

A history of Ottoman military flags

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the development of Turkish military flags from the first Janissary gonfalon to the regimental colours of the Turkish Republic. Drawing on original Ottoman flag charts and other documents, the banners of the Sultan, military commanders and military units since 1518 are presented.

The illustrations for this paper appear on Plates 76-78.

1 Introduction

There is no evidence that military flags were used when the Oghuz Turks of the Kayi tribe entered Asia Minor. These precursors of the Ottomans were subjects of the last Harzem ruler Jelalettin, who faced the Mongol invasion of Genghis Khan between 1219 and 1221. At the battle of Erzincan in eastern Anatolia in 1231, units of the Harzem army did not have distinctive symbols although traditional ensigns of rank called *tughs* were employed.

Made of horsehair, these *tughs* or *bunchuks* were ancient field signs of the commanders of Turkish-Mongol units. Their origin predates the period of the pre-Turkish nations. It is said that horsetails were used because the Turks believed that the world could only be conquered on horseback [1]. The *tughs* differed from one another in the number of horsetails used, higher ranking officers having a greater number of tails.

There is evidence that the Kayi Turks had already encountered textile flags in Harzem at Jelalettin's camp, where a purple flag was flown. However, it was the exclusive symbol of the ruler, not a common military emblem [2].

2 Early feudal flags

The origin of the earliest flags of the Ottoman Empire is the subject of an earlier article by the author [3]. Here we briefly record that the so-called Osman's

White Flag was given to the Kayi Turks by a Seljuk sultan as a symbol of the feudal relation between them. Simultaneously, some territory where they could pasture their livestock was granted to them. This is how the sanjak (something like a principedom) of the Kayi tribe was established. Later, it was named after its founder, Osman. This sanjak gained its independence in 1299 and became a formally independent Ottoman state, ruled by a Sultan.

Similar to the Christian tradition in Europe, the flag was considered among Turks as the symbol of a feudal relation. In the Turkish language the word *sancak* (sanjak) means both a banner and a piece of land invested with a fief to a vassal tenant. The White Flag continued in use as the only symbol representing the Empire until the reign of Sultan Selim I, "The Cruel" (1512-1520). In the first years of its existence the White Flag was used as a symbol of Osman's vassal subordination to the Seljuk Sultan, but later its symbolism changed slightly. Although the Ottoman ruler gained the title of Sultan, he remained subordinate to the Caliph of Cairo. Moreover, the Caliph of Cairo also gave the same vassal symbol to the Seljuks. Thus the use of the White Flag continued when the Ottomans achieved their independence.

After Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt in 1517 and gained for himself and his descendants the title of 'Protector of the Caliph and Faith,' the last vestiges of subordination to Cairo were broken and the state of vassal subordination, symbolized by the White Flag ended. This provided the final impulse for the Ottoman Sultan to adopt the Turkish colours in his own banner (see Fig. 2.11 and 2.12 and reference [4]).

While the White Flag was respected as the personal symbol of the ruler, flags of different colours were soon adopted by the military forces. Turkish historian Fevzi Kurtoglu [5] believes that these flags were red with a crescent. Reference [3] discusses evidence that such a flag was adopted during the reign of Sultan Murad I Hüdavendigâr (1362-1389). During this period the first regular and professional infantry corps, later to become known as the Janissaries, was established. The Janissaries, formed mainly along tribal and feudal lines, rapidly became the elite of the Ottoman army.

The confirmed usage of a red flag - the first military symbol of the Janissaries - is very ancient. The oldest Janissary flag in the Istanbul military museum is a red swallow-tailed gonfalon (Fig. 1) bearing a white hand apaumé (a Moslem symbol for good luck) in the upper right corner and a white double-bladed sword of Ali symbolising armed power. A white disk, or *moncuk*, an ancient Turkish symbol of good luck is placed in the lower left corner. This gonfalon is probably representative of early Janissary flags.

