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JANISSARIES AND OTHER RIFFRAFF OF
OTTOMAN İSTANBUL:
REBELS WITHOUT A CAUSE? *

Noksan isyan bizde bol Hacı Bektaş
Kul Veli (early-nineteenth century)

The history of the Ottoman empire after Süleyman the Magnificent has been written as a story of decline until recently. The decline paradigm, though questioned and criticized for nearly two decades now, is still dominant [except in some circles of specialists] as there has emerged no alternative paradigm that enables the fitting of disparate data into one coherent narrative thread. In other words, Ottoman studies is still in the phase of deconstructing the notion of decline as applied to the history of the Empire in its last three and a half centuries. It should not be forgotten, however, that the decline paradigm itself has a long and glorious past which is worth considering, at least as part of intellectual history. "The Ottoman decline" can hardly be considered a modern scholarly invention, given that it was a leading theme in Ottoman cultural life as well as a central element in European views of the Empire starting from the late sixteenth century. [Since then, declinism has permeated various discursive practices, prevailed over the (senti)mentalities of diverse social groups, and developed a number of supplementary narratives,

* This working paper was presented at a seminar at Princeton University's Near Eastern Studies Department in 1991. Among the discussants was Professor Norman Itzkowitz, whose *ağabeylik* and colleagueship I remember fondly as I look back upon my first few years with a "real job" at that department. I am also grateful to Baki Tezcan who suggested that the paper, rough as it is in many ways, could be included in this volume. As for the paper itself, it has been under construction and constant revision ever since it was written, since it is part of a lifelong project that started with my MA thesis, completed at McGill University in 1981, focusing on the social and cultural history of the so-called Janissary revolts in early modern İstanbul. Still far from giving presentable shape to the later version, even farther from writing the book I have in mind, I decided to take up Dr. Tezcan's offer and publish the paper as presented to the workshop participants in 1991. A few slight changes were made for the sake of clarity, completion of some incomplete sentences, and to indicate (on one occasion, in brackets) later directions of research taken by this author.

subplots, and formulations that need to be studied in terms of their rhetorical strategies and social uses.]

The paradigm posits not only [a continuous and extensive] decline but also a secondary narrative within it, a sub-story of reform and reaction [which is the main concern of this essay]. The period of decline, though continuous as a secular trend, is shaped by an incessant tug-of-war between the reformers who intend to reverse the tide of decay and the reactionaries who, driven by bigotry or a short-sighted defense of their interests, oppose changes. The reformists are almost always well meaning even when their efforts are misguided. What they are trying to do is save the state and "thus also" the society from decline. Certain sectors of the society, however, do not appreciate these efforts and resist them.

The reformist streak is generally seen in two phases: an early traditionalist phase and a later modernist phase. Until the Tulip Period (1718-30), all that the reformers can envision is a restoration of ancient institutions and practices which had once reached their high point under Süleyman the Magnificent. They just want to revive the traditional order as much as it can be revived. Starting from the early eighteenth century, however, in a process that accelerates after the French Revolution, reformers start looking westward for models and ideas, and modernization takes off. Thus the decline paradigm gels with the modernization perspective. The protagonists of the story are the Ottoman state and its reformers, particularly after the Tulip period when, because of their willingness to depart from tradition, they acquire the characteristics of an enlightened elite in the age of enlightened despotism. The villains, on the other hand, are those who repeatedly stand in the way of the reformers.

Among these, the Janissaries and the ulema are singled out because of their access to the means of violence and of legitimation, respectively. It is from a combination of these two forces that the party of reaction derives its strength and draws the support of the masses, who are exploited because of their perhaps sincere, but certainly unenlightened, piety. The political will of the party again and again expresses itself through revolts when Janissary-led urban mobs, fuelled by reactionary grandees including the ulema who also provide legitimacy to acts of disobedience, kill and pillage and oppose in the name of the traditional order and the religious law. Thus Ömer Lütfi Barkan, for instance: "Submitting to the pressure of its transformed army and reactionary political force, the Ottoman government was not free in its decisions. It was always obliged to take into account the attitudes of this retrograde and anarchic force."¹ Even when it is not engaged in open revolt, the motley crew of Janissaries and their pseudo-Janissary groupies are no more than a revolting mobile vulgus (movable or excitable crowd) composed of riffraff and given to vulgarity, extortion, rape, and all sorts of unseemly conduct. Consequently, Mahmud II had to eliminate the Janissary corps (in 1826) so that a full-fledged perestroika of Ottoman state and society in the mode of westernization and modernization could be undertaken.

¹ "The Price Revolution of the Sixteenth Century: A Turning Point in the Economic History of the Near East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975):3-28, at p. 23.

Not only are there internal inconsistencies in this paradigm but also a certain naivety about the idea of "reactionary movements led by obscurantist religious figures and followed by credulous and manipulable masses" which cannot be maintained in this day when the normative hegemony [or triumphalist narrative] of the Enlightenment and modernism is not as secure as it used to be in nineteenth and earlier twentieth century historiography.

The prevalent understanding of the revolts is shot through with inconsistencies even within the framework of the degeneration–reform–reaction–annihilation–modernization story. Particularly when we attempt to abandon the storyline altogether, we need to come to grips with the spectacular presence of rebellious urban crowds in Ottoman social life. The fact that the rebel leaders were from the Janissary corps, the once-elite, once-déraciné slave army of the Sultan, also rendered the revolts uninteresting in the eyes of most social historians to whom their uprisings seemed more like mutinies or coups than social movements. But the social composition of the "Janissaries" was very different after mid-sixteenth century when it started to include urban crowds, and it even was articulated to the rural disorders in that the urban crowd constantly was replenished by migrants from villages.

So typecast are the Janissaries and their revolts that even those who try to develop new approaches in the study of crowds and rebellions fail to include the former. Those who discuss Ottoman history within the context of a "universal crisis" in the seventeenth century, for instance, look only at the rural brigands called Celalis, under the influence of a particular notion of "social movements" in which, "social" does not include the categories of "slave soldiers" (or the mamluk institution) or of "riffraff." (Cf. the dismissive treatment of the lumpenproletariat as a social force in much of the Marxian tradition.) It is certainly more legitimate to deal with peasants, workers, or the bourgeoisie, yet the series of revolts that punctuated social and political life in the Ottoman capital for two and a half centuries were not caused by any of those three groups. As a result, we are still very far from understanding who the rebels were and what they stood for.

The presence of the Janissaries was instrumental in shaping the political life of numerous other towns, especially Damascus, Cairo, and other North African towns held by the *odjaks* ["regencies"] as quasi-capitals (but also see Erzurum, İzmir, etc.). All these present rather different cases. Because they were like regional centers of an empire that was never fully integrated or homogenized in terms of its political institutions, the particular social conflicts and power struggles of those regions were likely to be played out in those cities in different ways. In Damascus, for instance, the distinction between *yerli* (local) and İstanbul Janissaries was highly significant while in Cairo the presence of Mamluk forces, among other things, determined the flavor of Janissary participation in local life. In both of those cities, of course, one did not have the central government as in İstanbul. One could cite numerous other differences, but this is sufficient to warrant individual studies. (Eventually, all of this needs to be put together, especially in light of the fact that these different Janissary groups were aware of each other and there was some circulation of ideas as well as of individuals among these cities.)

