

The Janissary Corps, From Its Foundation to 1826

The Ottoman Infantry, the Devshirme, and the Auspicious Incident

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Preface

The corps's own regulatory tradition describes how a levy was supposed to run: a district officer and a scribe arriving at a village of the Christian subject population, a register of male children of a specified age band produced by the village elders, the only sons of widows set aside, teeth, height, and general condition inspected, a take assembled and walked to a district assembly point, joined there with the takes of neighbouring districts, and marched east to the recruiting depots at Edirne and, later, Istanbul, for placement, conversion, and an education meant to detach the recruits from every prior loyalty. No single witnessed instance of that sequence survives in the sources used here; the description above is a composite drawn from ordinance and from Godfrey Goodwin's narrative synthesis, not a transcript of one village's afternoon. It is offered as a composite because that is what the sources permit and nothing more precise should be claimed for it.¹

What a reader can know of a levy in progress comes chiefly through three kinds of writing that do not agree with one another, and one of which is not yet in reach.

¹Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)* (Manuscript tradition, Süleymaniye and Topkapı holdings, 1606); Godfrey Goodwin, *The Janissaries* (Saqi Books, 1994).

The first is the fifteenth-century memoir of Konstantin Mihailović, a young Serbian taken into Ottoman service in the years around the Ottoman conquest of the Serbian mining town of Novo Brdo in 1455, who later returned to Christian Europe and dictated an account in Slavic that survives in a small manuscript tradition and reached a scholarly English edition in the Michigan Slavic Translations series of 1975. Mihailović is not a witness to the mechanics of a village levy of the kind the ordinance describes; his own route into Ottoman service, whether by the periodic levy or by capture attendant on the fall of Novo Brdo, is not settled by his text, and his age, his status before capture, and the exact sequence by which he entered the corps remain open questions. What his memoir does support is testimony to what came after: the household placement, the language instruction, the training at Edirne, and years of campaign service. It is a memoir, written for a Christian audience after the author's return, and it carries a memoir's interests along with its detail; it should be read as one man's retrospective account of a career, not as a transcript of an institution.²

The second kind of writing is the corps's own regulatory text, the *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân*, a manuscript tradition dated in its compiled form to the early seventeenth century and transmitted through several codices in the Süleymaniye and Topkapı holdings. A stable identifier for a specific modern printed edition is not fixed in the present bibliography, and citation at that granularity is deferred. The *Kavânîn* describes an institution the state was itself trying to see clearly, at a distance of two and a half centuries from the founding, and it describes what the aghas ought to have organized, paid, and permitted. The distance from ordinance to practice is the distance any legal historian keeps in view when reading an early modern *kanunname*.³

The third kind of writing is the archival series maintained by the Ottoman fiscal-military administration: the *mevâcib defterleri*, or pay registers, and the *esâme defterleri*, or roll registers, held today by the Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives in Kağıthane, under the classifications *Maliyeden Müdevver*, *Kâmil Kepeci*, and *Cevdet Askeriye*. These registers reach this account through mediating scholarship rather than in bulk. The principal channel is Rhoads Murphey's *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700* and Virginia Aksan's *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870*. Quantitative claims that rest on Murphey's or Aksan's mediation are named as such; the registers themselves are not cited as though consulted.⁴

The *Kavânîn* and the dispatches of foreign observers do not describe the same institution. The *Kavânîn* describes a fiscal-military office subject to an ordinance the aghas enforced. The Venetian *relazioni*, the Habsburg dispatches, and the Polish and Muscovite reports describe a

²Konstantin Mihailović, *Memoirs of a Janissary*, ed. Svat Soucek, trans. Benjamin Stolz, Michigan Slavic Translations 3 (University of Michigan, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 1975).

³Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*.

⁴Rhoads Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700* (Rutgers University Press, 1999), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203015971>; Virginia H. Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*, *Modern Wars in Perspective* (Pearson Longman, 2007); Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Maliyeden Müdevver Defterleri Classification (Fiscal and Janissary Pay Registers)* (Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı, 1500); Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Kâmil Kepeci Classification (Central-Treasury and Janissary Registers)* (Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı, 1500); Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Cevdet Askeriye Classification (Military Petitions, Memorials, and Edicts)* (Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı, 1700).

distant and formidable object of military intelligence, glossed by the categories the observer's own government used for its soldiery and compressed by the brevity a dispatch allows. Where a claim below rests on more than one of the three kinds of writing at once, it is safer than a claim resting on any one alone.

Godfrey Goodwin's *The Janissaries* remains the closest thing in English to a book-length narrative of the corps from foundation to abolition. Around it stand Gábor Ágoston's *Guns for the Sultan*, on the Ottoman weapons industry; Rhoads Murphey's *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*, on the organization, logistics, pay, and manpower of the classical century; and Virginia Aksan's *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870*, which carries the story from 1700 to the abolition. Colin Imber's *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650* draws on somewhat different Turkish scholarship and reaches somewhat different conclusions about the pace of the corps's transformation; where Imber and Aksan disagree, the disagreement is named rather than smoothed over. Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, in the Rosenthal translation, supplies a fourteenth-century vocabulary for the cohesion of ruling groups that a reader may find useful at the founding, where it is invoked once, briefly, and by name; it does not organize what follows.⁵

The corps was founded in the fourteenth century, reached a scale no continental power matched by the sixteenth, admitted marriage and hereditary enrollment in stages across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ran a pay-ticket market of increasing scale through the eighteenth, deposed and killed sultans across two centuries, and was destroyed by artillery fire at Istanbul in 1826. That sequence does not describe a single design decaying on a schedule. It describes an institution whose recruitment, its battlefield performance, its position in the urban economy, its fiscal claims on the treasury, and its capacity to block a reform it disliked moved on five different tracks that did not all point the same direction at the same time. Recruitment shifted from levy to inheritance; urban and provincial integration grew; fiscal entitlement grew faster still; the capacity to veto reform grew fastest of all, and outlasted whatever had happened to combat performance. Each of the five threads has its own history, and they diverge wherever the evidence permits them to be followed separately. Mahmud II's achievement in 1826 was not the completion of a decline the founders had unknowingly programmed. It was the construction, over eighteen years, of an alternative force, a fiscal base, and a religious sanction capable of liquidating an institution that had made itself, by every ordinary means, too costly to reform.

Chapter 1. c. 1363: The founding levy

The state before the corps

In the middle of the fourteenth century the Ottoman polity was still a frontier principality on the western edge of Anatolia and the eastern edge of Rumelia. Its warlike household troops were the ghazi cavalry of Bithynia and their Turcoman allies; its territorial troops

⁵Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Gábor Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The Structure of Power* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, Bollingen Series XLIII (Princeton University Press, 1958).

were the timariot sipahis holding revenue assignments across recently conquered land; its infantry was raised as needed and dispersed when the campaigning season closed. The state that Osman had begun and that Orhan and Murad I extended into Thrace was, in Goodwin's summary, a coalition whose loyalty ran first to a family, a tribe, or a Sufi order, and to the sultan only in proportion to the sultan's ability to remain generous and victorious. Such a coalition conquered well. It garrisoned poorly, administered poorly, and settled a succession worse than either.⁶

The infantry problem was the sharpest of the three. Timariot cavalry served a campaigning season and dispersed to the fiefs that supported them; their institutional interest lay in the countryside they held. The ghazis of the frontier were formidable in a raid and less so in the sustained infantry work a siege of Constantinople or Belgrade would require. A ruler who wished to conduct such sieges needed an infantry that was not simultaneously a landed interest, that could winter at Edirne or Bursa, and that owed no household or lineage anything a rival in a civil war could purchase. That is a description of a household infantry, and in its more radical form a description of a slave infantry, since the household troops of the medieval Islamic world had been slave-recruited for centuries in the Ghaznavid, Seljuk, and Mamluk polities the Ottomans knew as models.⁷

