

# Ottomania All the Rage in Turkey

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## Articles & Testimony

**"F**atih 1453" (*The Conquest 1453*), a Turkish spring blockbuster that glorifies the Ottomans and their conquest of Istanbul, is breaking viewership records in Turkey these days.

Over 5 million Turks have already seen the movie, making it the country's most popular film of all time. The film's popularity sheds light on Turkey's emerging preoccupation with its Ottoman past: Ottomanism is all the rage in Turkey today.

In recent years, the Turks have re-engaged with their Ottoman past to the point of abandoning the early 20th-century thinking of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, Atatürk recreated Turkey in a European mold, in the hopes of completely separating it from its Ottoman history. Atatürk's thinking, termed "Kemalism," dictated that Turkey could become a great country only if it abandoned its Ottoman past.

Now, though, this need to distance themselves from their history has passed, and the Turks are once again connecting with their Ottoman heritage. Many Turks no longer seem content with an inward-looking state of mind. Rather, buoyed by record-breaking economic growth over the past decade and at the same time finding Kemalism's century-old thinking to be tiring, the Turks are, once again, feeling imperial.

The Turks' excited embrace of their Ottoman heritage was most recently demonstrated by the millions of people who flocked to the movie theaters to see "1453," though this is not a pure "return to the past." Rather, the rising Ottomanism is laden with contemporary accretions, such as consumerism and political neo-Ottomanism.

Resurgent Ottomanism is especially obvious in Istanbul, the former capital of the Ottoman Empire. Once upon a time, Istanbul was a bustling metropolis at the empire's heart. It was an Ottoman Babylon of sorts, with a multitude of languages and religions, a city which Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk vividly describes in his novel "White Castle." However, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the imperial Istanbul of long ago has vanished, giving way to an increasingly homogenous city.

Lately, though, Istanbul is rekindling its imperial character, and the city's cosmopolitanism is making a comeback. This is due to a variety of factors, from the collapse of the Iron Curtain, which has linked the city to its traditional Eastern European hinterland, to Turkey's booming economy.

Economic growth is the key. In the past decade, the Turkish economy has nearly tripled in size, experiencing the longest spurt of prosperity in modern Turkish history. The Turkish *Sabah* daily wrote that in 2011 alone, another 9,755 millionaires joined the country's wealthy elite. With 38 billionaires, Turkey already boasts more uber-wealthy citizens today than Japan, Canada or Italy.

As is the case elsewhere, the city's new rich class is buying influence through the arts, bringing top-notch exhibits to Istanbul. Accordingly, Istanbul is recovering from its 20th century provincial cultural stasis, and its residents are rediscovering and embracing the cosmopolitan Ottoman feeling of the olden days. In February alone, the city hosted three select exhibits, which brought Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Dali to the shores of the Bosphorus. The former Ottoman armory grounds hosted Dali's works under oriental domes, while Van Gogh's paintings found their home in a warehouse along the city's historic port.

Another show introduced Istanbulites to Nazmi Ziya Guran, one of the few Ottoman impressionists who blended Ottoman art with French techniques in the late 19th century. The exhibit, housed at Kadir Has University -- whose campus is, poignantly, a converted 19th-century cigarette factory -- allowed Istanbulites to experience fin-de-siècle Ottoman impressionism first hand.

Indeed, the Ottoman Empire and its capital, Istanbul, have always embraced cultural and temporal crossings. When Osman I, founder of the Ottoman principality, died in the early 14th century, his son and successor, Orhan, had him buried in an Eastern Orthodox monastery in Bursa, the first capital city of the Ottomans. With this act of brilliant statecraft, Orhan kicked off a multi-religious vision for the emerging Ottoman Empire. He paved the way for the integration of the Christian and Jewish populations of the withering Byzantine Empire into his state, catapulting the Ottomans to empiedom, thus transforming Istanbul into a cosmopolitan metropolis.

In due course, the Ottoman Empire expanded into Europe, thus incorporating numerous Eastern European nationals, from Greeks to Poles to Hungarians. As the empire became multiethnic, so did its capital. By the 16th century, Istanbul, with over a million inhabitants, was the largest city in the world. It also boasted a multilingual and multi-religious population, including Venetians, Germans, Spanish Jews and Armenians, as well as Ottoman Turks.

