Fighting for a Living

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Amsterdam University Press, 2013.
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/66285.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66285

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2319428
The janissaries are probably one of the most famous military corps in world history. Nevertheless, they were only a part of the Ottoman army and not even the most numerous one. At any period in the Ottoman history, they coexisted with a series of other military units, some of them created earlier (hence the name of yeni çeri, meaning “new troops”), others emerging in later times. All of these corps were of different natures as regards their modes of recruitment, the status of their members, their specific role in war, their method of remuneration, and so on. I shall concentrate on the corps (ocak) of the janissaries. Over several centuries, they were both a cause of terror and a source of admiration for the West, but they were also a danger for the Ottoman rulers themselves, due to their tendency to rebel. Beyond these stereotypes, one has to keep in mind that they did not offer only one face during all their long history. On the contrary, they were in a process of constant change, especially as far as their recruitment sources and military value were concerned.

Origins

The janissaries were established in the second half of the fourteenth century, probably under the reign of Sultan Murad I (there is some discussion on this point as well as on the origins of the corps in general, which remain somewhat obscure).
From the beginning, the janissary corps was an infantry unit and a standing army (which not all the infantry components of the Ottoman army were). Furthermore, its members were not free men. They were slaves, even if of a particular kind: they were slaves of the sultan (kapı kulu, hünkâr kulu). I shall return to the origins of these slaves. Initially, they were not allowed to get married. Later, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, this ban would be abolished by Sultan Selim I. From then on, there would be two kinds of janissaries, married ones and bachelors. Only the latter would continue to live in the rooms (oda) of the barracks. There is no doubt that this change was of great consequence for the nature of this army. In any case, it remained common for the janissaries to be attracted to young boys and, more particularly, according to certain sources to young Jewish boys. Of course, it is always better not to generalize in such matters.

**Evolution**

If we try to define their military role more precisely, we must underline the fact that it evolved significantly over time. The janissaries were not, at the beginning, the most efficient part of the army nor the true instrument of the Ottoman conquest that they would become later on. Initially, they were mostly imperial bodyguards who aimed to protect the sovereign and to give a public image of his power and wealth during ceremonies, very much in the ancient tradition of the slave guards of the Muslim princes. The janissaries never lost this part of their duties. Testimonies from different periods are available showing that they made a strong impression on ambassadors and other foreign visitors with their splendid, brightly coloured uniforms and their perfect discipline when they entered the second yard of the Topkapı Palace for official receptions.

They continued to be bound by a close personal tie to the sultan, under whose direct patronage they always remained. One small manuscript in the Vienna Library is interesting in painting a vivid picture of the close relationship between the sultan, in this case Suleyman the Magnificent, and his janissaries: on the janissaries’ side, they hold the deepest reverence which did not prevent them from making repeated and excessive financial

---

3 According to a proverb, a married man is not a kul for the sultan: Kavânîn, fol. 10v.

4 See, for instance, Capsali, Seder Elyahu Zuta, I, p. 82.

5 Bosworth, “Ghulâm”, parts I, “The Caliphate” and II, “Persia”.

6 See, among many examples, Fresne-Canaye, Le voyage du Levant, p. 62.
demands; on the sultan's side, there is an authority which, under certain circumstances, may become unyielding, but which also gives rise, at other times, to a smiling humour, almost friendly, and even at times indulging in jokes.\(^7\)

The importance of the janissaries in the military field would increase dramatically, in connection with two factors: first, they became a decisive tool in siege warfare, thanks to their specific ability to act as a monolithic and compact block in the final assault. The second and probably even more decisive factor was, following the example of the Balkan armies, the progressive adoption of firearms, more precisely the musket (tüfeng), instead of traditional weapons, in particular bows and arrows, starting from the beginning of the fifteenth century. In the Ottoman rulers' mind, the use of this new and revolutionary weapon was intended to remain the monopoly of the janissaries, in connection – one can imagine – with their status as a standing army under the direct supervision of the sovereign, which gave better opportunities for both training and control. An instructor in chief (ta’limhaneccionesi) was appointed by the sultan. In fact this monopoly quickly became obsolete, and firearms circulated among much larger sections of the population, partly because of quarrels between the various members of the Ottoman dynasty.\(^8\)

The number of janissaries equipped with firearms (tüfenkli, tüfenk-endâz) began to increase under the reign of Mehmed II, and this continued under the subsequent reigns. As for the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent, it is not clear whether the tüfenk-endâz were more numerous or even whether the use of tüfenk was generalized among the janissaries. The same sultan was also famous for having expanded the state arms factories. In any case, the adoption of firearms was the Ottoman response to the military evolution of its enemies, especially the Habsburg troops, who proved to be terribly efficient with their excellent guns made in Germany.

We have no details on the process of the adoption of firearms and we know nothing about the reception of this innovation by the troops, who had already demonstrated their corporatist mind as well as their propensity to mutiny.\(^9\) It remains striking in this respect that, as late as the year 1551, Suleyman considered it necessary to request the aga, the head of the janis-

---

\(^7\) Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Turkish Manuscripts, no. 1815, Kânûnîme-i Sultân Süleyman (Flügel, III, p. 250) [henceforth, Kânûnîme].

