

Ottoman military organization (1800–1918)

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The long nineteenth century was an age of reorganization for the Ottoman military. Many European and American observers at the time glorified this process as a reform that signified the “westernization” of the military. This attitude was reproduced in the twentieth century by scholars of Middle Eastern and Ottoman history in the context of “modernization.” In a rather Orientalist approach, they constructed a linear, progressive story about the so called modernization of Turkey, which seemed designed to justify the emergence of a secularist and westernist regime in post-Ottoman Turkey founded and monitored by praetorian generals. According to this version, late Ottoman history from the middle of the eighteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth had represented a confrontation between the so-called reformist/progressive statesmen in favor of westernization and their conservative/traditionalist opponents. It was argued that as a consequence of successive defeats against non-Muslim/European forces the “progressive party” in the Ottoman bureaucracy had finally discovered Europe and came to believe that the state could be saved only if the Ottoman military was reorganized in the fashion of its non-Muslim adversaries.

In fact, the dynamics of late Ottoman military reform were not much different than its contemporary rivals in continental Europe. Looking at the history of modern European warfare, one can easily conclude that the defeated often tend to imitate the victorious, in the hope of taking revenge. Each of the Austrian, Prussian, and Russian military reforms in the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had followed

either a catastrophic defeat on the battlefield or an invasion of their country. However, even before their military defeats at the end of the eighteenth century the Ottoman political elite did not hesitate to make military technology transfers from Europe or to employ non-Muslim experts in arms production.

On the other hand, the motivations behind the late Ottoman military reorganization and state-building efforts were not triggered by foreign affairs alone. Recent studies on Ottoman economic history have shown that increasing privatization and monetization in the Ottoman land-based economy from the mid-seventeenth century on strengthened local elites as tax collectors and suppliers of military manpower on behalf of central government. As a consequence of this the Ottoman political system became rather decentralized and contractual. Local magnates and governors in various parts of the empire, but especially in Egypt, the Balkans, Anatolia, and Iraq, proved to be an additional force in Ottoman high politics, alongside the palace, the bureaucracy of the Sublime Porte, the religious bureaucracy, and the Janissaries. For the central government in Istanbul, the hidden agenda behind the military reforms of the nineteenth century was the restoration of its monopoly of coercion – which was expected to ensure its monopoly of political and fiscal power.

THE OTTOMAN SEARCH FOR “NEW ORDER” IN THE AGE OF NAPOLEONIC WARS

The first modern attempt to form the nucleus of a new regular and standing central army instead of the existing organization of Janissaries, which had constituted the main body of the Ottoman infantry since the

fifteenth century, was made by Sultan Selim III in 1792. Following defeat by an Austro-Russian coalition, he asked his top bureaucrats for proposals regarding the reorganization of the army. Almost all of them were of the opinion that new “state soldiers” should be recruited and trained in accordance with contemporary European techniques of “drill and discipline.” Existing Janissaries, mercenaries, and forced volunteers, they argued, had not proven to be obedient and skilled soldiers.

The new regiments formed with the sultan’s approval were called the New Order (*Nizam-i Cedid*). To avoid the resistance of opponents (including the Janissaries), they were presented to the public as a branch of the existing army. However, with their two barracks built outside of Istanbul city center, and their French-style uniforms, drill, and training techniques, they clearly indicated the intention of restructuring the military.

With close relations to the new republican regime in France, the Ottoman government did not hesitate to ask the French ambassador in Istanbul for an official military mission – consisting of officers, technicians, and drill sergeants – to train the new recruits and to improve the armaments industry. Soon after the arrival of the French mission, however, the Egyptian expedition of Napoleon in 1798 interrupted Franco-Ottoman diplomatic and military relations. Ironically, one of the regiments of the New Order troops trained by French officers successfully resisted the invading Napoleonic forces. Joining the anti-Napoleon coalition of European states, the Ottoman government replaced the French military mission with British and German officers and technicians who succeeded in improving training, arms manufacturing, and rebuilding of fortifications.

