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The Ottoman Conscription System, 1844–1914

ERIK JAN ZÜRCHER

The introduction of conscription in the Ottoman Empire of course was closely linked to the introduction of a European-style army, but it did not coincide with it.

As is well known, the first attempt to create an army which was trained, equipped and dressed in the contemporary European fashion, was made by Sultan Selim III in 1792. His *Nizam-i Cedid* (New Order) army by all accounts was quite an impressive achievement in itself. Starting from a strength of about 2,500, the corps had 22,685 men and 1,590 officers in 1806, half of them stationed in the capital, the rest in provincial centres in Anatolia. When pressure against him and his new army on the part of the old army establishment, primarily the Janissaries, mounted, however, the Sultan succumbed without any attempt to use the considerable strength of his new army and disbanded the corps in 1808.¹

The *Nizam* troops constituted a professional army. They were not recruited on the basis of universal conscription, but rather in a fashion which is reminiscent of the system introduced by Peter the Great in Russia or the *Bunichah* system in Persia.² Governors and notables in Anatolia (not in the Balkans or the Arab provinces) were required to send contingents of peasant boys to Istanbul for training. Those enrolled in the corps remained under arms for an unspecified period.

The reforming Sultan was toppled in 1808, but the arguments for a wide-ranging reform of the army remained as compelling after Selim's demise as they had been before. The great defeats of the Ottoman army against Russia in 1774 and 1792 had shown up its weakness; the Napoleonic wars and especially the actions of the French and British troops in Egypt and Syria in 1798–1800 had made a deep impression on those who had witnessed them; and, from the 1820s onwards, the successes of the Pasha of Egypt, Mehmed Ali, with his French-trained army, served as a source both of inspiration and envy.³

When Sultan Mahmud II finally felt secure enough to take up the military reforms of Selim III in 1826, he first tried to avoid the clash with the army establishment which had been fatal to Selim, by forming his mod-

1. On the reign of Selim III: Stanford J. Shaw, *Between Old and New. The Ottoman Empire under Selim III, 1789–1807* (Cambridge, MA, 1971); on Selim's fall: *ibid.*, p. 345f.; on the *Nizam-i Cedid* army: idem, "The Origins of Ottoman Military Reform: The *Nizam-i Cedid* Army of Sultan Selim III", *Journal of Modern History*, 37 (1965), pp. 291–306.

2. See Stephanie Cronin's article in this issue.

3. See Khaled Fahmy's article in this issue.

ernized army from within the active parts of the Janissaries (most of whom, of course, by this time were not soldiers at all, but shopkeepers who held a Janissary pay ticket and thus enjoyed the privileges of the military ruling class). When this, too, met with stiff opposition and even open rebellion, Mahmud had the Janissaries shot to pieces in their barracks. The next day the venerable corps was formally disbanded (although in some provinces Janissary troops continued to exist into the 1840s) and the forming of a new army, the *Muallim Asakir-i Mansure-i-Muhammediye* (Trained Victorious Mohammedan Soldiers), was announced.

The new army, which was modelled entirely on the earlier *Nizam-i-Cedit* corps, quickly grew from 1,500 to 27,000 men. The army was organized along European lines, with the basic units being the regiment (*tertip*, later *alay*), consisting of three battalions (*tabur*). Once again, this was a professional army manned by volunteers and peasants recruited by the Sultan's officials in the provinces. There was no real system of recruitment, but the ranks of the army would be filled according to need. Each year the requirements of the army would be determined in a decision (*kararname*) of the imperial council and then communicated to the provincial authorities, who were left a free hand in the way they filled their quatum.

Recruitment age was between 15 and 30 years and, once recruited, the minimum term of service was twelve years. After twelve years the soldiers could opt for a civilian life, but in order to qualify for a pension, soldiers were obliged to serve until overtaken by old age or infirmity.

