

CHASING JANISSARY GHOSTS: SULTAN MAHMUD II'S PARANOIA ABOUT A JANISSARY UPRISING AFTER THE ABOLITION OF THE JANISSARY CORPS

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Abstract

During his first years as sultan, Mahmud II faced direct threats to his life from the Janissaries and their allies in Istanbul. Although he was able to keep his life and throne during the Alemdar Incident of 1808, he endured continuous political harassment and humiliation at the hands of the Janissaries in the following years. Such bitter experiences left deep scars in Mahmud II's psyche and he developed a deep hatred for his tormentors. Even his well-planned victory in 1826 and the destruction of the Janissaries could not convince the sultan that the Janissary threat was over. As a result, Mahmud II urged his ministers and officials to be vigilant for any signs of Janissary conspiracy following the so-called Auspicious Event in 1826. As his hypersensitivity on the subject led him to believe any allegation of potential Janissary plots and reprimand his ministers for their negligence, government officials quickly realized that they had to appear more vigilant than the sultan if they were to protect their careers. Some even exploited the sultan's weakness by exaggerating rumors or feeble attempts at rebellion as empire-wide Janissary conspiracies, seeking to get into the sultan's good graces. This atmosphere of paranoia had serious consequences for ordinary people, as anyone accused of criticizing or voicing an opinion against the sultan's new regime risked being exiled or executed. Thus, the period between 1826 and 1830 witnessed the uncovering of alleged Janissary plots against Mahmud II's administration and the subsequent executions and exiles of former Janissaries and civilians.

Keywords: Sultan Mahmud II, Janissaries, conspiracy, abolition of the Janissary Corps, paranoia

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Yeniçeri Hayaletlerini Kovalamak: Yeniçeri Ocağı'nın Kaldırılmasından Ardından Sultan II. Mahmud'un Yeniçeri İsyanı Paranoyası

Öz

Sultan II. Mahmud saltanatının ilk yıllarında yeniçeriler ve mütteliklerinin hayatına yönelik ciddi tehditlerine maruz kaldı. Sultan 1808'deki Alemdar Vakası sırasında hayatını ve tahtını korumayı başardysa da, yeniçeriler belli bir süre daha sultanın şahsına yönelik siyasi aşışılama ve tacizlere devam ettiler. Bu acı tecrübeler II. Mahmud'un halet-i ruhiyesinde sadece derin yaralar bırakmakla kalmadı aynı zamanda yeniçerilere karşı büyük bir nefret duygusunu da beraberinde getirdi. 1826'da iyi ve sabırla uygulanmış bir plan doğrultusunda Yeniçeri Ocağı'nın ortadan kaldırması bile sultanı iktidarına yönelik yeniçeri tehdidinin geçtiğı konusunda ikna edemedi. Sultan bu yüzden vezirlerini ve diğler devlet görevlilerini potansiyel bir yeniçeri komplosuna karşı her daim uyanık olmaları konusunda uarmaya devam etti. Yeniçeriler konusundaki bu aşırı hassasiyeti sultanı en ufak komplo ihbar ve ithamlarına dahi inanmaya ve vezirlerini ihmalkârlıkla suçlamaya kadar götürdüğünden, vezirler ve paşalar bu dönemde kendi kariyerlerini korumanın yeniçerilik konusunda sultandan daha hassas görünmekte yattığını anlamakta gecikmediler. İçlerinde bazıları sultanın bu zafiyetini istismar ederek önemsiz dedikodu ve olayları imparatorluk geneline yayılmış yeniçeri komploları olarak lanse ederek sultanın gözüne girmeye çabaladılar. Bu hâkim atmosfer sıradan halk ve sabık yeniçeriler için ciddi sonuçlar doğurdu; sultanın yeni rejimini ve reformlarını eleştiren ya da en ufak muhalif görüş belirten herkes sürgün ya da idam cezası riski ile karşı karşıyaydı. Bu sebeple, 1826 ile 1830 arası dönem II. Mahmud yönetimine karşı çeşitli yeniçeri komplolarının birbiri ardına ortaya çıkarıldığı ve sabık yeniçeriler ile sivillerin sürgün ve idam cezasına çarptırıldığı bir dönem oldu.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sultan II. Mahmud, yeniçeriler, komplo, Vaka-i Hayriye, paranoya

*"On the 17th day of Safer, twelve thousand Bektâşis with halberds in their hands will arrive at Üsküdar from Mecca. From there they will get across to Istanbul and gather at the Meat Square, then they will march to the Palace and among them a man named Muhammed Ali will rule in Istanbul."*¹

On June 15, 1826, Sultan Mahmud II oversaw the destruction and the abolition of the Janissary Corps, an achievement which his late predecessors had only dreamed of. The last Janissary rebellion did not last even a day, and the final

¹ For the interrogations concerning the October 1826 plot, see Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), Hatt-ı Hümayun (HAT), 294/17506, n.d.

stand of Istanbul's Janissaries was even less impressive, lasting no more than an hour.² This quick success was very surprising even for Sultan Mahmud II and his advisors, who had been preparing for this event for years, as they worried not only about the number of Istanbul Janissaries but also their supposedly large support base among Istanbul's residents.

Having survived the traumatic events of the deposition of Sultan Mustafa IV and the Alemdar Incident, during which his life had been in immediate danger from the Janissaries and their allies, Sultan Mahmud II seemed unconvinced that the Janissary threat was over even after news of the burning of the Janissary barracks and summary executions of Janissary ringleaders was reported by many of his officials on June 15, 1826. Thus, he ordered his ministers and high-ranking officials not to stay at their homes but rather in tents erected in the third courtyard of the Topkapı Palace until further notice.³ The soldiers from the Artillery, Mortar, and Sapper Corps were charged to protect the gates of the palace and two artillery pieces placed at the main palace gate were kept ready for any sign of trouble.⁴ Sultan Mahmud II's first Friday Ceremony after the abolition was also held at the Zeynep Sultan Mosque due to security concerns, as its small size and closeness to the palace gate made the sultan's security more manageable.⁵ Mahmud II's main concern was security, as he was afraid that there would be attacks and assassination attempts by the Janissaries and their allies against himself and the members of his government.

Immediately after the abolition, Sultan Mahmud II's government also ordered the Istanbul residents to set up a night watch in their neighborhoods. On the one hand, this aimed at providing a temporary solution to the problem of security, as the abolition of the Janissaries had also meant the removal of the police force from the city. On the other hand, the government also sought to curb the nocturnal mobility of unwanted elements during this period. Although the public would be relieved from this duty after two weeks, when the newly recruited troops of the Asakir-i Mansure assumed policing functions, Istanbul was placed under a state of martial law which would last much longer than the neighborhood watch. In fact, the state of alertness and vigilance would continue in the sultan's mind for

² Sahhâflar Şeyhizâde Seyyid Mehmed Es'ad Efendi, *Vak'a-nüvis Es'ad Efendi Tarihi (Bâbir Efendi'nin Zeyl ve İlâveleriyle) 1237-1241/1821-1826*, (ed. Ziya Yılmaz), Istanbul 2000, p. 608-617; Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Volume 1, Istanbul 1290/1873-1874, p. 136-143.

³ Sahhâflar Şeyhizâde Seyyid Mehmed Es'ad Efendi, *Vak'a-nüvis Es'ad Efendi Tarihi*, p. 618; Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Volume 1, p. 145. The high-ranking state officials continued to serve and stay in their tent bureaus in the third courtyard of the palace for more than two months, in accordance with the sultan's written order. İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devleti Teşkilatından Kapıkulu Ocakları*, Volume 1, Ankara 1943, p. 606-607.

