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**CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF JANISSARIES IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND
BEYOND**

by

MEGHANA GARCIA

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR TAZZARA

PROFESSOR FERGUSON

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Introduction

The rise of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is marked by continuous military conquest and expansion. The Ottomans built a remarkable empire, one that lasted for over six hundred years and had territories in three different continents. Before 1453, the Ottomans had control over most of Anatolia and large parts of southeastern Europe. After defeating the remaining parts of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, expansion continued and by the mid-sixteenth century, the empire stretched into North Africa, most of the Balkans, Hungary, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula. There are many reasons that account for Ottoman success at this time, but military superiority was a key component in their rapid development. The Ottoman Empire, along with the Safavid and Mughal Empires, is known as a “Gunpowder Empire”, a term coined by Marshall Hodgson in his 1974 book *The Venture of Islam*¹. Along with a highly-centralized government, these three gunpowder empires found persistent success in widespread use of guns and artillery in their military conquests². Besides having superior military technology, the Ottoman Empire utilized the power and efficiency of their slave army—The Janissary Corps.

Slave armies were not new or unique to the Ottomans. Their place in the history of Islamic civilizations began in the Abbasid era in the form of the Mamluk soldiers, whose paradigm “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

¹ Hodgson Marshall G. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. University of Chicago Press, 1977, 26.

² Ibid., 101.

schools”³. Young slaves were ideal because they would be more open to the changes imposed upon them by their superiors. Over time, Janissaries have become the most famous example of this type of military and social unit. The development of the Janissaries emerged alongside the development of the empire as a whole. A standing army was needed to continue military conquest and the Ottoman sultans needed some control over their ever-growing non-Muslim population. The solution to these two problems was found in the formation of a slave army created by Christian boys levied from conquered territories in a system known as *devshirme*, or The Collection⁴. This institution began sometime in the 1390s, under the reign of Sultan Murad I and was abolished in 1826 during the time of Sultan Mahmud II.

Christian boys in particular were enslaved because Islamic law forbids enslaving Muslims, but having a slave convert to Islam did not make them lose their servile status. Slaves under Islamic law often carried out transactions for their owners. Therefore, the Ottomans would not be breaking any religious laws by enslaving Christians then converting them to Islam. The slaves would become trusted and important figures who could occupy an elevated social rank through their membership in an elite household⁵. The boys, usually collected in their early teenage years, were taken to the capital (eventually Istanbul), converted, and trained for years in war, politics, economics, and Islam to become slaves and soldiers loyal to the sultan. The word “Janissary” comes from *yeniçeri*, which translates to “new soldier”. These “new soldiers” quickly became a central part of the Ottoman administration and military.

³ Veinstein, Gilles. “On the Ottoman Janissaries (Fourteenth-Nineteenth Centuries).” *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500-2000*, edited by Erik-Jan Zürcher, Amsterdam University Press, 2013, pp. 115–34. *JSTOR*, 122.

⁴ Imber, Colin. *The Ottoman Empire* (Palgrave, 2009), 134.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

As Ottoman conquest continued, the reputation and image of Janissaries with their guns and iconic white hats emerged into the public consciousness. The stories of Ottoman sultans enslaving their Christian populations and turning them into ruthless warriors spread throughout the empire and into Europe. They were an important part of not just the army, but the imperial court as well. Over time, Janissaries came into increasing political power, at times even assassinating sultans who did not pay them enough or listen to their demands. Instead, they would put their chosen leader in charge, someone who they saw as competent and would rule in the best political interest of the empire. Their proximity to the sultan and control within the armies is what created this influence over the head of the empire. While it can be easy for modern scholars to narrow in on the militaristic aspects of the importance of Janissaries, it is critical to consider all the roles they played in the Ottoman Empire. Similarly, contemporary writers and observers of the Ottomans, especially Europeans, often have a rigid set of ideas about the iconic slave army which go on to influence how other people view Janissaries. For example, some people recorded the intense disciplined behavior and loyalty displayed by the Christian slaves toward their imperial master.

For many, the most striking aspect of Janissaries is their status as slaves. It is important to differentiate this type of Islamic slavery from American ideas of slavery. Ottoman conceptions of slavery are more fluid and open to interpretation as compared to American ideas of chattel slavery. Chattel slavery is defined as “the enslaving and owning of human beings and their offspring as property, able to be bought, sold and forced to work without wages”⁶. Janissaries diverge from this definition of slavery partly because they were regularly paid and had social mobility. Janissaries were not the only types of slaves in the empire, but they were the

⁶ Dictionary.com.

highest-ranking and closest to the sultan and the imperial seat of power. Their access to state secrets and the treasury gave them an advantage over many members of the imperial court. Occasionally, they were manumitted and given new titles, but more often, they remained as property of the sultan for the entirety of their lives.

The important position of soldiers within the empire originated from before the foundation of the Janissary Corps. As early Ottoman rulers were concentrated on consolidating and centralizing power in Anatolia, they needed regional militias to counter “various Turco-Muslim and Christian rivals in the area”⁷. Janissaries emerged from the need to create a system of consolidated dynastic power by taking control of Anatolia and spreading out from there⁸. Slave armies were a solution to regional fragmentation among Turkmen tribes where “the little enterprise headed by Osman and sons achieved a series of lucrative raids and conquests of small Bithynian towns, and their success lured not only other warriors but also dervishes and scholar-scribes into their midst”⁹. As the empire developed, so did the system of slave armies, culminating in the creation of the Janissary Corps in 1363.

The primary sources that will be explored include travel accounts, histories, and artwork that originated from both inside and outside the Ottoman Empire, created by people from different ethnicities, religions, and general backgrounds. The written sources have been translated into English from their original languages. Some of these sources are more popular and widely read than others, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror* being a key example. In more recent years, there have been more readily available English translations of books and accounts originating in the Ottoman Empire during the early modern era, leading to an easier

⁷ Kafadar, Cemal. *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 1995. *JSTOR*, 119.

⁸ Ibid., 121.

⁹ Ibid., 131.

exploration of their history and stories. Most of the secondary sources used in this paper are originally written in English and do not focus specifically on the Janissaries themselves but contain pertinent information about them and their place within the empire and the army. The sources are not confined to written texts and strictly historical analyses. There is also the inclusion of a few Ottoman miniature paintings and an art analysis of their centrality to the Ottomans as one of their primary forms of artistic expression.

