

## The Force that Forged an Empire: Janissary Corps and their Role in Ottoman Empire Building

A popular saying goes, that Empires are forged through war. To launch a successful war, culminating in lands, riches, and people under a single banner, one needs an elite and loyal fighting force to carry out the deed and to not stray from its original intentions. For the Ottoman Empire, this force was the Janissaries. A Janissary, meaning “new soldier”, was a member of a distinctive class in Ottoman society that enabled the rise of the Ottoman Empire. The Janissaries came to be a double-edged sword, bringing forth the rise but also the decline of the Empire. This paper examines the causes for Janissarial rise to prominence in Turkish society, their unique culture and relationship to the Sultan as an elite fighting force, and the actions that led to their eventual doom.

The Janissary Corps was first established by Sultan Murad I in the year 1383. The Corps was established due to the need for a loyal, professional fighting unit that served the needs of the Sultan with exclusive loyalty. Prior to that period, the Sultan was compelled to use local tribal warriors called ghazis as his instrumental fighting force. However, this practice was impractical because this made the Sultan dependent on the ghazis and their loyalty was not certain. The Sultan needed a method for the systematic recruitment of loyal personal soldiers that he would have been able to use as he pleased without worrying about loyalty or morale. Sultan Murad I is credited with creating the Devşirme System.

The Devşirme System, meaning blood tax, was the practice of the Ottoman Empire to take young, strong, and intelligent boys from Christian families and train them in the Turkish language, culture, and the rules of Islam. The purpose was to bring them up from humble beginnings, and teach them the two vital elements of becoming a true Janissary: strict discipline and prevalent order. Those two elements were guaranteed to ensure unswerving and loyal soldiers to the Sultan. To guarantee sole loyalty to himself, the Sultan looked to marginalized groups within his Empire that were placed on low hierarchical levels compared with the general majority populace. Therefore, the Sultan turned towards the Christians. The Christians did not enjoy the same privileges that the Muslims enjoyed throughout the Ottoman Empire. Becoming a part of this exclusive fighting force offered the marginalized group some social mobility. By including Christians in the regime, the Sultan was bound to receive more compliance from the people. The boys recruited would come from Christian families; Jews were not included in the Devşirme system, and it was not permissible to enslave a Muslim according to Islamic doctrine. Also, by recruiting Muslims, they would be more likely to rebel and protest due to their pre-existent high societal standing. By recruiting boys who were not native to the central societal structure, they would be less inclined to go against the person who provided them with the opportunity of social advancement. Thus, the unswerving loyalty was guaranteed.

With loyalty guaranteed from marginalized groups, the next step was the selection and indoctrination of the boys to Ottoman ideals. Selecting boys from Christian families meant that the vast majority would come from the pre-dominantly Orthodox Christian Balkans. The young, strong and most intelligent boys were regularly selected by Ottoman officials to be taken and trained as Janissaries. The boys were taken from their families and placed with Turkish families. The job of the Turkish families was to teach them the Turkish language, culture and the Islamic religion. The brighter boys would be sent to the Palace

institutions, where they would have the ability to learn about the science of statecraft, thus enabling them to become high-ranking government officials, including Advisors, Governors, or even Grand Viziers. However, the majority would pursue skills in the art of war. The sole purpose of the Janissaries was to be a loyal war machine to the Sultan. This acculturation of Christian boys was met with little resistance from the Christian communities that produced the boys because this ensured those that were selected a way of social advancement that could lead to them becoming Governors of the regions from whence they came. It was in the people's interest to have one of their own in the Sultan's court, although the familial heartbreak was painful.

Once the boys were selected and made familiar with Ottoman culture, they were then trained in the skills of war as sharpshooters and soldiers. The more capable ones became officers in the Corps. The boys ate and slept together; the Corps became their family. This formulated an uncommon Janissary culture that was instrumental to the successful building of a wealthy and extensive Ottoman Empire. Boys underwent intense military training that would teach them the two core attributes of the Janissaries: strict discipline and prevalent order. They were not allowed to marry, to grow beards, or to pursue skills other than war. This was true at least in the beginning establishment of the Corps. Prevalent order was the immense respect that Janissaries held for their superiors, whether they were older Corps members or governmental officials. The Corps was under the direct supervision of the Ottoman Sultan. The Sultan would visit the barracks, meet with Janissaries and even dine with them. They were his personal troops and he served as a father figure to them. This helped to foster a unique relationship between a ruler and his troops that would be very beneficial for Sultans at first but one that would become progressively more and more strained in the future.

