Comparing Warrior Traditions: How the Janissaries and Samurai Maintained Their Status and Privileges During Centuries of Peace

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History has witnessed the rise and fall of countless warrior classes, all of which were the tools of rulers, and many of which grew strong enough to usurp power and become rulers themselves. The existence of warrior classes in such a great variety of cultures and eras seems to indicate a universal human disposition for entrusting a certain group with the most dangerous and undesirable task of conducting warfare. In some cases, such as that of the samurai, the warriors came from within the society itself, and in others, including those of the Mamluks, Cossacks, and janissaries, members of certain ethnic or religious groups were compelled to serve as professional fighters. Perhaps to compensate for the obvious occupational hazards involved with being a member of a warrior class, these groups were often respected and/or feared, and were frequently the recipients of certain tangible and intangible incentives that made their positions not entirely without benefit.

While all warrior classes achieved a degree of renown during their existence, the ephemeral nature of their profession generally made their tenure a relatively brief one. Some states, such as medieval France and England, were able to prolong simmering hostilities for centuries, necessitating a perpetually elevated state of military readiness and deployment. This provided a basis for the continued existence of the warrior classes that frequently formed the core of pre-modern armies. However, unlike idealized Orwellian states, few societies have been able to maintain constant and active warfare for several centuries, nor has any military class shown that it would have been able to adapt to the technological and strategic changes that a conflict of such duration would entail.

The challenges that technological advancement and/or peacetime placed on warrior classes forced them to either adapt or be eliminated. This is true for any profession that faces drastic and fundamental changes, but two of the major characteristics of warrior classes are extremely limited usefulness and a tendency for rapid slides into redundancy. In addition, the physical toll of warfare, combined with more recently recognized psychological conditions such as post-traumatic
stress disorder, made it exceedingly difficult for former professional soldiers with combat experience to adapt to civilian roles.¹

Comparison and the Problem of Difference

Two warrior classes whose centuries-long existence makes them stand out from the rest are the Japanese samurai and the Ottoman janissaries. Although these two groups differ greatly in their origins and the geopolitical situations of their respective nations, their histories have a commonality that makes them unique among military classes. For the last centuries of their existence, before they were crushed by the modern conscripted armies of the Japanese and Ottoman empires, respectively, both the samurai and janissaries continued to ostensibly profess their military roles while largely avoiding actual combat, either by choice or by necessity. Even during the eras in which they did not actively participate in military operations, the janissaries and samurai continued to separate themselves from the rest of society. This division was reinforced by legislative measures, but also extended to the religious and moral views of these two groups, which were often at odds with mainstream society.

For example, both janissaries and samurai tended to gravitate towards relatively minor mystical schools of their cultures’ dominant religions, i.e. Bektasi Sufism and Zen Buddhism, respectively. Both of these religious schools were associated to a considerable degree with the warrior class which they provided with metaphysical rationalizations that aided them in the pursuit of their professions. This close connection with these mystic schools is especially interesting when one considers that both of these schools were subject to extreme persecution in the years immediately following the elimination of the warrior classes with which they were associated.

Japan’s isolationism and domestic tranquility following the Tokugawa victory at Sekigahara in 1600 robbed that nation’s warrior class of any practical application for their military skills, gradually turning them into bureaucrats and administrators who talked romantically of ancient battles. In contrast, the perpetual volatility of the Ottoman Empire’s foreign relations would seem to dictate a constant demand for the military skills of the feared janissary troops. However, this was not the case. After the disastrous failure of the Ottoman armies at the gates of Vienna in 1683, the traditionalist janissary corps were unwilling and unable to adapt to the new methods of warfare being adopted by the European powers, and even went so far as to sabotage attempts to mod-
ernize undertaken by some of the more progressive sultans. This inadequacy prevented them from engaging in large-scale combat with the forces of other nations until their ultimate annihilation by their own government in 1826.

The peacetime roles played by janissaries and samurai in society, as well as their relationships with the remaining populace, were remarkably similar. The haughtiness and propensity for violence of both these groups made them feared and disliked by much of the citizenry. The often paltry stipends allotted to the warrior classes by the state made it difficult for a great number of them to survive, especially since their unique status frequently precluded them from most legitimate means of earning extra income. However, the methods by which these two groups dealt with the pressures on them during their last decades were also marked by significant differences, which accounts for the varied opinions held by later Japanese and Turks towards their former warrior classes.

The extreme differences in the geopolitical circumstances of Japan and the Ottoman Empire throughout their histories are a fundamental difficulty that those attempting to deal with these societies using a comparativist approach will encounter. While Japan’s unique geographical setting at the far edge of Asia has led to her remaining relatively undisturbed by power struggles with other nations throughout her history, the position of the Ottoman Empire in what is arguably one of the greatest crossroads of civilizations placed it in an almost perpetual state of warfare with continually changing borders.

