

Devshirme is a Contested Practice

Kathryn Hain

Abstract

The interpretation of *devshirme* by modern historians has compromised the historiography of this Ottoman institution because of the imposition of modern values on medieval people. Devshirme is a Turkish term translated the 'levy of boys' describing a draft of Christian boys who were enslaved for service to the sultan in his palace and to field his "new corps", the janissaries. For centuries, government agents would come to Christian villages, and with the help of the priest and church birth records, they would select the best and brightest of the teenage boys. These boys were then dressed in the characteristic red janissary uniforms and marched away in cohorts to Constantinople where they were stripped, circumcised, and selected for further training or sent to Turkish farms for hard labor to toughen them for military service when they were older. Some of the boys taken did rise through the ranks to become the rulers of Ottoman society replacing the Turkish elite. Christian shepherd boys became head eunuchs, *vezirs*, and military generals.

The problem comes when modern scholars look at the incredible access to social mobility and political power provided to these minority boys and conclude that the draft was received passively, if not positively, by the Christian community. An examination of the Greek Christian sources, however, shows that Christian leaders had disagreements with devshirme on four counts; loss of freedom, loss of sons to bury fathers, morality issues, and the eternal damnation of the soul that came with being a circumcised Muslim. Surviving songs also express the emotional loss experienced by individual families. The Christian communities were not passive but took action to prevent devshirme. Desperate to save their sons, some resorted to violence, subterfuge, marriage of young children, fleeing to become refugees, and bribery. Christian resistance to devshirme existed across the Ottoman Empire for centuries. Examining Christian sources provides a much more accurate analysis of devshirme from the viewpoint of medieval Christians than having historians base their conclusions on modern secular values.



Kathryn Hain is a PhD candidate at the University of Utah where she studies history of the Middle East, focusing on the Medieval/Classical Islam period.

Kathryn is a member of the Alpha Rho chapter of Phi Alpha Theta.



Devshirme is a Contested Practice

Devshirme, the levy of Christian boys, is a contested practice. The majority of historians analyzing this Ottoman acquisition of Christians enslaved for the sultan's service, emphasize how much this institution improved the economic and political prospects of these boys drafted from rural, outlying Christian villages. For these scholars, it is a foregone conclusion that Christians acquiesced to the loss of their children to the Ottoman army and palace. Just one example of many, Caroline Finkel, author of the recently published Ottoman history, *Osman's Dream*, concludes, "The youth levy appears not to have aroused much resistance among the Christians."¹ A few scholars oppose this view of Christian acquiescence. For example, Speros Vryonis, Jr. strongly contradicts it saying, "Fifteenth-century texts...vividly reveal the Christian hatred of it."² Still other scholars, like Barbara Jelavich, are more nuanced in reflecting mixed views of the Christian population. She states, "Reports exist of attempts of families to buy their children both out of the collections and into them. Newly converted Muslims of Bosnia, in particular, requested that they be included."³ This incongruence between scholars could be illuminated by hearing the voice of the Ottoman Christians affected by devshirme. Comparing modern scholars' conclusions to the medieval Christian voice in sermons, songs, and actions clarifies how modern historians miss the real issues and the real cost of devshirme for the affected Christian communities.

Muslim armies had been using slave soldiers since the Abbasid caliph, al-Mu'tasim, in the ninth century began recruiting Turks either as slaves or clients.⁴ Slave soldiers were obtained by slave dealers either kidnapping on the frontiers or at sea or the periodic and systematic enslavement of captives obtained by military conquest. A defeated population knew that any survivors who did not immediately convert to Islam faced dismal options. Islamic law gave the life of the captives to the victor to kill or use as they chose. The Christian captive's fate fell somewhere on a continuum between death and a yearly *dhimmi* head tax with the slave market or deportation in the middle. The cruelty and Ottoman originality

¹ Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream; The Story of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 233.

² Speros Vryonis, Jr., *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), XIII-439.

³ Barbara Jelavich, *The History of the Balkans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 41.

⁴ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates; The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* 2nd ed., (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), 157.

of devshirme is the extension of enslavement past the generation of conquest. The conquered population must endure the reality that the best of their children would be taken from them at any time for centuries to come.

