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## Irritable Istanbulites: Janissaries, The Military Residents of Istanbul

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**Abstract:** *The Janissary Odjak was one of the most important military units in the Ottoman army. Its human resources were supplied through the devshirme system. Most studies conducted within the scope of modern historiography have focused on the importance of the devshirme practice in terms of state administration and on the Janissaries' role in military and political history. Accordingly, much attention has been paid to their resilience on the battlefield or to the rebellions they led in the capital. In addition to their importance in military and political history, the Janissaries were also part of Istanbul's history. They played an active role in the daily life of the capital city, both as Istanbulites and as part of their duties. In this essay, which regards the Janissaries as residents of Istanbul, the negative characteristics attributed to them in historical sources will be discussed, and the effects of the devshirme practice on human psychology will be drawn attention. Rather than a state-centered approach that evaluates the Janissary Odjak solely as an institution, this essay can be described as a human-focused social history analysis that considers the psychological conditions of the members of the Janissary Odjak and their devshirme origins.*

**Keywords:** *Devshirme System, Adjemi Oglans, Janissaries, Janissary Odjak, Psychological Trauma, Social History*

### **Asabî İstanbullular: Yeniçeriler, İstanbul'un Asker Sâkinleri**

**Öz:** *Yeniçeri Ocağı, Osmanlı ordusundaki önemli askeri birimlerden birisi idi. Ocağın için ihtiyaç duyulan insan kaynağı ise devshirme sistemi aracılığıyla temin ediliyordu. Modern tarih yazıcılığın kapsamında gerçekleştirilen çalışmaların büyük bir bölümü, devshirme uygulamasının devlet idaresi açısından önemine, yeniçerilerin ise askeri ve siyasi tarih bağlamındaki rollerine odaklandılar. Dolayısıyla daha çok savaş meydanlarındaki dayanıklılıkları ya da başkentte gerçekleştirdikleri isyanlar göz önünde bulunduruldu. Askerî ve siyasi tarihteki önemlerinin yanı sıra yeniçeriler İstanbul tarihinin de bir parçası idiler. Gerek birer İstanbullu olarak ve gerekse sorumlulukları gereği şehrin gündelik hayatında aktif olarak rol aldılar. Yeniçerileri İstanbul'un sâkinleri olarak addeden bu deneme dâbilinde tarihî kaynaklarda onlara izafe edilen olumsuz özellikler tartışmaya açılacak ve devshirme uygulamasının insan psikolojisi üzerindeki etkilerine dikkat çekilecektir. Yeniçeri Ocağını sadece bir*

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*müesseseler olarak değerlendiren devlet merkezli bir yaklaşımdan ziyade, ocak mensuplarının psikolojik durumlarını ve onların devşirme kökenlerini göz önünde bulunduran bir yaklaşımı gözetilen bu denemenin insan odaklı bir toplumsal tarih analizi olduğu söylenebilir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Devşirme Sistemi, Acemi Oğlanlar, Yeniçeriler, Yeniçeri Ocağı, Psikolojik Travma, Toplumsal Tarih*

## Introduction

Whatever their perceived invincibility, patience and bravery under fire, Janissaries were in the final analysis still mere mortals. As an elite corps they had many special privileges, including judicial immunity, that set them apart from average civilians. Likewise they were able to endure (unlike the average man in the street) exceptional levels of privation, and had high thresholds for physical pain. But the fact that their limits, breaking points and perceptions of the tolerable and intolerable were different from the average, and defined by stricter codes of military discipline, made them no less real as absolutes. When Janissaries felt they had been denied due process or treated arbitrarily, they were as ready to protest, both on and off the battlefield, as the rest of mankind. (Murphey, 1999, pp. 159-160).

For many years, modern Turkish historiography has approached the Janissary Ođjak from a state-centered perspective, like classical Ottoman historiography. In the context of this state-centered approach, a “paradigm of decline and corruption” emerged. This paradigm was based on the assumption that the Janissary Ođjak was once an ideal military structure that later became corrupt. In historical studies shaped by the ideology of the Republic, a “dichotomy of supporters and opponents of modernism” was constructed, where the Janissary Ođjak was viewed as a military unit representing “reactionism.” In recent years, a group of academics has moved away from the state-centered approach, describing the process as an “alteration.” They have shifted from viewing the Janissary Ođjak merely as a state body and instead emphasized a human-centered approach. They focused on the Janissaries active in the economic life of Istanbul and drew attention to the Janissaries’ Istanbulite identity. They portrayed them as an element trying to prevent the absolutist policies of the sultan and his administrators and as the opposing voice of the people of the capital (Yıldız, 2022, pp. 201-211). Most of these analyses, which consider economic factors, naturally revolve around the Janissary revolts or use details of the revolts as data.

Research focusing on the Janissaries cannot be considered independent of the word “rebellion.”<sup>1</sup> However, I would like to approach this phenomenon from a

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 28 large-scale uprisings centered in Istanbul between the end of the sixteenth century and 1826, six resulted in the deposition of the Sultan. It should be noted that not all of these uprisings can be attributed solely to the Janissaries. There were also rebellions involving the Cebeci and Sipahi troops. Sometimes, contradicting the image of the “rebellious Janissary” ingrained in memory, they also played a role in suppressing rebellions. For example, although they acted together at the beginning of the events in 1622 and 1632, the Janissaries sided with Sultan Murad IV in the latter case, leaving the Sipahis in the lurch. It should also be noted that there was a rivalry between the Janissaries and the Sipahis, and tensions sometimes escalated into violence and deaths (Yıldız, 2022, pp. 213-217, 229, 240). Regardless of which side they were on, it can be said that a rebellion in Istanbul was unimaginable without their involvement, and they played a crucial role as an important element of political balance.

different perspective. I will focus on “a human psychology built on the phenomenon of rebelling against ill fortune” and a tradition shaped in the context of this psychology. The Janissaries, remembered with their white headgear (börk) and long mustaches, are naturally first associated with military history. The role of these irritable children of the capital city in urban life can not be considered independent of their military identity. On the other hand, it would be an oversimplification to think that their bullying and freedom of action stemmed solely from their military privileges, as this ignores the fact that they were also flesh-and-blood human beings. From my point of view, the psychology of devshirme lay behind the aggressive attitudes and behaviors of the Janissaries that negatively impacted the city’s daily life. There is no doubt that they endured a difficult process until they became Janissaries due to their devshirme origins. Their aggressive personalities, shaped by a difficult psychological process, came to the forefront as a phenomenon defining the Janissary Odjak over time and allowed them to become an important element of political balance.

Theoretically, the Janissaries were the servants of the Sultan. On the other hand, this servitude was the kind of servitude that could occasionally claim the sultans’ lives. The janissaries, who frequently revolted and could dethrone the sultans, also took their place on the stage of history as a dynamic that shaped Ottoman political history. So much so that when a sultan passed away, one of the first goals of his sons who wanted to succeed him on the throne was to gain the support of the Janissaries. The accession of Selim I to the throne is a meaningful example of showing the political power of the Janissary Odjak. With the support of the Janissaries, Selim was able to overthrow his father Sultan Bayezid II, who was still alive, by gaining superiority over his brother Ahmed. Let us also recall that two years later, during the Chaldıran (Çaldıran) campaign, the same Janissaries fired a warning shot at Selim’s otağ (tent of the Sultan) because they were short of food (Varlık, 1993, p. 193).