⁴ Esad Efendi, *Üss-i Zafer*, 2nd Edition, Istanbul 1293/1876, p. 130.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101. During the Alemdar Incident (1808) the Friday Ceremony was also held at the Zeynep Sultan Mosque, as there were similar concerns for Sultan Mahmud II's security; see Cabi Ömer Efendi, *Cabi Tarihi: Tarih-i Sultan Selim-i Salis ve Mahmud-ı Sani*, (ed. Mehmet Ali Beyhan), Volume 1, Ankara 2003, p. 303.

years to come. The present paper aims to examine Sultan Mahmud II's oversensitivity to a potential Janissary threat and the price of this mood for the populace during the period between 1826 and 1830. Even though all of the so-called Janissary plots were proved to be without any substantial base during this time, Sultan Mahmud II's government prosecuted those accused to such an extent that even the official historians of the state had to admit the harshness of such policies.⁶ Realizing the sultan's vigilance on the subject, many high officials and provincial governors also resorted to similar measures so as to be on the safe side, further increasing butcher's bill associated with the Auspicious Event.

Although described in modern historiography as a reform-minded prince who was educated and informed by Sultan Selim III, Mahmud seemed to have had little choice in his political views from the very beginning. The *coup d'état* of Alemdar Mustafa Paşa was a political *fait accompli* that put Prince Mahmud's life in direct danger, as Sultan Mustafa IV's palace servants attempted to murder all remaining male members of the Ottoman dynasty so as to deprive Alemdar of any other alternatives for the throne. Mahmud survived the attempt and became the new sultan, finding himself at the head of the reformist faction. When the new attempt at military reform during the Grand Vizierate of Alemdar Paşa ended with a bloody uprising in 1808, Sultan Mahmud II once again found himself facing death threats, surviving – barely – the anger of the Janissaries by achieving what his brother, Mustafa IV, had failed to do in 1807: having his brother strangled and becoming the only surviving male member of the dynasty. Even though the rebels chose to keep Mahmud on the throne, they never fully recognized him as the legitimate sultan. They tried to put political pressure on the young ruler, often humiliating him publicly with street posters and simple couplets, calling him a coward, a liar, and unfit for rule.⁷ The Janissaries also pressured Mahmud II to produce a male heir to the throne, not hiding their intention of replacing the sultan when the time came. Nevertheless, Sultan Mahmud II proved to be resilient, weathering all these storms, and succeeded in strengthening his authority by first eliminating the most powerful local notables and then the majority of the mid-ranking Janissary officers who had had any kind of involvement in previous uprisings.⁸ Though the Greek Revolution postponed the sultan's long-planned

⁶ The official historian Ahmed Lutfi claims that his predecessor, Esad Efendi, wrote that prosecuting and executing so many people based on suspicions was very excessive and unnecessary. Even though no such statement can be found in Esad's published works, it is possible that Ahmed Lutfi saw this remark among the documents passed to him by Esad Efendi. Ahmed Lutfi's decision to include it in his official chronicle also shows that he agreed with Esad Efendi's argument and, of course, it was safe for him to do so nearly 50 years after the abolition of the Janissary Corps; Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarib-i Lutfi*, Volume 1, p. 159.

⁷ See Mehmet Mert Sunar, *Cauldron of Dissent: A Study of the Janissary Corps, 1807-1826*, SUNY-Binghamton, Ph.D, New York 2006, p. 147-169.

⁸ Şanizade Mehmed Atallah Efendi, *Tarib-i Şanizade*, Volume 2, Istanbul 1284/1867-1868, 235-237. See also Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, *Tarib-i Cevdet*, Volume 10 (Tertib-i Cedid; İkinci Tab), Istanbul 1309/1892, p. 205-206.

military reforms, Mahmud II moved against the Janissaries in 1826 when he thought the Egyptian troops under the command of İbrahim Paşa had suppressed the rebellion in the Morea.

As Mahmud II and his inner circle had been preparing for a move against the Janissaries for a while, the announcement of a new military reform in the last days of May in 1826 was a very calculated political move. The Janissaries realized too late that they were politically and legally surrounded, and their last desperate attempt to resist Mahmud II's reforms would fail miserably. The government's victory was so smooth and quick that the sultan could not quite believe that the Janissary threat in Istanbul was over. Thus, Mahmud II not only ordered a state of martial law, which continued for months in the Ottoman capital, but also urged his ministers and officials to be over-vigilant for any signs of Janissary revival. The sultan's hypersensitivity regarding a potential Janissary threat defined the political atmosphere for years to come and affected the attitudes of his ministers and *paşas*, who did not want to put their careers in danger by appearing insensitive on this issue, even though there was no real threat of a Janissary uprising in Istanbul.

According to the supplement and postscripts written by Abdürrezzak Bahir Efendi for Esad's official chronicle, it was not long after the abolition of the Janissary Corps that Mahmud II's government discovered a Janissary plot to overthrow the new regime. According to Bahir Efendi, some Janissary elements, who had been able to enroll in the new Asakir-i Mansure units, planned to set the newly built watchtower at Bayezid on fire and in the ensuing chaos to assassinate the new commander-in-chief, Ağa Hüseyin Paşa, and some senior commanders.⁹ Even though the whole event seems to have depended on a rumor reported by one of Ağa Hüseyin Paşa's men, Bahir Efendi claimed that the government responded with the transfer of a certain Mansure battalion to the Dardanelles and the execution of several ringleaders.

After the abolition of the Janissary Corps, Sultan Mahmud II's government was eager to form the new troops as quickly as possible, and thus it initially allowed the enrollment of former Janissaries to the new Asakir-i Mansure army, both in the provinces and in Istanbul.¹⁰ This move also aimed at pacifying some of

⁹ The supervising of fire-fighting efforts during Istanbul fires was one of the duties of the Janissary Ağas. Since this duty was transferred to the commander-in-chief of the Asakir-i Mansure army in the new system, the plotters would supposedly draw Ağa Hüseyin Paşa into the trap and assassinate him; Sahhâflar Şeyhizâde Seyyid Mehmed Es'ad Efendi, *Vak'a-nünüs Es'ad Efendi Tarihi*, p. 774-775.

¹⁰ Even though Ottoman official sources portray this process as a development outside the control of the central state, this in fact was happening in full knowledge of the government. In many provinces, former Janissary elements were used by local authorities for manning the new army. The authorities not only allowed but also encouraged this process, even mentioning it in the imperial order declaring the abolition of the Janissary Corps. For example, for the case of Crete, see Yannis Spyropoulos, *Κοινωνική, διοικητική, οικονομική και πολιτική διάσταση του οθωμανικού στρατού: οι γενίτσαροι της Κρήτης, 1750-1826* [Social, Administrative, Financial, and Political Dimensions of the Ottoman Army: The Janissaries of Crete, 1750-1826], University of Crete, Ph.D, Rethymno

the former Janissaries by ensuring their place in the new system. However, the sultan and his ministers remained suspicious of these remnants of the old regime in their capital. In this case, the rumors of a plot and the burning of the watchtower gave Sultan Mahmud II's government the necessary pretext to get rid of some of these elements. Since government agents reported that the former Janissaries were concentrated in a particular battalion, the battalion was transferred to the Dardanelles from where its members were dispersed to several navy ships. The remaining battalions at the army headquarters in Istanbul also could not escape the scrutiny of Commander-in-chief Ağa Hüseyin Paşa, who mimicked his master's over-sensitivity on the subject and had them transferred to Eğriboz.¹¹

It is striking how much this rumor resembles a similar one that circulated during the Grand Vizierate of Alemdar Mustafa Paşa.¹² Although this fact alone casts some doubt on the reliability of Bahir Efendi's account, there are indeed some references to the burned watchtower and the plot in official documents. In an imperial order related to the discovery of a second Janissary plot in Istanbul, Sultan Mahmud II expressed his strong suspicions about the involvement of former Janissaries in the burning of the watchtower at Bayezid and urged his grand vizier, Mehmed Selim (Sırrı) Paşa, to interrogate the suspects also on this subject.¹³ Obeying his master's will, the grand vizier seems to have succeeded in extracting a vague reference to an earlier plot from an accused Mansure soldier during the interrogations. According to the statement of the Mansure soldier, there was indeed a plan to assassinate Commander-in-chief Ağa Hüseyin Paşa among the Mansure soldiers deployed in the Corps' headquarters during the great fire of Hocapaşa (August 2, 1826). However, the plan failed when the Mansure battalion, including the plotters, was transferred first to Üsküdar and then to the Dardanelles.¹⁴ Even though we have every right to be suspicious about confessions extracted by Grand Vizier Mehmed Selim Paşa through torture, the Mansure soldier's statement seems to partly corroborate Bahir Efendi's account. However, as it will be argued in the following pages, Grand Vizier Mehmed Selim Paşa and other high officials had a tendency not to directly contradict the hypersensitivity

2014, p. 361-363. The official recognition of Janissary enrollment in the new army units can be best summarized by the fact that Hüseyin Paşa, the new commander-in-chief and former Janissary *ağa*, was in charge of checking the validity of Janissary pay-tickets when their owners applied for enrollment in the Asakir-i Mansure Army. See Howard A. Reed, *The Destruction of the Janissaries by Mahmud II in June, 1826*, Princeton University, Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures, Ph.D, Princeton 1951, p. 336.

