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The Sultan of Constantinople and the Caliph of Baghdad:
Military Composition and Centralized Power in the Muslim World, 749–1800

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In an analysis of military structures pertaining to both the Abbasid Dynasty as well as the much later Ottoman Empire, it is quintessential to outline basic recruitment policies of each in order to better understand conscription patterns and regions, as well as the overall cohesion of their respective armed forces. This paper strives to examine the beginnings of Abbasid armed forces, starting with the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate in 749 AD. In order to understand main recruitment patterns, regions, ethnicities, and incentives for recruitment, this paper will conduct a study of the initial Ottoman military in order to showcase the differences between the two, as well as to suggest why the Ottomans enjoyed a supremacy that the Abbasids never held for an extended amount of time.

In studying Abbasid armed forces, it becomes apparent that they were quite juxtaposed to Umayyad armies, in that their military was comprised initially of Khurasanian tribesmen acting in accordance to the “Persian populace, Muslim and non-Muslim.”¹ This can be explained in

¹ Wilferd Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, N.Y.: *Bibliotheca Persica*, 1988), 8.

light of Persian nationalistic sentiments growing in response to Arab domination, especially “militant mawali (clients), recent converts to Islam who demanded inclusion in the political community (and were followed in this respect by non-Muslim subjects.”² Indeed, many new non-Arab converts to Islam became victims of discrimination at the hands of Arab nationalists, which strengthened Abbasid support: “The Abbasids took advantage of, and capitalized on, these factors. Through a very well-directed and skillful propaganda and a new ideology, the Abbasids managed to concentrate all these anti-Umayyad sentiments in one big group of opposition.”³ This discrimination of non-Arabs extended to include taxation, where the beginnings of Abbasid armed forces were prodded by heavy taxation of non-Muslim/Arab groups.⁴ One of the many tribes that formed the backbone of Abbasid forces, the Khurasanian, were kept in line with Abbasid principles and goals through “commissars on the basis of a code of rules (*aman*).”⁵ It is curious to note that the troops who secured victory for the Abbasids were called *ahl al-dawla*, hearkening to Persian sentiments of nationalism.⁶ The nationalistic sentiments of these factors in the army can be better understood if one takes into account the limited amount of Arabs there

² It is also important to note the pressing sentiments for both the Mawali and non-Muslim subject population of the Umayyad Dynasty to be incorporated into political communities for access to power, which prodded their support for the Abbasid cause; see Said Amir Arjomand, "'Abd Allah Ibn Al-Muqaffa' and the 'Abbasid Revolution,'" *Iranian Studies* 27, no. ¼, (1994): 11.

³ Roberto Marín-Guzmán, "The 'Abbasid Revolution in Central Asia and Khurāsān: an Analytical Study of the Role of Taxation, Conversion, and Religious Groups in its Genesis," *Islamic Studies* 33, no. 2/3 (1994): 227.

⁴ For the differences in taxation between Arab Muslims, non-Arab Muslims, and non-Muslims in the Umayyad Dynasty, see Roberto Marín-Guzmán, "The 'Abbasid Revolution in Central Asia and Khurāsān: An Analytical Study of the Role of Taxation, Conversion, and Religious Groups in Its Genesis," *Islamic Studies* 33, no. 2/3 (1994): 233-4.

⁵ Arjomand, "'Abd Allah Ibn Al-Muqaffa' and the 'Abbasid Revolution,'" 32.