Our focus here will be on the capital city of İstanbul where the thrust of the revolts was directed at the central government. In terms of the political history of the Empire in general, these were the most dramatic and spectacular uprisings which toppled sultans and vezirs.

Although these are usually called Janissary revolts, we obviously need much more precision on the identity of the rebels. They clearly were from many other segments of the society than just the Janissaries, even broadly defined. Even if we were to limit ourselves to the Janissaries, we need to ask: Who were they? What were their relationships to other segments of the society? Why did they rebel? Then we must also ask questions about where the rest of urban society stood at times of upheaval. Were they spectators? victims? allies?

There are also numerous issues in establishing the *histoire evenementielle* of the revolts, their structural features and evolution; the trajectory of "class" alliances; the political culture and mentality of the Janissaries [and of related groups]. Furthermore, the times in between revolts obviously need to be filled in with patient research, particularly with respect to the process of *esnafization*, namely, of the blending of "soldiers" into the commercial and artisanal life of the city. And changes in social-cultural life need to be brought into the tableau: diffusion of coffeehouses, Karagöz [the shadow-theater], etc. [Much more remains to be done before the story can be presented in all its richness. In what follows, I go over some of the most significant issues that would need to be covered in a general treatment of the social history of popular political activism in early modern İstanbul, in order to present an unfolding research project, as it stood in 1991.]

1) The great transformation of the "slave army," and of its major unit constituted by the Janissary corps, started in the second half of the sixteenth century. [And it might be considered a process of] turning into a "class."

The penetration of *ecnebis* (outsiders, i.e., the non-devshirme and the non-slave) into the corps was unavoidable if the state still wanted to provide opportunities for mobility as it had always done. The trouble in the latter part of the sixteenth century was that, given population rise (and pressure?) as well as the end of expansion, there were too many opportunity seekers and too few *dirliks* to distribute. It was impossible to absorb them all. [The need for larger armies also pressing, the administrations of] Selim II (r.1566-74) and Murad III (r.1574-95) chose to be more flexible on the incorporation of new elements into the standing army.² [In other words,] this is not a story of a "first moment of corruption" (usually dated to 1582) and then continued "degeneration." Rather, some vocal representatives of the true devshirme forces and old-guard askeri class opposed this kind of absorption policy because they knew that it would lead to *déclassement*. Their major argument was the financial burden imposed on the Treasury by swelling the ranks of the salaried soldiers, and they were certainly right in that respect. At the same time, they were also concerned with the fact that this new mode of

² Mustafa Akdağ makes a similar point in his *Türk Halkının Dirlik-Düzenlik Kavgası* (Ankara, 1975), 287-288.

recruitment worked as a challenge against the logic of the primacy of politics, for people were now inserting themselves into the system rather than being selected and inserted by [recognized mechanisms and agents of] the state.

While the recruitment system of *devshirme* was phased out in the seventeenth century, *kuls* remained *kuls* (as noted by Metin Kunt) until the nineteenth century. In other words, *kul* status continued to shape the relations of the Janissaries with other elements of state and society as well as their political ethos and ideology.

By the turn of the seventeenth century, the Janissary corps and the cavalry of the Porte had lost their strictly military character. Thereafter, the quantitative dimension and social significance of the fusion between "military" and "civilian" elements steadily increased until the abolition of the corps. A major item in any reformer's agenda in the seventeenth century was to reduce their numbers. Any success achieved in this respect was short-lived. [Because erratic but recurrent military needs and social pressures did not provide any longterm relief, a curve delineating the numbers of the Janissary and other *kul* soldiery over time would show a steady increase with occasional drops represented by moments of attempted fiscal austerity. In the post-classical era, this tension between the dynamics of fiscal discipline, on the one hand, and welfarism, on the other, provided one of the main faultlines and one of the main causes of tremor in the Ottoman body politic.]

[Much of that tremor was experienced in the streets and squares of İstanbul in the form of rebellions between the late sixteenth and the early eighteenth century. After the Patrona Halil Revolt of 1730, however, the capital city enjoyed a relatively long break in the series of upheavals, until it was resumed in 1807. This lull in rebellious eruption seems related to the changing means of control by the Ottoman state over the dynamics of order and disorder; some of those changes can be characterized as a relaxation of certain disciplines having to do with the *kuls*. Concerning the numbers and the payrolls of the Janissaries, for instance, the Ottoman administration adopted radical changes in the mode of "privatization."]

To know the exact numbers of the Janissaries after 1730 might be impossible as the records were kept secret even from Ottoman officials. The Zonanas, a wealthy Jewish family, had bought the position of the paymaster of the corps (*ocak bezirgani*). The paymaster, who held a *berat* as an "Honorary British Druggoman," would dispose "of all offices, and applications were made by the pretenders to them, i.e., the Janissaries, to Him." He jealously guarded the corps registers, not allowing any information to be revealed about the number of those who held *esame*, [or slots in the Janissary payroll registers that were sold somewhat like state bonds.] Naturally, the paymaster would occasionally clash with Ottoman officials who demanded information or attempted reform. In 1746, for instance, Tiryaki Hasan Pasha exiled one of the Zonanas to Rhodes, where he was eventually executed. When another member of the same family was holding the same position in the 1760s; Greenville, a diplomat, demanded to know how many Janissaries there were, but the paymaster's replied that he would answer only to the Sultan "s'il le lui demandoit sur sa tete." According to d'Ohsson, one can distinguish in the second half of the eighteenth century three groups lumped together as Janissaries, whose total number was a mystery even to their own commander: soldiers (about 120,000;

20,000 of them in İstanbul); esame-holders not performing any services (about 150,000); and pretenders (*taslakçı*), whose numbers d'Ohsson does not even venture to guess.

The latter group of pretenders [gives us a good idea as to the composition of the Janissary-affiliated social formation that had emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They] were not paid at all; they affiliated themselves with the corps for the honor, the protection, and the likelihood eventually to become a paid member. In their efforts to make a living under the harsh conditions of the monster city, these pretenders, most of whom were poor youths and [first- or second-generation] newcomers to İstanbul, would benefit from the solidarity and mess protection which were integral components of the Janissary code of honor and etiquette. [The Ottoman vocabulary of social types was embellished by new and colorful designations, like *pirpiri*, to capture the vibrant presence of such new social elements in urban life who, much like the inner-city youths of the contemporary United States, set the standards of or constituted a significant source of inspiration for urban fashions in clothing, body language, music and poetry.]