The nucleus of the new army consisted of approximately ten thousand officers and

other ranks. Though this was not large, the taxes levied to finance it caused remarkable disquiet among local magnates, peasants, and urbanites throughout the empire. The New Order was crushed only fifteen years after its creation in May 1807 by a popular uprising led by Janissaries during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1806–1808. A few months later, the Ottoman capital was the stage of a second violent confrontation between the troops of Alemdar Mustafa Pasha on the one side and Janissaries on the other. Mustafa Pasha, an ambitious local governor from the Balkan town of Ruschuk (located in today’s Bulgaria), invaded Istanbul to support the dethroned Sultan Selim III. He was appointed grand vizier and, although he was not able to prevent the execution of Sultan Selim III, Alemdar tried to revitalize the military reforms and enlisted his own mercenaries as “state soldiers” to form the nucleus of a new central imperial army. Thereafter he summoned some of the leading magnates from different regions of the empire to come to a compromise concerning the future of the state. Accepting a constitution-like document called “The Treaty of Union” (*Sened-i İttifak*) in September 1808, these members of a burgeoning local bourgeoisie hoped to legitimize their existing power and wealth in return for assisting the Ottoman army when requested to do so. However, the traditional Ottoman leadership in Istanbul did not tolerate these newcomers and organized a plot against them. Istanbul once again became the center of a civil war, with the rebels successfully postponing the “new order” reforms for the next twenty years.

DESTRUCTION OF THE JANISSARIES: COUP D’ÉTAT OR MILITARY REFORM?

The Greek Rebellion in Wallachia and the Morean Peninsula (1821–1826) was a

turning point in Ottoman history. After five years of counterinsurgency operations, the Ottoman central government was able to quiet the uprising, but not without the military support of its semi-independent governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha. The rebellion demonstrated that the Janissaries, coerced volunteers, and mercenaries were nothing more than an uncoordinated and disorganized association of fighters compared to the recently established regular army and navy of Muhammad Ali Pasha. The latter had inherited the unfinished project of the late Sultan Selim III and he attempted to form a standing army consisting mainly of conscripted native Egyptian Arab peasants trained by French officers and led by Turkish, Albanian, and Circassian commanders. Sultan Mahmud II, pursuing a policy of eliminating the local holders of power in Anatolia and the Balkans to restore the sultan's authority in these territories, did not keep his promise to grant more land and tax revenue to Muhammad Ali in return for his support against the Greek rebels. Instead, the sultan initiated a military reorganization project to enable him to confront his main domestic rival. After the news from Morea that the rebels had finally been defeated on April 23, 1826, discussions about forming a new military force were restarted in Istanbul following eighteen years of silence.

Only one month later, at the end of May 1826, the newly established musketeer infantry companies appeared on the training ground. Being afraid of their reaction against this organizational innovation, the government tried to convince the Janissaries to accept it by using the argument that the state faced an emergency caused by Greek and Serbian rebels backed by British and Russian support. High religious officials were ordered to give sermons that it was a religious obligation to oppose the enemy "with their own arms and techniques."

However, only three weeks later, on June 14, the last Janissary mutiny in Ottoman history broke out. This movement was led by middle- and low-grade officers who were supported by civilian Janissaries such as porters, coffeehouse owners, and manual laborers. However, the palace and the Sublime Porte were better prepared than their predecessors had been for a violent clash in the center of the Ottoman capital. Cannons fired upon the Janissary barracks, while other military forces, joined by students of religious schools and Muslim inhabitants of Istanbul, marched against the rebels. The government forces put down the mutiny on the same day it began. Approximately two thousand rebels were executed in Istanbul and many more were banished either to frontier fortresses in the Balkans or to their home provinces. Two days later, on June 17, it was officially announced that the Janissary Corps was abolished throughout the empire.

With the exception of some provinces (including Bosnia) where Janissaries were able to resist for several months because of their close commercial and social bonds with local officials and powerholders, the abolition of this four-centuries-old institution was realized more easily than expected. Although the estimated number of Janissaries at the time was seventy thousand, only thirty thousand of them were combat soldiers; the rest were officials and civilians who received the pay that originally had gone to combat soldiers, but which had been traded by third parties over the years as some sort of state bonds. In fact, from the mid-seventeenth century on, the Janissaries had gradually lost their role as the main combat force in the Ottoman army. Nevertheless, because of their continuing privileges concerning the carrying of arms and immunity from taxation, the Janissaries continued to act as an influential group in domestic political, social, and economic

affairs. In many towns of the empire they became involved in commercial activities of all kinds, sometimes establishing monopolies, sometimes playing the role of a trade union for their protégés among the riffraff of Istanbul. It was because of this that some nineteenth-century British agents in the Ottoman Empire – such as Stratford Canning, Adolphus Slade, and David Urquhart – described the Janissary Corps as the “representative of people” and wondered whether the post-Janissary regime might be a more repressive one, giving the sultan a loyal and apolitical military instrument; their concerns were not misplaced, given the history of the new Ottoman regular army as a domestic counterinsurgency force from 1826 to 1918.

