

# **Teachable Issues Concerning the Ottoman Empire**

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# Four important issues:

- common traditions with the West
- the nature of slavery and political organization
- human rights
- long-term impact

1. The Ottomans, like us, are heirs to Western civilization.



Ephesus, Turkey

# Ottoman Ties to Western Culture

- Cities like Troy, Pergamum, and Ephesus are *their* historical legacy, not just ours.
- The Ottomans lived close to the Byzantines for centuries, and both groups learned from each other.
- Early Ottoman rulers frequently married Christian princesses.

## 2. Different Concept of the Nature of Slavery



[www.siu.edu/COSTUMES/  
images/PLATE67CX.JPG](http://www.siu.edu/COSTUMES/images/PLATE67CX.JPG)

# The Devshirme (devşirme) System

- Slaves were taken from any non-Muslim areas. Race and language didn't matter.
- Slaves were given jobs according to their interests and abilities. (Slaves did NOT do agricultural work – as American slaves did.)

# Political Impact of the System

- Government positions were based on merit, not on birth.
- Slaves were loyal to the sultan. – They owed their rank to him, and they had no powerful families to support them if they rebelled.
- When the system ended in the mid-1600s, the government and military declined.

# 3. The Ottoman Empire's Record of Human Rights

- The millet system organized people by religions.
- But it also guaranteed the rights of the different religious minorities to freedom of religious practice, to their own religious leaders, and to religious autonomy.



# The Ottoman treatment of minorities was often BETTER than that in Europe.

- Anti-Semitism in Christian Europe led to frequent persecutions of Jews
- Many Jews ended up seeking refuge in Ottoman lands. After their expulsion from Spain, for example, in the 1490s, many went to the Balkans and the Middle East/North Africa (Ottoman lands).

It is NOT TRUE that Europe was more advanced in human rights than the Middle East.



Sarajevo  
Haggadah

It was modern nationalism, not religious persecution that led to ethnic persecution in the last days of the Ottoman Empire.

# Armenians *were* targeted during (and before) World War I

- In 1915, approximately 1.5 million Armenians were deported (out of 2 million total in the Ottoman Empire), and nearly 1 million died.
- The “reason” was fears of national separatism, not religious-based persecution.

# To think about:

- The Middle East has a long tradition of human rights.
- The rise of nationalism had a negative impact on human rights.
- Nationalist (and thus SECULAR) societies often struggle with human rights.
- There is a connection between war and human rights abuses.

# 4. Long-Term Impact of the Ottoman Empire



# Cultural Diffusion



Bosnian traditions

# Cultural Diversity

## The Balkan Region





# Idea of millets reflected in modern thought:

- Religion is still a determinant of identity in many parts of the former Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Balkans. (Example of Bosnia)
- Ottoman ideal of religious tolerance still a valued tradition, particularly in Muslim areas. (Example of the Holocaust rescuers)

# Conclusion:

- Studying the Ottoman Empire is important in its own right (huge geographic reach, long duration).
- The Ottoman Empire also leads students to examine issues of cultural diffusion, state organization, and ideology.