

The Divinely-Protected, Well-Flourishing Domain: The Establishment of the Ottoman System in the Balkan Peninsula

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Throughout history a number of states and individuals have aspired to the goal of establishing their rule over the entire world, and many of these have managed to establish large empires encompassing vast stretches of land and a spectrum of diverse peoples. Some of the best known of these multinational empires were the Roman, Habsburg and Russian empires.

No less impressive than these is that multinational empire which figured prominently in the history of Europe and the Middle East, the empire established by the Ottoman Turks. The Ottoman state was founded in the early 1300s as one of many small Turkish states in Anatolia by the hand of Osman, from whom the names "House of Osman" (the designation of the ruling family) and "Ottoman" are derived. The state steadily grew under Osman's successors, and, by the time of the battle of Kosovo in 1389 the Ottomans held extensive areas of land in Anatolia and Eastern Europe. And while state suffered a temporary setback in 1402 when the Turks were defeated by the forces of Tamerlane, it was able to recover.

It was under the reign of Mehmed II (1444-81) that the Ottomans realized their longtime goal of conquering the city of Constantinople (1453), which became the new Ottoman capital of Istanbul. The reign of Selim I saw relatively little advance in Eastern Europe but saw the conquest of the Arab Mamluk state of Egypt in 1517, bringing most of the Arab world under Ottoman control. Suleiman I (1520-1566, known as "the Magnificent") expanded the empire in Eastern Europe by taking most of Hungary, preventing the Habsburgs from gaining control of the area. It is this "golden age" of Ottoman expansion (from the time of the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the death of Suleiman in 1566) with which this study will be concerned. At its height, the empire of the Ottoman Turks ruled over a Balkan population that included Turks, Greeks, Serbs, Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, and Magyars.

One of the many problems with maintaining a multinational empire concerns the differences between the rulers and their subjects in language, culture, and especially religion. This was the problem concerning the empire of the Ottoman Turks, which was a presence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East for over 600 years (ca. 1300-1923). For example, the Turks established a state which was Islamic in character; and, for a time the Ottoman Sultan even laid claim to the title of Caliph of Islam. Yet about half of the area of the empire consisted of the Balkan Peninsula, in which the population was predominantly Orthodox Christian. So exactly how did the Turks manage to maintain their control over this area while holding on to a political structure founded on the principles of Islam? How did the Ottoman Turks, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,

solve the problem of maintaining control over an area and peoples that had different ways of life than their masters?

What were the institutions that the Turks used in governing the Christian population of the Balkans? One institution that figures prominently in the history of the Balkans was that of the *devshirme*. This was a system by which Christian youths were conscripted, made to convert to Islam, and placed in positions in the army and the bureaucracy. Another institution was the place of the Sultan in the Ottoman system in general, and particularly with regard to the Balkans during this time. A third institution involves the native institutions that were adapted to serve the purposes of the Ottomans. It is my opinion that it was preponderantly these three institutions which both strengthened the Ottoman position in the Balkan peninsula and allowed for the relative peace and prosperity of those areas under Ottoman control for several centuries before the system finally broke down, the reasons for which I will explore at the conclusion of this study.

The *devshirme*, according to a study by Basilike Papoulia,^{<1>} refers to "the forcible removal, in the form of a tribute, of children of the Christian subjects from their ethnic, religious, and cultural environment and their transplantation into the Turkish-Islamic environment with the aim of employing them in the service of the Palace, the army, and the state, whereby they were on the one hand to serve the Sultan as slaves and freedmen and on the other to form the ruling class of the State."^{<2>} The system had evolved from a slave system developed by the Arab and Persian states in which young Turkish slaves would be trained "for war and government in the palaces of caliphs and governors."^{<3>} When the Turks themselves came to power, they adapted the system to their own purposes.

The manner in which the *devshirme* was conducted was relatively simple. Approximately every five years, boys between the ages of eight and eighteen were taken from their parents and converted to Islam. They were subsequently sent to be raised by Turkish landowners in Anatolia, where they would learn at least the rudiments of the Turkish language and become acculturated to the tenets of Islam. Although the *devshirme* has largely been known as a slave system, the youths affected, although they were bound in service to the Sultan, had all of the other rights of freedmen. They were not, however, permitted to marry or have children. This was most likely to have been to prevent these individuals from insisting on positions for their own children (in fact, the decline of the effectiveness of the Janissaries in the eighteenth century would be marked by the repeal of this ban on marriage). A number of the youths taken would be raised to high offices in the bureaucracy, some would become influential at the Sultan's court, others would even have attained provincial administrative positions. But a great number of these would be placed in the sultan's *Yeni Ceri* ("New Army"), better known to the Western world as the "Janissaries." The Janissaries proved an effective fighting force which would be instrumental in the conquest and consolidation of the various provinces during the sixteenth century.

