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A Study on the Processing of the System of Devshirme in High School History Books in Turkey and Serbia

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ABSTRACT

The establishment and expansion of the Ottoman Empire made it necessary to create new institutions in the field of state organization. The conquest of new land made possible by a strong administration and a strong military structure. Accordingly, the first state organization took place in the administration and military fields. In order to meet the needs of the soldiers and to create a strong military structure, at the beginning, the pencik system and then the devshirme system started to be implemented. This system which was implemented from 15th to 19th century became one of the bases of the Ottoman Empire. Devshirme system and its implementation achieved great social, political and military influence in the Ottoman Empire and the countries that were a part of it.Today, the devshirme system is described in different ways in the history books in the countries, which existed in the lands owned by the Ottoman Empire. This study intends to reveal how devshirme system is processed in the history books used in high schools in Serbia and Turkey. The research was realized through the document analysis of qualitative research methods. In this study it is shown that in Turkish high school history books devshirme system is handled in accordance with the academic commitment, while in the Serbian history books the concepts are including hostility. In addition, it is concluded that in the schoolbooks the devshirme system is processed according to the countries' own perspectives.

Keywords:
Devshirme System, Serbia, Turkey, High Schools, History Books.

1. Introduction

It was inevitable that the Ottoman Empire, which started to expand in the 14th century, had to develop new institutions to evolve and expand its territory. In this context, the first area to which this applied in the state organization was military. The creation of a strong army became a necessity, both for strengthening the central authority and for extending the borders. To what extent it was necessary to introduce a new military system was especially evident during the Rumelia conquest. (Uzunçarşılı, 1970, p. 100-102; 414-415; Kazıcı, 2018, p. 497) In order to establish a strong military system, Kazasker Chandırlı Kara Halil Pasha came to the idea of introducing a penchik system, which was also used by other Muslim states that existed before the Ottoman Empire. The penchik system refers to forming an army by taking every fifth prisoner by the state (Beydili, 2013, p. 450; İnalcık, 2009, p. 58; Özcan, 2007, s. 226) The soldiers that were taken with penchik system were learning Islamic and Turkish tradition and were receiving salaries. In this way, during the reign of Murad I,

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the Janissary Corps was established. The date of the establishment of this corps is not certain, but according to some sources, it falls between 1363-1365 years. (Neşri, 1995, p. 199; İnalcık, 2006, p. 163) At the beginning of the 15th century, after the defeat of Yıldırım Bayazid in Ankara War, a civil war was started in the Ottoman state , a period known as the Ottoman Interregnum, during which the implementation of the penchik system was stopped. In order to keep the system in function and to ensure its development, a new "Devshirme" system started to be implemented. So, this system replaced the previous penchik system. (Kazıcı, 2018, p. 493-494; İnalcık, 2014, p. 127-128) The devshirme system first began to be applied among Christians living in the Balkans by taking one child among 40 families. Although this system was applied for the first time during the period of Mehmet Chelebi (1413-1421) it was validated in the period of Murad II (1421-1451). (Özcan, 1994, p. 254) According to the law of devshirme, it was decided to collect healthy and strong children between the ages of eight and eighteen, and this would be done every three to five years. Devshirme system was primarily implemented in Albania, Greece and Bulgaria, and then in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Hungary. (Kazıcı, 2018, p. 494) The children that were collected with devshirme were first registered in the Esame books. Afterwards, they were given to Turkish families to learn Turkish customs and language. On the one hand, in this way, the children's conversion to Islam was ensured and, on the other hand, the needs of the army were met. (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, p. 13) According to the rules of devshirme, children of Jews, Russians, Gypsies, Ajam, children of shepherds, orphans and children from families with one child could not be taken. Although this system was applied between 15th and 19th centuries and was more widespread in Balkans, since the end of the 15th century it was possible to find it in Anatolia, too. (Demir, 2017, p. 22) During the collecting of children, the names of their villages, sanjaks, fathers and mothers, the date of birth and the names of the dispatching officers were written in books and these books were kept in two copies. (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, p. 16-17) Children taken with devşirme, after spending some time in Turkish families, were brought to Istanbul, the conscripted boys were educated in the corps and the clever students were taken to Enderun school. The other students were transferred to various departments of the Janissary Corps. (Öztüna, 2006, p. 92) From the 16th century, the devshirme system began to deteriorate and lost its former value in relation to the emerging military technology in Europe. In the 19th century, in 1826, Sultan Mahmud II ended it by removing the Janissary Corps. (İnalcık, 2013, p. 58; Halaçoğlu, 1996, p. 53)

