

Version 1.0 | Last updated 27 February 2019

# Making Sense of the War (Ottoman Empire/Middle East)

By [Charalampos Minasidis](#)

**As World War I ravaged Europe and the Ottoman military mobilized, Ottoman society sought to make sense of its involvement in the war. Officials, intellectuals, and everyday citizens struggled both to legitimize Ottoman participation and to justify the sacrifices. The near catastrophe of the Balkan Wars had only recently led them to an existential crisis, forcing them to reconsider their role and reimagine the New Ottoman community. Nevertheless, the state apparatus and Ottoman intellectuals, although agreeing to frame war propaganda around Islam, were indecisive as to what kind of national identity would best serve the war effort and the empire. Widespread illiteracy forced the state to rely mainly on oral and visual propaganda, while early drawbacks and the war's duration convinced many conscripts and civilians alike to trust their own experience to make sense of the war.**

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
  - [2 Balkan Wars: Shaping the Ottoman War Culture](#)
  - [3 Mobilizing Muslims to Fight](#)
  - [4 Mobilizing Intellectuals](#)
  - [5 Delivering the Message](#)
  - [6 Making Sense of the War through Experiences](#)
  - [7 Not Accepting the End of the War](#)
  - [8 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## Introduction

The decision to side with the Central Powers was neither easy nor unanimous. Some factions within the [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#), which had controlled the [Ottoman Empire](#) since the coup on 23 January 1913, favored [neutrality](#) or even the Entente. As historian [Mustafa Aksakal](#) argued, the post-Balkan Wars' psychological effects of "pride, sense of violation, and revenge" dictated the need for an alliance with [Germany](#). CUP leadership believed that this particular "Great Power" offered a better guarantee of the [empire's](#) territorial integrity and political and economic independence.<sup>[1]</sup> The Second Balkan War's military success had convinced the CUP that force, action, and struggle would save the empire. However, the CUP did not believe this war would last long and tried to avoid it until Berlin threatened to break its alliance. The CUP valued the latter so much that it joined the war. It sought German support and guidance for the radical changes it wanted to implement, and considered the war as both a "historic opportunity" for modernization and a "war of independence" from the Entente. The latter's members principally dictated the Ottoman [economy](#) through the capitulation system, and were also the empire's main creditors.<sup>[2]</sup> As the Entente did not offer a defense alliance or agree to abolish the capitulation system, the Ottoman Empire moved unilaterally to abrogate the uneven trade agreements on 1 October 1914 and sided with the Central Powers.<sup>[3]</sup> The non-delivery of two promised British-constructed [dreadnoughts](#) in August 1914 added to an anti-British campaign in the CUP-controlled press.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Balkan Wars: Shaping the Ottoman War Culture

The [Balkan Wars \(1912–13\)](#) shaped Ottoman understanding of [modern war](#). The unexpected military defeat, the vast number of [refugees](#) and the desperate but successful defense at the outskirts of the capital during the First Balkan War produced what Eyal Ginio defined as "the Ottoman culture of defeat."<sup>[5]</sup> With the initial defeat seen as an identity crisis, many members of the elite tried to shape the memory of their compatriots and propose a path for the future. For Ginio, their "publications contributed to the shaping of a distinct Ottoman war culture that revolved especially around the topics of mobilization, Ottomanism and civic obligations."<sup>[6]</sup> Moreover, the war had long-term influences on the nation-building and [genocidal](#) policies that followed. Elite writers advocated for patriotism, masculinity, military preparedness, and modernization. They sought the militarization of Ottoman society, following [Colmar von der Goltz's \(1843–1916\)](#) model of the "nation in arms,"<sup>[7]</sup> with all sexes and ages assigned active roles for the future defense of the state. [Children](#) were specifically identified as future soldiers who should be educated to succeed where their fathers had failed. Other authors denounced non-Muslims and civic Ottomanism, advocating instead for a new unifying Turkish or [pan-Turkish](#) message. Another line of thought promoted revenge against the Balkan states and presented all Europeans as anti-Muslim. Publications of proven or alleged Bulgarian and, secondarily, Greek atrocities during the First Balkan War, of the glorious Ottoman past or Islam, and tours to sites of [atrocities](#) or of the Second Balkan War's victories, like Edirne, were used to demonize the enemy, galvanize the public and construct a desirable collective

identity.<sup>[8]</sup> Last, other authors promoted a national economy and called for boycotts against foreign and minority-owned businesses to regenerate the state. Prioritizing Muslims' economic and public interest had already been a popular idea. Since 1908, spontaneous grassroots boycott movements had gathered momentum across the empire. The movement gradually became exclusively Muslim in character and played an important role in the emergence of Turkish nationalism and its connection with both Islam and violence.<sup>[9]</sup> This movement also inspired Muslim and non-Muslim shops to start using patriotic slogans to advertise their products. During the Great War, most foreign companies and products were linked to the empire's enemies and marked as unpatriotic.<sup>[10]</sup> Everything that was written either in French or English was removed and destroyed.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Mobilizing Muslims to Fight

On 29 October 1914 a surprise Ottoman naval attack against Russian Black Sea ports forced the Entente to declare war and allowed the CUP to present the war as defensive to the public. On 14 November 1914 the Ottoman Empire declared a *jihad*, or "holy war" against the Entente, thereby politicizing religious sentiments.<sup>[12]</sup> This joint Ottoman and German effort no doubt instrumentalized religion and served to mobilize Muslims worldwide, demanding that each Muslim defend the Islamic state. A *fatwa* called on the Entente's Muslim colonial subjects to rebel against their colonizers.<sup>[13]</sup>