¹¹ The information about the plot comes from Abdurrezzak Bahir Efendi's supplement to Esad Efendi's history. Later historians, namely Ahmed Cevdet and Ahmed Lutfi, repeated Bahir Efendi's account. However, Ahmed Lutfi stated that he could not find any official documents relating to the event; Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Volume 1, p. 159. For Ahmed Cevdet's reference to the event, see Ahmed Cevdet Paşa, *Tarih-i Cevdet*, Volume 12, p. 188.

¹² Cabi Ömer Efendi, *Cabi Tarihi*, Volume 1, p. 269-270.

¹³ BOA, HAT.289/17327, n.d. "...bu mabbesde olanlara mübterik kulenin sebebi sual olundu mu bala bunda benim şübbem vardır".

¹⁴ BOA, HAT.294/17506, n.d.

and paranoia of Mahmud II on the issue of the Janissaries. It was highly probable that the whole statement might be related to the fact that the grand vizier and his men were just putting words into the mouths of the suspects in order to not contradict Sultan Mahmud II.

The abovementioned second Janissary plot was discovered just four months after the abolition of the Janissary Corps by the government in October 1826. A number of the new Asakir-i Mansure Army soldiers and the marines (*kaalyoncus*), alongside former Janissaries, were accused of conspiring to revive the Janissary Corps. Although there was no indication that the accused Asakir-i Mansure soldiers were former Janissaries, they were in close contact with former Janissaries and several Bektâşîs. For that reason, the government also charged a Bektâşî *şeyh* and his dervishes for their involvement in the plot.¹⁵ Despite the initial panic and fussiness of Sultan Mahmud II and his ministers, only twenty-nine persons were arrested and accused of plotting against the government. Of these, there were eight Asakir-i Mansure soldiers, six *kaalyoncus*, nine former Janissaries, and six civilians. All of the accused were taken to the new headquarters of the Asakir-i Mansure army and harshly interrogated. The grand vizier, Selim Mehmed Paşa, who was afraid of his master's wrath on the issue, hastily divided and transferred the soldiers of an Asakir-i Mansure regiment in Üsküdar to various Aegean Islands and the Dardanelles, since several of its soldiers were implicated in the Janissary plot.¹⁶ The discovery of the plot also triggered another Istanbul-wide manhunt for former Janissaries and Bektâşîs, resulting in the expulsion of some 800 individuals from Istanbul.¹⁷

The interrogations of the accused individuals at the Asakir-i Mansure headquarters in Bayezid revealed a half-cooked plan and rumors of a coming uprising among the Janissary elements who had slipped into the new army's ranks. Even though we are lucky as historians to have the summary accounts of the interrogations telling us about the beliefs and thoughts of former Janissaries and Bektâşîs after the abolitions of the Janissary Corps and the Bektâşî Order, the same cannot be said about the accused, who had to endure the process of interrogation.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid. This document includes not only the list of accused individuals, but also the summaries of their interrogations. This interesting document was first discovered and published by İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı in his famous *Kapıkulu Ocakları*. Uzunçarşılı, *Kapıkulu Ocakları*, Volume 1, p. 582-593.

¹⁶ BOA, HAT.290/17357, n.d.

¹⁷ BOA, HAT.340/18438, n.d. Although there is no date on the document, there is a section concerning the issues related to the conclusion of the Akkerman Treaty (October 7, 1826) which probably puts the date of this document around mid October 1826.

¹⁸ In fact, one of the accused Asakir-i Mansure soldiers died as a result of the beatings he took during the interrogations, while the Bektâşî *şeyh*, who was accused of being one of the ringleaders, committed suicide by drinking poison; BOA, HAT.294/17506.

The whole event and the rumors seemed to have been initiated by a former Janissary and Bektaşî *derviş* named Ahmed, who owned a pipe-bowl shop in Tahtakale. When his apprentice, who was an Asakir-i Mansure soldier in one of the Bosphorus fortifications, complained about the harsh discipline and beatings in the new army, Derviş Ahmed responded that his *şeyh* had previously revealed to him a prognostication on the revival of the Janissary Corps, using geomancy. He also said that there were many Bektaşîs performing *zîkers* by uttering the ninety-nine names of Allah and making similar divinations through geomancy. It seems that Derviş Ahmed convinced his apprentice of the good things to come; he, in turn, contacted several of his fellow Asakir-i Mansure soldiers, telling them the good tidings.

Derviş Ahmed was a follower of a Bektaşî *şeyh*, Mehmed Efendi, living in the Fatih district of Istanbul, an area close to the former Janissary barracks. After the abolition of the Bektaşî Order, Mehmed Efendi was able to remain in Istanbul and secretly continued practicing his duties as a Bektaşî *şeyh* in Laleli and Üsküdar. He seems to have revealed several prognostications to his followers by predicting the coming of a big event, namely the revival of the Janissary Corps and the Bektaşî Order. Mehmed Efendi first pointed to a specific date (Muharrem 7, 1242/August 11, 1826) by claiming that a major event would take place on that date. When the great fire of Hoca Paşa took place on August 2, 1826, Derviş Ahmed interpreted that his *şeyh* referred to this event. When he revealed his interpretation to his *şeyh*, Mehmed Efendi responded that he should look forward to another date (Safer 17, 1242/September 20, 1826) claiming that “*twelve thousand Bektaşîs with halberds in their hands will arrive at Üsküdar from Mecca. Then they will get across to Istanbul and gather in the Meat Square, from there they will march to the Palace and among them there will be a man named Muhammed Ali who will rule in Istanbul*”.¹⁹ As this prognostication also failed, Şeyh Mehmed Efendi told Derviş Ahmed that the big event would happen either on Rebiülevvel 17 or 25 / October 19 or 27, 1826, resulting in the destruction of the new army, and gave him a piece of paper (*remil kağıdı*) with geomantic dots as evidence.²⁰

It is quite interesting to observe how his followers kept their faith in Şeyh Mehmed Efendi despite the failure of his prognostications, and in this respect we might make reference to one of the masters of the historian’s craft, Marc Bloch,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For Islamic and Ottoman geomancy and the occult sciences, see Marinos Sariyannis, “Knowledge and the Control of the Future in Ottoman Thought”, *Aca’ib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural*, 1, (2020), p. 49-87; Jan Schmidt, “The Occult Sciences and their Importance in Ottoman Culture; Evidence from Turkish Manuscripts in Dutch Public Collections”, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları*, 23, (2003), p. 219-254; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, “Astrology, Lettrism, Geomancy: The Occult-Scientific Methods of Post-Mongol Islamicate Imperialism”, *The Medieval History Journal*, 19/1, (2016), p. 1-9.

and his findings in his study *The Royal Touch*.²¹ Their convictions had much to do with their expectations and their need to believe in miracles rather than the harsh reality that the Janissary Corps and the Bektaşî Order did not exist anymore. According to the interrogation records, Derviş Ahmed was able to convince not only himself but also his apprentice and his contacts in the Asakir-i Mansure army to plan an uprising among the Asakir-i Mansure regiments despite his *şeyh*'s failed prognostications.

The interrogation report offers invaluable insights into how such a movement spread by way of word of mouth and how social networks worked to organize such a plan. The confessions of the accused also show what measures the government took against a potential Janissary uprising and how the alleged conspirators planned to circumvent them. Even though the plan itself was far from being put into action and existed only in words and promises without much substance, it is still worth tracing how the original prognostication of the Bektaşî *şeyh* Mehmed Efendi spread to people who were apparently unhappy about Sultan Mahmud II's policies.