The Ottoman answer was not to buy the infantry, as the Abbasids and Mamluks had; it was to levy it from the Christian peasantry of the newly conquered Balkans and Anatolia. The mature form of the levy was called *devshirme*, a collection or gathering. Its earliest form, in the fourteenth century, was *pençik*, a fifth-of-captives claim by which the sultan drafted one prisoner in five taken in raid or war into his household. When the borders stabilized and captive supply fell short of household need, the fifth-of-captives claim was extended into a periodic levy on the settled Christian population, which supplied the corps for the remainder of its existence.⁸

The founding date

That the corps was founded around 1363, in the reign of Murad I, is the received scholarly reconstruction rather than a settled date. A chronology placing the founding in Orhan's reign, before 1362, appears in one strand of Ottoman chronicle writing; a chronology placing it around 1363 or 1365, in Murad I's reign, appears in the strand the modern historiography prefers, because it aligns with the push into Thrace and the transfer of the western capital to Edirne. Goodwin follows the Murad I chronology and names the discrepancy rather than adjudicating it. The decade is more securely fixed than the year, and a claim resting on the year alone risks a precision the sources do not support.⁹

What the interval reliably marks is the change from a fifth-of-captives household levy to a distinct standing corps at Edirne: organized into *ortas* of roughly a hundred soldiers, quartered in barracks, paid quarterly from the central treasury, and set apart in dress, banner,

⁶Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

⁷Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

⁸Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

⁹Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

and name from the timariot cavalry and the palace household. The name yeni çeri, “new soldiery,” named the corps as a distinct arm of service. In its earliest form the distinction was administrative before it was tactical: the corps was the sultan’s, in a way the timariots and ghazis were not, and the fact was rehearsed at pay day and inspection before it was rehearsed on a battlefield.¹⁰

What a levy did, and what one witness can say

The corps’s own regulatory tradition and Goodwin’s narrative synthesis describe the levy’s general shape: a district officer and a scribe arriving at a village, a register of boys of a specified age produced by the elders, the sons of widows and the married exempted, teeth, height, and condition inspected, a take assembled, joined at a district point with the takes of neighbouring districts, and marched toward the recruiting depots at Edirne and, later, Istanbul. That description is institutional rather than eyewitness. No account used here narrates one village’s levy as a witnessed event, and none should be presented as though it were.¹¹

Konstantin Mihailović, the closest thing to a first-person witness the sources offer, does not supply that scene. He was a young Serbian taken into Ottoman service in the years surrounding the Ottoman capture of the Serbian mining town of Novo Brdo in 1455, and his own text does not settle whether he entered service by the periodic levy the Kavânîn describes or by a route attendant on the town’s fall; the question is open rather than resolved by the memoir he later dictated in Slavic. What Mihailović does narrate, and narrates as a participant rather than as a chronicler of institutions, is what followed capture: an initial placement in a Muslim household for language instruction and religious conversion, followed by reassignment to a central depot and enrollment in an orta or, for a smaller number, the palace pages. He records the sequence of placements more reliably than he records the moment of his own taking, because the sequence of placements is the part of the institution he lived through as an adult recruit rather than experienced as a child at the edge of memory. His account should be read for that testimony, not for the village scene it does not, in fact, supply.¹²

The placement in a Muslim household ran, on the mediating scholarship’s account, between two and six years, and served three functions: it taught the recruit Turkish, converted him to Sunni practice under a household paid a small stipend for the office, and separated him from the other recruits of his levy, so that the household he first thought of as his own was not a household of fellow captives from his own district. The separation was reversed at reassignment, when the recruit entered an orta for the first time: the barracks, the mess kettle that was the orta’s material symbol, the ordinance under which the corps was governed, and the paymaster whose quarterly disbursement would be his livelihood. It was at that transit, not at the moment of capture, that a recruit became a Janissary in the sense the state

¹⁰Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

¹¹Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

¹²Mihailović, *Memoirs of a Janissary*.

cared about.¹³

The training at Edirne

Discipline in the barracks was strict and ritualized. Marriage was forbidden. Ownership of land was forbidden. Practice of a trade for private profit was forbidden. Absence without leave was forbidden. Attendance at the pay-day muster was compulsory. The daily ration was drawn from the orta's mess kitchen and taken in common. Uniform was standard within an orta and differentiated across ortas by insignia the corps kept as its own. The ordinance described, in effect, a barracks community whose structure resembled a religious order more than any contemporary European military formation, and the resemblance was not accidental: the corps was formally attached to the Bektaşî Sufi order, and its ceremonies of enrollment, promotion, and discharge drew on Bektaşî liturgical practice. A Janissary was, by his own description, a member of an order as much as a soldier of the state.¹⁴

A vocabulary for what the levy produced

Ibn Khaldun, writing in the Maghreb in the last decades of the fourteenth century, at almost exactly the moment the Ottoman corps was consolidating in Rumelia, described ruling groups as drawing their strength from *asabiyya*, group solidarity, a resource of tribal or lineage community that a dynasty could ride for a few generations and could not renew from within. There is no evidence the Ottoman jurists who advised Murad I had read him; the *Muqaddimah* was still a Maghrebi work in its first decades of circulation. What Ibn Khaldun's vocabulary offers a later reader is a name for what the *devshirme* manufactured rather than inherited: a corps of kinless boys, converted, quartered, forbidden the trades and marriages that would have tied them to a town, and paid from the sultan's treasury, produced a cohesion functionally equivalent to a lineage's without being one. Its members became one another's kin on the road to Edirne, in the household service that followed, in the discipline they took together, and in the paymaster's ledger that recorded them as belonging to the same orta.¹⁵

That the cohesion was manufactured rather than inherited is the fact worth keeping from Ibn Khaldun's frame. What is not warranted is the further claim that a manufactured cohesion runs on the same generational clock as an inherited one, decaying on a fixed schedule regardless of what happens to the institution around it. Recruitment channel, battlefield performance, urban and economic position, fiscal entitlement, and the capacity to block reform each moved on its own timetable, and each is best followed on its own.

What the founding produced

The founding levy gave the Ottoman state an infantry whose institutional loyalty ran to the sultan alone and whose reproduction did not depend on any lineage he could not supervise, a resource no earlier Islamic polity had held in quite that form. The Abbasid *ghilman* had been slaves purchased in the market, subject to a household politics of their own; the Mamluk household of Egypt had fissioned into factions its sultan could not always control. The

¹³Mihailović, *Memoirs of a Janissary*; Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*.

¹⁴Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

¹⁵Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*.

Ottoman corps was neither purchased nor free. It was levied from the subject population, converted and formed inside the sultan's household, quartered and paid from the central treasury, and organized in a way that made faction-formation more expensive than obedience for its own members. A state that could sustain that arrangement could garrison provinces, hold sieges, and transfer a throne from father to son without a general *levée en masse*.¹⁶

That was the recruitment channel at its founding: entirely levied, entirely kinless, self-renewing only by the state's own periodic action. Whether it stayed that way, and what became of the other four while it changed, the sources answer track by track.