The declaration of *jihad* had mixed results. German hopes for a global Muslim uprising against the colonial powers failed to materialize. At the same time, *jihad* rhetoric proved to be effective in justifying the conscription of Anatolian Muslims, especially after the prolongation of the war,<sup>[14]</sup> and explains Ottoman military effectiveness until the end of the Great War, galvanizing the Ottoman troops.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Mobilizing Intellectuals

Ottoman authorities constructed their propaganda around Islamic motifs, symbols and identity discourse. However, while Islam offered them the opportunity to provide a common language to their Muslim subjects and to focus on identity discourse, in many ways the authorities failed to fully take advantage of it. The focus on identity discourse meant that pre-war efforts to construct a national Ottoman culture and identity continued. However, there was no consensus on the characteristics of this supposedly unifying national identity, except that non-Muslims were viewed as disloyal and were to be excluded. The authorities summoned and paid intellectuals to produce articles, poems and prose intended to boost the morale of their compatriots and further the war effort. However, the division of intellectuals between four ideologies – Ottomanism, Islamism, Westernism and Turkism – led to contradictory propaganda and even disputes between intellectuals who supported the CUP and those who did not. The CUP had adopted Turkism as its national ideology since its 1913 congress. During the war it also promoted Turanism with the goal of liberating of all Turkic

populations under Russian domination, thereby legitimizing the offensive initiatives against the neighboring empire during the first phase of the war.<sup>[16]</sup>

The scholar and poet Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) popularized the concept of Turan. However, while he used it to symbolize an ideal country, both the CUP and the Ottoman Turkish-speakers understood it in its original geographical meaning, namely the lands inhabited by Turkic-speakers. In later writings, Gökalp explained Turan as an exclusively Turkic-speaking ideal country, created around the Turkish spoken in Istanbul, and sharing a common culture and civilization. After the initial defeats, a great number of intellectuals under Gökalp's patronage, replaced Turanism with Turkism. Periodicals such as the *Türk Yurdu* (Turkish Homeland) propagandized Gökalp's model of Turkism, while others such as *Yeni Mecmua* (New Magazine) also united CUP's critics like Refik Halit Karay (1888–1965). Gökalp appreciated Refik Halit's use of the colloquial language and focus – contrary to other writers – on commoners, as it could be part of the former's agenda. However, the split among intellectuals was such that even during the euphoria following the gains under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and Ottoman advance into the Caucasus in 1918, people like Halide Edip Adivar (1884–1964) called the government to use its limited resources and personnel to promote Turkism in Anatolia instead of the Caucasus.<sup>[17]</sup>

Halide Edip was also a latecomer to Anatolian Turkism. A strong supporter of the war and the Turan, in her early writings she argued that the alliance with Germany would “begin the process of Turkish reunification and create prosperous Turkish states full of modern and hard-working Turks.”<sup>[18]</sup> Similarly, Yusuf Akçura (1876–1935) stated that “almost all Turkish nationalist authors are unanimous in their thinking that the war that we have entered is a just war of salvation,” a war that would bring “the independence and freedom of nationalities and religions.”<sup>[19]</sup>

Although, the majority of Ottoman intellectuals sided with the war effort, Tevfik Fikret (1867–1915) and Abdullah Cevdet (1869–1932) chose to write about the futility and misery of the war. To deliver their **pacifist** message they focused on how soldiers and people on the ground were experiencing the war and took a moral stand against the glorification of any killings or sacrifices in the name of the war effort. However,  **censorship** prohibited them from publishing and popularizing their anti-war views. The lessening in 1917, and later the repeal of the censorship during the last year of the war offered **Ottoman journalists** and scholars the opportunity to question the empire's participation and even ask for peace.<sup>[20]</sup> On his behalf, Refik Halit chose to describe people's grim situation and attack the war profiteers. In a series of articles in various journals and newspapers, he discussed the shortage of **food** and denounced all those who became rich because of the war, accusing them of lack of solidarity and reproaching them as a threat to society by equating them to parasites.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Delivering the Message

The Ottoman authorities' main problem was how to deliver their message. As Erol Köroğlu argued, they lacked a modern propaganda mechanism and, in particular, a developed publishing sector. At

the same time, despite more than fifty years of educational efforts, Ottoman citizens remained uneducated and illiterate. Scholars and journalists' complex language worsened things, as it could be incomprehensible even to literates. In a letter published in *Türk Yurdu*, the reader R. T. urged writers to use simpler language easily comprehensible to Ottoman soldiers and civilians, but few followed.<sup>[22]</sup> Another problem was censorship. The latter did not allow newspapers to cover the initial defeats at Sarıkamış and Suez but had newspapers to present them as successes. However, the Entente's campaign in Dardanelles and authorities' anxiety about the outcome could not be covered. As the Entente's breakthrough failed, Ottoman authorities organized a trip to the Gallipoli front. Eighteen writers, painters, and musicians participated, but their propaganda work was minimal. The state lacked the mechanism to encourage intellectuals to be more productive during the war. Moreover, wartime exigencies and high inflation made any propaganda book purchase too costly. Pamphlets containing prose, poems and religious messages written in simple language explained *jihad* and Sunni Islam to soldiers and the public to secure their loyalty and cooperation.<sup>[23]</sup>

