Between the 1400s and the 1800s, three Muslim empires—the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Empire, and the Mogul Empire—conquered and controlled much of eastern Europe, central Asia, and India respectively. Strong leaders used powerful armies to amass territory that gave them economic control over major trade routes. As these empires spread into new areas, the religion and culture of Islam also expanded.

The Ottoman Empire

During the late 1200s, Turkish clans—calling themselves Ottoman Turks after their first leader, Osman—settled part of Asia Minor and began conquests to build an empire. They conquered much of Byzantine territory, making Constantinople their capital in 1453. Extending their Muslim empire even farther, by the 1500s the Ottomans controlled the Balkan Peninsula and parts of eastern Europe. By the end of their rule in the early 1900s, they had acquired much of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian Seas.

The Ottoman Empire maintained a strong navy in the Mediterranean to protect the lucrative trade they controlled there. Alarmed by the threat to their trade and to Christianity, Europeans under Philip II of Spain fought and defeated the Ottoman fleet at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. But the Ottomans rebuilt their navy and remained a significant seapower until the 1700s.

Suleiman I

Suleiman I was one of the early Ottoman rulers who strengthened Muslim forces prior to the Battle of Lepanto. He was a multitalented man—a heroic military commander, a skillful administrator, and a patron of the arts. Ruling from 1520 to 1566, Suleiman received the name “The Lawgiver” for his work in organizing Ottoman laws.
Suleiman acted as both the sultan, or political ruler, and the caliph, or religious leader; he enjoyed absolute authority. To rule effectively, however, Suleiman needed support from his personal advisers, the bureaucracy, a group of religious advisers known as the Ulema, and a well-trained army. A grand vizier, or prime minister, headed the bureaucracy. The Ulema made rulings on questions of Islamic law, and the army held much power by conquering and controlling new territories.

The Ottomans recruited officers from among the conquered peoples of their empire. An elite corps of officers called janissaries came from the Balkans, where Christian families were required by the Ottomans to turn over young boys to the government. Converted to Islam, the boys received rigorous training that made them a loyal fighting force.

**Ottoman Law**

Because the empire was so large, Ottoman Muslims ruled diverse peoples, including Arabs, Greeks, Albanians, Slavs, Armenians, and Jews. The population was divided into several classes: a ruling class made up of the sultan’s family and high government officials; the nobility, which administered agricultural estates; and the largest class, the peasants who worked on those estates.

To accommodate these diverse populations, the government made special laws affecting those who did not practice Islam, the empire’s official religion. Non-Muslims were allowed to practice their faith. Ottoman law also permitted the empire’s diverse religious groups to run affairs in their own millets, or communities, and choose their own leaders to present their views to the Ottoman government.
The Ottoman Islamic civilization borrowed from the Byzantine, Persian, and Arab cultures they had absorbed. Mosques, bridges, and aqueducts reflected this blend of styles. The Christian city of Constantinople was transformed into a Muslim one and renamed **Istanbul**. Ottoman architects renovated Hagia Sophia into a mosque and built new mosques and palaces. Ottoman painters produced detailed miniatures and illuminated manuscripts.

**Decline of the Ottomans**

By 1600 the Ottoman Empire had reached the peak of its power; thereafter it slowly declined. Even at its height, however, the empire faced enemies on its borders. Conquests ended as the Ottomans tried to fight both Persians and Europeans. In 1683 Polish King John III Sobieski led European forces in ending an Ottoman siege of Vienna. This European victory dealt a decisive blow to the Ottoman Empire. When Ottoman military conquests ceased, massive poverty and civil discontent afflicted Ottoman lands.

**Reform**

By the 1700s, the Ottoman Empire had fallen behind Europe in trade and military technology. Russia and other European nations began taking Ottoman territory, and local rulers in North Africa gradually broke away from Ottoman control. In the 1800s uprisings in the Balkans led to freedom for the Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, and Romanians. Unsuccessful revolts in Armenia and Arabia were brutally crushed.

Wanting to halt Ottoman decline, Ottoman rulers during the 1800s used European ideas to reform and unify the empire. In 1856 Sultan Abdul-Mejid I issued the **Hatt-I-Hamayun**, a sweeping reform decree that created a national citizenship, reduced the authority of religious leaders, and opened government service to all peoples.

**Reaction**

Powerful resistance to change grew among the religious leaders, who had lost civil authority in their own communities. Although many Muslim, Jewish, and Christian leaders protested reform, merchants and artisans in the individual communities welcomed it. Non-Turkish groups, such as Armenians, Bulgarians, Macedonians, and Serbs, however, had little interest in any reform that would save the empire. They wanted nation-states of their own.

After Abdul-Mejid’s death in 1861, the reform movement lacked the strong leadership needed to guarantee its success. To gain public support, reformers known as the Young Ottomans overthrew the weak sultan Abdul-Aziz and replaced him with Abdul-Hamid II.

At first the new sultan went along with the reformers. In 1876 he proclaimed a new constitution. He affirmed the unity of the empire and promised individual liberties for his subjects. In 1877 the first Ottoman parliament met in Istanbul. But later that year Abdul-Hamid II suddenly dissolved the parliament and ended constitutional rule. He believed that liberalism would ruin the government. To further protect the empire from change, he exiled many of the Young Ottomans and imposed absolute rule.

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**Visualizing History**

Portrait of Suleiman, “The Lawgiver,” from the late 1600s. What provision did the Ottoman law make for peoples of diverse religions?

**Student Web Activity 7**

Visit the *World History: The Modern Era* Web site at worldhistory.me.glencoe.com and click on **Chapter 7—Student Web Activities** for an activity relating to Suleiman I.