

Rise and fall of the janissary corps essay sample



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The origins of the Janissaries are shrouded in mystery, a mix between discernible fact and fable. Historians cannot agree on which Ottoman Bey brought them into existence - most traditional historical accounts name Orhan I (1281-1362) as the father of the Janissaries¹, growing from a need to supplement and reform the standing army of the time, the Yaya. There is also a modern school of thought which claims that Murad I (1326-1389) was the father of the Janissaries². While this has not been conclusively proved either way, this essay will base its premise on the former.

Although the Yaya were a regular Infantry force, their excessive pay and the highly-strung temperament of the Ghazis (tribal warriors) that made up the Yaya gave Orhan much concern. Orhan wanted a corps of soldiers loyal only to himself, rather than other Turkish nobles.

The recruitment of the Janissaries stems from the traditional one-fifth of booty in cash³ taken from those defeated by the Ottomans. During the late 14th century, this metamorphosed into recruiting defeated subjects into the military. Parallels can be drawn between this and the Ghilman slave-soldiers that had been incorporated in armies elsewhere in the Middle East⁴, such as the Sassanid armies. With the pace of Ottoman expansion, demand for soldiers soon outstripped supply of conquered subjects, so this practice was mated shortly after in 1438 with the system of devsirme (boy levy).

Devsirme involved boys from the families of Balkan Christian subjects between the ages of eight and eighteen being forcibly taken from their parents, rigorously trained and tested, converted to Islam, and then taken into service by one of the branches of Ottoman rule. Families with only sons,

gypsy families and youths from the cities were not subject to devsirme, because it was felt that depriving families of only sons would cause hardship, and that gypsies and youths from the city were untrustworthy. In keeping with the vision of a fiercely loyal and devoted unit, no chances were taken on raw materials.

Whether this made a difference is nigh on impossible to predict, but it demonstrates how much care and attention was taken with the minutiae in the creation and rise of the Janissaries. The four branches of the Ottoman Empire consisted of the administrative, the scribal, the cultural and the military⁵. The administrative consisted of the palatial (or inner) service and the divan (or cabinet), the scribal branch took care of revenue, and met government obligations such as salaries. The cultural branch, or the ulama were responsible for education and healthcare, religious duties and justice.

The need for incorruptible, impressionable soldiers was met by this system, because as recent Islamic converts, the youths would have no tribal affiliations or anything preventing them showing complete loyalty and dedication to the Ottoman ruler, something the Ghazis could not be relied upon for. The system itself caused mixed feelings – many families resented the ‘ theft of their pre-adolescent sons’⁶, but others realised that the devsirme system had the benefit of enabling the youths to reach great heights both socially and politically in the meritocratic atmosphere of the Ottoman empire.

Also, evidence that many Janissaries stayed in touch with their Christian families⁷, so after the initial shock and disgust with the policy, it was

generally seen as a benign system, and many Christian (and even Muslim) families even resorted to bribing the officials to pick their son. ⁸ A position in the Janissaries, while not as prestigious as palatial service, was nonetheless a coveted position. As a result of this, the Janissaries were never short of recruits, facilitating the rise of the corps. The discipline and cohesive nature of the Janissary corps is due in no small part to the training process the recruits underwent.

Selection was an involved process for the Ottomans, blending both bizarre and modern methods of selection, from strenuous mental tests to physiognomy examinations, the whole process being overseen by a board of examiners. A key factor in the success of the Ottoman empire, and more pertinently, the rise and success of the Janissaries, was this system of selection, training and education, even replacing their Christian name with an Islamic one.

Those destined for the inner service experienced a blend of strict military discipline with etiquette and manners Islamic teachings, languages and even music in 'Palace schools', supervised by the Kapi Agasi, or 'Chief White Eunuch'¹⁰ for between two to seven years, before further selection. The acemi oylan, some of whom would one day become Janissaries experienced a much more basic education - purely military with an intense programme of obedience, Turkish language and military drills.

After five to seven years, they were sent on to an acemi ocak (training corps) which had vacant places, where those not selected for technical branches were trained as basic Janissary infantry for at least six years. Only passing

out when a place became open in an operational Orta or unit, the training and preparation the Janissaries underwent forged them into arguably (as borne out by their battle successes) the most effective fighting force of the age. The strict, almost monastic lifestyle imposed on the Janissaries undoubtedly contributed to their effectiveness.

To prevent them from developing interests that would compromise their loyalty to the Sultan, Janissaries were forbidden to marry or own land¹¹. To supplement and encourage this ingrained loyalty, they were fed, accommodated, equipped, salaried and even paid 'accession money' every time a new ruler took gained the throne, all at the expense of the Ottoman treasury. The average Janissary was well-trained in a variety of contemporary weapons, including the sword, the javelin, the bow and firearms.