The Ottoman armies had originally been composed of Turks, volunteers, and prisoners of war until the rapid expansion of the fifteenth century. After the Battle of Ankara in 1402, the government passed the Janissary Law to conscript non-Muslim youth to form a new military force, the *janissaries* which means “new corps”.⁵ The initial law only recruited children at intervals of every five years which symbolized the sultan’s one fifth share of the booty from conquest, but eventually the Ottomans increased these ‘blood taxes’ to every four years, three, two, and sometimes yearly on the Christian population. (Jews, gypsies, and some Christian cities were exempt.)

Once the orders were given for new recruits, the janissary officer accompanied by his secretary and an escort of other janissaries would arrive at the local region and present the Muslim *qadi* with the relevant *firman* (government document) authorizing the recruitment. Successive *firmans* through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries show that children were recruited from age 14 to 20, although younger ones were taken for the palace service in a separate levy. The local Orthodox priest with his church’s birth records would be called to find and present all the eligible teens. The selection would then be made on the basis of physical appearance, robustness, and apparent intelligence. Orphans were banned. Preferred youth were the children of the priests and nobles. Families were supposed to be left with at least one son to work the land but the law was abused. From the sixteenth century, the agents exceeded the legal extortion to fleece the Christians. Unscrupulous agents would take more sons, more youth than required with the option for families to sacrifice their entire fortunes to buy their child’s freedom. The children of the poor who could not pay the bribe of sixty or more gold pieces were taken along as extras to sell to slave dealers.

The villagers were not only deprived of their sons, but they were then required to pay for the infrastructure that took their sons from them. The community was required to pay for the boys’ new red headdress and coats made by the Jews in Thessaloniki. The brilliant red color prevented

⁵ G. Yilmaz, “Becoming a Devshirme”, in G. Campell, ed., *Children in Slavery Through the Ages* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2009), 119.

Devshirme is a Contested Practice

substitution and reduced the chances of running away on the long march back to Constantinople. The village was also responsible for the expenses, salaries, and ‘bounties’ of the janissary officer, his secretary, and all his guards.⁶ The boys were gathered into cohorts of a hundred or more to walk to Constantinople where they were circumcised and divided between the palace schools and the military training. Anyone not chosen for the palace spent years being toughened by hard labor on Turkish farms until they were old enough for the military.

Slavery was accepted in Islam but devshirme was an obvious abrogation of the Islamic *shari’a* provisions, which protected Christian and Jewish *dhimmi* populations from enslavement. *Shari’a* law was flaunted again by the forbidden forced conversion to Islam and the boys’ continued enslavement after they became Muslims. Still, the *ulama* (Islamic religious scholars) showed their deference to the Sultan (and their dependence on his stipends) in that these issues were not even argued for a hundred years. Then Islamic scholars argued that the Balkan population was not protected as dhimmis since they had not yet converted to Christianity at the time of Mohammed. This argument is rather superfluous since both Greek Anatolian and Balkan Christian populations were similarly recruited. In any case, the sultan’s will trumped *Shari’a* law. Devshirme gave the sultan the manpower to both bypass dependence on the Turkish elite and to field the first standing army in the early modern era. These ‘crack’ janissary forces of Christian sons allowed the Ottomans to then terrorize Christian Europe for centuries, expanding their empire in every direction.

The historiographical issue is that a majority of modern scholars evaluate devshirme only on the basis of the social mobility that it provided. The book, *Osman’s Dream*, gives us numerous examples of typical, but wrongly slanted, typical Ottoman history of devshirme. Finkle uses very neutral language to leave a positive impression of the whole process. For example, Ottoman officials would “visit” Christian villages and chosen youths were “obliged” to convert to Islam.⁷ Finkle initially avoids the stereotypical next line about how much devshirme improved these boys’ opportunities. The social mobility afforded the boys is rather illustrated throughout the book every time an important official is described as coming into Ottoman administration through devshirme. The Ottoman’s

⁶ A. E. Vacalopoulos, *The Greek Nation, 1453-1669* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 36.