⁶ Patricia Crone, "The 'Abbāsīd Abnā' and Sāsānid Cavalrymen," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8, no. 1 (1998): 2.

were in the *ahl al-dawla*.⁷ It was largely due to Abu-Muslim al-Khurasani that the Khurasanian were brought into the Abbasid military, providing essential support at a largely local level, as he supported their nationalistic ideals in opposition to growing Arabo-centric sentiments.⁸ However, Khurasanian tribes were not the only Persians to become a factor in the coalition-like Abbasid forces: many Persians joined the Shi'ite sect as a way of opposing the Sunni Umayyads, revolting in the eastern territories of the empire in coalescence with larger Abbasid movements.⁹ These *Malawis*, outsiders in the Umayyad administration who used the Shi'ite revolts to further their political aims, became one of the largest factors in the initial Abbasid armies, gathered from the local levels of society.¹⁰

Thus, the Abbasid military was largely comprised of, at least in its formative years, large amounts of support from the local level, suggesting that Abbasid practices did not include a standing army of professionals.¹¹ Khurasanian troops from Iran played a large part alongside the *Malawis*, who were used by the Abbasids to quell any internal revolts after the creation of the

⁷ Ibid., 11. Crone analyses the fact that while the Umayyad dynasty favoured the usage of Arabs in the military, the Abbasid forces favoured Iranian troops “of whom there was after all a much greater reservoir,” as well as “freshly converted dhimmis whose acceptance in the Hashimite army constituted their entry into Muslim society.” The recruitment patterns of Abbasid rulers from the time of the revolution onwards therefore follow very nationalistic lines of thinking, along with those people at the most local of levels who formed the militias of the Dynasty. For more on this, see Crone, “The 'Abbāsīd Abnā' and Sāsānid Cavalrymen,” 13.

⁸ Khurasanian support was essential to the victory of the Abbasids and played a vital role in the initial formation of Abbasid armies, along with local militias. For more on this, see Roberto Marín-Guzmán, “the 'Abbasid Revolution in Central Asia and Khurāsān: an Analytical Study of the Role of Taxation, Conversion, and Religious Groups in its Genesis,” *Islamic Studies* 33, no. 2/3 (1994): 239. For more on the prevalent Arabo-centric mentalities which prodded many Persians to join the Abbasid army, see Crone, “The 'Abbāsīd Abnā' and Sāsānid Cavalrymen,” 15.

⁹ Marín-Guzmán, “The 'Abbasid Revolution in central Asia and Khurāsān,” 237-8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 239.

¹¹ Here it must be detailed that Abbasid caliphs used the Khurasanian troops in time of war, yet otherwise did not employ them on a consistent basis and had them stationed in Iraq, relying instead on locally drawn militias for Syrian affairs. For more on this, see Kenneth M. Setton, ed. *A History of the Crusades: The First Hundred Years*. Vol. 1. (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 82.

new dynasty.¹² Yet even these could not replace the locally formed militias, drawn from the populace when the need arose, that sustained the Abbasid Dynasty once power had been wrested from the Umayyads, and who essentially weakened the caliph through their military allegiance to their local emirs, called *rawabit*.¹³ Indeed, these local militias played a vital role in the Abbasid military, as local leaders were “still able to raise armies of up to four thousand horsemen when their interests demanded it.”¹⁴ These militias were used in greater frequency than Khurasanian troops, leading to a dependence on local leaders contributing to field an Abbasid force.¹⁵ There appears in the Abbasid forces a small percentage of black soldiers, yet their role remained strictly secondary, especially with the rise of the Turk.¹⁶ Recruitment policies largely hinged upon non-Arab Muslim (and in some cases, non-Muslim) political endeavours, heavy taxations, and nationalistic sentiments from Persia, as well as religious ideals which brought various Shi’ite communities into revolt. This essentially created “polyglot armies, including Turkish slave

¹² Hugh Kennedy, "Central Government and Provincial Élites in the Early 'Abbāsīd Caliphate," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 44, no. 1 (1981): 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27. It is curious to note that the Abbasid military favoured the Khurasanian troops in volatile areas, whereas the militias were used and subordinate to their immediate emir, suggesting that the Abbasids did not favour the idea of a standing army aside from their use of the Khurasani.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31. Kennedy asserts that the “local Arab militia, not tribal followings, was the main force in the country”: see page 32. It is curious to note how Kennedy suggests the militias prevented the caliphs from establishing military dictatorships, as the composition and recruitment methods of the army itself prevented him from doing so, due in large part to the various allegiances of the local militias.