Chapter 2. c. 1500: The corps in the classical age

A muster at Edirne

At Edirne in the last decade of the fifteenth century a paymaster on the second day of the quarter opened a *mevâcib* register, checked the names against a sergeant's roll call, and paid each Janissary a fixed daily wage in silver plus a small allowance in kind. The registers he opened descend, in bulk, to the Ottoman Archives at Kağıthane under the *Maliyeden Müdevver Defterleri* classification, where mediating scholarship reads them. What was on the pages was routine. What the routine described, taken across the corps, was the largest standing infantry paid by cash wage in Europe or the Mediterranean.¹⁷

Rhoads Murphey estimates the establishment strength of the corps at roughly 8,000 under Mehmed II, rising past 12,000 by the end of Bayezid II's reign and continuing upward across the sixteenth century to the mid-twenty-thousands by the last quarter of Suleyman's reign. These are establishment figures, what the state paid for, not field strengths, what it could put in the line on a given afternoon. A paying establishment of that size, uniformed and quartered at fixed depots, disciplined by an enforced ordinance, and armed with a growing proportion of firearms as the century wore on, had no continental parallel.¹⁸

The peak as a construction

That scale is what later scholarship calls the corps's peak, but contemporary Ottoman writing does not describe Suleyman's corps that way. It describes it as strained. Grand vizierial memoranda of the middle sixteenth century complain of difficulty paying the corps on time, of pressure from the aghas to enroll more men than the treasury could easily support, and of factional relations between the aghas and the palace pages who shared a recruitment channel. The registers, as mediating scholarship reports them, record pay delays of days and occasionally weeks, and a delay was a period of local disorder the state spent real administrative energy avoiding.¹⁹

¹⁶Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

¹⁷Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Maliyeden Müdevver Defterleri Classification (Fiscal and Janissary Pay Registers)*.

¹⁸Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire*.

¹⁹Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*.

That the same period is later called the peak reflects three things at once: a larger proportion of the standing establishment could be brought to a campaign than in any earlier century; the average discipline of the men in the line exceeded that of any comparable European infantry; and the proportion of gunpowder weapons the corps carried rose decade by decade. Those facts are compatible with the strain contemporaries reported. The peak was a peak by comparison across centuries, not by the estimate of the aghas running the corps at the time, and the strain of the classical century was not yet the political capacity the corps would acquire later. Recruitment was still entirely by levy; the strain the sources report is fiscal and administrative, not yet a sign that the corps could set its own terms.²⁰

Weapons and the industrial context

Gábor Ágoston's *Guns for the Sultan* established that the Ottoman state was fully capable of manufacturing, procuring, and maintaining gunpowder weapons and artillery at scale from at least the middle of the fifteenth century onward. The Tophane foundry at Istanbul, the Baruthane powder works, the arsenal at Gallipoli, and a network of provincial cannon foundries and powder mills formed a fiscal-military establishment of the same order as the corps that consumed their output. For the corps, the practical effect was a firearm line: the tüfek, a matchlock musket comparable to the Habsburg arquebus, reached roughly one weapon per two men by Suleyman's reign and approached one weapon per man by the century's end. The tactical advantage at Mohács in 1526 was in part an artillery and discipline advantage; the difficulty at Vienna in 1529 was a limit of siege engineering rather than of infantry fire. The corps's political position after 1600 rested in part on its continued monopoly of the fire arm, and the classical-century arming rate is where that monopoly was established.²¹

Cost

The mevâcib defterleri record wages by orta and by quarter, and the state's yearly disbursement to the corps is reconstructible in aggregate from Murphey's citations of total-payroll figures. By those figures, the corps's share of the central treasury's cash disbursements rose from single digits under Mehmed II to the low double digits by the end of Suleyman's reign, with a further rise late in the century driven by growth in the establishment rather than by any real rise in per-capita pay. That was the largest single item of central military expenditure the state ran, carried on a cash basis without the land-assignment mechanism that supported the sipahi cavalry: the treasury's relation to the corps was the relation of a payroll to a payroll office, and an interruption of silver flow was a political event in the barracks the same afternoon. The cost was defensible so long as the return matched the outlay, and in the classical century it did: the corps garrisoned the capital, held Belgrade and Buda, fought the Persian campaigns, took Rhodes, and put a large armed population at the sultan's disposal

²⁰ Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire*; Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*.

²¹ Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire*; Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*.

on a schedule the treasury could still meet.²²

Performance in the field

The corps's tactical role is legible in the campaign narratives Murphey and Ágoston reconstruct from Ottoman sources, and in the reports foreign observers left of engagements they witnessed or reconstructed. In a set-piece action the Janissary infantry held the centre of the line, behind wagons or field works where the ground permitted, with sipahi cavalry on the flanks and artillery in the wagon intervals; its function was to receive the assault, break it up with fire, and hold while the flanks manoeuvred. That function was performed at Mohács in 1526 with an efficiency the Habsburg military literature acknowledged, and at Chaldiran in 1514 with an effect Safavid contemporaries recorded as decisive. In a siege the corps supplied the infantry that carried an assault after artillery had prepared a breach, as at Rhodes in 1522, Belgrade in 1521, and Buda in 1526.²³

Performance was not uniform. Some ortas outperformed others; some campaigns showed a discipline European observers called unearthly, others a corps whose officers needed the threat of palace displeasure before their men would advance. What was consistent across the century was that the corps could reliably be brought to a field battle in committed numbers, paid on schedule, and trusted to hold a position under fire more consistently than any other formation the sultan had. Its performance in open battle depended on firearm discipline, its performance in a close assault on household cohesion, and its performance in a siege on both together. Where discipline held, the artillery had prepared the ground, and the ortas were fresh, the corps had no peer in the Mediterranean world; where any of those conditions failed, it performed at a level contemporaries would have called ordinary.²⁴

Imitation without warrant

Foreign powers watched the corps and, across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tried to build something like it. The Muscovite streltsy, established under Ivan IV, were a standing infantry paid by cash wage but not recruited from a subject Christian population by periodic levy, and not raised kinless. Polish infantry reforms drew on men raised from the royal lands and paid on a hybrid basis that made no comparable break with a recruit's prior loyalties. Habsburg landsknecht formations were mercenaries raised on a captain-by-captain contract, their discipline contractual rather than household. None reproduced the feature that made the corps distinctive. The reason was not that the imitators missed the substance; it was that the substance rested on a theological warrant no other Mediterranean power could produce. The devshirme was a levy on a subject religious population, justified by an Ottoman-Hanafi elaboration of extraordinary tribute, in a form no comparable Christian doctrine of tribute would sanction in reverse. What the imitators borrowed was the standing infantry paid by cash wage; what they could not borrow was the manufactured cohesion, and having never

²²Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Maliyeden Müdevver Defterleri Classification (Fiscal and Janissary Pay Registers)*.

²³Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire*.

²⁴Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*.

had it, they had less to lose when their own formations later drifted from their founding design.²⁵

Discipline and its costs

The corps's reputation for discipline was a genuine attribute of the formation and, at the same time, an ideological production of the Ottoman court, which had an interest in representing it to foreign observers as uniquely disciplined. The Venetian relazioni of the sixteenth century read the discipline as an attribute of a despotism the Venetians did not admire; Habsburg reports read it as an attribute of a formation whose defeat required careful preparation. Neither account is unmediated: the attribute is real, and the reports are also propaganda. The internal cost was substantial. Barracks punishment for infractions of the ordinance was graded and severe, including corporal punishment, demotion, transfer to a less desirable orta, and, for serious infractions, execution. The ceremonial upsetting of the mess kettle, which by the seventeenth century had become the signal for a demonstration against the court, was in its classical-century form the signal for a purely internal disciplinary meeting. The apparatus was elaborate, formally regulated in the Kavânîn tradition, and operated by aghas whose own authority derived from the discipline they enforced. That the discipline held across the century is evidence the apparatus worked; it is not evidence the apparatus worked without cost, and the state paid for it every quarter at pay day and every generation in the levy that renewed the corps.²⁶

Five variables at the classical peak

At the close of the classical century the five variables stood as follows. Recruitment channel remained entirely levied; no substantial hereditary enrollment had yet appeared. Battlefield performance was high, uneven at the margins, and driven by discipline and armament rather than by any crisis of cohesion. Urban economic role was minimal: barracks life, marriage prohibition, and the ban on private trade kept the corps materially separate from the commercial life of the capital. Fiscal entitlement was substantial and rising, but matched, in the state's own judgment, by military return. Capacity to veto reform barely existed; the corps of the classical century was an instrument the sultan directed, not an actor that constrained him. What happened to each of the five when the marriage prohibition, the first of the founding conditions, gave way is the rest of the corps's history.

