

THE GUNPOWDER EMPIRES

One of the great developments of the early modern period was the emergence of new land-based empires in various parts of Asia and Eastern Europe. These are sometimes called gunpowder empires because their conquests depended in part on the use of cannon. They arose at the same time that Western Europeans were constructing overseas empires, also using superior force. Interestingly, Western Europeans were often considerably awed by the Asian empires, whose administrative personnel, armies, and cities far surpassed those available in the national monarchies back home.

The documents that follow deal with three new empires—the Ottoman, Mughal, and Russian. They also all involve relationships with the West. Two documents come from Western observers, noting the strengths though also some of the constraints of the great empires. A cluster of documents from Russia (which was not so highly esteemed by Western observers) deal with efforts to use Western contacts to effect internal reforms around 1700. Russia's westernization, though highly selective, was in marked contrast to the lack of interest of many Asian leaders in Western example.

The empires discussed here were dazzling at the time, during most of the early modern period, clearly demonstrating superior military and political capacity. Two of them, however, would ultimately decline: the Mughal began to loosen its grip by the eighteenth century, the Ottoman by the nineteenth. And in both cases increasing European intrusion would result. It is vital to remember the achievements that preceded decline and that could have continuing impact in the regions. The same applies to Russia, which would encounter new challenges as a multinational empire at the end of the twentieth century though it managed to maintain vast holdings.

Questions

1. Why were European observers awed by the Ottoman and Mughal Empires? Were the reasons similar or different in the two cases?
2. Why might European observers exaggerate strengths in the empires?
3. Do the comments suggest why the Mughal Empire declined much sooner than the Ottoman?

4. In what ways was Russia more interested in active contacts with the West than the Ottoman or Mughal Empires? Why was this the case?
5. What did Peter the Great seek to westernize, and what did he leave untouched?

For Further Discussion

1. What were some significant contributions of the Ottoman and Mughal Empires to their regions, the Middle East and India, respectively?
2. Why did the Russian Empire last longer than the other two empires?
3. What were some characteristic weaknesses in the gunpowder empires?

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: BUSBECQ

Ogier Chiselin be Busbecq, of Flemish origin (in what is now Belgium), was an ambassador from the Holy Roman Empire to the Ottoman sultan, in Constantinople, from 1555 to 1562. His letters provide important data on the Ottomans. He was, however, eager to see reform in the Holy Roman Empire, and actively shaped his observations of the Ottoman Empire to encourage change back home.

. . . *Slaves*

At Buda I made my first acquaintance with the Janissaries; this is the name by which the Turks call the infantry of the royal guard. The Turkish state has 12,000 of these troops when the corps is at its full strength. They are scattered through every part of the empire, either to garrison the forts against the enemy, or to protect the Christians and Jews from the violence of the mob. There is no district with any considerable amount of population, no borough or city, which has not a detachment of Janissaries to protect the Christians, Jews, and other helpless people from outrage and wrong.

The Turkish monarch going to war takes with him over 400 camels and nearly as many baggage mules, of which a great part are loaded with rice and other kinds of grain. These mules and camels also serve to carry tents and armour, and likewise tools and munitions for the campaign. . . . The invading army carefully abstains from encroaching on its [supplies] at the outset; as they are well aware that when the season for campaigning draws to a close, they will have to retreat over districts wasted by the enemy, or scraped bare by countless hordes of men and droves of hungry animals, as if they had been devastated by locusts; accordingly they reserve their stores as much as possible for this emergency.

From C. T. Forster and F. H. Daniel, eds., *The Life and Letters of Ogier Chiselin de Busbecq*, vol. I (London: Kegan Paul, 1881) 86-88, 219-22.

From this you will see that it is the patience, self-denial and thrift of the Turkish soldier that enable him to face the most trying circumstances and come safely out of the dangers that surround him. What a contrast to our men! Christian soldiers on a campaign refuse to put up with their ordinary food, and call for thrushes, beccaficos [a small bird esteemed a dainty, as it feeds on figs and grapes], and suchlike dainty dishes! . . . It makes me shudder to think of what the result of a struggle between such different systems must be; one of us must prevail and the other be destroyed, at any rate we cannot both exist in safety. On their side is the vast wealth of their empire, unimpaired resources, experience and practice in arms, a veteran solidery, and uninterrupted series of victories, readiness to endure hardships, union, order, discipline, thrift and watchfulness. On ours are found an empty exchequer, luxurious habits, exhausted resources, broken spirits, a raw and insubordinate soldiery, and greedy quarrels; there is no regard for discipline, license runs riot, the men indulge in drunkenness and debauchery, and worst of all, the enemy are accustomed to victory, we to defeat. Can we doubt what the result must be? The only obstacle is Persia, whose position on his rear forces the invader to take precautions. The fear of Persia gives us a respite, but it is only for a time.

