FOUNDATION OF THE OTTOMANS

After the Mongol conquest of Persia, large numbers of nomadic Turks migrated from Central Asia to the Ilkhanate and beyond to the territories of Anatolia (Asia Minor) that the Seljuq Turks had seized from the Byzantine Empire. There they followed charismatic leaders who organized further campaigns for conquest. Among those leaders was Osman, who during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries carved a small state for himself in northwestern Anatolia. In 1299 Osman declared independence from the Seljuq sultan and launched a campaign to build a state at the expense of the Byzantine Empire. After every successful operation, Osman attracted more and more followers, who came to be known as Osmanlis or Ottomans.

Source: “The Foundation of the Ottoman Empire”, Jerry H Bentley, et al., Traditions and Encounters

1. How did the Turkic leader Osman establish his own state and following?

MOTIVATION TO CONQUER

Attacking the infidels (disbelieving enemies) attracted many Turkish nomad horseman… but also attacking and capturing rich Byzantine towns meant more booty and spoil that were distributed among the warriors.

Source: Gabor Agoston, Author of Guns for the Sultan

Many of the early Ottomans were Christians. They joined Osman in a common endeavor, and that was an endeavor, I think in the very earliest stages, to enrich themselves largely by booty and slaves one got from warfare.

Source: Heath Lowry, Princeton University

It would be wrong to call the Ottoman Empire a purely Islamic state. It was not. It was a state that claimed some kind of an attachment, some kind of allegiance to Islam, but combined it with other forms of heritage from the Byzantine tradition or from the Turkic tradition that did not really correspond to Islam. So they always had this very, very pragmatic [practical] approach to Islam.

Source: Professor Edhem Eldem, Bogazici University, NPR News, All Things Considered, 2004

2. According to the first two historians, what was the main motivation for Ottoman conquerors?
3. Considering the three sources together, how can we know that Islamic religious belief was not the primary driving force behind the Ottoman conquests?

SPECIAL SOLDIER SELECTION SYSTEM

Devshirme is a Turkish term translated as the ‘levy of boys’ describing a draft of Christian boys who were enslaved for service to the sultan in his palace and to field his “new corps”, the janissaries. For centuries, government agents would come to Christian villages, and with the help of the priest and church birth records, they would select the best and brightest of the teenage boys. These boys were then dressed in the characteristic red janissary uniforms and marched away in cohorts to Constantinople where they were stripped, circumcised, and selected for further training or sent to Turkish farms for hard labor to toughen them for military service when they were older.

Source: “Devshirme is a Contested Practice,” Kathryn Hain, PhD candidate at the University of Utah

So if you are a King, one of your main problems is hereditary nobles, because they always want to replace you, and they don’t want to give you your money, and they want their ugly sons to marry your gorgeous daughters… The Ottomans just bypassed the problem of hereditary nobles altogether by creating both an army and a bureaucracy from scratch so they would be loyal only to the Sultan. How? The devshirme, a program in which they kidnapped Christian boys, converted them to Islam, and raised them either to be members of an elite military fighting force called the Janissaries, or to be government bureaucrats.

Source: John Green, “Venice and the Ottoman Empire,” Crash Course World History

It was believed that a corps of highly trained slaves loyal only to the ruler and dependent entirely on his good will would serve the state more reliably and efficiently than a heredity nobility, whose interests might compete with those of the ruler.

Source: Leslie P Peirce, The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire, 1993

4. What are hereditary nobles, and why would rulers be worried about them?
5. Who were the Janissaries? How did the creation of the Janissaries strengthen both the Sultan’s army and the Sultan’s political control?

Some of the boys taken did rise through the ranks to become the rulers of Ottoman society replacing the Turkish elite. Christian shepherd boys became head eunuchs, vezirs (political advisors), and military generals. The problem comes when modern scholars look at the incredible access to social mobility and political power provided to these minority boys and conclude that the draft was received passively, if not positively, by the Christian community. An examination of the Greek Christian sources, however, shows that Christian leaders had disagreements with devşirme on four counts; loss of freedom, loss of sons to bury fathers, morality issues, and the eternal damnation of the soul that came with being a circumcised Muslim. Surviving songs also express the emotional loss experienced by individual families. The Christian communities were not passive but took action to prevent devşirme. Desperate to save their sons, some resorted to violence, subterfuge, marriage of young children, fleeing to become refugees, and bribery. Christian resistance to devşirme existed across the Ottoman Empire for centuries. Examining Christian sources provides a much more accurate analysis of devşirme from the viewpoint of medieval Christians than having historians base their conclusions on modern secular values.

