

TOWARD THE REHABILITATION OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SERBS DURING THE OTTOMAN RULE: THE SERBIAN SOCIETY IN THE 15TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to point out to the immense value of the social history of the Serbian people under the Ottoman rule, since it is the only way to come to some conclusions about less-known issues, such as everyday life and family life.

Key words: *Historiography, Ottoman history, the Serbs, Political history, Social history*

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The political implications of the Ottoman conquest of the Southeastern European countries are well known and transparent, as well as described in details in the historiography. However, the changes of the social structure had been much slower, thus in that particular sense the second half of the 15th century in the history of Serbian people under the Ottoman rule could be considered as the period of continuity rather than discontinuity in comparison with the situation from the first half of that century.

That is, also, the reason why the Ottoman documents dated second half of the 15th century could be largely used to enlighten some important issues from the social history of the Serbs during the last decades of existence of the independent Serbian medieval state. For more details see: (Miljković & Krstić, 2008).

However, the political history had been studied in far greater measure than the social one. Although that had been the case, the social history could enlighten the real position of the population, in this case Ser-

bian population under the Ottoman rule which lasted for centuries. Since there was no any national institution kept (except the Serbian Orthodox Church which under special political conditions had been reestablished in 1557 and lasted until 1766), the social history, i.e. historical geography, historical demography, economic history are the only ways to research the life of the Serbian population during the Ottoman times, especially in the field of the everyday life, which has become one of the most prominent branch of the world's historiography.

For such studies the queue issue is relevant choice of documents. One of the most important documents for the social history under the Ottoman rule (not only regarding Serbian history, but in general) is the Ottoman census books. The Ottoman census books called *defter*s (specially *tapu tahrir*) represent possible valuable sources for historical geography, historical demography, as well as the other sub-branches of the social history. However, the special attention has been paid to possible doubts that face every single researcher who studies this kind of sources. Some examples of the flagrant misuse and scientific abuse in publishing this kind of sources have already been highlighted. For more details, see: (Miljković, 2010a)

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I

After the fall of the Serbian Despotate (1459) and the Kingdom of Bosnia (1463) under the Ottoman rule, the new phase in the development of the Serbian society begun. The Ottomans brought along the new administrative system, primarily defined by the military and Islamic character of their growing state. Although the introduction of the Ottoman administration did not radically changed previously existed social relations, the Serbian society in the second half of the 15th century underwent through significant changes, primarily caused by the Ottoman social diversification into two groups: *asker* and *reaya*, applied throughout the Empire. Besides, the confessional diversification, expressed in the contrast between the Muslim and non-Muslim population had been very important, causing directly the intensification of the process of conversion into Islam, in smaller or higher degree (Filipović, 2005; Vasić, 2005; Жељазкова, 1990).

Although simplified and considerably general, the above mention social division could be applied to the Serbian society in the second half of the 15th century. However, the fact that the social order of the different provinces of the Empire, due to their specific geo-strategic position, was not completely similar has as its main consequence more complex social diversification, different from province to province.

Thus, the main classification of the Serbian society in the second half of the 15th century was the division into three groups: the *reaya*, the Wallach population and the „categories with special fiscal status“, i.e. population that was exempted of some tax due to the specific service they hold. Those groups were more numerous in the border regions, while in the inland regions they were rare or non-existent. There were also some Serbs who served in the Ottoman army, obtaining thus the *asker* status. This primarily applies to the Serbs-*sipahis*, which were quite numerous in the second half of the 15th century (Miljković, 2010) see also (Miljković, 2010c).

The most relevant social change occurring during the second half of the 15th century in the regions where the Serbs lived under the Ottoman rule was the disappearance of the highly ranked Serbian noble families and beginning of creation of the new Serbian „elite“, which was not of the noble origin and did not have the land in the full ownership; their new social status was obtained by acceptance of the service in the Ottoman army.

The most influential Serbs in the second half of the 15th century were those rare members of the medieval

noblemen who tried to establish themselves within the Ottoman governing system, such as Mara Branković, then influential Wallach families from Herzegovina such as family Miloradović-Hrabren, which had tried to obtain adequate positions in the new circumstances, and also some of the Wallach chiefs who, for the first time under the Ottomans, stepped out of the historical anonymity, as it was the case with the supreme *knez*² of the Wallach of the Smederevo *sanjak* (province), certain Maluga, or with the Bakić family (Vasić, 1958) (Atanasovski, 1979).

Those examples of the eminent Serbian medieval noblemen becoming a part of the Ottoman ruling class were isolated cases, thus the phenomenon could not possibly be considered as general.

On the other side, throughout the second half of the 15th century, could be observed the process in which prominent Wallach chiefs, *knezs and primikurs*, started to climb up the social scale. This process would reach its peak during the first half of the 16th century.

II

The conversion into islam is one of the most important issues of the social history of the Serbs under the Ottoman rule. For example, in the *sanjak* of Smederevo, the islamization was not dominant process during the second half of 15th century, when the region in question was the border region against Hungary. After conquest of Belgrade in 1521, and especially after battle of Mohacs (1526), began the process of reshaping of Serbian cities and towns into the oriental urban settlements, as it was the case with for example Užice, Valjevo and Belgrade. As for the village settlements, the conversion process had been sporadic. This statement could also be documented with several numeric examples derived from the Turkish census books for the various Serbian regions during the second half of the 15th century. For more details, see: (Miljković, 2010b).

Special question presents survey of historiography works dedicated to the issue of conversion to Islam, written by the authors from the ex Yugoslavia in the second half of the 20th century. Various authors had different approach on this particular issue, but longer description of their opinions, deserves much larger text dedicated to this subject.

²The Slavic term *knez* could be translated with the nobleman title of prince. But, since the Wallach chiefs were not always of the noble origin, we decided that it would be more accurate to preserve the Slavic term.

It should be only noted that the main discussion went the way they had treated the process itself (whether the process was undergone forcibly or not). See for example: (Filipović, 2005) (Жељазкова, 1990) See also: (Miljković, 2011).

CONCLUSION REMARKS

The aim of this short paper was to point out to the importance and sometimes even negligence of the social history within the scope of the Serbian historiography under the Ottoman rule. Lot of papers, studies and articles has been published during the last twenty years, but there is still a need for organized and well planned researched time in the Ottoman Archives in or order to fill in the blanks and to contribute more to this immensely important subject.

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