\(^8\) Turan, Sehzâde Bayezid Vak’ası, pp. 83-96; İnalcık, “The Socio-Political Effects of the Diffusion of Fire-Arms in the Middle East”.

\(^9\) We cannot consider the success of this change of arms as obvious if we bear in mind what the Habsburg ambassador, Busbecq, wrote about the failure of the vizier Rustem Pasha when
saries, to train his men, so that – the sultan says – “they will become experts in the use of the musket.” Equally striking is the fact that the sultan is said to have been anxious, at each of his visits to the barracks of the janissaries, to see all the officers shooting, according to their hierarchical order, in the training area, luxuriously laid out by the same sultan. In this context, the act of shooting appears both as a game and as a kind of rite, expressing the close relationship between the sultan and his slaves.

At this stage of their evolution, the janissaries were no longer only the personal escort of the sultan. They also became the main factor in the Ottomans’ military superiority. They took part in all the main campaigns, both on land and at sea, even in the absence of their patron, the sultan. In the same way, they were the elite of the fortress garrisons, scattered throughout the empire.

To this evolution corresponds a spectacular increase in their numbers. Let me give some figures to give an idea of the corps’ size.

Figures

However hypothetical they may be, the oldest figures remained low: 2,000 men in 1389, at the Battle of Kosovo; 3,000 under the reign of Murad II, in the first half of the fifteenth century. Later, they would increase from 5,000 to 10,000 men, during the reign of Mehmed II, the Conqueror (fâtih), in the second half of the fifteenth century. This increase would have taken place in particular during Mehmed’s wars with the Akkoyunlu sultan Uzun Hasan in the 1470s. The result was reached partly by the incorporation into the initial janissary corps of two new components that had existed independently until then, and that were devoted to the sultan’s hunting activity: the sekban or seymen and the zagarcı, all men in charge of the royal hounds. This explains the puzzling fact that several of the highest officers of the ocak retained designations in connection with hounds: such were the sekban başı, the zagarcı başı, the turnacı başı, the samsuncu başı.

Still later, under Mehmed’s son, Bayezid II, the number of the janissaries would reach 13,000. To this end, Bayezid created a new section of the ocak: he tried in 1548 to arm with pistols 200 horsemen who were his own kuls; see Turkish Letters, pp. 123-124.

10 “Yeniçerim kullarsm tüfenk atmaga idman eylemelerin emr edüb...”: Tokapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, Manuscript KK 888, doc. no. 30.
11 Kânûnnâme, fols 13-16.
the so-called companies of the aga (aga böülükləri). Nevertheless, this peak was followed by a marked decrease just before Suleyman’s reign, but things would change significantly during his long tenure (1520-1566), at the end of which their numbers stabilized at some 13,000 men,¹² a very high level for a standing army of the time. Nevertheless, one of the most recent historians of Ottoman warfare, Rhoads Murphey, has dwelt on the fact that, at any one time, only a portion of the total ranks were actually deployed at the front, the rest being confined to barracks in Istanbul or dispatched among the provincial garrisons.¹³

**General organization and command**

Before going further, let us have a glimpse at the general organization of the janissary corps and its terminology: its structures reflect its complex formation. It consists of three main components: the so-called cemâ’at, which is composed of 101 regiments of sekban or seymen. Consequently the total number of the orta (also called bölük) amounted to 196 (which became 195, when Murad IV decided to disband the sixty-fifth orta, considered to be responsible for Osman II’s assassination). At the head of each orta was a çorbacı (literally a “soup maker”). Another name for the chiefs of the regiments of the cemâ’at was yayabaşı or serpiyâde (“chief of the infantry-men”). Each çorbacı had a lieutenant (oda kethüdâsı or başodabaşı) under his orders, as well as a set of odabaşı (“chiefs of barrack-rooms”). An imam and a scribe were also available in each regiment.

At the head of the ocak in its entirety was the “aga of the janissaries” (yeniçeri agası). Originally, he was chosen from among the members of the corps, but after Selim I’s reforms he was one of the high dignitaries of the Palace and, once appointed, he became the first of the so-called rikâb agaları (“agas of the stirrup”). He depended directly on the sultan, with whom he had a close relationship. He had his own palace in the vicinity of the Süleymaniye mosque; he led his own council, the so-called yeniçeri divânı. This council included the five highest officers of the corps, four of them mentioned above in connection with hounds and hunting: the aga’s lieutenant (kul kethüdâsı); the chief of the sekban who, at the time, was the supreme commander of the corps; the zagarcı başı; the samsuncu başı; and the turnacı başı. Each of these high officers was at the same time chief of a

---

¹² Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500-1700*, p. 45.
particular orta. Among the other high officers who were not members of the divân, let me mention the muhzir aga (“bailiff aga”), who was the intermediary between the ocak and the grand vizier; the big and the little hâsseki who were dispatched to the provinces to deal with questions concerning the corps; the baş çavuş (“chief of the sergeants”) who checked the execution of the decisions and supervised the incorporation of new recruits.

Finally, the ocak had its own bureaucracy headed by the yenîçeri efendisi (“secretary of the janissaries”). He held the pay rolls (kötük) and was the chief of the aga’s chancery.

