

WHAT WAS THE GREATEST STRENGTH OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE?

Instructions:

Read this interpretation of the internal strengths of the Ottoman Empire, and answer the questions which follow.

- The greatest strength of the Ottoman Empire in the first instance was its **religious** zeal (ghazi, Jihad, etc). It was this zeal which meant that the Ottomans were so focused. A great leader such as Osman was also very important in these early stages.

However, this equation changed as time progressed. The Sultan, for example, was not that important - Although a strong **sultan** remained an advantage (E.g. Suleiman, way they can just call on unrestricted plunder), they were by no means essential (e.g. under Selim II the Empire reached its largest territorial extent, and even a succession of mad Sultans did not really undermine the effectiveness of the empire). In this sense we should look to the Sultanate as being more important (etc).

As a result, it makes more sense to look towards the **military** system, which mixed order and chaos in equal measure (etc). This is certainly more important than the sultan;

However, underpinning the whole system was **economic** factors. The prospect of plunder lay at the heart of the military expansion. Timars, devshirme. Plunder was the lifeblood of the Empire and gave meaning to the jihad, the military structure etc.

Just as economic factors were crucial to grease the wheels of the military machine, so too were they important for the **administrative** structure, which was important, but merely solidified the conquests, and itself drew upon the economic factors – e.g. Timars, Devshirme tax etc; perhaps more important was the **theory** which underpinned the system – meritocracy. However, this too meant that people's fortunes were dependent only on plunder and violence – which re-enforces the fact that economic factors lay at the heart of Ottoman expansion. Perhaps a distinction should be drawn here between initial strength and consolidation strength. Both worked it tandem.

Conclusion – The irony is that although economic factors provided the greatest strength of the Empire in the early stages, as time wore on it became a liability. Once the Empire had reached the natural limits of its expansion it meant that there was dissatisfaction; the lack of focus on developing an economic infrastructure meant that it had to collapse at some point. This – the fact that economic factors can be seen as the key reason for success and for weakness – inclines me to think that this was the most important factor.

Also – does it depend on what period of time or place you are considering?
Does it depend on the strengths and weaknesses of the European powers?

Task:

1. Produce a diagram illustrating this interpretation of the strengths of the Ottoman Empire.
2. To what extent do you agree with this interpretation of Ottoman power?