

Some Reflections on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire

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## SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE DECLINE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE <sup>(1)</sup>

The decline of great Empires has always been a subject of fascinated interest, and in our own day has a new poignancy, both for those who rejoice and for those who weep at the passing of Imperial greatness. The decline of the Ottoman Empire has also received its share of attention, though not of serious study. <sup>(2)</sup> The half-millennium of Ottoman history is still one of the most neglected of fields of study, and recent research, both in Turkey and in the West, while it has increased our knowledge of the beginnings and of the end of the Empire, has shed but little light on the processes of its decline. The modern Turkish historians, naturally enough, have devoted most of their attention to the early greatness and recent revival of their people, while such Western scholars as have discussed the subject have been content, in the main, to follow the analysis of the Ottoman historians themselves. Often, too, they have been influenced by the national historiographic legends of the liberated former subject peoples of the Empire in Europe and Asia. These have tended to blame all the defects and shortcomings of their societies on the misrule of their fallen Imperial masters, and have generalised the admitted failings of Ottoman government in its last phases into an indictment of Ottoman civilisation as a whole.

(1) This article is an extract from a book, now in preparation, on the emergence of modern Turkey.

(2) An exception is the essay on the decay of the Ottoman 'Ruling Institution', incorporated in H. A. R. Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, 1/1, *Islamic Society in the Eighteenth Century*, London 1950, p. 173 ff.

'The decline and fall of the Roman Empire', Professor Jones has recently remarked, 'was the result of a complex of interacting causes which the historian disentangles at his peril.'<sup>(1)</sup> The peril is all the greater when, as with the Ottoman Empire, the essential preliminary work of detailed historical research is so little advanced. The great mass of Ottoman records for the 17th and 18th centuries are unpublished, almost untouched; even the chronicles have received only slight attention. The internal economic and social history in that period has hardly been studied at all, while the study of political history has progressed very little beyond the point to which it was brought by Hammer and Zinkeisen in the 19th century.

In what follows no attempt is made to cut through the complex web of cause, symptom, and effect. What is offered is a broad classification and enumeration of some the principal factors and processes which led to, or were part of, or were expressions of the decline of Ottoman government, society, and civilisation. They will be considered in three main groups — those relating to government, to economic and social life, and to moral, cultural and intellectual change.

In the first group we may include the familiar changes in the apparatus of government — the court, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the armed forces, which form the main burden of the famous memorandum of Kochu Bey, presented to Murād IV in 1630.<sup>(2)</sup> If the first ten Sultans of the house of Osman astonish us with the spectacle of a series of able and intelligent men rare if not unique in the annals of dynastic succession, the remainder of the rulers of that line provides an even more

(1) A. H. M. Jones, 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', *History*, XL (1955) p. 226.

(2) Kochu Bey, an Ottoman official of Macedonian or Albanian birth, was recruited by the *devshirme* and joined the palace staff, where he became the intimate adviser of Sultan Murād IV (1623-1640). The memorandum which he composed for the Sultan in 1630 on the state and prospects of the Ottoman Empire has been greatly admired both in Turkey and among Western scholars, and led Hammer to call Kochu Bey 'the Turkish Montesquieu'. On the editions and translations of his treatise see F. Babinger, *Die Geschichtsschreiber der Osmanen und ihre Werke*, Leipzig 1927, pp. 134-5. A new edition was published in Istanbul in 1939. A German translation by W. F. Behrnauer appeared in *ZDMG*, XV (1861), p. 272 ff.

astonishing series of incompetents, degenerates, and misfits. Such a series is beyond the range of coincidence, and can be explained by a system of upbringing and selection which virtually precluded the emergence of an effective ruler. Similarly, the Grand Vezirate and other high offices, both political and religious, were filled and administered in such a way that what must surprise us is that they produced as many able and conscientious men as they did.

The breakdown in the apparatus of government affected not only the supreme instruments of sovereignty but also the whole of the bureaucratic and religious institutions all over the Empire. These suffered a catastrophic fall in efficiency and integrity, which was accentuated by the growing change in methods of recruitment, training, and promotion. This deterioration is clearly discernible in the Ottoman archives, which reflect vividly and precisely the change from the meticulous, conscientious, and strikingly efficient bureaucratic government of the 16th century to the neglect of the 17th and the collapse of the 18th centuries. <sup>(1)</sup> The same fall in professional and moral standards can be seen, though perhaps in less striking form, in the different ranks of the religious and judicial hierarchy.

