The Ottoman Home Front during World War I:
Everyday Politics, Society, and Culture

Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to examine the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of the home-front experience of the Ottoman people during World War I. It explores the new realities that the war created in the form of mass conscription, a state-controlled economy, government requisitioning of grain and possessions, widespread shortages, forcible deportations and voluntary displacements, death, and grief. Using archival and non-archival sources, it also focuses on how Ottomans wrestled with these wartime realities.

World War I required the most comprehensive mobilization of men and resources in the history of the Ottoman Empire. In order to wage a war of unprecedented scope effectively, the Ottoman government assumed new powers, undertook new responsibilities, and expanded its authority in many areas. Civilian and military authorities constantly experimented with new policies in order to meet the endless needs of the war and extended the state’s capacity to intervene in the distant corners of the empire to extract people and resources to a degree not seen before. Victory in the war became increasingly dependent on the successful integration of the armies in the field and the home-front population, a process that inescapably led to the erosion of the distinction between the military and civilian realms.
This process had profound implications for Ottoman society. Each policy formulated for this purpose brought about further intervention by the state in the daily lives of ordinary Ottomans with disastrous consequences. Ottomans, regardless of age, gender, and ethno-religious affiliation, had to cope with deprivation, bereavement, and hardships of all kinds. The unprecedented expansion of the state, however, inevitably created new sites of interaction between the state and society, transforming existing modes of interaction.

In tandem with deteriorating social conditions, the increasing encroachment of the state apparatus into the Ottoman people’s lives strained the legitimacy of the Ottoman state, intensified the pressure on the government and the military command, and undermined the mobilization effort. This loss of legitimacy in turn posed a sharp challenge to the state’s authority and its capacity to maintain social and cultural integration.
To the memory of my father
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INTRODUCTION

In an interview he gave in 1940, İhsan Dayı, a peasant from Sarıkamış in northeastern Anatolia, site of a horrific Ottoman defeat by the Russians during World War I, made an observation about people’s lingering discontent despite the general increase in their wealth. As the reader would likely expect him to cite a contemporary source for this discontent, the interviewee’s answer must have been quite surprising for many: “The Great War spoiled things for everybody. For four years, people endured misery. Now, they cannot forget it in any way. Before the war, our weddings would last all week. Since the war, weddings have lost their joy.”¹ Even after more than two decades, memories of World War I, as İhsan Dayı aptly observed, still haunted people who had lived through that period. The following is an attempt to understand this phenomenon.

This dissertation aims to examine the social-economic and cultural dimensions of the home-front experience of the Ottoman people during World War I. The Ottomans’ war lasted approximately four long years, from October 1914 to November 1918. Having signed a secret alliance with Germany, the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers. Over the next four years, the Ottoman armies saw combat in both the

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European and the Middle Eastern theaters of war. Yet, even the remarkable victories at Gallipoli in 1915 and at the Iraqi town of Kut al-Amara in 1916 did not help the Ottomans and their allies win the war. By the end of it, the empire had lost millions of its former subjects and most of its Arab provinces, being reduced to the lands of Anatolia.

Despite undoubtedly serious problems, the Ottoman Empire succeeded in mobilizing 2.9 millions civilians into the armed forces over the course of the war, and radically restructured the economy in order to serve the war effort. About one-quarter of the mobilized men either died as a result of wounds and infectious diseases or fell on the battlefield. The violent nature of the war also had far-reaching consequences for people who were not directly engaged in the fighting. Millions of Ottomans throughout the empire suffered heavily from the catastrophic effects of the war. By the end of the war, the social capital of the empire was exhausted due to battlefield casualties, ethnic cleansing, epidemics, and hunger. World War I was certainly the formative experience for the generation of Ottomans who lived through this period of Ottoman history.

The social and cultural history of civilian life in World War I has been an important subfield in the study of the Great War ever since the publication of volumes sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the 1920s and 1930s. These important studies provided the first collection of comprehensive data about the social, economic, and demographic impacts of the war on civilians. By the 1960s and 1970s, home-front studies had developed qualitatively and quantitatively, as the “silent actors” of the war (i.e., workers, peasants, and women), were becoming subjects of historical analysis. Over the last two decades, the emphasis has shifted from social and economic history to cultural history. Women’s wartime experiences have continued to
attract scholarly attention, while the history of remembrance and mourning has become an emerging, popular field of study.²

Despite the burgeoning interest in civilians’ experiences during World War I in recent decades, experiences from the Ottoman home front have remained noticeably absent from the historical narratives of this era. A variety of factors, such as the relative difficulty of studying Ottoman primary sources and the persistence of Orientalist prejudices, have kept the Ottoman case from being integrated into the growing literature on this subject. Despite the recent shift of interest towards “other fronts,” the Ottoman experience of war still awaits scholarly attention. This dissertation is an attempt to fill this gap.

The First World War has been also a largely forgotten episode in modern Turkish history. The successful War of Independence (1919-1922) and the foundation of the Turkish Republic (1923) in its aftermath have largely overshadowed the Ottoman experience of World War I and its disastrous impact on Ottoman society. Although the scale of the War of Independence was much more limited and the war itself was much less costly in terms of human lives, the official historiography and later historical studies have privileged it while not according the First World War serious attention in its own right.³ The battles at Gallipoli and the disastrous 1914-15 Ottoman campaign in eastern Anatolia have been two significant exceptions to this rule. The victory at Gallipoli was

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³ Recent studies on the Ottoman experience of World War I convincingly argue that the First World War deserves to receive more rigorous scholarly attention. I completely agree with this point of view. Mehmet Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance: The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War,” (PhD diss., Boğaziçi University, 2009), 15; Yücel Yankdağ, “Ill-fated Sons of the ‘Nation’: Ottoman Prisoners of War in Russia and Egypt, 1914-1922” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2002), 6-7.
clearly integrated into official Turkish historiography to highlight the role of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), in this campaign as a military hero, as well as to glorify the everlasting military prowess of the ordinary Turkish soldier. On the other hand, the official narrative of World War I has largely been geared toward condemning the leadership of the Committee of Union and Progress, especially Enver Pasha, accusing them of having wasted the lives of young men for their own ambitions. For the early Republican elites, the catastrophic defeat by the Russians of the Third Ottoman Army in eastern Anatolia and the perishing of tens of thousands of soldiers due to cold, hunger, and epidemic diseases constituted the best examples of such reckless behavior.

With the significant exception of studies on the Armenian genocide and, to some extent, the economy during the war, the majority of the scholarly work on the Ottomans experience in World War I has mostly showed a preference for political and military history. Although these studies significantly advance our understanding of these subjects, by their nature they cannot adequately address the dynamics of the home front. Therefore, the scholarship on the Ottoman experience of the First World War has so far paid little attention to how ordinary Ottomans, men and women, experienced the war, coped with the difficulties it brought about, and handled the loss of their sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers. Despite the fact that these people experienced extraordinary hardships during the war, the mainstream historiography on World War I has mostly privileged the narratives of military commanders and state officials.

This dissertation does not deal with the diplomacy of war, nor does it cover at length the campaigns, strategy, and tactics used by the Ottoman army. Instead, my work
focuses on the problems faced by ordinary Ottomans in wartime and their responses to the demands and pressures imposed by the wartime regime. War, in this dissertation, is approached not as the domain of politicians and military men, but as an experience shared by all members of society. Examining home-front civilians’ interaction with governmental agencies, policies, and discourses, as well as with their fellow citizens, and focusing on the daily material concerns of the Ottoman people and the meanings they attached to wartime experiences will provide a new and critical perspective on the disintegration of the empire. I strongly believe that the integration of the Ottoman people’s experiences into the literature will enrich and complicate our understanding of war.

For all belligerents, World War I was a completely novel experience when compared to earlier wars; it was a “total war.” Contemporaries as well as modern historians described it as a total war mainly for two reasons: first, the war required the comprehensive mobilization of all members of society regardless of age or gender, as well as the allocation of vast resources for military purposes. Second, the war blurred (and sometimes abolished) the boundaries between two distinct realms, the “military” and the “civilian,” inextricably combining the war-making of soldiers with the everyday activities of ordinary people. All members of the belligerent societies became legitimate targets, whether through blockade, occupation, looting, requisitioning, or aerial and naval bombardment.

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Both the mass mobilization and the blurring of the military-civilian distinction imposed enormous physical and psychological burdens on ordinary people in the form of death, disease, shortages, hunger, high inflation, unemployment, violence, and state oppression. As in other belligerent countries, people living all across the Ottoman Empire suffered heavily from mass conscription, forcible deportations and voluntary displacements, massacres, government requisitioning of grain and possessions, and other catastrophic effects of the war.

In order to wage a war of unprecedented scope effectively, the Ottoman government had to assume new powers, undertake new responsibilities, and expand its authority in many areas. Ottoman policymakers were well aware of the fact that they could not wage and win the war with the existing “infrastructural capacity” of the Ottoman state. During the war, government and military policies extended the state’s capacity to intervene in the distant corners of the empire to extract people and resources to a degree not seen before. In this dissertation, I also aim to explore this mechanism of the expansion of the state power and its social and cultural implications. Thus, this dissertation is also an inquiry into the nature of the Ottoman wartime regime.

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Due mostly to the increase in the state’s infrastructural capacity during the war, Ottoman state functionaries sought to penetrate even the remotest corners of the empire and mobilize all available human and material resources towards the war effort. Whether as official tax collectors, gendarmes who pursued deserters, troops on the way to or from the front, or provisioning officers who frequently visited the villages to impress extra grain, agents of the state made demands on the Ottoman people with increasing frequency. While the officials tried to intervene in daily civilian life and prevent the breakdown of law and social order, ordinary people persistently contended with the state by playing different levels of government against one another, resisting regulations, and seeking legal and illegal ways to evade military service and overcome scarcities. Writing numerous letters and petitions to state authorities, they complained about the wartime policies, high agricultural quotas, conscriptions, and unfulfilled promises of support. Examining this incessant interplay among imperial government, local authorities, the military, and the Ottoman people during the dramatic war years of 1914-1918, this study aims to shed new light on the “everyday politics” of the war. Following Belinda Davis, a historian of the German home front, I believe that this perspective will challenge the “still-dominant assumptions regarding the nature of politics itself as representing a narrow terrain of activity, largely separated from the rest of everyday life, practiced only at particular moments and often by limited segments of society.”

A scholarly endeavor to uncover the complexities of wartime civilian life on the Ottoman home front requires the use of a wide-ranging combination of archival and non-

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archival sources. Naturally, thousands of documents stored in the Ottoman Archives, which constitute the main body of sources for this dissertation, provide a unique glimpse into the functioning of the wartime Ottoman state. Imperial administrators’ correspondence with local officials has proved extremely useful in tracing the regional problems that the war created. In a similar vein, I have benefited immensely from thousands of pages of transcribed discussions in the Ottoman parliament and senate about the war. Although the deputies and members of the senate were not very successful in influencing the government’s wartime measures, the examples they cited of the malfunctioning of the state apparatus in the countryside and the horrendous impact of wartime polices on people in their districts of jurisdiction are invaluable for historians who study the Ottoman home front. Due to their close interaction with ordinary people, the observations of American missionaries and, to some extent, of consular officials also offer useful material on the war’s impact and the local wartime regimes in the countryside. Despite strict censorship imposed on the press, newspapers and journals are still useful sources to follow the government’s decrees and announcements. For the analysis of the official war culture (which I discuss in chapter four), they are indispensable. Fortunately, just in the last decade, numerous memoirs written by high-ranking military personnel, reserve officers, and even rank-and-file soldiers have been published. These memoirs, especially if they have not been “sanitized” and “realigned” with the official history either by their authors or their later editors, are priceless for the information they provide on the interaction between the military and local people. To my surprise, I have also noticed that the local histories of towns and provinces may serve as valuable repositories of primary materials in the form of memoirs.
Still, however, these sources must be supplemented with other types of documents if we want to scrutinize the war’s impact on ordinary Ottomans. As discussed above, until recently, the literature on World War I has neglected the people’s contribution to the Ottoman war effort. Given the disinterest in ordinary people’s experiences of war, no serious attempt has been made to collect and publish their narratives about the war and their lives on the Ottoman home front. During my archival research, I came across numerous letters, telegrams, and petitions written by ordinary people to state authorities. In my dissertation, I liberally use these unique sources in order to capture the voices of ordinary actors of the Ottoman home front, which would otherwise remain unheard. These documents, as I discuss in my chapter on women, not only offer information on people’s experiences of wartime difficulties, but they also testify to the rise of a new, dominant, collective identity of women as soldiers’ wives and mothers.

Even though letters, petitions, and telegrams open a window for historians onto the daily lives of ordinary Ottomans during the war, they do not provide much information on how people coped with the emotional difficulties associated with the deaths of family members, relatives or friends during and immediately after the war. When I first started my research, I thought that information relating to mourning and grief in the Ottoman Empire was substantially limited since the majority of Ottoman people were illiterate and did not generate a large amount of documentation useable for historians. Fortunately, I was quite wrong. Numerous laments and folk songs, some of them known but many of them completely unknown, represent the pervasiveness of mourning and lamentation among the Ottoman people. I benefited immensely from these
folkloric texts to analyze people’s positioning vis-à-vis the war and the miseries it brought.

By studying these sources, this dissertation seeks to offer a broad view of how World War I affected Ottoman society. It explores the new economic, social, and cultural realities that the war created in the form of mass conscription, a state-controlled economy, widespread shortages, population movements, death, and grief and examines how Ottomans wrestled with these wartime realities. Analyzing the wartime regime and understanding the Ottoman home-front experience may help us to grasp the meaning of the words so eloquently expressed by İhsan Dayı.
CHAPTER 1
“FILLING the RANKS:”
WAR, MOBILIZATION, and SOLDIERING in the OTTOMAN ARMY

I. Introduction

For millions of Ottoman men, war meant, above all, conscription and endless military service, which, for many, entailed combat, disease, injury, captivity, and, possibly, death. Despite undoubtedly serious problems, the Ottoman Empire succeeded in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of civilians into the armed forces on short notice, thus dramatically altering the lives of millions of people in order to fight a war against considerable odds.

Enormous losses over the course of the war compelled the Ottoman state to go to great lengths to recruit as many soldiers as possible. Throughout the war, the state constantly endeavored to extend its capacity to intervene in the distant corners of the empire to extract men in order to close the gaps in the ranks. By amending existing laws, drafting new legislation, and resorting to extrajudicial methods of recruitment, politicians and the army’s high command sought to cast the net of conscription as widely as possible. These efforts had a disastrous cumulative effect on the home front population. In the meantime, people who were drafted into military service developed a variety of escape strategies to untangle themselves from the net of conscription. During the war,
conscription became a field of contestation in which all social actors on the home front participated.

The focus of this chapter is on the wartime relationship that emerged between the Ottoman state and its male subjects through conscription and military service. Examining the state’s policies and regulations on filling the ranks of the army and the people’s various reactions to these policies, this chapter aims to explore the complexities of military conscription during the First World War and its impact on wartime Ottoman society.

II. The Balkan Wars and the New Law of Military Obligation (1914)

A consideration of the devastating experience of the Balkan Wars is important to an understanding of the Ottoman state’s approach to the subject of conscription during World War I. In the First Balkan War, the better-organized and better-trained armies of four Balkan states, Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro, inflicted humiliating and disastrous defeats on Ottoman forces.¹ By the end of the war, the Ottoman Empire had lost most of its territory in Europe, including Salonika, the headquarters of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). These lands conquered by the Balkan states had been under Ottoman rule for centuries. The war also precipitated the migration, under deplorable conditions, of hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees from their homes in

the Balkans to Anatolia and other Ottoman provinces. The defeat and humiliation of the imperial armies had enormous repercussions on Ottoman politics, society, and culture.²

The war also manifested the fighting prowess, skill, and training of the soldiers in the Balkan armies (especially Bulgarian soldiers), while exposing the weaknesses of Ottoman army organization as well as acute problems related to the conduct of the war, logistics and transportation, the preparation of reserve soldiers, and the wartime performance of conscripts.³ The political and military elite responded to the collapse of the army with a comprehensive reform plan.

The reform attempts of the Ottoman army in the wake of the Balkan War defeat have attracted considerable attention from students of late Ottoman history. The scholarship on military reform, however, has focused almost exclusively on the policies directed at the officer corps.⁴ These policies, which affected a considerable proportion of

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the Ottoman officer corps, without any doubt, constituted a key component of the overall reform project. After the Balkan Wars, Enver Pasha, a leading Unionist and the Minister of War, forced hundreds of aged, high-ranking officers to retire and dismissed many others whom he perceived as heavily involved in politics or as unsuccessful and incapable of keeping up with recent developments in the military profession. Although many of these officers were recalled by the army during World War I and employed in logistics organizations and other units, their elimination from the ranks marked a critical milestone in the rejuvenation of the Ottoman army. In the words of a contemporary observer, thanks to this operation, “the army had been reborn to a new world.”

It was not only the officer corps, however, that was subject to major reform efforts. The entire military system and army organization underwent a dramatic process of transformation and reorganization. From the creation of new military units and the elimination of old ones to the introduction of new training schemes, preparation of new campaign and mobilization plans, and formation of paramilitary youth organizations, the new leadership dealt with a series of problems that had been plaguing the Ottoman military system. In the reform process, the Ottomans availed themselves of the expertise of the German Military Mission headed by Major General Liman von Sanders and other German officers appointed to higher posts in the Ottoman army. The main goal of this

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massive reorganization was to revive the Ottoman army after the grave losses it had endured during the Balkan Wars and turn it into an effective fighting force. Even though the First World War broke out before these reforms were fully implemented, they significantly improved the Ottoman army’s performance in the war.

In the process of reorganization, the reserve forces (redifs) were abolished, due mostly to their poor performance during the Balkan Wars. According to the Law of Military Obligation of 1886 (Asakir-i Nizamiye-i Şahanenin Tertibat-ı Müteyemmene-i Cedideye Tevkifan Suret-i Ahzim Mübeyyin Kanun), recruits who completed their service in the regular army were transferred to the reserve forces, where they were to be recalled for a month of military training once every two years. The Balkan Wars, however, revealed the grim fact that the majority of these reserves were not properly trained, and that some were not trained at all during peacetime. When pitted against a strong, fast, and capable enemy, these soldiers panicked and deserted their ranks by the thousands. In

Statecraft 9 (1998): 91-128. On the activities of the Von Sanders Mission, see Liman von Sanders, Five Years in Turkey (Annapolis: The United States Naval Institute, 1927 [1920]), 1-21; Carl Mühlmann, Deutschland und die Türkei 1913-1914 (Berlin: Dr. Walther Rothschild, 1929), 1-27; Matthias Römer, Die deutsche und englische Militärhilfe für das Osmanische Reich, 1908-1914 (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2007); Glen W. Swanson, “War, Technology and Society in the Ottoman Empire from the Reign of Abdulhamid II to 1913: Mahmud Şevket and the German Military Mission,” in War, Technology and Society in the Middle East, eds. V.J. Parry and M.E. Yapp (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 367-385.


the course of the reorganization, reserve regiments were merged with the regular army to promote their adequate peacetime preparation.\footnote{Erickson, \textit{Ottoman Army Effectiveness}, 9.}

Another drastic change in military service concerned the introduction of a new system of drafting and mobilization based on the logic of dividing the empire into regions of conscription. Under this new organization, each army corps (kolordu) was regarded as a zone of conscription and was subdivided further into conscription districts.\footnote{\textit{Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi}, vol.3, 287; Cemal Akbay, \textit{Birinci Dünya Harbi'nde Türk Harbi}, vol.1, \textit{Osmanlı İmparatorluğu nun Siyasi ve Askeri Hazırlıkları ve Harbe Girişii} (Ankara: Genelkurmay Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1991), 109. The organization of the Ottoman army on the basis of army corps was a relatively recent development initiated in January 1911. “Osmanlı Ordusunda Kolordu Teşkilatının Kabulü ile Masrafı İçin 1326 Harbiye Bütçesi’nde 300.000.000 Kuruşun Münakalesi Hakkında Kanun,” \textit{Düstur}, Ikinci Tertip, vol.3, 7 Muharrem 1329 (8 January 1911): 30-31. See also Uyar and Erickson, \textit{A Military History of the Ottomans}, 220-21; Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 147-49.} Army corps would fill their ranks, both in peacetime and war, with conscripts drafted from their own zones. By this mechanism, the state officials aimed to overcome the strong reluctance of soldiers to serve in regions that were far removed from their own hometowns and villages. Emphasizing the need to make military service regional, army inspector Fuad Pasha articulated the problem: “… Military service should be regional. Their [the recruits’] nation is their own region. It would be futile to rely on the patriotism of these simple and ignorant people when sent to defend Syria, Armenia, or Thrace.”\footnote{Cited in Odile Moreau, \textit{L'Empire ottoman à l'âge des réformes: Les hommes et les idées du “Nouvel Ordre” militaire}, 1826-1914 (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2007), 294.}

This new organizational structure was also believed to facilitate the mobilization process, as army corps would each meet their needs for men, animals, and transportation vehicles from resources within their own zones. Given the insufficient and ineffective
transportation network, the army’s high command saw regional mobilization as a remedy to the problems of sluggish and chaotic mobilization during the Balkan Wars.

Along with these changes, arguably the most crucial component of military reform proved to be the enactment of a new Law of Military Obligation in May 1914 (Mükellesiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-i Muvakkati). The new law required all Ottoman male citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim alike (excluding the members of the Ottoman dynasty), to perform military service. Military obligation would commence after the recruits had reached twenty years of age and would end at the age of forty-five. However, in case of a war, the law permitted the conscription of Ottoman male citizens who were nineteen and twenty years old. The law brought the total military service term to twenty-five years, the first twenty years of which were defined as active service (muvażzaf) and the last five years as territorial guards (müştahfız). Recruits were obliged to serve actively under arms (bıfıl hizmet-i askeriye) for two years in the infantry and transportation classes, three years in gendarmerie and other classes, and five years in naval classes. After completing their time in active service, recruits would be transferred to the ihtiyat class, the reserve of the active army.

The new conscription law aimed primarily to increase the number of trained recruits by decreasing the active military service period to two years (and thereby increasing the number of recruits drafted at each call) and to abolish several exemptions.

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12 These were the service periods for the infantry and transportation units. Recruits in the gendarmerie and other units would not serve in the territorial guards. For naval units, the active service was set at twelve years and guard service at five years.

13 “Mükellesiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-i Muvakkati” Düstür, Ikinci Tertip, vol. 6, 16 Cemaziyelahir 1332 (12 May 1914): 662-704. The new law of conscription was never ratified by the Ottoman parliament and remained in effect provisionally throughout the war and its aftermath. In Turkey, it was replaced with a new law enacted in 1927.
that had been in practice for a long time. In an interview about the army reforms published in *İçtihad*, Enver Pasha highlighted the critical importance of this relatively short military service to the empire’s economic well-being while declaring it to be the most effective way to broaden the base of trained conscripts in a short amount of time.14

Along with reducing the period recruits had to serve, the law abolished exemptions from military service, which were regarded by the political and military elite as a major cause leading to the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan Wars. Indeed, Unionists had been expressing their resentment of military exemptions since they came to power in 1908. They managed to curtail a number of them, including the exemption granted to non-Muslims, inhabitants of the capital city, and students of religious seminaries (singular, *medrese*) from 1909 onwards.15 In spite of the drastically reduced number of exemptions, however, there were many who could still escape the net of conscription. Unionists identified this as one of the problems that had led to the erosion of the strength of the once-mighty Ottoman army. An important circular published by the central committee of the CUP in June 1914 stressed this point, portraying the new law of conscription as essential to the survival of the empire. The circular commended the law

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14 Abdullah Cevdet, “Harbiye Nazirimiz Enver Paşa Hazretleriyle Mülakat,” *İçtihad* 103 (23 April 1330): 45-50. The damages inflicted by protracted military service on the economy and society had been a concern of the Ottoman ruling elite since at least the early nineteenth century. These concerns were also incorporated into the Imperial Edict of Gülhane of 1839. Erik Jan Zürcher, “The Ottoman Conscription System in Theory and Practice, 1844-1918,” in *Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia, 1775-1925*, ed. Erik J. Zürcher (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 81.

for requiring each and every able-bodied Ottoman man to serve in the military and regarded it as an important milestone in the creation of the “armed nation” (millet-i müselleha).\(^{16}\) The abolition of exemptions, according to the circular, was at the core of the new legislation. The circular harshly criticized the outdated (köhne) Law of Conscription of the Abdülhamid era for exempting a significant portion of potential recruits from serving in the last conflict, while the Bulgarians had mobilized everyone, including rich and poor, educated and illiterate, students and non-students alike. Even Bulgarian women were employed in transportation. By restricting these exemptions, the new law would allow the Ottomans to develop an equally formidable fighting force.\(^{17}\)

The new law of conscription completely abolished exemptions permitted to those who were the sole breadwinners of their households (muin), limited the waiver of active service granted in return for an exemption fee (bedel) to peacetime, and severely restricted the exemption of governmental officials, religious functionaries, and students in universities and high schools. For many individuals and social groups who had historically enjoyed the privilege of exemption from military service, it was a shocking


\(^{17}\) “Millet-i Müsellahaya Doğru: Ordu Nasıl Teşkil Edilir?” Tanin (27 June 1914), 3. See also “Millet-i Müsellahaya Doğru: Yeni Ahz-ı Asker Kanunu Etrafninda,” Tanin (23 June 1914), 3. Actually, the British General Staff War Office stated that the Law of 1914 was “unquestionably an imitation of the Bulgarian military law.” Handbook of the Turkish Army (London: The Imperial War Museum, 1996 [1916]), 32.
experience to find out that they were also being called up when the mobilization for the war was ordered in August 1914.18

III. Seferberlik: Ottoman Mobilization for World War I

Upon the start of the war in Europe in early August 1914, the Ottoman Empire declared “armed neutrality” (müsellah bitaraflık), which it maintained for almost three months. In the meantime, however, the Unionist leaders concluded a secret alliance with Germany.19 Aware of the fact that the war eventually would spread to Ottoman lands, the Unionist leadership wanted to keep the army prepared for a conflict. For that purpose, it decided to order the mobilization (seferberlik) of the army and the navy immediately after the first shots were fired in the European theaters of war.20 Several leading military and civilian figures, as well as some cabinet ministers, objected to the idea of ordering a general mobilization on the grounds that such a comprehensive call to arms might provoke Russia and, more importantly, would place an insurmountable burden on the Ottoman people. Other ministers and, particularly, high-ranking officers argued in favor of the mobilization, maintaining that it might take an extensive amount of time to prepare

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18 Deputies from the Arab provinces of the empire, for instance, conveyed the anger of the people, “bordering on rebellion,” to Enver Pasha, who adamantly refused any revision of the law, saying, “We are on the verge of a general war, and I can in no way retract the law.” Kamal S. Salibi, “Beirut Under the Young Turks: As Depicted in the Political Memoirs of Salim ‘Ali Salam, (1868-1938)” in Les Arabes par leurs archives (XVIe-XXe siecles), eds. Jacques Berque and Dominique Chevallier (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1976), 211.

19 For the new scholarship on the subject, see Mustafa Aksakal, The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Sean McMeekin, The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); Kemal H. Karpat, “The Entry of the Ottoman Empire into World War I,” Belleten 68 (2004): 687-733.

20 The order of mobilization did not include the 7th Army Corps in Yemen, and the 21st and 22nd divisions, located in Asir and Hejaz, respectively.
the army for conflict.\textsuperscript{21} It also seems reasonable to argue that Enver Pasha, the main architect of the alliance with Germany, might have wanted to exploit this opportunity to train a significant portion of the male population and acquaint them with new methods of warfare. The lessons of the Balkan Wars once again came into focus and led the government and the army’s high command to proceed with mobilization before losing any more time. In the First Balkan War, only two weeks had passed from the beginning of the Ottoman mobilization to the outbreak of the war. Not surprisingly, the imperial army was caught woefully underprepared for a war against four Balkan armies.

The Ottoman state announced the mobilization mainly through newspapers, town criers, and red posters decorated with green flags, a gun, a saber, and a cannon. Local state officials placed these posters on the walls of government buildings, mosques, coffeehouses, and schools, and also sent them to village headmen to be placed accordingly.\textsuperscript{22} The message on the poster was plain and simple: “Mobilization is in

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\item \textsuperscript{21} Cavid Bey, the Minister of Finance, and Çürüksulu Mahmud Pasha, the Minister of Public Works, were the two most vocal politicians who opposed the idea of a general mobilization. \textit{Sene 1334 Meclis-i Mebusan Enciümén Mazbataları ve Tekalîf-i Kanuniyye ile Said Halim ve Mehmet Talat Paşalar Kabineleri Azalarının Divan-i Aliye Seklileri Hakkında Beşinci Şubece İcra Kilinan Taḥkikat}, vol.1 (Ankara: TBMM Basımevi, 1993), 99-102. For the criticism of Ahmet İzzet Pasha, a well-respected military figure and the former Minister of War, see Ahmet İzzet Paşa, \textit{Feryadım}, 182.
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effect. All soldiers to arms!” (Seferberlik var. Asker olanlar silah altına.) Its meaning, however, was difficult to comprehend for many. Although the criers explained the message to those who could not read it, the announcement of mobilization through visual material was a novelty for Ottomans, and many did not know how to respond to the call. The initial confusion was profound. In some places, people mistook the second word, “var” (literally, “there is/are”) with “van” (the name of a town in Eastern Anatolia), as the last letter written on the poster, r, resembled the letter n of the Ottoman alphabet.

It soon became clear that the Ottoman state had effectively ordered the conscription of all males, regardless of ethnicity or religion, between the ages of twenty and forty-five who were fit for service. The law concerning the draft and related announcements specifically stated that the inhabitants of the capital city and all non-Muslims (bilumum mile-i gayri müslime), who had historically been exempted from military service, were now obliged to serve. Street criers announced everywhere the state’s order that all eligible men would have to show up at the nearest enlistment office within five days. By the time the general mobilization was ordered, 200,000 soldiers were already in uniform (those born in 1891-93).

With the mobilization sixteen classes of the active army’s reserves (ihtiyat, those born in 1875-90) and seven classes of territorial

23 “Seferberlik İlanı,” İkdam (3 August 1914), 1.
24 Levent Alpat, Bir Osmanlı Askerinin Anıları, eds. Ozan Arslan and Ahmet Mehmetefendioglu (İzmir: Şenocak Yayınları, 2010), 67.
26 “45 Yaşına Kadar Olanların Hizmet-i Askeriye ile Mükellefiyetleri Hakkında Kanun-u Muvakkat,” Düstur, İkinci Tertip, vol. 6, 11 Ramazan 1332 (3 August 1914): 912-13. As discussed above, these groups had been liable for service since 1909, but the law once again underlined their obligation.
27 Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi, vol. 3, 288; Akbay, Birinci Dünya Harbi’nde Türk Harbi, 127. Larcher gives this number as 150,000 and argues that the active army was composed of two classes. Maurice Larcher, La guerre turque dans la guerre mondiale (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1926), 590.
guards (müstahfız, those born in 1868-74) were summoned. According to the new mobilization plans, the army aimed at expanding its fighting power to 450,000 men-at-arms. By mid-October 1914, the Ottoman state had reached this number and managed to bring a total of nearly a million men under arms, including the soldiers employed in the logistics organization, fortress garrisons, and coastal defenses.28

Contemporary observers noticed the high turnout of draftees in the early days of mobilization. However, they attributed this interest almost exclusively to citizens’ eagerness to join the ranks and serve in the army to protect the empire and Islam against their enemies. What they neglected is an extremely important amendment to the Military Penal Law (Askeri Ceza Kanunname-i Hümâyunu) that might have been the prime mover behind recruits’ rush to enlistment offices. The amendment called for severe punishments against those who did not enlist and those who deserted their battalions. According to the new law, men who did not show up at recruitment centers within ten days of having received the draft order and who lacked any valid excuse (mazaret-i sahihe) would be subject to capital punishment. Those who deserted and failed to return within seven days would also be sentenced to death. In addition, the law condemned those who facilitated such crimes and were negligent or lenient in the application of these new provisions to prison.29

28 Edward J. Erickson, Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 7; Akbay, Birinci Dünya Harbi’nde Türk Harbi, 127; Ali İhsan Sabis, Harb Haturalarım, vol.1, Birinci Cihan Harbîinden E Evelki Hadiseler, Harbin Zuhuru ve Seferberlik İlan, Harbe Nasıl Sürüklendi? (İstanbul: İnkılap Kitabevi, 1943), 195-96. Sabis, who was then a major and the head of the Bureau of Operations at the Ottoman Chief of Staff, also gives the distribution of this number for the army corps. For an informed discussion of these numbers, see also Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 139-142.

29 BOA. DH.HMS 23/102 (6 August 1914); “Askeri Ceza Kanunu’na Mûzeyyel Kanun-u Muvakkat,” Düstur, İkinci Tertip, vol. 6, 14 Ramazan 1332 (6 August 1914): 981-982. For the circular issued by the
People generally heard about the order of mobilization concurrently with state’s threat of execution by hanging. The army’s high command asked the army corps to expend every effort in announcing the provisions of this new law so as to expedite the mobilization process and to maintain the highest possible rate of participation. Official proclamations and town criers, who summoned people to recruitment offices to enlist, announced that noncompliance would be met with severe punishment. For instance, an official statement published in al-Ittihad al-Uthmani regarding those who did not report for duty reads: “…those who do not come to the barracks within forty-eight hours and do not establish their presence … will be subject to investigation and their relatives punished instead of them. If they flee, they will be executed immediately upon arrest. As for those reported within the appointed time, they will be excused.” In a similar vein, the proclamation of the governor of Baghdad, published to stir the enthusiasm of Muslims for the war, openly included this threat by citing examples from the capital: “Those who deserted or did not obey the invitation to join the army according to the lists to be submitted by conscription branches were, without loss of time, executed in


30 Yarbay Selahattin, Kafkas Cephesi’nde 10 ncu Kolordunun, 6.


Constantinople.” Gendarmes and policemen who patrolled the streets day and night routinely asked people for evidence of enlistment or exemption, and also reminded them of the dire consequences of noncompliance.

We have limited information about how widely the provisions of the law were implemented, especially in the early days of mobilization. Military units must have perceived the law mostly as a tool of coercion and intimidation, and refrained from actually putting it into practice, as even a single soldier was a valuable asset to the army. During the course of the war, however, troops had to resort to it as a deterrent against widespread desertion, especially during operations. The law’s second article concerning deserters provided the necessary legal basis for their execution.

Due mostly to this threat of severe punishment, the first mobilization call brought in high turnouts. Except for a few regions where the state’s authority was relatively weak, people throughout the empire rushed to conscription offices (ahz-i asker şubeleri) to enlist. The sight of thousands of recruits flocking to town centers and recruiting stations, sometimes with their families, led contemporary Ottoman observers to liken these buildings to “messy market places” (intizamsız pazar yerleri) and the general situation to “the day of judgment” (mahşer günü) or “the apocalypse” (kayımet).

33 National Archives of the United States, RG 59, 867.00/735 (8 August 1914).
34 Derveze, Osmanlı Filistinde Bir Posta Memuru, 315-16.
35 Colonel Arif [Baytn], a division commander on the Caucasus front, recalls ten soldiers being shot before their regiments. These soldiers had deserted from their ranks due to extremely hard labor and little time for rest. Baytn, İlk Dünya Harbi’nde Kağkas Cephesi, 90.
36 Baki, Büyük Harpçe Kağkas Cephesi, vol. 1, Methal: Teşkilat, Seferberolma, Tecemmül, Harp İlanına Kadar (İstanbul: Askeri Matbaa, 1933), 36
Izzat Darwaza, a postal official in Nablus, described those first days of mobilization as “an apocalypse, which appeared in the form of thousands of people from towns and villages all around the empire registering their names and receiving their documents in enlistment offices in the space of a week.”

Without taking into consideration the enormous demands created by the need to shelter and provision thousands of men, the military authorities called up all classes at once. In the words of the head of the enlistment office in a small Anatolian town, “except for the invalids and the elderly, no one remained outside the reach of conscription.” It was most likely the lack of regular and reliable population records and military rolls that compelled the authorities to act in this manner. Although the newly founded enlistment offices had worked to establish such records as part of the army’s reorganization process since at least the end of the Balkan Wars, military authorities were still far from assessing the number of people eligible for military service. Thus, they could not be certain as to how many people would respond to the recruitment call and whether that number would suffice to meet the wartime needs of the army. In the face of this

38 Derveze, Osmanlı Filistininde Bir Posta Memuru, 316.
39 Derveze, Osmanlı Filistininde Bir Posta Memuru, 316.
41 Nurettin Bey, then employed at the enlistment office in İnebolu, recalls, for instance, the heavy workload of the office, which was inspected by a German high-ranking officer, a member of the German Military Mission, in July 1914. Nurettin Peker, Tüfek Omza: Balkan Savaşı’ndan Kurtuluş Savaşı’na Ateş Hattında Bir Ömür, eds. Orhan Peker and Hilal Akkartal (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2009), 104. Although Nurettin Bey does not provide this officer’s name, he must have been Colonel Hans Kannengiesser. Hans Kannengiesser Pasha, The Campaign in Gallipoli (London: Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1928), 15. See also Şerif Bey, Sarpamış İhata Manevrası, 31.
42 Sabis, Harb Haturalarım, 111; Şerif Bey, Sarpamış İhata Manevrası, 60-61. See also the statements of Bronsart von Schellendorff on the lack of reliable data about the people who would and could be drafted: “1914-1918 Dünya Savaşında Türk Askeri Hareketlerinin Kısaca Tasviri,” in Birinci Dünya Savaşı
uncertainty and immeasurable risk, calling up the highest number of potential recruits must have seemed to Unionist leaders and the army’s high command to be the safest way to ensure a sizeable fighting force.

The recruits’ suffering, which, for many of them, would continue for four long years, started even before they officially became soldiers. Although they were ordered to take with them five days’ worth of their own food, in many places recruits had to wait much longer, sometimes weeks, to be enlisted. As all the available inns, hotels, and other facilities in towns were overflowing with recruits, those remaining had to stay wherever they could while waiting their turn to enroll and be assigned to their respective units. This lack of organization produced disheartening scenes of soldiers sleeping in the streets and in mosque yards, and seeking help from civilians. Kazım Karabekir, then a major and the head of the Bureau of Intelligence at the army headquarters, recounts his mother’s imprecations (beddua), directed at the authorities who caused this suffering, when she witnessed the lamentable condition of soldiers sleeping in the yard of the Fatih Mosque. These scenes must have created the impression in the minds of both soldiers and civilian 


witnesses that the Ottoman state was not fully prepared for the mobilization and upcoming war.

Recruits’ misery was further aggravated by the lack of experience demonstrated by the enlistment offices and their harsh treatment of and indifference towards these men.\textsuperscript{45} Being newly established, these offices fell well short of handling this arduous task properly. Thus chaos ensued in many of them. Although they worked beyond their capacity for extended periods of time, recruiting stations could not respond adequately to the flood of men. In most cases, they lacked sufficient personnel and the necessary levels of experience to conduct the draft in a timely and appropriate manner. In some regions, they could not separate trained soldiers (muallem) from the untrained raw recruits, and often sent them to the same units. As they could not be sure about the details of the conscription process because of the new law of conscription, some offices even called invalids to arms.\textsuperscript{46} Many of the new recruits, who had witnessed the chaos that overwhelmed these offices and saw that nothing was being done to enlist them, began to slip away, back to their villages. Seeing these men returning from the town centers, others, who had not yet left their homes, developed the feeling that the army was in no hurry, and postponed their applications. In the first days of the mobilization, invaluable time which could have been spent on training was wasted in this way.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45} See, for example, Erginsoy, ed., \textit{Dedem Hüseyin Atıf Beşe}, 135-36; Riggs, \textit{Days of Tragedy in Armenia}, 3-4.

\textsuperscript{46} Akbay, \textit{Birinci Dünya Harbi'nde Türk Harbi}, 175.

With the announcement of the mobilization and the accompanying threat of death for noncompliance, a wave of fear and anxiety swept through Ottoman towns and villages. This fear emanated not only from the extremely negative perceptions of military service that were prevalent, but also from the terror created by police officers, gendarmes, and governmental officials responsible for the conscription process. Especially in places where the records of potential recruits in enlistment offices were missing or incomplete, patrols went from house to house searching for men of draft age. On the streets and in public places, they asked for the necessary documentation evidencing exemption, the absence of which usually meant immediate detention and draft. In the words of a Jew from Baghdad, “The Turkish gendarmerie hunted us like wild animals and when we were caught they sent us to the qishle [barracks] and treated us like prisoners of war.” The fear and anxiety caused by the mobilization led men eligible for military service in some regions to flee to areas where they thought they would be more secure.

The mobilization’s immediate impact was quite visible in Ottoman towns and throughout the countryside. An American observer of the mobilization in Syria rightfully argued that, in the ten days between the first and tenth of August of 1914, the whole country was completely transformed. Conscription of a significant section of the male

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49 Mordechai Zaken, Jewish Subjects and Their Tribal Chieftains in Kurdistan: A Study in Survival (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 272.

50 In Beirut, for instance, people fled to Mount Lebanon as this region enjoyed a special status which provided its residents exemption from several taxes and military service. National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/638 (3 August 1914); National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/659 (22 August 1914). On the special status of Mount Lebanon in this period, see Engin Akarlı, The Long Peace: Ottoman Lebanon, 1861-1920 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
population brought the commercial life of the region to a halt: “…There were no young men to be seen in the streets, shops were closed, business was paralyzed, and the anxious countenances of women and children already bespoke fear and anxiety as to where they should find their next meal.”\textsuperscript{51} The conscription of hundreds of thousands of men had badly depleted Ottoman towns and villages. An eyewitness account notes similar negative effects on Baghdad caused by the mobilization and the war: “The streets of the inner town, through which it was hard to move in 1912, gaped emptily. The shops were mostly closed, the coffeehouses only half filled, and the countrywomen who sold food in normal times were absent…. There was no longer any life in the town, formerly one of the busiest in the Orient.”\textsuperscript{52}

Along with the economic recession in cities, a major problem resulting from the mobilization was the removal of a considerable portion of the labor force from agricultural production during the high season. The government’s call and accompanying threat of capital punishment obliged thousands of agricultural producers to abandon their crops and rush to the town centers.\textsuperscript{53} Clarence Douglas Ussher, an American physician and missionary stationed in Van, vividly described the abrupt cessation of farm work in the early days of mobilization: “… sickles lying in half-cut fields of grain, sheaves of wheat dropped on the way to the stack, and a little later weeping women with bags of bread or clothing on their backs running to overtake their men, who had been taken from


\textsuperscript{52} Alois Musil, \textit{The Middle Euphrates: A Topographical Itinerary} (New York: AMS Press, 1978 [1927]), 128-29. Along similar lines, Rev. E. C. Woodley of Marash reported that trade was at a standstill and that half of the shops in the bazaar were closed. E. C. Woodley, “The State of Things in Marash,” \textit{The Missionary Herald}, vol. 110 (1914), 510.

\textsuperscript{53} M. Zekai Konrapa, \textit{Bolu Tarihi} (Bolu: Bolu Vilayet Matbaası, 1960), 615.
the fields without time allowed them to secure necessary provisions from their homes or to say good-bye to their families. Conscription – for a war not yet declared.⁵⁴ This turned out to be a gross mistake on the part of the Unionist government, as the crop yield in 1914 was exceptionally good.⁵⁵ The observations of Dr. Daniel Thom, a longtime missionary in Mardin, indicate the most deplorable effects of the war on agriculture:

The government has robbed the city, and the country around, of its men, of its animals, of its money, leaving the threshing floors loaded down with a richer harvest than has ever been laid upon, to rot where they are, for lack of men and beasts to tread them out and care for them. The millions that will be lost to the people and the Government cannot be estimated. Such a suicidal conduct of a government I have not seen, during this variegated life I have lived.⁵⁶

The Army tried to correct this critical mistake by releasing older recruits and holding the commanders and officers of the enlistment offices responsible for organizing the harvesting of the fields belonging to the conscripts. The army headquarters ordered the military units to give furloughs to five to ten percent of soldiers so that they could help with the unfinished farm work. These soldiers were usually sent to nearby regions within a day’s walking distance.⁵⁷ The army corps were also allowed to gather the harvest in their regions using draft animals and transport vehicles confiscated for military

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⁵⁵ Ahmed Emin Yalman, Yakın Tarihte Gördüklerim ve Geçirdiklerim, vol. 1, 1888-1918 (Istanbul: Yenilik Basmevi, 1970), 270. Apparently, the same was true for the cotton crop, which, in the words of the US Consul in Mersin, “promised to be the largest in the history of the province of Adana,” but “will doubtless go to waste for the most part.” National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/652 (15 August 1914).
⁵⁷ Önal, ed., Tuğgeneral Ziya Yergök’ün Anıları, 32.
purposes.\textsuperscript{58} Despite these measures, however, the harvest throughout the empire was mostly lost.

Satisfied with the unexpectedly high turnout rate and concerned about the unfinished harvest work in the fields, the Ottoman state decided to release a certain segment of recruits, those who were older and untrained (\textit{gayri muallem}, soldiers 38-45 years of age), on a temporary basis.\textsuperscript{59} By discharging this older segment of recruits, the army aimed not only to accelerate the harvest but also to mitigate the problem of provisioning, which, for many military units around the empire, was becoming increasingly unbearable by the day. Recruits who had been released were instructed to be ready to rejoin their respective units when given twenty-four hours’ notice. In his edict on the conscription issued August 13, 1914, the sultan expressed his gratitude for his subjects’ willingness to join the colors and emphasized his desire to live in peace. He also underscored his expectations of those who were released to carry out the farm work of their brothers under arms. Similarly, in his proclamation on the conscription and discharges, Enver Pasha, the commander-in-chief of the Ottoman armies, stated that this effort and enthusiasm were good signs, but, in order to get rid of the “shame of desertion

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\textsuperscript{58} Akbay, \textit{Birinci Dünya Harbi’nde Türk Harbi}, 138.
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\textsuperscript{59} Which classes were temporarily released varied from region to region. In Aleppo, for instance, seven classes of cavalry and artillery from ages thirty-three to forty were released and given notice that they must answer the call within twelve hours. National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/677 (3 September 1914). According to British intelligence reports, men from twenty-three to thirty years of age were mostly drafted into active units, while men from thirty to thirty-eight years of age were sent to depot formations for training. Some men from thirty-eight to forty-five years of age received rudimentary training for a few weeks and were then sent home with instructions to be ready to rejoin when ordered to do so. F.J. Moberly, \textit{The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918} (London: His Majesty’s Stationery office, 1923), 31.
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of the Balkan War,” the army should be willing to make the greatest sacrifices with its very heart and soul.\textsuperscript{60}

While the released soldiers were allowed to return to their villages for a short time, thousands of younger recruits were leaving towns for gathering locations (\textit{tecemmü bölgeleri}) or depot regiments (\textit{depo alayları}), where they would receive rudimentary military training. Recruits from the same town were usually sent together under the supervision of an officer. As they were leaving their hometowns, high officials, religious authorities, family members, relatives, school children, and other people would often bid farewell to them and accompany their convoys for a couple of miles. These farewell scenes were heart-rending, as both the recruits and the people who were sending them off knew that there was little chance they would ever return from the battlefields. In the words of a soldier who was preparing to leave his relatives and his hometown, “The mountains are crying, the stones are crying, in short, the world is crying.”\textsuperscript{61} From time to time, anger and frustration also poured out of these farewell ceremonies. In Malatya, for instance, an old woman reacted angrily to people shouting “Long Live the Sultan” \textit{(Padişahım Çok Yaşa)}: “Down with the Sultan! Those who left [for the fronts] never returned. He wiped out our people.”\textsuperscript{62} In order to avoid these kinds of disturbances and

\textsuperscript{60} “… Balkan Harbi’nin firar lekesini temizlemek için Allah’ın himayesine sıkılarak büyük hamimizin iradeleri dairesinde canlı başla en büyük fedakarlıkları yapmak mecburuyetindedir…..” For the sultan’s edict and Enver Pasha’s declaration, see Arif Baytın, \textit{İlk Dünya Harbi’nde Kafkas Cephesi: Sessiz Ölüm, Sankamış Günlikü}, ed. İsmail Dervişoğlu (İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayınevi, 2007 [1946]), 16-17.


\textsuperscript{62} “Padişah olmaz olsun! Giden gelmiyi, kökümüzü gurutdu.” Adnan İşık, \textit{Malatya, 1830-1919} (İstanbul: n.p., 1998), 763.
tragic scenes, some convoys left the towns at night, when martial law kept people indoors.63

The lives of the fresh recruits were miserable even before they were sent to the fronts. As the army did not have a sufficient number of buildings or even tents to adequately house thousands of men, soldiers usually stayed in very crowded rooms which quickly became breeding grounds for typhus, dysentery, and other diseases, and were forced to sleep on the bare floor.64 They not infrequently went hungry and lived under quarantine, sometimes for weeks at a time. Endless drills and hard labor left them extremely weary.65 Learning whom to obey and how to fight occupied most of the recruits’ time. The majority of them were illiterate villagers and some did not even speak the same language as their officers. Instilling military discipline, punctuality, and obedience in them was not a simple task for their superiors, and usually included a heavy dose of curses and beatings. Anticipating long marches during the war, army commanders tried to increase soldiers’ stamina by pushing their bodies to the limit. As the mobilization was ordered during the summer of that year, the scorching sun undoubtedly contributed to the Muslim soldiers’ exhaustion. Even for a regiment commander, “the period of mobilization was more burdensome than the combat itself.”66

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63 See, for instance, the observations of Rev. John E. Merrill, president of the Central Turkey College in Antep (Aintab): John E. Merrill, “Seen and Heard in Aintab,” The Missionary Herald, vol. 110 (1914), 509.
64 Ussher, An American Physician in Turkey, 227; Riggs, Days of Tragedy in Armenia, 3-4, 38-44.
In addition to these problems, recruits usually lacked proper uniforms and footwear; their provisioning was inadequate; and their pay (important especially for purchasing tobacco) was always in arrears. At the beginning of the mobilization (and throughout the war years), clothing thousands of soldiers on short notice proved to be a daunting task for the military authorities. As domestic production failed to reach desired levels and imported material was appropriated by troops in and around Istanbul, some troops, especially those on the eastern front, had to prepare for war in ragged, multi-colored uniforms and defective footwear. A missionary who had observed the local conscription process in Van counted twenty-two sorts of material in the uniforms of a group of sixty soldiers. Even in the winter of 1914-15, there were some soldiers who were still wearing their summer clothes. For high-ranking commanders, this lack of clothing and equipment prompted a comparison between the current war and the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. Like that of many of his colleagues, the comparison of Hasan İzzet Pasha, then commander of the Ottoman Third Army in Eastern Anatolia, included a certain amount of wishful thinking: “In the Balkan War, the equipment of the army and the clothing of the soldier were perfect. We lost the war then. Now, equipment is

68 Ussher, An American Physician in Turkey, 216.
69 Hans Guhr, Anadolu’dan Filistin’e Türklere Omuz Omaza, trans. Eşref Özbilgen (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2007 [1937]), 43, 72; Aziz Samih, Büyük Harpте Kafkas Cephеsi Hatalarы: Zivinden Peterice (Ankara: Büyük Erkanharbiye Matbaası, 1934), 3-4, 43, 77; Tevfik Salim, “Şhhi Harb Tarih Tefkiki: Büyük Harbde Kafkas Cephesindeki Şhhi Vaziyete Dair Bir Tefkik,” Askери Mecmuа 97 (1935): 492, 496-97; Baytuın, Ilk Dünya Harbi’nde Kafkas Cephesi, 31, 165; Riggs, Days of Tragedy in Armenia, 11-12. Although the lack of proper winter clothing was a common problem for the majority of the Ottoman soldiers, it was an extremely difficult burden to bear for the “Baghdad Division,” a division composed almost exclusively of inhabitants of the Arab provinces.
inadequate, and the soldiers’ clothing is deplorable. God willing, we’ll win [I hope].”

Due largely to these extremely unfavorable conditions, after just the first few weeks of mobilization, disease, and desertion began to take their toll on the Ottoman army.

IV. Bedel: Paid Exemption from Military Service

Despite its claim to be comprehensive, the Law of Military Obligation of 1914 still included a number of categories of exemption for high-ranking governmental officials, diplomats, policemen, workers employed in munitions factories, railroad workers, telegraph operators, some religious personnel, those who were physically unfit, and, most importantly, those wealthy enough to pay the exemption fee (bedel).

Although the new law of conscription did not allow the wealthy to furnish substitutes to fight in their place (bedel-i şahsi), as was the case for the conscription laws of 1848 and 1869, the Ottoman conscription system still manifested a class bias. The new law granted citizens the right to pay a fee of fifty gold lira to purchase their exemption from service in the army. Obviously, the exemption fee allowed the wealthy to evade military

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71 Articles 91 through 95 of the law fully exempted some of these categories from military service while limiting the exemption of others to the periods of mobilization. During the war, the Yezidis, some state employees, and certain social groups were also excluded from the military service. Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 156-58, 182-86.

72 Tobias Heinzelmann, Heiliger Kampf oder Landesverteidigung? Die Diskussion um die Einführung der allgemeinen Militärflicht im Osmanischen Reich, 1826-1856 (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Lang, 2004), 200, 202.

73 For the majority of Ottomans, this was a very significant amount of money. By July 1914, the monthly salary of a primary school teacher or a police officer was only six lira. Zafer Toprak, İttihat-Terakki ve Cihan Harbi: Savas Ekonomisi ve Türkiye’de Devletçilik, 1914-1918 (İstanbul: Homer Yayınları, 2003), 153; Meclis-i Mebusan Zubat Ceridesi (hereafter MMZC), Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 1, 17 Teşrînisani 1333 (17 November 1917), 58.
service, fueling resentment among the urban and rural poor who could not similarly afford to buy their way out of it.

Since at least the Balkan Wars, the exemption fee had occupied the agenda of Unionist politicians as well as the army’s high command. The political program of the Committee of Union and Progress, accepted in the annual congress of 1913, categorically opposed the practice of purchasing exemption and promised to abrogate it in favor of a new law that would require all conscripts physically to perform their own military service.  

