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The rise of the Gunpowder Empires

Read the following information with a partner concerning the Gunpowder empires and then complete the questions and the Venn diagram that follows.

The term "gunpowder empire" is usually traced to the work of historian Marshall G. Hodgson, who sought to explain the rise of empires in the Islamic world. He used the term to describe new forms of states that appeared in Turkey, Persia, and Mughal India. According to Hodgson, artillery and other firearms had wide social and political consequences for these states. Because acquiring and maintaining guns demanded a highly developed government administration and extensive financial resources, the use of gunpowder tended to produce highly centralized governments that could buy large quantities of tin and copper, manufacture weapons, and train soldiers in the use of firearms. Other historians have adopted this term to refer to states outside the Islamic region that used gunpowder technology to extend their control over territories that were less advanced technologically.

The Chinese appear to have been the earliest people to make use of gunpowder for warfare. In the thirteenth century, the Chinese developed gunpowder that was high in nitrates and made use of it in cylindrical metal barrels. By the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century, the Chinese were making use of small handguns. The technology quickly made its way to Europe, and the Europeans improved on it to create large cannon. The effectiveness of cannon in warfare led others to take them up eagerly.

The Turkish Ottoman Empire was one of the earliest and longest-lasting of the gunpowder empires promoted by the spread of cannon and other firearms. The Turks had been pushed into the Near East from the eighth century onward by Mughal expansion in their original territory, around what is now Turkestan. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Turkish leader Osman I (c. 1258-1326) declared himself sultan, founding the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans spread their control over the area formerly held by the Eastern Roman Empire, also known as the Byzantine Empire. In 1453, Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444-1446 and 1451-1481) conquered Constantinople, bringing the Byzantine Empire to an end.

In their early years, Ottoman power was based on its cavalry. The Turks would make extensive use of firepower, using large cannon in their siege of Constantinople. They coordinated artillery with the use of cavalry and created an elite infantry corps known as the Janissaries. The Janissaries were child slaves taken from Christian parents and raised as Muslims. They were trained to be expert in the use of firearms.

With its capital in Istanbul, as Constantinople became known, the Ottoman Empire developed into a centralized administration, funding the military use of firearms to spread its power through most of the Middle East and north and west into the Balkan Peninsula of Europe. For a time, it looked as if the guns of the Ottomans would carry them even farther. In 1529, the Turks laid siege to Vienna. Sultan Mohammed IV attempted a second assault on Central Europe beginning in 1663, and he put Vienna under siege again in 1683. Although the Turks continued to hold much of the territory they had taken by the end of the seventeenth century and fought other wars against the Europeans, their empire was in a state of decline until its end in the early twentieth century.

The Safavid Empire of Persia also relied on the use of gunpowder for its power, and gunpowder seems to have shaped its structure. During the first half of the sixteenth century, Shah Ismā'īl I led his Safavid warriors to found a new Persian empire in Iran. The Safavid Empire lasted until 1722, and the Shī'ite branch of the Islamic faith established by Ismā'īl continues to be the dominant and contemporary religion of Iran today. Under Shah Abbās the Great, at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, Safavid Persia took on the characteristics identified by Marshall Hodgson as those of a gunpowder empire. The Safavids' hold on their territory had weakened considerably after the death of Shah Ismā'īl. Shah Abbās drove out foreigners, including Ottomans, who had made incursions into his territory. In doing this, he used a military force based on the use of gunpowder. He brought in an English adviser to help him reorganize and train his army. He divided this army into three bodies of troops--the slaves, the musketeers, and the artillerymen--all of whom were paid from a central treasury. He also created a strong, professionalized, central administration for organizing, training, and supplying this military force. In order to obtain the funds to maintain the political and military structures of the nation, the sixteenth century Safavids fostered trade with Europe, industry, and an elaborate system of communication.