Visual propaganda such as paintings, short films, and [photographs](#) were used to secure conscripts' and the public's support for the state and the armed forces. The most successful example was the *Harp Mecmuası* (War Magazine) that contained mostly photographs and was published by the General Staff Headquarters Intelligence Office.<sup>[24]</sup> Architectural propaganda was also deployed in the Arab provinces to produce large-scale visual messages. The authorities began restoring citadels, mosques and tombs to ensure Muslims' support.<sup>[25]</sup> However, during the early phase of the war, Ottoman civilians were, in large extent, still unfamiliar with visual propaganda. This in conjunction with the high illiteracy caused perplexity and incomprehensiveness to many, who did not know how to respond. An example of this was the main propaganda poster that could be found in all public buildings. It depicted an Ottoman soldier, holding the Ottoman flag in his right hand and a bugle in his left, and standing in front of a military camp. It had bright colors, with the khaki of the soldier's uniform and the red flag for victory. The slogan was also simple: "*Seferberlik var. Asker olanlar silah altına!*" ("Mobilization is underway. All soldiers to arms!"). Nevertheless, the message was still unclear to many, with some misreading *var* (there is/are) as *van*, namely the city of Van in Eastern Anatolia.<sup>[26]</sup>

As literary propaganda proved ineffective, administrative, military and religious officials used oral propaganda at public readings, meetings, sermons and memorial services to propagate the official message. Town criers, imams, and literate citizens communicated the messages of pamphlets, newspapers and posters to their illiterate compatriots. In addition, the Ottoman army's imams preached against desertions and self-mutilation as well as negotiated with deserters their return to service.<sup>[27]</sup> Even rumors and folk songs were utilized to support the cultural mobilization. CUP lower-level cadres propagandized the war at CUP local clubs and spread rumors that claimed certain success in the war. Books and pamphlets, published under the director of the Press Office, Hikmet Bey, contained predictions about the alliance with Germany, the anti-colonial Muslim revolt, and the Ottoman conquest of Turan and Egypt, and supported such rumors.<sup>[28]</sup>

On their behalf, the editors of women's periodicals espoused wartime propaganda through the descriptions of [female fighters](#) or statements suggesting women could and should also be drafted. However, as their military service was not necessary yet they should contribute to the war effort by collecting donations or working at the women's branches of the [Red Crescent](#), the Defense Organization, or other women's organizations as sewers, sick attendants and nurses. Consequently, many female volunteers entered into the predominantly male public space for the very first time.<sup>[29]</sup> Moreover, as children's value for a future war was obvious,<sup>[30]</sup> the state attempted to further the militarization and mobilization of male youths.<sup>[31]</sup> Youth organizations were an ideal place to spread ideas of Turkism<sup>[32]</sup> and linked it to physical education.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Making Sense of the War through Experiences

Ottoman officers, imprisoned in [Russia](#) and able to compare their own soldiers with their European counterparts, discovered with dismay that many of their soldiers were not only illiterate, but could neither identify the most fundamental tenants of Islam nor knew the name of their prophet and their sultan. Many did not have a sense of national belonging, but only a local one, and consequently did not comprehend for what they were fighting.<sup>[34]</sup> For many illiterate and uneducated Ottoman soldiers<sup>[35]</sup> their personal experience imbued their perspective of the war. Lacking any loyalty to abstract ideas, many deserted when they witnessed how catastrophic or prolonged the war had become. Experiences also guided all those who remained at the home front, especially in the rural areas.

The Great War meant an unprecedented [state intervention into Ottoman society](#). The Ottoman state responded to the war by promoting centralization, authoritarianism and nationalism.<sup>[36]</sup> However, the empire's inability to wage a modern war because of its infrastructural deficiencies meant a heavier reliance on its human and material resources. The CUP introduced two war policies related to soldiering and provisioning, which established a new and unaccustomed relationship between the state and the people. However, these two policies contradicted each other, as soldiering required a general mobilization that undermined the state's ability to provision the necessary workforce. The general mobilization even drafted sole breadwinners, causing many families to struggle for survival. In total, around three million men were drafted, while women, the elderly and youths had to work and support the war effort.<sup>[37]</sup>

To achieve its goals, the state expanded its presence into local communities, seeking to enlist as many as it could. A new relationship was created between the state and the people, but as it was ambiguous and fluid, it offered people on the ground ways to negotiate, avoid, resist or even manipulate the authorities.<sup>[38]</sup> As a result, [Mehmet Beşikçi](#) argued, the wartime experience either created a "tacit contract" between the state and the Anatolian Muslim society or marginalized those groups that resisted or rejected the state.<sup>[39]</sup> This "tacit contract" increased draftees' social status,

extended state protection to them and their families, and acknowledged that the state's military demands would not increase. The CUP restricted the "tacit contract" to Anatolian Muslims only. Most non-Muslims could not negotiate their participation in the war effort and were detached to labor battalions that proved lethal. The Ottoman state not only deported minorities, such as Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians, and even Arabs, from sensitive strategic territories, but also ensured that the deportees could not return or even survive the process. The policy dictated that non-Muslims' property was confiscated and their physical and cultural presence eradicated.<sup>[40]</sup> Such policy led local Armenians in Van to resist the new Ottoman governor's anti-Armenian actions in April and May 1915, and this, in turn, radicalized even more the CUP's decision to get rid of the minorities.<sup>[41]</sup> For Ronald Grigor Suny, the war, the different political goals between Young Turks and Armenians – namely preservation of the empire for the former and physical survival for the latter – and the exaggeration of the Armenian resistance or insurgency, formed what he coined as "affective disposition." This "cognitive and emotional state of perpetrators" radicalized the CUP and convinced its leaders to implement their anti-Armenian genocidal policy.<sup>[42]</sup> In essence, the Ottoman state transformed the war into a war against a group of its citizens.