Most striking of all was the decline of the Ottoman armed forces. The Empire could still draw on great reserves of loyal and valiant subjects, said Kochu Bey, writing in 1630. The Turkish soldier had suffered no loss of courage or morale, said 'Alī Pasha writing after the disastrous treaty of Küchük Kaynarja of 1774. <sup>(2)</sup> Yet the Ottoman armies, once the terror of Europe, ceased to frighten anyone but their own sovereigns and

(1) In the 16th century, the records are careful, detailed, and up to date; in the 17th and 18th centuries they become irregular, inaccurate, and sketchy. Even the quality of the paper becomes poorer. In this general picture of falling standards, the carefully kept registers of the Köprülü interlude stand out the more significantly.

(2) 'Alī Pasha was the son of a Grand Vezir and had himself served as governor of Trebizond. Two questions, he tells us, had profoundly occupied his thoughts: why the Empire, from being so strong, had become so weak, and what was to be done to recover her former strength. His memorandum, still unpublished, is preserved in manuscript in Upsala. A Swedish paraphrase was included by M. Norberg in *Turkiska Rikets Annaler*, V, Hernösand 1822, p. 1425 ff.

their own civil population, and suffered a long series of humiliating defeats at the hands of once despised enemies.

In the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire reached the limits of its expansion, and came up against barriers which it could not pass. On the Eastern border, despite the victories in the field of Selīm I and Suleymān, the Ottoman armies could not advance into Persia. The new centralised monarchy of the Safavids, then at the height of their power; the high plateau of Iran, posing new problems of logistics and calling for new and unfamiliar techniques; the difficulties of leading against a Muslim adversary an army whose traditions since its birth were of the holy war against the infidels — all these combined to halt the Ottoman forces at the frontiers of Iran, and cut them off from overland expansion into Central Asia or India.

In Eastern waters they encountered the stout ships of the Portuguese, whose ship-builders and navigators, trained to meet the challenge of the Atlantic, were more than a match for the calm-water ships of the Ottomans. Stouter vessels, more guns, better seamanship were what defeated the successive attempts of the Ottomans to break out of the ring, and swept Muslim shipping from the waters of the Indian Ocean.

In the Crimea and the lands beyond it they were stopped by Russia. In 1475 the Ottomans had conquered Kaffa. Part of the Crimean coast passed under direct Ottoman rule, the Giray Khans became Ottoman vassals, and in 1569 the Ottomans even launched a plan to open a canal between the Don and Volga and thus, by acquiring a shipping route to Central Asia, to break out of the Portuguese noose.<sup>(1)</sup> But here too the Ottomans found their way blocked. At the same time as Western Europe was expanding by sea round Africa and into Asia, Eastern Europe was expanding by land across the steppe, southward and eastward towards the lands of Islam. In 1502 the once mighty Khanate of the Golden Horde was finally extinguished, and much of its territory absorbed by Russia.

(1) On this project see the article of Halil İnalcık, 'Osmanlı-Rus rekabetinin menşei ve Don-Volga kanalı teşebbüsü (1569)', *Belleten* XII (1948), pp. 349-402. English version: 'The Origins of the Ottoman-Russian Rivalry and the Don-Volga Canal 1569', *Annales de l'Université d'Ankara*, I (1946-7), pp. 47-107.

The successor Khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan, and Crimea lingered on for a while, but before long the Russians were able to conquer the first two, and to exercise a growing pressure on the third. The way was open to the Black Sea and the North Caucasus, the Caspian and western Siberia, where the advance of Russia barred and enclosed the Ottomans as did the Portuguese and their successors in the Eastern seas.

