AP World Comparison Essay Example: Ottoman and Mughal Empires

Type of paper	Compare and contrast essay
Academic level	High school (AP World History)
Subject	AP World History
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Length	440 words (about 2 pages, double spaced)

PROMPT

Compare the methods that rulers of the Ottoman and Mughal empires used to legitimize and consolidate their power in the period c. 1450 to c. 1750.

Model response

Between 1450 and 1750, land-based empires across Afro-Eurasia expanded using gunpowder weapons, centralized bureaucracies and religious authority. The Ottoman Empire, centered in Anatolia and the Balkans, and the Mughal Empire in South Asia both ruled large, religiously diverse populations under Muslim dynasties. **Both empires consolidated power through military strength and bureaucracies that bound elites to the ruler, but they legitimized that power differently: Ottoman sultans relied more heavily on Islamic authority and a palace-trained administrative class, while Mughal emperors, especially Akbar, built legitimacy through alliances and accommodation with a Hindu majority.**

Military power was central to both empires' rise. Mehmed II's conquest of Constantinople in 1453 gave the Ottomans a new imperial capital and enormous prestige, and gunpowder artillery helped make that victory possible. The Mughal Empire began with Babur's victory at Panipat in 1526, where firearms and field artillery helped defeat a larger army. In both cases, conquest established the dynasty, but holding territory required systems that kept powerful elites loyal.

The two empires solved that problem in different ways. The Ottomans used the devshirme system, which took boys from Christian communities in the Balkans, converted them to Islam and trained them as janissary soldiers or administrators who owed their positions entirely to the sultan. This created an elite with no independent power base. The Mughals instead used the mansabdar system, in which officials received ranks and land revenue assignments in return for military and administrative service. Both systems tied elites to the ruler, but the Mughal system

incorporated existing regional elites, including Hindu Rajput nobles, rather than creating a new class from outside society.

Religion was the sharpest difference. Ottoman sultans presented themselves as defenders of Sunni Islam, and after Selim I conquered the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517, they controlled the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which strengthened their religious prestige. Non-Muslims paid the jizya tax but were allowed to manage many of their own communal affairs. In South Asia, where Muslims were a minority, Akbar (r. 1556–1605) abolished the jizya in 1564, married into Rajput ruling families and sponsored religious debates at his court. This accommodation broadened his support. The contrast became clear later when Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) reinstated the jizya in 1679, a policy that contributed to growing resistance and weakened the empire's cohesion.

Both dynasties also displayed power through monumental building. Süleyman the Magnificent sponsored grand mosques in Istanbul, while Mughal emperors built Fatehpur Sikri and, under Shah Jahan, the Taj Mahal. These projects show that, despite their different religious strategies, both empires understood legitimacy as something that had to be performed publicly, through architecture, ceremony and patronage, as well as enforced by armies.

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