Wars change societies; long wars change them even more profoundly. During the long career of the dynastic empire (c. 1300 to 1922) Ottoman provincial administration was transformed in significant ways more than once. Perhaps the most significant changes—at least until the Europeanising reforms of the nineteenth century—occurred at the turn of the seventeenth century, after a period of about thirty years of warfare and internal ferment. Successfully concluding the conquest of Azerbaijan (1578–1590) from the Safavis torn by throne struggles, the Ottoman government turned its military might against the Habsburgs in central Europe in 1591, perhaps in accordance with the political wisdom of the age that ‘soldiers should be on campaign’. Victory in the East whetted the Ottoman appetite for conquest in the northwest, but the traditional Ottoman military organisation was found wanting against Austrian armies, with far-reaching consequences. Provincial cavalry supported by revenue grants was neither equipped nor trained sufficiently for changing European warfare, and when some of them were dismissed from active service, they triggered internal turmoil. Meanwhile, having settled their own internal problems, Safavi armies now under Shah Abbas regained territories recently ceded to the Ottomans. A stand-still peace was signed with Austria in 1606, and rebels in Anatolia and Syria were brought to heel in 1608, though the eastern front remained active until 1639. After more than thirty years of almost continuous action, sometimes simultaneously on three fronts, the Ottoman conception of government evolved to suit changing times.¹

¹ I have written about this change in The Sultan’s Servants: the Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550–1650 (New York, 1983). Baki Tezcan considered the shift so momentous that his recent book is called The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World (Cambridge, UK, 2010), partly also as a reference to the short, unhappy reign of Osman II (1618–1622), the second after the eponymous founder of the dynasty (the third and last Osman reigned in 1754–1757). The nature of the change used to be considered the beginning of the long decline of the Ottoman Empire, but Ottomanists of the last generation have abandoned this misleading conception. For the Austrian War from the Ottoman perspective see Caroline Finkel, The Administration of Warfare: the Ottoman Military Campaigns in Hungary, 1593–1606 (Vienna, 1988). For the internal situation see Karen Barkey,
I Provincial Governors to 1600

Having begun as a miniscule frontier society, the Ottoman realm expanded through raiding as well as by concerted military action. As territories came under Ottoman control they were left to the care of military commanders, ghâzi frontier lords, sometimes the same captains who in fact had led the conquest. The realm was divided into districts termed ‘banners’ (Ottoman Turkish *sancak*, pronounced ‘sanjak’), and the governor was the ‘banner commander’ (*sancakbeyi*). In some fifteenth- and sixteenth-century district regulations (*kânûnname*) the governor is in fact referred to as the ‘cavalry banner commander’ (*atlı sancakbeyi*), leaving no doubt as to his essentially military function. Narrative accounts, too, sometimes refer to ‘banner’ as a group of cavalrymen, a battalion or regiment, rather than as a geographical district. The banner commander was, of course, responsible for the safety and order of his whole district, and the collection of revenues allocated to him in his district allowed him a measure of additional authority over the townsmen and peasants specifically within his revenue grant. He collected annual land rent, taxes on agricultural and artisanal production, commercial duties and fines for various types of transgressions. He was, then, an administrator of his district, and more closely of those parts of his district left in his personal care, but what defined him as an Ottoman official was the fact that he was a military administrator, the commander of the provincial cavalry who led his regiment to battle when ordered and presented his troops for muster when the army gathered. The banner then marched in formation with other banners of the same province, in a brigade or division, but nearer the front it might be given discrete tasks for reconnaissance, forward, or rear guard duty.

Early on, banner commanders were frontier lords, companions of the first few Ottoman rulers and similar if not quite equal to them in political and military stature, leaders of their own household men as well as of the independent...

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