Increase in membership and subsequent decline

After Suleyman’s era, starting from the reign of his grandson, Murad III, the number of janissaries increased dramatically and constantly. At the same time, standards of recruitment became more and more slack and the origins of the recruits much more diversified. The recruitment of new janissaries was hence no longer limited to slaves of the sultan nor, according to a tradition that had been established quite early on, to sons of janissaries. From now on, all kinds of foreigners (ecnebi) and “intruders” (saplama), including Turks, got access to the ocak, against the fundamental regulations. Thus, the corps lost its former homogeneity, which was, according to several of the authors of “books of advice” (nasîhatnâme), a cause of its decline. The same authors attributed these transformations – so reprehensible in their eyes – to the sovereigns’ slovenliness and blindness. Nevertheless, as Murphey underlines, there is another possible interpretation of their behaviour: they would have been trying to meet growing military needs in the face of more and more powerful adversaries. Be that as it may, the burden became heavier and heavier for the Treasury. In 1574, the janissaries numbered 13,600; they amounted to 35,000 in 1597, 37,600 in 1609, and 39,470 in 1670. The numbers reached 53,000 at the beginning of the eighteenth century, at a time when the corps had lost all military efficiency. 14 They remained merely a mighty pressure group in the state and society, as well as a terrible drag on the public finances, all the more so because, starting from 1740, Sultan Mahmud I, desperately searching for money, legalized the marketing of certificates (esâme) which gave the bearer the right to collect janissary wages. This period is generally considered to be the time of decay and corruption of the janissaries. The corps played a central

14 Aksan, “Whatever Happened to the Janissaries?”
role in the overthrow of the reforming sultan, Selim III, in 1808. As a result, his successor, Sultan Mahmud II, decided to abolish the corps in 1826, as a necessary precondition to the introduction of Westernizing reforms in the army. When the janissaries rose in revolt against this decision, the sultan had his artillery shoot them to pieces in their barracks on 18 June 1826, an incident known in Turkish history as the “auspicious event” (vakayi hayriye).

After this general background, let me try to define the corps according to the criteria to be considered in the framework of our research program.

**A sultan’s army**

The janissaries were clearly a state commission army or, to be more accurate, a sultan’s army. Since their origin, they were intended for the sultan's exclusive use and put under his direct patronage. Even in the later period, when they became a part of the state apparatus and one military institution among others, although the sovereign no longer took part in military campaigns in person, they kept some of their close ties with him. The fact, for example, that we come across sultanic orders concerning janissaries or janissaries’ cadets (who will be discussed below), including orders dealing with very minor affairs, which are not ordinary fermans but edicts of the highest rank (hatt-i hümâyûn, which means that they were issued on the basis of a personal note written by the sultan with his own hand on the paper of the initial request), is significant: it is an expression of the exceptional status of these kuls.15

**Pencyek and devşirme**

At the beginning, starting from the fourteenth century, the members of the corps originated from a single source, the pencyek.16 This Persian term (Arabic: khums) refers to the fifth part of the booty gathered during the raids and the fights against the infidels – the part which, according to Islamic law,

---

15 See, for example, an order following a petition concerning the graduation of janissaries’ cadets working in the Ibrâhîm Pasha Palace in Istanbul, with the note "hatt-i hümâyûnumla fermân olmuşdur" (“it was ordered with a note of my own majestic writing”): Istanbul, Başbakanlık Ottoman Arsivleri, Mühimme Defteri [henceforth, MD], LXIV, p. 42.
16 Beldiceau-Steinherr, "En marge d’un acte concernant le pengyek et les aqıncı". The author gives an edition of the important regulation, referred to below, extracted from Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds turc ancient 81, fol. 97r-v.
belongs to the sovereign. This booty includes, among other goods, captives who were automatically enslaved by those who took them (unless they were intended to be ransomed). In fact, it appears that this pencyek could take two different forms, according to the period and the circumstances. On the one hand, it could be a simple tax of 25 akçe (silver coins), a sum corresponding to the fifth part of the average value of a slave (i.e., 125 akçe). This tax was levied at the frontier, at the point of the slaves’ entrance into Ottoman territories. In this form, the pencyek survived, with or without the name, until the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the pencyek was nothing but the requisition, mainly on behalf of the sultan, of all the young male captives, between ten and seventeen years old (occasionally even older, but in that case the sultan had to pay for them), who had been enslaved in raids and who presented the required features of robustness, soundness, and physical integrity. The sources describing this second aspect of the pencyek, crucial for the janissaries’ history, are rare. The most developed and explicit one is a relatively late edict issued by Sultan Bayezid II in 1493, which nevertheless, as the text points out, reformulates older provisions. On another side, this edict takes into consideration only those captives who were caught during raids launched in the enemy territory. Nevertheless, we know that the same kind of young captives were also taken in other contexts as well: successful sieges or pitched battles; likewise a portion of these captives – and, indeed, the best portion – was the sultan’s own loot.