Several networks seem to have been at work in spreading the word of Şeyh Mehmed Efendi. The most important network seems to have been the professional one, as in the case of Derviş Ahmed, who convinced his apprentice who, in turn, influenced his fellow soldiers in the Asakir-i Mansure army, some of whom also spread the word to marines in the navy. Being from the same town and neighborhood also played a major role, as most of the Mansure soldiers, marines, and civilians involved in the plot were from Üsküdar. There was also a provincial connection, as several soldiers from Ahıska and Erzurum were originally *yamaks* (auxiliary forces deployed in forts) enrolled into the Mansure army. Another important network involved members of Janissary regimental structures, as many of the accused were former Janissaries, the majority of whom belonged to a single regiment, namely the 75th Cemaat. Nearly all the Janissaries had some kind of familiarity with Derviş Ahmed who also happened to be from the 75th Cemaat. As the original idea came from the Bektaşî *şeyh* Mehmed Efendi, it is not surprising to observe that the Bektaşî networks were also dominant in recruiting individuals for the planned uprising.

In spreading the plan, coffeehouses played a crucial role; a coffeehouse run by Mehmed Bayrakdar, a former Janissary from the 75th Cemaat, and a coffeehouse in Toptaşı, Üsküdar, frequented by Asakir-i Mansure soldiers and marines, provided not only safe locations for the plotters but also were effective in spreading the rumor of the uprising. Despite Sultan Mahmud II's initial ban on

²¹ Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, London 1973, p. 238-243. According to Bloch, the idea that the kings of France and England had miraculous healing powers and they could cure the disease of scrofula by touching the diseased stemmed from the need to believe in miracles rather than real-life experiences and had much to do with the strength of collective illusions.

coffeehouses, many of them, even ones run by former Janissaries, were apparently up and running four months after the abolition. Even though Esad Efendi claimed in his official history that following the abolition of the Janissary Corps the majority of the coffeehouses in Istanbul were closed down and their buildings transformed into other businesses due to their connections with Janissaries, Abdürrezzak Bahir Efendi pointed out that this was an exaggeration and that many were reopened after some time. This ban even became a new source of bribery for government officials who turned a blind eye to the reopening of coffeehouses in return for money from the owners.²²

Despite the fact that Sultan Mahmud II's government had expended considerable efforts on eliminating politically active mid-ranking- and sub-officers of the Janissary Corps, the socio-economic networks which had supported the Janissary establishment were more or less still in place. Many of the former Janissaries, who were not involved in the 1826 uprising, were continuing their businesses in crafts and trades. It is also interesting to observe that some of the old practices continued to exist in the new system. Although one should avoid making generalizations, the case involving the apprentice of Derviş Ahmed shows that an Asakir-i Mansure soldier could still work in the workshop of a small craftsman as an apprentice. Whether this was an exception or there were other similar cases is open to question. It was not a coincidence that many of the former Janissaries accused of involvement in the plot were engaged in small trades and crafts; they included a pipe-bowl maker/seller, a confectioner, a coffeehouse owner, the warden of sailmakers, a porter, and a butter/olive oil seller. A similar trend can also be observed among their supposed civilian accomplices: a chintz maker/seller, a maker/seller of pipe mouthpieces, and a *helva* maker/seller.

It may be stating the obvious, but people from the same provincial town or the same neighborhood also played a crucial role in these networks, especially where these towns and neighborhoods were important centers of Janissary activity. As mentioned earlier, nearly all of the Mansure soldiers accused and executed in the plot were migrants from the east Anatolian towns of Erzurum and Ahıska, two frontier regions where considerable Janissary forces were stationed. Similarly, all of the marines (*kalyoncus*) who agreed to join their cause were from the same Istanbul district, Üsküdar, the wharves of which had been largely under Janissary control prior to the Auspicious Incident.²³ To these connections, the role of regimental affiliations can be added: in the second half of the eighteenth century the 75th Cemaat was a regiment with soldiers in various fortresses, especially around the Black Sea, and a considerable number of men in Istanbul.²⁴ Although it is difficult to establish causation between the two events, it is worth noting that a few years

²² Sahnâflar Şeyhizâde Seyyid Mehmed Es'ad Efendi, *Vak'â-nîvîs Es'ad Efendi Tarihi*, p. 640.

²³ Sunar, *Cauldron of Dissent*, p. 46, 65-67, and *passim*.

²⁴ Maliyeden Müdevver Defter (MAD.d) 3946; 6536; Cevdet Askeriye (C.AS) 1022/44832 (29 Za 1197/October 26, 1783).

before the abolition of the Janissary Corps the abovementioned regiment had made its presence in the capital visible by participating in a number of bloody intra-Janissary rivalries, which had elicited an angry reaction from Mahmud II and caused the persecution of its soldiers.²⁵ A confessional network can also be added to all of these, with the Bektaşî *şeyh* and his followers. This is also not very surprising when one considers the close relationship between the Bektaşî order and some of the Janissaries. It can be argued that these Janissary networks in Istanbul present a model which was repeated with certain local differences in many of the provinces in the Ottoman Empire.

As word of the uprising spread through the abovementioned networks, reactions usually varied from passive acknowledgement to ardent support. Among those who offered their support, some also promised to bring a certain number of men to join the uprising. While Basmacı Mehmed said he could find a few men, Mehmed Usta, a former mid-ranking officer in the 64th Cemaat, promised to bring 50-60 men. Similarly, the coffeehouse owner Mehmed Bayrakdar of the 75th Cemaat, and a certain Zobi Topal İbrahim, a Mansure soldier deployed at the army headquarters, both pledged to find 200-300 men for the cause. Kalyoncu Hasan, a marine in the navy, also promised to find 30-40 men willing to support the uprising. Even though these promises seem to have been without much substance and were probably used by people to boast to their counterparts about how connected they were, such commitments had been the usual way to find men for earlier Janissary uprisings. In the Kabakçı Rebellion of 1807, for example, Janissaries in groups of 20-30, led by their mid-ranking- or sub-officers, kept pouring into the Meat Square from different parts of Istanbul to join the rebels.²⁶ It is highly probable that a similar method of spreading the rumor of an uprising by using different social networks and coffeehouses was also used in all other rebellions. However, it is very doubtful whether the alleged plotters could find enough men to support the October 1826 conspiracy.

From the interrogation records, it is also possible to learn the countermeasures that the plotters planned to take against the government restrictions which were put in place to prevent a potential Janissary uprising in Istanbul. One of the most striking points that the alleged conspirators made about the government's measures was the presence of ten artillery pieces kept in the army headquarters at Bayezid. When the Mansure soldiers involved in the plot referred to the threat that these artillery pieces posed against the rebels, Derviş Ahmed assured them that he was going to find an ally inside the army headquarters and that he had already prepared nails to spike the cannons and render them useless. This fear, of course, was a direct reference to the effective use of cannons against the Janissaries and the Janissary barracks by the government forces during the 1826 uprising. The 1826 uprising was not the first event in which mobile cannons and

²⁵ BOA, HAT.337/19314 (29 Z 1234/October 19, 1819).

²⁶ Cabi Ömer Efendi, *Cabi Tarihi*, Volume 1, p. 130.

grapeshot had been used against rebellious Janissaries in the Ottoman Empire; artillery pieces were also employed by the *sekeban* troops against the rebels during the Alemdar Incident in 1808 with some success.²⁷ The use of mobile artillery pieces and grapeshot against rebellious crowds had been seen in Europe since the late eighteenth century with the famous example of the 13 Vendémiaire event in 1795.²⁸

Another measure that the plotters had to deal with was the control of the gates of intramural Istanbul by the Mansure troops. As the plotters constantly referred in the interrogation records to breaking down or opening the gates of Istanbul, it seems that Sultan Mahmud II's government still kept the city gates closed while pedestrian traffic was probably conducted through wicket gates even four months after the abolition of the Janissary Corps.²⁹ This was, apparently, a measure against a potential Janissary uprising that was still alive in the minds of Sultan Mahmud II and his ministers.