¹⁵ It appears the Khurasani troops were only used in times of extreme necessity. Otherwise, the Abbasid army used locally drawn troops, making the main force of the country the militias. For more on this, see Hugh Kennedy, "Central Government and Provincial Élites in the Early 'Abbāsīd Caliphate," 35. Within the Abbasid Dynasty, garrison towns in Iraq eventually gave way to the Khurasani troops due to the increase in urban life and trade, yet in Syria, garrison towns of local militias held their position and thus prevented the dissolution of locally formed Abbasid forces, loyal to various emirs. For more on this, see Kenneth M. Setton, ed. *A History of the Crusades: The First Hundred Years*. Vol. 1. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press (1969): 82.

¹⁶ Daniel Pipes, "Black Soldiers in Early Muslim Armies," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 13, no. 1 (1980): 94. In regards to the rise of the Turk in Abbasid military composition, a product of the civil war between Harun ar-Rashid’s sons Al-Ma’mun and al’Amin, see Kenneth M. Setton, ed. *A History of the Crusades: The First Hundred Years*, 82.

troops that lacked cohesive unity,” comprised of Persians, non-Arab Muslims, Shi’ite supporters, and local militias.¹⁷

Ottoman forces seem to have been constructed in very different ways, similar to contemporary European forces at the time, yet different when looking at its individual characteristics. The main force of the army consisted of the *Sipahi* (Persian, “army”), which were cavalymen, in contrast to the infantrymen, later eclipsed by corps such as the Janissaries.¹⁸ These cavalry warriors, while under the direct authority of the sultan, were garrisoned under “the supreme command of the provincial governor who called them to the colours when need for a campaign arose, although in later times, at least, it was possible to compound for absence by a financial payment,” showing a sense of feudal-ness as seen in the Abbasid period.¹⁹ Indeed, most of the Ottoman army, before encountering trained European armies, was comprised of feudal forces acting on behalf of involved emirs, “since the élite force of the Janissaries was a numerically restricted one.”²⁰ They were later replaced by the rise of the *sipahi* in order to counter the effectiveness of European knights against Muslim feudal forces.²¹ These initial

¹⁷ Christopher Tyerman, *The World of the Crusades* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 36.

¹⁸ Bosworth, C.E., Temimi, Abdeljelil and Haig, T.W, “Sipāhī,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed, Ed: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (2012): 1.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note the qualities which these Sipahis shared with feudal Europe, as Bosworth states: “but since the land grants could only descend hereditarily to the sons or descendants of sipāhīs or djebelis, who had normally been brought up to the profession of arms and were capable of performing military service, a level of competence could be maintained. On a sipāhī’s death, his land grant usually passed to his son, although if the latter was still a minor, his required military service had to be performed by a djebeli substitute. If there was no heir at all or no capable heir, the grant reverted to the state, with its revenues collected ad interim by the mewkūfātī [q.v.], and it could then be granted out subsequently to some other deserving warrior”. For more on this, see Bosworth, C.E., Temimi, Abdeljelil and Haig, T.W, “Sipāhī,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed, Ed: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (2012): 2.

²⁰ Bosworth, C.E., Temimi, Abdeljelil and Haig, T.W, “Sipāhī,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (2012): 3.

²¹ It seems as though the idea of feudal land-grants in exchange for military service was incorporated into the Ottoman world via Europe and the Byzantine empire, where “sipahis (cavalymen) who composed the main force of the Ottoman army were given timars in the villages throughout the newly conquered country”. Inalcik, Halil. "Ottoman Methods of Conquest", *Studia Islamica*, no. 2 (1954): 107. For more on Sipāhī soldiers, the