One must distinguish between two kinds of Janissary involvement in the commercial life of the city in order to understand the full extent of their loss of military character. While many pursued what might be called regular trade activities, [mostly but not exclusively] of low status, some others formed gangs to collect forced tribute from rich tradesmen such as building contractors and sea merchants. All these operations were mess based [in the late eighteenth century]. In d'Ohsson's account, the 14th mess was collectively involved in bread-making (in or out of the bread-makers' guild?) while members of the 82nd were butchers. Various coffeehouses of the city were distinguished according to their patron-messes, with the official emblem of the appropriate mess painted on the walls of the coffeehouse according to its clientele. The emblems also proved useful to extortionist gangs, who would simply leave an axe with the sign of their mess on a construction site or on a ship which entered the harbor, signifying, respectively, that the construction could not continue or that the ship could not unload its goods unless the "soldiers" received their tribute. [Those who came to collect could easily flash the same sign on their accessories such as armbands or on their bodies as tattoos. The differing explanations of the Arabic word *al-washm* (tattoo) in two dictionaries, one written towards the beginning and the other at the end of the timespan covered in this essay, underscore the emergence of a new trend in the meantime and its association with a particular social constellation. In Ahteri's sixteenth-century dictionary, intended for Turkish-speaking readers of the lands of Rum, the word is explained with the quasi-ethnographic note that "*al-washm* ... is very common among the Arab people." In the late-eighteenth-century dictionary of 'Asım, however, prepared for a similar audience, the local trendiness of bodily ornamentation is recognized by the observation that "presently, it (*al-washm*) is a must among all Janissaries."³]

³ *Ahteri-i kebir* (İstanbul, 1263 A.H.), 675; 'Asım, *Kamus Tercümesi* (İstanbul, 1305 A.H.), 4:515.

By the eighteenth century, the Janissaries had become so irreversibly involved in commercial activities that some practiced their trades even during campaigns, and the majority would actually make sure that they would not set foot on campaigns in order to be able to continue their business.

2) Although the social transformation of the kuls was clearly the most significant development in the history of İstanbul from the perspective of this essay, it was accompanied by related developments, which worked in combined fashion to weave the peculiar social fabric of the city in the pre-Tanzimat era: an unprecedented growth in city size as well as in specific components such as the numbers of Sufi lodges, of waqf establishments and their employees, of public baths and fountains; the systematization of a professional guild framework; the increasing participation of women in public life; the invention and proliferation of coffeehouses; new means of socialization and a newly-found readiness for self-assertion [by a new "Bürgertum," so as not to say "bourgeoisie." Each of those developments --not always synchronous and not necessarily linear--is weighty enough to deserve separate studies for the full elaboration of the urban context that served as, arguably, the most common setting for depictions of the social life of the pre-modern Orient in travel literature and of classical Ottoman society in modern Ottomanist scholarship.]

By the end of the sixteenth century, Ottoman urban society had come to its own. Guilds, with their monopolistic practices, established their umbrella over the artisanal world. Migrations to the city had created a second tier of producers and laborers who remained outside the guild framework as petty tradesmen or daily wage laborers; the majority of these *lumpenesnaf* seem to have remained also outside the framework of family (and *mahalle*?) life, residing in the bachelors' inns (*bekar odaları*). Many of them established links with the Janissary corps while it was increasingly expected (and eventually also accepted) that a growing number of Janissaries would be engaged in some trade, within or outside the guild system. The urban society flourished with new forms of sociability and entertainment, as exemplified by the coffeehouses and Karagöz. The origins of each of these institutions or practices go back in time, but they are all sharp and clear before the end of the sixteenth century. That is also when the rites of order (such as the guild parades of which the one in 1582 obviously set a new standard) and disorder take shape.

The Tulip Period has cast such a spell on the imagination of Ottomanists that the cultural significance of the developments in urban life before the eighteenth century have not been properly appreciated. Thus, for instance, the "first truly urban culture" is attributed to the Tulip Period. Or, a historian of Ottoman public entertainment makes a revealing argument in analyzing the meddah (public storyteller) stories that contain a critique of the "degenerate" lifestyle of the Janissary-affiliated social class as a consistent motif: he notes that most of these stories are placed in the reigns of Osman II (r.1618-22) and Murad IV (r.1623-40) but dismisses this timing as anachronistic; he reasons that this kind of merrymaking and sensuality must be an eighteenth-century phenomenon. Andreas Tietze, on the other hand, is perfectly accurate when he speaks of "flourishing conditions which

prevailed in the folk life and folklore of İstanbul in the first half of the seventeenth century" and writes that the "development of ... shadow theater [then] coincided in time with the introduction and spread of other 'sinful' worldly distractions and of their institutional framework."⁴

The differences of opinion here are also related, I believe, to the common tendency to attribute all "good things" to state initiative in Ottoman history. The Tulip Period is supposed to have been ushered in by the policies of Nevşehirli Damad İbrahim Pasha. Vezirs of the era are also credited with the initiation of European-style diplomacy and with the establishment of the first printing press. They did in fact play some role in these developments, but that first diplomat was from the Janissary corps, and the printing press was largely the work of İbrahim Müteferrika who, not coincidentally, lies buried next to a sheikh of the "heretical" Hamzeviyye.

A sharia-minded reaction to the new urban reality was not late in coming. The selefi movement of the Kadızadeli is pitted against these incursions into the social space, against the new, *örf*-laden configuration of the public sphere which seemed too ready to recognize "innovations" as acceptable custom. It is in that light that we must read the vigorous debates raging over coffee, tobacco, and the "dances" of the Sufis, as well as the "obscure" disputes over the proper manner of exchanging greetings or over the aptness of bowing versus shaking hands, etc.⁵

At stake in these seemingly arcane controversies, which did not fail to trigger political turmoil as well as violent skirmishes in the streets, was no less than the delineation [and control] of the norms of sociability [in a moment of rapid flux]. That is probably why the old concept of *sohbet* (Ar. *suhba* = sociability, companionship) was appreciated anew in certain circles in the seventeenth century. Two Sufis of İstanbul wrote works with the unusual title of *Sohbetname* around the middle of that century. A new poem of the time, furthermore, captured the sentiments of coffeehouse customers:

gönül ne kahve ister ne kahvehane
gönül sohbet ister kahve bahane

(the heart fancies neither coffee nor coffeehouse
the heart fancies companionship [or, conversation], coffee is an excuse)

⁴ Andreas Tietze, *The Turkish Shadow Theater and the Puppet Collection of L. A. Mayer Memorial Foundation* (Berlin, 1977), 17-19.

⁵ The classical treatment of sixteen points of controversy between the Kadızadeli and their rivals is by their brilliant contemporary, Katib Chelebi, in his *Mizanü'l-hakk fî ihtiyari'l-ehakk*; Eng.trans. as *The Balance of Truth* by G. Lewis. For a modern scholarly treatment of the movement and its repercussions, which also brings to light other disputed issues, see the unpublished PhD thesis by Semiramis Cavaşoğlu, "The Kadızadeli movement: An attempt at şeri'at-minded reform in the Ottoman empire," Princeton University, 1989.

A pivotal question in the struggle over the soul and character of the new urban setting was who would determine and enforce its norms. Stated more abstractly, whose function was it to urge the community to conform to "enjoining good and forbidding evil (*emr-i ma'ruf ve nehy-i münker*)," [the Koranic principle behind the institution of *hisba*, which led to the creation of an official position by various Islamic states to supervise public morality and market life]? The Kadizadeli were not ungrounded in Islamic tradition in claiming that it was incumbent upon pious believers to take matters into their own hands, if need be, and enforce proper conduct upon their neighbors. The "liberal" authorities and their supporters (the majority of the *litrati*, it seems), on the other hand, saw in this the potentially disruptive seeds of vigilante justice. Katib Chelebi, for instance, wrote: "Ordinary folk know nothing of these rules and conditions; thinking that it is obligatory in every case to enjoin right and forbid wrong, they quarrel and are pertinacious with one another."⁶ They upheld the monopoly of the established authorities over enjoining right and forbidding wrong, even when this implied leaving the *hisba* in the hands of secular rather than religious authorities (*ehl-i örf* rather than *ehl-i din*).