Chapter 3. c. 1600: Marriage, sons, and inheritance

An ordinance that assumes what it forbids

Somewhere in the last quarter of the sixteenth century an aghas' memorandum to the diwan complained, in language the surviving copies transmit with minor variation, that a growing number of Janissaries were keeping households in the districts around the capital, that these households were producing sons the aghas were being asked to enroll into vacant orta places, and that the practice defied the corps's founding ordinance. The diwan's response, in

²⁵Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*.

²⁶Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*.

a form that varied by reign, was to regulate the practice rather than extinguish it. That the diwan legislated against a practice already general is itself the evidence that the practice was general: an ordinance forbidding a rare exception is a note in the kanunname; an ordinance forbidding what a growing share of the corps was already doing is a rearguard action.²⁷

So long as the levy alone manufactured recruits, the corps had no need to inherit anything, and the marriage prohibition was self-enforcing because barracks quartering was, in effect, a recruit's household for life. Once a substantial share of the corps kept a household outside the barracks, the corps acquired a lineage of its own, and a lineage reproduces itself; the levy was no longer required to reproduce the corps because the corps had begun to reproduce itself.

The stages

Goodwin's narrative places the admission of marriage and hereditary enrollment in a staged progression across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reaching its most consequential form under Selim II, Murad III, and Mehmed III. Imber emphasizes that the earliest concessions were informal and that formalization by successive ordinances is a poor guide to when the change actually occurred; the process from prohibition to hereditary enrollment covered a longer period than a crisper reform-moment narrative would suggest. The stages a careful reader may distinguish, without claiming clean administrative breaks between them, run approximately thus: general acceptance that a Janissary of long service might marry after retirement; acceptance that a Janissary might marry on active duty if the household was kept away from the barracks; informal household-service placements for Janissary sons comparable to levy placements; formal admission of Janissary sons to the pay-roll, on an equal or subordinate schedule; and, by a date the sources place across the middle of the seventeenth century, a hereditary channel that had become ordinary while the levy became an occasional recourse. At each stage the diwan reissued a restricting ordinance; at each subsequent stage the ordinance was ignored or quietly reinterpreted. That the *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân* transmits both the prohibition and the qualification in the same manuscript codices is the strongest legal evidence for the sequence. A specific modern printed edition is not fixed in the present bibliography, and no ordinance below is cited to a specific edition until one is.²⁸

What changed, and what it changed

By the last quarter of the seventeenth century great levies were no longer being called, and the corps was a self-recruiting body in fact if not in principle. The functional change was in what tied a recruit to the corps. A man born to a Janissary father in a barracks-adjacent Istanbul household carried that household's loyalties with him into the *orta*: a father, an uncle, half-brothers, and, within a generation, a circle of Janissary cousins with whom he might combine against an agha or an outside authority. The barracks had been the founding recruit's household; for the hereditary recruit it was a workplace he returned home from.²⁹

²⁷Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

²⁸Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The Structure of Power*; Anonymous, *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân (Laws of the Janissaries)*.

²⁹Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

That is one variable, recruitment channel, and it changed decisively across this period, from levy to inheritance. A hereditary Janissary population could in principle have fought as well as a levied one, cost the treasury as little, and deferred to the sultan as fully; whether it did is a separate question for each variable, and the sources answer them differently.

Battlefield performance

The campaign narratives Murphey and Aksan reconstruct show a gradual rise across the seventeenth century in the manpower required to deliver an equivalent tactical effect, and a gradual erosion of the premium the corps had enjoyed over comparable European infantry. The erosion was real and is distinct from the change in recruitment: European armies were professionalizing and re-arming across the same century, and a corps that stood still relative to its own classical-century standard would have shown a comparable erosion against a moving European benchmark even without any change in its own recruitment. The sources do not permit the erosion to be assigned wholly to hereditary enrollment rather than to the changing standard it was being measured against; both were operating at once, and neither is collapsed into the other here.³⁰

Urban and provincial position

The Janissary garrisons at Belgrade, Buda, Sofia, Salonica, Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo, which in the classical century had rotated with the Istanbul corps, became across the seventeenth century increasingly settled populations whose members married locally, took local trades in violation of ordinance, and intermarried with the Muslim elites of their garrison towns, a pattern the mediating scholarship documents from Ottoman-language provincial court registers. At Aleppo and Cairo the corps became, in substantial part, an urban commercial and political interest whose Janissary status gave it a legal position within the empire's constitutional structure while its economic and social interests grew increasingly indistinguishable from those of the local Muslim commercial classes. This was a change of urban economic role, positive rather than merely subtractive: the corps became, in these cities, a stabilizing and propertied presence rather than a garrisoned separation from the town around it. The Istanbul corps remained one interest among several the sultan balanced; the provincial garrisons became embedded in urban populations whose political posture the sultan could barely touch. What the state lost, by the century's end, was a coherent instrument of provincial garrison policy; what it retained was a garrison population still formally identical to the Istanbul corps, whose grievances the Istanbul corps continued to represent, and which the provincial garrisons would use as leverage for the remainder of the corps's existence.³¹

Capacity to veto reform

The corps intervened, at critical moments, in dynastic politics with an aggression the classical-century corps had not contemplated. Osman II was killed in 1622 after a Janissary demonstration opposed his proposed Anatolian recruitment reform; İbrahim I was deposed

³⁰Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

³¹Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

and killed in 1648 by a coalition that included the Janissary aghas; Mehmed IV was deposed in 1687 after a demonstration that ran with the pashas of the eastern armies against a court whose military failures had strained the state's fiscal capacity past what a demonstration could tolerate. A classical-century demonstration had usually been a pay-day protest organized by the ortas' aghas over the timely payment of wages. A seventeenth-century intervention was a political demonstration over a change of policy or of sultan, organized by the aghas in coalition with the ulema, the pashas, or the harem eunuchs. A grand vizier whose reform touched the timariot system, tax farming, or provincial cavalry could, in the classical century, count on the corps to enforce it against the affected interests; by the seventeenth century he could not, because the corps had its own stake in the arrangements those systems supported and had learned to defend that stake at the Etmeydanı. This is the variable that moved fastest and moved furthest: from an instrument the sultan directed to a constraint every reformer had to plan around.³²

The transformation these sources also describe

A strand of Ottoman-language scholarship on the seventeenth century reads this material differently and deserves to be stated in its own terms rather than staged as a foil to be overcome. On that reading, the corps did not decay through hereditary enrollment; it changed, in a way the state tolerated and in places encouraged, into a large occupational group whose social integration into the capital and the provincial cities was itself a benefit to the state rather than a cost to be regretted. A garrison that had married into the local elite, that paid taxes, held property, and worked a trade, was harder to dislodge from a town's politics, but it was also harder for a town to rise against, and its members had reasons of their own to keep the peace that a kinless barracks garrison had never had.

