

Central Asia and the Islamic World Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries

THE MILITARY REVOLUTION IN ISLAM

Gunpowder Weapons. In the late fifteenth century a military revolution swept over the Islamic world, following much the same patterns as in the West. The development of effective gunpowder weapons – first artillery and later muskets – created new political and social power structures, which contributed to the disappearance of the older medieval order. Artillery greatly reduced the military effectiveness of castles and fortified cities, which in turn diminished the independence of decentralized feudal lords. This facilitated the rise of powerful centralized empires, which maintained their power by their relative superiority in artillery over regional warlords. Muskets further diminished the military power of the medieval mounted military aristocracy. Before muskets, the military aristocrat, with his superior training and equipment, generally had the capacity to defeat a poorly armed and trained peasant. With a musket, however, a partially trained peasant could kill the most highly trained and expensively armed mounted aristocratic warrior. Thus, in competition between various armies, those with the best and most numerous cannons and muskets generally proved able to defeat their enemies.

Results of the Military Revolution. In the Islamic world this new military situation led to four major developments. First, Islamic central governments were able to become increasingly centralized and autocratic. Second, small Islamic states and principalities proved unable to compete in new gunpowder technologies and were overwhelmed by their stronger and larger neighbors. Third, Islamic states with superior gunpowder technology were able to overwhelm non-Islamic neighbors in the Balkans, India and parts of Africa. Fourth, the Central Eurasian nomads, whose military power depended on their skills at mounted archery, were eventually overwhelmed by musket-armed infantry. But in the end, although the Ottoman Turks were initially among the world leaders in the development and application of military gunpowder technology, the Muslim world slowly lost ground to the western Europeans, leading to the complete collapse of Islamic military power in the early eighteenth century. This inaugurated nearly two centuries of European domination over nearly all Muslim peoples.

THE GUNPOWDER EMPIRES

MUGHAL INDIA (1526-1756)

The fifteenth century in India was a period of extreme political fragmentation and conflict, with numerous small states, both Hindu and Muslim, struggling for the prize of the domination of India. In the end, an Afghanistan-based Islamic dynasty, using the latest gunpowder weapons, conquering the entire subcontinent.

The Rise of the Mughals.

Babur (r. 1504-1530). Babur, the founder and one of the most remarkable rulers of the Mughal dynasty, was a descendant of two other famous conquerors – Timur and Chingiz Khan. A man of enormous energy and talent, Babur is noted for his scholarship (he wrote a massive autobiography), military genius, interest in natural science, and excellent artistic sense. Heir to the small principality of Ferghana, he quickly rose to military dominance in Afghanistan. He modernized his army, mixing traditional central Asian horse-archer tactics with new gunpowder weapons and tactics derived from Ottoman Turkish mercenaries. With his powerful new military system, Babur invaded northern India in 1526. His campaign culminated in 1526 at the battle of Panipat, where Babur's powerful army crushed the more traditional Muslim army of the moribund sultanate of Delhi. By his death in 1530 Babur was master of northern India. He had founded the Mughal dynasty, which would dominate India for the next two centuries.

Akbar (r. 1542-1605). Local Indian Muslim rulers took up arms against the Mughal invaders and nearly expelled them. But in the reign of Akbar, Mughal power was reasserted. In his sixty-three-year reign, Akbar subdued all of northern India and Afghanistan and created a powerful centralized administration and modern army. A system of land reform provided peasants with fair taxes, laying the basis for agricultural prosperity. New wealth was derived from a rising class of artisans and merchants, and from international trade with the newly arriving Europeans.

Although raised a Muslim, Akbar took great interest in all the regions of India, sponsoring a series of debates between the various denominations of his realm, including European Jesuits. In an attempt to

unite his Hindu and Muslim subjects into a new society, he created his own religion, the Divine Faith, with himself as the high priest. Neither Muslims nor Hindus understandably accepted his efforts.

Islamic Culture in Mughal India

In the seventeenth century, Mughal Islamic culture reached its highest form in India. Nearly all of India was united into a single prosperous state and Islamic arts flourished. The cultural achievements of Mughal India derive from two main sources of inspiration: Islamic Persian culture and indigenous Hindu cultural forms adapted to the tastes and requirements of Islamic rulers.