What groups were affected by the imposition of the *devshirme*? For the most part, those subject to the draft were the Slavic peoples of the Balkans, which can be seen in the fact

that the predominant language of the Janissaries came to be a Slavonic dialect.<4> As I have stated, *devshirme* youths did learn Turkish, but appears to be an indication that some, at least in the Janissaries, maintained their native languages as well. The practice was confined mostly to the Balkans, although there is some evidence that Christians living on the western coast of Asia Minor were periodically subject to it as well.<5> The levy was carried out almost exclusively in the countryside; city dwellers were for the most part exempt (mostly because it was these individuals who stimulated commerce in the empire), as were families with only one male child. The levy was placed exclusively on Christians; the only Muslims included were those living in Bosnia, and only because they themselves requested inclusion.<6>

The institution of the *devshirme* served an important purpose: gradually easing the populace of the Balkans into accepting Muslim rule. Just because the area had been conquered by Muslims did not mean that it automatically ceased to be *dar al-harb* (literally, "house of war"; the name used for lands ruled by non-Muslims) and now constituted several provinces of a Muslim state. Indeed the name which the Turks gave to the Balkan provinces, *Rumeli*, literally means "Land of the Romans," because "Roman" was a designation often used for Christians in the Muslim world at that time. Further, this is an indication of how little they felt at home in Europe.<7>

When one civilization conquers people of another culture, an effort is often made to acculturate these minorities to the dominant culture. Consider, for example, the Germanization programs implemented in the Habsburg Empire by Maria Teresa and Joseph II in the eighteenth century, the goal of which was to encourage all peoples of that empire to use the German language. This program, although it made progress in some areas, only served to alienate other peoples such as the Magyars. The Turks, on the other hand, did not attempt to acculturate all of their Balkan subjects, realizing that such a feat would be very difficult to accomplish. They needed, however, at least a ruling class of Balkan peoples that could be counted on to be loyal to the Sultan. The system of the *devshirme* provided just that.

What was the reaction of the inhabitants of the Balkans to what V. L. Menage refers to as the "tribute of blood?"<8> The evidence seems to indicate reactions ranging from fear to indifference to enthusiasm.

One reaction was one of horror. Indeed, one of the earliest references to the *devshirme*, a sermon by the Greek Metropolitan of Thessaloniki, Isidore Glabas, (delivered in 1395) is a description of the evils that this system subjects Christian youths to. In this sermon, Glabas, according to a study by Speros Vryonis,

describes the fate of the tribute children. These free-born youths, as child-tribute and future Janissaries, become slaves of the Sultan. They are taken away by the Turks and forced to adopt . . . barbaric clothes, barbaric speech, barbaric impiety. This refers, no doubt, to their period of training in Anatolia on the estates of Turkish *spahis* and other

large land-owners, where they acquired the rudiments of the Turkish language and were instructed in Islam. As a fervent Orthodox cleric . . . Isidore feels that this conversion to Islam is the worst of all the evils involved . . . Finally, he depicts the diabolical results of this institution. These youths, whose parents had raised them as faithful Orthodox, and who would have studied with holy teachers of the Church and would have served the holy houses, are now trained by the Turks to kill their own people.<9>

It is notable, however, that this statement comes from a Greek, since in large part, Greeks were not subjected to the *devshirme* levy, for reasons which will become apparent. Therefore, Glabas' motivation for this sermon may result from a feeling of affinity with his Orthodox peoples, or a feeling of horror that they are being taken. There is also evidence that Glabas exaggerated the point about *devshirme* youth being trained to act against Christians. Many of these youths who became provincial officials enjoyed good relations with their Christian peasants, while there were also cases of *devshirme* bureaucrats using their positions to the benefit of their relatives.<10> On the other hand, there were indeed individuals who had been corrupted by the power that had been given to them. For example, since the Janissaries had the opportunity to plunder buildings when called on to put out a fire, they were, on occasion, accused of setting fires intentionally in order to loot houses.<11>

The view that the *devshirme* was an evil institution was shared by much of the population of the Balkans during this time. For example, fear of the imposition of the *devshirme* among them was great enough that it could be used as a bargaining chip by the Sultan in his dealings with the Balkan population, an example of which occurred during the siege of Jannina in 1430, in which the Turkish commander offered the people of the city exemption from the *devshirme* if they would surrender peacefully.<12>

Others would likely have welcomed the levy as a means of advancement for their children. The system offered comfortable bureaucratic positions to those children who would otherwise have been doomed to the drab life of a peasant farmer. For the child subject to the *devshirme*, in the words of Charles and Barbara Jelavich, "at home his opportunities were pitifully limited; in Constantinople he could rise to administer the empire."<13> As a result there is some evidence of Balkan parents, Christian and Muslim, bribing officials or sending their children to the countryside in order for them to be included in the *devshirme*.<14> It is difficult to know for certain what the average Balkan peasant thought of the *devshirme* system, since, being by and large illiterate, they have left no written accounts. Being illiterate, however, it was often the case that the peasants accepted at face value what their parish priests told them, and most of the clergy at this time were opposed to this institution for the same reasons that Glabas was. Therefore, it is a fair supposition that although there is evidence that a few peasants might have been able to see the bigger picture (and allow or want their children to be taken), many Balkan peasants were opposed to the *devshirme*. Although a wholehearted approval of the system on the part of the Balkan population would almost certainly have strengthened Ottoman rule, as we have seen, fear of the system could also be used as an effective weapon to keep the population in line.