As a consequence of the nature of the pencyek, the janissaries were initially recruited among foreign, non-Muslim young boys (it was forbidden by shari‘a to enslave Muslims, except in extraordinary cases of judiciary punishment). It corresponded exactly to the so-called mamluk paradigm as it had been in force in the Muslim world since the Abbasid era. According to this paradigm, which corresponds to a specific kind of military slavery, the aim was not to enslave already mature and experienced soldiers, but to search for untrained and inexperienced young boys who would not only be enslaved and forcibly converted but also systematically trained in specialized schools. Some historians, such as D. Ayalon and E. de la Vaissière, assumed, more or less explicitly, that such schools may have originated from Central Asian models. It is worth noting that in the account of the origins of the janissaries by the earliest Ottoman chroniclers, in the second

17 Ayalon, "Preliminary Remarks on the Mamlûk Military Institution in Islam"; Crone, Slaves on Horses; Pipes, Slaves, Soldiers and Islam. For a critical discussion, see La Vaissière, Samarcande et Samarra.
half of the fifteenth century; this new unit appears as nothing more than the byproduct of the establishment of the pencyek levies a century before.

Much more specific to the Ottoman case was the other method of acquiring new janissaries, which apparently was inaugurated a few decades after the institution of the pencyek. This second method partly replaced the first one after a time of coexistence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was called devşirme, a Turkish term meaning “collecting” or “gathering”, by reference to the levy of young boys, who were no longer foreign captives caught in the raids, but Christian subjects of the sultan. They were dhimmi, non-Muslim protégés of the sultan, who had lived in his European provinces. Later on, the same practice was also put in force in Anatolia. Young Muslims, especially Turks, were categorically excluded from the devşirme, with the exception of Muslim Bosnians who, for reasons that are not totally clear, were eligible for the system.

The earliest mentions of devşirme operations go as far back as the very end of the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, the practice seems to have become more regular starting from the second quarter of the fifteenth century, under the reign of Murad II. In spite of attempts to justify this institution from a legal and religious point of view, it was an obvious violation of two fundamental provisions of shari’a: on the one hand, it implied the enslavement of dhimmi subjects; on the other, the levy was followed by a forcible conversion, since all these Christian boys entering the sultan’s service had to become Muslims.

Volunteers or not?

Under such conditions, it seems at first glance completely unnecessary to ask whether these future soldiers were volunteers or not. Clearly, the young captives, entering the sultan’s service as part of his pencyek, were not volunteers. As for the devşirme, records are extant of attempts to escape the requisition by flight or concealment of the boys, at the approach of the

18 Giese, Die altosmanische Chronik des ʿĀšīkpaşazāde, Die altosmanischen anonymen Chroniken Tevārīẖ-i Āl-i ʿOs̱ mān...
21 See Wittek, “Devşirme and Shari’a”.

recruiting commissioners, or by corruption of these agents. Again, on the way from their homeland to Istanbul, some boys tried to run away; this was also the case at their arrival in the capital, where the forced conversion and the dispatching of the recruits took place. Later, in the first stages of the process of formation that I shall describe below, such attempts still occurred.22

Nevertheless, the question is more complex. If there is no doubt that the devşirme was generally very unpopular, not to say that it was considered to be one of the darkest aspects of the Turkish yoke (as is obvious from Balkan literature and folklore),23 on the other side, it remains true that for poor people, mostly peasants, it was also gateway to a better life, with better incomes and a better social position, in spite of the strain and the danger. It was true for a simple janissary, and much more so for the cream of the kuls, who could reach the highest positions in the state apparatus. As a consequence of these realities, some people who, being Muslims, were not eligible for the devşirme, made efforts to enter fraudulently, to the great displeasure of the authorities. It is also true that when people, after the preliminary stages, became full members of the corps, they do not seem to have been inclined to desert. In other words, if there was constraint, it finally turned into a form of acceptance. I shall return to possible explanations for this acceptance.

Moreover, with time, and this evolution can be traced as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century, not all the janissaries were the products of coercion, as in the pencyek or the devşirme institutions. Specifically, as already mentioned, sons of janissaries (kuloglus) started being introduced into the corps, and the same was applied for young Muslims adopted by janissaries (veledeshes).24 Likewise, the aga, head of the corps, was allowed to incorporate a number of protégés. In all these cases, entering the corps became a voluntary act.

In the same way, for the people who, according to Mustafa Ali, were admitted in the corps, by the will of Murad III in 1582 on the occasion of the great circumcision feasts of his son Mehmed, this admission was a favour and by no means a requirement. With all these changes in the recruitment methods, janissaries passed progressively from forced recruits to volunteers.

23 See, for example, Georgieva, “Le rôle des janissaires dans la politique ottomane en les terres bulgares”.
24 Kaldy-Nagy, “The Strangers (ecnebiler) in the 16th Century Ottoman Military Organization”.
Searching for the janissaries’ identity