The isolationist thinking of the Japanese shoguns following Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s failed attempts to conquer Korea and China in the last decade of the 1500s would have been a completely unthinkable political course for the Ottomans, whose empire straddled three continents and countless ethnic and religious groups. The Ottoman Empire was certainly no island unto itself, and the dynamic process of its rise and decline experienced nothing that could be equated to the “period of stasis” that Japan found itself in between 1710-1850. After reaching its zenith militarily and territorially in the years leading up to the debacle following the siege of Vienna in 1683, the Ottoman Empire spent the rest of its existence on its heels, with brief respite coming only from the practitioners of realpolitik in France and England who staved off its collapse for fear of further emboldening Russia.

Given the tremendous geopolitical and cultural gap between these two states, it seems as though any commonalities could be dismissed as
mere coincidence, and comparativist studies linking the two would fare no better than more clichéd attempts with red and orange fruit. Therefore, when studying the warrior classes of these two nations, the comparativist must ensure that he or she is not simply creating tables of superficial similarities, the origins of which are so vastly different as to render this exercise meaningless. Thus, the most important step in the comparativist approach is to clearly delineate temporal and historical boundaries that would provide the study with the greatest possible relevance.

The myriad differences between Japan and the Ottoman Empire necessitate a common event or societal experience that establishes a connection between the two. In this case, the event that ultimately links the fate of the janissaries and samurai in the decades preceding their respective demises is increasing internal and external pressure for technological and societal modernization, which in both cases is brought about by the influence of the Western powers. These two groups faced astoundingly similar challenges to their established hierarchy and authority, ultimately culminating in their destruction after they were unwilling or unable to adapt to the new order.

**Impact of Internal and External Pressures**

The emergence of warrior classes is an interesting intermediate stage that occurred in many civilizations in the interval between primitive peasant armies and modern conscripted national armies, and can be attributed to a variety of social, economical, and technological factors. The armies of most earlier societies consisted of largely untrained peasants who often provided their own weapons, as in the case of Japan. To these peasants, being compelled into military service was a catastrophic occurrence, as it took them from their families and fields in an age when physical labor was the fundamental means of survival. This seriously affected the morale of early armies, and the lofty ideologies of nationalistic scholars which served to galvanize later soldiers were largely non-existent. These factors led to high desertion rates, and the poor equipment and inadequate training of these troops resulted in them being greatly inferior to the few well-organized armies of the pre-modern period, such as those of the Roman Empire.

The creation of specialized military classes or groups was a marked improvement on the earlier peasant armies, and was made possible by advances both in technology and strategy in the societies in which they appeared. Armor, weaponry, horses, and training combined to make a
single European knight or Mongol warrior equivalent to many untrained peasants on the battlefield. War became largely the domain of professionals, and the numbers of individual warriors competing for honor were much smaller than they had been in earlier times.

For example, at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356, the largest French army the 14th century had seen was comprised of 16,000 men, while the eventually victorious English only fielded half that number. In contrast, Charles Martel's victory at almost the same spot 600 years earlier is estimated to have involved upwards of 150,000 troops on both sides. A similar situation was seen in Japan, where early conflicts during the Nara and Heian periods saw large numbers of peasant conscripts on the battlefield, but casualties were very low due to most combatants on the losing side fleeing as soon as the probable outcome became clear.

The professional fighters who participated in the conflicts leading up to the Genpei War at the close of the 12th century were slightly less likely to flee, but the legendary battles described in the War Tales (Gunki-Mono) from 1000-1200 were usually carried out by forces of no more than a few thousand. The expense of armor and weaponry, and the training required for mastering both horsemanship and the weapons used by most medieval warrior classes, were too great for all but a small section of the population to undertake. The accurate firing of a bow from horseback, for example, meant not only that the Mongol warrior or samurai owned a horse and bow, but also that he had spent many years honing his skills, for this was no mean task.

It was not until much later, when agricultural and manufacturing techniques had freed up a considerable amount of labor, and training techniques had reached a highly developed stage, that peasants were reintroduced to the battlefield on a large scale under the leadership of the warrior classes. The arquebus, which was introduced to Japan by the Portuguese in 1543, required less training to master than a bow, and the inventiveness of the Japanese gunsmiths allowed its mass production at a fairly economical rate. The sizes of armies again increased dramatically, with 74,000 Tokugawa troops facing 80,000 enemy soldiers at Sekigahara in 1600.

