

Social Structure of the Ottoman Empire

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Sultan Selim III holding an audience in front of the Gate of Felicity at Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Courtiers are assembled in a strict protocol. Painting from 1789. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The Ottoman Empire was organized into a very complicated social structure. This was necessary because it was a large, multiethnic and multireligious empire that ruled over parts of Asia, Europe and North Africa. Ottoman society was divided between Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslims generally enjoyed higher standing than Christians or Jews. During the early years of Ottoman rule, a Sunni Turkish minority ruled over a Christian majority and large Jewish minority. Key Christian ethnic groups included the Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians, as well as Coptic Egyptians.

Christians and Jews were considered by Muslims to be "people of the Book," or people of the Bible. This was the special status given to Jews and Christians because they, like Muslims, believe in the Old Testament. Because of this, the Ottomans set up the "millet system," to give members of different religious groups some autonomy. That means they were ruled and judged

under their own religious laws, had their own schools, charities, social services and their own leaders who represented them at the court of the Sultan. There was sharia law for Muslims, canon law for Christians and halakha for Jewish citizens. Because there were differences in Christian beliefs, Armenians had their own millet, Greeks were another and so on.

Non-Muslims usually paid higher taxes than Muslims. Early in the empire some Christians were subject to the "devshirme," a tax paid in male children. Christian families had to give up a son to be raised by the government. These boys were converted to Islam to serve in the military or the government. In theory, only Muslims could become high government officials, but enforcement of that rule was lax during much of the Ottoman period.

Over time, Muslims became the majority. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1922, its population was 81 percent Muslim. In the period before the collapse, the Ottoman government became much more intolerant of religious minorities, showing special hatred for Armenian Christians. In the 1910s, more than 1.5 million Armenians were killed, and many more were forced to leave the empire.

Government versus nongovernment workers

Christians and Jews could become important government officials — if they converted — but strong preference for those positions was given to Muslims. Also, the government was united behind the idea of promoting Islam.

The Ottoman court, or high government body, was called the divan, and people associated with it were considered to be of higher status than those who were not. They included members of the sultan's household, army and navy officers, and government officials and bureaucrats. They also included scribes, teachers, judges, lawyers as well as other professionals. Members of the government, which was overwhelmingly Turkish, made up only about 10 percent of the population.

Members of the governing class were headed by the sultan, who was like an emperor. The sultan had his grand vizier — like a prime minister, to run the government for him. Religion was a big part of the Ottoman system. The sultan was considered the "guardian of Islam." There were also regional governors and officers of the Janissary corps, or elite soldiers, in the ruling class. The Ottoman Empire's government became known collectively as the Sublime Porte, after the gate to the palace where the sultan would announce decisions and greet members of his court and foreign diplomats.

The remaining 90 percent of the population was made up of taxpayers who supported the government. They included farmers, tailors, merchants, carpet-makers, mechanics and other types of laborers. The vast majority of the sultan's Christian and Jewish subjects fell into this category.

According to Muslim tradition, the government welcomed the conversion of any subject to Islam. But Muslims usually paid lower taxes than other citizens. So Ottoman leaders actually did not want too many people to become Muslims. If too many non-Muslims converted to Islam, the empire would have faced economic disaster.

In summary

The Ottoman Empire had a small-but-elaborate government. It was made up almost entirely of Muslims, most of them of Turkish origin. This divan was supported by a large cohort of mixed religion and ethnicity, mostly farmers, who paid taxes to the central government.