The conspirators also hoped to attract the artillery troops and marines to their side, yet they had no illusions on the matter. According to the statement of Kasım, a Mansure soldier involved in the plot, the plan was to start the uprising among the Mansure regiments in Üsküdar on Thursday, October 18, 1826. The rebels were then to get across the Bosphorus to the Imperial Arsenal at Tophane to incite the artillery troops to join the uprising. However, they calculated that the artillery troops would resist such an attempt and prevent them from disembarking at Tophane, so they also formed an alternative plan. When one of the plotters mentioned the possibility of an uprising to his neighbor, a soldier in the Cannon Wagoner Corps, he received a very negative response, the wagoner replying that they would direct their cannons at the rebels. Nevertheless, there are some vague references in the interrogation records to alleged insiders and fellow townsmen in the Artillery Corps. This might not be very far-fetched, since an artillery officer and an artilleryman played a role in another alleged Janissary plot, which will be discussed below.

Another expectation on the part of the plotters was to incite the artisans and shopkeepers of the Grand Bazaar to join the uprising, for they had long-established connections with the Janissary Corps, by sending messengers and criers during its early phases. This was also in accordance with the well-established practices of the previous Janissary uprisings.³⁰ One should note that this was not

²⁷ Mehmet Ali Beyhan, *Saray Günliği (1802-1809)*, Istanbul 2007, p. 255-256, 258. See also Şanizade Mehmed Atallah Efendi, *Tarih-i Şanizade*, Volume 1, p. 126-127.

²⁸ Napoleon's commanders also employed the same tactic against Spanish rebels in the streets of Madrid in May 1808 during the famous Dos de Mayo uprising; Owen Connelly, *The Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, 1795-1812*, London 2005, p. 146.

²⁹ For the placing of the soldiers of the Mortar Corps at the Gates of intramural Istanbul following the abolition of the Janissary Corps, also see Esad Efendi, *Üss-i Zafer*, p. 93.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion of the Janissary methods and tactics employed in Istanbul rebellions, see Sunar, *Cauldron of Dissent*, p. 96-148.

an unrealistic objective considering the discontent of Istanbul's artisans, which continued throughout the reign of Sultan Mahmud II. The sultan's financial policies, which usually worked against the interests of artisans, were the main reason for this discontent. As the artisans and guilds did not shy away from showing their resistance from time to time, the sultan retaliated with harsh punishments ranging from banishments to executions.³¹

The first target of the plotters seems to have been the Mansure headquarters at Bayezid, which they planned to burn down to declare the revival of the Janissary Corps. Even though his name was never mentioned in the interrogation records, Commander-in-chief Ağa Hüseyin Paşa, a former Janissary whose treachery had long been hated by his former comrades, was probably at the top of their list.

The plot was initially revealed to the government by an artillery soldier and a corporal from the Mansure regiments deployed in Üsküdar.³² The artillery soldier was from the same home town as the plotters, and when he told the rumor to a corporal, the issue was revealed to the chain of command. Nevertheless, both the artillery soldier and the corporal were exposed to rigorous interrogation about their connections and could not escape from being exiled to Ada Kale.

Even though the plan was far from posing any serious threat to the government, its discovery sent tremors through the government circles. The sultan was especially furious, threatening and warning everyone from the grand vizier to the high command of the Mansure army with his imperial orders. Government ministers and officials had no choice but to share their master's exaggerated alertness by promising to relentlessly prosecute anyone related to the Janissary cause. The investigation and interrogations should have revealed that there was no real danger, yet the grand vizier and his officials not only pronounced harsh punishments for the alleged plotters but also looked for other potential threats. In an extraordinary government council (*Meclis-i Meşveret*) convened at the mansion of the Şeyhülislam after the discovery of the conspiracy, government ministers drew attention to the fact that even the Janissary officers (*çorbacı*s) who were rewarded with honorary titles for their compliance in the abolition of the Janissary Corps were not trustable and their existence in Istanbul was a constant source of

³¹ For example, during the campaign season of 1828, when Grand Vizier Benderli Selim Sırrı Paşa asked the Istanbul artisans to join the imperial army as *ordu esnafı*, they questioned his logic by asking why they should continue this old practice in the new system. They claimed that they should be exempted from military service as they were now required to pay more taxes to support the new army; Charles MacFarlane, *Constantinople in 1828: A Residence of Sixteen Months in the Turkish Capital and Provinces*, Volume 2, 2nd Edition, London 1829, p. 217-218. Similarly, Sultan Mahmud II's order to recruit Istanbul's residents for a relief force which was to be sent against the invading Russian army in 1829 fell on deaf ears; Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Volume 2, 93. The sultan and his ministers retaliated with a series of executions which also included members of Istanbul artisans in the summer of 1829. *Ibid.*, p. 88. For the punishments against artisans and guild hierarchies, see also Nalan Turna, "Pandemonium and Order: Suretyship, Surveillance, and Taxation in Early Nineteenth-Century Istanbul", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 39, (Fall 2008), p. 177.

³² BOA, HAT.290/17357.

trouble.³³ The council advised their exile from Istanbul and the advice was duly followed by the sultan and the grand vizier. Although these Janissary officers collaborated with Sultan Mahmud II during the abolition of the Janissary Corps, they could not escape his suspicion, and even with their exile their punishment was not over, as the following pages will reveal.

In the end, the majority of the plotters were given harsh punishments: out of twenty-nine accused, seven Mansure soldiers and eleven others were sentenced to death, while the Bektaşî *şeyh* Mehmed Efendi committed suicide in prison and one of the Mansure soldiers died from torture. While five of the accused were found not guilty, the remaining four plotters were exiled to the provinces. There was some discussion regarding whether or not to execute the seven guilty Mansure soldiers in the European military way, by putting them in front of a firing squad; the decision was finally taken to execute them by hanging them from the neck in front of the Mansure regiments as an exemplary punishment.³⁴ The other eleven culprits – five former Janissaries, four marines, a Bektaşî *derviş*, and a civilian – were executed in public places in Üsküdar and intramural Istanbul.³⁵

While the atmosphere in the capital was thick with alleged plots and punishments, some of the provincial governors were also quick to realize that over-scrutiny and hunting down ex-Janissaries could put them in the good graces of Sultan Mahmud II and bring some career advancement. One such person was the district governor of Çirmen, Esad Paşa, who had distinguished himself through his harsh punishment of the Janissaries in Edirne during the abolition of the Corps.³⁶ It was not a coincidence that just one month after the October 1826 plot, Esad was the one who revealed another Janissary plot, supposedly designed to reinstitute the Janissary Corps in the Balkans. According to a report sent by Esad Paşa on December 3, 1826, government agents in the town of Zağra-i Atik (Stara Zagora in modern Bulgaria) discovered a member of the Artillery Corps voicing criticisms of Sultan Mahmud II's reforms and the abolition of the Janissary Corps.³⁷ Even though the local notable decided to apprehend the artillery soldier, he was able to flee the town and his pursuers. However, he was then arrested in Gabrovo and sent to Tırnova for interrogation. According to Esad Paşa, his interrogation revealed a ring of conspirators and alleged correspondence among some former Janissary officers, an artillery officer in Istanbul, and several former Janissaries and Janissary sympathizers in the Balkans, aimed at reviving the Corps. The alleged plot included some twenty people including former Janissaries, the son of the head clerk of Edirne Courthouse, a merchant, and an Artillery Corps officer, alongside the courier Ahmed, the abovementioned artillery soldier. As the second

³³ BOA, HAT.340/19438, n.d.

³⁴ BOA, HAT.290/17357.

³⁵ BOA, HAT.289/17327.

³⁶ Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Ahmed Lutfi, Volume 1, p. 171.

³⁷ BOA, HAT.402/21083 (3 CA 1242/December 3, 1826).

interrogation of Ahmed, conducted in Istanbul, seemed to confirm the suspicions, the initial response of the government was to exile all the culprits, including the head clerk of the Edirne Courthouse and his son.

