

The situation of the Christian in the Balkan Peninsula during the Ottoman Rule. The Role of the Converts to Islam to the Rise of the Ottoman state

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Abstract:

One of the most delicate of South-Eastern History's subjects regards the centuries in which this region was under Ottoman rule. The Greek, Serb and Bulgarian historiographies accentuate the negative character of the Ottoman rule, considering it as a censorship in their national histories. The works of the Romanian historians of older times (but also of more recent ones) often focus on the danger that the Ottomans posed for the Romanian countries North of the Danube. In this paper I intend to briefly and synthetically present the main institutions and governing attitudes of the Ottomans in the Balkans, as well as their repercussions on the Christian peoples of the Balkan Peninsula.

Keywords:

Ottoman Empire, converts, reaya, millet, crypto-Christians

In a tourism guide of old Christian Constantinople, the German historian Rudolf Grulich affirmed:

„The Turkish dominance constitutes, up until the present day, a trauma for the Christian peoples of the Balkans. This past époque is presented by the Greeks, Bulgarians and Serbs only negatively. But does this match the real situation? How did other conquerors of the age behave? How did Muslims live in the Iberic Peninsula after the Spanish *Reconquista*? How did

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the Christian princes behave with their Christian subjects of another confession after the Reform? Wasn't the principle *Cuius regio, eius religio* valid in this case? Weren't Muslims and Jews banished from Spain, Huguenots from France, bohemian brothers and Salzburg Protestants banished from the Habsburgic countries because of their religion? Let us look closely then: How did Christians live under the Crescent?"¹

Of course, one of the most delicate of South-Eastern History's subjects regards the centuries in which this region was under Ottoman rule. The Greek, Serb and Bulgarian historiographies accentuate the negative character of the Ottoman rule, considering it as a censorship in their national histories. The works of the Romanian historians of older times (but also of more recent ones) often focus on the danger that the Ottomans posed for the Romanian countries North of the Danube. However, there are also exceptions. The most important Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga, analysed the nature of the Ottoman dominance in one of his works on the Balkanic wars of the second decade of the past century:

„Was the situation of the Christians within the Turkish Empire the same as it is portrayed in the polemic and propaganda brochures? Was the re`aya subjected to a systematically adversarial [...] abasement for 500 years and in all that time the people dispossessed, ostracized, forced into recreancy, hurt and killed according to the whims of the governing organs...? We must adamantly answer: No. If it was so, with all their admirable organization, undisputedly superior to those of the Christian countries of the centre and West Europe, this domination could not hold for so much time"².

Starting from this quote, in this paper I intend to briefly and synthetically present the main institutions and governing attitudes of the Ottomans in the Balkans, as well as their repercussions on the Christian peoples of the Balkan Peninsula.

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The Ottoman Empire was an absolutist, bureaucratic and agrarian state. At the same time, it did not have a homogenous and centralized administration. The success of the ottomans, over so many centuries, was due to the fact that they accepted the diversity and autonomy of the territories that they held, governing through flexible administrative methods and practices. Of great importance was the fact that the provinces had to pay their taxes to the central treasury of The Porte in time. As Nicolae Iorga affirmed in another one of his works,

¹ Rudolf Grulich, *Konstantinopel. Ein Reiseführer für Christen (= Texte zum Ost-West-Dialog 14)*, Gerhard Hess Verlag Ulm, 1998, p. 92.

² Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria statelor balcanice in epoca modernă*, București, 1913, p. 29.

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„In all places, life was allowed to unfold according to century or millennia old customs [...]. Nobody had to fear for their religion and nationality [...]. Nobody took the land away from the peasant, the shop or workshop from the townsman, the church from the priest, in which the divine Christian mass continued to go on. The qadi only judged the conflicts of his own according to Quranic Law or the conflicts in which Turks or Muslims were involved; whomever wanted was free to address the village elder (*protogeroi*), the priest or even the metropolitan at any time in order to obtain a solution from them”³.

Practically, in the Ottoman Empire took place an interesting cultural synthesis, merging together the concepts of state and governance from throughout the whole Middle Eastern space and that of the East-Mediterranean world (Antique Persian, Arab, Seljuk, Mamluke and Byzantine).

The sources of the Imperial Ottoman ideology and administration were:

- The tradition of the ghazi warriors, from the frontiers with the „pagan” regions. This way, the Ottomans continued the holy war against the Christian „pagans”, started by the Muslim war even since the first decades of its existence. „The extension of the realm of the *dar al-Islam* (the domain of Islam) at the expense of the *dar al-harb* (the domain of war, the domain of those who fought Islam) was the Ottoman’s duty”⁴;
- The traditions of the „Mameluks”. The Sultan governed only with the help of slaves, of non-Muslim origin, wrested or picked from among their people and converted to Islam. This way, the contest for the throne between the different Muslim tribes and groups was avoided.⁵
- The Imperial Arab and Persian-Islamic traditions of the „just governance”. The Sultan was the keeper of the flock (of his *re’aya*), which God entrusted to him. He was obligated to respect the law of *Sharia*, to offer his subjects equality and the protection of a universal and just Islamic community.⁶ The same as the Selgiukid Empire, the Ottoman sultans integrated the *ulema* in the state administration (naming provincial *qadi* and a supreme religious authority – *shaykh al-Islam*).⁷ The Sultan

³ Idem, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*, II, p.197-198.

⁴ Peter F. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule. 1354-1804* (= *A History of East Central Europe V*), University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, p. 8.

⁵ More about the synthesis made by the Ottoman governmental system in H. Inalcik, *Imperiul Ottoman*, p. 119-125 and Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge, 1988 (reprint 1995), p. 359-360.

⁶ Andrina Stiles, *Imperiul Otoman, 1450-1700*, București, 1995, p. 115;

⁷ Halil Inalcik, *Imperiul Ottoman. Epoca clasică*, București, 1996, p. 194, 198-199.

governed with the help of a *Diwan*, led by a „grand *Vizier*”.⁸ At the same time, as we will argue, the Sultan was careful to maintain the „circle of equity” intact, so that every member of society could fulfil his duties adequately⁹;

- The traditions of religious tolerance from the old Persian Empire. The Sultans assured the religious autonomy of the different non-Muslim religious communities, instituting the so called system of *millet* (in Persian, *melli* means „nation” or „community”)¹⁰. Three such *millets* were known: Christian orthodox (led by the Constantinople Patriarch), Armenian Christian (led by the Armenian Patriarch) and Judaic (led by the great rabbi).

1. From the Border Emirate to the Sultanate of Sunni Orthodoxy

The Ottoman Empire was formed out of one of the emirates (the *beyliks*) from the border of the Anatolian Turkic world with the Byzantine Empire, which based their legitimacy on the fights with the „unfaithful” Byzantine soldiers. These border emirates were formed as associations of soldiers (*ghazi*) who fought in the „holy war” against the Christians.¹¹

„Muslims *ghazis* and their Christian equivalents, the Greek *akritoi*, had developed a rough frontier society. This society was the result of centuries of continuous warfare, during which borderlines were never firmly established and the authority of the central government in the frontier region was at best nominal. The resulting no man’s land attracted adventurous free spirits from both sides who made a living from robbing each other, justifying their action as a defence of their faith. Even this curious way of life required rules; which developed as a rough code of behaviour and chivalry, accepted by both sides”.¹²

Peter Sugar pointed out the heterodox character of the religious faith of these military societies on both parts of the frontier:

„Both the *ghazis* and the *akritoi* were „fighters of the faith”, but neither group was educated and sophisticated enough to understand the true meaning of the religions for which they fought. They were fanatical upholders of their beliefs, but those beliefs had little to do with what the Muslim

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 184-185.

⁹ A. Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁰ P. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹¹ P.F. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 9-14; H. Inalcik, *op. cit.*, p. 45-48.

¹² P.F. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

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ulema or the Christian theologians would have recognized as the correct understanding and interpretation of the respective religions. The religions of the frontier – with this Christian and Muslim mixture of superstitions, mysticism, traditional, and in some cases even pagan beliefs – were more similar to each other than they were to officially correct versions of the creeds. These folk-religions began to fuse and became dominated by Muslim characteristics”¹³.