The chronological boundaries of this study stretch from the reign of Sultan Mehmed II starting in 1451 to the reign of Sultan Süleyman I, which ended in 1566. The reason for these dates is the number of primary sources that were written during this time, from both internal and external perspectives. Because the fall of Constantinople in 1453 was successful largely because of Janissary and artillery efficiency, it is crucial that accounts of this historical event are brought into discussion. Two of these sources are Konstantin Mihailović's *Memoirs of a Janissary* and Kritovoulos' *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*. Both of these books were written during the reign of Mehmed II and include unique points of view that have shaped how different people view the role of Janissaries during the siege of Constantinople and after. The fall of the Byzantine Empire is a topic of great importance in world history, and Janissaries are at the center of it. As for the inclusion of the sixteenth century, there are a few travel accounts written by people visiting the court of Süleyman I from many different places that have been included. Janissaries were an important part of Ottoman court culture and a topic of interest for these travelers. While a few sources stretch slightly beyond the sixteenth century, the focus will remain before the death of Süleyman I.

Sources and perspectives from Europe as well as from different parts of the Ottoman Empire have been selected to show the variety of ways people thought about Janissaries and

Ottomans. While the Ottomans are primarily known as Muslim Turks, it was mainly the elite that fell into this category. There were Greeks, Arabs, Armenians, Serbians, Hungarians, Egyptians, Christians, Jews, and many other ethnicities and religions who not only lived in the empire, but sometimes had high-ranking jobs. Of course, not everyone wanted to be a part of the Ottoman Empire. Some of the first intelligence about the Ottoman people had come in the form of Janissaries in battle, forcefully taking over their territories and kingdoms. Janissaries are complex figures, and their identities can often change depending on the perspective of the people writing or making art about them. Therefore, the primary sources used do not all come from the same region or type of person, but rather draw on perspectives from a wide range of places and peoples, all of which led to differing cultural perceptions of Janissaries in the Ottoman Empire and beyond its borders. This thesis aims to situate Janissaries in a diverse set of literary, artistic, and visual representations and see how perceptions emerge from certain sources as forms of cultural production.

Why have Janissaries been chosen as the topic of this thesis? Janissaries are intriguing because they offer a different way to look at slavery that is not the same as chattel slavery, which is more widely known to Americans. Instead, there will be an exploration into another type of enslavement where the slaves have various degrees of social, political, and economic power that came from their position of being the sultan's slaves. They also challenge the absolute idea of "Ottoman versus European" conflicts and instead shape it into an "internal vs external" dilemma instead due to the multi-ethnic social makeup of the empire combined with the geographic location of many Ottoman territories and the capital of Istanbul itself being in Europe instead of Asia. In addition, they were a well-known symbol of the persistence of the Ottoman Empire, an image that many Europeans feared would invade. This thesis argues that in accounts originating

from both inside and outside the Ottoman empire, Janissaries are described as ruthless and powerful. Further examinations reveal that these accounts, despite their frequent negative connotations, are rooted in admiration and envy of Janissaries' political power and success rate as a dominant military unit.

Section 1: Background on Janissaries and the Ottoman Court

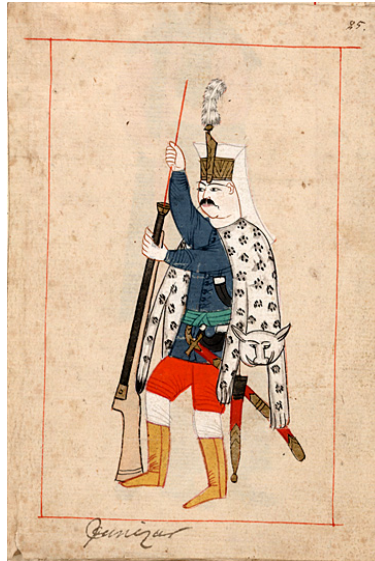
How did Janissaries end up being included in so many narratives and reports about the Ottoman Empire? What was their place within the military and the imperial court and how did these positions lead to their rising power and influence over the empire? To understand the place of Janissaries in accounts concerning the Ottoman Empire, one must first know how they developed as a unit over time. They were never the main fighting component of the Ottoman armies, yet they had the reputation of being the most formidable component of Ottoman military strength.

A quick history of the Janissaries provided by Gilles Veinstein answers certain aspects of these questions. Primarily he focuses on how Janissaries changed within the military. Veinstein explains that, at first, Janissaries were imperial bodyguards tasked with protecting the sultan and being part of his public image of power and wealth. Although their duties and roles expanded over time, this part of their jobs stayed constant. Reports from different periods show the strong impressions that Janissaries left on ambassadors and foreign visitors, particularly because of their bright uniforms and disciplined behavior¹⁰. Clearly, something changed between Janissaries being mere imperial bodyguards to becoming intimidating soldiers who were key units in many battles and sieges. One explanation for this change is the widespread use of gunpowder and artillery within the Ottoman armies¹¹. Their use of muskets and other firearms aided in their infamous siege warfare. Once again, the image of Janissaries in their white hats and guns became etched into the history books of Europeans and other groups they fought. Even in records such as

¹⁰ Veinstein, "On the Ottoman Janissaries", 116.

¹¹ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 100.

the *Rålamb Book of Costumes*, guns were acknowledged as a central part of the Janissary uniform.



Rålamb, Claes,. *Rålamb Book of Costumes*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress

Figure 1: Janissary from Ralamb Costume Book

While their jobs as imperial bodyguards at court remained, their duties expanded as well as their numbers. When the Janissary Corps was first established in the late fourteenth century by Murad I, they numbered around 1,000. By the time Süleyman I died in 1566, there were around 13,000. At the height of their recruitment in the start of the eighteenth century, they had about 53,000 members¹². With growing numbers, the inner identities of the Janissaries adapted as well.

Veinstein notes that the Janissaries did not evolve just as a military unit, but as a complex group with a unique identity¹³. They became members of the Bektashi order of Islam, a Sufi movement. Because the Janissaries were converted to Islam after their recruitment, many of them grew up with complex religious identities. Being born and raised Christian then placed into

¹² Veinstein, "On the Ottoman Janissaries", 120.

¹³ Ibid., 125.

an Islamic world could have led to disloyalty. However, the Ottoman solution to this problem was to train the boys for seven or eight years by sending them to work with farmers to learn physical labor as well as “to teach them the rudiments of Islam, through living in an Islamic environment, and finally to teach them Turkish”¹⁴. This training led to a more cohesive group unity and understanding of their place within the Empire. Although the Janissaries worked as a solid unit, this did not always signify loyalty. A prime example of this is Konstantin Mihailović, a Serbian Janissary who wrote about his continuous disdain for Ottomans and Muslims throughout his book *Memoirs of a Janissary* which will be examined more closely in section 4 of this thesis.