Although at first viewed as dirty and unclean, and therefore unsuitable for such disciplined troops, gunpowder soon became a useful tool, and gave the Ottoman forces an advantage over those without it. The quality of the Janissary training and their effectiveness as a modern, elite fighting unit was proved in battle many times over, most notably their role in the siege of Constantinople in 1453, and their victories over the Safavids, the Mamluks and the Hungarians in 1514, 1516 and 1526¹² respectively.

The victory over the Hungarians was perhaps the finest hour of the Janissaries, where the musketry skills of the Janissary infantry brought down repeated charges of Hungarian cavalry. The Janissaries had proved their worth as the premier fighting unit of the Ottoman empire. With the meteoric

rise of the Janissaries, it is hard to imagine that they would rise to become a political force in competition with various Sultans. Their effectiveness as warriors declined as their influence grew - using revolts and mutinies, they forced through policies aimed at bettering their station.

While at first compliant with the restrictions placed upon them, such as the previously mentioned laws forbidding them to marry, to own land or to grow facial hair, over a period of time they campaigned against them. Janissaries sought more pay, the opportunity to marry and induct their sons into the corps, and many other privileges they felt were unfairly denied them. This grew from an awareness of quite how much power they held, both militarily and socially, as prestigious elite troops.

In 1449 they staged their first revolt, securing higher wages - this was the starting point for a decline into nepotism, politicking and the fade of their martial skills. Other reforms followed, most notably permission to marry in 1566, granted by Selim II. Suddenly, Janissaries were more concerned with the advancement of their family than loyalty to the Sultan, and it was borne out by their actions. By 1568 they had secured the right to enlist their sons¹³ and in the 17th century, they had become so influential that they were the dominant power in government.

Much of the original restrictions placed upon them were broken - they became landowners, went into trade and those who enlisted their sons in the corps, bypassed the selection process and the acemi oylan training school. As a result of this, and an increasing shift from almost monastic warriors to rich, influential tradesmen, their military prowess declined severely and the

cohesion between their tight-knit units faded. Many of those demanding salaries as Janissaries were in fact not soldiers, but merchants, camp-followers and charlatans who had assimilated themselves and sought money, greater power and influence.

The Janissaries continued placing their own interests above those of the Ottoman Empire, and in doing this and resisting efforts to reform, became the authors of their own demise. Arguably, by this time, the Janissaries were no longer fit for purpose, or able to function in any way, shape or form as an Infantry corps. As such, they presented a very real and serious threat to the stability of the Ottoman Empire¹⁴ After reaching such heights, the Janissaries strongly resented any attempt to curtail their power.

Any Sultan who tried would quickly be deposed, as demonstrated by the example of Osman II. Osman blamed the ineffective Janissaries for his defeat by the Poles at Khotyn in 1621, and he was further suspicious of the Janissaries because of their loyalty to his rival, the previous Sultan. He planned to create a new army made up of ethnic Turks, but lacking the support the Janissaries enjoyed, he was quickly imprisoned and executed. While this demonstrates how powerful the Janissaries had become, it also shows how far they had fallen from their original vocation.

By the 19th century, the Janissaries had pushed too far; they had alienated the people and practically all of their supporters by refusing to acknowledge their responsibility towards the Ottoman Empire, instead being too concerned with accruing wealth and power. When they became aware that Sultan Mahmud II was taking steps to replace them by building up a new

army, they mutinied as they had done so many times before. This time however, they were forced back by the Sultan's troops, whose training and discipline was superior to the outdated and ill-prepared Janissaries.

Fighting desperate last stand actions at their barracks, the Sultan's troops brought field artillery against them, setting on fire the Aksaray barracks and resulting in many casualties - historians put the estimate of Janissary casualties as between 4, 000¹⁵ and 10, 000¹⁶. The surviving Janissaries were either exiled or executed, and the fall of the corps was complete. It can be argued that the factors that led to the success of the Janissaries were the very factors that, when ceasing to be put into practice, led to the destruction of the corps.

Human greed comes into it as well, and Lord Acton's famous quotation about power corrupting, absolute power corrupting absolutely, can be well applied here. The devsirme system and the rigorous selection, training and discipline that followed it produced fighting men capable of great feats of arms, and the restrictions placed on them ensured their loyalty and effectiveness as an elite unit. The end of the devsirme system in 1648¹⁷, and the short-sighted policies allowing the Janissaries to develop self-interests caused the loyalty to the throne to be severed.

Once this was gone, the Janissaries quickly established themselves as political entities, while unwilling to give up their position as an elite fighting unit. However, in failing to keep up the standards such a position entailed, they sowed the seeds for their downfall. Had the Janissaries been kept firmly in check, and their loyalty to the Sultan been unwavering, it is unlikely they

would have met such an end. It is ironic in that the Janissaries were created out of a need to reform the corrupt and questionable loyal forces at the time, and were disbanded by force because they had come full circle and in turn became corrupt and disloyal.