On the Anatolian side of this frontier zone there were several emirates of *ghazi* warriors: next to the one led by Osman I (1258-1324/26; the founder of the Ottoman dynasty, related to Şeykh Edebali) there was the one led by Mehmed Bey of Aydin (who managed to conquer Birgi/Pyrgion in 1308 and to extend his dominion up to Izmir (the old Smyrna). Further North, between the Aydin emirate and that of Osman, there was the Karasi emirate, which managed to conquer Manisa (the old Magnesia). It seems that the emirs of Aydin had more to gain in taking over the leadership of this society of *ghazi* warriors, especially given to the fact that the Byzantines considered them to be most capable in offering them mercenaries for the Byzantine civil war between the emperors John VI Kantakuzenos (1341 and 1347-1354) and John V Palaiologos (1341-1391)¹⁴. However, starting with 1346, the one that took over the task of providing mercenaries was Orhan (1326-1360), Osman’s son. In 1326 he managed to conquer the important fortress of Bursa, followed by Izmit (Nikomedia), Iznik (Nikaia) and Üsküdar (Scutari). In 1345, Orhan managed to annex the Karasi emirate. After conquering Bursa, there was an efficient administrative apparatus at Orhan’s disposal, being thus capable to establish an incipient Ottoman administrative system. On the other side, Orhan took up the Byzantine model, now employing in his turn Christian mercenaries, which he integrated in *yaya* infantry units. This way he ensured a certain attenuation of the dependency on Turkic elements. From these troops, the persons that were willing to submit themselves to a more severe discipline were organized into *müsselem* cavalry troops, while the older troops and less inclined to respect the discipline norms constituted the raiding formations, used in the first line against the enemy (the *akingi* troops).¹⁵

Thus, the resemblance between the two societies of „warriors of the faith” can be observed on both sides of the frontier. The Byzantines used Muslim Turkish mercenaries in their internal fights and Orhan used Christian Greek mercenaries,

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Metin Kunt, „The Rise of the Ottomans”, in Michael Jones (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. VI, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 847.

¹⁵ Stanford J. Shaw, *Das osmanische Reich und die moderne Türkei*, in *Der Islam II. Die islamischen Reiche nach dem Fall von Konstantinopel* (= Fischers Weltgeschichte XV), p. 25-28.

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integrated in his emirate's army¹⁶. The apex of Orhan's actions was building the bridgehead-fortress of Gelibolu (Gallipoli) over the Dardanelle straight in 1354, which eventually led to the Byzantine counter-reaction, the removal of John VI from the throne.

Orhan's son, Murad I (1360-1389) continued the Ottoman expansionist policy. In 1361 he conquered Adrianopolis, the capital of Byzantine Thrace, that later became, under the name of Edirne, the second Ottoman capital. Because Byzantium's granary was precisely on the valleys of Thrace, the emperor John V had to accept Ottoman vassalage and pay tribute. The new direction of expansion, led by Murad I, targeted the Slavic states of the Balkans, grinded by an old rivalry: Bulgaria and Serbia defeated in 1371 on the river Marica (at Ermenen/Ormenio). The Balkan states thus entered in the Ottoman vassal system, next to the remains of the Byzantine Empire. For the Ottomans, the vassalage system had the advantage of assuring the military control, in the context of a minimal opposition and without the need of constructing a costly administrative system. During the next years the military campaigns continued both towards East and South (Macedonia and Greece) and North. Monastir was conquered (1382), Sofia (1385), Niš (1386) and Thessaloniki (1387) followed¹⁷. The decisive battle was fought at Kosovo Polje (1389). The Ottomans managed to defeat the Christian Balkan armies but the Ottoman Sultan Murad I was assassinated. His son, Beyazid I Ildirim then annexed Bulgaria (1393 and 1396) in order to avenge the betrayal towards his father; at the same time, annexed several Turkish emirates from Anatolia: Aydin, Saruhān, Menteše, Hamīd, Germiyān, Kastamonu and Karaman (Konya - 1397), banishing their emirs. Beyazid I managed to face the great anti-Ottoman Christian crusade at Nicopolis (25th of September 1396), however, not the campaign of the Uzbek Timur Lenk (Tamerlan). The former managed to take the Ottoman sultan prisoner in the battle of Ankara on the 20th of July 1402, the cause being the already obvious identity crisis of the Ottoman state, one that I will come back to later¹⁸.

While Osman was the military leader of a semi-tribal society being an equal to the other aristocrats in the internal life of his tribe, his descendants gained an ever greater authority, rising above the Turkish aristocracy. Because of the expansion of the controlled territory, its form of administration was also modified, of

¹⁶ Marlene Kurz, „Christen unter islamischer Herrschaft: die *zimmi*-Verwaltung im Osmanischen Reich“, in *Christen und Muslime.... Interethnische Koexistenz in südosteuropäischen Peripheriegebieten* ed. Thede Kahl, Cay Lienau (= *Religions und Kulturgeschichte in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa* 11), LIT, Wien Berlin 2009, p. 89-90.

¹⁷ Anthony Bryer, „Byzantium: the Roman Orthodox world“, in Christopher Allmand (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. VII, Cambridge University Press, p. 777-778.

¹⁸ P. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 20-23; Nicolas Vatin, „Ascensiunea otomanilor (1362-1451)“, in *Istoria Imperiului otoman* (Edit. Robert Mantran), București, BIC ALL 2001, p. 33-50.

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course, within the Byzantine models that existed at the moment of the conquest. Many Byzantine officials put themselves in the employment of their new masters, being disposed even to convert to Islam. On the other hand, Murad I and Beyazid took up, through the Seljukids, the classical Muslim imperial inheritance, especially its institutions: the *Sunni* Islamic orthodoxy (in the place of the heterodox religiousness of the first Osman age), the *divan* led by a *Vizier* (most of the members of the *divan* belonged to the Turkish aristocracy) and the de-centralized system of cultivation and exploitation of the land, the *timar* system¹⁹. Thus, in the second half of the 14th Century, the nature of the Ottoman state came to know significant changes, embracing Byzantine and Seljukid traditions, where the former ones were predominant.

2. The Role of Christians and Christian Renegades Converted to Islam, in the Ascension of the Ottoman Empire

As we have argued, Christian mercenaries joined Orhan, forming the *yaya* infantry troops (the second line of the front, next to the *müsselem* cavalry troops), while in the first line there were the raiding formations (especially feared) of the *akingi*.

The links between the first Ottomans and the Christians did not, however, stop here:

„Among Orhan’s wives were Theodora, the daughter of Stefan IV Uroš, the ruler of Serbia, and Maria, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor, John VI Cantacuzene; one of Murad I’s wives was the daughter of Emperor John V Paleologos, and another, Tamara, was a Bulgarian princess whose father, John Alexander II Shishman, ruled from Trnovo. Among the wives of Bayezid I was the daughter of John Hunyadi (Maria), Lazar I of Serbia (Despina), Louis, Count of Salona (Maria), and another unnamed daughter of the emperor John V. Mehmet I blamed Christian influence on policies for his father’s failures and gave up marriage alliances with Christians. However, one of Murad II’s wives, Mara, was a Christian princess, the daughter of George Brancović of Serbia, and among Mehmet II’s numerous women we

¹⁹ The *Timar*-ul was a conditioned feud, granted to a military leader that had the „obligation to maintain a certain number of cavalymen [...]. This led to the creation of a powerful military force in which the main role was that of the provinces” (M. A. Mehmed, *Istoria turcilor*, București, 1976, p. 136). „The term *timar* is of Persian origin and means „to care for something”. The institution of *timar* is of pre-Ottoman origin; for the Ottomans, the attribution of a *timar* obligates its possessor, apart from the mandatory military service to that of maintaining the *timar* and collect the appropriate revenues and taxes” (Nicoară Beldiceanu, „Organizarea Imperiului otoman (sec. XIX-XV)”, in *Istoria Imperiului otoman*, p. 112, nota 1). So, *timar* continues the old *iqta*’ from the Seljukids and the *pronoia* from the Byzantines. See also, H. Inalcik, *Imperiul otoman.*, p. 207-222.

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find several noble Christian ladies including a Palaeologos and a Comnena. These marriages would not be important if they did not denote certain policies dealing with the treatment of the European provinces”.²⁰

On the other hand, these matrimonial relationships also had consequences on the configuration of the Ottoman institutions:

„Given the fact that the Ottomans began to develop their own institutions, the members of these Christian entourages gained an ever more overwhelming influence in the configuration of the Ottoman court ceremonies. Under these influences, Murad and Bayezid distanced themselves from the simple and nomadic stance of emir of their predecessors and started to hide away from their own people, behind complicated Byzantine hierarchies and ceremonies”.²¹

As Nicolae Iorga showed, the matrimonial links between the great Christian imperial and knezial families on one side and Turks on the other, were not limited only to the Ottoman Court.

„Only a part of the men in charge of the Ottoman Empire were of Turkish descent. However, the sultans could not use Christians in the service of the state, although there was no apparent hate against them. Quite the contrary, the Christians and the Turks were bound through the numerous matrimonial links. Empress Eudokia, the daughter of Constantine Dragaš²² and wife of the Byzantine Emperor (Manuel II Palaiologos) was formerly married to a Turk, having her own Muslim children²³ [...]. Often times, Byzantine princes like John VII were seen in the Ottoman camp as welcomed guests. Through two Byzantine marriages, Osman’s descendants managed to penetrate the circle of recognised dynasty; other Greek leaders followed the example of the Cantacuzins and Paleologs. The Imperial family from Trapezunt did not consider that it lowered itself when it married its high ranked orthodox girls with great Turkish leaders from the region [...]. For a long time, Turkish traditions dwelled in Constantinople; on the *Hippodrom* in front of Saint Sofia, the imperial princes could delight themselves watching Ottoman warrior games. The Ottoman rulers were not seen as barbarian or

²⁰ P. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 15-16.