Still others were able to recognize the benefits of this system while decrying its evils. Consider the case of Michael Konstantinovich, a Serb soldier taken prisoner in 1454 and forced to serve nine years in the Janissaries. His case is unique in that he was taken as an adult, while the Janissaries were made up exclusively of *devshirme* youth. Konstantinovich at the same time exhorts "all peoples who honor Jesus Christ to help the [Balkan] Christians against the pagans" and concedes that "amongst these pagans there is great righteousness, they are just to themselves and among each other and also toward their subordinates, whether those were Christians or Jews."<15>

All of these points of view were valid for the time. From a modern, Western, standpoint, one would be justified in condemning a system which involved the removal of young boys from their family, home, and religion, but the practice makes more sense in the context of the conditions prevailing during the sixteenth century. Even using today's values, one can note that conscription in service of the state has been practiced at some time in almost every society. Religion played a far greater role in a person's life than it currently does in Western cultures. It not only involved the individual's relationship with the divine, but "human beings thought, spoke, acted, carried on business, married, bought, sold, and inherited property, and died according to customs and practices that accorded with the dictates of their religions."<16> The boundary between "Church" and "State" was extremely vague, in many respects non-existent. It was, perhaps, natural for the Ottomans to expect those in their service to adhere to the same religion that they did. And although some, both today and at that time may have seen conversion as a small price to pay for the material benefits which were offered to *devshirme* youth, the revulsion on the part of Christians to this practice is understandable, since the conversion of these youth would, essentially, lead them away from what their people regarded as the true faith, as well as from their history and culture.

Nonetheless, the system of the *devshirme* was instrumental in the success enjoyed by the Turks during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in governing their heterogeneous empire. It created a system of advancement based on personal merit rather than birth, a kind of civil service system that up to that time, with a few exceptions, had not existed. Even in Western Europe, where position was still determined more often than not by birth, the value of such a system was recognized. In a letter written in 1555, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, the ambassador of the Holy Roman Empire to Istanbul, states that

among the Turks, dignities, offices, and administrative posts are the rewards of ability and merit; those who are dishonest, lazy, and slothful never attain to distinction, but remain in obscurity and contempt. This is why the Turks succeed in all that they attempt and are a dominating race and daily extend the bounds of their rule.<17>

A significant point about the *devshirme* was that it was technically in violation of Islamic law. Islamic law, or *Shari'a*, forbade to forcible conversion to Islam of the "people of the book," Christians and Jews (referred to by the Ottomans as *zimmi*, or "cattle"). So why would a state founded on the tenets of Islam use an institution which was in conflict with *shari'a*? As the Ottoman state expanded, its rulers recognized the need for additional administrators and troops in order to maintain its hold on the lands it had conquered.

Therefore, some form of conscription or slave labor was necessary. Indeed, as Paul Wittek puts it, "to renounce on principle the use of the subjugated populations as a source of military strength would necessarily have created in the course of time a more and more difficult situation."<18>

The Sultan, however, could not set himself up as a leader of a Muslim state if one of the key ingredients of that state's success was an illegal institution. Therefore, attempts had to be made to justify it in the eyes of the law.

Some interpreters of the *shari'a* considered the *devshirme* as part of the booty which, according to *shari'a* can be taken in a Holy War. In this light, a custom long present in the Islamic world could be associated with the *devshirme*. Thus, the Sultans would substitute the one-fifth of the wealth that they were entitled to with human booty, taking one out of every five captives.<19> Indeed, matters of "custom and necessity" in state affairs, in traditional Islamic practice, fell outside the range of *shari'a*, and thus by this argument did not conflict with Islamic law.<20> I cannot find evidence that this specific argument was used at that time, however, this was an argument which was not likely to have been used, since, if the Sultan was called on to defend the practice, he would have needed something more substantial to please the *ulema*.

In addition, some commentators have regarded the imposition of the *devshirme* as a means of influencing "voluntary" conversion. There is some evidence that a large number of Christians in the Balkans, particularly in Thrace and Macedonia, converted to Islam in order to avoid being subject to the levy of the *devshirme*.<21> If more people converted to avoid being drafted than were taken in the *devshirme*, one could take an attitude of "the end justifies the means." I can find, however, no evidence that the numbers of people converting for that reason are higher than, or comparable to, the number taken in the *devshirme*.