In spite of this principle, however, archival evidence points to significant discord among officials on the issue of avoiding military service through payment of the exemption fee. The underlying cause for this dissonance was the significant share of revenue the exemption fee generated for the Ottoman state. During the preparation of the new law of conscription, the army high command and the Ministry of War advocated the complete abolition of exemption through *bedel* for primarily military and ideological reasons, while the Ministry of Finance highlighted the enormous burden that the elimination of *bedel* would place on the imperial treasury. As a result of these discussions, financial concerns and the view of the Ministry of Finance seemed to outweigh the military’s objections to *bedel*. The new conscription law of 1914 did not

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75 For instance, revenues yielded through the military exemption fee constituted 14.5%, 18.2%, and 22.2% of the imperial budget in 1330 [1914], 1331 [1915], and 1332 [1916], respectively. Muharrem Öztel, *II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Osmani Maliyesi* (İstanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 2009), 91.

abrogate the practice of paying a fee in lieu of military service, but limited its application to peacetime only. Under the new legislation, recruits who paid the fee of fifty Ottoman gold lira would receive six months of rudimentary military training and pass into the reserve class afterwards.\footnote{Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 175-76.}

Although the law clearly stated that the state would not accept exemption fees after mobilization begun, the severely deteriorated financial situation of the empire and the pressing needs of an impending war obliged the Ottoman authorities to shelve this principle. Upon the announcement of general mobilization and the issuance of the call to arms, the Ottoman state declared that it would accept exemption fees from citizens in lieu of military service. The \textit{ihtiyat} class of non-Muslims constituted the first group to which the state granted the right to purchase exemption.\footnote{“Taht-ı Silaha Ceb Olunan Milel-i Gayri Müslüman Efrad-ı İhtiyatiyesinden Bedel-i Nakdi Kabulü Hakkında Kanun-u Muvakkat,” \textit{Düstur}, ikinci tertip, vol. 6, 11 Ramazan 1332 (3 August 1914): 913.} Soon it was extended to the \textit{müstahfîz} class of non-Muslims and finally to untrained (\textit{gayri muallem}) Muslims who were in the \textit{ihtiyat} and \textit{müstahfîz} classes.\footnote{“Taht-ı Silaha Ceb Olunan Milel-i Gayri Müslüman Efrad-ı Müstahfazasından Bedel-i Nakdi Kabulü Hakkında Kanun-ı Muvakkat,” \textit{Düstur}, ikinci tertip, vol. 6, 14 Ramazan 1332 (6 August 1914): 926; “Müslim Efrad-ı İhtiyatiye ve Müstahfazasının Gayri Muallem Kısımından da Bedel-i Nakdi Kabulü Hakkında Kanun-ı Muvakkat,” \textit{Düstur}, ikinci tertip, vol. 6, 16 Ramazan 1332 (8 August 1914): 931. The state defined “trained” (\textit{muallem}) as individuals who had received three months of rudimentary military training.} The exemption fee was set at thirty Ottoman gold lira. Together with the war tax (\textit{harp vergisi}) and local taxes added to this amount, it would reach a sum of forty-three lira. This amount had to be paid in a week following the promulgation of the law.\footnote{Ottoman citizens who were living in autonomous provinces (\textit{eyalat-ı mümtaze}) and were abroad at the moment would have two weeks to pay their exemption fees. The Ottoman state extended this period of payment three times, first for a week (13 August 1914), then for 10 days (21 August 1914), and finally for a month (7 October 1914).}
Even though the state had enacted this decision, the tension between military officers and civilian authorities on purchasing exemptions resurfaced in the early days of the mobilization. In his diary, Cavid Bey, a leading Unionist and the Minister of Finance, noted the resistance of the army high command to every proposal he put forward to expand the number of citizens who might benefit from the law. The army clearly intended only to accept exemption fees from individuals and groups whom it deemed “less useful” for military purposes. Cavid Bey’s notes even suggest that the army must have seriously contemplated limiting the option of buying exemptions only to non-Muslims. Even when they consented to include Muslims, they tried to keep the number of potential beneficiaries as low as possible by specifying a very short period for the payment of the fee and by excluding individuals who had received three or more months of military training. By granting the right to Muslims from the very beginning, setting a longer period for payment, and, finally, excluding men who received military training of six months or more (instead of three), Cavid Bey argued, the state could have gained five to six hundred thousand lira more from bedel payments. He rightfully criticized the military for continuously asking for more money while drying up all sources of revenue.81

Buying exemption from military service was not an option for many, as the fee constituted a significant amount of money. Even for the relatively more affluent segments of the society, coming up with forty-three lira was not easily accomplished, especially given the very short notice. The situation was further aggravated as banks throughout the

empire ceased allowing people to withdraw money they had deposited. For instance, Emin [Sazak] Bey, a local notable and son of a landowner, recorded in his diary that he had just barely put together the necessary amount by selling beşibirlik (five-lira gold pieces kept for use as jewelry) that he had at home.\(^82\) The desire to buy exemption put many who, unlike Emin Bey, did not have gold on hand at the mercy of usurers, leading many families to financial ruin.\(^83\) The magnitude of the fee and the short deadline given for payment obliged people to sell their produces and personal belongings such as rugs and jewelry well below market prices in order to gather the necessary amount. A missionary in Mardin described this extraordinary situation vividly: “The gold from the heads, and necks and wrists, is taken to the market and peddled like old iron, and no one will buy, doing anything and everything to raise money to pay exemption fees.”\(^84\) This unexpected flow of goods to the market lowered the prices of almost everything dramatically in the first days of mobilization, although only fleetingly. According to contemporary observers, the price of one bushel of wheat (about 36.5 kilograms) dropped to ten piasters, and barley to five or six piasters. For one or two lira, it was possible to buy a cow.\(^85\)

The option of paying an exemption fee created a great deal of excitement among Ottoman citizens. In a letter to a friend, Rev. Henry Riggs, an American missionary in


\(^{83}\) Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), 72. See also the report dated 3 September 1914 by the US Consul in Aleppo, National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/677 (3 August 1914).


Harpurt, recounted the excitement in the air as follows: “There is, as I said, absolutely no enthusiasm over the war, so far as I have seen or heard. The only sign of enthusiasm is the enthusiasm to pay ‘bedel’ (military exemption tax), which has risen to white heat of late. It was announced that ‘bedel’ would be accepted only up to last evening, and the scramble to pay it would be ludicrous if it were not so pitiful.” Many, of course, could not even imagine paying such an amount, as it was far beyond their capacity. Exemption from military service and the payment of exemption fees, therefore, must have been the staple of conversation among the soldiers at the front who were suffering from combat, bitter cold, and extremely harsh living conditions. A young Ottoman sergeant wrote in his diary that they usually passed the nights telling stories around the fire. Occasionally, however, they also brought up delicious desserts and the acceptance of the exemption fee. Like thousands of others, perhaps, these soldiers yearned for the sorts of foods not included in their rations, and deeply envied those who had the financial power to pay the fee.

As the war progressed, the Ottoman state continuously sought to increase its revenues through military exemption taxes. In March 1915, for instance, the government enacted a new provisional law that would allow the state to accept exemption fees from non-Muslims, untrained Muslims, tax farmers, individuals who had been assigned to non-combat posts due to their physical conditions, and soldiers in labor battalions and supply columns. Unlike the previous laws on exemption fees, this law did not set a time limit

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86 Riggs, *Days of Tragedy in Armenia*, 10.
on the payment. The law, however, did not permit the recruits who were already enlisted to purchase exemption.

Towards the middle of the war, the government decided to change the rules of the game and shorten the exemption period secured through the payment of bedel. For those who had already paid the fee in accordance with previous laws, this period was limited to eighteen months. Once this period had expired, if people wanted to continue their exemption, they had to pay an additional fee of thirty lira, which would grant them another year of exemption. After the promulgation of the law, people who wanted to buy themselves out of military service would have to pay a fee of forty-four lira for their first year of exemption and thirty lira for each additional year. This new legislation was clearly at odds with previous laws, which stated plainly that the exemption fees that were to be paid would be good for the duration of the mobilization. Prolonged war, high inflation, the gradual depreciation of the Ottoman currency, and the increasingly apparent inequality between those who paid the exemption fee and those who suffered the horrors of war at the front must have prompted the government to act in this manner. In its reasoning, the government underlined this last point and maintained that the fee paid for exemption was trivial compared to the hardships suffered by the soldiers who rushed to perform their military service and sacrifice their lives to protect the empire, “a service that was impossible to measure materially.” Beyond that, however, given the dwindling


revenues of the state from other, more conventional sources such as the tithe and the cattle tax, the Ottoman authorities clearly saw raising revenue from exemption fees as one of the most straightforward methods of closing the ever-growing budget deficit.

V. Filling the Ranks: Ottoman Policies of Conscription during the War

The Law of Military Obligation of 1914, as discussed above, significantly extended the scope of conscription and provided an efficient legal tool for officials to intervene on the home front to extract men for the army. However, as the war dragged on and became more destructive than anyone might have anticipated at the outset, the legislation and the state’s measures to supply the army with fresh recruits proved to be insufficient in certain respects. As a response, the Ottoman state enacted numerous additional laws and devised new mechanisms to regulate the process of conscription and maintain an unremitting flow of recruits to battlefields. The experiences of the Balkan Wars, once again, were pivotal in determining the government’s wartime policies of conscription. The Unionist elite strongly believed that one of the major reasons behind the Ottoman loss in the Balkan Wars was the government’s reluctance and inability to enact laws that helped to mobilize all available resources for war purposes. The Ottomans were determined not to repeat the same mistake in the Great War.

The first radical attempts to widen the conscription net came in the aftermath of the Sarıkamış disaster. The Ottoman army’s campaigns in the winter months of 1914-15 resulted in the devastating loss of thousands of soldiers. Encouraged by some high-ranking German officers and motivated by dreams of imperial glory in the Caucasus, Enver Pasha led the entire Third Army to almost complete destruction in an ill-conceived
offensive against the Russian army. Tens of thousands of soldiers died in the mountains of northeastern Anatolia as a result of cold, typhus, and starvation.91 As Colonel Friedrich Bronsart von Schellendorf, the first assistant chief of the Ottoman General Staff, observed, these soldiers constituted the most distinguished fighting force of the imperial army.92 Their loss was a heavy blow for the Ottomans.

In the meantime, the massive Entente attack on the Dardanelles began in February 1915 and contributed significantly to the sense of urgency among the Ottoman political and military elites.93 In the months to come, the battle at the Dardanelles would absorb thousands of recruits as the Ottoman army effectively resisted the English and French onslaught. Deteriorating domestic security as a result of the deportation of Armenians compounded the Ottoman authorities’ concerns over the manpower shortage. The annihilation of three army corps on the Caucasus front, and the pressing need to strengthen the Gallipoli front and maintain security on the home front had important repercussions for the Ottoman policy of conscription. Along with drafting new classes of conscripts ahead of schedule, the Ottoman state tried to wrestle with the manpower problem by dragging groups and individuals who had so far remained exempt from the service into the conscription net.

91 Larcher estimates this number at as high as 90,000. However, Erickson questions the reliability of this number and puts his estimate at 58,000. Edward J. Erickson, Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 59-60.


93 The literature on the Gallipoli campaign is voluminous. For example, Erickson, Ordered to Die, 76-95; idem, Ottoman Army Effectiveness, 16-66; Robin Prior, Gallipoli: The End of the Myth (New Have: Yale University Press, 2009).
The decimation of regular units during the campaigns of the winter of 1914-15 and their replacement by local gendarmerie battalions proved detrimental to internal security and the maintenance of order on the home front. With the wide-scale deployment of trained gendarmes to the fronts, the state’s ability to maintain order in the countryside had been weakened dramatically. The requisitioning, collection, and transportation of necessary food supplies to logistics stations, the impressment of new recruits, and the pursuit of deserters were each hampered by the dwindling number of gendarmes. In the words of a contemporary observer, “Had the gendarmes remained in place the deserters and those who had not reported for duty (bakaya) would not have outnumbered them by ten to one, public order would not have been disrupted, and everything the army wanted to accomplish would have been done in a timely manner.”

The Ottoman state responded to the diminution of internal security forces by extending conscription to those with any kind of familiarity with firearms (silah istimaline kabiliyetli olanlar). The provisional law enacted for this purpose allowed for the enlistment of young men of nineteen and twenty years of age, if they had not already been drafted, and men who were over forty-five years of age. These new conscripts would be employed “in the defense of borders and coasts and the maintenance of public


order.” In the course of discussions of the law in parliament, deputies lambasted the lack of a fixed upper age limit and the abuses to which this uncertainty might lead. Many of them expressed their concerns that this regulation would leave the door open for the conscription of much older men of ages fifty, sixty, or even seventy. This process in turn would negatively affect life on the home front as, in the absence of young men, these older men had already been forced to undertake farm work, transportation, and other duties along with women and children. To assuage these concerns, the army representative tried to assure the deputies that these people would not be sent to the fronts. Since they would be called up only when the local commanders sensed danger with regard to the local security situation, the scope of the law’s implementation would be limited.

The Ottoman state’s attempts to make up for the losses it suffered in the winter and spring of 1915 and to repopulate the ranks of the army led to the conscription of refugees (muhacir). Refugees had historically enjoyed periods of exemption from military service (as well as from several taxes) in the Ottoman Empire. In line with the new Regulation for the Settlement of Refugees (İskan-ı Muhacirin Nizamnamesi) of

97 MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 1, 7 Kanunuevvel 1331 (20 December 1915), 186-93.
99 Refugees who came in the wake of Crimean War (1856) and Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78, for instance, were exempted from the service for twenty-five years. In 1888, the state reduced this period of exemption to six years. Ahmet Cevat Eren, Türkiye’de Göç ve Göçmen Meseleleri: Tanzimat Devri, İlk Kurulan Göçmen Komisyonu, Çıkarılan Tüzükler (Istanbul: Nurgök Matbaası, 1966), 41, 42; Faruk Kocacık, “Balkanlar’da Anadolu’ya Yönelik Göçler,” Osmanlı Araştırmaları 1 (1980), 168, 178; Fuat Dündar, İttihat ve Terakki’nin Müslümanları İskân Politikası (1913-1918) (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), 197-98; Nedim İpek, Imparatorluktan Ulus Devlete Göçler (Trabzon: Serander Yayınları, 2006), 72.
1913, the new law of conscription granted them exemption from military service for the first six years after their arrival in Ottoman territory. The sheer magnitude of casualties and the burning need for able-bodied men, however, compelled officials to rescind this provision and render refugees liable for service immediately. The new legislation authorized the Ministry of War to draft those refugees who had already arrived as well as those who would arrive during the course of the war if necessary. The law reduced the six-year exemption period significantly and granted refugees only three months for settling and registration. Although the law left the door open for the conscription of incoming refugees, the Ministry of War gave orders to the army corps to exempt those who had migrated from lands invaded by the enemy due to the enormous desperation brought about by fleeing the advancing Russian army. The army high command clearly sought to conscript the tens of thousands of Muslim refugees who had fled to the Ottoman Empire during and after the Balkan Wars and were exempt from military service in accordance with the new law of conscription of 1914 and the regulation concerning the settlement of refugees.

The state’s efforts to conscript refugees attracted considerable criticism from both deputies and senate members as well as from refugees themselves. Much to the

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100 İskan-ı Muhacirin Nizamnamesi (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1329 [1913]).
102 BOA.DH.I.UM 14/18 (29 December 1915); BOA.DH.I.UM 14/21 (9 January 1916). For the statements of the army representative Lieutenant Colonel Behiç Bey in the parliament and senate on the same subject, see MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 1, 4 Kanunisani 1331 (17 January 1916), 361; MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 2, 8 Şubat 1331 (21 February 1916), 119. Despite these orders, however, in many regions military units continued to draft these refugees who were fleeing from the Russian advance. BOA.DH.I.UM 14/28 (17 February 1916); BOA.DH.I.UM 14/26 (3 April 1916).
annoyance of army representatives and other senate members who supported the proposal, Abdurrahman Şeref Efendi, a famous historian and a prominent member of the Ottoman Senate, likened their situation to the lamb that escaped the wolf’s clutches but was slaughtered by the butcher.\textsuperscript{103} Other members of the parliament and the senate argued that refugees had already become victims of the war, losing everything they once owned. As most of the refugee families left their properties, businesses, and other sources of income behind, their survival depended mostly on the labor of the men. While they had escaped the enemy and sought refuge in their new homelands, the conscription of these men would condemn their families to poverty and hunger.

Refugees themselves resisted the state’s attempts to draft them using various methods. The most common way for them to evade service was to prolong their refugee status. After having settled in a certain region, refugees would not stay there long, instead joining other newly arrived groups and migrating to other parts of the empire. In this way, they could continuously present themselves to authorities as newly arrived refugees and enjoy the three months’ settling period of exemption from service. After this period was over, they would move to another location or destroy their registration documents to continue to evade military service. Although the state sent order after order to catch these refugees and hand them over to the recruiting stations, it turned out to be practically impossible to keep track of them.\textsuperscript{104} As a partial solution, the army ordered the immediate conscription of refugees who had left their families in their native countries and came

\textsuperscript{103} MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 2, 8 Şubat 1331 (21 February 1916), 119.
\textsuperscript{104} BOA.DH.SN.M 36/64 (15 April 1915); DH.UMVM 123/89 (18 August 1915);
alone. They would not be granted the three months exemption. Some other refugee groups who could not move freely from one location to another opted to remain in uninhabited areas and around swamps to hide the male members of their families from officials.

While the Ottoman state coped with serious difficulties in filling the depleted ranks, significant developments were taking place regarding the conscription of non-Muslim subjects. As discussed above, the call for mobilization included all male subjects of the empire, irrespective of their ethno-religious identity. The recruitment of non-Muslim soldiers, however, had always been a controversial issue for the Ottomans, and that fact had not changed since 1909 when their exemption from service was formally abolished. Despite occasional calls for equality before the law and fellowship in carrying the burdens of protecting “the Ottoman nation,” neither Muslims nor non-Muslims had shown much enthusiasm for the idea of serving together in the ranks. During the First World War, however, conscription became an equally insurmountable burden for Ottoman non-Muslims, who, on the eve of the war, constituted about twenty percent of the empire’s population.

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Even before the start of the war, the army high command seemed to be developing a strong sense of distrust towards non-Muslim soldiers. In the first days of mobilization, the Ministry of Interior sent a circular to the provinces regarding the army’s decision to employ non-Muslim soldiers in road construction. This decision, however, was not intended to separate all non-Muslims from their units by sending them to labor battalions. There is evidence that the army began to disarm Armenian soldiers in eastern Anatolia and place them in labor battalions in October 1914. But especially following its defeat on the Caucasus front, the army embraced a considerably more radical stance toward non-Muslim soldiers. Responding to rumors that increasing numbers of Armenians were voluntarily surrendering to the enemy or sharing secrets about Ottoman forces, in February 1915, the army high command decided to remove non-Muslims from active service and form them into labor battalions. Before being sent to labor battalions, the soldiers were disarmed and their uniforms were taken away.

For many of them, this was a humiliating shock. Alexander Aaronsohn, a Jewish soldier from a small village named Zicron-Jacob south of Mount Carmel (today Haifa in northern Israel), recalls his feelings as follows: “I shall never forget the humiliation of that day when we, who, after all, were the best-disciplined troops of the lot, were first herded to our work of pushing wheelbarrows and handling spades, by grinning Arabs, rifle on shoulder.” In a similar vein, Khalil Sakakini, an Arab Orthodox Christian and a noted intellectual, recorded this feeling of humiliation in his diary: “Today a large

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109 BOA.DH.ŞFR 43/214 (10 August 1914).
110 Guenter Lewy, The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2005), 228; Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 162.
111 Aaronsohn, With the Turks in Palestine, 24.
The number of Christians were recruited as garbage collectors to Bethlehem and Bait Jala. Each was given a broom, a shovel, and a bucket and they were distributed among the alleys of the town. Conscripts would shout at each home they passed, ‘send us your garbage.’ The women of Bethlehem looked out from their windows and wept. No doubt this is the ultimate humiliation. We have gone back to the days of bondage in Roman and Assyrian days.”

The fear of being disarmed, the humiliation, and the increased sense of threat and foreboding led many non-Muslim soldiers to desert the labor battalions.

The army usually employed the soldiers of labor battalions in constructing new roads and repairing old ones, cutting down trees for fuel for locomotives, transporting wood, ammunition, and other military provisions, and in several municipal services.

Ottoman authorities also used labor battalions in the Arab provinces of the empire not only for military construction but also for grandiose renovation projects in the cities of Beirut, Damascus, Jaffa, and Aleppo initiated by Cemal Pasha, the commander-general of the Fourth Ottoman Army. War, in the words of historian Salim Tamari, transformed these provinces “into one huge construction site” and these battalions provided the


necessary free labor. Not surprisingly, non-Muslim soldiers employed in labor battalions suffered from extreme weather conditions, backbreaking work, undernourishment, and, finally, mistreatment at the hands of their guards. When the deportation of the Armenians began in April 1915, unarmed Armenian soldiers in labor battalions found themselves to be, in the words of Erik J. Zürcher, “sitting ducks.” Especially on the eastern front, they were either marched off to their deaths or killed by gendarmes and tribesmen.

Between February 1915 and January 1916, the Ottomans successfully defended the Dardanelles against the Entente troops, forcing the latter to withdraw. The defeat of the British and French forces affected the overall course of the war in several important ways, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this dissertation. It should be emphasized, however, that the cost of the campaign for the Ottoman Empire was insurmountable. It placed an enormous burden on the Ottomans in terms of losses in manpower and material resources. Official estimates put the number of casualties at 90,000 dead and 165,000 wounded and sick, while Liman von Sanders Pasha,

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commander of the Ottoman Fifth Army in Gallipoli, estimated that there were 218,000
Ottoman casualties, 66,000 of whom were fatalities.⁸⁷

From the early months of 1916 onward, the Ottoman political and military elites
were occupied with trying to recuperate from this costly victory and, at the same time,
resist the enemy now advancing on two different fronts. Eastern Anatolia as well as
Mesopotamia drained much of the Ottoman firepower during this period. The British
advance towards Kut al-Amara and Baghdad obliged the Ottoman army to reinforce this
front with thousands of new conscripts while simultaneously trying to halt the Russian
advance towards Erzurum.

At around the same time, the Ottoman High Command decided to contribute to
the European campaigns of its allies. Enver Pasha and his advisors were certainly
convinced that the fate of the war would be decided on the western front and that the
Ottomans should actively engage in battles here to tip the balance in favor of their
allies.⁸⁸ Between the summer of 1916 and the spring of 1918, approximately 100,000
Ottoman soldiers were sent to Romania, Galicia, and Macedonia. These troops were
formed by selecting the best-trained soldiers available in the Ottoman army, and they
were equipped and dressed much better than their counterparts remaining in Ottoman
lands.⁸⁹ The stiff opposition mounted by several high-ranking Ottoman and German

⁸⁷ Von Sanders, Five Years in Turkey, 104; Erickson, Ordered to Die, 94.
⁸⁸ In February 1916, Erich von Falkenhayn, chief of the German General Staff, demanded an Ottoman
contribution to the German war effort. Gerold von Gleich, Vom Balkan nach Bagdad: Mililitärisch-
politische Erinnerungen an den Orient (Berlin: Scherl, 1921), 73.
⁸⁹ Carl Mühlmann, Das deutsch-türkische Waffenbündis im Weltkriege (Leipzig: Verlag Koehler &
Amelang, 1940), 106-08, 120-24, 184; Kansu Yazman, ed., Kumandanım Galiçya Ne Yana Düşer:
For a rather technical description of Ottoman campaigns on the European fronts, see Birinci Dünya
officers, most notably Liman von Sanders, on the grounds that the Ottomans themselves desperately needed these troops, did not suffice to alter this decision.\textsuperscript{120}

The government and army high command once again attempted to fill the ranks, which had been sorely depleted due to combat, disease, and desertion, by increasing the upper age limit for military service from forty-five to fifty.\textsuperscript{121} The law particularly emphasized that the provisions would also cover individuals who had already performed military service and fulfilled their obligations. As discussed above, many of these men above forty-five had already been drafted into home and coast guard regiments. Now, with this new legislation, the state aimed to call up those who had managed to evade service or collect their exemption fees. In its reasoning, the government maintained that the empire still had extensive sources of manpower to continue the war effort. The Law of Military Obligation in its current form, however, did not suffice to meet the needs of the army, which was fighting on several scattered fronts.\textsuperscript{122}

While increasing the upper age limit of conscription, the Ottoman government also attempted to draft young men below the regular age of conscription. A drastic change in the law allowing eighteen-year-olds to be drafted had already been approved at


the height of the conflict in Gallipoli.\textsuperscript{123} Moreover, a new provisional law enacted in October 1916 empowered the heads of enlistment offices to conscript those who were not liable according to their registered ages (\textit{sinn-i mukayyed}), but were suitable for service because of their personal characteristics.\textsuperscript{124} By means of this law, as the army representative explained, the state aimed to draft people who had either destroyed their identity cards, never registered, or registered late. The unreliability of population records and the generally accepted idea that Ottomans did not register their children until years after they were born underlay the government’s move in this direction.\textsuperscript{125}

The bill generated arguably the most heated discussions about conscription in the Ottoman parliament, which was usually quite compliant with the demands of the army and the government. Deputies from all over the empire demonstrated their eagerness to repeal the provisional law immediately. In no other meeting of the parliament during the war was the rejection of a law so fervently requested. Since the law had been in effect for some time on a provisional basis before it reached the parliament, deputies had witnessed the horrors the law was creating on the ground.\textsuperscript{126} Arguing that the law brought about the


\textsuperscript{125}This is clearly understood from the government’s reasoning. \textit{Meclis-i Umuminin Mün‘akid Olmadığı Esnada Heyvet-i Vükelaça Ba-İrade-i Seniyye Mevki-i Icaya Konulan Levayih-i Kanuniyye}, 1332 (Ankara: n.p., n.d.), 96.

\textsuperscript{126}Under CUP rule, “provisional laws” (\textit{kavanin-i muvakkata}) became a powerful policy instrument. During the war, the Unionists issued hundreds of these provisional laws that went into effect upon the sultan’s decree (\textit{irade}), pending later parliamentary approval. With this mechanism, the government aimed to act swiftly when faced with a problem and bypass any obstacle that might be created by members of parliament. Tarık Zafer Tunaya, \textit{Türkiye’dedে Siyasal Partiler}, vol. 3, \textit{Itihaat ve Terakki – Bir Çağın, Bir Kuşağı, Bir Partinin Tarihi} (İstanbul: Hürriyet Vakfı Yayınları, 1989), 385-88. According to a high-
conscription of children fourteen and fifteen years of age, many of them demanded its immediate abrogation and the release of the conscripts who had been drafted by means of it. According to Faik Bey, deputy of Edirne, this law should not remain in effect even for a minute due to the abuses it encouraged. Similarly, in the words of Haralambidis Efendi, deputy of Istanbul, this law was about “the determination of age through the body” (cüsse itibariyle sinn tayini kanunudur). Eventually, the parliament rescinded the bill, which would become one of only a few government proposals pertaining to conscription ever rejected by the parliament during the war.

Despite this rejection, however, the army high command persisted in reducing the age limit for conscription. In May 1917, the government revised the law of conscription once again and added seventeen-year-olds to the list of subjects who could be drafted in case of war and by imperial rescript (irade-i seniye). As a result of this amendment, much to the chagrin of their mothers, fiancées, and loved ones, seventeen-year-old boys ranking officer, the Ministry of War had a “bureau of laws,” which was charged with the duty of preparing drafts of laws in line with the army’s demands. Ali Fuad Erden, İsmet İnönü (Ankara: Bilgi Yayımları, 1999 [1952]), 77. Some provisional laws, including the new Law of Military Obligation of 1914, remained in effect for years without being approved by the parliament.

127 “Bu öyle bir kanundur ki, istilzam ettiği suistimalat sebebiyle bir dakika daha mevki-i tabikte bulundurulması gayri caizdir.” MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 2, 23 Kanunusani 1332 (5 February 1917), 111. For the discussion, see 111-12, 319-27, 392-96.

128 MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 2, 23 Kanunusani 1332 (5 February 1917), 322.


would now be entering the ranks of the Ottoman army. Perhaps nothing could better
express their grief than the following folk song\textsuperscript{131}:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hey onbeşi onbeşi</th>
<th>Oh, boys born in 1315 [1899],</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tokat yolları taşlı</td>
<td>The roads of Tokat are stony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onbeşliler gidiyor</td>
<td>The boys born in 1315 are leaving,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarımın gözü yaşlı</td>
<td>The eyes of my love are drowning in tears.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed above, the high number of casualties during the first two years of the
war and the ever more threatening advance of Russian and British forces compelled the
military and civilian authorities to expand the resources of conscription. Entangled in an
increasingly destructive war, the Ottoman High Command realized that the army was so
depleted that it could not bear the burden of exemptions any longer. As the new law of
conscription had already eliminated many exemptions, the only sizeable group of
individuals who still enjoyed the privilege of not being drafted was those who could pay
the exemption fee. Desperate in its search for new recruits, the government enacted a
provisional law in October 1916 and revoked the legislation that allowed for the purchase
of exemption from military service.

Enver Pasha first hinted at the possibility of drafting men who had paid the
exemption fee in his speech to the parliament on the general military situation.\textsuperscript{132}
Although he did not mention it explicitly, it was clearly understood that by enacting this
law, the government was attempting to fill the gap in the ranks, which had been depleted
due to the deployment of tens of thousands of soldiers in the European theaters of war in
an effort to support the empire’s allies. In its reasoning, the government openly stated that

\textsuperscript{131} Cahit Öztelli, \textit{Evlerinin Önü...: Bütün Halk Türküleri} (Istanbul: Hürriyet Yayınları, 1972), 130.

\textsuperscript{132} MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 1, 17 Teşrinisani 1332 (30 November 1916), 59.
the level of human resources necessary to sustain the strength and order of the imperial army had diminished, and that this situation required the exploitation of all available reserves.\textsuperscript{133}

The law annulled previous legislation on exemption fees and authorized the Minister of War to conscript those who had already bought exemption in accordance with these laws in case of urgent necessity (\textit{ihtiyac-i mübrem halinde}). The fees they had paid would be reimbursed.\textsuperscript{134} The law also empowered the Ministry of War to keep people employed in institutions of public utility, factories and the like (\textit{menaфи-i umumiyeye ait müessesat, fabrika ve sairede bulunanlar}), in their positions.\textsuperscript{135} The calls from deputies in the parliament and senate members to exempt teachers working in community and private schools, refugees, artisans and craftsmen, and, most importantly, farmers fell on deaf ears.\textsuperscript{136} The army representatives, however, assured the deputies that during the implementation of the law, the Ministry of War would take into consideration the specific needs of each region in regard to agriculture, industry, and the economy.\textsuperscript{137}

The government announced the law, which came to be known among the people as \textit{redd-i bedel} (literally, “rejection of the exemption fee”), and invited those who had


\textsuperscript{134} This, however, never happened according to contemporary observers. Joseph Pomiankowski, \textit{Der Zusammenbruch des Ottomanschen Reiches: Erinnerungen an die Türkei aus der Zeit des Weltkrieges} (Zurich: Amalthea-Verlag, 1928), 243.


\textsuperscript{136} For the discussions in the parliament, see \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 2, 19 Kanunusani 1332 (1 February 1917), 69-79, 163.

paid an exemption fee to enlistment offices. This announcement caused great concern and displeasure, especially in urban centers and among merchants and businesspeople. Worried about turmoil in the economic sphere, Enver Pasha had to publish a declaration in newspapers to reassure public opinion: “The government would never use this authority in a way that would instigate an economic crisis. It would provide sufficient time to those who would be called up to make the necessary business arrangements in order to avoid any harm being inflicted on themselves, their families, and the nation.”

By enacting this law, the state clearly violated the contract set forth by the previous laws on exemption fees. Subjects from all over the empire who had already paid the exemption tax wrote to the Ministry of Interior and the parliament to protest and ask for the maintenance of the existing system on the grounds that their presence on the home front was crucial. In their petitions, people underlined the importance of their activities to the well-being of the empire and sought to obtain exemption from service. The many attempts in this direction, however, proved fruitless and people began to contrive new ways of evading service. Since the bedel was no longer an option, people resorted to bribing conscription officials and physicians to obtain a draft deferment.

Despite all these strenuous measures, however, the Ottoman army continued to suffer from acute manpower shortages on all fronts. Mustafa Kemal Pasha, commander of the Seventh Army, for instance, bitterly complained about the weakness of his troops

138 MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 2, 10 Mart 1333 (10 March 1917), 182.
140 Jernazian, Judgment unto Truth, 99.
in a report dated September 1917: “The army is now much weaker when compared to its condition at the beginning of the war… The human resources of the empire are not sufficient to meet the deficiency [of the army]…. Half of the 59th Division, which was sent to me with thousand-men-strong regiments to perform the most difficult duties in the world, consists of invalids who do not even have the strength to stand up. After they are separated out, seventeen- to twenty-year-old underdeveloped boys and forty-five- to fifty-five-year-old useless men make up the remaining soldiers.”

In March 1917, Bronsart von Schellendorff, the chief of the Ottoman General Staff, was reporting to the German Army Headquarters that while Ottoman army headquarters had managed to replace losses among officers, it would no longer be possible to do so among the rank-and-file soldiers “despite the fact that the bolt is screwed as tight as possible in this country.”

How indelible a mark this left on the collective memory of the Ottoman people is summarized in a song heard by an officer on the streets of Birecik (Urfa):

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Binbaşı geliyor eli sopalı
Arkasına takmış körü, topalı
Halimiz çok yaman oldu
Seferberlik çıkaldi
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The major is coming, stick in hand
Behind him come the blind and the crippled.
We have been in such a disastrous state
Since the order of the mobilization.

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142 “Während wir also imstande waren, die Offizierverluste durch Neueinstellung auszugleichen, ist dies bei den Mannschaften nicht mehr möglich, trotzdem die Schraube so scharf angezogen wird, wie es in diesem Lande möglich ist.” Mühlmann, Das deutsch-türkische Waffenbündis, 184. For the process of recruitment of reserve officers, see Beşçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 186-92.

VI. Evading Service

The strength of the Ottoman army reached a peak of 800,000 combatants in November 1915. This number dropped sharply, to 400,000 in March 1917, and to 275,000 in January 1918. At the time of the armistice, there were fewer than 100,000 Ottoman combatants on the battlefields. The imperial army had lost a significant number of its forces to battlefield casualties and epidemic diseases, captivity, as well as to desertion. Tens of thousands of Ottoman soldiers deserted their ranks over the course of the war. By the end of 1917, Liman von Sanders estimated their numbers to be roughly 300,000. According to General Hans von Seeckt, von Schellendorff’s successor as the Chief of Staff of the Ottoman army, this number reached 450,000 by the end of the war.

Along with desertion, Ottoman soldiers resorted to several tactics to evade service in the army. Some inflicted wounds on their limbs, some went to their villages on temporary furloughs and did not return, some acted as if they had serious diseases, some committed minor crimes so as to be thrown in jail, and, finally, a small number of them took their own lives. Most of the time, evading military service was not simply an act of

144 Larcher, *La Guerre turque*, 601; Mühlmann, *Deutschland und die Türkei*, 81.
145 Yücel Yanıkdağ, “‘Ill-fated Sons of the ‘Nation’: Ottoman Prisoners of War in Russia and Egypt, 1914-1922” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2002), 1. Yanıkdağ estimates the total number of Ottoman prisoners of war as nearly 250,000.
146 Liman von Sanders, “Türk Ordusunun Bugünkü Durumu,” in Kurat, ed., *Birinci Dünya Savaşı Srasında*, 21. However, in a report to the German Army Headquarters written in March 1917, von Schellendorff estimated this number to be as high as 500,000. Mühlmann, *Das deutsch-türkische Waffenbündis*, 184.
treason, but a humane reaction to a number of problems that plagued the lives of soldiers on the fronts.\textsuperscript{148}

From the early days of mobilization, the troops lost a significant part of their manpower during the marches from their encampments to the front.\textsuperscript{149} An underdeveloped network of railroads, the poor condition of the overland routes, a woefully insufficient number of motorized vehicles, locomotives, and railway cars, and inadequate coal production made walking the only option for Ottoman soldiers to reach their destinations. Frequent, poorly planned, and sometimes completely unnecessary marches, which could amount to forty kilometers a day\textsuperscript{150} in horrible conditions, along with inadequate provisioning and accommodation en route, were bound to be detrimental to the strength of the military units. As discussed above, a considerable number of soldiers did not have proper clothing and footwear, which made the long walks unbearable. Soldiers were usually not given sufficient food to keep them alive in the extreme weather and road conditions. Once they reached a provisioning station (\textit{menzil noktası}), it was not uncommon for the commander of the station to refuse to provision the soldiers, instead sending them on to the next station.\textsuperscript{151} Consequently, soldiers who were not strong enough fell ill or died, and many of them opted to desert their columns in order to escape a similar fate.

\textsuperscript{148} In his detailed analysis of desertion during the war, Mehmet Beşikçi reaches a similar conclusion. Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 309-387, here especially 323-336.

\textsuperscript{149} Şerif Bey, \textit{Sarıkamış İhata Manevrasi}, 67, 80.

\textsuperscript{150} In order to accelerate the marches, army commanders occasionally removed stops that had normally been scheduled. Yarbay Selahattin, \textit{Kafkas Cephesi’nde 10 ncu Kolordunun}, 34.

\textsuperscript{151} Hans Guhr, \textit{Anadolu’dan Filistin’e}, 107. Hans Guhr served as a German division commander on the Caucasus front.
When caught, soldiers openly asserted that such woeful conditions played the pivotal role in their decisions to desert. The U.S. Consul in Baghdad reported in October 1914, for instance, that 1,600 men had returned to Baghdad from various stages on the march to Mosul. These men claimed that they were not deserters, but that they had received neither food nor proper treatment. According to the consul, they were “quite willing to continue their military service, but could not survive under the conditions they were forced to endure recently.”\(^{152}\) As in many other regions, the initial enthusiasm of these soldiers quickly disappeared under difficult circumstances. A similar statement was made by a soldier before he was taken to the gallows in Urfa: “I entered the service and served my sultan faithfully. I was hungry and naked in the army, and my family at home was destitute. Who could stand this? Let me tell you, if I could rise from the dead, if you were to treat me again the same way as a soldier, and if I knew that I’d be hanged, I’d still desert.”\(^{153}\) Apparently, this soldier was speaking for many others.

Soldiers were also deeply affected by the scenes they witnessed en route. Arguably, the most touching of these scenes that affected their morale were those of refugees and wounded veterans. On their way to the fronts, soldiers came into contact with hundreds of these veterans who had not received any assistance from the army. Moreover, many of them were attacked and robbed by brigands.\(^{154}\) The heart-rending

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\(^{152}\) National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/719 (17 October 1914).

\(^{153}\) Jernazian, *Judgment unto Truth*, 44.

sight of these wounded soldiers, who were sent rearward, sapped the motivation and
discipline of soldiers marching forward to an uncertain fate.

Even in the early days of the mobilization, while the troops were being ordered to
their bases or to the front, rates of desertion reached worrying levels for military
authorities, and as the war dragged on, the problem became increasingly acute. Rev.
Henry Riggs, for instance, recollects his conversation with a young lieutenant who,
starting out from the training camp in Malatya with two hundred fresh troops, despite his
best efforts, could only deliver sixty men to the front, all others having deserted on the
way: “He did not seem to think that this was an unusually high proportion.”\(^{155}\) Statements
of high-ranking commanders of the Ottoman army seemed to confirm this young
lieutenant’s experience. Mustafa Kemal Pasha, for instance, complained in 1917 that, of
troop units departing Istanbul with a thousand men, even the most powerful of them
reached Aleppo with only five hundred soldiers.\(^{156}\) Of the divisions sent to the Caucasus
front and south of the Taurus Mountains, according to Liman von Sanders, there was
none that had not lost thousands of soldiers.\(^{157}\) This high rate of desertion en route
probably explains why Bronsart von Schellendorff, the chief of the Ottoman General
Staff, equaled deploying a division to a frontier zone to a lost pitched battle (\textit{kaybolmuş
meydan muharebesi}).\(^{158}\)

On the marches, soldiers often sneaked off to their villages to visit their families,
get some pocket money, help out with the farm work, or, in some cases, furnish

\(^{155}\) Riggs, \textit{Days of Tragedy in Armenia}, 44.

\(^{156}\) Cebesoy, \textit{Büyük Harpte Osmanlı İmparatorluğu


protection against assailants. While some of these soldiers eventually returned to their units, many of them did not. The army attempted to address this problem by assigning more responsibility to unit leaders and threatening to court-martial them if they lost more than a certain percentage of their men on the way.159 The most commonly tried solution to forestall desertion was the formation of cordons of armed guards around troops on the march and at stopovers.160 Occasionally, soldiers were even tied together by their superiors. A British POW witnessed the departure of a group of Arab soldiers in such a deplorable condition: “Their right hands were lashed to a wooden yoke while their left carried a rifle.”161 Another sergeant observed that Kurdish soldiers who were recruited to fill the ranks of the Second Ottoman Army were shackled to one another before being sent to their regiments.162 Despite these measures, however, soldiers continued to find ways to circumvent them and desert their marching columns.

Although the trying circumstances still stood out among the factors that motivated desertion on the front, other dynamics were also at play. At the front, desertion was commonly observed among troops who had lost their confidence in their commanders and their faith in military success. When they realized the superiority of the enemy and abandoned hope of defeating it, soldiers became occupied with the idea of saving their own lives and the lives of their families from the approaching disaster. Especially if they

160 Süleyman Nuri, Çanakkale Siperlerinden TKP Yönetimine: Uyanan Esirler (İstanbul: TÜSTAV Yayınları, 2002), 80; Çanlı, ed., Çanakkale’den Doğu Cephesine, 72; Apak, Yetmişlik Bir Subayın Hatıraları, 129.
161 Francis Yeats-Brown, Golden Horn (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1932), 120.
162 Erginsoy, ed., Dedem Hüseyin Atıf Beşe, 213.
were from nearby towns and villages, it proved difficult to keep soldiers in their ranks at these moments of defeat. Even if their hometowns were hundreds of miles away from the front, soldiers slipped away from their units to seek food and shelter in nearby villages. Troops often responded to these kinds of desertions by deploying a column to the rear for the purpose of catching and shooting deserters in order to reinstate discipline.

As the war dragged on and military units lost significant portions of their initial personnel, the weakening of the bonds of solidarity and companionship also became an important factor leading to soldiers’ desertion. In the face of enormously high losses, army headquarters was compelled to merge disparate units below strength and fill the depleted ranks with soldiers who had received very little or no military training at all. In these replenished and reconstituted units, soldiers usually did not know one another or their commanders, a situation that generated a sense of alienation and loneliness. Soldiers who felt this way usually deserted at the first opportunity.

In order to prevent desertion, the army high command ordered adherence to the provisions appended to the Military Penal Law in the early days of mobilization and the

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163 For examples, see Önal, ed., Tuğgeneral Ziya Yergök’ün Anıları, 84; Eti, Bir Onbaşının Doğu Cephesi Günlüğü, 64-66, 109.


165 See, for example, Çakır, Elli Yıllık Önce Şark Cephesi, 68; İstekli, ed., Bir Teğmenin Doğu Cephesi Günlüğü, 138-39; Eti, Bir Onbaşının Doğu Cephesi Günlüğü, 64-66; Baytuğ, İlk Dünya Harbi’nde Kafkas Cephesi, 46; Şerif Bey, Sariçağı İhata Manevrasi, 105. This type of desertion was so widespread that the governement had to enact a draconian provisional law which authorized the superiors to use weapons to instill obedience in their subordinates in these cases. “Askeri Ceza Kanununa Müzeyyel Kanun-ı Muvakkat,” Düstur, İkinci Tertip, vol. 6, 23 Zilhicce 1333 (12 November 1914): 1390.

implementation of harsh and effective measures to capture deserters. Among other methods of punishment, commanders adopted executions by shooting or hanging as useful methods to prevent desertion. Military units at the battlefronts as well as on the home front mostly employed execution as an exemplary punishment to discourage and deter desertion. In towns and cities, executions were usually carried out in public squares, whereas at the fronts deserters were executed ceremonially before their regiments or divisions. An eyewitness to the brutality of the general conscription process in the Arab provinces of the empire wrote, “The authority Jamal Pasha gave to his gendarmes was so excessive that they publicly executed all those accused of desertion in Tyre, Nabatieh, and Bint Jbail. They also killed those unfortunates who had no ransom money to pay, so that every gendarme became another Jamal Pasha in the village.”

The dramatic increases in the number of deserters during the third and fourth years of the war, however, rendered the execution policy impractical. In most cases, deserters were put back into the ranks again after a few days of imprisonment or beating if they were ever caught. This was quite a dilemma for the army high command. On the

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one hand, it became practically impossible to execute or severely punish every single deserter due to the desperate need of the army for able-bodied men. On the other, however, soldiers who heard that deserters had not been punished would be more likely to make their own attempts at desertion. Due to the extraordinarily high number of deserters, capital punishment was reserved for those who had deserted multiple times. In Kayseri, for instance, Vehip Pasha, then commander of the Third Army, first ordered the stamping of the right hands of the deserters with an “F” (firari) mark. If a soldier with a marked hand was caught deserting again, he would be summarily executed. As even this method became ineffective due to the enormous number of repeat offenders, he issued a new order to prepare lists of them and execute every tenth one.\textsuperscript{171}

As discussed above, the absorption of the local gendarmerie forces by the ongoing conflicts on several fronts left the Ottoman state crippled in its struggle against desertion and deserters. In most army regions, the local authorities attempted to fill this gap by soliciting the home front population’s help and by encouraging them to cooperate with state officials. A circular sent by the Ministry of War to armies and army corps, dated April 1915, clearly indicated this intention: “… It is deemed suitable that local administrations announce that whoever from the local population would capture a [deserted] Muslim or non-Muslim soldier and return him to the local administration or the military authority would be rewarded with a cash prize of no less than one lira.”\textsuperscript{172}


Similarly, in Syria and Palestine, according to British intelligence reports, the Ottoman army offered five pounds to Bedouins for every deserter they captured and returned.\(^{173}\)

To curb desertion, army corps also adopted several other “innovative” methods, which had drastic consequences for people on the home front. Realizing that neither corporal punishment nor the threat of execution prevented widespread desertion from the ranks, army commanders employed punitive measures that directly affected soldiers’ families. Fahrettin Pasha, commander of the Twelfth Army Corps in Iraq, for instance, ordered the revocation of deserters’ civil rights, confiscation of their property, and, finally, conscription of their male family members.\(^{174}\) Similarly, divisions and regiments published daily circulars and asked unit leaders to announce the measures the state had taken against deserters’ families. In one of these circulars, a division commander informed his subordinates that the families of two deserters were deported to Yemen, their houses were burned down, and their property was confiscated.\(^{175}\) Although these tough sanctions on deserters’ families thwarted desertion to some extent, there were still hundreds of soldiers who did not return to their units.

Although desertion was a very common method of evading service in the Ottoman army during World War I, it was not the only one. During the war, thousands of soldiers intentionally inflicted wounds on their own bodies. In the early months, even before the Ottomans entered the war, the number of soldiers who mutilated themselves in


\(^{175}\) Bahtiyar İstekli, ed., \textit{Bir Teşvemin Doğu Cephesi Günlüğü} (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2009), 139. For similar measures, see also Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 361-62.
order to avoid combat had reached alarming numbers. A medical sergeant on the
Caucasus front noted in his diary that every day, eight to ten soldiers shot themselves just
in his own division.\textsuperscript{176} Although the army had severely increased the penalties for
perpetrators, making them exceptionally harsh for such acts committed during time of
mobilization,\textsuperscript{177} these strenuous measures proved insufficient to prevent soldiers from
engaging in self-mutilation. As a result, the state imposed capital punishment on the
perpetrators of these acts if the crime was committed facing the enemy (\textit{cürüm dışman
karşısında ika edildiği surette}).\textsuperscript{178} In a daily order to regiments dated May 1915, a
division commander on the Caucasus front described the increasing number of self-
mutilation cases and stated that the latest two cases would be court-martialed and
executed immediately. The commander of this division, however, must have realized that
even the threat of execution would not deter soldiers from maiming themselves. He urged
officers to offer religious services for at least an hour a day to temper the negative
atmosphere and increase soldiers’ morale.\textsuperscript{179}

\textit{Tebdil-i hava}, or change of environment for medical reasons, constituted another
major phenomenon that weakened the Ottoman army. Despite the army headquarters’
stiff opposition, doctors prescribed a significant number of soldiers a change of

\textsuperscript{176} Eti, \textit{Bir Önbaşının Doğu Cephesi Günlüğü}, 47, 57. See also, Faik Tonguç, \textit{Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Bir Yedek Subayın Anıları}, ed. Mürşit Balabanlılar (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1999), 52; Ahmet Diriker, ed., \textit{Cephelerde Bir Ömür: Ahmet Nuri Diriker Paşa’nın Hayatı} (İstanbul: Scala Yayıncılık, 2009), 57.


\textsuperscript{179} İstekli, ed., \textit{Bir Teğmenin Doğu Cephesi Günlüğü}, 153-54.
environment and sent them home on leave. Army doctors resorted to this option as a response to the increasingly deteriorating health conditions of the recruits, owing to unhygienic living conditions, extreme weather, and, finally, poor and unchanging rations, which led to soldiers’ undernourishment. The following numbers from just one front indicate the enormity of the problem. On the Gallipoli front, between the months of October and December, 1915, the losses of the Sixteenth Army Corps were 509 killed, 2,158 wounded, 3,386 sick, and 2,159 prescribed a change of environment, culminating in a total loss of 8,212 men from a military unit of approximately 12,000.180

The large number of soldiers for whom a change of environment was ordered was only part of the problem. According to a German officer who bitterly complained about this practice, once their furloughs expired, many soldiers attempted to obtain extensions by lawful and unlawful means: “They never returned at the right time, and often not at all, to their regiments. So, the ‘teptil hawa’ slid unnoticed into the class of deserters.”181

As one might expect, for many doctors and other health personnel tebdil-i hava and other forms of granting leaves and exemption became a lucrative endeavor. Soldiers themselves or their relatives regularly bribed those who held the authority to grant or extend their leaves of absence.182

182 See, for example, the diary notes of a medical sergeant who himself accepted a bribe to grant a change of environment. Eti, Bir Onbaşıın Doğu Cephesi Günügü, 131, 139. See also the last words of a soldier who was about to be executed for being a deserter and told the crowd that he first paid a bribe to extend his tebdil-i hava, but then could not find sufficient money to continue this. Çalık, ed., Kurtuluş Savaşında Adalet Bakani, 21; Riggs, Days of Tragedy in Armenia, 5; Aaronsohn, With the Turks in Palestine, 27.
In order to curb the evasion through environment change for medical reasons, the government revised the law of military obligation and reduced the time spent on medical furlough that would be counted towards military service. While, in the previous version, this time was a year, the government set a new upper limit of three months and stated that the state aid given to these soldiers’ families would be cut off after six months.\textsuperscript{183}

In a similar vein, the government also took stern measures against soldiers who were granted temporary leaves of absence but returned late to their units or did not return at all. If such a soldier did not present a valid excuse within seven days of his designated date of return, he would be regarded as a “deserter” and would be sentenced to capital punishment or forced labor (\textit{hidemat-ı şakka}).\textsuperscript{184}

While putting limits on temporary furloughs, the army also tried to combat another source of evasion within its ranks. The army high command increasingly came to realize that soldiers were intentionally committing crimes to receive prison sentences with the sole purpose of staying away from the war zones. This, according to military authorities, inevitably brought about the diminution of the strength of the army.\textsuperscript{185} In May 1916, a provisional law replaced the prison sentence, hard labor (\textit{prangabendlik}), and enchainment (\textit{demirbendlik}) for petty crimes committed by rank and file soldiers, corporals, and low-ranking officers with beatings with a stick. For every day of hard


labor, and for every two days of imprisonment and enchainment to which they were sentenced, culprits would be hit once with a stick.\textsuperscript{186}

The lack of reliable statistics makes it difficult to reach definitive conclusions about the overall impact of these punishments. It would be safe to assume, however, that despite the numerous measures taken by the government and army high command as well as by army commanders on the ground, desertion and evasion of military service by other means continued to grow dramatically in the second half of the war. Together with battlefield casualties, epidemic diseases, and captivity, evasion of service played a significant role in the disappearance of the Ottoman army as a formidable fighting force.

VII. Conclusion

In his letter to an Austrian colleague dated March 1914, German General von Moltke wrote about his observations of the Ottoman army:\textsuperscript{187}

\begin{quote}
Turkey militarily is of no value. The reports from our military mission are frankly hopeless. The army is in a state that defies every description. When one used to speak of Turkey as the 'sick man,' now one has to speak of him as the dead [one]. She does not have power to live anymore and is irretrievably in a state of agony. Our military mission resembles a group of doctors who stand at the deathbed of a terminally ill patient.
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}

\end{flushright}
Disproving von Moltke’s opinion, the Ottoman army performed remarkably well in World War I. Despite the serious problems discussed in this chapter, the Ottoman Empire succeeded in rejuvenating its devastated army in the Balkan Wars and bringing hundreds of thousands of civilians under arms on short notice. Against considerable odds, the army fought successful battles on several fronts, surprising both its enemies as well as its allies.

Yet World War I took a heavy toll on the Ottomans in terms of the human costs that were endured. At the beginning of the Great War, the population of the Ottoman Empire was estimated to be around twenty-three million. Over the course of the war, the Ottoman army conscripted a total of 2.85 million men. By the war’s end, the empire had suffered some 750,000 fatalities from combat and disease. Additionally, there were approximately 500,000 deserters roaming the Ottoman countryside.¹⁸⁸ Proportionally, the Ottoman Empire endured the second greatest number of casualties among all of the World War I belligerents, exceeded only by Serbia.¹⁸⁹ This gigantic loss of human capital had enormous social, economic, and demographic consequences for the home front population as well as for the states established in the region following the demise of the empire.