After the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the 19th century, modern Turkey was born of its ashes. Led by Atatürk, Turkey became a new state dominated by an elite who sought to sever all ties with their Ottoman past.

Multiculturalism swiftly ended; Italians, Russians, Greeks and Armenians left the city, and Istanbul became almost entirely Muslim and Turkish. The city's imperial luster seemed to be lost forever.

Lately, however, this trend of homogenization has been reversed. Instead, Istanbul's multi-religious and multiethnic nature is getting a fresh infusion. Again, economic growth has been the key: In the third quarter of 2011 alone, the Turkish economy grew by a record 8.2 percent, outpacing not only the country's neighbors, but also all of Europe. Turkey is the only growing and stable country in its region. Hence, many Eastern Europeans, such as Romanians, Moldovans and Russians, are returning to the city, looking for trade and jobs. Azerbaijani, Ukrainian and Kazakh billionaires are coming to Istanbul to find a safe haven for the wealth they have amassed in the energy and metals trades.

Initially attracted by the international trade and finance opportunities Istanbul offered, Western Europeans, too, returned. Some of them eventually settled down and intermarried with the Turks, a convergence reminiscent of the economic boom years that graced the Ottoman Empire.

Even Armenians are coming back, thanks to economic growth. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, tens of

thousands of Armenian citizens have arrived in Istanbul in search of jobs. This influx has been so significant that Armenians now outnumber the city's 60,000-strong Turkish Armenian community. Responding to the influx, Ankara recently expanded its laws to allow the children of undocumented Armenian immigrants access to the Turkish school system. The return of Armenians "has reached a meaningful point," says Aram Atesyan, acting patriarch of the Armenian Church in Turkey.

The Greeks are coming back, too. The financial crisis in Greece has started a mass migration of professionals to "Constantinople," including academics, doctors and teachers. Take Georgia Kapoutsi, for instance, a 29-year-old English teacher from Athens who recently moved to Istanbul to "learn, work and live." "Wealthier Greeks are returning to the city for its quality of life and to escape Greece's chaos," she notes. Istanbul's trendy Cihangir and Beyoglu neighborhoods are brimming with wealthy Athenians who fill the district's humming bistros and vintage stores.

Istanbul's re-emerging cosmopolitan identity has even surpassed that of the original Ottoman realm. Take, for instance, the Filipinos, who are coming to Istanbul as babysitters, and the Chinese, who have built the city's first Chinatown in downtown Taksim. Taner Akpınar, a Turkish specialist in labor economics, points out that "due to free labor movements ... Istanbul has been a haven for immigrants from the Asian countries." For instance, whereas only a decade ago, Central Anatolian Turks and Kurds from Eastern Turkey provided domestic help in upper class households, now rich Istanbulites are increasingly hiring East Asians, looking beyond traditional Ottoman realms. Indeed, Istanbul is opening to a whole new world.

Subsequently, new trends have recently emerged that help restore Istanbul's imperial identity on the one hand, while challenging Kemalism's nation-state ethos on the other.

One of these trends is Ottoman Islamic consumerism. This trend, which envisions the Ottomans as a religious civilization, is a type of Ottoman revivalism that is increasingly being adopted by some of Turkey's newly moneyed conservative elite. Safak Cak, an Istanbul-based designer, says Islamic consumerism "explains why some people are busy designing mansions with specially arranged praying rooms and Swarovski-covered toilet seats."

Consumerist and conservative Ottoman revivalism is not just limited to interior design, though. Turkey now has a number of "Islamic" summer resorts, with baroque Ottoman architecture, state of the art services, and separate facilities for men and women.

The rise of Ottoman revivalism is Kemalism's demise in reverse. For decades, visitors to Turkey were treated to Ataturk mania -- statues and portraits of Turkey's founder, Kemal Ataturk. Such depictions were sprinkled across the country, from airports and schools to hotels and homes. Now, medieval Ottoman calligraphy, indecipherable to many Turks but undoubtedly Islamic in character, is replacing Ataturk mania. Ottoman Islamic consumerism sells a simple message: Never mind who the Ottomans really were, just buy their symbols.