A more solid justification for the practice has to do with a distinction between those Christians who embraced their religion before the time of Muhammad and those who converted afterwards. In some interpretations of Islamic law, the status of *zimmi* is given to the former but denied to the latter.<22> The vast majority of the population of the Balkans - Albanians, Bulgarians, and Serbs - converted to Christianity some time after the revelation of the *Qur'an*.<23> It is no coincidence that it is these groups on which the *devshirme* was imposed. According to this argument, Greek Christians and Jews were exempted from the system because their religion dated from long before the time of the Prophet.<24>

During the early part of the sixteenth century, a work on the Ottoman state written by a Kurdish nobleman named Idris Bitlisi presented another justification of the *devshirme*. Bitlisi calls on the tradition that allows Muslims to loot towns taken by force.<25> It is his contention that since the lands from which these youth were taken were conquered by force, the inhabitants were automatically reduced to the status of slaves of the Sultan, and thus it is proper for them to serve as fighters in the "Holy War."<26>

In addition, Bitlisi made use of the *hadith* (saying of Muhammad) which stated that "every infant is born with a natural tendency to Islam" to justify his view that any action taken to guide people toward Islam is acceptable. As Bitlisi puts it, "every year some thousands would be led from the error of unbelief to the light of the true guidance of Islam, and through envy of this body other such youths would follow them into the army of Islam."^{<27>} It is unclear whether the "envy" that Bitlisi speaks of refers to envy of the salvation which conversion to Islam would bring, or to the material benefits that those included in the *devshirme* enjoyed.

There were, however, many who were uncomfortable with Bitlisi's interpretation. For example, Sa'duddin's historical work, which drew heavily on Bitlisi's, omitted the passages regarding the *devshirme*.^{<28>} This came some seventy years later, when the empire began to go into decline, a decline which was marked by the disappearance of the institution of the *devshirme*.

The question of the legality of the *devshirme* brings up the question of what place the *shari'a* was to occupy in the Ottoman state. Strict adherence to the *shari'a* could be expected in the Middle Eastern and North African parts of the empire, but how does one impose Islamic law on a predominantly Christian population, as was found in the Balkans? This is an issue that is of crucial importance, as the ruler of a large state cannot maintain that rule without some form of central legal code.

Essentially, this was another example of how the Ottoman system was adapted to meet the challenge of a Muslim state governing a Christian population. The answer to the above question can be found in the distinction between *shari'a* and *kanun*. One can think of *shari'a* as religious law, and *kanun* as civil law, but this is an oversimplification. In traditional Islamic society, the only law is *shari'a*, as is demonstrated by the reliance of modern Islamic societies such as Saudi Arabia on *shari'a*. But most schools of Islamic law realize that *shari'a* does not cover all aspects of life. Thus the Ottomans established another law code, the *kanun*. In theory, *kanun* is subordinate to *shari'a*. Because of this theoretical subordination of secular to holy law, the *ulema* (the Muslim religious leaders) held a prominent place in Ottoman society, and often pressed for more literal adherence to the *shari'a*.

In practice, however, *kanun* was "functionally more important in the structuring of Ottoman government and society."^{<29>} For example, according to traditional Islamic law, a town taken by storm was open "for whatever plunder the victors might choose."^{<30>} But when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, Mehmed chose not to plunder it but to rebuild it. He realized that Constantinople was a far greater prize as the new capital of his state than it would be as a looted and destroyed city, and that his position in the Balkans would be enhanced by Turkish occupation of the city. Similarly, Mehmed's appointment of the cleric Gennadius as the Patriarch of the Orthodox church has been seen as incompatible with Islamic law, mainly because it involved heaping benefits on a member of a population which had resisted Muslim soldiers. Here again, *shari'a* was bent to achieve a political gain. Gennadius was an opponent of the proposed reunification of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, a condition which Rome

had made a prerequisite for aid to the failing Byzantine state from Western Europe. By perpetuating the division between Catholic and Orthodox, Mehmed effectively prevented interference from the West. No Western European power would oppose the Ottomans until Suleiman began leading raids into lands claimed by the Habsburgs, and by then the Turks were better able to deal with them.

Now we turn our attention to the individual who was responsible for creating the *kanun*, and in whose name the state was ruled. At the very pinnacle of the Ottoman system stood the Sultan, whose rule over his dominion was, in theory, absolute. The period which marked the golden age of Ottoman expansion was blessed with several very competent Sultans, serving both as able administrators and as military champions. Even those Sultans who were not capable rulers could at least set themselves up as a rallying point, one which all of their subjects, Christian or Muslim, Turk or Slav, shared in common.

The Sultan justified his rule with the notion that his place was sanctioned by God by virtue of his birth. This is the claim which would become known in the West as divine-right monarchy, and in the Far East as the "mandate of heaven." The Sultan could reinforce this with the knowledge that his was the only position that was hereditary in the Ottoman state. Unlike the neighboring states in Europe and the Middle East, in which noble houses could also make such a claim based on their own hereditary positions, in the Ottoman system, the House of Osman was the only one in which birth conferred rank.<31> There had been a native Turkish nobility, but this body had for the most part been suppressed by the end of the fifteenth century, and all the positions which would be given to nobles in other states would be conferred upon those individuals who had been drafted through the *devshirme*.