While the hostility of the state meant the cultural and physical destruction for the vast majority of Anatolian Christians, their properties were used to compensate state officials and collaborators.<sup>[43]</sup> Many prisoners, immigrants and refugees, tribesmen, and religious believers voluntarily offered their particular skills in exchange for material gains or political support. For Beşikçi, these volunteers constituted the state's "loyal" and "useful" supporters who contributed "in the demographic homogenization of Anatolia."<sup>[44]</sup>

While some profited from the misery or death of others, for others the war meant suffering and refugeedom. The Russian advance into Northeastern Anatolia led to hundreds of thousands of new Muslim refugees. In the beginning, officials tried to control and minimize the refugee movement, neutralize any disloyal elements, and aspired to settle loyal subjects to non-Muslim areas. Soon, however, the stipends to refugees could not defray the living expenses in light of high inflation and food shortages that led to famine and starvation.<sup>[45]</sup> Diseases claimed thousands of lives of both soldiers and civilians, mainly refugees, as the lack of resources, poor infrastructure and medical conditions, the difficulties in transferring patients and importing medical equipment, the great number of unburied bodies, and the huge number of deserters, refugees and deportees contributed to the spread of epidemics from the war zones to the home front.<sup>[46]</sup>

Food shortages marked life on the home front. The state's unprecedented intervention in agriculture and provisioning and its low-price payments in paper money led peasants to withhold their productions, resist authorities and contributed to the collapse of the provisioning system.<sup>[47]</sup> This, together with the Entente's naval blockade, the epidemics, and locust led to the Syrian famine of 1915 and the failure of provision in eastern Anatolian in 1916. The majority of Ottoman citizens blamed the authorities and war profiteers for their sufferings. People and communities responded

differently to such an existential problem. Many abandon previous moral codes to survive, while others came together, considering solidarity the best way to deal with the shortages.<sup>[48]</sup> At the initial phase of the war either charitable or religious organizations replaced the inadequately stocked and corrupt soup kitchens the government had organized. Later, missionaries, the American Red Cross and the American Committee for Syrian and Armenian Relief intervened, but the Ottoman authorities did not allow their activities in all affected areas.<sup>[49]</sup>

The army also had requisitioned any food and material supplies that could be used for the war effort. Local officials did not pay in time or at all the pensions designated to women whose husbands or sons had been conscripted. Petitions by local committees and women to the local and central government as well as the army highlight the harsh reality on the ground and their mistreatment at the hands of state and army representatives. In their petitions, women utilized the official propaganda messages and presented themselves as the mothers and wives of the nation's protectors who deserved not to starve, beg or be abused, while their men were sacrificing themselves defending their nation and religion. In this way, as Yiğit Akın suggested, women reminded the state and army officials the "tacit contract" which they ought to observe.<sup>[50]</sup>

The army was particularly sensitive to this kind of rhetoric. The wellbeing of conscripts' families became a high concern due to the increase in desertion rates. Around half a million conscripts deserted during the war, which may explain their perception or experience of the war.<sup>[51]</sup> For Beşikçi, it was the "unilateral termination of the tacit contract" that caused massive desertions among the Anatolian Muslims – as it was much harder for minorities to escape the labor battalions – who did not want to cope with the poor conditions, bad treatment, and loss of hope, especially as the war lasted longer than expected.<sup>[52]</sup> In the case of the Arab-speaking provinces, many viewed the war as something foreign to them, preferring to wound themselves than enlisting, while bounty hunters searched for deserters.<sup>[53]</sup> Moreover, the Ottoman Empire's poor infrastructure meant that the conscripts had to walk, in some cases, thousands of kilometers to the warfront, without proper clothing, shoes, and surveillance.<sup>[54]</sup> This allowed many of them to witness the atrocities of the war. Burned villages, displaced elders, abused women, and orphaned children begging for food raised their concerns about their own families back home. In many cases, conscripts too mistreated villagers, confiscating or stealing food, driven by hunger. More importantly, famine, mistreatment, and, especially, the abuse and rape of women threatened conscripts' masculinity. By deserting, they abandoned their role as protector of the nation to regain that of protector of their families.<sup>[55]</sup>

Gangs of armed deserters joined groups that looted unprotected villages and towns. In response, various communities started arming themselves and got involved in a struggle for resources and power. Old refugee populations from the Caucasus and Bosnia, new refugees from the Balkan Wars and local Anatolian Muslims – mostly mountaineers and semi-nomadic peoples – exploited the demonization of non-Muslims and used the gradual collapse of state mechanisms as a way to profit themselves, by attacking their wealthiest Christian and Jewish neighbors, and soon Muslims, too.