The initial collection of the Christian boys to be trained as Janissaries was infamous throughout Europe. The *devshirme* was a topic of interest for many starting from soon after the Janissary Corps was founded at the end of the fourteenth century. In places like Hungary and Serbia where the Ottomans frequently invaded and subsequently took over, Janissaries were known as kidnappers and plunderers. “Helpless” Christian boys would be carted away into a life of servitude and war with little chance of seeing their family again. This in combination with the image of the artillery used by the Janissaries are some reasons why they developed such a negative reputation abroad as well as in the non-Muslim majority territories of the Ottoman Empire.

However, Veinstein makes the argument that recruitment into the Janissary Corps was beneficial particularly for peasants who would have the opportunity for a better life, one that included social mobility, respect, and a good income¹⁵. Eventually, the recruitment into the

¹⁴ Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, 139.

¹⁵ Veinstein, “On the Ottoman Janissaries”, 124.

Janissary Corps became more lax, and Muslim-born boys and volunteers started to join. Even though they did not always have the best reputation, elite Ottoman families were eager to send their sons to join such a prestigious and admired group.

Internally, it is easier to see how the image of Janissaries developed within the context of the imperial court. Leslie Peirce's book *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, while focusing on the women of the harem and its evolution, often touches upon the place of Janissaries in the court as trusted members of the sultan's inner circles. The imperial harem was a complex ecosystem that Janissaries were an inherent part of. Peirce argues that control within the harem led to wider economic and political control within the empire¹⁶. Janissaries had immense influence over the sultan due to proximity which over time led to the detriment of some sultans and the state treasury. If a sultan enacted a policy or made a decision they did not agree with, Janissaries were quick to voice their displeasure¹⁷. Due to their elite education and knowledge about the inner workings of the imperial court, some Janissaries often acted as unofficial advisors to the sultan, especially in terms of decisions concerning the military and expansion.

In addition, Janissaries were key players in fights for succession. If a prince wanted a better chance at winning the throne from among his brothers, Peirce explains that "it was imperative that they win the loyalty of strategic elements in the ruling class, most particularly Janissary officers and leading government officials in the capital who could manipulate affairs to their advantage"¹⁸. During the reign of Süleyman I around 1553, three of his sons fought for future control. One of them, Mustafa, had the support of the Janissaries because of his status as a

¹⁶ Peirce, Leslie Penn. *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. Oxford University Press, 1993, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 180.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

warrior. This conflict had an impact on foreigners such as Ogier de Busbecq who wrote about this incident in his *Turkish Letters*. The Flemish ambassador also mentioned their power over the sultan, saying that they “were masters to such an extent that not even Soleiman himself could control them and was actually afraid of personal harm at their hands”¹⁹. In some instances, Janissaries physically removed some sultans from power and declared their chosen heir as the next ruler as seen in the case of their deposition of Selim III in 1806²⁰. Even though they were a cause for continuous Ottoman expansionary success, Janissaries were still somewhat distrusted in Istanbul because of their immense influence over the sultan and lines of succession.

The development of Janissaries from imperial bodyguards to elite infantry soldiers is closely linked to the advent of gunpowder and the growing conscription numbers of the Corps which led to unique identities and positionality of the Janissaries. The *devshirme* became a notorious method of recruitment both inside and outside of the Ottoman Empire and gave Janissaries an unsavory reputation particularly in Eastern Europe. However, the economic and political incentives of joining the Janissaries became a reason why many Ottomans sought a position for their sons within their ranks. The political authority of Janissaries is seen in the context of the imperial court where their relationship with the sultans and influence over the line of succession added to their negative characters. It is from information like this that internal and external perspectives began to develop as visitors to the Ottoman capital as well as people already living in Ottoman territories wrote and created art depicting Janissaries in different ways. While slave armies were not new, they were unique and a topic of intrigue for many people as the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire expanded.

¹⁹ Busbecq Ogier Ghislain de, and Edward S. Forster. *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin De Busbecq, Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople, 1554-1562: Translated from the Latin of the Elzevir Edition of 1663*. Louisiana State University Press, 2005, 162.

²⁰ Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, 102.

Section 2: External Perspectives

People from areas outside the Ottoman Empire, especially Western Europeans, were often at odds with the ever-growing power of this gunpowder empire. Because of its geographic location along trade routes and proximity to the rest of Europe, the Ottoman court had no shortage of visitors and ambassadors who traveled back to their home countries, spreading notions of what the Ottomans were like, how they behaved, and what customs they practiced. The Venetians in particular had many interactions with the Ottomans, which were not always positive and rooted in conflicts over the control of sea trade in the Mediterranean. While Venice did construct many images of the Ottomans for the rest of Europe, they were not the only ones who interacted with them. One of the biggest sources of information about Ottomans originating from European sources that circulated the continent were pieces of travel literature. Travel literature and journals reflect outside perspectives of people experiencing a new and foreign culture for the first time.

These outside perspectives on the Ottoman Empire reveal a lot about prior prejudices and preconceived notions about Ottoman court cultures and Janissaries. Because of their positions as slaves and bodyguards of the sultan, visitors to the imperial court were sure to come into contact with them. The inclusion of Janissaries in multiple historical records about the Ottomans suggests that they were topics of interest to foreigners visiting the empire for the first time. The accounts of diplomats visiting the Ottoman Empire focused on Istanbul in particular because it was the capital. One of the most notable diplomats who wrote about his time spent visiting the Ottoman capital during the reign of Süleyman I in the mid-sixteenth century was Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, a Flemish ambassador for the Holy Roman Empire.

In his collection of notes titled *The Turkish Letters*, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq recollected many aspects of the Ottoman Empire that he learned about during his stays there from 1554 to 1555 and from 1556 to 1562. He was a diplomat on the behalf of Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia, Ferdinand I. While Busbecq did not intend for his letters to be published, they ended up circulating around Europe starting in 1581. In his letters, Busbecq experienced the court of Süleyman I and most notably, the conflict of succession that occurred between three of Süleyman's sons where Janissaries played important roles. In particular, Busbecq explained that "Mustapha, on account of his remarkable natural gifts and the suitability of his age, was marked out by the affection of the soldiers and the wishes of the people as the certain successor of his father"²¹. Busbecq seemed appalled by the bloody nature of the succession. However, he was interested in the power that the Janissaries had in this conflict, especially that they could proclaim their favorite as the next sultan and when Mustapha was killed, they "inveighed against Soleiman as a crazy old lunatic; then they railed against the treachery and cruelty of the young man's stepmother and the wickedness of Roostem"²². Although Busbecq was not present at the sites where these conflicts were occurring, he heard about them first-hand from high-ranking officials in Süleyman's court and therefore retained some of their biases.

