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## The Conscripting System in Armed Forces: Turkey's Example

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### Abstract

In the armed forces of Turkey the compulsory service is the valid system. This is how temporary privates are obtained from among healthy and young male citizens. They constitute the backbone of the military man power; their numbers attain figures much bigger than the numbers of rank-carrying personnel, namely commissioned-officers and petty-officers. It is a widely known fact that military life is indeed tough, especially for those occupying the lower levels within the hierarchical pyramid. Conventionally those conscripts have their own informal ways to cope with the mentioned hardships. Effective seniority circles and Landsman solidarity are two most commonly observed practices, despite the rigid forbidding regulations of the official policy.

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### 1. Introduction

In Turkey healthy men at the age of twenty are recruited for military service on an obligatory basis for a specified term. Successful students get a deferment until a certain age (usually 29). Deserving recruits are assigned first or second grade corporal ranks. Re-engaged corporals constitute the lowest ranked professional personnel. Then, higher up the hierarchy come the non-commissioned-officers and the officers, respectively. They are voluntary, schooled professionals. Some of the officers (the ones who hold the ranks of sub-lieutenant) are also conscripts; but they own university degrees. The highest officer rank is that of a colonel, over which are placed the generals.

Historically states relied on different methods of recruitment for their armies. In ancient times and in the middle ages soldiers were paid soldiers, in other words, mercenaries. Those professional soldiers could even be recruited

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from foreigners<sup>(\*)</sup>. But in modern times, with the emergence of national feelings and the formation of nation-states, the idea of compulsive military service came into being.<sup>(\*\*)</sup>

In modern times, sometimes lottery systems were employed. This was the case in the United States of America during the Vietnam War years (A problem arose when the heavy-weight boxing champion M. Ali Clay's name emerged in the lottery and he responded by refusing to go serve under arms. As a punishment, his title was cancelled "on the table instead of on the rings". Years later, his boxing prohibition got abolished. He emerged as a champion again. Finally, his kindling the Olympic torch in Atlanta was like an amend of his country to the former champion. In September 2000 in the opening ceremonies of *Sydney* Olympic games, among the honor guests we see the middle-aged handsome face of Mohammed Ali once more!).

In highly developed countries, where armed forces offer satisfactory opportunities, usually there are enough number of volunteers to keep the armies going. *Sociologist Gans (1972) says that the poor sections of the society are quite functional in this sense; they are lured into armies (as well as other dangerous or difficult civilian jobs) for the sake of the payment (Ritzer, 1983: 233).*

Though the above arguments can not be knocked down altogether; the concept of national character must also be given credit. Indeed, the same authors *do* admit this very same national character, when it comes to martial values.

An American sergeant-major, Cecil Stack, compares the Turkish Army with the American army as far as structure goes: The basic structure of each army looks the same, with units built on units; so in this manner platoons make companies, companies make battalions and so on. The Turkish Army parallels the U.S. army with officers, NCOs [non-commissioned-officers] and enlisted men. Every male citizen at age 20 must start military service if he has no physical disability and if his education is not interrupted. In the enlisted ranks are privates, who wear no rank insignia; [second order corporals] corporals, who wear red, one-stripe rank insignias; and sergeants [first order corporals], who are not equal to NCOs and wear red, two-stripe rank insignias. They have a 20-month [then the year was 1986, now the term is shortened] obligation and leave when it is up. Conscripts soldiers also must live in the barracks during the week. They can leave on weekend passes if their schedules permit. A second lieutenant said: "These men receive very little money; the army provides them with food, clothing and a place to sleep" (Stack, April 1986: 15). [Then the description goes on with daily activities like physical training and field tactics].

A realistic picture of the Turkish Army in 1960's is given by a scholar as follows: *The Turkish Army counts around half a million men. A good part of the American aid and the local budget is spent to keep this army. The obligatory service period lasts 24 months [It progressively got shorter]. Those with higher education [now at least a B.S. or a BA.] degrees perform their service as reserved officers. According to the given figures; an American soldier stationed in Turkey costs 7700 dollars per year, while a Turkish soldier costs only 240 dollars. The simple Turkish soldier, called Mehmetçik<sup>(\*)</sup> undergoes his service in rather harsh conditions: The head closely cropped [Since 1993 a soldier is allowed to have some hair on top of his head], only one piece of clothing, a straw mattress, a mediocre nourishment (900 grams of bread and 35 grams of meat per day). But, even in those circumstances he is very devoted to his officers and executes the given orders without even bothering to understand what motives lie*

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\* This, the Byzantians did do, for instance: "The entrance of Armenians into Byzantine society [for such military purposes] excited considerable antagonism and jealousy on the part of the Greeks, who considered them to be crafty and treacherous. The antagonism is reflected rather virulently in medieval Greek poetry and proverbs" (Vryonis 1975:140). Seljuqs later did the same thing: "Seljuqs in Asia Minor absorbed the Greeks and Armenians into their military [as well as administrative, religious and agricultural] institutions. In addition, they forced the Nicaean-Trebizondine Greeks, the Georgians, and the Cilicians, as vassals, to furnish troops on an annual basis" (Vryonis, 1975:141).

\*\* "In both the American and French Revolutions the extending of the rights of citizenship (in particular the right to vote) was closely lined with the responsibility of military service. The linkage between citizenship and mass conscription was most clearly enunciated in France, where conscription was institutionalized early and became widely accepted"...In the Soviets, article 63 of the 1977 constitution stated the service of male citizens as a sacred obligation (Jones, 1985:52).