Conscription proved to be a major component of the wartime experience for the Ottoman home front population. Mobilization on such a scale was disruptive for society and disastrous for the economy. The exigencies of the war compelled the state to find ever-new ways to extract men in order to fill the depleted ranks of the army. To this end,

¹⁸⁸ Erickson, Ordered to Die, 207-211; Hikmet Özdemir, The Ottoman Army: Disease and Death on the Battlefield (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 52, 121, 124; Larcher, La Guerre turque, 86-87.

the government and the army high command changed the age limits for conscription, abolished many of the existing exemptions, resorted to recruiting volunteers, and fought, albeit ineffectively, against the evasion of military service. In the meantime, hundreds of thousands of Ottoman soldiers evaded service or deserted their ranks. Comparable numbers also ended up in foreign captivity. Unlike the European belligerents of the war, they managed to do so due to the lack of a sufficient number of security personnel behind the lines. While the state continuously tried to improve its extractive capacity by adopting new measures, the war absorbed its personnel on the home front who were charged with enforcing these measures on the ground. As a result, conscription became a contested field of interaction between the state and its subjects, a field which played a significant role in determining the disastrous outcome of the war for the Ottomans.

\[190\text{ Mehmet Beşikçiler discusses the role played by the volunteers during the war and the Ottoman state’s policies towards them in significant detail. Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 195-252.}\]
CHAPTER 2

“THE INSATIABLE GIANT:”
STATE, PEOPLE, and the PROVISIONING of the OTTOMAN ARMY

I. Introduction

The First World War was a truly novel experience for the Ottomans in the sense that the war-making of soldiers and the everyday activities of ordinary people became inextricably linked to a degree not seen in earlier conflicts. The exigencies of the war required the allocation of vast human and material resources for military purposes. The effective extraction of these resources from society and their delivery to combat zones came to greatly affect the course of the war, a process which essentially obliterated the boundaries between two distinct realms, the “military” and the “civilian.” For the Ottomans, nowhere was this intertwining more evident than in the tremendous task of provisioning the hundreds of thousands of men-at-arms.

In the absence of external supply sources, due to the Entente blockade and the still undeveloped and inefficient transportation network, the Ottoman state officials wrestled with enormous difficulties in feeding, clothing, and equipping the army while preventing the civilian population from succumbing to starvation. In order to address the problem of provisioning, the civilian and military authorities experimented with several provisioning systems and devised a number of policies. These policies dramatically increased the presence of the state in Ottoman people’s everyday lives, thereby imposing new burdens
upon Ottoman citizens. By focusing on the state’s provisioning policies during the war, this chapter aims to analyze these policies’ impact on the home-front population as well as people’s reactions to them.

II. The Policy of War Taxes (*Tekalif-i Harbiye*)

During the First World War, Ottoman military and civilian authorities utilized two main legal instruments to meet the material needs of the army required by the massive war effort: the Law on the Method of the Imposition of War Taxes (*Tekalif-i Harbiye’nin Suret-i Tarhı Hakkında Kanun*) and the Law on the Acquisition of Military Transport Vehicles (*Tedarik-i Vesait-i Nakliye-i Askeriye Kanunnamesi*). These laws remained in effect throughout the war but were also supplemented by others, especially during the latter half of the conflict, as they proved inadequate to meet the broader objectives of the state.

The first of these laws, the Law on War Taxes, was a slightly modified version of a provisional law on war taxes implemented during the Balkan Wars.\(^1\) It authorized the military to determine the regions of the empire in which war taxes could be imposed. It charged the war taxes commissions (*tekalif-i harbiye komisyonları*), composed of the highest-ranking civilian and financial officials of the locality, a military representative, a member of the local administrative council and a representative from the municipality, with commandeering all kinds of goods and supplies required by the army. The commission would leave an amount sufficient to meet the needs of the people and

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confiscate the rest (*ahalinin ihtiyacına kافي miktarın terkiyle üst tarafına vaz’ı yed edecek*), issuing official receipts to the owners of these confiscated goods and supplies. Another commission, composed of members of the local administrative council, municipality, and local chamber of commerce, would prepare a comprehensive list that would include local prices for all sorts of confiscated goods. These lists would be used in calculating the total value of impressed goods and supplies. The receipts distributed to people would bear this amount, which would be reimbursed from the annual budget of the year following the end of the mobilization.

In order to supplement the Law on War Taxes and to meet the needs of the army for draft animals and vehicles, the state resorted to a second legal instrument, the Law on Transport Vehicles.\(^2\) This law required the delivery of privately owned animals and vehicles to the army during the mobilization period. It authorized the army general staff to determine the type and quantity of these vehicles and the breeds of the animals as well as the regions from which they would be collected. The law also exempted two broad categories of animals and vehicles from the obligation: animals and vehicles that were required by civilian and military officials to execute their duties and animals that were either pregnant or used for breeding. Commissions established specifically for this purpose in town and city centers would conduct the collection of animals and vehicles upon the declaration of the mobilization. The law also imposed penalties for non-compliance. As the law anticipated open or disguised resistance to its implementation and

to the officials who would attempt to commandeer people’s animals and vehicles, it
prescribed the use of force when necessary to reach its goals.3

The Ottoman state had resorted to both laws throughout the course of previous
conflicts. The Law on Transport Vehicles, enacted in 1889, had been enforced during
both the Greek-Ottoman War of 1897 and the Balkan Wars of 1912-13; the Law on War
Taxes had been implemented during the Balkan Wars. Their implementation in previous
conflicts, however, had remained limited and confined to certain regions of the empire.
During the First World War, however, the Ottoman state put these laws into practice on
an empire-wide scale. Although these laws were two separate legal instruments, both the
officials who employed them and citizens who were subjected to their provisions
perceived them as two means to the same end, namely, the appropriation of civilian
property for military purposes.

When first put in practice, these laws attracted fierce criticism due mainly to the
enormous burden they imposed upon society. During discussions in the parliament, for
instance, the Law on War Taxes met with strong opposition from deputies, especially
from those who had witnessed the abuses committed by local war taxes commissions
during the Balkan Wars. Matyos Nalbandyan Efendi, the representative of Kozan, Kazım
Bey of Biga, and Fazıl Berki Bey of Kengırı all pointed to the fact that while the
commissions had not hesitated to commandeer the only means of subsistence of the poor,
the wealthy had managed to get around the impressments and protect their goods from
confiscation. “We should not forget that these [poor] people fight against the enemy on

3 “Bununla beraber cem-i vesait-i nakliye için icab-ı hal ve maksada muvafik olmak üzere tedabir-i cebriye
the borders,” claimed Matyos Nalbandyan Efendi. “They go to the war and leave their animals as a means of subsistence for their families. Then, we proceed to commandeer these animals on which these families are dependent.”

Deputies rightfully drew attention to the law’s vague language, as well as the extraordinary authority the law allowed the commissions, which could (and did) lead to the arbitrary implementation of the policy by military officials, as had happened during the Balkan Wars. In order to avoid these problems in the future, Faris al-Khuri Efendi, the deputy of Damascus and the future prime minister of Syria, proposed increasing the number of civilians (*ahali ciheti*) in the commissions by adding one more representative each from the municipality and the local administrative council.

Among the issues raised by the deputies was reimbursement for the value of confiscated goods and supplies. After the Balkan Wars ended, owners had waited for the state to make good on its promise to compensate them for their losses. During the discussions of the annual budget of 1330 (1914/15), however, Cavid Bey, the Minister of Finance, confessed that the government did not have any data on the state’s debts to the people resulting from the impressment policies during the Balkan Wars. The minister’s confession clearly suggests a lack of organization and miscommunication among different organs of the Ottoman state. The government decided to postpone these debts

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4 *Meclis-i Mebusan Zabît Ceridesi* (hereafter *MMZC*), Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol. 1 (*İçtima-ı Fevkalade*), 2 Haziran 1330 (15 June 1914), 311. See also *MMZC*, Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol. 2 (*İçtima-ı Fevkalade*), 24 Haziran 1330 (7 July 1914), 17, 546.

5 *MMZC*, Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol. 2 (*İçtima-ı Fevkalade*), 24 Haziran 1330 (7 July 1914), 13.
until the special commission (Tetkik-i Vesaiik Komisyonu) founded by the Ministry of Finance finalized its investigation and a new foreign loan was secured.6

Despite all the complaints and concerns about the law and the obvious flaws in its implementation, the Ottoman state did not hesitate to impose war taxes to meet the immediate needs of the army mobilized in August 1914. Actually, the Ottoman field service regulations, translated from the German Felddienst Ordnung of 1908, clearly state that requisitioning through war taxes in “our own country” (kendi memleketimiz dahilinde) was allowable only when supplies could not be obtained by other means. When it was applied, it should be subject to the provisions of specific regulations (nizamname-i mahsus). On the other hand, according to the regulations, requisitioning was the most effective method of exploiting the resources available in the theater of war. Even in those cases, however, strict discipline had to be maintained, and plundering and similar excesses (yağmagirlik ve sair tecavüzat) were to be prevented.7

Although the field service regulations explicitly cautioned against unrestrained requisitioning even in the land of the enemy, the boundary between requisitioning and looting became increasingly blurry during the implementation of war taxes in the Ottoman Empire, especially in the first days of the mobilization. Widespread corruption and the abuse of power on the part of civilian and military authorities, as well as the lack

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6 A group of deputies proposed the postponement of the disbursement of the unpaid portion of state officials’ salaries and the immediate reimbursement of the value of confiscated goods as “these goods had been confiscated from the weakest and the most helpless section of the society.” MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol.2, 24 Haziran 1330 (7 July 1914), 17-18.

7 Hidemat-i Seferiye Kanunnamesi: Müşvedde Halinde (İstanbul: Matbaa-ı Askeriye, 1329 [1913]), 266-67. During the war, a new edition of the field service regulations was published, but the clauses on requisitioning through war taxes remained unchanged. Hidemat-i Seferiye Kanunnamesi (İstanbul: Matbaa-ı Askeriye, 1332 [1916]).
of necessary preparations and the disorderly manner in which requisitioning was
conducted, played crucial roles in what amounted to plunder in the eyes of citizens and
even some officials.

Disorder and chaos in the implementation of war taxes arose partly from the
dramatic transformation of the Ottoman military in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars. In
the face of the humiliating defeat in the First Balkan War, the Ottoman government had
undertaken an ambitious program to strengthen the army and increase its efficiency in
war.\(^8\) As discussed in the previous chapter, along with other radical changes, such as the
enactment of a new provisional law of conscription, the introduction of a new
mobilization plan was an important part of this process. In August 1914, the Ottoman
army was mobilized according to this new plan, which had been inspired by the German
scheme of mobilization and required an extensive period for preparation. According to
the new mobilization regulations, the various army corps (kolordu) were required to meet
their wartime needs for people, animals, vehicles, goods, and supplies in their own
regions of conscription (ahz-i asker dairesi).\(^9\)

Although the army headquarters had sent the instructions on future mobilizations
according to this scheme in May 1914,\(^10\) the mobilization in August did not leave

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sufficient time for the collection of necessary data on the male population eligible for military service or on available equipment, storehouses, vehicles, animals, and other goods. By the time of the declaration of mobilization, the majority of the army corps had not finished their peacetime preparations for such a comprehensive reorganization.11

Similar to the military officers, civilian officials, who were charged with taking necessary steps to facilitate the mobilization effort, had not prepared the necessary lists of animals and vehicles.12 Some officers even recounted that the civilian authorities remained mostly uninterested in mobilization and did not facilitate the preparation of the army at all, a problem which led to the prevalence of general disorder in the first months of the mobilization.13 This confusion and the lack of preparedness for such a massive mobilization increased the burden of war taxes and severely aggravated civilians’ misery. Even in the official history of the war, it was clearly acknowledged that the impressments in the first days of the mobilization had a “frightening impact” on the civilian population.14

14 *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi, Osmanlı Devri, Birinci Dünya Harbi*, 110. See also Sabis, *Harp Hatıralarım*, 111-12.
Local authorities began to add almost everything that might conceivably be needed for military purposes to the list of items to be confiscated upon the declaration of mobilization; the lists thus came to include everything from dried vegetables to coal, from kerosene to all kind of cereals. War taxes commissions seized twenty-five percent of all livestock and foodstuffs in the hands of merchants, including items such as potatoes, beans, chickpeas, onions, and butter. The impressments were not, however, limited to comestibles. In Beirut, for instance, the governor, who himself supervised the impressment process, ordered the tailors of the town to deliver a large quantity of clothing and underclothing for conscripts; as a result, many of the tailors closed their shops and fled the town.

With the strong motivation to meet the needs of an ever-growing army, the war taxes commissions laid their hands on as many sorts and quantities of goods and supplies as they could. In the words of the U.S. vice consul in Izmir, the process of requisitioning turned into “official brigandage.” These swift and harsh impressments on an unprecedented scale clearly reflected the Ottoman government’s expectation of a short war and a speedy victory. With the anticipation of territorial and material gains as a result


16 National Archives, Record Group 59 (hereafter RG), Records of the Department of State, 867.00/649; National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/659. Khalil Totah also remembers the seizure of clothing in stores with the purpose of using it for uniforms. Thomas M. Ricks, Turbulent Times in Palestine: The Diaries of Khalil Totah, 1886-1953 (Jerusalem and Ramallah: The Institute of Palestine Studies & Passia, 2009), 152. In another case, before the Ottoman campaign to the Suez Canal, the army commandeered all the large cloth bags in Beirut to use them as sandbags. The military authorities also assessed every household a quota for extra bags. In order to meet this quota, people turned to household items such as “window curtains, couch covers and even their extra clothing.” Margaret McGilvary, The Dawn of a New Era in Syria (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2001 [1920]), 172; Bayard Dodge, The American University of Beirut: A Brief History of the University and the Lands Which It Serves (Beirut: Khayats, 1958), 39.

17 National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/651.

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of a couple of months of fighting, the military and civilian authorities focused on meeting the needs of the army in the shortest possible time frame, disregarding the needs of the civilian population as well as the soundness and stability of the imperial economy. Enver Pasha, Minister of War and commander-in-chief of the Ottoman army, allegedly replied to those who suggested he be more attentive to the economy that he was fighting for the very existence of the empire and that at such a critical moment of history there was no need to consider agriculture and trade.\textsuperscript{18}

The comprehensiveness and vagueness of the law on war taxes, in addition to the belief, at least in official circles, in the priority of the army’s requirements and the sense strengthened by official propaganda that the empire was fighting for its very existence, vested the war taxes commissions and the requisitioning officers with extraordinary authority. In many cases, they did not hesitate to use this power in excess of legal limits to enrich themselves. In his novel \textit{Hakka Sığındık} (We Trusted in God), which was published right after the war, Hüseyin Rahmi compared the requisitioning officers to magicians:

… [W]hen he [the requisitioning officer] enters a place of business or a warehouse with the whip of war taxes in his hand, as if it were the magic wand of a magician, hundreds of barrels of olive oil, canisters of gas, sacks of sugar, baskets of rice, bales of wool, cotton, cloth vanish in the direction he pointed…. This officer had the power to confiscate all of the goods in the market just by scrawling a couple of numbers on a piece of paper. How did Istanbul, with all its movable and immovable properties, not pass into their own possession? And how did not we, all the inhabitants of the city, end up as their chained slaves? Quite a surprise!\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} André Mandelstam, \textit{Le Sort de l’Empire ottoman} (Lausanne and Paris: Librairie Payot et Cie, 1917), 144.

\textsuperscript{19} \ldots [E]linde tekalif-i harbiye kamçısıyla bir ticaret evinden, bir depodan içeri girdi mi hokkabazların tlsımli değneklere gibi, bunun ucunu nereye uzatsa önüne yüzlerle fiş fiş yağlar, teneke teneke gazlar, çuval çuval şekerler, gazevilerle pırcıçler, balya balya yükler, pamuklar, kumaşlar işaret ettiği tarafta akip
Especially in urban centers, the activities of the war taxes commissions were also associated with complaints that the military authorities brutally used the law to confiscate not only items that were required by the war effort but also luxury consumer goods. Silk women’s garments, silk stockings and petticoats, corsets, children’s shoes and clothes, caviar, champagne, tableware, babies’ slippers, and face powder were among the goods that were impressed by military authorities.\(^\text{20}\)

This sort of excessive requisitioning, however, was not a phenomenon limited to urban centers. In the countryside, too, military authorities resorted to the Law on War Taxes and the Law on the Acquisition of Military Transport Vehicles to meet the needs of their troops while appropriating “everything that was pleasing and had value.” Jakob Künzler, a Swiss missionary in Urfa, described the requisitioning in the first days of the mobilization as “unbelievable”: “There was nothing in storage that was not vital for the war and, which therefore, could not be requisitioned by the officers…. Most of the requisitioned goods ended up in the private homes of the officers.”\(^\text{21}\)


\(^{21}\)Jakob Künzler, *In the Land of Blood and Tears: Experiences in Mesopotamia during the World War (1914-1918)*, ed. Ara Ghazarians (Arlington: Armenian Cultural Foundation, 2007 [1921]), 9. For similar observations, see Ephraim K. Jernazian, *Judgment unto Truth: Witnessing the Armenian Genocide*, trans. Alice Haig (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 46-47. Jernazian observed the unequal implementation of war taxes between the Armenian and Turkish merchants: “Armenian shopkeepers were almost stripped in the process, whereas Turkish shopkeepers were required to give very little.” According
Riggs, an American missionary in Harput, for instance, writes in his memoirs that he saw soldiers making off with loads of easy chairs, “almost the entire stock in trade of a struggling young cabinetmaker.” The officers responsible for requisitioning justified their acts by stating that the sale of these items would generate income for the army to purchase necessary provisions.

Officials occasionally commandeered more goods, animals, vehicles, and dwellings than required by the local army troops and took money from the owners who wanted exemption from this obligation. Ephraim Jernazian, an Armenian Protestant pastor in Urfa, recounts, for example, the appropriation of private homes for the housing of officers stationed in the city. While ten to twelve houses were needed, officials selected about one hundred homes and exempted the owners from submission in exchange for ten to fifteen lira apiece. It was also alleged that military authorities made considerable profits by speculating on the goods they had requisitioned. Ali Haydar Bey, deputy of Konya, for instance, openly asserted that the military sequestered wool from

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24 Jernazian, Judgment unto Truth, 47.
merchants at an assigned price of nine piasters and sold it in the market for twenty-five piasters.  

The military authorities implemented the impressment policy so harshly that it received severe criticism even from some members of the government. Cavid Bey, a leading Unionist and the Minister of Finance, for instance, mentioned the complaints that reached him in the first days of mobilization. He pointed out the army’s confiscation of completely unnecessary luxury goods, the military authorities’ indifference to civilians’ needs, and their ignorance of the danger of starvation among the urban population: “What has been done has reached the point of banditry.”

In order to prevent this kind of abuse, the government amended the Military Penal Law in September 1914 and made such illegal activity a felony with the purpose of subjecting the perpetrators to harsh punishments. According to this new amendment, members of the transport and war taxes commissions who abused their authority would be subject to capital punishment or a minimum of fifteen years of hard labor. Even this severe threat of punishment, however, proved to be inadequate to forestall the abuse of power vested in the war taxes commissions by military and civilian authorities.

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25 Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol.3, 20 Mart 1333 (20 March 1917), 274. See also André Mandelstam, Le Sort de l’Empire ottoman (Lausanne and Paris: Librairie Payot et Cie, 1917), 143-144. Some local administrators also used material confiscated through war taxes to undertake new construction activities. Hasan Bey Bazri al-Ghabi, the unpopular governor of Jaffa during the war, for example, erected a new mosque that bore his name with such materials. Ruth Kark, Jaffa: A City in Evolution, 1799-1917 (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Press, 1990), 49.

26 “Maliye Nazırı Cavid Bey’in Notları, Türkiye’nin I. Dünya Savaşına Girmesi,” Tanin 19 Birinciçeşrin (October) 1944. The increasingly harsh policy of confiscation was also among the reasons behind Cemil [Topuzlu] Pasha’s resignation from the mayorship of the capital city. Mustafa Ragib Esati, İtihat ve Terakki’nin Son Günleri: Suikastlar ve Entrikalar, ed. İsmail Dervişoğlu (İstanbul: Bengi Yayınları, 2007), 110.

Apart from the widespread corruption, the regular implementation of the law on the ground was immensely flawed. In many cases, the official receipts, which should have been issued in exchange for delivered goods, were not issued.\footnote{See the observations of the American vice consul-general in Izmir, National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/643; and the American consular agent in Haifa, National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/653 and RG 59, 867.00/657; Margaret McGilvary, \textit{The Dawn of a New Era in Syria}, 59.} Even when they were, the official record did not mean much, for the recipients knew that their chance of reimbursement was extremely low.\footnote{Jakob Künzler, who witnessed the requisitioning process on his way to Baghdad, wrote that “every salesman knew that the slip of paper left behind as a receipt could be torn up because the goods would never be paid for.” Künzler, \textit{In the Land of Blood and Tears}, 10.} When receipts were given, as one consular official wrote, they were merely “chance bits of paper scrawled on by a chaoush [çavuş, sergeant] or gendarme, bearing no seal or official character whatever.”\footnote{National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/651.}

It was also not uncommon for the military authorities to confiscate goods and supplies and only afterwards apply to the war taxes commissions for the assignment of a price, if they did so at all. On a number of occasions, military officers bypassed the war taxes commissions and confiscated the needed goods and supplies in exchange for receipts, an act that generated tension between military and civilian authorities, who were supposed to collaborate on the issue of provisioning army troops.\footnote{Memur-i Mülkiye ve Maliyeyin Seferberlik Etnasindaki Vezaifini Mümeyyin Talimat (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Askериye, 1327 [1909]), 5-6, 8.} For instance, the deputy governor of Istanbul, who, at the same time, headed the war taxes commission of the city, wrote to the Ministry of Interior about numerous impressments carried out by army officials without giving information to the commission. According to the deputy governor, these acts could only be described as extortion (\textit{gasp}) and thus, the perpetrators
should be prosecuted and punished. The Ministry of Interior continuously warned governors and district administrators about these cases and reminded them that no one, including military officers, was above the law. The minister asked them to prevent direct confiscation by military officers and to conduct the impressments through the war taxes commissions.

Even more importantly, the burden of war taxes did not fall equally on the Ottoman people. It was common for local officials and military officers to agree not to confiscate goods, supplies, animals, and vehicles from wealthy people in exchange for bribes or other favors, while implementing the law to the fullest extent for the rest of the population. Although the impressment process placed an unprecedented burden on the Ottoman population as a whole, it was particularly onerous for ordinary citizens. Most of the time, during the process of impressment, officers did not take into consideration the critical importance of confiscated goods, animals, or vehicles in people’s lives. The story of a poor peasant from Maraş who found himself responsible for twelve members of his extended family after his four sons were conscripted into the army is quite telling. When he brought firewood to sell in the town center, the commission of war taxes commandeered his horse, his family’s only means of livelihood. The song in which this old woodcutter expressed his agony probably reflected the plight of thousands of poor Ottomans who were subjected to war taxes:

32 BOA.DH.IUM 93/4-1/16 (9 February 1916).
33 BOA.DH.IUM E/27-18 (31 January 1917).
35 Besim Atalay, Maraş Tarihi ve Coğrafiyası (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1339 [1923]), 85-86.
Alman benim abaşımı [habeşimi]  Do not take my dark horse
Merhamet eylen efendim        Please pity me, sir.
Bundan başka malım yokturst    It is all I have.
Merhamet eylen efendim        Please pity me, sir.
***                    ***
Bununla tabur dolmaz          This won’t meet the needs of the
Ben ağlarım yüzüm gülmез        battalion.
Dedi oğlum, halim bilmez      I cry, no smile on my face,
Merhamet eylen efendim        Said my son, unaware of my situation.
***                    ***
Beş sene askerde durdum          Please pity me, sir.
Latif [redif] dediğin gördüm    I was in the army for five years.
Paşalara boru çaldım          I experienced reserve duty.
Merhamet eylen efendim        I sounded the bugle for commanders.
...                         Please pity me, sir

As the war progressed, the strain of requisitioning became harder to bear for the poor as the military authorities increasingly ignored the bureaucratic procedure of the war taxes and transport vehicles commissions and conducted their impressments in an exceedingly arbitrary way. A keen observer of local incidents described this arbitrariness as “one of the standing abominations of that abominable government.”36 The experience of Şevket Süreyya, a young reserve officer appointed to the Caucasus Front, is quite revealing in this regard. On their way to the front, Şevket and his friend stopped at Kayseri in central Anatolia, where the logistics officer promised to attach them to a military convoy. After the convoy failed to arrive, he pinned his hopes on a camel convoy and lastly on the pack animals of passing troops. When neither of these alternatives materialized, he finally decided to raid a market-place and commandeer the villagers’ donkeys, handing them out to the reserve officers. The owner of the donkey given to Şevket and his friend was an old, exhausted peasant whose animal was his only source of

36 Riggs, Days of Tragedy in Armenia, 13.
subsistence. For days he followed Şevket and his friend and slept in front of inns where they stayed in hopes of getting his animal back.37

This sort of unrestrained and random behavior was frequently part of the confiscation process. Especially during the army campaigns, the implementation of war taxes was conducted in an almost entirely arbitrary manner. Under the pressure of desperate conditions, soldiers summarily confiscated goods and supplies without official authorization, often using brute force. As they passed through villages and small towns, soldiers simply took from the local population whatever goods, supplies, and animals they needed in an *ad hoc* fashion. For instance, Ragıp Efendi, a reserve officer on the eastern front, recalls the panic his battalion experienced before the advancing Russian army, and their aggressive search for draft animals in villages. Soldiers forced open the doors of houses whose male occupants had been drafted and impressed the few animals that had not already been requisitioned. Despite the begging and pleading of the peasant women, who wanted to use these animals to flee from the enemy, the soldiers did not pity them: “We beat up those who did not want to surrender their animals, knocked them down with kicks and slaps. May God forgive us! What injustice, cruelty, brutality, and torture….”38

37 Şevket and his friend eventually gave back the donkey. Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, *Suyu Arayan Adam* (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1999 [1959]), 79-80. Contrary to the experience of Şevket and his friend, local authorities also confiscated animals and vehicles rented by recruits who were on their way to battle fronts. Mehmet Çanlı, ed., *Çanakkale’den Doğu Cephesine Hüseyin Avni Gencoğlu’ nun Hatıraları* (Ankara: Murat Kitabevi, 2007), 32-33.

An important factor contributing to the destructive implementation of war taxes in the war zones was the underdeveloped structure of the logistics organization (*menzil teşkilati*).\(^{39}\) Modern logistical organization was relatively new for the Ottoman army, which tried to put it into practice during the Balkan Wars, albeit in an incomplete and disorganized manner. During the First World War, the army corps continuously objected to the presence of the logistics organization and considered its officers and soldiers to be unnecessarily withdrawn from the fighting proper. Most likely because of the relative newness of this organization and its poor performance during the Balkan Wars, battalions developed a habit of meeting their needs through their own means. As they did not trust the army headquarters and its logistics organization, each battalion tried to create its own supply system and storehouses and kept them secret from other battalions as well as from the army headquarters.\(^{40}\) In order to fill these storehouses, soldiers resorted to requisitioning. As this process was implemented without informing other units or army headquarters, for many villages it must have meant subjugation to multiple requisitionings.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{40}\) According to lieutenant colonel Aziz Samih, for instance, hundreds of such storehouses were revealed in Erzurum, and there were many others in nearby towns and villages. Aziz Samih, *Büyük Harpte Kafkas Cephesi Hattıraları: Zivinden Peteriçe* (Ankara: Büyük Erkanhariye Matbaası, 1934), 26-27, 82-83. On this topic, see also Arif Baytuğ, *İlê Dünya Harbi’nde Kafkas Cephesi: Sessiz Ölüm, Sarıkamış Günlüğü*, ed. Ismail Dervişoğlu (İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayinevi, 2007 [1946]), 32, 166.

\(^{41}\) It was also not uncommon for military units on the march to impress supplies from villages that had already been subjected to the requisitioning by other units that had taken the same route to the front. Baki, *Büyük Harpte Kafkas Cephesi*, vol. 2, *Harp Başından Sarıkamış [Harıc] Kadar* (İstanbul: Askeri Matbaa, 1933), 200.
The impact of the commandeering of draft animals on a large scale was equally adverse, even devastating, for local economies and people. Despite the explicit call in the law for moderation in the implementation of the obligation and concern for the maintenance of agricultural production,\textsuperscript{42} animals and vehicles were collected in an excessively brutal and shortsighted manner. Along with the extensive withdrawal of manpower from agriculture, this reckless requisitioning of draft animals led to the neglect of the exceptionally good harvest of 1914, which eventually caused serious shortages, especially in large population centers.\textsuperscript{43}

The aggressive impressment of vehicles and animals stemmed mostly from the structural problems of the Ottoman transportation network. By the time the war broke out, Ottoman roads and railways were woefully inadequate to handle the heavy traffic resulting from the mobilization and frequent troop movements. The Ottoman railway system was severely limited in capacity when compared with the extensive railway networks of other belligerent nations. While Germany had 64,000 kilometers of railways for 540,000 square kilometers of territory and France had 51,000 for 536,000, there were only 5,759 kilometers of Ottoman railways to cover an empire of 1,760,000 square kilometers.\textsuperscript{44} Moreover, these railway lines were far from constituting an integrated

\textsuperscript{42} "Tedarik-i Vesait-i Nakliye-i Askeriye Kanunnamesi," 433.
\textsuperscript{44} Emin, \textit{Turkey in the World War}, 85. A different source gives this number as 5,411 kilometers. Ahmet Onur, \textit{Türk Demir Yolları Tarihi} (Istanbul: K.K.K. İstanbul Askeri Basimevi, 1953), 29.
system, they resemble rather “a series of often fragmented single track lines of several different gauges.”45

The major single-track line that connected the capital, Istanbul, to the Arab provinces of the empire, thus serving as the principal supply line for the armies in the region, was truncated at two locations in the Taurus and Amanus mountains. Despite the backbreaking work of labor battalions and British prisoners of war, the Amanus tunnels were not completed until January 1917, while the construction of the Taurus tunnels was finished only a month prior to the signing of the armistice in November 1918. Military supplies transported on the line would need to be unloaded at these points, carried on horseback through mountain roads, and loaded again at the railhead.

In addition to the rudimentary structure of the system, several difficulties prevented the Ottomans from operating the railway network smoothly. The fuel question was arguably the biggest obstacle that handicapped the Ottomans’ efforts. The continuous Russian bombardment of cargo ships in the Black Sea and the lack of a direct railway line that would integrate coalfields with the railroad network made it practically impossible for the coal extracted in Ereğli and Zonguldak on the Black Sea coast to be used for transportation. On the other hand, coal obtained from Germany was either consumed in the northern sections of the Anatolian railway, used in factories doing war work, or allocated for use by the urban population.46 Under these conditions, wood served as the only source of fuel in the southern sections of the railway network. The almost exclusive


use of wood not only diminished the locomotives’ performance by forty percent\textsuperscript{47} but also led to the extensive depletion of forests in the region. Towards the end of the war, even olive trees and vines had to be burnt “to feed the locomotives.”\textsuperscript{48}

The Ottoman war effort was significantly hampered by the underdeveloped and inefficient transportation network. Ottoman railways did not cover many parts of the empire, including eastern Anatolia, which became a major zone of conflict between Ottoman and Russian forces. Ankara, the last station on the central Anatolian branch of the major railroad line, was approximately 700 kilometers from Erzurum, the headquarters of the Ottoman Third Army. The road more commonly used by military units deployed to the eastern front extended between the Ulukışla station of the Anatolian railroad and Sivas, and was approximately 400 kilometers long. Draft animals and oxcarts therefore became the only means of transportation for men, supplies, military equipment, and ammunition in these “railless” parts of the empire, especially after the Russian fleet had taken the upper hand in the Black Sea from mid-1915 on. In order to maintain the continuity of transportation, new animals had to be constantly requisitioned, as inadequate feeding, overloading, poor road conditions, and contagious diseases decimated them by the thousands.\textsuperscript{49}

The collection of transport vehicles and animals was therefore an integral part of the Ottoman mobilization effort and was carried out in conjunction with the conscription

\textsuperscript{47} Stanley, “Review of Turkish Asiatic Railways,” 194.


\textsuperscript{49} Emin, \textit{Turkey in the World War}, 87.
of soldiers. Town criers, who called people to recruitment offices to enlist, also instructed the populace to bring in all draft animals for official inspection.\textsuperscript{50} In the process, the government benefited from harsh measures adopted at the beginning of the mobilization in an attempt to prevent evasion of this obligation. An appendix to the Military Penal Law stipulates that owners who conceal (\textit{ihfa}) their animals and vehicles from commissions and military officials are subject to imprisonment.\textsuperscript{51}

Despite these harsh measures, however, in several regions, local people were reluctant to deliver their vehicles to the commissions and instead chose to hide them, as they did not receive cash in exchange and desperately needed their animals to cultivate their fields. The U.S. consul general in Beirut noted, for instance, that an exodus of animals from the city had started in spite of “the cordon of gendarmes, which has been thrown tightly about the city.”\textsuperscript{52} When people hid their animals or hesitated to deliver them to authorities, their houses were entered and animals were impressed forcibly.\textsuperscript{53}

In many cases, however, people, especially wealthy members of society, found other ways to evade the obligation. Veterinary boards, which conducted this inspection process and thus exercised enormous authority over the fates of animals and their owners, played a crucial role in this process. While collecting old and feeble animals, these boards


\textsuperscript{52} National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/639.

not uncommonly, in exchange for bribes, rejected quite strong horses as “unsound.”

According to one observer, there appeared to be a large number of beasts branded unsound and “although unfit to carry military supplies they did carry a certain amount of freight.”

The burden that the appropriation of pack animals for military use imposed on people was enormous. Animals and vehicles were generally pressed into service along with their owners. In an exceedingly arbitrary manner, officials simply took advantage of the weakness and vulnerability of the owners of these animals and vehicles and forced them to load the goods and supplies to be transported. They were held strictly accountable for the goods and supplies that were entrusted to them. George E. White, president of Anatolia College at Merzifon (Marsovan), observed the disastrous impact of this service on peasants and their animals. The military transportation in their region started with horse-wagons and continued until the horses were decimated by the strain. Two-wheeled ox-carts were then employed in transportation. Finally, camels and donkeys were called for army service:

... [A]nd then our neighbors in Marsovan shed tears, not that they were unwilling to do their bit, but they knew that poor Jack and Jenny from their little stalls under the house could not carry food enough to feed themselves all the way to the distant battle front, let alone reaching there with loads of military supplies.

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54 A. Faik Hurşit Günday, Hayat ve Hatratım (Istanbul: Çelikcilt Matbaası, 1960), 109; National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/639. The American consul general in Beirut used the term “backsheesh” (bâhşîş, bakshish) for a bribe.

55 Riggs, Days of Tragedy in Armenia, 13.

56 Riggs, Days of Tragedy in Armenia, 13-14.

57 George E. White, Adventuring with Anatolia College (Grinnell: Herald-Register Publishing Co., 1940), 88. Citing A.D. Novichev, Ekonomika Turtsii v Period Mirovoi Voin (The Economy of Turkey during the World War), Feroz Ahmad states that the oxen population declined by 86.5 per cent between 1913 and
Widespread employment of draft animals in military transportation and their decimation during the service greatly contributed to the sharp decline in agricultural production. Even at the beginning of the mobilization, local officials wrote reports in an alarming manner about the withdrawal of draft animals. A consular officer in Haifa stated, for example, that if the requisitions were not stopped soon, peasants “will have no means to sow their crops and famine will result.”\(^{58}\) Among other factors, the commandeering of pack animals and vehicles contributed to the shortages of supplies in the mountainous and coastal regions where the population was always dependent on food from elsewhere.\(^{59}\) Despite these obviously negative impacts of the excessive requisitioning, however, numerous circulars sent by the Minister of Interior and the Ministry of War on the subject clearly show that military officials continued to commandeer draft animals throughout the war years.\(^{60}\)

### III. Transformation of the Policy of War Taxes

The widespread implementation of war taxes had a catastrophic impact on the Ottoman economy due mostly to the anxiety it provoked among merchants and producers. As early as October 1914, even before entering the war, the Ottoman

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\(^{58}\) National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/657.


\(^{60}\) BOA.DH.IUM E/35-66 (12 June 1917). For the Ministry of War’s order to the army corps about the prevention of commandeering from farmers who owned only one pair of oxen, see BOA.DH.IUM E/39-12 (25 September 1917).
government had already realized the “impact that the current method of collecting war
taxes inflicted on the economy” and established a commission to revise it.\textsuperscript{61} A report
written by the governor of Aleppo clearly indicates the problems that the war taxes
created on the ground. According to the governor, the unequal and remorseless
implementation of war taxes brought the region’s once vibrant economy to a halt.\textsuperscript{62} For
instance, only one tenth of the olive oil needs of the Fourth Army could be obtained
through requisitioning as a result of the sharp decline in production. Administrators of
soap-manufacturing towns informed the governor that because of fear of impressment,
soap was not being produced in their regions this year. In previous years, livestock
traders from Aleppo used to travel to the provinces of Mosul, Van, Diyarbekir, and
Erzurum to purchase large numbers of sheep. In 1914, however, drovers did not attempt
to bring even a single animal. Similarly, even though the season was passing, traders did
not set out to tour villages and tribes to collect the wool that the peasants and tribe
members had produced. According to the governor, this would further depress the
economy in the region, as the owners of livestock would not be able to pay their cattle
taxes, which they normally paid from the annual sale of wool. Merchants ceased
importing from abroad as everyone tried to sell off their goods below regular market
prices (as they knew that the war taxes commissions would assign lower prices for their

\textsuperscript{61} The commission would be composed of the undersecretaries of the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of
Finance and the head of the army provisioning office: BOA.MV.193/42 (7 October 1914). While
attempting to amend the law, the government seriously contemplated disbursing at least part of the value of
impressed goods by printing money. This was the idea proposed by Prime Minister Talat Bey, who was
later convinced by the Minister of Finance, Cavid Bey, to pay with treasury bonds: “Maliye Nazırı Cavid
Bey’in Notları, Türkiye’nin I. Dünya Savaşına Girmesi,” Tanin 3, 5 Birincikanun (December) 1944.

\textsuperscript{62} For the prosperity of the region in, especially, the pre-war period, see Peter Sluglett, “Aspects of
Economy and Society in the Syrian Provinces: Aleppo in Transition, 1880-1925,” in Modernity and
Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, eds. Leila Tarazi Fawaz and C.A. Bayly (New
goods and supplies). The governor described the situation as an economic crisis (buhran-i iktisadi) and singled out the war taxes as the major cause of it. As the impressments had led to a sharp decline in production as well as concealment of existing goods and supplies from governmental authorities, this system defeated its own purpose, as it did not assure the provision of the army’s needs. The governor proposed the abrogation of the law of war taxes and a new method of direct purchasing to feed and equip the army.\(^{63}\)

By the end of the first year of the Ottoman Empire’s participation in the war, the war taxes had put the subsistence of the people living in urban centers, and especially those in the capital city, into a precarious situation. The fear that their goods would be confiscated led merchants to cease importing from abroad.\(^{64}\) Similarly, bringing staple items to the capital became an unprofitable business for them, as the military impressed a substantial portion of their commodities. The government first attempted to solve the problem by exempting the wheat imported to meet the needs of the capital from the thirty percent customs duty. However, members of the special parliamentary commission (encümén) rightfully realized that it was not the customs duty but “the excessive intervention of the military and the bad, almost hostile implementation of the war taxes” that hindered imports, and modified the government’s proposal accordingly.\(^{65}\) The resulting law exempted the import of flour, rye, wheat, barley, corn, oats, wheat bran, straw, and livestock from customs duties and provided protection from the arbitrary and

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\(^{63}\) BOA.DH.SYS 123-2/2-5 (20 February 1915).

\(^{64}\) “Maliye Nazırı Cavid Bey’in Notları, Türkiye’nin I. Dünya Savaşına Girmesi,” Tanin 19 Birincîteşrin (October) 1944.

\(^{65}\) “… ithalat fıkdanının gümrük resminden değil, cihet-i askeriyenin müfrit müdahelatından, tekalî-i harbiyenin pek fena adeta düşmanca tatbikinden neşet ettiği düşünder ...:” “Maliye Nazırı Cavid Bey’in Notları, Türkiye’nin I. Dünya Savaşına Girmesi,” Tanin 7 Şubat (February) 1945.
excessive imposition of war taxes. The law also extended this protection to other goods and supplies that were brought into Istanbul. Despite the opposition of Prime Minister Talat Bey, the deputies managed to extend the clause of immunity to goods transported from one place to another within the empire.  

War taxes also had a devastating impact on the agricultural economy in the countryside. The widespread confiscation of grain and other products gradually reduced the incentive of peasants to plant for market, as they knew that the army would impress their product. Despite the ever-increasing prices of agricultural products, unlimited and uncontrolled requisitioning deterred producers from sowing seed in many regions of the empire. “Farmers are frightened,” asserted a deputy in parliament. They did not want to spend their money and labor to cultivate their fields. Another deputy gave the example of Silvan (formerly Mayyafariqin), a small town in southeastern Anatolia, which used to meet all the rice needs of the region before the war but now did not harvest even a single kilogram.

Realizing the ever-declining agricultural production and the civilian populations’ reluctance to sell their products to the army, the council of ministers adopted a new policy of war taxes in 1915. The council set upper limits on the amount of the goods and

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68 MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 3, 9 March 1334 (9 March 1918), 59.  

69 For the testimony of a deputy from the region, see MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 3, 10 March 1333 (10 March 1917), 151.
supplies that could be subjected to requisitioning. For instance, only fifteen percent of all sheep and goats could be taken through war taxes. The rest of the meat that the army needed would be purchased at the market. More importantly, however, the council decided that the need of the army for grain would be met through the annual 12.5 percent tithe. Again, if the tithe did not satisfy the needs of the army, the missing amount would be purchased at the market. The decision strictly prohibited the confiscation of agricultural products from merchants and the general population. Clearly, the fear that declining imports and agricultural productivity would put the subsistence of the army in a precarious situation played a crucial role in the introduction of this new strategy.

Indeed, in certain regions considered to be of critical importance, the government and local administrators had already put this strategy into practice. For instance, Cemal Pasha, who did not want to alienate the people of Syria and Palestine any further through the implementation of wild and uncontrolled requisitioning, had adopted this policy. Upon assuming the post of Commander of the Fourth Ottoman Army and governor-general of Syria and Western Arabia, he gave an express order to military and civilian officers to refrain from implementing war levies and to pay in cash on the spot for goods and supplies they needed. In his memoirs, Cemal Pasha represented this policy as a favor to the people living in these provinces and underlined the distinction between the Arab

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70 BOA.DH.IUM E/14-49 (4 May 1915). The date on the archival document is (21 April 1332). However, the actual must be 1331 as the decision explicitly mentions the needs of the army in the year 1915.

71 BOA.DH.IUM 93/4-1/31 (7 March 1916).
provinces and the rest of the empire, where all sorts of goods and supplies were commandeered in exchange for receipts.\textsuperscript{72}

In May 1916, the government decided to pass this new policy into law. A short but extremely important amendment to the law on war taxes aimed to control the unrestrained implementation of these levies and ease the burden on the people who were subjected to them. This new amendment brought a dramatic change to the previous understanding of this policy by introducing the principle of prompt payment for confiscated goods and supplies (\textit{bedelini ber-veçh-i peşin vererek}) instead of the familiar policy of confiscation in exchange for official receipts. The law also aimed to restrain the arbitrary and excessive implementation of war taxes by subjecting impressments to the approval of the cabinet.\textsuperscript{73} Although this revision did not rule out the option of confiscations entirely, it clearly reflected the government’s realization that the burden of impressments exceeded the financial capacity of the people (“\ldots ahalinin istitaat-i maliyesi fevkine çıkmıştır.”).\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, the amendment also reflected the government’s belief that the new procedure of purchasing with cash (instead of


\textsuperscript{74} 1332-1333 Meclis-i Mebusan Encümen Mazbataları ve Levayih-i Kanuniyye, vol. 1 (Ankara: TBMM Basmevi, 1993), 635. For certain goods and supplies, the army resorted continuously to war taxes with the approval of the cabinet. See, for instance, the cabinet’s approval of the implementation of war taxes for twenty-five percent of livestock and soap production to meet the needs of the army in the year 1917. BOA.DH.IUM E/29-72 (24 March 1917).
impressing in exchange for receipts) would inspire the peasants to reveal their concealed grain and sell it to the army.\footnote{75}

Although this new policy attempted to alleviate the problems created by extensive requisitioning without compensation, it brought about little improvement, inasmuch as the prices for the purchases were usually well below market levels and payments were generally made in already depreciated paper currency.\footnote{76} Furthermore, despite this radical change, local military authorities continued to pressure governmental officials to confiscate goods and supplies through the levying of war taxes without providing any compensation.\footnote{77}

IV. Centralization of the Provisioning System

The Ottoman state’s provisioning policy went through a significant modification in July 1916 in the direction of a more centralized structure. By the first half of 1916, it had already become obvious that while some provinces of the empire enjoyed relatively bountiful harvests, other regions suffered from severe shortages. Although agricultural

\footnote{75} The number of alarming reports from local administrators and military officials must have obliged the government to dramatically revise its provisioning policy. For the opinion of Hasan Izzet Paşa, the commander of the Third Army, that cash payment for at least a portion of confiscated goods and supplies would increase production, see Tuncay Öğün, *Kafkas Cephesinin I. Dünya Savaşındaki Lojistik Desteği* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları, 1999), 48.

\footnote{76} Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War*, trans. Ali Maher Ibrahim (London: Saqi Books, 1994), 135. The investigation conducted by the governorship of Istanbul revealed that since the beginning of the mobilization war taxes commissions assessed very low (“pek dur”) values for the confiscated goods and that this caused merchants and the populace at large to suffer economically: BOA.DH.IUM 93/5-1/17 (25 May 1916). This brings to mind the age-old Ottoman practice of “state purchase” (*miri mübayaa*), to which the government resorted in wartime to intervene in the economy and to procure essential goods and supplies. For a discussion of its effects on the Ottoman economy, see Mehmet Genç, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Devlet ve Ekonomi* (İstanbul: Otüken Yayınları, 2000), 211-25.

\footnote{77} For the complaints of the *mutasarrif* (district administrator) of Karahisar, see BOA.DH.IUM 93/2-1/5 (1 June 1915).
production declined everywhere in the empire, some grain-producing regions continued to harvest more grain than needed by their own populations. However, despite the harsh requisitioning policies of the army, this excess grain could not always reach the military storehouses or regions where people faced food shortages or famine. When it did, the prices were usually too high for the poorer segments of the population to afford. This imbalance was further accentuated by the exclusive allocation of the already underdeveloped transportation network for military purposes.

The new structure was a response to the problems that plagued the provisioning of the army and the penurious regions of the empire. In the face of the prolonged conflict and the inadequacy of previous strategies, the Ottoman authorities decided to centralize the system of provisioning through a new governmental agency (İaşê-i Umumiye Heyeti), equipped with extraordinary authority over grain production, trade, and distribution. The agency was presided over by the Minister of Interior. In towns and provinces, the local branches of the agency (tali heyetler) would act as executive organs of the new organization. While the highest-ranking civilian official of the locality would be the head of these local branches, the branch membership would consist of representatives of the

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79 BOA.DH.IUM 98/2-1/36 (23 March 1916); BOA.DH.IUM 98/2-1/55 (13 May 1916); BOA.DH.IUM 98/2-1/58 (15 May 1916).


81 “İaşê Kanun-i Muvakkatı,” Düstur, İkinci Tertip, vol. 8, 22 Ramazan 1334 (23 July 1916): 1230-32. Similar models implemented by the allies of Ottoman Empire clearly inspired the government to move in this direction. See, the declaration of Prime Minister Talat Pasha, MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 1, 6 Şubat 1332 (19 February 1917), 498.
local administrative councils, municipalities, and chambers of commerce; the head of the local branch of the Agricultural Bank (Ziraat Bankası); and the local military commander.

The law and the related regulations divided the empire into three zones of provisioning\(^\text{82}\) and outlawed the transportation and trade of grain among these zones.\(^\text{83}\) The law granted exclusive authority to the central agency and its representatives to purchase the remaining grain in the hands of the merchants and producers after their need for sustenance, seed, and fodder was deducted from their annual production.\(^\text{84}\) Accordingly, it also obliged producers and merchants to give information about the grain in their possession and, more importantly, to sell this grain to local procurement officials (mübaya vekilleri) at officially determined prices.

The ultimate goal of this new organization was to extract the grain from the countryside in a more efficient way and divert it to the portions of the army and the regions considered of critical importance.\(^\text{85}\) As the division of the empire into

\(^{82}\) The first zone of provisioning would include the provinces of Istanbul, Edirne, Hûdavendigar, Konya, Ankara, Aydın, Kastamonu and the districts (liva) of Bolu, Çatalca, Kale-i Sultanîye, Karesî, İzmit, Eskişehir, Kütahya, Karahisar-ı Sahib, Niğde, Menteşe, and Antalya. The second zone of provisioning would be composed of the provinces of Syria, Beirut, Adana and the districts of Aleppo (center), Jerusalem, Mount Lebanon, and İçel. The districts and provinces that remained outside of these two zones would comprise the third zone.

\(^{83}\) Military officials always insisted on taking measures against the free circulation of goods and supplies among provinces. Some armies had actually already banned the export of grain, oil, and livestock out of the regions under their control despite the orders given by the Ministry of Interior against the restriction of trade and transportation. For the orders of the commander of the Third Army, Mahmut Kamil Pasha, see BOA.DH.IUM 98/1-1/22 (23 October 1915).


\(^{85}\) The new centralized structure has so far been analyzed only on the basis of the provisioning of the capital city. Focusing on this aspect of the law, the secondary literature has missed its main function, namely the extraction of grain from the countryside to feed the army. See, for example, Toprak, İtihat-Terakki ve Cihan Harbi, 138-143; Eldem, Harp ve Müttareke Yıllarında, 43-47.
provisioning zones indicates, the government seemed to be particularly concerned about
the provisioning of the two primary regions, along with meeting the needs of the army.
First, by including the grain-producing regions of central Anatolia in the first zone and
imposing a strict regulation on grain trade in this zone, the government attempted to
secure the provisioning of the capital city, Istanbul, and, thereby to avoid potential unrest
that might pose a threat to the regime. Second, the highest-ranking official of the locality
was authorized to regulate the provisioning of most of the Arab provinces of the empire
according to the new interim law of provisioning.\textsuperscript{86} In the regions that remained outside
of these two zones, the government did not implement the law to control the grain trade,
in effect leaving the army free to conduct its provisioning as usual.

With this legislation, the state also undertook an ambitious effort to determine the
number of people and draft animals per household as well as each household’s need for
seed grain. The agency then would decide upon a certain amount of grain for the daily
subsistence of people and animals. Through this law, the state also assumed the
responsibility of distributing grain to towns and villages whose production did not meet
their needs.

The obligation of producers to deliver their products to the state at officially set
prices constituted the backbone of the new organization as well as the state’s policy of
provisioning for the remainder of the war. The objective of this obligation was to protect
the state from increasing market prices and to maintain a constant flow of grain to army

\textsuperscript{86} Fritz Grobba, \textit{Die Getreidewirtschaft Syriens und Palästinas seit Beginn des Weltkrieges}
(Hannover: Orient-Buchhandlung Heinz Lafaire, 1923), 24-25.
troops and urban centers, particularly the capital city, Istanbul.\textsuperscript{87} In order to achieve this objective, the state’s representatives consistently assessed prices for agricultural produce well below the market level. However, even these low prices were not always paid to peasants.\textsuperscript{88} In the face of skyrocketing prices for draft animals, agricultural equipment, and manufactured goods that were commonly used by peasant households, this low-price policy led to widespread suffering in the Ottoman countryside.

In Madaba, Transjordan, for example, officials offered eight piasters in paper money or four piasters in silver per \textit{sa} (equal to 5.2-6.0 kilograms) of wheat, whereas the current market rate was eighteen piasters in gold.\textsuperscript{89} Peasants from Kırkkilise, a small town close to the capital, criticized the government’s new policy for two reasons. While everything needed by cultivators increased in price eight to ten times over, officials assigned less than half of the official market value to peasants’ products. Furthermore, the amount of grain allocated by the officials for peasants’ sustenance, fodder, and seed was so low that it was insufficient to meet their needs for an entire year. Since bread was the main source of their nourishment, peasants claimed, under these conditions, that they lacked the energy to move, let alone work, in their fields.\textsuperscript{90}


\textsuperscript{88} For the confession of Ali Cenani Bey, deputy of Ayntab and a member of financial subcommittee, see \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 3, 9 Mart 1334 (9 March 1918), 65; For the observations of Mehmet Ömer Vehbi Bey, deputy of Karesi, see \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 3, 10 Mart 1334 (10 March 1918), 85; Hacı Adil Bey, chair of the parliament, \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 2, 23 Şubat 1334 (23 February 1918), 460.

\textsuperscript{89} Eugene Rogan, \textit{Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 222.

\textsuperscript{90} BOA.DH.IUM E/20-99 (27 September 1916).
In response to the state’s aggressive intervention in local agricultural economies, producers usually resorted to two strategies. In many regions, peasants whose surplus of food was insufficient to keep them alive simply deserted their villages and headed off to large towns in search of a livelihood;\textsuperscript{91} in Syria, they fled into the Hauran region where the Druze sheikhs offered them land and seed.\textsuperscript{92} Alternatively, they hid their grain from requisitioning officers and sought ways to transport it to urban centers where grain was scarce and prices were accordingly high.\textsuperscript{93} Grain smuggling became especially widespread in the border regions of the third provisioning zone, where the grain trade was not regulated by the law. Producers in the first and second zones continuously attempted to bring their products to the third zone to benefit from the relatively high prices the army paid there. In turn, this movement of grain put the subsistence of border provinces at risk, provinces whose populations had already increased due to immigrants fleeing the war on the Caucasus Front.\textsuperscript{94}

In April 1917, presumably as a response to widespread smuggling, the government revised the law’s stipulations and divided the empire into five zones of provisioning.\textsuperscript{95} In each zone, the newly established Central Zone Councils (\textit{Mintka}

\textsuperscript{91} Ahmad, \textit{Kurdistan during the First World War}, 134-35.


\textsuperscript{93} For the observations of Ziya Bey, deputy of İzmit, see \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 3, 10 Mart 1333 (10 March 1917), 149; Schilcher, “The Famine of 1915-1918,” 237.

\textsuperscript{94} See, for instance, the case of Çorum, which was on the border of the first and third zones of provisioning, BOA.DH.IUM E/32-46 (15 Nisan 1917). For attempts at smuggling grain to the capital, see BOA.DH.IUM E/20-81 (24 September 1916). For the observations of a number of governors and district administrators, see BOA.DH.IUM 98/2-1/51 (3 May 1916).

