

## THE FOREIGN POLICY OF SULEIMAN THE MAGNIFICENT

### Suleiman the Conqueror

Selim died in 1520, soon after the defeat of the Mamluks, and his son, Suleyman I, succeeded him. Suleyman in his time was regarded as the most significant ruler in the world, by both Muslims and Europeans. His military empire expanded greatly both to the east and west, and he threatened to overrun the heart of Europe itself. Suleyman believed, however, that the entire world was his possession as a gift of God, and that it was his duty to carry jihad across the globe. Therefore, even though he did not occupy Roman lands, he still claimed them as his own and almost launched an invasion of Rome (the city came within a few hairbreadths of Ottoman invasion in Suleyman's expedition against Corfu). Moreover, as universal Caliph of Islam he could even justify attacking other Muslim nations such as the Safavids, who he argued had abandoned orthodox belief or practice. Each of these invasions or annexations were preceded, however, by a religious judgement by Islamic scholars as to the orthodoxy of the ruling dynasty.



In 1521, one of his first moves as sultan was to invade and capture the Serbian city of Belgrade, which was considered to be the gateway to Central Europe. From Belgrade, Suleyman faced an open road to Hungary and, beyond that, Austria. A 1526 Ottoman victory at the Battle of Mohacs in Hungary further advanced Ottoman interests in the region, and by 1529, Suleyman had led the Ottoman army to the gates of Vienna. His drive into Central Europe was done partly for territorial gain, and partly for political reasons. The Habsburgs, rulers of the Holy Roman Empire, controlled much of Central Europe, and the Ottomans' increasing involvement in European politics in the 1520s led them to enter into an alliance with France against the Habsburgs.

The issue began with a war between Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Francis I of France, in 1521. Francis sought Ottoman assistance in the war when it became clear that he was losing. He appealed to the Ottomans to help prevent Charles from establishing hegemony over all of Europe, resulting in one dominant power over the continent. The Ottomans agreed to help France prevent the Holy Roman Empire from dominating Europe, and a formal Franco-Ottoman alliance was concluded in 1536. That alliance was the cornerstone of European diplomacy for much of the 16th century, and it countered the alliance the Holy Roman Empire made first with Italy, and later with the Safavid Empire in Persia. Because of the threat of a two-front war based on the Holy Roman Empire-Safavid alliance, the Ottomans ensured peace on one side before waging war against the other.

By 1533, renewed hostilities with the Safavids on the eastern frontier led Suleyman to conclude a peace treaty with Archduke Ferdinand of Hungary in order to focus Ottoman military might on the Safavids. Their eastern campaign that year proved to be enormously successful for the Ottomans, as they took the major cities of Baghdad and Tabriz from the Safavids, and annexed the Safavid provinces of Azerbaijan and Iraq. By 1538 the Ottomans controlled the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, thus giving them control of all trade routes, by land and sea, from western Asia to India. The Ottomans were not able to maintain all of what they took from the Safavids, however, and the Persian city of Tabriz was one which changed hands several times before the Ottomans concluded a peace treaty with the Safavids in 1555. That treaty returned Tabriz to the Safavids and left the border between the two empires peaceful for the next 25 years.

Meanwhile, Suleyman faced a new and unexpected threat from the Russian Empire. The Ottomans had witnessed the expansion of the principality of Muscovy into an empire of its own with little concern, but by the mid-16th century, the Russian Empire began to challenge the Ottoman Empire in the Black Sea and Caucasus regions. Ivan IV, also known as Ivan the Terrible, came to the Russian throne in 1547, and annexed the Muslim Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, which were remnants of the Golden Horde. In 1559, Suleyman successfully kept Ivan from also annexing Azov, in the northern reaches of the Ottoman Empire. The hostilities died down in the 1560s, and Suleyman allowed Ivan to keep Kazan and Astrakhan, in return for

Ottoman control of the Khanate of the Crimea. This feud with the Russian Empire demonstrated to Suleyman that his Empire had not two but three fronts to defend, when the new threat posed by the Russian Empire to the northeast was added to those of the Safavids to the southeast and the Europeans to the west.

### **Suleiman the Machiavellian**

Besides invasions and campaigns, Suleyman was a major player in the politics of Europe. He pursued an aggressive policy of European destabilization; in particular, he wanted to destabilize both the Roman Catholic church and the Holy Roman Empire. By encouraging the disunity of Christianity, the Ottomans hoped to decrease the chances of Christian Europe uniting in a Crusade against the Muslim Ottomans. Several historians, in fact, have argued that Protestantism would never have succeeded except for the financial support of the Ottoman Empire. One notable example was Suleyman's outward support of Lutherans fighting the Pope in the Holy Roman Empire to guarantee that Europe remain religiously and politically destabilized and so ripe for an invasion. Suleyman considered the Protestant rejection of icons and papal authority to be closer to Muslim belief than either Catholic or Orthodox Christianity, and his support of Protestantism was one of his key policies in Europe.

In this, Suleyman was responding to an aggressively expanding Europe. Like most other non-Europeans, Suleyman fully understood the consequences of European expansion and saw Europe as the principle threat to Islam. The Islamic world was beginning to shrink under this expansion. Portugal had invaded several Muslim cities in eastern Africa in order to dominate trade with India, and Russians, which the Ottomans regarded as European, were pushing central Asians south when the Russian expansion began in the sixteenth century. So in addition to invading and destabilizing Europe, Suleyman pursued a policy of helping any Muslim country threatened by European expansion. It was this role that gave Suleyman the right, in the eyes of the Ottomans, to declare himself as supreme Caliph of Islam. He was the only one successfully protecting Islam from the unbelievers and, as the protector of Islam, deserved to be the ruler of Islam.

#### **Task**

Come up with between 5 and 10 questions to turn this account into a worksheet.  
Swap your questions with a partner and answer them on a separate sheet.