\* "Mehmetçik" means "little Mehmet / *petit* Mehmet". Mehmet is an abbreviation of Mohammed and is a very common name, literally loved by Turks. "This title designates the common soldier, who constitutes the main pillar of the Turkish Army. The title is an historic one. Historian Reshad Ekrem Kochu, in an extract about Fahreddin [Turkkan] Pasha gives the following knowledge. The Pasha instigated this title by using it regularly in daily issued orders and registering it on to the army archives. The pasha was the defender of the city of Medine against the British and their collaborators, the local forces, during the First World War. It was he who had sent some of the holy relics of the Blessed Prophet to the treasure of the Sultan in Istanbul, before the opposing forces seized the sacred city" (Erendil, 2000: 28).

beneath a given order. In actuality, this soldier is not unhappy at all, the living conditions in his own village in general being more miserable (Kıslalı, 1967:154-155).

Indeed, the army training even today is hot and the life is hard. But it has to be like that. A military motto says: “He who does not shed his sweat on peace time, sheds his own blood in war time”. Some individuals (though very few in number) can not take all that and try to escape the present situation on the cost of crippling himself, an act which is liable to be punished by law: *Upon evaluations based on the data of the last decade (1990-1999); we draw the following conclusions: The annual number of events (rendering himself unsuitable for the service) is 224 on the average. In the last two years, the number of events tend to diminish (15 % below the average), indicating a positive development. Those who commit such acts constitute 3 soldiers per ten thousand. 76 % of the Actors have either no education or only primary school diplomas; 7 % of the actors are high- school graduates; while no soldier with higher education ever commits such an act. Graduates. Generally soldiers who suffer from psychological problems or family problems are known to resort to the acts of wounding themselves, following sudden episodes of acute depression (Kaza ve Olay Onleme Broshuru no.1/ Brochure for Prevention of Events and Accidents no.1 1990:22-23).*

It is this difficulty of the service which makes it honorable. He who successfully accomplishes this obligation is a proud man. He is now more of a man, whereas one who was exempted from duty due to health reasons feels ashamed among ex-veterans all his life long. Similarly, in a typical village coffee-house, teen-agers who have not yet been in the army are individuals of lower social status with respect to other young men who had returned from the army. The army as an institution enjoys a very high prestige in the eyes of the citizens.

## 2. Methodology

It should be stressed that this research concerns a very rarely encountered topic for today’s Turkish Sociology. The history of sociology (as well as other social sciences), though deep chronologically, is not quite diversified in Turkey.

Ziya Gökalp made the views of the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, the synonym for Western philosophy for a decade or more. [Later] other Turkish teachers and writers returned from France to place Bergson on a pedestal... Interest in the majority of western [thinkers] caused short-lived enthusiasm with one exception: Auguste Comte’s teachings have held almost complete sway over the new Turks since the Young Turk Ahmed Rıza popularized him. Turks have joined in Comte’s easy confidence that his over-simplification of scientific method could solve moral and social as well as physical problems. On the whole critical judgements of conflicting philosophers has not been sufficiently cultivated in Turkish schools (Bisbee, 1951: 159).

Focusing on social solidarity groups is a fairly conventional topic of research all right; but setting this theme within a military environment carries us onto the field of *military sociology*. This is a special sociology which is somewhat new even for the more developed parts of the world.

“The field of the *sociology of war and peace [military sociology]* has been and is likely to remain strikingly different from other fields in sociology. First, the rapid increase in interest and work still means that only a handful of specialists are at work. Even if the number were to double or even triple, we would still be dealing with a very small group. Second, it is a field in which there is more theoretical ideal type analysis and suggestive propositions than empirical substance” (Janowitz, 1968: 18).

The research has many restrictions, the most obvious one deriving from the military nature of the topic. As Janowitz (1968:17) puts it, “*the secrecy of military institutions, both official and professional, has been offered as a barrier to sociological analysis*”.

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The officially approved transparency policy of the Turkish Armed Forces since 1992 reached its culmination in January, 1998; when press members were escorted by the commanders for a tour of the various military educational institutions. Nevertheless, naturally, there is a reasonable limit up to which point secrecy can be abolished for the military.

Meanwhile military sociology itself has emerged as a necessity to be taken up by Turkish scholars. Bozdemir (1983:23) appears to be the first scholar to point at this vacancy. He wrote that lack of interest on the part of

scientific circles towards what in French is called “*sociologie militaire*” is a pity, while Turkey constitutes a very rich laboratory regarding both long-ranged historical events and the impact of the Armed Forces on the contemporary society.

Charles Moskos of *Northwestern University*, a leading authority in contemporary *American military sociology*, illuminates us regarding the methodology of military sociology:

Two grand traditions exist in American military sociology, what we can call, with only some simplification, the *quantitative* and the *qualitative*. Both schools have impressive lineages starting in World War Two and both continue to have their practioners into the present. No categorization of research styles, of course, can be neat as the dichotomy described here. Good quantitative sociologists pay attention to context, and good qualitative sociologists do not shy away from numbers. Yet the difference between the two schools are real. The *quantitative* tradition relies on *surveys* or *experimental settings* for its data. The *qualitative* tradition looks toward *participant observation*, *case studies*, and *comparisons across time and countries*. *Quantitativists* typically seek to specify *variables* in *hypothesis* form; then they seek to test the resultant hypotheses. *Qualitativists* are more likely to discern *variables* in a *holistic* context; then they use those *variables* to *generate hypotheses*. One way to highlight the distinction between the two traditions is that quantitative sociologists generally feel close to *social psychologists*; while qualitative sociologists usually feel more akin to *social historians*.