The central importance of the royal family in this state also served as an effective bond. In many multinational states that are not united by religion, ethnicity, or a common way of life, the royal family, or even an individual, can come to define a state more than anything else. Thus it makes more sense to speak of the Habsburg or Romanov empires than it does to speak of countries named "Austria-Hungary" or "Russia." The case was much the same in the Ottoman state, which derives its name from that of its founder, Osman. In official documentation of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Turkish state was referred to as "the divinely protected well-flourishing absolute domain of the House of Osman."<32>

The position of the Sultan as the central figure in the Ottoman state had an interesting implication in the Muslim parts of the empire. As is customary in Muslim states, the Sultan's name was invoked in Friday services. The importance of this ceremony is to be found in the fact that "the omission of the name of the ruler, or the substitution of another name for the constituted one, is frequently a sign of revolt."<33> One observer has seen this as an early form of the opinion poll, which would gauge the subjects' satisfaction with the job the ruler was doing.<34>

When one is considering the place of the Sultan in the Ottoman system in the Balkans, one might ask would be whether this practice of invoking the sultan's name was found

among the sultan's Balkan Christian and Jewish subjects as well. After all, prayer for the rulers and other benefactors of the church was a custom observed in parts of Christian Europe at the time, and to some extent it persists in the modern Mass. I could find no documented evidence of Christian services invoking the Sultan's name. It is my supposition, however, that this custom was practiced among the Greeks of Istanbul (where the Orthodox Patriarch worked closely with the Sultan) but was found much less often as one moved further west.

The Sultan in the Balkan provinces commanded the same loyalty once given to the Byzantine emperor. Mehmed II regarded himself as the heir to the Byzantine emperors, and with good reason, as it was he who forged a new empire from the hollowed-out shell of the Byzantine state.<35> The Sultan could establish a dynastic link to Byzantium as well. This was done by citing marriages of early Ottoman rulers to the daughters of the pre-Ottoman Christian rulers in the Balkan states.<36> For example, Murad I and Bayezid I, the two Sultans who presided over the fourteenth-century advances into the Balkans, each married into Balkan nobility; Murad to the Bulgarian princess Tamara and the Byzantine princess Helena, Bayezid to the Serbian princess Despina.<37> In addition to this dynastic link, it has been pointed out that in the decades following the fall of Constantinople, the sultan's court assumed the forms of the old Byzantine court.<38>

To the average Balkan peasant of the Middle Ages, the Byzantine emperor was most likely an abstraction: a figure in a far-off city who controlled his destiny and to whom he owed his loyalty. The Balkan peasant of the sixteenth century would have had the same relationship with the Sultan as his ancestor had had with the Byzantine emperor. Since the lowest classes of society rarely had direct contact with their rulers, it is likely that many did not particularly care who it was who ruled them.

But the Sultan's very presence in the area could also have an effect on the population of a conquered province. During this time, it was customary for the Sultan to accompany the army on expeditions of conquest. This has much to do with what is known as the *gazi* tradition among the Turks. The term *gazi* means "fighter for the faith," and refers to any Muslim ruler who leads armies to conquer non-Muslim territories. The *gazi* tradition impelled Muslim rulers to conquer both to expand the boundaries of Islam, and to guarantee safe passage of Muslims to Mecca.<39> This *gazi* image figured prominently in the actions of the early Sultans, and was the impetus for the initial Turkish incursions into the Balkans.<40> Thus at times many of the inhabitants of the Balkans would see Sultans such as Mehmed and Suleiman as they moved through Rumeli on their campaigns of conquest.

The question of the Sultan's visibility is somewhat debated. Some maintain that the adaptation of Byzantine court rituals made the Sultans more isolated from their subjects than their predecessors in Anatolia had been.<41> On the other hand, it is likely that the early Sultans realized the importance of having the Sultan present in the Balkans. This seems to me to be apparent in the choice of establishing the Sultan's court on the European side of the Straits; first at Edirne, then at Istanbul, rather than in the Turkish heartland of Anatolia.

In a state in which the ruler claims absolute power, it would be expected that a competent ruler would use that power to govern the people in the way he saw fit, rather than relying on ministers whose points of view might differ from the ruler's. Therefore, unlike most of the Sultans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (an age characterized by the decline of the Ottoman state), the Sultans who presided over the golden age of the Ottoman Empire took an active role in the legislation of their state. Both of the Sultans whose actions most impacted the Balkans during this time, Mehmed II and Suleiman I, produced a "book" of codified laws, or *Kanunname*. Much of the legislation produced in these works would have at least some impact on the lives of the inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula.

Mehmed II had such confidence in his *Kanunname* that he is reported to have said, "Once this law is observed, how can the state be destroyed, heaven forbid?"<42> Mehmed was the one who made all significant decisions regarding foreign and domestic policy. He maintained absolute rule, "to all indications uninfluenced by those whom he himself had raised to positions of prominence in the *serai*, the army, and the corps of officials."<43>

In Muslim states, a ruler is bound to certain obligations, known as the *hadd*. As part of this, the ruler was to "treat his subjects and followers kindly, justly, in accordance with established tradition."<44> By many indications, Mehmed showed some real concern for his Balkan subjects. For example, there is an account by a Burgundian knight in which Mehmed attends a Christian mass in Pera, even eating an unconsecrated wafer.<45> This is an unusual activity for a pious Muslim, but it could have great symbolic value for those of his Christian subjects who observed this. Even if this account was a fabrication on the part of an observer of that time, the fact that it exists could indicate at least some respect on the part of the Christian population for their Muslim overlord. Also, under a practice begun by Mehmed, four times a year a member of the Serbian Janissary corps would tour the provinces to supervise the administration and "see to it that the people were not oppressed."<46>