The second part that made the Janissaries such an important factor in building the Ottoman Empire was their unique culture and relationship with the Ottoman Sultan. When Sultan Murad I formed the Janissary Corps, he did not only form an elite fighting force, but another class within Ottoman society. The cultural development through years of intense training produced an extremely loyal and capable fighting force designed for one thing: war. More specifically, they were meant for the extension and successful governance of a functioning Empire. In the year 1383, the Ottomans had already established a strong foothold in Asia Minor and the southern Balkans and were progressively swallowing the last remnants of the Byzantine Empire. Murad I needed the Janissaries for his Balkan conquests against the established Slavic Empires. The first major campaign that the Janissaries took an instrumental part in was the Battle of Kosovo that led to Ottoman conquest of Serbia. The Janissary loyalty and skill was proven very valuable and thus the Sultan became a more independent central figure, capable of launching a war single-handedly without the support of local rulers. Further conquests included Bulgaria and most of the Balkan Peninsula before the time of Mehmed II. During this time, Ottoman leadership was centralized around the Sultan due to his elite guard. The Sultan became progressively independent and that made the governance of an Empire easier but more autocratic. Everything rested on the Sultan, and there was no real opposition, whereas before local rulers could show their dissatisfaction by withholding local troops and taxes from the Sultan. The Ottoman Sultan was able to get a firmer grasp over his territories and to enforce his laws thanks to the steadfast support of the Janissaries.

With the centralization of power in the Ottoman Empire, further conquest was made possible at a much faster rate. In the year of 1453, the young Sultan Mehmed II conquered the Byzantine city of Constantinople. Not only did this feat ensure greater riches and power to the Ottomans, but it sent shockwaves throughout Europe that the Ottoman were here to stay. It is important to note that this conquest along with many others were due to the central administration of the Sultan, which in turn was ensured by the Janissaries. The culture embedded in this elite Corps, strict discipline, loyalty and order, directly influenced conquests by the Sultans.

This culture of the Janissaries helped to form the special relationship with the Sultan. They would do his bidding by carrying out his orders in times of war. The Sultan would personally lead the Janissaries to battle, whose main job was to support the central formation of the Army. With cavalry support, the Janissaries proved to be a very competent and lethal fighting force that was the turning points of many battles in favor of the Ottomans. A unique characteristic was that the Janissaries would march with a band, whose music before battle would put fright into the hearts of the enemy. The clothing worn by the Janissaries was colorful and traditional Ottoman garb. The most interesting part was their headpiece, which resembled a long sleeve with a spot for a spoon. The attire and characteristics of the Janissaries were a source of interest in Europe for the coming centuries.

The personal relationship between the Sultan and the Janissaries culminated in the formation of a whole separate class within Ottoman society. The Janissaries were not associated with the different millets. They were a unique, homogenous group because they were from a Christian background, indoctrinated in Islamic culture and now enjoyed the personal support of the Sultan. Their position of power was even greater than that of the Muslim millet in the Ottoman Empire. Although oppressed, the Christian millet provided this route of social mobility for young boys. The Sultan's preference was to select those groups that would otherwise not have the opportunity of high social ranking in order to ensure their everlasting loyalty. The Janissaries also had other opportunities for progression. The Sultan personally oversaw the Corps and appointed the more capable Janissaries to important governmental positions. Numerous Janissaries became Grand Viziers to Sultans, while others served as Ministers and Governors of newly conquered territories. This was beneficial for the Sultan, to appoint a Governor over a land whose ethnic origin is the same with the people of the land, to ensure less rebellions and hostilities in conquered territories. Thus, the Janissaries rose to become a powerful and distinct class within Ottoman society that had a direct support of the Sultan.