There is one other faultline in military sociology that ought to be mentioned, one that cuts across the quantitative versus qualitative dichotomy. I refer to the distinction between the sociology *of* the military (military sociology as a substantive microcosm contributing to general sociological theory and method) and sociology *for* the military (sociologists as players in improving the effectiveness of armed forces). Yet, while acknowledging the differences between sociologists *of* and *for* the military; I argue we ought not think of an enduring split between these two kinds of sociologists (Moskos, 1988: v-vi).

Moskos (1988: vii) specifies that this volume of his (*Soldiers and Sociology*) is a “*compilation and updating*” of his articles that, he believes, “*follows the qualitative research tradition of S.L.A. Marshall*” (\*), albeit reflecting his “*core identity as an academic sociologist*”.

This work is the product of a researcher advocating mainly for the qualitative approach. Being the son of an officer, he has been in touch with the military circles ever since his childhood and has evaluated his vast experience and familiarity with the military environments along the course of this study. Occasionally references are made to “*an officer*”, whose promotion from second lieutenant to captain can be *inferred* when years are compared; this officer is a very good *informant* of the researcher and his identity is *confidential*. The researcher’s treasure of experiences also includes formerly-heard and later-remembered casual talks and even bits of eavesdropping, which are far more valuable instruments of data/information gathering than pre-planned formal interviews. In such a deliberately planned and notified interview, the respondent would be self-conscious and modify his words and assertions depending on his perception of the interviewer (a disguised investigator behind a cover-story? A person who is not deserving that information, having not obtained the necessary permission from fully proper levels of authority to full extent? Who knows?).

Even in a civilian environment it is impossible to “*extract*” the genuine attitudes and the real thoughts of subjects in some kinds of research. It is a well-known fact that financial issues usually constitute some sort of *taboo*, for instance. Shortcomings of questionnaires in certain given circumstances like an authoritarian environment also goes without saying.

As for a common technique used in social psychology; that of first “*playing it dumb*” and collecting information by deception and then providing a debriefing to the individual; that would not have worked for the military, either (for obvious reasons of ethics).

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\* “*Samuel Lyman Atwood Marshall (1900-1977)*, although not formally trained as a scholar — indeed, he was a journalist by trade and not a college graduate — was an innovative combat historian in World War Two, *Korea*, *Israel*, and *Vietnam*. *Marshall’s* classic book on combat motivation in World War Two, *Men Against Fire*, broke new ground with its *methodology* of after-battle interviewing. *Marshall* wrote a total of twenty books, dealing in one way or another with *soldiers* and *war*. His work makes a compelling case for the critical importance of better understanding the *nature of the soldier* and what assists or inhibits his performance” (*Edgar M. Johnson* [Technical Director of the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences] as deduced from the Foreword of Moskos’ work: *Soldiers and Sociology*).

### 3. How-it-Should-be versus How-It-in-Reality-is

In spite of all the official norms and regulations in any organization; it is not practically possible to make people comply with all those written formal “stuff”. The army is a very realistic institution as compared to civilian institutions. It is an all-compassing environment where almost no privacy is available for the individual. For instance, where else can the authorities periodically examine the armpit shaves of their men (in accordance with public hygiene and Islamic conventions)? Maybe in no other organization the needs of the people are so realistically and thoroughly recognized and admitted by the authorities!

Still, for all that realism, many practices naturally do escape the attention of authorities. The enlisted men have their own unwritten but well-observed procedures/codes. Certain groupings based on *compatriotship* is one such issue (the German word for compatriot is *Landsmann*). Closely-knit seniority circles’ solidarity is another. The latter, in contrast to the former, does have some formal “taint” or “tone”. But the senior privates usually abuse their implicitly approved prerogatives and “elongate” their rights tremendously on the cost of the novice-groups. In that respect, *legitimate power* (\*) is over-emphasized and transformed into *coercive power*.

The problem of favoritism based on coming from a common geographical section of the country, pertains more to the army (the land forces) than the other two services, here the social make-up being more heterogeneous. As for the Navy, only young lads from coastal regions are conscripted / drafted to serve in this service. This practice renders the social structure pretty uniform with respect to regional backgrounds. When it comes to the Air Force, this service generally picks out more educated young men, creating an environment where the need for as well as the significance of countrymen’s solidarity declines, while *expert power* (the power enjoyed by the technical specialist) gains a lot of importance. The general climate there automatically favors technocracy.

The influence of informal constellations [within formal formations] is widely recognized. Frequently informal relations determine the functioning of the more formal structures. Events ranging all the way from the loss of a ball game to the winning of a national election have been attributed to them. In fact, it is the business of foremen, personnel managers, trouble-shooters, and politicians to know the informal complex of attitudes and feelings that lies behind formal group behavior. By virtue of this knowledge they can steer a course get will get the desired results. In the same way, the effective leader knows that the success of any program must take into consideration the cultural, psychological, emotional, and other clique alignments, especially of ‘key’ people. Failure to consider these informal, unofficial, transitory alignments is recognized as a tactical blunder, poor diplomacy, or a lack of tact (Lundberg, Schrag and Larsen, 1954: 409).

