
When Historians Fall Short: The Janissaries and the Ottoman Decline Thesis

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This article examines the historiography of the Janissaries, a longstanding Ottoman military organization. It critiques the decline thesis, a narrative about the Ottoman Empire which was dominant for decades. The decline thesis suggests that the Ottoman central state began to weaken after the 16th century. It holds that all aspects of the Ottoman Empire thus atrophied until the state was dissolved in 1923. This article focuses on how the decline thesis led to the simplistic perception of the Janissaries of the late Ottoman Empire as weak and corrupt. Recent research into their economic and social activities has revealed that by the 19th century the Janissaries had transformed and become interwoven with Ottoman society. This renewed research has underscored the detrimental effects of the decline thesis' dominance. Although a new generation of Ottoman historians have rejected the decline thesis, it remains prevalent in lieu of a compelling alternative.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Janissaries, decline thesis, critical historiography, Middle East, Europe

Present-day Ottoman historians are grappling with the legacy of their predecessors. In the last half-century, they have attempted to dispel longstanding narratives about the late Ottoman Empire. Scholars have discarded the “decline thesis,” which previously dominated the historiography, and begun to search for new ways to conceptualize the end of the empire. These renewed investigations are transforming perceptions of Ottoman organizations such as the Janissaries.

As its name suggests, the decline thesis asserts that the power and ability of the Ottoman state peaked by the 16th century and then waned until its dissolution in 1923. This narrative is compelling and straightforward, and early Ottoman historians used it to place their focused studies of the empire into a broader context of decline. The decline thesis portrays the late Janissaries as a military group that, like the rest of the empire, had lost its luster and become feeble and corrupt. It was not until the late 20th century that Ottoman historians broadly rebuked the idea of decline. For the preceding century, students of the empire had been discouraged from reexamining that which already had a clear place in the story of decline. The decline thesis' historical pedigree made it especially difficult for historians to dispel.

Towards the end of the Ottoman Empire, European perspectives dominated political discourse,

causing Ottoman intellectuals to become some of the first progenitors of the decline thesis. Europeans saw the Ottomans as a backward and distinctly un-modern society. The leadership of the late Ottoman Empire internalized this perspective, which juxtaposed every aspect of the empire against European ideals of modernization and progress. These Ottoman intellectuals wrote letters, which were essentially policy memos intended for the Sultan and other high-level bureaucrats, that spoke of the empire as being in decline and suggested courses of action to arrest or reverse the process. These writers called for a losing battle, however. They condemned the Ottomans to compete in a game that Europe had invented and forced them to commit to reshaping the empire in the image of European states.

The decline thesis was compelling and intuitive, and after taking hold its dominance of Ottoman historiography precluded alternative narratives from taking hold for decades. It took until the 1970s for historians to begin to question the narrative's utility. These critical historians found its origins problematic and believed that its influence limited the scholarly debate on the empire. They began to search for alternative ways to conceptualize the end of the empire. This academic pivot spurred renewed investigations of organizations such as the Janissaries, understanding of whom had previously been limited.

Declinist Perceptions of the Janissaries

The decline thesis fostered a perception of the Janissaries as a hopelessly lost institution that embodied deep problems festering within the empire. Historians saw the late Janissaries as an embodiment of the corrupted institutions which had brought the Ottoman Empire to its knees. The heritage of the Janissaries, which can be traced to the early days of the empire, allowed for a clear pre- and post-decline comparison. The decline thesis historiography read selectively from this institutional transformation to paint a deceptive picture of the Janissaries' contribution to the end of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the Janissaries of the early empire were hardly comparable to the institution of the same name that existed in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Historians knew the early Janissaries as a strictly regimented military group that was successful in battle and fiercely loyal to the Sultan. The Sultan first introduced the organization as his personal bodyguard around the middle of the 14th century. New Janissary recruits were young, male, and Christian: they were initially prisoners taken from the spoils of territorial conquest, but later were taken from Ottoman subjects in Anatolia and the Balkans. These became the property of the Sultan, and were educated and converted to Islam. They could then be assigned various positions in his service, one of which was as a Janissary: the elite standing infantry corps in the empire. Bound to a common owner, forced to live and work together, and paid a good wage, the early Janissaries were "outstandingly good fighters." As slaves of the Sultan, they were not allowed to marry, have children, or pass their titles on to any heirs. These rules ensured their dependence on the patronage of the Sultan and prevented their interests from diverging from his. In this clearly defined capacity during the early empire, the Janissaries became known for their discipline as bodyguards and success in battle.

The early Janissaries cultivated an image among Westerners as fearsome and disciplined, striking an imposing figure as the Sultan's bodyguards in meetings with visiting Europeans. Europeans accepted the idiosyncrasies of the Janissary organization because of their skill and professional appearance. Through a Eurocentric lens of decline, this early permutation of the Janissaries, only a few thousand strong, is viewed as "pure." The decline thesis uses this reference point of

"purity" to demonstrate their precipitous decline.