These biases stem from his contacts in court. Busbecq's main source of information about the successionary conflict was Rustem Pasha, a vizier who disliked the power that Hurrem Sultan, Süleyman's favorite, had over the imperial harem and the court²³. He was upset at the marriage between Süleyman and Hurrem because of the change in power dynamics within the

²¹ Busbecq, *Turkish Letters*, 29.

²² Ibid., 33.

²³ Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 77.

court that followed. Busbecq heard Rustem Pasha's views on the role of Hurrem and the Janissaries in the struggle for the throne and was undoubtedly influenced against them, which is reflected in his writing.

Busbecq's view of Janissaries seems to shift during his first audience with Süleyman and his court in Anatolia. He praised the men of the court, explaining to his audience that "In all that great assembly no single man owed his dignity to anything but his personal merits and bravery; no one is distinguished from the rest by his birth"²⁴. Busbecq understood that the Janissaries and other officials worked hard and rose through the ranks to achieve their positions, not because they inherited the roles from their parents. In this sense, Busbecq can be seen as criticizing the governments of Europe for not having a similar system, especially when it came to military organization. He wrote about his fear of the future of Christian Europe, for he knew that due to Ottoman courage, resourcefulness, discipline, and unity, they will surely prevail in any military conflict between the two powers²⁵. If Europe were to develop an army as efficient as the Janissary Corps, Busbecq believed they would be unbeatable. By criticizing other European standards of military organization, Busbecq ended up directly complimenting the Ottoman soldiers.

Busbecq was a keen observer of the world around him. He noticed minute details and took an interest in mundane activities. In addition, he was a good writer, so readers of *Turkish Letters* would have been introduced to a clear image of what Busbecq saw of the Ottoman world. Within this image is the description of what Janissaries physically looked like. During his stay in Istanbul, Busbecq witnessed an impressive military parade. This image of the perfect

²⁴ Busbecq, *Turkish Letters*, 59.

²⁵ Ibid., 112.

organization and discipline of a large army silently marching through the streets of the capital became etched into his mind and subsequently into his letters. Because they were soldiers, they wore “uniforms of the same shape and colour, so that you could recognize them as the slaves or household of the same master”. They carried muskets, wore white hats with plumes that created the illusion of a forest when they marched together²⁶. A similar parade in 1730 painted in the *Surname-I Vehbi* shows the scenes that Busbecq probably saw in the sixteenth century in the streets of Istanbul.



Surname-I Vehbi: An Eighteenth Century Ottoman Book of Festivals

Figure 2: Janissaries marching to Mehter martial tunes played by the Mehterân military band

Janissaries were not the only members of the parade and Busbecq recorded that there were cavalry units, Turkish horsemen, chief officials, and the sultan himself²⁷. This parade was large and “Their total number is said to be about 6,000 men”²⁸. For Europeans that had come into

²⁶ Busbecq, *Turkish Letters*, 146.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145-147.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

contact with the Janissaries and other Ottoman troops, Busbecq's words would have conjured up the memory of the foot soldiers with their guns seizing territory in the name of the Ottoman Empire. The imagery of an infantry unit that moved like a forest would be terrifying to see in battle.

Another way Busbecq's written observations on Janissaries shows his admiration of them is through his commentary on their status as slaves. Instead of describing slavery as an oppressive institution, Busbecq instead focused on the less negative sides of the practice. He described the historical importance of slave labor in the creation of magnificent works of antiquity and passing on their knowledge to future generations. He also understood that the vast number of slaves captured by Ottomans during raids, not necessarily all Janissaries, represented the power and wealth of the empire and that enslavement was a way to ensure that talented and hardworking men could improve the labor force by being put under direct command of guiding figures²⁹. He was "aware that slavery has various drawbacks, but these are outweighed by its advantages"³⁰. While he did not go into detail about the economic and political opportunities granted to certain Janissaries, Busbecq's ideas about slavery as a positive were not unique to him. The success of a slave labor force was popular in Classic times and the success of Janissaries as a slave army would have added to the complex feelings surrounding the institution of slavery.

Unlike most examples of travel literature in Europe at this time, Busbecq did not intend for his letters to be read by anyone other than the friend he sent them to. However, they became widely published soon after he left Istanbul for the final time. Busbecq was an educated man and

²⁹ Busbecq, *Turkish Letters*, 101-102

³⁰ Ibid., 101

his observational skills along with his position as an ambassador gave Europe insight into the heart of the Ottoman Empire. It is likely that this collection of letters would have been an introduction to the imperial court and Janissaries for many readers, thus further shaping the external perspectives on the slave army.

There are many accounts that reveal how Europeans, especially Venetians, regarded the Ottomans and their slaves. Venetian attitudes toward the Ottoman imperial court system is understood in relation to Venetian ideas of despotism. The Ottomans were engaged in a series of sustained frontier conflicts with Western Europe. This was not just land-based conflicts, but sea-based as well. Because the Ottomans and Venetians constantly fought for control over the Mediterranean, a defensive political discourse was created, one that saw Ottomans as despots. In *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte*, Lucette Valensi explains that “the Ottoman Empire had been perceived, since the sixteenth century and even in Venice, as a barbarous monster, that a stereotype of the absolutist and despotic character of the Ottoman monarchy had been handed down from one century to the next”³¹. In creating a separation between the Republic of Venice and the Empire of the Ottomans, Venetian writers capitalized on the issue of slavery, claiming “that the entire state of the Ottoman Empire is founded on and entrusted to people who were all born into the Christian faith and who, by various means, were enslaved and borne off into the Mohammedan sect”³². The Ottomans were depicted as an empire that was not free, unlike Christian Europe. There was also apprehension toward Janissaries, who were considered a type of enslaved military nobility that was unfamiliar to Venetian ambassadors.