Suleiman's inclination for legislation has prompted the Turks to remember him as *Kanuni*, or the Lawgiver. Although he was powerful enough to overcome the influence of the *ulema*, he worked with the chief *ulema* as well as other legal experts in the composition of his *Kanunname*.<47> In theory, "any man could come direct to the sultan to demand justice."<48> In practice, it was highly unlikely that most of his Balkan Christian subjects would have found Suleiman so accessible, with the possible exceptions of those citizens living in Thrace who could afford the fare to Istanbul.

The Sultan's rule was also important in the administration of the Balkans, as well as the other provinces. It was the Sultan from whom all the rights and commissions, as well as the land titles, of those who held land in Turkish territory, came. The death of the reigning Sultan nullified all rights and commissions, leading to the statement that "the Sultan was the state itself."<49>

When a state enters into a period of decline, it is often assumed by those in power that the reason for the decline was connected to foreign influences. Therefore, the course of

action often taken is to remove the foreign influences and replace them with traditional native institutions. This was what the viziers and the *ulema* who presided over the seventeenth century attempted to do, exemplifying Turkish traditions in the name of "traditional reform."

But it is my opinion, at least in the case of the Ottoman state, that the influx of foreign institutions and their adaptations into the Turkish system played a large part in the success of the empire during its golden age. After all, a group of people who are as different from their Turkish conquerors as Balkan Christians were will not be easily reconciled to foreign rule unless certain adjustments are made for their benefit. Such adaptations could have the added advantage of allowing the state to run more efficiently. We have already seen how the *devshirme* was adapted from a slave system practiced in the Arab and Persian states.

In order to assimilate the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula into the empire, it was necessary to adopt some European customs. This was especially important before the conquest of the Arab Mamluk state in the early sixteenth century, when the majority of the population of the Ottoman empire was Christian. Some have advanced the opinion that the situation of the Ottomans in the Balkans "was rendered more difficult by the presence in its territory of stable and vigorous institutions centuries older than its own."<50> In one sense this was true, but in another, the presence of an existing structure which could be adapted to suit the Ottoman administration made the process easier.

The best way to do this was to adopt the state system established by the Greek Byzantine state, which had been a major power in the Balkans for almost a thousand years before the advent of the Turks. By the time the Turks began their incursions into the Balkans, however, most of the Balkan peoples formerly under Byzantine rule, such as the Serbs and Bulgarians, had established their own independent states, and additional internal and external problems had long since prevented Constantinople from reestablishing Byzantine control in the area.

In many cases the Sultan was able to enlist the aid of the same Greek bureaucrats who had formerly served the Byzantine emperor. In return for loyalty to the Ottoman system, these Phanariote (as the servants of the Patriarch came to be called; after the name of the part of Istanbul where the Greeks lived) Christian bureaucrats would be appointed to administrative positions in the empire. If they themselves could not control the Balkans, these Greeks could at least in this way live vicariously through the Turks. In addition, the Turks often let native princes continue to administer conquered territories as long as they proved trustworthy. For example, although the battle of Kosovo brought an end to the medieval Serbian state, several of the minor Serb princes continued to dispense justice, collect taxes, and retain armed guards with little Turkish interference until the nineteenth century. Other areas, such as northern Albania and Montenegro, were allowed "complete autonomy and tax exemption in return for contingents of fighting men."<51> In many cases, the only change might be to replace the prince's Slavic title with a corresponding Turkish one. The *timar* system of land tenure practiced by the Turks had a number of

parallels with the native forms of feudalism practiced in the Balkans, and thus the Ottomans were able to continue this system with little difficulty.

The *millet* system of administration would prove an effective way of pacifying the provinces. Under this system, peoples were grouped according to religion, not by ethnic group. Thus there existed *millets* for Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, and Jews. For our purposes, the most significant *millet* is the Orthodox one, since the vast majority of the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula adhered to this branch of the Christian religion. This millet was headed by the Orthodox patriarch in Istanbul, who, as we have seen, was appointed by the Muslim Sultan. The *millet* system gave the members of the church hierarchy, from the patriarch down to the parish priest, extensive administrative and legal functions in addition to their traditional ecclesiastical ones, to the extent that they were allowed to hear cases in which all of the litigants were Christians, provided those involved submitted voluntarily to Church courts rather than Turkish ones.<52> The patriarch himself held the rank of vizier, and served as an official intermediary between the Orthodox Christians and the Sultan's government.<53> The servants of the patriarch in Istanbul could eventually serve in various positions throughout the Balkans.