It would not be wrong to say that the Janissaries, the guards of the Ottoman Sultan’s sultanate, built a sultanate of their own in the daily life of Istanbul. Considering this, the study will focus on the Janissaries’ identity as Istanbulites rather than their roles in wars and rebellions. The first part of the essay focuses on the psychological tension created by the devshirme system and the human psychology molded by this tension. Subsequently, the discussion addresses another form of psychological tension added to this process: the obligation to constantly face death and to kill as a requirement of being an elite soldier. In the context of this psychological pressure, which was undoubtedly universal in military terms, the Janissaries faced another exceptional challenge that made their duties even more difficult: having to kill people who once shared their faith. The second part of the essay examines the collective attitude developed to cope with both forms of psychological tension and the military tradition built on this attitude. The final section of the essay first focuses on the process of the Janissaries’ inclusion in the economic life of Istanbul. Then, the methods such as bullying and extortion they use to get involved in commercial life are associated with a tradition built on traumatic psychology. The essay concludes by discussing how the Janissaries’ involvement in the Istanbul economy changed the Janissaries’ Istanbulite identity. In this essay, the terms “Janissary Odjak” and “Adjemi Oglans (Boys)” have been preferred to be used

in their original forms rather than their English equivalents. As will be explained in the following section, the English terms do not fully capture the meaning of these concepts. In Turkish, the word “odjak” means much more than military troop, and this detail is also of particular importance concerning the analysis of the psychology of devshirme.

### **A Painful and Fatiguing Process: From Being a Devshirme to Being a Janissary**

How did the Janissary culture leave its mark on the urban life of Istanbul? What did the image of the Janissary mean for the other inhabitants and guests of Istanbul? We have sufficient historical data to answer such questions, and it does not say very favorably about them. But what was the underlying reason for these unfavorable impressions of the Janissaries? The devshirme system is one of the most important phenomena to be considered when answering this question.

The Janissary Odjak was a military unit built on the devshirme system. The human resources of the Janissary Odjak were Christian children who were deracinated from their families, were converted to Islam, and were trained as soldiers. As a requirement of the process of transforming from a small border principality into a political power, the Ottoman Empire also had to build an institutional structure and form regular military units. The dynasty, which wanted to increase its conquests, needed a military force that would always be at its disposal. Previously, there was a practice of using one out of every five captives captured during raids for state service. Some changes were made in this practice. When the need for soldiers arose, delegations were sent to the Christian settlements in the Ottoman-ruled lands. Through these committees, a new human resource was created by selecting healthy and strong children and young people between the ages of 8 and 20. With the practice of devshirme, not only the need for soldiers but also the need for bureaucrats in the palace was met. The intelligent and talented ones among the devshirme children were selected and sent to a special school (*Enderûn*) in the Court. They were trained as bureaucrats there (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, pp. 5-14). It should also be noted that most of the children removed from the lineage were intended to be raised as soldiers. Only a few had the opportunity to receive education in the palace. The rest of them went through a series of stages until they were recruited into the Janissary Odjak. The children were given to Turkish farmers to learn Turkish and acclimatize to the new culture, and after working there for a while, they were sent to the Adjemi Odjak.

Adjemi (Acemi) means novice, beginner, newbie, freshman, rookie, and so on in Turkish. However, the process that the devshirme boys went through in the Adjemi Odjak did not correspond to the training of a boot camp in the modern sense. They were assigned heavy tasks such as working in the Gelibolu and Istanbul shipyards, lading onto transport ships, providing the palace’s need for wood, and carrying stones for construction in the time they spent in the Adjemi Odjak. Until they were recruited into the Janissary Odjak, these children and young people were forced to labor in agricultural and livestock work by farmer families, as well as in hard labor at the Adjemi Odjak. On the one hand, they were adapting to the new culture, while on the other, they were maturing physically (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, pp. 35-42, 146).

Children who were deracinated as part of the devshirme system went through a difficult psychological process before becoming Janissaries. These difficulties

included being taken away from their families, being separated from their cultural environment, being forced to live in a foreign territory, and accommodating themselves to a new way of life. When they became Janissaries, the obligation to attack, fight against, and kill people from communities they had once belonged to was added to this process. It is not wrong to say that there are some advantages and disadvantages of facing such a situation at an early or later age. At this point, I would like to emphasize that I use the term “advantage” with the awareness that these people were in a tragic situation under any circumstances. We can assume that children who were deracinated at a young age adapted to the new cultural environment more easily than older ones, while those between the ages of 15 and 20 coped with the shock of separation from their families more easily but found adapting to the new cultural environment much more difficult. The impact of the difficulties I have listed above on individuals can cause what is called “psychological trauma” within the discipline of psychology. We should consider the prevailing psychological state in a military unit consisting of individuals exposed to a series of traumatic experiences.

The devshirmes, whether became Janissaries or bureaucrats, undoubtedly faced similar difficulties. Of course, the devshirmes who found a place in the Ottoman bureaucracy also had problems that varied according to their positions. On the other hand, they enjoyed a high standard of living in terms of influence, economy, and prestige. In this respect, the case of Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmet Pasha serves as an important example. His appointment of his cousin as the Patriarch of the Serbian Church demonstrates that the pasha maintained contact with his relatives. Additionally, his appointment of another cousin, Mustafa Pasha, a devshirme like himself, as the Beylerbeyi of Buda (Budim) further illustrates that he did not hesitate to use his influence within the empire for the benefit of his close circle (Afyoncu, 2009, pp. 354-357). Within the scope of this study, I will discuss the situation of the devshirmes who did not enjoy the same high standard of living and influence as the mentioned bureaucrats. Other devshirmes who have been excluded from the study are the Bosnians. Historical data shows that Bosnian Muslim children were also brought to Istanbul as part of the devshirme practice. We also know that some of the Muslim families in Bosnia, especially those belonging to the community known as Poturogullari, voluntarily handed over their children to the Ottoman authorities (İlgürel, 1988, p. 324).

### **Harvest of the Devshirme System: Janissaries as Killing Machines**

Apart from the memoirs attributed to Konstantin Mihailović of Ostravica, we do not have any extant primary sources reflecting the psychological state of a Janissary. However, the practice of devshirme was the beginning of an agonizing process not only for those who were deracinated but also for those who were left behind. Historical and folkloric data reveal the extent of the trauma experienced. The situation of those who were deprived of their children can help us understand the psychology of their children. Some sentences in the sermon performed by Isidore Glabas, the metropolitan of Thessaloniki in 1395, contain expressions that make it easier for us to understand the feelings of a man who was exposed to the devshirme practice as a father and a Christian:

What would a man not suffer were he to see a child, whom he had begotten and raised. . . carried off by the hands of foreigners, suddenly and by force, and

forced to change over to alien customs and to become a vessel of barbaric garb, speech, impiety, and other contaminations, all in a moment? Or what would happen, if this would suffice to make it clear, if a man were to find himself as if cut into two parts; and if he were to see the one dismembered section of his body, his son, become a substance of baseness and not used for any good purpose; and to see the remaining section, himself that is, not only useless but dead and full of lamentation and agony? Which one shall the father lament, himself or his son? Shall he lament himself because he has been deprived of the staff of his old age? Because the light of his eyes has perished? Because he will not have his son to send him to his grave in fitting manner, and to perform the other rites and honors? Because he sees that seed which he hoped to offer to God changed into an offering to the devil. . . ? (Vryonis, 1956, pp. 436-437).

