



The Ottoman Centuries

John Patrick Douglas Balfour (Lord Kinross)

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The Ottoman Empire began in 1300 under the almost legendary Osman I, reached its apogee in the sixteenth century under Suleiman the Magnificent, whose forces threatened the gates of Vienna, and gradually diminished thereafter until Mehmed VI was sent into exile by Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk).

In this definitive history of the Ottoman Empire, Lord Kinross, painstaking historian and superb writer, never loses sight of the larger issues, economic, political, and social. At the same time he delineates his characters with obvious zest, displaying them in all their extravagance, audacity and, sometimes, ruthlessness.

The Ottoman Centuries Details

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Author : John Patrick Douglas Balfour (Lord Kinross)

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From Reader Review The Ottoman Centuries for online ebook

Serdar Sincer says

Her sayfas?nda ba?lang?c?ndan itibaren imparatorluk kafamda kuruluyor. Keyifle okuyorum. Yazar?n anlat?m dili muherte?em.

Earl Grey Tea says

This book was a plethora of information and I was able to learn a lot. Luckily, I had been playing quite a bit of Europa Universalis IV, so I was somewhat familiar with some of the locations and historical concepts.

I found the earlier parts of the Ottoman Empire more interesting, learning about how the first few Sultans were able to form their new dynasty. After Sultan #10, the quality and competency of the Sultans were all down hill from there. The book was still chock full of information, but it was a slow decent to the inevitable collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

After the conquest of Constantinople, the majority of the book centered around the European holdings of the Ottomans, especially the Balkans and the Black Sea. Except for a couple of armies to confront the Persians once in a while or European army running around in Egypt, there was much focus on the Middle Eastern section of the Ottoman Empire.

Happyreader says

Despite being a Scotsman, Lord Kinross has written a very balanced and readable Ottoman history. He respects the empire and reports and analyzes the history without bombast or a Eurocentric bent. This would be a good book for anyone interested in European or Middle Eastern history.

There is a lot here to keep readers interested. How the first sultans conquered through both force and patiently playing off the animosities between Latin and Greek Christians. How the Ottomans created a model of rule very different from their European and Asian counterparts and expanded their empire through those differences – which also planted the seeds of their demise. How the Ottoman Empire at different times disrupted and maintained the balance of power in both Europe and Asia. For such an influential empire, it's a shame that this history is barely covered in most US world history classes.

Betul says

This book had been collecting dust on my bookshelf for a very long time, so I decided to finally read it in February 2018. This book is seriously huge (thickness and size - 600+ pages), and the font is small, so I knew it would take me some time to finish it. It took me like 6 months to read half of the book last year. The

main reason was that this author's English was sometimes not the easiest to understand. It wasn't too bad, but if I didn't understand a couple of words, it made it difficult for me to get what was going on. Which resulted in me having to reread the same paragraph a couple of times. But I finally pushed myself to finish it this year, and I am happy I did, because I think it laid a great groundwork for the biography of Atatürk, which I have been dying to read.

I am of Turkish origin but didn't really know a lot about the history of the country, which I am happy I am finding out now. I think it is important to know about your roots and have an understanding of what your ancestors have gone through. I think *The Ottoman Centuries* was a very detailed book, and I enjoyed learning about how the Republic of Turkey came into existence.

Rindis says

The Ottoman Empire lasted a shade over six centuries, and Lord Kinross covers its history in a bit over 600 pages. 600 quite good pages, with a fair number of full-page images (mostly period portraits or landscapes) and a small number of maps. This is high-level history, so details are often sparse, but it does the job of outlining the course of the Ottoman state well.

This is not 'a new history', or... 'new' anything, even for when it came out in 1977. It is a long look at an admired subject, all told in one volume without going outside the confines of established historical study. It is instead a solid bedrock to lay the foundation for other works, such as *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*. If anything comes off a bit biased, it is probably British involvement in the 19th century; I can't help but feel a little cynical about that, though I think he didn't romanticize it all that heavily either.

Jean Bonilla says

Whew! This book is DENSE. I gave it one star because it starts out well. The early history draws on other works I've read. Suleimen the Magnificent is dynamic, proactive, and inspiring. But after his reign concludes, the empire steadily decline, until it simply disintegrates and the last Sultan is sent off to end his life in obscurity.

Good points: an interesting insight into how Turkey evolved as a secular state, while so many other Moslem nations have religious governments. That same perspective is valuable in interpreting today's tension over whether countries like Afghanistan should adopt religious or secular governing frameworks. It also is relevant to our policies today in the region. I do recognize a very few of the names of modern political actors, but there isn't a lot of detail about their work.