²¹ Stanford J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 37-38.

²² Constantine Dragaš (Dejanovic) was the knyaz of (today Kjustendil), situated in the South-West of Bulgaria and actual Macedonia. He perished in the Battle of Rovine (17th May 1395), fighting as a vassal next to Bayezid the 1st and Serbian knyaz Lazar.

²³ Actually, Eudokia was the mother of Constantine Dragaš; his daughter’s name being Helena, being the mother of the last two Byzantine emperors: John VIII (1425-1448) and Constantine XI Dragases (he thus took the name of his mother; 1448-1453).

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feared rulers by the Rum Christians but quite the contrary, as just monarchs, who continued the old rule of the Byzantine emperors, even if not under a Christian form, being thus dignified to the title of Basileu or Tzar [...].

Of course, the two societies, the Turk and the Balkanic-Christian one, were only different concerning religion. If the Ottomans had no reason to renounce their faith, some Eastern Christians easily decided to convert to Islam [...]. Once with their religion, the renegades also modified their political orientation; many times they did not even think about their conationals and the former did not have any expectations from the renegades [...]. Only their tongue they did not lose, the same as the customs that they continued to practice. The number of new Ottomans of foreign tongue was so great, that a prisoner of war that remained for a long time in Turkey, country which he left only in 1458, could write these memorable lines: „One can barely hear the Turkish tongue around the sultan, because the whole Court and many of the dignitaries are renegades. Those Turkish born had only been provisioned some religious dignities.”²⁴

To these willing renegades a new category was added, that of those recruited by the Ottoman authorities from among the Balkan Christians. It is the case of the institution called *devşirme* (i.e. recruitment). This practice is known in the Balkan historiography as the „tribute of blood” (in Greek, *paidomazoma*, i.e. harvest of children)²⁵. Once in a couple of years, Ottoman officers (that, they themselves came from among the *devşirme*) visited the Christian villages and picked young men aged 8-22. These were considered to be slaves of the Porte (*kapikulari*), converted to Islam and then educated in Ottoman schools. The chosen ones had the chance of evolving on the social ladder of the Empire. The Muslims did not have this chance because in the Islamic juridical system, the Muslims could not become slaves. Thus, even if young Turkish peasants had the physical and intellectual qualities needed, they could not climb the social ladder of the Empire, remaining simple peasants (that is why, some documents mention attempts to bribe the officers, made by Christian and Muslim peasants in order to get their children recruited).²⁶ “The method was unknown in earlier Islamic practice, and almost certainly illegal from the point of view of shariat Islamic law”.²⁷

²⁴ N. Iorga, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches...*, I, p. 476-478.

²⁵ Anthony Bryer, art. cit., p. 777.

²⁶ A. Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 64-67; P. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe*, p. 55-59; H. Inalcik, *op. cit.*, p. 168-171. The system was abolished toward the end of the XVIIth Century. Until then, according to P. Sugar, it affected the fate of over 200.000 young Balkans.

²⁷ M. Kunt, art. cit., p. 860.

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The beginning of these practices dates from the time of Murad I, who was interested in forming a new army that comprised *yeni ceri* (jannisaries, infantry troops), while the owners of *timars* in the provinces (*timariotes*) provided the cavalry troops (*sipahi*).

During the time of sultan Bayezid, the *devşirme* knew an ever greater importance, the same as that of willing renegades. The distancing of the sultan from the old Ottoman governing traditions (of the *ghazi* warriors) led to the catastrophic defeat by Timur Lenk's army in the Battle of Ankara²⁸:

„Bayezid was very unpopular among several elements of Turkish society and it is well known that he lost the Battle of Ankara because only his Christian forces remained loyal, while numerous Muslim units deserted during the fight. The *ghazis* resented his highhanded „illegal” treatment of fellow Muslim princes. The leading Turkish families' descendants of the first successful *ghazi* leaders and of those who allied themselves with the Ottomans early and had achieved wealth and leading positions, resented the sultan's increasingly „Byzantine” tendencies: the growing centralization of power, a court that was more and more „Imperial”, and several new influences including slaves in the ruling and decision-making process, all of which diminished their position. Both of these groups accused Bayezid not only of abandoning the *ghazi*-tradition, but even of being a bad Muslim, because he was too strongly under the Christian influence of his mother, wife, and European friends. Bayezid was certainly not interested in changing his faith, but he desired to become an universal ruler and his interest in the eclectic religious tendencies then fashionable made him somewhat more tolerant of other religions than was permissible under the regulation of strict High Islam. At the same time he was eager to diminish religious antagonisms”.²⁹

The rivalry between the old Turkish aristocracy and the renegades (willing or recruited through the *devşirme* system) stood at the base of the evolution of the Ottoman state after the fall of Bayezid I in his captivity and until the conquest of Constantinople. In 1402, the Ottoman state was in decomposition; in Anatolia the old Turkish emirates had reappeared under Mongolian suzerainty, led by the sons of Bayezid and in the Balkans, the Christians vassals were inclined to shake off the Ottoman supremacy, although, as Peter Sugar indicates, there was a layer of merchants (who enjoyed a hefty support from the population) interested in the re-establishment of the Ottoman state:

²⁸ Stanford J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 42;

²⁹ P. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 23-24.

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„On the higher social level there were the important commercial interests. These persons were eager to re-establish „normal” conditions. They were not hostile to those „Byzantine” features that not only favoured productions and trade, but also made foreign business connections possible. For them the reunification of Western Anatolia, through which numerous important trade routes led, was of prime importance, even if it involved the re-absorption of their own lands and the Turkish principalities into the Ottoman state. Small in number but without a firm religious commitment, this element needed mass support. It found such support mainly in Europe among those who were dissatisfied with centuries of religious strives and persecution and who, although they found Ottoman practices preferable to what had preceded, wanted to go further, to an elementary proto-democracy that included religious equality and freedom. This element played an important role in the civil war that restored the Ottoman Empire. The significance of this fact is enormous. The extremely elitist and hierarchal Ottoman State owed its rebirth to grass-root support. Although led by Muslim families, often of European mainly Greek origin, this faction did not attempt to strengthen Byzantium or recreate the various Balkan states. Rather, it tried to rebuild the traditional Ottoman domain”.³⁰

While the Balkan vassals supported Bayezid’s older son, Süleyman Şah (with his residence at Edirne), Mircea the Old supported the younger son, Musa³¹ (with his residence at Bursa; he succeeded in eliminating Süleyman in 1411 and almost managed to reunite the European part of the Ottoman state with the Asian one). However, the Turkish emirs from Anatolia successfully supported the third son, Mehmet, in exchange for his promise to revert to the old traditions of the *ghazi* warriors and to eliminate the institution of *the Porte’s slaves – Kapikulari*, considered as un-Islamic. Despite this fact, Mehmed I (1413-1420), the restaurateur of the Ottoman state, managed to maintain the *janissary* troops (as a personal guard), without extending them though. The sultan Murad II (1420-1451) knew how to capitalize on the rivalry between the two groups, thus sometimes supporting the renegade camp, to which he offered numerous *timars* in the Balkans. The main stakes in this rivalry were the continuity of the European conquests. Indeed, given the fact that an expansionist policy within the Balkans assured a strengthening of the *devşirme* camp in face of the Turkish one, the renegades supported the organization of new campaigns in Europe. On the other hand, the Turkish aristocracy radically modified its options from the beginning,

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

³¹ Tasin Gemil, *Romanians and Ottomans in the XIVth – XVIth Centuries*, Encyclopaedia Publishing House, Bucharest 2009, p. 121-131.

resisting any expansion in Europe until the integral incorporation of the territories conquered by the Ottoman state.³²

In 1434, Murad II once again started his campaigns against Serbia, Hungary and Wallachia. He conquered Serbia (with the exception of Beograd), which was annexed in 1439 and split into *timars* in favour of the renegades. The *akingi* raiding troops were sent in Wallachia and Hungary (Transylvania) but were defeated by Iancu of Hunedoara (John Hunyadi). The campaign of the latter followed in the Balkans (conquering Sofia and Niş, even threatening the Ottoman capital of Edirne). Murad II still managed to beat Hunyadi at Izladi (Zlatica), on the 24th of November 1443. Notwithstanding, both parties decided to sign an armistice. At the request of an ever more insistent Turkish aristocracy, the sultan decided to sign a peace with Hungary in June 1444, in which Serbia was declared to be independent and Wallachia was offered to Hungary. Then, Murad II also concluded a peace treaty with the Karaman (Konya) emirate, after which he abdicated in favour of his son, Mehmed II Fatih (Mohamed the Conqueror) and decided to retreat to a life of contemplation in Anatolia.³³ However, at the Pope's pressure a new anti-Ottoman crusade was organized to which Hungary, Venice and Serbia rallied. The last two defected though, fearing not to spoil their relations with the Ottoman Court. Thus, Venice delayed in blocking the Bosphore, permitting the deployment of Ottoman troops (with Murad II returned to command them) from Anatolia to the Balkans and the despot Gheorghe Brancovici of Serbia refused to militarily support the crusader troops. These were excruciatingly defeated at Varna (on the 10th of November 1444), which benefited the *devşirme* against the interests of the Turkish aristocracy.³⁴