On their behalf, the Christian communities formed local militias manned by those males who had evaded the draft and could not escape abroad. The war evolved into countless local wars.<sup>[56]</sup>

Discontent with the war was widespread, but aside from desertion and open rebellion against conscription in the periphery of the empire, explicit anti-war actions were rare. Most of them were connected with women participating in food riots, from the winter of 1914 until the spring of 1916 or with women, again, trying to block male conscription.<sup>[57]</sup> However, as the petitions of local communities and women to the central and local authorities demonstrate, for the majority of Ottoman citizens discontent did not evolve into an open question about the war.<sup>[58]</sup> That was also true of those affected by famine and epidemics Arab-speaking territories, where people viewed the end of the war as the end of their sufferings but did not openly challenge the Ottoman government.<sup>[59]</sup> Nevertheless, the prolongation of the war and discontent over profiteers and corrupt CUP members and protégés, led the CUP by mid-1918 to allow open criticism of such activities as a way to address discomfort and avoid any challenge to its authority.<sup>[60]</sup>

## Not Accepting the End of the War

The Armistice of Mudros, signed on 30 October 1918, and the fleeing of CUP's leadership unleashed attacks in the Ottoman press by CUP's oppositionists. Just days after the armistice Refik Halit wrote a sarcastic article describing his astonishment with the unexpected change of everyone's perception of the war. As he stated, all now claimed they had been against the war from the start. Continuing his articles on the war profiteers, Refik Halit connected them to CUP.<sup>[61]</sup> For him the CUP leadership:

...hit, broke, burned, destroyed; they hanged and murdered; they terrorized everybody; in the end, they ran like snakes after leaving our lifeless bodies lying around; they are running away after having let our enemies into the country... Pashas! Where are you running, by jumping from one rooftop to another, you pashas with sticks in your hands, swords hanging from your waists and bloodshot eyes?<sup>[62]</sup>

He concluded his article by arguing that the CUP and the war had weakened the nation in such a degree that no one could avenge the people or stop them from returning and completing the catastrophe they initiated.<sup>[63]</sup>

However, the armistice did not mean the end of the war for the Ottomans. While the Entente was occupying strategic territories, the CUP was organizing the armed resistance against Entente forces.<sup>[64]</sup> The CUP transformed its local clubs across the empire into the Societies for the Defense of the National Rights as the catastrophe that the Ottomans had feared since the First Balkan War became a reality. Such societies, just like other resistance organizations, such as *Karakol*, aimed to protect what they perceived as their Anatolian homeland from any partition, and especially from Armenian and Greek aspirations.<sup>[65]</sup> The Entente's failure to demobilize the Ottoman army stationed in the eastern provinces, and the latter's decision to join the resistance strengthened the national

movement. Moreover, the Congress of Sivas (4–11 September 1919) tried to build a national umbrella organization that could incorporate all local resistance organizations, and from April 1920, the Great National Assembly at Ankara dictated the national struggle.<sup>[66]</sup>

Turkish nationalists did not make any fundamental changes to the propaganda messages they delivered. Through the newspaper *Hakimiyet-i Milliye* (National Sovereignty) nationalists constructed their propaganda around *jihad* and pan-Islamism, and, like the CUP leadership, they presented it as an anti-imperialist action serving pan-Asiatic freedom.<sup>[67]</sup> On the ground, the national struggle enjoyed popular support among the Ottoman public and led to widespread demonstrations against various occupations.<sup>[68]</sup> Ministers, guilds, civil society's associations, and even the Red Crescent supported the movement. A great number of religious functionaries participated actively in the movement and mediated between the nationalists and the rural population.<sup>[69]</sup> At the same time *Karakol* smuggled volunteers and weapons from the Entente's occupied territories to the areas where resistance occurred.<sup>[70]</sup> Notably, before the decisive battle of Sakarya/Sangarios, between 23 August and 13 September 1921, hundreds of volunteers joined the nationalists.<sup>[71]</sup>

However, the palace and the new government under the Party of Freedom had capitulated to the Entente's demands and viewed the nationalists with suspicion. On 11 April 1920, they declared the Assembly's actions illegal and circulated their decision through the official press. In support, the *şeyhülislam* in Istanbul published a *fatwa* declaring the nationalists infidels. Both declarations officially started a civil war between those loyal to the sultan and those to the Assembly.<sup>[72]</sup> Unofficially, the civil war had been underway since 1919 as many royalists rebelled against the nationalists, while a number of nationalist associations denied the Assembly's leadership. Also, parts of Anatolian rural society resisted the nationalist mobilization, while many of the existing gangs that looted the countryside either continued their activities or had to declare sides with a small number of them even switching sides during the war, and even fighting for the Greek army.<sup>[73]</sup> To fight desertion, the nationalists, contrary to the Ottoman army, adopted harsh measures, executing, imprisoning, or using as hard labor hundreds of deserters.<sup>[74]</sup> Nationalists' final victory meant the abolishment of the Ottoman monarchy, the establishment of the Turkish republic, the exclusion and extermination of non-Muslim minorities and the assimilation of Muslim ones. The war had assisted them in constructing a national identity based on Turkism, social Darwinism, militarism, and republicanism.

## Conclusion

The Balkan Wars helped form an Ottoman war culture that shaped Ottomans' understanding for their future military engagements and influenced the construction of Turkishness around Islam and the decision to exclude, by any means possible, non-Muslims from the Turkish nation. The war propaganda was constructed around Islam, while oral and visual propaganda were used to mobilize the majority of illiterate Ottoman citizens. Nevertheless, there was no unanimous decision in either

the state apparatus or among intellectuals regarding the construction of a new national idea. At the same time, as the war effort floundered, both society and conscripts used their experiences to make sense of it. Their answer to the state's non-compliance of the "tacit contract" was petitions and desertions respectively. For Christians, the war led to the destruction of their communities, while their properties were seen as a reward for the state's collaborators. Meanwhile, the power vacuum in the countryside was transformed into a struggle for resources and power. When the Entente started occupying Ottoman territory, most parties realized that the catastrophe they had feared was already upon them. For them, the war entered its new phase, which lasted until 1923.