\textsuperscript{95} In the revised version, the first zone of provisioning would include the provinces of İstanbul, Edirne, Hûdavendigar, Konya, Ankara, Aydın, Kastamonu (excluding the district of Sinop) and the districts (\textit{liva})
Merkez Heyetleri) would conduct the procurement, transportation, and distribution of grain under the supervision of the central agency. With this revision, the government brought the entire empire under the scope of this law while recognizing the critical importance of local circumstances in provisioning affairs.96

The tension between military and civilian authorities over the issue of provisioning became increasingly visible during this period. Gradually declining production (and therefore the decreasing annual tithe return, which was allocated to army consumption), the perceived inefficiency of tithe collection by civilian officials and tax farmers (müftezims), and, finally, a strong sense of urgency forced the army to intervene in the process of tithe collection and the purchase of grain from producers. In October 1916, the Ministry of War first ordered the army corps conscription offices (Kolordu Ahz-i Asker Şubesı) to supervise the process and provide necessary support in the collection of grain and its transportation to train stations. In a separate circular sent to the army corps, however, the Ministry ordered the dispatch of military officials to towns and villages to secure the acquisition of grain from peasants. In this process, the Ministry also ordered the officials to take this process as seriously as conscription and to disregard any opposition from civilian officials and local people. Local civilian authorities reacted to

of Bolu, Çatalca, Kale-i Sultaniye, Karesi, İzmit, Eskişehir, Kütahya, Karahisar-i Sahib, Niğde, Menteşe, and Teke. The second zone of provisioning would be composed of the provinces of Diyarbakir and Mamuratulaziz and the districts of Maraş, Urfa, and Ayntab. The third zone would include the provinces of Sivas and Trabzon and the districts of Kayseri, Samsun, and Sinop. The provinces of Syria, Beirut, Adana, and Aleppo and the districts of Jerusalem, Mount Lebanon, and İçel would comprise the Fourth Zone. The Fifth Zone would include the province of Mosul and the district of Zor.

96 The government’s proposed amendment mentions only that the previous regulations did not serve the purpose sufficiently ( “maksada kafi gelmediği”): BOA.MV 247/23 (9 April 1917); BOA.DH.IUM E/32-9 (19 April 1917). For the new regulations, see “Ordu-yu Hümayun ile Ahalinın İlaşesini Temin Zimnında Neş Edilen 10 Temmuz 1332 Tarihli Kanun-ı Muvakkatın Suver-i Tatbikiyesi Hakkında 29 Ağustos 1332 Tarihli Nizamname Makamina Kaim Olmak Üzerine Tanzim Olunan Nizamname,” Düştur, İkinci Tertip, vol. 9, 20 Cemaziyelahir 1335 (12 April 1917): 646-48.
these orders by trying to resist the army’s increasing intervention on the grounds that the procurement and transportation of the grain that had been collected as annual tithe and stored for local consumption would upset the local population and pit civilian and military authorities against each other.97

V. Army Control of Provisioning

This increasing interference on the part of the army foreshadowed the military takeover of the entire system of provisioning a year later. In the summer of 1917, a government decree established a new agency (İaše Müdurlüyet-i Umumiyesi) under the Ministry of War (İaše-i Umumiye Kararnamesi).98 The head of the army provisioning office (Levazimat-i Umumiye Riyaseti), İsmail Hakkı Pasha (nicknamed “the Lame,” Topal) was charged with administering the new agency. Similar to the previous organization, the agency enjoyed an absolute monopoly on purchasing and distributing grain and other supplies with the purpose of “provisioning of the imperial army, all institutions, and the regions whose population are in need.” The decree also subordinated all governmental officials to orders and instructions given by the agency and held them

97 BOA.DH.IUM E/23-87 (9 November 1916).
responsible for the execution of these orders. Those who opposed the orders and instructions given by the agency would be imprisoned and their goods confiscated.

Under the new structure, the empire was, once again, divided into provisioning zones. This time, however, each army zone was accepted as a provisioning zone and army commanders became the heads of these new provisioning zones. At the lower levels of the new structures, military officials and gendarmerie commanders entered the local commissions of provisioning councils (Mintika İaşе Komisyonları). These councils undertook the administration of procurement at the local level and assumed the duty of regulating local agriculture. To this end, the law conferred upon the councils the authority to employ all governmental officials in provisioning affairs, an article that clearly indicated that the provisioning of the army (as well as the capital city) had become the utmost concern of the state.

The decree and related legislation entitled local provisioning commissions to determine the annual amount of grain needed by the cultivators for seed, fodder, and subsistence, as well as their annual need for rice, sugar, olive oil, and olives. Under this new structure, similar to the former civilian organization, the local commissions continued to maintain the exclusive authority to purchase excess grain and other supplies at the official prices they set. Unlike the previous regulations, however, the legislation provided a specific amount of grain to be purchased (on top of the regular tithe, 12.5 percent of annual production) and also left the door open to double this amount. The

100 For İsmail Hakki Pasha’s dispatch on the confiscation of these goods and the role of police officers in this process, see BOA.DH.IUM E/38-95 (3 September 1917).
instructions of the law also encouraged citizens and governmental officials to denounce people who hid their products from the state and pledged to give half of the revealed items to the denouncer.\textsuperscript{101}

The debate over the decree in parliament was arguably one of the most heated discussions of the war years.\textsuperscript{102} Although the original decree already involved harsh measures to facilitate grain requisitioning, the government decided to revise it in a way that would maximize the state’s extractive capacity. The modification of the original decree and the new form of legislation proposed by the government rightfully gave the deputies a strong impression that the state intended to acquire three times the regular tithe \textit{(aşar ve aşarın iki misli)} from producers everywhere. The new proposal also abolished the principle of determining the official prices locally on an arbitrary basis and set fixed prices for the double tithe (six times the average of three years’ local prices before the mobilization) and triple tithe (double the price paid for the double tithe).

Deputies, particularly the ones who closely observed local conditions and the implementation of the decree in its last eight months, harshly criticized the provisions in the revised version of the legislation on the grounds that they would aggravate the suffering of the peasant masses given the drastically increased costs of agricultural production, extensive withdrawal of men from agriculture, and the war’s prolonged impact on the composition of the agricultural labor force. The misery of small farmers whose production barely exceeded their subsistence needs received particular attention.

\textsuperscript{101} Ahmet Ağaoğlu, a prominent intellectual and the deputy of Karahisar-ı Sahip, argued that this had “an extensive and ruinous impact on the general morality.” \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 3, 9 Mart 1334 (9 March 1918), 64.

\textsuperscript{102} The decree was put into practice provisionally in August 1917 without the approval of parliament. The Ottoman parliament discussed the decree in March 1918, eight months after its enactment.
Nazım Bey, deputy of Kirkuk, declared that “rather than serving the agriculture of the country, the agency devastated it.”\textsuperscript{103} Other deputies rightfully argued that the extraordinary amount of grain that the state was forcibly purchasing from producers threatened to bring agricultural production to a complete halt. If the law passed in its current form, deputies stated, it would condemn the majority of the peasantry to starvation and eventually deplete the resources necessary to provision the army. They asked for at least the peasants’ seed, fodder, and subsistence grain to be exempt from the regulations.\textsuperscript{104}

These objections were actually supported by the detailed information on the implementation of the decree gathered by the subcommission of the imperial budget (\textit{muvazene-i maliye encümeni}). The information presented by the subcommission revealed that while in some provinces, in addition to the tithe, governmental officials were purchasing an additional 12.5 percent of the grain, in some others, this additional amount reached fifty percent. The subcommission also stated that peasants were usually not paid for the grain they had sold to the state. In the first zone of provisioning alone, the state owed eight million liras to producers, an amount that was almost triple the initial capital allocated for the agency. The subcommission soberly observed that despite the increased budget and power of the Ministry of Agriculture, its continuous attempts to increase the acreage of land under cultivation, and, finally, the Law on the Obligation of

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 3, 10 Mart 1334 (10 March 1918), 83.

\textsuperscript{104} See discussions in \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 3, 10, 14 Mart 1334 (10 March 1918), 56-74, 82-92, 129-159, 168-193, 198-222, 444-472.
Agricultural Production (Mükellefiyet-i Ziraiye Kanunu),

agriculture had deteriorated gradually during the war. Either the peasants’ real lack of grain and seed to meet their subsistence needs or the perception that their surplus production would be appropriated brought about significantly deficient production everywhere in comparison to previous years.

Against these observations and fiery criticisms, the government and the representatives of the army defended the law on the grounds that acquiring three times the normal tithe was the only way to provision the imperial army and that the exemption of small producers from this regulation was unthinkable, as they constituted the majority of the farming population. Ali Cenani Bey, speaking for the subcommittee, expressed the prevailing opinion among the ruling elite: “It is necessary that, under these [extraordinary] circumstances, peasants should be content with less bread…. It would not be appropriate to jeopardize the provisioning of the army on the grounds that this would slightly pressure the peasantry.”

To poor peasants, however, the requisitioning of almost half of their grain proved to be an insurmountable burden. Hasan Fehmi Efendi, deputy of Sinop, vividly portrayed the suffering of peasants he had met:

105 A. Güündüz Ökçün, Taşkın Çalısha ve Ekme Yükümlülüğü (Mükellefiyet-i Ziraiyye), Belgeler (1914-1922) (Istanbul: Sermaye Piyasası Kurulu Yayınları, 1997 [1983]).


107 “[Z]ürraın da böyle bir sırada kendi ekmeğini fazla yemeyip de az bir miktara kanaat etmesinde zaruret vardır. Binaenaleyh, bugün zürraın ahvalini bir parça tazyik edecektir diyerek...memleketin müdafasıyla meşgul olan ordunun maişetini tehlkiye duçar etmek doğru olamaz.” MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 3, 14 Mart 1334 (14 March 1918), 177. Vehip Pasha, then the commander of the Third Army, thought along the same lines when he said: “It is necessary that the ones on the front eat their fill and that the ones on the home front live abstemiously (kanaatkarane).” Hürşit Çalık, ed., Kurtuluş Savaşında Adalet Bakani Ahmet Rifat Çalık’a’nın Anları (Istanbul: n.p., 1992), 18.
Whomever I talked to said that for the sake of the country’s salvation and as a sign of sacrifice that was imposed on us by the nation, I had sent my father, brother, son, in brief, ten or fifteen people from my family and relatives to the war. The news about the martyrdom of five, six, or seven of them reached us. Three or four of them are living with us after having been maimed in the war. Two of them have been taken prisoner. A couple are still at the fronts. Although I was deprived of all manpower, I managed to produce ten kilos of wheat, which was taken from me, disregarding my need for seed to plant three months from now, fodder for the draft animals that I employ in my field, and, finally, my need for the wheat for sustenance. I was not paid for any of this.\footnote{MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 3, 9 Mart 1334 (9 March 1918), 70.}

In the meantime, the government issued a draconian provisional decree concerning producers who withheld or consumed their tithe with the purpose of not submitting it to the state. The government based its reasoning on the observation of a high number of cases of grain smuggling even in the early stages of annual tithe collection.\footnote{The governors’ reports must have influenced the government to take bolder measures against the perpetrators. See, for example, Konya governor Muammer Bey’s telegram, which pointed to increased prices and lenient penalties as the reason for the increasingly widespread cases of theft and smuggling. BOA.DH.IUM E/38-84 (18 September 1917).} Although the Law on Tithes included measures against these cases, grain prices increased to levels that would encourage peasants to take such risks. Light penalties and the prospect of high profits, the government implied, would most probably induce producers to hide their grain from governmental officials, a process that “would surely cripple the provisioning of the army.”\footnote{Meclis-i Umuminin Mün’akit Olmadığı Esnada Hey’et-i Vükelaca ba-İrade-i Seniye Mevki-i İcraya Konulan Mukarrerat, 1333 (Ankara: n.p., n.d.), 25.} The perpetrators would be tried and sentenced to imprisonment of up to three years or the pecuniary penalty of 500 liras.\footnote{BOA.MV 248/17 (18 September 1917); “Seferberlikte Seferber Ordunun İaşesine Muhtass Hisse-i Aşarı Vermemek Kasdi ile Mahsulatını Keşt Edenler Hakkinda Kararname,” Düstur, Ikinci Tertip, vol. 9, 3 Zilhicce 1335 (20 September 1917): 727-28.} The state certainly benefited from this law by increasing its extractive capacity in the
countryside. On the other hand, with this law, in the words of a deputy, “the Anatolian people were robbed and their grain was taken, they were left to famish, and many of them perished from starvation.”

The legislation and the state’s new policy of acquisition proved to be disastrous for small farmers. Peasants were continuously disgruntled that state agents were claiming too much of their produce and thus forcing them into starvation. Families who had lost their working hands were hit especially hard. Güllü, the wife of a soldier named Halid, who wrote in the name of all women in the village of Telo of Pötürge (Mamûretülaziz) in eastern Anatolia, compellingly stated that their harvests did not reach five hundred or even two hundred kilos of grain. They could grow only seventy to eighty kilos, a quarter of which the provisioning officials purchased in addition to the regular tithe. The villagers would eagerly submit any grain in excess of their need for sustenance to the government for free. However, she wrote, even a single seed would not remain for them after the government’s purchase. In a similar vein, women from Keskin (Ankara) pleaded for the help of the Minister of Interior and asked for exemption from the second round of purchases (ikinci misil mûbayaa): “If we handed in this grain, we would surely be devastated, as would our children.” Farmers from Kırkkilise wrote that if the local provisioning commission insisted on purchasing their surplus grain, they would have no other option than to sell their draft animals to feed their families and then quit farming.

112 MMZC, Term 4, Year of Session 1, vol. 1, 1 Mart 1336 (1 March 1920), 313.
113 BOA.DH.IUM E/38-74 (16 September 1917).
114 BOA.DH.IUM E/39-46 (1 October 1917).
115 BOA.DH.IUM E/43-37 (10 November 1917).
Furthermore, in many cases, government officials, along with gendarmes, intruded into homes and storehouses to conduct searches and seizures, which outraged many producers in the Ottoman countryside. In the absence of tax farmers (mültezims, the majority of whom were drafted), the government conducted the collection of tithes and provisioning quotas (iaşe hissesi) through state officials, including teachers. Owing to this new mode of interaction and, more importantly, two- and three-fold increases in the tax burden, peasants began to long for the times when they submitted only their regular tithe and were subjected to tax farmers, about whom they used to complain bitterly before the war.\footnote{M. Zekai Konrapa, \textit{Bolu Tarihi} (Bolu: Bolu Vilayet Matbaası, 1960), 640.}

Transportation of the delivered grain to army storehouses in town centers turned into another burden for small farmers. Given the lack of an extensive road network, peasants were compelled by military and civilian officials to carry the grain the state bought from them with their own vehicles and animals. Since the army had already commandeered stronger draft animals and vehicles, this journey from villages to towns and big cities was a long and painful nightmare for the majority of villagers. Their weak animals perished on the way, their vehicles broke, and convoys of women, children, and the elderly suffered from hunger, cold, and sometimes from the attacks of marauders who had deserted from the army and survived through banditry.

The process of delivery also became an opportunity for the peasants’ exploitation. Taking advantage of the peasants’ vulnerability, officials who were charged with the duty of receiving the carried grain allocated a certain portion of it to themselves. They usually
claimed that it weighed less than the declared amount or was mixed with unwanted materials and asked the peasants to pay the price of the missing part.\textsuperscript{117}

VI. Conclusion

They [those who engaged in corruption while carrying out the impressments] are the greatest enemies of a country. I could not have done this in bygone days, but now I expose them. God willing, our nation will not see the disaster of war again. But if that day should come and the necessity should arise for the war taxes commissions to swing again into action, be you citizen, official or anyone else, take heed, and never let these things happen again.

The author of this warning, Muhittin Birgen, editor-in-chief of the semi-official Unionist daily, \textit{Tanin}, wrote in his memoirs that it was not only Enver Pasha’s delusions or Cemal Pasha’s pomposity that led to the defeat of the empire. Abuses and corruption in military requisitioning policies were also among the reasons why the Ottomans lost the war.\textsuperscript{118}

As discussed in this chapter, these policies constituted a significant component of Ottoman home-front life during the First World War and even beyond.\textsuperscript{119} With the purpose of feeding, clothing, and equipping a huge army, the Ottoman state intervened forcefully and sometimes even destructively in the lives of people throughout the empire.

\textsuperscript{117} The deputies’ own observations on the subject are quite revealing: \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 3, 16 Mart 1334 (16 March 1918), 273-276. See also \textit{IŞık Öğütçü}, ed., \textit{Orhan Kemal’in Babası Abdülladhir Kemali’nin Anıları} (Istanbul: Epsilon Yayınları, 2005), 213-215.

\textsuperscript{118} “Bir memleketin en büyük düşmanları bunlardır. O zaman yapamazdım; fakat, onları böylece teşhir ediyorum. İnşallah vatanimiz bir daha harp felaketi görmek; fakat bir gün gelir de öyle bir zararet hasil olur ve tekalif harbiye komisyonları tekrar faaliyete geçerse, vatandaş, ister memur ol ister bi başkası, sankin ha böyle şeylerin yapılmamasına müsaade etme!” Muhittin Birgen, \textit{İttihat ve Terakki’de On Sene}, 306. The impact of the requisitioning policies was so strong that, according to Tamara Chalabi, “there is still a term extant in Jabal Amil that refers to the Ottoman confiscation of food, \textit{balsa}, which roughly translates as ‘extortion.’” Chalabi, \textit{The Shi’is of Jabal Amil}, 55.

\textsuperscript{119} Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the post-war period, it should be noted that the nationalist government in Ankara conducted the War of Independence with the help of very similar (and even harsher) policies of extraction. For a rather descriptive overview of these policies, see Serpil Sürmeli, \textit{Milli Mükadele’de Tekalif-i Milliye Emirleri} (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları, 1998).
The general performance of soldiers on the battlefields came to depend upon the state’s ability to effectively extract resources from civilian society. More than any other set of policies, the demands of military provisioning obliterated the distinction between the war front and the home front.

This blurring of the military-civilian distinction, however, imposed enormous physical and psychological burdens on ordinary people. While resisting the state’s encroachment on their lives, they suffered heavily from the effects of this process. In tandem with deteriorating social conditions, the increasing encroachment of the state apparatus on the Ottoman people’s lives strained the legitimacy of the Ottoman state, intensified the pressure on the government and the military command, and undermined the mobilization effort. Therefore, the Ottoman state’s policies of provisioning were as significant a factor in the disintegration of the empire as the Ottoman military defeats on the war fronts.
CHAPTER 3
WAR, WOMEN and the STATE:
OTTOMAN SOLDIERS and THEIR FAMILIES

I. Introduction

For the Ottoman Empire, as for all belligerent societies, World War I was a period in which entrenched assumptions about gender roles and boundaries were radically challenged.¹ For both urban and rural women, the mass conscription of men opened up new possibilities for employment in production and services, while compelling them to assume de facto headship of households, carry the unbearable burden of everyday hardships, and, finally, enter into negotiations with government officials over their rights and privileges. As in other combatant societies, Ottoman women contributed in a number of ways to the Ottoman war effort and embraced the new social roles that the war dictated.

Yet, their contribution to the war effort was generally downplayed by the national memory. With some exceptions, women’s wartime experiences were excluded from the official historiography altogether. In both contemporary publications and later scholarly works, the war was envisioned as a predominantly masculine enterprise. While valorizing

the dedication, bravery, and altruism of soldiers, historians relegated women’s experiences of war to the margins of the official histories of the war.

In the official discourse of the post-war period, women were mostly memorialized as “angels of charity.” Their wartime experiences were thus reduced to caretaking activities. Although women’s increasing presence in the public sphere as nurses, charity organizers, and supporters was an important phenomenon, an exclusive focus on these activities ignores the wartime experiences of the majority of Ottoman women. This perspective also obscures the social and economic cleavages among women. This chapter emphasizes the importance of studying wartime gender relations to expand and complicate our understanding of the Ottoman experience of World War I. It aims to challenge the historical and cultural construction of war as exclusively male-centered and render women’s diverse wartime actions and experiences visible.²

Students of the Ottoman women’s movement have paid some attention to elite women’s wartime activities within the urban context.³ Although these studies have provided useful information about urban women’s experiences, they do not adequately

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² For a “call to arms” along similar lines, see Elizabeth Thompson, Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); 1-38; Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur, eds., Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1-20. See also Steven Heydeman’s general suggestion to study war as “a social and political process.” Steven Heydeman, “War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East,” in War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East, ed. Steven Heydeman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1-30.

address the entire spectrum of Ottoman women’s wartime experiences. This chapter differs from previous studies in its focus on a broader range of women’s experiences and roles in wartime Ottoman society. It also shifts the emphasis from an exclusively urban context to the countryside, where equally important wartime transformations took place. Although peasant women constituted the majority of the empire’s female population and played a crucial, albeit less visible, role on the Ottoman home front, historical scholarship has long overlooked their experiences. Here, I aim to underline their agency and emphasize their role as political actors. Employing previously unexplored material, my analysis focuses on women’s perceptions of and reactions to the war and the dramatic changes it brought to Ottoman society. Concentrating on one major group of women, namely soldiers’ wives and mothers, this chapter also examines how the war shaped women’s relationship with the Ottoman state and influenced their understanding of gender roles.

II. War and Ottoman Women

Although the war touched the life of nearly every Ottoman woman, it is almost impossible to produce a coherent story of their war experiences. The impact of the war was not identical from class to class, ethnic group to ethnic group, or from region to region. Yet, it would be safe to argue that, in both their personal and social lives, the majority of Ottoman women felt the disastrous impact of the war. Except for a relatively small, well-to-do segment of society, Ottoman women bore enormous material and emotional burdens during the course of the war. Virtually everywhere throughout the empire, women had to work much longer and harder as they performed conscripted
men’s work on top of the farm work and domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children and the elderly, which they already “naturally” had to deal with.

The demands of the Ottoman Empire’s involvement in the war led to dramatic changes in the way the state functioned and its capacity for intervention, a process which resulted in the emergence of a new relationship between the state and its people. For millions of men, this relationship materialized in the form of conscription and long military service. For women, it entailed primarily the withdrawal of men from their households and the increasing intrusion of the state into their daily lives. During the war, women were subjected to a variety of state policies and regulations, and, as a result, came into much more frequent contact with state officials.

Arguably the most visible impact of the First World War was the gradual exodus of the male population from communal life. As discussed in the first chapter, over the course of the war, the Ottoman army mobilized about 2.9 million troops. By the war’s end, it had suffered 750,000 fatalities from combat and disease. The high rate of casualties during the war deeply affected the demographic balance in Anatolia and other Ottoman lands, a process which had extensive social and cultural repercussions.


5 According to the data collected through the Turkish census of 1927, there were approximately 830,000 more women than men in the 20 - 45 age group. In the census data, the figures were 2,151,604 male and 2,797,916 female. The percentage of widows exceeded thirty percent in the western and northeastern provinces of the country. There were 1,062,916 widows in 1927 when the total population of Turkey was slightly more than thirteen million. Justin McCarthy, Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 120. Donald Webster’s calculations show even higher ratios for widowhood. Donald Everett Webster, The Turkey of Atatürk: Social Process in the Turkish Transformation (Philadelphia: The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1939), 59. See also Frederick C. Shorter, “The Population of Turkey after the War of
Given the absence of male members of the household, the hardships became increasingly unbearable for many families. While the men were away women, children and older members of the family had to eke out a living on their own. The departure of men, unforgiving wartime conditions and ensuing economic difficulties forced many women to take over the duty of providing for their families. Urban centers throughout the empire saw an expansion in the number of women in the workforce during the war. For many of those who had never worked before, this meant a radical change in their daily lives. Even for relatively well-to-do families whose male members were conscripted into the army, privations became an everyday feature of life.

War apparently did not differentiate between ethno-religious communities. Women from various ethnic groups were affected negatively when the male members of their families were conscripted. According to a report prepared by the Bnei Brith Society in İzmir, Jewish women had fallen into destitution due to their husbands’ absence, shortages, and inflated prices. Once relatively affluent members of society, they started to

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6 “Kadınların Muharebeden İstifadeleri,” Sabah (13 October 1917): 3; Yavuz Selim Karakışla, Women, War and Work in the Ottoman Empire: Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women, 1916-1923 (İstanbul: Ottoman Bank Research Center, 2005); Charlotte Lorenz, “Die Frauenfrage im osmanischen Reiche mit besonder Berücksichtigung der arbeitenden Klasse,” Die Welt des Islams 6 (1918): 72-214. Although the war opened up some work opportunities for women, at the end of the war, they had to forfeit these positions to men returning from the fronts. Tiğince Oktar, Osmanlı Toplumunda Kadının Çalışma Yaşamı: Osmanlı Kadınları Çalıştarma Cemiyet-i İslamiyesi (İstanbul: Bilim Teknik Yayınevi, 1998), 66-67.

7 See, for example, the wartime struggles of a young mother and wife who lost her husband during the war and had to work in an army workshop stitching uniforms for soldiers for long hours for very low wages. İrfan Orga, Bir Türk Ailesinin Öyküsü (İstanbul: Ana Yayıncılık, 1995).

8 War, the disappearance of male members of the household and the accompanying economic impoverishment usually entailed a decline in the social status of these families. For examples, see İrfan Orga, Bir Türk Ailesinin Öyküsü; Sarkis Torossian, From Dardanelles to Palestine: A True Story of Five Battle Fronts of Turkey and Her Allies and a Harem Romance (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1947 [1929]), 98; Nazan Bekiroğlu, Şair Nigar Hanım (İstanbul: İletişim Yayımları, 1998), 110-118.
work as housemaids, dishwashers, and charwomen. They had to resort to selling the furniture in their houses to earn enough money to purchase their daily bread.  

Although the wartime experiences of peasant women were considerably different from those of urban women, they too had to cope with the problems created by large-scale conscription. The war effort drained the Ottoman countryside of much-needed manpower and led to a sharp decline in families’ productive capacity. With every call for enlistment, thousands of households joined the needy soldiers’ families who could not maintain their subsistence. Contemporary observers took notes of numerous villages throughout the empire whose entire young male population had been drafted into military service. Men’s conscription required women to serve as the sole supporters of their children and aged members of the family.

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9 Siren Bora, *İzmir Yahudileri Tarihi 1908-1923* (İstanbul: Gözlem Yayınları, 1995), 238. Occasionally soldiers’ families expressed their outrage in more violent and confrontational forms. In at least one instance, soldiers’ families broke the windows and stormed a bakery in Kasaba (İzmir) and threatened the owner of the shop if he did not lower the prices. DH.IUM 4/1-33 (25 March 1916). Sarkis Torossian, a captain in the Ottoman army, writes in his memoirs that in Istanbul he heard stories “of bands of desperate women sallying forth at night to sack foodshops or attack an unsuspecting traveler.” Sarkis Torossian, *From Dardanelles to Palestine: A True Story of Five Battle Fronts of Turkey and Her Allies and a Harem Romance* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1947 [1929]), 94.

10 A Hungarian ethnographer, Istvan Györfi, was not allowed to visit certain villages in Anatolia, as the population of these villages was composed only of women and children. Melek Çolak, “Macar Etnograf Istvan Györfi ve Kuzey Marmara Bölgesi İnceleme Gezisi (1918),” *Belleten* 265 (2008): 943-951; M. Zekai Konrapa, a young governmental official in the district of Bolu, recalls the conditions of the villages his team visited while conducting examinations of village schools: “Whichever village we visited we did not come across a man. The war emptied all villages.” M. Zekai Konrapa, *Bolu Tarihi* (Bolu: Bolu Vilayet Matbaası, 1960), 619, 641; Rauf İnan, a secondary school student, remembers villages in Eastern Anatolia where the elderly and children made up the entire male population. He also vividly describes the emotional stress that women in these villages underwent. In almost everything, a dream, a spider web, a bird’s flight, or pages of a popular folktale, *Kerem and Aslı*, which young Rauf was reading, they looked for a good omen for the return of their husbands and sons. M. Rauf İnan, *Bir Ömrün Öyküsü*, vol. 1, *İkinci Meşrutiyetten Çifteler Köy Enstitüsü Müdürlüğü* (Ankara: Öğretmen Yayınları, 1986), 25-26. See also Fahri Çakır, *Elli Yıl Önce Şark Cephesi ve Anadolu Hatıraları* (İstanbul: Çınar Matbaası, 1967), 29; Leyla Neyzi, ed., *Amele Taburu: The Military Journal of a Jewish Soldier in Turkey during the War of Independence* (İstanbul: Isis Press, 2005), 40, 43, 46.
The war dramatically transformed the social composition of villages and made women the focal point of rural life as a large proportion of the remaining males were either young boys or elderly men. Although older male members of the village community still occupied prominent roles within the social order, women usually had to undertake the bulk of the farm work by themselves. The absence of men forced them to perform tasks which were previously performed by the male members of the family.\(^1\)

Not only did women throughout the Ottoman countryside have to cultivate their own crops, but they also had to bring them to the market to sell or locate buyers elsewhere. An article published in *Vakit*, for instance, mentions a new stratum of traders (*esnaf tabakası*) composed entirely of women. These women brought their products from nearby towns and villages to the capital and established a new marketplace for themselves.\(^2\) Falih Rıfkı [Atay], then a young officer, who was serving at the Fourth Army headquarters in Damascus, for instance, recalls peasant women at train stations who tried to sell fruit to passengers: “It is obvious that these clumsy, shy women had never left their villages and their hearths.”\(^3\)

Not only were women burdened with farm work in the absence of young men, but from the start of the war, women throughout the empire were frequently employed, either

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\(^{1}\) These experiences were indelibly inscribed into the memories of Ottoman women. These women, many of whom were illiterate, poignantly expressed their feelings in folk songs. Probably no other text could convey the despair of the war better than this song: *Adam’ olan hergediyor/ Onyedili harbediyor/ Her nereye vardıysam/ Kız, gelin çiftte gidiyor* (Families who have a man in their households lay their lands fallow/ Boys who were born in 1317 (1901) are fighting/ Wherever I go/ [I see] girls and brides go out to plow) Ahmet Z. Özdemir, *Öyküleriyle Ağtlar I* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2002), 32.


willingly or forcibly, in various forms of military labor. Local military commanders, for instance, often forced women to haul military equipment, ammunition, provisions, and other goods to distant locations. Particularly, in the provinces and on fronts where the army suffered from a lack of recruits, proper roads, or means of transportation, military authorities resorted to extracting labor from the locals, most of whom were women, children, and the elderly.

Similar to other aspects of life on the home front, official narratives of civilians in the military labor force differ considerably from those of civilians who actually experienced it. Reporting on the war service of women from Erzurum, the semi-official newspaper of the CUP regime, Tanin, applauded their sacrifice and altruism and likened them to the heroic women of the 1877-78 Russo-Ottoman war: “Sending their men to the defense of borders and carrying boxes of ammunition on their shoulders along with their children, the women of Erzurum proved that they are daughters of the women of ’93.”

Similarly, according to Fevzi Çakmak, a high-ranking commander on the eastern front, women demonstrated a great willingness to transport military goods, as they were fed along the way and received some money and food in exchange for their service. The duty assigned to these women (and their children) was that of carrying equipment and foodstuffs from the Black Sea shore up into the snowy mountains, from which they were

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15 Although the majority of the transportation was restricted to military purposes, there is evidence that women were also employed in civilian transportation, too. See BOA.DH.IUM E/24-35 (22 November 1916).

16 “Erzurum Hanımları,” Tanin (6 January 1915): 2. The year 1293 in the Islamic religious (hijri) calendar corresponds to 1877-78 CE.
sent on to army logistics stations (*menzil istasyonları*). From this high commander’s perspective, these women, described as a merely technical detail, were nothing but small cogs in the giant logistics machine of the Ottoman Third Army.

Many women, however, interpreted this kind of military employment as the unfair expropriation of their labor. In a telegram to the Ministry of Interior, Hatice and her fellow townswomen from Uşak in western Anatolia, who were all wives and mothers of soldiers called to active military duty, bitterly complained that they were being forced to carry provisions to a district center which was ten hours away. Despite the cold weather and the lack of draft animals (they were plowing fields of three-four households with only one yoke of oxen), local administrators used violence and compulsion on these women to employ them in transportation. Similarly, soldiers’ wives and mothers from Espiye cried out that for one and a half years they, together with the children and elderly women, were employed in the transportation of ammunition and provisions from Tirebolu on the Black Sea coast to military locations that were anywhere from five to twelve hours away without receiving any compensation. Abdulkadir Kemali Bey, a reserve officer during the war, also testifies to women’s misery under military employment. He recalls women, children and elderly villagers waiting in front of the army supply office to transport grain with their own carriages. Women bitterly

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18 BOA DH.I-UM, 20/1-1/14 (17 March 1918).
19 BOA DH.I-UM, 20/11-3/1 (1 January 1918).
complained that they were forcibly employed in grain transportation without pay and that some of them were not even allowed to take their newborn babies with them.\(^\text{21}\)

Women’s interaction with military authorities was not limited to their participation in the military labor force. Actually, close contact with military personnel became a constant feature of everyday life on the Ottoman home front. Soldiers of all ranks who were passing by towns and villages on their way to and from the war fronts encountered populations composed mostly of women, children, and the elderly. Throughout the empire, newly recruited soldiers marched on foot in convoys to the nearest railway station, army camp, or major logistics station in order to join the army corps to which they were assigned. Similarly, on their way to the fronts, soldiers had to cover hundreds of miles on foot simply because of the limited extent of the Ottoman railway network.\(^\text{22}\) Most of the time, soldiers would have to spend the night in whatever village they happened to be near when the sun set and meet their needs for food and shelter through local resources. They generally forced local inhabitants out of their houses,\(^\text{23}\) commandeered foodstuffs, and took arbitrary possession of other valuable items.

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\(^{21}\) Later, during and after the War of Independence, the nationalist government in Ankara appropriated this image of the “woman with the oxcart” and turned it into a symbol of national unity and sacrifice to save the motherland. The figure was inscribed on the front side of the Medal of Independence (İstiklal Madalyası) which was awarded to those who fought in the War of Independence to honor their service.

\(^{22}\) Especially on their way to the eastern front, soldiers had to cover extremely long distances on foot as the railroad ended in Ulukışla in south/central Anatolia. See, for example, Halil Ataman, *Esaret Yılları: Bir Yedek Subayın 1. Dünya Savaş Şark Cephesi Hatıraları*, ed. Ferhat Ecer (İstanbul: Kardeşler Matbaası, 1990), 37-38.

\(^{23}\) For instance, Master Sergeant Sami recorded in his diary that his troop decided to spend the night in a village called Kolsuz near Niğde on 18 December 1918 on their return journey from Palestine. On that very cold night, they forced a young bride from her place in order to stay there. (“Bir yeni gelincikleri evinden zorla çıkarıp o gece orada barındık.”) Sami Yengin, *Drama'dan Sina-Filistin'e Savaş Günlüğü* (1917-
Women keenly felt the ravages of this close contact with marching convoys. In a telegram to the Ministry of Interior, soldiers’ wives from Tirebolu painted a revealing picture of the difficulties women experienced during these marches. When military officials commandeered houses, the occupants would have no other option but to sleep outside under the trees, even when temperatures were below freezing. Although they had already delivered three-eighths of their maize and all of their rice to the army, local gendarmerie commanders also compelled the peasants to sell the grain they had reserved for their own subsistence. If the gendarmes could not find the grain the peasants had stored, they confiscated their domestic appliances such as pots, pans, and cauldrons. By entering their houses and occupying them, soldiers effectively undermined the privacy of families and violated the sanctity of their homes. Women’s tone conveyed the hopelessness, anguish and shame they felt: “we’ve lost our chastity, honor, and modesty” (*bizlerde ırz, namus, haya kalmamıştır*).\(^{24}\)

George E. White, president of the Anatolia College at Merzifon (Marsovan), a high school established and directed by American missionaries, observed the interaction between soldiers and local women. His notes are worth quoting at length:

> A convoy of recruits would reach a village toward evening and the officer in charge would requisition lodging and supplies for the night. Most of the men were away doing their own soldier service, and the village women with their children and others would neither dare to refuse their uninvited guests nor remain in their homes over night when soldiers were camping in their village. So the village families would go out to the fields or forests to pass the night and return cold and miserable in the morning to find that their hungry visitors had eaten what there was to eat; had burned what there was to burn; had


\(^{24}\) BOA DH.I-UM, 20/2-2/13 (1 December 1917).
carried away what there was to wear; and had left behind them a half-wrecked village. A few days later, the experience would be repeated, and this time one or more of the soldiers would be left behind sick with smallpox when the rest marched away, and soon the village cemetery would be crowded with fresh graves. Some villages were almost or entirely wiped out by such experiences. The atmosphere around us and around everybody in the country was quivering with excitement. This was war.25

Indeed, the encroachment of civilian and military authorities was not limited to passing convoys of soldiers. A telegram received by the Minister of Interior, Talat Pasha, on December 31, 1917, clearly reflected the transforming and expanding functions of the state apparatus as well as the wartime crisis engulfing Ottoman society. The ten women who signed this telegram, Fatma, Atiye, Ayşe, Fatma, Fatma, Yeter, Fatma, Havva, Hatice, and Zeynep, were all wives and mothers of soldiers who had been called off to military duty. They bitterly complained about the increasingly harsh policies of state and military officials, and the prevalence of poverty and hunger. These peasant women, who lived in a small, relatively isolated village on the Black Sea coast, were pointing to widespread problems. The elderly and children were taken to be employed in the construction of roads and fortifications. They gave their mules, horses, sheep, and cattle to the military. Their fields remained unsown due to the lack of seed grain, draft animals, and necessary farming tools. Deserters and refugees who roamed the area plundered their entire stock of hazelnut and most of their maize. The remaining grain, the peasants cried out, would likely be sufficient for only four months. Despite these harsh conditions, state officials still pressured them to provide grain for the army at extremely low prices. Given the high prices of both staple items and consumption goods and governmental policies,

women asserted that people were barefoot, inadequately clothed, and poorly sheltered. They asked the Minister of the Interior to be transferred elsewhere so they would not die of starvation or, alternatively, they asked to be cast into the sea. The misery and destitution was obviously not unique to this small northern Anatolian village.

III. War, the State, and Soldiers’ Families

In urban centers and especially the countryside, soldiers’ families were arguably the social group most affected by the war. They carried the heaviest burden of the war and suffered most of its traumatic effects on the home front. They also became the object of several state policies, and developed a new political identity vis-à-vis the state.

Throughout the war years, women in general, and soldiers’ wives in particular, increasingly became public figures who were generally depicted in war propaganda and literature as the vulnerable, passive embodiments of the nation who needed to be protected by the soldier on the battlefront. From the symbolic and cultural perspective, while the front-line soldier was at the heart of the system of values underpinning

26 BOA DH.I-UM, 20/2-2/3 (31 December 1917).

27 Here I use the term “political” in the sense offered by Keith Michael Baker, who defines it as being the process of “making claims; as the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole.” This conceptualization of politics as a complicated web of interrelated practices offers historians the advantage of rescuing politics from the monopoly of the elite circles, parliamentary debates, and governmental decrees. Furthermore, it opens new avenues to merge “high” politics with broader segments of society, as well as with a wider array of popular and individual forms of expression and contestation such as the local press, pamphlets, songs, rumors, clandestine literature, rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Keith Michael Baker, Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4. See also William Sewell, “Ideologies and Social Revolutions,” Journal of Modern History 57 (1985): 57–85; Wayne Te Brake, Shaping History: Ordinary People in European Politics, 1500–1700 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), 6–7; Kathleen Canning and Sonya O. Rose, “Gender, Citizenship, and Subjectivity: Some Historical and Theoretical Considerations,” in Gender, Citizenship, and Subjectivities, eds. Kathleen Canning and Sonya O. Rose (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 1-17.
patriotism and sacrifice on the home front, the soldiers’ wives, mothers, and families (in the singular asker zevcesi, asker validesi, or asker ailesi) were also important and commonly encountered figures in the wartime discourse.

In the first days of the war, in an official declaration aimed at the army and navy, the Ottoman parliament requested that the soldiers continue fighting bravely and avenge the “extinguished hearths, chafed wounds, and trampled martyrs [of the Balkan Wars].”

Following these heartening words, the parliament explicitly pledged to take care of soldiers’ families while they were away at war: “Do not ever be concerned about your families, your hearths. They are entrusted to us for safekeeping by God’s will (onlar bize vediatullahtr).” As this official declaration illustrates, the Ottoman state admitted that it had a duty to provide for soldiers’ families and to keep them from suffering. During the war, it attempted to respond to the problems of soldiers’ families through both material and symbolic measures. War, in this sense, brought about a profound modification of the state’s relationship with women as well as a dramatic change in women’s social identity. It was their husbands’ and fathers’ conscription for the war that initiated this process of transformation of women’s identities vis-à-vis the state. Thus the implementation of several policies -- among them the financial support program discussed below -- represented the emergence of a new state-sanctioned identity marker of women as

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28 Meclis-i Mebusan Zabit Ceridesi (hereafter MMZC), Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol. 1, 8 Kanunuevvel 1330 (21 December 1914), 26. The nationalist movement in Anatolia employed the same argument to re-mobilize people for the fight against the invading Greek armies. See, for instance, Mustafa Necati’s address to soldiers in Kastamonu: “Oh brothers toiling on the fronts! My soldier brothers! Do not be anxious about your families, children, and fathers whom you left in our care. They are entrusted to us.... We will never hesitate to make the utmost sacrifice.” Bir Hitabe (Kastamonu: Kastamonu Vilayet Matbaasi, 1338 [1922]) transcribed in Mustafa Eski, Mustafa Necati Bey’in Kastamonu’da Çalışmaları (Ankara: Kastamonu Eğitim Yüksekokulu Yayınları, 1990), 179-192, 192.

29 These themes were echoed in speeches of higher-ranking officials. See, for example, Irfan Bedri, “Asker Ailelerine Elimizden Gelen Her Türülü Yardım En Büyük Vazifemiz,” Tanin (24 January 1915): 3.
“soldiers’ wives” or “soldiers’ mothers.” In this new relationship, the sons, husbands, and fathers serving in the army came to represent the link between the state and women in wartime Ottoman society.

Official discourse was not the only venue where the special status of soldiers’ families was highlighted. The civil society, acting generally in cooperation with the wartime government, spent considerable effort to mobilize popular opinion in favor of them.  

Indeed, in addition to official policies, the Ottoman government also relied on the efforts of civil society organizations to supplement state aid to soldiers’ families. Several philanthropic organizations were formed (or revitalized) during the war for the purpose of providing material support for soldiers’ families in distress. Arguably, the Ladies’ Aid Society for Soldiers’ Families (Asker Ailelerine Yardımcı Hanımlar Cemiyeti) was the most vocal and active among new associations the war spawned. The activities of these organizations included organizing theatrical performances and concerts as fund-raisers for soldiers’ families, collecting donations to contribute to the welfare of these families.

30 For a general discussion of the relationship among war, mobilization, and civil society in the late Ottoman Empire, see Nadir Özbek, “Defining the Public Sphere during the Late Ottoman Empire: War, Mass Mobilization and the Young Turk Regime (1908-18),” Middle Eastern Studies 43 (2007): 795-809.

31 “Bir Fazilet Dersi,” İctihad 126 (28 January 1915): 462. It was largely uppermiddle and upperclass, elite women who led and participated in these organizations. In her diaries, Şair Nigar Hamım, who befriended women from the higher echelons of society, mentions their eager participation in charity activities. Nigar Binti Osman, Şair Nigar: Hayatımın Hikayesi (Istanbul: Ekin Basım evi, 1959), 74. For the activities of Talat Pasha’s wife, Hayriye Hamım, see Murat Bardakçı, Talat Paşa’nın Evrak-ı Metrukesi: Sadrazam Talat Paşa’nın Özel Arşivinde Bulunan Ermeni Tehciri Belgeler ve Bazı Hususi Yazışmalar (Istanbul: Everest Yayınları, 2008), 206-07. It is important to note that there are predecessors of this kind of organizations in Ottoman society. Emine Semiye, “Şefkat-i Nisvan,” Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete 160 (30 April 1314): 1-2; as cited in Serpil Çakır, Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1994), 43-44.

conducting campaigns to gather clothing, dried food, and sanitary materials, and running
day nurseries.\textsuperscript{33}

On the other hand, major nationalistic civil society organizations broadened their
scope of activities to extend aid to officers’ and soldiers’ families who were living in
indigent circumstances. The \textit{Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti} (National Defense Society) was
apparently the most active of these charity organizations which stepped in to support
municipal welfare activities in many Ottoman cities.\textsuperscript{34} The wartime activities of
\textit{Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti} were not limited to the capital city alone. In İzmir, for
instance, charity organizations ran soup kitchens and opened sewing workshops where
soldiers’ family members were employed.\textsuperscript{35} In Niğde, the women’s branch of the society
collected donations for the war effort.\textsuperscript{36}

Besides conducting such activities, Ottoman civil society organizations and the
press also sought to mobilize the patriotic and religious sentiments of the urban
population to raise support for soldiers’ families. In a public declaration addressing the
Ottoman people, the \textit{Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti} stated that the government also
depended on the willingness of the Ottoman nation to embrace and support the family
members of soldiers, despite its hard work in attempting to meet the needs of those
families. Soldiers who rushed to the borders to defend the religion, chastity, honor, life,

\textsuperscript{33} “Asker Ailelerine Yardımcı Hanımlar Cemiyeti,” \textit{Vakit} (29 February 1918), 2; “Yardımcı Hanımlar
Cemiyeti,” \textit{Vakit} (1 March 1918): 2; “Havadis-i Dünya: Asker Ailelerine Yardımcı Hanımlar Cemiyeti,”


\textsuperscript{35} Yaşar Aksoy, \textit{Bir Kent, Bir İnsan: İzmir’in Son Yüzyılı, S. Ferit Eczacibaşı’nın Yaşamı ve Anıları}
(Istanbul: Dr. Nejat F. Eczacibaşi Vakfı Yayınları, 1986), 134-38; Celâl Bayar, \textit{Ben de Yazdım}, vol. 5, \textit{Milli
Mücadeleye Giriş} (İstanbul: Baha Matbaası, 1967), 1545-46.

and property of the nation, reads the declaration, must not be concerned with the needs of their families. If *jihad* was a duty that fell on every Muslim, “nourishing deprived families that the soldiers left behind in their villages was an equally religious and humanitarian duty.”\(^{37}\) In a similar vein, the journal *Sebilür-Reşad*, for example, invoked Ottoman Muslims’ sense of solidarity. Aksekili Ahmet Hamdi Bey, a prominent religious authority of the period, reiterated that it was Muslims’ obligation to help soldiers’ families and called upon them to give alms to these families.\(^{38}\)

The most direct way in which the Ottoman state showed its concern was to devise a state subsidy system for soldiers and their families. As part of the new law of military obligation, the state pledged to provide a certain allowance for soldiers’ family members who did not have anyone else to take care of them. In this way, the state tried to mitigate the negative effects of the loss of one (or more) male members of the household to the army by assigning family members a monthly payment of 30 *kuruş* (piasters) as compensation for the loss of income. In order to qualify for this allowance, the family members had to be entirely dependent on the soldier and should not have income from any other source.

The Ottoman Empire was not alone in devising policies to diminish domestic hardships experienced by soldiers’ relatives. During the First World War, almost every combatant nation developed financial support programs for soldiers’ families who grappled with hardships originating from the recruitment of family breadwinners. These

\(^{37}\) “Cihad-ı Ekber,” *İkdam* (16 September 1330/29 September 1914), 2.

programs varied considerably in terms of the amount of allowance, the number of family members entitled to the pension, and the institution responsible for overseeing the program. Nevertheless, they all served the same purpose and signified the special status of soldiers’ relatives on the home front.39

Previous regulations on recruitment in the Ottoman Empire included a category of exemption called muinsizlik (which literally means “being without a supporter or breadwinner”).40 Young men could claim exemption from military service if they could prove that their close relatives were entirely dependent upon them. In order to be released from military service, according to the regulations of 1870 and 1886, an individual had to be the sole breadwinner for his parents over the age of seventy (or younger than seventy, but unable to earn their own living), his widowed mother, his own household (hane), or his grandparents. If there were other male relatives (father, father-in-law, son, brother, etc.) living in the same village or town who could take care of the above-mentioned dependants, then the conscripts had to draw lots and begin to serve their terms in the army.41


41 Issues related to the exemption of the sole breadwinners were more or less the same in the laws of recruitment of 1870 and 1886. See Mustafa Gül, “1870 Asker Alma Kanunu,” Askeri Tarih Bülteni 23
The principle of exemption based on being the sole supporter remained more or less unchanged until the Balkan Wars, when breadwinning soldiers were called up to fill the gaps in the army’s ranks. In December 1912, the Ottoman state passed a provisional law to wrestle with the problems caused by the conscription of these men. The law stated that a monthly allowance of thirty kurş (piasters) per capita would be paid to the family members of these soldiers. With the end of the Balkan Wars, the state did not return to the policy of exempting breadwinners from military service. Instead, in March 1914 it decided to conscript men who were born in 1891, 1892, 1893, and 1894 and those who were designated as reservists (kism-i saniye tefrik edilmiş) due to their status of the sole supporter of his family.

In May 1914, the principle of aiding soldiers’ families financially from the state treasury was codified in the new provisional Ottoman law on military obligation (Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanun-u Muvakkat). There were a total of seven articles related to the aid to soldiers’ families, grouped under the subtitle of “Muhtac-i Muavenet Asker Aileleri Hakkında Ahkâm” (Provisions Regarding Soldiers’ Families in Need of...
The new conscription law of 1914 repealed the exemption of sole supporters and brought about the practice of direct financial aid to soldiers’ families whose male breadwinners were drafted into the army. The law set “a minimum of 30 kuruş per person” monthly allowance for individuals whose subsistence depended on a conscript’s earnings. The law gave a list of relatives of the conscript who were potentially entitled to receive the monthly payment. This list includes a conscript’s disabled or physically impaired father (malul veya bedenen gayri muktedir pederi), his widowed mother, his lawfullay wedded wife (zevce-i menkuha veya muteddesi), his disabled or physically impaired grandfather, his widowed grandmother, his unmarried, divorced, or widowed sister (bakir veya seyyib hemşiresi), his disabled or physically impaired brothers and brothers under the age of sixteen, his unmarried or widowed nieces, his nephews under the age of sixteen, and finally, his unmarried daughters (zatüzzevc olmayan kızları) and sons under the age of sixteen.\(^{45}\)

The law also lists the potential substitute breadwinners (singular, muin) who could take care of the conscript’s relatives in his absence. According to this list, a father, son, brother, grandfather, brother-in-law, or uncle could be appointed as a substitute breadwinner, depending on their wealth and income as well as their geographical proximity to the family members in need.\(^{46}\) In order to be considered as a substitute breadwinner, the father must live in the same district (kaza); the son, brother, grandfather, and brother-in-law in the same village (kariye) or neighborhood (mahalle); and the rest in

\(^{45}\) Mecmuas-i Kavanin-i Cedide-i Osmaniye’den Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanunu (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Cihan, 1332 [1916]), 19.

the same household (*hane*). The law regarded the relatives of the conscript as being eligible for state aid only if none of these potential breadwinners was present, if they did not earn yearly income sufficient for their maintenance, if they were not employed in agriculture, trades, and crafts, and, finally, if they did not receive a salary or allowance from any other source. The law authorized local conscription councils (*ahz-ı asker meclisleri*) to determine whether the relative was in need of support.\(^{47}\)

As discussed above, the scheme of state aid had already been implemented by the time of the Balkan Wars. However, it was during the First World War that the Ottoman state put the policy into full practice on a large scale. As part of the new law of conscription, the policy of family separation allowances affected literally millions of soldiers and their relatives on the home front. Recruitment of conscripts under the category of the sole supporter must have been an unexpected development throughout the empire. Local folk poets felt obliged to mention this destabilizing experience in their works. An epic poem by Murad Ali, a young conscript from Elbistan (Maraş), probably encapsulated the feelings of tens of thousands of young men like him:\(^{48}\)

Bin üçyüz otuzda bir emir çıktı.  An ordinance came out in ‘330 [1914].
Nicesinin evin başına yıkıtı.  It brought many [families’] houses down upon their heads.
Muinli muinsiz aradan kalktı.  The difference between *muinli* and *muinsiz* was abolished.
Herkes harmonını koyup gidiyor.  Everybody abandons their harvests and goes.

While this policy represented a critical milestone in the history of Ottoman military conscription, it also introduced a new understanding of mutual obligations

\(^{47}\) **Mükellefiyet-i Askeriye Kanunu**, 21.

between the state and its citizens. In theory, the relief for soldiers’ families differed from previous forms of poor relief in the Ottoman Empire in two ways. First, it was applied universally to everyone who was qualified to receive the aid, regardless of the wish of the benefactor. Second, it was generally perceived, by both recipients and administrators, not as a donation but as a form of compensation granted in return for the soldiers’ sacrifice for the nation. People earned this right through the military service of their fathers, husbands, and sons. Talat Pasha, the Minister of Interior, emphasized this point of reciprocity and expressed the Ottoman state’s obligation to support soldiers’ families in his speech on the annual budget of 1332 [1916]. It is incumbent upon the government when it asks for a sacrifice from the nation, argued Talat Pasha, to provide the necessary support to people to the extent possible: “The first thing to fulfill this duty was the maintenance of the welfare and livelihood (terfih ve ikdar) of the families of our brave soldiers. This year three million lira were allotted and dispensed for this purpose.”

The idea of reciprocity and a direct relationship between military service and state support to soldiers’ families was also evident in the treatment of families of soldiers who had deserted. Although the Law of Military Obligation of 1914 did not provide a clear explanation concerning the status of these families, for the Ministry of War, it was self-evident that they must be taken out of the allowance scheme. As the ultimate goal of the law was to provide support to families while their breadwinners were serving in the army, according to military officials, they were not entitled to their monthly allowances if the

49 For poor relief in the late Ottoman Empire, see Nadir Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Sosyal Devlet: Siyaset, Iktidar ve Meşrutiyet, 1876-1914* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002).

50 *MMZC*, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 1, 26 Kanunusani 1331 (8 February 1916), 511.
soldier deserted his battalion or if he did not return from leave. Termination of the military service of the conscript would automatically end the state’s obligation to his family.