Sultan Mehmed II was supported by the renegades even from the beginning and after taking power (in 1451), after the death of Murad II), decided to conquer Constantinople. Again, the rivalry between the Turkish aristocracy and the *devşirme* surfaced. While the first attracted attention on the impossibility of conquering the great city, the renegades supported the intention of the young sultan. The conquest, on the 29th of May 1453, of Constantinople inaugurated a new époque in the history of the Ottoman empire:

„Within the empire, it meant the beginning of the end of the Turkish aristocracy's dominance. Candarli Halil Paşa lost his office of Great Vizier and together with many of his supporters (who had their fortunes confiscated) they were arrested for the partially true reason that their opposition to the conquest of Constantinople was due to their treacherous relations with

³² Stanford J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

³³ Tasin Gemil, *op. cit.*, p. 154-162.

³⁴ Nicolas Vatin, *art. cit.*, p. 64-67.

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Byzantium. The *devşirme* now obtained the possibility to take over the political leadership, in tune with their military and financial position that they gained over so many years".³⁵

As Tasin Gemil writes,

„Mehmed II, the sultan`s slaves became preponderant in the Empire as a whole, while ancient aristocratic groups, such as a powerful families at the borders of Rumelia and the Turkish aristocracy of scholar-dignitaries declined in importance. Significantly, immediately after the conquest of Constantinople, Mehmed II ordered the execution of the Grand Vizier Çandarlı Pasha, thus ending the primacy of the Turkish aristocracy in Ottoman leadership. In addition, after 1453, most of the grand viziers were of Christian-slave origin".³⁶

Indeed, from the 71 great Viziers between the years 1453-1676, only 13 were of Turkish origin (most of them being sons of renegades), while 22 were of Slavic origin (Serbs, Bosnians, Croatians), 20 of Albanian origin, seven of Greek and nine of other origins.³⁷

As a consequence, we must distinguish between the terms *Turk* and *Ottoman*, which are mistakenly took as one and the same by many people.³⁸ In the classical époque of the Empire, the majority of the Turks were not Ottomans and the majority of the Ottomans were not Turks. The Ottomans represented a social class, the leading elite of the state, both in Istanbul and in the administrative-territorial units. In the empire`s golden era, most of the Ottomans were of European origin (Greeks, Serbs, Albanians, even Italians, Hungarians, Germans, French but almost never Romanians), born as Christians and converted to Islam, with a high degree of education (most of them knew Persian and Arabic), *slaves of The Porte* but with a lot of power and wealth.³⁹

³⁵ Stanford J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁶ Tasin Gemil, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

³⁷ This information was calculated after M. A. Mehmed, *Istoria turcilor*, p. 382-289. It is not surprising that the Slavic language was the second one spoken at The Ottoman Gate (N. Iorga, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, III, p.188). Through the *devşirme* system the birth of a leading class that could betray the state out of power or clan interests was avoided. All the Ottoman dignitaries being slaves, they were obligated, with the price of their life, to be loyal to the sultan. The former had the right of life and death over them.

³⁸ E.g. Ernst Christoph Suttner, „Zur Rechtslage nicht-muslimischer Volksgruppen im europäischen Teil des Osmanischen Reichs“, in *Christen und Muslime....*, p. 75-83. Suttner writes that the converts became „Turks“.

³⁹ From an ethnic point of view, „the majority of the Turks were not Ottoman and the majority of the Ottomans were not Turks“ (A. Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 7-8).

Reverting to the *devşirme* system,

„it is simple to condemn it, because it imposed, on one side, the rupture from one's family, country and religion as a pre-condition for the advancement in the service of the state and on the other the conversion to Islam as the main condition to enter the dominant class. These conditions, however, did not constitute anything but the natural manifestations of that particular society, because in Ottoman society, just like in Europe, religion was, in those times, one of the most important things in the life of the individual. Religion was not only a person's or a group of person's expression of their convictions regarding the life..., but was the mandatory guarantee of a just behaviour, of the correct positioning of the person within life's domains. The people spoke, acted, worked, got married, bought, sold, inherited and died observing the prescriptions of their religion. Their religion was manifested through the way they spoke, the clothes that they wore. Man's whole existence was expressed through religious forms, being determined by them. Thus, it was very natural that the changes in the social status be followed by a change in the religious one. Equally as natural, a change in religion was for each of them a means of gaining the characteristics that opened the entrance in another class. In many of the cases the conversion only took place at the surface; that which was important was obtaining the necessary conditions for advancement, while the old convictions and traditions, as well as the family ties, although kept secret, remained just as powerful and important”.⁴⁰

Genuinely, most of these renegades (willing or through the *devşirme* system) were all the time conscious of their Christian origin. In the last years of his life, the Great Vizier Mehmed Sokolli boasted with his supposed origin from the family of Serbian despots. The fact that before being recruited in the *devşirme* he was a beadle, explains his inner attachment for the people and the Church he was born into, thus in 1557 he reinstated the Ipek Serbian Patriarchate and named his brother Macarie as Patriarch.⁴¹

3. The Absolutism of the Ottoman Sultans

The Ottomans brought back in actuality the old greatness of the Islamic sovereign, the *shepherd of the heard* entrusted to him by God. More than this, after the conquest of Constantinople, the intention of Mehmed II Fatih was that of uniting „in his own person, the Islamic, Turkish and Roman traditions of universal

⁴⁰ Stanford J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 90-91.

⁴¹ Nicole Iorga, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*, III; p. 167.

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sovereignty". Six decades later, after the defeat of the last Mamluke sultan, Selim I gained the title of „servant of the cities Mecca and Medina" in the Alep mosque and in the presence of the „shadow caliph" al Mutawakkil III, practically becoming the most important leader of the Muslim world (this is why he brought the saint relics of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Istanbul). The descendant of Selim I, Süleyman the Magnificent, emitted claims over the *Supreme Caliphate*, using the title of *Caliph of The Muslims*.⁴² Through this, he reunited within the person the spiritual authority of the caliph and the secular one of the sultan, wishing to resurrect the old glorious times of the first caliphs. At the same time though, he „invested the institution of the caliphate with a new meaning, rooting his concept not on classical doctrine but on the principles of the *ghazawat* – The Holy War".⁴³

However, „when Suleyman I assumed the quality of defender of the Islamic world, this was only an aspect of his universal policy. In Europe, he refused to recognise the right of Charles V as an emperor, acknowledging him only as King of Spain and encouraging any forces that opposed Charles's sovereignty claims over all of the Western Christendom".⁴⁴ Thus, Süleyman considered himself the legitimate descendant of the Roman Emperors and Byzantine Emperors.

Because they considered themselves defenders of the Islamic religion, it is self-explanatory that the Ottoman sultans put *Sheriat* at the base of the state. However, unlike the sovereigns of the previous Islamic empires, the Ottomans did not limit themselves only to using legal traditions but codified them in the so-called *Kanunname*-s, term that could be translated as „Books of Laws". It's not surprising that the first that ordered that these codifications be put together was Mehmed II the Conqueror. On the basis of his universal sovereignty claim, he decided to rupture the tradition and also recognize, next to the religious Islamic law, a code of laws aimed at resolving issues of a political-stately and social nature, which were not taken in consideration by the *Sheriat*. The term *kanon* is therefore put forward, a term which designates the Christian religious norm and was used by the Ottomans in the sense of civil law, state law: The Sultan commands the codifying of the Ottoman *kanuns*, because these provisions are essential for prosperity in the business (affairs) of the world and for the adjustment of the business (affairs) of the subjects.⁴⁵

The first *kanunname* was edited soon after the fall of Constantinople and was aimed at regulating the organization of the *re'aya*-ls (especially taking in account

⁴² The last representative of the Abbasid dynasty, the shadow caliph al-Mutawakkil III, received permission to return to Egypt from Süleyman the Magnificent, where he died in 1543 (A. Clot, *op.cit.*, p. 287).