The larger scale of most battles in the Warring States period, when compared with those of the Heian or Nanboku periods, necessitated organized troop movements and clear strategies. Glory-seekers who madly charged the enemy line were not merely in danger of throwing their own lives away, but could threaten the entire development of a battle as designed by the master strategists. For this reason, the heroics of
earlier ages were discouraged, often with the penalty of death for disobeying orders. The introduction of firearms by Oda Nobunaga also meant that any conscripted farmer with a gun would be able to send the bravest mounted samurai crashing to the ground.

These new methods of warfare, combined with the astounding increase in the size of armies, caused the role of the samurai to shift from being the central actors in a battle to more of an officer role, giving and passing on orders from above to the lower class warriors and armed peasants who did the actual fighting.

The fall of Osaka castle in 1615 was one of the most important occurrences in the history of the samurai, and in many ways it also signified the end of their existence as a true warrior class. Throughout the 250 years of the pax Tokugawana, the samurai became more and more a class of pure bureaucrats with no actual direct relationship to warfare. While the scorn and disdain the samurai class had for learning of any sort until the early 17th century is legendary, and they universally regarded any academic pursuits as effeminizing and antagonistic to the true samurai spirit, once Japan had been united and warfare had effectively ended, the Shogunate realized that a large mass of men with swords and no other skills was an undesirable entity in times of peace and threatened the new order. The brush was added to the arsenal of the Japanese warriors, and over time it would come to be the only one of the samurai’s implements that saw any action.

In the Ottoman Empire, unlike the mercenary armies common in the 15th and 16th centuries, which consisted of seasoned fighters who had little need for additional training and lived off the booty they were able to acquire on their campaigns, the janissaries were put through an elaborate education and could depend on a fixed salary. This combination of factors fostered a powerful sense of fraternity and allegiance to the order. The training they received gave them a vital edge in combat against troops who were not fortunate enough to enjoy the benefits of years of formal drilling. The high quality of the early janissary forces was maintained in no small part through strict fiscal discipline by the Ottoman government. The number of janissaries was kept low enough to ensure that they could be reliably paid by tax money alone, and that they would be equipped with the most advanced firearms of the age.

As Oda Nobunaga was discovering in Japan in the 1550’s, effective use of arquebuses in battle required not only the weapons themselves, but also a great deal of dedicated training. Firearms met with widespread aversion by both Japanese and Ottoman troops due to the noise and filth
that was part and parcel of their use. At this stage, however, control over the corps was tight enough, and the fisc sufficiently healthy, for the janissaries to be supplied with arquebuses and instructed in their use. This firepower, combined with a detachment of Italian canoneers, was the key to the Ottoman’s crushing victories over the Persian and Mamluk armies during the empire’s greatest period of expansion in the early 16th century.

While the yearly campaigns that Süleyman continued to stage to expand and consolidate Ottoman territory were largely successful due to the continued superiority of the janissaries, developments far beyond his borders were to undo many of his accomplishments and do irreparable damage to the janissary corps. In 1502, a mere five years after Vasco da Gama had reached Calcutta, the Portuguese began to blockade the entrances to the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, forcing all maritime trade between Europe and Asia to travel around the Cape of Good Hope. Süleyman was ultimately powerless to stop this diversion of trade to the Portuguese-controlled route, and Ottoman prosperity decreased sharply in the latter half of the 16th century. The sultan attempted to rectify the situation through the heavy-handed approach of simply creating new taxes, resulting in crippling inflation and large-scale flight to urban centers. Further naive economic responses by the government merely exacerbated the situation, leading many soldiers and peasants to resort to brigandage merely to survive.

The sultan attempted to counter this banditry through the use of his most valuable military asset: the janissaries. The janissaries were spread across the empire to eliminate rural brigands, and eventually settled in provincial towns where they became the official authorities. They seized this opportunity and began to accumulate wealth through corrupt business dealings and political land seizures. As this was often far more lucrative than their former military careers had been, these janissaries neglected their martial training and became largely a class of corrupt provincial bureaucrats. This dispersion of the janissaries was the origin of the rot that would set in and ultimately destroy the corps, although this process was to take centuries for its completion. While the temptations of a life in provincial areas far from the strict central authority undermined janissary discipline and undoubtedly contributed to the “softening” of the corps, the financial troubles that precipitated these measures had further, more drastic repercussions.

The government not only had difficulty maintaining the reliable flow of a meaningful payroll to the janissaries in this time of inflation,
but it was also unable to keep the leading edge it had enjoyed in the field of military technology and armaments. What had been an overwhelming advantage gradually faded as the European powers continued to develop and arm their troops with new firearms, especially the miquelet flintlock, which was vastly superior in battle to the outdated Ottoman arquebus.