That reading has real force, and the reason it has force is visible in what the state actually did across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: it kept paying the corps, kept using it to garrison the empire's largest cities, kept drawing on its Istanbul and provincial ortas for policing and for campaign manpower, and kept negotiating with its aghas rather than disbanding it, long after any of the individual conditions of the founding design had lapsed. A state that believed it was watching pure decay had cheaper options than four more generations of payroll. It did not take them, and the reason it did not is close to the reading above: the corps by 1700 was delivering things the state still wanted, urban order, provincial garrison manpower, a claimant class with a stake in continuity, at a price the state judged worth paying until the price became the state's own capacity to reform anything else. That judgment was not an error the state failed to notice. It was the bargain the state was actually making, decade by decade, until the bargain itself became the problem a different kind of solution would be needed to solve.

Where the corps is measured as a fighting force against a moving European benchmark, its account shows the erosion described above. Where it is measured as an urban and provincial institution, its account shows growth and increasing embeddedness. Where it is measured by its capacity to constrain the sultan's own reform program, its account shows the sharpest

³²Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

and most consequential change of any of the five variables tracked here. None of the three descriptions is false, and none subsumes the other two.

Chapter 4. c. 1700: Pay-tickets and the phantom roll

The *esâme* market

The *esâme* certified enrollment in a particular *orta* at a stated daily wage. It was issued by the corps's paymaster and presented at the quarterly distribution. In principle the certificate was cancelled at the enrolled soldier's death. By the middle of the seventeenth century, however, *esâme* were circulating beyond active soldiers; by the last decades of the century money-changers regularly discounted claims on future pay. By the early eighteenth century many certificates in the capital were held by people not on active duty, including some who had never served.³³

That the certificate was tradable, and traded, is the datum from which the fiscal shape of the eighteenth-century corps has to be reconstructed. The datum is not a claim about individual fraud. It describes a market in Janissary-enrollment claims operating in parallel to, and eventually largely independent of, the corps's manpower function: fiscal entitlement diverging sharply here from a battlefield performance that had eroded only unevenly.

What the roll came to include

By c. 1700 the roll included several categories of person whose relation to the corps's actual manpower was tenuous, absent, or notional, distinct in the regulatory tradition and blurred in practice. The most numerous was the *yamak*, originally reserve personnel on reduced pay who became, across the seventeenth century, a channel by which non-serving persons were carried on the roll for the pay-ticket their enrollment produced. A second category was the retired Janissary drawing a pension in the form of a continuing *esâme*, a recognized function of long service the regulatory tradition approved. A third was the widow or heir of a deceased Janissary continuing to draw against an *esâme* not cancelled at the holder's death. A fourth, and the source of the largest share of the accounting excess, was the outright phantom entry: a name on the roll to which no person corresponded, its wages collected by an interested party in the paymaster's office. In some *ortas* the arrangement was managed collectively by the officers, phantom wages pooled into a fund for provisioning and small charities; in others it was managed privately by individual officers or by money-changers who had bought a claim on a phantom entry's future wages. The state's accounting mechanism did not distinguish between the two arrangements, and the legitimate categories, retirees, widows, and *orta* funds, carried more of the total volume than the outright fraud that drew the era's scandal.³⁴

³³Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

³⁴Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

What the mediation supports, and what it does not

The mediating scholarship offers a range for the share of the establishment that was phantom or otherwise unavailable for active service. Murphey, working from the *mevâcib defterleri* and the seventeenth-century campaign accounts, places active strength at around sixty per cent of establishment strength in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, with a downward trend across the following decades. Aksan, working from the eighteenth-century pay-registers, describes an establishment that continued to grow across the century while deployable strength grew much more slowly, the ratio of deployable to enrolled varying by campaign and decade; the mid-century figures she is willing to give show an establishment in the low six figures against a deployable strength no eighteenth-century Ottoman campaign approached even at maximum mobilization.³⁵

Those are the figures the sources support, and they are figures at the resolution of an establishment total, not of an individual transaction. Two claims that have circulated about the *esâme* market outrun that resolution and are pulled back here rather than repeated. The first is that certificates traded within a narrow, quantified band of one another's price; the *mevâcib* and *Cevdet Askeriye* holdings that could establish a genuine price series have never been consulted at the register level, and no such figure is asserted. The second is that the *esâme* constituted a defined legal instrument equivalent to a life annuity; contemporaries and the mediating scholarship describe a discounting logic that resembles an annuity in its projection and a discount note in its pricing, but the certificate's precise legal character, and whether Ottoman practice treated it as a single settled instrument or as a bundle of customary arrangements that varied by *orta* and decade, is not established at that level of detail. The market is therefore described by its documented function rather than assigned a single legal taxonomy or a reconstructed price series.³⁶

The mechanism of the market

The market was integrated with the ordinary financial practice of Istanbul. Money-changers, acting on their own account or for investors, advanced cash against the future wages attached to a certificate. Custom rather than statute governed the transactions, but recurring quarterly pay gave the claims a regular schedule. Parties to the market included officers of the corps, retired Janissaries whose *esâme* had converted to a pension, widows of the deceased, the money-changers themselves, provincial merchants whose capital was augmented by *esâme* holdings, and, in a category the sources describe with particular embarrassment, paymaster's clerks and their patrons whose access to the roll let them insert phantom entries for a share of the resulting income. That last category produced the era's scandal; the surviving aggregate evidence does not establish its share of the market.³⁷

³⁵Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

³⁶Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Cevdet Askeriye Classification (Military Petitions, Memorials, and Edicts)*.

³⁷Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

Cost

The narrowest fiscal cost to the state was the wages disbursed against entries for which no corresponding service was rendered, a non-trivial fraction of the treasury's cash outlays across the century and, on Aksan's mediating figure, a substantial share of the total military budget. The larger cost was borne on the campaigning side: an establishment nominally sufficient to garrison the frontier and field two armies turned out, on mobilization, to supply a substantially smaller force on a single front, and the shortfall had to be made up by other formations the state paid for a second time. The state's response, across the century, was neither to audit the roll aggressively nor to resize the establishment; both were understood by the diwan's fiscal officers to be politically impossible. An audit would have expropriated the money-changers and officers holding phantom entries and provoked a response from the corps the state could not afford; a resizing would have required mass discharge, which the entry-holders would resist, or attrition, which would take decades and leave the frontier under-garrisoned meanwhile. Both were attempted at various dates by reform-minded grand viziers and withdrawn under pressure.³⁸

What the state built instead, across the eighteenth century, was alternative capacity that did not depend on the corps's roll: levied provincial troops, irregular formations paid by campaign contract, and, by the century's last quarter, the beginnings of the European-style infantry that would become Selim III's Nizâm-i Cedid. The corps's political position was maintained; the state's military position was maintained; the two were reconciled by paying twice, once to the corps for a nominal service substantially not delivered, and again to the alternative formations for the service actually rendered.³⁹

The corps as veto player

Between the accession of Ahmed III in 1703 and the accession of Selim III in 1789, at least eight serious reform proposals touching the corps's roll, pay structure, or recruitment channel were advanced by grand viziers or reform-minded advisers, and none reached its intended conclusion. Some were withdrawn under the pressure of a demonstration; some were narrowed inside the diwan before reaching the sultan; some were formally accepted and quietly ignored in practice. A memorandum of the reign of Mahmud I complains that reform proposals uniformly went one of three ways: rejected outright, accepted and ignored, or narrowed until they addressed nothing worth reforming, and concludes, so far as the mediating scholarship reconstructs it, that no incremental reform was possible so long as the corps retained a veto over its enactment. A reform that could be represented as a modest housekeeping measure, costing the aghas or the money-changers nothing material, could be enacted; a reform touching the esâme market, the orta funds, or the ratio of hereditary to levied recruitment could not be enacted at all. This is the variable that had moved furthest by 1700: not battlefield performance, which had eroded but unevenly, and not urban role, which had grown but remained locally variable, but the corps's capacity to block a reform it

³⁸Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

³⁹Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire*.

opposed, which by the early eighteenth century was close to absolute.⁴⁰

The century that followed

By c. 1700 the corps was a fiscal liability the state could not resize without provoking it politically. Recruitment had become hereditary; the urban and provincial garrisons had grown into propertied local interests; the roll had been colonized by a market in enrollment claims; and the corps's political capacity to block reform had, by any measure available, become close to total. Battlefield performance alone had moved in a simply negative direction, and even there unevenly. Two sultans, in succession, would try to close the resulting gap between what the state paid for and what it received by building an alternative rather than by reforming the corps itself. The first attempt cost the sultan his life. The sequence began with Selim III.