However, it remains true that, during the most glorious period of the empire’s history, mainly during the fifteenth and the first part of the sixteenth centuries, the Ottoman conquest, so loudly praised as a triumph of Islam, was in fact largely operated by men of Christian origin. If this paradox was already encapsulated in the “mamluk paradigm”, it takes a particularly striking shape in the janissaries’ case, since a major part of the conquests concerned were to the detriment of Christian lands. When historians look for an explanation of this paradox, it seems that they have to address the various components of the specific culture of the ocak. All of them converge into the making of a new identity, strong and satisfying enough to substitute for the old one (without erasing it altogether). At the root of this identity was an esprit de corps, which is certainly shared by all corps but which, in this case, reached the highest degree for three reasons at least: a sharp consciousness of being part of a military elite in a close relationship with the sovereign and responsible for the empire’s greatness; a common initiation into a rich corpus of symbols (for example, each orta had its own emblem) at work, in a series of rites, ceremonies, and feasts; and the prominent influence of Bektashism, a syncretic form of Islam. The close tie, even the symbiotic connection, between the ocak and this Ottoman Sufi order (tarikat) is well known, even if the exact chronology, causes, and conditions of the interface between the two communities are not altogether clear. Obviously, for chronological reasons, the tradition of the creation of the ocak by the “saint”, Hâci Bektash Veli, founder of the order, cannot be anything but a legitimizing legend. As a matter of fact, it is not even certain that the Bektashi impact moulded the corps from its very origin. The official affiliation came relatively late, not before the year 1591, during the reign of Murad III. Starting from that time, the great master of the order (baba) became the çorbacı of the ninety-ninth orta, and Bektashi dervishes were incorporated into the ocak where they became highly influential in every field, offering spiritual guidance to the soldiers.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that syncretic beliefs existed in the religion of the janissaries a long time before the end of the sixteenth century, as it existed in the early stages of Ottoman history in general. Perhaps we have an echo of these beliefs, as they were in force in the second half of the

25 Uzunçarşılı, Osmanlı devleti teşkilâtından kapu kulu ocakları, I, pp. 26-28; Vatin and Veinstein, “Paroles d’oglan, jeunes esclaves de la Porte”.
26 Küçükyalçın, Turna’nın Kalbi, pp. 111-120.
fifteenth century, in the puzzling description of Islam which is to be found in the first pages of the “memoirs of the Serbian janissary”, Konstantin Mihailović.27 A prominent place is given to ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, whom he would have explicitly designated as his successor (in fact, he is always mentioned in the gülbank, the specific prayers of the janissaries). These Shiite features would be confirmed later by a special reverence, not only for ‘Ali and his holy sword, called Zulfikar, but also for his two martyr sons, Hasan and Hüseyn. At the same time, Konstantin also quoted Muslim preachers who combined an expected harshness against Christians with a more surprising love for Christ. In their view, Jesus had not been crucified, a lookalike being killed instead. “Jesus is of God’s spirit but Mohammed is God’s emissary”, they say, along with, “What is Mohammed’s will that is also Jesus?” This reverence for Christ was interpreted as a consequence of the Christian origin of most of the janissaries at that time, but a definitive conclusion on the question remains out of reach. Anyway, it is not certain that it persisted in the later periods, while Shiite inspiration definitely did. How could Ottoman power, having been transformed into a champion of Sunnism in the meantime, tolerate this deviation in its military elite? It is another paradox of the janissaries. Maybe the fact that this Shiite imprint was nevertheless encapsulated in a tarikat, which obviously was a heterodox one, but at the same time firmly controlled by the state, by means of its centralization and hierarchical structure, made things easier.28 Be that as it may, a degree of Shiism remained one of the peculiarities of the ocak’s culture as well as a unifying factor for its members.

Slaves paid in silver

As I noted at the beginning, janissaries were not free men. They were slaves and remained so all their life. Their patron, the Ottoman sultan, never emancipated them (or very exceptionally, as a reward for extraordinary acts), in contrast to the mamluk sultans of Egypt who solemnly emancipated their own mamluks at the end of their training period in the barracks of the citadel of Cairo. At any rate, they were slaves, but slaves of the sultans, which made a big difference in comparison to ordinary slaves. As several Western travellers noticed, there was not a more honourable position in

27 Mihailović, Memoirs of a Janissary, pp. 3-27; the French translation is Mihailović, Mémoires d’un janissaire.
the empire than to be slave of the sultan. The *kul* elite (of course, neither simple janissaries nor the corps officers but *kuls* who had become governors or viziers) married princesses of the reigning dynasty. They were never sold to private persons and were thus not in danger of being used for menial tasks. Not only could they exert the highest functions, but they were also in a position to accumulate greater or lesser fortunes and, according to their status, totally or partly bequeath them to their heirs.

All these slaves were paid in silver money by the Treasury. This point may explain – at least in part – the fact that the Ottoman beys took some time to adopt a troop of this type, even though it was a piece of their Islamic inheritance: they needed to have reached a sufficient measure of monetization. As a matter of fact none of the previously established other troops were paid in money. As for the janissaries, the initial pay (‘ulûfe) was 2 akçe per diem. But this amount, still very modest indeed, increased with time, through a succession of augmentations (terakkî), and could reach 12 akçe for a simple soldier. The concrete mechanism of these increases is not altogether clear: we cannot determine the roles of the military value to be rewarded and stimulated, of the length of service, or of favouritism. Officers’ wages were much higher. The aga’s reached the enormous amount of 400 akçe daily. It is possible to see how the amounts varied through the numerous payroll muster lists (*mevâcib defteri*) kept in the archives.29