The earlier shift from untrained peasant armies to professional warriors was unproblematic in the sense that the peasants who were released from military duty were able to simply return to their villages and farms and resume agriculture or other productive activities. However, this later shift that marginalized and effectively eliminated the need for warrior classes created far more problems. While peasants were undoubtedly overjoyed to be relieved of their military obligations, the members of the warrior classes had no other economic basis of existence, and extended periods of peace also presented problems for this reason. Governments were suddenly afflicted with a large social group consisting of military professionals who were either unable or unwilling to fight, but were equally unable or unwilling to relinquish their military status and benefits.

**Striving to Maintain Legitimacy**

During their respective periods of military inaction, both the janissaries and the samurai were increasingly pressured to define themselves as warriors to justify the continued enjoyment of the privileges accorded to their classes. While they were active on the battlefield, this right had rarely, if ever, been called into question, since the reality of their military roles was apparent to all. In the eras of relative peace, however, they were unable to demonstrate the services they supposedly provided to the nation, and instead began to rely on new, vaguely constructed ideologies based on the military exploits of their forebears. These ideologies were based largely on idealized accounts of ancient events and heroes, but they also incorporated elements from the mystic sects that were representative of these military castes. In this way, the janissaries believed themselves to be infused with the "Gazi Spirit," while many samurai of the Edo period tended to rely to a varying degree on a vague, and often contradictory, construct that became the basis for the notorious 20th century ideology of *bushido*.

Although the janissary corps owed its overwhelming superiority on the battlefields of Europe and Asia largely to its advanced military technology, strict training regimen, and unprecedented organization and
administration, it maintained a spiritual link with the Turkic horsemen who rode forth from central and western Asia to terrify all societies they encountered during the 13th and 14th centuries. Just as the Mughal rulers of India claimed a dubious connection with the great Mongol conquerors, the largely Christian-born janissaries saw the members of their order as the spiritual descendants of these earlier fighters. The image of these martial role-models was later amalgamated with a more recent one, namely that of the gazi warriors of the 14th and 15th centuries, who had conquered vast territories at least ostensibly in the name of Islam. As Shaw points out, “the Ottoman state had been born out of gaza, and the first Ottoman rulers had themselves been rude raiders on the marches of the Islamic domains; they had laid the foundations for the uniquely polyethnic and polylingual Ottoman polity by constantly prosecuting the conquest of non-Muslim territories.”

It is interesting that the gazi spirit was cultivated by the janissaries of later years, especially in the late 15th and 16th centuries, as most of them came from the regions to which the original gazi warriors had laid waste, considering them to be the lands of the infidel. The gazi ideology proved extremely useful to the Ottoman rulers when the empire was still young, since at its core lay the concept of the gazi as a fighter for the faith. Once they had crippled the Byzantine military, the early Ottomans found it far easier to conquer the lands in southeastern Europe, which consisted primarily of petty Christian states, than the large Islamic states to the east and south of Anatolia. However, despite the gazi defining themselves as fighters against the infidel, many of their actions in Christian lands show that even in the early periods, this title was little more than a rallying cry, and was not accompanied by earnest attempts to annihilate or convert the unbelievers at swordpoint. The Ottoman policy was very similar to that of the Mongols during their age of conquest, and cities that submitted willingly were left largely undisturbed, while those that resisted were dealt with harshly. As those who accepted Ottoman suzerainty and paid taxes were free to continue practicing their own religion, and those who refused were forcefully converted and/or had their lands settled with Turkomans, the ultimate result was the ethno-religious checkerboard that is still in evidence in the Balkan nations today.

After the Balkans had been largely pacified in the late 14th century, the Ottomans turned their attentions towards the conquest of the remainder of Asia Minor. This was problematic with regard to the carefully cultivated gazi tradition, as this newest expansion meant direct
conflict with other Islamic states. These other states had little compunction about fighting the Ottomans themselves, and they were free from the unique Ottoman moral dilemma of being purely fighters on the frontiers of Islam. As a solution, prior to entering into combat with other Muslims, "they secured legal ruling from the ulema justifying their acts, charging that such wars were not only legal but also mandatory against those who had attacked in the rear while the Ottomans were fighting the infidels and annexing their territory." By ensuring that their actions were legitimized by the religious authorities, the Ottomans were able to gradually conquer and annex their Islamic neighbors, while at the same time maintaining their gazi status by claiming that these conflicts were actually for the greater good of the faith.