No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the deference 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 discharges. In making his appointments the Sultan pays no regard to any pretensions on the score of wealth or rank, nor does he take into consideration recommendations or popularity, he considers each case on its own merits, and examines carefully into the character, ability, and disposition of the man whose promotion is in question. 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 the 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 music, mathematics, or the like; and that the mind does not derive its origin from the father, so that the son should necessarily be like the father in character, or emanates from heaven, and thence infused into the human body. Among the Turks, therefore, honours, high posts, and judgeships are the rewards of great ability and good service. If a man be dishonest, or lazy, or careless, he remains at the bottom of the ladder, an object of contempt; for such qualities there are no honours 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 ideas, with us there is no opening left for merit; birth is the standard for everything; the prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in the public service.

THE MUGHAL EMPIRE: MONSERATE AND BERNIER

Antonio Monserate was a Jesuit who visited the great Emperor Akbar's court from 1580 to 1583, at the benefit of the Mughal power. The following are excerpts from his Commentary. François Bernier, a Frenchman, was the personal physician of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb for twelve years. He wrote the first European work dealing with racial classifications of humans, and in 1684 he published his *Travels to the Mughal Empire* to detail his experiences in India.

• • •

MONSERATE

This Prince is of a stature and type of countenance well fitted to his royal dignity, so that one could easily recognize even at first glance that he is the king. . . . His forehead is broad and open, his eyes so bright and flashing that they seem like a sea shimmering in the sunlight. . . . He creates an opportunity almost every day for any of the common people or of the nobles to see him and converse with him. It is remarkable how great an effect this courtesy and affability has in attaching to him the minds of his subjects. . . . he has an acute insight, and shows much wise foresight both in avoiding dangers and in seizing favorable opportunities for carrying out his designs. . . . Unlike the palaces built by other Indian kings, his are lofty [and] their total circuit is so large that it easily embraces four great royal dwellings. . . . Not a little is added to the beauty of the palaces by charming pigeon cotes. . . . The pigeons are cared for by eunuch and servant maids. Their evolutions are controlled at will, when they are flying, by means of certain signals, just as those of a well trained soldiery. . . . It will seem little short of miraculous when I affirm that when sent out they dance, turn somersaults all together in the air, flying orderly rhythm, and return to their starting point, all at the sound of a whistle. [Akbar's] empire is wonderfully rich and fertile both for cultivation and pasture, and has a great trade both in exports and imports. . . . Indian towns appear very pleasant from afar; they are adorned with many towers and high buildings in a very beautiful manner. But when one enters them, one finds that the narrowness, aimless crookedness and ill planning of the streets deprive these cities of all beauty. . . . The common people live in lowly huts and tiny cottages, and hence if a traveler has seen one of these cities, he has seen them all.

EUROPEAN AWE AT OTHER EMPIRES

BERNIER

The Moguls have left and communicated their name to the strangers that now govern Indostan, the country of the Indians; though those that are employed in public charges and offices, and even those that are listed in the militia, be not all of the race of the Moguls, but strangers and nations gathered out of all countries, most of them Persians, some Arabians, and some Turks. For, to be esteemed a mogul it is enough to be a stranger, white of face, and a Muslim; in distinction as well to the Indians, who are brown and pagans, as to the Christians of Europe, who are called Franguis [i.e., "Ferengis" or "Franks"]. . . .

My lord, you may have seen before this, by the maps of Asia, how great every way is the extent of the empire of the Great Mogul, which is commonly called India or Indostan. I have not measured it mathematically; but to speak of it accordingly to the ordinary journeys of the country, after the rate of three whole months' march, traversing from the frontiers of the kingdom of Golconda as far as beyond Kazni near Kandahar, which is the first town of Persia, I cannot but persuade myself otherwise but that it is at least five times as far as from Paris to Lyons—that is about five hundred common leagues. . . .

In this same extent of country there are sundry nations which the Mogul is not full master of, most of them still retaining their particular sovereigns and lord that neither obey him nor pay him tribute but from constraint; many that do little, some that do nothing at all, and some also that receive tribute from him. . . .