Janissaries were paid in regular quarterly instalments, in solemn ceremonies in the second yard of the Topkapı Palace. As for the provincial garrisons, their wages were transported across the country with a security guard. Nevertheless, this precious load was sometimes attacked by bandits – this could happen even at the apogee of the empire, during Suleyman’s reign.30 Any shortcoming in these payments (as occurred in the so-called *sıvış* years, the “effaced” years resulting from the gap between the solar and the lunar calendars)31 or any adulteration of the distributed money led to riots among the troops. Besides these regular wages, they received a special bonus (*bakhşiş*) at every new enthronement. Extraordinary grants were also expected during the campaigns, as an incitement or a reward. To neglect these traditional grants was a serious risk for the sultan. Selim II experienced the consequences when he refused to give the *bakhşiş* to the janissaries at the beginning of his reign, as did Osman II who, among other

---

29 Darling, “Ottoman Salary Registers as a Source for Economic and Social History”.
30 Barkan, “H. 974-975 (M. 1567-1568) Mali bir Yılina ait bir Osmanlı Bütçesi”.
31 Sahîlioğlu, “Osmanlı Imparatorluğu’nda Sıvış Yılı Burhanları”.
foolish mistakes, was not generous enough during the Polish campaign, resulting in his being deposed and in the end in his death.32

These official allocations were not the only source of income for the janissaries. It is well known that they were also involved in craft and commercial activities, mainly in the capital itself and also in the various cities where they were sent (as a way of getting rid of them in troubled times). Contrary to what has often been put forward, this passage from military to economic activities did not occur exclusively during the period of decline. It already existed in former centuries. However, in these earlier periods, crafts and trades were only occupations during the winter or the intervals of peace,33 and not a substitute for military involvement, as it became the case later on. From this point on, close ties were created between the ocaκ and the guilds of the capital.

Consequently, janissaries succeeded in accumulating properties that they left to their heirs. The countless probate inventories of janissaries, which are to be found in the kadi registers of many cities, provide precise data on this point. Both soldiers and businessmen – in proportions varying according to the period – could join a quite prosperous urban middle class.34

Trainees without much training

Returning to the military activity of the janissaries, the question arises as to what extent they have to be considered true professional militaries, who are not only endowed with a practical experience of the job but who had been systematically trained in a preliminary stage of education, as the “mamluk paradigm” postulated it.

According to my sources, at the very beginning, the boys recruited in the framework of the pencyek were directly assigned to the janissary corps with an initial wage of 2 akçe per diem. In other words, they were immediately operational without a preliminary training period.35 However, this situation did not last. A few decades later, a new corps was established, the so-called ‘acemi oğlan (literally “the foreign boys”) based in the harbour of Gelibolu (Gallipoli) on the Dardanelles. A second branch of this corps, much larger

33 Murphey, “Yeni çeri”. On the relationships between the janissaries and the corporations (esnaf), see Kafadar, “Yeniceri-Esnaf Relations”.
34 Barkan, “Edirne Askeri Kassamina ait Tereke Defterleri”; Öztürk, Askeri kassama ait onyedinci asır Istanbul tereke defterleri.
35 Kavânîn, fol. 4v.
in number, would be created in Istanbul, following the conquest of the city. The ‘acemi oglan’ was meant to be a preliminary stage in janissary training. From now on, it was no longer possible to enter the corps immediately. One had to be an ‘acemi oglan’ first.

Before examining what the real function of this cadet corps was, I have to mention another preliminary stage, an initial one, which took place between the levy as pencyek or devşirme boy and the incorporation into the ‘acemi oglan’. This first stage was carried out in the countryside, among Turkish farmers (Türk üzerinde olmak). The principle was to establish the young recruits “overseas”, so that no flight to their homelands – a common temptation – was possible. That means that Rumelian boys were sent to Anatolia. Logically, the reverse (Anatolian boys sent to Rumelia) must have been true, but I have not come across evidence for this. This stay in the countryside was of quite a long duration: four to eight years, according to the sources. Nevertheless, it could be shortened when boys were needed for an urgent task in the capital. This rural stage did not exist initially and is said to have been established by Mehmed II. A first aim was to make the boys stronger by using them in hard labour, as well as to accustom them to obedience and submission, but another important goal, which Mehmed II would have had in mind, was to allow them to learn Turkish. Consequently, ‘acemi oglan’ and janissaries would speak Turkish (certainly, writing in Turkish was another story, and the janissaries’ literacy another question). According to some sources, the rural stage was also an opportunity for those converted to be initiated into the basis of their new religion (even if Anatolian peasantry were not an authority in these matters). It appears that this period staying “among the Turks” did not survive as long as the devşirme system: it was no longer in force after the devşirme campaigns of 1622 and 1636.

Now, if we come back to the ‘acemi oglan’, we are naturally inclined to consider the period spent in this body of cadets as a time of military preparation and training. Consequently, the fate of an ‘acemi oglan’ would be necessarily to become a full janissary. As a matter of fact, they are frequently called yeniçeri oglanları (or in Persian gilmân-i yeniçeriyân), which means boys who are janissaries-to-be. Consequently, all studies on the janissaries, including the most recent ones, consider the ‘acemi oglan’ to be a cadet corps

36 Ibid., fol. 7r.
37 Uzunçarşılı, Osmanlı devleti teşkilâtından kapu kulu ocakları, p. 24.
or trainees in connection with the janissaries.  

However, this interpretation needs discussion and nuancing.