### 4. *Landsmann* (Compatriot / *Mitburger*) Solidarity

Favoring of countrymen / compatriots in an organization or in any competitive environment where interests conflict, is a form of nepotism commonly seen in Turkey. Networks of some unsophisticated professions—Journalist and writer *Cetin Altan* insistingly emphasizes that most Turks are not in possession of any craftman-skill— for which little if any expertise knowledge is required, like concierges in apartment buildings in a certain district of a big city are known to be in the monopoly of men from a certain province.

The procedure obviously stems from feudal vestiges and fits more into a *gemeinschaft* than a *gesellschaft* (employing the terms of *Tonnies*). As a society evolves and departs from primitive ways, all kinds of favoritism automatically diminish. But, in a sense, the modern society can be more ruthless to many people, especially to those who are culturally deprived and short of talents. (Here, some controversy is present and one might as well philosophize about this topic).

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\* Legitimate power is based on legal rights. Coercive power involves the ability to force and punish. Reward power is based on a person’s perception that another person can mediate rewards or prizes. Referent power has to do with identification with another person, where attraction and feeling of membership or a desire to join gains importance (paraphrased from French & Raven 1978:447-449).

A tanker master sergeant speaks (February 26, 1996): “Emotionally disturbed draftsmen [those who take pills and those who masochistically cut their own chests with razor-blades etc.] were all excluded from compatriot-circles in the armored division where I served some years ago. In a battalion of, say, 1200 men, the approximate number of such men were about fifty. They usually came from urban centers and mostly from broken families, with parents in Europe etc. Sometimes the doctors had to carefully administer to them sedatives like *Diazem*, *Melleril* and so forth. They were far more difficult to handle than ex-convicts”.

Many civilian administrators do this practice without even questioning its ethical nature and not even bothering to dissimulate the practice. They simply seem to take it for granted that such a behavior is accepted and proper socially. But the army at least recognizes (\*) it as a vice on the part of rank-holding personnel and tries to cope with the problem. A retired general has a few words to say, about this, for example: *Regional influences may even affect young officers (special treatment of subordinates coming from the same locations, bias in dispersal of services etc.). Such behaviors must definitely be prevented by commandants and no doubt should arise about the fairness of the administration* (Oka, 1985: section 3, p. 10).

Certain cities have gained the reputation of being lands of “tough men”. Individuals coming from those regions may give way to their egos and easily succumb into the misuse of that edge/advantage.

An individual soldier oppressed by a compatriot clique or a witness of the situation can not report this to the authorities. The fear of retaliation is there. But, maybe more important, is the traditional moral code of loyalty to his equals and belittling of official intervention of any kind.

It is said that our people do not talk, but instead they mumble. The grapevine absorbs the complaints. Gossips continue in full swing. But nobody stands up to make a proclamation to the officers. So, such practices usually go unnoticed by the unit-commanders.

As a matter of fact, the idea of speaking his piece of mind upon perception of wrongdoing can occur only in the most modern societies. Even there, courageous and resolute people few in number are up to such an act. They can differentiate between betrayal (or denunciation or spying) and *whistleblowing* (\*).

A commando lieutenant-colonel (January 29, 1999) speaks: “Compatriotship has its good aspects in the army among privates. A private may enjoy the solidarity of his own townspeople. He is naturally closer to them. A compatriot may lend him money when he is broke. [The broke man is more likely to encounter him again and pay the money back, so he has credit]. A compatriot may simply donate him cigarettes and other important things. Also, they offer each other psychological relief and consolation in bad times. That is very important. But sometimes compatriot cliques may form and, my God, they do resemble gangs! Many officers do not penetrate into the worlds of the privates and they don’t know what may be going on there, among the ranks. When I was a company commander I always took time to stroll through the tables at meal times.

Having once completed my tour, then I had my own meals with them. (In commando companies, officers are included in the soldiers’ food in their mess halls). So, once, what do I see? All the good meat was accumulated on some certain tables, while all the lipids and bones on other tables! What was the matter? Those from *Adana* and *Mardin* were bullying the others! That I found out after a short inquiry. The youths were reluctant to speak up on the spot. ‘*Sir, er, well, it’s hard to explain; this is the custom,*’ they would say. ‘*this is the way it goes here!*’ What did I do? I made the good food exchanged with the bad food. Let the bullies feed on bones and lipids! That pays them right! See if they can dare to do it again! Well, I even know that such a compatriot clique may squeeze money [ransom] from others by force! They may change their old parkas and boots with others’ new ones”.

This same lieutenant-colonel, in his youth, had some problems with one of his superior battalion commanders, a huge but corrupt man. That major had a habit of assigning soldiers from holiday resort locations (*Bodrum*, *Marmaris* etc.) to comfortable positions. The lieutenant-colonel (at the time a captain) discovered that the battalion commander

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\* Almost universally, the moral codes appear to be stronger in the military than in civilian institutions. This follows from inherent logic that an armed force indispensably needs more auto-control. As Moskos (June 8, 1997) puts it, “*What distinguishes the armed forces from the rest of society is its necessity for good order and discipline...Only the armed forces have as a main purpose the responsibility as it is well put, ‘to kill people and break things.’ A military unchecked by a moral code is asking for chaos that unnecessarily risks the lives of our young men and women in uniform*”.

his yearly leaves of absence in holiday-villages in such centers (a total of one month divided into three ten-day-periods at different hotels). His own soldiers (sons of owners or themselves employees of tourist hotels) used to make the necessary arrangements for his sake.

