

# Slaves in the ottoman empire

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The Ottoman Empire existed from year 1453 to 1923 and was one of the largest and most well organized empires in world history. The Ottomans were very successful and conquered enormous territories with their large and professional standing armies. The Ottoman Empire was a slave society and slavery was very popular among the Ottomans.

The sultan owned all property and had enormous power, and that was partly because he had so many slaves. That gave him much more control than if he had hired freemen, since slaves were always loyal but freemen could not be trusted in the same way. Islamic law regulates all aspects of the slave's status. It lays down the obligations of masters and slaves and determines the relations between them. The law commends manumission but does not require it. No distinction is made between types of slaves -- such as according to color, function, or origin of servile state. During the early period of Islam, most of the slaves were prisoners-of-war captured by the victorious Muslim armies.

With the stabilization of the frontiers,... this situation changed and many of the captives were exchanged or ransomed. Since the Sharia forbids the enslavement of free-born Muslims and Zimmis (protected minorities) who do not violate the conditions of their status, and since the various mechanisms of manumission and the absence of slave-breeding practices limited the ability of the slave population to reproduce itself, slaves had to be recruited from outside the Islamic world. Slaves in the Ottoman empire in general were brought from Eastern Europe and parts of Southern Russia. In the Islamic world slavery had religious rather than racial connotations, with most of the slaves in Ottoman history being Christians.

The Ottomans had many European and Central Asian "Mameluk" slaves and the elite Janissary troops of the Ottoman army were all Christian-born slaves taken mostly from the Balkans. Male and female slaves in the Ottoman Empire; what their status and rights were, what work they had to do and who they were. Most male slaves did military service. They were either bought from Spain, North Africa or Venice, captured in battle or acquired through devshirme. Devshirme was a system by which young Christians were recruited for the army or the imperial civil service. The sultan had agents that searched for promising Christian children who they then converted to Islam and trained to be Janissary soldiers. But the best of these children, in terms of physique, intelligence and other qualities, were selected for education in the palace school, where they instead were trained for civil service. There were also some slaves who were personal servants or bodyguards.

The sultan had slaves called "agents" who took care of his administrative and financial affairs, and these agents were actually the ruling class of the Ottoman society. They had the authority to collect revenues and their main function was to expand the wealth of the empire. Major slave import routes, 19th Ottoman Empire Female slaves were mostly concubines or servants of their owners' wives. Slave concubinage was the central element of Ottoman reproductive policy and most sultans never married. They did not have to because in Muslim law a child held the legal status of his father and therefore a slave concubine's sons could claim the throne just as well as the sons of the sultan's wife or a freewoman. The slave concubines lived in the harems and if a concubine gave birth to a child she then took care of it until

it, if it was a boy, became about ten years old, or if it was a girl, got married. A boy would then be given a province to govern and the mother would look after him and make sure that he behaved well.

Some female slaves were given as gifts from lower officials to their superiors, for example the sultan, so that the lower officials would gain more status.

There were not many powerful women in the Ottoman Empire, but one called Hurrem, or later Roxelana, has become quite famous. She was a Russian slave who was purchased for Suleiman's harem and she soon became the sultan's favorite slave. They had five children, four of them which were sons, and after a time Suleiman visited only her. About eight years later he married her and Hurrem became the first woman who went from slave concubine to legal wife. An Ottoman source of the early 17th century explains the exemption of Muslim Turks from the Devshirme: " If they were to become slaves of the sultan, they would abuse this privilege. Their relatives in the provinces would oppress the reaya and not pay taxes.

They would oppose the sanjak beyis and become rebels. But if the Christian children accept Islam, they become zealous in the faith and enemies of their relatives. " The government considered the Devshirme as an extraordinary levy on the reaya (tax paying subject) not as the enslavement of its own subjects. There were levies every three to seven years, according to need. (Estimates vary from 1000 to 3000 taken annually) When the youths arrived in Istanbul the best of them were selected as pages for the Palace. ..

They then went to Palaces in Istanbul and Edirne to receive a special training, while the remainder were hired out... to Turkish villagers in Anatolia

before entering the January corps. According to Ottoman sources, Mehmed the Conqueror established this practice which was intended to teach the boys the Turkish language and Turkish customs. ..

. European observes record that the temperament and capabilities of each boy were carefully considered. Those who showed an ability in the religious sciences prepared for the religious professions; those proficient in the scribal arts prepared for a career in the bureaucracy. According to (one writer) who had himself been a page, the Palace education aimed to produce " the warrior statesman and loyal Muslim who at the same time should be a man of letters and polished speech, profound courtesy and honest morals". But its fundamental aim was to instill complete obedience and loyalty to the sultan. Slavery in the Ottoman Empire has been stated as comparatively mild, which is quite true. Great men (such as the sultan) cared much about their own safety and wanted a big and loyal slave household, and therefore they treated their slaves well and with kindness.

Some slaves were actually wealthy and had slave households of their own, which proves that a slave career in the Ottoman Empire could be rather advantageous. People did not look down on slaves as if they were worth less, like it was the case in many other places in the world. Sometimes Christian parents even bribed the government to make them accept their children as slaves, since that meant social advancement for the children. Female slaves were sometimes abused by their owners though, but the mere fact that cases of such problems have been found in high court records tells us that slaves had quite an unusual position in the Ottoman society. Slave owners

did apparently not have the right to do whatever they wanted with their slaves, even though they owned them. Ottomans had no history of segregation on racial grounds and many of those both black and white who were the descendants of slaves have intermarried with the Ottoman population. To sum it up, the male slaves in the Ottoman Empire were janissary soldiers, bodyguards, personal servants or civil service workers.

Many of them were Christians who had been acquired through a system called devshirme when they were young. The female slaves in the Ottoman Empire were either slave concubines in the harem or servants of their owners' legal wife/wives. The slaves in the Ottoman Empire were not at the bottom of the society, they did actually have some status and many of them were wealthy. Slaves could even have their own slaves and gain power in the society. Slaves were accepted by the people and they sometimes had advantageous positions. It happened that Christian parents wanted their children to become slaves and they paid the government so that they would enslave their children. Though, after all they were slaves and they could not decide over their own life or do what they wanted to do, and it can be questioned if it really was something positive to be a slave.

By Recep MAZ