Literature. Mughal literature was based on the models supplied by the courts of Islamic Persia. Numerous scholars and administrators from Persia were hired by the Mughal sultans and brought with them their Persian cultural heritage. Poetry and history writing in Persian especially flourished. Among the notable works of history in Islamic India are the *Baburnama*, an autobiography by the conqueror Babur, and the *Akbarnama*, a biography of Akbar. Some Sanskrit literature, most notably the *Mahabharata*, was translated into Persian for the entertainment of Mughal emperors.

Architecture. Indian Mughal architecture includes mosques, palaces and tombs. Even the fortifications of Mughal India were often built with a style and beauty that renders them works of art. Among the best examples of the vibrant Mughal architecture is the palace complex at Fatipur Sikri. However, the most splendid building is the magnificent Taj Mahal. Built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1627-1658) in 1634 as a tomb for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, the Taj Mahal is considered by many to be the most beautiful building in the world.

Decay of Mughal Rule

Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707). The last half of the seventeenth century was dominated by the emperor Aurangzeb. A stern and autocratic man, he is noted for military expeditions, tyranny, and oppressive taxes. A strict Muslim, Aurangzeb reversed the earlier Mughal policy of accommodation with his Hindu subjects, initiating a series of oppressive anti-Hindu laws. Although successful in his lifetime, his policies undermined the strength and unity of the Mughal state, ultimately leading to a precipitous decline in Mughal power.

The Maratha Rebellion. Aurangzeb's tyranny and anti-Hindu policies sparked massive rebellions of the Rajputs and Sikhs, but the most serious rebellion was that of the Hindu Marathas under their charismatic leader Shivaji. In a very real sense, Shivaji's rebellion represents the first stirring of resurgent Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment, which would culminate in social problems in the twentieth century.

The Maratha rebellion was never fully subdued, and after Aurangzeb's death, Maratha Hindu warriors and other rebels increasingly undermined the Mughal state. Delhi was threatened, and Mughal military resources strained; ultimately the Iranian brigand-king Nadir Shah sacked Delhi in 1739. Although Mughal emperors remained on the throne, their empire vanished as various regional warlords and rebels declared their independence. Thus, by the middle of the eighteenth century India was again in political chaos, with numerous warring petty Hindu and Muslim states ripe for eventual conquest by the British. Mughal emperors continued to rule at Delhi as powerless puppets until the last ruler was finally deposed by the British in 1858.

SAFAVID IRAN

Following the collapse of the Timurid empire in Iran in the late fifteenth century, Iran was rent into numerous small, unstable principalities, constantly at war with each other. The political and social chaos of the age lent itself to apocalyptic religious fervor. In the mountains of Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran, a small band of fanatical Shi'ite Sufis known as the Red Turbans (Qizilbash) were galvanized by their leader Ismail (r. 1501-1524). Proclaiming himself a quasi-messianic figure, Ismail led his troops to a sweeping conquest of Iran and Mesopotamia in the first decade of the sixteenth century. In spite of his defeat by the Ottoman army at the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, after which Mesopotamia was conquered by the Ottomans, the Safavids had become firmly established in Iran, which their dynasty would rule for the next two centuries.

The Shi'ite Conversion

Origins. Prior to the Safavid conquest, Iran had been largely a Sunni Muslim society, with only small non-Sunni minorities. Nonetheless, Iran had always served as a center of Sufism, esoteric Islamic thought, and heresy. Ismail had risen to power based on his claims to be an incarnation of the Twelfth Shi'ite Imam, a claim which aroused great excitement throughout Iran. Twelver Shi'ism was declared the official state religion, and a massive proselyting program was undertaken, both by conversion and by coercion. In the end, nearly all Iranians were converted to the Twelver branch of Shi'ism.

Significance. The conversion of Iran to Shi'ite Islam in the sixteenth century was to have important effects on world history. First, within Iran itself, Shi'ite culture, thought, mysticism, and philosophy became a fundamental element of Iranian society. Unlike the Sunni branch of Islam, Iranian Shi'ism developed a quasi clergy, in which the *ulama* (scholars) were organized into a regular hierarchy, and a great deal of social, legal, educational, economic, and political power eventually was usurped by the scholar class in Iran.

Shi'ite Fundamentalism. Finally, of course, the conversion of Iran to Shi'ism laid the foundation for the radical political revolution led by the Shi'ite Islamic fundamentalists, who overthrew Shah Mohammed Pahlavi (who was largely a puppet of the Western governments, which took control of Iran after 1925) in 1979 and transformed the balance of power in the Middle East in the late twentieth century. Today, the Iranian Shi'ite Islamic fundamentalist movement is still a major force in the Islamic world.