⁴³ H. Inalcik, *op. cit.*, p. 109, 79 și 110.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

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the differences between the Muslims and non-Muslims). In 1476 a second *kanunname* appeared, which dealt with the principles of state organization, indicating the superior functionaries of the Empire's and the Palace's leadership, along with the attributes, advancements, ranks, incomes and life revenues, aspects related to protocol and their punishments. These two *kanunname*, together named *kanun-i osmani* were subsequently completed by the next sultans.⁴⁶ As Tasin Gemil writes,

“the famous *Legal Codes – Kanunname* of Mehmed II institutionalised the sultan's centralised and absolute authority. . These *Kanunname* were in fact a synthesis of earlier Ottoman legal and administrative codes. Although they underwent changes later, especially in the age of Suleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566), the legal codes of Mehmed II remained the administrative foundation of the Ottoman Empire”.⁴⁷

As H. Inalcik points out, the Ottoman *Kanun*, formulated through *fermans* – „any of the sultan's orders is the sultan's law” – was such a set of regulations that each of the sultans provisioned according to the circumstances. The *fermans* thus always confirmed a new leader that ascended to the throne. The fundamental, immutable law was the *Sheriat* (the Turkish form of the Arab term *shari'ah*), the religious law of Islam. The *fermans* always contained a formula that mentioned that the provision was pursuant to the *Şeriat* and to the *kanun* that was established beforehand.⁴⁸

It is important to mention here that

„the history of the Ottoman Turks sufficiently establishes the fact that the sultans exercised the legislative right according to times and places; as another authority put it down, they exercised this right in a manner supplementing or improving the received law, in legal phraseology, they legislated *juris adjuvandi et supplendi causa* and *juris corrigenda causa*, and, at the same authority very correctly remarked, they did so every time they were compelled by reasons of *political necessity*”.⁴⁹

4. The Ottoman Society and the Imperial Persian-Islamic Tradition of ”Just Governance”

Each person had their own well established place within the Ottoman society, depending on the person's religion and occupation, as well as on the social

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

⁴⁷ Tasin Gemil, *op. cit.*, p. 175; Marlene Kurz, “Christen unter islamischer Herrschaft”, p. 89-90.

⁴⁸ H. Inalcik, *Imperiul Otoman*, p. 158.

⁴⁹ Theodore H. Papadopoulos, *Studies and Documents relating to the History of the Greek Church and People under Turkish Domination*, Second Edition with supplementary material, Variorum, 1990, p. 6.

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category that they were part of.⁵⁰ Between the social classes there was a relation of circular interdependency called *The Circle of Equity*, which was based on the essential difference between the Ottoman ruling class and the tax paying class, called *re'aya* or flock.⁵¹

The Ottoman class was comprised of four different categories: the functionaries of the Imperial Palace (*mülkiye*), the treasurers (*kalemiye*), the soldiers (*seyyfiye*) and the *ulema* (*ilmiye*).⁵²

The sultan's „flock” or his *re'aya* constituted the class of peasants that paid taxes. It was composed out of Turks that were Muslim born and the *dhimmi* group, persons of other religions than the Muslim one. Either Muslim, Christians or Jewish, all the members of the sultan's flock were free people but they were bound to the land.⁵³ The *slaves of The Porte* were recruited from among the *re'ayals* of Christian confession through the *devşirme* system and were then properly trained in order to become functionaries of the palace, soldiers⁵⁴ or treasurers (the *ulema* were usually recruited from among those that were born Muslim).

In the same system of Ottoman governance, the sultan had the role of watching over this *circle of equity* that we have mentioned, so that it wouldn't break. Through this, the Ottomans took up the traditions of just governance that were established in the Orient ever since the époque of the Persian Sasanid Empire, by Chosroe I (531-579).

⁵⁰ „A clear limit (*hadd*) established the position of each individual within society. Nobody could surpass this limit, each had the right or even the obligation to act against the violation of this *hadd*” (P. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 32).

⁵¹ A. Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 115-116.

⁵² More in P. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 34-43. The *Ulema*, just as all the other Ottoman functionaries, knew quite a rigid hierarchization, according to their education and typed of madrassa that they graduated from. At the base of the pyramid were the *mufti* and the *qadi* of the small fairs. Then followed the *qadi* from the towns and then the ones for 32 more important cities. The „superior clergy” was made of the *qadis* of Mecca, Medina, Edirne, Bursa, Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo and Jerusalem), then the Istanbul *qadi* and the two *kadiaskers* of Anatolia and Rumelia. The latter one also wore the title of *sheyh ül-Islam*. The superior clerics were those that assisted to the vows of installment of the new sultans; they also had the theoretical right to deposition the sultans and great Viziers that did not respect the norms of the *Shari'a*. However, from a practical point of view, the sultan was the religious leader of the empire's religious community; he named and destituted the *qadis*. *Sheykh ül-Islam* was the leader of the Ulema. His duty was to emit religious decrees (*fetwas*), which held written answers for all the problems that fell under the incidence of *Shari'a Law*. After the 16th Century, their role acquired an added importance (gaining control over the function of *qadi*, being thus somewhat like a minister of justice); at the same time the dependency on the political authority rose (H. Inalcik, *op. cit.*, p. 350-352 și 194).

⁵³ A. Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 9. Mai pe larg, P. Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 43-49 și H. Inalcik, *op. cit.*, p. 212-215.

⁵⁴ The janissary armies, faced by the Romanian rulers for centuries, also originated from the *devşirme* class, not being comprised of Turkish ethnics.

After the (quasi-communist) egalitarian revolt led by Mazdak, the reforms of Chosroe I aimed at creating a harmonious society in which each social class would be complementary to the other. In the vision of the reforming *shahinshah*, the common people gained a great importance. Not only that the tax system was improved but also there was a new method of control that was established. From the work *Karnamag* or „The Book of The Deeds” of the *shahinshah* stands out the fact that the district and village judges were obligated to ask the tax paying villagers, without the knowledge of the domain owners and the tax collectors, if the taxes were correctly imposed and collected. The sealed reports of these judges would be then centralized and analysed by the authorities (starting from the *dehaqans* to the superior organs)⁵⁵. The motto of the Iranian Empire provisioned that:

„With justice and moderation, the people will produce more, the tax revenues will rise and the state will develop richly and powerfully. Justice is the fundament of a powerful state”⁵⁶

According to the Muslim historian Mas’udi, Chosroe I even aimed at the realization of a circle of social equity, expressed through the following syllogism:

„1. Royalty is based on the army; 2. The army is based on money; 3. Money is based on *harac* (the land revenue); 4. The *harac* is based on the cultivation of the land; 5. The cultivation of the land is based on justice; 6. Justice is based on the integrity of public functionaries; 7. The integrity of the functionaries is based on the credibility of the Viziers; 8. In front of the whole system there is the vigilance of the king over his own inclination and his capacity to direct things in such a way in which he should reign over them and they would not reign over him”⁵⁷.

This governing conception remained alive in the Middle East and in Central Asia, so that one of the rulers of the Turkish state of the Qara-Khaniz (11th – 12th Centuries) expressed the same conception about the state, which then re-emerged in all the Islamic works of political theory:

„In order to rule the state one needs a great army. In order to maintain the troops one needs a great wealth. In order to obtain this wealth, the people must be prosperous. In order for the people to be prosperous, the laws must be just. If one of these is neglected, the state will collapse”⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Josef Wiesehöfer, *Das antike Persien. Von 550 v. Chr. Bis 650 n. Chr.*, Artemis und Winkler, Zürich, 1993, p. 236.

⁵⁶ Halil Inalcik, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 254-255.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

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At a later time, in the Selgiukid sultanate, the two important philosophers and political persons al-Ghazali and Nizam al-Mulk reiterated and practically applied the old governmental theories of the times of Chosroe I. On one side, the sultans were given religious legitimacy, being considered „shadows of God on earth”. Then, the idea of the *circle of equity* was continued, considering that the main duty of the sultans was maintaining the prosperity of the Islamic society through imparting justice and through seeing that all the individuals would be able to properly fulfil their tasks as members of the social classes in which God had established them:

„The stability of the empire (*daulat*) and the ordering of the affairs of the kingdom (*mamlakat*) are among the fruits of the spreading of justice and the dispensations of compassion (*ihsan*), to which we are commanded by the creator, may He be exalted and sanctified... Justice consists in ... keeping every one of the people of the world – the subjects (*re`aya*), servants (*mustakhdamin*), officials (*mutaqallidan-i a`mal*) and those charged with religious affairs (*mubashiran-i umur-i dini va dunyavi*) – in their proper ranks and due stations”⁵⁹.

The same theory of governance was also at the base of the organization of the Ottoman Empire. The so-called *circle of equity* was expressed in the following manner:

„1) The state is supported by the *Şariat*; 2) *Şariat* is supported by the authority of the; 3) The sultan’s authority cannot exist without the *askers*; 4) There can be no *askers* without wealth; 5) There can be no wealth without the *re`aya*, the one that produces it; 6) The sultan protects and maintains the *re`aya*, imposing justice; 7) Justice assures harmony within society; 8) Society is like a garden, and its wall is the state”⁶⁰.