Under the decline thesis, it wasn't until the late 16th century that the Janissaries became impure. The changing needs of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries led to changes to the organization intended to allow them to keep pace with developments in warfare. The Janissaries' expanding duties sent them to towns and outposts far from Istanbul, where they served as lookouts and guards at the empire's borders. The number of Janissaries skyrocketed from a few thousand to as many as 400,000 by the 18th century. With each Janissary drawing a salary from the empire's treasury, they became an intolerable financial burden. To resolve the problem of high wage bills, the Sultan did away with prohibitions on moneymaking activities in a Janissary's free time, allowing them to supplement their income.

Decline thesis historians viewed the Sultan's decision to allow the Janissaries more autonomy as a sign of weakness and attributed it to the empire's broader descent from power. They frequently referenced this reform as a key moment in the decline of the Janissaries; it was the moment that the Sultan's inability to control the burgeoning ranks of his personal army forced him to release them from his short leash. Historians saw additional reforms, such as the Sultan allowing Janissaries to marry and pass their titles on to children, as further markers of decline. These alterations, which allowed Janissaries to take on roles in local economies as merchants, artisans, and traders, were believed to be broadly detrimental to the organization and, consequently, the empire. However, these moments may not have been as pivotal as historians have previously thought.

The Critical Historiography

Renewed research into the Janissaries has called into question the 'purity' ascribed to the early Janissaries. This criticism was spurred by historians who chose to revisit areas of study previously considered settled under the decline thesis. Historians such as Cemal Kafadar have suggested that Janissaries may have been involved in business ventures as early as the mid-15th century. This revision contradicts the notion that the Janissaries were permitted to slip into corruption because the central state which had long kept them in line became too weak to do so. This declinist focus on the central state draws attention to the power which

semi-autonomous groups such as the Janissaries jealously guarded against the Sultan's desire for authority.

The decline thesis historiography portrays the late Ottoman Janissaries as a cancerous growth that the weakening state could no longer contain. As the corps grew less rigidly organized, the Janissaries became resistant to doing their official jobs as soldiers, making them a strategic liability for the Sultan. The units would frequently desert when the army tried to march, and their poor discipline and training resulted in embarrassing failures against the Russian Empire and the loss of vast amounts of land. During this time, the Janissaries remained close by the Sultan's side, serving as his bodyguards and as a large standing force in Istanbul. This position gave them considerable leverage over the Sultan and, as Ottoman historian Colin Imber has identified, allowed them "the tempting role as kingmakers, with a ready ability to make and unmake rulers." What motivated them to take advantage of this role has been the subject of revision by recent critical historiography.

By virtue of their proximity to him, the Janissaries had always been able to influence the Sultan. However, this power meant little when they were subservient and disciplined. As the organization became economically independent, they showed a willingness to speak up for their newfound interests. Decline thesis historians such as Stanford Shaw thought that this independence turned the Janissaries into a counterproductive and volatile force that constrained the Sultan's ability to act in the empire's best interest. Shaw's writings, which were dominant among students of the empire, made the Janissaries infamous.

For many years, the Janissaries were undoubtedly most well-known for resisting the modernizing reforms of the late Ottoman Empire. The decline thesis frames reformer Sultans and their modernizing policies, such as the Tanzimat, as protagonists. These protagonists tried to bring the empire into the European fold by assimilating European culture, regardless of whether it could fit with existing Ottoman society. The Janissaries' role in derailing these reforms cemented their legacy in the decline historiography as traitors who were willing to go to great lengths to preserve the status quo that had brought them to power. Historians like Bernard Lewis have castigated the Janissaries for what he saw as nearsighted selfishness that cost the empire dearly. The decline

thesis cast the sudden and unwelcome involvement of the Janissaries in the highest levels of palace politics as evidence of how far they had fallen from their earlier, more disciplined selves.

The Janissaries of the Second Empire

Early historians' portrayal of the Janissaries as a monolithic bloc was one factor that constrained their studies into the organization. In the latter days of their existence, the number of Janissaries topped 400,000, a quantity of individuals which defies homogenization. However, decline thesis historians typically singled out only the agha, the leader of all the Janissaries. Historian Ali Yaycioglu explains that there are drawbacks to condensing the motives of the Janissaries in this manner. While this simplification may have sufficed when the Janissaries numbered just a few thousand, it was wholly insufficient to explain the actions of the transformed Janissaries of the later empire.

A limited conception of the Janissaries' function within the empire was another symptom of the decline thesis. Like many Ottoman institutions, the late Janissaries fair unfavorably in this regard because they have no close European counterparts but are nonetheless compared to European expectations. Historian Gülay Diko outlines a Janissary institution that had transformed so drastically by the end of the 19th century that it defied productive comparisons to European analogs, because there were none. The decline thesis neglects that the Janissaries were not performing the same duties they had centuries prior. In fact, in intertwining themselves with local economies, the Janissaries took on new duties of protection to an assortment of interests.