⁷ Finkle, *Osman*, 78.

most renowned Grand Vezir is just one example. “Koprulu Mehmed was from Albania, a product of the youth-levy...”⁸

Finkle compromises her neutrality towards devshirme when she discusses Varvar Ali Pasha’s autobiography, *Rimovana autobiografija Varvari Ali-Pase*, which includes his recruitment by the youth levy. Finkle uses the word “drafted” to describe the taking of boys by Sultan Ahmed’s agents, but Varvar Ali Pasha remembers the event with less equanimity; “They took me weeping and in distress, I did not know what was in store for me.”⁹ The boy eventually captured the attention of the Sultan and embarked on an illustrious career as governor of many different provinces. After forty years of serving all over the Empire, he was able to return to his native land, Bosnia, as governor. At this point, three years before his death, he wrote, “Should the grace of God be granted to His servant, a shepherd may be (transported) to a sultan’s domain.”¹⁰ This conclusion surely vindicates all those scholars who emphasize how positive the institution of devshirme was in improving the lot of poor, rural, disenfranchised Christians. Finkle, herself, finally puts that emphasis into words; “His brilliant career was a clear demonstration of the opportunity open to a boy such as he, removed from a poor peasant family.”¹¹ It is her conclusion that the fourteenth century Christian sources would contest:

*No doubt there were tears on both sides as such boys left home and family, but the youth-levy appears not to have aroused much resistance among the Christians subject to it – it almost seems that it may have been regarded as a legal duty owed to a legitimate monarch, rather than a tyrannical imposition.*¹²

Two arguments supporting Finkle and other scholars who support the view that Christians were not opposed to devshirme were the Muslim parents who wanted their sons in the janissaries and the Circassian case. This Muslim example, however, is not a legitimate comparison because they did not believe, as the Christians did, that conversion and circumcision equaled damnation. The second argument, which purports the Christian’s positive outlook towards devshirme, is that Circassian or other extremely impoverished parents voluntarily sold their own children into slavery. However, this is also a situation that needs to be examined

⁸ Finkle, *Osman*, 253.

⁹ Finkle, *Osman*, 231.

¹⁰ Finkle, *Osman*, 233.

¹¹ Finkle, *Osman*, 233.

¹² Finkle, *Osman*, 233.

Devshirme is a Contested Practice

within its own context. The Circassian population was predominantly agricultural slaves under their lords so selling their children to Ottomans only changed the owners. “Under normal circumstances of settlement, free-born Circassians did not sell their children into slavery”¹³ When their circumstances improved after the population exchanges between Russians and the Ottomans, so also changed the Circassian propensity for allowing their children to be enslaved.

To get a more accurate analysis of devshirme from the Christian viewpoint, the Greek sources need to be considered. A major fourteenth century voice debating with modern historians that Christians acquiesced to devshirme is Isidore Glabas, the metropolitan of Thessaloniki, in his sermon dated February 28, 1395. “His sermon concerning the carrying off of the children by the decree of the emir, and concerning the coming Judgment, delivered on the first Sunday of the Fasts” vividly portrays that the Patriarch’s “eyes are filled with tears and can no longer bear to see my beloved” and that the fathers feel as if they are “cut into two parts” by the loss of their sons”¹⁴ Nowhere does Finkle’s positive view of social mobility appear.

The Patriarch’s first issue with devshirme is political not religious, but no anti-Muslim, anti-Turkish or anti-Ottoman statements are made, probably to protect the church. The Patriarch knew that his audience had enough experience living as conquered *dhimmi* to be able to understand the unspoken Greek sentiment against the Ottoman domination. Still the political lament is quite bold considering the cost of subversion to the Ottoman Empire. He reflects on transition of the boys from freedom to slavery:

¹³ E. R. Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and its Suppression: 1840-1890* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton, University Press, 1982), 189.

¹⁴ Speros Vryonis, Jr., *Byzantium: Its internal history and relations with the Muslim World, collected Studies* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1971), XIII;435-437.

Or shall he lament his son because a free child becomes a slave? Because being nobly born, he is forced to adopt barbaric customs? Because he who was rendered so mild by motherly and fatherly hands is about to be filled with barbaric cruelty? Because he who attended matins in the churches and frequented the sacred teachers is now, alas! taught to pass the night in murdering his own people and in other things? Because he who was appointed to serve the holy houses is now entrusted with the care of dogs and fowl? Because he who was raised in many and pleasing occupations and services is now forced to endure the freezing and scorching winds, and to cross rivers, mountains, precipices, and places difficult of access?¹⁵

Although there might be some rural-urban differences in response to the devshirme, this Patriarch did not believe that any boys had been given a chance for upward social mobility, but rather, they had gone from being noble born, free Greeks to barbarians and slaves. They had exchanged mass for murder.