From the end of the 14th century the Ottoman Empire began to spread in the Balkans, and for a short time, the Ottomans dominated in countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. The Serbian Empire, which began to disintegrate after the death of Emperor Dushan (1355), and the Serbs who were inhabited in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ruled by the Kotromanich dynasty (Ћирковић, 1982, стр. 7-8), with the Ottoman conquest of Smederevo in 1459 and Kljuc in 1463, came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, both Serbia and Bosnia had to accept the dominance of the Ottoman Empire. (İnalcık, 2011, p. 32-35) After being included in the Ottoman Empire, these regions, as well as other parts of the state, were also divided into administrative units-sanjaks. In accordance with the Ottoman law, existing taxes were introduced to these regions and, as part of devshirme, children were recruited from these areas. Serbian, Bulgarian, Albanian and Croatian children who were gathered for the devshirme system, later had the chance to take part in the Ottoman army and even to become civil servants and to be senior executives in the state. Some of the children who were taken from these regions, found themselves in a high position in the state administration of the Ottoman Empire. Sokullu Mehmet Pasha is the most famous among them. (Hamzaoğlu, 2004, p. 108)

After the Ottoman Empire began to decline, and since the concept of military service in Europe gained new dimensions, in the 18th century the Janissary Corps lost its former influence, and the collection of children with deshirme was not carried out under strict rules. Nevertheless, the devshirme system was applied until the 19th century, when it was completely abolished during the reign of Mahmud II. Serbia remained under the Ottoman rule until 1878, when it gained independence with the decision of the Congress of Berlin. (Стојанчевић, 1981, p. 420) Bosnia and Herzegovina came under the influence of Austro-Hungarian Empire, which annexed this country in 1908. (Çetin, 2017; Özkan, 2016)

Although much time has elapsed since the disappearance of the devshirme system, the concept of Ottoman administration in the Balkans, as well as the implementation of the devshirme system, is still debated. Serbian sources and the Serbian people still see the Ottoman administration as a structure that enslaved people (Ћирковић, 1982, p. 313) and seen as a way to force them to accept Islam. Serbian sources describe the devshirme system in a different way from Ottoman or Turkish sources and call it "blood tax" or "tribute in

blood". In addition, some sources emphasize that parents were often hiding their children in order to save them from devshirme. (Ђоровић, 1997, p. 312-313) Again, according to some sources, because the Ottomans used to collect only healthy boys, mothers were even hurting their children, in order to save them. (Самарџић, 1993, стр. 30)

Although the subject of devshirme has come up in Serbian and Turkish historiography many times and a lot of works have been written on it, there is no comparative study on how it is handled in school books. One of the first works about devshirme in Serbian historiography is written in the end of 19th century by Jovan Tomić. In his work called *Danak u Krvi* Tomić mostly focused on European travelogues, and that is why this study is incomplete. After that, in the 20th century, Radovan Samardzić, with his study called *Beograd i Srbija u Spisima Francuskih Saveremenika XVI-XVII veka,* made a great contribution to the research of the devshirme system. In Turkey, one of the most important studies about devshirme, called *Devşirme Usulü ve Acemi Oğlanlar,* written by Ahmet Refik, was published in 1926. But the most comprehensive work about devshirme is written by historian İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı. (Matkovski, 1969, p. 273-274)

In order to show how the devshirme system is being presented in Serbian and Turkish sources, the contents of historical schoolbooks used in Serbian and Turkish high schools are analyzed in this study. The study attempts to show how the devshirme system is predisposed in the textbooks of those countries, what the differences and similarities in their representation are, and whether and to what extent the hostile terms are used in lessons.