Chapter 5. 1807: The killing of Selim III

A new formation, funded by a new treasury

In 1793, in the fifth year of his reign, Selim III issued the Nizâm-i Cedid, or New Order, a body of ordinances authorizing a new-style infantry formation on European lines: recruited from the provinces rather than the capital, quartered apart from the Janissary depots, trained by officers who had studied French and Prussian drill and tactics, and armed with modern muskets from newly commissioned works. The formation was funded through a separate treasury, the İrad-ı Cedid, drawing on newly imposed taxes on specified commodities and on adjustments to the existing revenue base. Formation and treasury were designed to reinforce one another: a separate treasury paid for a separate formation, which reported to a separate command answerable to the sultan directly rather than to the Janissary aghas.⁴¹

The Nizâm-i Cedid did not propose to abolish the corps. It proposed to circumvent it, by building a parallel force whose scale would eventually exceed the corps's own and whose battlefield performance would demonstrate the obsolescence of the corps's tactical model, avoiding the corps's veto rather than confronting it directly. Selim III and his advisers had studied a century of Janissary interventions and understood the constraint they faced.

The fiscal side of the reform

Any account of the Nizâm-i Cedid that starts from the corps alone omits the treasury half of the story. Aksan places the İrad-ı Cedid at the operational centre of Selim III's program: the new formation would have been unaffordable without the new revenues, the new revenues could not be sustained without cuts to existing pay-lines, and the political resistance the reform provoked ran through tax adjustments and provincial revenue transfers as much as through rivalry between the old formation and the new. On this reading the fiscal apparatus failed first, and the military rivalry was a lagging indicator of a fiscal contest already lost. A reading centred on the corps as the operative actor instead has to explain the failure by the corps's political capacity to prevent the parallel force's maintenance. Both readings converge

⁴⁰Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

⁴¹Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Ağoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire*.

on the same terminal event; the difference is which cause is treated as primary. The fiscal reading has the stronger claim where the two are in tension: a parallel force whose fiscal base had held would have survived a political attack of the shape the corps mounted in 1807.⁴²

Colin Imber reads the corps's institutional transformation as largely complete by the middle of the seventeenth century, so that the eighteenth-century episodes elaborate a pattern already set rather than working out a still-progressing change. Aksan reads the eighteenth-century fiscal-military environment as still shifting meaningfully by generation, so that the corps's capacity in 1807 reflects that environment as much as its earlier institutional history. Neither claim is wrong; they describe different denominators. Imber is right that the corps's basic political posture, an actor with a veto rather than a pure instrument, had been set for a century and a half; Aksan is right that the specific fiscal terrain on which that posture was exercised in 1807 was itself a product of eighteenth-century conditions the corps had not created alone. The political capacity was long-settled; the fiscal occasion for using it was period-specific.⁴³

The French connection

The Nizâm-i Cedid drew, in its instructional form, on French military practice mediated by a small number of French officers in Ottoman service after the Revolution, a technical relationship that followed from the diplomatic alignment Selim III pursued with France after the Russian-Ottoman peace of Jassy in 1792. The alignment was interrupted by Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition in 1798 and repaired in stages after the peace of Amiens in 1802, but the residue of French instructional practice in the formation persisted through the interruption and did not survive 1807. That the formation was, in principle, Ottoman in funding, command, and recruitment did not blunt the corps's rhetorical use of the French association: a body that had for two centuries been closer than any other Ottoman institution to a household infantry converted by administrative fiat was, in 1806 and 1807, positioned to call another Ottoman formation foreign in inspiration, and the complaint carried weight with an audience for which the distinction had, for local political purposes, stopped mattering.⁴⁴

The reform's course and its opposition

The Nizâm-i Cedid reached, by the late 1790s, a strength of perhaps 20,000 to 25,000 men, well below the corps's establishment but at the same order of magnitude as its deployable strength on a given campaign. It was not tested against a first-rate European enemy in the years available to it; its Danubian and Peloponnesian deployments produced results a favourable reading called promising and a hostile one called inconclusive. Its fiscal base was contested throughout its existence. The reform party was small: the sultan, a fluctuating circle of grand viziers and advisers, and provincial notables who saw opportunity in the new formation's provincial recruitment. The opposition was wide: the Janissary corps, whose esâme market was threatened by a parallel force whose growth would eventually make the corps's roll

⁴²Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

⁴³Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The Structure of Power*; Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

⁴⁴Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

unaffordable; substantial elements of the ulema, whose factional politics ran with the corps's grievance; the provincial notables whose revenues were being transferred to the İrad-ı Cedid; and the ayan of Anatolia and Rumelia, whose regional autonomy the reform's centralizing tendency inconvenienced. The reform's political base was narrow throughout.⁴⁵

1807

In May 1807 the yamaks stationed at the Bosphorus fortresses, ordered into new-style uniforms and drill as part of a proposed extension of the Nizâm-i Cedid to the corps's auxiliary personnel, refused and marched on the capital, joined by Janissaries of the Istanbul barracks and by ulema elements whose factional politics ran with the corps. Aksan places the resulting assembly in the Janissary barracks district at Etmeydanı, where demands for the abolition of the İrad-ı Cedid and the Nizâm-i Cedid, and for the removal of the reform-party grand vizier and his associates, reached the palace. Selim III agreed. The Nizâm-i Cedid was dissolved, the İrad-ı Cedid abolished, several reform-party officers killed by the demonstrators, and Selim III compelled to abdicate in favour of his cousin Mustafa IV.⁴⁶

A counter-revolt led by Bayraktar Mustafa Paşa, the ayan of Ruse and a supporter of the reform party whose provincial position the Nizâm-i Cedid's recruitment pattern had strengthened, moved on Istanbul in July 1808. On learning of Selim III's deposition, he had assembled a force at his own expense, moved south through Rumelia gathering provincial adherents, and reached the capital with force sufficient to enter the palace by rapid manoeuvre; his arriving force was too late to prevent Selim III's murder on Mustafa IV's orders. Bayraktar deposed Mustafa IV and placed Mahmud II, the last surviving prince the reform party could plausibly hope to influence, on the throne. Bayraktar became grand vizier and moved to restore the Nizâm-i Cedid in a new form; a Janissary demonstration that autumn killed him, dispersed his supporters, and returned the initiative to the corps. Mahmud II spent the following year or two in extreme precarity and did not resume active reform politics until the political weather had shifted.⁴⁷

What the throne learned

Two conclusions followed for any serious reformer at court, and both were preserved in the diwan's institutional memory across the following decades. First, no incremental reform could pass through the corps: it had shown the capacity to defeat any reform that would eventually have made its own dissolution possible, and to kill any sultan whose reform posture it read as sufficiently threatening. Reform through the corps, or in cooperation with it, or conducted adjacent to it in a way it could observe and answer, was not a viable path. Second, a reform that succeeded against the corps would need force sufficient to overwhelm it in direct confrontation, with the fiscal-military preparation for that confrontation already in place before the confrontation began. Both conclusions were operative across Mahmud II's reign and were acted on when the reform party finally moved against the corps in 1826.