The Patriarch also speaks of the social cost to the parents:

Which one shall the father lament, himself or his son? Shall he lament himself because he has been deprived of the staff of his old age? Because the light of his eyes has perished? Because he will not have his son to send him to his grave in fitting manner, and to perform the other rites and honors?¹⁶

While a modern person might see the economic loss of the son's labor in the family farm or business or the provision for parents in old age, the greater concern of the fourteenth century parents was the loss of the son who could bury them and perform the required rites. Suraiya Faroqhi, a modern Turkish scholar, takes a few cases and makes them the norm in her book, *Subjects of the Sultan; Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire*, when she states about the 'levy of boys' that "if their careers were successful they frequently interceded for their relatives or even brought the latter to Istanbul."¹⁷ This possibility of having parents and sons reunited was obviously **not** the experience and expectation of the Greek community in fourteenth century Thessaloniki.

¹⁵ Vryonis, *Byzantium*, XIII-436.

¹⁶ Vryonis, *Byzantium*, XIII;437.

¹⁷ Suraiya Faroqhi, *Subjects of the Sultan; Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2005), 62.

Devshirme is a Contested Practice

The third issue touched on by the patriarch was sexual morality, a subject not suitable to be spoken of openly in church but even there, the text hints of the homosexual reputation of the janissaries with their dancing boys. Janissaries were not allowed to marry until Sulyman I (d. 1566).

*...carried off by the hands of foreigners, suddenly and by force and forced to change over to alien customs and to become a vessel of barbaric garb, speech, impiety, and other contaminations...*¹⁸

Since the meaning of ‘vessel’ in New Testament Greek is discussed in the epistle written to their own city, (I Thessalonians 4:4) as a metaphor for a man’s sexuality, the adults in the congregation would understand what was being described. The phrase ‘forced to change’ could also be understood by the parents as the forced castration endured by the boys chosen to work in the palace and the dangers inherent in that place. For example, in 1656, to appease yet another janissary revolt, the body of the Chief White Eunuch was thrown over the wall of the palace into the mob below; his mutilated corpse was strung up in a tree in the hippodrome.¹⁹ Parents were aware enough of the reputation of the janissaries in their taverns to know what the future offered boys without family support and marriage to influence them.

In the world view of our cleric, the eternal religious implications of the devshirme were the worst and left for last in his list of laments:

*But the worst of all the evils is that, alas! he [sic] is shamefully separated from God and has become miserably entangled with the devil, and in the end will be sent to darkness and hell with the demons.*²⁰

Even though conversion to Islam held dire spiritual consequences, it is interesting that Isidore Glabas’s sermon did not mention resistance. Christians had a scriptural model of Biblical heroes living under devshirme-like conditions in the Babylonian empire; Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These boys were chosen because they were “from the royal family and nobility-young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace.” (Daniel 1:3-4.) Their names were changed, they were put in the palace

¹⁸Vryonis, *Byzantium*, XIII;437.

¹⁹Finkle, *Osman*, 249.

²⁰Vryonis, *Byzantium*, XIII;437.

school for three years to learn the language and literature of the Babylonians, and they were most likely castrated for palace work. They were also faced with the demand to convert. The Bible heroes refused and ended up either thrown into a fiery furnace, probably a brick kiln, or thrown into a den of hungry lions. Isidore Glabas did not preach this example, showing that the boys should refuse conversion to Islam although his audience was only those left behind. None of the literature indicates that any of the Orthodox boys refused conversion although it was well known that janissaries carried the gospel of St. John in Greek and Arabic under their armpits as a protection device against evil.²¹

The Patriarch did not soften any of the consequences for the community at what was the fate for their inducted boys; slavery, barbaric cruelty, dangerous, difficult marches, the possibility of being forced to become murderers, eunuchs, or homosexuals, and in the end, damnation. His sermon shows the values operating in this fourteenth century Christian community and none of them included social climbing in Ottoman society. The conclusion of modern scholars that being 'drafted' for the janissaries or palace administration was 'accepted' by the Christian community for the opportunity of social climbing was obviously a view not shared in fourteenth century Thessalonika.

The actions of many different Christian communities over the centuries of devshirme speak more in support of the arguments of Isidore Glabas than of the modern scholars like Finkle and Faroqi. Parents would try to protect their sons from devshirme by many different means. Bulgarian, Greek, and Albanian parents would marry sons at age eight to ten rather than risk being drafted.²² Parish priests caused names to vanish from parish records. Youth disappeared and parents searched for Muslim substitutes.²³ Communities sent letters to foreign governments, for example, the Knights Hospitalers of Rhodes or the pope in Rome to come to rescue them in order to save their children. ²⁴ For those living along the coast or the frontiers, flight became an option. In the Peloponnese and Albania, the populations dwindled and large chunks of cultivated land became desolated.²⁵ Several times (Albania, 1565 and

²¹Speros Vryonis, Jr. *Studies on Byzantium, Seljuks, and Ottomans, reprinted studies.* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1981), XIII;272.