Why was the colour red used? As mentioned above, the Kayi Turks were already exposed to red banners in Harzem in the early 13th century. Later, the colour red became very popular among Islamic countries. One of the few surviving documents attributed to Osman's son, Sultan Orhan (1324-1362), dated July 1348, mentions 'the red Vizieri cloth.' The Vizier was the commander-in-chief of the army. During the reign of Orhan's son, Sultan Murad I, it was

Vizier Candarli Kara Halil Hayrettin Pasha who in 1361–1363 formed the first group of foot-soldiers and cavalry of the Bektāşi Dervish Order. The colour of this Order was red from the 12th century onwards.

Despite the adoption of the vassal Sultan's White Flag and of Janissary gonfalons, the ancient military symbols of the Turks were not forgotten. Marsigli [6] mentions that wherever a military campaign was attended by the Padishah (Sultan), his seven bunchuks were placed in military order. Before the start of the campaign the Sultan's personal flag was taken from the palace and displayed in front of the assembled army. Thus, both kinds of symbols were used in parallel.

3 Reforms and new military flags

Murad's reform of the armed forces in the 14th century led to the introduction of some (unspecified) red flags for the Janissary corps. At the same time another red flag bearing a white crescent was introduced in the Ottoman navy.¹ However, the golden age of Ottoman military symbols began with Hayrettin's reform in 1518. New symbols were adopted for auxiliary units of the infantry and cavalry, as well as specific symbols for different infantry corps. Şevket's [2] flag chart (Fig. 2) shows the flag of artillery bearing a cannon and four balls (Fig. 2.2), the flag of heavy artillery charged with a mortar (Fig. 2.3), that of musketeers (Fig. 2.5), the flag of the cavalry of Turkey (Fig. 2.4) and the cavalry of the provinces decorated with golden *zülfiķar* (a double-bladed sword) and four crescents (Fig. 2.9). Members of the volunteer cavalry from the provinces rode under the flag in Fig. 2.8 and the trained infantry from the provinces marched under the flag in Fig. 2.7. Flags of the Janissary corps resembled the one shown in Fig. 1, but were divided horizontally green over red with a gold border embroidered all around and the symbol of the specific corps in the centre. In the example shown in Fig. 2.1 the symbol was a *zülfiķar*, elsewhere it was a key, anchor, ship, minaret, etc.

The only personal rank flag was that of Pasha (General) (Fig 2.10). The obverse side bore quotations from the Qur'an in the centre while the reverse side bore stars or other symbols in the same place. According to Turkish historian Kurtođlu [4], these banners were used by generals in conjunction with tughs in accordance with their rank. The banner of the Ottoman Sultan is shown in Fig. 2.11 and 2.12.

Wise and Rosignoli [7] record that the Sultan used a bunchuk with seven tails (tughs), a commander-in-chief or Grand Vizier a tugh with four tails, and lower commanders used tughs with one to three horse tails. According to the rules of court etiquette, the various ceremonies and audiences with the Sultan were presented by the highest officials of the Imperial court. The *bey*s (administrators of sanjak) were represented by one flag and one tugh, the *beylerleys*

¹See Fig. 1 of my paper on Ottoman Naval Flags in these Proceedings.

(administrators of provinces) by one flag and two tughs, the viziers (ministers) by one flag and three tughs.

Viziers had the right to use either their personal flag or their flag of office *sancađi ŗerif-i*. From reliable sources (*i.e.* the flags of Hayrettin Barbaros Pasha, Turgut Pasha and Vakayii Ali Pasha, governor of Egypt in the 17th century) we know that it was only the *bey*s in the rank of Pasha and *beylerleys* who had the right to a personal flag. Selim III extended the right to Captain-Pashas in the Ottoman navy.

Flags of *bey*s were granted by the Sultan without consultation, while *beylerleys* and viziers had the privilege to propose the design of their flag to the Sultan. The flags granted by the Sultan followed the pattern of a monochromatic field in green, yellow, blue or red, charged with a *zülfiķar* embroidered in gold. When *bey*s were promoted to the rank of *beylerley* or vizier, their flags were augmented with various inscriptions (mainly suras from the Qur'an) or decorative patterns (particularly stars, less often crescents). These flags of office (*sancađi ŗerif-i*) resembled those of the governing Sultan in their shape and final appearance, although they were smaller and less elaborately decorated. Only a few of these flags bore crescents, while the sunburst motif was reserved for the Sultan exclusively.