On the local level, administrative councils (singular, meclis-i idare) were charged with administering the financial support program in collaboration with recruitment offices (ahz-i asker daireleri) and revenue offices (mal sandıkları). While recruitment offices provided the records of families whose sole supporters had joined the army, the local revenue offices were assigned the duty of dispensing money to these families. The first monthly allowance would be paid out to family members after the conscript appeared in person at the recruitment center and began his military service.

Although it was the administrative councils’ duty to run necessary checks, they occasionally passed their authority on to local religious leaders and village or neighborhood headmen (muhtars) to testify to the social status of the soldier’s family and the presence of any other relative who could take care of family members in the absence of the soldier. Thus, imams, muhtars, and administrative council clerks played a critical role in a family’s receipt or denial of state aid. Not infrequently, however, they used their authority to extract money or other favors from soldiers’ families. At the end of the war, their abuse of power became so blatant that local newspapers openly criticized them. “We hear that you extort money from those poor people [families who receive muinsiz

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51 BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/1 (21 July 1915), doc.3; BOA.DH.IUM E/8-58 (16 July 1915); BOA.DH.HMŞ 23/120 (16 July 1915);
52 DH.I-UM 4/3-9/57 (15 May 1916)
53 Hfzi Veldet Velidedeoğlu, Anıların İzinde, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi Yayınları, 1977), 162-63. See also the complaints filed by inspectors that headmen haphazardly distributed certificates (singular, ilmühaber) necessary for the assignment of the allowance. Thus, the inspectors observed, many families who were not in need were assigned pensions. BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/27 (2 March 1916), doc.3.
payment or martyrs’ compensation],” wrote Ses, published in Balıkesir. “This is a sin, a tyranny…. What would we do if you - muhtar, imam - committed such tyranny?” Ses also threatened to publicly announce their names if they continued their misbehavior.54

The introduction of the separation allowance, in theory, aimed at marking a shift in the status of soldiers’ families. In previous periods and particularly during wars, the absence of the male members of the family had left women dependent on familial or communal support and public charity to overcome economic and social hardships. Yet, by assigning monthly payments, the state tried to compensate for the material losses the soldiers’ families endured. However, some state officials were skeptical about the use of state aid by soldiers’ families. Reşid Bey, governor of Diyarbekir, for example, expressed his concern to the Ministry of Interior by claiming that those families with too much money at their disposal were likely to spend the allowance on unnecessary items rather than necessities and would get accustomed to laziness. The underlying concern of the governor’s arguments was that, once the policy had been implemented, thousands of women would gain control of money in a way unthinkable before the war. In order to avoid the potential “dangers” of this situation and to save the imperial treasury sizable sums, he proposed to set the upper limits for monthly payments per family to 100 piasters in villages, 150 piasters in towns, and 200 piasters in cities.55 Two years later, in the face of skyrocketing prices, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Finance, Tahsin Bey, used a similar argument when fighting against a proposal to raise the monthly allowances.

Payments made to many families exceeded the incomes of these families before the war,


55 BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/35 (24 May 1915), doc.3.
particularly in the countryside. For instance, in certain parts of the Ottoman countryside, “a breadwinner of a family of six,” claimed Tahsin Bey, “could not normally earn 150 kurus a month.” But now, it was alleged, these people were even managing to save some money from their allowances.56

On the other hand, some local administrators rightfully claimed that the family allowance of thirty piasters per person might meet the needs of a household of five or six. But it certainly would not be sufficient for “an old woman or a child who lived on their own.” They also criticized lawmakers, albeit implicitly, for being oblivious to regional differences in the prices of staple items. In some provinces, governors and mutasarrıfs (district administrators) attempted to ease the suffering of soldiers’ families by assigning them monthly payments higher than thirty piasters. The uncertainty of the upper limits of pensions in the law allowed them - at least on paper - to determine monthly payments on an ad hoc basis. These efforts, however, were met with consistent resistance by the imperial administrators, particularly by the Ministry of Finance. In a letter to the Minister of Interior, for instance, the mutasarrıf of Dersim in eastern Anatolia convincingly argued in favor of a decision by a local administrative council to assign forty piasters to a woman. Since only the lower limit was stated in the law and since the ultimate goal of the law was to spare these women from poverty, as the mutasarrıf claimed, this decision fully complied with the law. Despite his reasoning, however, the mutasarrıf was asked to

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56 MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 1, 26 Kanunusani 1331 (8 February 1916), 521. For similar arguments of the governor of Mamuretulaziz, see BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/35 (10 May 1915), doc.4. Since the monthly payments were assigned per capita, it became a common practice throughout the empire to register new and previously unregistered births and conceal deaths in the family. Sapançalı H. Hüseyin, Karaman, 24; Mehmed Hayri, Türkiye’nin Sıhhi ve İctimai Coğrafyası: Niğde Şancağı, ed. İlhan Gedik (Niğde: n.p., 1994 [1922]), 192; Şefik Arif, Türkiye’nin Sıhhi ve İctimai Coğrafyası: Urfa Vilayeti (İstanbul: Kağıtçılık ve Matbaacılık Anonim Şirketi, 1925), 42.
lower the monthly allowance back to thirty piasters based on the argument that this was the payment assigned to soldiers’ families empire-wide (including the capital).\footnote{57} Similarly, in January 1917, the local administrative council of Kayseri decided to raise the monthly payments of all soldiers’ relatives to forty piasters a month to keep up with increasingly high inflation in the price of consumer goods. Again, the Ministry of Finance summarily revoked this decision taken by local authorities.\footnote{58}

Indeed, on the ground, the implementation of this policy of economic assistance to soldiers’ relatives was seriously flawed. In the first months of the mobilization and the war, local civilian authorities did not seem to grasp the importance of state pensions for army morale and for the wellbeing of soldiers’ families. This negligence resulted in tension with military authorities. “One cannot overstate,” a complaint by the Ministry of War read, “the impact of this [the lamentable situation of families who fell into poverty and destitution] on soldiers who are ready to give their lives for the motherland and, thus, on the entire army.”\footnote{59} Upon receiving a number of similar warnings and complaints from military officials, the Ministry of Interior admonished the administrators of provinces to pay due attention to finalizing the assignment of pensions without any further delay.\footnote{60} Enver Pasha, who himself observed the miserable situation of soldiers’ families in the western Anatolian province of Karesi in August 1914, ordered the provisioning of these

\footnote{57} BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/15 (6 January 1915).
\footnote{58} BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/50 (27 February 1917).
\footnote{59} BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/25 (24 August 1914), doc. 9.
\footnote{60} BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/5 (30 July 1914); BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/6 (13 August 1914).
families by municipalities in towns and by councils of elders in villages until allowances were assigned, an order which subsequently was sent to all provinces.⁶¹

Throughout the war years, the inspection of local administrative councils by the state’s fiscal inspectors (maliye müfettişleri) revealed that their functioning was far from ideal. Due presumably to other bureaucratic duties that had been assigned to these councils, they were overwhelmed by hundreds and even thousands of applications for state aid from soldiers’ families. Despite continuous warnings from the center, the situation did not significantly improve even towards the end of the war for some districts.⁶²

Local administrators’ and administrative councils’ subjective decisions on applications became a matter of widespread complaint and frustration. In some regions of the empire, local administrators motivated by “the idea of the interest of the imperial treasury (menfaat-i hazine mülahazastyla)” assigned stipends to only one or two members of a family of four or five. It was also not unusual for officials to assign stipends to only one person per household.⁶³ With similar concerns and under the pressure of deteriorating financial condition, local officials also attempted to delay the assignment of payments. As late as February 1918, for instance, the mutasarrıf of Niğde

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⁶¹ BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/25 (24 August 1914), doc.3, 6; The municipality of Istanbul pointed out the impossibility of the implementation of this plan in a city as big as Istanbul. BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/25 (24 August 1914), doc.11.

⁶² For instance, as late as December 1916, there were approximately 500 applications piled up before the local administrative council of Sandıklı in western Anatolia awaiting reviews. BOA.DH.IUM E/25-5 (11 December 1916). For a similar situation in Siverek in southeastern Anatolia, see BOA.DH.IUM 4/3-9/69 (1 September 1915). The Ministry of Interior asked the Ministry of War for permission to employ literate soldiers on the commissions established by the local councils. These soldiers would not be used in other sections of local governments. They would deal exclusively with the pensions of soldiers’ families. BOA.DH.IUM 4/3-9/62 (11 September 1916).

⁶³ See the petition of Vasili son of Yorgi, whose mother was assigned a pension while his sister was denied. BOA.DH.IUM E/42-84 (1 December 1917).
seemed reluctant to assign pensions to soldiers’ families starting on the date of the conscription of soldiers. Despite a number of circulars on this issue, he intended to pay the pensions starting from the month in which the application was made.\textsuperscript{64}

In a general circular to all provinces and districts, the Ministry of Interior cautioned local administrators against such decisions. According to the Ministry, due to the poor performance of local councils in investigating applicants’ economic and social situations, pensions were being assigned to people who were not in need while being denied to others who desperately were. In the event of recurrence of such unlawful cases, the Ministry warned, councils would be subjected to legal investigation.\textsuperscript{65}

In some districts, ethnic considerations played a role in the rejection of several women’s applications for pensions. In the central Anatolian district of Boğazlıyan, local officials did not assign monthly payment to Armenian women who had converted from Christianity to Islam (\textit{muhtediyes}) despite their husbands’ service in the military.\textsuperscript{66} The women petitioned against their unlawful treatment to military inspector Hulusi Pasha, who was visiting the town in the summer of 1916. Upon his report, the Ministry of War had to remind the Ministry of Interior and its personnel that the new law of military

\textsuperscript{64} BOA.DH.IUM 4/3-9/57 (28 February 1918).
\textsuperscript{65} BOA.DH.IUM E/27-37 (4 February 1917).
\textsuperscript{66} BOA.DH.IUM E/25-50 (17 December 1916), The district governor of Boğazlıyan was Mehmed Kemal Bey, who was found guilty and hanged in 1919 for his role in the deportation of Armenians. See Nejdet Bilgi, \textit{Ermeni Tehciri ve Boğazlıyan Kaymakami Mehmed Kemal Bey’in Yargılanması} (Ankara: KÖK Sosyal ve Stratejik Araştırma Vakfı, 1999). Based on the archival material in the Prime-Ministry Ottoman Archives, it is not possible to determine the extent to which non-Muslims were denied allowances and pensions. Beki L. Bahar, a Jew, writes in her memoirs that despite her uncle-in-law’s father’s death at Gallipoli, his widow was denied a pension. Beki L. Bahar, \textit{Ordan Burdan Altmış Yılın Ardından} (İstanbul: Güzlem Gazetecilik Basın ve Yayın A. Ş., 1995), 67. Similary, Elenika and her forty friends, writing from the Christian neighborhood of Söğüt (Eskişehir), claimed that their husbands, who had died of epidemic disease when they were performing their military service, were denied pensions unlike their Muslim counterparts. BOA.DH.IUM E/54-23 (6 July 1919).
obligation applied to every Ottoman regardless of ethnicity and confessional community (kavmiyet ve milliyet tefrik etmeksizin) and that it had ordered equal state support to all families in need.

Pensions that were assigned to soldiers’ families could also be cut off later for several reasons. The detection by state officials of a family’s untruthful declarations about their economic and social status was the main reason for the revocation of state aid. However, local officials sometimes went too far in ceasing some families’ payments. Those who owned even a small plot of land or received a minute salary were taken out of the state pension system. For instance, Huriye and her friends from Silifke, all soldiers’ wives, wrote to the Minister of Interior and alleged that they were not considered without a supporter (muinsiz) because of small pieces of land (of ten dönüms) that they owned and asked the minister how they were going to raise their children: “Does not the nation need these little boys and girls?" In February 1917, officials in İzmit deemed families who owned a couple of kilos of wheat or maize well-off (sia-i hal eshabından) and deprived them of their monthly salaries. The case required the intervention of the Ministry of War, which had to remind the local authorities that these families might have needs other than grain and that it was not proper to take their stipends away. Similarly, in his defense against the charges that the system in his town was malfunctioning, the kaymakam (subgovernor) of Sandıklı argued that the employment of women in hoeing or similar jobs was the reason that they were being denied monthly payments. It was, as the

67 BOA.DH.IUM E/75-52 (20 Mart 1915)
68 BOA.DH.IUM E/28-15 (19 February 1917). For similar cases, see BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/38 (6 May 1916). The Ministries of Finance and Interior continually warned local administrative councils to conduct in-depth investigations regarding the economic background of soldiers’ families before assigning stipends. See, for example, BOA.DH.I-UM E/46–34 (29 October 1917).
civil inspector of the situation correctly observed, their deprivation which forced these women to work unceasingly in these jobs to earn their living and led them to ask for the assignment of monthly allowances.\textsuperscript{69} Although the thirty-piaster-per-month allowance was quite inadequate in the face of spiraling prices, it undoubtedly provided some comfort for tens of thousands of families, especially in the early months of war. Thus, its termination for any reason meant disaster for these families. In this sense, soldiers’ families suffered severe hardships during the period between the death of the conscript (and the consequent cessation of the monthly payments) and the assignment of the casualty allowance. According to the Military Resignation and Retirement Law (\textit{Askeri Tekaüd ve İstifa Kanunu}) introduced in 1909, a bereaved family was to receive a monthly payment for any member of the family who was killed in battle or died of contagious disease contracted during the performance of a military duty.\textsuperscript{70} However, it usually took months before the first payment was made. During heated discussions in the parliament, deputies pointed out that soldiers’ families generally received the news of the death of the conscript together with the news that their family allowance was cut off. These families, most of which had lost their sole source of

\textsuperscript{69} BOA.DH.IUM E/25-5 (9 December 1916). The practice of providing state help to only a couple of members of families (not to all of them) was not uncommon during the war years. For the critique of this practice in Uluborlu by the military inspection committee, see BOA.DH.IUM E/33-8 (8 May 1917).

\textsuperscript{70} "\textit{Askeri Tekaüd ve İstifa Kanunu}," \textit{Düstur}, İkinci Tertip, vol. 1, 8 Şaban 1327 (25 August 1909): 694-716. According to this law, a deceased soldier’s family was paid 100 piasters a month. This “family pension” (\textit{aile maaşı}) was to be divided among his wife [or wives], his children, his mother, his grandmother, and his aged or disabled father and grandfather. The minimum monthly amount per family member could not be less forty piasters. For a rather limited, but still useful, discussion on the subject, see Mucize Ünlü, “Osmanlı’dan Cumhuriyet’e Şehit Aileleri, 1875-1923,” \textit{Gazi Üniversitesi Kastamonu Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi} 11 (2003): 215-32.
income, usually fell into destitution or were saved from it only through communal support.  

Archival evidence suggests that the real payment process on the ground was also fraught with serious problems. Reports that reached some deputies alleged that local revenue officers did not bring small denominations of currency with them to villages, which created a problem when a sum of paper money could not be divided appropriately among a group of women, and they began quarreling with each other. Similarly, in urban centers, huge numbers of women and children queued up to receive their pensions. Quarrels among them, too, were not uncommon.

The 55th article of the Law of Military Obligation required disbursement of monthly allowances directly to the members of the soldier’s family by local revenue officers (maliye tahsildarları) in the presence of the council of elders of a village or neighborhood. However, as a number of archival documents reveal, this did not always occur. Women often had to follow revenue officers around or personally go to governmental offices, where they were usually met with anger and insults. Mounting complaints about revenue officers even reached high-ranking authorities. Some members of the Ottoman parliament alleged that the officials who were responsible for handing out the pensions to soldiers’ families withheld a certain amount of the payments for

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73 Irfan Orga, Bir Türk Ailesinin Öyküsü, 190.

74 See, for example, BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/33 (19 March 1916), doc.15.
themselves. In March 1917, even the Minister of Finance, Cavid Bey, confirmed the widespread rumors about the corruption involved in the assignment and distribution of women’s pensions and charged the inspectors of the ministry with combating malfeasance. However, eliminating these problems proved extremely difficult if not impossible.

While the family allowance scheme was fraught with problems at the micro level, the system did not function smoothly at the macro level either. Expecting a short war, Ottoman policy-makers did not foresee the enormity of the task of aiding hundreds of thousands of soldiers’ dependants. The financial burden and administrative complexity of the scheme soon exceeded the Ottoman the policy-makers’ predictions. In December 1917, it was estimated that there were 1.5 million dependents who received state aid under the category of muinsiz aile maaşı. The incessant demand of the army for new conscripts, of course, was the main reason behind the ever-expanding number of families seeking state help. But the increasingly unbearable economic conditions also compelled many families who had initially managed to endure the absence of their breadwinners to apply for monthly allowances.

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75 In Giresun, for instance, government agents sequestered ten piasters or more of families’ pensions. BOA.DH.IUM E/36-3 (13 June 1917). In Ömerli, the district commander of the capital reported, the head of the local revenues office and the scribe working in his office regularly confiscated families’ allowances by threatening them. BOA.DH.IUM E/39-5 (23 September 1917).

76 MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 3, 11 Mart 1333 (11 March 1917), 186.

77 1332-1333 Meclis-i Mebusan Encümen Mazbataları ve Levayih-i Kanuniye, vol. 1, 29 Kanunuevel 1333 (29 December 1917), 279. This number would rise even higher if the families of deceased soldiers were included.

78 BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/39 (7 May 1916).
A prolonged war and an increasing need for new recruits compelled Ottoman officials to continuously make adjustments to the imperial budget.\(^79\) The amount appropriated for the support of soldiers’ families without a breadwinner rose gradually from twenty million piasters in the fiscal year 1331 \([1915]\) to 100 million in 1332 \([1916]\) and finally to 500 million in fiscal years 1333 \([1917]\) and 1334 \([1918]\). Moreover, the government asked parliament for permission on a number of occasions to spend money in excess of the designated budget to extend state aid to families of newly conscripted soldiers. Remarkably low amounts for this earmarked in the budgets of 1915 and 1916 suggest a strong expectation for a short war on the part of the CUP government as well as a lack of preparedness and organization.

Despite the increasing amount of money allocated in the annual budgets, the state failed to pay soldiers’ families, along with other groups whose livelihood depended on payments made by the state.\(^80\) In March 1916, for instance, the governor of Syria asked the Ministry of Finance to send the province twenty thousand lira as, due to unpaid pensions and consequent privations, families without a supporter, widows, orphans, and other needy groups had become so disgruntled that “they could not be silenced anymore” (“iskât edilemeyecek bir hale geldiğinden bahisle”).\(^81\) Similarly, MPs from various


\(^{80}\) James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of the Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 23. Gelvin cites news from *Al-Muqtabas*. In Eğridir in southwestern Anatolia, for example, only half of the monthly allowances could be paid due to the lack of necessary governmental funds. BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/30 (11 March 1916). For İzmit, see BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/34 (29 March 1916), for Vezirköprü in northern Anatolia, see BOA.DH.IUM E/23-47 (11 May 1917).

\(^{81}\) BOA.DH.IUM 4/1-41 (2 May 1916).
provinces who were unwilling to acquiesce often raised complaints about the state’s failure to live up to its promises to these families.\footnote{See, for example, Hamdullah Emin Pasha’s (Antalya) complaints in \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 1, 29 Kanunuevvel 1332 (11 January 1917), 321; complaints of Mehmet Sait Efendi, deputy of Mamuretülaziz, \textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 2, 2 Mart 1334 (2 March 1918), 617, 620.} Even Talat Pasha himself confessed before parliament that the government could not pay family allowances regularly. In some cities, during his trips throughout the country, the Minister of Interior ordered the postponement of the payment of governmental officials’ salaries to disburse stipends to soldiers’ families.\footnote{\textit{MMZC}, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 1, 8 Kanunuevvel 1332 (1 December 1916), 185. See also the memo from the Minister of Interior to the Minister of Finance in which Talat Pasha highlighted the fact that in most places, pensions were not paid on time, which led to misery for soldiers’ families. BOA.DH.IUM E/36-8 (23 July 1917). Toward, possibly, the end of 1917, for instance, women from Taraklı (Adapazarı) complained that each year three to five stipends were withheld and that in the current year they had only received one payment. BOA.DH.IUM E/46-34, doc.3 (no date).}

Once the payments were made families realized that the depreciated Ottoman paper currency was worth hardly anything in many Ottoman provinces.\footnote{The situation was particularly dire in Arab provinces. James L. Gelvin, \textit{Divided Loyalties}, 23. See also Leila Hudson, \textit{Transforming Damascus: Space and Modernity in an Islamic City} (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 127-30.} With increasing inflation, paper currency had completely lost its already low value as a medium of exchange. Despite this erosion, the monthly stipends were almost always disbursed in paper money. A group of women from Tarsus who described themselves as mothers and wives of “veteran or martyred Islamic soldiers” wrote to the Minister of Interior that vendors did not honor paper currency and that they could not buy the items they needed: “Paper [currency] in our hands, we’ll die of hunger” (“Elimizde kağıt acımızdan öleceğiz.”) They urged the Minister to intervene in local provisioning by ordering the export of grain from neighboring regions and by preventing profiteering.\footnote{BOA.DH.I-UM E/15–51 (10 January 1916).}
Despite the policy of financial aid, poverty and deprivation became a constant part of the lives of soldiers’ families. Towards the mid-point of the war, provincial administrators who were closely observing the local conditions began to complain about the insufficient level of state aid to military dependents and demanded that the government take concrete steps to alleviate the miserable condition of soldiers’ families, including raising monthly payments.\footnote{BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/47 (7 January 1917); BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/48 (12 February 1917).} Conveying the demands of soldiers’ families to the Minister of Interior, the governor of Sivas drew attention to the facts that thirty piasters was sufficient only to buy bread for five days, that it was impossible for an individual to live on this amount, and that the local government did not have any other means to maintain the subsistence of these families. He asked for the government’s permission to adjust allowances in accordance with the rising cost of living.\footnote{BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/52 (17 September 1917).} Similarly, in a telegram sent to the Minister of Interior, Cemal Azmi Bey, governor of Trabzon, wrote that the complaints from thousands of destitute women who surrounded him dwelt upon three issues: payment of family pensions, provisioning of refugees (muhacirler), and distribution of seed grain to the poor. According to the governor, merely in order to receive daily bread from the government many people had chosen to migrate to other parts of the empire.\footnote{BOA.DH.KMS 38/17 (30 March 1916). Local civilian administrations, in cooperation with the army, were providing grain and bread to migrants and refugees. Fuat Dündar, \textit{İttihat ve Terakki' nin Müslümanları \textit{İşkân Politikası (1913-1918)}} (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), 181-82.} As a remedy, Cemal Azmi Bey asked for an increase in monthly payments, which had become inadequate in the face of high inflation. Although the local administrative council did have the authority to raise them, the governor replied that he

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still wanted to ask for permission from the center, as such a decision would put a substantial burden on the imperial budget.\textsuperscript{89}

Deputies and senators from various provinces also raised concerns about the inadequacy of separation allowances due to runaway inflation. Mehmet Sadık Bey, deputy of the province of Ertuğrul, criticized government’s decision to raise officials’ salaries by fifteen percent while keeping the pensions of soldiers’ families at the previous level.\textsuperscript{90} Abdurrahman Şeref Efendi, in a similar vein, argued that due mainly to the extraordinary economic conditions, it became impossible to subsist even in the villages on thirty piasters a month.\textsuperscript{91}

Four years into the war and due mostly to calls from deputies, local administrators, and thousands of women, the Ministry of Finance finally realized the inadequacy of the monthly pensions. Despite this, however, it persisted in its refusal to increase the monthly amount of state aid to soldiers’ families by clinging to the idea of maintaining a balanced budget.\textsuperscript{92} The Ministry, however, also recognized that the deprivation of these families arose mostly from the inflated prices of bread and grain. In October 1917, it approved the proposal of the Ministries of Interior and War to supply monthly grain to soldiers’ families at official prices (\textit{iaşe fiyat}) set by local provisioning

\textsuperscript{89} The Minister of Interior, Talat Pasha, replied that a proposal along these lines had been prepared by the Ministry of Finance and submitted to the Sublime Porte. BOA.DH.IUM E/30-90 (29 March 1917).
\textsuperscript{90} MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 1, 8 Kanunuevvel 1332 (1 December 1916), 185.
\textsuperscript{91} Meclis-i Ayan Zabit Ceridesi, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 2, 8 Şubat 1331 (21 February 1916), 120.
\textsuperscript{92} Until the end of the war, the monthly pensions remained at thirty piasters per person.
commissions. The price of distributed grain would be deducted from their stipends, a policy that was already in place for governmental officials in the countryside.

Towards the end of the war, the system of the state aid to soldiers’ families seemed hopelessly flawed. In March 1918, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Finance, Tahsin Bey, made clear the complete dysfunction of the system while responding to questions in parliament about the delay of the assignment process. According to the data he gave, there were a total of 1,590,000 people who had applied to receive separation allowances but were still waiting for the completion of the investigation regarding their social and economic status. Tahsin Bey argued, however, that everywhere this duty was incumbent upon the local conscription councils, each of which consisted of just one

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93 In November 1917, the Ministry of Interior notified the provinces of the policy without giving much detail about its implementation. BOA.DH.I-UM E/46–34 (29 October 1917). Despite the order from the Ministry, however, some provinces highlighted the impracticality of the policy due to the “situation of the army’s provisioning” (ordunun vaziyet-i iâsesi); it was tantamount to abandoning the families to their fates. “…[As] it is definitely not possible to maintain these families,” wrote the governor of Mamuretulaziz, “there is no other solution for their provisioning.” BOA.DH.I-UM E/46–34 (23 January 1918), doc.5. Similarly in Urfa, the local provisioning commission fell short in providing for the soldiers’ families as the commission was charged with the duty of maintaining food for officials and their families and as it did not have sufficient stored grain. BOA.DH.I-UM 20/2–2/48 (2 January 1918).

94 Even before the new policy of supplying grain at official prices was put into place, distributing bread (and sometimes also other staple items) to soldiers’ families had become a common practice in some regions of the empire. Presumably as a result of the personal initiative of local military and civilian authorities, bread was provided to these families from military bakeries either for free or for a very modest amount, well below the ever-increasing market prices. See, BOA.DH.I-UM 98/4–1/49 (21 November 1917); BOA.DH.I-UM 20/6–2/72 (26 August 1919); M. Rauf İnan, Bir Ömrün Öyküsü, 16. See also “Asker Ailelerine Ülkenin Çeşitli Yerlerindeki Aşhanelerden Yemek Verilecek,” Tanin (25 August 1918): 2. However, in at least some provinces, this process of distribution seemed to be tainted with discrimination and injustice. Aziza al-Tergeman from Damascus, for instance, recalls that some women, presumably family members of Turkish officers, could get “all sorts of meats, sugar, and flour” from cooperative stores while poor native Damascene women suffered terrible privations. Siham Tergeman, Daughter of Damascus, trans. Andrea Rugh (Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1994), 197.
person: “Let’s assume that there were 150 thousand people without a supporter in a certain city. The investigation of these 150 thousand is upon one man.”

After the war, in August 1920, the Ottoman state officially decreed the termination of the monthly payment to soldiers’ families without breadwinners. At around the same time, the nationalist government in Ankara also abrogated the scheme of monthly payments to soldiers’ families. Unlike the Ottoman government, however, it put into practice the principle of communal support for needy soldiers’ families in place of governmental aid. The law held each village community responsible for providing the annual grain needed by these families. In towns and cities, municipalities were charged with distributing one kilogram of bread per family on a daily basis. In order to meet the expense of this new item on the budget, they were authorized to quadruple the tax on buildings (müsakkafat vergisi).

IV. Soldiers and the Home Front

As a number of pieces of correspondence in the archives demonstrate, the government considered the welfare of soldiers’ families a paramount concern. Although there was an implied wartime social contract between the state and soldiers’ families, practical considerations determined the government’s policies. One of the fundamental

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95 MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 2, 2 Mart 1334 (2 March 1918), 620.

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goals of state policies towards soldiers’ families was to highlight their privileged status and thereby make the new recruits feel confident that their families would not suffer any material hardships, thus encouraging them to stay in the ranks and keep fighting. Actually, an important piece of correspondence between the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Interior reveals the concern of state authorities that soldiers might desert in order to help their suffering families. An investigation by Ottoman army officials into unceasing desertions that “cannot be prevented despite all manner of prosecutions and harsh penalties” disclosed that problems related to the assignment of women’s pensions and their distribution were among the causes of desertion from the army’s ranks. News that reached soldiers about the irregular disbursement of monthly payments, the negligence of revenue officers, and the unfair treatment of women based on personal enmities disturbed them, causing them to leave their posts to lend support and protection to their families at home. The Minister of War asked the Ministry of Interior to take necessary measures to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. It was also decided that perpetrators would be tried in courts martial upon the accusation of facilitating desertion (firari teshil cürümüyle). 98

Indeed, soldiers’ concern for their families’ well-being and security was among the most important factors that stimulated desertion from the army ranks. 99 Men deserted their comrades-in-arms, sometimes temporarily, to lend support and protection to their

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98 BOA.DH.I-UM E/23–51 (24 October 1916). As the war progressed, the Ministry of Finance also embraced the policy of exemplary punishment for the officials who delayed the assignment process without reason. BOA.DH.I-UM E/46–34 (29 October 1917).

families at home.\textsuperscript{100} Thus, along with other support programs, the financial aid policy adopted by the Ottoman state had the manifest aim of decreasing high desertion rates.

In the meantime, the Allied powers had realized the emotional impact of propaganda on Ottoman soldiers in regard to their families’ miserable situation on the home front. In order to stoke their concern and encourage them to desert from their units, British planes dropped leaflets over Ottoman troops, depicting the desperate conditions their families had to deal with. “You run from one disaster to another with empty stomachs. The government did not leave any grain, stove, pots or pans in your villages. Your children fell into destitution, your homes into ruin.... If you don’t pity yourself, show mercy to your children starving in your villages and to your women who sell their chastity due to poverty.”\textsuperscript{101} A Russian propaganda leaflet mentioned women and children who stormed into stores out of hunger. Some of these women were shot dead by the police.\textsuperscript{102} “Do they [the Germans] give you bread?” read another leaflet, emphasizing the helplessness of the home-front population, “Do they help your families in your homeland? No! They care only about themselves. They never care about you. Nobody

\textsuperscript{100} As discussed in the first chapter many other factors, including fear; lack of food, clothing and equipment; and poor medical treatment, can be counted as causes of widespread desertion in the Ottoman army. Erik Jan Zürcher, “Little Mehmet in the Desert: The Ottoman Soldier’s Experience,” in \textit{Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced}, eds. Peter H. Liddle and Hugh Cecil (London: Leo Cooper/Pen and Sword, 1996), 230-241; Erik Jan Zürcher, “Between Death and Desertion: The Experience of the Ottoman Soldier in World War I,” \textit{Turcica} 28 (1996): 235-258.


pays attention to the hunger and vulnerability of your families.”  

103 In a similar vein, another propaganda flyer asked: “Do you think that you fight for the welfare of the homeland and the family? Oh, you naïve soldiers! You fight for their total annihilation, but you are not aware of this fact.” The flyer highlighted the fact that the Germans, who were also struggling with starvation at home, deprived the Ottoman home front of all kinds of provisions. “As the war continues,” the flyer stated, “the situation of children, wives, and elderly people will worsen and eventually you will perish due to starvation.”  

104 These propaganda pointed the soldiers to the conclusion that their fighting was directly related to (if not responsible for) their families’ misery. They clearly indicate the interconnectedness of the war-making of soldiers and the civilian life on the home front.

As the measures discussed above show, Ottoman state officials, and particularly the high command of the Ottoman army, were acutely aware of this fundamental link. As discussed above, the Ministry of War officials consistently criticized the malfunctioning policies towards soldiers’ families and expressed their concerns that these flaws would negatively affect the morale of soldiers “who entrusted their families to the protection of the state.”  

105 Along with the relief policies directed at soldiers’ family members, the CUP


105 BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/33 (23 February 1916).
leadership resorted to all available means to relieve soldiers’ concerns about their families at home. In accordance with this purpose, Harp Mecmuası, the Ottoman propaganda magazine widely disseminated among both civilians and soldiers, published several literary pieces on experiences of soldiers’ families on the home front. In contrast to the Allied propaganda messages, these texts were designed to create the impression that military service was a short interlude in a conscript’s life and that once he returned home from the battlefield, he would find his family and village unaffected by the war. In a poem by Manastırlı M. Hasib, for instance, the mother of Sergeant Hasan encourages her son to keep fighting bravely and updates him on what is going on in their village: “Do not worry, the community takes good care of us/ Thank God, there is abundance of provisions and grain everywhere.” (Sen düşünme, millet bizi gözü gibi baktıyor/ Bolluk şükür, zad zahire her tarafından akıyor.) Then she recounts that their neighbor Ahmed, son of the muhtar, has died a martyr. His sweetheart, Emine, was very proud at the funeral as she is now a “martyr’s bride.”

Dedi Ahmed beni artık ahirette beklesin.
Ben onunum, utanmasın beni Hakk’tan ıtesin.
Kaderim bu; şehid olmuş benim şanlı yiğidim.
Kız kalırım varmam ere, ben de canlı şehidim.

(She said: Let Ahmed wait for me in the next world.
I am his, let him not hesitate to ask God for me.
This is my destiny; my fine young hero died a martyr.
I won’t marry, I’ll stay a virgin; I am a living martyr.)

In this short poem, the poet skillfully addresses two burning issues that bothered the soldiers on the front. While he reassures them that their families will not suffer from

106 Manastırlı M. Hasib, “Hasan Çavuş’un Anasından Name-i Teşci,” Harb Mecmuası 16 (February 1917): 250. For a similar emphasis, see the poem by Celal Sahir, “Köyde Kalanın Türküsü,” Türk Yurdu 75 (21 January 1915), 35.
hunger, he also promises that their fiancés and wives will remain loyal to them during their absence and, moreover, would remain faithful even if they never returned.

Indeed, the soldier’s concern about his fiancé in the poem quoted above signifies a crucial problem. Along with extreme privations, hard work, and loss of family members, violence against women was a characteristic feature of everyday life on the Ottoman home front. Women from all ethno-religious backgrounds were subjected to violent assaults. The lives of women living near the front lines in the eastern and southern provinces of the empire were affected by the horrors of invasion by enemy forces and by voluntary and forced migrations. In particular, Armenian women who were forced to leave their towns and villages were sexually assaulted by gendarmes and marauders and suffered horrific abuses on their deportation marches.107

Although violence (real or perceived) affected almost every woman’s life, especially those in the countryside, soldiers’ families were one of the most vulnerable groups on the Ottoman home front. The development of a new relationship between the state and women, which I discussed above, can also be observed through the special treatment of assaults on military families. By August 1915, the Ministry of War had warned the Ministry of Interior that these assaults were adversely affecting soldiers’ morale. Army officials seemed extremely concerned that the soldiers would become distracted by troubles at home. They recognized that unless the government took harsh

measures to prevent these attacks, the war effort would be seriously compromised. Soldiers whose families were attacked either requested leave or deserted their units in order to go back to their villages and take revenge. For these soldiers, military service was at odds with the duty of protecting the family. War, in this sense, led to the violation of the right of husbands to exclusive sexual access to their wives, hurt the honor of the family, and undermined masculine dominance. While fulfilling the duty of protecting the nation against the enemy, they found themselves unable simultaneously to protect their hearths and homes.

Alarmed by increasing desertion rates, the state came to assume the role of “surrogate husband” which would protect the family and its honor in the absence of men. With the purpose of accelerating the process of trial and punishment, military tribunals were charged with the duty of prosecuting crimes against officers’ and soldiers’ relatives. In a circular, the Ministry of War declared that the military tribunals would treat the attacks on military families as the equivalent of the serious offense of “undermining military strength” and mete out harsh punishments for those accused.

In January 1915, the Ministry of Interior sent a general circular to all provinces informing them that in some regions assaults were taking place against the families of soldiers who were “ready to sacrifice their lives on the borders in order to defend religion, chastity, and motherland.” The Minister of Interior ordered local administrators to do their best to prevent such unfortunate incidents and, if they occurred, to

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immediately send the perpetrators to courts martial. A couple of months later, a similar circular was sent to the provinces regarding encroachments on soldiers’ properties that occurred during their absence. The Ministry reminded the local officials that it was their duty to maintain the security of soldiers’ estates and properties which were entrusted to the care of the government and urged them to put into place necessary measures to prevent such incidents.

The Ottoman government also enacted a provisional law which aimed to shield soldiers’ and officers’ families from landowners who might want to dispossess them. The law prohibited the expulsion of these families from dwellings they rented. Moreover, the law stated that if the military families were so destitute that they could not pay their rent, the Ministry of War or an affiliated organization of the Ministry would make good the necessary amount during the period of mobilization. While defending the law in parliament against critics, the Minister of Law stated that its goal was to save soldiers’ families from being thrown out of their homes and, thereby, to provide comfort to soldiers and officers who were fighting on the borders.

The increasing number of assaults on soldiers’ families and their properties, however, gave a new sense of urgency for the government to take bolder measures. In September 1915, the frustrated Ottoman government enacted a draconian law to curb

\[\text{\cite{BOA.DH.HM$23/113$, (3 January 1915).}}\]
\[\text{\cite{“Hizmet-i vataniyelerini ifa etmek için silah altında bulunan efradin hükümetin yedd-i emanetine mevdu olan emval ve emlakin her türlü taarruz ve tecavüzden temin-i masuniyeti….” BOA.DH.SN.M 36/49, (27 March 1915).}}\]
\[\text{\cite{“Seferberlik Müddetince Efrad ve Zabitın Taht-ı İsticarında Bulunan Meskenlere ve Hukuk-ı Tasarrufiyelerinin Teminine Dair Kanun-ı Muvakkat,” Dıştur, Ikinci Tertip, vol. 7, 7 Cemaziyelevvel 1333 (23 March 1915): 530. See also BOA.SN.M 35/128 (12 April 1915)}}\]
\[\text{\cite{MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol. 1, 22 Teşrinievel 1331 (4 November 1915), 614.}}\]
such assaults on soldiers’ families. According to this provisional law, people who forcibly raped soldiers’ wives, children, or other close relatives were to be summarily executed.\textsuperscript{113} Despite these harsh measures, however, the state became increasingly unable to shield soldiers’ families from sexual abuse and exploitation as the war progressed.

During the war, military families’ poverty also rendered young female members of the households increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. A report by the military inspection committee of the second conscription district (\textit{ahz-ı asker mintkası}) established a direct connection among the malfunctioning system of state support to soldiers’ families, the destitution of women and their eventual fall into prostitution.\textsuperscript{114} In some cases, desperate conditions coerced women, and particularly soldiers’ family members, to engage in sexual activity with state officials. According to contemporary observers, prostitution grew rapidly both in urban centers and in the countryside during the war years. A local teacher from Central Anatolia reported that pressure from tax collectors, gendarmeries, police officers, and provisioning officials played the major role in forcing women into prostitution: “Young brides who lost all male members of their families had to fawn over these officials in order to be assigned family stipends, to receive their monthly payments, to obtain grain, and to hide husbands who had deserted.”\textsuperscript{115} Writing about the misery of soldiers’ families in Giresun and governmental officials’ exploitation of their despair, the local head of the CUP organization described


\textsuperscript{114} In Uluborlu, for example, the local \textit{kaymakam} turned an arsenal into a place of custody (tevkifhane) for such women. BOA.DH.IUM E/33-8 (8 May 1917).

the terrible situation vividly: “Honor was trampled to satisfy their sensual appetite.”

These observations were also confirmed by one of the highest-ranking authorities of the city of Kayseri, the mayor Ahmed Bey, who witnessed women acceding to officials’ sexual demands in order to receive their thirty piaster monthly allowance.

There was an almost universal consensus among contemporary observers that morality degenerated during the war years. “The foundation of our national morality (milli ahlakımız) was shaken [during the war],” writes M. Zekai Konrapa, at the time a young governmental official, “The Islamic morality of the great Turkish nation received the greatest blow during this war.” In a similar vein, the Director of Health in Ankara, Muslihiddin Saffet, underscored the fact that extreme poverty led to a general deterioration of morality, which had been sound until the beginning of the war. The increasing rate of prostitution arose from the seduction of women whose husbands or fiancés were killed during the war through the promise of remarriage. Saffet also mentions women who lost male relatives and were compelled to become servants to overcome poverty. These women were also seduced by men and, eventually, trapped within the increasingly wider net of prostitution. The situation was no different in the Arab provinces of the empire. There, too, young girls sold their bodies for a loaf of bread, “parents gave their daughters away like commodities – even married them off to ‘arab al-

116 “Yine memurinin şehvet-i hayvanıyesini teskin için bir çok namuslar paymal edildi ve elyevm edilmekte.” BOA.DH.IUM E/36-3 (13 June 1917).
118 M. Zekai Konrapa, Bolu Tarihi (Bolu: Bolu Vilayet Matbaası, 1960), 641. See also Mevlanzade Rifat, İttihat Terakki İktidarı ve Türkiye İnkılabının İcyüzü (İstanbul: Yedi İklim Yayınları, 1993), 196.
119 Dr. Muslihiddin Safvet, Türkiye’nin Şehhi İctimai Coğrafyası: Ankara Vilayeti (İstanbul: Hilal Matbaası, 1925), 55-56.
badiya’ (Bedouins of the desert).” A diary writer from Jerusalem keenly observed that the conscription of men left women in a particularly precarious situation. For many of these women prostitution was the only means of survival.

As these examples show, widespread prostitution among abandoned women, orphans, and soldiers’ wives stood out as one of the most traumatic signs of the war. The Ottoman state actively, albeit ineffectively, sought to control prostitution, especially in urban centers, by regulating prostitutes and establishing employment organizations. The fight against prostitution was not limited to the capital city. Other parts of the empire also saw intense activity to save girls who had fallen into prostitution. In Jerusalem, for example, a women’s employment society (Committee for Women’s Employment) was

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121 The writer of the diary, Ihsan Tourjman, was the son of a clerical family and served as a soldier in the logistics department of the Ottoman Fourth Army, which was based in Jerusalem. In his diary, Tourjman mentions Jewish, Christian, and Muslim prostitutes. Abigail Jacobson, “Negotiating Ottomanism in Times of War: Jerusalem during World War I through the Eyes of a Local Muslim Resident,” International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 40 (2008), 77-78. On prostitutes, he wrote the following: “…I pity these prostitutes: they sell their bodies for few pennies to satisfy the animal instincts in their men. They must be the most miserable of God’s creation…. But they could only have chosen this profession because they have no alternative, or because they were forsaken by men who promised to marry them and then disappeared.” Salim Tamari, “The Short Life of Private Ihsan: Jerusalem 1915,” Jerusalem Quarterly 30 (2007): 53-54.


123 Yavuz Selim Karakışla, Women, War and Work in the Ottoman Empire: Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women, 1916-1923 (Istanbul: Ottoman Bank Research Center, 2005); Zafer Toprak, “Osmanlı Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyeti, Kadın Askerler ve Milli Aile,” Tarih ve Toplum 51 (1988): 34-38. In these studies, it is usually ignored, however, that the main goal of such employment organizations was to find jobs for women in order to save them from immoral ways of making a living. The second article of the Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women states that the goal of the Society was to “safeguard women by accustoming them to moral maintenance of livelihood through finding them employment.” (“İşbu cemiyetin maksadı kadınlara iş bulup kendilerini namuskârane temin-i maişete alıştırarak himaye etmektir.”) Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyeti-i İslamiyesi, Nizamname (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Askeriye, 1332 [1916]), 2.
established during the war with the goal of providing them a livelihood without compromising their chastity. However, these activities remained mostly an urban phenomenon, which had a very limited impact, if any, on the countryside, where prostitution proliferated on an unprecedented scale.

The weakening of state authority throughout the countryside towards the end of the war only aggravated the vulnerability of Ottoman women. The thousands of deserters roaming the mountains became a real threat for families whose male members did not return from the war. For instance, Ses, a local newspaper published in Balıkesir, reported that bandits in the region were regularly pillaging villages, killing the elderly, and ransacking peasants’ goods and animals. They were also forcing young girls and married women to divorce and remarry brigade members. As a reaction, locals throughout the empire, who had realized the inefficiency of governmental forces in preventing the gangs from pestering soldiers’ families, were forming their own brigades to “save the honor of their villages.”


The same problems continued during the National Struggle (1919-1922). The leadership of the nationalist resistance movement in Anatolia felt obliged to take this threat seriously. Established with the primary purpose of forestalling widespread desertion, Independence Tribunals (İstiklâl Mahkemeleri) became the main tool for the nationalist regime to wrestle with the problem. Interpreting the assaults as acts which undermined the “material and moral forces of the country,” tribunals sentenced assailants to death or three to fifteen years in jail based on how the crime was committed. Although it was not specifically mentioned in the legislation, the tribunals did not hesitate to treat the assaults on soldiers’ families as one of the most detrimental crimes to the national struggle, along with deserting, spying, rebelling, and spreading anti-nationalist propaganda. In July 1922, Independence Tribunals were “officially” and explicitly charged with the duty of punishing those who assaulted (taaruz ve tecavüz) soldiers’ families.


128 Ergün Aybars, İstiklâl Mahkemeleri, 1920-1927 (İzmir: Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Yayınları, 1988), 149, 154. For examples of penalties meted out by the Kastamonu Independence Tribunal, see Eyüp Akman, Açıksöz Gazetesi’ne Göre Kastamonu İstiklal Mahkemeleri (Ankara: Gazi Kitabevi, 2005), 100, 115, 133, 134, 138; Mustafa Eski, Mustafa Necati Bey’in Kastamonu’daki Çalışmaları (Ankara: Kastamonu Eğitim Yükselkoku Yayınılar, 1990), 53. It is important to note that in some cases, the tribunal also punished the assaulted women for not protecting their Muslim chastity (iffet-i islamiyeyi muhafaza etmemek).

V. A New Collective Identity?

The First World War upset the established patterns of Ottoman women’s personal, familial, and public presence. War, in this sense, forced women to deal with issues beyond their immediate households as they struggled to survive. Wives, mothers, sisters, and even children of Ottoman soldiers came increasingly into contact with governmental officials in a more regular manner, challenging the entrenched assumptions about women’s role in public life. Before the war years women’s direct communication with state officials was quite limited. The absence of men and the necessities of war, however, compelled them to interact with officials with increasing frequency. In order to apply for state aid, request the exemption of their sons, husbands, or fathers from military service, register a complaint about a local official’s misbehavior, collect monthly pensions, or receive their daily bread from municipal or military bakeries, women gradually entered the public arena as never before. Both for women and for official authorities who previously had access to them only through their husbands or fathers, this spelled a dramatic change.

Women’s petitions, letters, and telegrams to the Minister of Interior constitute our major source of information about their activities in wartime and the new identity they embraced. Frustrated by deteriorating local conditions and insufficient state aid, hundreds of Ottoman women from all parts of the empire sent petitions and letters to various

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130 This is a generally accepted phenomenon. However, contemporary observations and later scholarly works have limited their focus to the capital city. See, for example, Ahmed Emin, *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 231-238; Sacit Kutlu, *Milliyetçilik ve Emperyalizm Yüzyılında Balkanlar ve Osmanlı Devleti* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2007).
ministries as well as to local authorities.\textsuperscript{131} The inadequacy of relief aid, the
government’s policies of impressment, and poor treatment at the hands of state officials
were the subjects that loomed large in their petitions. While these petitions provide vivid
illustrations of the enormous difficulties war brought to Ottoman women, they also testify
to the rise of a new, dominant, collective identity of women as soldiers’ wives and
soldiers’ mothers.\textsuperscript{132}

Although some petitions were signed or sealed by only one woman, the number of
signatures on the majority of these documents indicate the presence of collective action
among women. Sometimes officials received petitions signed by dozens of women, a
level of organization which was rarely seen before the war. Occasionally, this
cooperation also crossed ethno-religious boundaries. For instance, the group of soldiers’
wives who wrote from Sındırı (Kütahya) to ask for the repeal of the decision to
discontinue their pensions included Muslim women as well as their non-Muslim, Greek
neighbors.\textsuperscript{133} It is also notable that many of the petitioners had to travel long distances
from their villages to get to a district center where they could find a telegraph office.
Women from Ordu on the Black Sea coast, for instance, walked twenty hours to the
district center to wire a telegram about the horrors of the government’s requisitioning

\textsuperscript{131} It is important to note that women’s petitions from Arab provinces of the empire were extremely rare
among the files of the Ministry of Interior. One possible explanation for this scarcity might be that women
in this region might have tendered their petitions to Cemal Pasha, the authoritarian commander of the
Ottoman Fourth Army and the governor-general of Syria and Western Arabia, and his bureaucracy in the
region. For the paternalistic disposition of Cemal Pasha, see Ali Fuad Erden, \textit{Birinci Dünya Savaşı’nda
Suriye Hatıraları} (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2003), 105, 284.

\textsuperscript{132} Apparently, these telegrams and letters reflect only part of the story. Many women were too hesitant to
write a petition. For a more extended discussion of petitioning in a slightly later period, see Yiğit Akin,

\textsuperscript{133} BOA.DH.IUM E/14-117 (3 April 1916).
policies. They also wrote, with an apologetic tone, that only nine of them could make the journey to the district center while others stayed in the village to take care of children.\footnote{BOA.DH.IUM 20/11-3/18 (20 February 1918).}

In their letters and telegrams, women generally used a respectful tone to elicit official sympathy. At the same time, however, their tone could be angry, assertive, and demanding. In almost all of the petitions they wrote, women unfailingly specified their identities in terms of their relations to family members in military service. They signed the petitions with the addenda “mother of” or “wife of,” or mentioned how many relatives they had sent to the fronts. The fact that they had sent their husbands and sons to the army and that some of them had lost their loved ones equipped these women with a unique sense of entitlement.

When writing to state officials, women underlined their sacrifice and contribution to the war effort by giving up their husbands and sons to the army. The emphasis that their relatives were fighting against the enemy was repeated in petition after petition. Implicitly or explicitly, women argued that the state was obliged to support their families, whose sole breadwinner had been taken away by the state and the army. The designation of “soldier’s mother” or “soldier’s wife” gave these women a new and powerful identity. Empowered as “soldiers’ wives and mothers,” petitions and telegrams became the main vehicle in the hands of women with which to invite the leaders of the Unionist regime to intervene in the local politics of subsistence on their side.

In their petitions, women consciously underlined the contradiction between the horrendous conditions they were enduring and the benevolence and protection they expected from the representatives of the Ottoman state. The rhetoric they employed...
clearly displayed their awareness of the moral obligation that the state had towards soldiers’ families, whom it promised to shield in the absence of their protectors. “At a time when our husbands and fathers entrusted us to your high protection and ran to the frontiers, thinking nothing of their own lives and bearing their chests to the enemy’s bullets,” wrote “soldier’s wife” Hatice and her friends in the name of all soldiers’ wives in Beypazari, “we often go hungry.” They saw the drought and unprecedentedly high prices of grain as the two principal causes of their hunger. However, they basically blamed the local government, which was sending the grain collected in the district to Istanbul, as derelict in its duty to distribute it to indigent families. Moreover, local officials forced them to transport this grain with their own animals despite their incapacity. The petitioners asked the Minister of Interior to save them from hunger and release them from drudgery.135

Women from Konya seemed to be keenly aware of the discrepancy between their sacrifices and the state’s (or more accurately, local officials’) treatment of them. They were in need of seed grain to cultivate and produce for “our husbands who are sacrificing their lives for the nation’s cause.” They met with the refusal of the kaymakam, who insulted them by telling them that they “are not the people of this state” (siz bu devletin milleti değildir).136 Women from Malatya had a similar experience with governmental officials. They presented themselves to officials as “…lonely and destitute families of Ottoman heroes who face the rifle and cannon of the enemy to defend the nation and

135 BOA.DH.IUM E/24-35 (22 November 1916).
136 Instead of working for the provisioning of the nation and the army, women claimed, they were now spending time idly [due to the lack of seed grain]. Here, women successfully managed to relate their needs to those of the nation and its fighting forces. BOA.DH.IUM E/33-65 (8 April 1917).
religion and to protect our chastity.” When they visited the town’s accountant to complain about the inadequate payment of their allowances (they had received only one or two payments in the last eight to nine months), they were sworn at and driven away from the “government’s door of mercy” (hükümetin bab-ı merhameti). While their husbands were shedding their blood, and while they and their children, were “in an unendurable fire of hunger,” officials enjoyed regular salaries. Soldiers’ wives compared themselves to state officials and implied that they deserved better treatment (or at least to be treated as well as officials) in exchange for the sacrifices they had made.137

Petitions and telegrams became powerful tools in the hands of disheartened wives and mothers who wrote to the Minister of Interior to remind him about the “contract” that the soldiers (and their families) had with the state. The identity of “soldier’s wife” and “soldier’s mother” gave them a strong sense of entitlement to state support. “For years, our husbands and sons have sacrificed their lives and blood and performed their duties bravely,” wrote fourteen women from Boğazliyan in the opening line of their telegram. They, however, were deprived of food and were forced to resort to begging. The local government’s policy of exporting existing grain to another town and its disregard for these women’s need rendered them helpless. This, as the women implied, was a violation of the social contract.139 Similarly, thirty-four women from Ermenek in central Anatolia, mostly soldiers’ wives and mothers, relayed the hunger and poverty they experienced and

137 BOA.DH.IUM E/8-83 (8 April 1915).
138 In several other petitions women highlighted the contrast between themselves and state officials, who were receiving their salaries in a timely manner. See, for example, the petition of soldiers’ families from Alaşehir in BOA.DH.IUM E/23-19 (31 October 1916); the petition of Nefise from Silifke in BOA.DH.IUM 88/2-4/38 (15 June 1915); the petition of Şücriye, Adile, Refiye, Aşe from Yozgat in BOA.DH.IUM 20/4-2/72 (3 October 1918).
139 BOA.DH.IUM 20/11-3/44 (10 April 1918).
singled out the army’s requisitioning and harsh weather conditions as the main reasons for their suffering. They pleaded for help in their provisioning as they thought the Minister of Interior, as the representative of the state, “would not ignore starvation of lonely women like us while our sons sacrifice their lives against the enemy.”

“While our husbands are toiling on the borders to protect the glory and honor of the nation,” wrote women from İskilip (Çorum), they were sure that “the compassion of our exalted government would not let their families die of starvation.”