The Kadizadeli were not always excluded from the ruling elite, however. Some rulers and *vezirs* seem to have been willing to heed their arguments whether by conviction or expediency. There were also various members of the *ulema* who adopted attitudes more conservative than the Ebussuudian "liberal" synthesis (of the *sharia*, *örf*, and *kanun*) without necessarily being followers of the Kadizadeli movement. It was under the influence of both or either one of those groups that some Ottoman governments adopted anti-*örf* attitudes that amounted to the suppression of various "excesses" dominating the new social life of the cities: frequent bans on coffee and tobacco; invoking the ancient but neglected *shar'i* injunctions concerning dress codes, for instance, with respect to non-Muslims; voices raised against the visibility of women in public life; etc. In most of those cases, social repression went hand in hand with disciplining action against the Janissaries and was followed by political tension.

While trying to understand the political and social world of the Janissary-affiliated urban crowds, rather than relegating it to an incomprehensibly chaotic realm of retrogression as done by their more literate Ottoman rivals and many modern scholars have done, one should beware the equally reductionist tendency to dump the Kadizadeli movement into the dustbin of "reaction" or to attribute to it an unreasoned, innate conservatism. In its puritanical sensibility and opposition to the reading of the Kur'an in return for monetary rewards endowed for the expiation of one's sins there are, parallels to the Reformation. Its less-than-warm attitude to price controls and to the unproductive *vakıf*-related jobs (of the readers of Kur'anic verses) could be interpreted as "economic rationalism," while its rigorously literal legalism could be seen to embody some "legal rationalism" that questioned [the preponderant use of] vague and subjective criteria such as *istihsan* and *örf*. There are such unexpectedly pleasant results of that legalism as the debate in which

⁶ Katip Chelebi, *The Balance of Truth*, trans. G. L. Lewis (London, 1957), 108-109.

Kadizade deems the eating of lobsters merely reprehensible whereas his rival Abdülmecid Sivasi Efendi, a Sufi sheikh, turns out to be more rigid.

Nor were the Kadizadeli devoid of a sense of humor; Na'ima, who does not seem to have entertained the tiniest bit of sympathy for that movement, describes a certain Ebu Ahmedoğlu as "one of the wits of Kadizade's following."⁷ This witty Kadizadeli shows up in a hilarious anecdote related by the historian, which is noteworthy on several counts. First of all, it represents one of the earliest manifestations of a quasi-mercantilist turn of mind among the Ottomans through a crude but not pointless defense of the virtues of cabbage (an indigenous product) in front of the Indian ambassador. Secondly, and more importantly for our purposes here, Ebu Ahmedoğlu not only appears as a connoisseur of refinement and wit but also turns out to be the one to suggest that the empire needs more sophisticated diplomats.

3) It is against this background [of social transformation and public contestation of "the Ottoman constitution" in the (long) seventeenth century] that the *histoire evenementielle* of the revolts ultimately needs to be told, for they arose in response to and were shaped by tensions inherent in the new social realities and the impasses in their political and cultural mediation. The uprisings have never been studied as a series, which would enable us to view each snapshot in a diachronic perspective.

The revolts:

[disregarding those that were undertaken by the soldiers when they were still primarily soldiers, namely, those that can be considered army mutinies in a narrow sense, such as the Buçuktepe Revolt of 1446;⁸ the one that turned against Abdüsselam Efendi, the treasurer, in 1525; various cases of near-rebellious tumult as in the accessions of Bayezid II (1481) and Selim II (1566), or during the Çaldıran campaign (1514).]

By the sixteenth century, delayed salaries, unpaid largesses, debasement of the currency, and the physical burden of military life had emerged as the main causes of Janissary unrest. All of these factors continued to play their parts in future revolts; they were intensified after the late-sixteenth-century depreciation of the currency and ensuing price revolution, which hit hardest on those who, like the soldiers, were receiving fixed salaries. To these problems were added the issues of social repression and eventually the threat of the supercession or abolition of the corps (through the creation of alternative military bodies).

1589: the Beylerbeyi Incident

1600: the Lady Kira Incident

(a relatively minor case in 1603: the Yemişçi Hasan Incident)

⁷ Part of the relevant passage is translated in Bernard Lewis, *İstanbul and the Civilization of the Ottoman Empire* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1963), 169-172.

⁸ See Halil İnalcık, *Fatih Devri Üzerine Tetkikler ve Vesikalar* (Ankara, 1954), 92 ff.

[all of the above were undertaken by sipahis of the Porte and not by the Janissaries; see below]

- 1622: the Osman II (the Young) Incident
[His reform program seems to have included the abolition of the Janissaries. Can one envision a "traditional" Ottoman order without them? In what sense can this reformer be considered a traditionalist?]
- (a relatively minor case in 1632: against Murad IV)
- 1648: the dethronement of İbrahim I (the Mad)
- 1651: against the agas of the Janissary corps
- 1655: against İpşir Mustafa Pasha [also for the abolition of the corps]
- 1656: the Incident of Vakvakiye (thus named because the victims were hung on a huge oak tree, reminiscent of the mythical Vakvak)
- 1687: the dethronement of Mehmed IV (the Hunter)
- 1703: the Edirne Incident
- 1730: the Patrona Halil Incident
- (some relatively minor disturbances the next year and one in 1740)
- 1807: the Kabakçı Mustafa Incident
- 1808: against Alemdar Mustafa Pasha (one of the provincial notables)
- 1826: attempted revolt suppressed, and Janissaries massacred; the "Auspicious" Incident.

The revolts were only the organized moments of the use of violence by the Janissaries with a directly political thrust [representing dramatic peaks in an otherwise rugged terrain of political volatility]. The times in between were not necessarily times of peace and quiet. Once the cycle of revolts started, policy makers and administrators seem to have been constantly aware of Janissary disquiet, even when it was dormant, as a potential challenge. Or, the disquiet could and did manifest itself in various forms without blooming into full rebellion: threats of uprising; petitions accompanied by such threats; "insolence" against their own officers or grandees; arson; coercion and brutality against civilians, etc.

Whatever its relation to one's notion of order and decency, the cumulative experience of political activism by the Janissaries and their affiliates eventually created a new political reality, which could be seen as the kernel of a [political party or even a] representative institution,⁹ including alliances and clashes with other social-political forces.

⁹ See, however, the cautionary remarks by Roderic Davison, "The Advent of the Principle of Representation in the Government of the Ottoman Empire," in *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish History, 1774-1923: The impact of the West* (Austin, 1990).

a) Janissaries and other kuls:

Not all of the revolts in İstanbul were in fact Janissary revolts. The erroneous identification of the Janissaries with the whole kul sytem can be traced back to the conventions of early modern European Turcica, which saw in that largest and most impressive unit of the Ottoman standing army the essence, or the embodiment, of the whole "slave" system. Though some note is occasionally taken of the existence of other kul units, "Janissary," for all practical purposes, became a generic term for all kuls in that literature and, later on, in a good deal of the scholarship as well. Thus also "Janissary revolts" became the generic term for the numerous cases of urban unrest that plagued Ottoman political life in the post-Süleymanic era.