The status of the Janissaries as a distinct elite group in the Ottoman Empire earned them many privileges and opportunities. Their importance in the forging of the Empire was unquestionable. Through their efforts the Ottomans reached the doorstep of the Hapsburgs in Vienna. However, through all the conquests that the Janissaries helped to achieve, one thing began to corrupt the previously unshakable strict discipline and prevalent order of the Corps. The Janissaries began to become aware of their importance in Ottoman Empire building. They began to demand more autonomy from the Sultan and the Ottoman state. The direct support of the Sultan began to turn to the Janissaries' direct influence over the Sultan. The relationship between the two soon began to deteriorate.

In order to understand the changing relationship between the Sultan and the Janissaries and how it influenced the Ottoman Empire, the relationship between the two must first be explored. The Janissaries were dependent on the Sultan to provide a better life and to help them rise through the social ranks. However, in the subsequent centuries the Janissaries began to exert more influence over the Sultan and his political decisions. The Janissaries understood that the Sultan was mutually dependent on them and so they began to play a major political role starting in the sixteenth century. This political influence did not only undermine the power of the Sultan but the tradition of the Janissary Corps as a whole.

The Janissaries were created to serve as an elite fighting force and their rank guaranteed them regular salaries. The first show of dissatisfaction with the Sultan came in 1449, when the Janissaries revolted for higher wages. They refused to take their meals and instead struck their spoons on their plates. The Sultan was pressured to give in to their demands because his right to rule could only be secured with a strong muscle, and that muscle was the Janissaries. Another characteristic of the Janissaries was that they could not marry and that they could not pursue other fields of skill besides that of war. Those traditional characteristics were later undermined through greater Janissary pressure. In 1566, with an ensuing strike by the Janissaries, Sultan Selim II gave in to their demands and allowed them to openly marry. This event signified the symbolic break from tradition; the sole loyalty to the Sultan, the one characteristic that made the Janissaries so special and so valuable to the Ottoman Empire was broken. Instead Janissaries now started their own families. The Sultan was no longer their father but rather he was a counterpart, someone who could bring them great wealth if they could exploit his good graces.

Similarly, with the relaxation of the celibacy rule, further rules imposed on the Janissary Corps were later relaxed. Through pressure, the values that once defined the Janissaries began to crumble. Janissaries could pursue other skills besides war. This gave the soldiers options on top of their already privileged rank. This led to the rise of the great architect Sinan, but this also led to the undermining of the fighting unit that was the Janissaries. They began to be less warlike and less capable on the field. Furthermore, children of Janissaries began to be recruited for the Corps. This undermined the basic rule used in recruitment: to take the strongest and the brightest. Now, the Corps came to be a lineal affair and the new recruits were neither the best boys in the land nor the brightest. This act undermined the reason for the creation of the Janissaries: a professional fighting force composed of the best Christian boys. The Corps and the ideals behind its creation began to disintegrate throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Janissaries were no longer effective in the field of battle because they did not go through the intense training that their predecessors did. The strict discipline and prevalent order that held the Janissaries together was disintegrating. What resulted was a self-interested caste in the Ottoman Empire that came to be more of a burden than a benefit to later Sultans.

Through all these changes to the Janissary Corps, the relationship with the Sultan changed as well. The Sultan became a virtual subordinate to the Janissaries' demands. Through securing more rights and privileges for themselves and their families, the Janissaries began to exercise greater political control over the Empire. Their demands included greater wealth, but the Empire could not comply with this due to the lack of conquest over new territories. The Ottoman Empire had shrunk from their wars with the Hapsburgs, partially due to the lack of Janissary discipline and effectiveness on the field of battle. The last attempts at significant territorial expansion came in the late seventeenth

century and culminated in the Battle of Vienna between the Ottoman forces and the joint armies of the Holy League. The Ottoman defeat marked the end of the era of Ottoman expansion further into the heartland of Europe. The Ottomans were beaten back and lost a significant amount of wealth, cattle, and manpower. The Janissaries that were once the most professional and effective fighting unit in Europe did not resemble anything of their former self. They had become decadent and avaricious leeches living off of the Ottoman state, which was more concerned with personal riches than serving their Sultan. The great Janissary prowess was gone.