But truthfully, I don't recommend this tome for anybody who wants to take a first look at the area's history. I found the lack of information on the rounding up and elimination of the Armenians disappointing because that's a subject of interest to me personally, but far more significant for the average reader was the dearth of decent maps. Yes, there are maps, but they are inadequate and poorly aligned with the battles and movements in the text. Who ever heard of Konya or Bursa? And Angora? Yarn must come from there. If I hadn't spent four years living in Hungary, I would have had no clue as to the location of Keresztes or Temesvar or how to pronounce them! Given the fact that the events described are relatively unfamiliar to American readers, this deficit made understanding the history quite hard. Lastly, came the chore of tackling

the many names of the sultans, their Grand Vezirs, and the numerous relatives and relationships. Thank goodness for Wikipedia!

If you already have a working knowledge of the era and its geography, this detailed description makes a good follow-on study. For me, it was too much at one gulp.

2018 Update: I've come back to up my rating to two stars because in the year and a half since I finished the book, I've thought back numerous times on its information and descriptions. It has served me as an source of context in reading books as varied as the life of Cleopatra and the life of Shakespeare. I also reflected back somewhat differently on the history of Marco Polo's journeys. In short, it deserves another star!

Clay Kallam says

Not since Shelby Foote's wonderful "The Civil War: A Narrative" have I enjoyed a history book as much I did "The Ottoman Centuries." John Patrick Douglas Balfour, aka Lord Kinross, tells the complex story of the rise and fall of the Ottomans by using its sultans and its foreign relations as the lens. The combination works well, as the personalities of this long line of absolute rulers were imprinted on the empire, and the connections to Europe -- much greater than I had known -- ground the narrative for a Western reader.

And given the continued importance of the Middle East and Islamic states in the modern world, a better understanding of their roots can only be a positive, as for example, the power of Islamic fundamentalism was an integral part of even this very powerful empire throughout its existence.

For me, another plus was the fact that I was simply ignorant of much of the rich and vital detail of the history of Ottoman Empire, and now I have least a basic grasp of one of the most important states of the past thousand years.

Bob Newman says

Why did Constantinople get the works ?

Covering 622 years of history in exactly that many pages is no joke, especially when your subject is as vast as the Ottoman Empire, that began with Osman in the year 1300 and shuffled off the record in 1923, when the man who became known as Ataturk shipped the last sultan into exile. To write about so much history is necessarily to choose certain topics to the detriment of others. Lord Kinross made his choices, and though I will argue with him over this and that, the result is certainly a splendid book, which must be called the classic history of the Ottoman Empire---for lay readers. Here are no compilations of dry statistics, no detailed analyses of agricultural production or shipbuilding techniques to confound the layman. Not a single footnote "mars" the pages, nor are references to other writers more than a handful. Kinross inserts few dates to confuse the reader, though I could have used some more enlightening in this direction. His prose is wonderfully smooth, his passage from one topic to the next, fluid. He brings up the big picture again and again, even providing an excellent summary of his ideas in the epilogue. Maps and interesting engravings pepper the pages. I looked forward to reading this book for years: I was not disappointed. However, certain

caveats must be mentioned. First and foremost, this is a history that seems to have been written on English and French sources only. Thus, while I can definitely attest to its readability, I can't be sure of its accuracy. Second, Kinross' choice of subject is strictly limited. He portrays the succession of sultans, from the dynamic first ten, to the usually poor-performing, last twenty-five. He covers the various wars, rebellions, and coups in clear, graphic prose and he concentrates on the administrative patterns of the different periods of the Empire, rightly praising the early network of Christian-born officials that brought the standard of government to a level far beyond anything pertaining in Europe at the time---creating such an atmosphere that for centuries, European peasants preferred to be ruled by the Ottomans than by their own, more grasping, unpredictable rulers. Diplomacy and the many treaties entered into over the years also get intelligent treatment, and an occasional foray is made into economic development. There is still a great deal missing. If you are interested in general Ottoman culture, literature and the arts, religion, or daily life, this is not the book for you, these subjects are hardly touched. Other areas too are strangely neglected---discussion of the Turkish rule in North Africa and Asia is left out in favor of Europe. The building of the Suez Canal is mentioned only in passing. Pan-Turkism rates only a couple small paragraphs and names such as Ziya Gokalp do not appear. World War I, Gallipoli, the fighting in Mesopotamia, etc. are all glossed over with incredible speed. However, as I said before, with such a vast topic to cover, the author had to make some choices and I am just quibbling about them.

I strongly recommend this excellent book to any reader wishing a solid, well-organized, readable history of the Ottoman Empire, one of the most fascinating (and long lasting) formations of human history. And by the way, you WILL learn why Constantinople got the works.

Sean says

This was a terrifically readable history in which Lord Kinross seamlessly switched back and forth between the individual characters and the overall picture. That's more or less what the blurb boasted and it is exactly what the book delivered. This really brought to life the Ottomans, who were much more important historically than I had realised.