2. Method

2.1. Model of the Research

In this study, a qualitative method was used in order to examine the ways in which the subject matter of the devshirme was processed in the Serbian and Turkish high school books. Qualitative research method was preferred because of the fact that it is appropriate to reveal the underlying causes of a case and to enable the historical researches of historical subjects.(Yıldırım & Şimşek, 1999, p. 19) Case studies are used in order to present and describe the existing situation. (Yin, 2003, p. 47) Document analysis method was used in order to determine how the topic of devshirme was showed in textbooks in high schools in two countries. In this context, history textbooks of high schools in both countries were examined. (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 1999, p. 140) The findings of the study were directly referenced in order to increase the reliability of the data using descriptive analysis method.(Yıldırım & Şimşek, 1999, p. 159) The findings are presented comparatively.

2.2. Sample of the Research

The sample of the research is composed of a historical textbook for the 10th grade of high schools in Istanbul, prepared by the Turkish Ministry of Education and a textbook for the 3rd grade of the Sociolinguistic schools in Serbia, prepared by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia.

2.3. Limitations of the Research

The research findings of this study were limited to historical schoolbooks for the 10th grade of high schools in Turkey and historical schoolbooks for the 3rd grade of the Sociolinguistic schools in Serbia. Since several different historical textbooks are used in Serbian sociolinguistic schools, only three of them are analyzed in this study. All of these books were prepared and published under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. In addition, the study is limited by the method of document review carried out for the purpose of gathering information.

3. Findings

In the history textbook taught in Serbian high schools and prepared by Radoš Ljušić (Љушић, 2012), devshirme system and the Ottoman military structure are explained as a part of the lesson *Ottoman Empire (16-18th century)* under the title *State Structure.* Here, the army structure in the Ottoman Empire is described in a paragraph with eight sentences. In the continuation of the same topic, the slightly larger paragraph also provides information on the devshirme system. Despite the definition of the devshirme, no description is given about the origin of this system, but it is stated that the children that were taken with the devşirme became the sultan's slaves. It is also emphasized that the devshirme represented a sign of the Ottoman ruthlessness

towards the Christians. In this book it is said that parents, in order to save their children from devshirme, often used to hurt them or to marry them, even if they were just 8 years old. This situation is expressed in a schoolbook in the following way: 'Да би спречили одвођење деце, родитељи су обогаљивали децу секући им прсте или их женили младе, чак и са осам година, пошто су ожењени били изузети од данка у крви.' ('In order to prevent the taking away of their children, parents used to injure them by cutting their fingers off, or marrying them young, even at the age of eight, because married boys were exempt from devshirme').(Љушић, 2012, p. 60) According to information from the same page, some parents were giving children voluntary for money in order to ensure their progress on the social scale. According to Ljušić's assertions (2012, p. 60) the children gathered by devshirme were taken to Bursa and İstanbul, where they were employed as slaves, forced to accept Islam, and then after learning the language they were being educated. ("Бирани према физичкој и интелектуалној обдарености, ови дечаци су смештани у Истамбул или Бурсу, где су неко време радили као робови, насилно примали ислам, учили турски, пролазили кроз војну обуку, а обдаренији завршавали посебне школе.")(Љушић, 2012, p. 60) According to the explanations from the book, after education, some lads were moved to the army, while some of them could be promoted to important state positions. In the book, as an example of high-ranking officials in the state service, Sokullu Mehmet Pasha is shown, a Serb, taken with devshirme to Istanbul in the 16th century, and who became the vizier of three sultans.(Љушић, 2012, s. 60) In another chapter of the book, in lesson *Pech Patriarchate*, it is stated that Sokullu Mehmet Pasha played an important role in the renewal of the Serbian church in 1557, and that in this way he wanted to help his people.(Љушић, 2012, p. 75)

Image 1.
Representing of Janissaries in Serbian history textbooks

In another history schoolbook used in Serbian high schools and prepared by Dragomir Bondzić and Kosta Nikolić (Бонџић, Д. Николић, К., 2014) the devshirme topic is presented as part of the lesson *Serbian People in the Ottoman Empire from 16th to 18th Centuries* under the title *The Position of Serbs in Ottoman Empire*. In this source it is claimed that devshirme system started to be used in the Ottoman Empire in 1420 and that it was a special form of Muslims violence against Christians. As the principle of the devshirme system, it is stated that the Ottomans were taking children from 7 to 20 years old from Christians. It is also emphasized that the implementation of the system of devshirme was remembered as one of the cruelest institutions in the Ottoman Empire ("…остао је упамћен као једна од најокрутнијих установа које су икада постојале у Османском царству").(Бонџић, Д. Николић, 2014, p. 70) This source also provides examples and information similar to the previous book. In the same way Sokullu Mehmet Pasha is taken as an example and it is told that he and other taken children after coming to important state positions were helping their people by building bridges, caravanserais and fountains.(Бонџић, Д. Николић, 2014, p. 70)