Parallel to the *Mansure* army, a second modernized unit was formed out of the old corps of Imperial Gardeners (*Bostancıyan*) who for centuries had guarded the imperial palaces and the seafront along the Bosphorus. They were now reconstituted as an Imperial Guard, called the *Hassa* (Special) army, whose strength reached about 11,000 by the end of the 1830s.⁴

In July 1834, a further momentous step in the modernization of the army was the establishment of a reserve army or militia, based on the Prussian "Landwehr", called the *Asakir-i redife-i mansure* (Victorious reserve soldiers), or *Redif* for short. Between ten and twelve battalions were established per province, manned with able-bodied men of between 23 and 32 years of age. They trained twice a year and added their strength to the regular army (now again generally known as *Nizamiye* (Regular), which name was reintroduced officially in 1841) in times of war. The establishment was 57,000 in 1834 and after a reorganization in 1836 grew to 100,00 men. During the nineteenth century the main task of the *Redif* was that of keeping law and order in the countryside. To conform with the Prussian regulations of 1814, the *Redif*

4. The army reforms of Sultan Hamhüt II are described in Stanford J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey. Volume II: Reform, Revolution and Republic. The Rise of Modern Turkey 1808–1975* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 41–45 and in Fahri Çoker, "Tanzimat ve Ordudaki Yenilikler", in Murat Belge (ed.), *Tanzimattan Cumhuriyete Türkiye Ansiklopedisi Vol. 5* (Istanbul, 1985), pp. 1260–1266.

had its own separate officer corps, whose members at first were drawn from the younger members of the local notable families (who were supposed to take the role of the *Landjunker* in Prussia) and served for two days a week for a salary, one quarter of that of equivalent regular army officers.⁵

Universal conscription of the modern European model began to be discussed towards the end of Mahmud II's reign and there can be no doubt that this time the role model was very much Mehmed Ali, whose well-trained army of conscripted Egyptian peasants had shown its superiority over the *Mansure* army in Syria in 1831–1833.

The "Military Council" (*Dâr-i Şûrâ-yi Askerî*), which was established in 1937, a year later proposed that a five-year term of military service should be introduced and this suggestion was incorporated in the famous "Imperial Edict of Gülhane", the reform charter promulgated in 1839. The edict noted that up to now the burden of defence had fallen very unequally on different areas and that lifetime service had damaged the population as well as the quality of the army.⁶ The passage in question reads:

As regards military matters, for the above-mentioned reasons these are among the most important. Although it is the duty of the subjects to provide soldiers for the defence of the fatherland, it is also true that up to now the size of the population of a province has not been taken into account and because some [provinces] had to provide more [soldiers] than they could, others less, this has become the cause of all kinds of disorder and chaos in useful occupations such as agriculture and trade. As life-long service for those who enter the army causes loss of zeal and decline in the population, it is necessary with regard to those soldiers who will be recruited in each province according to need, to establish some good rules and to establish a system of alteration with a term of service of four to five years.

This led to the new army regulations which were promulgated in September 1843 under Rıza Pasha. Primarily inspired by Prussian regulations, with some French influences, this established a regular *Nizamiye* army manned by conscripts (*muvazzaf*), who served for five years (later reduced to four, three and – finally – two years); and a reserve army, manned by those who had completed their service with the regular army and those who had drawn a low number in the *kur'a* (drawing of lots). The term of service in the *Redif* was seven years, during which time the reservists were called up for training during one month a year (when this proved too disruptive, this was later changed to once every two years). Each of the five armies (*ordu*) into which the Ottoman Army was divided – the Guard, Istanbul, the European provinces, Anatolia and the Arab provinces – had its own separate reserve

5. Jean Deny, "Redif", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*, vol. III (Leiden, 1995), pp. 370–371.

6. There are several editions of the Edict of Gülhane. I used: [?] Petermann (mit Ramis Efendi), *Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der neuesten Reformen des Osmanischen Reiches, enthaltend den Hattischerif von Gülhane, den Ferman von 21 November 1839 und das neueste Strafgesetzbuch* (Berlin, 1842). The quote is taken from pp. 11–12.

attached to it.⁷ The *Redif* army would continue in this fashion until 1912, when a decision was taken to merge it with the regular army. Due to the upheavals of the Balkan War, this merger only took place in the course of 1914.⁸

The system of conscription was first established in detail under the *Kur'a nizamnamesi* (regulation on drawing lots) of 1848. It put the strength of the army at 150,000 which meant that, with five-year service, the army needed to recruit 30,000 men a year. This quatum consisted of volunteers and conscripts.