feudal forces formed the bulk of Ottoman armies before the rise of the *sipahi*, based on a system of *timars* and *ziamet* that indicated the individuals' rank in the army, across Anatolia which was utilized as a necessity,²² which outlined future military service required by the Sultan depending on how much land they were granted.²³ This system was used by the predecessors of Murad I, where the Ottoman military was dependant on “the military services provided, on a voluntary basis, by Turkmen horsemen and border raiders, who served under semi-independent commanders of the frontier districts.”²⁴ However, beginning with the reign of Murad I (1362 – 1389), a standing military comprised of professional troops slowly began to take form, threatening the balance of power held by Turkish military families, frontier commanders, and the sultan.²⁵ Murad became systematically less reliant on “ghazi volunteers and more on regular cavalry (*sipahis*) supported by land assignments,” causing feudal forces to largely disperse back

backbone of the Ottoman forces and beginning of the standing army, see Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 35. For more on the system of *timars* used to regulate the numbers of the *sipahi* cavalry, see Ágoston, Gábor “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 2 (2011): 282.

²² “The Ottoman state developed its distinct *tīmār* organization, apparently borrowing in its successive periods of expansion elements from each of these [Byzantine, Western Europe, the Islamic States, the Turco-Mongol states] feudal systems.” Note the emulation, albeit a changed form, of Abbasid feudal forces. For more on this, see Inalcik, H., “*Tīmār*”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2. For more on Timars and Ziamets, see Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*, 35.

²³ Gábor Ágoston, “Ottoman Military Organization (up to 1800),” *The Encyclopedia of War* (2011): 1.

²⁴ Murphey, R., “*Yeñi Čeri*”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1. For more on the composition of these feudal forces, as well as the volunteer corps fighting along the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire in the 14th century, see Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* vol. 2 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 424. For the transition of the Ottoman military from nomadic cavalry units to a standing army, paid by the Sultan during the mid-fourteenth-century, see Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*, 35.

²⁵ This standing army incorporated troops such as the *Yeñi Čeri* (Janissaries), which caused significant upheaval between the new military order and the one which it was trying desperately to modernize in the face of trained European forces, namely, nomadic volunteer forces raised by independent emirs. For more on this, see Murphey, R., “*Yeñi Čeri*”, 1-2. This resistance to the growing power of the standing military, largely signified by the *Yeñi Čeri* corps, still lingered on during the reign of Mehmed II; For more on this, see Murphey, R., “*Yeñi Čeri*”, 7.

into the population, thus creating the basis of the Ottoman standing military.²⁶ This exodus of feudal forces could also be a consequence of Ottoman economic, social, and monetary reforms utilized in the 16th century as part of their military revival, causing an emphasis on a standing military in order to release people back into the population.²⁷ Indeed, the introduction of the *timar* system “provided the Ottoman sultans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with a standing provincial cavalry army of 50,000–80,000 strong, while relieving the central Ottoman bureaucracy of the burden of revenue-raising and paying military salaries.”²⁸ This modernization of Ottoman forces, including the creation of permanently salaried and mobilized troops at the sultan’s command, served a twofold purpose: firstly, it acted to negate the effectiveness of the Frankish knight on the battlefield, who easily out-skilled volunteer cavalymen of the old military institutions in terms of weaponry and tactics, while secondly, it served as “an essential tool in combating centrifugal tendencies among the Turkmen beys.”²⁹ These permanently

²⁶ It is also essential to note the military units sent to the sultan on demand by Christian territories which had submitted to a vassal state, yet had not converted to Islam, as they were used in campaigns of the Ottoman empire during the expansion into the Balkans. For more on this, see Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 426. For information on Byzantium’s vassalage to Murad I under Emperor John V of Constantinople, see Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*, 36. For more information on the role of Murad I in the modernization of the Ottoman forces, see Gábor Ágoston, “Ottoman Military Organization (up to 1800),” 1.

²⁷ For more on the Ottoman social reforms, which enabled the empire to utilize more manpower in other sectors of society now that a standing army was formed, see Ágoston, Gábor. “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 2 (2011): 282.