In Africa, desert, mountain, and climate offered obstacles which there was no incentive to surmount, while in the Mediterranean, after a brief interval, naval supremacy was lost to the maritime countries of the West. <sup>(1)</sup>

But the classical area of Ottoman expansion had been in none of these. Since the first crossing of the Bosphorus in the mid-fourteenth century, Europe had been the promised land of the Ottomans — the 'House of War' par excellence, in which the power and the glory of Islam were to be advanced by victorious battle against the infidel. On September 27, 1529, after conquering Hungary, the armies of Suleymān the Magnificent reached Vienna — and on October 15 they began to withdraw from the still unconquered city. The event was decisive. For another century and a half inconclusive warfare was waged for Hungary, and in 1683 yet another attempt, the last, was made against Vienna. But the cause was already lost. The Ottoman Empire had reached the line beyond which it could not advance, from which it could only withdraw. The valour of the Habsburg, as of the Safavid armies, no doubt played its part in stemming the Ottoman onslaught, but is insufficient as an explanation of why the defenders of Vienna were able to halt the victors of Kossovo, Varna, Nicopolis, and Mohacs. There too we may perhaps find an explanation in the problems

(1) Luṭfi Pasha, writing after 1541, could already see the danger to Turkey of the growing naval power of Europe. He quotes with approval a remark by Kemālpashazāde (d. 1533-4) to Selim I: 'My Lord, you dwell in a city whose benefactor is the sea. If the sea is not safe no ships will come, and if no ship comes Istanbul perishes.' He himself had said to Sultan Suleymān: 'Under the previous Sultans there were many who ruled the land, but few who ruled the sea. In the conduct of naval warfare the infidels are ahead of us. We must overcome them.' Luṭfi Pasha, *Aṣāf-nāme*, ed. and tr. R. Tschudi, Berlin 1910, text 32-3, translation 26-7.

of a new and different terrain, calling for new techniques of warfare and especially of supply and transport.

It was after the halting of the Ottoman advance that the lag began to appear between the standards of training and equipment of Ottoman and European armies. Initially, the backwardness of the Ottomans was relative rather than absolute. Once in the forefront of military science, they began to fall behind. The great technical and logistic developments in European armies in the 17th century were followed tardily and ineffectively by the Ottomans — in marked contrast with the speed and inventiveness with which they accepted and adapted the European invention of artillery in the 15th century. One possible contributory factor to this change is the ebb in the flow of European renegades and adventurers to Turkey — but to state this is to raise the further question of why Turkey had ceased to attract these men, and why the Turks made such little use of those who did come.

The decline in alertness, in readiness to accept new techniques, is an aspect — perhaps the most dangerous — of what became a general deterioration in professional and moral standards in the armed forces, parallel to that of the bureaucratic and religious classes, which we have already noted. It led directly to what must be accounted, in the Ottoman as in the Roman Empire, one of the principal causes of decline — the loss of territory to more powerful foreign enemies. Modern historians have rightly tended to put the loss of territory to invaders among the symptoms rather than the causes of weakness, but the effect of the steady draining away of man-power, revenue, and resources should not be underrated. For Kochu Bey and his successors, the causes of these changes for the worse lay in favouritism and corruption. The different presuppositions of our time may incline us to regard these less as causes than as symptoms, and to seek their motives and origin in vaster and deeper changes.

During the 16th century three major changes occurred, principally of external origin, which vitally affected the entire life of the Ottoman Empire. The first of these has already been mentioned — the halting of the Ottoman advance into

Europe. This was an event comparable in some ways with the Closing of the Frontier in the United States — but with far more shattering impact. The Ottoman state had been born on the frontier between Islam and Byzantine Christendom; its leaders and armies had been march-warriors in the Holy War, carrying the sword and the faith of Islam into new lands. The Ottoman ghazis and dervishes, like the pioneers and missionaries of the Americas, believed themselves to be bringing civilisation and the true faith to peoples sunk in barbarism and unbelief — and like them reaped the familiar rewards of the frontier-warrior and the colonist. For the Ottoman state, the frontier had provided work and recompense both for its men of the sword and its men of religion, and, in a deeper sense, the very *raison d'être* of its statehood. True, by the 16th century that state had already evolved from a principality of march-warriors into an Empire, but the traditions of the frontier were still deeply rooted in the military, social, and religious life of the Ottomans, and the virtual closing of the frontier to further expansion and colonisation could not fail profoundly to affect them. The Ottoman systems of military organisation, civil administration, taxation, and land-tenure were all geared to the needs of a society expanding by conquest and colonisation into the lands of the infidel. They ceased to correspond to the different stresses of a frontier that was stationary or in retreat. <sup>(1)</sup>