Conscription took place through the drawing of lots among those eligible on the basis of sex, health and age. Those whose name was drawn were drafted into the *Nizamiye* army, while the others were relegated to the *Redif*, without first having to serve with the regular army.

The system remained more or less unchanged until the new army regulations proclaimed in August 1869 under Hüseyin Avni Pasha. Under this regulation the army was now divided into three categories: the *Nizamiye* (regulars), the *Redif* (reserve – *Landwehr*) and the *Mustahfiz* (guards – *Landsturm*). The regular army is divided into two classes: those actually under arms for four years are called *Muvazzaf*. Those who have completed this four-year service were then incorporated for one or two years in the *İhtiyat* (active reserve) to serve in their region of origin, where they apparently acted as a kind of permanent “backbone” to the local *Redif* battalion. The total active land army of the empire after the changes of 1869 is put at 210,000, 150,000 under arms and 60,000 in the active reserve.

Those who had completed their service with the regular army, those who had been allowed to return to their homes because they were sole breadwinners and those who were over 32 years of age served with the *Redif* for a further six years, as did those whose name had not come up to begin with. In 1869, the strength of the reserve was foreseen as being slightly over 190,000.⁹

The *Mustahfiz* was the least active, least well-armed part of the army. It was not expected to take the field in times of war, but rather to take over garrison duties and general law-and-order work, when the regular army and the reserve were at the front. It consisted of (relatively) able-bodied men who had done their service in the *Nizamiye* and/or *Redif*. They served for eight years, between the ages of 32 and 40. Total strength was 300,000.

In March 1870 the whole system of recruitment was reviewed and codified in a new *kur'a kanunnamesi* (conscription law), published in 1871. This remained the basic set of regulations until after the constitutional revolution

7. “Redif”, in *İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, 9 (Istanbul, 1971), pp. 666–668.

8. Deny, “Redif”, gives 31 August 1912 as the date of the decision to abolish the *Redif*, on the authority of the official collection of Ottoman legislation known as *Düstur*, vol. IV, p. 615.

9. Belge, *Tanzimattan Cumhuriyete Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 5, p. 1263.

of 1908, but some of its provisions were modified during the army reforms of 1879 (after the disastrous defeat in the war against Russia) and those of 1885–1887, when the German military advisers led by Colmar von der Goltz worked in Istanbul.

The law consists of 77 articles, grouped in seven chapters: General ground rules for the legal draft; Reasons for exemption from military service; Treatment of those who dodge the draft or intend to use tricks to escape from military service; Execution of the draft; Measures to be executed after the draft; Conditions for the acceptance of volunteers in the army; and Conditions surrounding the people who send replacements or pay the exemption tax.

The way the draft should be executed is described in great detail: first, conscription councils are formed in each recruiting district (which coincided with the *Redif* districts). Three months before the drawing of lots is to take place, the population records are checked and lists of possible recruits drawn up. All those who figure in the records are then ordered to appear in person in the district capital. After those who can show that they have a right to exemption on the basis of health or other reasons, have been separated, all those who are going to be included in the draft are arranged around a square or open space. Two bags are put in the centre, one filled with envelopes, each containing a small piece of paper with the name of one of the men on it; the other, with an equal number of pieces of paper in envelopes. Depending on the number of recruits needed, that number of slips of paper in the second bag is inscribed with “*asker oldum*” (I have become a soldier), the rest being blanks. The envelopes are then taken from the first bag and the names read, one after the other, and they are matched with a paper from the second bag. This goes on until all the slips with *asker oldum* on them have been read.¹⁰ Later legislation, such as the military service law of 1916 is even more detailed and specific. Under article 14 of this law all males who have reached age 18 before 1 March in any given year have to report in person and in the company of their village headman to the authorities in the district capital before the end of October. Recruitment starts on 1 May and includes all those who have turned 20 before 1 March.¹¹

It seems, however, that this regular procedure was not always followed in areas (Albania, Kurdistan) where feudal relationships were strong. According to one report, the conscription in Albania was purely a façade and recruits were really sent by their chiefs.¹²

In the reforms of 1879 (which also introduced the division as the basic unit of the army) the term of service with the regular army was brought to

10. *Qur'a qânunnâme-i humâyûnu* (Istanbul 1286/1870–1871, parts 1 and 4.