It is not only for the sake of terminological precision that we need to be concerned with this gloss. In order to understand the dynamics of kul politics, we must not lose sight of the fact that the kuls of the Porte consisted of various bodies that did not always act in unison. For one thing, there were various smaller units which the government could mobilize against rebels, be they Janissaries or others. As might be expected, units based in the palace, especially the *bostancı* corps which consisted of the gardeners and guards of royal grounds, were often successfully used in this manner. Furthermore, and more important, there were long-standing rivalries and conflicts of interest among various corps, especially between the Janissaries and the sipahis (cavalry) of the Porte, which did not fail to pit them on opposing sides in various political conflicts.

The rivalry between the Janissaries and the sipahis of the Porte, attested to as early as in the 1530s, was due to a large extent to their own competition for prestige and benefits (largesse; tax collection rights; salary payments in gold, of which the treasury could dispose only so much, instead of depreciating silver coins; etc.). An interpretation based on ethnic identity has also been advanced to explain this rivalry, claiming that the Janissaries represented the devshirme clique versus the Porte cavalry who supposedly were "Anatolian Turks."¹⁰ Although there is no basis for such anachronistic readings, it is clear that intra-kul competition could be linked to factional struggles at the higher echelons of the Ottoman political elite, somewhat reminiscent of the contest of royalist d'Artagnan and Co. versus the troops of Cardinal Richelieu. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Janissaries in fact functioned more like "royalist" forces than rebels in suppressing numerous uprisings or such attempts by the sipahis of the Porte. The rebellions of those decades were primarily undertaken by the latter.¹¹ It may be partly due to their loyal role that the Janissaries were rewarded by having their "excesses" overlooked in this period. When Osman II (r.1618-22) took stringent measures against such "corruption," however, the Janissaries did not fail to join forces with

¹⁰ Thus a modern Turkish author has gone so far as to identify a SheikhuIslam who sided with the sipahis in 1600 as a "nationalist." A. Altunsu, *Osmanlı Şeyhülislamı* (Ankara, 1972).

¹¹ For an instance of fanciful attribution of all kul revolts to the Janissaries in later Orientalist literature, see p. 272 in Frances Elliot, *The Diary of an Idle Woman* (Leipzig, 1893).

the sipahis and other kuls against the Sultan in the most spectacular revolt to date. Even the palace gardeners seem to have been of two minds in this case.

This alliance-in-arms did not necessarily smooth out the tensions mentioned here. The relative stability of the latter part of Murad IV's reign (1622-40) was partly due to the Sultan's skill in playing the two large kul bodies against one another. Eventually, in a bloody clash fought out in the streets of İstanbul in 1648, the Janissaries defeated the joint forces of the Porte cavalry and the novices (*acemi*), emerging as the single most influential body among the kul forces thereafter. Thus it took six decades after the Beylerbeyi Incident of 1589 for the Janissaries to emerge with a quasi-monopoly over political disorder in the capital. Even after that point, however, it would be wrong to totally disregard the differences among various corps in political developments.

b) Janissaries and guilds:

Once the Janissaries took up trades and tradesmen enrolled in the corps, did the two categories merge? Not quite. Given the rigid monopolies of the guilds, many of the migrants to the cities apparently remained outside the framework of the guilds but could have access to a Janissary status or some affiliation with the corps. They turned to street peddling, to growing new sectors as coffeshop keepers, porters or the like, to gangsterism, etc. I, therefore, had written (in my M.A. thesis in 1981) that the esnafization of the Janissaries in İstanbul took place not at the level of the guilds but at that of the "lumpenesnaf." I now believe the situation is somewhat more complicated as many Janissaries (of higher ranks?) were also clearly esnafized within the guild structure. When a government edict was sent to the Janissaries in the eighteenth century, for instance, a copy went off to the barracks and another to the Sarrachane (Saddlers' Market). I have discovered a good deal of evidence in both directions in the court records but need to do much more patient research on this question, mostly on that same source material (note that the records of the İstanbul court are missing from most of the revolt years).

Even if the commercialization of the Janissaries took place at both levels, it was at the lower level that political activism manifested itself more commonly. It seems that a relatively more seamless fusion occurred at this level. The relations with the "guilded" esnaf of the bedestan or other major trades, however, was never free of tension, though numerous Janissaries had infiltrated those circles. It could turn out that those Janissaries who were established in guilds or more "respectable" professions were not as ready to participate in revolts as the others. At any rate, relations between the rebels and the guilds were never free of tension because of the issue of lumpenesnaf and because, after all, prolonged upheaval is bad for business.

c) Janissaries and the Bektashi order:

In dealing with the Janissaries as rebels or as the embodiment of riotous and "profligate crowds," it would be much better if we knew more about the connections established between the kul soldiery and non-establishment politico-cultural tendencies represented mostly by certain Sufi orders. Here, we certainly have to put aside the inherited notion of an automatic connection between the Janissary corps

and the Bektashi order. There are numerous cases of individuals from the corps affiliated with other unorthodox movements. The biographers relate, for instance, that the Janissary poet Sani of the sixteenth century had in his youth been a disciple of Sheikh Karamani (of unidentified affiliation but hardly belonging to the Bektashiyye, which was so keen on appropriating the legacy of figures like this, especially if martyred) and had barely escaped with his life when his sheikh was executed; thereafter, Sani vowed not to get involved in any order and instead dedicated his talents to writing satire and vulgar erotica. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Hamzevi offshoot of the Melamiyye seems to have been highly successful in gaining Janissary hearts and minds in Balkan cities and in İstanbul. The most renowned Melami figure in the capital, Sütçü Beşir (executed by Köprülü Ahmed Pasha in 1662), is noted by Rycout for his influence within the corps but misidentified as a Bektashi, presumably because the British consul, like many other foreign observers, had heard of the Janissary-Bektashi connection and held this to be an essential link. On the other hand, Niyazi-i Mısri, a sworn enemy of the Hamzevis but no prayer-rug-under-the-arm-Muslim himself, had followers among the soldiers according to his biographers as well as his own diary (which he kept in Bursa while detained under virtual house arrest because of his persistent wish to join the armies on campaign).

It would be misleading, however, to limit the Janissaries' religio-cultural orientations to unorthodox movements. How, if at all, can we include among those who strayed from orthodoxy, Sinan the Architect, also from the corps, or Ayyansarayi, who composed an epic work on İstanbul's Sunni heritage through its architecture? While the latter identifies himself as a member of the 15th mess of the corps,¹² he also tells us that he was encouraged to write his *Garden of Mosques* by his Sheikh Müstakimzade, a Nakshibendi. The diary of Seyyid Hasan, a seemingly conformist, praying-five-times-a-day-and-more Halveti from the Köprülü era, reveals that his rather wide circle of brethren included numerous *beşe* [a title adopted by many Janissaries, at least from the late sixteenth century onwards] and other low- to mid-level members of the military. Members of the corps can even be encountered in the fold of the ultra-orthodox Kadızadeli, according to Evliya Chelebi's anecdote about the Janissary who vandalized the figural representations in an illuminated *Shahname* manuscript from the auctioned inheritance of the bey of Bitlis.