For this reason, one of the main duties of the Ottoman sultan was that of dutifully caring for his flock, on which the whole prosperity of the state rested, so that it would not be exploited to the damage of the whole society, by the *timar* holders. The Ottoman administrative-territorial units (the *sangeaks* led by a *beg* or *bey* and the *vilayets* – known in the Romanian historiography as *paşalâcuri* -, led by a *beglerbeg* or *bey* or *beyis*⁶¹) were roamed, about four times per year, by

⁵⁹ A.K.S. Lambton, *Theory and Practice in Medieval Persian Government*, London, 1980, p. 210.

⁶⁰ A. Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 115-116.

⁶¹ Thus, the term *raia* that is used in the Romanian historiography to designate the territories conquered by the Ottomans North of the Danube is not properly used. The population became *re`aya* – the flock of the sultan. The territories were included in the administrative-territorial units that existed South of the Danube. In the beginning, the regions of Turnu and Giurgiu were included in the

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inspectors that were in charge of discovering those that lived on the back of the „poor sultan’s flock or *re’aya*”. The attempt of the *timars* to squeeze more than was established by the sultan from the peasants was harshly punished.⁶² Because a just administration was assured, in front of each province a soldier and a judge-cleric were named. The *bey* could not apply any punishment before firstly obtaining the judicial solution from the *qadi* and the *qadi* could not personally execute any of his own sentences.⁶³

From this point of view, the way of organization of the Ottoman Empire in its golden era was greatly superior to that of the Central European states. Unlike the serfs of Christian Europe, the peasants of the Ottoman Empire were not under the legal jurisdiction of their landlords. Comparing to the old Christian landlords that had the liberty to act arbitrarily, the persons that held feuds in the Ottoman Empire were much more strictly controlled by the central government. The Ottoman laws sought to assure the country’s capacity to support the military system, which had in its turn as a consequence the prevention of the peasant’s exploitation at the hands of the feudals, in their own interests. The situation of the Balkan peasantry under Ottoman dominance was certainly not worse but most probably somewhat better than under the former Christian rules⁶⁴. Those that suffered after the Ottoman conquest were exactly the privileged Christian categories, the peasantry being transformed in the sultan’s flock.⁶⁵

5. The Problems of the Conversions to Islam of the Crypto-Christians. The Decay of the Ottoman Empire

In the first part of this paper we have mentioned the existence of numerous renegades, willing or through the *devşirme* system, who contributed to the ascension of the Ottoman Empire and to its expansion in Europe (even to the conquest of its centre, the old Constantinople). Some of the willing renegades arrived in the Ottoman Empire from across its borders, thus Nicolae Iorga presents numer-

sangeac of Nicopoles and Dobrogea, Southern Basarabia and Ucrain, as well as the „raials” North of the Danube, were organized in a special province – the Ocaekov-Silistra vilayet, made out of 7 sangeacs. In 1552 the Timișoara vilayet was founded and in 1660 the Oradea vilayet (L. P. Marcu, „Populația autohtonă in cadrul pașalâcurilor și raialelor turcești”, in *Istoria Dreptului românesc*, vol. I, București, 1980, p. 320-323). See also Tasin Gemil, *The Timar Regime and its application in Dobruđja and Banat*, Ovidius University Press, Constanța 2004.

⁶² Some historical sources confirm the fact that the theft of a single hen could of been punished by death sentence (N. Iorga, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, vol.II, p. 199).

⁶³ H. Inalcik, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁶⁴ Jean W. Sedlar, *East Central Europe in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500*, Seattle, 1994, p. 106-107.

⁶⁵ I. Sakázov, *Bulgarische Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Berlin-Leipzig, p. 91, apud Gheorghe I. Brătianu, *Sfatul domnesc și adunarea stărilor in Principatele Române*, București, 1995, p.39.

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ous examples of new Ottomans of Croatian, German-Austrian (*Deutsche Türken*), Italian and French origins, entered in the service of the sultans only out of interest and material gains. At the same time, the persons recruited through the *devşirme* system came from the Balkans.

„All of these retained the characteristics of their races: Serbian malleability, Albanian courage, Bulgarian stubbornness, Greek finesse. At the same time, the long years of schooling made them capable of living among the Turks in high offices, without appearing as or making themselves unloved for being foreigners. Some renegades, hunters of fortune of the lowest kind, managed to even avoid circumcision; some decided to secretly baptize their children. They attended the mosque rarely, some of them letting themselves being represented by another faithful person”.⁶⁶

The affirmation of the historian Nicolae Iorga would seem surprising but it is based on documents. This is why, at the end of this paper, we deem necessary to insist on the next issues: a) was there a policy of forced conversion to Islam?; b) were there Crypto-Christians within the Ottoman Empire?; c) what is the cause of group conversion to Islam within the Balkans?; d) did these renegades, sometimes Crypto-Christians, have anything to do with the decline of the Ottoman Empire?

Regarding forced conversion, the census of the capital city of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, alone, demonstrate the contrary. During the immediate years of the conquest, Mehmed II Fatih repopulated the capital, colonizing (practically deporting – *sürgün*) both Muslims and Christians from all the empire's provinces⁶⁷. Thus, the new capital of the empire did not become an integrally Muslim city but a cosmopolitan one. At the beginning of the 16th Century, 80,7% of the population of the European provinces was Christian and 18,8% Muslim. In Istanbul, Christians were about 31,6%, Muslims 58,3% and Jews 10,2%. In Sofia Muslims constituted 66.4%, in Skopje 74,5% and in Bitola 75% of the population. The city with the most Jews was Salonic (54.3%; where Christians constituted one quarter of the population).⁶⁸ Before World War I, from the 1.1 million inhabitants of Istanbul (with its suburbs), only 44% were Muslim, while 23% were Greek Orthodox, 18% Armenian, 5% Jewish and 60.000 were Western residents.⁶⁹

As one may notice, there was a considerable population of Muslims in the main cities of Bulgaria and Macedonia, while the rural areas remained Chris-

⁶⁶ Nicolae Iorga, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*, III, p. 188.

⁶⁷ André Clot, *Mahomed al II-lea, Cuceritorul Bizanțului*, Editura Artemis, București, f.a., p. 61-63.

⁶⁸ Peter Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 50-55.

⁶⁹ Rudolf Grulich, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

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tian. Actually, precisely in these cities, there was a more important colonisation of Turkish population in the Balkans.

On the other hand, there were some mass conversions to Islam:

„Did the Porte try to determine its Christian or Jewish subjects to change their religion and adopt Islam? The answer can only be a nuanced one: the sultans did not institute, seemingly, a policy of Islamization of the non-Muslims. However, the Bosnians and even a part of the Albanians ended up as Muslims, keeping their language. Later on, a small group of Romanians from Oriental Macedonia, the Megleno-Romanians, converted to Islam, keeping, in their turn, their language. In Asia, the Georgians will themselves embrace Islam, probably in the 17th Century. Finally, during the second half of the 17th Century, a small group of Jews converted to Islam, after the religious uproar that shook the community, while the more than doubtful religious conviction of some Christians favoured the conversion to a heterodox Islam;

Certainly, The Porte cannot be accused of leading a policy of massive Turkization or forced Islamization [...]. Actually, the sultan did not have any interest to convert the Christian masses, as their conversion to Islam meant the cessation of a tax of 25 aspers, owed by any Christian farmer (*ispence*) and of the poll tax. In the 15th Century, the total of those two taxes was equal to at least 2 golden coins (7,14 g). [...] In the 1500s, the empire numbered 894.432 Christian homes: The Porte could annually lose approximately 2800 kg of gold and it showed so little interest in the Islamization of Christians that it sometimes continued to levy *ispence* from renegade Christians. The fact is attested by several Ottoman censuses”.⁷⁰

The mass conversion of the Albanians and the Bosnians was thoroughly analysed by historians, without arriving at a universally accepted result. The majority consider that today's Bosnian Muslims originate from the conversion to Islam of the numerous Slavic populations, of the heretical Bogomilic faith (persecuted by Hungary before the Ottoman conquest).⁷¹ Still, analysing the Ottoman census in Bosnia between 1520-1530, Peter Sugar observed that the Sarajevo population was 100% Muslim, while in the whole province Muslims accounted for only 46% (in 1489 they constituted 18,4% of the whole province). Given the fact that the Bogomils especially populated Bosnia's rural environment, Sugar concludes that:

⁷⁰ Nicoară Beldiceanu, art. cit., p. 118-119.