By the end of the 16th century, major Ottoman conflicts with their co-religionists had largely been resolved in favor of the former. For the next three-and-a-half centuries, the primary battle lines would be drawn along the Ottoman borders with Europe and Russia. This allowed the janissaries to adopt the gazi spirit of old as their own tradition, for most hostilities ultimately involved the infidels. Of course, this same phenomenon could be seen on the other side of the trenches, where European powers were terrified of the Islamic hordes who encroached further and further into their continent, causing European soldiers to identify with the crusading knights of earlier times. As is frequently the case in war, the heritage of the combatants was often very similar, and the belief in fighting as a part of a greater religious community against the unbelievers was exploited by leaders on both sides. The fierce determination and fearlessness of the early gazi warriors was put forth as an example to the janissaries throughout their existence, and the title of gazi was even bestowed upon Mustafa Kemal after his defeat of the Greeks in 1921, long after the age of the janissaries had passed.

With regard to the ideological framework of the samurai, while bushido is most commonly described as a Japanese warrior code akin to medieval European chivalry, this view is an oversimplification that is saturated with the decidedly unhistorical works of nationalistic Japanese scholars who were most active in the half-century leading up to the second world war. The term bushido itself can only be said to have come into mainstream use following the publication of Nitobe Inazo's extremely influential Bushido: the Soul of Japan in 1900. The word had found scattered and isolated use in previous texts, the earliest being the Koyogunkan from about 1690, but these were primarily separate instances in which the respective authors had combined the terms
bushi (warrior) and do (way), and this linguistic construct was not widely circulated in society until the 1900s. This is evidenced by the fact that Nitobe firmly believed that he had invented the word himself, and retained great pride in his accomplishment until informed of its sporadic earlier use by a journalist shortly before his death in 1933.¹⁹

In the period relevant to this study, therefore, the ideological foundations that were available to the samurai would have been limited to romanticized tales of long-past battles and theoretical justifications of their exalted position that were put forth by scholars with strong Confucian leanings. The most influential of these works was Yamaga Sōko’s Shidō, which he published in the latter half of the 17th century. The title of Yamaga’s ethic, which could be translated as “the way of the gentleman”, is more relevant to the Edo-period samurai also because it is lacking the militaristic bu of the later bushido. The primary concern of Yamaga and his compatriots was ensuring the survival of the privileges and positions held by his class, and they undertook the process of legitimization with heavy reliance on Confucian ideology and ethics.

Following the failed attempts to conquer Korea and T’ang China by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1592, Japan remained virtually unthreatened by foreign powers until the early 19th century. For this reason, the government did not deem it necessary to continue the advancement of military technology that had occurred at such a rapid pace in the 16th century. On the contrary, the shogunate rather collected all the firearms it could and left the samurai with only their swords, which served little more than a symbolic function throughout the Edo period. The lack of external and internal threats to the established order also put the necessity of maintaining a warrior class into serious question, and most samurai neglected their military training and concentrated on their new bureaucratic careers. However, they continued to jealously guard not only the exclusivity of their order, but also their roles as the rulers and administrators of the Japanese state. Although no serious challenge rose to threaten their hegemony, writers such as Sōko relied on recently reimported Confucian ideas to publish countless works justifying the warrior’s exalted position in society. They saw themselves as a group that produced nothing in agriculture or manufacturing and did not engage in trade, yet performed a vital societal function by acting in accordance with an eternal virtuous Way, thereby serving as examples to the rest of society. Sōko summarized their function as follows:

“The three classes of the common people make him [the samurai] their teacher and respect him. By following his teachings, they are
enabled to understand what is fundamental and what is secondary....Herein lies the Way of the samurai, the means by which he earns his clothing, food, and shelter.”

Saeki Shin’ichi points out that many of these Confucian scholars, while samurai themselves and proud of their status, tended to de-emphasize and even criticize the association of their class with militarism, which they felt had no place in the peaceful world of the Tokugawa age. However, the most popular works of the age, such as those of Sōko, were invariably those that continued to emphasize the military role of the samurai and draw connections between ancient heroes and the bureaucrats who were their contemporaries, even if the parallels they found seem fairly contrived in retrospect. This can also be observed in the popular themes of theater and literature at the time, which tended to concern themselves with the exploits of ancient heroes, allowing samurai in the audience to picture themselves as a natural part of an unbroken military tradition. The swords worn by the samurai served as symbols that connected them to their martial ancestors, and had little practical purpose in the Edo period. Firearms had been shown to be the measure of all things on the battlefields of the 16th century, which is also evident in the shogunate’s insistence on maintaining close control of these dangerous implements. Swords served several symbolic roles, for on the one hand, they demonstrated the supposed superiority of the samurai over unarmed commoners and reminded them of their origins, but on the other hand they posed no real threat to the shogunate, for it was still in virtually complete control of the nation’s firearms.