In the words of a tanker master sergeant (February 26, 1996), “*compatriotship is not such a big issue among the non-commissioned-officers and among the sub-lieutenants (reserved officers); but it is really something for a private! Istanbulites don't stick together. Thracians (\*\*\*) do, to some extent*”.

As urbanization, institutionalization and specialization increase; (along with other *gemeinschaft* values) the idea of compatriotship also tends to decline, as expected. In that respect, compatriotship was an important concept even for the American soldier, but way back in 1860's, during the Civil War and the Spanish-American War days.

Years ago, while a sub-lieutenant (reserved officer in the service) I met a young man on a train trip. He was the son of a rich business man. He recounted his service memories (A uniform-clothed man is very liable / likely to hear such stories as if taken in a captured audience situation by a researcher). He told things like: “*I was a sergeant and I liked to impose discipline. A few soldiers from the province of Adana used to give me a hard time. They were supposedly the big shots of the barracks. Once I woke them up in the middle of the night. I said: 'This place is the soldier's home and furnace. Here bullying does not work!' and I gave them hell! Well, I disliked men from that city because they used to swear at God [jamais! / never ever!] (\*\*\*)*”.

## 5. Seniority Solidarity

In an institution, the senior members are those who entered there before the others did. The idea of seniority usually entails elderliness by age. But it also generally involves a possession of higher legitimate authority. In fact, elderliness and higher authority mostly overlap, though they are distinct concept *per se*. In the mind of a young person, nevertheless, authority is associated with age.

Throughout the course of growing up, the idea of respect for the adults is inculcated in family circles and schools. Even in adulthood, this social-role-learning goes on: “On receiving a gift from the hand of a giver, a *Turk* does not open it and admire it effusively [in a copious, demonstrative manner]; he or she puts the gift aside unopened as long as the guest is there, and pays attention to the giver rather than the gift. Such courtesies are basically keyed to attentive consideration for others” (Bisbee, 1951: 161-162).

The recruit (novice) spends the first one and a half to three and a half months (depending on his military branch like infantry, artillery etc.) of his (now) 15-month-service-term, in basic training, which is a “hot” experience for him. During this process drill-sergeants train them. The drill-sergeant enjoy this authority a bit too much. An artillery colonel (and later a brigadier general) (May 1994) in a lounge of a military institution in *Ankara* asked the other officers casually: “*I wonder if any of you ever worked at a [Basic] Training Center and seen the way the drill sergeants treat the recruits! In one word, it is awful! I know it from the Training Center in Erzincan*”.

A popular saying stipulates that “if you have a first order corporal acquaintance in the army, this provides better protection than having a general (!) as an acquaintance”. In April 1999 a project was commenced in the Land Forces High Command, aiming for the betterment of such centers. Moderation of the organizational climate was the key point. As a remedy, replacing, in the long run, the then-present first order drill corporals (themselves conscripts)

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\*\* Thrace, the small European section of Turkey is much more modern than the rest of the country in all respects. The following extract from the writings of an outstanding scholar is a very enlightening interpretation regarding the historical contribution of such regions to the formation of modern Turkey: “Religious suppression was quite diminished with respect to *Anatolia*. Feudal structure was lost. Though the *Roumelite* could not catch up with the rest of *Europe*, at least, he knew his own locus as well as the situation of the world. As for *Anatolia*, was just the opposite was true. *Anatolia* was for centuries submerged in the swamps of ignorance and bigotry, left to its own sort and looked down upon. The letter [journalist] *Hasan Tahsin* had written to his father is the letter of a civilized, knowledgeable and conscious intellectual. It was civilized intellectuals like him who planned, wisely organized and safely led to victory our war of independence and later carried *Turkey* onto the civilized world through the revolutions” (Sengor May 22, 1999).

\*\*\* Years ago, a university student from *Adana* explained this horrible habit of some *Adanians* in the following manner: “*The reason why people swear at God [jamais! / never ever!] in our region has to do with climate. Cotton is a very delicate plant. Sometimes the cotton crop is ripe and just before the harvest a rain pours out and spoils the cotton*”.

with specialist first order corporals (lifers who volunteer to stay once their term is over and get this wish granted) got proposed. This project got realized and experienced, knowledgeable experts have taken over the task of training the recruits.

The total term of the service now being 15 months; in a unit, there are different circles of (skilled) privates ( who have left the basic training behind) under arms. Each seniority circle, exercises control over and provides advice for the lesser senior circle. Sheer formal authority is held by corporals (with one red stripe) and sergeants (with two red stripes); but an ordinary private (without any stripes) from a former seniority circle wants to stress his seniority against a corporal or sergeant from a newer seniority circle. This is not an explicit practice, but implicitly that kind of works. Unpleasant and hard work generally is the lot of the less senior privates in practice, though, officially this should not be the case. To ensure their prerogatives, members of such circles cling together.

A tanker lieutenant-colonel (February 10, 1979) speaks: “The most important value for the draftsmen is seniority (*tertip*). It is valid for the privates just as it is for officers and non-commissioned-officers. “In tea it is the infusion which counts for; in the army it is the seniority which counts for” you know [In Turkish the words “seniority” and “infusion” rhyme, making it more effective]. But, compatriotship also counts a lot, informally of course. They use the term “*toprak*” [soil] for it. In a company if, “*toprak*” cliques ever counterbalance the most senior circle (*en ust tertip*), then just you watch! Too many events break out! You know, if a corporal catches a sentry in sleep at night, it is those things which matter regarding his decision whether or not to notify the company commander. How strong is *landsmanship* ?

