

The Devshirme System

James M. Ludlow, American Presbyterian Missionary in Turkey, from his translated manuscripts of the Ottoman sultans, late 19th century, about the Tribute of Children, 1493

The advice of the vizier was followed; the edict was proclaimed; many thousands of the European captives were educated in the Mohammedan religion and arms, and the new militia was consecrated and named by a celebrated dervish. Standing in the front of their ranks, he stretched the sleeve of his gown over the head of the foremost soldier, and his blessing was delivered in the following words "Let them be called Janizaries [yingi-cheri--or "new soldiers"]." Such was the origin of these haughty troops, the terror of the nations. They are kept up by continual additions from the sultan's share of the captives, and by recruits, raised every five years, from the children of the Christian subjects. Small parties of soldiers, each under a leader, and each provided with a particular firman, go from place to place. Wherever they come, the protogeros assembled the inhabitants with their sons. The leader of the soldiers have the right to take away all the youth who are distinguished by beauty or strength, activity or talent, above the age of seven. He carries them to the court of the grand seignior, a tithe, as it is, of the subjects. The captives taken in war by the pashas, and presented by them to the sultan, include Poles, Bohemians, Russians, Italians, and Germans. These recruits are divided into two classes. Those who compose the one, are sent to Anatolia, where they are trained to agricultural labor, and instructed in the Mussulman faith; or they are retained about the seraglio, where they carry wood and water, and are employed in the gardens, in the boats, or upon the public buildings, always under the direction of an overseer, who with a stick compels them to work. The others, in whom traces of a higher character are discernible, are placed in one of the four seraglios of Adrianople or Galata, or the old or new one at Constantinople. Here they are lightly clad in linen or in cloth of Saloniki, with caps of Prusa cloth. Teachers come every morning, who remain with them until evening, and teach them to read and write. Those who have performed hard labor are made Janissaries. Those who are educated in the seraglios become spahis or higher officers of state.

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