**Struggling against the Inevitable**

The realization that their military elites were no longer able to stand up to the threat of the rapidly expanding European and American empires struck the Ottoman and Japanese rulers with varying rapidity. In the case of Japan, Russian raids in Hokkaido in 1806 and the ineffectiveness of the troops at Nagasaki in the *Phaeton* affair two years later were clear warnings that the military was in dire need of drastic reform if it was to deter the foreigners in the future. However, these incidents were relatively brief, and the shogunate’s advanced state of decline prevented any decisive action being taken in the field of military reform. It was not until the more famous arrival of Commodore Perry’s black ships in 1853 that a true sense of urgency developed. The American fleet was the first foreign expedition that made demands of the Japanese government and was officially authorized to use force if
these were not met. The previous incidents involving one or two foreign ships paled in comparison with the threat posed by the U.S. Navy, and Japan was finally and reluctantly torn from its isolationist slumber.

While Japan was suddenly and rudely awakened by the specter of overwhelming foreign military supremacy, Ottoman realization of their own tactical and technological inferiority had been increasing gradually for almost 200 years along with the gap between their armies and those of the European powers. However, a case could also be made for the Russo-Turkish war of 1768-1774, in which the Turks were on the defensive from beginning to end, as the incident that made it unequivocally apparent that the Ottoman army required far more than the largely cosmetic reforms that had been undertaken up to that point. The treaty of Küçük Kaymarca signed between Russia and the Ottomans granted Russia wide-ranging authority over the Orthodox peoples of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the Crimea, Balkans, and Greece, and also guaranteed the right of Russian traders to travel freely on the Black Sea and through the Bosporus and Dardanelles. The janissaries had failed to ensure the survival of Ottoman Europe, and the albeit nominal Russian suzerainty over the Orthodox Christians of the empire ultimately resulted in these regions fighting for their independence (Greece) or merging with Russia (the Crimea).

These geopolitical setbacks made it apparent to all that maintaining the status quo in military matters would be to the great detriment of Japan and the Ottoman Empire. This was probably understood best of all by the samurai and janissaries themselves, for they were the ones who were responsible for dealing with the foreign powers. However, as is the case in human affairs, the domestic power and privileges enjoyed by the military castes made them extremely hostile to the implementation of drastic changes that could threaten their exalted positions, even if those changes were necessary for the survival of their respective nations. In both cases, the first attempts at reform were to modernize the redundant warrior classes. For example, the grand vizier’s advisor, Halil Hamit, pushed through reforms of the janissary corps over the course of four years beginning in 1781. He worked to instill discipline and fight corruption, striking almost two-thirds of the janissaries from the rolls for inaction, and raising the salaries of the remaining troops. Ultimately, however, he became the victim of janissary intrigue and was executed, and the momentum for modernization of the janissary corps was lost completely, allowing the relieved janissaries to largely fall back into their earlier habits.
Experiences such as this caused future reformers both in Japan and the Ottoman Empire to leave the original warrior classes largely unmoleded, with the modernizer’s efforts focusing on the creation of new units with modern weapons that were ostensibly intended to fight alongside the older orders. In the Ottoman Empire, primarily French advisors were called upon to build up and train naval and artillery units that used the most modern technology available. The so-called New Army of 1792 was funded through steep new taxes on luxuries such as tobacco, liquor, and coffee, which generated hostility not only among the janissaries, who rightly saw this new force as a threat to their privileges. Sultan Selim III continued to increase the size of the artillery corps over the objections of the janissaries, almost doubling the number of cannoneers from 2,875 in 1796 to 4,910 in 1806. His efforts were frustrated not only by the janissaries and their supporters in the religious elite, but also by the catastrophic state of the empire’s coffers. The new regiments were set up with European uniforms, training, and weapons, and were kept separate from the janissaries to minimize conflict between the two. Selim III’s actions met increasing headwind in 1805-6, when the janissaries allied with other conservatives to prevent the founding of new military academies in cities like Edirne, and also succeeded in forcing the disbanding of a few of the new troops. The resistance to reform became bolder still in 1807, and violence erupted when a new officer attempted to persuade the janissaries manning the Bosporus forts to accept new uniforms. This incident was the catalyst for a massive janissary revolt that ultimately forced the sultan to disband most of the new army and abdicate in favor of his more pliable cousin, Mustafa IV.

Mustafa IV was killed soon thereafter in skirmishes between janissaries and their enemies, and Mahmut II took power. He was the nephew of Selim III and had been very fond of his uncle, never forgiving the janissaries for his deposition and later murder. Mahmut II bided his time, however, instigating minor reforms and attempting to rebuild the new army as best he could, especially the artillery. The janissaries, emboldened by their achievements in crippling the new army and destroying Selim III, became more intolerable than ever before. They continued to refuse military service, instead spending their time drinking and terrorizing the citizenry. By 1826, their excesses had cost them virtually all outside support, including that of most religious conservatives, and the enmity of the populace had reached critical mass.

