Nipissing University

History 2805 -- History of Islamic Civilization

The Gunpowder Empires

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In this lecture I focus on the great Islamic empires of what in Europe is called the early modern period, roughly 1500 to 1800.

After the collapse of Timur�s empire in the early 15th century, politics changed quite a bi . The empires of the later period had quite a different character from the ones that went before. Simply, they were much more stable, much more identified with a particular piece of territory, and much more involved in the life of the local communities that made them up.

Why did this happen? Why the greater stability?   This is actually a question of some importance, and one that is seldom thought about.

From about 200 A.D. to 1400 A.D., Central Asia, all too often ignored in world history, was an extremely important danger zone.   There is a stretch of territory from the Austrian border to Manchuria that during the Middle Ages was dominated by nomads, who sloshed back and forth in it, sometimes spilling out the eastern end to attack China, or the western end to attack Europe, or over the southern border to attack India or the Middle East.   Although there weren�t actually that many people in this zone, their mastery of horses and their belligerent culture made them an important military resource for either their own leaders or for outside rulers.

But after 1400, the importance of these nomads and this zone decreased dramatically.

There seem to be two reasons for this.

- Despite all the cities and villages leveled and depopulated by various Mongol and Turkic warlords, urban and agricultural culture was encroaching on the steppes. This is precisely the period when the Ukraine, for instance, ceased to be dominated by herders and began to be dominated by peasants and their landlords. So the nomadic zone shrank. More and more Turks settled down.

- After about 1400, the key military resource ceased to be well-trained mounted men. Instead, the key resource was gunpowder weaponry -- both the large cannons that could demolish or defend a walled city or fortress, and the handguns, that trained infantry could use to destroy any force that did not have them. After 1400, throughout the world, in some place more quickly than others, armies were reorganized to take advantage of the new type of weapons. Reorganizing armies meant reorganizing the societies that supported them. Rulers who did that job well were able to put together strong states. Rulers who failed lost control in favor of ones who did a better job of it.

Now it is a common assumption that however important Islamic societies were in the Middle Ages, in modern times Western Europe left Islam behind -- Europe successfully modernized and the Islamic countries did not. Different people have different ideas of what modernism means. But if modernism means the gunpowder revolution, then this idea is completely false.

During the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, the greatest gunpowder states, whether one is talking about population, area, or sheer military power, were not European states, but Islamic ones: the Ottoman Empire based in Constantinople (Istanbul); the Safavid Empire based in Iran; and the Timurid or Mughal Empire based in India. In fact some historians of Asia and Islam call these �the gunpowder empires.�

Each of these empires had its own particular character, and I will discuss them in a moment. But they have some important things in common, which should be outlined first.

- Each of the gunpowder empires lasted a fairly long time. The Safavid empire in Iran, the shortest lived, was founded about 1500, and lasted till 1722. The Mughal empire of India began in the 1500s and lasted effectively until the mid-1700s and in name until the 1850s; the champion, the Ottoman empire began in the late 1300s, became a major empire in the 1400s, and lasted until 1918.
- Each of the empires had fairly stable boundaries and became identified with a particular region. This is clearest in the case of the Safavid empire.   Its boundaries are not identical with those of present-day Iran, but they are close enough to fool most of us. In general, it is important that these were not nomad empires (though the Ottoman and Timurid ruling classes had a nomadic heritage), with a ruling class equally at home or not at home anywhere in the Islamic world. Also, you can now make fairly direct connections between things that happened in these empires in the gunpowder era with things that are happening now in some of the same places.

- Finally each of the empires had an important impact on the religious composition of society.   The impacts were different, and its these differences that I am going to discuss now.

First, let�s have a brief look at **Iran**. The **Safavid** empire gives us the most important example of a Muslim state created by a sufi order.
The Safavid family went back to the fourteenth century, when a member who claimed to be a descendent of Ali founded a sufi order. By the fifteenth century, the order controlled the mountainous area on the modern boundary of Turkey and Iran, and had become a disciplined, organized military force called the Kizil-bashes, or Red-Heads. In 1501, their leader Shah Ismail seized the Iranian capital of Tabriz. His descendants, especially his great-grandson Shah Abbas, made Iran a mighty empire supported by modern artillery and musket-bearing infantry, and by an important share of the world silk market.