DRILL IN UNIFORM: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NEW REGULAR ARMY

Following the abolition of the Janissaries as the main body of the Ottoman central army, efforts were made in Istanbul to recruit jobless and poor youngsters aged 15–25 for the new army: “The Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad” (*Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediyye*). The new army was planned to consist of eight regiments with a total of twelve thousand officers and other ranks. Although the recruits were expected to join the ranks voluntarily on a professional basis, low wages and the twelve-year obligatory service was not attractive to many young men. During the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, which occurred only two years after the founding of the new Ottoman army, the urgent need for more troops was met by coercing draftees. Local officials preyed upon them and sometimes sent them in chains to army camps. However, many of these “volunteers” were sick, old, or unskilled, providing horseless

cavalries and unarmed infantries who fled from the battlefield at the first opportunity.

Although the new army was officially imagined as an all-Muslim community, many Muslims tried to avoid both voluntary and mandatory military service. Under the leadership of their feudal and tribal chiefs, rural and tribal communities of ethnic Bosnians, Albanians, Kurds, Yezidees, Arab Bedouins, Lazes, and Turcomans fiercely resisted conscription for dozens of years, and proved willing to give service only as undisciplined mercenaries during campaigns.

In the first ten years, from 1828 to 1836, the number of recruits was reported to have reached 161,036 soldiers. Of every ten draftees, however, five were lost because of epidemics, four disappeared as war losses (deserters, captives, deaths), and the remaining one was dismissed. Those who were able to retire after twelve years of obligatory service constituted a very small minority. In addition to the main body, a second branch was created in 1837 as a pool of reserves who would be employed in the agricultural sector during peacetime, except for short terms of training. The number of these reserve (*redif*) recruits was reported at 85,000 in 1838.

For the Ottoman political elite, the key attributes of the new army were “discipline and drill.” However, the army lacked the skilled officers to teach European drill and maneuvers. Husrev Pasha, the second commander in chief and the real founding father of the new army, when grand admiral of the Ottoman army, had employed a French sergeant named Gaillard as the instructor of the model troops he formed following the destruction of the Janissaries. Husrev presented him to the sultan who, after attending a military exercise led by Gaillard, appointed him as the instructor of his recently established infantry troops. Gaillard was succeeded by a Piedmontese

émigré captain, Giovanni Timoteo Calasso, who came to Istanbul following service in various countries (including a short term among the Greek rebels). He became the founder of regular cavalry squadrons in the new army and replaced the centuries-old Ottoman way of riding, saddle, and stirrup with those of Hungarian hussars.

In the late 1820s Istanbul seems to have been an attractive place for adventurous and émigré European officers of middle and low grades who were willing to accept the low salaries and positions offered by Ottoman government. However, by the 1830s, official military missions replaced individual career-seekers. European powers such as Prussia, Britain, France, Austria, and even Russia vied with one another to send their officers, engineers, and technicians to Istanbul. Such initiatives, however, were not limited to technical assistance: European and Ottoman governments alike attempted to use military missions as a diplomatic instrument for establishing political alliances. But sometimes Ottoman statesmen did not know how and where to employ the European officers sent to them. Most of these European officers were used as drill sergeants or instructors rather than in higher command positions because they were non-Muslims. But there were other reasons: the Ottoman commander in chief, Husrev Pasha, for instance, did not appoint any European to a command position because these were filled by his and the sultan's own retainers. Often illiterate, these appointees were not suitable to command regular troops. Only a small number of foreign engineers and officers were efficiently employed in tasks such as the improvement of fortifications at the Dardanelles or frontier zones, and in the mechanization of Ottoman rifle and cannon manufacturing.

Beside the two imperial engineering academies, founded in the 1770s to educate

officers for the army and navy, the first Imperial Military School for Officers was inaugurated in 1836. The next year another school was opened for artillery. At the same time, Ottoman cadets were sent for the first time to military academies in Paris, London, Vienna, and Berlin – another practice borrowed from Muhammad Ali Pasha's Egypt. The Ottoman officer and general staff education was based mainly on the contemporary French military school curriculum. The Prussian lieutenant colonel W. L. Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, who came to Istanbul in 1883 under the German military reform mission and stayed till 1896, revised this rather theoretical military training, attempting to make Ottoman staff officers more aware of the practice of military science.