How are we to reconcile such evidence with the fact that the Janissaries did indeed have some link to the Bektashiyye? The issue of relations with the Bektashi order remains vexing. There is not one word about it in the memoirs of Konstantin Mihailovic, who was enslaved as a war captive in 1458 and served the Ottomans as a palace kul for several years; his description of the dervishes displays no such awareness, certainly no insider knowledge. [but this could be because, precisely speaking, Mihailovic, whose work has been published as the *Memoirs of a Janissary*, was a kul but not a Janissary, a good example of the misuse of the term as mentioned above] Still, the sermons he heard as a kul soldier seem to have

¹² See f.1b in his autograph copy of *Mecmua-i Tevarih*, Topkapı Palace Library, H.1565.

contained a strong dose of 'Alid sympathy: "the heathens hold Ali to be a prophet like Mohammed... he was a mighty and brave man, and had a sword called difficary ... Muhammad...on his deathbed... commanded... 'obey my Ali'." But 'Alid, or even Shi'i, does not necessarily imply Bektashi.

It is impossible to determine precisely when the legend about Hacı Bektash's allegedly blessing the new army, upon its establishment in the fourteenth century, started to take shape. Before the end of the fifteenth century, however, these stories clearly enjoyed some circulation and credibility. Their political relevance rested particularly in the motif of the holy man "designing" the headdress of the soldiers -- one of the critical deeds of any patron saint who would thereby establish his spiritual authority.

Some circles saw nothing but Bektashi usurpation of symbolic capital in these legends. 'Aşıkpaşazade, writing in the 1480s, observes in a state of shock that such a claim is being advanced by the Bektashis in his time, but he unequivocally dismisses it. This proves at least that there was no universally accepted tie at that time, whereas by the end of the sixteenth century, Sunni authors have no qualms about referring to it as the corps of the Bektashis and their officers as the agas of the Bektashis.

To compound the problem further, the Bektashi order itself changed over time, and its emergence with a monopoly over various "heterodox" or antinomian movements seems to be a phenomenon of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. For all we know now, such legendary figures of Bektashi traditions as Hacı Bektash, Baba Ilyas, Saru Saltuk, Yunus Emre, or Ahi Evren can hardly have been Shi'is in their lifetime. In fact, the distinction between Sunni and Shi'i, or that between orthodox and heterodox, does not seem to have been particularly meaningful in late medieval Anatolia. For the circles not touched or touched [by accident or design] only superficially by medrese traditions, "metadoxy" --a state of being beyond a bookish and rigid adoption of an established orthodoxy or heresy-- may be a more apt depiction. It is only during the institutionalization of an imperial administration that orthodoxy started to become more clearly distinguishable for the Ottomans. And heterodoxy was its counterpart as adopted by some (but certainly not all) of the tribes, dervishes, and ahis who fell by the wayside of the process of Ottoman centralization. Because the hardening of the boundaries of orthodoxy and heterodoxy occurred in the Ottoman world along the lines of Sunnism and Shi'ism (primarily 'Alevi rather than [post-Safavid] Ca'feri) under the impact of the Safavid challenge of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, those who found themselves on the wrong side of the doxy battles ended up Shi'i-'Alevis.

Again during that period, the Bektashi order emerged as the champion of most of the Islamic, perhaps even some Christian, unorthodoxies in Anatolia and the Balkans. Through mechanisms that are not very clear, the order appropriated numerous other popular traditions and successfully recast them as parts of a seamless Bektaşhi-'Alevi tradition emanating from a single source to be located in the spiritual energy of Hacı Bektash. One of the mechanisms was re-telling the "spiritual conquest" of Anatolia and the Balkans in various narratives that not only showed Hacı Bektash as the most powerful figure in the process but also depicted

many other venerated men and women as his disciples or subordinates. [Almost all hagiographies adopt similar strategies of subordinating other holy figures to one's sheikh. Why were Bektashi hagiographers more successful?] Thus eventually numerous holy figures, whose "historical" relationship to Hacı Bektash can be doubted or even proven to be impossible, were appropriated by the Bektashi order as their very own. Indeed, the figure of Hacı Bektash himself as he is cast in the Bektashi tradition appears to have been a later invention. Just as the Safavid order itself started off Sunni and later turned Shi'i, the holy man after whom the Bektashi order was founded lived his life in all likelihood as a Sunni [or, in metadoxy], who probably was not a major figure among the babas.

It is likely but not provable at present that some of the Bektashi figures had played some role in the formative years of the corps. This does not seem to have brought the Janissaries under full Bektashi control, however. The Janissary scribe who penned the *Kavanin-i Yeniçeriyân* (The Code of Janissaries) in the early seventeenth century was rather inhibited about that Bektashi connection, whatever its precise nature was. On three occasions, he mentions Timurtash Dede, a descendant of Hacı Bektash (and not HB himself), as having played a role in the origin of some corps tradition. The dede always shares the credit, however, either with a descendant of Mevlana Celalüddin Rumi, a representative of the rival order of Mevleviyye, or with a secular figure, named Bektash Pasha.

It was only about a decade earlier that another scribe of the corps had built a monumental lodge for the Mevlevis in Yenikapı. Were the officers of the corps trying to cover their rear now that the ascendancy of the Mevlevis and the fall from grace of the Bektashis vis-a-vis the Sunni orthodox state was obvious? This evenhandedness may be more understandable in the broader context of the times, when sharia-minded attitudes were gaining ground and challenging the legitimacy of various customary or kanun-ized institutions and practices deriving from loose frontier traditions (cash-waqf, devshirme, etc.) as well as more recent innovations (coffee, tobacco, etc.). The most obvious parallel is the disputation over the patron saints of various crafts, best represented by Münir-i Belgradi's attempt to provide a firmly Sunni reading of the futuwwa traditions while attacking the Ahi Evren legends. In this polemical tract written around 1620, tanners and practitioners of other leather-related crafts, who maintained some aspects of the relatively autonomous organization and ethos of earlier *ahi* traditions more jealously than other guilds, are told to dismiss the hagiographic accounts of patron saints from outside the realm of accepted prophets and *sahabe* [companions of Prophet Muhammad]. [Münir-i Belgradi had also written one of the numerous polemics against the "dances" of the Sufis.]

Nonetheless, the Janissary corps was never purged of its Bektashi connection. While the order never had a monopoly over the allegiances of all the Janissaries, it clearly enjoyed an unequalled relationship with this body of soldiers whom Ottoman writers routinely called "zümre-i Bektashiyan." In fact, the Anatolian Turks, Kurds, and Albanians who infiltrated the corps in large numbers in its post-devshirme phase may have boosted the presence of Bektashi-ʿAlevi elements and influences in the corps. This relationship probably improved, or became less inhibited about making

itself visible, once the Janissaries took root in Ottoman urban society and fell beyond the pale of both socio-religious and political orthodoxy. The *'aşık* literature that flourished in the coffeehouses, for instance, was tinged by Bektashi imagery. Many Janissary messes would open up their own coffeehouses after a ritualized procession under the leadership of a sheikh from the Bektashi order. It is certain that in the eighteenth century there was a Bektashi baba residing in the 99th mess of the corps; a certain Haydar Baba was one of the prime instigators of the turbulences in 1807-8. Even though the *Code of the Janissaries* does not mention such an office, it is difficult to assume that a Bektashi baba was planted in the corps after the seventeenth century.

d) Janissaries and the ulema:

How could the Janissaries, who had at least some connection to the Bektashi order, have had an unflinching ideological alliance with the ulema [as the narrative of modernization-versus-reaction would have it]? Cases of tension with the ulema can easily be documented but should be seen in conjunction with the fact that the means of legitimizing political action (or of de-legitimizing actual power holders) were sought through their consent. Before revolts, the “soldiers” would usually try to get a favorable *fetva* from the SheikhuIslam or to obtain the support of one faction of the ulema within which they would find their own candidate for the next SheikhuIslam.

e) Janissaries and the state: the former remained kuls, perceived their relationship with the state within contractualism, and turned out to be a check on absolutism and downsizers of the power of the state.