⁴⁵ Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

⁴⁶ Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

⁴⁷ Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

What the corps had cost the throne

Between 1793 and 1808 the throne learned that no incremental reform would pass through the corps, and the corps demonstrated that the price of an attempt was the sultan's life. The Nizâm-i Cedid had been the most ambitious military reform since the corps's own founding, and it had been defeated by a corps whose military utility to the state was, in that same decade, lower than at any point in three centuries. The state paid the corps for one function and received, in effect, another: a capacity to veto reform that had, by 1807, come to exceed its capacity to fight. The next sultan to move against it would move directly, with a force prepared for the confrontation the previous reform had lacked.

Chapter 6. 1826: Etmeydanı and the abolition of the corps

Grapeshot at Etmeydanı

On the afternoon of 15 June 1826, an artillery train under the *topçubaşı* and a body of new-style musketeers under the *seraskier* Hüseyin Paşa moved into position around the Etmeydanı, the Meat Square in Aksaray that stood before the corps's own Yeni Odalar barracks, and opened fire on a body of Janissaries and their sympathizers gathered there in demonstration against a new formation the sultan had authorized the preceding week. The Etmeydanı, where the corps had marshalled its demonstrations for two centuries, was a different place from the Atmeydanı, the former Hippodrome near Hagia Sophia; the two names are easily confused in transliteration and the two squares are not the same square. The June 1826 gathering and cannonade took place at the Etmeydanı, and the prose below does not use the two names interchangeably.⁴⁸

Within two hours the square was cleared. The corps's principal Istanbul barracks were burnt out over the afternoon and evening, in some cases with the surviving demonstrators inside. By the following morning the corps had been declared formally abolished by imperial decree; the aghas who could be found had been executed; the surviving rank and file had been driven from the capital, killed on the roads leading out of it, or in some numbers exiled to the provinces; and Mahmud II, in his official gazette, called the sequence the *Vaka-i Hayriye*, the Auspicious Incident. The naming was official, and it was propaganda. It described, in the state's own language, an event whose material shape was a massacre followed by a purge. Calling the sequence the Auspicious Incident does not change what it was; calling it, without qualification, an abolition does not describe it exactly either. Abolition names the decree; the decree named an event whose material shape was killing at scale, followed by execution, exile, and the seizure of the corps's institutional assets. The decree is one thing; the battle, and what came after the battle, another.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Cevdet Askeriye Classification (Military Petitions, Memorials, and Edicts)*.

⁴⁹Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Cevdet Askeriye Classification (Military Petitions, Memorials, and Edicts)*.

Four preparations

The distinction between Selim III's method and Mahmud II's was the distinction between building a parallel force to render the corps eventually obsolete and building a force able to render it immediately liquidatable, and the second required four things the first reform had not assembled.⁵⁰

The first was an alternative armed force: across the years between 1808 and 1826 Mahmud II built up new-style formations located outside the capital, commanded by officers whose careers depended on the sultan personally rather than on the Janissary establishment. The second was fiscal preparation: the revenues supporting the new formations were not gathered under a single visible treasury whose abolition could become the corps's opening demand, as the *İrad-ı Cedid* had been in 1807, but distributed across several revenue lines whose formal designation stayed unchanged while their substantive use shifted; disabling the new formations would have required the corps to attack several dispersed lines simultaneously, and the dispersal was deliberate. The third was religious authorization, addressed below. The fourth was control of the capital at the chosen moment: bringing the new-style formations and the artillery arm, institutionally distinct from the corps since the classical century and possessed of a professional identity of its own, into alignment with the reform party, so that the *topçubaşı*'s officers were positioned, at every serious stage, to fire on the corps if ordered. Mahmud II chose the moment in the immediate aftermath of an ordinance the corps read as a mortal threat, on a day the corps had committed itself to a demonstration it could not withdraw from without loss of face, with the new-style formations and the artillery already in position. None of the four elements was novel in isolation; Selim III had attempted several of them without bringing them into alignment. Mahmud II had eighteen years, and used them for that purpose.⁵¹

Religious authorization

Selim III had lost the ulema's support in the last stages of the *Nizâm-ı Cedid*, partly through inattention and insufficient patronage and partly through a rhetorical failure to embed the reform in a defensible Islamic-legal frame. Mahmud II undertook, from early in his reign, a systematic engagement with the leading ulema of the capital and of the principal Anatolian and Rumelian centres: patronage of the mosques and medreses of the capital, particular favour to the *şeyhülislams* whose factional politics would run with him, and advance preparation of an Islamic-legal frame that would let a sympathetic *şeyhülislam* issue a fetva declaring the corps to have forfeited its legal existence without a legal-textual scandal. The effect was cumulative rather than dramatic; by the middle 1820s the leading ulema of Istanbul were, in factional terms, aligned with the reform party more than at any point in the preceding century. The corps's traditional rhetorical position, that a new-style formation was a foreign-inspired innovation, was still used in 1826, but it no longer carried the ulema's factional politics with it as it had in 1807. When the moment came, the *şeyhülislam* Yasin-cizade Abdolvahhab Efendi issued the fetva within hours of the artillery fire. The corps's

⁵⁰Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

⁵¹Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

capacity to appeal to Islamic legitimacy against the reform had been exhausted in advance, not by argument in the days of the confrontation, but by eighteen years of prior cultivation.⁵²

The material sequence

The provocation was an ordinance establishing the Eşkinçi, a new-style formation drawn from the corps's own ranks, equipped and drilled on European lines, and paid on a schedule that transferred a portion of the corps's own pay-lines to the new formation. Published 25 May 1826, it was formally accepted by the aghas under palace pressure within days; the acceptance was not credible, and the rank and file read it as the beginning of the corps's dissolution and refused the associated drill. On 14 June the mess kettles, symbols of a Janissary revolt since the classical century, were carried from the kitchens to the Etmeydanı. The sultan's council authorized the seraskier to move.⁵³

The sequence of 15 June began at approximately three in the afternoon. The artillery train was in position; the new-style musketeers held the flanking streets; the demonstrators were called on to disperse and refused; the artillery opened. The Janissaries, carrying arms in the manner of a barracks demonstration rather than of a set-piece defence, and unprepared for artillery fire, dispersed into the surrounding streets and were pursued by the musketeers. The principal barracks were surrounded by evening; those that resisted were burnt, those that surrendered had their occupants arrested. Executions of aghas took place across the following two days. The fetva was issued. The decree of abolition was published in the state gazette on 17 June.⁵⁴

Contemporary Ottoman accounts give figures for the dead in the range of several thousand; European diplomatic dispatches give higher figures. The mediating scholarship treats the higher figures as impressionistic and the lower as probably closer, without settling on one number, and none is adopted here. At any of the reported figures the state had killed a large number of its own subjects at the capital in a single afternoon.⁵⁵

Execution, exile, and the seizure of the corps's assets

What followed the battle was administratively distinct from it and belongs under its own description rather than folded into the cannonade. Aghas who could be identified were executed over the following days. A further number of the rank and file were exiled to the provinces rather than killed, a category the sources distinguish from the deaths at the Etmeydanı and on the roads out of the capital without giving it a settled total. In Aksan's reconstruction, the abolition decree cancelled the *esâme* rolls and brought the *orta* funds and paymaster's registers under treasury control; the fiscal entitlement the corps had spent a century building was extinguished in the same weeks as the barracks were destroyed. The Bektaşî order, with which the corps had been formally affiliated since its founding, was itself

⁵²Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Cevdet Askeriye Classification (Military Petitions, Memorials, and Edicts)*.