Charalampos Minasidis, The University of Texas at Austin

Section Editors: [Melanie Schulze-Tanielian](#); [Yiğit Akin](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ Aksakal, Mustafa: *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914. The Ottoman Empire and the First World War*, Cambridge et al. 2008, pp. 19–41, 191.
2. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 39. For more on the European financial presence in the Ottoman Empire on the eve of the war see Pamuk, Şevket: *The Ottoman Economy in World War I*, in: Broadberry, Stephen / Harrison, Mark (eds.): *The Economics of World War I*, Cambridge 2005; Birdal, Murat: *The Political Economy of Ottoman Public Debt. Insolvency and European Financial Control in the Late Nineteenth Century*, London et al. 2010; Geyikdağı, Necla V.: *Foreign Investment in the Ottoman Empire. International Trade and Relations, 1854–1914*, London et al. 2011.
3. ↑ Aksakal, Ottoman 2008, pp. 91–92; Zürcher, Erik J.: *The Young Turk Legacy and Nation Building. From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk's Turkey*, London et al. 2010, p. 219.
4. ↑ Beşikçi, Mehmet: *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War. Between Voluntarism and Resistance*, Leiden 2012, pp. 48–49.
5. ↑ See Ginio, Eyal: *The Ottoman Culture of Defeat. Balkan Wars and their Aftermath*, London 2016.
6. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 79.
7. ↑ On Goltz's militaristic ideas see Goltz, Colmar von der: *The Nation in Arms*, London 1887.
8. ↑ On atrocity propaganda see also Çetinkaya, Y. Doğan: *Atrocity Propaganda and the Nationalization of the Masses in the Ottoman Empire during the Balkan Wars (1912–13)*, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (2014), pp. 759–778; Çetinkaya, Y. Doğan: *Illustrated Atrocity. The Stigmatisation of Non-Muslims Through Images in the Ottoman Empire during the Balkan Wars*, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 12 (2014), pp. 460–478.
9. ↑ See Çetinkaya, Y. Doğan: *The Young Turks and the Boycott Movement. Nationalism, Protest and the Working Classes in the Formation of Modern Turkey*, London et al. 2014.

10. † Köse, Yavuz: Between Protest and Envy. Foreign Companies and Ottoman Muslim Society, in: Gara, Eleni / Kabadayı, M. Erdem / Neumann, Christoph K. (eds.): Popular Protest and Political Participation in the Ottoman Empire. Studies in Honor of Suraiya Faroqhi, Istanbul 2011, pp. 275–281.
11. † Erdemir, Lokman: I. Dünya Harbi'nin İstanbul'da Sosyal Hayata Etkisi [The Impact of the First World War on Istanbul's Social Life] in: Arslan, Ali / Selçuk, Mustafa (eds.): Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Osmanlı Devleti [The Ottoman State during the First World War], Istanbul 2015, p. 306.
12. † On the politicization of Islam before the Great War see Karpas, Kemal H.: The Politicization of Islam. Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State, Oxford et al. 2001.
13. † See Zürcher, Erik-Jan: Introduction. The Ottoman Jihad, the German Jihad and the Sacralization of War, in: Zürcher, Erik-Jan (ed.): Jihad and Islam in World War I. Studies on the Ottoman Jihad on the Centenary of Snouck Hurgronje's "Holy War Made in Germany", Leiden 2016, pp. 13–27.
14. † See Beşikçi, Mehmet: Domestic Aspects of Ottoman Jihad. The Role of Religious Motifs and Religious Agents in the Mobilization of the Ottoman Army, in: Zürcher, Jihad 2016, pp. 95–115.
15. † Zürcher, Introduction 2016, p. 24.
16. † Köroğlu, Erol: Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity. Literature in Turkey during World War I, London et al. 2007, pp. 1–45.
17. † Ibid., pp. 90, 102–108 172–173. On Gökalp see also Karpas, Politicization 2001, pp. 375–388.
18. † Adivar, Halide Edip: Halâs Muharebesi, in: Tanin (28 Tefrinisani 1330/11 December 1914), quoted in: Köroğlu, Ottoman 2007, p. 7.
19. † Akçuraoğlu, Yusuf: Cihan Harbi ve Türkler, in: Türk Yurdu 73 (11 Kanunuevvel 1330/24 December 1914), translit. ed., volume 4, p. 21 quoted in: Köroğlu, Ottoman 2007, p. 7.
20. † Maksudyân, Nazan: Civilian and Military Power (Ottoman Empire), in: Daniel, Ute et al. (eds.): 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2017-02-01. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11037](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11037).
21. † Köroğlu, Ottoman 2007, pp. 173–180.
22. † R. T.: Mektuplar. Giresun'da Bulunan Muhterem Karilerimizden Biri Yazıyor, *Türk Yurdu* 130 (15 March 1333/1917) translit. ed., volume 5, p. 36 in: Köroğlu, Ottoman 2007, p. 9.
23. † Köroğlu, Ottoman 2007, pp. 11–14, 75–76, 83, 85–90.
24. † Ibid., pp. 79–82.
25. † Theunissen, Hans: War, Propaganda and Architecture. Cemal Pasha's Restoration of Islamic Architecture in Damascus during World War I, in: Zürcher, Jihad 2016, pp. 223–273. However, the discriminatory refurbishing and modernizing projects also alienated a large number of locals.
26. † Akın, Yiğit: Seferberlik. Building Up the Ottoman Home Front, in: Kieser, Hans-Lukas / Öktem, Kerem / Reinkowski, Maurus (eds.): World War I and the End of the Ottomans. From the Balkan Wars to the Armenian Genocide, London et al. 2015, p. 59–61.
27. † Beşikçi, Domestic Aspects 2016, p. 96–105; Köroğlu, p. 87; Akın, Seferberlik 2015, p. 61.
28. † Köroğlu, Ottoman 2007, pp. 72–75.