While the great Ottoman war-machine, extended beyond its range, was grinding to a standstill in the plains of Hungary, the life and growth of the Ottoman Empire were being circumvented, on a far vaster scale, by the oceanic voyages of discovery of the Western maritime peoples, the ultimate effect of which was to turn the whole Eastern Mediterranean area, where the

(1) The significance of the frontier and of the frontiersman in Ottoman government and society has been demonstrated by Paul Wittek in a series of studies and monographs. A general statement will be found in his *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire*, London 1938. The whole question of the frontier as a cultural entity, with some reference to F. J. Turner's famous thesis on the significance of the frontier in American history, has been re-examined by Owen Lattimore in his 'The Frontier in History' (published in *Relazioni I*, pp. 105-138, of the Tenth International Congress of Historical Sciences, Rome 1955).



Empire was situated, into a backwater. In 1555 the Imperial Ambassador in Constantinople Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, one of the acutest European observers of Turkey, could still comment that the West Europeans basely squandered their energies 'seeking the Indies and the Antipodes across vast fields of ocean, in search of gold', and abandoning the heart of Europe to imminent and almost certain Turkish conquest. <sup>(1)</sup> But in about 1580 an Ottoman geographer, in an account of the New World written for Murād III, warned of the dangers to the Islamic lands and the disturbance to Islamic trade resulting from the establishment of Europeans on the coasts of America, India, and the Persian Gulf; he advised the Sultan to open a canal through the isthmus of Suez and send a fleet 'to capture the ports of Hind and Sind and drive away the infidels'. <sup>(2)</sup> By 1625 'Omar Ṭālib could see the danger in a more pressing form : 'Now the Europeans have learnt to know the whole world; they send their ships everywhere and seize important ports. Formerly, the goods of India, Sind, and China used to come to Suez, and were distributed by Muslims to all the world. But now these goods are carried on Portuguese, Dutch, and English ships to Frangistan, and are spread all over the world from there. What they do not need themselves they bring to Istanbul and other Islamic lands, and sell it for five times the price, thus earning much money. For this reason gold and silver are becoming scarce in the lands of Islam. The Ottoman Empire must seize the shores of Yemen and the trade passing that way; otherwise before very long, the Europeans will rule over the lands of Islam'. <sup>(3)</sup>

The effects on Middle Eastern trade of the circumnavigation of Africa were by no means as immediate and as catastrophic as was at one time believed. Right through the 16th century

(1) *The Turkish letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, translated by E. S. Forster, Oxford 1927, p. 40.

(2) *Ta'riḫ al-Hind al-Gharbī*, Constantinople 1142/1729, fol. 6b ff.

(3) The observations of 'Omar Ṭālib, written on the margins of a manuscript of the *Ta'riḫ al-Hind al-Gharbī* in Ankara (Maarif Library 10024), were published by A. Zekî Velidi Togan, *Bugünkü Türkîli (Türkistan) ve Yakın Tarihi*, I, 2nd ed., Istanbul 1947, p. 127.

Eastern merchandise continued to reach the Ottoman Empire, coming by ship to Red Sea ports and Basra and overland across Persia, and European merchants came to Turkey to buy. But the volume of international trade passing this way was steadily decreasing. From the 17th century, the establishment of Dutch and British power in Asia and the transference of the routes of world trade to the open ocean deprived Turkey of the greater part of her foreign commerce and left her, together with the countries over which she ruled, in a stagnant backwater through which the life-giving stream of world trade no longer flowed. <sup>(1)</sup>

The European voyages of discovery brought another more immediate blow, as violent as it was unexpected. The basic unit of currency of the Ottoman Empire had been the silver *aḳche*, or *asper*, in which all the revenues and expenditures of the state had been calculated. Like other Mediterranean and European states, the Ottoman Empire suffered from a recurring shortage of precious metals, which at times threatened its silver-based monetary system. To meet these difficulties, the Ottoman Sultans resorted to such well-tried measures as controlling the silver-mines, discouraging the export and encouraging the import of coin and bullion, extending the non-monetary sector of the state economy, and alternately debasing and reissuing the currency.