In the book prepared by Aleksandra Kolaković and Minja Milinović (Колаковић & Милиновић, 2016), and used in history lessons in high schools in Serbia, devshirme system is described in lesson *Serbian People in the*

Image 2.
Representing of Janissaries in Serbian and Turkish history textbooks

Ottoman Empire Between the 16th and 18th Century. In this book it is described in the part *The Life of the Serbs in the Ottoman Empire* with special title *Blood Tax* ("Данак у крви").

The information presented in the book is very short and does not include details. According to the information in the book, the Turks used to take Christian children between seven and fourteen years of age, mostly from Serbs, every third or seventh year, and they were taking them to Edirne or Istanbul, and were forcing them to accept Islam. The children taken with devshirme were educated in state centers according to İslamic rules. They could become janissaries or take part in the elite group of soldiers to protect the sultan or could take part in the state administration. Although children were taken only from Christians, it is expressed in schoolbooks that in some cases Muslim families in Bosnia were giving their children voluntarily. In this way they wanted to ensure important state positions for their children. As in previous textbooks here is also stated that parents were often hiding, marring or injuring their children in order to save them from the devshirme. 'Хришћани су настојали да заштите своје синове од данка у крви на разне начине-сакривање, сакаћење, рана женидба.'(Колаковић & Милиновић, 2016, p. 89) As in the previous contents, Sokullu Mehmet Pasha is shown as an example again here, and it is emphasized that he had a very important role, especially in the renewal of the Pech Patriarchate.(Колаковић &. Милиновић, 2016, p. 87-90)

In Turkish high school books, the theme of the devshirme is described in the third unit called *Warriors and Soldiers in the Process of Statehood* as part of the lesson *Janissaries and Devshirme System*. (Yüksel, 2018) The explanation of the devshirme system begins with an explanation of its origin and the information about penchik system is also given. According to the textbook explanation, during the Ottoman conquest of Rumelia, the number of prisoners increased, and Kazasker Chandarlı Kara Halil Pasha got the idea to take advantage of the prisoners and introduced a penchik system. In this way, every fifth prisoner in the Ottoman State was taken for the army.(Yüksel, 2018, p. 86) The penchik system led to the emergence of a new institution in the military. In the textbooks, it was pointed out that based on the penchik system in the Ottoman state, a new military institution developed the so-called Janissary Corps. When the prisoners started being educated in the period of reign of Murad I, a new institution called Acemi Oğlanlar Ocağı was established. Over time it turned out that the penchik system was not sufficient to meet military needs, so after Ankara war, this system was completely abolished, and in its place a devshirme system was introduced. According to the explanations in the book, the devshirme means taking Christian children, not only from the Balkans, but according to the needs from other areas too, then their education and then transferring to the Kapıkulu troops. Turkish schoolbooks also provide information about which children couldn't be taken away with devshirme, such as Jewish children or children living in cities.

In the same book, information about the implementation of devshirme is also provided. According to this explanation, only boys between 9 and 14 years of age could be included in devshirme, and only in rare cases the older lads were taken too. During the devshirme, in collection of children, the aid was provided by pops, kadis and beys, and all information about children, such as the names of the parents, even the eyes and hair color were written in special notebooks. Again, according to the information in the book, special attention was given to the physical appearance of children and tall children were taken more than others. It is stated that the children were taken to the center of the state where they were accepting Islam, taking Islamic names and these new names were recorded together with the previously recorded information. It is also explained in the book that the children gathered by the devshirme system and janissary who served to the Ottomans had to show loyalty to the sultan and in case of their replacement they had to accept new sultan and swear their allegiance to him. (Yüksel, 2018, p. 88-89)