From the very beginning, the legitimacy of the Safavid dynasty was its Shi�ite nature.   Shah Ismail made Shi�ism the official religion of Iran, suppressed the Sunni leaders, and set up a Shi�ite religious establishment in each city. His descendants consistently followed that policy, and eventually Iran became a Shi�ite country. This had two major effects.

- First, Iran became diplomatically and politically isolated from other Islamic countries, at least much of the time. Shi�ite teachings in Iran stressed that Sunnis were as bad as infidels and maybe worse; Sunni rulers outside of Iran didn�t have a very high opinion of the Safavids, either.

- Second, the establishment of Shi�ism in Iran eventually helped undermine the Safavid dynasty and alienate the central government from local Muslim communities. Although Shi�ism owed its predominance to royal authority, the ulama did not feel particularly grateful. In fact, they did not really believe the Safavids represented the true line of Ali. In the end, the skepticism of the urban religious leadership helped undermine the dynasty, which came to an effective end in 1722.

And although a new dynasty arose to unify the country before 1800, there remained a division between the local communities and the monarchy reminiscent of the Middle period.   The conflict between the Shah and the ayatollahs in the 1970s is directly connected with Safavid developments. So is Iran�s status as the main home of Shi�ism.

In **India** during the same period, the monarchy faced quite a different religious situation. By the 1500s, when the **Mughals** or **Timurids** took over, North India and large parts of the south had been ruled by Muslims for centuries. Yet the local religious tradition was still thriving. Muslims, though numerous, were a small minority, and Hindu princes and generals were still an important factor.

One of the big questions of imperial politics was how should a Muslim sultan rule such a country. One approach was to find as much common ground with members of the Hindu elite as possible, so that their talents and local connections could be used to the benefit of the imperial court. This led to a politics of elite accommodation, where rich, influential and powerful families from both traditions intermarried and shared a courtly culture made up of both Persian and Hindi elements. From the Muslim side, this could be justified only by a sufi-like approach to religious truth. Sufis had always taken the position that religion was not just a set of rules, that there was a higher mystical truth, and that some truth could be found in every religion. Sufism had thrived in India, where respect for holy men was so important, and tolerance of a variety of religious rituals was a practical necessity. So a ruler like Akbar, the greatest Mughal emperor (1556-1605; a contemporary of Elizabeth I and Philip II of Spain), pursued a universalistic religious approach, trying to bring Muslim and Hindu traditions and practices together at his court.

On the other hand, there were plenty of Muslims in India who took a much stricter approach to religious truth. Legal scholars, the *ulama* of Muslim India, could easily point out how the universalism of the court was against God�s law. Since this attitude was closer to the Islamic mainstream than Akbar�s policy, it always had a constituency. Eventually a Mughal emperor was won over to the idea that Islam had to be purified in India, and that the supremacy of Muslims over the rest of the population had to be enforced. This was Awrangzeb (1658-1707). He followed his policy with great energy. However alienating the Hindu aristocracy and military was not good politics. The end result was that the Mughal power, which economically was already in trouble, was undermined.

The third and the most important of the gunpowder empires was the **Ottoman empire**. Although it originated with a Turkish dynasty of nomadic origin, controlled much of the old Middle Eastern homeland of Islam during its existence, and ruled almost all of the Arabic speaking countries, the Ottoman empire was something new. The power of the Ottomans was not based on the old countries of Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. These countries were much less prosperous than they had been in the past. Their power was based on being on the frontier of Islam at a time when the initiative in the war with Christian Europe passed back to the Muslim side.

The earliest Ottoman rulers had been the leaders of *ghazi* bands in the fourteenth century. Ghazis were frontier fighters against the infidel, usually of nomadic background and fighting on horseback. Anatolia was a good place for ghazis, because the Christians of Constantinople were handy, and there were lots of local Turks willing to take up the cause under a capable ruler. Over a number of generations, the Ottoman clan had provided the most capable leaders.

In the fifteenth century, the Ottomans found themselves in a new situation.