³¹ Valensi, Lucette. *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte*. Cornell University Press, 2009, 56

³² Ibid., 24

In “Turkey is a Republic of Slaves”³³, written by Gianfrancesco Morosini in 1585, Morosini, an ambassador, admired the way the Ottomans were able to keep the size of their armies large by using slaves³⁴. However, he looked down on how Janissaries were “taken while still boys, and either persuaded or forced to be circumcised and made Muslim”³⁵. Morosini believed the Turkish leaders of the Ottomans saw their Christian subjects as sheep that they could enslave as much as they wanted. He walked his Western audience through his understanding of what the recruitment and training of Janissaries were like, which added to the negative views Europe had on the institutions of the Ottomans. Due to his limited interaction with Janissaries, Morosini did get some information about their training wrong, such as their exposure to Turkish and Islam, but his theories were cemented in his writings and sent back to the lords of Venice where the myth of the slave soldiers kept circulating. On the other hand, Morosini ended up agreeing with Busbecq in that the Ottoman armies were much more disciplined and numerous than their European counterparts, which served as a major problem for Venice as the two powers fought for control of the Mediterranean³⁶. Morosini regarded Turkey as a “republic of slaves” where even Christians who were not formally enslaved should be considered subjugated just as much as Janissaries were. Contrary to Busbecq’s approach to describing Istanbul, Morosini did not provide insight into how he obtained his information about the Ottoman systems of slavery. Though this makes him less credible in a sense, his perspective as a Venetian ambassador in particular must be considered. Venetians and Ottomans had a long-standing rivalry, more so than other European countries. So, it can be understood that

³³ Davis, James C. *Pursuit of Power*. Harper, 1970

³⁴ Ibid., 133

³⁵ Ibid., 136

³⁶ Ibid., 134

Morosini would emphasize the aspects of the Ottoman court that would be less appealing for European audiences.

Travel and ambassadorial accounts originating from outside of the Ottoman Empire show different perceptions toward Janissaries. Europeans had encountered Janissaries in battle multiple times and their reputation as powerful slaves often left negative impressions. However, extended interactions with Ottomans, as shown by Busbecq's travel journal, unveils a complex admiration of the discipline, unity, and loyalty that Janissaries displayed in Istanbul.

Section 3: Internal Perspectives

The Ottoman Empire was not a homogenous entity. The vast territory and timeline it covered ensured that subjects of the empire were from different religions, races, and ethnicities. Even though the dominant political group were Ottoman Turks, the term “Turk” cannot be used to describe everyone from within the Ottoman Empire. The differences in languages also meant that even though they were all under Ottoman rule, Hungarians, Egyptians, and Arabs would not have been able to easily communicate with each other. Therefore, when considering how people within the Ottoman Empire perceived Janissaries, there are diverse and numerous perspectives to consider as well as different mediums.

Within the imperial court were many historians and officials who were in charge of assisting the sultan in governing the empire. Mustafa Ali was an educated writer and bureaucrat who served Süleyman, Selim II, and Murad III. One of his more famous works is the *Counsel for Sultans of 1581*, a series of advice for the sovereign on how to best rule. Ali was educated in Istanbul and understood Arabic, Persian, and Turkish³⁷, showing his awareness of the multi-ethnic aspects of the empire. At one point in his life, Ali “was appointed secretary of the Janissary Corps”³⁸ and was able to observe their behavior and roles carefully, both inside and outside of the context of court. Ali did not trust the Janissaries, partly because he saw them as outsiders. He warned that “The King that had shown him— the sinner— so much favor, Becoming himself a criminal”³⁹. The sinner Ali was referencing was Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, a vizier who was the product of the *devshirme* system. Ali believed that the influence of an “Infidel” on the

³⁷ Fleischer, Cornell H. *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire : The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541-1600)*. Princeton University Press, 1986, 24

³⁸ Ibid., 143

³⁹ Âli, Mustafa bin, and Andreas Tietze. *Mustafâ 'âlî's Counsel for Sultans of 1581*. Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften, 1979, 37

sultan would not only corrupt the sultan, but the empire as a whole. He did not trust Janissaries because they were foreign Christians and therefore not products of “Faith and Fatherland”⁴⁰ that were necessary for good statesmen and advisors to the sultan. Ali also advised the sultan to not overpay Janissaries or let them be idle for too long, citing an example where a group of Janissaries with lavish funds left the palace and “under the influence of drinking wine and listening to harp and rebeck, had given themselves over to a life of passions”⁴¹. Ali had an elite, educated, insider perspective on the inner workings of the imperial court. His distrust of Janissaries and their influence over the treasury and politics was apparent in his advice to the sultan.

Other perceptions of Janissaries stemming from within the Ottoman Empire emerge in moving from the center of the empire to its periphery. In *Journey to the Sublime Porte*, Shaykh Qutb al-Din al-Nahrawali detailed his trip from Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula to Istanbul and the court of Süleyman I on a diplomatic mission. When this was written around 1557, Mecca and Medina were part of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman sultans did not visit Mecca and Medina in person⁴² and instead relied “on local elites and administrators who had served under the Mamluks for the administration of the newly acquired territory”⁴³. Despite this, there was still a significant Ottoman presence in the cities, which was reflected in their architecture, art, literature, and legal codes. One reason for this was the circulation of texts originating from Istanbul⁴⁴, which probably included information about Janissaries. Al-Nahrawali’s account acts in a similar way to Busbecq’s *Turkish Letters*. Both writers traveled from distant locations as

⁴⁰ Ali, *Counsel for Sultans*, 51

⁴¹ Ibid., 54

⁴² Burak, Guy. “Between Istanbul and Gujarat: Descriptions of Mecca in the Sixteenth-Century Indian Ocean.” *Muqarnas*, vol. 34, 2017, 288

⁴³ Ibid., 291

⁴⁴ Ibid., 295

diplomats of some type and interacted with advisors and officials in Süleyman's court. Where al-Nahrawali differs from Busbecq is in his descriptions of the imperial court. Al-Nahrawali does not pay attention to the Janissaries. Instead, he makes frequent references to soldiers that accompany his group for safety⁴⁵, advisors in the imperial court who were products of the *devshirme* system⁴⁶, and the slave boys he observed in the presence of Süleyman⁴⁷. The closest al-Nahrawali comes to a direct reference to the Janissaries is in a conversation with Mustafa Pasha who explained to him that another man, Pīrī, "had belonged to a unit of imperial guards suspected of having shot at the sultan with arrows"⁴⁸. The imperial guards in question were Janissaries. Clearly, al-Nahrawali is familiar with the history of Janissaries and their central place in the imperial court. Even before Janissaries started deposing of sultans they did not approve of, they still posed a threat to the safety of the ruler. Al-Nahrawali did not have a strong reaction to the potential threat to the sultan's life, suggesting that either he did not care for the safety of Süleyman or that he was already familiar with the power Janissaries had in the court. The translator, Richard Blackburn, has to provide relevant information about the Janissaries and the *devshirme* in the footnotes because al-Nahrawali most likely assumed his audience would already be familiar with them and would not need context. Even though Mecca is over a thousand miles away from Istanbul, it was still a part of the Ottoman Empire and absorbed certain aspects of its culture. During his more subtle discussions of advisors who were products of the *devshirme* system, al-Nahrawali praised their behavior and detailed his interactions with them. In this way, he admired the strenuous years of training that Janissaries had.