⁵³Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

⁵⁴Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*; Ottoman Archives of the Presidency State Archives (BOA), *Cevdet Askeriye Classification (Military Petitions, Memorials, and Edicts)*.

⁵⁵Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*.

suppressed and its principal lodges closed in the aftermath, on the grounds of its association with the abolished corps. Execution, exile, and the seizure of the corps's fiscal and religious infrastructure were three distinct operations, run in the same weeks under the cover of the same decree, and the decree's language did not distinguish them either.⁵⁶

The naming and its uses

Mahmud II's gazette represented the sequence as a moment of divine favour, an intended message to the Ottoman-language public, the ulema, and the foreign chanceries who would need a name for what had occurred. The naming converted a massacre into an event that could be celebrated, positioned the state as having received a favour rather than exercised a power, and dissolved the corps by rhetorical fiat as much as by decree. Ottoman-language accounts of the Tanzimat era, whose reform program extended Mahmud II's, adopted the name with approval; European accounts of the period alternated between the sultan's name and a description of the massacre. Modern scholarship, including Aksan and Goodwin, uses the sultan's name in quotation marks or with a gloss and treats the material sequence as a massacre, and the account above does likewise.⁵⁷

The provinces

The abolition at Istanbul was followed, across the summer and autumn of 1826, by orders to the provincial governors to dissolve the Janissary garrisons of the major centres. The orders were carried out unevenly. At Salonica and Sofia they were executed with reasonable dispatch. At Aleppo and Damascus the garrisons, substantially integrated by 1826 into the local urban commercial elite, resisted and had to be suppressed by operations that took months. At Cairo the question did not arise in the same form, because Muhammad Ali Paşa's autonomous Egyptian regime had already reorganized its own military establishment on new-style lines and no longer maintained a garrison of the shape the Istanbul abolition targeted. The provincial sequence showed that the Istanbul abolition preceded a fully worked-out provincial plan, and that the garrisons had, over a century and a half, acquired local political weight the central state had to fight, town by town, to displace.⁵⁸

The new army

Within days Mahmud II authorized the Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye, a new imperial army on a fully new-style basis: conscripted from the provincial population, trained on European lines by a mixture of Ottoman officers and foreign advisers, paid through a rebuilt treasury whose revenues had been prepared for the transfer over the preceding decade, and equipped from a reorganized Tophane. It was not a modest reform; it was the full replacement of the Ottoman state's founding infantry with one recruited, paid, trained, and armed on principles with no continuity to the founding infantry. Its performance in its early campaigns was not clearly better than the corps's had been, and it would be rebuilt several times before it reached the shape the later nineteenth-century state relied on. That its early performance was not obviously superior is not evidence the abolition was unnecessary: the

⁵⁶Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

⁵⁷Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

⁵⁸Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Goodwin, *The Janissaries*.

abolition had not been undertaken to raise a better army in the near term but to remove an institution whose veto had made every other reform impossible. The new army was the means. Removing the veto was the end.⁵⁹

Where the five variables stood

By 17 June 1826 the recruitment channel that Chapter 3 traced from levy to inheritance had ceased to matter, because the institution that channel had fed no longer existed. Battlefield performance, which had eroded unevenly against a moving European benchmark since the seventeenth century, was not what the abolition was fought over; the new army's uncertain early performance shows as much. Urban and provincial economic role, grown substantial and locally entrenched over two centuries, was not dissolved by decree; it was suppressed, town by town, against real resistance at Aleppo and Damascus, and it was this embeddedness, not any measure of the corps's fighting quality, that made the abolition a military operation in the provinces rather than a paper order. Fiscal entitlement, built up across the eighteenth century into a market with its own participants and conventions, was extinguished administratively in the same weeks as the barracks, by the cancellation of the *esâme* rolls and the seizure of the *orta* funds. Capacity to veto reform, which had grown from negligible in the classical century to decisive by 1700 and had cost Selim III his life in 1807, was the variable the entire eighteen-year preparation had been built to defeat, and it was the only one of the five that the state needed force, rather than an ordinance, to end.

Coda

Four and a half centuries stood between the founding levy and the guns at Etmeydanı. Across that span the Janissary corps was not a fixed design running down on a schedule set at its creation. It was a coerced household infantry whose recruitment, whose performance in the field, whose position in the empire's cities, whose fiscal claims on the treasury, and whose capacity to block a reform it disliked, moved on five tracks that did not keep the same pace or point the same direction.

Recruitment shifted, across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from a periodic levy on Christian villages to hereditary enrollment among the corps's own families, a change in the institution's kind of membership rather than a loss of membership. Battlefield performance eroded against a European benchmark that was itself moving, unevenly, by *orta* and by campaign, in a way no single number covers. Urban and provincial economic role grew, and grew in a direction the sources support calling growth rather than decline: garrisons at Aleppo, Cairo, and a dozen lesser towns became propertied, married, locally rooted populations whose members had reasons of their own to keep the peace a kinless barracks garrison had never had. Fiscal entitlement grew fastest of the first four, from a straightforward quarterly wage to a market in enrollment claims that outlived most of the soldiers whose service had originally justified it. And the capacity to block a reform grew

⁵⁹Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged*; Ağoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire*.

fastest of all: negligible under Suleyman, decisive by 1700, and absolute enough by 1807 to cost a sultan his life for attempting an end run around it.

None of the five variables, taken alone, explains 1826. A corps that had only grown fiscally expensive could have been starved by degrees. A corps that had only grown militarily unreliable could have been left to wither on the frontier while better troops did the state's fighting, which is in fact what the eighteenth-century state had already arranged. A corps that had only grown locally rooted in the provinces could have been left alone there, as in large part it was, until 1826 forced the question. What could not be managed by degrees was the fifth variable: an institution that could veto its own reform could not be reformed, and a state that wanted to change its own military establishment eventually had to choose between permanent deference to the corps and the corps's forcible removal.

Mahmud II's achievement was not the completion of a decay his predecessors had failed to arrest. It was eighteen years of institutional construction aimed specifically at the fifth variable: an alternative armed force built and commanded outside the corps's reach; fiscal preparation that dispersed the new formations' revenue across lines the corps could not disable with a single demand, as it had disabled the *İrad-ı Cedid* in 1807; religious authorization secured in advance from an ulema Mahmud II had cultivated for a decade and a half, so that a *fetva* dissolving the corps's legal existence could be issued within hours rather than argued over for years; and control of the capital at a chosen moment, the new-style formations and the artillery arm already in position around the *Etmeydanı* before the corps had committed itself to a demonstration it could not retract. Selim III had attempted pieces of this program and had been killed for it. Mahmud II assembled all four pieces before he moved, and the corps that had outlasted a century of failed reform proposals did not survive the afternoon in which all four pieces were in place at once.

Ibn Khaldun supplied the fourteenth century with a vocabulary for a related but distinct problem: the cohesion of a ruling group drawn from tribe or lineage, consumed across generations and incapable of renewal from within. The Ottoman corps was never quite that. Its cohesion was built, not inherited, out of captured boys with no lineage to consume, and what happened to it afterward was not the running down of a fixed resource but the accumulation, on five different tracks and across four centuries, of an institution that the state that had built it could no longer afford either to keep or to lose. What ended at *Etmeydanı* in June 1826 was not a corps that had quietly decayed into irrelevance. It was one the state had spent a fortune building, a fortune sustaining, and, in the end, a fortune of a different kind, in artillery, in patronage, and in eighteen years of patient preparation, dismantling.

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