Through their petitioning, women sometimes skillfully played state institutions against one another. In Geyve and Akhisar, for instance, women who applied to the district governor (kaymakam) to collect their [unpaid] pensions were kicked out of the governor’s office. Embittered by this brutal and humiliating treatment, they brought their complaint to the head of the recruitment office, presumably aware of the army’s higher sensitivity concerning these issues. A series of correspondence among the recruitment office, the Ministry of War, and the Ministry of Interior about the case resulted in a stern warning to district governors that “these nasty situations would have a deleterious impact on the soldiers of the imperial army.”

The underlying, albeit implicit, message, of many of these petitions and telegrams was that their husbands’ and sons’ military service was at odds with these women’s welfare. The war depleted the Ottoman countryside of manpower and turned these men, who had previously been producers, into consumers. Over and over again,


141 BOA.DH.IUM 20/3-2/33 (11 May 1918).

142 BOA.DH.IUM 88/3-4/31, (22 February 1916).
women wrote that they struggled with these hardships on their own. “We sent our sons and husbands to the army” wrote numerous women from Kirkkilise, who now did all of the agricultural work previously performed by their sons and husbands. “They [governmental officials] don’t leave anything [any grain] for our subsistence. They want to seize everything we produce. They don’t take into account what we have given so far. We will starve!” These women, like many others, implied that the state’s conscription and requisitioning policies were responsible for their loss of pre-war standards of living and current suffering.143

A telegram from women from Yozgat revealed the burden on soldiers’ families in a similar vein. They poignantly asked, “Since our children are sacrificing their lives for the nation, performing their military service and some even dying as martyrs, we remain without breadwinners. We don’t have any source of income. We sold our household items to meet our needs for sustenance.” They included these heart-wrenching details, which they hoped would elicit a positive response from state officials. At the same time, however, they underscored that it was war that caused their and their children’s destitution. They clearly justified their claims on the state through their husbands’ and sons’ military service, and pleaded for the government to relieve their suffering.144

VI. Conclusion

Very few women on the Ottoman home front managed to remain isolated from the suffering and death of the First World War. War brought to women privations, hard

143 BOA DH.IUM E/80-35 (7 October 1916).
144 BOA DH.IUM 20/4-2/72 (3 October 1918)
work, aggression, violence, anxiety, and, finally, the loss of male members of the household. War and its burdens singled out a certain group of women: soldiers’ wives and mothers. Both the official discourse of the state and popular sentiments dignified this group of women as the symbol of Ottoman altruism and sacrifice. The state devised several policies to alleviate their misery and to fill the gap that was created by husbands’, fathers’, and brothers’ military service during the war. These policies, however, did not provide sufficient comfort to soldiers’ families. Subsequently, women directed their frustration at local, provincial, and imperial officials. Embracing a new and powerful identity as “soldiers’ wives and mothers,” they appealed to governmental officials for solutions to their problems. They did not ask for equal rights with men or the rights of citizenship. But they demanded that the government honor the implicit contract between the state and soldiers’ wives and mothers. In doing so, they developed an uneasy relationship with the representatives of the state. Their actions and experiences have not been studied as fully as the Ottoman military defeats on the war fronts. Nevertheless, the story of soldiers’ mothers and wives on the home front remains an instructive part of the story of the disintegration and the collapse of the empire.
CHAPTER 4
REPRESENTATIONS of WAR, COMBAT, and DEATH:
THE OTTOMAN CULTURE of WAR

I. Introduction

The previous chapters of this dissertation have focused primarily on the social aspects of the Ottoman home front experience during the First World War. I have explored how the Ottoman state tried to sustain the war effort as well as how the Ottoman people interacted with the wartime policies of the state. This chapter shifts the focus onto the cultural dimensions of the war, examining how the Ottoman state strove to justify its war effort to the people while demanding continuous sacrifices from them. It also investigates how the Ottoman people perceived the war and dealt with its devastating consequences, particularly the experience of losing loved ones. In short, this chapter aims to explore the Ottoman “war culture,” a complex and comprehensive system of images, symbols, and representations through which the state sought to “mobilize the imagination” of its people, and by means of which the people made sense of the war, the enemy, and their own role in the conflict.¹

A thorough exploration of the Ottoman “war culture” requires analysis of both the idealized wartime modes of behavior officially promoted by the state and popular

perceptions of the war. This chapter, therefore, examines the different meanings attached to the war, military service, and death. It does so by contrasting the cultural products of ordinary people, mostly poems, songs, and laments, with the official public discourse created by the political and intellectual elites and propagated through newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, speeches, and sermons, as well as various activities of governmental institutions and civil society organizations. While this chapter primarily aims to analyze the cultural context surrounding the Ottoman home-front experience, it also seeks to understand the divergence between the official war culture and its popular counterpart and shed light on how the Ottoman people comprehended and remembered the war on the ground.

II. The Official Ottoman War Culture

During the First World War, “mobilization” did not simply entail military mobilization (i.e., raising mass armies from the population and placing them onto the battlefield) or economic mobilization (i.e., reorganizing industrial and agricultural production, transportation, and distribution). When a nation mobilizes for war, as historian John Horne argues, it does so “both imaginatively, through collective representations and the belief and value systems giving rise to these, and organizationally, through the state and civil society.”^2 In this respect, mobilization involves two inextricably linked dimensions: the material and the cultural. The belligerent governments of the Great War, including that of the Ottoman Empire, worked hard to “mobilize” their respective societies in these two distinct senses of the term.

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In this regard, World War I was a war of propaganda. The war forced elites everywhere to become more interested in “the social engineering of public opinion.” Like every other belligerent power, the Ottoman state energetically sought to manipulate public opinion and bring it into line with the official war effort. The government used both positive and negative measures to reach this goal. Immediately after announcing the mobilization, the government imposed strict censorship on the press to conceal military secrets, obscure the losses suffered by the Ottoman forces and, more generally, downplay the horrors of the war. Censorship of the press proved particularly effective in suppressing controversial news and opinions, which had the potential to negatively affect morale on the home front. In addition, the army also censored military correspondence in an attempt to monitor the flow of information to and from the battlefronts.

Although censorship played an important role in molding the official war culture, it was not sufficient to persuade the Ottoman populace to continue their support of the government’s war effort. The disastrous defeat in the Balkan Wars had brought about a widespread war-weariness and a general decline in morale. This defeat, as discussed in the previous chapters, had also thoroughly shaken belief in the capabilities of the Ottoman soldier. The Ottoman government thus went to great lengths to overcome this war-weariness and re-motivate the home front (or at least keep it quiet and cooperative). Along with imposing strict measures to eliminate “deleterious” information, forging a

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4 On the imposition of censorship on the press, see Kazım Karabekir, *Birinci Cihan Harbine Nasıl Girdik*, vol.2 (İstanbul: Emre Yayınları, 1994 [1937]), 166; Ahmed Emin, *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 104-05, 265-66. For the detailed regulations about the implementation of censorship, see Sansür Talimatnamesi (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Askeriye, 1330 [1914]). Censorship of the press lasted approximately four years, until June 1918.
wartime culture by combining patriotic and religious symbols and developing a positive image of the “self” therefore became essential to the Ottoman war effort.

The Unionist leadership sought to fuel enthusiasm for the war in provincial centers through the widespread network of semi-official organizations, such as the Navy League (Donanma Cemiyeti) and the Society for National Defense (Milli Müdafaa Cemiyeti), as well as local Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) clubs, which brought together local civil and military officials, intellectuals, and notables. From the early days of the war, important events such as the abrogation of the capitulations, as well as successful campaigns, and even the capture of the European cities of Warsaw and Bucharest by the allies of the Ottomans, were celebrated throughout the empire with fanfare. The Ottoman army’s victories, especially at Gallipoli and Kut al-Amara, were


6 “Şehrimizde Tezahürat-ı Milliye,” İkdam 6307 (12 September 1914), 1; “Her Tarafta İstiklab-i Milli Şenlikleri,” Tanin 2025 (12 September 1914), 1; Karabekir, Birinci Cihan Harbine, 311-12; Mehmet Emin Elmacı, İttihat Terakki ve Kapitülasyonlar (Istanbul: Homer Kitabevi, 2005), 74-84. In his letter to the Board of Trustees of the Syrian Protestant College, President Howard Bliss wrote that the news about the abolition of the capitulations was “received with great enthusiasm by the population” in Beirut and that “there were decorations and public meetings and speeches.” Nicholas Z. Ajay Jr., “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918: The War Years,” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1972), Appendix III, 153. Capitulations refer to a series privileges and concessions granted unilaterally by the Ottoman Empire to European powers. Under the capitulatory system, subjects of European empires enjoyed extraterritoriality as well as exemption from Ottoman taxes and customs duties.

7 For the mention of celebrations in Diyarbakır of the Austria-Hungarian victory on the Isonzo front, see İzzettin Çalışlar, On Yıllık Savaşın Günü: Balkan, Birinci Dünya ve İstiklal Savaşları, eds. İsmet Görgülü and İzzeddin Çalışlar (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1997), 255; for Erzurum celebrations of the fall of Warsaw, see Bahtiyar İstekli, ed., Bir Teğmenin Doğu Cephesi Günü: (İstanbul: Türkiye İş
praised as monumental achievements that reversed the 300-year-long decline of a once glorious empire. Unionists naturally drew on these celebrations to bolster the morale of the home-front population and increase the Ottoman people’s confidence in the fighting prowess of the Central Powers. The government must have also hoped to instill a “national” consciousness in the Ottoman people through these celebrations. As Talat Pasha recalls in his memoirs, “creating a national feeling and ingraining it into people’s souls” was one of the goals of this war.

The Unionist leadership worked also to keep a tight rein on the day-to-day flow of information about the war to the provinces. Widely disseminated bulletins produced by the official news agency (Osmanlı Millî Telgraf Ajansı) were used for the purpose of informing town-dwellers of recent developments on the fronts. These bulletins, which were full of exaggerated news about the military victories of the Ottomans and their allies, were prepared by the army headquarters, printed locally, and sold for a very low price. They were also affixed to walls and windows of governmental buildings,

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8 For the order of the Ministry of Interior to organize empire-wide celebrations for the victory at Gallipoli, see BOA.DH.KMS 36/18 (9 January 1916); Joseph Pomiankowski, Der Zusammenbruch des Ottomanischen Reiches: Erinnerungen an die Türkei aus der Zeit des Weltkrieges (Zurich: Amalthea-Verlag, 1928), 244; Konrapa, Bolu Tarihi, 628; Mediha Kayra, Hoşça Kal Trabzon: Bir Kız Çocuğunun Günüğünden Birinci Dünya Savaşında Anadolu, ed. Cahit Kayra (Istanbul: Dünya Kitapları, 2005), 37-38.


10 For the Ministry of Interior’s general warning to regularly inform all the administrative units down to townships (nahiye), see BOA.DH.KMS 32/30 (18 May 1915).

11 Fevzi Güvemli, who was eleven years old when the war broke out, could not forget in later years the peddler who sold these bulletins, which included news about the “terrific victories of Germans.” They cost ten paras each and sold with wild enthusiasm. Fevzi Güvemli, Bir Zamanlar Ordu: Anlar, ed. İbrahim Dizman (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayımları, 1999), 11. See also Kayra, Hoşça Kal Trabzon, 37 (This
coffeehouses, and the local clubs of the ruling party. In the remote corners of the empire, these bulletins were the only available source of information about the war, at least for the reading and listening public.¹²

Both at the imperial center and in the provinces, religious functionaries and secular intellectuals supported the state’s propaganda efforts by providing publications and delivering speeches. The CUP also dispatched influential orators to the provinces for such purposes. In the early days of mobilization, for instance, the CUP central committee sent pro-war members of the parliament to the provinces in order to assuage widespread trepidation and to persuade people (as well as officers) of the benefits to entering the war.¹³ In the provinces, local officials and officers hosted regular conferences about current developments on the fronts, based on news sent from the army and party headquarters. Throughout the empire, sermons in mosques also became an important medium for patriotic and religious propaganda. Given the predominantly illiterate population, especially in the provinces, these sermons must have played a crucial role in shaping public opinion of the war effort.

Broadly speaking, the official Ottoman propaganda effort comprised two closely interrelated dimensions. On the one hand, the official discourse about the war focused intensively on macro-scale issues. These ranged from the loss of the Balkan provinces


¹³ Karabekir, Birinci Cihan Harbine, 187. It is not clear, however, if these kinds of deployments continued regularly until the end of the war.
and hopes of regaining them to the Russians’ age-old hatred of the Ottoman Empire and their recurrent dreams of capturing Constantinople and controlling the straits, from the abrogation of the capitulations to the liberation of fellow Muslims and Turkic peoples who were suffering under the yoke of the British, French, and Russian empires. The second aspect of Ottoman propaganda was more symbolic and revolved around the myth of the ordinary Ottoman soldier. Elaborating on these two dimensions together, Ottoman politicians and intellectuals sought to shape the official war culture and to shift public opinion into alignment with their wartime policies and dreams.

From the very beginning, the Ottoman official wartime rhetoric persistently underlined that the Ottoman Empire was the victim of unilateral Entente (more specifically, Russian and British) aggression. The Ottomans were being provoked, as the Unionist-dominated press argued, by a series of events orchestrated by the British and the Russians, which eventually led to the empire’s entrance into the war despite its strong intention to keep its neutrality and its desire to live in peace. War for the Ottomans, then, was of a different nature from the war prosecuted by these aggressors: it was a legitimate act of self-defense. Emphasizing the defensive nature of their war effort, however, was not a strategy that was unique to the Ottomans. Especially during the first half of the war, all major belligerent nations based their propaganda campaigns on the narrative of victimization, and presented their war efforts as rooted solely in self-defense of national honor and boundaries.

essential in convincing people to mobilize only months after a disastrous defeat in the Balkans.

The first important incident that reinforced this image of the Ottomans being treated unjustly by the European powers was the British seizure of two dreadnoughts built in British shipyards for the Ottoman navy. Before the official declaration of war, the British government decided not to deliver these two ships, despite the fact that they had been largely paid for by the Ottoman government as well as Ottoman society. For Ottomans from all walks of life who had contributed to the purchase of these new dreadnoughts through donations and were waiting anxiously to receive them, this was a serious blow. It immediately prompted an outcry in Ottoman public opinion. The Ottoman press almost unanimously described this act as hostile, humiliating, and in violation of international law. The Ottomans had once again been deceived by European machinations, which aimed to prevent the empire from gaining strength militarily over the Balkan states. The confiscation of these two dreadnoughts by the British and the Ottomans' subsequent “purchase” of two German ships in their stead provided the pro-German wing of the Unionists with the unique opportunity to excite

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patriotic feelings against Great Britain and justify their rapprochement and eventual alliance with Germany.

Ottoman attempts to portray the empire as the victim of Entente assaults intensified as the war on European fronts dragged on. Finally, following the official communiqué (tebliğ-i resmi) describing the first clash between the Ottoman and Russian navies in the Black Sea on 29 October 1914, the press unanimously adopted this stance.17 Working to recover from the devastation wrought by the Balkan Wars and longing for peace and tranquility, as the official discourse asserted, the Ottomans found themselves under attack by the Russian army in the Caucasus and by the Russian navy in the Black Sea, as well as by the British army at Aqaba. The enemy had been lying in wait, ready to pounce at the slightest sign of weakness or vulnerability shown by the Ottomans. With the sole purpose of legitimately defending themselves, the Ottomans were left with no choice but to engage in war with these aggressive enemies. In the imperial declaration of war (beyanne-i humayun), the sultan himself emphasized that the hostility of the Entente armies had propelled the Ottoman Empire, which was “always subjected to sudden and unjust attacks,” to abandon its long-held desire for peace.18 Holy war was declared and the war had begun solely as a result of the “unmanly attacks” (tecavüzat-i

17 For the official communiqué, see “Karadeniz’de Mühim Hadisat,” Tercüman-i Hakikat 12052 (30 October 1914), 1. For newspaper reports, see “Karadeniz’deki Vakia-i Ahire,” İkdam 6356 (31 October 1914), 1; “Beklenmeyen Vak’a,” Tanin 2104 (31 October 1914), 1.

18 “Beyanne-i Hümâyûn Suretidir,” Tanin 2117 (13 November 1914), 1. For the same emphasis, see also the reply of the Ottoman parliament to the sultan’s inaugural address (arza-i cevabıye), Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi (hereafter MMZC), Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol. 1, 8 Kanunuevvel 1330 (21 December 1914), 21-25; for the annual closing declaration of the parliament in 1916, see MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 2, 29 Şubat 1331 (13 March 1916), 497 (Hayat ve mevcudiyetimize vakar ve hayesiyyeti milliyemizle mütensisib bir surette mubahaza ve idameden başka bir endişemiz olmadığı halde çalışiyorduk. Halbuki düşmanlarımız mevcudiyetimize kastediyorlardı.)
namerdaneleri) of the Entente powers. The Ottomans, according to this line of argumentation, like any honorable nation, had no choice but to defend their soil and protect their people.

The official discourse depicting the Ottoman Empire as defending itself against rapacious enemies served two basic purposes. First, the government and army high command wanted to obscure the fact that it was actually the Ottoman navy, under the command of German Admiral Souchon, that had attacked Russian coastal defenses and sunk Russian commercial ships. Second, and more importantly, by deploying this rhetoric, the political and military elite sought to present a convincing argument to the war-weary Ottoman people that would energize them and enlist their support for a new war.

These official attempts to depict the Ottomans as victims of Entente aggression were, paradoxically, in clear contrast to the jingoistic messages heard in public demonstrations, most likely organized by local Unionist clubs. As the U.S. Consul in Beirut reported, for instance, a crowd, which was led by the governor and was “most vociferous in their expressions of enthusiasm,” avidly took up the cry of “On to Batoum [Batumi]” as their slogan. The image of the victimized Ottoman was also invalidated by the pan-Turanic themes found in the songs that were sung during the military training of

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20 There are several eyewitness accounts that held that these demonstrations were organized by the CUP to create the impression that people actually wanted this war. Karabekir, Birinci Cihan Harbine, 395; Hüseyin Cahit Yağcı, Siyasal Anılar, ed. Rauf Mutluay (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2000), 291.

21 National Archives, RG 59, 867.00/639 (7 August 1914).
new recruits conscripted during the mobilization. Furthermore, while the government and the press adopted the rhetoric of legitimate self-defense, aggressive tendencies could also be discerned in the public acts of leading Unionist figures. Cemal Pasha’s initiative, for instance, to demolish the Russian monument erected in San Stefano near Istanbul to commemorate the Russian victory in the 1877-78 Russo-Ottoman War was intended to erase the memory of the defeat and arouse public hatred against the Russians.

Nowhere, however, was this contradiction more visible than in the discourse of “revenge” that plagued the Ottoman political and intellectual scene. For many, the war presented the Ottomans with the unique opportunity to exact vindictive justice upon their enemies. Halide Edip, who wrote that she had been waiting for this day of “hatred and revenge, redemption and life” (šin ve intikam, halas ve hayat) since her childhood, was only one of the Ottoman intellectuals who greeted the war with enthusiasm and anger.

In its declaration to the army and the navy, the Ottoman parliament similarly expressed its enthusiasm that the “day of revenge” had finally arrived: “The day of revenge, for which the [members of the] nation, from old to young, from the martyrs to the living,

22 Mehmet Derviş Kuntman, then a young doctor in Tokat, remembers soldiers singing a song that went “Kafkas dağılarında kaymak yiyelim” (“Let’s eat whipped cream on the Caucasus Mountains”). Mehmet Derviş Kuntman, Bir Doktorun Harp ve Memleket Anıları, ed. Metin Özata, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Genelkurmay Askerî Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2010 [1965]), 71. Şevket Süreyya mentions the “March of Reserve Officers” lyrics, which run: “Reserve officers, the time has come, stand up! / We are leaving for the Caucasus, Turan awaits us” (“İhtiyat zabitleri yol göründü, kalkın / Gidiyoruz iştı Kafkasya’ya, Turan bizi bekliyor”). Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, Suyu Arayan Adam (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1999 [1959]), 79-80.
have been waiting for centuries, is finally here.” Now, the Ottoman soldier seized the chance of destroying the greatest enemy of the Ottomans and Muslims, the Russians and their allies.\(^{25}\)

Indeed, since the end of the First Balkan War, the theme of revenge had dominated Ottoman political and intellectual life. Obsessed with the recent loss of the Balkan provinces, the Unionists spent considerable effort to instill the desire for revenge into every Ottoman citizen’s heart. In the months preceding the First World War, “revenge” became a central theme in public education, the military, and the press.\(^{26}\) Songs of revenge were composed, poems of revenge were written, and even “stones of revenge” were erected.\(^{27}\) One of the most popular songs of the period expressed this trauma of the Balkan Wars and the strong feelings of revenge in gendered terms: “Oh, innocent Turkish children / Inscribe this date into your hearts / In 1328 [1912] / Turkish honor was hurt / Oh revenge, ah revenge! / Let me tell you all / What happened in Rumelia / Dirty hands of Bulgarians / Stabbed mothers with bayonets / Oh revenge, ah revenge!”\(^{28}\)

\(^{25}\) MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol. 1, 8 Kanunuevvel 1330 (21 December 1914), 26.


\(^{27}\) Klaus Kreiser, “War Memorials and Cemeteries in Turkey,” in The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, eds. Olaf Farschid, Manfred Kropp, and Stephan Dähne (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2006), 185. On this prevalent desire for revenge, see also Aydemir, Suyu Arayan Adam, 55.

\(^{28}\) “Ey masum Türk evlatları / Kalbe yazın bu tarihi / Bin üç yüz yirmi sekizden / Türk namusu lekelendi / Of of intikam ah intikam! / Söyliyeyim size bütün / Rumeli de neler oldu / Bulgarların pis elli / Sünğüledi anneleri / Of of intikam ah intikam!” For the full lyrics, see Mustafa Rona, 20. Yüzyıl Türk Musikisi: Bestekarları ve Besteleri Güfterile [sic], 3rd ed. (Istanbul: Türkiye Yayınevi, 1970 [1955]), 93. This feeling was so entrenched in the minds of the military and civilian elites that even during the War of Independence Mustafa Kemal Pasha was heard singing this song with enthusiasm. Süreyya Ağaoğlu, Bir Ömür Böyle Geçti-Sessiz Gemiyi Beklerken (Istanbul: Ağaoğlu Yayınevi, 1984), 33.
In World War I, the Ottomans, of course, were not fighting with the Balkan nations at which this feeling of revenge had originally been directed. They even signed a non-aggression pact and later became allies with the most hated of them, Bulgaria. The discourse of revenge, however, continued to occupy a central place in Ottoman war propaganda. Cemal Pasha, for instance, who left Istanbul for Damascus with his large entourage, was met with fanfare at every stop, where school children sang “revenge songs about Rumelia.” At the local level, too, the discourse of revenge was employed to motivate recruits and to bolster the morale of the local population. M. Zekai Konrapa, a young reserve officer, recalled the verses written on the blackboard in the recruitment office: “March! The army of the crescent and the star, you have every ambition/ Let’s burn the Balkans from one end to the other to redeem our honor.” The scars of the Balkan wars went so deep into the Ottoman psyche that Unionists were able to continue to deploy the rhetoric of revenge, even though its object had changed, in World War I.

Once the war had started, numerous intellectuals exalted it as a just and holy war, which gave all Ottomans the duty not only of defending the honor and borders of the empire, but also of fighting for the very existence of Islam. Defending the empire thus overlapped with the duty of defending the religion (which, in official Ottoman war culture, almost always meant Sunni Islam), a theme that would occupy a fundamental


place in official Ottoman propaganda, at least through the first half of the war. A quick victory over the hereditary foes of the Ottomans and Islam, as numerous articles in the press maintained, could prevent the crimes from which Muslims were suffering under the yoke of the Russian, British, and French empires. Thus “among all the belligerents,” wrote Türk Yurdu, “none is more righteous than the Ottomans.”

“It has become a sacred duty for us,” wrote a leading Unionist intellectual and politician, Ahmet Ağaoğlu, a year later, “to fight against the Entente, which currently rules ninety-eight percent of all Muslims through oppression and tyranny (cebr ve zulm), has caused the decline of all Muslim governments, and has decided to destroy the last two remaining Muslim states [i.e., Ottoman Empire and Iran].” As Ağaoğlu’s article testifies, religious themes and imagery were inseparable components in the official war culture, and were commonly employed in Ottoman propaganda geared to both the soldiers on the battlefields and the civilian population on the home front.

Ottoman politicians and intellectuals also welcomed the war as an historic opportunity to “break the chains” that were keeping the empire in a dependent and backward state. “By closing the straits,” wrote Ağaoğlu in Tercüman-i Hakikat, “Turkey has ensured its full sovereignty, which it had been incapable of maintaining for two hundred years, and broken the capitulations which had been put around its neck like a

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Although this was a constant theme in the official Ottoman discourse, it became increasingly prominent as the dreams of recapturing the lost lands and saving 300 million Muslims and Turkic people dimmed. Especially in the second half of the war, the Ottoman political and intellectual elite came increasingly to emphasize the Ottomans’ desire to protect their existence and maintain their sovereignty and political and economic independence.

As in other belligerent societies, the Ottomans were also inclined to go beyond particularistic arguments and attempt to give the war a universal meaning. The Ottoman Empire fought together with its allies in what was supposed to be a decisive battle to save not merely the Muslims living under the rule of colonial powers, but the whole of humanity. The president of the Ottoman parliament, Halil [Menteşe] Bey, gave a speech at the annual opening ceremony of the parliament that exemplified this rhetoric. According to this leading Unionist, the Ottoman people would eagerly endure every sacrifice necessary to defend humankind against “English selfishness, Russian greed, French revenge, and Italian treachery,” which had led to the destruction of millions of people’s lives and billions of liras’ worth of assets.

35 Ağaoğlu Ahmed, “Rus Gazetelerinin Hezeyanları,” Tercüman-ı Hakikat 12050 (28 October 1914), 1. In his memoirs, Ahmet Emin Yalman writes that even the moderates were inclined to interpret the developments along these lines. Ahmed Emin Yalman, Yakın Tarihte Gördüklerim ve Geçirdiklerim, vol. 1, 1888-1918 (İstanbul: Yenilik Basımevi, 1970), 217.

36 See, for example, the speech of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Nesimi Bey, in the parliament: MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 1, 3 Kanunuevvel 1333 (3 December 1917), 175-77.

37 MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 1, vol. 1, 22 Eylül 1331 (5 October 1915), 490. Even after the Ottomans lost the war, Halil Bey insisted that the Ottomans had provided valuable services to humanity and civilization in this war. MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 5, vol. 1, 14 Teşrinievvel 1334 (14 October 1918), 8. See also Enver Pasha’s speech in the senate, MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 1, 24 Teşrinisani 1332 (7 December 1916), 121 (“Ordu-yı hümâyunun her fere'd fere'di yalmız Osmanlı'nın değil, fakat bütün alem-i İslam'ın ve insaniyetin mukaddaretini temin için uğraştığını bilerek vazifesine devam edece ve îşâllah da muvaffak olacaktır.”)
III. The Ottoman Cult of the Ordinary Soldier

The second aspect of the official Ottoman war culture was centered on the idealized image of the ordinary soldier, Mehmetçik, “Little Mehmet,” comparable to the British Tommy Atkins. Constructing the cult of Mehmetçik, who was loyal and obedient to his superiors, dedicated to religious and patriotic values, and committed to the goal of protecting the empire and Islam, was a vital element of Ottoman wartime propaganda. Along with the new and more intrusive recruitment policies discussed in the previous chapter, the government, in cooperation with the military and the intellectual and literary elites, also devoted considerable energy to developing this cult of the ordinary soldier and propagating it through the press, popular literature, songs, theater plays, speeches, and sermons.38

The soldier who figured centrally in the official propaganda was a man who was ready and eager to perform historically monumental tasks. His foremost qualities were altruism, courage, modesty, and, most importantly, a sincere willingness to sacrifice in the name of a greater Ottoman cause. The official rhetoric assigned the ordinary soldier a momentous role: the fate of the six hundred-year-old empire, under attack by enemies from every direction, depended upon him. His performance on the battlefield would determine not only the future of the seat of the sultan and home of the caliph, but also the lives of millions of Ottomans and fellow Muslims. Aware of the fact that he was fighting

38 A group of artists who were invited to the Gallipoli front by the Ministry of War, for instance, were asked to produce artistic works that would not simply eulogize important personalities or institutions but feature vivid descriptions of the soldier’s essence and people’s capabilities (askerin cevherine ve milletin kabiliyetine dair hakiki ve şe’ni tasvirler). İbrahim Alaettin Gövsa, Çanakkale İzleri: Anafartaların Mümhebet Kahramanına, 3rd ed. (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu Yayınları, 1989 [1922]), 8.
for the very existence of the empire and defending the entire Islamic world, the soldier, as
described in wartime propaganda, was determined to fight to his last drop of blood.

In the wake of the Ottoman victory at Gallipoli, *Mehmetçik* was glorified for
fulfilling this historic duty of defeating the enemies of the Ottomans and Islam. In “Hail
to the Army” (*Orduya Selam*), a well-known poet of the era, Mehmed Emin Bey
[Yurdakul], addressed the soldier as “the sword of God”: “… Your chest spanned wide /
protecting the sultans’ thrones / Your voice calling ‘God is great’ (tekbir) / answered the
cannon of the enemy.” 39 This image of the soldier found its distinguished place in the
poem (*gazel-i hümâyûn*) written by Sultan Mehmed V himself to honor the defenders of
the throne and published in each and every newspaper and magazine: “Yet, as divine
assistance reached our army / Each soldier turned into a steel-bodied fortress.” 40

Highlighting these virtues, the official narrative forged a link between the historic
Ottoman heroes of past centuries and the brave modern-day soldiers of Gallipoli, the
Caucasus, the Suez Canal, Galicia, and other battlefronts of World War I. The war in
Gallipoli proved especially evocative of this connection. The soldiers’ courageous
defense of the peninsula against the Entente forces, the official narrative underlined,
echoed the valor and bravery of their ancestors who first set foot in Gallipoli in the early
fourteenth century to expand the borders of the early Ottoman state against the Byzantine

39 “Senin göğsün hakanların / Tahtlarına kanat gerdi / Tekbir sesin düşmanların / Toplarına cevap verdi”
published in the second edition of *Ordunun Destanı* (1918). Köroğlu describes Yurdakul as a “single-
Propagandadan Milli Kimlik İnşasına* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2004), 284-98.

40 “Lakin imdad-ı ilahi yetişip ordumuza / Oldu her bir neferi kal’a-i pulad-beden” Enfal Doğan and Fatih
Tiğlı, “Sultan V. Mehmed Reşad’ın Çanakkale Gazeli ve Bu Gazele Yazılan Tahmisler,” *İstanbul
Empire. After the declaration of holy war, Ottoman politicians and intellectuals also drew on tropes of the heroic deeds of the soldiers of the “golden age” of Islam. They conjured up the bravery, devotion, and determination of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions and narrated the arduous tasks they successfully carried out in the first wars of Islam against the “infidels.” The deployment of narratives that lauded the sacrifices and heroism of past Ottoman and Islamic soldiers obviously intended to encourage similar acts in the current conflict and endow the war with a broader historical significance.

Indeed, these qualities of bravery and stoicism attributed to the Ottoman soldier, as the propaganda underlined, were intrinsic to him. They were inherited from his ancestors, yet had remained latent until recently. The Great War, however, offered numerous opportunities for the virtues of the Ottoman soldier to be revealed. Unlike the Balkan Wars, in which the Ottoman soldier was poorly led and thus could not exhibit his true courage and strength, this time he flourished under virtuous, devoted, and caring leaders. The war therefore proved to be a historic opportunity for the Ottomans to remove the “deep black stain that the Balkan Wars put on the forehead of the nation.”

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41 Among numerous examples in the official propaganda, see the speech of the representative of the parliamentary committee that visited the front. MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 1, 16 Teşrinisani 1331 (29 November 1915), 48.

42 This is a recurrent theme in Ottoman literature. See Gottfried Hagen, “The Prophet Muhammad as an Exemplar in War: Ottoman Views on the Eve of World War I,” New Perspectives on Turkey 22 (2000): 145-172.


war dragged on, a governmental declaration (*hükümet beyannamesi*) maintained that the Ottoman people had managed to “gloriously expunge all the abasements of the previous [Balkan] war” through new victories and gallantries (*sehamet*) and to prove their “patriotic and heroic nature” (*fitrat-i cengaverane ve vatanperverane*).45

The Ottoman soldier portrayed in the official propaganda was a man who would voluntarily put the cause of the empire and religion above his own life and be willing to leave his village and family behind and rush to the battlefront. He eagerly undertook the most difficult duties, yet performed them skillfully. In return, he did not expect any reward or recognition, and sometimes even rejected rewards if they were offered to him. The most effective way to highlight the altruism of the ordinary soldier was to show that he prioritized his duty to the empire over his attachment to his home, family, and loved ones. Zahir, the hero of Faik Ali’s play *Payitahtın Kapısında* [At the Gates of the Capital], tells his fiancée before leaving for the front that he has found a love, a love for the nation, for which he can leave her without thinking twice. “Don’t be jealous of this love. Share this feeling of mine sincerely. And love me less, much less than the nation.”46 Similarly, in Ali Ekrem’s famous poem *Şehid Oğlum* [My Martyred Son], the son’s loyalty to the nation is so strong that he does not hesitate to leave his own mother, who heartily embraces him: “‘Mother,’ he said, ‘let me go off to the war / Let me destroy the

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45 For the governmental decree read by the prime minister Talat Pasha in the parliament, see *MMZC*, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 2, 2 Şubat 1332 (15 February 1917), 181-82.

46 Faik Ali [Ozansoy], *Payitahtın Kapısında: İki Perdelik Manzum Temaşa* (Istanbul: Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası Matbaacılık Osmanlı Şirketi, 1918), 76.
enemy of the nation / The nation is my real mother, not you / I will not let the enemy trample my nation.”

Like the soldier’s willingness to take up arms and rush to the defense of the motherland, his perseverance in the face of adverse circumstances was also greatly admired in the official war propaganda. “History is the witness,” asserted Enver Pasha in his declaration on war, “that there is no soldier more steadfast and more altruistic than the Ottoman soldier.” His determination “could not be subdued by bullets, bayonets, or even cannons.” The soldiers’ eagerness to take part in the bloodiest of conflicts was a recurrent theme in propaganda texts. Missing out on a combat, on the other hand, was extremely upsetting to the soldiers. Sergeant Kadiroğlu Mehmet, for instance, a soldier whose story was published in *Harb Mecmuası [War Magazine]*, the prominent propaganda organ published by the Ministry of War, expressed his regret in a letter he wrote to his regimental commander explaining that he could not take part in the battle because he had lost his right arm while throwing unexploded grenades back into the enemy’s trenches, but still wanted to fight with his left arm. Similarly, Sergeant Fahreddin was a soldier who, when he heard of an upcoming offensive, “could not sleep out of joy, like a child waiting for the holiday (*bayram*) morning.” He is portrayed as complaining bitterly upon learning that his battalion was left behind as a reserve unit on

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48 “Başkumandanlık Vekaletinin Beyannamesi Suretidir.” For a copy of the flyer that includes the *fetva* on the war (*feteva-yı şerife*), the imperial declaration (*beyannames-i hümayun*) and the declaration of the acting commander-in-chief (*başkumandanlık vekaletinin beyannamesi*), see Polat, *Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti*, 216-22.


the Galicia front: “I took part in all the [other] combats. Why shall I sit now like a woman?”\footnote{Mehmed Rifat, “Galiçya Mefahirinden,” \textit{Harb Mecmuası} 15 (December 1916): 227-233.} Returning to active duty was, of course, a re-masculinizing act to be met with enthusiasm and excitement. Sergeant İsmail, for instance, who had been seriously wounded during the Balkan War, “returned to his battery with joy (gülge güle)” after recovering from numerous other wounds he had suffered at Gallipoli.\footnote{“Bir Kahraman Asker İsmail Çavuş,” \textit{Harb Mecmuası} 4 (January 1916): 54.}

Representation of war as a joyous activity served the dual purpose of concealing the traumatic and disruptive aspects of armed conflict and the unprecedented human costs associated with modern warfare, thereby assuaging the concerns of civilians whose relatives were serving at the front. It also aimed to highlight what was supposed to be a distinctive feature of the Ottoman soldier: gaiety in the face of mortal danger. \textit{War Magazine} regularly printed photographs and articles depicting soldiers as if they thoroughly enjoyed fighting. One of these pictures showed a platoon chatting “with the joy of [the idea of] another attack after having carried out a bloody raid upon the enemy.”\footnote{“Çanakkale cephesinde düşmana kanlı bir baskından sonra yeni bir baskı neşesiyle kuştu orman yamacında dinlenip yarenlik eden bir postamız.” \textit{Harb Mecmuası} 9 (May 1916): 136-37. See also a photograph depicting a “joyful breakfast on the Gallipoli front” (“Çanakkale harb sahasında: Neşeli sabah yemeği”), \textit{Harb Mecmuası} 1 (November 1915): 16.} In a literary piece, Sergeant Yusuf was described as a hero for whom “bullet, shell, shrapnel, all these are toys that bring joy.”\footnote{K.N., “Makedonya Cephesi Harp Menakıbindan,” \textit{Harb Mecmuası} 27 (June 1918): 426-29.} A possibly fictitious excerpt from the diary of an officer similarly notes that “as we get used to them, the enemy’s shells became quite ordinary for us; they were even fun. It was as though we would catch the
bullets that flew over us.”

Taking fighting lightly and playing down its horrors were represented as common features of the ordinary Ottoman soldier that distinguished him from the “cowardly” enemy.

Apart from his zest for fighting, the Ottoman soldier was also portrayed as enjoying his life under arms. The army took all necessary measures to ensure a positive experience for him and to eliminate potential problems that might disturb the recruit. Creating a familial and egalitarian image of the army, which minimized the differences among young men from all walks of life and united them behind a common goal, was therefore an important dimension of the Ottoman official propaganda. “What a wonderful place is the army / It is as warm as a mother’s lap,” reads a poem by a Unionist intellectual describing a young recruit’s life. In order to wage a just and righteous war, people from different social backgrounds and different parts of the empire came together to fight side by side against the enemy. With benevolence and compassion, the army embraced all of them warmly. *Halife Ordusu Misır ve Kafkas’da* [“The Caliph’s Army in Egypt and the Caucasus”], a theatrical play written by Muhiddin Baha [Pars], channeled this message through the story of a peasant soldier from Anatolia (*Anadolułu nefer*).

Meeting university students who had also joined the army prior to the war, the soldier could not hide his excitement: “This is how the army should be: There are peasants and city-dwellers here; simpletons and scholars… When everybody is all together like this,


then, to us peasants, military service is like a wedding, like a feast.”

This picture of an egalitarian and unifying army is also sketched in Süleyman Nazif’s well-known article, “To the Istanbulite Martyrs of Gallipoli” (Çanakkale ‘nin İstanbullu Şühedasına), where he maintained that, in the aftermath of the battle at Gallipoli, there were many socialite families in Istanbul who mourned the loss of their sons in defense of the capital. While the people of Istanbul had continued their lives unchanged during previous wars in Libya and the Balkans, this time they responded to the call to arms and died on the battlefield alongside their fellow Ottomans. The gravity of the threat to the very existence of the empire brought the Ottomans together. The realities of the military conscription system, as discussed in previous chapters, were, however, often a far cry from this ideal representation of the egalitarian and familial Ottoman army.

While Ottoman war propaganda presented the image of a unified nation in order to ward off the threat to the very existence of the motherland, it excluded non-Muslims from this picture altogether or relegated them to marginal roles. The idea of Ottomanism and the brotherhood of the Ottoman people so lauded in the first years of the constitutional regime was almost nonexistent in the official discourse regarding the war.


58 Süleyman Nazif, “Çanakkale’nin İstanbullu Şühedasına,” 76. Another underlying message in this literary piece is the military service of the residents of the capital. For centuries, Istanbul residents had been exempt from military service. This exemption was revoked only recently, after the 1908 Revolution.

The experience of the Balkan Wars must have dashed the Unionist elite’s hopes of achieving a pan-Ottoman unity that crossed ethno-religious boundaries. Toward the end of the war, Arabs also seemed to be left out of the picture. Talat Pasha’s insistence that the heroic defense of Gallipoli was the “immortal masterpiece of Muslim Anatolia” (müslüman Anadolu’nun la-yemut bir şaheseri) pointed to the exclusion of the Arab subjects of the empire from the official war narrative.

In order to be powerful and persuasive, the “official cult of the Ottoman soldier” had to draw equally on images of “the self,” as well as stereotypes, exaggerations, and misconceptions about the enemy. Construction of the idealized image of the Ottoman soldier vis-à-vis distorted images of the enemy therefore became a significant aspect of wartime Ottoman official culture. In this regard, one of the recurrent themes constantly highlighted in the popular press and the official propaganda was the Ottoman soldier’s unwavering determination against more numerous and technologically superior enemies. In describing his fight against countless soldiers brought from all over the world and the deadliest weapons ever invented, the official rhetoric endowed the Ottoman soldier with superhuman qualities, reinventing him as a modern-day chevalier. The Ottoman soldier’s struggle against the enemy was compared to David’s conflict with Goliath and Moses’ conflict with Pharaoh. Süleyman Nazif’s well-known literary

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61 Historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker convincingly argue that “one cannot dissociate this ‘culture’ [war culture] from the emergence of a powerful hatred of the opponent.” Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, 14-18: Understanding the Great War, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 102-03.

62 This theme later worked its way into the National Anthem of the Turkish Republic written by a famous poet of the era, Mehmet Akif Ersoy.

63 “Türklük Şuunu: Çanakkale Müdafaası,” Türk Yurdu 84 (3 June 1915), 147.
piece, “Çimentepe’de” (“On Çimentepe”), for instance, narrates the story of six reserve officers who jumped out of their trenches under the fire of “twenty battleships and their two hundred and forty cannons, which could fire 1360 shells per minute.” Singing the song they had composed the night before, “The Turk’s blood has drenched this land / My mother gave birth to me for this day,” they lunged at the enemy in an act of martyrdom.⁶⁵ These superhuman qualities originated in the moral superiority of the Ottoman soldiers as well as the legitimacy of their war against rapacious and immoral enemies. The pages of the popular press were full of tales of the military prowess and heroism of soldiers who had singlehandedly killed dozens of enemy soldiers or, with their small platoons, had repelled entire enemy regiments and divisions.⁶⁶

The message was clear: the enemy’s numerical and technological superiority were bound to come up short in the face of the Ottoman soldier’s steadfast devotion to duty. In the wake of the victory at Gallipoli, Servet-i Fünun (Treasury of Sciences) proudly wrote that brave Ottoman soldiers heroically fought against people from all over the world, ranging from “the English noblemen to French socialists, from African cannibals (yamyam) to India’s Zoroastrians (mecusi),” and “all the means of destruction (vesait-i tahrip) that human beings have invented since the Great Flood…. In this apocalypse, we

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⁶⁶ Among many examples, see the story of sergeant Halil İbrahim from Paşaköy, Afyonkarahisar, who killed about forty Russian soldiers in Galicia “Galiçya’dan Anavatana – 2,” Harb Mecmuası 14 (November 1916), 210-15; for corporal Hüseyin oğlu Ismail who killed more than fifty British soldiers “Çanakkale Kahramanları: Bir Zabitin Muslimahedatından,” Harb Mecmuası 16 (February 1917): 243-47.
had such days that we had only one weapon to use against the enemy: our chests.”

“What did we have to counter their dreadnoughts, airplanes, and submarines?” asked Ahmed Hikmet in the special issue (*nüsha-i fevkalade*) of *Yeni Mecmuua* (New Magazine) on the victory at Gallipoli. “One chest, one pair of biceps, one chest, one pair of biceps.” What professor İsmail Hakkı Bey wrote in the same issue succinctly summarized this line of thought: “The defense of Gallipoli is the answer of the body to science.”

Emphasizing the technology and de-emphasizing the people using it was an effective way for Ottoman propaganda to dehumanize the enemy. The above-mentioned reserve officers, for instance, were not met by sailors waiting offshore or by soldiers waiting in the opposing trenches, but by twenty battleships and thousands of shells. In another example, it was not the British soldiers who killed artillery sergeant Tevfik at the Suez Canal, but “armored cars, which spread fire.” One of the underlying messages of this rhetoric was, of course, the impotency and cowardice of the enemy. The British and the French were so lacking in bravery that they had to avoid engaging in hand-to-hand combat.

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69. “Çanakkale müdafaası vücutun fenne munakelesidir.” İsmail Hakki, “Çanakkale Müdafaası Nedir?” in *Çanakkale: Yeni Mecmuanın Özel Sayısında*, 120. More serious analysis, on the other hand, acknowledged that both sides employed the latest technology and “all scientific means available” (*bütün vesait-i fenniye*) to strengthen their defenses and increase their combat efficiency. Kemal Behiç, “Çanakkale Kara Muharebatı,” in *Çanakkale: Yeni Mecmuanın Özel Sayısında*, 81.

combat with the Ottoman soldier, choosing instead to hide behind their technologically superior weapons, as well as colonial troops.\textsuperscript{71} Even in this age of technology, truly honorable soldiers, the Ottoman propaganda implied, did not need to rely upon such weapons.

Integral to this image was the representation of the enemy in an extremely negative light. Ottoman official propaganda portrayed Britain and France as nations that had betrayed their own civilization. While advocating tolerance, rationalism, peace, and dialogue, the Unionist political and intellectual elites argued, Europe did not hesitate to provoke conflicts everywhere and put millions of people in harm’s way. Europe pioneered scientific developments and technological advancements, but it never regretted harnessing its knowledge and expertise in the service of war. As the battle of Gallipoli perfectly demonstrated, Europeans could be as cruel and barbarous as any “uncivilized” people. War, in that sense, helped to reveal the real, heartless and inhumane side of European civilization.\textsuperscript{72} “So, Europe is a bastard which rejects its roots,” wrote poet Faik Ali, “So, Europe is merely a bandit and a pirate.”\textsuperscript{73} This rhetoric was also echoed in a famous poem by arguably the most prominent intellectual of the era, Ziya Gökalp: “There

\textsuperscript{71} This image, at the same time, presented a totally conflicting picture to the one drawn in the official propaganda, which depicted the Ottoman army and its allies as equipped with cutting-edge weapons and devices such as zeppelins, airplanes, modern communication systems, and other state-of-the-art technologies of warfare. This was also at odds with the Ottoman fascination with naval technology, which reached its zenith with the arrival of two German ships and their “Ottomanization.”

\textsuperscript{72} Elaborating on this discourse, Ottoman intellectuals intentionally disregarded the fact that they cooperated with two European empires during the war.

is an island far away / The people of which are called the English / [They are] both civilized and monstrous / We cannot be sure about their ruse.”

In visual propaganda and literary sketches, the inhumanity of and the atrocities committed by the Entente forces were contrasted with Ottoman compassion and chivalry. As opposed to the violent, barbarous enemy who did not hesitate to attack hospitals, schools, and mosques, and to kill civilians, the wounded and prisoners of war, the Ottoman soldiers were portrayed as compassionate and merciful to the enemy prisoners they captured. In *Yadigar-ı Harb* (*Souvenir of the War*), a wartime play written by a well-known poet of the era, Abdülhak Hamid, a conversation between a soldier and his commanding officer reflects the humane character of the ordinary Ottoman soldier while emphasizing the enemy’s brutality:

- … Who is that, Mehmet? Did you take someone captive again?

- No, sir. He is a wounded enemy officer. I have taken him to the Red Crescent, to the hospital.

- Hospital? The one that the enemy shelled and destroyed?

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Photographs published in *War Magazine* and other venues that showed, for instance, Ottoman soldiers traveling on foot after having given their horses to British POWs, or paintings by major Ottoman artists depicting, for example, an Ottoman soldier giving water to a wounded enemy soldier, were also used to strengthen this image. Through this imagery, the Ottomans sought to upset the entrenched negative perceptions of themselves as barbaric and uncivilized and show that the opposite was actually the case.

A central component of Ottoman official wartime rhetoric was the glorification of the fight for the empire and the signification of death on the battlefield as a manly deed. Defense of the borders, in this respect, was construed as the protection of the family, hearth, and home. Thus, defending the empire came to be portrayed as the utmost sign of “manliness” and “valor.” In turn, the Ottoman soldier, who loyally fought to protect the honor of the motherland and the family, was represented as the embodiment of manly virtues and masculine qualities. As one author presented him, the Ottoman soldier would crush the enemy who “cast his covetous eyes upon the land of the caliph, the country of the sultan, his virtue (*ismet*) and his existence.”

76 “An exemplary lesson of ‘compassion to the prisoner’ given by the Ottoman soldier who was on foot serving as escort while the British officers captured during the historic desert campaign were riding horses” (“**Tarihi çöl seferinden alınma esir İngiliz zabitleri at üstünde giderken yaya muhafız giden Osmanlı askerlerinin ‘esire şefkat’ dersinden bir numune-i ibret.”) *Harb Mecmuası* 14 (November 1916): 224. For the painting, “A Little Water / Turkish soldier helping a wounded enemy soldier” (“Biraz Su / Yaralı düşman askerine yardım eden Türk askeri”), by Ali Cemal Bey, see *Türk Resim Sanatında Şişli Atölyesi ve Viyana Sergisi*, ed. Ahmet Kamil Gören (İstanbul: Şişli Belediyesi and Resim ve Heykel Müzeleri Derneği, 1997), 82.

77 For a similar observation, see Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 100-102.


from us? Why did this nation feed us?” asked another poet in the voice of a soldier;

“Were we not the shield of its honor?”80

Once the Ottoman soldier was depicted as the defender of the family, the British, the French and the Russian came to be portrayed automatically as barbarous enemies who were obsessed with violating the chastity of Ottoman women. “There is one who tries to eat away at your existence / He is the one who sets his eye on your honor (namus) and your wife / Your fatherland, your mother, and your wife are in safe hands as long as you are alive.”81

This message, which linked the personal honor of the soldier with imperial interests, must have been particularly accessible to many Ottoman soldiers for whom the idea of “nation” was too abstract. On the battlefield, therefore, this rhetoric of defending the chastity of women was commonly employed to motivate soldiers in campaigns.

Colonel Ziya Bey, for instance, gave a short speech to his regiment before the Battle of Köprüköy in which he held that “the intention of the enemy you face is to destroy us, to crush our honor and virtue.”82 A soldier similarly remembers his commander’s first speech after they arrived in Gallipoli: “Here is the gate of Istanbul and the heart of all of

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Turkey. Our mothers and sisters sent us here to protect their honor and chastity (namus ve iffet). Our duty is to overwhelm the enemy that would impinge upon our honor.”

While entrusting the honor of the empire and the family to the soldier, the official rhetoric also prescribed certain roles for relatives who sent their fathers, sons, and husbands to the army. Parents, wives, and children were expected to carry on during the war, which tore their male family members away from them, with great pride and dignity. The message sent through propaganda was that they should, first and foremost, encourage their sons and husbands to go to war, fight bravely, and, if necessary, die a hero’s death. Realizing that attachment to family members might play a significant role in deterring young men from answering the call, Unionist politicians and intellectuals sought to develop a wartime image of the supportive and encouraging family. In a poem published by Celal Sahir in Türk Yurdu (Turkish Land), for instance, a wife called out to her husband: “Go, my lion-hearted one, go and save the country / If you don’t go, I won’t shed fewer tears but more!” In Sergeant Fahreddin’s story, published in War Magazine, his son, Necmeddin, plays a similarly encouraging role. When he hears the drums announcing the mobilization, Necmeddin curiously asks his father, “Father! Our Sultan has declared war. This is why the drums are being played. Those who go to the army will become either a martyr or a gazi…. Dad, will you not become a martyr or a gazi like

them?" Mehmed Emin (Yurdakul), the national poet (milli şair), repeated the same message in his well-known poem *Ordunun Destanı* (*Epic of the Army*), exhorting young women to emulate their mothers and grandmothers: “And be like those who / Demanded [from their husbands] heroism and sacrifice...” and admired them. “How happy is the woman who, / In her heart, suppresses deep sorrows that shake the soul / In the springtime of her life / Endures her inner woe for the nation.”

While emphasizing its supportive functions, the official propaganda marginalized the suffering of the home-front population and shrouded it in an all-encompassing discourse of duty (vazife) and sacrifice (fedakarlık). Just as the soldier was expected to sacrifice his life for the sake of the empire, home-front civilians were expected to place the empire’s survival above their own grief. Their duty in the war included, but was not limited to, the acceptance of privations and other difficulties with fortitude. Cenab Şahabettin, another famous poet of the era, wrote in *War Magazine* that even the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453 had not required as great a sacrifice from the nation (*millet*), yet “the nation has never seemed so willing to make such a sacrifice.”

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85 Mehmed Rifat, “Galiçya Mefahirinden,” *Harb Mecmuası* 15 (December 1916): 227-233. Islam grants the status of “martyr” to those who were killed in a battle, which was fought to further God’s religion. One of the most direct verses in Qur’an (3:169-70) on martyrs specifies their status and reward as follows “And do not think those who have been killed in the way of Allah as dead; they are rather living with their Lord, well provided for. Rejoicing in what their Lord has given them of His bounty, and they rejoice for those who stayed behind and did not join them, knowing that they have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve.” For more detailed information, see E. Kohlberg, art. “Shahid,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., www.encislam.brill.nl.

86 “Ve onlara benzeyin ki eşlerinden / Kahramanhık, fedakarlık isterlerdi....” “O kadına ne mutlu ki ruhu sarsan / Hiçkırıklı hıçkırıları kalbde boğar / Ömrün bahar çiğnliğinde aşkı çarpan / Genç bağrına vatan için taşlar basar.” Mehmed Emin, *Ordunun Destanı* (İstanbul: Matbaa-i Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası, 1331), 14, 16.

The popular press and propaganda literature included numerous accounts that strengthened this image of the family that would not hesitate to sacrifice its only breadwinner for the motherland. In a fictitious account, the soldier Hüseyin’s mother reminds her son of their family tradition of heroism, and asks him to proudly take part in this tradition. Bidding farewell to her son, who is about to leave for the front, she exclaims, “Hüseyin! Your uncle fell in Şıpka [in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78], your father in Dömeke [in the Greco-Ottoman War of 1897], and your brothers at Gallipoli eight months ago. You are all I have left! If the call to prayer coming from the minarets fell silent, if the candles in the mosques burned out, die and do not come back to [our] village.”