Reading Ottoman historians and most of the modern scholarship, one gets the impression that the Janissaries were driven to unruliness and rebellion because of their material and vile concerns, such as delays in the payment of salaries, payment with bad coins, or any kind of “reforming” act that threatened their extra-legal and corrupt behavior. Any political edge that their commotions might acquire, are then interpreted as having been due to the machinations of dignitaries and their factional intrigue. In other words, the Janissaries, with their usually corrupt material concerns and their tendency to bring their physical power to violent use for their self-interest, were manipulated by this faction or that statesman in order to channel their violent energies against political foes. I would like to suggest that the Janissaries and other kuls had a much more sophisticated perception of their role in Ottoman political life. Whether others were willing to bestow legitimacy on that perception or not (and the official political culture was not), the “soldiers” based their actions on it. I believe that this can be borne out by reading the sources emanating from kul milieux¹³ and also by studying Janissary culture from their food-related rites to their rebellions.

¹³ For instance, a kul rebel's account in verse of the 1589 revolt, the analysis of which was included in an appendix that originally accompanied this working paper. It will be published as a separate essay.

From the point of view of the Janissaries, their allegiance to a particular ruler was of a contractual nature. In his *Loyalty and Leadership*, Roy Mottahedeh distinguishes between two kinds of bi'at (oath of allegiance) which were based on different power configurations in medieval Islamic history. He suggests that "biat [in its original version] was a voluntary offering of allegiance to a ruler. Later theory, bowing to almost universal later practice, made the biat to the caliph more a public recognition of an established rule, a sort of 'homage'." It seems that the original version was not totally defunct. Or rather, there were always cases in between.

Once their role in securing the central autocratic power in the hands of the Ottoman family against the threatening centrifugal tendencies of potential aristocracies was established in the fifteenth century, the Janissaries were quick to learn how to exploit the dynasty's dependence on them. They started bargaining in return for allegiance, adopting the role of sultan-makers (ordinarily, but not always, from within the family).

1) Going through accessions [in chronological order provides the primary documentation of this fact].

2) Prince Ahmed's written promises, supported by a solemn oath ["*vallahi aliyyülazim ve billahi'l-kaviyyilkadim ki bu ahd ü peymana muhalefet itmeyem*" in a letter he wrote asking for the support of the Janissaries in his bid for the throne], proved ineffective in the end as the Janissaries sided with Selim (the Grim), but still demonstrate that the Janissaries expected certain things in return for their political support.

3) The detailed account given by Selaniki of Selim II's enthronement: before his first entrance into the palace in front of his kuls for the official pledge of allegiance, the Sultan was warned by Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, a seasoned statesman and a kapıkulu himself, that the soldiers expected a public verbal declaration to the effect that the Sultan recognized their "rights" to pay raises and an accession largesse. When Selim showed reluctance to make such a commitment, commotion started and took on threatening proportions. In the end, he had to concede and to make the public pronouncement of "*makbulümdür* (I accept)"—an interesting phrase one often encounters in *hüccets* (legal-notarial documents, such as commercial contracts).

4) Finally, a written *hüccet* emerges in 1807, one year before the *Sened-i Ittifak* (a better-known compact signed with another social force, the ayan (provincial notables), which seems more like a "social group;" hence, the unequal treatment of the two documents in scholarship). In four and a half centuries the kul system had come full circle. It started in the late fourteenth century as the safety valve of centralized autocracy against possible encroachments into its theoretically indisputable monopoly over redistribution and political power. By the early nineteenth century, however, a new social class bearing kul status and enjoying kul privileges had emerged to demand a say in the destiny of the Ottoman polity and

was ready to institutionalize its share in political power, as the hüccet indicates. That the role played by the Janissaries in this document was more than the outcome of a momentary compromise is clear from the continuation--and strengthening--of their role in the next couple of decades. The government of Mahmud II, heir to one of the most successful autocracies in history, was "reduced" to seeking consensus. The downsizing of the central state's authority found its physical expression in the fact that Mahmud II agreed in 1808 to lower the Alay Kōşkū (the kiosk-tower for [watching] parades), from the balcony of which he would hold discussions with the soldiers. The Janissaries found it too high and distant and asked for it to be shrunk. The Sultan complied, but it is well known how he struck back less than two decades later.

In 1822 in the case of an emergency arising "from the general apprehension of the certainty of a war with Russia ... a very extraordinary innovation was made in the constitution of the state, and something like an approximation to a popular government. At a grand sitting of the Divan summons were issued to the *Mutevelis*, or paymasters of the different *ortas* [messes] of janissaries, to be present as representatives of these corps, and as they included a large body of the citizens of Constantinople, they were in some measure the representatives of the people."¹⁴ That is why they had to be annihilated (just like the *ayan* who, too, had recently signed a contract), not because of some abstract opposition or ideological allergy to reforms or to Westernization.

Being a *kul* to the Sultan, except for the loose application of the term *kul* to all the subjects, was realized through an elaborate system of allegiance-versus-duties and benefits-versus-privileges. This system of *biat* followed by reciprocal expectations of *hizmet* and *nimet* (Arabic, *khidma* and *ni'ma*) was constantly reinforced through ritual and symbols, mostly related to food. In fact, institutionalized alimentary and pastoral symbolism permeated various aspects of life for a Janissary. The three-monthly salary he drew from the treasury, his basic means of subsistence, was called "*ulufe*/provender," while one of the ways in which the Sultan addressed his Janissaries was as "my lambs," and the groups of newly recruited boys bring driven to the capital were referred to as a "*sürü*/flock."

Food-related institutions and practices of the Janissaries had a ritualistic quality and were charged with symbolism. The food cooked in the barracks and the food received from the royal kitchen on ceremonial occasions was much more than nourishment; each one of those occasions seems to have functioned as a re-assertion of the original allegiance. The *aşçıbaşı* [chief cook] was much more than a cook; he was one of the most important (and respected or feared) officers in a mess. (Note the parallelism to the organization of some? dervish orders). At the level of the mess, the kitchen functioned as the jail, presumably because its quasi-sacred aura prevented indecency. The most significant shared space for all the corps was called *Etmeydanı* (Meat Square) because the meat of the corps was distributed there with an elaborate ritual involving a *gülbenk* after it was brought there by special functionaries, *segirdim ustaları*, whose function was considered to be so hallowed

¹⁴ R. Walsh, *A Residence at Constantinople*, 2 vols. (London, 1836), I: 394-395.

that whoever passed in front of them during the transportation of the meat (from the slaughterhouse in Yedikule to the Meat Square) was considered to be punishable by death. Not merely spatial convenience but also this quasi-sacred nature of Etmeydanı is what brought the Janissaries together there before every revolt; after all, they could not begin a rebellion without an oath-taking ritual.