11. *Mükellefiyet-i askeriye qânûn-u muvaqqatısı* (Istanbul, 1332/1916), articles 14 and 21.

12. PRO/FO 195/2323, Report of 20 June 1909 by military attaché, Constantinople (H. Conyers Surtees).

six years, of which three were spent under arms (at least in the infantry) and three in the active reserve. The period of service in the *Redif* was brought down from eight to six years, of which three were classed as *Mukad-dem* (vanguard) and three as *Tali* (rear). Service with the *Mustahfiz* likewise was brought down from eight to six years. In 1887 the *Redif* districts were reorganized.

At the end of the empire, the Young Turks changed the term of service with the regular army again: in 1909 it was brought down from three to two years for those soldiers serving in particularly unhealthy climates: with the Sixth Army in Iraq and the Seventh in Yemen. Between the Balkan War and the start of the First World War, the term was brought down from three to two years for everyone, at least in the infantry, but as mobilization started almost immediately afterwards this measure was largely theoretical.

THE PROBLEM OF EXEMPTIONS

In introducing conscription as the basis for its recruitment system, the empire of course faced the same problems as European states. Conscription presupposed the existence of a fairly reliable census to determine where the potential manpower could be found. This required a sizeable growth in the state, and especially the provincial, bureaucracy. A census in the strict sense of the word, i.e. a population count of the whole empire at one and the same time, remained outside the possibilities of the Ottomans until the very end of the empire. Only the republic was able to introduce it in 1927. The Ottomans had a tradition of population registration, however, and the first one of modern times (counting only male heads of households) was held in the years 1831–1838. A second registration, specifically for the purpose of enabling conscription to work, was conducted in 1844. As usual counting was impossible in many areas due to lack of manpower or resistance (particularly on the part of tribes), the results were no more than a rough estimate and certainly a serious undercount of the population. European writers working from the 1844 results put the total population of the empire (excluding Africa) at about 32 million, while the much more reliable data from the later nineteenth century, particularly the registration carried out between 1882 and 1890 and published in 1893, give a total of about 17.5 million, which is not incredible given the large losses in land and population of 1877–1878, but certainly represents an undercount.¹⁴ For 1914, at the beginning of the last large-scale war ever fought by the Ottomans, the

13. FO/PRO/2323, Report of 28 May 1909 by military attaché, Constantinople.

14. Kemal Karpat, *Ottoman Population 1830–1914. Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison, 1985); Justin McCarthy, *The Arab World, Turkey and the Balkans: A Handbook of Historical Statistics* (Boston, 1982); Nuri Akbayan, "Tanzimat'tan Sonra Osmanlı Devleti Nüfusu", in Belge, *Tanzimattan Cumhuriyete Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 5, pp. 1238–1246.

number is put at 18.5 million for the core provinces¹⁵ or between 23 and 25 million, if all of the outlying provinces are included.¹⁶

The lack of an accurate census made it especially difficult for the Ottoman authorities to get all those who were liable to serve to take part in the draft. Although some wars, such as the 1897 war with Greece and the 1912 Balkan War did arouse enthusiasm in some places, resulting in quite large numbers of volunteers,¹⁷ under normal circumstances military service was very unpopular. This was due primarily to the length of service. The lack of manpower, especially in combination with the attrition caused, not so much by the great wars, but by the never-ending guerrilla warfare in Albania, Macedonia, the Hawran and above all Yemen, meant that conscripts were very often kept under arms for far longer than their legal term. Some reports speak about conscripts serving for ten years and more.¹⁸ Even when there was initially an enthusiastic response, this tended to evaporate very fast when recruits were faced with conditions in the army.¹⁹ The lack of an industrial base meant that the state had the greatest difficulty in feeding, clothing and equipping its soldiers. Pay was regularly in arrears. The conditions under which the army had to fight in wartime were atrocious. In the 1877–1878 Russian war, in the Balkan War of 1912–1913 and in the First World War large parts of the army were starving and many more soldiers died from cholera, typhus and dysentery than did of wounds.

