

Constantinople

City of the World's Desire 1453-1294 by Phillip Mansel

The Devshirme System

...Greeks, Armenians, Italians and Jews were brought to the city mainly for economic reasons. The dynastic state itself imported a fifth racial element. The Ottoman government was called the Gate, from the part of the ruler's palace most visibly associated with power: Ottoman government was seen as the administration of the state and of justice in front of the Sultan's gate by his extended household and administrators. The main body of the Sultan's officials and soldiers were slaves known as *kapi kulu*, or 'slaves of the Gate.' They were youths between the ages of 8 and 16, conscripted according to need from the rural Christian population of the Balkans and, less frequently, Anatolia, by the process known as *devshirme* or 'gathering.' They could not be Turkish. After the conquest of Bosnia in 1463, although the Koran [Quran] forbade the enslavement of Muslims, Muslim Slavs could be 'gathered.' Muslims of Turkish origin could not.

The youth's date of birth and details of parentage were recorded. They were then taken to Constantinople, circumcised and converted to Islam. The best looking and best born were educated in the palace school or a Pasha's household, and eventually entered government service. The others were 'given to the Turk' – sent to farms in Anatolia to learn Turkish. They then worked as gardeners in the imperial palace, sailors in the imperial navy, or on building sites in the city. Eventually they joined the Janissaries. A force numbering some fifteen to twenty thousand, the Janissaries were the spearhead of the Ottoman army and the principal military and police force in Constantinople itself. They patrolled the walls, garrisoned the Seven Towers, enforced law and order, guarded the Patriarch and the Sultan himself.

Some Christian families were heart-broken to see their children 'gathered.' There was a song:

Be damned, O Emperor, be thrice damned
 For the evil you have done and the evil you do.
 You catch and shackle the old and the archpriests
 In order to take the children as Janissaries.
 Their parents weep and 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.



Nasuh, Matrakci (1588). "Janissary Recruitment in the Balkans" *Süleymanname*, Topkapı Sarayı Museum, ms Hazine 1517.

More worldly families were delighted to see their children secure a footing in the Ottoman career ladder. Slavery was less degrading in the Islamic world than in the Christian world. *Devshirme* youths educated in the Sultan's or viziers' households had the chance to occupy the highest points in the empire – and look after their relations. 'Slaves of the Gate' were free from many of the legal restraints imposed on other slaves in matters of marriage and property. It was the Bosnian Slavs themselves who demanded to remain eligible for 'gathering,' despite their conversion from Christianity to Islam. A Venetian *Ballo* wrote that the Janissaries 'take great pleasure in being able to say "I am a slave of the Grand Signior," since they know that this is a lordship or republic of slaves where it is theirs to command.' A hundred years ago, might not selected Irish Catholic youths have felt a similar pride, if they had been converted to Protestantism, sent to Eton and then told to govern the British Empire as servants of the Queen Empress? ...