The Golden Age of Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629)

Iran reached its political and cultural height during the reign of Shah Abbas I. A man of tremendous energy and brilliance, Abbas led Iran into perhaps its most glorious cultural age. Having established a strong military and efficient administration, Abbas set about making his capital at Isfahan one of the great centers of commerce and culture in the world. At its height the population of the city number over 1 million, making it one of the largest, wealthiest and most splendid cities of the seventeenth century.

Persian Culture. Iranian art especially flourished in the age of Abbas. Iranian painting, architecture, tile working, carpets, tapestries, brocades, metalworking and ceramics all became internationally renowned. The architectural masterpieces of the age are the Luft Allah and Royal mosques. The cultural power of this golden age was felt throughout most of the Islamic world. Iranian models in poetry, literature, art and architecture were adopted throughout the Ottoman and Mughal empires. Persian was the international language of culture and diplomacy in the Islamic world. The education of most Muslim gentlemen would include a healthy dose of Persian poetry, much as their contemporaries in Europe were gaining a classical education based on Greek and Roman models.

The Fall of the Safavids

Nadir Shah (r. 1729-1747). Following the glorious reign of Abbas, the Safavid dynasty was led by a series of weak rulers. They squandered the power and wealth of the state, leaving it open to outside intervention. A general in the service of the last Safavids usurped all real authority, attempting to reestablish power and stability. A brilliant general, Nadir Shah, defeated the Ottoman Turks, central Eurasian Turks and the Mughals, sacking their capital at Delhi in 1739. However, he was a poor statesman, unable to come to grips with the social and economic crisis facing the Islamic world. He was assassinated in 1747, after which Iran entered a half century of political chaos.

Qajar Dynasty (1794-1925). Eventually one of the regional warlords established supremacy in Iran, initiating the Qajar dynasty, which ruled Iran throughout the nineteenth century. The Qajars rulers were never able to establish strong centralized government, faced numerous social problems, and were threatened by the expansionist Russians and British. By the beginning of the Second Thirty Years War, they were essentially under Russian hegemony.

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The Rise of the Ottomans

Origins. Various bands of Turkish nomads had settled in the Anatolian highlands following the great Turkish victory over the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071. In the early fourteenth century these Turks were divided into numerous petty tribes which vied with each other in attacking and plundering the

collapsing Byzantine state. The most important and successful of the tribal warlords was Osman (r. 1281-1326), whose successors would rule Turkey for over 600 years as the Ottoman dynasty.

Conquest of Constantinople. The Ottomans made steady progress during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, conquering most of Anatolia from rival Muslim Turkish princes and conquering nearly all of the Christian Balkans as well. Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine empire, with its massive walls, proved unconquerable until the Turks developed artillery. In 1456 Constantinople fell and was renamed Istanbul, the new capital of the Ottoman empire; the city was destined to become the center of Islamic culture for the next several centuries.

Creation of Empire. Ottoman military expansionism did not cease with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. During the next century and a half, the Ottomans conquered most of modern Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Moldavia and southern Russia from the Europeans. Syria and Egypt were conquered from the Mamluks in 1517. They added Mesopotamia and much of Arabia by 1538 and most of North Africa was conquered by 1574. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottomans were not only the most important Islamic empire, but the largest and most powerful European states as well.

The Golden Age of the Ottoman Empire.

Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566). The greatest ruler of the Ottoman empire was Suleiman the Magnificent. His policies and personality left a permanent stamp on all facets of Ottoman life. His early career was marked by his modernization of the army and by his great military conquests in the Balkans, eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, creating a vast, prosperous and secure empire. The political boundaries established by Suleiman remained essentially unchanged for the next 150 years.

Administration and Army. Suleiman's second greatest contribution was the establishment of a sound Ottoman administrative system. Known in Turkish law as Suleiman the "Lawgiver," he supervised the creation of an administrative and legal structure for the empire, under the legal genius Khoja Chelebi, which would last until the great Westernizing reforms of the nineteenth century/ The early Ottoman empire was renowned in Europe for its powerful military, efficient bureaucracy and autocratic imperial authority. Recruitment for the army and bureaucracy was based in part on the *devshirme*, a "tax" on young Christian boys who were taken in a state of quasi-slavery to the great palace university at Istanbul for a grueling training course in military and administrative skills. The elite soldiers who emerged from this training program, known as the Janissaries, were among the finest in the world. The success and longevity of the Ottoman empire is in large part due to its superb administration and army.