The revealing of a new plot by Esad Paşa also gave an opportunity to Grand Vizier Mehmed Selim Paşa, who had been reprimanded by the sultan for his negligence in spotting the previous plot. The grand vizier tried to redeem himself in the eyes of his master by resorting to the malicious prosecution of the accused. The reports prepared by the grand vizier on the plot betray his enthusiasm to turn a simple investigation into a serious Janissary plot. Thanks to his efforts and the sultan's suspicions, the plot revealed by Esad Paşa suddenly became an empire-wide Janissary plot.

In a report written by Mehmed Selim Paşa to Sultan Mahmud II, the grand vizier pointed out that he had long suspected that the plot was a part of a larger conspiracy alongside the October 1826 Janissary-Bektaşî plot.³⁸ Since such a large conspiracy would not be possible without the involvement of former senior Janissary officers, the grand vizier claimed, he made every effort to investigate the matter thoroughly. It is quite clear that Mehmed Selim Paşa turned to his usual tricks of pressuring the accused individuals through torture, which he had over-scrupulously employed in the previous plot. First he put a former junior officer of the 23rd Cemaat under such pressure, and personally oversaw his interrogation. Ultimately, the grand vizier and his men were able to extract the name of another alleged plotter from the junior officer, who eventually committed suicide in prison. Since the junior officer had given the name of another former Janissary officer, who was also the warden of the pastry-makers' guild (*çörekçiler kethüdası*), this man was brought to the capital from his exile in Bolu. A different method was used on the former warden: first threatening him and then promising his release if he cooperated by revealing his accomplices. Finally, the grand vizier got what he wanted: the name of the chief plotter, who was the former head of the Istanbul firefighters. The grand vizier's methods raise serious doubts about the validity of the confessions, as under such conditions the interrogated individuals were more likely to name someone randomly in order to save themselves from bodily harm.

As the former head of the Istanbul firefighters was not a layman and probably had still some connections with the higher circles of the government, the grand vizier seemed to proceed more carefully and was unable to apply the same methods of pressure used on the others. Mehmed Selim Paşa accused the former head of the Istanbul firefighters of conspiring with former senior Janissary officers about a Janissary uprising through secret meetings in his mansion. The accused staunchly denied this, saying that he never had any meetings with former Janissary officers, and the grand vizier was unable to obtain a confession from him. However, Mehmed Selim Paşa found another way of establishing evidence, by

³⁸ BOA, HAT.294/17509, n.d.

getting a confession from a servant employed in the mansion of the former head of the Istanbul firefighters. The servant claimed that he had witnessed meetings between the accused and several former senior Janissary officers in the mansion. As a single eyewitness was enough for the grand vizier to prove his theory, he claimed in his report that he had solved the whole case.

Interestingly, the grand vizier resorted to a clever way of addressing Sultan Mahmud II's psychology by referring to a dream that the sultan had had. Evidently, the sultan had previously shared details of the dream and its interpretation with his grand vizier. Although there is no information about the particulars of the dream, it is clear from Mehmed Selim Paşa's report that it was regarded as a warning about a potential danger. In his report, Mehmed Selim Paşa pointed out that the interpretation of the sultan's dream had proven to be correct, and he again cleverly resorted to some flattery, claiming that it was, in fact, Sultan Mahmud II himself who had uncovered this large plot through his dream. The grand vizier concluded his report by advising the executions of some former senior Janissary officers who had been previously exiled to their hometowns after the October 1826 plot. He also argued that even though there was no proof that those among the higher echelons of the Janissary Command had any involvement in the plot, it was not proper for them to stay in Istanbul and they should all be exiled to Bursa.

160 Though the evidence was very weak in terms of proving a large Janissary plot, the written imperial order on top of the grand vizier's report shows that the sultan was of the same opinion as his grand vizier. Sultan Mahmud II wrote that it was even dubious whether or not these former senior Janissary officers were Muslims and it was not possible to trust them anymore.³⁹

The discovery of two alleged Janissary plots within three months seems to have convinced Sultan Mahmud II that although these former Janissary officers had collaborated with the government in the abolition of the Janissary Corps, they still posed a threat to his new regime. Thus, he ordered their execution alongside the conspirators of the original plot.⁴⁰ According to historian Ahmed Lutfi, the number of former Janissary officers who were executed in different provinces of the empire was seventy-six. The government agents did not even spare two former Janissary officers who were on their way to Mecca for pilgrimage.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Among the culprits of the alleged plot, Ahmed, the artillery soldier, was executed in Istanbul; Çividoğlu Süleyman, who lodged and helped Ahmed in Edirne, was executed in front of his rental rooms at Edirne; and ex-Janissary officer Canbaz Mustafa of Edirne was executed in his exile in Tulca; BOA, HAT.290/17381 (9 C 1242/January 8, 1827); Bab-ı Asafî Kalebendlik Kalemî Defterler (A.DVN.KLB.d) 929/01:3.

⁴¹ Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfî*, Volume 1, p. 172-173. Ahmed Lutfi, with his usual circumspection, did not fail to imply that this was unnecessary bloodshed by putting the blame not on Sultan Mahmud II, but his ministers and governors.

After these waves of alleged conspiracies and punishments, Sultan Mahmud II's government did not discover any more Janissary plots in the following year. Nevertheless, the sultan and his servants retained their alertness on the subject throughout 1827 in the capital and provinces. While some undercover agents of the government frequented the public places in the capital, some also toured the provinces keeping their eyes and ears open for any signs of "Janissary propaganda".⁴² The paranoia of the sultan and his officials had life-and-death consequences for ordinary people who risked being punished for even small transgressions. A coffeehouse owner was executed in front of his coffeehouse for not fully removing a Janissary insignia from the walls of his shop in İzmid, and another coffeehouse owner in Edirne met with the same fate for openly criticizing the abolition of the Janissary Corps during this period.⁴³ According to a *kalebend* (imprisonment) register covering the period between April and August 1827, 209 former Janissaries from various provinces were sentenced to exile or capital punishment by Sultan Mahmud II's government.⁴⁴

Throughout the rest of 1827 the prosecution of Janissary elements seemed to ease, as Sultan Mahmud II was busy in his military pursuits, forming a new army. The increase in the number of Mansure soldiers also built the sultan's confidence in his success. He was now more often observed in his uniform-like clothes at the head of the Mansure battalion formed from the palace pages.⁴⁵ As Mahmud II became the Ottoman version of the "*soldatenkönig*", Frederick the Great, the sultan's paranoia about the Janissaries would have been on the verge of fading were it not for the Russian declaration of war in April 1828.

Following the abolition of the Janissary Corps, the vulnerable military, political, and social position of the Ottoman Empire presented too good an opportunity to pass up for the empire's sworn enemy, which pressured the Sublime Porte for new concessions on several issues. In accordance with the traditional Russian strategy, its diplomats would push the present issues to their limits, to force the Ottoman state to accept the Russian demands on the table. If the Ottoman state agreed to accept Russian demands, this would also constitute new grounds for future political concessions. If not, there was always the military option, which Russia would not hesitate to use at the first suitable opportunity. Since Sultan Mahmud II's government was quite aware of this strategy, it had no wish to accept the Russian demands. When Russia opted for military action by

⁴² For some examples, see BOA, HAT, 290/17394, n.d.; 293/17460 (3 Muharrem 1243/July 27, 1827).

⁴³ BOA, HAT.289/17335 (3 Zilhicce 1242/June 28, 1827); 290/17381 (11 Cemaziyelahir 1242/January 10, 1827).

⁴⁴ While 60 former Janissaries received capital punishment, 149 were exiled to different parts of the empire; BOA, A.DVN.KLB.d.929/01.

⁴⁵ Gültekin Yıldız, "Üniformalı Padişah II. Mahmud", *II. Mahmud: Yeniden Yapılanma Sürecinde İstanbul*, (ed. Coşkun Yılmaz), İstanbul 2010, p. 103-129.

launching its invasion of the Danubian Principalities with a war manifesto, the Ottoman Empire reciprocated by declaring war on Russia in May 1828.