4. **Conclusion and Discussions**

In the Ottoman Empire between the 15th and 19th century, the devshirme system contributed significantly to the strengthening of the Ottoman military structure. With the empowerment and expansion of the state, the system was implemented more effectively and many children from the Balkans were taken. Considering the situation from the point of view of the Ottoman State, it is a general historical fact that devshirme was a system that provided the benefit to the state. On the other hand, a lot of negative perceptions have been developed among the people in Serbia, and other Balkan countries, where the devshirme system was implemented, and it is understood that people did a lot of things in order to save their children from devshirme. The judgments in the history books used in Serbia confirm this argument. The implementation of this system has caused a negative perception among Serbs living in Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina. It can be concluded that in Serbian historical textbooks the term "blood tax" is used for devshirme and as result, negative ideas about this system have been created. In addition, it is understood from the findings of the study that the content devoted to the devshirme system in Serbian textbooks is very obscure and that it is aimed at ensuring that the system is perceived badly by the Serbian people. On the other hand, the example of Sokullu Mehmet Pasha in the Serbian textbooks, including his renewal of a church to help Serbian people, shows that the contents of the textbooks are inconsistent.

At the same time, Turkish history textbooks provide detailed information about the origin of the devshirme and penchik system, as well as the reasons and needs of implementation of this system. Also, in Turkish history textbooks it is explained that the implementation of devshirme system started after the Ankara War (in Serbian books after 1420). In Turkish schoolbooks' explanations it is not possible to see some negative and hostile aspects about devshirme. In other words, there is no content about how the implementation of this system is seen by other societies. However, in Serbian textbooks, this issue is shown as an example of the persecution, violence and ruthlessness of the Ottomans against Christians. It is pointed out that families, in order to save their children, were hiding, injuring or marrying them young. These contents in the textbooks show that the concepts of hostility still exist in Serbian textbooks. In Serbian schoolbooks, the word "slave" is often used in the description of devshirme. In other words, the position of the children collected during devshirme is expressed by word "slave". The word "violence" is one of the concepts used to describe the acceptance of Islam by children. According to the expressions in the books, children were forced to accept Islam. But in Turkish schoolbooks there is no information about this kind of implementation of devshirme system. Again, one of the differences between the contents of the books is related to the age of the collected children. Thus, in Serbian books it is stated that during the devshirme children between 7 and 20 years old were gathered, while in Turkish books it is stated that children between 9 and 14 years old were taken. In Serbian books, apart from the fact that the devshirme represented a form of Ottoman violence against the Christians, there are no other facts about the implementation of this system presented. But in the Turkish history textbooks it is stated that in devshirme and collecting of children, priests and kadis took part and that all information about children and their families were registered in special notes. What is interesting is that Sokullu Mehmet Pasha is shown as an example in the textbooks of both countries. The help he gave to the Serbian people, especially in the renewal of the Pech Patriarchate, is emphasized in the books of both countries. It means that Sokullu Mehmet Pasha's opening of the Serbian church as the grand vizier in 1557 and appointing his brother Makarye as the patriarch is seen as a common theme in the textbooks. (Afyoncu, 2009, p. 355) This narrative can be seen as an example that the children could find their families when they wanted to. This shows that some of the information in the Serbian textbooks does not correspond to the historical reality.

There is no significant difference between the photographs used in history textbooks of both countries, and even some of the photographs used in those textbooks are the same. In the light of the findings obtained from the study, it is seen that the devshirme system is remembered as a special form of violence against the Christians and Serbs in the consciousness of the Serbian people. Also, this is reflected in the information presented in the Serbian high school books. As educational material, textbooks have a significant impact on students' perceptions of other countries. That is why the terms used in Serbian textbooks in description of devshirme such as slave, violence, cruelty etc. can affect the students' perception and foster the feelings of hostility. It can be concluded that using this kind of terms can create a negative image not only about Ottoman Empire, but also about Turkish people. On the other hand, in Turkish schoolbooks it is not possible to see a negative and hostile terms in the description of devshirme. It is understood that in Turkish textbooks

devshirme subject is presented according to the academic level of the students and that the subject is evaluated in the context of Turkish history, without showing any empathy to other nations and their understanding of devshirme.

In the light of the study, it can be suggested to remove the terms that express the hostility in the history textbooks, and include academic information that would create emotional perception in children. Also, it can be suggested to conduct the research on how the question of devshirme is perceived today in the countries that were a part of the Ottoman Empire.

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