29. † See van Os, Nicole: Gendering Jihad. Ottoman Muslim Women and War during the Early Twentieth Century, in: Zürcher, Jihad 2016, pp. 153–178.
30. † Ginio, Ottoman Culture 2016, pp. 151–182.
31. † Beşikçi, Domestic Aspects 2016, pp. 203–245.
32. † Köroğlu, Ottoman 2007, pp. 58–61.
33. † Özçalık, Sevil / Grüsshaber, Gerhard: Frank, Fresh, Frish, Free at the Bosphorus? Selim Sırrı and the German Model of Youth Mobilization in the Late Ottoman State, 1908–1918, in: Middle East Critique 24/4 (2015), pp. 375–388.
34. † See Yanıkdağ, Yücel: Educating the Peasants. The Ottoman Army and Enlisted Men in Uniform, Middle Eastern Studies 40/6 (2004), pp. 92–108; Yanıkdağ, Yücel: Healing the Nation. Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914–1939, Edinburgh 2013.
35. † The literate Ottoman citizens were filling the ranks of the non-commissioned officers.
36. † Beşikçi, Domestic Aspects 2016, p. 1.
37. † Akın, Yiğit: When the War Came Home. The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire, Stanford 2018, pp. 3, 5–7, 80–81.
38. † Beşikçi, Domestic Aspects 2016, p. 1; Akın, War 2018, pp. 6–7.
39. † Beşikçi, Domestic Aspects 2016, p. 7.
40. † Akın, War 2018, pp. 164–171. See also Ahmad, Feroz: The Young Turks and the Ottoman Nationalities. Armenians, Greeks, Albanians, Jews, and Arabs, 1908–1918, Salt Lake City 2014.
41. † Cora, Yasar Tolga: Revolutions and Rebellions. Van Resistance as Rebellion (Ottoman Empire/Middle East), in: Daniel, Ute et al. (eds.): 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11268](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11268).
42. † Suny, Ronald Grigor: They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else. A History of the Armenian Genocide, Princeton et al. 2015, p. xx.
43. † On the property transfer and also the decisions by both the Ottoman and the Turkish state to consider many of these appropriations illegal and produce a series of laws for the distribution of the deportees' properties see Üngör, Uğur Ümit / Polatel, Mehmet: Confiscation and Destruction. The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property, London 2011; Morack, Ellinor: The Dowry of the State? The Politics of Abandoned Property and the Population Exchange in Turkey, 1921–1945, Bamberg 2017.
44. † Beşikçi, Domestic Aspects 2016, p. 202.
45. † Akın, War 2018, pp. 163–189.
46. † See Özdemir, Hikmet: The Ottoman Army 1914–1918. Disease and Death on the Battlefield (translated by S. Kardaş), Salt Lake City 2008.
47. † Williams, Elizabeth: Economy, Environment, and Famine. World War I from the Perspective of the Syrian Interior, in: Çiçek, M. Talha (ed.): Syria in World War I. Politics, Economy, and Society, London 2016, p. 157.
48. † Akın, War 2018, pp. 129–132, 138; Fawaz, Leila Tarazi: A Land of Aching Hearts. The Middle East in the Great War, Cambridge et al. 2014, pp. 88–160, 233–274.
49. † Tanielian, Melanie S.: The Charity of War. Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East, Stanford 2017, pp. 173–234.

50. † Ibid., pp. 82–162. See also Akın, Yiğit: War, Women, and the State. The Politics of Sacrifice in the Ottoman Empire During the First World War, in: *Journal of Women's History* 26/3 (2014), pp. 12–35.
51. † Zürcher, *Young Turk* 2010, p. 177.
52. † Beşikçi, *Domestic Aspects* 2016, p. 31.
53. † al-Qattan, Najwa: *Safarbarlik. Ottoman Syria and the Great War*, in: Philipp, Thomas / Schumann, Christoph (eds.): *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, Beirut 2004, pp. 164, 166.
54. † Zürcher, *Young Turk* 2010, pp. 182–184; Zürcher, Erik-Jan: *Refusing to Serve by Other Means. Desertion in the Late Ottoman Empire*, in: Çınar, Özgür Heval / Üsterci, Coşkun (eds.): *Conscientious Objection. Resisting Militarized Society*, London et al. 2007, p. 49.
55. † Akın, *War* 2018, pp. 96–180.
56. † See Gingeras, Ryan: *Sorrowful Shores. Violence, Ethnicity, and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1912–1923*, Oxford 2009.
57. † Maksudyan, *Civilian and Military* 2017.
58. † Zürcher, *Young Turk* 2010, p. 189.
59. † Çiçek, M. Talha: *War and State Formation in Syria. Cemal Pasha's Governorate during World War I. 1914–17*, London et al. 2014, p. 250.
60. † Zürcher, *Young Turk* 2010, p. 189.
61. † Köroğlu, *Ottoman* 2007, pp. 181–182.
62. † Halit, Refik: *Efendiler Nereye?*, in: *Zaman* (5 November 1334/1918), p. 210, quoted in: Köroğlu, *Ottoman* 2007, p. 182.
63. † Köroğlu, *Ottoman* 2007, pp. 182–183.
64. † Fromkin, David: *A Peace to End All Peace. The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, New York 1989, p. 372.
65. † Zürcher, *Young Turk* 2010, pp. 20–21, 121, 198.
66. † Ibid., pp. 14, 200.
67. † Yenen, Alp: *The “Young Turk Zeitgeist” in the Middle Eastern Uprisings in the Aftermath of World War I*, in: Yavuz, M. Hakan / Ahmad, Feroz (eds.): *War and Collapse. World War I and the Ottoman Empire*, Salt Lake City 2016, p. 1200.
68. † See, for example, Erzurum, Şirin: *The Greek Occupation of Izmir and the Protest Meetings in Istanbul 14 May 1919 – 13 January 1920*, İstanbul 2015.
69. † Küçük, Hülya: *The Role of the Bektāshīs in Turkey's National Struggle*, Leiden et al. 2002, pp. 57–58.
70. † See, for example, Criss, Nur Bilge: *Istanbul Under Allied Occupation 1918–1923*, Leiden 1999.
71. † Zürcher, *Refusing to Serve* 2007, p. 51.
72. † See Akandere, Osman: *11 Nisan 1920 (1336) Tarihli Takvim-i Vekâyi'de Kuva-yı Milliye Aleyhinde Yayınlanan Kararlar [Resolutions Published against the National Forces at the Takvim-i Vekâyi (Calendar of Facts) on 11 April 1920 (1336)]*, in: *Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi [Journal of Social Sciences Institute]* (2003), pp. 95–142.