⁷¹ Stanford J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

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„It might be perfectly true that with time the great majority of the Bogomils, Paulicians, and other „heretics” turned to Islam, but it appears unlikely that they were the spearheads of conversion”.⁷²

Regarding Albania, Edwin Jacques considered that the majority of those that converted did so out of economical reason (in order to be exempted from some taxes), thus wishing to escape the economic and fiscal discrimination (especially during the 18th Century). On the other hand, the same historian also drew attention to the „decadent character” of Albanian Christendom (imposed on the population in two foreign languages: Greek in the South and Latin in the North). Referring to the material interests for the conversion to Islam of the Albanians, the following quote is especially significant:

„Albanians always, so now, before the two alternatives of material interest and religious affairs, always prefer the former... Religion, Mohammedanism, as well Christianity, has not rooted itself in the hearts of Albanians deeply enough so that for religious reasons he will spurn material interests. The religious conviction of the Albanians has been and is more a means than an end. The change of religion up until our day was not taken place because of inner convictions. The reasons must be sought elsewhere. Only the blind cannot see them. Archbishop Fan Noli has perfectly analysed the psychology of our nation when he said that in Albania we have «four different religions which have not taken root in the hearth of a pagan people »”.⁷³

Peter Sugar also drew attention to the fact that in its greatest part, „the conversion of the Albanians is also a seventeenth century phenomenon; earlier even the majority of the *timarli* were Christians. Thus, these earlier conversions must have been „voluntary”.⁷⁴

At the same time, Sugar pointed out to the popular religiousness existent in the Balkans, both in the ranks of Christians and Muslims:

„According to anthropological and sociological studies among both the Greek and Slavic Orthodox in the Balkans, a phenomenon paralleling that discussed in connection with Islam existed. Here, too, a lack of thorough religious training, the resulting misunderstanding of basic dogmas, the survival of pagan rites connected with fertility, health, etc., in an environment that did not change with the acceptance of Christianity, the willingness of the clergy to accommodate their flocks, the great division between higher and lower clergy, and the discontent with authorities who were closely identified with

⁷² Peter Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁷³ Edwin E. Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

⁷⁴ Peter Sugar, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

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the „established” church led to the inclusion of enough pagan rites, customs, superstitions, and beliefs to create a folk culture and religion whose remnants are still observable in the folk customs of today`s Balkan people.

Many of these rites and beliefs were universal. People everywhere were interested in rain, at the right time of the year, in fertility, and in other factors basic to primitive rural life and were continually seeking to ensure that everything would go right by creating spirits, demons etc., who if handled properly would behave in a manner favorable to those who depended on their good will. If one keeps in mind that the customs connected with these basic beliefs, fears and habits were only in part Turkish or Islamic, and remembers that part was learned from the Greek inhabitants of Asia Minor during the long centuries of frontier life, the similarities between certain aspects of folk religion as practiced by the Muslims and Christians will not come as a surprise”.⁷⁵

Of course, Sugar admits that „the Christians had certain rituals and beliefs that the Muslims did not – or rather were not supposed to – have. Among these the belief in saints, the use of icons, and Baptism were the most important”.⁷⁶ But in the plane of the inter-human relationships there were interesting interferences taking place between Christian and Muslim customs. Rites of the Balkan Islamic population enveloped Christian practices like the Baptism or the cult of saints.⁷⁷ Muslim peregrines prayed at orthodox monasteries, kissing the holy relics of the saints.⁷⁸ Also, some Christians participated in popular Muslim processions.⁷⁹ The documents point out to the fact that the Muslims from Northern Albania employed Catholic priests to baptize their children, they wed in Christian churches and buried themselves according to the Christian ceremonials.

“The supernatural powers set in motion by Christian ritual may, however, be conciliated by Mohammedan; for instance, Baptism may be regarded as given an additional security to Mohammedan children, or Christian charms may be worn with salutary effect by Mohammedans... In the face of a common disaster, such as a prolonged drought or an epidemic, Chris-

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 52, 54.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 52-53.

⁷⁷ Stefan Rohdewald, „«Der heilige Sava und unsere Muslime» - Albanische, türkische bzw. muslimische Verehrung christlicher Heiliger aus serbischer und bulgarischer Perspektive (20. Jahrhundert)”, in *Christen und Muslime...*, p. 155-161.

⁷⁸ F.W. Hasluck gave many examples in his work. F.W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, I, Oxford University Press 1929, p. 63-75.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 77-95; Jean W. Sedlar, *op. cit.*, p.190.

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tian and Moslem will combine in supplication and even share the same procession.”⁸⁰

Specially the Baptism

“was regarded as a magic form of protection against material and more abstract threats. The Albanian Council alluded to the question and condemned the habit of some *Turks* to take their children to church «not to make them Christians, but for the corporal health, to preserve them from stink, epilepsy, dangers of sorcery and from the wolves»”.⁸¹

This confessional tolerance was typical for the whole region, because there were cases even in the Catholic Ragusa (today Dubrovnik) of Catholic burials performed by Orthodox priests.⁸² The reports of Catholic Bishops from Kosovo to the Holy See from the 18th century are very interesting, because they indicate a very strange religious situation. The young Archbishop of Skopje, Matija Masarek, reported that during his pastoral visits, he was asked to enter even in Muslim villages:

„When they take us to their villages and it does not good to their sick people, they do not give us any pay, but look at us with angry eyes. If they get better, instead, they do not ascribe it to the Holy Gospel, neither to the power of Jesus Christ, whose Holy Name they do not even stand to hear, but to the priest’s virtue like puff of their dervishes. When their demoniac or somebody affected by some other disease recovers, they say that those demons and diseases are Christian, and must therefore be healed by the reading of the Christian priest”.⁸³

The use of Christian symbols or relicts by Muslims was widespread in the Balkans:

“With regard to the superstitious use of Christian symbols and texts Thomas Smith writes of the seventeenth century Turks: «Some of them, notwithstanding their Zeal for Mahomet and the Religion by him established, retain not only a favourable and honourable Opinion of our Blessed Saviour, but even place some kind of confidence in the usage of his Name, or of the words of the Gospel, though it may seem to be wholly in the way of Superstition. Thus in their Amulets, which they call *Chaimaili*, being

⁸⁰ Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam...*, p. 63.

⁸¹ Luca Maiocchi, „The Coexistence of Catholic and Muslim Communities in 18th Century in Kosovo”, in *Christen und Muslime...*, p. 108.

⁸² Heinrich Felix Schmid, „Konfession und Nationalität in Südosteuropa”, in *Österreichische Osthefte*, 5, 1963, p.103.

⁸³ Luca Maiocchi, art. cit., p. 106.

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little bits of Paper about two or three fingers breadth, roll'd up in pieces of Silk, containing several short Prayers or Sentences out of the Alcoran, with several Circles with other Figures, they usually inscribe the holy and venerable Name of Jesus or the figure of the Cross, or the first words of St. John's Gospel and the like».

Georgewicz, an Hungarian Croat, who lived thirteen years in captivity among the Turks, mentions this use much earlier... At the time of which our author writes (the reign of Suleiman I, 1520-66), Turkish arms were turned chiefly against Christendom: it is hard to resist the conclusion that the Christian charm was here used expressly to nullify Christian opposition, magical or otherwise...

So, in Crete, as late as the revolution of 1897... The Moslems believe that if they wear a Christian relic Christian bullets cannot hurt them".⁸⁴

The phenomenon of the *bektaşizm*⁸⁵ is also a special one, „an interesting result of the fusion of Christian-Muslim ideas and beliefs” that promoted „the brotherhood among people, regardless of religion, race and condition, the cult of the Christian saints and of the Virgin”.⁸⁶ According Julian Baldick, “the Bektashism represent an extremist Christianizing wing of Sufism, with a background of conversion from Christianity and implantation on Christian soil. Indeed, one might feel that the Bektashis' beliefs and practices put them outside both Sufism and Islam”.⁸⁷ Bektashism was a Muslim belief and system,

“but inwardly of so eclectic a nature as to make it possible for the primitive type of Christian in either Asia Minor or Albania to reconcile his old beliefs and practices with an external situation where outward acceptance of Islam may have seemed necessary. Not only Greek or Albanian Christians but many of the descendants of the millions of Turks who at one time

⁸⁴ F.W. Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 34-36.

⁸⁵ “Bektashism, as well as Alevism or the former *Kızılbaş* are, in their earlier stages, examples of religious syncretism and refer to a popular saint, *Hacı Bektaş Veli*, a Turkish dervish who belonged to the Turkoman Tribes and came to Asia Minor from Khorassan as an immigrant seeking refuge to escape the Mongol invasion towards the year 1230. He was not a Theologian, but a mystic and according to tradition he was a hearer and a thaumaturge. Through he was a Muslim, he did not give up the ancient practices and customs of Central Asia but rather carried on under a guise of fairly orthodox Islam both social and religious practices of earlier Turkish life, combined with a system of mysticism influenced by the Central Asian Sufi, Ahmet Yesevi” (Domma Michail, “Bektashism (Bektaşilik) in the Balkans and in Western Thrace: Historical Background and Ethnographic Observation”, in *Christen und Muslime...*, p. 114-115.