The memories of the trauma appear in Bulgarian folk songs, so to speak, a motif of tragedy. One of these songs tells the story of Janissaries who came to Bulgarian lands and divided the captured women among themselves as booty. A girl named Dragana was given to a Janissary of Bulgarian origin. The Janissary took her to his tent, and as they spoke, they discovered that they were siblings. As they entered the tent, the soil around the hearth had already turned red, and a bloody rain had begun to fall outside (Acaroğlu, 1982, p. 179). The sentence attributed to a Janissary of Bulgarian origin in the repeated rhyme of another folk song is very explanatory in terms of our subject. The Janissary uses the expression “They mourn for me while I am alive” for his mother and siblings. In other words, this child who became a devshirme is no different from a living dead in their eyes (Mevsim, 2004, p. 76). Similar motifs reminiscent of this kind of tragedy are also found in Slovak ballads. In one such ballad, which tells the story of an old Slovak woman who served as a maid to a Janissary, it is said that she sang a lullaby to put the Janissary’s son to sleep. Upon hearing the lullaby, the Janissary realizes that the woman is his mother (Sirovátka, 2019, p. 203). Apart from these examples, it is evident that the memory of the Janissaries was used as an important political argument in recent Serbian history. In the propaganda campaign launched in 1988 under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, it was emphasized that Muslims in Sarajevo would create a new generation of Janissaries through Serbian women. The following year, 1989, marked the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, in which the Serbs were defeated by the Ottoman army. Within the context of this propaganda, the battle was cited as the moment when Serbian children began to be made into Janissaries (Volkan, 2004, pp. 228-229). By the mid-1990s, it was observed that parties with opposing political views labeled each other as Janissaries. In 1995, during a media campaign against the Soros Fund, Dragoš Kalajić described young people who accepted Soros Fund scholarships to study abroad as “Janissaries of the new world order.” The discourse of peace activist Nenad Čanak is particularly ironic. He recalled that Serbian children who became Janissaries were often more brutal toward their roots and implied that Slobodan Milošević, whom he described as the “Red Sultan,” behaved like an Ottoman Sultan, with his supporters acting like Janissaries (Živković, 2011, pp. 120-121).

Aside from the tragic trail in the collective memory, we know from the Ottoman law books that Christian subjects of the empire worked for free in mountain passes (Derbent), mines, and castle constructions to be exempt from devshirme practice

(Akgündüz, 1994, p. 134-135; Uzunçarşılı, 1988, pp. 97-113). The Ottoman Empire took advantage of this fear of Christians losing their children and used the offer of exemption from devshirme as a trump card in the negotiations for the surrender of Christian lands. Such exemptions were among the terms of surrender granted in places such as Ioannina, Peloponnese, and Chios (Vryonis, 1956, pp. 439-441; 2005, p. 544). The following sentence in the 1476 law of tribute (*haracî kanun*) clearly shows that the practice of devshirme was also used as a threat: “Send me the names of the infidels who have escaped so that I can have them captured and their sons recruited as Janissaries.” (Akgündüz, 1990, p. 509). The Ottoman administration's response to families who refused to give up their children was severe. A 1705 judgment states that Zeses Karademos, who refused to surrender his children for devshirme, was executed along with them in Naousa, Thessaloniki (Vryonis, 2005, pp. 549-552).

If we go back to those who were deracinated boys, the first order given to them after they were brought to the state center was to convert. The children were first asked to raise the forefinger of their right hand and repeat the Islamic confession of faith.<sup>2</sup> The next step probably caused the first culture shock they experienced: “circumcision” (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, p. 23). In the practice of circumcision, part of the skin covering and protecting the tip of the penis is cut off. Boys in Muslim societies were either circumcised at a very young age by the decisions of their families, or they grew up with the awareness that they would be circumcised before they became adults due to the nature of the culture they belonged to. In other words, there was a state of psychological readiness. Considering that this practice was a rite of passage, we can say that there is also volunteering. This religious tradition is continued in the same way in today's Turkish society. However, devshirme children, due to their Christian origins, were psychologically unprepared for such a practice.

Forced to convert after a difficult journey, these people had to see their former beliefs as heresy and their parents and siblings as infidels. This process took place in a very short time. It would not be wrong to think that they were exposed to a series of shocks. Some lines in the memoirs attributed to Konstantin Mihailović, who was able to revert to his origin after serving as a Janissary in the Ottoman army for a while and died as a Christian, reflect the dilemma and psychological tension of a devshirme who was forced to convert. While describing the Friday prayer of Muslims, he uses the following expression for the sermon performed before the prayer: “They attributed the goodness of Jesus to Muhammad and blamed their evils on Christians.” In his memoirs, his use of the expression “rabid dog” for Sultan Mehmed, in whose army he had to serve for many years, is a first-hand account of the contradiction these people were in. Mihailović's closest comrade on this arduous path was his brother, who, like him, was a Janissary. However, unlike Konstantin Mihailović, he never had the opportunity to share his true feelings with us. He likely continued to guard the gates of the imperial treasury for some time as a loyal servant of the Sultan and died as a Muslim (Mihailović, 1975, p. 17, 113, 137). Considering the difficult process experienced before becoming a Janissary, there is no reason not to think that a type of person has emerged that can be described as aggressive, ruthless, and even a killing

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<sup>2</sup> “Eshedu en lâ ilâhe illallah ve eshedu enne Mohammedan abduhû ve resûluh” It means that I bear witness that there is no deity but God, and I bear witness that Mohammad is the Messenger of God).

machine. Historians agree that the Ottoman government established the Janissary Ođjak because it preferred soldiers with no genealogical ties. It seems that another reason for this preference was their mercilessness and ruthlessness. The mechanism underlying traumatic experiences is that an alien experience occupies the self, prevents it from reaching self-object relations, or forcibly removes the occupied self from the network of integrative object relations in which it feels safe. This occupation is the occupation of the ego. Breaking away from the object relations that constitute the habitual environment of trust has a traumatizing effect. From the subject's point of view, trauma is the result of a kind of relationship loss, prevention, or abandonment. The subject becomes alienated from himself/herself (depersonalization) or his/her environment (derealization). For a traumatic experience to form, the presence of a damaging, shocking, and disruptive traumatic stimulus is not sufficient on its own. In addition, the relational channels that the person has been using and benefiting from to maintain his/her integrity must be closed, and there must be no opportunities available to establish new integrity (Saydam, 2011, pp. 207-208).

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis... The experience of terror and disempowerment during adolescence effectively compromises the three normal adaptive tasks of this stage of life: the formation of identity, the gradual separation from the family of origin, and the exploration of a wider social world (Herman, 2015, p. 51, 61).

The process that devshirme children underwent before becoming Janissaries involved many experiences that experts consider the causes of psychological trauma. A person who is forced to learn an unfamiliar language and convert to a religion in a foreign land was deprived not only of his freedom but also of his family, the cultural environment in which he grew up and the communication he had established with the people around him until that age. Moreover, he had to kill people who were once his co-religionists. Not all of them were as lucky as Konstantin Mihailović. The only way out for these individuals was to "become a successful soldier," and on the path to success, it was essential to be merciless and to kill. From Mihailović's lines, we also learn that they were offered additional incentives. Mihailović states that the Janissaries who brought the head of King Vladislav to the Sultan after the Battle of Varna in 1444 and the head of Emperor Constantine after the conquest of Constantinople were promoted to Sandjak Beylik (Mihailović, 1975, p. 81, 95).

### **Manifestations of Psychological Trauma in Istanbul Urban Life**

It is unthinkable that such a traumatic process would not be reflected in people's attitudes and behavior. Many historical sources emphasize the rule-breaking and rude behavior of people of devshirme origin. The sources emphasize the rule-breaking and rude behavior of those of devshirme origin, which had become part of everyday life in Istanbul and was more common during chaotic situations, such as the death of a reigning sultan, fires, and on days when large crowds gathered, like during celebrations and feasts (bairams). In this regard, the observations of foreign witnesses



who were part of embassy delegations in Istanbul provide us with valuable data on the aggressive behavior of the Adjemi Oglans, candidates to become Janissaries. Nicolas de Nicolay, a member of the French embassy delegation in Istanbul in the mid-16th century, reports that the vast majority of Adjemi Oglans, trained and poisoned by Turkish tradition, were hostile to Christians. According to him, Adjemis, with their rude behavior, were one of the most dangerous types of people living in Turkish lands (Nicolay, 2014, pp. 190-192, 219-221).

