Cultural Sociology of the
MIDDLE EAST,
ASIA, & AFRICA
AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

THE MIDDLE EAST

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SAGE reference
gathered as a part of the devshirme levy. Once collected, the boys were taken back to the capital and given a physical and intellectual examination. The brightest were sent to serve in the palace and eventually grew up to become the administrators, ministers, and governors of the empire. The others were sent to the barracks of the Janissary divisions and were trained and educated to become the next generation of the sultans’ elite guards.

The devshirme may have been levied on a regular basis, but it was more likely enforced according to need. Some sources state that the levies were carried out annually or every five years. However, it is more likely that they were enforced more often during times of need. For instance, during the reign of Mehmed II, when prisoners of war were in abundance, the devshirme was infrequent. The number of boys to be levied was not always the same and was also fixed according to need. The total number of boys taken cannot be ascertained accurately because some of the officers in charge of recruiting them were corrupt and took more boys than they were permitted to take in order to sell the excess for profit.

The boys who were collected by the devshirme were the slaves of the sultan, but formed some of the wealthiest and most powerful groups in the Ottoman Empire. Most of the boys ended up in the Janissary Corps. These men were the sultans’ elite guards. They were well armed and trained. They were also housed in a number of barracks in the palace complex and paid on a regular basis. The most promising of the devshirme boys served in the administration and supplied the provincial governors and viziers of the empire. These men accrued huge amounts of wealth and power.

By the 17th century the ranks of the Janissaries had been opened to Muslims, and frequent devshirme levies were no longer necessary. They became more sporadic and far apart during this century. The last record of a devshirme is one that was carried out in Greece in 1705.

Further Readings

Ottoman Institutions, Millet System

The Ottoman millet system refers to the imperial practice that divided peoples by confessional community between the 15th and early 20th centuries. As of the early 19th century, the millet system based on this practice had become the backbone of Ottoman legal and societal organization. In essence, the Ottoman peoples were categorized into religious communities and not according to their ethnic identity, presenting a nuanced classification in stark contrast to our modern understanding of the term millet (nation). A review of this system helps to understand the functioning of local religious communities in the Ottoman Empire and the evolving nature of relations between these communities and the imperial government.

Each millet possessed considerable domestic autonomy. The Muslim millet was the largest (75 percent of the total population, according to the 1897 census), while the Armenian (Apostolic, Catholic, and, later, Protestant), Orthodox (including Greek, Arab, Bulgarian, and other flocks under the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarch irrespective of their ethnic differences), and Jewish millets constituted the remainder, along with a variety of others. The Orthodox Patriarch, the Armenian Patriarch, and the Jewish Grand Rabbi were the de facto leaders of their respective millets, exercising free rein to legislate and execute civil and family laws, collect taxes, and run their communities independently. The autonomy of any given millet was guaranteed provided its followers remained loyal to the Ottoman government.

See Also: Minority Religions; Ottoman Balkan Conquests; Ottoman Empire (Summary); Ottoman Institutions, Millet System; Slavery.

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The recognition of millets as legal entities led to their co-option into the mainstream of the empire. Millet leaders became natural allies of the government, and churches integrated into the imperial statecraft as ecclesiastical institutions. However, a significant development changed the nature of the millet system in the 19th century: whereas the millets had been inextricably linked to the imperial structure of governance, the rise of nationalism in the empire undermined the existing social order, thus forcing certain millet members to challenge the status quo and assert an ethnically based identity that was fundamentally opposed to an imperial arrangement.

Previously interpreted as an indication of state support for religious pluralism, the millet system became the nexus of criticism directed by minority communities at the imperial center. A new generation of leadership, especially among Greek and Armenian millets, claimed that the system had been oppressing their nations and favoring the Muslim majority. The millet system dissolved with the Ottoman Empire, engendering civil disorder that eventuated in the establishment of new nation-states in the majority areas of minority millets.

The Making of the Millet System
The Ottoman government practiced the most institutionalized version of the millet system ever known in the Balkans and the Middle East. Nevertheless, the system itself was not an Ottoman innovation. The Romans, among others, allowed their subjects, or citizens, to uphold communal laws under the jurisdiction of recognized authorities. For instance, in the 5th century c.e., the Persian kings of the Sasanid Empire regarded the Christians within their realm as a millet and allowed them to coexist with the Zoroastrian majority. Subsequent Muslim empires in the Middle East likewise regarded non-Muslim minorities, mainly Christians and Jews, as millets with definite rights to preserve their religions, communal values, and the free exercise of their laws as overseen by approved religious leaders.

