Today, at least some historians accept that we can write a coherent history of Ottoman society, although – as is true of any historical field – certain aspects probably will remain unknowable. Put differently, we now can study groups of people who lived lives of their own, apart from the sultans’ commands ordering them to do certain things and refrain from doing others. Admittedly, private archives are few and often not very rich; by contrast, the documentation in the central archives in Istanbul and in the registers of local judges is overwhelming, both in quantity and in quality. Therefore, it is not astonishing that the process of conceptualising Ottoman society apart from the governmental apparatus is slow and difficult. After all, in today’s Istanbul, Izmir or Ankara, many readers of newspapers and watchers of television shows may believe that ‘the state’ is a superhuman entity, which imposes values next to which all others are irrelevant. Positing, as subjects worthy of study, categories of people without any share in the operation of the state thus may seem a futile exercise. It takes a certain stubbornness to insist that women, slaves and children were part of Ottoman society; and if we want to figure out how this society functioned, some historians at least will need to focus on children, by definition human beings with very limited contact to the state apparatus.

With respect to boys and girls, the task of the social historian is especially difficult. For as Yahya Araz has said in an important article, children were (and are) unable to speak for themselves and in any official procedure, they needed (and need) a representative to speak on their behalf (kendi adına konuşamaz).¹ If we want to establish the history of children as a viable part of Ottoman social history, it thus makes sense to focus on cases where children’s lives as reconstructed by twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians intersect with problems that have occupied these scholars for some time already. Among other questions, the present
volume highlights the transition from childhood to the life of a peasant-soldier and furthermore, the question whether recruits levied for service to the sultans and never manumitted (devşirme) were slaves or freemen. Even more difficult is the question whether workers in state factories and private households had sold their labour voluntarily, as the capitalist model assumes that they had done. Furthermore, a chapter in this volume refers to the demographic transition, which during the 1800s and 1900s resulted in the wealthier part of society having fewer children and investing money and effort in their upbringing. As for the poor, with no money to invest, they had no alternative but to continue producing offspring in large numbers. Finally, the articles in this volume encourage us to discuss the integration of pre-Tanzimat and post-Tanzimat social history, which is a recent phenomenon. Older readers remember that throughout the twentieth century, scholars were often specialists of one or the other period, with a tendency to treat the years on which the relevant historian had not done much work as a quantité négligeable. While this attitude has not completely disappeared, it is now less pervasive, and compared to earlier studies of Ottoman childhoods, the present collection innovates by bringing together specialists on the early modern period and others whose main interest is in the later Ottoman Empire.

**From Children’s Fates to Debates in Historiography: The Beginnings of a Soldier’s Life**

Given space limitation, we can only introduce a few historiographical debates with linkages to the reconstruction of children’s lives. Cahit Telci revisits the vexed question of when adolescence began, when it ended and when a youngster with a hereditary obligation to serve the Ottoman ruler needed to join the sultan’s armies. Certainly, the Shari‘ah posits puberty as the time when a boy became a man, when he might found a family and represent himself in court. However, what other obligations, including military service, did physical maturity entail in the 1400s and 1500s?

To answer this question, at least where the Ottoman authorities are at issue, Telci has used registers listing the members of peasant militias and containing references to the ages of the youngsters on record. These lists show that boys between ages twelve and sixteen, who often had passed the upsets of puberty, were available for inclusion into the army and thus formed a separate category of juveniles, which perhaps we can describe as ‘young men’. Military needs thus overdetermined the stages of youth as ordinary people viewed them.
Foreword

From Children’s Fates to Debates in Historiography: The Freedom or Slavery of Devşirme Boys

Another difficult historiographical question tackled in this volume concerns the personal status of boys levied for the sultan’s service. Were they slave or free? While Islamic law recognises only the two absolutes of slavery and freedom, devşirme boys must have been somewhere ‘in between’. After all, the sultan never sold these draftees, while the same thing was not true of ordinary slaves, including the girls serving in the sultan’s palace, whom the queen mother might send to the slave market in her capacity as the head of the sultan’s harem. Moreover, a slave could not marry a free woman; but a vizier of devşirme origin, while never emancipated, might marry a princess or a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, to the great scandal of certain members of the Egyptian and Iranian elites.

Given these difficulties, Gülay Yılmaz has analysed the status of the boys, whom in the late 1400s and early 1600s the sultan’s officials levied for service in the army. The author focuses on the physical characteristics of these youngsters, recorded in the relevant registers. These descriptions allow her to ‘place’ the boys on the continuum between ‘slave and free’ – apparently, they were much closer to slavery than to freedom.