First, I shall observe that the oldest traditions did not explain the creation of the new corps in that way. The sultan took this measure – they say – first to save money, since the initial wages of the ‘acemi oglan’ were less than those of the janissaries (1 akçe instead of 2); secondly, because he lacked a regular corps intended for a specific need: transporting troops in ships from the Asiatic to the European parts of the state across the Dardanelles.

Now, taking these two preliminary stages into account, we can try to evaluate the number of years coming before the proper entrance into the janissary corps: the stay in the Turkish families is said to last possibly seven or eight years. Afterwards, the time spent as an ‘acemi oglan’ is said to be about five to ten years. Thus, the total time of these preliminary stages would be from twelve to eighteen years. According to the “treaties of advice” (nasihatnâme) of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period of fifteen to twenty years was an optimum. In one of these works, the kitâb-i mustetâb, the ‘acemi oglan’ period is presented as even longer and divided into two parts: a six to seven-year period properly as an ‘acemi oglan’, followed by a five to ten-year period as gardeners (bostancis) of the imperial palaces.

In any case, all these figures remain highly theoretical. We know through orders contained in the “registers of important affairs” (mühimme defteri) that these stages could, in fact, be either shortened or extended considerably, according to the circumstances. On this point as on many others, Ottoman authorities were fully pragmatic.

Be that as it may, it remains true that enlistment in the janissary corps did not occur very early in a man’s life. Janissaries were not young men. It is all the more true that the devşirme recruiters did not take the boys as young as it is frequently assumed. According to a specific law (kanun) dedicated to the institution, the ages were between fourteen or fifteen and seventeen or eighteen years (remembering that for the pencyek boys the age was ten to seventeen years). In practice, the recruits could be even older; at least this was the case in a devşirme register of the beginning of the seventeenth century.

38 Still today, in the Turkish army, acemilik means the training period.

39 Kavânîn, fol. 5r.

40 For example, KK 888, no. 1603; MD, VI, p. 223, no. 479; VII, p. 789, no. 2157; IX, pp. 14 and 122; XXI, p. 145; LIII, p. 173. It remains true that, when the authorities had to urgently remove the boys from the Turkish families, they were ordered to choose the ones who had been there for the longest time (eski).

century.\textsuperscript{42} We find that, at that time, 80 per cent of the boys were between fifteen and twenty and 50 per cent between eighteen and twenty years old. If we take all these figures into account – however hypothetical they may remain – we come to the puzzling conclusion that, when becoming a janissary, the man was somewhere between thirty-seven and fifty years, which is hardly believable.

Let us add here that, once a janissary, the man would spend his whole career in the corps, unless he was upgraded to a more prestigious corps, i.e., one of the standing cavalry sections or one of the Palace corps, or acquired fief (timar) in the province, which, at least in certain cases, was considered a punishment and not a promotion. Finally, when a janissary was judged too old (ziyâde ihtiyâr), exhausted, and “out of use” (‘amelmande),\textsuperscript{43} he was retired (oturak, korucu, emekdâr) and continued, as such, to belong to the corps, being given a pension. Such a pension (oturaklık) was also given to a soldier who became ill, disabled, or insane. The marked reverence for the old retired soldiers, among the members, can be counted among the signs of this esprit de corps that I emphasized above.

If there was a long time between the first recruitment and the final entrance into the janissary corps (kapuya çıkmak), this time does not appear to be a time of military training sensu stricto. There was nothing to be compared to the several-year, methodically organized training existing in the Cairo barracks of the mamluk sultans, according to the historian Makrizi.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{center}
A glance at the mamluks’ training
\end{center}

Let us remember that in the fifteenth century, there were twelve barracks (tibâq, pl. tabaqa) in Cairo for the education of the “royal mamluks” (al-mamalik al-sultâniyya) who had to become first-class horsemen. Each barrack was capable of accommodating 1,000 mamluks. There was at least one religious man (faqîh) per group of students to teach them the Qur’ân, the Arabic script, some basic knowledge of shari’a, and the Muslim prayers. When the mamluks who had been bought quite young reached majority, they started their actual military training. Each group had a cavalry

\textsuperscript{42} Istanbul, Başbakanlık Ottoman Arşivleri, Maliyeden müdevver, no. 7600.
\textsuperscript{43} Kânûnnâme, fol. 16r.
\textsuperscript{44} Ayalon, “Preliminary Remarks on the Mamlûk Military Institution in Islam”, pp. 9-17; Rabie, “The Training of the Mamlûk Fâris"
(furûsiyya) instructor, a mu'allim, whose training included equestrianism, the lance game, archery, and fencing. Tuition in horsemanship consisted of several stages before the young man was able to sit firmly on a bareback horse. At the beginning he practised on horse models made of dry clay, stone, or wood. The first exercise was to jump over it correctly. Then a saddle was placed on the model and the mamluk practised jumping without, and then with, full equipment. In the following stage, the candidate practised training on a live horse.

During his whole training, the mamluk was considered a simple student (kuttâbiya) without pay or personal goods of any kind. On the other hand, when his education was over (disregarding how many years it lasted and what age he had reached at this point), he received, as personal property, a horse, and clothing, as well as a set of arms (a bow, a quiver and arrows, a sabre, and armour). From that moment on, he was a true soldier, eligible for a wage, although it was of course the lowest one. In addition, he was given a certificate, called 'itâqa, which is not only proof that he had become a trained horsemanship but also as a mark of emancipation, since the mamluk who at last enters the sultan's service is no longer his slave. He was a free man even if he maintained a close link with his former patron. Thus, two important differences with the janissaries are to be noticed: the latter remained slaves and did not receive real military training.

