JANISSARIES AND THE OTTOMAN ARMY: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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Abstract. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the Janissaries and their crucial role in the Ottoman military system. As an elite corps established in the late 14th century, the Janissaries represented the backbone of the Ottoman army for several centuries. The paper examines their origins through the devshirme system, organizational structure, training, discipline, and their gradual transformation from a loyal military force to a politically influential institution. The research highlights how the Janissaries contributed to the military successes of the Ottoman Empire during its peak, and how corruption, loss of discipline, and political involvement led to their eventual decline and abolition under Sultan Mahmud II in 1826. This historical review aims to shed light on the dual legacy of the Janissaries as both a symbol of power and a cause of internal instability within the Ottoman state.

Introduction. The Janissaries, known in Turkish as Yeniçeri (“new troops”), were one of the most distinctive and influential military institutions in the history of the Ottoman Empire. Formed in the late 14th century during the reign of Sultan Murad I, the Janissary corps became the first standing army in Europe organized on a professional and disciplined basis. Their creation marked a turning point in Ottoman military history, setting a model of centralized control and loyalty to the Sultan. The Janissaries were primarily recruited through the devshirme system, which involved selecting young Christian boys from the Balkans, converting them to Islam, and training them in the strict discipline of military service. This system ensured absolute loyalty and eliminated any hereditary or tribal affiliations that could challenge the Sultan’s authority. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, the Janissaries played a vital role in the Empire’s expansion, contributing to major conquests such as the capture of Constantinople in 1453. The Janissaries played a crucial role in shaping the military and political history of the Ottoman Empire. As one of the earliest

examples of a standing professional army in the world, they symbolized the discipline, organization, and centralized authority that defined Ottoman military success for centuries. Initially formed under Sultan Murad I in the late 14th century, the Janissaries were recruited through the devshirme system, which brought young Christian boys into the service of the Sultan, converting and training them to serve as elite infantry soldiers. Their loyalty, rigorous training, and advanced military tactics contributed significantly to the expansion and stability of the Ottoman Empire, particularly during its classical age of conquest and consolidation. However, over time, their power and privileges expanded beyond military functions, leading to internal corruption, resistance to reform, and eventual downfall. Understanding the evolution of the Janissaries provides valuable insight into the dynamics of Ottoman state power, social transformation, and military modernization. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the historical evolution of the Janissary corps, emphasizing their transformation from an elite and loyal military force to a politically dominant yet corrupt institution. During the 14th century, the Janissaries were established as the first standing army in Europe, composed mainly of Christian youths recruited through the devshirme system. Their strict discipline and centralized loyalty to the Sultan made them an essential tool in consolidating Ottoman power. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the Janissaries reached their peak, playing decisive roles in major conquests such as the capture of Constantinople in 1453. They became symbols of Ottoman military superiority and organization; however, as their influence grew, the corps began to acquire privileges that distanced them from their original military purpose. By the 17th century, hereditary membership replaced merit-based recruitment, leading to a decline in discipline and combat effectiveness. The Janissaries increasingly intervened in political affairs, even rebelling against sultans, and their role shifted from loyal soldiers to powerful political actors. In the 18th century, they resisted modernization and reforms such as Sultan Selim III’s Nizam-i Cedid program, which aimed to create a modern army. Their resistance marked them as a major obstacle to military and administrative progress. Finally, in the 19th

century, the tension between reformist rulers and the Janissaries culminated in the Auspicious Incident of 1826, when Sultan Mahmud II decisively abolished the corps. This event marked the end of a long era in Ottoman military history and opened the path toward modernization and centralization of the army. Thus, Table 1 illustrates how the Janissaries' transformation—from disciplined soldiers to a politically entrenched elite—mirrored the broader challenges of maintaining power, discipline, and modernization within the Ottoman Empire.

Literature review. Scholarly research on the Janissaries and their role in the Ottoman military system is extensive and multifaceted, reflecting their long-lasting influence on both military and political history. Halil İnalcık emphasizes that the establishment of the Janissary corps was not merely a military innovation but also a socio-political reform that centralized the Sultan's power and professionalized the army [1]. Colin Imber notes that the Janissaries' strict discipline, continuous training, and loyalty to the Sultan were crucial factors that enabled the Ottoman Empire to dominate large territories across Europe, Asia, and Africa during its classical age [2]. Similarly, Stanford Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw argue that the Janissaries formed the backbone of the Ottoman military administration, linking the Sultan's authority directly with military governance [3]. However, by the late 16th and early 17th centuries, researchers such as Suraiya Faroqhi and Caroline Finkel observe a significant decline in the integrity and efficiency of the corps. They highlight that corruption, nepotism, and the gradual admission of non-devshirme recruits weakened the traditional discipline and loyalty that once defined the Janissaries [4]. Gábor Ágoston further explains that their increasing political power allowed them to interfere in state affairs, often influencing the succession of sultans and resisting necessary military reforms [5]. Cemal Kafadar also points out the socio-economic dimension of this transformation, suggesting that as the empire's economy changed, the Janissaries sought new means of income and privilege, drifting away from their original military purpose [6]. Modern historiography views the abolition of the Janissary corps during the "Auspicious Incident" (Vaka-i Hayriye) of 1826 as both

an inevitable and necessary step toward modernizing the Ottoman state. This event, as noted by İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, marked the end of a centuries-long institution that had once been the pillar of imperial expansion but later became a barrier to reform [7]. Overall, the literature collectively portrays the Janissaries as a paradoxical institution — one that symbolized both the power and the eventual stagnation of the Ottoman Empire [8].

Research discussion. The Janissary corps represented a unique and complex institution within the Ottoman military and political framework. Their creation marked a turning point in the empire's centralization of power, ensuring the sultan's direct control over a loyal and professional army. Initially, the Janissaries were instrumental in expanding Ottoman territories through disciplined warfare and advanced military organization. Their rigorous training, strict hierarchy, and loyalty to the sultan made them one of the most formidable forces in the medieval world. However, over time, the nature of the Janissary corps evolved significantly. As the Ottoman Empire expanded and stabilized, the Janissaries gradually gained economic and political influence, which led to the erosion of their original military character. They began to interfere in state politics, deposing and installing sultans according to their own interests. This shift from military professionalism to political opportunism weakened both their discipline and the empire's stability. The decline of the Janissary system reflects a broader pattern observed in empires where elite military forces transform into self-interested political entities. Despite their eventual downfall in the 19th century, the Janissaries left a lasting legacy in Ottoman history as symbols of strength, loyalty, and, ultimately, the dangers of unchecked power within a centralized state. Their evolution illustrates the delicate balance between military might and political authority, serving as a historical lesson in governance and institutional reform.

Conclusion. The study concludes that the Janissary corps played a decisive and multifaceted role in the military, political, and social evolution of the Ottoman Empire. Initially established as an elite, loyal, and highly disciplined military unit,

the Janissaries served as the foundation of Ottoman military power, ensuring the Empire's rapid expansion and consolidation during its classical period. Their professional training, organizational discipline, and exclusive loyalty to the Sultan enabled the Ottoman state to maintain internal stability and external dominance for several centuries. However, over time, the transformation of the Janissary corps from a strictly military institution into a politically active and economically privileged class led to serious challenges. The weakening of the devshirme system, the admission of unqualified recruits, and the growing corruption within the corps eroded their military efficiency and undermined the Sultan's authority. By the 17th and 18th centuries, the Janissaries had become resistant to reform and often acted as a destabilizing force in Ottoman politics. Their opposition to modernization efforts and repeated uprisings demonstrated the dangers of unchecked military influence in state governance.

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