Therefore, we should not be too optimistic when evaluating the levying process. Certainly, some of these youths might aspire to a future that was more brilliant than that awaiting them in their villages. Even so, perhaps many Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not send their sons voluntarily, as twentieth-century scholars often have assumed. It is quite possible that the administration had placed this obligation on them when they were still Christians and had not released them after their conversion to Islam. This argument coheres with Yusuf Hakan Erdem’s assumption that Balkan subjects of the Ottoman sultans had not necessarily received protected (zimmi) status, but given the right of conquest, they were – at least in principle – slaves. For this reason, the sultan could take away their sons and have these youngsters serve him in a status that was – at the very least – slave-like.

From Children’s Fates to Debates in Historiography: Voluntary as Opposed to Forced Labour

Is it possible to differentiate between voluntary and forced labour when children are at issue? If we admit that such a differentiation is indeed possible – I have some doubts on this issue – we need to delineate the borders
between forced labour and labour provided (more or less) voluntarily. Adults normally accord only limited importance to the wishes of children, at least once the latter have passed the age of five to seven. For once arrived at this stage of their lives, they can no longer use fits of screaming to persuade their parents to do their bidding. It is thus a matter of argument whether the efforts of children employed in workshops are freely given.

In his memoir of a childhood in Istanbul during and immediately after World War I, Irfan Orga has provided a lively account of the feelings of a boy from a once wealthy family, when apprenticed to a barber. As Orga tells us, he was a complete failure, and his relatives discontinued the exercise in short order. We may take this fact as an indication of abiding privilege, for a boy from a lower-class background simply might have suffered a bad beating. After that, he would have had no alternative but to satisfy his master to the best of his ability.

Legally speaking, children who laboured in households and factories might be slaves or free, but regardless of their exact status, they worked because their owners or parents had concluded contracts obliging them to provide service to third parties. Alternatively, the state apparatus needed the children as workpeople and forcibly employed them in workshops and factories.

Didem Yavuz Velipaşaoğlu has studied the latter phenomenon, discussing the textile and carpet factory of Hereke on the Gulf of İzmid, where from the mid-1800s onward, Muslim and non-Muslim children worked for eleven hours a day, six days a week. Given the paternalism of Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) however, the factory campus contained some provisions for the entertainment of these young workers, which they might use if after sixty-six hours of unremitting labour, they still had the energy to do so. Hygienic conditions were often deplorable: in this sense, this was a classic case of the exploitation of cheap labour, known from all industrialising countries.

Among household servants, conditions varied: some of these children had responsible employers and others lived lives of misery. Court records give us a sampling of the worst cases, as the compassionate employers of juvenile household servants did not usually end up in court. However, even if the worst cases, with which the work of Yahya Araz has familiarised us, were a minority – and perhaps even a small one – the problem was the lack of outside supervision. As the girls were often under-age, they could not turn to the courts to complain of mistreatment or exploitation. Furthermore, even if they were old enough to do so, current standards of proof usually prevented the courts from providing any relief. Some of these young women may have felt that they were worse off than slaves.
were; for at least in the late 1800s, the latter might invoke a foreign consul, a governor or a judge and obtain manumission. Parents and relatives were often unable to help as they had lost touch with the girls that they had placed in service: after all, the feminist writer Fatma Aliye, when hiring a young household help for a lengthy period, made it quite clear that she would not welcome any visits of the girl’s relatives to her home. As the servant and her family likely were illiterate, the girl could thus not count on any outside protection, any more than a slave could do.

Child slaves in Crimea must have suffered from similar loneliness and lack of protection. As Fırat Yaşş has shown, Crimea was exceptional in the sense that many children born into slavery lived there, a situation uncommon in the central Ottoman lands due to frequent manumissions. Even after liberation, integration into Crimean society was difficult, as ex-slaves often lived together in separate town quarters. However, for many liberated former child slaves returning home was impossible too, as they had been born in Crimea, raised as Muslims and spoke no language but that of the Crimean Tatars.