⁸⁶ M. Maxim, *op.cit.*, p. 179 and notes 65-66 from p. 191.

⁸⁷ Julian Baldick, *Mistical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism*, London 1989, p. 170.

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were Nestorian Christians may in this way have been absorbed into the Bektashi system".⁸⁸

These examples lead us to the issue of the Crypto-Christians. Their existence is attested even since the beginning of the Ottoman emirate:

„The first well attested mention of Crypto-Christianity in lands under Ottoman domination dates from 1338, eight years after the fall of Nicaea in Anatolia. In that year the Christian inhabitants of Nicaea, who had embraced Islam but had later repented, appealed to the Patriarch of Constantinople, John XIV, asking him whether the Church would be willing to receive them back in its fold and save their souls. The Patriarch replied that the Church would accept them if they manifested their repentance publicly and suffered the consequences, in which case it would even number them among its martyrs. As for those who, for fear of punishment, dared not profess their Christian faith publicly but only in secret, the Church would still save them if they strove to keep, as far as possible, the commandments of God. The enemies then could be masters of the Christians but not of their souls".⁸⁹

Stavro Skendi's study also presents many other testimonials on Crypto-Christianity in Crete, Cyprus, Greece and the other Balkan states, insisting on the model of religiousness and on the causes of this phenomenon:

„What beliefs and rites did the Crypto-Christians of Cyprus preserve? They were almost the same for both those who came from Catholicism and from Orthodoxy. They baptized and confirmed their children before the Muslim circumcision. In addition to the Moslem name, they gave them a secret Christian name. They fasted, and communion was administered to them. They were married according to both the Moslem and the Christian rite; as a rule, a Moslem bridegroom was requested to become a Crypto-Christian and undergo baptism. They visited the mosque and the church. On the deathbed they received the consolations of the Christian religion and then rested in a Moslem cemetery".⁹⁰

Edwin Jacques mentioned the fact that the church authorities, both orthodox and catholic, were conscious of the existence of the Crypto-Christians. Sometimes the official church attitude was tolerated, at other times it wasn't. In the South of Albania (with an orthodox population) the religious conscience seemed to be especially lax, as the wife of the British ambassador to Istanbul affirmed in 1717:

⁸⁸ John K. Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, London 1994, p. 215-216.

⁸⁹ Stavro Skendi, „Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under the Ottomans”, in *Slavic Review*, an. XXVI, 1967, nr. 2, p. 228.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

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„These people, living between Christians and Mahommetans and not being skilled in controversy declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best, but, to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth, they very prudently follow both. They go to the mosque on Fridays and to the church on Sundays, saying for their excuse that at the day of judgment they are sure of the protection of the true prophet; but which that is they are not able to determine in this world”.⁹¹

The situation was, however, different in the North of Albania, which was inhabited by Catholics.

„There the secret Christians or *laramani* attended church only when they dared. They secretly asked the priests to hear their confession and grant them Communion. The archbishops of Uskup yielding to circumstances allowed the priests to administer the Sacraments to these occult Christians and to extend to them spiritual succour. This accommodation continued until 1703, when the Albanian Pope Clement XI, ruling from 1700-1721, took a different approach. He sent the Archbishop of Antivari (later Tivar, now Bar) on a pastoral visit throughout the Albanian communities, then received his report of the destroyed churches and desecrated shrines. To discourage further conversions to Islam, the Pope called the second council of Albanian bishops presided over by the Archbishop of Antivari. There it was decided that Communion must be refused to those Christians who, while preserving in hearth the religion of Christ, yet failed in its outward confession by following the customs of the Turks and receiving Muslim names. A later encyclical of Benedict XIV dated 1 August 1754 confirmed these decision. It forbade archbishops, bishops, priests and Albanian missionaries to permit Catholics to take Muslim names, whatever to escape the payment of taxes, or for any other reasons”.⁹²

Instead of a Conclusion

From those presented up to this point, one can ascertain that the situation of the Christian population in the Balkans was not impossible under the Ottoman rule. The different ethnicities cohabited in peace in the beginning, being defended by a state organism that guaranteed peace and good order. In its golden époque, the Ottoman Empire ceased to be a Turkish state. Based on an interesting political system, it was a multi-ethnic and pluri-confessional state, with a high degree of

⁹¹ Edwin Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 228; Luca Maiocchi, *art. cit.*, p. 99-101.

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tolerance, based however, on the Islamic state doctrine, one that constituted the bond needed for keeping the system united.

The question that one would ask then is how the situation of the modern époque manifested, characterized by conflicts and massacres between the Balkan peoples. The problem is highly important. In the Western press, the Balkan area was often described as being Europe's gunpowder keg. The Bosnian and Kosovo crisis stem their origins precisely in the centuries of Ottoman decline, which started much earlier in the Balkans than in the provinces of the Near Orient.

Paradoxically, one of the motives of the decay of the Ottoman society results from that system of Ottoman dignitaries originated from the Christian Balkan environment. Once the *devşirme* came into power, the sultans did not dispose of the possibility to oppose the renegades and the Turkish aristocrats one against another. More than that, Iorga considered that the decline which the Ottoman Empire knew had its origins in „the seeds that the renegades had planted, from the old Christian moral environment: the Greek intrigue, the Serbian betrayal, the Bulgarian avidity, the Albanian stubbornness”.⁹³ It is not a surprise that the perversion of the religious conscience also led to economical corruption.

The system of organization of the Ottoman state was perverted. Bribery became a state policy, the consequence being the general weakness of the state. The *circle of equity* ruptured. The central power could not maintain order and legality. The janissary army started to obey the central orders less and less, thus at the margins of the empire the authority of the sultan diminished. Local village autonomy stopped being respected. Many peasants deserted their villages and joined the shepherds that roamed the mountains, grouping together in bands of outlaws, feared even by the Ottoman army. The central power tried to use these groups of outlaws, colonizing them in villages (especially in Bulgaria) and offering them a special juridical situation. However, other groups of outlaws kept their independence, united, forming true nomadic tribal unions (especially in Serbia, Bosnia and Albania). The mountainous geographic environment accentuated their character, fighting capacity and unconditional allegiance to the group leader. The blood brotherhoods and cross brotherhoods gained a special role in organizing these tribal societies. At the same time, a historical mythology was built, with national heroes. For the Serbian people, the Battle of Kosovo Polje of 1389 played an overwhelming role, the central element being not the defeat of the Turks but the success of the Serbian soldier in killing sultan Murad I. The repetition of this act of vengeance became a goal for all the Serbian fighters. Just the same, the figure of Skanderbeg obtained a central role in Albanian mythology. More so, after

⁹³ N. Iorga, *Istoria statelor balcanice ...*, p. 37.

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1750, the Albanians almost managed to constitute independent political formations, under the form of the *pašas* of Shkoder and Janina. These almost became states within a state (resembling the *deys* of the Near Orient and Northern Africa), refusing to obey the sultan and even entertaining diplomatic relations with the foreign powers. They were reconquered by the sultan's army only in 1822 (Janina) and 1831 (Shkoder). Thus, in the Balkan Peninsula appeared two types of societies. The mountain zones of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro and Western Serbia, from the Pindus Mountains and from Northern and Central Albania constituted a „patriarchal cultural zone” (ruralized, with tribal unions), while Central and Southern Macedonia⁹⁴. The inhabitants of the patriarchal cultural zone were characterized by their disposition towards fighting, disobedience, perfidy, cunning, creativity and appetite for knowledge. Thus, in the West of the Balkan Peninsula, through the ever greater development of the *cult of national heroes*, the premises of the formation of the „modern” nations were created.⁹⁵

Parallel to these processes, the intervention of the European powers took place, especially that of Austrians and Russians. During the Austrian-Turkish wars from the 17th-18th centuries, the Habsburgs invited a great number of Serbs to colonize territories in Croatia and Southern Hungary (Vojvodina). This movement of population led to a modification of the demographic structure, both in Kosovo (where the Albanians remained a majority – the Ipek Patriarchate was disbanded) as in the Banat, Croatia and southern Hungary. This way, the basis was laid for a future ethnic confrontation in Croatia. In that which regards Russia, the first important interference in Balkan politics took place in 1774, when, after a Russian-Austrian-Turkish War (1768-1774), the Tsarina Ekaterina II obtained, through the Kuciuk-Kainargi peace treaty, the right of protectorate over the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire. From this year onward, the history of the Balkan peoples is closely linked to the Austrian and Russian imperial policies.

⁹⁴ Emanuel Turczynski, *Konfession und Nation. Zur Frühgeschichte der serbischen und rumänischen Nationsbildung*, Düsseldorf, 1976, p.32, note 114.

⁹⁵ H. Michael Miedling, „Patriarchalische Mentalität als Hindernis für die staatliche und gesellschaftliche Modernisierung in Serbien im 19. Jahrhundert”, in *Südostforschungen*, an. L, 1991, p. 169, note 20.