A second and perhaps deeper trend is neo-Ottomanism, which overlays the Ottoman legacy with modern day political sensitivities. Just as the sudden spread of middle-class prosperity in 1950s United States instilled a can-do attitude in Americans, the same is now happening in Turkey. A young cab driver we spoke with in Istanbul said, "Europe is too small an arena for Turkey; we need to be a global player."

Accordingly, in the past decade, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has pursued a foreign policy that transcends the country's 20th century Europeanizing vocation. Buoyed by economic dynamism, political stability (the AKP has already run Turkey longer than any other party since it became a democracy in 1946) and a new supra-European vision, the Turks are again embracing their Ottoman past, though with a modern, power politics twist.

Subsequently, neo-Ottomanism is becoming the political lens through which many Turks view world politics. "The

Conquest 1453" best exemplifies this trend. Armed with plenty of artistic license, including an imaginary Turkish female chief engineer whose skills help the Ottomans breach the walls of Constantinople, the movie casts Ottomans and contemporary Turks as a superior but tolerant people, enjoying their global power status.

After two hours of fighting between medieval Turks and Greeks, "1453," nevertheless, ends with a contemporary, albeit neo-Ottomanist, political message. Having just conquered Istanbul from the Greeks, victorious Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II marches into the Aya Sofya, hugs a little Christian girl, and promises a grand message of "a world of Muslim-Christian coexistence, to be managed by the Turks." The French paper Le Figaro also sees the film as confirming the rise of political Ottomanism, saying, "The huge enthusiasm for this epic [film] is an indication of the wave of Ottomania that has affected Turkey in recent times."

A third and alternative trend that enshrines Turkey's imperial past is cosmopolitan Ottomanism, reminiscent of Sultan Orhan's vision. Deeply rooted in a nostalgia for the Ottoman era, this vision calls for the city's inhabitants to cherish Istanbulite cosmopolitanism.

The rise of cosmopolitan Ottomanism can best be observed in Karakoy-Galata, the city's Ottoman-era financial center. Karakoy-Galata, which became dilapidated with shabby shops and parts suppliers in the 20th century, is now being gentrified. The area's recent revival can be traced back to the opening of the Istanbul Modern Museum in 2004. Overlooking the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn and housed in a converted customs warehouse, this is Istanbul's answer to New York's Museum of Modern Art. A welcome addition to the city's contemporary art scene, the museum has 8,000 square meters of exhibition space, and its permanent collection is filled with a selection of modern Turkish art. Istanbul Modern, which also hosts the Istanbul Biennial, the biannual contemporary art exhibition, calls forth the city's past cosmopolitan charms.

Furthermore, most of the Istanbul-based Turkish universities and think tanks have opened research centers in Karakoy-Galata, thus taking advantage of the grandeur of Ottoman-era financial houses, especially the Ottoman Imperial Bank building designed by French-Ottoman Levantine architect Alexandre Vallaury.

The Ottoman Imperial Bank building now houses SALT Galata, a private organization that promotes research in visual and material culture with an open archive of print and digital resources. SALT Galata also holds a 219-capacity auditorium, the Ottoman Imperial Bank Museum, workshop spaces, a bookstore, a temporary exhibition space and a cafe, Ca d'Oro Restaurant (named after the Venetian Palace overlooking the Grand Canal, the Casa D'Oro) fitting the cafe's paysage over the Golden Horn.

Soon after its opening, SALT became a hub for contemporary art, including an exhibit titled "Scramble for the Past," which explores the historiography of archaeology under the Ottoman domain. The exhibit affirms Istanbul's re-emerging cosmopolitan identity as a blend of East and West and narrates archaeology not as a Western imposition upon the East, but rather as a process that emerged out of the interaction between Europe and the Ottoman world. This is one way to define Istanbul: a bit of Europe and a bit of the East.

In the past decade, Istanbul has emerged as the wealthiest town between Frankfurt and Mumbai, restoring its reputation as a global city of political power. At the same time, Turkey has outgrown Ataturk's Europeanizing vocation, instead choosing to embrace its Ottoman past. Accordingly, while Istanbul rediscovers its true cosmopolitan self, it will also emerge as a hub of consumerism and neo-Ottoman political power.

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