. . . Of the like sort are more than an hundred rajahs, or considerable heathen sovereigns, dispersed through the whole empire, some near to, others remote from, Agra and Delhi; amongst whom there are about fifteen or sixteen that are very rich and puissant [several of them princes]; are so great and powerful that if they three alone should combine they would hold him [i.e. the Great Moghul] back; each of them being able in a very short time to raise and bring into the field twenty-five thousand horse, better troops than the Mogul's. These cavaliers are called rajipous, or children of the rajahs. These are men who, as I have said elsewhere, carry swords from father to son, and to whom the rajahs allot land on condition that they be always ready to appear on horseback when the rajah commands. They can endure much hardship, and they want nothing but good order and discipline to make them good soldiers. . . .

The Mogul is obliged to keep these rajas in his service for sundry reasons: the first, because the militia of the rajahs is a very good (as we said above) and because there are rajash (as was intimated also) any one of whom can bring into the field

above twenty-five thousand men; the second, the better to bridle the other rajahs and to reduce them to reason, when they cantonize, or when they refuse to pay tribute, or when, out of fear or other cause, they will not leave their country to serve in the army when the Mogul requires it; the third, the better to nourish jealousies and keenness among them, by favoring and caressing one more than the other, which is done to that degree that they proceed to fight with one another very frequently.

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE: PETER THE GREAT (1682–1725)

The first of the following decrees from the czar involved the creation of a Governing Senate (council), which reflected some of the changes he sought in administration and state functions. A second decree, from 1714, established so-called compulsory education for the nobles (though this was not actually fully enforceable); a related “instruction” urged selective study abroad. A 1721 decree (number 4) was designed to encourage manufacturing, but through a very distinctive means. Finally, a 1724 decree set up an academy modeled on Western associations—such as the Royal Society in England, which had been established in the seventeenth century—to encourage discussion of science. Which reforms probably had the greatest impact? Which would be most likely to encounter resistance? What groups and activities were left untouched?

. . . .

The *ukaz* [decree] should be made known. We have decreed that during our absence administration of the country is to be [in the hands of] the Governing Senate [Peter then names its new members]. . . .

Each *gubernia* [region] is to send two officials to advise the Senate on judicial and legislative matters. . . .

In our absence the Senate is charged by this *ukaz* with the following:

1. To establish a just court, to deprive unjust judges of their offices and of all their property, and to administer the same treatment to all slanderers.
2. To supervise governmental expenditures throughout the country and cancel unnecessary and, above all, useless things.
3. To collect as much money as possible because money is the artery of war.
4. To recruit young noblemen for officer training, especially those who try to evade it; also to select about 1,000 educated boyars for the same purpose.
5. To reform letters of exchange and keep these in one place.
6. To take inventory of goods leased to offices or *gubernias*.
7. To farm out the salt trade in an effort to receive some profit [for the state].
8. To organize a good company and assign to it the China trade.

9. To increase trade with Persia and by all possible means to attract in great numbers Armenians [to that trade]. To organize inspectors and inform them of their responsibilities.

2. *Education Decree*

Send to every *gubernia* [region] some persons from mathematical schools to teach the children of the nobility—except those of freeholders and government clerks—mathematics and geometry; as a penalty [for evasion] establish a rule that no one will be allowed to marry unless he learns these [subjects]. Inform all prelates to issue no marriage certificates to those who are ordered to go to schools. . . .

The Great Sovereign has decreed: in all *gubernias* children between the ages of ten and fifteen of the nobility, of government clerks, and of lesser officials, except those of freeholders, must be taught mathematics and some geometry. Toward that end, students should be sent from mathematical schools [as teachers], several into each *gubernia*, to prelates and to renowned monasteries to establish schools. During their instruction these teachers should be given food and financial remuneration of three *altyns* and two *dengas* per day from *gubernia* revenues set aside for that purpose by personal orders of His Imperial Majesty. No fees should be collected from students. When they have mastered the material, they should then be given certificates written in their own handwriting. When the students are released they ought to pay one ruble each for their training. Without these certificates they should not be allowed to marry nor receive marriage certificates.