This was largely a marriage of convenience for the Greek Orthodox Church. For several centuries before the Turkish conquest, various Slavic groups had attempted to break away from the Greek church and establish their own independent national churches in the same way they had political states, resulting in Serbian and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches. When the Ottomans assumed control, they once again subordinated these national churches to the Greek Church. This body would be headquartered in Istanbul under the Sultan's watchful eye, and the Patriarch of the Church would be appointed by the Sultan.

As a result, active forced conversion did not take place. Although many among the Turks wished to convert their non-Muslim populations, such a move would not have been financially prudent, since the state in large part depended on the revenue collected from the head tax which non-Muslims were made to pay. In addition, guarantees given to the Orthodox patriarch by the sultan not only protected Christians from forced conversion, but also stated that a Christian who would willingly adopt Islam must "establish that he was of age, and the religious head of his community had the right to try to dissuade him in the presence of his parents or relatives."<54> Therefore, the decision to convert to Islam seems to have been a private one, made for reasons of social or economic advantage for the individual, and was not in large part the result of any active proselytizing on the part of the Ottoman administrators.<55>

There would, nonetheless, turn out to be an increase in the Muslim population in the Balkans during the period of Ottoman control. The predominance of Muslim minorities in Bulgaria and Thrace, for example, was the direct result of Ottoman rule. But this, however, was the result of resettlement in the Balkans of Muslims from Anatolia and other parts of the Middle East. Throughout the Balkan Peninsula, Christians would remain the majority of the population, except in towns that were built by the Ottomans for administrative or political reasons.<56> The only places in which a great part of the population would be converted to Islam would be in those areas which were not

originally Orthodox Christian, an example being the Muslims of Bosnia, who before the Turkish invasions adhered to the Bogomil teachings, considered heretical by both eastern and western Christianity. Having been persecuted before, Bosnians now sought to associate themselves more closely with the new occupying power.<57> The following table<58> outlines the religious makeup of the population of the major cities of the Balkan peninsula during the reign of Suleiman:

City	% Muslim	% Christian	% Jewish
Istanbul	58.2	31.6	10.2
Edirne	82.1	12.8	5.1
Salonika	25.2	20.2	54.3
Sarajevo	100	0	0
Larissa	90.2	9.8	0
Serres	61.3	32.8	5.9
Monastir	75	20.2	4.8
Skopje	74.8	23.7	1.5
Sofia	66.4	33.6	0
Athens	.5	99.5	0
Nikopolis	37.7	62.3	0

So the Balkan peoples had little to fear for their physical well-being (with the possible exception of those in the border provinces) from not being a Muslim. There were, however, stipulations. For example, Christians were forbidden to build new Churches or repair old ones, and could not make use of church bells.<59> Their secular lives faced similar proscriptions, such as being forbidden to ride horses or bear arms or to have houses loftier than those of neighboring Muslims.<60> Balkan Christians also had to contend with the head-tax placed on all non-Muslims (*cizye*), which was a major source of revenue for the Ottoman state.

As would be expected, most of the ruling classes of the empire (the "Professional Ottomans") were Muslim. The rest of the population (which, as in all other states, made up the vast majority), both Muslim and Christian, constituted the *reaya* ("protected flock").<61> With the exceptions mentioned above, all in the *reaya* class, Christian and Muslim, were to be treated equally, all entitled to the same protection in theory, if not always in practice. This system was meant to keep the *reaya* satisfied with their position as the producers in society, and contributed to the ease with which European peasants were reconciled to Ottoman rule.<62>

The Ottoman administrators would prove to be vigilant and demanding tax collectors, particularly in the more affluent areas.<63> In addition to the new taxes imposed by the Turks, pre-conquest taxes continued to be collected. Evidence of this is found in the listing in legal codes of taxes with non-Turkish names, or taxes covering such

commodities as wine or pork, forbidden to Muslims.<64> It is unclear whether the reason why pork was not outlawed dealt with an issue of religious tolerance, or whether they simply wanted to benefit from the additional tax revenue, although one would imagine that both factors played a part in that decision.

The Ottomans did, however, make some changes to the already existing system, in order to make it run more efficiently. The nature of Turkish feudalism differed from that practiced in the Balkans in that it was less exacting and more benign.<65> Unlike the feudal system practiced in Western Europe and the pre-conquest Balkans, under Turkish feudalism, the peasant was not tied to the land. The local lord had no legal rights to lordship and justice over the peasants living on his fief.<66>

As a result, it has been observed that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries many of the peasant populations of the Balkans welcomed and frequently assisted the Ottoman conquest.<67> As a result, the Balkan peasants suffered relatively little oppression until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the *timar* system, much like the rest of the Ottoman system, began to be corrupted. In addition, the presence of Ottoman troops made the highways of most of southeastern Europe far less dangerous than they had been previously, when Serbian and Bosnian "robber barons" had been in control.<68>

I would argue that the Turks, for all intents and purposes, established two states, one Christian, the other Muslim. The part of the empire in which Muslims made up the majority of the population (the Middle East and North Africa) could be governed in much the same way as Muslim states had been since the establishment of the first Caliphate. The Christian part, the Balkan Peninsula, comprised the former lands of the Byzantine Empire, and in conquering them, the Turks assumed much of the structure and customs of the former Byzantine state. The difference between the two was, in fact, recognized by the Turks. When succession to the Sultanate was disputed between two candidates (as was the case in the confusion following the capture of Bayezid I by Tamerlane in 1402), the solution often proposed was to split the empire in two, with one claimant taking the province of Rumeli, while the other one would rule the Muslim provinces.<69>