²⁸ Gábor Ágoston, “Ottoman Military Organization (up to 1800),” 3. This number of Ottoman cavalry is used as well in Ágoston, Gábor. “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800”, 282.

²⁹ The need for a standing military, as opposed to the feudal forces raised and utilized by various commanders along the frontier, became more apparent by the 1360’s Ottoman conquests of the Balkans, where interaction with mobilized European forces led them to modernize their land forces in order to subjugate the Balkan powers. For more on this, see Murphey, R., “Yeñi Čeri,” 2. The main difference between these the feudal forces and the new standing military, aside from their loyalty to the Sultan, was the permanent employment of the former. For more on this, see Murphey, R., “Yeñi Čeri”, 3. For more on the ties between Janissary troops and the Sultan following the rule of Murad I and Bayazid, see Gilles Veinstein, "On the Ottoman Janissaries (fourteenth-nineteenth Centuries)", *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500-2000*, ed. Zürcher Erik-Jan (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 121.

salaried troops, including the fledgling Janissary corps, came to be distinguished against those more nomadic factions of Ottoman forces due to their constant mobilization or permanent payment at the hands of the sultans.³⁰ Beginning under Murad I, these Janissary units slowly began to take precedence in the Ottoman military, until by the 15th century they came into “a more specialised role as troops trained for the assault of fortified places,”³¹ largely due to their “specific ability to act as a monolithic and compact block in the final assault.”³² The significance of the Janissaries began to grow, especially during the 15th century following the conquest of Constantinople, as they gradually overtook the role of the traditional *azabs*, “relegating them to garrison service.”³³ Indeed, Sultan Bayezid (1389 – 1402) expanded the Janissary corps with the sole intention of creating an army that could hold its own against any coalition force from Europe,³⁴ increasing the number of Janissary troops to 13,000 by the end of his reign, “a very high level for a standing army of the time.”³⁵ By the beginning of the 17th century, the role of the Janissary corps, and by extension, the salaried troops of the Ottoman Empire, completely removed the once existing feudal forces “as the indispensable operational core of the Ottoman

³⁰ Ibid., 116. For the origins of the Janissary corps, a product of the *Pencyek* and *Devsirme*, see pages 121-123. For the differences, including monetary payment, between the Janissary corps and the nomadic/feudal forces used by the Ottomans before Murad I, see page 127. For more on the origin of the Janissary corps, founded in 1370’s, see Gábor Ágoston, “Ottoman Military Organization (up to 1800),” 2.

³¹ Murphey, R., “Yeñi Čeri,” 3-4. See also Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 426.

³² Gilles Veinstein, “On the Ottoman Janissaries (fourteenth-nineteenth Centuries),” 117.

³³ Gábor Ágoston, “Ottoman Military Organization (up to 1800),” 1-2. For more on the role of the *azabs*, a remnant of the militia from early Ottoman military personnel who were eclipsed, and ultimately replaced by the Janissaries, see Ágoston, Gábor “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800,” 293.

³⁴ Murphey, R., “Yeñi Čeri,” 7. It is curious to note the importance of the Janissary Corps; the swelling of their numbers was a measure used in the 16th century to counterbalance the Hapsburg superiority in firepower in the war for Hungary. For more on this role, see Ágoston Gábor, “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800,” 284.

³⁵ Gilles Veinstein, “On the Ottoman Janissaries (fourteenth-nineteenth Centuries),” 118.

army.”³⁶ This is not to say, however, that infantry became the most important force in Ottoman armies; cavalry units such as the *Akinci* played a vital role, especially in Suleiman I’s conquest of Hungary, and greatly outnumbered the Janissary units.³⁷ Yet even these cavalry units followed the trend of permanent salaried troops, accompanying the *Yeñi Čeri* as the fundamental basis for the standing army.

