The conquest of Mexico by the Spanish invading forces resulted primarily from the cooperation of many indigenous Indians, who also wished to overthrow Montezuma and the Aztec Empire. Indeed, the Spanish may have lost without the important intelligence information, supplies, and the swarms of fighters which came from the rebellious Indian city states and populations seeking freedom from Aztec tyranny. Principally among these rebel Indians, the Tlaxcalan Indians, after themselves fighting against the Spanish, soon realized that it was a better to utilize the Spanish forces to assist them in gaining their own objectives. The native Indians realized that the superior, steel weaponry, horses, and artillery (cannon) of the Spanish could be highly effective in cutting down the Aztecs. However, it was not just an alliance of powers that ultimately defeated the Aztecs, the defeat of the Aztecs owed as much to the timing of the invasion, the onset of Euroasian diseases, and the weak response of Montezuma to thwart off the initial inroads made by the Spanish toward the capital city of Tenochtitlan.

The Aztec’s were unprepared for the Spanish invaders arriving during the summer harvest months, when Aztec forces were not positioned to be mobilized fully, and it is also indeed likely that the steady march of the Spanish army towards the capital was misunderstood by Montezuma to be a show of respect and submission to Aztec authority, rather than a hostile military action. As aggressions commenced and then continued for the next two years, the Spanish were driven from Tenochtitlan for a short time, but the spread of disease (smallpox) wreaked havoc on the Aztecs in the capital, and a second invasion spearheaded by Spanish cannon fire and masses of Tlaxacalan forces soon wore down and ended the Aztec reign. The initial small forces of Cortes were highly fortunate to have the support of legions of native Indians, the advantage of a surprise entry into Aztec territory at the most opportunistic time of year, and they were also lucky to have an epidemic of disease decimate the Aztec armies.

Many factors limited the size of the armies of early-modern European states, preventing many of these expansionist-minded nations from stretching their borders as far as they would have hoped. Key to these problems of maintaining large forces was the lack of centralized control, the need to raise money, and the logistical obstacles faced in supplying and maintaining standing armies and mobile fighting forces. These factors severely limited nations, like the Ottoman Empire, from extending their areas of conquest and control in the past, having used up all of the resources which are required to make expansion, conquest, and the maintenance of armies and vital infrastructure possible.

However, as the early-modern states grew in size and wealth, due primarily to the promotion of trade and commerce, new efforts were made to build efficient governmental bureaucracies that focused on how to pay for the supplies, weaponry, and personnel needed to foster the success, security, and strength of individual nations. Many nations followed the patterns developed by the Dutch and Swedish, who had found it beneficial to retain mercenary forces year-round, while also promoting loyalty, incentives, and stricter standards of regular payment for a new class of ‘professional soldiers’ that would be allegiant to the state. The placement of military apparatuses under the control of a civil authority also brought about changes in the social order, discipline, and structure of how military affairs were overseen, delegated, and financed by the states.

The English Empire pioneered a system of ‘deficit spending’, made possible by the creation of the governmentally controlled Bank of England, as well as, new methods of taxation, to effectively finance the maintenance and growth of its military establishment. A new emphasis on the tactics, training, and methods of recruitment and discipline also spearheaded the changes that were adopted in early-modern Europe.

While the adoption of gunpowder weapons was an important technological advancement that certainly aided, and was sometimes decisive, in the battles of many nations around the world, these rising “gunpowder empires” did not, for the most part, rely or depend on the usage of these ‘new weapons’ to get to where they already were. Empires of one kind or another had always existed, and their successes relied more upon the social, economic, political, and administrative structures that guided their actions from the top down. It was commerce, trade, and the growth of revenue resources and administrative improvements which would allow already established empires to add gunpowder technology to their already existing arsenals. The deployment of the new gunpowder weapons only augmented the effective fighting tactics already standardized in the existing methods of warfare. Empires, such as, the Mughal, Safavid, and Muscovite Empires, sustained their power through the force of their cavalry and sheer masses of fighters wielding pikes, swords, bows and arrows and other such armaments.

Indeed, as Jeremy Black points out, it was “not technology, but technique” which bred success for expansionist empires. It was the raising of monies, and the effective use of tactics in building defenses, promoting loyalty, creating incentives, and raising the standards of training and discipline, which had proven to be the most important factors in the evolution and continued strength of large empires. The empire that comes closest to owing their growth and success to gunpowder technology during this period was the Ottoman Empire which was using, and in many ways relying on gunpowder weapons in many battles to expand its Eurasian centered borders. But, to call the Ottomans a “gunpowder empire” discounts the fact that without the primary role of the Ottoman sipahi cavalry and masses of infantry taking the lead role in fighting, the gunpowder weaponry would not alone be able to provide victory.

Victories and sustainability of any empire is more a product of the social, political, and economic dynamics that control the philosophies and methods used by the controlling central authorities of a state, and the Ottoman’s lagged behind in these crucial areas. Successes attributed to gunpowder technology would not preserve the control of the Ottoman Empire, for they lacked the effective administrational and economic strength necessary to keep their frontier forces loyal and logistically competitive against other socially, politically, and economically modernizing empires.