Based on an innately Islamic but vigorously multireligious constitution, the Ottomans modified the millet system in two important respects. First, millets selected their own leaders without any government intervention provided these leaders were apolitical and committed to acting as steadfast state agents. Second, millets were provided with unprecedented domestic autonomy. Besides the legislation, execution, and arbitration of laws and the regulation of a number of taxes, millets undertook the provision of education, the organization of commercial activities, and the management of residential and public property. In return, unwavering adherence to imperial authority was demanded, along with acceptance of the superiority of Islam. In court, for instance, Islamic codes overrode millet laws and customs in dealing with matters involving Muslim subjects.

The Ottoman millet system grew increasingly complex during the Era of Reorganization (Tanzimat, 1839–76). New millets were established, while Armenian and Orthodox millets splintered into smaller communities, such as the division of the Orthodox Church into the Bulgarian Church and the Greek Church. In a matter of four decades, the Ottoman religious landscape hosted more than 15 independent millets, with each vying for greater influence.

The internal division of millets coincided with the penetration of nationalist ideas from Europe. Inspired by the French Revolution, nationalism within the Ottoman Empire was encouraged by rival powers Britain, France, Russia, and, later, the United States. Nationalism stirred a rising generation of millet leadership to redefine their millets in ethnic and anti-Ottoman terms. The older generation of leaders, however, mainly patriarchs, remained loyal to the Ottoman millet system. The ensuing tension between the old and the new millet leaderships saw an alliance between the former and the imperial government, but the eventual victory of the latter.

Ottoman Millets
The imperial census dated 1897 indicates that the following millets constituted the Ottoman population: 75 percent Muslims, 14 percent Orthodox, 6 percent Armenians, 1 percent Jews, and the rest Protestants and others. As these figures indicate, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews were the most visible minorities and thus recognized as the most important conventional millets.

The Orthodox millet was designated by Mehmed II (r. 1444–46 and 1451–81) immediately after the conquest of Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453. The Armenian millet was officially recognized in 1461. Sultan Mehmed II appointed the Armenian archbishop of
Bursa to be the Armenian patriarch. Like the Orthodox patriarchs, the Armenian patriarchs enjoyed tremendous authority over their followers, including the Syriac Orthodox and the Gypsies (Copts in Ottoman terminology). From the 1890s onward, the Armenian millet broke into several congregations, in part thanks to new leadership and in part as a result of American missionary activity as the Protestant Armenians established the Armenian Protestant Church.

In its early years during the 15th century, the Orthodox millet was called the Greek millet. More precisely, it included the Greeks, Albanians, Arabs, Bulgarians, Romanians, and Serbs who professed the Orthodox faith. The Ecumenical Patriarch, or the Patriarch of Constantinople, continued to be the highest authority leading the Orthodox millet. Ottoman regulations likewise allowed Jews to select their Grand Rabbi and to organize their millet.

Indicative of high rates of relative intracommunal fluidity and upward mobility in the ranks of the imperial administration, worthy millet members achieved communal leadership and imperial administrative positions while others became intellectuals and successful merchants. Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–39) indicated how the millet system should work when he noted, “I should only differentiate the Muslims of my subjects at mosque, the Christians at church, and the Jews at synagogue. Apart from that, they are all my sons and daughters.” In fact, millets lived in self-designated quarters with residences and public spaces that included places of worship, separate bazaars, and meeting houses. In local cultures, millets even had certain dress codes indigenous to them. The sultan’s wish did not indicate the actual functioning of the system; Muslims held a higher status by design, as indicated in legal matters that involved Muslims and non-Muslims.

In the long run, the millet system worked arguably well. It guided the diverse Ottoman peoples through centuries of coexistence and helped minorities retain their religious identities. The system dissolved not because it was dysfunctional but rather as a result of a rising tide of exogenous nationalism and the empire’s ultimate dissolution.

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See Also: Colonialism and Mandates; Imperialism; Nationalism; Ottoman Empire (Summary).

Further Readings