Ottoman military development during the 15th to 17th centuries played a large part in its conquest into Europe, as well as in the centralization of power in the hands of the Sultan, largely due to the close ties between the *Yeñi Čeri* units and himself.³⁸ As Marshall Hodgson states, “Ottoman absolutism built upon the tradition of looking upon the central power, including all its administrative branches, as one great army; and of regarding this army as at the personal service of the monarch.”³⁹ Indeed, “no longer dependent on steppe nomadic economy and culture, the Ottoman polity was settled, confident and accommodating, centered on loyalty to the ruling dynasty and its religion, not on origins, ethnicity or past associations.”⁴⁰ Ottoman military dominance in Anatolia, as well as in eastern Europe, can be examined in light of the Sultan’s centralized government, which enabled him to have “more control over their [Ottoman] empire’s resources and the means of organized violence.”⁴¹ This could not be further removed from the

³⁶ Murphey, R., “Yeñi Čeri,” 9. For the role of the Janissary corps in securing the power of the Sultan, see Gilles Veinstein, “On the Ottoman Janissaries (fourteenth-nineteenth Centuries),” 117.

³⁷ Gábor Ágoston, “Ottoman Military Organization (up to 1800),” 1-2.

³⁸ Gilles Veinstein, “On the Ottoman Janissaries (fourteenth-nineteenth Centuries),” 116-117.

³⁹ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 99.

⁴⁰ Christopher Tyerman, *The World of the Crusades* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 398.

⁴¹ Ottoman dominance in the 16th century, in light of power centralization and military reforms, was unmatched in either its European or Asian rivals. This was later to be eclipsed by their Russian adversaries in the 18th century. For more on this, see Ágoston, Gábor. “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800,” 282.

feudal-like military and political composition of the Abbasids, and for the reasons submitted below, Ottoman sovereignty can be analyzed.

Abbasid military institutions were largely comprised of several political, religious, and demographic entities in their formative years leading to the downfall of the Umayyad Dynasty. These included Shi'ite factions, forces and garrisons local to emirs, and Persian sympathizers in light of Arabo-centric ideologies prevalent in the Muslim world. Khurasanian troops played a huge part in the Abbasids' rise to power, forming what can be called a proto-standing army in the Muslim world, yet they failed to dislodge local forces as the backbone of Abbasid military policies.

These factors outline the first difference between Ottoman and Abbasid military formation, although both had the humble beginnings of a feudal-like military: new military groups in the Abbasid world, such as the Khurasani, failed to permeate into existing military formations, thus limiting their effectiveness against foreign and domestic rivals.⁴² Innovative military branches in the Ottoman empire, such as the introduction of the Yeñi Çeri, were exposed to resistance from existing military families in Anatolia, yet gradually came to dominate the military, expelling the feudal mentality that had been relevant to Ottoman military foundations since its beginnings. Due to this, "irregular ghazi troops had tended gradually to recede into the general herding and peasant population... With their changed social position, their attitudes changed; well established themselves, there were ready to look for a heroic chief, more ready to accept an established monarch. At the same time, their power was diluted."⁴³ This leads into the

⁴² The weaknesses of the Abbasid Dynasty in this paper is being viewed from an internal/military perspective; this is not to negate the inter-caliphal disputes which greatly weakened the Abbasids, such as the pressures from the Fatimids, Frankish Counties in the Middle East, and Turkic pressures. For more on these, see Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*, 24.

⁴³ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 100. See also Murphey, R., "Yeñi Çeri," 2-3.