In the countryside it was relatively easy to go into hiding, even for those who were registered. “Leaving for the mountains” to stay out of the hands of the representatives of the state was a well-established tradition in the Ottoman Balkans and Anatolia. Like other countries, therefore, the empire had a system of heavy penalties for draft dodgers and people who hid or helped them. The regulations adopted in 1909 also included a system of material and personal sureties, whereby those who had no property were

15. Stanford J. Shaw, “The Ottoman Census System and Population”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 9 (1978), pp. 325–338.

16. Ahmed Emin [Yalman], *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven, 1930), p. 79.

17. See for instance the biography of Atatürk’s bodyguard: Ömer Sami Coşar, *Atatürk’ün Muhafızı Topal Osman* (n.p., n.d.), p. 5, describing recruitment in Giresun. However, when the British consuls reported on the reactions to mobilization in their stations at the request of the Committee of Imperial Defence (request by Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary to the CID, dated 25 October 1912), they described a very patchy response: “Salonica: ‘prompt’; Gallipoli: ‘sullen’; Izmit: ‘willing’; Adana: ‘unwilling’; Adalia (Antalya): ‘reluctant’; Alexandretta (Iskenderun): ‘prompt and willing’” (FO/PRO 195/2445, pp. 260–332).

18. PRO/FO 195/2346, Report by military attaché Constantinople (Tyrrell) of 10 April 1910. The same general picture emerges from many eyewitness reports.

19. Reports by the British consuls in Damascus and Antalya are illustrative. The consul in Damascus, in his report of 7 December 1912, says that in the first weeks of October there was much enthusiasm to go to the war. Sixty to seventy per cent of Muslims presented themselves, but after reverses and because of bad treatment, enthusiasm dropped and by the end of October only 30 per cent of Muslims responded. People started to flee and hide. Of a company of 130 regulars sent from Damascus to Aleppo, 40 deserted on the way (PRO/FO 195/2445, pp. 291, 311).

required to have a male family member (father, brother or uncle) vouch for them.²⁰

What made the manpower problem even more serious is the exceptionally large proportion of those exempted from military service. Like most countries which introduced conscription, the Ottoman Empire, too, had a set of regulations about exemptions. Broadly speaking, one can say that there existed two types of exemption: individual and collective. Groups which were exempted were: women, non-Muslims (formally until 1856, in practice until 1909), inhabitants of the holy places, Mecca and Medina, religious functionaries and students in religious schools and a whole range of professional groups. Exemption from the draft was a prime attraction of membership of each of these groups. It is even reported that young men went on pilgrimage to Mecca when recruitment threatened. The regulations of 1871, 1886, 1909 and 1916 all contain provisions about exemptions. The 1916 regulations are particularly specific, with long lists of exempted professions. Some of these (top civil servants, judges, muftis, etc.) are exempted under all circumstances, while others (for instance, lower ranking civil servants, policemen, railway clerks) are exempt except in case of mobilization.²¹

Nomads, even if not legally exempt, by and large were so in practice. Istanbul with its outlying districts (and a population of over a million) also did not deliver a single soldier to the army.²² The Ottoman army, therefore, was an army of sedentary Muslim men, and as over 80 per cent of the population was rural even at the dawn of the twentieth century, primarily one of sedentary Muslim peasants.

Individuals who belonged to those sections of the populations which were obliged to serve could claim exemption if they could show that they were *muinsiz* (without support). The actual regulations are quite complicated and interesting as they clearly reflect the realities of life and family relationships of the time, as in this example:

The father-in-law is not to be considered as the supporter of a husband, but he may be so considered in a case where the wife inhabits the home of the father-in-law of her husband (i.e. of her own father).

A young married man whose wife is dead or divorced leaving children is exempted. The care of the latter is the duty of the young father, even though natural supporters of the young woman exist, as for example, her father, father-in-law and brother. This is in order that the orphans may not be allowed to fall into the hands of the step mother.²³

20. PRO/FO 195/2323, Report from embassy Constantinople containing a summary of the new recruitment law in translation.

21. *Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Qânûn-u Muvaqqatı* (1916 conscription law), articles 91, 92.