⁴⁵ al-Nahrawali, Qutb al-Din. *Journey to the Sublime Porte: The Arabic Memoir of a Sharifian Agent's Diplomatic Mission to the Ottoman Imperial Court in the Era of Suleyman the Magnificent*. Trans. Richard Blackburn (Ergon in Kommission, 2005), 135

⁴⁶ Ibid., 164

⁴⁷ Ibid., 190

⁴⁸ Ibid., 172

In comparing Mustafa Ali and al-Nahrawali's observations of Janissaries in the capital, it is clear that Ali has stronger feelings toward them. He worked with them directly and observed their patterns of behavior as they affected the court and the treasury. Al-Nahrawali, on the other hand, had a more peripheral perspective. Although Mecca and Medina were within Ottoman territory and interacted with Janissaries, their perceptions seem more muted or nonchalant. To al-Nahrawali, Janissaries were not as much of a threat to the stability of the empire as they were to Ali. Internal perspectives, similar to external ones, cannot be put into a single category of perception.

Advice for sultans and travel literature, while important in understanding impressions of the Ottoman court, were not the only mediums of Janissary representation that originated within the empire. Miniature paintings were a staple of Ottoman art culture. Because the imperial court were patrons of many miniature artists, the sultan and his entourage were frequently depicted in the artwork. Therefore, images of Janissaries were created and circulated. Begüm Özden Firat's book *Encounters with the Ottoman Miniature* explores the importance of art in shaping not just internal and external perspectives of the Ottomans, but also how it creates a deeper historical perspective of the subjects being depicted. Using Firat's discussion of Ottoman miniature paintings in combination with examples from Johannes de Thurocz's *Chronica Hungarorum* and examples from Michael Pirker's "Pictorial Documents of the Music Bands of the Janissaries (Mehter) and the Austrian Military Music" leads to an understanding of how perceptions of Janissaries was formed within the Ottoman Empire. Firat argues that miniature paintings originating from the Ottomans should not be confined to being just historical images to be examined in relation to the time in which they were created. Instead, they should be used to understand present interpretations of history. Through Firat focuses on artwork from the

eighteenth century, her theories are easily applied to paintings originating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Miniature painting as an art form was well-developed within the Ottoman Empire. They covered several subjects like Ottoman history, science, sultanic portraiture, literature, and religion⁴⁹. Janissaries were frequently depicted in them because the miniature paintings sometimes focused on scenes of daily life within the empire, including parts of the imperial court and the military. As part of their training within the capital, Janissaries would learn different trades. One of these trades was miniature painting, meaning that sometimes, Janissaries were directly involved in depicting themselves in artwork⁵⁰. Outside of Istanbul, “schools of miniature paintings, such as those in Aleppo and Baghdad, sprang up in the provinces”⁵¹. The development of this art style was not confined within the boundaries of the empire. In fact, early Ottoman miniature paintings were “influenced by the examples of Western schools brought by Venetian artists” and “local artists were grappling with Persian, Timurid, and Chinese masterpieces so as to find a unique Ottoman visual voice”⁵². Firat also argues that miniature paintings are representations of cross-cultural encounters between Europe and the Ottomans and should be seen as results of positive interactions⁵³.

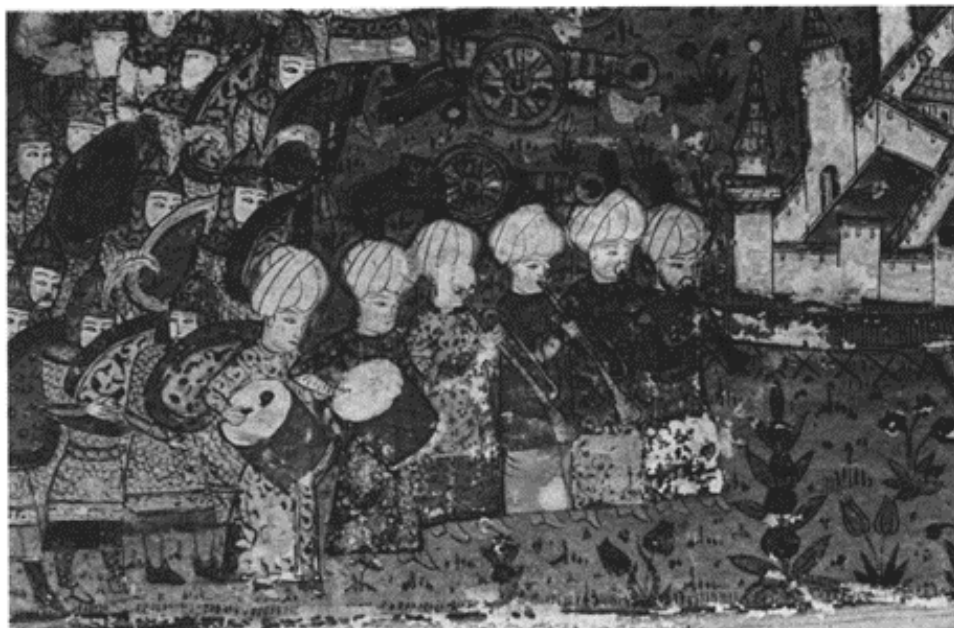
⁴⁹ Firat Begüm Özden. *Encounters with the Ottoman Miniature: Contemporary Readings of an Imperial Art*. I.B. Tauris, 2015, 6

⁵⁰ Veinstein, “On the Ottoman Janissaries”, 133

⁵¹ Firat, *Encounters with the Ottoman Miniature*, 7

⁵² Ibid., 6

⁵³ Ibid., 181



Pirker, Michael. "Pictorial Documents of the Music Bands of the Janissaries and the Austrian Military Music."

Figure 3: Miniature from an Ottoman Manuscript by Mustafa bin Dschalal

For example, This miniature painting from a manuscript does not showcase the militaristic side of Janissaries, but rather their musical one. The Western European influence on Ottoman artistic styles is seen in the instruments used by the Janissaries, which were a result of the "mutual influence of Europe and the Turkish military music"⁵⁴ that caused musical knowledge to flow between both realms.

⁵⁴ Pirker, Michael. "Pictorial Documents of the Music Bands of the Janissaries (Mehter) and the Austrian Military Music." *Ridim/RCMI Newsletter*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1990, 3



Ali Amir Beg. *Süleymannâme*, Istanbul, Topkapi Palace Museum

Figure 4: Janissary Recruitment in the Balkans

Janissary Recruitment in the Balkans is a famous miniature painting full of colorful figures. The young Janissaries in this image are not engaging in warfare or other violent activities. The Ottoman officials and Balkan locals do not appear to be quarreling. The seated figures on the left are handling money and paper, most likely recording the registration of the boys. This scene would have been common in many provinces throughout the Ottoman Empire, a part of daily life.