3. *Navigation Study Abroad*

1. Learn [how to draw] plans and charts and how to use the compass and other naval indicators.
2. [Learn] how to navigate a vessel in battle as well as in a simple maneuver, and learn how to use all appropriate tools and instruments; namely sails, ropes, and oars, and the like matters, on row boats and other vessels.
3. Discover as much as possible how to put ships to sea during a naval battle. Those who cannot succeed in this effort must diligently ascertain what action should be taken by the vessels that do and those that do not put to sea during such a situation [naval battle]. Obtain from [foreign] naval officers written statements, bearing their signatures and seals, of how adequately you [Russian students] are prepared for [naval] duties.
4. If, upon his return, anyone wishes to receive [from the Tsar] greater favors for himself, he should learn, in addition to the above enumerated instructions, how to construct those vessels aboard which he would like to demonstrate his skills.
5. Upon his return to Moscow, every [foreign-trained Russian] should bring with him at his own expense, for which he will later be reimbursed, at least two experienced masters of naval science. They [the returnees] will be assigned soldiers, one soldier

per returnee, to teach them [what they have learned abroad]. And if they do not wish to accept soldiers they may teach their acquaintances or their own people. The treasure will pay for transportation and maintenance of soldiers. And if anyone other than soldiers learns [the art of navigation] the treasurer will pay 100 rubles for the maintenance of every such individual. . . .

4. *Right of Factories to Buy Villages*

Previous decrees have denied merchants the right to obtain villages. This prohibition was instituted because those people, outside their business, did not have any establishments that could be of any use to the state. Nowadays, thanks to Our decrees, as every one can see, many merchants have companies and many have succeeded in establishing new enterprises for the benefit of the state; namely: silver, copper, iron, coal and the like, as well as silk, linen, and woolen industries, many of which have begun operations. As a result, by this Our *ukaz* aimed at the increase of factories, We permit the nobility as well as merchants to freely purchase villages for these factories, with the sanction of the Mining and Manufacturing College, under one condition: that these villages be always integral parts of these factories. Consequently, neither the nobility nor merchants may sell or mortgage these villages without the factories because of pressing needs, it must be done with the permission of the Mining and Manufacturing College. And whoever violates this procedure will have his possessions confiscated.

And should someone try to establish a small factory for the sake of appearance in order to purchase a village, such an entrepreneur should not be allowed to purchase anything. The Mining and Manufacturing College should adhere to this rule very strictly. Should such a thing happen, those responsible for it should be deprived of all their movable and immovable property.

5. *Founding the Academy*

His Imperial Majesty decreed the establishment of an academy, wherein languages as well as other science and important arts could be taught, and where books could be translated. On January 22, [1724], during his stay in the Winter Palace, His Majesty approved the project for the Academy, and with his own hand signed a decree that stipulates that the Academy's budget of 24,912 rubles annually should come from revenues from custom dues and export-import license fees collected in the following cities: Narva, Dorpat, Pernov and Arensburg. . . .

Usually two kinds of institutions are used in organizing arts and sciences. One is known as a university; the other as an Academy or society of arts and sciences.

1. A University is an association of learned individuals who teach the young people the development of such distinguished science as theology and jurisprudence (the

legal skill), and medicine and philosophy. An Academy, on the other hand, is an association of learned and skilled people who not only know their subjects to the same degree [as their counterparts in the University] but who, in addition, improve and develop them through research and inventions. They have no obligation to teach others.

2. While the Academy consists of the same scientific disciplines and has the same members as the University, these two institutions, in other states, have no connection between themselves in training many other well-qualified people who could organize different societies. This is done to prevent interference into the activity of the Academy, whose sole task is to improve arts and science through theoretical research that would benefit professors as well as students of universities. Freed from the pressure of research, universities can concentrate on educating the young people.
3. Now that an institution aimed at the cultivation of arts and sciences is to be chartered in Russia, there is no need to follow the practice that is accepted in other states. It is essential to take into account the existing circumstances of this state [Russia], consider [the quality of Russian] teachers and students, and organize such an institution that would not only immediately increase the glory of this [Russian] state through the development of sciences, but would also, through teaching and dissemination [of knowledge], benefit the people [of Russia] in the future.
4. These two aims will not be realized if the Academy of Sciences alone is chartered, because while the Academy may try to promote and disseminate arts and sciences, these will not spread among the people. The establishment of a university will do even less, simply because there are no elementary schools, gymnasia or seminaries [in Russia], where young people could learn the fundamentals before studying more advanced subjects [at the University] to make themselves useful. It is therefore inconceivable that under these circumstances a university would be of some value [to Russia].
5. Consequently what is needed most [in Russia] is the establishment of an institution that would consist of the most learned people, who, in turn, would be willing:
(a) to promote and perfect the sciences while at the same time, wherever possible, be willing (b) to give public instruction to young people (if they feel the latter are qualified) and (c) instruct some people individually so that they in turn could train young people [of Russia] in the fundamental principles of all sciences.