This situation was suddenly transformed when the flow of precious metals from the New World reached the Eastern Mediterranean. American gold, and, to a far greater extent, American silver had already caused a price revolution and a financial crisis in Spain. From there it passed to Genoa and thence to Ragusa, where Spanish coins of American metal are first reported in the fifteen eighties. Thereafter the financial impact on Turkey of this sudden flow of cheap and plentiful silver from the West was immediate and catastrophic. The Ottoman rulers, accustomed to crises of shortage, were quite

(1) On these questions see the important studies of Fuad Köprülü (in his additional notes to the Turkish translation of Barthold's *Muslim Culture — Islam Medeniyeti Tarihi*, Istanbul 1940, p. 255 ff.); and Halil İnalcık in *Belleten*, XV no. 60 (1951), p. 661 ff.

unable to understand or meet a crisis resulting from an excess of silver, and the traditional measures which they adopted only served to worsen the situation. In 1584 the asper was reduced from one-fifth to one-eighth of a dirham of silver — a measure of devaluation which unleashed a continuous financial crisis with far-reaching economic and social consequences. As the price of silver fell by 70 %, that of gold rose by 100 %; cheaply bought silver coin by the million flowed from Europe to Turkey for quick and profitable resale, crowding out the traffic in commodities, draining the Empire of gold, and accentuating the steep rise in the level of prices, which brought distress and then ruin to whole classes of the population. Before long there was a vast increase in coining, coin-clipping, and the like; the rate of the asper fell from 60 to the ducat to over 200, and foreign coins, both gold and silver, drove the debased Ottoman issues even from the internal markets. Twice in the 17th century the Ottoman government tried to stem the inflationary tide by the issue of a new silver currency: first the para, which appears as a silver coin in the sixteen twenties, then the piastre, or *ķurush*, which appears in the sixteen eighties, in imitation of the European dollar. Both followed the asper into debasement and devaluation. <sup>(1)</sup>

Precisely at this time of monetary and financial crisis, the government was compelled to embark on a great expansion in its salaried personnel and a great increase in expenditure in coin. When Meħemmed the Conqueror had faced a monetary crisis, he had reduced the numbers of paid soldiers and increased the numbers of cavalry sipahis, whose services were rewarded

(1) The effects on wages, prices and currencies of the flow of American bullion, first studied for Spain in the classical monograph of Earl J. Hamilton (*American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain 1501-1550*, Harvard 1934), were examined on a larger scale for the whole Mediterranean area in the great work of F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1949. Braudel's pointers on events in Turkey (especially pp. 393-4, 419-20, 637-643) were taken up and developed by Halil Inalcık in his illuminating study, 'Osmanlı İmparatorluğunun Kuruluş ve İnkişafı devrinde Türkiye'nin İktisadî Vaziyeti üzerinde bir tetkik münasebetile', *Bellelen*, XV, no. 60 (1951), p. 656 ff. See further the review of Braudel's book by Ömer Lütfi Barkan in *Revue de la Faculté des Sciences économiques de l'Université d'Istanbul*, XI (1949-50), pp. 196-216.

with fiefs and not coin. (1) But in the changed conditions of warfare of the 16th and 17th centuries, this had ceased to be possible. The greatly increased use of firearms and artillery necessitated the maintenance of larger and larger paid professional armies, and reduced the relative importance of the feudal cavalryman. Both Kochu Bey and Hājji Khalifa note and deplore the decline of the sipahis and the increase in the paid soldiery which, says Hājji Khalifa, had increased from 48,000 in 1567 to 100,000 in about 1620. (2) Both writers are aware of the harmful financial and agrarian effects of this change. Understandably, they miss the point that the obsolescence of the sipahi had become inevitable, and that only the long-term, professional soldier could serve the military needs of the time.