second difference between Abbasid and Ottoman practices that lead to ultimate Ottoman supremacy: the formation of a standing military, initially comprised of slaves loyal only to the throne, which allowed Ottoman sultans to centralize power at the expense of the rival Turkic beys.⁴⁴ In essence, the Janissary corps allowed the sultan to have a “state commission army or, to be more accurate, a sultan’s army,” increasing his power while becoming less dependent on feudal forces.⁴⁵ Although the mentality of the *ghazi* remained along the frontiers of the Ottoman world, “their personnel had gradually ceased to be drawn from Muslim adventurers and hereditary frontiersmen,” giving way to professional standing armies newly utilized from the time of Murad I onwards.⁴⁶ Abbasid caliphs lacked centralized authority, primarily due to their armies consisting of feudal and garrison forces loyal to a plethora of regional commanders, compelling the caliph to contend with local emirs in exchange for military support.⁴⁷ This same pattern can be seen if one analyses the turbulent years between 1617-1730, where seven out of ten Sultans were deposed, leading to a collapse in the Ottoman war machine due to the emergence of third party “local power brokers,” thus diminishing the capability of the empire to face external threats as it had in the 15th century.⁴⁸ In essence, Ottoman capabilities of centralizing power proved essential to their military dominance in both Europe and Asia.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁵ Gilles Veinstein, "On the Ottoman Janissaries (fourteenth-nineteenth Centuries)," 121.

⁴⁶ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 100.

⁴⁷ “As the Caliphs power declined that of his Turkish vassals increased”. For the decrease in power of the Abbasid Caliph, including the rise of the Ghaznavids in India, see Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*, 24.

⁴⁸ For more on the collapse during the 17th century, see Ágoston, Gábor, “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800,” 284.

The final difference this paper proposes between Abbasid and Ottoman military styles and composition pertains to external influences. The Abbasid military continued to have relations, peaceful or not, with Byzantine and Western forces until its collapse in 1558 at the hands of the Mongols. Despite this interaction, Muslim forces did not stray from regionally divided factions, staying largely dependent on the goodwill of regional emirs and their forces to field an army. The Ottomans, however, once having captured Edirne and beginning their conquest into the Balkans, began a systematic modernization of their army, including land-holding grants adopted from the Byzantine world and the formation of permanent salaried troops, in order to contend with the forces of Christendom.⁴⁹ In fact, this adaptation to and emulation of European styles of fighting can be attributed to the rise of the Yeñi Çeri corps as the new backbone of the Ottoman standing army.⁵⁰ This adaptation manifested not only in recruitment patterns and tactics, but also in weapons. By the 15th century, “under Murad II they began to use matchlock arquebuses, called *tufek*,” a tactic of the west.⁵¹ Thus, the supremacy that the Ottoman military machine enjoyed can largely be attributed to martial developments which centralized power at the hands of the caliph while modernizing in the face of foreign adversaries. In the words of Marshall Hodgson, “the [Ottoman] army has been called the ‘ruling institution,’ a term

⁴⁹ These parallels transcend military fundamental similarities, as Byzantine and Ottoman politics were quite intermarried during Byzantine vassalage to the Ottomans. For more on this, see Christopher Tyerman, *The World of the Crusades*, 399.

⁵⁰ For more on Ottoman emulation of European styles of fighting, including tactics and weaponry, see Gilles Veinstein, "On the Ottoman Janissaries (fourteenth-nineteenth Centuries)," 116.

⁵¹ Gábor Ágoston, “Ottoman Military Organization (up to 1800),” 1-2. This exposure to Western military tactics and armies can also be contributed to the conquest of Hungary; for more on this, see Ágoston, Gábor. “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800,” 294.

that allows for the presence within it both of bureaucrats and of military, wielding all central power as one block.”⁵²

About the author

Peter del Rosso graduated from the University of Waterloo in 2020 with an honour's degree in Medieval Studies, and a double minor in Classical Studies and History. During his undergraduate degree, and after being the recipient of the St. Jerome's Upper Year Student Award and the Arts Convocation Award in Medieval Studies, he became aware of his passion for medieval military history, specifically that which pertains to European and Turkic-Syrian military confrontations during the late eleventh century. Peter is currently completing a Masters degree at the University of Waterloo, after receiving the Phyllis Young Forsyth Graduate Scholarship, completing a thesis on the logistics surrounding the First Crusade.

⁵² Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 101. It is curious to note the role which Ottoman military commanders played in social settings as well, as they were responsible for “maintaining law and order in the provinces.” For more on this, see Ágoston, Gábor. “Military Transformation in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, 1500–1800,” 290.

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