Who caught whom? The informal pressure of such circles is tremendously stronger than the legitimate authority itself, believe me! If the most senior privates also happen to be from a strong “soil”, you can then use this opportunity as a company commander, for the benefit of the company. Order, discipline, everything perfect! All works completed timely and properly! [making the beds, doing all the cleaning inside the barracks and outside the barracks (*mintika temizligi*), peeling potatoes in the kitchen etc.]. A strong “soil”? *Adana*, I would say. Once in my company we had a number of them. Their repression over the rest of the company was terrible! Those who resisted or defied them were awoken in the middle of the night, brought outside the ward and beaten severely”.

A couple of *case histoiesy* depict the significance of seniority among conscripts: When I was a junior high school student, one Sunday we entered into a pudding shop. Some soldiers were already in there. One of them was the orderly (*posta*) of an officer, whose son was with us. This familiarity led to a dialogue between the two groups. The dialogue soon deteriorated into a frivolous bull session in that relaxed atmosphere.

Then a corporal told a certain talkative private to shut up. The soldier, however, assuming a roughneck role; made his right hand into an obscene jest (the culturally equivalent version of the middle finger show). He asked: “Do you know what this is?”. He gave his own answer: “ This is a gold thread, superior to your red stripe. I’ll take this and sew it on my arm! I am from an earlier recruit circle, mind you!” General laughter gave him an implicit support; while the corporal paid his own bill and left.

In a military establishment in İstanbul in 1999, one day some laborers had to work overtime. When the task was over they had to be fetched home by a military vehicle. (The regular commutal bus normally takes the personnel at 5 p.m.). The head duty officer gave orders to the garage. Soon the vehicle, the driver-private and the necessary papers (signed by the head duty officer himself) were all ready. But the vehicle could not start. The workers, all exhausted by hard work, were getting impatient, nervously sipping at their teas in the salloon normally used as the waiting room for the visitors.

Where was the bottle-neck in this delay? An armed guard equipped with a helmet and a security vest did not show up. The head duty officer dialed a number on the phone and urged the first order corporal in charge to hurry. The reply was some relief for all: “*One of my men will come down right away, my commander!*” But minutes elapsed and no one came.

Then the master sergeant in charge of the entrance duty left his booth and walked up to the office of the head duty officer. With a knowing grin on his face, he uttered the secret behind the whole story: “*Sir, it takes two to three minutes for a young man to run down that slope over here. But, they can not decide about whom they should send! Each private appointed by the first order corporal argues that some one less senior is more deserving for the ‘corvée’. The debate locks up just at this point, sir*”.

Of course the sanction imposed by a regular officer is different. If an officer points his finger to a private and orders him to come along; the absolute obedience is automatic. But (though in theory the orders issued by all

superiors of all ranks are equally effective); in practice; the order from a first or second order corporal (himself a draftee) could be open to some negotiation if the conditions permit; especially in absence of a witnessing officer.

The concept of seniority is so prevalent in the military culture that it applies even to civilians working for the military. Recently a civilian employee working for the military got arrested with the charge of a military-natured offence and put into a military prison. As a consequence of two successive trials, they released him about three months later. After his return to the work-place, his colleagues asked him about his impressions there. (He lost his moustache there; but his hair-size was nearly the same as before). He narrated the following: “The wards of those under arrest were different from the wards of the sentenced convicts. In both instances the wards were further divided on the basis of military status. Our ward contained re-engaged extended draftees (specialists), civilian clerks and laborers working for the military and pure civilians suspected of involvement in military crimes. We were about 25 to 30 inmates. The number was not constant.

The ward had a *big-shot*. In fact the man was a pure civilian. An educated man, too. What made him the *big-shot*? Just one criterion: His extended confinement. He had been there for nearly two years. His trials lingered for months and the judges could not come to a verdict yet.

The man wanted to subdue me. What a persecution, man! The effectiveness of such guys outweigh that of the administration. The guards themselves (all privates) were pretentious enough in application of their authority, on the other hand. I had one special advantage. (With the age of 43) I was the oldest man there. Age naturally summons some respect, as you know. Otherwise the big-shot could have rendered life even more difficult for me”.

## 6. Clever Leadership Pays off

Ideally all kinds of assignments and in parallel all favors or rewards should go to the deserving persons in the army. In other words, instead of all sorts of nepotism or favoritism, only meritocracy should dominate the command climate. However, it can not be denied that compatriots’ favoritism comes into play among rank and file.

It should be noted that all aspects of informal practices can not be “bad” even from the point of view of the authorities. In the hands of clever commanders, such practices through careful manipulations may turn out beneficial and contribute to cohesion, which is a key concept especially in battle circumstances.

Indeed, a military commander may deliberately compose a special team (which will probably be obliged to give a fight under extremely dangerous and inconvenient conditions) entirely from compatriots. This may increase the cohesion of the team and enable the men to achieve the mission in question. Such evaluations are up to the commanders and the prevailing battle circumstances.