4 Regimental colours in the Ottoman army

Following his defeat in the Russian-Turkish War of 1787–1792, Sultan Selim III restructured his army. He ordered the disbandment of the obsolete Janissary corps in the reform known as Nizam-i Cedid. Discipline in the land forces was strengthened and some changes were made in the artillery and heavy artillery. The Sultan ordered the establishment of new units of the infantry, organized and trained along the model of French infantry battalions and armed with the latest weapons. However the Sultan failed in his attempts to disband the Janissaries who eventually overthrew him in 1807 and retarded the reform process.

Although the reform process stalled when the Sultan was overthrown, the expression Nizami-i Cedid remained associated with the introduction of new battalions in the Ottoman infantry. Another defeat in the Russian-Turkish War of 1806–1826 sealed the fate of the Janissaries. This and previous military defeats forced Sultan Mahmud II to take a number of energetic steps. In 1826 he created a modern army along the European model to replace the obsolete Janissary corps. Those Janissaries who tried to organize a mutiny were killed in massive executions.

While the usage of flags established in 1793 continued without interruption in the navy, new regimental flags were introduced in the newly created army. According to the order known as *Asakiri Mansurei Muhammediye*, dark coloured flags² with the name of the regiment embroidered in gold were adopted. On the

²The exact colours were not specified. In practice, the colours N, B+, V+, Vi+, were used.

reverse side verses from the Qur'an were embroidered, the most frequently used being the first verse of Fatiha (Fig. 3). This design became a model for many famous military flags taken as trophies in the struggle against Turks all over Europe. Today, these flags may be seen in the museum collections of many countries, including Turkey.

Until 1826 the Ottoman army used simple flags in various colours. These flags originated from the Janissary symbols hung on a crossbar, which is why their dominant colour was red. It appears that the requirement for army flags to follow the 1518 Janissary prototype was relaxed during the 17th and 18th centuries, and simpler red-coloured flags were used in the Ottoman land forces (Fig. 4 and 5). Some of these flags may be seen in the collections of the Topkapi Palace. Fig. 4 shows an example - on a red silk cloth a crescent is embroidered with golden thread. Fig. 5 shows a very similar banner, where a crescent was added in each corner. At the end of the 18th century the newly formed military units started to use regimental colours based on European models. These colours were manufactured from cloth of many colours, hand embroidered with various combinations of Qur'anic verses and the regiment's name.

When the constitution was adopted in 1876 steps were taken to introduce order into regimental flags and this promoted the development of such flags. Flags were manufactured from red silk with the obverse side bearing at least two lines of a quotation from the Qur'an. The reverse side was decorated with the Sultan's seal (*tugra*) in the centre of a sunburst of eight rays. The inclusion of this symbol was specified by the constitution as an obligatory part of any distinguishing flag of the governmental services on land. The finial of the flagpole was a brass crescent (Fig. 6).

The foundation of the Turkish Republic initiated the development of a unified model for regimental colours in the Turkish army. This new scheme was well specified and strictly regulated. Fig. 7 shows an example of a modern Turkish regimental colour. It consists of a red silken field adorned with a white crescent and star. In the upper hoist corner two golden initials 'T.C.' stand for the Turkish Republic (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti*). Inside the letter C is the number of the flag. The sunburst motif is still present and now symbolizes the Republic. The name of the regiment is embroidered in the lower fly. The border is embroidered with gold and the fringing is also in gold. The finial of the flagpole is a round *monjuk* surmounted by a crescent and five-pointed star. Two cords of twisted horsehair ending in tugs hang from the finial. In this way the ancient Turkish field symbols - tugs - are incorporated in modern-day flags, connecting the past with the future.