Stephan Gerlach, who served as a Protestant preacher in Maximilian II's embassy delegation and was in the Ottoman lands between 1573 and 1576, described the Adjemi Oglans as "a bunch of useless vagabonds" and wrote that they were worse than the Turks. An incident recounted by Gerlach is remarkable as it shows the extent of the Adjemis' excesses. In April 1575, Sultan Murad III saw the Adjemi Oglans drinking in a Greek (Rum) tavern by the sea. When the Adjemi Oglans noticed the Sultan, they said, "We are drinking to your health" and made a toast. Angered by this, Sultan Murad banned drinking. Upon hearing this, the Janissaries, together with the Spahis, boiled over and attacked the Subashi who was attempting to enforce the ban.<sup>3</sup> They sent a letter to the Sultan's Court full of threats because they could not accept that wine was forbidden to them and that they had been handed over to the Subashi unprecedentedly. They threatened to avenge themselves on the Sultan during the next military expedition. The Sultan, who could not risk being let down by the Janissaries in a possible war, reversed his decision and, in response to these threats, abolished the ban on wine. We also learn from Gerlach's lines that they abused their duties. One of the responsibilities of the Janissaries and Adjemi Oglans was to extinguish fires. However, Gerlach reports that the Adjemis went to rob the burning houses instead of putting out the fires. Furthermore, some of the fires that broke out in the homes of wealthy Jews were intentionally set by Adjemis looking to loot (Gerlach, 2010, pp. 100, 185-186, 192-193; 2007, pp. 570-571). Hans Dernschwam, who was part of Emperor Ferdinand's embassy delegation to Sultan Süleyman in 1553, provides similar information about the fires and adds that the French monastery was barely saved from the depredation of the Adjemi Oglans and Janissaries during the fire of January 20, 1555 (Dernschwam, 1992, p. 164).

Salomon Schweigger, who served as a Protestant preacher in the embassy delegation of Rudolf II and was in Istanbul between 1578 and 1581, states that the Adjemis, whom he describes as disobedient and wild, tormented the Greeks and Jews living in the city. They frequently went to taverns and drank without paying. If the saloonkeeper demanded payment, they would beat him and pour the wine barrels onto the floor. They could drub or even kill someone over money; for instance, a member of the embassy delegation once had the Adjemi Oglans beat a Jew. No one dared to fight with them; if one got into a fight, the others would immediately come to his aid (Schweigger, 2004, pp. 184-185). Reinhold Lubenau, who served as a pharmacist in Rudolf II's embassy delegation and was in the Ottoman lands between 1587 and 1589, repeats Schweigger's information. What makes Lubenau's observations remarkable is that he not only reported what he observed but also shared his personal experiences.

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<sup>3</sup> Janissaries and Adjemi Oglans could only be tried within the Janissary Odjak. Even the Subashi, who was responsible for the general order of the city, did not have the authority to try them (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, pp. 622-623).

Lubenau wrote that he changed his path when he saw the Adjemi Oglans, whom he described as raving, impertinent, and aggressive, and explained the reasons for this with a few examples. On the day of the Ramadan feast, the Adjemis walked the streets with musical instruments in their hands, demanding money from Christians and beating up those who refused to give it. Lubenau adds that a servant named Conrad Mehrholt, who had been sent to buy bread, was stabbed by one of the Adjemis. Lubenau also reports that on another day, he and some jeweler friends rented a rowboat for a trip at sea, but the Adjemi Oglans beat them, threw them out of the rowboat, and injured his friends in the head, while he was wounded in the shoulder (Lubenau, 2016a, p. 244, 297, 368-369). Adam Werner, who was in Istanbul in 1616 as the secretary of the embassy delegation sent by Emperor Matthias, reports that an Adjemi he encountered on the road drew his dagger and swore at him. With nowhere to run, Werner had to pull out his knife. The convert accompanying him told the Adjemi that Werner worked for the embassy delegation. The Adjemi then said that he thought Werner was “a Galatian giaour (infidel) dog,” which is why he wanted to kill him. Werner also adds that the Adjemi Oglans had a great hatred towards Christians and were more hostile than the Turks (Werner, 2011, p. 60, 80-81).

As seen, our eyewitnesses, because of their own identity and beliefs, could not understand why the Adjemi Oglans, who were of Christian origin, used violence against Christians. They referred to them with negative adjectives such as aggressive, vagabond, dangerous, raving, wild, impertinent, and disobedient, pointing to these traits as the reason for their actions.<sup>4</sup> I want to approach it from a different perspective. Rather than seeing these negative characteristics as the cause of events, I see them as the result of a traumatic and deeply depressing psychological process. I define their rule-breaking and aggressive behavior as attempts to take revenge on life by individuals who cursed their ill fortune and were in a state of depression. They could not vent their anger at their ill fortune on their superiors or the Muslim population. There were only two options. Either they could take their anger out on each other or non-Muslims. The first option meant loneliness. They had to look out for one another to survive. As our witnesses pointed out, they seem had chosen the second option. Since the Subashi could not try them, they bullied non-Muslims and faced little to no punishment. They could also fabricate a religious discourse to justify

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<sup>4</sup> From the lines of Salomon Schweigger, we understand that he was conscious of the hardships the Adjemis endured. He narrates that these boys were forced to labor as animal herders and learned to fend for themselves in deserted places. In this way, they were brutalized and made ruthless. When it comes to the rude behavior of the Adjemis towards non-Muslims, Schweigger forgets what he had written in the previous lines and uses the adjectives ill-tempered, wild, and worthless vagabonds (Schweigger, 2004, pp. 184-185). We can say that among our witnesses, the person who drew the most attention to the psychological state of the Adjemis was Reinhold Lubenau. His awareness probably stemmed from his being a pharmacist. He wrote that he came across a group of devshirme boys and burst into tears on his way to Istanbul. Many of them were forced to work like slaves in the countryside, caring for and herding animals. Working in freezing temperatures and extreme heat accustomed children to hunger, thirst, and misery, thus brutalizing them and making them more resilient in war. When starts mentioning the evils that the Adjemis do to non-Muslims, Lubenau’s empathy also ends. Just like Schweigger, he uses negative adjectives such as aggressive, raving, and impertinent, and can not associate these characteristics of Adjemis with the process of brutalization he mentioned on the previous page (Lubenau, 2016a, pp. 367-369).

their actions. Nicolay did not understand their psychological state when he accused them of being “more royalist than the king” (Nicolay, 2014, p. 192). Moreover, there was no guarantee that all Adjemis would become Janissaries. In other words, they lived in a constant state of uncertainty.

For the Adjemis, becoming a Janissary was a new opportunity to earn more money and gain additional privileges. Those who showed courage on the battlefield could rise to higher ranks and increase their earnings.<sup>5</sup> However, becoming a Janissary did not erase the traces of the traumatic process they had experienced. Another difficult psychological process awaited them. Membership of an elite military unit provided them important financial opportunities, but it also certainly created new psychological tension. The tension they had to overcome had two dimensions. The first was the tension that comes from constantly facing death. From a military perspective, it is not wrong to say this is a universal phenomenon. The second, as defined by Erdal Küçükyağın as “the contradiction of the warrior,” was equally painful: a warrior was someone who had to kill as part of his duty but also needed forgiveness for this violence, which would be considered a sin by all religions under normal circumstances (Küçükyağın, 2013, pp. 186-188). This psychological tension was also universal, but in the case of the Janissaries, another detail made situation even more difficult. Unlike many other armies in the world, they had to fight against people from communities they once belonged to, return to the land of their birth as occupying soldiers, and kill people there. In the next section, the focus will be on how they coped with this psychological burden and the solutions they came up with. Before that, I would like to show, based on the observations of witnesses who were in Istanbul during different centuries, that the Adjemis continued their aggressive and bullying behavior even after becoming Janissaries.