- First, they conquered both Constantinople and the Balkan peninsula, acquiring a new Christian subject population and a tremendous amount of wealth and power.
- Second, the ghazi army of old became obsolete because of gunpowder. The irregular cavalrymen of old had to be replaced by a more professional army trained in the new weapons. Instead of relying on the established Turkish military class for their troops, the Ottomans began raising gun-carrying infantry recruited from two sources: slaves imported from the Caucasus region, and their new Christian subjects.

The Christians were recruited in a systematic way. One of the taxes levied on the sultan�s new domains was the *devshirme*, a tax on children. Young adolescent boys in large numbers were conscripted into the sultan�s service. After being converted and educated, they were enrolled in the elite regiments of **Janissaries**, the most famous slave-recruited army in Islamic history. Like the Mamlukes of Egypt, they were members of the sultan�s personal household, responsible to him alone. They were not allowed to marry until retirement, and their children were not eligible to join their regiments. And they were highly trained soldiers with a high degree of morale and dedication. With this army, the Ottoman sultans made tremendous gains in southeastern Europe, and in 1529 came close to taking Vienna, the gateway to Germany. At about the same time, the Ottomans used fleets to seize most of the Mediterranean coastline, threatening Christian control of that sea for the first time since the 11th century.

I should point out that the Ottomans had in the sixteenth century a highly trained and loyal bureaucracy to match their army. Although I haven�t mentioned it before, this was something all the gunpowder empires had in their early days. The modern armies and the overall strength of these empires depended on the monarch�s control of local resources; and since all of the empires were essentially new in the sixteenth century, they made a pretty big impact simultaneously.

The Ottoman rulers used their efficient administration to create a two pronged religious policy.

- The Ottomans found themselves by 1530 the masters of a tremendous amount of Christian territory. It was not possible to Islamicize this area in a hurry. So the sultans turned the Christian populations over to the rule of their own bishops, who were mostly very cooperative with the imperial authorities. This spared Christian sensibilities in the new conquests and gave the sultans reliable deputies over large areas. Same for Jews where they lived.

- The second part of the religious policy applied to the Muslim population. The Sultans, partly in reaction to the Shi�ite threat from Iran, were intent on establishing a Sunni uniformity on their subjects. They did this by controlling the education of religious scholars and keeping important religious appointments under their control. In the heyday of the Ottoman Empire, the religious life of the Muslim population -- and maybe of the Christians and Jews -- was under more effective government supervision than ever in the past.

The prestige of the sultans was very great in the Muslim world outside of Iran, and they could claim to be caliphs without fear of contradiction -- again, outside of Iran and other Shi�ite areas.

The Islamic gunpowder empires were among the most impressive political and military powers of the 16th century. But by the middle of the 18th century, they were all looking a bit rocky. Christian powers were taking control of territory formerly ruled by Muslims, not just in Europe, but even in India! I don�t want to end this lecture without looking very briefly for an explanation of this phenomenon. These are, after all, the last Islamic communities that could feel superior to Christian Europe in power and civilization. Why did they fall so quickly from such an impressive position to one of long-term weakness?

Two things come to mind.

I have said more than once in this class that the dar-al-Islam was the center of the world, and represent the center of culture and innovation for much of the rest of the Eastern Hemisphere. But by 1600, it was clear that the major communication routes of the world no longer went through the Middle East. They went through the world�s oceans, which were increasingly under European control. The advantages of contact with the outside world, access to its resources and opportunities went to Europe. This had a very bad effect on the economic situation of the Islamic world.

Second, the center of innovation in culture was no longer in the Islamic world either. Though Islamic governments had latched onto guns as early as European governments, the other great new machine of the early modern period had almost no effect on Islam. That is the printing press. Perfected in Germany in the 1450s, it was in use throughout Europe by 1500 -- there was even one in Constantinople. But the Constantinopolitan press was only used for Christian literature. Religious authorities forbade its use for Islamic texts. Maybe in the short run, the Islamic world avoided a lot of turmoil by rejecting the press and its uncontrolled dissemination of information. In the long run, however, it would pay a high price for standing pat with what it already knew.