Culture. Finally, Suleiman presided over the golden age in Islamic culture. The crown of Ottoman culture was its architecture, created by a delightful and harmonious blend of Byzantine, Arab and Persian styles. The master architect for Suleiman was Sinan, one of the greatest architects in world history. A product of the *devshirme* system, Sinan first served for nearly twenty years as a military engineer in the Janissary. His skills in engineering won him the position of royal architect in 1538; he designed over 300 buildings in the course of his fifty-year career. His masterpiece is the Selimiye mosque at Erdine, which surpasses the size of the great Byzantine dome of Hagia Sofia. The entire architectural "feel" of Istanbul is essentially the extension of the artistic vision of Sinan.

Other arts also flourished in the Ottoman empire. Following Persian models, painting and illuminated manuscript illustration became an important art form. Metalworking and tile working were also highly developed. The Ottomans developed a complex semiartificial literary language which was a mixture of Turkish, Persian and Arabic; indeed, the educated Ottoman could speak all three languages fluently. Poetry was an integral part of Ottoman aristocratic society; historical writing also flourished.

CRISIS IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

By the early eighteenth century, all the major Islamic empires were in a state of severe crisis with both internal and external dimensions. Internally, the Islamic states were faced with government corruption and incompetence, economic depression, intellectual stagnation, and decentralization. Externally, Islamic societies were unable to face the rising military and economic threat of western Europe.

Government Corruption. By the early eighteenth century, most Islamic governments had become incapable of governing. In part this was due to moral decadence of the leaders. Many rulers of

Iran, Turkey and India were alcoholics or drug addicts who had murdered their way to the throne, only to idle away their time and squander government resources in the pleasure of the harem. Rather than dealing with the important and difficult problems of governing, imperial courts became rife with corruption, intrigue and murder.

Tyranny became the norm in governments in the Islamic world. In the Ottoman empire, for example, a new ruler ascending the throne would frequently systematically murder all his brothers and other potential rivals. As polygamists, Ottoman sultans would normally have numerous sons, each of whom realized that if he did not succeed his father, he would most likely be killed. The resulting factions, intrigues, murders and coups created an environment in which an heir to the throne would likely be a murderous paranoid tyrant. Courtiers who dared to challenge such rulers often paid for their impudence with their lives. Under such circumstances, reform was extremely difficult. The resulting paralysis left rulers and governments incapable of dealing with the numerous serious problems facing the Islamic world.

Economic Depression. The Islamic world entered a period of relative economic depression in the eighteenth century. Warfare and internal disorder contributed to depopulation. Europe was beginning its industrial and economic revolution, increasingly gaining control of the trade routes of the world. Competition from European products and the usurpation of the trade routes by the Europeans led to the decline of Islamic industries and the loss of trade routes. For example, Iсфаहান, the capital of the Safavid dynasty, which had been one of the great trading and cultural centers of the world in the seventeenth century, had been reduced to one-fourth of its former population by the end of the eighteenth century.

Government incompetence, corruption and squandering of resources, combined with economic depression, meant that most governments in the Islamic world were in a continual state of bankruptcy. Unable to pay their soldiers, bureaucrats or foreign loans, the governments attempted to increase taxes on an already impoverished peasant population. Such oppression often led to widespread dissatisfaction with the imperial order.

Intellectual Stagnation. Continuing intellectual patterns, which had begun in the Renaissance, the eighteenth century in Europe was a period of tremendous intellectual vitality and development. Along with new philosophical ideas about democracy, new intellectual approaches to the natural and physical universe were developed, which culminated in the European Scientific Revolution. These changes gave the Europeans an increasing advantage in technology, providing greater agricultural and industrial capacity, more wealth, better ships and weapons and superior armies.

A similar intellectual revolution was not forthcoming in the Islamic world. After many brilliant intellectual advances in technology, law and sciences in the sixteenth century, Islamic thought became sterile and conservative, content with repeating the authoritative pronouncements of the past rather than breaking new ground. For example, printing was introduced in Europe in 1453; within a few decades every major city in Europe had its own printing presses. The first printing press in Istanbul was not introduced until 1727, nearly three centuries later. Thus, the Islamic world participated in few of the tremendous intellectual changes that were transforming Europe. By the time Muslim intellectuals realized they were seriously behind Europeans, it was far too late to catch up. This technological and intellectual lag behind the West had plagued the Islamic world since the eighteenth century.

