



Asparuch Velkov, Evgeniy Radushev. *Ottoman Garrisons on the Middle Danube*. Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1996. 547 pp. \$83.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-963-05-7391-7.

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An Ottoman Muster Roll

Asparuch Velkov and Evgeniy Radushev have published the complete text of an Ottoman *yoklama defteri*, or “muster roll,” for troops serving in Hungary in the mid-sixteenth century for the first time. The authors present the text rendered into regularized Arabic script and an English translation. This document is an extremely valuable source of raw data on the staffing of Ottoman garrisons in several important Hungarian forts including Budun [Buda], Peste [Pest], Ostorgon [also called Esterгон, modern Esztergom], and Hatvan. These registers listed troops by type and unit, identified the unit commanders and soldiers by name, and recorded each man’s daily pay. The document published by Velkov and Radushev gives information for the year 956 of the Islamic calendar, corresponding to 1549-1550 CE. This register does not record the full garrison, as the Janissaries were listed in separate muster rolls, but gives information on most other types of troops present in Ottoman fortresses.

The soldiers of these garrisons represent the wide variety of troops in the Ottoman army of the sixteenth century. There are listings for artillery men of various types [*topcuyan*, *humbaraciyân*], armorers [*cebeciyân*], musicians [*mehterân*], carpenters and ship-builders [*neccaran*], cavalry [*farisân*], light infantry [*azebân*], and even religious officials stationed at the fortresses. Although this register records only imams and muezzins, similar documents often list other Muslim clerics such as preachers, prayer leaders, and Koran reciters. Two particularly interesting groups stand out: the *gonulluyan* and *martalosân*. The *gonulluyan* were volunteers who served in fortress garrisons initially without pay, but who could

be entered into the pay books for good service. These troops became a larger and more important component of garrisons along the Habsburg frontier during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *martolosân* were local Christian troops stationed in forts under Ottoman commanders. These units too became more numerous during the seventeenth century.

Registers of this type provide a great deal of valuable information not only about the composition of the garrisons but also about the administration of Ottoman frontier defenses. There is of course the basic information on the size of the garrisons and the payroll costs to the Ottoman state of maintaining the frontier defenses. Interesting details also can be gleaned from the names of the soldiers, as they often carry their place of origin as part of their name. Furthermore, names are very useful in determining the religion and, sometimes, ethnicity of the troops. The document published here presents even more information because it was a working register, and not a formal copy intended for the records of the central administration. This register has numerous notes added next to entries for various members of the garrison. These notes detail many aspects of life in an Ottoman fort. There are the formal administrative details, such as promotions, men taking the posts of fallen comrades, soldiers not being present for the muster or arriving without their certificates of assignment [*berat*], and men being reassigned for service in a different unit. Less formal aspects of garrison life are also noted. Men are listed as having run away, become brigands, or been taken captive. When a soldier died and left children it

was noted. In some cases soldiers are accused of dereliction of duty, and other soldiers are listed as having borne witness to their behavior. Even details of the economic life of the forts are hinted at, as in the case of several soldiers of the *azeb* units at Budun who owed substantial sums, sums far exceeding their wages, to Mehmed, a bath attendant [*hamamci*] in that fortress. These notes breathe life into what could be a very dry list of names and numbers.

Velkov and Radushev have done an excellent job of deciphering this document and presenting it in regularized Arabic script, especially with regard to personal and place names. The transcription lists of Muslim, Christian, and geographical names are extremely useful to scholars working with Ottoman documents from this region. The authors' achievement, however, will go unnoted by scholars unfamiliar with documents of this type. Muster rolls like the one published here were written in the special scribal hand of the Ottoman financial bureaucracy, called *siyakat*. Amounts were often represented not by numerals but by logograms that were stylized abbreviations of the Arabic names for the numbers involved. The difficult *siyakat* script was used to ensure that fiscal records remained the special provenance of the trained financial bureaucrats. It is understandable that Velkov and Radushev did not publish an entire facsimile, as the transcription and translation of the 139 folio document already has resulted in a book of over 500 pages. The lack of even a few sample pages in facsimile or any description of the form of the register, however, is a serious flaw. This book could have made a substantial contribution to the study of Ottoman paleography, but its usefulness is now limited to the actual contents of the register.