To the east of the Ottomans and the Safavids, the Mughals shaped an Indian empire. The founder of this empire was Bābur (1483-1530), a Turkic prince of Central Asia said to be descended from the conquerors Tamerlane (Timur) and Genghis Khan. Bābur was driven out of Central Asia and descended into northern India, where he established Mughal rule. Bābur's grandson, Akbar, is considered the greatest of the Mughals. Akbar extended his empire to include all of northern and part of central India. His ability to do this resulted from the centralized organization of his political and military structures. The emperor ruled through high officials known as *mansabs*, who were top administrative or military officials who governed provinces, occupied key bureaucratic positions, or recruited and trained soldiers. Akbar's army relied heavily on the infantry, which was supplied with muskets, and on heavy artillery, using cannon. Much of his success came from the inability of competing powers in India to afford artillery or to train and maintain armed infantry.

Akbar was succeeded by his son Jahāngīr and his grandson Shāh Jahān, builder of the famous Taj Mahal. These two rulers maintained the army and administration created by Akbar. Under Jahān, the Mughal Empire is said to have reached its highest point culturally.

The concept of the gunpowder empire also has been extended to include non-Islamic nations that achieved wide territorial power through firepower and centralized administration. Russia, in the center of the Eurasian landmass, followed a pattern of expansion similar in ways to that of the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals. Ivan the Great (1440-1505), grand duke of Moscow from 1462 to 1505, combined a centralized state with the new technology of artillery to begin Russia's rise from a marginal territory dominated by the Mughals in the south to a major empire.

Ivan's son, Ivan the Terrible, became the first czar of Russia. In the seventeenth century, the Romanov Dynasty came to power and accelerated the development of the state and the army. In particular, during the reign of Czar Alexis, the Russian army became a permanent, professional force, trained in the use of artillery and muskets. This made Russia successful in its wars against its western neighbors, Sweden and Poland, and prepared it for its spread across the east and southeast. Alexis's son, Peter the Great, on the throne from 1682 to 1725, pushed the centralization of authority, the organization of bureaucracy, and the professionalization of the military even further. Under Peter, Russia created an effective navy armed with artillery.

The maritime empires of the Iberian states, Portugal and Spain, also are frequently described as gunpowder empires. Both of these nations at the southwestern tip of Europe made use of ships designed to carry large cannon to dominate other parts of the world. During the reign of King Philip II, Spain's heavily armed ships made Spain one of the major European powers, as it took over much of the Americas. By 1600, the vast territories from New Mexico and Florida in the north to the tip of South America were under Spanish control. Only Brazil, taken by the Portuguese, was outside the Spanish Empire. Portugal had employed its own ships to establish itself in Goa, on India's Malabar Coast; in the Moluccas, in the East Indies (now called Indonesia); and in Macao, off the coast of China. However, Portugal was forced into a union with Spain from 1580 to 1740. By the end of the seventeenth century, the period of the Iberian empires had passed. Following the death of Spanish king Charles II, in 1700, other European powers became involved in fighting over who would succeed Charles and Spain's period of greatness ended.

Significance

By the seventeenth century, the advancement of firearms technology by well-organized military forces enabled a small number of states to spread their power over vast portions of the globe. The Ottoman Empire came to dominate much of the Islamic world. Even after centuries of decline, at the beginning of World War I, in 1914, the Ottoman Empire still controlled or influenced much of the Middle East. Although the Safavid Dynasty did not conquer as wide a territory as did the Ottomans, or survive as long, the Safavids had a lasting influence on the civilization of Iran and helped to establish Shīte Islam in several countries in the Middle East.

Similarly, weapons and centralized administration enabled Russia to begin its transformation from a weak marginal state under the grand duke of Moscow into one of the world's largest empires. The rise to power of Spain and Portugal, just before and during the seventeenth century, placed much of the Western Hemisphere under Iberian control and resulted in Spanish becoming one of the world's most widely spoken languages.

1. What is a gunpowder empire?
2. What empires in history would be considered gunpowder empires?
3. In general, what did these gunpowder empires have in common besides the fact that they used gunpowder.

Complete the following Venn, comparing empires from last trimester with these new gunpowder empires.

