

# Sources from the Past

## Ghislain de Busbecq's Concerns about the Ottoman Empire

*Ogier Ghiselin (also spelled Ghislain) de Busbecq was a diplomat who traveled to Istanbul in 1555 as a representative of Habsburg King Ferdinand of Hungary and Bohemia to negotiate a border dispute between Ferdinand and Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent. In a series of four letters to a friend, Ghislain commented on Ottoman state, society, customs, and military forces. His observations left him deeply concerned about the prospects of Christian Europe in the event of conflict with the Ottoman realm.*

The Sultan [Suleyman "the Lawgiver"] was seated on a very low ottoman, not more than a foot from the ground, which was covered with a quantity of costly rugs and cushions of exquisite workmanship; near him lay his bow and arrows . . . ; The Sultan then listened to what I had to say; but the language I used was not at all to his taste, for the demands of his Majesty breathed a spirit of independence and dignity, which was by no means acceptable to one who deemed that his wish was law; and so he made no answer beyond saying in an impatient way, "Giusel, giusel," that is, "well, well." After this we were dismissed to our quarters.

The Sultan's hall was crowded with people, among whom were several officers of high rank. Besides these, there were all the troopers of the Imperial guard, and a large force of Janissaries [the elite infantry corps], but there was not in all that great assembly a single man who owed his position to anything save his valor and his merit. No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the respect to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service. There is no fighting for precedence; a man's place is marked out by the duties he discharge . . . ; It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should only be assigned to the competent. Each man in Turkey carries in his own hand his ancestry and his position in life, which he may make or mar as he will. Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth; for they do not believe that high qualities are either natural or hereditary, nor do they think that they can

be handed down from father to son, but that they are partly gift of God, and partly the result of good training, great industry and unwearied zeal; arguing that high qualities do not descend from a father to his son or heir, any more than a talent for mathematics or the like . . . ; Among the Turks, therefore, honors, high posts, and judgeships are the rewards of great industry and good service. If a man is dishonest, or lazy, or careless, he remains at the bottom of the ladder, an object of contempt; and such qualities there are no honors in Turkey!

This is the reason that they are successful in their undertakings, that they lord it over others, and are daily extending the bounds of their empire. These are not our ideals, with us there is no opening left for merit; birth is the standard for every man; the prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in public service.

It makes me shudder to think of what the result of a struggle between such different systems must be; one of us must perish and the other be destroyed, at any rate we cannot both exist in safety. On their side is the vast wealth of their empire, unlimited resources, experience and practice in arms, a veteran soldiery, an uninterrupted series of victories, readiness to endure hardships, union, order, discipline, thrift, and watchfulness. On our side are found an empty exchequer, luxurious habits, exhausted resources, broken spirits, a raw and insubordinate soldiery, greedy generals; there is no regard for discipline, license, riot, the men indulge in drunkenness and debauchery, and victory of all, the enemy are accustomed to victory, we, to defeat. We doubt what the result must be?

### For Further Reflection

- What key aspect of the Ottoman social order, according to de Busbecq, made the Ottoman empire stronger than European states? Was it simply military power, or did other social factors play a role in distinguishing the Ottomans from Europeans?

*Source:* Foster, C. T. and F. H. Blackburne Daniell. "Suleyman 'the Lawgiver.'" in *The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, vol. 1. London: Hakluyt Society, 1881. pg. 152–156.

Ottoman imperialism climaxed in the reign of **Süleyman the Magnificent** (reigned 1520–1566). Süleyman vigorously promoted Ottoman expansion both in southwest Asia and in Europe. In 1534 he conquered Baghdad and added the Tigris and Euphrates valleys to the Ottoman domain. In Europe

**Süleyman** (SOO-lee-mahn)

he kept the rival Habsburg empire on the defensive throughout his reign. He captured Belgrade in 1521, defeated and killed the king of Hungary at the battle of Mohács in 1526, consolidated Ottoman power north of the Danube, and in 1529 subjected the Habsburgs' prized city of Vienna to a bloody but nonetheless terrifying siege.