I could not put this book down during some parts, particularly the chapters on Mehmed the Conqueror, Suleiman the Magnificent, and Mahmud II. Reading about Rhodes and Malta was like watching a good war movie. If you are like me and you normally switch off when you hear about the history of Greece and the Balkans, you should read this book - it is the cure.

The era of reform (and repeated relapse) from the Tanzimat onwards was also really interesting because of how it narrated the difficulty of reform in a country that needed it to survive but which was dead set against it, and how it played out, alternating between reform through tyranny, reform through constitutional rule, stagnation despite constitutional rule, and stagnation through tyranny.

My one criticism is that I felt from my supplementary reading that it did gloss over or almost whitewash some of the Ottomans' medieval cruelties, particularly under Mehmed II and Suleiman the Magnificent, which were a step up from what the rest of Europe was (usually) doing. That said, it had enough content to cover and those parts were so interesting that maybe Lord Kinross simply wanted to illustrate more important historical events and facts. You certainly couldn't say that he was uncritical of the Ottomans during their stagnation and decline.

The military history was lightweight but very interesting and (grossly generalising) portrayed the Turks as very handy during sieges but not quite so competent in open battle. [As an avid Age of Kings player this has

permanently enriched my game playing experience and further enhanced my respect for Ensemble Studios game balance person.]

Overall, I would recommend this to anyone who enjoys European history and doesn't know much about the Turks, you will feel greatly enriched from reading it.

Carlos says

I was honestly surprised how engaging this book was, considering its massive size. Kinross controls the pace of the narrative wonderfully to be able to highlight both the characters that occupied the throne as well as the ebb and flow of military superiority against Europe. Considering that the book covers over 500 years of history, Kinross is quite adept at skipping unnecessary details in favor of highlighting the steep rise and drawn out decay of the empire. He controls the amount of external events that intrude in the story keeping the reader focused on the empire limiting the scope of the Napoleonic, Russian and even the First World War to those aspects that directly involved the empire. While I wouldn't suggest this book to anyone who doesn't already enjoy history books, I would definitely rank it as one of the best in providing a detailed overview of its subject for the interested lay reader.

Jaybird Rex says

Though readable and maybe a good introduction to the topic, this book is utterly western in its approach and, therefore, it's difficult to get into any approximation of the mindset of the Ottomans while reading it. A glance at the Select Bibliography (and it is a short list) shows only English titles and a handful of French and German titles. No Turkish titles, no primary sources.

Thus, while the book sweeps centuries, it might have serious issues passing as the thesis of a graduate student in history. A balance in perspective is important, and this book lacks it just a bit. That said, as vast a swathe as it does cover, the reader does get a concise outline of the enormous history of the empire with coherence. I guess that's something.

Omar Taufik says

This is a book written as a history to the six century long Ottoman Empire ..

The author started his six hundred plus page book with the westward migration of the Turkmen tribes from the Central Asian steppes finally reaching Asia Minor. The rise of the Ottoman principality from between the other Turkmen principalities in Anatolia at the dawn of the fourteenth century and the birth of the Ottoman dynasty to last six centuries ending the book with final collapse of the empire at the start the twentieth century with the end of world war 1.

I do believe that the author did not put the proper emphasis on the final years especially after the losing the war until the final establishment of the republic of Turkey since such years are still considered a part of Ottoman history.

In between the author displays deep knowledge takes us on this long journey from sultan to another going through the major battles, treaties and changes with great talent and valuable analysis including interesting description of each sultan and other major figures.

Something to note about this book is that this book was written by a twentieth century British author where it could be considered an Ottoman history in Western or European eyes - seems that the author primarily depended on Western sources available - providing other than Ottoman history a great deal of useful European history and how the Ottoman state impacted the various powers in Europe and vice versa.

The religious factor in describing the many wars fought and ethnic conflicts is present but may not be an issue considering the context of the author writing and period of early twentieth century Europe .. but still was fair to a good extent ..

At the end the author provides us with a great epilogue for his book and this history and state.

This book is a strong recommendation for those interested in the subject but as mentioned before the cultural context might be disturbing to non Western readers sometimes plus the length and ocean of details might be overwhelming for beginners in the subject... but from my end I truly enjoyed this book !

Erik Graff says

Knowing very little about the scope of Ottoman history and then mostly from the perspective of Western Europe, I snapped this up during a work break from the Amarinh Bookstore in downtown Evanston. It was just what I wanted: a general survey written for the layperson.

Eressea says

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Dean Lombardo says

A Historical Treasure.

For many Westerners, a notable omission from our pre-adult schooling is the history of the Ottoman Empire, which began in about 1300 A.D. and lasted several centuries before its dissolution shortly after World War I. In terms of an introduction, I know of no better introductory course with which to fill these knowledge gaps than “The Ottoman Centuries,” by the late-great Scot, Sir Patrick Balfour, aka Lord Kinross.