Thurocz, Johannes de. *Chronica Hungarorum*. Andras Hess, 1473. X01v

Figure 5: Janissaries in Hungary

This image of Janissaries in Hungary from *Chronica Hungarorum*, however, shows a more negative aspect of the Janissary Corps. In this painting, it seems as if the Janissaries are invading the countryside and interrupting the lives of ordinary Hungarians. While this is from an outsider source (as Hungary was yet to be taken over by the Ottomans), this scene would have been recognizable to generations of Hungarians and other Europeans who encountered the Janissaries and other troops in territorial struggles.

Counsel for Sultans, Journey to the Sublime Porte, and miniature paintings show the complex internal perspectives of Janissaries. Mustafa Ali warned against the growing influence of the slaves in the court while al-Nahrawali was less disturbed about them from his position in Mecca at the periphery of the Empire. The multi-ethnic and multi-religious parts of the Ottoman Empire make it impossible to create a single internal perspective in regards to ideas about Janissaries. The various attitudes toward Janissaries would only continue as the empire expanded their territorial acquisitions as well as trade routes and interactions with other parts of the world.

Section 4: Comparing Kritovoulos and Mihailović

It is difficult to categorize sources into being strictly internal or external. The complex cultural identities and attitudes that emerged throughout the Ottoman Empire led to the creation of written accounts that reflect the intricate social dynamics of the time. It is necessary to take a closer look into some of these complex sources and figures in order to understand some of the more minute different cultural perceptions of Janissaries. *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror* by Kritovoulos and *Memoirs of a Janissary* by Konstantin Mihailović are two sources that are not easy to categorize. Kritovoulos was a Greek historian who famously wrote a biography of Sultan Mehmed II and detailed the fall of Constantinople at the hands of the Ottomans in 1453 even though he was not present at the historic event. His writing clearly conveys his admiration of the sultan and the power of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, Mihailović was a Serbian Janissary who directly participated in the siege on Constantinople yet had a strong hatred toward the Janissary Corps and the Ottomans. A close look at these two sources reveals that both writers understand the ruthless and powerful nature of the Janissaries but admire the efficiency and success of the slave army.

Although Kritovoulos did not live through the entirety of Mehmed II's reign, he wrote extensively about the sultan's life until his death around 1470. Kritovoulos wrote in praise of Mehmed II, opening up the biography in dedication "To the Supreme Emperor, King of Kings, Mehmed the fortunate, the victor"⁵⁵. The intended audience for this history included the sultan himself as well as future historians studying the rise of the Ottoman Empire. Kritovoulos therefore used words and phrases that would appeal to the sultan. He wrote about the eloquence, bravery, skill, and leadership abilities of Mehmed II extensively and included information about

⁵⁵ Kritovoulos. *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, trans. Charles T. Riggs. Princeton University Press, 1954, 3

the strength of the Ottoman military. In his description of the organization of the military, Kritovoulos explained the importance of Janissaries to the sultan because of their role as bodyguards and in protecting the empire⁵⁶. Kritovoulos acknowledged the central role Janissaries played in Ottoman conquest as well as how their existence emphasized the control of the sultan over his territory. However, he also detailed the violent aspects of a Janissary attack. During the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Kritovoulos wrote that within the city streets, “a great slaughter occurred of those who happened to be there”⁵⁷. Men, women, and children were robbed, enslaved, and killed without discrimination. Though the siege was successful, Kritovoulos did not shy away from the terror that followed the Ottoman soldiers into the city.

An interesting aspect of Kritovoulos’ work is the separation between himself and the history being told. The clearest influence of Greek historiography on him is in “his use of the ancient geographical names—calling the Albanians Illyrians, the Hungarians Paeonians, the Serbs the Triballi, the Danube River the Ister, the Black Sea the Euxine, etc.”⁵⁸. Besides this, his words do not strongly come off as originating from a Greek source. He was not a witness of the events he wrote about, instead relying on the accounts from others. He did not insert himself as a character in the story of the Ottoman Empire. Instead, he attempted to tell the truth of the chronicled events but understands that his judgment in the book will be influenced by his position as a Greek among the Ottomans⁵⁹. Even though Kritovoulos generally wrote about the positive aspects of Janissaries and Ottomans, his perspective as an outsider is nuanced. The battles and bloodshed that were an inherent part of Mehmed II’s reign, Kritovoulos chose to see this as a transfer of power and prosperity that went from the Romans to the Byzantines before

⁵⁶ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, 15

⁵⁷ Ibid., 71

⁵⁸ Riggs, Charles T. *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, viii

⁵⁹ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, 10-11

ending in the hands of the Ottomans⁶⁰. To him, Janissaries can be seen as instruments used by the sultan to declare authority over his domain. While they were certainly successful, they caused lots of destruction and violence.

Konstantin Mihailović's *Memoirs of a Janissary* further complicates ideas about perceptions toward Janissaries. Mihailović was a Serbian Janissary in the fifteenth century who wrote about his time in the Corps in a memoir intended for a European Christian audience. Unlike Kritovoulos, Mihailović despised the Ottomans and Mehmed II. He criticized Islam and warned Christendom about the dangers it posed to Europe. He described the sultan as a man who “deceived under truce wherever he could; afterward he paid no heed that he had not kept a truce with someone”⁶¹. In other words, Ottomans would do whatever it took to achieve their goals. Furthermore, Mihailović distrusts Janissaries even though he was one. He and his brothers were taken as part of the devshirme when they were young teenagers and enslaved. He tried to escape back into Christendom multiple times, finding success and refuge with Hungarians in 1463⁶². During his tenure as a Janissary, Mihailović took part in several important campaigns, most notably the 1453 siege of Constantinople and the 1462 attack against Vlad III of Wallachia. It is in these accounts that Mihailović's true perceptions about Janissaries and Ottomans emerge.