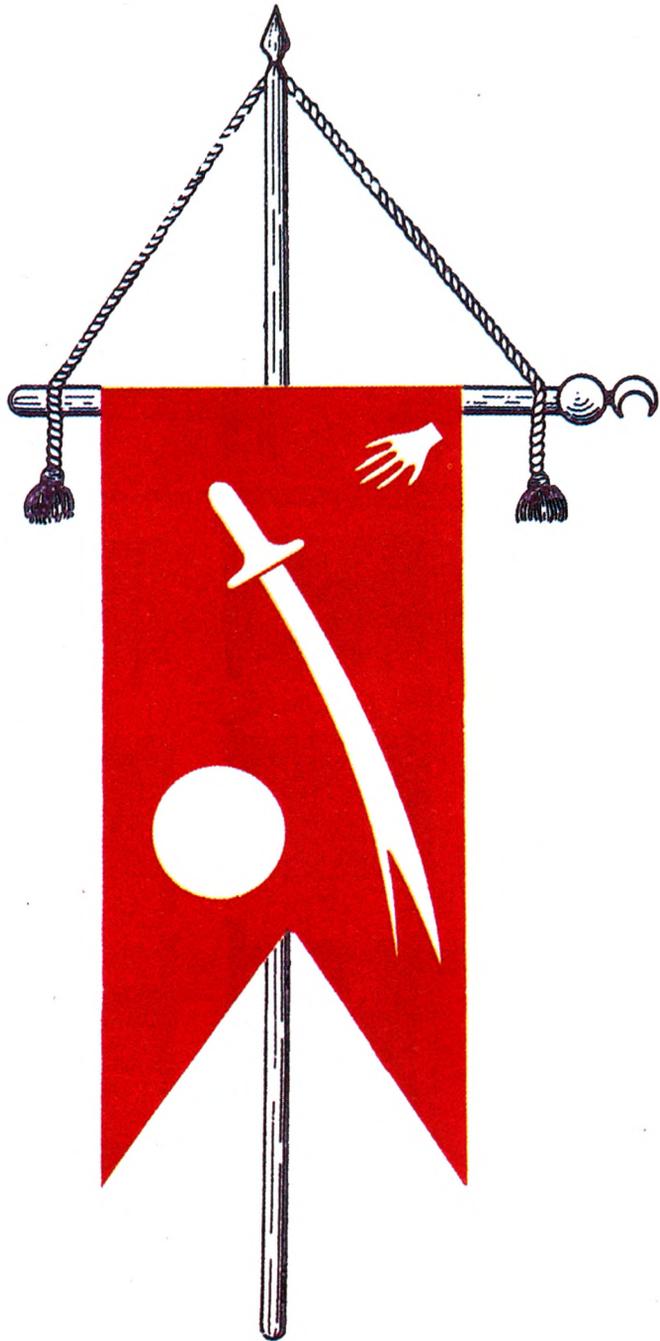
References

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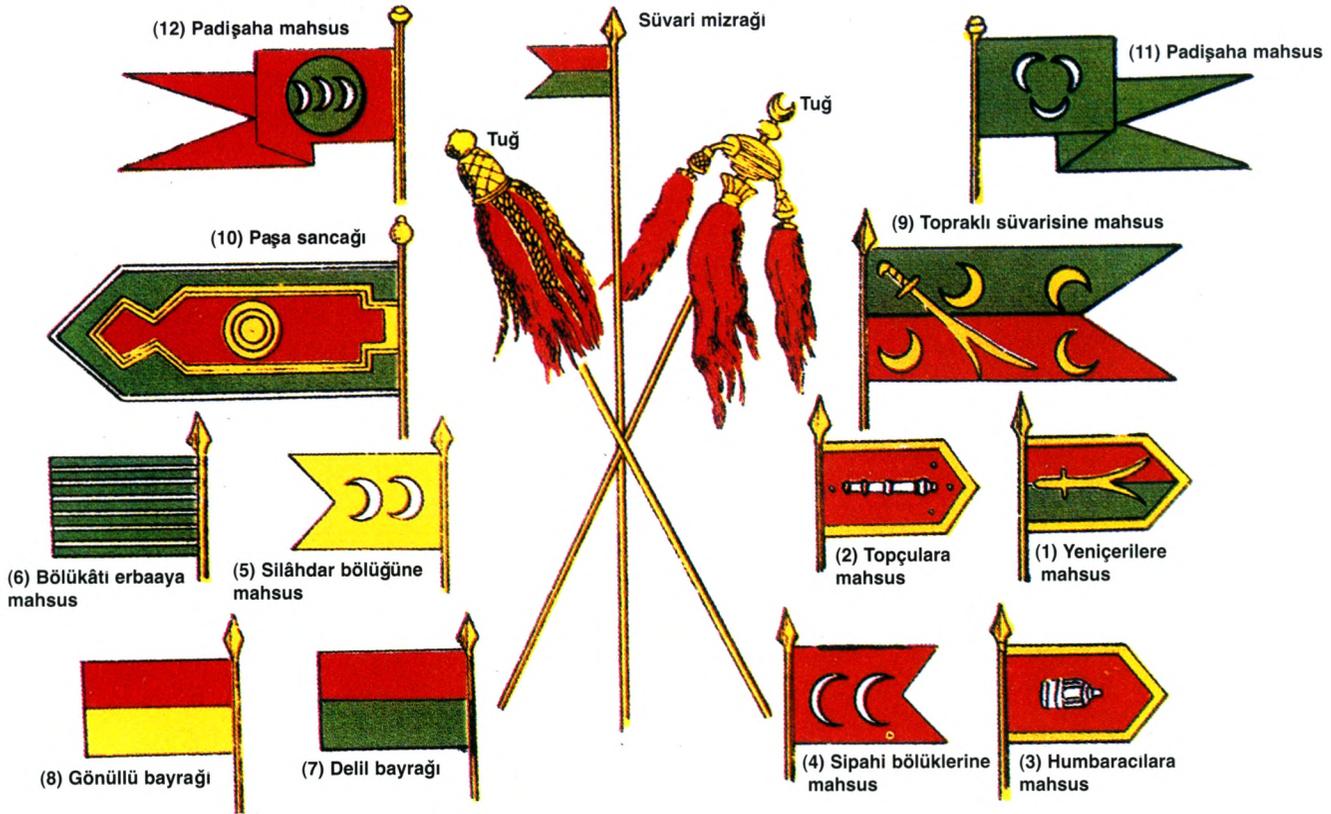
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The oldest Janissarian flag from the Istanbul Military Museum

Figure 1