Once again, Sultan Mahmud II found himself in a difficult position; the formation of the new army was far from complete and the destruction of the old order had resulted in widespread discontent among the Muslim population – albeit silent – regarding the sultan’s government.⁴⁶ Even though the only open Janissary rebellion was in Bosnia, the loss of old privileges and the new tax burdens introduced by Sultan Mahmud II immensely contributed to the widespread atmosphere of discontent in the provinces and the capital. War with Russia meant not only new demands by the Ottoman government from its subjects, but also increasing economic difficulties for the lower and middle strata of the Ottoman society. To complicate the matter further, the inexperienced units of the new Ottoman army fighting alongside the traditional provincial forces proved to be no match for the Russians, and news of military failures and the surrender of strategic fortresses on the Danube Basin poured into Istanbul during the summer of 1828. These developments seemed to revive Sultan Mahmud II’s paranoia about an uprising in Istanbul as he suddenly decided to move further away from the capital to the newly completed military barracks in Rami. He also chose to keep his Hassa Army, the best-trained and equipped units in the Ottoman army, in Istanbul. It may not be fair to relate the moving of Mahmud II to the Rami Barracks only to his security concerns as his advisors probably aimed to maintain the military image of the sultan with this move. Since Sultan Mahmud II could not risk going on the campaign at the head of his army like the Russian Tsar did, this was seemingly the next-best move.⁴⁷

Since the Russians were not able to fully achieve their military objectives until the winter of 1828, there was still an environment of optimism dominant in Sultan Mahmud II’s government. Mahmud II and his ministers believed that the next campaign season would completely turn the tide and the Ottoman forces would push the Russians beyond the Danube. The sultan’s attitude towards his ministers and Ottoman society in general was positive, often encouraging and calling for sacrifices for the cause of the state and religion. While Mahmud II and his ministers were optimistic about the public support for the campaign, some foreign observers were more perceptive about the negative mood of Istanbul’s

⁴⁶ Although official Ottoman sources were understandably silent on this issue, both Adolphus Slade and Charles MacFarlane, who were present in the Ottoman Empire at that time, agree that public opinion was negative on both the Russian war and Sultan Mahmud II’s government; Adolphus Slade, *Records of Travels in Turkey, Greece, &c. and a Cruise in the Black Sea with the Capitan Pasha in the Years 1829, 1830 and 1831*, Volume 1, 2nd Edition, London 1833, p. 369-380, 438-457; Charles MacFarlane, *Constantinople in 1828*, Volume 2, p. 36-43.

⁴⁷ During the Ottoman–Russian War of 1806-1812, Sultan Mahmud II publicly announced his intention to go on the campaign at the head of the Ottoman army. When he failed to do so, he was ridiculed by the Janissaries with street posters; Cabi Ömer Efendi, *Cabi Tarihi*, Volume 1, p. 701.

population even at the very beginning of the Ottoman–Russian War. While the Ottoman sources were usually silent about the opposition to the Russian War, Charles MacFarlane, who was in Istanbul at the time, claimed that the public spirit in the Ottoman capital was decidedly low and gloomy.⁴⁸ MacFarlane pointed out that while Sultan Mahmud II's government was trying to assure the Ottoman public of its military success against the Russians, it did not let anyone voice any opposing views.⁴⁹

When the campaign season of 1829 proved to be even more disastrous for the Ottoman army, and the Russian forces easily occupied Edirne without facing any resistance, the mood of the government drastically changed, as the Ottoman capital was now under the direct threat of a Russian invasion. Although the Ottoman sources with the exception of Ahmed Lutfi provide very limited information on the sultan's mood, foreign sources were more open in portraying the despair and panic dominating the government and Istanbul's residents. Alongside the rumors of the Russian army marching on Istanbul and the Cossacks already being outside the capital's walls, there were rumors about secret meetings of former Janissaries and a conspiracy by Greeks who were in contact with the enemy. Although these alleged conspiracies were no more real than the Russians marching on Istanbul or the Cossack menace, it was enough to cause Sultan Mahmud II's government to panic and to declare night curfews for Istanbul residents, who were prohibited from going out of their homes after 8 p.m.⁵⁰ As rumors are often the weapon of the weak, there was probably very little possibility of a Janissary uprising or the reinstatement of the Janissary Corps in the capital during that time. Nevertheless, this did not mean that such rumors were ineffective; for example, a former Janissary, who was probably encouraged by the news of a possible Janissary revival and so dressed up in Janissary style, was unlucky enough to come across the sultan's convoy returning from a visit to the tomb of Mehmed the Conqueror, and most likely met with unfortunate consequences.⁵¹

In order to convince Mahmud II to sign a peace treaty with Russia, the European ambassadors also preyed on his fears by pointing out that if the Russian

⁴⁸ Charles MacFarlane, *Constantinople in 1828*, Volume 2, p. 36–43. Also, for his vivid description of the silence and emptiness of the streets in Sultan Mahmud II's *selamlık* ceremony during the Eid al-Adha of 1828 in June, see MacFarlane, *Constantinople*, Volume 2, p. 216.

⁴⁹ For example, a sweet drink vendor (*şerbetçi*), who had been a prisoner in Russia during the previous war, was executed and hanged in front of his shop for openly criticizing Sultan Mahmud II's decision to declare war; MacFarlane, *Constantinople*, Volume 2, p. 37. Sultan Mahmud II did not hesitate to exile even one of his favorites, İzzet Molla, who dared to present a report prepared by the doves in the government to propagate peace with Russia; Abdülhak Molla, *Tarih-i Liva*, (ed. Mehmet Yıldız), Ankara 2013, p. 22–23.

⁵⁰ Adolphus Slade, *Records of Travels in Turkey*, Volume 1, p. 370.

⁵¹ Slade, *Records of Travels*, Volume 1, p. 378. For the same event, see Abdülhak Molla, *Tarih-i Liva*, p. 97. Although the author was vague about what happened to the person in Janissary dress, only writing “*he was removed*”, this was probably a reference to his arrest and execution.

army advanced to the Ottoman capital, there would be a popular uprising against his rule in Istanbul.⁵² Although such claims were far-fetched, they probably inflamed the sultan's suspicions and anger toward his own subjects. In the face of a direct Russian threat to Istanbul, the faltering of Mahmud II and his ministers also worsened the situation. After issuing an imperial order for Istanbul's Muslim populace to arm themselves against a possible Russian attack on the city, Sultan Mahmud II and his ministers changed their minds, possibly remembering the connection between the artisans of Istanbul and the Janissaries, and issued an exception for artisans and shopkeepers, ordering them to disarm.⁵³

According to Ahmed Lutfi, such inconsistencies caused further rumors against Sultan Mahmud II's government. Some rumors probably even included elements of Russian propaganda, as they claimed "there were 20,000 Janissaries marching with the Russian army" or "the Russian army was coming to Istanbul for reinstating the Janissary Corps".⁵⁴ Against such rumors and the growing opposition to his rule, Sultan Mahmud II's reaction was ruthless and harsh. Once again, he reverted to his usual disregard for human life, and public executions became common scenes on the streets of Istanbul, reminding his opponents of the atmosphere of fear during the abolition of the Janissary Corps. An imperial order was also issued, threatening anyone criticizing the government or the army with the death penalty. Ahmed Lutfi wrote that twenty or more public executions took place in different parts of Istanbul within a matter of days. Artisans and the guild hierarchies especially constituted a target, there being several guild wardens and a number of artisans among the executed. It is interesting to observe that both the official historian Ahmed Lutfi and the British Admiral Adolphus Slade used a similar image to describe Sultan Mahmud II's harsh measures, likening it to the contemporary medical practice of bloodletting. The body-politic metaphor served well for their different purposes; while Ahmed Lutfi used it to normalize the sultan's ruthless policies, Slade employed it for a more critical approach.⁵⁵

While Hüsrev Paşa, the commander-in-chief of the Mansure Army and head of Sultan Mahmud II's secret police, busied himself with finding and executing conspirators, not even women who dared to criticize the government could escape from the government's wrath.⁵⁶ Such drastic measures were effective in terrorizing

⁵² Slade, *Records of Travels*, Volume 1, p. 379.

⁵³ Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Volume 2, p. 87.

⁵⁴ Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Volume 2, p. 88. Even though there is no direct evidence that these rumors included elements of Russian propaganda, it was very logical for the Russians to utilize such divisions within the Ottoman polity.