Mahmut II realized that he would have the support of the populace
in a confrontation with the janissaries, and enrolled 5,000 men in a new army, but kept them well outside the city to avoid immediate trouble. After careful consultation with political, religious, and friendly military leaders, Mahmut II decreed sweeping reforms of the janissary corps that were intended to goad the order into revolt. This pronouncement was effective in that the janissaries began to gather in their barracks to plot action against the sultan. On June 15, 1826, the sultan threw open the armories to liberal students and other fervent enemies of the janissaries. This motley group, combined with the recruits and artillery of the new army, succeeded in corralling the revolting janissaries in their barracks and burning most of them alive. Mahmut II then decreed the abolition of the order and proceeded to execute hundreds of known janissary troublemakers and rebels, while those that were fortunate enough to escape went into hiding and did their utmost to distance themselves from the disbanded corps. On the whole, however, most janissaries were spared capital punishment and were slowly reabsorbed into society, albeit at the lowest levels. They found employment in the form of menial labor where no questions were asked regarding their backgrounds or status, but military affairs were handed over entirely to the new army, which grew rapidly with the funds freed up by the deletion of the janissary rolls. The financial windfall from the elimination of "the vast, if imperfectly distributed, social welfare system of the janizaries: a muster roll of close to half a million men, who were paid a fee per man...probably 1 in 10 were actual fighting forces" was considerable, and played a vital role in guaranteeing the Ottoman Empire’s survival for another century.

The financial considerations involved in eliminating the janissaries were strikingly similar to those relevant in the case of the Japanese samurai. In 1877, nine years after the Meiji Restoration, the stipends paid to the roughly 2 million samurai still accounted for roughly a third of all government spending, which crippled the economy and undermined the new government. The issue of economics was not at the forefront only a few decades earlier, however, when the shogunate still believed that it would be able to keep the Western Powers at bay through targeted reforms of the existing military class. The Chinese defeat during the Opium War in the early 1840’s reverberated throughout Japan, and a course of modernization was undertaken. However, these reforms focused primarily on resuming the manufacture of firearms that had largely ceased almost 200 years before, and failed to take into account technological innovations, and the entire undertaking...
was revealed to be woefully inadequate when Perry's arrival demonstrated the overwhelming power that the foreigners were able to muster.

In response to the new threat, the shogunate accelerated the construction of coastal defenses and also began to integrate non-samurai into military units. Japan was saved from the Western Powers largely due to the latter's preoccupation with affairs in other parts of the world, for "the newly created imperial government faced the world and the nation without money, without military power, and indeed, without true nationwide authority." General Yamagata Aritomo took charge of the creation of a modern fighting force, and managed to put a conscription law into effect over widespread protest from many different quarters. Peasants were reluctant to be drafted into military service, and the samurai were rightly afraid that the resulting loss of their monopoly on military power would also cost them their special status. The great hero of the civil war preceding the Meiji Restoration, Saigo Takamori, emerged as a champion for samurai rights. While Yamagata and his foreign advisors drilled his new recruits in the modern tactics he had observed during a trip to Europe, Saigo retired to his fief in Kyushū, which became a rallying point for disgruntled samurai. Thousands joined Saigo in southwestern Japan, and this military buildup culminated in the greatest of several samurai revolts that took place between 1874-1877.

As in the Ottoman Empire fifty years before, the high cost of modernizing the Japanese army competed with the large stipends paid out to the militarily ineffective warrior class, but the Japanese governments were more successful with their attempts at incremental reform than the Sultans had been. Samurai privileges were gradually curtailed throughout the 1860s and 70s without provoking major unrest, until the government abolished both the wearing of swords and the payment of samurai stipends in 1876. Yamagata's conscripts, which were largely commanded by samurai officers, spent seven months putting down the resistance in Kyushū, which ended with Saigo's suicide and the complete abolition of the samurai class. The bulk of the lowest-ranking samurai had already been made heimin, or common people, in 1872, and the reduction and ultimate loss of their official stipends was largely offset by their new ability to enter trades and professions that had been forbidden while they still had the status of warriors. Many were also eligible for service in the new army, but while the earliest officer corps were almost exclusively ex-samurai, the former members of the warrior class were especially fond of using influence and money to
evade the military service that had become compulsory for all 20 year-old Japanese.\(^{36}\)