The fall of the decline thesis has caused the economic and social activities of the Janissaries to receive closer scrutiny by historians. These reinvigorated studies have examined the Janissaries' connections to entities other than the Sultan. If the Janissaries became less faithful to the Sultan in their later years, these historians ask, to whom did their loyalties shift? Historians still see the Janissaries as acting in 'selfish,' i.e., rational and self-interested ways, but they are now more closely examining the interests underlying these actions. Historians Virginia Aksan and Gülay Diko have found that frequently, the Janissaries' interests were embedded in the interests of local economies.

New academic works have made essential developments in understanding the Janissary's involvement in the economy, finding that these relationships were complex and often mutually beneficial. Gülay Diko's article "Blurred Boundaries between Soldiers and Civilians" explains the nature of these relationships. Diko explains that the Janissaries and the guilds were inextricably connected. The guilds were coalitions of workers in particular trades, and membership was required for an individual to enter the trade they represented. Janissary membership in guilds swelled as early as the early 17th century as the groups realized the benefits of these symbiotic relationships.

The Janissaries and guilds were drawn towards one another because they could each offer something valuable to the other. Firstly, the Janissaries wanted to join these guilds because they allowed them to chart lucrative careers in skilled trades. The guilds guarded the monopolies they held over their trade, preserving the value of their skills on the market. The Janissaries offered the guilds their status as an "untouchable" class throughout the empire. The Janissaries were exempt from judicial checks and taxation, allowing them to shelter revenue streams and become supremely wealthy. Having a Janissary as a guild member gave them access to these valuable privileges, and the dual advantages of this relationship caused them to become common. The recognition, prestige, and privileges accorded to the Janissary title allowed them to rise through the guilds' ranks quickly, often taking on leadership roles. Janissaries did not limit their entrepreneurship to their membership in the guilds, however.

The Janissaries also took advantage of their privileged status to facilitate long-distance trade within the empire. Janissaries were more physically mobile than most citizens, which allowed them to establish trade relationships. While on campaign in distant locations, the Janissaries contacted purveyors of valuable goods. When they returned from the campaign, they linked these suppliers with purchasers in the empire's core. This dynamic allowed them to become significant merchants in urban centers such as Istanbul, helping to provision these cities with various luxury and staple goods. Janissaries became indispensable in satiating the metropole's appetite for consumption.

One of the most underappreciated services the Janissaries provided to the broader empire was an

ability to advocate for their interests in ways that ordinary citizens could not. Janissaries were known to protest in great numbers against government actions that they perceived as unfair, even going so far as to revolt against their commanders when they saw fit. These Janissaries acted in self-interest, but in doing so, they protected groups that were otherwise vulnerable to government officials' arbitrary exercise of power. Past generations of Ottoman historians stripped these rebellious actions of the economic and social factors which motivated them. They saw revolts by a once-renowned military unit as evidence of how far it had fallen and as damning evidence of a broader decline.

In their role as advocates for local interests, the Janissaries acted as a mechanism of vertical accountability within Ottoman society. They were connected to the top and bottom echelons of the empire. At the top, the Janissaries maintained a close connection with the Sultan and held a seat among his top advisors. At the bottom, as members of the working class, the Janissaries' fortunes were closely tied to that of local economies. This connection forced the Ottoman leadership to pay heed to the desires of those who might otherwise have been swept aside, forming an institutional check on the Sultan's powers. This check, however, was viewed as a weakness under the decline thesis. The Janissaries limited Sultans' ability to act unilaterally and prevented them from enacting Westernizing reforms which would have centralized power. The decline thesis ignores the unique role that the Janissaries played as representatives of the bottom rungs of society, a service that was lost when the Janissaries were dissolved.

Conclusion

Under the decline thesis, historians saw the Janissaries' constant rebukes of the Ottoman state's attempts at reform as quintessential evidence of the paralysis which prevented modernization. This historiography diminishes the importance of the institutions that allowed many smaller groups to coexist within the empire. Institutions such as the Janissaries were critical in this respect. They represent one of the key strengths of the Ottoman Empire which the decline thesis minimized.

However limiting it may have been, the decline thesis stood for so long because it is such a compelling narrative. It purported to take advantage of the clarity of hindsight to reveal the late Ottoman

Empire's dysfunction. When historians looked for evidence of the Ottoman decline, it seemed to exist everywhere. This abundance was a product of confirmation bias which historians' European gaze exacerbated. It took a new generation of historians using new sources and methods to recognize this and reject the thesis.

Despite this paradigm shift in Ottoman historiography, the decline thesis is pernicious. It remains the prevailing narrative in general historical works which cover the empire. Thus, outside of Ottoman academia, the decline thesis seems healthy as ever. Why is this? While Ottoman historians have concluded that the decline thesis is inaccurate and misleading, they have not yet constructed a replacement with the same persuasive power. Until historians put forth a new and satisfying narrative, the idea of decline will likely persist in the layman's historiography.

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