Families might endure wartime difficulties, but none of these mattered so long as the enemy was defeated and the empire and the religion survived. All necessary sacrifices to ensure victory for the Ottoman army should be made without hesitation. In his widely-read poem “Hail to the Army” (“Orduya Selam”), Mehmed Emin spoke for every woman and household when addressing the army: “Know that in this country every woman’s / Last son is yours / Big or small, every household’s / Last life is yours.”

Accordingly, the death of a relative on the battlefield should have been perceived by families as an occurrence to be met with stoicism and resignation. Death was thus not portrayed as something devastating, unendurable, or as a source of remorse. On the contrary, sacrificing a family member for the sake of the empire was something of which to be proud. A fictitious letter from a mother to her son in the army describes the death of


their village headman’s son almost as if it were a wedding, an event to be celebrated by his family and the village community:

Muhtargilin Ahmed şehid olmuş haber geldi dün
Şenlik oldu, mevlüt oldu, düğün oldu bütün gün.
[News arrived yesterday that Ahmed, the village headman’s son, had been martyred
The whole day was a festival, a birthday celebration, and a wedding feast.]\(^{90}\)

In the meantime, the Unionist elite also established a “material” link between the hero’s death and his family’s sacrifice. Realizing that the glorification of martyrdom in printed and oral propaganda was not sufficient to encourage soldiers to “die a hero’s death,” Unionists decided to supplement this rhetoric with more tangible rewards. In August 1915, the government enacted a law that awarded five lira to the families of fallen Ottoman soldiers whose exceptional services (hidemat-i fevkaladeleri) were attested to and approved by their superiors.\(^{91}\) In this way, the government showed bereaved families that it acknowledged their sacrifice and compensated them for the heroic deeds of the soldiers.

Controlling the meaning of death, indeed, was perceived by the Unionist elite to be one of the most effective ways to ensure the willingness of Ottoman society to sustain the heavy human and material costs of the war. Politicians and intellectuals therefore consciously elaborated on the discourse of patriotic death and stoic sacrifice with the purpose of regulating popular attitudes towards war and the heavy casualties it caused.

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\(^{90}\) Manastırli M. Hasib, “Hasan Çavuş’un Anasından Name-i Tesç,” *Harb Mecmuası* 16 (February 1917): 250.

Through news, speeches, sermons, popular literature, religious propaganda, and public ceremonies, the Unionist government not only aimed to honor the dead and commemorate their heroism, but at the same time attempted to provide a template of interpretation for those who had experienced the death of a family member, relative, or friend.

Commemorative ceremonies proved to be important venues for providing the blueprint of the idealized behavior for bereaved families. One such memorial service held at the Mekteb-i Sultani, a leading educational institution in Istanbul, was attended by numerous officials, high-ranking officers, veterans, teachers, and students of the school. Among those in attendance were parents who had lost sons during the war. Their speeches, according to a newspaper report, “made all the attendees cry.” One of the speakers, Fuad Pasha, a retired field marshal and a prominent member of the Ottoman senate whose three sons were killed in the war, epitomized the sacrifice that the Unionist elite so much admired. “I lost my three children on the battlefield, for the sake of the religion and the nation,” exclaimed Fuad Pasha. “The value of human life is nothing [by comparison]. I regret that I could not attain the level that my children reached for the sake of the religion and the nation. I envy their [high] status.”

The emphasis on such a well-known figure as Fuad Pasha, of course, also served to strengthen the egalitarian image of the imperial defense while showing that he accepted the death of his children with great pride.

As indicated by Fuad Pasha’s speech, the “Ottoman cult of honorable death” assumed religious overtones from the very beginning. Upon the declaration of jihad, holy

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war, Ottoman propaganda began to represent fighting against the enemy as the equivalent of doing the work of God and invited Muslims from all over the world to protect the caliph and his seat at the expense of their own lives. Dying on the battlefield while fighting against the “infidel” was therefore praised as the most pious act, an act that would also be generously rewarded in the afterlife. The exaltation of martyrdom not only had the specific purpose of endowing death at the front with a broader, overarching significance, but it also provided a common vocabulary with which to interpret death for both Muslim soldiers and home-front civilians.

The soldier’s willingness to die at the battlefront, however, came as much from his belief in a heavenly reward as from his determination to protect the motherland. The official Ottoman war culture glorified the self-sacrifice of the soldier and maintained repeatedly that his death would create a new energy that would prolong the life of the empire. Far from being a negative thing, therefore, the death of the ordinary soldier was propagated as a sacred duty, exalted as a (if not the) source of imperial regeneration.

IV. “Hidden Transcripts”: Popular Perceptions of War and Death

It is not easy for historians to ascertain how widely the Ottoman people embraced and identified with the official rhetoric about the war. People to some extent were informed about the progress of the war through the press, official news agency bulletins, and local sources. They were also exposed to at least some aspects of the official narrative of the war. However, the infrastructural problems of conveying news and propaganda to remote corners of the empire, the low literacy rate of the population, and the predominantly rural society limited the impact that the Ottoman official war culture
had on people. Civilians on the home front must also have learned from passing troops or from relatives and friends who were on furlough that there was a considerable discrepancy between the war of official propaganda and the actual war.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, the Ottoman Empire was one of the belligerents most severely affected by World War I. Over a period of four years, approximately 2.9 million men came to be involved in the campaigns. The extraction of these men from society and the economy, coupled with the state’s increasingly ruthless intervention in the everyday lives of the Ottoman people, placed an unendurable burden on their shoulders. This burden became even heavier as a result of the unprecedentedly large number of casualties, which reached a total of some 750,000 soldiers. By the end of the war, there were very few families and presumably no villages or neighborhoods that had escaped from the terrible effects and death toll of the war. This traumatic experience gave birth to a distinct culture of war. Separate from the official war culture, it featured its own symbols and representations, offering people an alternative means of interpreting the war and alternative channels to express their feelings about it.

Students of Ottoman history are not as fortunate as their Europeanist counterparts, who have countless diaries, letters, and other documents at their disposal that enabled them to grasp what ordinary people felt about the war and how they dealt with its disastrous impact. Notwithstanding a small number of significant exceptions, the Ottoman people did not leave behind individual records through which historians could trace their perceptions of the war and their experiences of losing loved ones. We know disproportionately more about what hardships the Ottoman populace underwent during the war than about what meanings they attached to these experiences.
At the time of the war, the majority of the Ottoman people were illiterate. The first reliable data about the rate of literacy comes from the first population census of the Turkish Republic in 1927, nearly a decade after the war had ended. According to this data, just under eleven percent of the population of the Turkish Republic could read and write; in the much larger pre-war territories, the literacy rate must have been lower but variable in numerous respects. The significant difference between the number of literate men and women renders this picture even more dramatic: while seventeen percent of all men were literate, less than five percent of women were. A similar disparity could also be observed between the urban dwellers and rural population. In Istanbul, for instance, 53.7 percent of the population was literate, while in the eastern Anatolian towns of Hakkari and Van this figure dropped to 3.08 and 3.54 percent respectively. Thus, it would be safe to assume that the vast majority of Ottoman society was illiterate at the time of the war.

This lack of literacy, however, did not preclude the emergence of an authentic popular culture of war. Numerous songs, ballads, and laments collected by folklorists in the decades following World War I offer perhaps the best evidence that the Ottoman people developed a way of understanding the war noticeably different from the official

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93 The last Ottoman census conducted in 1905/06 did not include questions about literacy.

94 This is the ratio of literate people to the entire population, minus children below seven years of age.

95 28 Teşrinievvel 1927 Umumi Nüfus Tahriri, vol. 3, Usuller, Kanun ve Talimatnameler, Neticelerin Tahlili (Ankara: Başyecalet Müd evenat Matbaası, 1929), 22. This low rate of literacy differentiated the Ottomans from other belligerents. In France, for instance, the population was more or less universally literate by the time of the war. Leonard V. Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker, France and the Great War, 1914-1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 53. Similarly, in Bulgaria four out of five soldiers in the army were literate. Snezhana Dimitrova, “‘Taming the Death’: The Culture of Death (1915–18) and Its Remembering and Commemorating through First World War Soldier Monuments in Bulgaria (1917–44),” Social History 30 (2005): 179.
understanding. These songs and laments provide historians with an invaluable glimpse into the experiences and feelings of the home-front population, subjects that have been omitted from official histories of the war, but which may have dominated local memories throughout the empire. They reflect, collectively, how the Ottoman people perceived and remembered the war and its disastrous impact. In the absence of monuments and memorial sites for public remembrance and mourning in the Ottoman Empire of the sort that were erected throughout Europe, these songs and laments became the primary “sites of collective memory and mourning” for the Ottoman people.96 No analysis of the wartime culture of the Ottoman Empire would be complete without an understanding of these folklore accounts.

The multitude and ubiquity of songs about war and death attracted the attention of folklorists as early as the 1930s and 1940s.97 The prominent Turkish novelist Yaşar Kemal, for instance, who collected laments in the southern Anatolian Çukurova region in the 1940s, wrote that in every single village he visited, he heard women’s laments on the war. He regretted that he could not extend his fieldwork and go to nearby Uzunyayla,

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where he could have collected hundreds more verses that dealt with similar issues. Ever since then, folklorists, teachers, local intellectuals, and amateur researchers have collected folklore accounts from various communities that reflect the traumatic experiences of war. These accounts were transmitted orally (and, on some rare occasions, in written form) to succeeding generations. In each generation, women memorized and sang them when they performed mourning rituals and on other such occasions. Parts of these songs were possibly changed and mixed with verses or stanzas from other songs in the process of transmission, and many of them vanished altogether.

These songs vary considerably in length, style, poignancy, and forcefulness. Stanzas from laments that had been sung for previous wars and campaigns were occasionally blended with newer accounts. People freely and extensively used these familiar verses to express “new” bereavements and experiences. Folklorists also collected similar verses and stanzas from various parts of the country. This indicates the popularity of these songs and laments as well as the power and appeal of the messages they expressed. People who suffered from similar difficulties articulated their agonies using similar language. After they had been sung for the first time in a certain location, they gradually attained wider popularity and, eventually, became anonymous creations, as the original creators were no longer remembered.

While the majority of the sources used in this chapter were sung and written in Turkish, the people of the empire whose native tongues were different also produced

98 Yaşar Kemal, Ağıtlar (Istanbul: Adam Yayınları, 1996), 26, 153. In her story, “Şebben’in Kara Hüseyin’i,” Halide Edip mentions songs that women sang about the battle of Gallipoli and the attack on the Suez Canal (“hep şarkılar Çanakkale‘ ye Kanalli‘ya aitti.”) Although this is a fictional account, it is probably based on the personal observations of the author, who traveled around Anatolia in the immediate aftermath of the war. Halide Edip Adıvar, Dağa Çikan Kurt (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1963 [1922]), 89.
similar accounts. In his article on the war and Iraq, historian Dina Rizk Khoury asserts that poetry and popular songs written by Iraqis during and in the immediate aftermath of the war were “preferred venues for popular expression by the intelligentsia and by the common people alike.”

Similarly, for Armenian deportees and the survivors of the Armenian genocide, songs and laments, in both Armenian and Turkish, became effective mediums through which they could express their agony about the deportation and mass killings and, at the same time, preserve the memories of these events.

Many of these songs and laments were written by female relatives of soldiers, as it was primarily women who mourned and performed other grieving rituals. However, as will be discussed below, some songs were clearly written by men who were conscripted during the mobilization, took part in the war, and personally witnessed the destruction of modern warfare. Since the majority of soldiers, just like their relatives on the home front, were illiterate, they also used songs to express their feelings. Young Ahmet Hamdi (Tanpinar), for instance, who later became a prominent novelist and intellectual in early Republican Turkey, recalled that he had first heard soldiers singing these songs at a train station in Konya in the summer of 1916: “... Leaning up against one another under the

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101 Erik J. Zürcher is among the first scholars to have drawn attention to soldiers’ songs. He does not, however, discuss them in detail. Erik Zürcher, “Little Mehmet in the Desert: The Ottoman Soldier’s Experience,” in *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, eds. Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle (London: Leo Cooper/ Pen and Sword, 1996), 235-37.
dim lamp of a freight wagon, children with pale and tired skin were singing one of these songs, which, like melting lead, scorched and left cinders as it flowed. No complaint could have been more terrifying.\textsuperscript{102}

The First World War or, as the Ottomans came to refer to it, the \textit{seferberlik} is arguably the single most salient historical event recounted by these songs. In all of the languages of the region, the war itself and all the horrors that surrounded it were referred to in popular memory as \textit{seferberlik} (“mobilization” in Turkish, actually a Turkicized form of the Arabic for “overland journey” or alternatively, “land campaign,” \textit{safar al-barr}).\textsuperscript{103} As these folklore accounts and other written testimonies reveal, people throughout the empire remembered the \textit{seferberlik} as one of the most significant events in their personal and collective histories. It came to denote a chronological milestone as exemplified in the usage of the phrases “before the mobilization” (\textit{seferberlikten evvel}) or “after the mobilization” (\textit{seferberlikten sonra}). As Dina Rizk Khoury shows, for instance, Iraqis dated their own and their children’s birth according to the chronology of the war: “For many, the British occupation was a period of ‘fall’ (\textit{suqut}) and the children born during this period were known as the children of \textit{suqut}.”\textsuperscript{104}


\textsuperscript{103} Hanna notes that the war is also remembered as \textit{al-tajammu} ("the collection" in Arabic), referring to the collection of recruits before their departure. I have also come across the term \textit{sevkiyat} ("dispatching" in Turkish), referring either to the dispatch of troops to the fronts or to the forced deportation of the Armenian population. Adnan İşik, \textit{Malatya, 1830-1919} (İstanbul: n.p., 1998), 762. \textit{Seferberlik}, however, is by far the most common term by which people remembered World War I.

\textsuperscript{104} Khoury, “Ambiguities of the Modern,” 317.
Seferberlik, however, acquired several other meanings beyond the immediate, straightforward usage of the term. As mentioned above, it came to denote both a certain period that was etched into the popular memory, and the war itself. People who lived through it commonly remember World War I as the “war of mobilization” (seferberlik harbi). The fact that World War I is the only war remembered in the region in conjunction with mobilization points to the unprecedented totality of this war’s mobilization of human and material resources of the empire as discussed in previous chapters. According to Najwa al-Qattan, seferberlik invoked at least six different meanings in the Arab provinces of the empire: wartime mobilization, bounty hunters who roamed city streets hoping to catch young men evading the draft, civilian travel and forced dislocation during the time of official mobilization, and the Great War itself. The term also referred to war in general, “to wars from which nobody ever returns and, most poignantly, to sites from which no one comes home.” In Turkish, the term was most commonly used in this sense, as exemplified by the expression “He went to the mobilization and did not come back.” Finally, seferberlik was closely associated with hunger and death.

Linda Schatkowski Schilcher and Elizabeth Thompson similarly underline that the term seferberlik passed into Syrian colloquial Arabic as safar barlik, meaning “famine,” suggesting a linkage in people’s minds between military conscription and general suffering. The numerous different meanings that this seemingly

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105 For a similar observation, see Beşikçi, “Between Voluntarism and Resistance,” 6.
straightforward term gained in popular usage also point to the multiplicity of experiences it brought about and the deep traces it left in the collective memory of the Ottoman people.

While referring to these experiences, songs and laments composed by ordinary Ottoman people painted a completely different picture of war and death from that offered by the highly propagandist official rhetoric. They implicitly and explicitly negated the language of sacrifice, heroism, and resignation endorsed by the Ottoman state. In that regard, they became “hidden transcripts,” to use a term coined by anthropologist James C. Scott.\textsuperscript{108} When read against the dominant discourse, this mostly untapped body of sources can provide a unique glimpse into the tension between the war as described in official propaganda and the war as experienced.

Arguably, nowhere was the tension between the idealized representations of the war and its perception by ordinary Ottoman people more visible than in the process of conscription. The conscription of hundreds of thousands of young men, as discussed in previous chapters, created unprecedented material and emotional burdens for the Ottoman people to shoulder. Songs and poems written by both the soldiers themselves and their relatives revealed the harrowing impact of this separation of young men from their families and the indelible marks it left on the collective memory of the Ottomans. They clearly showed that this war, the war of seferberlik, gave rise to widespread distress

among the Ottoman people rather than offering an opportunity to reveal the latent valor and heroism of the Ottoman soldier.

In this regard, folkloric accounts usually drew a completely different picture of recruits from that found in official propaganda, where they were portrayed as happy to join the ranks without any pressure from above while waiting impatiently to meet the enemy and crush him. The soldiers in these songs apparently went to war with much trepidation. One of these songs summarizes the mobilization process with heart-rending simplicity:

Seferberlik oldu gelin dediler “The mobilization is underway, join!” they said.

Üç günün Erzurum dediler “Bring three days of food,” they said.

Gidin Erzurum’da ölün dediler... “Go to Erzurum and die there!” they said.

Others use the metaphor of “spreading fire” to describe the mobilization and subsequent conflicts. Instead of “wedding,” “festival,” or “feast,” people frequently preferred metaphors like “fire,” “doomsday,” or “flood” to describe the mass departure of young men for the army. As seen in the previous chapter, the writers of memoirs recalled the process of mobilization with similar metaphors.

Gizli gelen tezkereyi açtılar. They opened the secret memorandum.

Onbeş’den kırkbeş’ye seçtiler. They picked [men] between 15 and 45.

Alem üstüne atas saçtılar. They set the whole world on fire.

Ne Karalı günler kalmadı bu sene. What horrible days we have had this year.

Orucun onunda belirdi alamet. The first signs appeared on the tenth of Ramadan.

Bayrama varmadan koptu kıyamet. Before the holiday, doomsday arrived.

Ağlaman analar, sonu selamet. Don’t cry, mothers, there will be peace in the end.

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Ne karalı günlere kaldık bu sene. What horrible days we have had this year.

The mobilization and war were certainly not perceived by people as an historic opportunity for the Ottomans to take their revenge and defeat the herediatry enemies of the empire and Islam. On the contrary, they were a source of death and a cause of the disintegration of the family:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kimini toplar götürdü.</td>
<td>Cannons carried off some of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimini humma yatırdı.</td>
<td>Typhus laid others low.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Körolası seferberlik,</td>
<td>Curse this mobilization;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neçe ocaklar batırdı. (^{111})</td>
<td>It ruined so many homes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In another song, the war is the reason behind the dramatic change in family structure, a change that was perhaps best observed in the closure of “all big houses”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anan duyar bacınc ağlar.</td>
<td>Your mother hears, your sister cries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ak gelinler karalar bağlar.</td>
<td>Brides in white put on black [to mourn].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hep kapandı büyük evler</td>
<td>All the big houses were shut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaldi koca karyıman. (^{112})</td>
<td>Only old women and men remained.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The state’s expansion of the age range of conscription to include boys of seventeen and eighteen (and sometimes even younger) to make up for losses and refill the ranks as the war dragged on opened deep scars in the Ottoman people’s collective memory. Many songs touchingly recorded this grievous practice. A young woman, for instance, who lost her three brothers, wrote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gardaşım askerde kazar tabiya.</td>
<td>My brother digs earthworks in the army.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devlet de şaşırmış düştü sabıya.</td>
<td>The state has gone mad and even takes children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{110}\) İşık, *Malatya*, 762. The author heard this song from his mother in 1943 and recorded it in his school notebook. Here, the song refers to the announcement of the mobilization on the 10\(^{th}\) of the month of Ramadan and the declaration of war on the sacrificial holiday (*kurban bayrami*) approximately three months later.


Folklore accounts repeatedly convey the agony created by the recruitment of these young boys. These hundreds of songs and laments, which describe their conscription and death, according to Yaşar Kemal, almost constitute their own genre. Villagers called these accounts “laments of ‘Woe my mother draft’” (vay anam kur’asının ağtları).114 Since these boys were so young when they were called to arms, villagers told Kemal, they departed from their villages crying “Woe, my mother (vay anam);” hence the common name of these laments. In some villages, women expressed their grief even through the rugs they wove. Similar to the laments, they called these “rugs of ‘Woe my mother draft’” (vay anam kur’asının kilimi).115 The picture drawn in the official propaganda of families who eagerly sent their sons and husbands to the war and the feelings reflected in these folklore accounts stood worlds apart.

Even the name of this genre, not to speak of the content of the laments and songs, negated the image of the virile and heroic soldier protecting the honor of the empire and the chastity of the women on the home front that was featured so prominently in the official narrative. For mothers who composed these songs, the recruits were mere children, like “rosebuds,”116 they were weak and vulnerable, too young to be sent to the front to die:

Davul zurna çalınıyor Drums are beaten, pipes are played

116 “Onaltılı dedikleri / Yeni açılmış güл değil mi?” (“Isn’t the sixteen-year-old they called / Like a newly opened rose?”). Kabacalı, Gül Yaprağın Döktü, 280.
Onbeşliler gelsin deyi.  To call Fifteeners to arms.
Onbeşliden asker m’olur?  Could a fifteener be a soldier?
Topluyorlar ölsün deyi.  They’re gathered up to die.

Seferberlik çıktı, gelin dediler.  “The mobilization is underway, come on!”
Çantasını alan dağlardan aştı.  They said.
Görpe kuzularım yollarda şaştı.  Taking up their bags they crossed over the mountains.

Soldiers and their relatives seemed also to be keenly aware of the non-egalitarian nature of conscription and death on the battlefield. While the official narrative consciously refrained from mentioning bedel, the exemption from military service granted in exchange for a certain fee, in order to create a powerful image of “unity and equality in defense of the fatherland,” songs refused to remain silent on the issue. Bedel proved to be a recurrent theme in folklore accounts, whereby people expressed both their envy and resentment of these privileges:

Yolları var takırdan.  His roads are rough.
Karavanası bakırdan.  His mess kit is copper.
Zengin olan bedel verir.  The rich man buys exemption.
Hep ölen böyle fakirden.  The poor man faces death.

The fact that conscription imposed enormous burdens on people on the home front ensured that the war and mobilization were viewed in folklore accounts through the prism of the family and the individual rather than that of the empire and the official

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117 Emir Kalkan, Kayseri ve Yöresi Ağıtları (Kayseri: Kültür Müdürlüğü Yayınları, 1992), 19. For another version of the same lament, see Efdal Sevinçli, “Seferberlik Üstüne ve Bir Seferberlik Ağıtı,” Türk Folklor Araştırmaları 358 (1979): 8659-8661. Onbeşliler (fifteeners) were boys who were born in 1315 (1899) and conscripted when they were seventeen. For very similar version of the same lament sung for onaltılar/sixteeners, see Şükrü Elçin, Türkiye Türkçesinde Ağıtlar (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1990), 14-16; for the onyedililer/seventeeners, see Ahmet Z. Özdemir, Öyküleriyle Ağıtlar 1 (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2002), 31.


religion. In contrast to the official narrative, which emphasized the war’s political, military, and religious meanings, the suffering and bereavement of families torn apart were at the forefront of these accounts. The crying of women overwhelmed by the distress of being left alone was therefore heard constantly. A mother, for instance, who fell into destitution because of the conscription of her seven sons, wrote:

Yaşıtlarını gördükçe  When I see boys your age
Günde bin kere ölüyom.  I die a thousand times a day.
Yedi oğlanın anasıyım  I am a mother of seven sons
Elden fitire alıyom.  Yet I take alms from strangers.

Anguish over home-front hardships, which mounted beyond endurance, also included a deep concern over widows who would be forced to remarry:

Kurban oluyum kaşına.  I’ll die for your eyebrow.
Sarığını sar başına.  Wrap your turban around your head.
Beni çobana verirler.  They will marry me to a shepherd.
Hele feleğ'in işine.  Alas, my dark fate.

For the deported Armenians, this was an extremely traumatic experience:

Giden giden Ermeni kızlar!  Armenian girls who go and go!
Bir gün ölüm bize düşer.  One day death will come upon us.
Düşmana avrat olmamaya  Before I become the wife of the enemy,
Yeprat’ın içinde ölüm bulayım.  Let me find death in the Euphrates.

The soldiers’ own songs or the songs written using their voices also reveal the profound concern they felt for their families on the home front and the pain of separation. The abstract concepts of protecting the empire and sacrificing one’s own life in the name of this greater cause collided with the soldier’s role as the head of the family and his essential duties of safeguarding his family members and providing for them.

120 Kalkan, Kayseri ve Yöresi, 23.
121 Özdemir, Öyküleriyle Ağıtalar, 61.
122 Svazlian, The Armenian Genocide, 83.
Möyünlü möünsüz hepsini ald. Çoluğu çocuğunu arada kaldı. Sivas kolordusu sevkiyat oldu. [The army] took all the breadwinners. Their families were left out in the cold. The Sivas army corps was ordered to the front.

Bugün Kızılırmak bulanık akar. Nice koçğıdın bendini yıkar. Dizilmiş yavrular yollara bakar.123 Today, the Kızılırmak flows muddy. It destroys many heroes’ weirs. Little ones are lined up, watching the roads.

In the songs of both soldiers and civilians, war itself is described as carnage that includes blood, tears, fear, pain, and sorrow, but never joy. Soldiers who themselves experienced the suffering inflicted by modern warfare were especially disinclined to romanticize their front experiences. One of them poignantly addresses the sultan:

Topların gülesi ne yaman geldi. Kapandı kulaklar, hep sağır oldu. Gövdede yaralı, gömlek kan doldu. Askerin kanını gör padişahım! How frightfully came the cannon balls. Ears closed, all became deaf. Bodies wounded, shirts covered with blood. See the soldier’s blood, O my Sultan!

İnşallah bu sefer mehdi uyanır. Şehitler gömlegi kana boyanır. Atılan mermie can mı dayanır? Canların kıymetini bil padişahım!124 Hopefully, this time the messiah will return. The martyrs’ shirts are bloodied. Can the spirit withstand bullets? Know the value of lives, O my Sultan!

Asking the sultan to appreciate the value of the lives of all soldiers, this soldier certainly felt different from the altruistic soldier of the official propaganda, who would willingly sacrifice his life for the greater Ottoman cause.

Without any hesitation, these songs and laments detailed the miseries and deprivations widely experienced by the men sent to the fronts. Both the soldiers and their relatives who had learned about their difficulties talked bluntly about the gruesome

123 İbrahim Aslanoğlu, “Cönklerden Derlemeler: Bir Demette Beş Çiçek,” Sivas Folkloru 6 (July 1973): 12. In the first verse of the poem, “møyünkü møyünsüz” is the folk pronunciation of “muinli muinsiz,” and it refers to the abandonment of the exemption of sole breadwinners and their consequent conscription, a process, which is discussed in detail in the previous chapter.

realities of war that the official discourse diligently strove to marginalize. This soldier was neither a David fighting Goliath nor a Moses fighting Pharaoh, but a vulnerable human being whose shoulder, for instance, was bruised by the bag he had to haul and whom the doctor beat when his feet were injured during long marches. One soldier who gave up any hope of returning to his hometown probably spoke for many:

... Boyle yaşamadan eyidir ölüm. Bizi bu hallerde gören ağlasın. ... 
Death is better than living like this. Cry, those who see us like this.

... Umudum yok memlekete gitmeye. ... 
I have no hope of going back to [my] hometown. 

Bu genç yaşta razı oldum ölmeye. Bizi bu hallerde gören ağlasın.¹²⁵
I am resigned to die at this young age. Cry, those who see us like this.

Bereaved relatives occasionally went further and highlighted the discrepancy between their material sacrifices on the home front and the hardships and deprivation that their sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers underwent. A sister, for instance, who learned that her brother had died “hungry, thirsty, and naked,” wrote:

The poor girl cried, “What a pity. We sent whatever food we had to the army. We carried flour, bulgur, shirts, and blankets. Look, boys and sons were left on the ground.”

Death itself took on a completely different meaning in these accounts. In general, the themes of heroism, sacrifice, and death for the empire and religion did not feature in these songs. What historian Samuel Hynes said about the personal memoirs written by soldiers is equally applicable to these songs: “Indeed, in personal narrative The War, as a

¹²⁶ Cahit Öztelli, Uyan Padişahum (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1976), 450.
global historical reality, scarcely exists, only men exist, and act, and sometimes die, and when they do, they do so personally." In other words, the soldier who fell in combat did not die a glorious and heroic death for the motherland. People who mourned their dead sons and husbands did not speak the language of pride and patriotism. In this sense, they truly reflected the individual dimension of mourning. This feature, however, does not render them less political.

Similar to the lack of patriotic feelings, people very rarely invoked religious definitions of war and death. People, at least the ones who composed these songs and laments, did not find consolation in resigning themselves to the divine will in the face of the enormous difficulties of war. Religion simply did not provide them with the necessary means to comprehend and explain war and death. On the other hand, however, they did not question the power and benevolence of God. Their anger at losing their relatives did not engender disbelief or rebellion in their songs and laments.

In contrast to the attempts of official propaganda to sanitize death and conceal the horrifying circumstances that led to it, these songs did not hesitate to highlight them. Death here was not quick, painless, altruistic, or essential. On the contrary, in many songs, death in the war is portrayed as a waste of young lives. One song expresses this feeling with the metaphor of “breaking young saplings”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turkish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Höbek çadırlar kuruldu.</td>
<td>Groups of tents were pitched.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hücum borusu vuruldu.</td>
<td>The bugle sounded the charge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarıkamış dağlarında</td>
<td>In the mountains of Sarıkamış</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Doksan bin fidan kırıldı. Ninety thousand saplings were broken.

As people on the home front learned about the ineptitude of the state in providing an adequate supply of provisions, clothing, and armaments, the sense of “waste” could only have intensified. People who had lost their relatives on the Caucasus front, for instance, realized that, in the first place, it was not the enemy who had destroyed the lives of thousands of soldiers:

Sarıkamış’ta var maşın. There’s a train in Sarıkamış.
Urus yığmış ağır koşun. The Russians brought in heavy equipment.
Bizim uşak açık cıblak Our boys famished and naked,
Dağlarda buyudu kızın. Frozen in the wintry mountains.

People also underlined the difference between the two combatant armies by mentioning the Russian railroad at Sarıkamış and implying the lack of an Ottoman counterpart. While the Ottoman state did little to protect its soldiers from the cold, the Russians supported their frontline soldiers by extending the railroad to Sarıkamış.

Clearly, people who lost male members of their families in the war did not greet these deaths with resignation and pride. Their behavior rarely conformed to the official version of the war narrative presented by the government and intellectuals. On the contrary, war, in folklore accounts of the period, was condemned extensively as a disaster that left behind hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans:

Bardız deresi kan akar. Bardız creek flows with blood.
Analar çiğerin dağlar. Mothers suffer greatly.
Her evde çocuklar ile In every house children and
Al duvaklı gelin ağlar. Brides in red veils cry.

128 Baki Yaşa Altıok, Öyküleriyle Kirşehir Türküleri, Destanları, Ağıtları (Ankara: Oba Yayıncılık, 2003), 218. For a slightly different version (“Bir Sarıkamış uğruna / Nice fidanlar kırıldı”) (“For the sake of a Sarıkamış / So many saplings were broken”), see Yılmaz İlk, Dikenin Gülü Aşşalar: Geçmişten Günümüze Aşşar Yörükler (Antalya: Akdeniz Yayınları, 2005), 30.
129 Kalkan, Kayseri ve Yöresi, 30.
Similarly:

Bakımsız kaldı hep tarlalar, bağlar.  
All the fields and orchards remain unattended.

İssız ıssız ırmak boş yere çüçüş.  
Desolate rivers flow nowhere.

Analar yas tutar, bacılar ağar.  
Mothers mourn, sisters cry.

Yavuklu yavrular irakta kaldı.\textsuperscript{131}  
Young brides wait forlorn.

In another example, the death of a son does not remind the mother of the sanctity of self-sacrifice for the empire. The anger she directs at the German officer who gave the order to attack and the sorrow she feels for her son’s death and burial without a shroud or coffin are explicit in the lament:

Hücum demiş Alamanın zabiti.  
Attack, said the German officer.

Yavrumun kefeni asker kabutu.  
My son’s shroud is his military coat.

Salma girmeye yoktur tabutu.  
He does not have a coffin to be carried in.

Yoksa yavrum seni vurdular mı’ola?  
My boy, did they shoot you?

Kefensiz kabire koydular mı’ola?\textsuperscript{132}  
Did they put you in a grave without a shroud?

Some laments written by parents even expressed deep regret at not having bought their sons out of military service. A mother who had lost five of her sons in the winter campaign of 1914-15 (commonly known as the Sarkamış disaster) composed the following lament with her daughter:

Öyle deme kızım hatun.  
Don’t say this my dear daughter.

Oğlum öldü kaldım yetim.  
My son died and I was left all alone.

Böyle olacağım’ bilsem  
If I had known this would happen

Alırdım oğlumunu satın.\textsuperscript{133}  
I would have bought him out.

\textsuperscript{130} Altınoğlu, Öyküleriyle Kırşehir, 218.

\textsuperscript{131} Öztelli, Uyan Padişahım, 450.

\textsuperscript{132} Ömer Faruk Yaldızkaya, Emirdağ Yöresi Türkmen Ağıtları (İzmir: Bayraklı Matbaacılık, 1992), 37.

Implicitly or explicitly, these songs and laments put the blame on the state and the army for forcing these young men to die an excruciatingly painful death. Thus, prominent military and political figures to whom key roles were accorded in official propaganda became targets of criticism and anger in folk songs. The usual reverence shown for them in the daily press did not exist here. Instead, both soldiers and their relatives directed their resentment at army commanders, whom they rightfully held responsible for the anguish and suffering they were experiencing:

Sarıkamış içi meşe, Sarıkamış, full of oak trees,
Urus yaktı hep ataş. All of which the Russians burnt.
Bizi koydun eli bağlı You left us bound, hand and foot
Nere gittin Enver Paşa? Where did you go Enver Pasha?

Women also blamed Enver Pasha for causing tragedies at home:

Aşağıdan ses geliyor. Voices come from down below.
Fıgan bağırmı deliyor. Laments rend my heart.
Kör olasın Enver Paşa Damn you, Enver Pasha,
Gelinleri el alıyor. Strangers are taking away the brides [to marry].

A similar criticism is directed against Hafiz Hakkı Pasha, who led the Tenth Ottoman Army Corps in the same campaign:

Allahuekber başı duman. Mist covered Mount Allahuekber.
Olduk Urusa perişan. We were routed by the Russians.
Kör olasın Hakkı Paşa Damn you, Hakkı Pasha,
Sen eyledin bizi pişman. You filled us with regret.

The alliance with Germany was similarly interpreted as a source of misery, destitution, and death. These songs dramatically upset the official image of an honorable

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134 M. Fahrettin Kırzıoğlu, Edebiyatımızda Kars (İstanbul: İşıl Matbaası, 1958), 109.
136 Kalkan, Kayseri ve Yöresi, 32.
and powerful ally and draw a completely different picture. A woman who lost all of her brothers in the war, for instance, wrote:

Kağıt sildim da almadı. He did not get the letter I sent.
Tel verdum aynı gelmedi. He did not respond to the telegram I wired.
Alamanya harp eylesin. Let Germany do the fighting.
Gayri kardeşim kalmadı.¹³⁷ I do not have any more brothers.

As in the other songs discussed above, the Germans are also blamed for separating men from their loved ones and shattering families:

Kimini toplar yatırdı. Cannons killed some of them.
Kimini gana bastırdı. The others were soaked with blood.
Vay soyun gurusun Alman. Damn you, German, may your race die out.
Nice ocaklar batırdı.¹³⁸ You ruined so many homes.

Kurdish women sung a similar lament in the Kurmanchi dialect of the Kurdish language:

Alamani, Alamani, German, German,
Te çuma mera qenunek danani? Why did you not bring justice?
Ar dī mala te kevi, Alamani! Your hearth be damned, German!
Te pasiya meran mera ani. You killed our men.
Mala te bıșevte, Alamani. May your hearth be ruined, German.
Te-koke meran mera ani.¹³⁹ You wiped out our men.

V. Conclusion

During World War I, the Ottoman political and intellectual elite employed a multi-layered official rhetoric to justify the state’s war effort and mobilize the war-weary Ottoman people in support of their government. This rhetoric, on the one hand, described the war in absolute terms as a life-and-death struggle not only for the fate of the empire

¹³⁷ Özdemir, Öyküleryle Ağıtlar, 92.
¹³⁸ Kalkan, Kayseri ve Yöresi, 26. Note the similarity between this lament and the one cited in fn. 109.
¹³⁹ Nuri Dersimi writes that he first heard this lament from an old Kurdish refugee. M. Nuri Dersimi, Hatturatım (İstanbul: Doz Basım-Yayin Ltd. Şti., 1997), 73. Cited also in Hans-Lukas Kieser, Der verpasste Friede: Mission, Ethnie und Staat in den Ostprovinzen der Türkei, 1839-1938 (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2000), 448. In translating the verse into English, I used Kieser’s German translation.
but also for the state religion. On the other hand, it featured various official representations of combat and death designed to glorify the ordinary soldier as a symbol of patriotism, masculinity, and heroism. This narrative denied the violence and brutality of the war and portrayed the death of the soldier as a glorious sacrifice for the fatherland.

The folklore accounts discussed in the second part of this chapter, however, cast serious doubt upon the penetration and persuasiveness of the official Ottoman discourse of war and death. This, of course, is not to suggest that the official discourse about the war and the accompanying Islamic-oriented nationalism did not have any effect on the Ottoman people. There may certainly have been men like the ones featured in Süleyman Nazif’s story, who sacrificed themselves at Gallipoli to save the empire. There may also have been people among the bereaved families who forced their own memories and feelings into the officially-approved molds, remained silent, or sought consolation in the idea of sacrifice for the motherland or the Muslim conception of martyrdom.

This chapter, however, has attempted to show that the war and the accompanying material and emotional sufferings led to the emergence of a parallel realm of symbols and representations, distinct from and critical of the official constructions. These symbols and representations prove the presence and prevalence of alternative narratives about the war and death produced by “common” people who were directly affected by the war’s tragedies. Numerous songs and laments, many of which were composed by soldiers’ families and other relatives (but sometimes also by the soldiers themselves), provide precious insights into the popular culture of war, death, and grief, which has generally remained beyond the grasp of students of late Ottoman history.
CHAPTER 5
REFUGEES and the REFUGEE EXPERIENCE in the OTTOMAN EMPIRE DURING WORLD WAR I

I. Introduction

Millions of people throughout the world were displaced by the war between 1914 and 1918. Everywhere the movement of armies produced massive waves of refugees. The German occupation forced Belgian and French civilians to flee their homes and move to safer regions. Hundreds of thousands of civilians in Galicia in eastern Europe sought refuge in Austro-Hungarian cities before the advancing Russian army. The Italian army’s disastrous defeat at Caporetto led to the displacement of one and a half million ethnic Italians. The joint campaign orchestrated by the Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian armies turned most of the Serbian population into refugees. The occupation of Romania similarly forced hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee into Moldavia.¹ None of the belligerents, except the United States and Great Britain, could escape the destabilizing impacts of these voluntary and forced displacements of people during the war.

This chapter deals with the causes and consequences of the “refugee crisis” in the Ottoman Empire during World War I with a particular focus on eastern Anatolian

refugees. Throughout the war, the Ottoman Empire was the scene of large-scale deportations and refugee movements. Millions of Ottomans either left their homelands voluntarily to escape the enemy or were forcibly deported by the state authorities. The Ottoman government and local administrations diligently worked to regulate and track the movement and settlement of refugees. The refugee problem was also perceived by the Ottoman elites as an “opportunity” to demographically redesign Ottoman society and eliminate or neutralize certain “undesirable” elements within it.

While the wartime demographic upheaval had a profound impact on Ottoman society as a whole, it also changed the lives of individuals in dramatic ways. Civilians living at or near the fronts had arguably more traumatic wartime experiences than other home-front civilians. Due to the proximity of their homes to the battle zones, they were subject to frequent disturbances caused by constant troop movements, excessive demands by the military authorities, and, violence, terror, and voluntary or forced displacement as a result of enemy conquest. Leaving one’s home and traveling in wartime to unfamiliar places constituted an extremely harrowing experience for the majority of refugees. This chapter therefore also focuses on the individual and collective experiences of the Ottoman people as refugees in the cruel world of mass migration.

The official Ottoman parlance emphasized a basic distinction between “refugee” (mülteci) and “migrant” (muhacir). A refugee was defined as someone who migrated from occupied territories to the interior due to the war, whereas a migrant was someone who came from one of the former provinces of the empire that had been surrendered to other states by treaty. See the explanation of the Director of the Directorate of Tribes and Refugees, Hamdi Bey, in the Senate. Meclis-i Ayan Zabet Ceridesi (hereafter MAZC), Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 1, 3 Kanunusani 1334 (3 January 1918), 207. The Regulation for the Settlement of Refugees of 1913 gives slightly different definitions for these terms. İskan-i Muhacirin Nizamnamesi (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1329 [1913]), transcribed in Ahmet Halacoglu, Balkan Harbi Sırasında Rumeli’den Türk Göçleri (1912-1913) (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1994), 110-15. Although state officials paid due attention to this difference as it bore legal implications, the Ottoman people almost always used the term muhacir to describe people who had migrated for any reason. A similar difference between refugees (bezhentsy) and migrants (vykhodtsy) existed in the Russian Empire. Peter Gatrell, “The
II. The Refugee Crisis

Although this chapter dwells mostly on the refugees who left their homes as a result of the Russian advance, it is virtually impossible to grasp the enormity of population displacements in the wartime Ottoman Empire without examining the forced deportations. Fearing that the Armenians living in Ottoman territories might collaborate with the Russian enemy and organize a rebellion that would jeopardize the Ottoman war effort, the Unionists in 1915 decided to deport them to the province of Der Zor (Dayr al-Zawr in what is now in northeastern Syria). The deportations, which were carried out in an extremely brutal manner, included Armenians from all regions of the empire, even those who lived far from the war zone in eastern Anatolia, and from all walks of life. Tens of thousands of deported civilians were slaughtered on their march to Der Zor by governmental forces, Kurdish and Turkish irregulars, and armed gangs. Similar to the Muslim refugees discussed below, the majority of Armenian deportees were women, children, and the elderly. Under the extremely harsh weather and road conditions, many of them died from starvation and exhaustion before reaching their final destinations, while a significant portion of women and children were abducted into Muslim homes. The properties of deported Armenians were confiscated by the state and auctioned off, a process by which the wealth that had been accumulated by the Armenians was transferred to Muslims. Without any doubt, the Armenians were subject to the utmost cruelty during the war, which eventually led to the virtual disappearance of a population with one of the longest histories in the region and the destruction of their tangible and intangible


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heritage. As one Russian official rightly commented after his army occupied much of eastern Anatolia, “Turkey has left us an Armenia without Armenians.”

The Armenians, however, were not the only people who were subjected to the Ottoman forced displacement policies. The Unionist policy of removing Greeks from coastal regions of Anatolia was already in place before the start of the war. In the early months of 1914, irregular bands and governmental forces terrorized tens of thousands of Greeks living on the Aegean coast and in Thrace (today northwestern Turkey and eastern Bulgaria), obliging them to flee to Greek islands in the Aegean Sea and to mainland Greece. This policy was continued during the war as Anatolian Greeks were regarded with great suspicion by the Ottoman authorities, and their loyalty to the empire and its war effort was routinely questioned. The Minister of Interior, Talat Bey, for instance, declared in the parliament to Simonaki Simonoğlu Efendi, the deputy from İzmir, who was pleading for the Anatolian Greeks to be permitted to return to their homes after the battle of Gallipoli, that “some people who lived under the title of citizen in this country have betrayed it and brought provisions to enemy submarines, and that is why this


measure is deemed necessary.”6 By late 1916, the number of displaced Ottoman Greeks due to the war (ahval-i harbiye hasebiyle dahile naklolunan Rumlar), according to Talat Pasha’s “Black Book,” had reached 93,088.7 Many of these were forcibly driven from their homes into the Anatolian interior to places that were substantially different from where they had been living.8 The same source gives the number of Greeks who had fled to Greece as 163,975. According to a prominent journalist, Ahmed Emin (Yalman), deportations of the Greeks were “more or less a matter of military necessity,” and, in terms of the level of suffering, they “certainly were not comparable with the treatment received by the Armenians.”9

Along with the deportation of the Ottoman Armenians and Greeks, smaller-scale deportations targeting other ethno-religious groups also took place during the war. The Ottoman state exiled approximately 5,000 families from the Arab provinces to the

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6 Meclis-i Mebusan Zabit Ceridesi (hereafter MMZC), Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 1, 10 Kanunuevvel 1332 (23 December 1916), 212. During his interrogation at the Higher Court of Justice (Divan-i Ali) in the post-war period, Said Halim Pasha, who was prime minister at the beginning of the war similarly linked the deportation of the Greeks to the Anatolian interior to their assistance to the naval forces of the Entente Powers. Meclis-i Mebusan, Encümen Mazbataları ve Tekalif-i Kanuniye ile Said Halim ve Talat Paşa Kabineleri Azalarının Divan-ı Aliye Sevклeri Hakkında Beşinci Şubece İcra Kilınan Tahkikat (Ankara: T.B.M.M. Basımevi 1993), 97.

7 Murat Bardakçı, Talat Paşa’nın Evrak-ı Metrukesi: Sadrazam Talat Paşa’nın Özel Arşivinde Bulunan Ermeni Tehciri Belgeleri ve Bazı Hususi Yazışmalar (Istanbul: Everest Yayınları, 2008), 79. The “Black Book” was a detailed report prepared for Talat Pasha on population movements in the Ottoman Empire. The “Black Book” not only contained statistical information on the Armenian and Greek deportations during World War I, but it also provided a broad and quantitative picture of refugee movements before and after the Balkan Wars.


Anatolian interior for their allegedly pro-Entente and Arab nationalist activities\(^{10}\) and deported about 6,000 Jews mostly from Jaffa and Jerusalem to Egypt. The Ottoman state’s policy, which ostensibly originated from the concern that ethnic others and non-Muslim minorities might sympathize and collaborate with the enemy and engage in treacherous activities, reflected, in historian Alan Kramer’s words, “the historic shift in the nature of warfare between the French Revolution and World War I from war between small professional armies to war between mobilized nations, in which some ethnic groups were defined as the nation while others were stigmatized as the ‘enemy within’.”\(^{11}\)

The refugee movements in eastern Anatolia began immediately after the official declaration of war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. Muslim villagers living in the border regions left their homes even before the first Russian troops had crossed the border.\(^{12}\) The first clashes between the Ottoman and Russian forces in Köprüköy and Azap in northeastern Anatolia displaced many more Armenians and Muslim Ottomans.\(^{13}\)

Indeed, the Ottoman strategy of meeting a probable Russian offensive around Hasankale

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\(^{12}\) Süleyman İzzet Yeğinatı, *Büyük Harbin Başında 2. İhtiyat ve Nizamiye Süvari Tümenerilerle [sic] Aras Cenup Müfrezesinin Müharebeleri* (İstanbul: Askeri Matbaa, 1939), 21. The author described the situation of these refugees who tried to cross the Murat River in cold and snowy weather as “severely miserable” (*cidden acınacak bir halde*).

\(^{13}\) Yılmaz Akkılıç, ed., *Askerin Romanı: E. Sv. Alb. Abdüllahim Akkılıç’ın Savaş ve Barış Anıları* (Kocaeli: Körfez Ofset Yayınları, 1994), 116-17. The author, who was present in the region states that his unit, as part of the military duty assigned to it, “attacked these [non-Muslim] groups who tried to flee towards Kars.”
had resulted in the army’s withdrawal of forces from the border zones. Thus, the villages between the border and Hasankale were left unprotected against enemy assaults. In the meantime, about 30,000 Armenian villagers living in the border areas sought refuge behind Russian lines to protect themselves and their families from the aggression of Ottoman troops and irregulars. These first refugees, whether Muslim or Christian, ended up in villages and towns not very far from their homes.

Refugee movements continued into 1915. With the advance of the Russian army towards Van and Bitlis, people from this region poured into neighboring provinces. The capture of Van by Russian forces and Armenian bands in May 1915, its recapture by the Ottoman army in the following months, and the subsequent inter-ethnic violence between Muslims and Armenians triggered the migration of a significant portion of the entire province’s population. In a similar vein, the first deportations of Armenians in the aftermath of the Van rebellion sparked a wave of panic among Ottoman Armenians who, in the hundreds of thousands, fled into Russian territory.

The worst, however, was yet to come. This stream of refugees, which never completely stopped after the beginning of the war, swelled to a flood all across the front in the early months of 1916, when the Russian army began its advance into Ottoman territory and captured all the cities and towns on its way, including Erzurum in February 1916, Bitlis and Rize in March 1916, Trabzon in April 1916, and Bayburt and Erzincan in

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15 Sanborn, “Unsettling the Russian Empire,” 313.
July 1916. The Ottoman army’s retreat turned hundreds of thousands of villagers and townspeople from all over the eastern front into refugees who would follow the retreating troops. Many of them must have feared Russian cruelty and, more importantly, Armenian retribution and fled their homes and villages to evade any potential harm that might be inflicted on them by the advancing foes. Muslims from eastern Anatolia, who had witnessed and occasionally taken part in the deportation of the Armenian population a year prior, rightfully anticipated a “wave of revenge” by Armenian bands of irregulars. Rather than enduring the enemy occupation, muhacir çıkmak (becoming a refugee) seemed to be the only rational choice for many of the people living in this region.

As the exodus of refugees slowed towards the end of the year, Ottoman senior officials were beginning to learn the dimensions of the unfolding human disaster. In October 1916, the total number of refugees had reached about 702,000, according to a report presented by the Ministry of Interior to the Prime Ministry. This number was appraised at 800,000 in a statement made by the director of the Directorate of Tribes and Refugees, Şükrü Bey, in the senate in early 1917. At the end of the year, the official records of the Directorate stated that refugee population amounted to more than a million

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17 Refugees who did not apply for state assistance but migrated and settled with their own resources were not included in this number. ATASE no.1/2, kls.361, dos.1445, fih.15-22, 23 transcribed in Askeri Tarih Belgeleri Dergisi 81 (1982): 219-222. This is the number given in Talat Pasha’s “Black Book.” Bardakç, Talat Paşa’nın Evrak-s Metrukesi, 49.

18 MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 1, 22 Kanunuevel 1332 (4 January 1917), 225-26. Şükrü [Kaya] Bey later became the Minister of Interior in the early Turkish Republic.
people. Together with the approximately 1.2 million Armenian and Greek deportees, the total number of displaced persons was roughly more than ten percent of the total pre-war population of the Ottoman Empire. These statistics, however, likely underestimated the actual figures, as the state authorities could not keep track of every refugee due to organizational and infrastructural problems as well as the refugees’ own attempts to evade state authority. The real number of Ottomans who were displaced from their homes for one reason or another must certainly have been higher.

In response to the rapidly growing number of refugees, the Ottoman government in March 1916 created a specific agency, the Directorate of Tribes and Refugees (Aşair ve Muhacirin Müdürüyet-i Umumiyesi), charged with administering “the refugee problem.” Based on the critique of previous ineffective and insufficient refugee policies, the new agency aimed to regulate the refugee flow, organize the dispatch and settlement of incoming refugees (muhacirinin sevk, iskan ve tavtini), and keep track of the refugee population. Although the immediate goal of the agency was to get the refugee problem under control, the agency’s mission also included the task of “civilizing the

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19 MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 1, 22 Kanunuevvel 1333 (22 December 1917), 361. A post-war Ottoman document written by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and addressed to the British High Commissioner similarly gives the number of refugees from the provinces of Erzurum, Trabzon, Bitlis, and Van and the sancak of Erzincan as more than a million. BOA.HR.MÜ 5/326 (7 June 1919), transcribed in Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeniler (1915-1920) (Ankara: Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü Yayınları, 1995), 242.


21 BOA.DÜIT 27/1-1 (2 Mart 1332); “Aşair ve Muhacirin Müdürüyet-i Umumiyesi Teşkilatı Hakkında Kanun,” Düşur, Ikinci Tertip, vol. 8, 7 Cemaziyevelvel 1334 (12 March 1916): 661-62. MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 1, 30 Kanunusani 1330 (12 February 1916), 575-76; MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 2, 24 Şubat 1331 (8 March 1916), 372-73; MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 2, vol. 2, 23 Şubat 1331 (7 March 1916), 261-70. Aşair ve Muhacirin Müdürüyet-i Umumiyesi replaced the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Refugees (İskan-i Aşair ve Muhacirin Müdürüyeti), which was founded primarily for the purpose of dealing with the refugee crisis created by the Balkan Wars.
tribes” (aşairin temdini) by facilitating their assimilation into the sedentary way of life.22

The establishment of this new agency marked the increasing institutionalization and bureaucratization of governmental responses to the refugee problem, which had so far been handled by temporary commissions set up during the consecutive refugee crises of the previous decades.23 While the refugee crisis in the Balkan Wars had given rise to the creation of a specific institution, World War I led to its transformation and expansion.

Not surprisingly, the mass movements of refugees imposed enormous financial and material burdens on the Ottoman state. In 1914, the government was still dealing with the consequences of the disastrous refugee crisis of the Balkan Wars. When World War I broke out, tens of thousands of refugees from former Ottoman provinces were still dependent on state assistance for their provisioning, accommodation, and employment. Furthermore, full-scale mobilization and two years of fighting had already drained the financial power of the government and exhausted the Ottoman people, as discussed in previous chapters. By the time the Russian advance began in the winter of 1916, the Ottoman authorities were utterly unprepared to deal with refugees arriving from the occupied provinces by the thousands within a matter of weeks.

Nevertheless, the refugees immediately became the main concern not only of the central government and the Directorate of Tribes and Refugees but also of the

22 For the long history of the Ottoman state’s attempts to settle and “civilize” the tribes, see Reşat Kasaba, A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); Fuat Dünder, İttihat ve Terakki’nin Müslümanları İskân Politikası (1913-1918) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), 52-56.

governorships of the provinces in the region. The Directorate attempted to regulate the
“flood” of Eastern Anatolian refugees by dividing it into four “streams” and directing
each of these streams to different parts of the empire to avoid overcrowding in provinces
adjoining the war zone and prevent refugees from perishing en route. Two factors, the
physical condition of the roads and the availability of provisions at the refugees’ final
destinations, were critical in determining these four routes. The Directorate also
prepared a detailed set of instructions for the local administrations to handle the
transportation, settlement, provisioning, and support of refugees.