Source: “Devşirme is a Contested Practice,” Kathryn Hain, PhD candidate at the University of Utah

6. What negative impact did this Devşirme process bring to the effected populations?

7. What potential benefit could be gained by being taken in the Devşirme?

8. Based on the author’s comments, what issue is being debated by modern scholars?

9. Based on your prior knowledge, would the Devşirme system be a violation of Sharia, Islamic religious teachings and laws? Why or why not?

THE PRIZE OF CONSTANTINOPLE

...Their [Ottoman] aim was not merely political and military. For centuries Constantinople was the largest metropolis in the known world, the impregnable [unconquerable] core of a great [Byzantine] empire, served by a deep-water port that gave access to the sea. Known as New Rome and the Queen City, it had been built to impress, its magnificent public monuments, decorated with statuary set in an elegant classical urban landscape.
Its apparent invincibility and famous reputation made it a great prize. The city was also reputed to be hugely wealthy. While the [Ottoman] Turks had no interest in its famous collection of Christian relics, the fact that many were made of solid gold and silver, decorated with huge gems and ancient cameos, was of importance. Their existence added weight to the rumour that Constantinople contained vast stores of gold, a claim which cannot have been true by 1453. By the early fifteenth century the city had lost all its provinces to Turkish occupation and was totally isolated. The surviving Greek territories of Trebizond and the Morea were similarly surrounded and made no effort to assist the ancient capital....


10. According to Judith Herrin, what was one reason the Ottoman were interested in conquering the Byzantine capital of Constantinople?

CANNONS BIG AND SMALL

Ottoman armies won battle after battle, but there was a fishbone in the Turkish throat: Constantinople. This, the Second Rome, the Christian capital of the Byzantine Empire, lay in the center of the Ottomans' Muslim empire. The Ottomans began their siege and their bombardment of the city the Turks called Kizil Elma, the Red Apple, on April 6, 1453... [Sultan] Mehmed ordered... the most gigantic cannon... it was nearly 7 m long and, according to tradition, made a noise so great that women within hearing had miscarriages. It's stone ball was over four hundred kilograms in weight... The combatants, Turk and Greek, made use of all kinds of [weapons], but it was cannon, Big and small, That dominated the battle... the Turks entered the city on May 29, 1453.

Source: Alfred W. Crosby, Throwing Fire: Projectile Technology Through History

11. What technological innovation allowed the Ottomans to successfully take over Constantinople?
THE BIRTH OF ISTANBUL

In 1453 the Ottomans led a major land and sea assault against Constantinople. Using massive cannons, Ottoman forces battered the city’s walls. After a siege of almost two months, Constantinople fell. The Byzantine Empire no longer existed. Mehmed became known as “the Conqueror,” and, in triumph, claimed the center of eastern Christianity for Islam. Mehmed made Constantinople his capital, which became known as Istanbul. In keeping with tradition, he allowed his soldiers to pillage the city for three days, during which many residents were killed or enslaved. Mehmed then rebuilt Constantinople into a Muslim city. He had palaces and mosques built and even had Hagia Sophia, the great Orthodox Christian cathedral, turned into a mosque. To repopulate the city, he had people moved there from across the empire. Soon, the city was again a major trade center with people of many cultures. [Mehmed even took the title “Qayser-i-Rum”, or Caesar of Rome.]

Source: “Fall of Constantinople”, Susan Ramirez, World History: Human Legacy

After this the Sultan entered the City and looked about to see its great size, its situation, its grandeur and beauty, its teeming population, its loveliness, and the costliness of its churches and public buildings and of the private houses and community houses and those of the officials… When he saw what a large number had been killed and the ruin of the buildings, and the wholesale ruin and destruction of the City, he was filled with compassion and repented not a little at the destruction and plundering. Tears fell from his eyes as he groaned deeply and passionately: “What a city we have given over to plunder and destruction.”

Source: Kritovoulos, Life of Mehmed the Conqueror

12. In what ways did Mehmed retain connections to the Byzantine tradition?

13. In what ways did Mehmed reshape Constantinople according to Turkish and Islamic style?
14. Make a prediction. What do you think will happen in the future for the Ottoman Empire? What do you think its next steps will be, and will it be successful?