²² Vacalopoulos, *Greek Nation*, 36.

²³ G. Goodwin, *The Janissaries*, (London: Saqi Books, 1994), 34.

²⁴ Vryonis, *Decline of Medieval Hellenism*, 241, and Vryonis, *Byzantium*, XII;248.

²⁵Vacalopoulos, *Greek Nation*, 42, and Vryonis, *Studies*, XIII;301, and Vryonis, *Byzantium* XII;249.

Devshirme is a Contested Practice

Naousa, 1705) the Christians hacked the Turkish recruiting agents to pieces.²⁶ After murdering the devshirme officials, the communities lived in revolt until Ottoman troops wiped them out.²⁷ Entire communities converted to Islam as ‘crypto Christians’.²⁸ Boys ran away during the long march to Istanbul.²⁹ And the ever ubiquitous bribes that impoverished communities but oiled the Ottoman Empire’s machinery freed others.³⁰

Devshirme ended in 1705 in Naousa when the attempt to recruit the children caused another revolt. The janissary corps was disbanded in 1826 but by then, many were Muslim volunteers. The impressments of small children for the palace, especially girls for the harem, however, continued into the mid eighteenth century or later. Some scholars believe that about half a million children were lost to Christianity while others put the number closer to a million. The reality is that numbers are practically unattainable.³¹

Each of the selected boys left behind a grieving family. The raw emotion of losing a family member is still felt across the centuries, captured in a song that is still sung in Epirus:

²⁶Vacalopoulos, *Greek Nation*, 37.

²⁷Vryonis, *Byzantium*, XII;249.

²⁸Vryonis, *Studies*, III;143, XII;300, and XIII;439), Vacalopoulos, *Greek Nation*, 33.

²⁹Vryonis, *Studies*, XIII;272, and Vryonis, *Byzantium*, XII;246, and Konstanty Michalowicz, b. ca. 1435. *Memoirs of a Janissary* (Ann Arbor : Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1975) 99.

³⁰Vryonis, *Byzantium*, XII-248.

³¹Vacalopoulos, *Greek Nation*, 41.

*Be Dammed, Emperer, thrice be dammed.
For the evil you have done and the evil you do.
You catch and shackle the old and the arch priests,
In order to take the children as janissaries.
Their parents weep, their sisters and brothers, too
And I cry until it pains me;
As long as I live I shall cry,
For last year it was my son and this year my brother.³²*

Finkle and other historians are right that devshirme did provide a path to power and wealth for the few boys chosen for the palace school. They needed to check Christian sources, however, before concluding that Christians accepted devshirme and appreciated its social mobility. Modern, secular Ottoman historians underestimate the love of freedom, the filial bond and the faith of Ottoman Christians. Describing Ottoman devshirme is an example where imposing modern, western, secular values onto a medieval, eastern, religious community instead of checking the sources caused misguided history.

³² Vacalopoulos, *Greek Nation*, 37. and G. Yilmaz, *Becoming a Devshirme*, 122.

Devshirme is a Contested Practice

Bibliography

- Faroqhi, Suraiya. *Subjects of the Sultan; Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.
- Finkel, Caroline. *Osman's Dream; the Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300-1923*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.
- Goodwin, Godfrey. *The Janissaries*. London: Saqi Books, 1994.
- Jelavich, Barbara. *The History of the Balkans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Kennedy, Hugh. *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates; The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century*, 2nd ed. New York: Longman Perarson, 2004.
- Michalowicz, Konstanty b. ca. 1435. *Memoirs of a Janissary* Ann Arbor : Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1975.
- Palmer, J. A. B. *The Origin of the Janissaries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1953.
- Speros Vryonis, Jr. *Byzantium: its internal history and relations with the Muslim World*, Collected Studies. London: Variorum Reprints, 1971.
- _____. *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- _____. *Studies on Byzantium, Seljuks, and Ottomans*, Reprinted Studies. Malibu: Undena Publications, 1981.
- Toledano, Ehud R. *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression: 1840-1890*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Vacalopoulos, Apostolos E. *The Greek Nation, 1453-1669*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1976.