Military Inferiority. The greater economic strength, control of the seas and superior military technology of the Europeans, combined with the decaying conditions in the Islamic empires, gave the Europeans an increasing military superiority over the governments in the Islamic world. In 1669 the Ottomans were able to conquer Crete from the Venetians, while in 1683 they besieged Vienna. Aurangzeb continued Mughal expansion in India, conquering Bijapur and Golkonda from 1686 to 1687. However, these were the last great conquests of any Islamic state in the world. Within a few decades, Islamic military might had collapsed. Muslim armies have been continually on the defensive against European powers until the present.

Results. These problems created an enormous social, economic, and political crisis in the Islamic world. Although these problems developed over several decades, the result was the complete collapse of the Safavid and Mughal dynasties, the serious decline of the Ottomans, and imposition of European military domination over nearly all Islamic countries. The greatest political, economical and intellectual problem facing the Muslim world became determining the proper response to European world domination.

THE AGE OF WESTERN DOMINATION (c. 1750-1873)

Western European competition with Islamic civilization dates back to the Middle Ages with early wars between Arabs and Byzantines and the Crusades. However, European explorations and master of the sea in the sixteenth century provided a new phase in this competition. Initiated by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, various levels of armed conflict between Europe and the Islamic world continued for several centuries in northwest Africa, west and east Africa, Arabia, India, the Balkan frontier, and central Asia.

However, it was only in the eighteenth century, when the social and political crisis in the Islamic world had reached its full proportions and European military technology had become substantially superior, that the Europeans began having a real potential for actual conquest and colonization. Aside from the failed attempts by the Spanish and Portuguese to conquer Morocco in the sixteenth century, the first major European success was the British conquest of India.

The British In India

The Coming of the Europeans. The first European intervention in India involved the establishment of Portuguese trading colonies in 1498 and the Portuguese acquisition of the port of Goa in 1510. Thereafter, the Dutch conquered Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka), while the French and British also established control over important ports such as Madras, Bombay and Calcutta.

The East India Company. It was not until the collapse of the effective power of the Mughal emperors in the mid-eighteenth century that the Europeans became major players on the India scene. At first, the Europeans simply represented one among many competing factions, which included Mughals, Afghans, Turks, Rajputs, Marathas and other Hindus. Furthermore, the earliest British intervention in India was not an official government act, but an effort by the British East India Company, seeking purely economic gains. The goal of most Europeans was not military conquest, but the establishment of ports and control of trade and industry. However, they were not averse to using military force and Indian mercenary armies to accomplish these goals. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the increasing political chaos in India, coupled with superior European military technology and growing importance of the India trade to European economies, caused the military rivalries in Europe itself to spill over to India.

British Conquest of India. From 1756 to 1763, the Europeans initiated what could be called the first "world war," as French and British forces clashed in Europe, North America, west Africa, and India. In India, the British, with their Indian allies, met the French and their allies at the battle of Plassey in 1757. It ended in a decisive victory for the British, laying the foundation for creation of the British empire in India. Thereafter, the British increasingly adopted a policy of territorial expansion in India as the means to ensure their economic supremacy. During the next century, all of the Indian subcontinent was conquered or otherwise acquired by the British.

Effects of British Rule. British rule in India had mixed results. On the one hand, the British managed to bring political order and economic stability to the subcontinent. Sectarian and ethnic differences between Hindus and Muslims were temporarily ended as the British played the role of unbiased outsider in preserving peace. A great deal of modernization also occurred with the expansion of rail lines, telegraph systems, and other Western technologies. Many Indians received Western-style educations, which allowed them to adopt modern technologies for their country.

On the other hand, there were also numerous problems with British rule in India. In a sense, the British became a new Indian "caste," occupying the most privileged and powerful positions in Indian society, while compelling the Hindu and Muslim Indians to serve as subordinates. Furthermore, although there was great internal economic and technological development in India, most of the economic benefits from British rule in India were gained by the British. Early dissatisfaction with British rule in India culminated in 1857 with the unsuccessful Indian (Sepoy) Rebellion. Similarly, the Afghans, one of the most independent-minded and warlike people on earth, refused to submit to British rule and successfully prevented the British from conquering their homeland in a series of Afghan Wars (1839-1880).

Despite the relative benevolence of British rule, it was a case of a foreign power dominating local peoples. By the late nineteenth century, a new generation of Indian intellectuals, trained in modern schools but still loyal to their homeland and traditions, began the long process which would ultimately lead to independence by founding the first Indian National Congress in 1885.