

of it, as this attracted people and capital to Dutch cities. What we might call “social toleration” also played a role, for it was far easier for successful and intelligent artisans or lesser merchants to rise in stature, gaining local or even provincial offices and marrying into regent families, than it was for commoners in countries of Europe dominated by aristocracies to move into the highest circles of power.

### The Ottoman Empire

While Dutch successes provided luxury for some, and decent food, clothing, and housing for most, in eastern Europe only the elites flourished. Most states in eastern Europe were ruled by dynasties that considered their realms as simply large estates to be exploited and expanded, and which were dependent on the higher nobility for money and troops. As we saw in chapter 6, noble landowners reintroduced serfdom in much of eastern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, passed laws that hindered the growth of cities or the development of new forms of production, and maintained their own freedom from taxation and other privileges. Their economic and legal privileges were generally enhanced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by rulers who depended on the nobles to be officers in their growing armies and officials in their expanding bureaucracies. These rulers created absolutist states – most of which lasted until World War I – not by limiting the power of nobles, but co-opting it.

The largest state in eastern Europe in 1600 was the Ottoman Empire, with Istanbul by far the largest city in Europe. (Historical demographers estimate that the two largest cities in the world in 1600 and 1700 were Beijing and Istanbul, both with populations of about 700,000.) Ottoman holdings stretched around the eastern Mediterranean to North Africa and down the Tigris and Euphrates to the Persian Gulf; all of the area around the Black Sea was controlled directly by the Ottomans or by states that paid tribute to the sultan. In theory, Ottoman sultans were absolute monarchs, appointing local leaders, making political decisions, and directing the army and navy. In practice, as the empire grew, more of the day-to-day administration was handled by officials, under the leadership of a grand *vizier*, a position that became heritable. The sultans themselves rarely left their extensive palaces, where they were surrounded by wives, concubines, servants, and officials who followed elaborate rituals in their interactions with the ruler. Complex protocol also marked Louis XIV’s court at Versailles, but Louis personally oversaw political and military affairs, whereas most sultans did not, growing ever more distant from the realities of their subjects’ lives.

The Ottoman Empire was built through military expansion, and the Janissaries – troops forcibly conscripted from Christian or Muslim families – became increasingly important politically as well as on the battlefield. There was no clear line of succession in Islamic law, so that various sons, nephews, and other male relatives of the ruling sultan might all claim the throne. In

early Ottoman practice, many of these royal princes had been given administrative or military positions with real duties, but by the seventeenth century most of them were also more or less imprisoned in the palace, so that they were not prepared for the challenges of rule. The death of every sultan was followed by intrigue and often warfare among claimants to the throne, with each faction backed by powerful Janissaries and officials. The huge bureaucracy needed to run the enormous empire became increasingly corrupt, with local officials regarding the provinces under their authority as territories to be exploited rather than parts of a whole.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Ottomans developed the most effective army in Europe in terms of both weaponry and supply systems, along with a huge war fleet of armed galleys that controlled the Mediterranean. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, other European powers built on Ottoman advances, and developed lighter and more mobile field artillery, as well as sailing ships that were faster and sturdier than rowed galleys. Much of the Ottoman fleet was destroyed by a combined fleet of European powers at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Though the fleet was rebuilt within a year, and the Ottomans took Tunis in North Africa from the Spanish in 1574, they no longer dominated trade in the Mediterranean, but shared it with Venetian and later Dutch and English merchants.

On land, Ottoman armies were split between fighting the Safavid Empire in Persia to the east and maintaining their hold in Europe. The collapse of the Safavids in the seventeenth century allowed the Ottomans to turn their attention fully to Europe, and they mounted a huge campaign against the Habsburgs, making an alliance with two other Habsburg enemies, Protestant nobles in Hungary and Louis XIV. The Ottomans besieged Vienna in 1683, but German and Polish armies rescued the city, and then continued to push the Ottomans out of most of Hungary and Transylvania (part of present-day Romania). Despite these losses, Janissaries and other officials who dominated the Ottoman court blocked political, military, or economic reforms; tax revenues declined, agricultural and technological innovations developed elsewhere were not adopted, and Ottoman society stagnated.

### Habsburg lands

The main beneficiary of the decline of Ottoman power was the Austrian Habsburg dynasty, which controlled a complex group of territories in central and eastern Europe, some of them within the Holy Roman Empire and some outside it: the German-speaking provinces of Austria, Tyrol, Styria, and several smaller territories, along with Czech-speaking Bohemia, Moravia, and Hungarian-speaking Hungary. The Thirty Years War, much of which was fought on Habsburg lands, left these territories depopulated and impoverished, and made it clear that the Empire would not be united in religion or transformed into a strong state. It also left the Habsburgs in clearer control of many of their holdings, and though they continued to be regularly elected as Holy Roman