That possibility put aside; when necessary; a clever, resourceful small-unit-leader may even motivate an individual soldier merely by reference to the soldier’s home-city! A tactful display of (preferably first-hand and convincingly self-experienced) bit of information accompanied by a positive remark about his home-city can render a soldier more enthusiastic for his mission. Moreover it fills the soldier with feelings of appreciation towards that particular commander. The soldier, on such an occasion, in a sense takes the commander as an honorary “*landsman*” besides an official superior. Following are a number of case histories:

In a military establishment in İstanbul in the year 2000; *Bekir* was serving as one of the two orderlies of the head duty-officer (); keeping the officer’s room and the environment tidy, answering phones in his absence, daily changing the bed sheets and the name plates of all the subordinate duty officers and NCOs, preparing and serving tea etc. He came from *Tortum, Erzurum*. One certain major who had his night duties as he head duty officer (three to four times in a month) used to appreciate the disciplined, serious manners of that *Anatolian* boy. So, sometimes he used to tease him: “*Bekir, I think the waterfalls in your town deserve to be more famous than the Niagara Falls in America. But, the unfortunate case is that Niagara falls are better known all over the world. Now, what would you say in face of that open injustice?*” Never ever spoiled; *Bekir* would “describe” a shy, humble smile with his solemn, almost sad-looking mouth and confirm the officer’s words: “*As you say so, my commandant*”

In the superb novel *The Moon is Down*, written by John Steinbeck, a certain episode was interesting from the point of view of military leadership. The invading-army’s commandertreats a young lieutenant kindly, asking him if he receives news from home etc. Nevertheless, he later treats another elderly officer harshly. The local mayor

witnesses all that and the commander explains him. The latter officer is a “*born soldier*” and he “*relies on discipline the way others rely on sympathy*”.

Indeed; the other orderly beside Bekir, had a different, predominantly hedonistic and happy character. His self-esteem came later than his need of joy. (A captain would even fall into the error of calling him a “hammer-head” because his head was protruding backwards. *Cemil* would tolerate that address, or rather this abuse even without the slightest grimace on his face!). *Cemil* was from a province of, *Ankara*; one of the focal points of the folk culture in *Central Anatolia*. One of the most popular “*coquin*” folk-songs originates from that town, *Gudul*: “*The water is springing from among the stones. Bow your face and I’ll give you a kiss among the eyebrows! They say my sister’s husband said ‘psst’ to me*” [in a seductive manner]), *don’t believe it my lad!*”.

The same major would flatter *Cemil* on a hard day’s evening by alluding to the folk-songs of his hometown: “*Cemil, so you folks compose all those beautiful, joyful folk-songs at home; you do, don’t you?*” *Cemil*’s face would lighten up with his broad, somewhat spoiled smile and his eyes would twinkle. The fatigue of the day would disappear like magic!

In the same military establishment in *Istanbul* in the year 2000; a certain office had to be improved in outward appearance. The office of the above-mentioned major, to be more specific! For the purpose, two privates were sent from the Support Services Company to carry the heavy metallic cupboards into open air to be painted by spray dyes. The same evening the freshly-painted cupboards were brought back by the two privates. The officer in charge of the office offered them eau de Cologne: “*You guys had to smell a lot of paint today. Now let us all smell some pleasant scent, to overcome that old paint odor!*”

Then the officer expressed his thanks to the *Mehmetciks* and ordered tea for them. A fellow-*Mehmetcik* brought the teas. The officer now inquired into their home-cities as an easy topic of conversation. One private, *Ahmet*, a furniture-maker by trade, had come from *Tortum, Erzurum*; the very same town from where the above-mentioned *Bekir* had come.

The association was automatic in the head of the officer. Meanwhile *Bekir* had left for home, having completed his service. The major asked *Ahmet* if he knew *Bekir*, his countyman. *Ahmet* had been here for three months and *Bekir* left only about a month ago. So, two months of *Ahmet*’s service time must have overlapped with that of *Bekir*.

However *Ahmet* did not meet *Bekir*! Quite astonishing! How come? Well, because *Bekir* had been in the guard combat company whereas *Ahmet* was from the support services company. Even in night time they couldn’t have come together, the sleeping-wards of the two companies not being adjacent.

(The men of the former company mainly serve as armed sentries all around the establishment day or night. The men of the latter company mainly fulfill the required tasks as skilled or unskilled manpower as well as auxiliary sentry posts without rifles like in kitchens or wards etc.). From the all-of-a-sudden-gloomy facial expressions of *Ahmet*, it was all too easy to infer his disappointment for having missed to encounter his fellow countryman!

For the sake of equity, the officer now turned to the other private, *Deniz*. He was from *Gazi Antep*. The officer meditated for a few seconds and then started to talk: “*In Antep can you still eat that old locally-prepared, delicious ice-cream out of deep small bowls? Or else; did those new, lousy market products, the so-called “ready ice-cream” brands, which make your fingers all sticky; begin to invade the Antep market, as well?*”

*Deniz* replied that presently both kinds were available back home. The conversation gave the two soldiers a feeling of self-satisfaction. In a stressful environment where people must constitute a indiscriminate mass and where “heads” are counted in roll-calls; an occasional appeal to a person’s individuality (if only on the basis of his home-city), an emphasis of humane aspects of life; is indeed a precious prize. As *Dogan Cuceloglu* insistently points out; it is the message that everybody needs. A message like “*you exist; you are unique being; and I esteem you!*”

Finally; on a shiny August morning in the year 2001; that same (informant) officer found himself on the rear seat of a military car on the way to the *Infantry School* in *Tuzla*. The privilege of riding in an official car was a rare occasion in his military life. His mission for today was to designate the especially-talented reserve-officer candidates from among the ranks, on their first day at the *Infantry School*.