The value of the text of the register to non-Ottomanists is further constrained by problems in the English translation. In many cases the translation gives the sense of the Ottoman text, but strips away some precise terms that give insight to Ottoman bureaucratic practice. For example the authors rightly translate *defter-i yoklama* in the heading of the entire register as "roll-call register," but use the term "check" for *yoklama* elsewhere in the text. More seriously they translate *mevacib defteri* as "registration," when the specific meaning is "payroll register." The term *erbab-i mevacib* is translated as "servicemen" which does not convey that these are men receiving a government salary, a fact that would be brought out with a more exact translation. Finally the authors' translation of the term *masar* as "the first three months" or "the first trimester" is correct, but nowhere do they explain the full meaning of the word. This in fact was

a technical term of the Ottoman financial bureaucracy that derives from the names of the first three months of the Islamic calendar (Muharrem, Safer, and Rebiulevvel in Turkish). Pay for Ottoman troops was issued quarterly, and each of these pay periods had a similarly constructed acronym. Velkov and Radushev give a translation of the term that is correct, but one without the context that would add depth to their translation of the document.

This lack of context is a major flaw of the entire work. Added to the problems outlined above, the text of the document is presented without any information about its provenance or its relation to other documents. It is also only one register, and there is no discussion of, or comparison with, any similar material in archives in Vienna, Istanbul, or elsewhere. There are hundreds of extant muster rolls or payroll registers that have similar form and content which could provide a comparative context for the document published here. Unless one is already familiar with these Ottoman fiscal records there is no way to know how typical or unique this document is. Again the authors miss an opportunity to make this work accessible and valuable to scholars outside Ottoman studies.

The only analysis of the muster roll is found in the book's introduction written by Strashimir Dimitrov. After a brief overview of the history of Ottoman expansion into Hungary, Dimitrov discusses the different types of troops serving in the garrisons listed in the document. Much of what he says is descriptive, giving the number of units of each type of troop, the number of soldiers, and making some comments on the pay for commanders and regular soldiers. Dimitrov calls all the troops listed in this register "mercenary," presumably to differentiate them from the Janissary troops who do not appear in the document. This is completely misleading. The term "mercenary" implies that these troops served only for money and had no ties to the Ottoman government, which was not the case. The soldiers listed in this register were as much a part of the regular Ottoman army as the Janissaries. Several of the units, such as the *topcuyan*, *humbaraciyan*, *cebeciyan*, and *ulufeciyan-i suvari* (a type of cavalry), were *kapikulu*, or "slaves of the Porte," as were the Janissaries.

Dimitrov presents some very interesting conclusions about the garrison troops based on an analysis of the names listed in the register. He notes that many of the soldiers bear the name *bin Abdullah*, or "son of Abdullah." This is the name traditionally taken by converts to Islam. Of the over 6000 men listed in this register

almost one third appear to be converts. This raises intriguing questions about the scale of conversion in the Ottoman Balkans in the sixteenth century. Dimitrov cites a study by M. T. Gokbilgin of a 1543 muster roll for the *yuruk* corps in Kocacik that shows between twenty five and thirty five percent of the troops were converts.[1] Taken together these studies suggest that the opportunities found in military service were significant factors in Balkan Christians' decisions to convert to Islam. Dimitrov also uses the lists of names to track the geographic origins of the troops. Of the soldiers who do have place names listed, he concludes that most came from the empire's Rumelian provinces, especially from Bosnia. It would be very useful to check similar registers for Ottoman forts in other regions to see if any larger conclusions about the sources of the military's manpower could be drawn.

A few words about the end matter: There is a very valuable index of geographical names used in the document that give both the Ottoman and modern name, as well as the country in which the place is now found. There is also a glossary of Ottoman terms, which unfortunately is not as useful as intended. The awkward language and often imprecise definitions greatly detract from the cases where the information is accurate. For example, the word *kethuda* is defined as "steward of a high ranking official; warden of a trade guild" (p. 545). In the context of a muster roll this term is perhaps better

defined as "second in command of a military unit." Similarly, the glossary gives "master of leather-ammunitions for horse-harnessing and horse-riding" for the term *sarac* (p. 546). This would be more simply put as "saddler, or leather-worker." The awkward language and often imprecise definitions greatly detract from the cases where the information is accurate.

To conclude, by transcribing and translating this muster roll Velkov and Radushev have presented very useful raw data about the organization of the Ottoman military in sixteenth century Hungary. Without the proper context or analysis, however, this data remains raw. The limitations of the volume make it truly useful only for Ottoman specialists. This is quite unfortunate, as with only a few additions this work could have been quite valuable to a much wider audience of Balkan scholars.

Notes:

[1]. Presumably cited in Strashimir Dimitrov, "Za jurjuskata organizacija i roljata ji v etnoasimilacionnija proces", *Vekove* (1982), 1-2.

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