In his illustrated and mapped 622-page volume, Kinross traces the roots of the once mighty Turkish-based Empire, starting with the nomad peoples who flowed westward along the Eurasian steppes absorbing land and other tribes in the sixth century before settling in Anatolia, which is now largely modern-day Turkey. Centuries later, from this new homeland arose a succession of Sultans powerful enough to not only build an expanding empire of warriors, scholars, governors and landowners throughout Asia, Europe and parts of the Middle East and Africa, but to keep neighboring Christians to the West in near-constant fear. The first Sultan was Osman, who ruled from about 1299 to 1326 and from whom the Ottoman Empire got its name. With 35 Sultans to follow him, some impressive and some ineffective, the Empire grew and contracted, blossomed

and decayed, but in a progressive period under the leadership of Bayezid I, Mehmed II (“the Conqueror”), and Suleiman I, the Ottoman Empire came to be the most powerful human force on Earth. Mehmed achieved the unthinkable from the Western perspective: His forces captured the capital of the Christian Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, in 1453 and renamed it Istanbul. Kinross writes with seeming objectivity, but also with vivid detail and passion, as he covers the numerous battles between Ottoman Muslims and Christians, and Ottoman Muslims and their Muslim rivals to the east. Despite vicious defensive counterattacks led by warriors such as Romania’s Vlad Dracul (1431-1476) – who is mentioned briefly and not-sensationalized in this book – as well as other Christian knights, European countries and city states fell to the Ottoman invaders. Albania, Romania and much of Greece and Hungary were soon absorbed into the sometimes respectful, sometimes brutal Ottoman Empire.

At its height under Suleiman I, the Ottoman Empire continued to grow and with advanced weaponry and military techniques it was eventually knocking on the doors to Austria and Italy. However, like with every great empire that has ever existed, the “height” is often abruptly or gradually followed by a decline. In this case, the decline was gradual through internal conflict between the sovereign leader and his once-loyal Janissaries (a large special fighting force) and due to a legacy of ineffective leaders who, upon abandoning traditional practices, turned to distractive debauchery, leading to mismanagement of imperial affairs. Another factor in the decline of the Ottomans was that the West was catching up, first by regaining its naval superiority (and confidence). The West’s initial glimmer of hope in a long time came when a southern European Catholic alliance handed the “invincible” Ottomans a tide-turning defeat off the coast of western Greece during the Battle of Lepanto in 1571.

Nationalistic fervor arose in lands such as Bulgaria and Greece, and the rest of Europe, anxious to protect the rights of their fellow Christians, whether Latin or Orthodox, began to mediate and even at times intercede with force. By the late 17th century the Empire was shrinking but this is not to imply that further great Sultans did not rule from this point forward. Selim III (1789-1807) introduced major reforms that included open exchanges with the West and internal policies that once again united the Empire through the elimination of corruption and inefficiency. However, the conservative elements in the Empire rebelled and dethroned and killed Selim. The reforms of a following Sultan, Mahmud II (1808-1839), gained greater traction and helped the Ottomans prosper for a period before threats from ambitious Russian tsars desiring control over the Black Sea and the Dardanelles, and further rebellions within the Empire, pushed the kingdom to its breaking point. Bankruptcy followed and the Empire became deeply indebted to foreign lenders. Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909), by some known for his persecution of the Armenian people, introduced reforms in the areas of long-distance communication, infrastructure and education. In this environment and with a growing influence of liberalism from the West, a group of intellectuals known as the Young Turks rose to power.

In the early 20th century as tensions heightened toward war, the weakened Ottoman Empire found its only ally in Germany, formerly Prussia, which in the past had helped to train Ottoman soldiers. Siding with Germany, the Ottomans ended up on the losing side of the war and hence saw their empire reduced to basically what is now modern-day Turkey. The last Sultan, Mehmed VI, was exiled in November of 1922, and the modern Republic of Turkey formed in 1923.

Thanks to Lord Kinross, I now have some familiarity with an important time and place in our collective history, a portion of history merely touched upon in U.S. high schools. Entirely fascinating, the exciting history lesson provided in “The Ottoman Centuries” flows in an easy-to-read and easy-to-digest manner, and if I were to criticize anything it would be that natural tendency we all have to narrate history through the eyes and hearts of our homeland. A few times, Kinross assigned ulterior motives to the actions of Russia, France and Germany toward the Ottomans, while in typical fashion, the British author and historian matter-of-factly

described all British involvement as the altruistic goodwill of an “unquestionably” gentle British Empire. Beyond that, I loved the book, devoured it, and I recommend it to any history buffs wishing to ramp up on a magnificent subject that may still be foreign to them.