Moreover, these people had no connection with their villages of origin – if they even knew from where they had come. As Yaşş recounts in a telling anecdote, in 1675 Ukrainian Cossacks raided a Tatar settlement, taking away some seven thousand Christians in addition to their Tatar captives. After the band had left Crimea, the Cossack leader asked the Christians whether any one of them wished to return, and nearly half the ‘liberated’ captives expressed this wish, explaining that they had made their home in Crimea. While the Cossack commander first consented to let them go, he then sent soldiers after the returnees to kill them all. Probably, some of those who did return ‘home’ found integration difficult as well, and they may have wondered whether there was much to choose between serfdom in Ukraine and slavery in Crimea.

**From Children’s Fates to Debates in Historiography: Wealthier Couples having Fewer Children**

Historians with an interest in demography working on European societies have long known that in wealthy milieus, people had fewer children, a tendency that in the Netherlands and in Geneva/Switzerland was apparent already in the seventeenth century. For a long time, historians of South Eastern Europe have asked themselves what happened in the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire, with Maria Todorova’s analysis of the nineteenth-century church registers of Bulgaria’s Catholic minority a major contribution. However, nobody will claim that the demographic
behaviour of a small minority of Christian villagers can tell us anything about the wealthy sections of Muslim urban society.

Admittedly, the evidence on Muslim families in three Bulgarian towns is of limited use because post-mortem inventories, the only source for this kind of study, only record children who were alive at the time when their parent died. Given the large number of diseases that might end the lives of children, many others must have predeceased their parents, but these youngsters remain inaccessible to the historian. Despite this limitation, the study of Irfan Kokdaş has shown that in Sofia, Vidin and Ruse the tendency of wealthy people to have fewer (surviving) children is observable from the nineteenth century onward. Therefore, the tendencies observed in early modern Catholic and Protestant Europe appear among the wealthy Muslim populations of present-day Bulgaria as well. Unfortunately, the patchy survival of sources does not allow us to discern whether there were any centres in the Ottoman world, from which this tendency originated and diffused. We might hypothesise that Istanbul was such a place. Alternatively, the limited integration of markets in the Ottoman world may have meant that social customs changed in different towns quite independently of one another.

Farewell to ‘Traditional Society’

Before the 1970s, the tendency to separate pre- and post-Tanzimat historiographies had an intellectual underpinning, namely the assumption that before the 1850s, subjects of the sultan had lived in a ‘traditional society’, established in the second half of the fifteenth century and which changed very little until the challenges of the 1800s. In terms of method, this assumption had negative consequences: as researchers assumed that society was static over several centuries, it was acceptable to ‘mix’ data from different periods, a proceeding, which in turn rendered changes nearly invisible.

However, increasing numbers of archival documents becoming available to researchers induced more and more people to doubt the existence of a nearly unchanging ‘traditional society’. When scholars examined the implications of the texts that they studied, they often came to very different conclusions. Legal historians made us aware that in the 1700s, Ottoman sultans and their officials instituted de facto appellate courts, a practice not foreseen by the Shari’ah.10 A historian of education pointed out that in the late 1700s and an early 1800s, a sizeable number of Istanbul girls, perhaps some twenty per cent, had a few years of elementary schooling, and female teachers of young boys and girls were active
as well. In Orthodox communities, embroidering textiles for church use, long a specialty of monks and nuns, from the late 1500s became an activity of lay professionals, among whom women were prominent. Moreover, historians of crafts and guilds have traced changes in practices and organisational structures.

Taken together, all these changes have made historians realise that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, dramatic changes certainly occurred, but the latter were no ‘rootless imports’ but often had roots in changes that had occurred during the 1600s and 1700s. We can assume that what was true of women or artisans was true of children as well, and slow but long-term changes preceded the more dramatic mutations of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Containing a balanced overview over the different childhoods experienced by Ottoman subjects, the present collection invites us to rethink questions of continuity and change, between the early modern period and the years about and after 1850.

Notes

2. Exceptions did however exist, for example Halil İnalcık and particularly Mubahat Kütükoğlu.
3. Toledano, ‘The Concept of Slavery in Ottoman and Other Muslim Societies: Dichotomy or Continuum?’, pp. 159–76.
4. Nur Sobers-Khan has focused on the possible implications of describing the physical appearances of liberated slaves: Slaves without Shackles: Forced Labour and Manumission in the Galata Court Records, pp. 219–78.
5. Erdem, Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and its Demise, p. 3.
7. Toledano, As if Silent As if Silent and Absent, pp. 92–3.
10. Tuğ, Politics of Honour in Ottoman Anatolia.
11. Akiba, “Girls Are Also People of the Holy Qur’an”: Girls’ Schools and Female Teachers in Pre-Tanzimat Istanbul.
Foreword

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