Two different routes could lead to *Tuzla* from his military lodging. The soldier at the place of the driver, *Murat*, was himself a *Marmara-boy*. The armed guard sitting next to him at the front seat, *Hasan*, was from *Zonguldak*. The officer said: “*In a little while we will take up the coastal road and enjoy ourselves! Moreover we will reach our destination sooner!*”

Soon a clear breeze free from the smallest dust particles was blowing through the open windows from the direction of the sea. The islands were spread out one after the other on the right hand side. The three men inside the car were all delighted to be riding there! The officer said: “*No wlet us make some contribution to your knowledge ogf geography: The names of those beautiful islands are respectively Kınalı, Burgaz, Heybeli and Büyükada*”.

Then he remarked: “Murat appreciates green ever since his childhood. He is from Marmara. But the funny thing, Hasan is a coastal boy, too, from Zonguldak! And some hard work is waiting this old officer here, today. Don’t we all deserveto enjoy that lovely view and that sweet wind? Imagine that hateful E-5 road now! Probably we would have come to a stop every f..ckig minute if we had made the wrong choice!. Aren’t we all lucky?”

## 7. Conclusion

Doubtless to say, military service is honorable but far from being easy. It is a further growing up experience and education for the young recruits. Moreover it is a must for each young Turkish man. As a matter fact; the typical Turkish male citizen undergoes two ordeals resembling the historical initiation ceremonies: One is circumcision in childhood, the other is the military service at the end of adolescence.

Traditional values continue to affect many modern institutions, the Armed Forces being no exception. The bulk of the conscripts is represented by the traditionally-oriented country youths as well as the youths from the “bidonville” (or shantytown) sectors of urban centers. Now, the latter do preserve most of the traditional values. So, the role of traditional ways and means still linger in the military service, like in many other so-called modern aspects of the national scene.

During the service; to cope with the difficulties of a new and demanding environment; the young men resort to the traditional ways. They first search the shelter of fellow countrymen. Once they get some experience; a new “grip” is available for them as extra support. This is the historically rooted concept of seniority and they now cling to that, to gain some respite (on the cost of more suffering for the new-comers, which is another paradox!).

Both concepts are open to abuse and injustices. But their elimination is not so easy. The alleviation of their sharpness appears to occur, though somewhat slowly, along the course of an increase in modernization.

Still; many desirable effects of those traditional practices are also there for the isolated individual involved. Moreover; clever manipulation by leaders can render those traditional vestiges harmless or even beneficial on an institutional level, as well. After all; for any entity, reconciliation with the old traits is a healthier coping behavior than mere repudiation; no matter what those traits can be.

## Visual Supplement



Fig. 1. Soldiers at a moment of repose (illustration by the Author—S.C.)

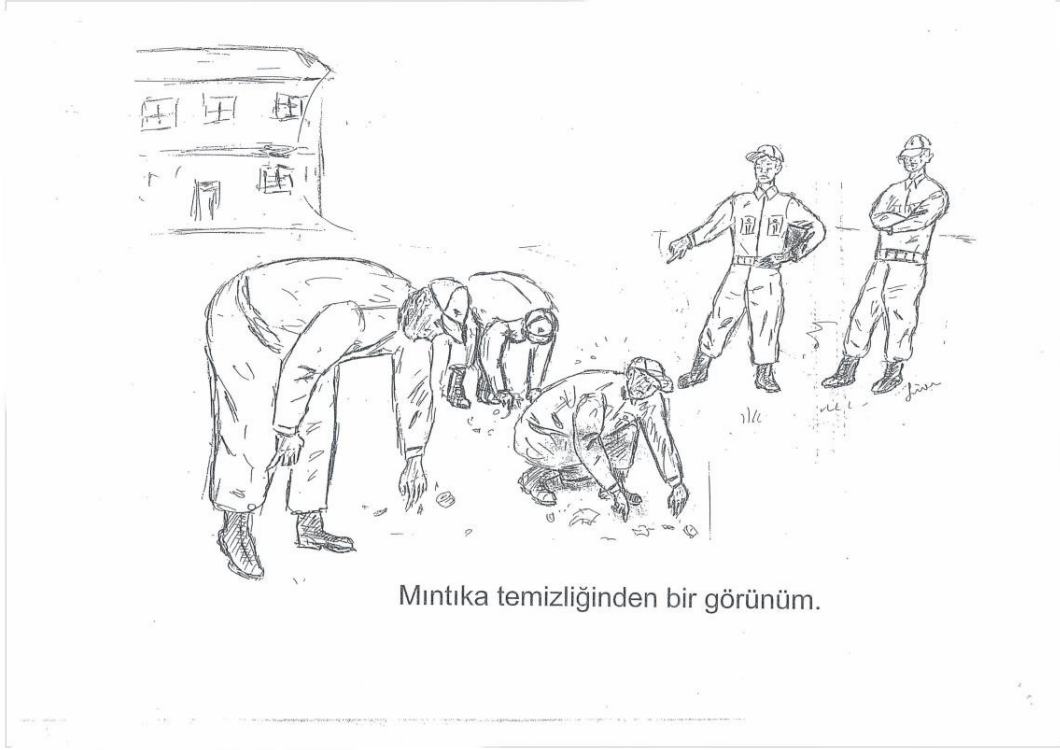


Fig.2. A view from the routine territory cleaning (illustration by the Author—S.C.)



Fig. 3. A young conscript-nominee dreaming about the sweet near-future (illustration by the Author—S.C.)



Fig. 4. Soldiers love to sing folk songs, like those ones working in the kitchen of the barracks (illustration by the Author—S.C.)

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