Hans Dernschwam notes that the Janissaries were tolerated in their drinking, that they obtained alcohol more easily than other Turks, and that after drinking, they behaved arbitrarily and made rude jokes not only against non-Muslims but also against other Turks (Dernschwam, 1992, p. 119). The lines of the traveler Jean Thevenot, who spent nine months in Istanbul between 1655 and 1656, show that not much had changed a century later. His observations indicate that the Janissaries could drink wine without fear of anyone. The situation was not much different during the Ramadan feast. They sprinkled a few drops of rose water on passing Europeans and asked for tips. If those sprinkled with rose water did not give money as a tip, the Janissaries would try to take it by force (Thevenot, 2014, p. 69, 89). An incident reported in the letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, who was Emperor Ferdinand’s envoy in Istanbul between 1556 and 1562, shows that the Janissaries were looking for

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<sup>5</sup> As was the custom in the Ottoman army, the Janissaries also participated in the *Serdengeçti* (Fedayee) units that were formed when a difficult military mission arose. The term *Serdengeçti*, meaning “one who gives up his head,” was used to describe volunteer soldiers who were on the front lines of attacks against enemy armies or fortresses. It was necessary to engage in hand-to-hand combat and risk death to be promoted to higher ranks and achieve a more comfortable lifestyle. Konstantin Mihailović states that the first person to raise the flag on the walls during sieges was promoted to the rank of Beylik (Mihailović, 1975, p. 185). Sources report that of the three hundred *Serdengeçtis* sent to Bozcaada in 1657, no more than fifty survived. In 1686, of the two thousand Janissaries sent to defend the fortress at Buda, only two hundred survived (Murphey, 1999, pp. 163-164).

reasons to extort non-Muslims. As Busbecq's servants walked through the city, they saw Janissaries swimming in the sea. The Janissaries began insulting them, and a brawl broke out when Busbecq's servants responded. During the fight, one of the Janissaries lost his headgear. The Janissaries then came to the street where Busbecq lived, uttering threats and demanding compensation for the damage. A sergeant under Busbecq's command gave the Janissaries a few gold coins, and the incident was settled. When Rüstem Pasha heard about the incident, he sent a servant to Busbecq to warn him not to clash with the Janissaries under any circumstances. As mentioned earlier, the Janissaries could fabricate religious discourses to legitimize their actions. Busbecq's account points to this kind of action. Busbecq states that Janissaries believed that insulting Christians was religiously correct behavior. They thought they could convert Christians to their religion by insulting and humiliating them (Busbecq, 2014, pp. 168-172). From the notes of the French traveler Josephus Grelot, who was in Istanbul about a century later, we learn that not much had changed in terms of the Janissaries' bullying. The Janissaries who went to the "Adalar" (Islands) to enjoy themselves, got drunk and stirred up troubles. To get free food and drink, they threatened and sometimes beat the Greeks who lived on the Adalar (Grelot, 1998, pp. 54-55).

From the statements in *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân*,<sup>6</sup> we understand that the Janissaries did not hesitate to commit the excesses that were tolerated in the context of Istanbul's urban life in their barracks. The author of *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân* reports that Janissaries returning from campaigns brought prostitutes to the barracks and committed adultery. Apart from prostitutes, many married women also went to the Janissary barracks to have sex. Moreover, some of these women were murdered for their jewelry, and their bodies were found in the sewers. As the number of such incidents increased, Ibrahim Pasha, with the Sultan's permission, had a mosque built in the middle of the barracks and stationed a guard at the gates to prevent the Janissaries from bringing in wine, women, and other forbidden items (Özbek, 2017, pp. 185-186).

The periods of greatest concern for the palace bureaucrats in terms of preventing the excesses of the Adjemis and Janissaries occurred on the days when the Sultans passed away. The aggressive behavior and acts of looting that emerged during such periods of uncertainty went far beyond the chaotic situations caused by fires and threatened the urban order of Istanbul. Schweigger reports that the Janissaries, upon receiving the news of the Sultan's death, took the liberty of robbing houses, and, not content with this, plundered the mansions of the pashas (Schweigger, 2004, pp. 162-163). Nicolas de Nicolay provides a more logical explanation for the chaotic situations that arise during the ascension to the throne. As soon as they heard the news of the Sultan's death, the Janissaries turned their attention to the homes of Christians and Jews, looting them. Unlike Schweigger, Nicolay does not describe these acts of looting as a custom. He associates these events with the concerns of the new Sultan. The *Shehzades* (princes), who needed the support of the Janissaries to ascend to the

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<sup>6</sup> *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân* means "Laws of the Janissaries" and is the title of a work written by a ranking Janissary at the beginning of the 17th century. The author complained about actions contrary to the old traditions of the Janissary Odjak and made suggestions for reform. For this reason, the text can also be considered an advice book (Özbek, 2017, p. 5).

throne, ignored the looting (Nicolay, 2014, pp. 194-195). Lubenau reports that the news of the Sultan's death was kept secret until a successor arrived in Istanbul due to fears of looting, adding that the new Sultan had to give large gifts to please the Janissaries (Lubenau, 2016b, p. 594). The two cases Gerlach recounts show that high-ranking officials in the Palace were just as concerned as the non-Muslim population. In the first case, he recounts what he heard, and in the second, what he witnessed. Although the first incident did not occur in Istanbul, it is significant because it illustrates what the accession to the throne meant for the Janissaries. Gerlach states that after the siege of Szigetvár in 1566, the Janissaries developed a grudge against (Sokollu) Mehmed Pasha because he kept the news of Sultan Süleyman's death secret. While Mehmed Pasha's action helped secure the capture of the fortress, the Janissaries were deprived of a great gain as they were unaware of what was happening until Selim ascended the throne. Gerlach's account reveals that the Janissaries, who had not gained much during Selim's accession, profited from his death. On 22 December 1574, it was announced that Sultan Selim had died and that his son Murad had succeeded him on the throne. Gerlach adds that he had heard Selim had died on 13 December. He reports that guards were stationed at key points in the city due to fears of disturbances by the Janissaries and Adjemis. A few days earlier, Jews had buried their valuables underground, and the wealthy of the Capital had taken their money and jewelry to the Grand Bazaar for safekeeping. Gerlach also notes that on 23 and 24 December, (Sokollu) Mehmed Pasha, Chief Admiral Kılıç Ali Pasha, Piyale Pasha, and the Beylerbeyi of Rumelia organized feasts for the Janissaries (Gerlach, 2010, pp. 98-99, 159-160). The efforts of top officials to please them demonstrate the extent of the fear spread by the Janissaries.

