The Safavid Empire
Pre-Modern Era
1450-1750
The Shi’a Challenge of the Safavids

Main Idea:

- In the first years of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, the Safavids founded a dynasty that conquered what is now \textbf{Iran}. Restoring Persia as a major center of \textit{political power} and \textit{cultural creativity}, they also established one of the strongest and most enduring centers of Shi’ism within the Islamic world.
Comparing the Gunpowder Empires

- **Ottomans**
  - Turkic nomadic group
  - Highly militant group
  - Sunnis

- **Safavids**
  - Turkic nomadic group
  - Highly militant group
  - Shi’a

Therefore:

These two groups would be in conflict with one another despite both groups Islamic ideologies.
Background on Safavids

- Founded by Sufi mystics and religious preachers near the Caspian Sea (Think Tehran, Iran)
- After centuries of warfare, Ismail (a surviving Sufi commander) captured the city of Tabriz and was proclaimed the shah, or emperor.
- In the next 10 years, Ismail’s followers conquered much of Persia and drove out the Safavid’s enemies.
The Battle of Chaldiran

- Safavid expansion into NW Persia created conflict with Ottomans.
- One of the most fateful battles in Islamic History - Chaldiran
  - More than dynastic clash – ideological
  - Battle demonstrated importance of gunpowder:
    - Cavalry (Safavids) versus cannon (Ottomans)
    - Devastating defeat for Safavids
    - Ottomans could not follow up w/ crushing blow to Safavids, but dreams of territorial expansion were finished.
Life under the Shahs

- Like the Ottomans, the Persian Safavids created a bureaucracy to supply the government.
- Practice of recruiting slave armies from Russia:
  - Much like Janissaries, some of these boys rose to positions of power and prestige within the government.
State and Religion

- **Padishah(s) – King of Kings**
  - Opulent palace life
  - Claimed to be descendants of Shi’a imams (or successors of Ali)

- **Religious scholars – Mullahs**
  - Teachers, but sponsored by state
  - Paid by state – had to mention the Safavid ruler every Friday.

- **Pressure others to convert – but showed tolerance (not to Sunnis)**
Artistic Splendor -

- Isfahan- city and seat of power for Safavids built by Shah Abbas.
  - Half million people in its 25 mile circumference.
  - Colleges, markets, government buildings, gardens, public baths, rest houses.
  - Great Mosques – demonstrate glory of Empire
  - Originally there existed a Jewish quarter, but later in Shah Abbas’s rule Jews were forced to convert to Islam or leave city.
Women in Safavid Empire

Originally it is believed that women were:

- Subordinate to men
- Lost legal and hereditary rights
- Even women of nomadic background lost their independence when they settled in towns or conquered areas.
- Especially women/wives of the elite were subject to strict laws and codes:
  - Seclusion in the household
  - Veiling when out in public
Women in Safavid Empire:

Recent evidence suggests otherwise:

- There was a struggle against these restrictions
- Some women openly refused to wear face covers while in public
- Women donned bright clothing in defiance
- @ court women played an important political role (indirectly) and were often deeply involved in political conspiracies
- Women were active in trade & moneylending
- Women could often provoke provisions in Islamic law to protect their rights and even divorce if conditions in marriage had become intolerable.
Rapid fall of Safavid Empire

- Abas became paranoid of his sons
  - Killed all of his kids and successors
  - His weak grandson was chosen (cause he could be controlled)

- Princes
  - Locked away from public and became poor in their leadership ability
  - Poor government couldn’t fight outside invaders.

- Ottomans, Mughals, Afghani tribes besieged Ishfahan – fell Oct 1722 (80,000 inhabitant killed of starvation & disease)

- Area became a battleground for generations to come…