

THE EDITOR'S DESK

One of the most characteristic and successful aspects of the social systems produced by Middle Eastern Civilization was that through which slaves were brought into the service of the state. From earliest times, through the great empires of Classical Islam and the Ottomans, private and public figures possessed and used slaves. In the public sector, slaves manned the armies and increasingly controlled the bureaucracy of the late Abbasids and the Seljuks. Slaves dominated the governmental and military systems of the Mamluks and the Ottomans. Under the dominion of the Ottoman Sultan, all members of the Ruling Class were considered to be the slaves of the Sultan.

But under these conditions, what did slavery signify? It was, indeed, a far cry from that known in the West, and was more approximate in fact to some sort of bonded servitude. The slave in Islam was considered to be a member of his master's household, thus acquiring its social status. The slaves of the Sultan thus, by acquiring his status, became the Ruling Class, with the right to dominate and exploit the Empire in his name. As in many other aspects of Middle Eastern civilization, so also in that involving this sort of slavery, the Ottomans organized and institutionalized what they inherited from the past. Slaves were acquired through a regular system of conscription (*devşirme*) imposed on the best of the non-Muslim youths of the Empire, primarily Christians. These youths were converted to Islam and trained and educated as personal slaves (*köle*) of the Sultan before being transformed into the kind of general slaves, or bonded servants (*kul*), who composed the Ruling Class, occupying high positions in the government and the army. It was through the *Devşirme* system that subject youths of merit and energy were enabled to rise as far as their ability and luck could take them, while the Ottomans were assured of a sufficient supply of men able and willing to operate the Empire which they conquered. But however high individuals rose in the system, they still were servants of the Sultan; their lives and properties were fully devoted to his service. They could be dismissed, demoted, exiled and even executed with little more than a moment's notice, with their property confiscated and their family scattered, for any reason whatsoever, without benefiting from the protection which the secular and religious laws gave to even the lowliest of the subjects of the Sultan regardless of religion. It was, thus, a Ruling Class of abject servants who manned the Sultan's government and army.

But what of the system itself? How effectively did it work? By Ottoman theory at least, and in western literature on the subject, it has always been assumed that the *Devşirme* youths, converted to Islam and trained to be Ottomans, cut themselves off entirely from their old families and homes so that they could devote

their full attentions to their new master and his state. It has been claimed that it was these *Devşirme* men who thus made the system work and built the Ottoman state into the great Empire that it was for so long. However, more recent scholarship, delving into the Ottoman sources themselves, has begun to take a more critical look at this theory, pointing out that only starting in the late fifteenth century did the *Devşirme* youths displace the older Turkish aristocracy which had built the Empire and this took place particularly under Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–1566), when the Empire was falling into its long agony of decline, rather than in its age of greatness. And far from being the monolithic group of slaves serving their master abjectly and completely, the *Devşirme* youths now are seen to have been highly political men, divided into parties according to their places of origin and personal ambition, using the Ottoman state more to benefit themselves and their places of birth, and in many cases their original families, than the Sultan and his state, and thus acting as agents of weakness rather than of strength. It is this aspect of the *Devşirme* system which is described by Dr Metin Kunt, of the Bosphorus University (formerly Robert College), Istanbul, in his study of 'Ethnic-Regional (*Cins*) Solidarity in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Establishment'.

In our other contributions this quarter: Fuad Said Haddad, of the American University of Beirut, examines al-Farabi's ideas on the objects of education; Russell A. Stone, of the State University of New York at Buffalo, discusses the relationship between the 'Religious Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism in Tunisia'. Dale F. Eickelman, of the University of Chicago, studies the organization and structure of the Muslim city, and in particular of one urban quarter in a Moroccan town, applying the discipline of social analysis to the information uncovered by himself and other scholars versed in the languages and history of Islam. Donna Robinson Divine, of Smith College, discusses the influence of party politics in bureaucratic organization and operation in modern Israel, stressing in particular a comparison between educational and party backgrounds of individual bureaucrats as relative criteria for advancement within the governmental system. Reeva S. Simon, of Beersheba, Israel, discusses the various efforts of members of the Hashemite dynasty to expand their rule from their bases in Iraq and Jordan to include other parts of the Arab world, under the guise of various plans for Arab confederation, between 1921 and 1958. Ferydoon Firoozi, of Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois, analyzes the fiscal and economic policies of the Iranian government from the time at which the modern system of program budgeting was introduced (1964) until 1970, emphasizing in particular the role of the revenue system in influencing the private sector of the economy. And Khaldun S. Husry, of the American University of Beirut, concludes his study of the massacre of the Assyrians in Iraq in 1933.

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