These regulations designated the provinces bordering the theater of war as
“temporary regions of settlement” (geçici iskan bölgeleri). After being kept in these
temporary regions of settlement, refugees were to be sent to their final destinations. All of
the provinces designated as temporary regions for settlement were actually provinces to
which the refugees had fled and been resettled before the Russian advance in the winter
of 1916. As it became clear that the flood of hundreds of thousands of new refugees
would further deepen the already acute provisioning crisis in these regions and jeopardize
the army’s war effort, the government decided to send new refugees into provinces not

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24 First route: Black Sea coast; second route: Sivas-Tokat-Amasya-Çorum-Yozgat-Ankara; third route:
Kemah-Harput-Malatya-Besni; fourth route: Diyarbekir-Urfa-Maraş-Adana. MAZC, Term 3, Year of

25 Menatık-ı Harbiyeden Vürud Eden Mütecilerin Sevk, İskan, İçe ve İkdarlarını Mübeyyin Talimatname
(Istanbul: Matbaa-i Osmaniye, 1332 [1916]).

26 Menatık-ı Harbiyeden Vürud Eden, 1. These provinces were Adana, Diyarbekir, Aleppo, Mamuretülaziz,
Mosul, Sivas, and Van, as well as sancaks of Canik, Maraş, Urfa, and Zor.
directly adjacent to the war zone.\textsuperscript{27} These provinces, the government hoped, could sustain significant increases in their populations resulting from the arrival of new refugees.

A fundamental goal of the Ottoman policy of refugee settlement was to keep the refugees in the places where they were settled, at least for the duration of the war. They were allowed to change their settlement locations (singular, \textit{iskan mahalli}) only if they could prove that they had relatives in other places who could help them, that they had found jobs, or that they could not adapt to the climate in their settlement location.\textsuperscript{28} After being settled, however, refugees continued to change their locations despite strict orders from the local and imperial authorities. For many refugees migration therefore continued unabated until the end of the war.

A variety of factors, ranging from high local bread prices to frequent conflicts with host communities, dissatisfaction, and hope of finding a better place to settle, often encouraged refugees to take to the road again.\textsuperscript{29} Refugees in eastern Anatolia, if they were not very far from the war zone, sought to return to their villages after every advance of the Ottoman army, only, as often as not, to be displaced again by Russian counterattacks. Despite these many frustrations, refugees almost always retained the hope of returning to their homes soon. Thus, many of them did not want to travel far from their homes, and attempted to find temporary refuge as close to their homes as possible.

Repeated attacks by enemy forces, however, would dash refugees’ hopes and push them

\textsuperscript{27} For instance, due to the concern that two hundred thousand refugees massed in Diyarbekir would put the provisioning of the Second Army at risk, the army head command ordered the dispersal of these refugees to other provinces. BOA.DH.ŞFR 73/99 (13 July 1917).

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Menatık-ı Harbiyeden Vürud Eden Mültecilerin}, 2.

\textsuperscript{29} BOA.DH.IUM E/32 - 46 (13 May 1917).
out of their temporary retreats over and over again. Regardless of why they decided to change their locations, the continuous movement of refugees increased the burden on the wartime government.\textsuperscript{30}

At specific locations along the migration routes of the refugees, the Directorate, in cooperation with the army and local administrations, opened soup kitchens and provisioning stations to provide refugees with daily food. At these stations, refugees were also vaccinated against contagious diseases, which had begun to exact increasingly heavy tolls on the refugee population. At their final destinations, local administrations, civil society organizations, philanthropists, and missionaries continued to distribute food to refugees and attended to their needs to the extent their resources allowed.\textsuperscript{31} The directorate also opened orphanages in some locations and employed a relatively small number of the refugees, especially women, in workshops, to save them from falling into the trap of prostitution.

The Ottoman state also assigned refugees a daily stipend of two kuruş for adults and one kuruş for children, which was later increased to three kuruş for adults and sixty para (one and a half kuruş) for children.\textsuperscript{32} According to its director’s statement, however, the Directorate’s resources allowed it to assign salaries to only half of the total number of

\textsuperscript{30} BOA.DH.HMŞ 27/72 (14 December 1916).


\textsuperscript{32} BOA.DH.IUM E/16-44 (4 August 1916); BOA.DH.EUM.VRK 17/85 (13 August 1916); BOA.DH.ŞFR 70/18 (15 November 1916).
refugees.\textsuperscript{33} As with other state allowances, payments to refugees were usually in arrears, sometimes by months.\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, as the war dragged on, the ninety-kuruş monthly payment to refugee families eroded in the face of widespread shortages and high inflation. Especially in the Third Army region in eastern Anatolia, the state decided to distribute flour or wheat to refugees to prevent starvation instead of raising their stipends.\textsuperscript{35}

The sheer number of refugees and the already depleted resources of the Ottoman state, however, precluded the Directorate from being able to ameliorate the refugees’ sufferings and improve their living standards. Despite all the measures taken, thousands of refugees fell into despair and destitution. The immediate impact of the refugee crisis was felt in the provinces bordering the theater of war, but, gradually, even provinces far from the war zone suffered from the problems of increased population coupled with declining agricultural production. Thanks to the relentless stream of refugees coming from the occupied regions, provinces like Sivas and Mosul, but especially cities with relatively smaller pre-war populations such as Urfa, Samsun, and Çorum, saw their populations grow rapidly. Similarly, the Russian advance along the Black Sea coast pushed the local population westward, a mass migration which, according to a contemporary observer, nearly tripled the population of every town and village not yet occupied by the Russian army. This unprecedented accumulation of refugees led to a

\textsuperscript{33} MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 2, 12 Mart 1333 (12 March 1917), 214.
\textsuperscript{34} BOA.DH.I-UM 4/1/38 (11 April 1916).
\textsuperscript{35} MMZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 1, 17 Teşrinisani 1333 (17 November 1917), 60; BOA.DH.I-UM 98-4/1-48 (23 October 1917); BOA.DH.I-UM 20-2/2-7 (26 December 1917). An adult refugee would be given 400 grams of flour (or 600 grams of bread) daily whereas a child was entitled to 300 grams of flour (or 450 grams of bread).
combined crisis of provisioning, housing, and public health which had been previously unseen.  

Despite the diligent work of the Ottoman relief organization, especially in major population centers, the size of the problem soon exceeded its capacity. In early 1918, Hamdi Bey, who succeeded Şükrü Bey as the director of the agency, admitted before the members of the Ottoman senate that the organization was struggling just to keep the refugees from dying: “What a great success [it would be],” he said, “if we manage to keep these refugees and immigrants alive.”

By the time the director made this statement, however, death had become a routine occurrence within the refugee communities scattered throughout the empire. Northern Anatolian towns, for instance, saw hundreds of “half-naked, skeleton-like” children, *muhacir çocukları* (refugee children), wandering the city squares like “living mummies and shadows.” Not unlike what was happening in the poverty-stricken streets of Beirut, Damascus, and Aleppo, which suffered from acute shortages during the war, every morning, the municipal garbage carts collected the bodies of dead people from the streets. Muzaffer Lermioğlu, a refugee who had heard this rumor while in Samsun, followed these carts one morning and saw with his own eyes workers placing twenty-three bodies, most of them children, in mass graves. Jakob Künzler, a Swiss doctor in Urfa, similarly wrote in his memoirs about “a long line of beggars, walk[ing] the streets

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37 “Biz bu mülteci ve muhacirlerin yalnız sağlık kalabalıklarının muvaffak olabilirsek, ne büyük muvaffakiyet, biz ona çalışıyoruz.” MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 1, 3 Kanunusani 1334 (3 January 1918), 208.
of the city, knocking on all doors” from early in the morning until late at night. They repeated the same words: “Have mercy, we are victims; for God’s sake, give us a piece of bread!” (Heyran, kurban, Allahın hatıri için bir parça ekmek verin!). Künzler observed the terrible toll that hunger exacted on these miserable refugee children, up to seventy of whom died every day.39

Refugees who moved from occupied territories to southern Anatolia received even less assistance from the state and the army, and thus suffered more when compared with refugees who moved in other directions.40 Refugees from Erzurum and Bitlis who were settled in Urfa, for instance, sent Rıza Paşa, a prominent member of the Ottoman senate, a telegram describing the wretched conditions in which they lived and the numerous deaths from hunger among refugees despite the availability of grain in the storehouses held by the state and the army. Sordid conditions forced many refugees to consume the discarded blood and inner organs of animals they collected from slaughterhouses.41


41 MAZC, Term 3, Year of Session 4, vol. 1, 23 Subat 1334 (23 February 1918), 425. Other members of the senate mentioned that they had received similar telegrams.
III. The Refugee Crisis and Demographic Engineering

Based on the official documents and correspondence between the central government and provincial administrators, it is clear that the Ottoman state perceived the war and subsequent refugee crisis as an opportunity to demographically redesign Ottoman society. The transportation and settlement (sevk ve iskan) of refugees were thereby turned into effective instruments of “population politics” in the hands of state authorities.42 War and the consequent expansion of the state apparatus, as discussed in previous chapters, equipped the Ottoman government with the necessary infrastructural power43 and legal tools to transform prevailing social hierarchies and loyalties, which it deemed archaic yet which were powerful and persistent. Against this background, the Unionists eagerly sought to eliminate the challenges that threatened their authority, especially in the countryside, by regulating the movement of hundreds of thousands of people already displaced by the war.

Eastern Anatolia and upper Mesopotamia became the main theater of this process of demographic redesign. After uprooting hundreds of thousands of Armenians concentrated mostly in these regions, relocating and annihilating them constituted the major, most well-known aspect of this process. The Unionist government, however, also attempted to undermine the feudal social structure of the Kurds and integrate them into

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42 The Ottoman state authorities’ attempts to change the demographic structure of certain regions to which they assigned strategic importance started well before World War I. For the settlement of 1877-78 refugees from the Caucasus and Rumelia in Thrace and Gallipoli, see Nedim İpek, Rumeli’den Anadolu’ya Türk Göçleri, 1877-1890 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1994); Selim Deringil, “19. Yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Göç Olgusu Üzerine Bazı Düşünceler,” in Bekir Kütükoğlu’na Armagan (İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Basımevi, 1991), 435-442.

the predominantly Turkish regions of central Anatolia. In his telegram to the province of Diyarbekir, Talat Pasha explicitly opposed the idea of transporting Kurdish refugees who had fled the war zone to Arab provinces of the empire. “They would remain a useless and harmful element,” Talat Pasha declared, “as they would either be Arabized there or preserve their nationality (milliyet).” To prevent this from happening, Turkish refugees were to be settled in localities such as Urfa, Maraş, and Aytab, where the majority of the local population was composed of non-Turks. Kurdish refugees, on the other hand, were to be transported to predominantly Turkish provinces and settled in a scattered way (müteferrikan). Settled Kurdish refugees were never to exceed five percent of the local population. In order to put an end to their tribal life and eliminate their previous affiliations, tribal and religious leaders were to be separated from the refugees and settled in different provinces, preferably in town and city centers.

The correspondence between the Directorate and the provinces clearly indicates that the CUP leadership considered the settlement of Kurdish refugees in central Anatolia not as a temporary measure specific to wartime, but as a long-term demographic

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44 The CUP’s policies towards the feudal structures prevailing in the eastern and southern provinces of the empire deserve more scholarly attention. According to examples cited by Feroz Ahmad, in the aftermath of the 1908 revolution, at least some Unionist leaders reacted harshly against the absolute dominance of local notables and religious leaders over the population in these regions and promised them liberation from the yoke of feudal lords. Feroz Ahmad, “The Agrarian Policy of the Young Turks, 1908-1918,” in Économie et sociétés dans l’Empire Ottoman (fin du XVIIIᵉ-début du XXᵉ siècle), eds. Jean-Louis Bacque-Grammont and Paul Dumont (Paris: Éditions CNRS, 1983), 275-288. Like many of their other wartime policies, however, the Unionist endeavor to weaken the tribal affiliations clearly contradicted other policies, most notably the deployment of tribal cavalry battalions against the Russian forces.

45 “Bunlar oralarda ya Arablaşmak veyahud milliyetleri muhafaza etmek suretiyle yine gayri müf fid ve muzur bir anasır halinde kalacakları cihatle matlub hasıl olamayacağından....” BOA.DH.ŞFR 63/172 (2 May 1916), BOA.DH.ŞFR 63/188 (4 May 1916).

46 Menatık-ı Harbiyeden Vürud Eden Mültecilerin, 4.
When some Kurdish refugees began to leave the Anatolian provinces to which they had been settled after receiving news of the recapture of Muş and Bitlis by the Ottoman Second Army in August 1916, the government fiercely resisted this development. The Unionists strongly believed that the time had come to “make [the Kurds] abandon their tribal lives and turn them from an unreliable element into a useful one,” and thus had no intention of allowing Kurdish refugees to return to their homelands after the war. In their new homes, the Unionist leadership hoped, they would be gradually assimilated into the local population and develop new identities.

Despite the determination of the central government, however, the project of integrating Kurdish refugees into the central Anatolian population did not yield the desired results. Due mostly to the primitive state of the transportation network, many refugees simply could not be sent to their intended final destinations. On several occasions, attempts to transport them farther into Anatolia encountered resistance from the refugees themselves, who insisted on settling in areas more familiar to them. On some other occasions, civilian and military officials opposed the directives of the government on the grounds that such movements would certainly lead to the deaths of many refugees en route.

47 Ibid.
49 BOA.DH.ŞFR 63/187 (4 May 1916) (“...bütün bu mülteciler bilahare de memleketlerine iade edilmeyeceklerinden...”); BOA.DH.ŞFR 63/188 (4 May 1916) (“... bunlara artık aşiret hayatı terk ettirmek ve kendilerini gayri mukayyed bir unsur olmaktan çıkarıp müfid bir unsur haline getirmek için...”).
50 BOA.DH.ŞFR 63/283 (1 August 1916); BOA.DH.ŞFR 65/78 (21 September 1916).
51 Ahmed İzzet Pasha, the commander of the Second Ottoman Army, for instance, persuaded the government that he would form cavalry brigades from the members of these Kurdish tribes, thereby managing to avoid further displacement. Ahmet İzzet Paşa, *Feryadım*, vol.1 (İstanbul: Nehir Yayınları, 1992), 256-57.
As part of its wartime population politics, the Ottoman government also directed the settlement of refugees from occupied provinces to the villages emptied by the deported Armenians.\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, given its depleted financial resources, the Ottoman government saw financing the settlement of the refugees with the Armenian communities’ seized assets as the most feasible policy option. The Ministry of Interior ordered local administrations to satisfy the needs of the refugees for shelter, clothing, grain, and other goods by distributing movable and immovable properties left behind by the Armenians when they were driven out (\textit{emval-i metruke}).\textsuperscript{53} When they arrived in towns and cities where such properties existed, refugees were given Armenian houses according to their social status and occupation. The wealthy and the governmental officials frequently abused their authority in this process of distribution. Upon moving to new towns, they immediately allocated for their personal use the most spacious and beautiful buildings, which could otherwise have easily sheltered multiple destitute refugee families.\textsuperscript{54} Most of the time, however, refugees would be confronted with the harsh reality that the Armenian properties had already been occupied by the local people before their arrival. Despite numerous orders from the Ministry of Interior, local people,


\textsuperscript{54} Lermioğlu, \textit{Akçaabat – Akçaabat Tarihi}, 261.
sometimes in collaboration with local officials, actively refused to vacate these buildings for the use of the refugees.\textsuperscript{55}

The government spent considerable time and effort trying to settle Muslim refugees in villages abandoned by the deported Armenians, and redistribute the lands and houses in these villages.\textsuperscript{56} Even before the massive wave of migration began in the winter of 1916, the government had tried to ascertain the feasibility of using abandoned Armenian villages in the resettlement efforts and continuously demanded information from local authorities about these villages’ location, agricultural potential, and housing capacity.\textsuperscript{57} Through this policy, the government sought to achieve two major objectives: offset the decline in agricultural production caused by the deportation of Armenians, troop movements, and mass mobilization, and bring the constant movement of refugees to an end. In these villages, the commissions sent by the central government dispensed arable land and seed grain to the refugees and also furnished them with farm animals and tools for agriculture.\textsuperscript{58} Helping the refugees to establish themselves in the former Armenian villages and thus turning them from consumers into producers was critical for the Ottoman state, not only in terms of alleviating the government’s burden of provisioning for them, but also in meeting the sustenance need of the armies in the

\textsuperscript{55} Kieser, \textit{Der verpasste Friede}, 484.

\textsuperscript{56} BOA.MV 198/163 (30 May 1915); BOA.DH.ŞFR 54/189 (27 June 1915).

\textsuperscript{57} BOA.DH.ŞFR 54/15 (14 June 1915); BOA.DH.ŞFR 54/136 (24 June 1915).

\textsuperscript{58} Rev. Henry H. Riggs of Harput, who provides an invaluable eyewitness account of this process of distribution, states that the government provided refugees with seed grain “very generously, as it was quite important that the land should be properly tilled and cared for that winter and spring.” Henry H. Riggs, \textit{Days of Tragedy in Armenia: Personal Experiences in Harpoot, 1915-1917} (Ann Arbor: Gomidas Institute, 1997), 180.
region. In the absence of Armenians, these refugees constituted the only available labor force that could bring the untilled land again under cultivation.

Although settling in villages vacated by the Armenians provided refugees with shelter, they experienced enormous problems in adapting to their new lives, which would be fashioned under significantly different circumstances from the ones they had been used to. A variety of factors, ranging from climate to location, availability of natural resources, fear of imminent Russian attacks, tensions with the local population, and discontent with the new and different lifestyle, made their adaptation extremely difficult, if not impossible. Rev. Henry Riggs, who closely observed the settlement of Kurdish refugees in the region of Harput, reported that “far from being pleased with the action which the government had taken, they were without exception quite discontented, and said that it would be impossible for them to stay there.” When the weather and road conditions allowed, refugees such as the ones observed by Rev. Riggs would take to the roads again and move to a different place. Before leaving, refugees either sold the farm equipment and animals given to them by the state at the market\(^59\) or, as Riggs noted, left the villages “absolutely empty, having slaughtered and eaten the cattle, eaten the seed grain which was left to them, and burned up the implements for firewood.”\(^60\)

Not surprisingly, the failure to get the refugees permanently settled in the abandoned Armenian villages had disastrous consequences for the Ottomans. It increased the number of people on the move, thus multiplying the burden on the central government and local administrations. The failure to bring stability to the lives of

\(^{59}\) BOA.DH.SN.M 35/99 (2 March 1915).

\(^{60}\) Riggs, *Days of Tragedy in Armenia*, 180.
refugees or turn them into agricultural producers also led to a serious shortage of provisions and the neglect of thousands of acres of land on which the government had been counting to feed the military units, town dwellers, and incoming refugees.

IV. The Refugee Experience

The road over the bluff and winding along the seashore for miles, as we see it from our home, was black with frightened people hurrying along, the women, old and young, with their kneading-troughs, beds, and babies bound to their backs; other little barefooted tots were running along beside them. Older boys and girls were driving sheep or pulling along the unwilling, weary cattle and horses. Some of those of the older ones died in our city; more of them and of the little ones must have died further on their way. So little proportion will ever reach the coveted lands vacated by Armenians to the west and southwest from here.

Rev. Lyndon S. Crawford, an American missionary stationed in Trabzon, thus described the plight of refugees fleeing the Russian army. Studies on dislocation and mass migration tend to ignore the individual dimension of the refugee experience, which Rev. Crawford’s observations keenly point out. Displacements and massive refugee movements often cause tremendous societal upheavals and they almost universally bring uncertainty, apprehension, and, usually, intense destitution and misery to the individuals who experience them. The Ottoman refugee experience, in this sense, was no exception.

Refugee convoys, as Rev. Crawford saw, consisted mostly of women, young children, and old men. Young and middle-aged men who had paid the military exemption tax, secured exemption from the military service in some other way, or received furloughs also sometimes led these migrating groups. The government’s decision to

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conscription of refugee men, however, separated most of them from their families as the war dragged on. Retreating soldiers occasionally deserted their ranks to help their families migrate, especially if their units were stationed close to their hometowns or villages. Most of the time, however, women found themselves with little choice but to take matters into their own hands and navigate the enormous difficulties of migration. Subject to patriarchal structures, having spent most of their lives in their villages, and knowing little of the world outside their immediate environments, they found the refugee experience highly disorienting.

In addition to physical suffering, a deep sense of uncertainty about the future and the accompanying psychological strain also overwhelmed the refugees. The suffering of the previous mass migrations in eastern Anatolia, especially the one caused by the 1877-78 Russo-Ottoman War, were deeply ingrained in the collective memory, which also added to the refugees’ distress. Especially during the early months of the war, refugees usually lacked any clear idea of where to go and where to obtain food and shelter. They sometimes did not even know which direction they should take. They often simply wanted to take refuge behind Ottoman lines as quickly as possible to avoid any potential harassment from the enemy. Aziz Samih, an Ottoman officer who served in eastern Anatolia during the war, described the movement of the refugees as being “towards an

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63 It was not unusual, for instance, that in the absence the household’s male members, the eldest women would first lead the family in their migration; then, upon her death, younger women would take the lead. See, for instance, Koloğlu Safiye Duman’s memories about her family’s migration. Osman İlkır, Artvin Zeytinlik Bacağı Aşağı Maden ve Aşağı Madenliler (A. Hod ve A. Hodlular), vol. 1, Köyun Doğal ve Toplumsal Yapıları (Istanbul: Aşağı ve Yukarı Maden Köyleri Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği Yayınları, 1992), 45-46.
unknown horizon” (*meçhul bir ufka doğru*): “Every retreat of the army repeats these scenes of migration…. Men who shouldered their infirm, old mothers, women who wrapped their children with blankets, shouldered, and embraced them, children who strove to walk behind oxcarts. If you ask them where they are going, they don’t know either.” A year later, he observed a similar lack of guidance: “I asked them their destination. All of them, senseless and oblivious, [are] lost travelers in a scary nightmare…. What guides them is a natural drift (*sevk-i tabii*).”

The underdeveloped and already overburdened transportation infrastructure of the Ottoman Empire added significantly to the misery of the refugees. The railroad network did not extend into eastern Anatolia, the major zone of conflict between the Ottomans and the Russians. Despite the intense activity of hundreds of labor battalions, overland routes were still torn up and in primitive condition. They could not handle hundreds of thousands of refugees and deportees without interrupting military transportation to and from the war zone. The turmoil on the roads and at meeting points astonished many contemporary observers. A young reserve officer, Şevket Süreyya [Aydemir], who was on his way to the eastern front, for instance, remembers that they found the small town of Suşehri in Sivas province in the “turmoil of doomsday” (*mahşer karışıklığı*) caused by

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the refugee flow and the personnel and equipment of the retreating army.\textsuperscript{65} Ali Oğlu Reşid, a refugee who had left Van in the aftermath of the Russian occupation, described the situation in a different region with similar words: “People from towns and districts were swarming like ants as if doomsday or the Great Flood had come.”\textsuperscript{66} As seen in these eyewitness accounts, mahşer or mahşer günü (doomsday or judgment day) became arguably the most common metaphor through which the refugees articulated at least the initial parts of the migration experience.

Heavy military and civilian traffic accelerated the deterioration of roads, especially in the winter and the spring. Mud, therefore, was a recurrent theme in the refugees’ narratives of migration. Muddy and snowy roads damaged the already dilapidated carts, injured undernourished animals, and exhausted people traveling by foot. The inadequacy of the supply stations on the roads, which were supposed to provide food, medical assistance, and shelter to refugees, made the journeys even more unbearable. According to German consular reports, even wealthy refugees froze to death on their migration routes from Erzurum to Erzincan.\textsuperscript{67} Halil Ataman, a reserve officer in the retreating Ottoman army, recalls awful scenes of suffering refugees trying to march onward in extremely cold weather: “At night, the temperature was forty degrees centigrade below zero; oxcarts, donkeys, women, men, the elderly, and children,

\textsuperscript{65} Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, 	extit{Suya Arayan Adam} (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1999 [1959]), 85. For similar observations, see Süleyman Nuri, 	extit{Çanakkale Siperlerinden TKP Yönetimine: Uyanan Esirler} (İstanbul: TÜSTAV Yayınları, 2002), 90.


\textsuperscript{67} Paul Leverkuehn, 	extit{A German Officer during the Armenian Genocide: A Biography of Max von Scheubner-Richter}, trans. Alasdair Lean (London: Gomidas Institute, 2008 [1938]), lxxii.
everybody on the road was in a miserable state. I even saw a heart-wrenching mother [with two children]; one [was] bound on her back and the other walked. Grasping that child with one hand, her other hand was on the headgear of the oxen pulling the cart on which she had loaded all of her belongings. What suffering had this woman who guided the oxen endured…. We stopped again. A call, ‘The road is closed,’ was heard. Another oxcart broke down, its oxen frozen. Wrapped in quilts, the woman who owned the cart and her children just stood there.”

In order to avoid congestion on the roads and prevent the refugees from perishing during migration, the civilian authorities in some cases tried to persuade local populations not to leave their localities. In Erzurum, for instance, the governor, Tahsin [Uzer] Bey, spent considerable energy trying to stop the residents, on orders from the army, from evacuating the city. The Third Army headquarters was clearly convinced that people would not suffer more under Russian occupation than they would as refugees: “If the poor, the infirm, and children do not migrate and instead remain where they are, their attrition rate would by no means exceed the losses that migration would cause. This is the reason we write to the governorship, to prevent migration.”


69 “Boyle fıkraların, züefanın ve çocuk çocuğun hicret etmeyecek yerlerinde kalmaları halindeki zayıflarını hiç bir vakti şimdi halin doğuracağı zayıfa çıkamaz. Bunun için hicretin mindenlmesi vilayete yazıldı.” Samih, *Büyük Harpte Kafkas Cephesi Hatıraları*, 95. The government announced through street criers that Erzurum was strong enough to hold out for two years even if it was surrounded [by the enemy]: “Do not be afraid, do not flee. There is no need to be miserable on the roads.” “Korkmayın, kaçamayın! Yollarda
forbidding the majority of people from leaving their hometowns proved to be unenforceable. In his letter to the Minister of Interior, the governor expressed his deep regret that, although he did everything to prevent migration (muhaceret), those who worried about Armenian retribution could not be stopped.\textsuperscript{70} The huge number of refugees, as a result, clogged the roads, making it nearly impossible for troops to move to and from the battle zones.

The transportation network was not in any better shape in northern Anatolia along the Black Sea coast, where only small causeways linked towns to one another. Although some refugees, especially the wealthy and the influential, preferred to travel by sea, taking to the roads seemed to be the only viable alternative for many others who could not afford to purchase or rent any means of transportation.\textsuperscript{71} Upon receiving news of the Russian advance and the Ottoman retreat, families of government officials and people with financial resources hastily sought to arrange small sailboats to escape. Given the anxiety generated by the rumors of the advancing enemy, the scarcity of sailboats and the local government’s requisitioning of boats for the transportation of official records, as well as officers’ and officials’ families, caused their prices to skyrocket.\textsuperscript{72} Contemporary observers recalled astounding injustices and inequalities surrounding this process. Senior governmental officials’ personal belongings, furniture, even their flowerpots took

\textsuperscript{70} Tahsin Uzer, \textit{Makedonya Eşkiyalık Tarihi ve Son Osmanlı Yönetimi} (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1979), 337.


\textsuperscript{72} Mediha Kayra, \textit{Hoşça Kal Trabzon: Bir Kız Çocuğunun Günlüğünden Birinci Dünya Savaşında Anadolu}, ed. Cahit Kayra (İstanbul: Dünya Kitapları, 2005), 44.
precedence over poor refugees with small children who desperately waited on the docks for a seat on one of these sailboats. One contemporary observer recounts the cry of poor soldiers’ families, which fell on deaf ears: “Our men are in the army. We have neither money nor men to guide us; do not let the enemy trample us and our children; please save us by taking us into your sailboats; our honor and chastity are entrusted to the state; you know that, please take us along.”

In addition to the poor quality of the roads, the lack of bridges over overflowing creeks and streams, characteristic of the Black Sea coast, rendered the migration of thousands of refugees unendurable. Especially in the early days of the migration, thousands of people massed on the banks of these streams awaiting help from the state and the army. The Harşit Creek near Tirebolu proved to be particularly impassable. The huge crowd assembled on the eastern bank of Harşit, notes Muzaffer Lermioğlu in his memoirs, did not leave “any grass to eat nor any leaf to chew.” Some did not hesitate to turn the misery and desperation of these people into lucrative business opportunities. One local boatman, for instance, would ferry people across the Harşit in exchange for one gold Ottoman lira, a very significant amount of money at the time.

73 “Bizim askerlerimiz askerdedirler; paramız, önmüze düşcecek erkek, herhangi bir kimsemiz yok; bizi, şu çocukları düşmana ezdirmeyiniz, ne olur bizi de kayıtlarına alarak kurtarınız, irz ve namusumuz devletindir, siz bilirsiniz bizi de almaz.” Hikmet Öksüz and Veysel Usta, Mustafa Reşit Tarakçıoğlu: Hayatı, Hatıratı ve Trabzon’un Yakın Tarihi, Trabzon’un Yakın Tarihi (Trabzon: Serander Yayınları, 2008), 128.

74 “Kalabalık o kadar çoğalmıştı ki buralarda otlanacak bir tutam ot, dışlenecek tek bir yaprak bile kalmamıştı” Lermioğlu, Akçaabat – Akçaabat Tarihi, 260. See also, Öksüz and Veysel Usta, Mustafa Reşit Tarakçıoğlu, 131.

Refugees usually departed their villages together and provided some support and confidence to each other in a world of constant uncertainty and incessant anxiety. They made every effort to maintain this unity and stick together wherever the current took them. Şevket Süreyya, a young reserve officer who had listened to his family’s dramatic tales of migration during his childhood, during the Balkan Wars had seen refugees from the Balkan provinces in his hometown, Edirne. Once again witnessing the behavior of displaced groups of people during World War I, he accurately observed that “the refugees strove to continue the life to which they were accustomed on the roads, with the same people, the same connections, the same hierarchy.”

Due to losses and illnesses, however, refugee convoys would often have to leave some of their members behind, and would eventually fragment. Once refugees lost contact with their relatives and fellow townspeople, life became much more miserable for them, both physically and emotionally.

The deaths of family members, relatives, and friends during the migration was a common experience for refugees. Harsh weather conditions, improper clothing, and inadequate nourishment made the journey extremely exhausting for everyone. The death toll on the road was exceedingly high, especially among the elderly, children, and the infirm. “A dead person under every bush,” as a refugee remembered years later. For

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76 “Aynı insanlar, aynı bağlar, aynı hiyerarşı içinde, alıştıkları hayat nizamını yollarda da devam ettirmeye çalışırlar.” Aydemir, Suyu Arayan Adam, 84.

77 Yaşar Kemal’s family, located originally in the village of Ernis on Lake Van, departed along with the entire village population in the spring of 1915. After one and a half year of migration, his family was the only remnant of this group that was able to reach Çukurova. Yaşar Kemal, Yaşar Kemal Kendini Anlatıyor: Alain Bosquet ile Görüşmeler (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2004 [1992]), 21.

want of implements, refugees usually could not bury their dead properly. The panic and anxiety caused by the advancing enemy, the sense of urgency to find a safe haven, and the group pressure from other refugees usually obliged them to leave dead bodies unburied; these would quickly decompose and generate unbearable scenes that were entrenched in the refugees’ memories.

One of the principles of the Directorate in handling the refugee problem was to keep refugees together as a group and prevent them from dispersing to places other than those determined by the state. Traveling together in unsanitary conditions, however, led to the outbreak of infectious diseases among the refugees, especially when the local governments and the army could not keep them properly vaccinated. Weakened by malnutrition and overall exhaustion, they were particularly vulnerable to the ravages of epidemic disease. Consequently, the mortality rate among them was very high. According to the Directorate records, at least twenty percent of the refugees who traveled towards Diyarbekir died en route. With every move of these refugee groups, cholera, typhus, typhoid fever, dysentery, and other diseases spread to uninfected sections of the empire.

Migrations and deportations proved particularly traumatic for families with small children. Especially during the winter months, children who were improperly clothed and insufficiently fed suffered greatly, and their parents could do little to protect them from the deplorable conditions. Out of desperation, many handed over their little children to officers who they thought could provide a safer future for them. One officer who witnessed such a sorrowful scene on the eastern front recalls, “Those who had lost hope

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79 *MAZC*, Term 3, Year of Session 3, vol. 2, 12 Mart 1333 (12 March 1917), 213. This number dropped to five percent as a result of an intensive vaccination campaign.
for themselves or were too weak to carry themselves, tried to hand their children off to the passers-by. ‘Take them and save…’ they say, but nobody stops to listen and goes on.”

Some children got lost in the confusion of migration and were never found. On more desperate occasions, families were forced by the dreadful conditions on the road to abandon their children as they were no longer able to provide for them. Other refugees, suffering the same hardships, could not take these abandoned children into their own families, as having to clothe and feed an additional child would mean having one less piece of bread and scrap of cloth for their own children. Orphan refugee children were thus some of the most heart-rending figures to emerge out of the Ottoman refugee experience during World War I. Equipped with only their natural instincts for survival, these abandoned refugee children formed “gangs,” the size of which could reach up to three to four hundred children. These starving child gangs launched “attacks” on villages, stripping them of everything edible they could find. Yaşar Kemal, who heard stories of these children from his own relatives and a beggar who actually had been a member of

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80 “Herkes hayatından bıkmış, kendisini sürüklemeden aciz, çocuklarını gelip geçenlere uzatıyor. ‘Al bunu kurtar’ diyorlar. Kimse dinlemiyor ve herkes geçiyor.” Samih, Büyük Harpte Kafkas Cephesi Hatıraları, 73. Some high-ranking officers, however, tried to save at least some of these children from misery. Mustafa Kemal Pasha (later Atatürk), for instance, recounts in his notes that he took a twelve-year-old refugee orphan child, Ömer, with him. Three more orphans were brought to the commander but he only gave money to them. Şükrü Tezer, ed., Atatürk’ün Hatıra Defteri (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1972), 71.


82 Muzaffer Lermioglu narrates the story of a young soldier’s wife who committed suicide after losing three children to starvation. Lermioglu, Akçaabat – Akçaabat Tarihi, 260-61.

83 On his way to the front, Mustafa Kemal Pasha came across a refugee couple who were followed by a small child who had lost his own parents. When he angrily asked them why they did not take the child, they replied that he was not their own child. Şükrü Tezer, ed., Atatürk’ün Hatıra Defteri (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1972), 71.
one of these gangs, likened them to “swarms of locusts”: “The children had become herds, hungry, impoverished, stark naked…. They meandered as herds, attacking villages and towns. Hundreds of children would attack a village they had spotted, entering from one end and exiting from the other. No edibles would remain in the village. They were like a swarm of locusts.”

Refugees usually had little time to settle their affairs and pack their belongings before they had to depart. In towns and cities, the fear of the approaching enemy obliged them to sell whatever they could well below market prices and look for means of transportation, which, according to one contemporary observer, had become extremely expensive and difficult to find. The army’s requisitioning policies, discussed in the previous chapters, had created a shortage of healthy, strong draft animals and proper carts. The mass retreat of Ottoman troops generated a sense of urgency and magnified the already pressing need for more animals and vehicles. Given the weaknesses of pack animals and the scarcity of transport vehicles, refugees usually could not take much with them and were forced to leave many of their belongings behind. Along the road, they would often have to abandon their last remaining possessions.

Refugees from the villages were often more fortunate in being able to find working carts. If they were lucky enough, they would also have managed to drag a couple of cattle with them. Sooner or later, however, their cattle starved en route, as the refugees

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85 Riggs, Days of Tragedy in Armenia, 181. Rev. Riggs compared the panic of the Muslim population in Harput with what Armenians had experienced the year prior. For the increased prices in Trabzon, see Kayra, Hoşça Kal Trabzon, 47-48.
could not carry enough fodder, or they were stolen or slaughtered by other refugees, deserters, and brigands. Before leaving their homes, women usually baked bread and prepared other imperishable foodstuffs. Refugees often had to spend their nights under trees, as the few available inns and other buildings on the road were already overcrowded by either retreating soldiers or the refugee groups traveling ahead of them. In towns and cities, they slept in a variety of places, including mosque yards, school gardens, medreses, stables, haystacks, and graveyards. If they were lucky enough or had maintained good relations with governmental officials, they might be allowed to stay in properties abandoned by the Armenian deportees.

In towns and villages where they took temporary refuge during their migration or were settled by the state authorities, refugees were met with a spectrum of reactions from the local population. Depending on a number of factors, people provided assistance to refugees, remained indifferent to their sufferings, or, in several cases, showed open hostility and resentment toward them. In some Black Sea towns, refugees were looked down upon and called kirli muhacir (“dirty refugee”). Some eastern Anatolian villagers did not let refugees stay in their villages. Jakob Künzler, a Swiss physician in Urfa, for instance, reported that the inhabitants of a nearby Turkish village quickly shut their doors to Kurdish refugees out of fear. From the second half of 1916 on, when the Ottoman state’s provisioning policies were exceptionally severe, the local populations in these

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86 İlker, Artvin Zeytinlik Bucağı Aşağı Maden, 46; Aydemir, Suyu Arayan Adam, 84. Refugees who started out in Trabzon and Of, for instance, could not make it to Ordu with even one animal remaining. Sıtkı Çebi, Ordu Şehri Belediye Tarihi (Ordu: Ordu Belediyesi Yayınları, 2002), 265.

87 Öksüz and Veysel Usta, Mustafa Reşit Tarakçıoğlu, 134.
villages “jealously guarded their dwindling supplies” from these refugees.\(^{88}\) Another refugee who migrated from Kelkit (Gümüşhane) to the village of Alaca close to Çorum, where he stayed for a year, remembered the huge fight between refugees and the local people that was sparked by a rumor that the locals had stolen the refugees’ money.\(^{89}\) On the other hand, some women and men from Harput, for instance, banded together to help refugees who had fled from the Russian advance. This effort was described by a contemporary observer as “remarkable” because it was “so unusual for a Moslem city.”\(^{90}\)

Refugees came from all ethno-religious groups and all socio-economic classes. Refugee convoys even included a significant number of wealthy and once-influential individuals and families, but the trying experience of migration gradually leveled the social and economic distinctions between them and the refugees from poorer sections of Ottoman society. This dramatic upheaval in their lives and drastic change in their living standards, of which the wealthy refugees had perhaps never conceived a possibility, brought about both severe physical and emotional strains. Once-influential notables now had to seek refuge in villages near Erzurum and till the soil in the fields abandoned by the Armenians.\(^{91}\) Fevzi Güvemli, then an eleven-year-old boy from Trabzon who had migrated to Samsun with his family, remembers, for instance, the queuing up of people from upper-class families in front of bakeries to get the daily bread ration, \textit{vesika ekmeği}, distributed by the state to refugees: “Every day we gathered in front of the bakery where the bread was dispensed and waited for the opening of the shutters. The baker read our

\(^{88}\) Künzler, \textit{In the Land of Blood and Tears}, 68.
\(^{89}\) Sabri Özcan San, \textit{Rusların Gümüşhane İlini İşgali} (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1993), 91.
\(^{90}\) Riggs, \textit{Days of Tragedy in Armenia}, 178.
\(^{91}\) Sezen, ed., \textit{İki Kardeşten Seferberlik}, 112.
Still, however, the lives of poorer refugees were much more miserable than those of their relatively affluent counterparts. Many of them had no choice but to rely upon the inadequate assistance provided by the government and municipalities as well as by charity organizations. Begging for food and money became common practice for these hard-pressed families in the towns where they were settled. The desolate conditions forced many refugee women to resort to prostitution as the only way to obtain a livelihood. Destitution rendered them especially vulnerable to officials and war profiteers.  

The entire process of migration, with all its miseries, was engraved in the collective memory of people as *muhacir çıkmak* (“becoming a refugee”). Women, once again, expressed the pain of leaving their homes and villages through laments:

Çocuklar dizi dizi,  
Terk ettik köyümüzü.  
Urus gözün körolsun,  
Muhacir ettin bizi.  

Children all lined up,  
We left our village.  
Damn you, Russians!  
You made us refugees.

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93 Without providing much detail, Lermioğlu mentions in his memoirs that every day they witnessed many of these tragedies. Lermioğlu, *Akçaabat – Akçaabat Tarihi*, 264. In his diary, Hüseyin Atif Bey complains about the officers on the home front who enjoyed themselves with refugee women who were ready to exchange their honor and chastity for a slice of bread. Erginsoy, ed., *Dedem Hüseyin Atif Beşe*, 225.

A much more common song narrates how people perceived the entire experience of being a refugee:

Trabzon'dan çıktım başım selamet. 
Çavuşulu'ya vardım koptu kıyamet. 
Anam, babam, yarım Hakk’a emanet.
Ah bu muhacirlık şimdi büktü belimi. 
Zalim Urus yaktı, yıldı evimi.  

I set out from Trabzon, godspeed! 
When I got to Çavuşlu, all hell broke loose. 
My mother, father, sweetheart, be entrusted to God. 
Oh, this refugee life has worn me down. 
The cruel Russian burnt my home and destroyed it.

As this song aptly describes, the refugee experience devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands of people; it “wore them down.” Even if they managed to return to their villages (many of them could not), however, they seldom found peace and tranquility. Many refugees who returned to their homes after the conflict had ended found their properties partially or completely destroyed, or occupied by other people who had also been displaced during the war. Having rushed back to their towns and villages in the hope of resuming their pre-war lives, tens of thousands of people thus remained without shelter, food, fodder, draft animals, or any means of production. Recognizing this as a socio-economic crisis that now plagued eastern and northern Anatolia, the government prohibited refugees from returning to their homes. Only those who could afford their own seed and provisions were allowed to return.

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97 BOA.DH.ŞFR 84/186 (20 February 1918); *Ahval ve Zaruret-i Harbiye Neticesiyle Bir Müddet İşgal Altında Kağıt Olan Vilayat Ahalisinden Dahile Mecbur-u İtica Ölanların Suret-i Sevk ve İadesi Hakkında Talimatname* (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1334 [1918]). For details of refugees’ return, see İpek, “Birinci Dünya Savaşı Esnasında,” 206-15;
Many others who had been relocated to houses abandoned by deported Armenians and, to a smaller extent, Greeks were pushed out of these dwellings upon the return of the surviving deportees. The Directorate, which, during the war, had organized the settling of Muslim refugees in buildings and villages abandoned by non-Muslim Ottomans, was charged with resettling the Armenians and Greeks in their homelands.\textsuperscript{98} For thousands of refugees, returning their temporary dwellings to their original owners came to mean another dramatic upheaval in their lives. If they were fortunate enough, the Directorate and local governments would allow them to move in to other properties that had not yet been reclaimed by their previous owners.\textsuperscript{99} Many, however, perceived the return of the deported Armenians and Greeks as an incident that would bring with it the same sufferings of migration they had experienced only a couple years previously. For this reason, in some provinces Muslim refugees resisted the return of the Greeks and Armenians to their own villages.\textsuperscript{100} These dramatic events, so ubiquitous in post-war Anatolia, must have significantly deepened the already existing inter-ethnic tensions among different ethno-religious communities within Ottoman society.

\textsuperscript{98} Dündar, İttihat ve Terakki’nin Müslümanları, 88-92.


\textsuperscript{100} BOA.DH.ŞFR 96/7 (1 February 1919), transcribed in Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeniler (1915-1920) (Ankara: Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü Yayınları, 1995), 211.
V. Conclusion

“Oh, damned you, migration, go to hell! It should not happen even to our enemies.” Thus spoke a reserve officer of his feelings about the mass migration of Ottoman people upon witnessing their misery. Refugees, as seen in the words of this young officer, reminded everyone of the unbearable sufferings the war had brought on the Ottoman people.

The migration of Muslim refugees into the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars is a well-known episode of late Ottoman history. The refugees’ arrival in the capital from the lost provinces of the empire in deplorable conditions received extensive attention in the contemporary press and was ensconced in the collective memory of Ottoman Muslims as a symbol of Greek and Bulgarian atrocities. According to the “Black Book” of Talat Pasha, a total of 339,074 refugees had arrived in Anatolia and Istanbul in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars. World War I, on the other hand, saw the displacement of about a million refugees from the war zones in addition to the deportation of more than 1.2 million Armenians and Greeks. In that sense, the Ottoman refugee crisis during World War I was much deeper and more destructive than its counterpart in the Balkan Wars.

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A sustained comparison would also reveal that the Ottoman refugee crisis during the war was far greater in scale than anything experienced by the other belligerent powers. Although other combatant powers were by no means immune to the destabilizing effects of refugee movements and population displacements, the sheer size of the Ottoman refugee population, the underdeveloped transportation infrastructure, and the state’s inadequate and ineffective measures to deal with this gigantic problem turned mass migration into a disaster for millions of families throughout the empire. Despite this unfolding human tragedy, the Unionist government sought to make use of the refugee crisis, together with the deportation of the Armenians, for its demographic engineering projects.

The Ottoman refugees’ misery did not come to an end with the armistice in October 1918 and the collapse of Unionist single party rule. With the start of another war between the invading Greek army and the nationalist forces, hundreds of thousands of people again found themselves facing inter-ethnic violence and forced or voluntary dislocation. Their migration or displacement once again generated heart-wrenching scenes similar to the ones discussed above. The compulsory population exchange between Anatolian Greeks and Greek Muslims stipulated by the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923 closed this tragic chapter of Ottoman/Turkish history, a chapter at the end of which Anatolia acquired a religiously homogeneous demographic structure.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ For a detailed account of the population exchange, see Onur Yıldırım, Diplomacy and Displacement: Reconsidering the Turco-Greek Exchange of Populations, 1922-1934 (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).
CONCLUSION

OTTOMAN SOCIETY at WAR, 1914-1918

The Ottoman people lived the ten long years between 1912 and 1922 in a “continuum of crisis,” which was mostly shaped by successive conflicts.¹ Ottoman society was at war throughout this period, with only brief intervals of peace. The Balkan Wars (1912-13), World War I (1914-18), and, finally, the national War of Independence (1919-22) literally exhausted the human capital of the empire, leaving millions of people dead, wounded, and captive, and millions of others widowed, orphaned, and bereaved. World War I, which, compared to the conflicts preceding and following it, was fought on a much larger scale, turned out to be much more destructive for the Ottoman people. In the war, the Ottoman Empire suffered 750,000 fatalities from combat and disease. Proportionally, it endured the second greatest number of casualties amongst all the World War I belligerents, exceeded only by Serbia. By the end of the war, Ottoman society was deeply traumatized due to the high number of casualties, a devastated economic infrastructure, voluntary and involuntary displacement, cultural anxiety, ethnic tensions, and political instability.

World War I required the most comprehensive mobilization of men and resources in the history of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, World War I marked a watershed for all

belligerents; it was a significantly different experience from earlier conflicts. For almost four and a half years, fighting nations mobilized their societies and subordinated their economies to the war effort to an unprecedented extent. What distinguished the Ottoman experience of World War I from that of other combatants and what makes its case truly unique was its lack of the necessary means to fight a war on such a grand scale. The Ottomans were determined to try to fight the “total war” without having a strong industrial base, high agricultural productivity, and, finally, a developed and extensive transportation infrastructure. The Entente navies’ blockade of the straits connecting the Aegean to the Black Sea and of the coasts of Syria and Lebanon, frequent natural disasters, and, more importantly, the significant loss of manpower to conscription and ethnic cleansing further increased the challenges that the Ottomans confronted during the war. Against this backdrop, Ottoman civilian and military authorities constantly experimented with new policies in order to meet the endless needs of the war.

Each policy devised for this purpose brought about further intervention by the state in the daily lives of ordinary Ottomans. While earlier conflicts had similarly required the extraction of men and resources from across society, the degree of state intervention in society in World War I surpassed anything that had taken place before. The magnitude and duration of the conflict, the sheer size of the army, fighting on multiple fronts, unrealistic war aims, the desire for the complete subjugation of the enemy manifested in the rhetoric of “decisive victory” (zafer-i nihai), and, finally, the large-scale destruction inflicted by modern weapons necessitated extensive mobilization and the continuous allocation of vast resources for military purposes. Victory in the war became increasingly dependent on the successful integration of the armies in the field and
the home-front population, a process that inescapably led to the erosion of the distinction between the military and the civilian. While other major belligerent nations resorted to external sources of soldiers and supplies from colonies while seeking to expand the capacities of their industries, agriculture, and transportation, the intensified exploitation of material and human resources in their core territories appeared to the Ottoman authorities to be their only effective policy alternative.

This process had profound implications for Ottoman society. Ottomans, regardless of age, gender, and ethno-religious affiliation, had to cope with deprivation, bereavement, and hardships of all kinds. Except for a small, fortunate segment of society, the Ottoman people had to shoulder the enormous physical and emotional burdens created by the war. The unprecedented expansion of the state, however, inevitably created new sites of interaction between the state and society, transforming existing modes of interaction. Conscription, requisitioning, forced employment in agriculture and transportation, refugee settlement and other wartime policies of the Ottoman state gave rise to new fields of contestation.

Women emerged as important actors on the Ottoman home front. Unlike their counterparts in Western Europe, Ottoman women were, some exceptions notwithstanding, not generally integrated into the urban workforce, as the Ottoman Empire did not have a significant war industry. Nevertheless, throughout the empire, women bore the brunt of the costs of the war and the wartime policies of the Ottoman state. In the absence of men, they tilled the soil, tended the animals, brought products to market, and took care of their families. At the same time, however, they were employed in military transportation, obligated to work in agriculture, subjected to a variety of state
policies and regulations, and mistreated and abused by state officials and other men on the home front. During the war, women, in general, came into more direct contact with the Ottoman state more frequently than ever before. In order to collect their monthly pensions, receive their daily bread from municipal or military bakeries, or apply for state aid for themselves and their children, women repeatedly interacted with the representatives of the Ottoman state. War did not bring about economic empowerment and social liberation for the vast majority of Ottoman women. They, however, developed a powerful collective identity as “soldiers’ wives and mothers” through which they negotiated with local and imperial officials, often demanding at times that the latter honor the implicit contract between the state and soldiers’ families.

The enormity of the problems that plagued the Ottoman war effort did not stop the Unionist leadership from engaging in ambitious demographic engineering projects. On the contrary, the Unionists perceived the war as the most suitable opportunity to eliminate certain ethno-religious communities deemed to be “dangerous,” either by assimilation or annihilation. War provided the government with a window of opportunity within which they could act freely without foreign interference; in these circumstance, the authorities enjoyed total control over policymaking, jurisdiction, and law enforcement, and almost an absolute monopoly on the means of violence. While all the belligerents of World War I practiced “population politics” through internment, deportation, and resettlement, none of these reached the degree of destructiveness the Unionist policies had on the Ottoman Empire’s long-established Armenian community. The Unionist policies towards the Armenians reflected the same aggressiveness, shortsightedness, and disproportionality that also characterized other wartime policies. While, on the one hand, the Unionists
devised policies to maximize the human and material resources that would be allocated for the war effort, they did not hesitate to exterminate more than a million people.

The developments on the Ottoman home front during World War I also had far-reaching consequences for the ruling elites. By the time the guns had fallen silent, the legitimacy of the Ottoman state, the Ottoman army, and the Committee of Union and Progress had significantly diminished in the eyes of the majority of the people. Many Ottomans rightfully saw the state as nothing but an oppressive force, which constantly demanded that their sons, fathers, and husbands enlist in the army, ruthlessly impressed their properties and products, compelled them to work in military transportation and agriculture, and forcibly settled them in far-off, unfamiliar provinces. This force, however, could not provide security to them in the countryside against the thousands of armed bands roaming the mountains. Nor could it maintain the welfare of the destitute and the needy, many of whom were victims of the war, or offer assistance to them to piece together their lives. Innumerable deaths, mounting social problems, and economic hardships, all combined with the conviction that government officials were involved in widespread injustices, turned many Ottomans away from the war effort and the Unionist regime, which had been its champion. War, as the folk songs and laments discussed in the fourth chapter attest, had been completely discredited in the eyes of the Ottoman people.

Under these conditions of intense hostility to everything associated with the Unionist government and the war, the remobilization for the nationalist war in Anatolia in

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2 Falih Rıfkı, for instance, notes that it became fashionable to curse the army: “Within the atmosphere of defeat, I saw that the epic achievements, heroism, and the suffering of the Turkish army were forgotten. It was fashionable to curse the army.” (Bozgun havası içinde Türk ordusunun bütün destanının, kahramanlığıının, ısrabının unutulduğunu gördüm. Orduya sövmek moda idi.) Falih Rıfkı Atay, Zeytindağı, 3rd ed. (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1943), 139.
1919 against the invading Greek army could only be made possible through extensive use of state coercion imposed by the Independence Courts (İstiklal Mahkemeleri) and an intensive propaganda effort based on familiar themes of Islamic-oriented nationalism. At the same time, the leaders of the nationalist movement spent considerable energy to distance themselves from the Unionist regime, despite the fact that the movement actually drew much of its strength from the Unionist organization in Anatolia and included numerous former Unionists. During the War of Independence (1919-1922), nationalists re-implemented many of the policies that were experimented with during World War I, some to an even more destructive degree. In contrast to the outcome of the previous conflict, however, this time they significantly contributed to the defeat of the enemy.

People living in provinces far from the imperial center were similarly disenchanted with the war, as well as with the Ottoman administration. The tyrannical rule of Cemal Pasha in Syria and his merciless treatment of Arab notables and intellectuals, as well as the Ottoman wartime policies of conscription and confiscation and widespread shortages and famine, alienated Arabs from the Ottoman state. The utterly devastating wartime experiences of the Arab subjects of the empire, both on the battlefront and on the home front, played a considerable role in the upsurge of antagonistic feelings towards Ottoman rule in the Arab provinces of the empire.

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The First World War radically transformed all belligerent societies. It affected social structures and identities, breaking down old modes of domination while also creating new ones. After the war, the world was completely different from the world of just four years prior. The lives of many Ottomans changed beyond all recognition. Despite the increase in interest in World War I, the Ottoman battle- and home-front experiences of the war have remained largely unknown, even though they fully replicated and in many respects exceeded the experiences of other belligerent nations. This study has tried to fill a crucial gap in late Ottoman historiography as well as the global historiography of World War I by examining the home-front experience of Ottomans during World War I. This examination of the wartime interaction between the Ottoman state and society and the war’s impact on the lives of ordinary Ottoman subjects will, I hope, enhance our understanding of the late Ottoman period, provide a new perspective on the disintegration process of the empire, and contribute to the growing body of comparative analyses of the belligerents of the First World War.
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