The price was appalling. Faced with a growing expenditure and a depreciating currency, the demands of the treasury became more and more insatiable. The underpaid and over-sized salaried personnel of the state—civil, military, and religious—had greater and greater difficulties in making ends meet, with the inevitable effects on their honesty, their prestige, and their further recruitment. Though the feudal cavalryman was no longer needed by the army, his disappearance was sorely felt in the countryside, as the old Ottoman agrarian system, of which he had once been the keystone, tottered and collapsed. In place of the sipahi, who resided in or near the fief in which he had a hereditary interest, palace favourites, parasites, and speculators became the recipients of fiefs, sometimes accumulating great numbers of them, and thus becoming, in effect, absentee owners of great latifundia. Other fiefs reverted to the Imperial domain. (3) But the growing inefficiency and venality of the

(1) Cf. Inalcık, *op. cit.*

(2) *Düstūr al-'Amal li' Işlāh al-Khalal*, Istanbul 1280/1863 (as an appendix to the *Ḳawānīn-i Āl-i 'Othmān* of 'Ayn-i 'Alī), pp. 131-2; German translation by W. F. Behrnauer in *ZDMG*, XI (1857), p. 125. In this little treatise, written in about 1653, Hājji Khalifa examines the causes of the financial and other troubles of the Ottoman Empire.

(3) From the late 16th century onwards the cadastral registers in the Ottoman archives show a steady decrease in the number of timārs, and a corresponding increase in the extent of Imperial domain (*Khāṣṣ-i shāhi*).

bureaucracy prevented the formation of any effective state system for the assessment and collection of taxes. Instead these tasks were given to tax-farmers, whose interposition and interception of revenues became in time a prescriptive and hereditary right, and added to the number of vast and neglected latifundia.

The shrinking economy of the Empire thus had to support an increasingly costly and cumbersome superstructure. The palace, the bureaucracy and the religious hierarchy, an army that in expenditure at least was modern, and a parasitic class of tax-farmers and absentee landlords — all this was far more than the mediaeval states or even the Roman Empire had tried to support; yet it rested on an economy that was no more advanced than theirs. The technological level of agriculture remained primitive, and the social conditions of the Turkish countryside after the 16th century precluded the appearance of anything like the English gentleman-farmers of the 17th century whose experiments revolutionised English agriculture.

These developments are not peculiar to Turkey. The fall in money and rise of prices, the growing cost of government and warfare, the sale of offices and farming of taxes — all these are known in other Mediterranean and adjoining states, where they contributed to the rise of a new class of capitalists and financiers, with a growing and constructive influence on governments.

In Turkey too there were rich merchants and bankers, such as the Greek Michael Cantacuzenos and the Portuguese Jew Joseph Nasi — the Fugger of the Orient, as Braudel called him. (1) But they were never able to play anything like the financial, economic, and political role of their European counterparts. Part of the cause of this must undoubtedly be found in the progressive stagnation of Ottoman trade, to which allusion has already been made. But that is not all. Most if not all of these merchants were Christians or Jews — tolerated but second-class subjects of the Muslim state. However great their economic power, they were politically penalised and socially segregated; they could obtain political power only by

(1) Braudel, p. 567.

stealth, and exercise it only by intrigue, with demoralising effect on all concerned. Despite the scale and extent of their financial operations, they were unable to create political conditions more favourable to commerce, or to build up any solid structure of banking and credit, and thus help the Ottoman government in its perennial financial straits. In England too finance and credit were at first in the hands of alien specialists, who have left their name in Lombard Street. But these were ousted in time by vigorous and pushful native rivals. In Turkey no such rivals arose, and in any case, in the general decline of the 17th century, even the Greek and Jewish merchant princes of Constantinople dwindled into insignificance. Fortunes were still made in Turkey, but their origin was not economic. Mostly they were political or fiscal in origin, obtained through the holding of public office. Nor were they spent on investment or development, but consumed or hoarded, after the fashions of the time.

Reference has often been made to the technological backwardness of the Ottoman Empire — to its failure not only to invent, but even to respond to the inventions of others. While Europe swept forward in science and technology, the Ottomans were content to remain, in their agriculture, their industry, and their transport, at the level of their mediaeval ancestors. Even their armed forces followed tardily and incompetently after the technological advances of their European enemies.