TOWARDS A NATION-IN-ARMS: THE EVOLUTION OF OTTOMAN CONSCRIPTION PRACTICE

Following the catastrophic defeat against the forces of Muhammad Ali Pasha and the death of the authoritarian sultan Mahmud II, the Ottoman central government announced the Imperial Edict of Gulhane at the end of 1839, which guaranteed universal respect for the life, honor, and property of all Ottoman subjects, as well as equality at court, and a just distribution of the burden of taxation and military service. In this document military service was defined as the religious/patriotic duty of all Muslim males for the sake of the "defense of the homeland."

During the subsequent military reorganization of 1843, through which the existing Ottoman regular forces were divided into five armies garrisoned in different regions of the empire, the term of obligatory military service was established as five years, with an additional reserve status of seven years. Conscription was to be regulated by drawing lots

among the Muslim inhabitants of a certain age. But the absence of a population census in all provinces made conscription difficult, and throughout the empire – and especially in the tribal frontier zones – the Muslim population had resisted the census, conscription, and seizure of their arms.

In 1846 a conscription law was enacted for the first time in Ottoman history. It applied to those between the ages of 20 and 25. For each district, a quota was to be determined in regard to its actual population. Those who were not conscripted in one year because of exemptions or the local quota being filled would be transferred to the next year's ballot, until they reached the age of 26. Exceptions were to be made for high-ranking palace and state officials, inhabitants of the capital, students and professors of religious high schools, judges, preachers, the sole male in a family, and the only son of a widow. Furthermore, those who could not serve personally for various reasons could be exempted upon payment of a fee or by arranging for someone to take their place. Buying an exemption in this way became the norm for non-Muslims. The new Ottoman conscription system combined French and Prussian practices: choosing only a proportion of able-bodied men by lots was the main recruitment principle used in France after 1815; maintaining a reserve force was a Prussian innovation formulated during the last years of the Napoleonic Wars.

In 1869 a second wave of military reorganization was planned by Huseyin Avni Pasha, the first formally educated minister of war. First of all, a Prussian-like general staff was established under the ministry of war. Military service was designated as four years, with an additional sixteen years at various levels of reserve status. The second conscription law of 1870 introduced some changes: substitutes were permitted for those who were occupied in a trade, commerce, or

other important jobs. However, with the third law of conscription enacted in 1886, this replacement practice was abolished and even those who were exempted by paying a fee were obliged to attend five months of basic military training. By the same law, the term of active military service was increased to six years, which was decreased in 1909 to three years and in 1913 to two.

In 1909, shortly after the beginning of the second Constitutional Period, with its promises of equality for all citizens, many of the exemptions were abolished. However, the majority of non-Muslim Ottoman citizens were unwilling to accept this change, and many of them chose to leave the country to evade the draft. Some non-Muslim draftees were reported to have fled from the battlefield during the Balkan Wars in 1912–1913, but the Ottoman army did have Jewish and Christian privates among its ranks during World War I.

When the regular army had been established in the first half of the nineteenth century, high-ranking Ottoman bureaucrats had favored using Islam as a patriotic mobilization device rather than satisfying the demands of non-Muslims for political emancipation in a system of universal conscription. Although officials explained their decision as arising from the possibility of negative reactions on the part of Muslim privates against non-Muslim officers and from the practical difficulties involved in maintaining harmony between Muslim and non-Muslim privates, the decision was a conservative one. As a consequence of the decision, the Ottoman state was unable to obtain the fullest usage of its heterogeneous population for military purposes – in contrast to rivals such as the Austro-Hungarian monarchy or czarist Russia. The patriotic obligation to serve in the armed forces became a burden imposed on the Muslim population of Anatolia and Ottoman Rumelia.