Back to the Ottoman trainees

As long as the Rumelian boys lived with Anatolian Turkish families, they had to engage in livestock farming and agriculture, both tiresome chores (belâ) which certainly made them stronger as well as more docile, giving them the opportunity to develop qualities already taken into account by the devşirme recruiters upon selection. Such qualities may be necessary preconditions of military capacity, but they are not a substitute for military technical training. Furthermore, the ‘acemi oğlan stage does not seem to offer much military training either. As a matter of fact, all these young men were employed by the sultan, his family, and other grandees in a great variety of tasks that had nothing to do with proper military work.

As we saw above, their initial duty was to work on the ships coming across the Dardanelles, as well as to transport heavy material (torba hizmeti). The same kind of tasks were ordered for the Istanbul ‘acemi oğlan as well, for ships coming across the Bosphorus, carrying different sorts of provisions for the imperial palace, such as firewood or snow collected in the mountains
around Bursa. Domestic service in several palaces was also partly carried out by some contingents of ‘acemi oglan. Another of their major occupations was to care for the imperial gardens in Istanbul and the surrounding areas as well as in Edirne and its district. For instance, in 1577, some 467 ‘acemi oglan were employed as gardeners in Edirne. Another possible destination of the recruits, probably in connection with some inborn gifts quickly discovered by the recruiters, was to become apprentices in the workshops of the Palace and thus to acquire high-level skills in one of the many crafts intended for the sultan’s consumption and use. Thus in a list of 1526, we find former devşirme or pencyek boys in twenty-six of the forty workshops of the Palace. Likewise, when the sultan undertook the building of a new monument, either a civil or a religious one, he naturally resorted to his ‘acemi oglan. For instance, we find them on the Selimiye mosque construction in Edirne. In the same way, they contribute to shipbuilding in the shipyards of Galata: many boys were mobilized after the destruction of the Ottoman fleet in Lepanto. The authorities had the same reaction when a big fire devastated the capital. In short, the ‘acemi oglan appear to be more slave manpower at the disposal of the sultan to meet the various needs of the Palace and the state than a cadet corps for a professional army. A famous passage of the third of Busbecq’s Turkish Letters has to be interpreted, at least partly, as an allusion to the ‘acemi oglan: “If the State requires any work of construction, removal, clearance or demolition, slave labour is always employed to carry it out.”

It is also true that a proportion of ‘acemi oglan will never become janissaries. They will spend their entire carrier until their retirement as cadets, though not without an increase in their daily wages in time. ‘Acemi oglan with grey hair and beards are mentioned, in particular among the gardeners. Why this inertia in the graduation? Perhaps because they became so good in their speciality that it would have been a pity to let them leave their job, or simply because they were forgotten, the authorities always remaining anxious to limit the number of janissaries, partly at least for financial reasons.

45 MD, XXX, p. 108.
46 Veinstein, “À propos des ehl-i hıref et du devşirme”.
47 MD, IX, p. 46, no. 122; XXII, p. 206.
48 “Ne kadar dölgerlik ve kala française san’atı bilir ve sa’ir tersâneye müte’allik san’at bilir oglan var ise…”: MD, X, p. 235.
49 MD, LIII, p. 173.
50 Turkish Letters, pp. 101-102.
51 MD, X, p. 158, no. 240; LVI, p. 66, no. 134: “nicessinin saç ve sakalli ankarib pıır olmuşdur”.
These assertions, however, may be somewhat too categorical and deserve some nuance. I cannot deny that one finds here and there some hints of military training of the ‘acemi oglan. This is the case in an important source of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the report of Teodoro Spandougin Cantacusino (Spandounes), according to which:

Après qu’il les auront osté de ce meschant mestier, ilz leur font apprendre à tirer de l’arc et des dards. Aprez, ils les despartent à divers capitaines à ce qu’ilz appreignent l’exercice des armes et aulcuns d’eux les mectent sur la mer.52

In the same way a later traveller, Gilles Fermanel, wrote in 1630-1632:

Les Azamoglans qui sont en grand nombre, après avoir long-temps servy aux jardinages, estant d’age colmpetent, sont exercez à tirer de l’arquebuze, et après sont faits Janisiaires.53

Such mentions coming from Western sources are not corroborated, as far as I know, by Ottoman sources. Moreover, the picture that they give of the facts sounds like an attempt at rationalization, which does not correspond to the more complex reality that I have hinted at, with a variety of situations and fates for the boys. Be that as it may, even if some training did exist, at least for a part of the ‘acemi oglan, it was certainly but a minor part of these state slaves’ agenda.

Under these conditions, it was mainly through their experience on the field, and the lessons given to them by their veterans, that the janissaries learned how to fight. As a consequence, extended periods of peace, like during some of the eighteenth century, could not help but have a negative impact on their military value.

52 Spandouyn Cantacasin, Petit traicté de l’origine des Turcqz, p. 104.
53 Fermanel, Le voyage d’Italie et du Levant, p. 76.