So what was the ultimate effect of the imposition of the Ottoman system in the Balkans? It did guarantee several centuries of peace and order. It is the opinion of some scholars, however, that this order came with a price. It has been stated by those holding this view that "Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Bosnians, and Albanians, proud peoples with a long and glorious past, were now condemned to an existence without history. The brilliant deeds of their ancestors lived on only in their tenacious memories and in the heroic poetry that they managed to preserve."<70> I am not in complete agreement with this view, however. These "brilliant deeds" were somewhat overrated. While the Balkan states could boast some justifiably "heroic" figures, a number of the Balkan princes before the Turkish invasions were corrupt, cruel, or both. A well-known, if extreme, example of this would be Vlad Tepes, one of the last rulers of independent Wallachia, whose legendary cruelty inspired the character of Count Dracula. In contrast, under able administrators, several parts of the Balkans enjoyed a good deal of autonomous development. The peoples living in the Balkans maintained their own distinctive cultural heritage, upon

which the Turkish presence had little influence, especially outside the major urban areas.<71>

The argument advanced by the critics above seems to infer that a people must have an independent state in order to have a history. But independence, however, is not always the best thing for a people. This is demonstrated by the current instability of the republics of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. It is my opinion that the peoples of the Balkan peninsula would have been far better off as part of a multinational empire such as that of the Ottoman Turks, with each group assured autonomous development, than they would be with their own independent states.

What Ottoman rule did manage to accomplish, however, was to at least temporarily submerge much of the ethnic hatreds among the peoples of the Balkans, in much the same way as Tito's Communist partisans did in Yugoslavia. Groups which despised each other, such as the Greeks and Serbs, lived in relative peace with one another for several centuries. It has been said that for a period of time, ironically enough, the Turks had less trouble maintaining their rule over their Christian subjects in the Balkans than over their Muslim subjects in the Middle East and North Africa.<72> It is notable that these ethnic conflicts began to arise once again after the empire went into decline, and when the drive to push the Turks out of Europe was completed in 1912, a war among the Balkan nationalities directly followed. These groups may have been able to band together against what they saw as a common foe, but once that threat was completely removed, Greeks, Serbs, and Bulgarians fell to fighting among themselves to divide the spoils of war.

So why did the Ottoman system fail? I would argue that the major weakness of this system was that it hinged on having a competent Sultan presiding over it. One of the weaknesses of hereditary rule is that it cannot guarantee a consistent succession of capable rulers. A prince groomed for the role since birth could still turn out to be incompetent. Indeed, the House of Osman had been fortunate enough to have produced rulers of the caliber of Mehmed II and Suleiman. In the seventeenth century, Sultans began to keep their brothers (and potential rivals for the throne) in seclusion rather than kill them. Imprisonment would have a detrimental effect on these individuals, and when some of them did end up becoming sultan, they were ill-equipped to deal with affairs of state.

The Ottoman system began to break down after the death of Suleiman I in 1566. The ability of succeeding Sultans would decline, and the state would suffer because of it: "fish rot from the head," as a Turkish proverb would explain it.<73> Although the empire's Balkan possessions remained intact for another century, further conquests ceased, and Western Europe's military capability advanced further than that of the Turks. It is perhaps ironic that the state remained prosperous as long as the conquest of new territory continued, and while most states would use the cessation of conquest as a prompt to consolidate and strengthen their gains, in the Ottoman state this signaled the beginning of the empire's decline.

Without a powerful Sultan, the *ulema* were able to exert their control over the state, at times creating and deposing sultans at will. Under the guidance of the *ulema*, the state assumed a more Islamic character, which could only have alienated the Christian inhabitants of the Balkans. I find it to be no coincidence that at this same time, the system of the *devshirme*, always considered of ambiguous legality in the eyes of the *shari'a*, began to disappear. As a result, a valuable source of qualified bureaucrats and soldiers began to dry up at a time when the state needed them the most. As the empire went into further decline, Turkish rulers would follow the model, set by the Habsburgs and czarist Russia, of pitting the various subject nationalities in the Balkans against each other, with implications that are still apparent in the area today.

In this increasingly interconnected world, terms such as "globalization" and "cultural exchange" are often bandied about. The current trends have led some to predict that the coming years will see the gradual development of a single state under which the entire world or most of it will be united under one government, perhaps under the auspices of the United Nations. As we have seen, this idea of a "world empire" is hardly new. A study of the Ottoman Turkish state of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries shows the difficulties that come along with such an attempt. Although the attempt ultimately failed, both due to internal flaws as well as external pressures, the Ottomans developed several unique practices, and made good use of already existing ones, intended to better consolidate their empire, and, at least for a brief while, created a "well flourishing" domain.

Notes

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