The problem of agriculture in the Ottoman Empire was more than one of technical backwardness, however. It was one of definite decline. Already during the reign of Suleymān the Magnificent, Luṭfi Pasha warned of the dangers of rural depopulation, and urged that the peasantry be protected by moderation in taxation and by regular censuses of village population, as a control on the competence of provincial government. (1) Kochu

(1) Luṭfi Pasha, *Āṣāfnāme*, chapter 4. Luṭfi Pasha's treatise, written after his dismissal from the office of Grand Vezir in 1541, sets forth rules on what a good Grand Vezir should do and, more urgently, on what he should avoid. In this booklet, written at a time when the Ottoman Empire was still at the height of its power and glory, the writer shows deep concern about its fate and welfare, and is already able to point to what, in later years, became the characteristic signs of Ottoman decline.

Bey reinforces these arguments; but by 1653 Hājji Khalifa reports that people had begun to flock from the villages to the towns during the reign of Suleymān, and that in his own day there were derelict and abandoned villages all over the Empire. (1)

Much of this decline in agriculture can be attributed to the causes named by the Ottoman memorialists: the squeezing out of the feudal sipahis, the mainstay of the early Ottoman agrarian system, and their replacement by tax-farmers and others with no long-term interest in peasant welfare or land conservation, but only an immediate and short-term interest in taxes. Harsh, exorbitant, and improvident taxation led to a decline in cultivation, which was sometimes permanent. The peasants, neglected and impoverished, were forced into the hands of money-lenders and speculators, and often driven off the land entirely. With the steady decline in bureaucratic efficiency during the 17th and 18th centuries, the former system of regular land surveys and population censuses was abandoned. (2) The central government ceased to exercise any check or control over agriculture and village affairs, which were left to the unchecked rapacity of the tax-farmers, the lease-holders, and the bailiffs of court nominees. During the 17th century some of the more permanently established lease-holders began to coalesce with the landowners into a new landed aristocracy — the *a'yān-i memleket* or country notables, whose appearance and usurpation of some of the functions and authority of government were already noted in the 17th century. (3)

(1) Hājji Khalifa, chapter 1.

(2) See for example the list of *Tapu* registers for the Arab provinces, given in my 'The Ottoman Archives as a Source for the History of the Arab Lands', *JRAS*, 1951, p. 149 ff. The great majority of the registers listed there are of the 16th century. After 1600 the surveys become less and less frequent, and the resulting registers more and more slipshod.

(3) See, for example, the remarks of Hüseyin Hezarfen, writing in 1669 (R. Anhegger, 'Hezarfen Hüseyin Efendi'nin Osmanlı devlet teşkilâtına dâir mülâhazaları', *Türkiyat mecmuası*, X (1951-3), 372, 387). The *a'yān-i vilâyet* already appear occasionally in *Kânûns* of the 16th century. (Ömer Lütfi Barkan, *XV ve XVI inci asırlarda... Kanunlar*, I, Istanbul 1943, index).

While agriculture declined, industry fared little better. The corporative structure of the guilds fulfilled a useful social function in expressing and preserving the complex web of social loyalties and obligations of the old order, and also, though to a diminishing extent, in safeguarding the moral level and standards of craftsmanship of the artisan. Their economic effects however were restrictive and eventually destructive. A man's choice of profession was determined by habit and inheritance, the scope of his endeavour limited by primitive techniques and transport, his manner and speed of work fixed by guild rule and tradition; on the one hand a sufi religious habit of passivity and surrender of self, on the other the swift fiscal retribution for any sign of prosperity, combined to keep industrial production primitive, static, and inert, utterly unable to resist the competition of imported European manufactures. <sup>(1)</sup>

Some have sought the causes of this backwardness in Islam or in the Turkish race — explanations which do not satisfy, in view of the previous achievements of both. It may, however, be possible to find part of the explanation of Ottoman lack of receptivity — perhaps even of Ottoman decline — in certain evolving attitudes of mind, inherited by the Ottomans along with the classical Islamic civilisation of which they had been the heirs and renovators.