During World War I the Ottoman conscription regime was transformed by the Ottoman–German joint general staff into a system of total mobilization. Active personnel rose from 295,000 in 1913 to around 800,000 in each of the four years of the war. The total number of recruits has been estimated at 2,873,000, including 2,608,000 army regulars, 80,000–100,000 tribal irregulars, 250,000 gendarmerie, and 15,000 naval men. At the time of the Mudros armistice on October 30, 1918, the total number of men under arms was about 560,000. Organized in eleven armies, the total operational force of the Ottoman military in the war amounted to 36 infantry divisions, fourteen of which were units recreated after the defeat in the Balkan Wars (1912–1913). However, in regions populated by Arab and Kurdish tribes, such as East Anatolia, Syria, Iraq, Arabia, and Yemen, the resistance against conscription continued.

EFFECTIVENESS OF OTTOMAN ARMED FORCES: REGIONAL MILITARY POWER OR DOMESTIC COUNTERINSURGENCY FORCE

In the nineteenth century, nationalized regular armies played a twofold role throughout Europe: war-making abroad and state-making at home. The Ottoman case was no exception. From its establishment in 1826 to the demise of the empire in 1918, the regular army fought three times against Russia: in 1828–1829, in 1853–1855 (in the Crimean War in alliance with France and Britain), and in 1877–1878; twice against Muhammad Ali Pasha's Egyptian army in 1832–1833 and in 1839; against Greece in 1897; against Italy in 1911–1912 (in Libya); against the Balkan League (including Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria) in 1912–1913; and finally against the Allies of the Entente in 1914–1918. Except for the

Crimean War and the Greek War of 1897, none of these conflicts ended in victory for the Ottoman Empire (although it should be noted that the Ottoman army proved to be more effective in World War I than had been expected by contemporary European political and military observers).

On the other hand, the army was often successful in its counter-guerilla and counterinsurgency operations against tribal and rural groups resisting policies of taxation and conscription in Ottoman Bulgaria, Albania, South and East Anatolia, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Libya; it put down the much more politicized uprisings in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1875), in Bulgaria (1876), in Crete (1897), and in Macedonia (1903). These counterinsurgency expeditions, especially those of the Third Army in Macedonia in the early 1900s, turned the army into a reactive and irregular combat force, which may have negatively influenced the capabilities of officers to maneuver larger units in regular warfare.

Groups of irregular hired warriors (*Bashibozuks*) of tribal origin have always been a part of Ottoman counterinsurgency forces. Mercenary groups composed mainly of ethnic Albanian or Laz warriors, semi-independent Kurdish light cavalry battalions formed by Ottoman statesmen in the 1890s, and the Circassian irregular cavalry units of the Ottoman Intelligence Agency during World War I, were among these. However, these irregulars comprised a two-edged sword in the hands of Ottoman authorities. Their use of violence in crushing domestic uprisings and their plundering of civilian populations not only alienated local groups from the Ottoman government, but also caused diplomatic friction between the Sublime Porte and European powers who intervened on behalf of Christian minorities.

The main deficiencies of late Ottoman military forces were the scarcity of

experienced and skilled officers, the absence of communication necessary to carry out complicated offensive maneuvers, the disorganization of logistics and sanitation, the absence of non-commissioned officers, the jealousy and competition between commanders, the incoherence between educated and non-educated officers, and the poor quality of intelligence gathering and processing.

Nevertheless, from the time of the Ottoman–Russian War of 1877–1878 onward, the Ottoman military was reported to be superior to its Russian rival in its use of the most recent military technology, such as heavy Krupp cannons and breech-loading, rapid-fire rifles of American and British origin. In the adoption of operational and tactical innovations such as trench warfare and triangular infantry divisions and corps, the Ottoman general staff – advised by the German military mission – was among the most proficient of the combatant states.

As a consequence of the various wars and domestic counterinsurgency operations in which they had participated, late Ottoman educated-officer cadres formed a self-image of themselves as “saviors of the state and nation.” Politicized officers and cadets were directly involved in Ottoman palace politics through the *coups d'état* of May 1876, July 1908, April 1909, and January 1913. The military dictatorship of the Committee for Union and Progress (1913–1918), the Young Turk party, as well as the establishment of a military republic in post-Ottoman Turkey following the “War for Independence” (1919–1922), can be deemed the by-products of late Ottoman military history.

SEE ALSO: Balkan Wars (1912–1913); Crimean War (1853–1856); Greco-Turkish War (1897); Janissaries; Muhammad Ali

(Kavalah Mehmet Ali Pasa) (ca. 1769–1849); Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878); Russo-Turkish Wars (pre-1878); Turco-Italian War (1911–1912).

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