⁵⁵ Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Volume 2, p. 88; "Bunun üzerine yine kan almak tedbirinin tekririyle bir takım kesanın vücudları izale...". Slade, *Records of Travels*, Volume 1, p. 438; "Mahmoud, by nature and by long practice, well adapted to appease a revolt; he had often tried the most approved recipe, bloodletting, and always found it efficacious; and on this occasion though unable to shed the blood of the Russians, he determined not to spare that of his more dangerous foes, his disaffected people".

⁵⁶ Slade, *Records of Travels*, Volume 1, p. 447. Slade provided a vivid picture of the terror and the panic dominating the daily life of Istanbul during that time. For details see *ibid.*, p. 438-457.

Istanbul's residents, who were too scared to go out and, in Slade's words, Istanbul looked like "a city of the dead" for several days.⁵⁷ As the Janissary identity once again became grounds for punishment, scenes familiar from the Auspicious Event were repeated, with former Janissaries, regardless of their social status and position, risking bodily harm to remove the regimental tattoos from their arms.⁵⁸

The signing of a peace treaty with Russia in September 1829 calmed the chaotic atmosphere, and daily life in Istanbul slowly resumed its usual pace. However, Sultan Mahmud II kept his bitterness towards his ministers and Istanbul's residents. In his written imperial orders, he portrayed himself as a lonely man striving to save the empire. He legitimized his approval of the peace by claiming that he was forced to sign the treaty because there was no support from his subjects and state officials for his endeavors. He was specifically furious about the behavior of Istanbul's populace: he wrote that "I learnt and understood by experience what kind of evil the residents of Istanbul could dare to commit".⁵⁹ During this time the sultan's anger could even be turned on his inner circle; upon his return from the Rami Barracks in May 1830, Sultan Mahmud II decided to disband the special cavalry unit he had previously formed from the palace pages and some of its members were dispersed to the Hassa Army regiments with lower ranks.⁶⁰ It was claimed that the sultan's furious mood was followed by a period of seclusion in his palace-like mansion at Tarabya, where he shut himself up for weeks.⁶¹ Mahmud II did not even go to the Topkapı Palace and intramural Istanbul for the Eid al-Adha ceremony of 1830 as usual. The ceremony had to take place in the Göksu (Küçüksu) Pavilion with a limited number of attendees.⁶²

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

⁵⁸ For example, when Adolphus Slade realized that the captain of the Ottoman warship *Selimiyye* had out of fear resorted to some unhealthy methods to remove his Janissary tattoos, he referred him to a European doctor, who erased the tattoos via a small medical procedure. Slade, *Records of Travels*, Volume 1, p. 455-456.

⁵⁹ "Moskoulı Dersaadetimize takarrub ettiđi gibi cümlemizin ne hale girüb şaşırduğınızı gördüm İstanbul balkı denilen heriflerin ne suretde fesadata mütecasir olacaklarını bildim ve anladım bu fenalıklar meydanda durur iken kiminle sebat etmeli ve redd ile cevap verildiđi suretde ne vechle muharebeye duruşmalı deyü muştur kalarak ileride zühura gelecek fenalıkları ilme'l-yakın bilerek musalahayı kabul etmekliğimiz lazım geldı"; Ahmed Lutfi, *Tarih-i Lutfi*, Volume 2, p. 122-123.

⁶⁰ Tayyâr-zâde Atâ, *Târih-i Enderûn*, (ed. Mehmet Arslan), Volume 3, Istanbul 2010, p. 158-159. See also Hâfız Hızır İlyas Ağâ, *Letâif-i Vekâyi'-i Enderûniyye: Osmanlı Sarayında Gündelik Hayat*, (ed. Ali Şükrü Çoruk), Istanbul 2011, p. 541-544. In fact, the sultan had already expressed his anger and displeasure about the unserious attitudes of palace pages during the war, when he was staying at Tarabya. Tayyâr-zâde Atâ, *Tarih-i Enderûn*, Volume 3, p. 154.

⁶¹ Lord Eversley, *The Turkish Empire: Its Growth and Decay*, London 1917, p. 280. I could not locate any primary sources to support Lord Eversley's claim, even though it is not very far-fetched considering the tone in the written imperial orders.

⁶² *Tarih-i Lutfi*, v. II, 192-193. Since Ahmed Lutfi, as the official historian, needed to find an excuse for such behavior, he claimed that the winter conditions prevented the ceremony from taking place as usual. However, the same winter conditions did not prevent the sultan from crossing the Bosphorus with a steamboat from Tarabya to Küçüksu for the ceremony.

Mahmud II's disillusionment was nevertheless auspicious for the populace of Istanbul, as the frequency of punishments and executions in Istanbul decreased, even though Hüsrev Paşa continued now and then to take his master's revenge on Istanbul's residents. Hüsrev's punishments sometimes took weird forms, such as imprisoning people for holding a *belva* soiree and bastinadoing the elders of that neighborhood for letting it happen.⁶³ Nevertheless, the indiscriminate punishments of 1826-1829 slowly disappeared, along with any further discoveries of alleged anti-government Janissary plots after 1830.

Conclusion

Following the abolition of the Janissary Corps, Sultan Mahmud II was highly concerned about a potential Janissary threat against his regime. As a young sultan his experience with the Janissaries had been marked by direct life threats and humiliation which had left deep scars on his psyche. Even the easy victory against the Janissary Corps in 1826 was not enough to convince him that the power of the Janissaries was broken in the empire. This resulted in Mahmud II developing a state of hypersensitivity, in which he constantly warned his ministers and officials to be vigilant on the issue of the Janissaries. Sultan Mahmud II's paranoia sometimes manifested itself in the form of a dream or often as an overreaction to accusations of alleged government "plots". His viziers and officers were quick to realize that if they did not play along, their careers would be in jeopardy. They soon learned to appear to be more vigilant and ruthless than the sultan himself on the issue of the Janissary threat. Some even exploited Mahmud II's weakness by exaggerating puny attempts at rebellion as regime-threatening empire-wide conspiracies. The consequences of this state of hypersensitivity were dire for former Janissaries or anyone who dared to speak against Mahmud II's regime. Even those from the higher echelons of the Janissary Corps, who had collaborated with the sultan during the abolition, could not escape from Mahmud II's suspicions and between 1826 and 1829 ended up being exiled and executed. The increased butcher's bill did not really concern the sultan, who seemed to develop a disregard for human life. Mahmud II's tone in his handwritten orders commanding his officials to torture or execute the accused is very indifferent. Although the sultan's handwritten orders and comments on the margins of official reports betray his state of mind on the issue of the Janissaries, one should also note that Sultan Mahmud II tried to use the atmosphere of paranoia to discipline his ministers and his Muslim subjects. His calls for vigilance and a state of emergency were also means for social control and for forming a disciplined bureaucracy. Although his success is debatable in the case of social control, Mahmud II was successful in forming an autocratic regime supported by a subservient bureaucracy.

⁶³ *Tarih-i Lutfi*, v. II, 172. For several executions and exiles during that time see *Tarih-i Lutfi*, v. II, p. 143, 150, 163.

The sultan was also aware of his unpopularity in the eyes of the public and he expressed his anger towards the residents of Istanbul in particular in times of crisis, such as the Ottoman–Russian War of 1828-29. Mahmud II's paranoia about a Janissary uprising also had important effects on Istanbul's urban topography, as he chose not to stay in intramural Istanbul after the abolition of the Janissary Corps. Whether this choice purely arose from his security concerns or from his contempt for old Istanbul is uncertain. However, as he preferred to stay in the palaces on the bank of the Bosphorus, construction of the imperial buildings shifted to this new area. During the Ottoman–Russian War of 1828-1829 Mahmud II decided to move even further, to the upper Bosphorus, shifting his residence between the Rami Barracks and Tarabya. The Russian occupation of Edirne in 1829 and the direct threat it posed to Istanbul inflamed Mahmud II's suspicions of a popular uprising against his rule, once again triggering a wave of executions which targeted former Janissaries and anyone who dared to utter a word against the sultan's administration in Istanbul. Overall, Sultan Mahmud II's psychological mood and his fear of the Janissaries poisoned the political atmosphere, resulting in unnecessary bloodshed against his subjects between 1826 and 1830.

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