### **An Antidote to Trauma: The Psychology of Unity Against Outsiders and Bektashi Symbolism**

How did these individuals, who had to cope with all sorts of difficulties in a foreign land and culture, far away from their families and relatives, survive psychologically? Above all, becoming a janissary meant that a difficult process was partially over. Those accepted into the Janissary Odjak were now members of an elite unit. The archaic form of the word *odjak* is "od-çak/ ôt-çak", derived from the Old Turkic word "od/öt" meaning fire. The original meaning of the word is "a place where a fire is lit", but it is also used metaphorically to refer to home, family, and institution. In this context, the new home of a devshirme who became a Janissary was now the odjak, and each of the Janissaries was a member of the family living in this odjak, that is, in this home. The word *yoldash* (comrade), which is often repeated in *Kavânîn-i Yeniçeriyân*, also indicates the core characteristic of the community formed within the Janissary Odjak. The term *yoldash*, which also appears in *the tezkire of the sofa* (*sofa tezkiresi*)<sup>7</sup> that I will quote below, means "companion" or "traveler of the same

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<sup>7</sup> In the early period of the Janissary Odjak, there were strict prohibitions on recruitment. The human resources of the Janissary Odjak were supplied through the devshirme system. People of Turkish origin were not allowed to join the Odjak. Another prohibition did not allow Janissary to marry. Over time, both prohibitions began to be violated. Janissaries started to marry, and by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the children of Janissaries began to be recruited as "Sons of Slaves" (Kul Oğlu). In the later periods of the Empire, the devshirme system was completely abolished. *The Tezkire of Sofa* mentioned above reflects a practice from this period.

path” in Turkish and indicates a fellowship. The phrase “No one outside of us knows our state”, which also appears in the tezkire of the sofa, emphasizes that, on the one hand, they had come the same way as rootless devshirme and, on the other hand, as members of a family belonging to the same Odjak, they would continue along the same path:

“Mü’miniz kalû belâdan <sup>8</sup> beri Hakk’ın birliğini eyledik ikrâr; bu yola vermişiz seri, nebîmiz vardır Cenâb-ı Ahmed-i Muhtar; ezelden beru mestâneleriz, nûr-ı ilahi’de pervâneleriz. Bir bölük bu cihânda divâneleriz; sayılmayız parmakla tükenmeyiz kırılmakla, taşramızdan sormakla kimse bilmez halimiz. On iki imâm, on iki tarîk cümlesine dedik belî; üçler, yediler, kırklar <sup>9</sup> nûr-ı nebî, kerem-i Ali, pîrimiz Sultan Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî. 1234 senesi <sup>10</sup> cennet mekân, firdevs âşîyan, kanun sâhibi el-gazi sultan Süleyman Han hazretlerinin kurduğu nizâm-ı müstahsene üzre on dokuzuncu bölüğün çorbacısı Hüseyin Ağa’nın izniyle Aşçı Usta ve Odabaşı Ağa ve cümle ihtiyârların ma’rifetiyle Mehmed Atâullah Efendi ibni Abdurrahman Bey yoldaşlığa tâlip ve râgıp olup ismi kul defterine kayıt ve sofamıza yağmurluk vaz idüp yedine işbu sofa tezkiresi ita olundu vakt-i hacette ibraz oluna” (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, p. 154). <sup>11</sup>

The following prayer, called “gülbank”, was recited before the salary was paid:

“Allah Allah, illallah baş uryan sine püryan, kılıç al kan; Bu meydanda nice başlar kesilir olmaz hiç soran; Eyvallah, eyvallah kahrımız, kılıncımız düşmana zıyan, Kulluğumuz Padişaha ayân; Üçler, yediler, kırklar, gülbeng-i

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It is an official document proving that those recruited into the Janissary Odjak were indeed Janissaries. Although it is a late document, we know from the Bektashi literature that many of its expressions are old and traditional.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase “*qalu bala*” means “*Yes, we bear witness*” and was quoted from the Qur’an (A’râf Surah, 7/172). This phrase, interpreted mystically by various sects and Sufi circles throughout Islamic history, refers to the time before creation and means “*from all eternity*.” The entire verse is as follows: “(Prophet) when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, ‘Am I, not your Lord?’ and they replied, ‘Yes, we bear witness.’” (Abdel Haleem, 2005, p. 106).

<sup>9</sup> The phrase “*the threes, the sevens, and the forties*” refers to the sacred persons and phenomena in Bektashi (and Alawite) doctrines. For example, the phrase “*the threes*” refers to Allah, Mohammad, and Ali. According to Bektashi’s belief, Prophet Mohammad and Ali were created from the Divine Light (Nûr) of Allah and Hadji Bektash also possessed this Divine Light (Ürkmez, 2020, pp. 201-215).

<sup>10</sup> Mohammedan calendar.

<sup>11</sup> “We are believers from *qalu bala*. We have confessed the unity of Reality. We have offered our head on this Way. We have a prophet, the most exclusive of the eminent who was selected by the Lord. We have been the intoxicated from all eternity, we are the moths in the divine light. We are a company of infatuated dervishes in this world. We can not be counted on the finger, we can not be finished by defeat. No one outside of us knows our state. The Twelve Imams, the Twelve Ways, we have affirmed them all, the Threes, the Sevens, the Forties, the divine light of the Prophet, the Beneficence of Ali, our Pir, the head sultan, Hadji Bektash Veli. In 1234, in conformity with the benevolent arrangement established by the Law-Giver, the Conqueror, Sultan Süleyman Han whose place is in Paradise and whose abode is Heaven, and by permission of the Soup-Maker (Commander) of 19. unit and with the knowledge of all the elders this Discharge Certificate has been given to the son of Abdurrahman, Mehmed Atâullah, who has sought and desired the companionship (*yoldashlık*), and whose name is written in the Record of the Way. When required let it be shown.”

Muhammedî, nûr-ı nebî, kerem-i Ali; Pîrimiz, sultanımız hünkâr Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, Demine devrânına hû diyelim; Hû!” (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, p. 422).<sup>12</sup>

The phrase “many heads are beheaded in this yard, no one (comes here) to ask!” highlights the boundary between the outside world and the Odjak. Nobody showed concern for them, and no one cared or worried about them except their comrades (yoldashs). They had no one to call on or ask for help. The suffering of one Janissary could only be felt by another Janissary. Modern research has shown that in a group of people suffering from the same problems, people can more easily share their feelings with other group members. The reassurance of group solidarity is invaluable for survivors of extreme situations, including combat, rape, political persecution, battering, and childhood abuse. It is observed that trauma victims who participate in group therapy hold on to life much more easily:

Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates, the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim, the group exalts her (him). Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her (his) humanity... The restoration of social bonds begins with the discovery that one is not alone (Herman, 2015, pp. 214-215).

In my opinion, the synergy in the Odjak provided the devshirmes who became Janissaries with the kind of tranquility that can be achieved through group therapy in the modern sense. The sense of shared destiny and belonging to a community built on that sense was a partial cure for the wounds of devshirmes who had been exposed to trauma after trauma. On the other hand, it is a historical fact that the Janissaries, despite their common Christian origin, belonged to different cultures. Their different cultural backgrounds could have caused some problems within the Odjak over time. Their Christian roots were not enough to unite these people of Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, Albanian, and Greek origins into a community. They needed a local identity and symbolism to hold them together.