22. Ahmet İzzet [Furgaç], *Denkwürdigkeiten des Marschalls İzzet Pascha* (Leipzig, 1927), p. 169.

23. PRO/FO 195/2323, Report of 26 September 1909.

The essential point was that those men were considered *muinsiz*, and therefore exempt, who could not be replaced as breadwinners of their household.

Those who were not without support could only escape conscription by a lucky draw or through payment. Anyone drawing a blank for six years in a row and so escaping service in the regular army was enrolled in the reserve, but any Muslim man liable to serve, could also buy exemption. The first conscription law of 1848 allowed conscripts to send a personal replacement (*bedel-i şahsî*), in other words: they could send someone else if they could force, persuade or pay anyone to go in their place, but the 1870 regulations, while still mentioning personal replacement as a possibility, also detail the way in which service could be bought off. Exemption could be brought for 5000 kuruş or fifty gold Lira (a very considerable sum at the time). Those seeking exemption were not allowed to sell land, houses or tools in order to pay.²⁴

This payment, called *bedel-i nakdî* (cash payment-in-lieu) in the sources, should not be confused with the – much lower – sums paid by non-Muslims until 1909. Those who had bought their exemption, like those who drew a lucky lot, were declared reservists, until a change in the law in 1914, which stipulated that they should serve for six months with the active army and only then be classified as reservists.

The regulations for payment of the *bedel* also found their way into the first military service law of the republic (of 1927), but by then the amount was determined as 600 Lira.²⁵

With the famous exception of the Janissary corps, which had been recruited from among the Christian peasantry (but whose members converted to Islam), primarily in the European provinces, the empire had only rarely employed non-Muslims for its land forces. Traditionally the bearing of arms had been the prerogative of the ruling elite, the *Askerî* (military) servants of the Sultan and when lack of manpower forced the government to start arming members of the subject class (*reaya*) in the form of irregulars (*Levend*) drawn from the peasantry and the town roughs, this use was again confined to Muslims.

The Reform Edict of Gülhane, the first conscription law of 1844 and the regulations of 1871 all specified that all Muslims (*bilcümle ahaliyi müslime*) were not liable to serve in the army. At that time, the idea that non-Muslims should be allowed, or forced, to serve seems to have been as alien as the idea of female soldiers. But the reform edict (*islâhat fermanı*) which Ali Pasha drew up in 1856 in close cooperation with the French and British ambassadors and which formed the empire's entry ticket to the "Concert of Europe", emphasized equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. Application of this principle would have to cease and non-Muslims would have

24. *Qur'a qânûnnâme-i humâyûnu* (Istanbul, 1286/1870–1871), article 70.

25. H. Bowen, "Bedel", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*, vol. I (Leiden, 1960), p. 855.

to take part in the drawing of lots as well.²⁶ In reality, there was very little enthusiasm for the idea on either side. The army feared that an intake of Christian peasants would be a burden to it and that non-Muslims would damage morale. This was a serious point, because, as all observers of the Ottoman army between 1850 and 1918 agree, the fighting spirit of the Ottoman troops was to a very high degree religious. Attacks were always carried out under simultaneous shouting of “Allah, Allah” and “Allahüekber” (God is great). It would be hard to envisage a religiously mixed army doing the same. Most Muslims, especially in the countryside, disliked the idea of Christians bearing arms (one observer compares their feeling to those in the southern United States in respect of equality of blacks).²⁷

Most Ottoman Christians were equally unenthusiastic. By and large they felt themselves to be subjects of the Ottoman state, not members of an Ottoman nation. The idea of Ottoman nation-building (known at the time as the idea of the *İttihad-i Anasır* or Unity of the Elements) always was limited to a small, mostly Muslim, elite.

