political development. Once dominant warrior aristocracies crumbled before governments able to afford expensive weapons. The Chinese scholar

-gentry and Japanese shoguns had some success in limiting their impact, but nomads no longer were able to dominate sedentary peoples. Nomadic dynasties similarly declined when confronted by smaller, technologically-superior rivals. The efficient utilization of firearms by European nations was a major factor in their rise to world power.

State and Religion

The Safavids originally wrote in Turkish, but Persian, after Chaldiran, became the language of state. They also adopted elaborate Persian traditions of court etiquette. The initial militant Shi'ite ideology was modified as the Safavids drew Persian religious scholars into the bureaucracy. Religious teachers received state support, and teaching in mosque schools was supervised by religious officials. The population of the empire gradually converted to Shi'a Islam, which developed into in integral part of Iranian identity. When the power of the dynasty declined, religious leaders became more independent, but they continued to serve its rulers.

Society and Gender Roles: Ottoman and Safavid Comparisons

Both dynasties had much in common. They initially were dominated by warrior aristocracies who shared power with the monarch. The warriors gradually left the rulers' courts for residence on rural estates where they exploited the peasantry. When central power weakened, the result was flight from the land and rebellion. Both empires encouraged the growth of handicraft production and trade. Imperial workshops produced numerous products, and public works employed many artisans. Policies encouraging international trade were followed, although the Safavids were less market-oriented than the Ottomans. Women endured the social disadvantages common to Islamic regimes. The earlier independence within nomadic society was lost. Women were subordinate to fathers and husbands and had few outlets, especially among the elite, for expression outside of the household.

The Rapid Demise of the Safavid Empire.

Abbas I, fearing plots, had removed all suitable heirs. The succession of a weak grandson began a process of dynastic decline. Internal strife and foreign invasions shook the state. In 1772 Isfahan fell to Afghani invaders. An adventurer, Nadir Khan Afshar, emerged from the following turmoil as shah in 1736, but his dynasty and its successors were unable to restore imperial authority.

The Mughals and the Apex of Muslim Civilization in India

 Turkic invaders, led by Babur, invaded India in 1526 after being driven from Afghanistan. They sought booty, not conquest, and remained only when prevented from returning northward. Babur's forces, using military tactics and technology similar to the Ottomans, crushed the Muslim Lodi dynasty at Panipat in 1526 and in 1527 defeated a Hindu confederation at Khanua. Within two years Babur held much of the Indus and Ganges plains. The first Mughal ruler was a talented warrior also possessing a taste for art and music, but he was a poor administrator. His sudden death in 1530 brought invasion from surrounding enemies. Babur's successor, Humayn, fled to Persia; he led successful return invasions into India that restored control in the north by 1556. He died soon after.

Akbar and the Basis for a Lasting Empire

Humayn's 13-year old son Akbar succeeded to the throne and immediately had to face pressure from Mughal enemies. Akbar and his advisors defeated them, and the young monarch became a ruler with outstanding military and administrative talent. His armies consolidated Mughal conquests in north and central India. Akbar advanced a policy of reconciliation with his Hindu subjects; he encouraged intermarriage, abolished head taxes, and respected Hindu religious customs. Hindus rose to high ranks in the administration. Akbar invented a new faith incorporating Muslim and Hindu beliefs to unify his subjects. The Hindu and Muslim warrior aristocracy were granted land and labor for their loyalty. Hindu local notables were left in place if taxes were paid.

Social Reform and Social Change

Akbar attempted to introduce social changes that would benefit his subjects. Among them were reforms to regulate the consumption of alcohol. He strove to improve the position of women. Akbar encouraged widow remarriage and discouraged child marriages. He prohibited satiand attempted to break seclusion through creating special market days for women.

Mughal Splendor and Early European Contacts

Even though most of his reforms, including the new religion, were not successful, Akbar left a powerful

empire at his death in 1605. Not much new territory was added by successors, but the regime reached the peak of its splendor. Most of the population, however, lived in poverty, and India fell behind Europe in invention and the sciences. Still, by the late 17th century the Mughals ruled over a major commercial and manufacturing empire. Indian cotton textiles were world famous and gained a large market in Europe.

Artistic Achievement in the Mughal Era

The 17th century rulers Jahangir and Shah Jahan continued the policy of tolerance toward Hindus along with most other elements of Akbar's administration. Both preferred the good life over military adventures. The were important patrons of the arts; they expanded painting workshops for miniatures and built great architectural works, including Shah Jahan’s Taj Mahal, often blending the best in Persian and Hindu traditions..

Court Politics and the Position of Elite and Ordinary Women.

Jahangir and Shah Jehan left the details of daily administration to subordinates, thus allowing their wives to win influence. Nur Jahan, Jahangir's wife, dominated the empire for a time through her faction. Mumtaz Mahal, wife of Shah Jahan. also amassed power. While the life of court women improved, the position of women elsewhere in society declined. Child marriage grew more popular, widow remarriage died out, and seclusion for both Muslim and Hindus increased. Sati spread among the upper classes. The lack of opportunity for a productive role and the burden of a dowry meant that the birth of a girl became an inauspicious event.

Conclusion: The Rise of Europe and the Eclipse of Islam as the Pivot of the World Order

The early modern Muslim empires had sufficient internal reasons for destruction, but their demise was made more certain by a common ignoring of the rising European threat. Little effort was made to incorporate European technological advances. The failure to meet the European challenge weakened the economic base of their empires as revenues and profits were drained off by foreigners. Importation of European bullion brought damaging inflation. Muslim leaders and scholars ignored these trends and caused serious difficulties for the world of Islam in the future.

Discussion questions and answers:

1. Discuss the similarities in the causes for decline in all of the Islamic early modern empires and explain how the decline was related to the rise of the West.

2. Discuss the similarities in problems confronting both the early modern Muslim empires and the earlier Umayyad and Abbasid empires

.All the empires suffered from the common problem of failing to establish a firm succession process. The difficulty of military domination by warrior aristocracies was apparent in both old and new empires. So were problems with religious minorities; the Mughal problems with the Hindu majority were typical of earlier dynasties. Some problems -most involving the West -were peculiar to the early modern period. The commercial supremacy of the Umayyads and Abbasids was unchallenged by the West: the Abbasid trade network stretched from Africa to Southeast Asia. The West then also did not present an intellectual challenge to the great Muslim empires. The later rise of the West totally revised its relations with the Islamic world. Loss of commercial leadership caused revenue loss as the West broke the Muslim monopoly of relationships with Africa and Southeastern Asia. Western military technology allowed the West to threaten Muslim independence