At this point, it is understood that the Bektashi identity had an important function and prevented such problems to some extent. There was a close bond between the Janissary Odjak and the Bektashi Order, which was under the control of the Ottoman administration. Hadji Bektash, regarded as the founder of the order, was also the spiritual leader (Pir) of the Janissaries. As seen above, the tezkire of the sofa and the prayer (gülbang) contain a considerable amount of Bektashi symbolism. Beyond their military activities, the Bektashi symbolism that permeated every aspect of their daily

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<sup>12</sup> Allah, Allah, İllallah! Heads naked, chests open, swords (with) red blood, many heads are beheaded in this arena, no one (comes here) to ask! Eyvallah, Eyvallah! Our wrath, our sword (is) destruction for (our) enemy, our service (is) obvious for the Sultan! “The Threes”, “The Sevens”, “The Forties”, (this) prayer for Muhammed, lights of the prophets, beneficence of Ali; (to) our sultan, the sovereign Hadji Bektaş-ı Veli! For his Moment, for his Cycle let us say Huu. Huu!

lives helped the Janissaries forge a new community, eliminating the differences among them. This new identity appears to have alleviated the severity of the psychological traumas they endured. Bektashism not only provided an identity that unified them but also eased the transition of these individuals of Christian origin into Islam by offering a flexible interpretation that tolerated practices otherwise unacceptable under Sunnite doctrine.<sup>13</sup> The Bektashi identity was a bridge that allowed for a flexible transition between religions. Moreover, it relieved the psychological tension described above as the “contradiction of the warrior.” Like all warrior classes, the Janissaries had to resolve this contradiction to maintain their mental health and continue their routine lives in peacetime. Bektashi doctrine provided a religious discourse that legitimized the act of killing aside from that enabling the warrior to face and prepare for the reality of death. It provided the warrior with inner peace by preaching that he would be a martyr if he died and that the act of killing was a necessity for the sake of religion (Küçükyağcı, 2013, pp. 186-188). It can be said that the function pointed out by Küçükyağcı is a universal phenomenon and has its equivalents in many religions. However, this function was one of the basic characteristics of Bektashism. The Bektashi Order was built and institutionalized on the cult of Hadji Bektash. At the center of the cult was Hadji Bektash Veli, the embodiment of divine approval that legitimized holy war. The blessing of Hadji Bektash Veli by the warrior groups dates back to the period before the emergence of the Ottoman Principality (Beylik).

Another important characteristic of the Janissaries was their unity against outsiders. Regarding the security of the embassy delegation, Lubenau wrote that “when we left our residence, the mere presence of a single Janissary was enough to make us feel safe.” The Adjemis and Janissaries who had been bullying the non-Muslims did not show any aggressive behavior when they saw the Janissary guard with the embassy. On the contrary, if one of them attempted such behavior, the other Janissaries would intervene and beat him. They were careful not to damage the reputation of the elite unit to which they belonged. Lubenau also reports that Janissaries who committed a major offense were taken to Rumelihisarı and secretly executed at midnight. This secrecy was due to fear that the Janissaries, known for their strong solidarity, might revolt (Lubenau, 2016a, p. 244, 363, 396).

### **From the Spirit of the Odjak to the Spirit of the Company**

Developments such as population growth, advances in military technology and the decline of the Ottoman war economy, which began to be felt in the second half of the 16th century, led to significant changes in the Janissary Odjak. Advances in military technology triggered the need for a larger army, and a larger army meant more soldiers. This inevitably led to the opening of the Janissary Odjak to people who were not of devshirme origin, eventually leading to the abolition of the devshirme system.

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<sup>13</sup> I would like to emphasise that I am not claiming that the Janissaries were fanatic disciples of the doctrine of Bektashism. Although it has a flexible structure compared to the Sunnite interpretation of Islam, the Bektashism doctrine has an ethical understanding that adopts the principle of “control your hand, your tongue and your flesh!” as its motto. As will be seen in the examples I will give in the following chapter, some of the attitudes and behaviors of the Janissaries in the context of the daily life of Istanbul were completely against to the Bektashi doctrine.



The change was not only about human resources or the number of Janissaries. On one hand, the Janissaries mingled with tradesmen and artisans, integrating into the commercial life of Istanbul. On the other hand, tradesmen and artisans began to militarize by joining the Janissary Odjak. This phenomenon, which Cemal Kafadar defines as “esnafization” (the process of becoming tradesmen), caused major changes in the urban life of the capital (Kafadar, 1981, p. 82). Janissaries who engaged in trade began joining guilds to ensure the legitimacy and stability of their commercial activities. By the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Janissaries who became guild members could earn additional income through their business ventures. Guild members who joined the Janissary Odjak as soldiers benefited from the patronage and tax exemptions that came with their Janissary identity (Yi, 2004, pp. 132-133). This patronage allowed guild members easier access to raw materials controlled by the Janissaries while simultaneously protecting them from the interventions of the central administration (Sunar, 2006, p. 94). Thus, the Janissary Odjak became a dynamic force that wielded influence not only in politics but also in the economic life of the city.

It is understood that the Adjemi Oglans, who had long been employed in the heavy labor of the capital, gradually became involved in the commercial life of Istanbul, albeit through illegal means. A decree from 1575, sent to the Kadi (Muslim Judge) of Istanbul, reveals the existence of Adjemis who made unfair profits by selling wood. They purchased wood from sailors bringing it to the capital for eight akçes and sold it for fourteen akçes. In two separate decrees sent to the Kadi of Istanbul in 1584 and 1587, we see two opposing approaches taken by the Ottoman administration. The first decree clearly stated that Janissaries, Adjemi Oglans, and other soldiers were forbidden from engaging in business. In contrast, the second decree ordered Janissaries and Spahis working as tradesmen and artisans in the bazaar to obey the laws governing artisans (Altınay, 1988, pp. 113-114, 130-131, 134-135). Based on these last two documents, we can not consider that the change in question took place in a very short period. In light of these documents, we can say that there was an exceptional group of soldiers who turned a hand to trading and that this group was overlooked. The widespread involvement of Janissaries in commercial activities took place over a much longer period. In 1651, another aspect of the relationship between the Janissary Odjak and commercial life became apparent. This time, we are not dealing with a few Adjemi Oglans or Janissaries trying to profit, but with the Agha (Ağa), the highest-ranking member of the Janissary Odjak. The Janissary Agha strongly opposed SheikhuIslam Bahai Efendi’s fatwa that permitted the use of tobacco. Behind the Janissary Agha’s reaction lay economic interests rather than concerns about protecting public safety. This fatwa deprived the Janissaries, who were skilled in smuggling and black marketing, of a considerable amount of profit. Considering the smuggling and black market activities, the prohibition of tobacco was much more profitable for them. It is worth noting that the SheikhuIslam was later dismissed from office (Yılmaz, 2015, p. 132). On the other hand, not all Janissaries involved in Istanbul’s commercial life engaged in illegal activities. Cemal Kafadar highlights two types of Janissaries: those who had regular economic activities in the commercial world, and those who extorted money from wealthy merchants and contractors by force (Kafadar, 1981, p. 112). The latter type appears to be the heir to the Janissary identity shaped during the harsh devshirme process. These Janissaries

seem to have capitalized on the bad reputation inherited from their predecessors, exploiting it in their commercial dealings. Urban merchants, unable to resist the irregularities and harassment of the Janissaries, often chose to benefit from their influence. Those who could not join the Janissary Odjak had only one option: to pay tribute and become protégés of the Janissaries.

In terms of demonstrating the influence of the Janissaries in the commercial life of the Capital, two lines of work in the transportation sector, portage and boating, are two significant examples. As mentioned before, the Ottoman administration's use of the Adjemi Oglans' labor in the transportation sector goes back a long way. Therefore, it was easier for the Janissaries to take control of these sectors compared to other sectors. According to state roll call data from 1677, 490 of the 1,292 boatmen working in Istanbul were soldiers, with 227 of them being Janissaries. Some Janissaries even owned multiple boats and employed slaves. A later roll call from 1752 reveals that soldiers from other classes were also involved in this work. Out of 3,423 boatmen, 1,938 were soldiers, of which 335 were Janissaries. Considering that 741 soldiers' class was unspecified, it is reasonable to assume that the number of Janissaries was higher (Altıntaş, 2022, pp. 145-146, 151-153). The events following Grand Vizier Alemdar Pasha's order in October 1808 illustrate the extent of the Janissaries' influence in commercial life, reminiscent of the tobacco dispute of 1651. The Grand Vizier announced that all boatmen and porters had to join the newly established Sekban-ı Cedid Army, or they would be prohibited from continuing their professions. This decree met with strong opposition from the Janissaries. In the following month, the Grand Vizier blew up the armory during an uprising, perishing along with many Janissaries who had come to kill him. This was not the only reason, of course. Of course, this was not the only cause of the unrest. The Grand Vizier's decisions often harmed the interests of the Janissaries. For instance, he attempted to sell *mests* (traditional shoes)<sup>14</sup> brought from Kayseri, leading to a conflict between the central authority and shoemakers who were under Janissary protection (Sunar, 2014, p. 72, 75). Another crisis that broke out on April 16, 1810, shows the effects of the decisions taken by the Janissaries on the commercial life of Istanbul. Porters and artisans from the Grand Bazaar clashed, and at first glance, it was thought that the fight was over a woman. However, the real reason behind the conflict was that the Janissaries, who were also porters, had excessively increased the transportation fees (Sunar, 2022, p. 279).