That a moment was ripe for a breach of contract from the Janissaries' point of view (for a rebellion, from the authorities' point of view) could be announced eloquently through another food-related act: not eating the soup served to them, for accepting the *ni'met* provided by the sultan meant the continuation of obedience to the state. If they were not ready to do so, they would turn their soup cups over since eating the soup would signify that they were ready to go on with their services (*hizmet*). Konstantin Mihailovic wrote as early as the fifteenth century: "whoever has taken soup with them [i.e., the Ottomans] has had to repay them in meat."

If the gesture of the soup cups seemed too weak to express the intensity of their dissatisfaction, or if it were to be neglected, the Janissaries would turn to an even more radical gesture: the removal of the cauldron of the mess kitchens from the hearth. That was a potent signifier of full rebellion (and not merely a threat as in the case of the soup cups), for the cauldron on the fireplace represented order and repose. [As Keçecizade wittily phrased it after 1826, "raising the cauldron again and again, the Janissaries finally spilled it over and extinguished the fire of the hearth (*ocak*, which also means the corps)."]

I do not intend to give the impression that this was the way the Janissaries were organized, period, and that no thing changed through time. We do not know of an Etmeydanı before the new barracks were built in the age of Süleyman, for instance. I have not seen any references to *segirdim ustaları* before the eighteenth century. Neither kanun consciousness nor the various particulars of the kanun itself (both in the general sense and in the sense of the specific code of the Janissaries) were timeless elements of the Ottoman order. The Janissaries loved ritual, and ritual was their way of giving a basis of legitimacy to their interpretation of their role within the social and political order. If they received a largess upon a particular occasion, thereafter it was their "tradition," or kanun, to receive the same, hopefully glorified through an added ceremonial. They kept on adding refinements and whatever emerged through this transformative and cumulative process was "our kanun," while the kanun discourse tends to present the code as immutable.

Rebellion represented that moment when the Janissaries considered the original contract of allegiance to be invalid. Because all such contracts had to be renewed with each new ruler, the moment was opportune for the Janissaries to go wild upon the death of a ruler before the accession of a new one. Consequently, prudent statesmen hid the death of rulers to avoid those moments when the world, lacking its pillar, seemed to have been rendered naked without its garb of legitimate order.

To either side in this contract, violence or the threat to use it seems to have been the only means available whenever it felt the other side had breached the agreement. Hence, the cycle of revolts and brutal repression. By and large, they functioned in a realm outside the sharia. The Janissaries [within the confines of

their roles and functions as kuls] could not be brought to sharia courts. As devshirme was a practice that transgressed the boundaries of the sharia, they insisted on the legitimacy of kanun in general and of the kanun of the corps in particular. Still, they tried to use the legitimizing means of shar'i authorities whenever possible.

What the so-called experiments with "reform" in the seventeenth century dealt to the Janissaries, in the short run at least, was brutal repression. Under Osman II and Murad IV, kul soldiers found in İstanbul's coffeehouses were dumped in sacks and thrown into the Bosphorus to drown. Tugi, one of the *solaks* (a unit within the body of the cavalry of the Porte) who participated in the revolt against Osman and later wrote a narrative account of that violent incident in a touching ambivalence, tells us that the soldiers had been rather unnerved because, among other things, the young Sultan had been engaged in live target practice shooting arrows at them during the campaign of Hotin. They did not fare any better under the reforming vezir Köprülü Mehmed Pasha (1656-61). But the worst was to come under Mahmud II, the most systematic reformer of them all. The so-called Auspicious Incident of 1826 was a true massacre, a bloody annihilation of thousands of men who were literally blasted away by the forces of modernism.¹⁵

While the Janissary corps was abolished and the Bektashi order closed down, a milder and subtler form of control was brought to bear on the *'aşık* bards, for instance, who were forced to organize within a guild framework under a (government-appointed or-approved) superintendent (*kethüda*). A new era in "media manipulation" had arrived, signifying the transition from an early modern to a modern state. Mahmud II was also the one to launch the first Ottoman newspaper.

5) The Janissary rebels are not recognized for having ever elaborated the vision of an alternative political order. Even in the most spectacularly successful revolts, the leaders were accepted, promoted, assimilated, and eventually executed through the orders of the new ruler enthroned by the rebels. But note the apparently unique example of Calık Ahmed, a Janissary rebel who in 1703 suggested that the Ottoman dynasty should be discarded in favor of a "cumhur cem'iyyeti."¹⁶ Any literal translation of this term (popular assembly?) is hazardous since the word "cumhur" was used in several meanings including a rebellious crowd (rather than the whole population). Did Calık Ahmed have a Janissary oligarchy in mind? Most probably, since Na'ima mentions the North African regencies in the same sentence. In any case, his daring suggestion was not actively pursued. [Although Naima characterizes him as a brute who led the rabble, Dimitri Cantemir depicts him in a much more favorable light as a prudent officer who made sure that the rebels would not engage in plunder and whose eventual death was mourned by the whole city of İstanbul.] But was he really unique? Future research may uncover similar voices but is

¹⁵ See p.5 in *The Diary of an Idle Woman*, written by a European resident in İstanbul in the late nineteenth century: "one feels almost a savage joy that these same Janissaries were themselves cut off by a general massacre."

¹⁶ Na'ima, VI, zeyl, p.31: "Cezayir ve Tunus ocakları gibi cumhur cem'iyyeti ve tecemmu' devleti ..."

unlikely to change the assessment that in each particular instance of political action, the Janissaries were basically reacting to circumstances rather than acting in the name of a particular political project or vision; in other words, they do not seem to have been engaged in the articulation of views that would significantly alter the structures of the Ottoman political order. Yet, as the nature and identity of the Janissaries changed, so did the nature of what they reacted to and what they defended. Whatever they had attained through whatever circumstances became their tradition and thus their right worth defending. Likewise with their increasing "representative" role. The cumulative effect of the continual socialization of the Janissaries and of their repeated political activism, as short-sighted as each individual instance of revolt may have been, was clearly the transformation of the Janissary corps into some sort of a political party.

No self-respecting Ottoman Sultan could support this situation much longer. The tug-of-war between the corps and the Sultan culminated in a civil war in 1826. In the meantime, Mahmud II had successfully cultivated other military bodies as well as social groups, such as the ulema, the medrese students, and the guilds all of whom came to his support against the Janissaries. The abolition of the corps spelled the end of the kul system, and thus of the Ottoman ancien regime, and rendered the Tanzimat possible.

Official Ottoman historiography has deemed it "the Auspicious Event," and most of later scholarship followed this assessment in its general thrust, but there were also those with a different interpretation. Only a few decades after the incident, Namık Kemal, the Young Ottoman poet-political thinker in search of an alternative to absolutist monarchy, nostalgically invoked the Janissaries who, he argued, could represent the will of the people and check the absolute power of the state.

It would be sheer romanticism to make heroes out of the Janissaries, to reverse the picture and deem Mahmud II a villain. But history does not need to be written in defense of the modernizing elites against an undifferentiated reactionary mob. The crowd, too, is made up of faces and voices.

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