Under Süleyman the Ottomans also became a major power. In addition to their own Aegean and Black Sea fleets

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## A Conqueror and His Conquests: Babur on India

*Babur was a talented writer as well as a successful warrior. His memoirs make fascinating reading and provide a unique perspective on early Mughal India. His writings include his reflections on the territories he conquered in India, which he compared unfavorably to his central Asian homeland, and on his decision to stay in India and found an empire.*

**Most of the inhabitants of India** are infidels, called Hindus, believing mainly in the transmigration of souls; all artisans, wage-earners, and officials are Hindus. In our countries the desert dwellers get tribal names; here people settled in the cultivated villages also get tribal names. Again, every artisan follows the trade handed down to him from his forefathers.

India is a country of few charms. The people lack good looks and good manners. They have no social life or exchange of visits. They have no genius or intelligence, no polite learning, no generosity or magnanimity, no harmony or proportion in their arts and crafts, no lead-wire or carpenter's square. They lack good horses and good dogs; grapes, melons, and any good fruit; ice and cold water; good food or good bread in the markets. They have no baths and no advanced educational institutions. . . . There are no running streams in their gardens or residences, no waters at all except the large rivers and the swamps in the ravines and hollows. Their residences have no pleasant and salubrious breezes, and in their construction [there is] no form or symmetry. . . .

Among the charms that India does possess is that it is a large country, with large quantities of gold and silver. Its air in the rainy season is very fine. Sometimes it rains ten or fifteen or even twenty times a day, and in such torrents that rivers flow where no water was previously. While it rains, and throughout the rainy season, the air is remarkably fine, not to be surpassed for mildness and pleasantness. Its only fault is its great humidity, which spoils bows. . . .

**Aurangzeb** The Mughal empire reached its greatest extent under **Aurangzeb** (reigned 1659–1707). During his long reign, Aurangzeb waged a relentless campaign to push Mughal authority deep into southern India. By the early eighteenth century, Mughals ruled the entire subcontinent except for a small region at the southern tip.

Although he greatly expanded Mughal boundaries, Aurangzeb presided over a troubled empire. He faced rebellions throughout his reign, and religious tensions generated conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. Aurangzeb was a devout Muslim, and he broke with Akbar's policy of religious toleration. He demolished several famous Hindu temples and

It was the hot season when we came to Agra. All the inhabitants had run away in terror. We could find neither grain ourselves nor corn for our horses. The villages, out of hostility and hatred for us, had taken to thieving and highway-robbery and it was impossible to travel on the roads. We had not yet had opportunity to distribute the treasure and to assign men of strength to each district. Moreover, the year was a very hot one and pestilential simooms [sandstorms] were striking people down in heaps, and masses were beginning to die off.

For all these reasons, most of the best warriors were unwilling to stay in India; in fact, they determined to leave. . . .

When I discovered this unsteadiness among my people, I summoned all the leaders and took counsel. I said, "Without means and resources there is no empire and conquest, and without lands and followers there is no sovereignty and rule. After the effort of long years, through much tribulation and the crossing of distant lands, by flinging ourselves into battle and danger we have through God's favor overcome so many enemies and conquered such vast lands. And now, what force compels us to do what necessity has arisen, that we should, without cause, abandon a country taken at such risk of life? And if we returned to Kabul, we would again be left in poverty and weakness. Henceforth, let no well-wisher of mine speak of such things! But let not those turn back from going who cannot bear the hardship and have determined to leave." With such words I reasoned with them and made them, willy-nilly, quit their fears.

### For Further Reflection

- What does Babur's reaction to India suggest about his views of his own central Asian homeland?

*Source:* Babur. *The Babur-nama in English (Memoirs of Babur)*. Translated by Annette Susannah Beveridge. London: Luzac, 1922. (Translation slightly modified.)

replaced them with mosques. He also imposed a tax on Hindus in an effort to encourage conversion to Islam. His promotion of Islam appealed strongly to the Mughals themselves and other Indian Muslims as well, but it provoked deep hostility among Hindus and enabled local leaders to organize movements to resist or even rebel against Mughal authority.

## IMPERIAL ISLAMIC SOCIETY

Despite their ethnically and religiously diverse populations, there were striking similarities in the development of Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal societies. All relied on