Turkish military flags of the 16th and 17th centuries (Mahmud Şevket Paşa)

Figure 2

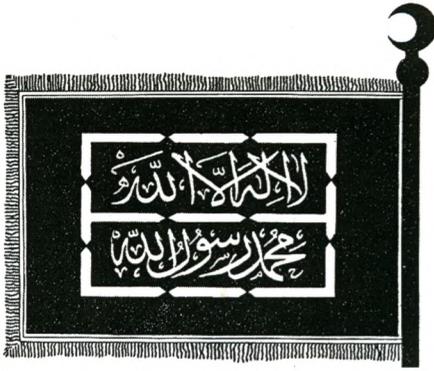


Figure 3



Figure 6

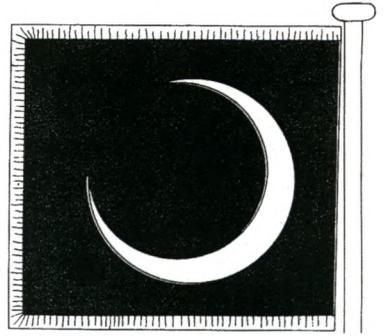


Figure 4



Figure 5

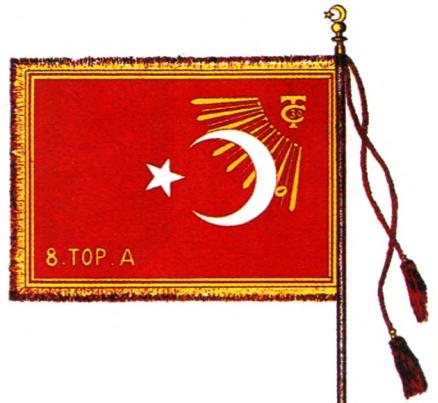


Figure 7