The Ottoman government, finally, had the strongest incentive of all not actually to conscript Christians. The emphasis on equality before the law in the 1856 edict also meant that the *cizye* tax which Christians and Jews traditionally paid as a tribute to the Islamic state in which they lived, had to go. Although the number of Ottoman Christians went down considerably during the last century of the empire due to the loss of European provinces, they still represented nearly 30 per cent of the population in Abdülhamit’s reign and close to 20 per cent on the eve of the First World War. Not surprisingly, the *cizye* was the second most important source of tax revenue (after the tithe) of the state. No wonder, then, that the state actually preferred that the Christians should pay an exemption tax (first called *iane-i askerî* – military assistance, and then *bedel-i askerî* – military payment-in-lieu) of their own, rather than serve. This indeed remained universal practice until 1909. The *bedel* was much lower than that required of Muslims and just like the *cizye* before it, it was paid collectively by Christian and Jewish communities to tax-farmers and, later, salaried treasury officials.

That the recruitment of Christian subjects into the army was never a serious option before 1909 is shown very clearly by the text of the 1870 regulations. Its first article reads:

All of the Muslim population of the Well-protected domains of His Majesty are personally obliged to fulfil the military service which is incumbent on them.

There is no mention of non-Muslims anywhere, which clearly suggests that in the Ottomans’ eyes they did not come within the compass of the military service law.

26. Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire 1856–1876* (New York, 1973; reprint of 1963 edition), pp. 94–95.

27. PRO/FO 195/2323, Report of 20 June 1909.

Military service for non-Christians thus remained a theoretical option until 1909. This is not to say that there were no Christians in the army – there were, but they were in the officer corps, primarily in the medical corps, which consisted for a large part of Armenian and Greek army doctors who held the ranks of lieutenant and captain.

The Young Turks, who came to power in July 1908 and for whom unity and equality between the different ethnic “elements” of the empire was a top priority, started work on the change of the recruitment law soon after they had suppressed the counter-revolution of April 1909 in Istanbul. In July 1909 military service was made compulsory for all Ottoman subjects. At the same time a number of Muslim groups – for instance, students in religious colleges who had failed their exams, but also the inhabitants of Istanbul – lost their exemption status as well. In October 1909 the recruitment of conscripts irrespective of religion was ordered for the first time.²⁸

The reactions of the Christian communities to the new law was mixed. There was no enthusiasm, but the spokesmen of the Greek, Syrian, Armenian and Bulgarian communities agreed in principle, but with the all-important proviso that the members of their communities served in separate, ethnically uniform, units officered by Christians. The Bulgarians also insisted on serving in the European provinces only.²⁹ This was totally unacceptable to the Young Turks, who saw it as just another way to boost the centrifugal forces of nationalism in the empire – the opposite of what they were aiming for. At grass-roots level, many young Christian men, especially the Greeks, who could afford it and who had the overseas connections, sought to leave the country or at least to get a foreign passport.³⁰

Those who could not leave, change their nationality, or pay the much higher *bedel-i nakdî* (along with well-to-do Muslims), were indeed recruited when the First World War broke out, but the Ottoman government continued to mistrust its Christian subjects to such an extent that almost without exception they were left unarmed. Instead they served in labour battalions, doing repair work on the roads and railways and, especially, carrying supplies to the front.

The result of the extensive system of exemptions employed was that the empire, already far less populous than its rivals, drew less conscripts from its relatively small population as well. Its yearly required intake of recruits in 1913–1914 (when the term of service was still three years) was 70,000 or about .35 per cent of the population. In reality the intake was probably lower. In Bulgaria the ratio at the same time was .75 per cent. Fully mobi-

28. At this time, the measure may well have been largely symbolic. In 1912 only 5 per cent of those liable to serve seem to have answered the call (PRO/FO 195/2445, p. 291) and according to one report (PRO/FO 195/2456/60, yearly military report Constantinople), no Christians were called up in 1914.