73. ↑ Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores* 2009, pp. 81–165; Zürcher, *Refusing to Serve* 2007, p. 48. On switching sides see Fortna, Benjamin: *The Circassian. A Life of Esref Bey, Late Ottoman Insurgent and Special Agent*, Oxford et al. 2016.
74. ↑ Zürcher, *Refusing to Serve* 2007, p. 50.

## Selected Bibliography

Ahmad, Feroz: **The Young Turks and the Ottoman nationalities. Armenians, Greeks, Albanians, Jews, and Arabs, 1908-1918**, Salt Lake City 2014: University of Utah Press.

Akin, Yiğit: **When the war came home: the Ottomans' Great War and the devastation of an empire**, Stanford 2018: Stanford University Press.

Akin, Yiğit: **Seferberlik: building up the Ottoman home front**, in: Kieser, Hans-Lukas / Öktem, Kerem / Reinkowski, Maurus (eds.): *World War I and the end of the Ottomans. From the Balkan Wars to the Armenian Genocide*, London 2015: I. B. Tauris, pp. 56-75.

Aksakal, Mustafa: **The Ottoman road to war in 1914: the Ottoman Empire and the First World War**, Cambridge 2008: Cambridge University Press.

al-Qattan, Najwa: **Safarbarlik. Ottoman Syria and the Great War**, in: Philipp, Thomas / Schumann, Christoph (eds.): *From the Syrian land to the states of Syria and Lebanon*, Würzburg 2004: Ergon, pp. 163-173.

Beşikçi, Mehmet: **The Ottoman mobilization of manpower in the First World War: between voluntarism and resistance**, Leiden 2012: Brill.

Çetinkaya, Y. Doğan: **The Young Turks and the boycott movement: nationalism, protest and the working classes in the formation of modern Turkey**, London 2014: I. B. Tauris.

Çetinkaya, Y. Doğan: **Atrocity propaganda and the nationalization of the masses in the Ottoman Empire during the Balkan Wars (1912-13)**, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46/4, 2014, pp. 759-778.

Criss, Nur Bilge: **Istanbul under Allied occupation 1918-1923**, Leiden; Boston 1999: Brill.

Fawaz, Leila Tarazi: **A land of aching hearts. The Middle East in the Great War**, Cambridge 2014: Harvard University Press.

Gingeras, Ryan: **Sorrowful shores: Violence, ethnicity, and the end of the Ottoman Empire, 1912-1923**, Oxford 2009: Oxford University Press.

Ginio, Eyal: **The Ottoman culture of defeat: the Balkan Wars and their aftermath**, London 2016: Hurst & Company.

Karpat, Kemal H.: **The politicization of Islam: reconstructing identity, state, faith, and community in the late Ottoman state**, Oxford 2001: Oxford University Press.

Köroğlu, Erol: **Ottoman propaganda and Turkish identity: literature in Turkey during World War I**, London 2007: I. B. Tauris.

Schulze-Tanielian, Melanie: **The charity of war. Famine, humanitarian aid and World War I in the Middle East**, Stanford 2018: Stanford University Press.

Somel, Selçuk Akşin: **The modernization of public education in the Ottoman Empire, 1839-1908: islamization, autocracy, and discipline**, Leiden; Boston 2001: Brill.

Suny, Ronald Grigor: **'They can live in the desert but nowhere else'. A history of the Armenian Genocide**, Princeton 2015: Princeton University Press.

Yanıkdağ, Yücel: **Healing the nation. Prisoners of war, medicine and nationalism in Turkey, 1914-1939**, Edinburgh 2013: Edinburgh University Press.

Zürcher, Erik Jan: **The Young Turk legacy and nation building. From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk's Turkey**, London 2010: I.B. Tauris.

Zürcher, Erik-Jan: **Jihad and Islam in World War I. Studies on the Ottoman jihad on the centenary of Snouck Hurgronje's 'Holy War made in Germany'**, Leiden 2016: Leiden University Press.

## Citation

Minasidis, Charalampos: Making Sense of the War (Ottoman Empire/Middle East) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.11344](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11344).

## License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/de/).