Classical Islamic civilisation, like others before and after it, including our own, was profoundly convinced of its own superiority and self-sufficiency. In its earliest, primitive phase, Islam had been open to influences from the Hellenistic orient, from Persia, even from India and China. Many works were translated into Arabic from Greek, Syriac, and Persian. <sup>(2)</sup> But with the solitary exception of the late Latin chronicle of Orosius, not a single translation into a Muslim language is known of any Latin or Western work until the 16th century,

(1) Sabri F. Ülgener, *Iktisadi İnhitat Tarihimizin Ahlak ve Zihniyet Meseleleri*, Istanbul 1951. Much light is thrown on these questions by Professor Ülgener's attempt to apply the methods of Weber and Sombart to the study of Ottoman social and economic history.

(2) See further my 'The Muslim Discovery of Europe', *BSOAS*, XX (1957), p. 415.



when one or two historical and geographical works were translated into Turkish. For the Muslim of classical times, Frankish Europe was an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief, from which the sunlit world of Islam had nothing to learn and little to fear. This view, though becoming outdated towards the end of the Middle Ages, was transmitted by the mediaeval Muslims to their Ottoman heirs, and was reinforced by the crushing victories of Ottoman arms over their European opponents. On the warlike but open frontier one could still exchange lessons with one's likeness on the other side; through renegades and refugees new skills could still reach the Islamic Empire. But the willingness to learn these lessons was not there, and in time the sources also dried up. Masked by the still imposing military might of the Ottoman Empire, the peoples of Islam continued to cherish the dangerous but comfortable illusion of the immeasurable and immutable superiority of their own civilisation to all others — an illusion from which they were slowly shaken by a series of humiliating military defeats.

In the military Empire, at once feudal and bureaucratic, which they had created, the Muslims knew only four professions — government, war, religion, and agriculture. Industry and trade were left to the non-Muslim conquered subjects, who continued to practise their inherited crafts. Thus the stigma of the infidel became attached to the professions which the infidels followed, and remained so attached even after many of the craftsmen had become Muslim. Westerners and native Christians, bankers, merchants, and craftsmen, were all involved in the general contempt which made the Ottoman Muslim impervious to ideas or inventions of Christian origin and unwilling to bend his own thoughts to the problems of artisans and vile mechanics. Primitive techniques of production, primitive means of transportation, chronic insecurity, and social penalisation, combined to preclude any long-term or large-scale undertakings, and to keep the Ottoman economy at the lowest level of competence, initiative, and morality.<sup>(1)</sup>

This apathy of the Ottoman ruling class is the more striking

(1) Ülgener, *op. cit.*, p. 193 ff.

when contrasted with the continuing vigour of their intellectual life. An example of this may be seen in the group of writers who memorialised on the decline of the Empire, which they saw so clearly but were powerless to stop. We may point also to the brilliant Ottoman school of historiography, which reaches its peak of achievement in the work of Na'īmā (1655-1716); to the Ottoman traditions of courtly and religious poetry, two of the greatest exponents of which, Nedīm and Sheykh Ghālib, lived in the 18th century; to the Ottoman schools of architecture, miniature, and music. It is not until the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th that we can speak of a real breakdown in the cultural and intellectual life of Turkey, resulting from the utter exhaustion of the old traditions and the absence of new creative impulses. And even then, behind the battered screen of courtly convention, the simple folk-arts and folk-poetry of the Turks continued as before.

In the late Middle Ages, the Ottoman Empire was the only state in Europe which already possessed the territory, the cohesion, the organisation, the man-power and the resources to carry the new apparatus of warfare, the crushing cost of which was outmoding the city states and feudal principalities of mediaeval Europe, as surely as modern weapons have outmoded the petty sovereignties of Europe in our own day. In part perhaps because of that very primacy, it failed to respond to the challenge which produced the nation-states of 16th century Europe, and the great commercial and technological efflorescence of which they were the scene.

Fundamentally, the Ottoman Empire had remained or reverted to a mediaeval state, with a mediaeval mentality and a mediaeval economy — but with the added burden of a bureaucracy and a standing army which no mediaeval state had ever had to bear. In a world of rapidly modernising states it had little chance of survival.

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