This illustrates perfectly how pacified the supposed “warrior class” had become, leaving military duties up to the peasants who had no means of escaping the draft. Further evidence of the decline of the samurai’s fighting spirit is the fact that only about six percent of samurai took part in the revolts of the 1870s, while the rest were fairly pragmatic and adapted quickly to their new roles.\(^{37}\) Like the janissaries, of whom only a very small percentage were actually killed in 1826, most samurai realized that the end of an era had come, and gave up their privileges fairly quietly when they realized the severity of the official response. However, unlike the janissaries, who were primarily a nuisance, the samurai had been the bureaucratic class under the ancien régime, and many were vital to the new government in similar roles. According to Schwentker, by 1881 former samurai made up roughly 5.3% of the population, but held over forty percent of official positions in the Meiji Government. In this way, at least upper-class samurai with hereditary positions were able to maintain their positions and influence, while only losing their nominal status as members of a warrior class. In other words, although their social class was abolished, the drastic changes that all Japanese were faced with in the last decades of the 19th century did not affect most samurai to a much greater degree than they did commoners, and the loss of warrior status was largely superficial and did not necessitate similar desperate actions as those taken by the fugitive janissaries.

The Legacy vis-à-vis Historical Events

The appearance of an exclusive military class is a phenomenon of civilizational evolution that can be found in the histories of many societies. In most cases, such as that of the English knighthood, this process of evolution continued and the martial caste changed to adapt to the conditions of various eras. In pre-modern Japan and the Ottoman Empire, however, the military classes failed to evolve beyond a certain point, and instead stagnated or even regressed, at least technologically. Both the samurai and janissaries became extremely powerful politically, controlling all of Japan’s affairs and, in the Ottoman Empire, having the clout to strike out at and even assassinate Sultans at will. However, in both cases the power and resources wielded by these elites came to be used almost exclusively for the promotion of the groups’ own interests, which were put before the interests of the nation as a whole. This
situation was especially problematic in the Ottoman Empire, which was actively threatened on all sides and lacked a cohesive and effective fighting force that could have prevented further decline. The fact that Japan was largely isolated from hostile foreign powers meant that a direct conflict of interest between the samurais’ duties to their nation and to themselves did not occur until the second half of the 19th century. The fantastic amounts of capital that these nations were forced to spend on the stipends and salaries of their martial elites severely hindered their ability to modernize and invest in any field, and not just in the military. The resurgence of both of these states at the time is in no small part due to their successful elimination of the massive welfare rolls that were the samurai and janissary classes.

Although the janissaries were abruptly made fugitives in 1826 and were only gradually reabsorbed into society throughout the following decades, many samurai fared considerably better, almost seamlessly making the transition into positions in the new government and military. Their ranks and titles had been abolished, but the loss of their stipends was at least partially compensated for by new government salaries appropriate to their new positions. It was the lowest samurai who were hardest hit by the reforms, but their lot had always been difficult, and their stipends had always been meager, at best. They had always looked enviously upon wealthy merchants whose social station was officially far below their own, and now they themselves were finally able to legally pursue other professions and at least had the potential for improvement of their financial situations.

However, for most, the loss of their former status as members of a martial elite was difficult to bear, and was the motivation for many of the rebellious samurai who rallied to Saigo’s side. While neither the samurai or janissaries were willing and/or able to engage in combat, they were extremely proud of the status and privileges accorded to them within their respective societies. The vigor with which the samurai and janissaries continued to portray themselves as the only legitimate fighters in Japan and the Ottoman Empire during their centuries of inaction is astonishing, as is their ability to protect their privileged status from an increasingly resentful populace. These two military castes are perhaps best viewed as particularly resilient mutations in the course of military-societal evolution, which were able to defy the forces of natural selection until the pressures from the most advanced militaries of the time became overwhelming.
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2Conrad Totman, Early Modern Japan (California, 1993) pp. 32-35. Totman claims that especially the “eighteenth century was a grim time devoted to conscious ‘systems maintenance,’” with virtually no stimulus or threats from abroad until the 19th century.
3Barbara W. Tuchman, A Distant Mirror (Ballantine, New York, 1978) p. 144. Tuchman believes this to be the most accurate figure of the many wildly varying accounts given by chroniclers and bards, some of whom put the number of troops on the French side at up to 80,000. The problem of reliable troop figures is a major one in the history of almost all regions, with chroniclers on both the winning and losing sides frequently increasing the number of combatants to make battles seem more dramatic and important.
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*24* Such as the limited introduction of modern artillery units under the direction of the Baron de Tott, whose efforts faced constant opposition from the conservative janissary factions. Shaw, *Volume I*, p. 251

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*28* Aksan, Virginia, "Breaking the Spell of the Baron de Tott: Reframing the Question of Military Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1760-1830" *The International History Review* (XXIV, 2, June 2002) p. 267

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