The relaxing of the rules for the Janissary Corps came after the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent and symbolized the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The influence that the Janissaries had over the Sultan prevented the Empire from modernizing and making the necessary changes to its military in order to make it up to par with the rest of Europe. Suffering numerous defeats, the Ottomans were pushed back to the Balkans. Revolts among the different ethnic people in the Ottoman Empire resulted in the undermining of central Ottoman authority. If it wanted to survive, the Ottoman Empire needed to modernize quickly. The central authoritarian rule of the Sultan should have enabled rapid modernization but he was already under the direct influence and surveillance of the Janissaries. Any proposed change to the military by the Sultan was met with a Janissary revolt. The Janissaries would come out of their barracks and take over the palace. They were powerful enough to depose the Sultan. The deposition of the Sultan resulted in the accession of a new Sultan who was more reluctant to institute changes to the military in fear of Janissary backlash. What started out as a professional military Corps, whose members would be the slaves of the Sultan, evolved to become the de facto leaders of the Ottoman Empire with the Sultan as their puppet.

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the Ottoman Empire becoming a bystander in world affairs, while the modernized European powers rushed off to establish colonies overseas and raise their national revenue. The political elite and the Ottoman people were weary of the Janissaries and their constant demands. The Janissaries were absorbing state wealth without contributing to the betterment of the Ottoman Empire. Their ranks were swelled with the children of retired Janissaries who lacked the ethics of their predecessors. They were holding on to the remainder of their power and resisted change because they feared that it would infringe on their special privileges in Ottoman society. Their depositions of Sultans became more frequent and severe. Selim III was deposed due to his willingness to adopt minor changes on the military. He was succeeded by Mahmud II who realized the need to get rid of the Janissaries for the betterment of his Empire. With the support of the army and the people of Istanbul, on June 15, 1826, Sultan Mahmud II began to modernize his army, which encouraged Janissary mutiny. The Sultan declared war on the Janissaries and used European gunners to fire on their barracks while the army aided by citizens, fought the Janissaries in the streets of Istanbul. Soon the Janissaries were defeated as the majority of the Corps was killed, imprisoned, or exiled. Later on this act came to be known as the Auspicious or Fortunate Incident. The Empire was in dire need of modernization and throwing off the shackles of its once loyal elite fighting force was the only way.

It is important to note the events that led to the fall of the Janissaries. The Corps was formed on the principles of strict discipline and prevalent order. It was those principles that led to the rise of the Janissaries and it was only by the abandonment of the two that led

to their impending doom. Prevalent order ensured the Janissaries' sole loyalty to their Sultan, while the strict discipline ensured the professionalism and competency of the Corps on the battlefield. During the formation of the Janissaries, they had become an incredible asset to the Ottoman Empire, helping to expand territories and bring immense wealth while forging a strong Ottoman presence in Europe. By the beginning of the nineteenth century however, the Janissaries had abandoned the very principles that made them great. They were no longer the assets that they once were but were now a liability that cost the Ottoman Empire money that the treasury did not possess.

In conclusion, this paper examined the causes for Janissary rise, their culture and relationship with the Sultan and the actions that led to their disbandment. The Janissaries were established due to the need of a reliable and loyal military force to serve the Sultan. They rose to prominence due to their competency and ability to conquer new territories that brought wealth, lands, and people under Ottoman dominion. This in turn led to the rise of a unique Janissary culture defined by their personal relationship with the Ottoman Sultan. Selected from young Christian boys, the Janissaries underwent immense military, cultural, and religious training. Strict discipline and prevalent order were emphasized and this guaranteed their competency and sole loyalty to the Sultan. The Janissaries enjoyed salaries, high rank in Ottoman society and social mobility, with some Janissaries rising to become Grand Viziers. This in turn led to the actions that brought about their inevitable doom. The abuse of their privileges, relaxing of Janissary norms, incompetence, and constant interference in the politics of the Sultanate, all led to the eventual disbandment of the Janissaries. However, it is very important to note that it was due to the Janissaries that the Ottoman Empire reached its zenith under Suleyman the Magnificent. The Janissaries brought the Ottoman Empire to an enormous size and the Corps was widely regarded as the best fighting force in Europe. The benefits that the Janissaries brought to their Empire were great and the Corps will always be regarded as the Force that forged an Empire.

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