The fact that they had a say in the commercial life of Istanbul seems to have brought about a significant change in the spirit of unity and solidarity among the Janissaries. It can be said that conflicts of interest pushed the Odjak spirit into the background and brought the "Company spirit" to the fore.<sup>15</sup> Their aggressive and

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<sup>14</sup> A type of light shoe made of soft leather, which can be worn both indoors and under shoes outdoors. It has the function of protecting ablution. Those who wear *mest* do not need to wash their feet again when renewing ablution, as their feet remain clean inside the shoes.

<sup>15</sup> It can be argued that another social dynamic that brought the military company spirit to the forefront was the sense of compatriotism that emerged as a result of migration from the provinces to Istanbul. From the eighteenth century onwards, many people who migrated to Istanbul sought the protection of the Janissaries, much like the local Istanbul tradesmen and artisans. Immigrants who were patronized by the Janissaries could find work and

violent behavior, which I consider to be the legacy of devshirme psychology, continued. On the other hand, since the distinction between the artisans, who were civilians, and the Janissaries, who were soldiers, had become blurred, the aggressiveness that had previously given them an advantage over the civilian population was now reflected in the conflicts of interest between the Janissary companies. The events in the Galata district of Istanbul are important examples of the extent to which these conflicts of interest reached. As the unloading point for merchant ships arriving in Istanbul, the Galata district became the scene of a significant struggle for influence between the 25th Company (Ağa Bölüğü) and the 64th Company (Jamaat).<sup>16</sup> In 1772, when Albanian sailors became involved in this struggle, the two rival Janissary companies allied and entered into armed conflict with the Albanian sailors. In 1810, these two Janissary companies fell out again. The 25th Company (Ağa Bölüğü), allied with the 75th Company (Jamaat), clashed with the 64th Company (Jamaat), which had allied with the 71st Company (Jamaat). One of the important sources of income in the Galata district was the tribute collected from freighters docking in the harbor. The question of which Janissary Company would collect this tribute was the main cause of conflict. To prevent major casualties, sometimes two Janissaries representing each company would duel. After a duel or battle, a piece of wood bearing the symbol of the victorious Janissary Company was nailed to the nose of the freighter. This symbol indicated that the freighter was now under the patronage of the victorious Janissary Company. On 1 January 1820, there was a clash between the Janissaries repairing the Armenian Church in Kumkapı and the Janissary Company responsible for the security of the Kumkapı district. It appears that the latter attempted to extort tribute from the Armenians, while the former did not allow it. These examples can be multiplied. I would like to conclude with a somewhat ironic case: it has been observed that the painting of additional buildings during the expansion of Topkapı Palace caused another conflict among the Janissary Companies. It seems that to avoid further conflict, the Palace divided the painting work between the 48th and 78th Companies (Jamaats), both of whom were working in the same sector. In all the incidents I have listed, except for the last example, there were deaths or injuries (Sunar, 2022, pp. 266-270, 276-277, 281, 283).

Before concluding this essay, I would like to underline that the attitudes and behaviors of the Janissaries, which we define as bullying, were quite normal from their perspective. They viewed their actions as an earned right. Their reaction to Grand

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accommodation. The intersection of compatriot relations with the Janissary trade networks led to the creation of business lines monopolized by people from the same region, who belonged to the same Janissary Company (Kokdaş, 2022, p. 186, 198). For example, Ibrahim Agha, an immigrant from the town of Tosya in Kastamonu, found a job as a porter with the help of his compatriots and joined the 59th Company (Ağa Bölüğü) of the Janissary Odjak through their support. After obtaining the position of Chief (Kethüda) of Üsküdar porters, Ibrahim Agha was promoted to the rank of "Turnacılık" in the Janissary Odjak. He likely rose to his first position thanks to his Turnacılık rank. All members of the 59th Company were porters, and most were migrants from Tosya (Sunar, 2014, p. 68, 71).

<sup>16</sup> When the Janissary Odjak was founded, the companies within it were called *Jamaat* (Cemaat) or *Orta*. During the reign of Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512), companies called *Ağa Bölüğü* were established and the number of companies of the Janissary Odjak increased to 196.

Vizier Alemdar Mustafa Pasha's order to remove the symbols nailed to the freighters is the clearest indication of this:

“... Ancak kendü nâm ve bıçaklarımız darbıyla, gazab-nâk birer ikişer gemi zabt ve anların hıfz u hırâseti ile bir âherin şerrinden halâsiyle, geldikçe pâyımızı alup medâr u ma”âş edüp bir zemândan berü, bizler bunu müceddeden ihdâs etmeyüp öteden berü gördüğümüz üzere birbirlerimize meydân okuyup darb-ı destimiz ile zabt eylediğimiz gemilerin, nişânlarımızı bu güne tahkîrâne söküp bizler ne güne medâr-ı ma”âş edelim” (Beyhan, 2003, pp. 246-267).<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

When it comes to the Janissaries and their actions, it would not be wrong to say that historical sources generally agree they were aggressive bullies. We know that many sources written by Ottoman bureaucrats, in the context of various political interests and expectations, are biased and contain certain prejudices against the Janissaries. Foreign visitors to Istanbul did not write favorably about them either. I chose to use the accounts of foreign visitors, as they were not part of the political polarization and conflicts in the capital. I used similar expressions to those of Ottoman bureaucrats and foreign witnesses in describing the actions, attitudes, and behaviors of the Janissaries. Some of my comments and conclusions about the Janissaries may seem reductionist as I take into account the negative adjectives that historical sources use to describe them. However, unlike these sources, I did not use the negative adjectives as tools of judgment but as data to understand the psychological state of the devshirme. They viewed the adjectives they used as the causes of the events they witnessed. In contrast, I approached the attitudes and behaviors that these adjectives describe as the results of a process. In my approach, which centers on the phenomenon of psychological trauma, I argue that the Janissaries' bullying attitudes and excesses stemmed from the agonizing process of the devshirme system. Their anger at their ill fortune shaped their image in collective memory. This image, along with their aggressiveness, allowed them to have a say in the commercial life of the capital. The abolition of the devshirme system weakened the “spirit of being united against outsiders.” The comrades (yoldashes) who shared each other's pain and could feel each other's suffering were replaced by partners focused on economic interests. The spirit of the Janissary Company, which was associated with specific lines of work, preponderated over the spirit of the Odjak. By the second half of the 17th century, the heirs of the Janissary Odjak, which was based on the devshirme system, had become one of the local elements of Istanbul. By the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they had become tradesmen influential enough to patronize the new migrants coming to the city, and they maintained this position until 1826, when the Janissary Odjak was annihilated.

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<sup>17</sup> “ Thanks to our reputation and our daggers, we patronize a few freighters. We protect these freighters from harm, and in return, we get our share. This is not a new custom of our invention. As we have seen from our predecessors, how can we earn a livelihood if we do not receive tribute from these freighters that we have obtained by challenging and combating each other ?”

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