29. PRO/FO 195/2323, Report of 20 June 1909.

30. According to reports from Gallipoli and Rhodes in 1912 (PRO/FO 195/2445, pp. 275 and 363.

lized, as in early 1915, only 4 per cent of the population was under arms and on active duty, compared with, for instance, 10 per cent in France.³¹ The actual strength of the army on the eve of the First World War is not altogether clear, but it is certain that it was relatively small by contemporary continental European standards. The reports of the British military attaché for 1910 gives the peace strength as 300,000 and service in the regular army as three years. This means that 100,000 recruits per year were needed, but the actual annual contingent was put at 90,000, of which 50,000 were enrolled after exemptions. This meant that the actual peace establishment was only about 150,000 and the inclusion of large numbers of *Redifs* was necessary to bring the army up to strength. The British report written in 1914 puts the peace strength of the army at 230,000 before the Balkan Wars and 200,000 thereafter. Larcher, on the other hand, states that in 1914 the active army was composed of two classes of about 90,000 each, which would mean an army of between 180,000 and 200,000 men.³² The peace establishment of the Russian army (which also recruited a low percentage of the population, but could afford it because of its sheer size) was five times its size in the early twentieth century. The Austrian army was at least twice the size of the Ottoman.³³

When fully mobilized, the Ottoman army was of course much bigger – this, after all, was the main advantage of the conscription system, but mobilization was painfully slow, taking four to five months to complete (if transport to the front is included). The mass mobilizations of 1912 and 1914 showed up all the inherent weaknesses in the Ottoman system. The slow mobilization of 1912 (mainly due to lack of good roads, but also to confusion and the inability of the armies to absorb, equip and feed the reservists) meant that the Balkan War had been lost before the troops from the Asiatic provinces could even reach the European fronts. With only one single-track railway available for supplies and troop movements, the troops at the front (only thirty miles from the capital Istanbul for most of the war!) were starving and when the Syrian reserves finally arrived the cholera they brought with them caused a massacre among the troops. At the outset of the war there seems to have been very little enthusiasm, but nevertheless a genuine and quite widespread readiness to serve; however, this evaporated quickly under the circumstances. Even during the first days of marching after leaving their depots, the supplies ran out. Troops had to live off the land and large-scale desertions started.³⁴

31. Maurice Larcher, *La guerre turque dans la guerre mondiale* (Paris, 1926), p. 590.

32. PRO/FO 195/2346, Report of 17 January 1910, p. 126; PRO/FO 195/2456/60, Report of 1914; Larcher, *La guerre turque*, p. 590.

33. F. Schrader *et al.*, *Atlas de la géographie moderne* (Paris, 1914), maps 28 and 33.

34. There are quite a few eyewitness reports from the Turkish side of the front in the Balkan War. Among the best are: Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, *With the Turks in Thrace* (London, 1913); and Lionel James, *With the Conquered Turk. The Story of a Latter-Day Adventurer* (London, 1931).

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 again saw a very slow process of mobilization (even slower than that of the Russians). This time it had to take place in winter, which made the whole process more burdensome, especially in Eastern Anatolia. On the other hand, warfare was practically impossible in winter on the Caucasian front and if Enver Pasha had not squandered 72,000 soldiers' lives (out of 90,000) by ordering an attack over the mountain passes at Sarıkamış, the Ottoman army could have been at full war strength in the spring. Once again, the call to arms was answered relatively well, in Anatolia if not in the Arab provinces, but as in the Balkan War, the conditions in the army (payment with worthless paper money, undernourishment, lack of medical care, epidemics of typhus, cholera and dysentery, bad or non-existent clothing and shoes) were so bad that desertions soon started to become a problem of enormous proportions. By the end of the war the number of deserters was four times that of soldiers on the front.³⁵

The conclusion would seem to be that the Ottomans, over a period of sixty years and as part of a more general programme of modernizations, managed to put in place quite a sophisticated system of recruitment through conscription modelled on that of Prussia/Germany, but that by the early twentieth century at least, the lack of infrastructure and an industrial base meant that they could not really cope with the mass army they had so diligently created.

Conscription failed as an instrument of Ottoman nation-building, too. The system of exemptions through the *bedel-i nakdî* and the *bedel-i askerî* meant that the burden never fell equally on all Ottoman subjects. Even at the end, the Ottoman army remained an army of Anatolian Muslim peasants, in a sense foreshadowing the establishment of a Turkish nation-state in Anatolia after the First World War.

35. Erik Jan Zürcher, "Between Death and Desertion. The Ottoman Army in World War I", *Turcica*, 28 (1996), pp. 235–258.