Throughout his memoir, Mihailović distanced himself from the other soldiers by using phrases such as “the infantry” or “the Janissaries”⁶³, suggesting that he did not see himself as one. He saw himself as an outsider in an insider's position. During the siege of Constantinople, Mihailović noted the important role that Janissaries had in taking down the city. Though it is unconfirmed, Mihailović's reported that the Greek Emperor Constantine's head was brought to

⁶⁰ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, 12

⁶¹ Mihailović Konstantin. *Memoirs of a Janissary*. University of Michigan, 1975, 44

⁶² Ibid., 71

⁶³ Ibid., 67

Mehmed II by a Janissary⁶⁴, suggesting that they were the ones to end the Byzantine dynasty. This led to Janissaries having a bad reputation among the Greeks, and further cemented Mihailović's negative depiction of them as they destroyed a significant Christian entity. However, while Mihailović disliked the Janissaries, he admired their power and success. He praised the organization of the Ottoman military structure and how effective they were in battle, stating that "If you pursue him [a Janissary], he will flee; but if he pursues you, you will not escape"⁶⁵. Mihailović also economically and politically benefited from his position as a Janissary. Although he was not enthusiastic about his role in life, the sultan appointed him to guard a fortress, writing that "he gave me fifty Janissaries for the garrisoning of the fortress. And he gave me a half-year's wages for each of the Janissaries"⁶⁶. If he wanted to, Mihailović could have made more money and advanced further up the ranks. Instead, he wrote about his personal experiences within the Ottoman Empire to warn Christian Europe about the threat of Janissaries who he thought would win nearly every battle they fought.

A central event in both Kritovoulos and Mihailović's accounts is the siege of Constantinople. It showcased the power of Janissaries to the rest of Europe and brought more legitimacy to Ottoman territory. It was at this moment that the ruthless efficiency of the Janissaries was established in histories, memoirs, and artwork, such as this miniature from *Chronique des Empereurs*.

⁶⁴ Mihailović, *Memoirs*, 47

⁶⁵ Ibid., 86

⁶⁶ Ibid., 71



David Aubert, *Chronique des Empereurs*, 1462

Figure 6: Siege of Constantinople. 1453

Kritovoulos emphasized the valor and experience of the infantry as they were brought in to finalize the fall of the city but seemed horrified by the plundering that occurred within the city walls⁶⁷. Similarly, Mihailović noted that Constantinople would not have been taken by the Ottomans if it were not for the efforts of the Janissaries and the violent strategies of Mehmed II⁶⁸. Despite the fact that these two writers had different perspectives on how they regarded the Ottomans, both shared similar sentiments about the actions of Janissaries as they besieged Constantinople. While there is some question about the legitimacy of both their accounts—as it is unsure if Mihailović was truly part of the battle and Kritovoulos was relying on other sources—the correlations between their stories must have some sense of truth to them.

The History of Mehmed the Conqueror and *Memoirs of a Janissary* offer complex perspectives about Janissaries that are highlighted when looked at side-by-side, especially considering that they were written around the same time. Both authors can be considered “outsiders”: Kritovoulos was Greek and Mihailović was Serbian. However, the two wrote from “internal” perspectives, from the point of view of an imperial historian and of a member of the Janissary Corps. In their descriptions of the siege of Constantinople, both authors write about the

⁶⁷ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, 69

⁶⁸ Mihailović, *Memoirs*, 46

events of the attack and the soldiers who partook in it in similar ways. Where they differed was in their messages. Kritovoulos intended to demonstrate the victories of the Ottomans under the leadership of Mehmed II. He wanted to record the battles, speeches, and achievements of the sultan and his armies. Mihailović, on the other hand, wanted to warn Christian Europe about the same aspects of the Ottoman Empire that Kritovoulos lauded. Kritovoulos and Mihailović show that it is not a simple task to categorize internal versus external cultural perceptions of the Janissaries. There were overlapping identities caused by the multi-religious and multi-ethnic makeup of Ottoman society. Regardless of this, the complicated perspectives of Janissaries were shared among many people.

Conclusion

A look into accounts written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries about Janissaries reveals that while they were seen as ruthless and powerful, there was deep-rooted admiration and envy over political and military successes and powers. Artwork, histories, memoirs, and travel accounts originating from both internal and external sources help prove that ideas circulated about Janissaries and their status as imperial slaves and powerful figures were complex. Previously existing notions of identity and power within the Ottoman Empire are challenged by the Janissaries and their status as slaves because of their influence and social mobility.

The immense political power held by Janissaries inside of the imperial court was not seen in many places. Their proximity to the sultan as well as their influence over the line of succession was notorious throughout the empire. When most people think of slaves, they do not think of educated, trained, and paid soldiers. The sheer amount of mobility that Janissaries had compared to other countries and empires at this time suggests that a looser economic and social structure was present within the Ottoman court. Earlier sultans such as Mehmed II and Süleyman I often fought alongside their soldiers in battles, which further shifts ideas about a strict hierarchy.

Because of the conflicting lights Janissaries were viewed in, it is clear that Ottomans and other Europeans alike were both uncomfortable with the growing power of the Corps. In 1826 during the “Auspicious Incident”, the Janissaries were finally abolished by Sultan Mahmud II who had grown tired of the revolts and sultanic murders instigated by the slave soldiers. By this point, the guidelines for recruiting Janissaries had become lax and now allowed for Muslim-born

boys to join as well as get married. While their composition had changed, the reputation and power of Janissaries had remained.

By applying knowledge about the power of Janissaries to Ottoman-European interactions, it becomes easier to understand how outsiders viewed the Ottoman military. Events such as the siege of Constantinople and the advance into Hungary were successful because of the Janissaries. They were feared in Europe because everyone knew how organized they were as a military unit. While the Ottomans made significant advances into European territories, they also had control in parts of north Africa, Anatolia, and the Arabian Peninsula. The vast amount of land taken under Ottoman control in a relatively short amount of time was impressive yet frightening.

It is also important to note that the Ottomans represented the growth of Islam. While there were significant populations of Christians, Jews, and other religions in Ottoman territory, Muslim Turks were in control. They were the ones with the power to enslave Christian boys from conquered areas, which would sour interactions between the Ottomans and European Christians. The Safavid and Mughal Empires were also Islamic empires thriving at this time, but the Ottomans were closest to Europe and had more interactions with them through trade and warfare. The Islamic influences from Persia and India were distant, so the Ottomans became the focus of frontier conflicts, causing Janissaries to become subjects of intrigue for Christian Europe.

The distinction between internal and external perspectives is broken down when examining the Janissary system. They were born Christian, in European or other outside territories, and brought to Istanbul where they were converted to Islam and had the chance to be politically and socially powerful while still remaining as slaves. The Ottoman Empire was a

multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire that ultimately was an important part of Europe. The ways people understand Janissaries is not black and white; what once started as a way to consolidate power in Anatolia developed into an organized military and slave system. Janissaries are just one example of how cross-cultural perceptions can reveal so much about a place, system, history, or group of people. Historical accounts can be limiting, but by closely examining and comparing them, understandings about the world can transcend their set definitions.

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