

Version 1.0 | Last updated 16 July 2018

Women's Mobilization for War (Ottoman Empire/ Middle East)

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The Ottoman mobilization of manpower in August 1914 not only involved men being called to arms, but also women being mobilized to work in the industrial, service and agricultural sectors. Female labor was needed not only to supply a large number of soldiers with equipment, uniforms, shoes, food and care, but also to replace the enlisted men in the factories, workshops, offices, and fields.

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Introduction

For the Ottomans, the First World War was yet another war to fight within a period of only three years. Previously, the [Ottoman Empire](#) had been engaged in a war with [Italy over Libya](#) (September

1911 – October 1912) and involved in struggles with its Balkan neighbors in the [Balkan Wars](#) (October 1912 – May 1913; June – July 1913). The First World War differed from these preceding wars. It affected much larger areas of the [empire](#) and it was a [total war](#), involving more civilians – both willingly and unwillingly – than before. From telegraphs that Ottoman women sent to the central authorities, it is clear that these women and their families from all over the empire suffered under the absence of male family members, forced deportations, the heavy burden of military requisitions and inadequate state measures to provide for the families of enlisted soldiers.^[1] Memoirs of both civilians and military officers describe how village women in Anatolia were forced to transport goods and provisions for the army and how they [fell victim to ravaging soldiers](#) on their way to or from the battlefield.^[2] Inhabitants of Greater Syria suffered from famine and subsequent deadly [diseases](#).^[3]

While many civilians suffered, they also formed the much-needed economic backbone to the army. To properly dress soldiers and civilians, the Ottoman authorities sought to increase local production with the assistance of private or semi-private parties, especially since ties with the Ottoman Empire's traditional trade partners, such as [Great Britain](#) and [India](#), had been cut and [Germany](#) and [Austria-Hungary's](#) ability to contribute to the Ottoman war effort also evaporated over the war years.^[4] The Ottoman Empire increased local production by expanding industrial production in existing factories and workshops and opening new factories and workshops. Moreover, an effort was made to mobilize the potential home industry. Women, including Ottoman Muslim women, proved to be an important source of labor to facilitate this growth in a time when male labor was scarce. The many private and semi-public women's organizations which were established before and during the war proved to be a useful tool to tap into women's labor.

To feed soldiers and civilians, moreover, women in the [rural areas](#) were expected to increase their share in agricultural work to replace the many able-bodied men who had been called to arms. Furthermore, during the war years Ottoman Muslim women increasingly took the places of not only men, but also of non-Muslim women.

Calling upon Civilians; Controlling Civil Initiatives

From the second half of the 19th century onwards civilians had been called upon regularly to contribute to improving the situation of soldiers and their families in the Ottoman Empire. Committees were founded and Ottoman men and women, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, in cities such as Istanbul, Edirne, and Thessalonica, engaged in associational work to support them. The Ottoman authorities acknowledged the potential of such civic activities and supported the establishment of three large semi-public organizations to arouse patriotism and to extract resources from the patriotic Ottoman civilian public in the aftermath of the Young Turk revolution of July 1908. A few days after this [revolution](#), the *Donanma Cemiyeti* (Navy League) was founded. Its major goal was to collect money to purchase ships and later, [aircraft](#).^[5] The *Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti* (Ottoman [Red Crescent Organization](#), ORCO) was, after some false starts, finally founded in April 1911.^[6] It

opened and operated hospitals and collected and provided materials and care for those wounded in war times. Finally, the *Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti* (National Defense League, NDL) was founded by the Unionist government following the coup in January 1913. This organization became the coordinating force behind collecting goods for active soldiers in the field, while it also supported the dependents of enlisted soldiers.^[7] All three organizations branched out all over the Ottoman Empire. The Red Crescent and the NDL, moreover, established Central Women's Committees in March 1912 and February 1913, respectively.^[8] Both committees established local women's branches in several provincial towns of the empire: the NDL starting during the Balkan Wars, the Red Crescent only during World War I.

So when the Ottoman authorities wanted to appeal to the Ottoman public during World War I, a strong network reaching into the outer corners of the empire was in place.^[9] This network, combined with the network of local branches of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), allowed Ottoman authorities to control and curtail the many patriotic civic initiatives of private organizations by forcing them to cooperate with these semi-public organizations. Through the marginalization of [private philanthropy and charity](#), Ottoman authorities not only tried to prevent any initiatives which could have run counter to their own nationalist and militarist tendencies, but they also successfully turned the philanthropic and charitable activities of the women's organizations into activities from which they benefitted directly.

Combining Patriotism and Philanthropy

During the war, the Ottoman authorities, the Red Crescent's Women's Center, the NDL, and several women's organizations participated in campaigns to improve the fate of the soldiers, such as the one for "winter presents" launched only a few weeks after the mobilization of August 1914 and repeated a year later during the Battle of Gallipoli.^[10]

Patriotic civilians were asked to contribute money or goods, which they could purchase from sales outlets of the workshops established by women's organizations. While organizations of Ottoman Orthodox (Rum) women had been running such workshops from the end of the 19th century onwards, Ottoman Muslim women's organizations started to establish them only in the direct aftermath of the Balkan Wars to provide female [refugees](#) and the [widows](#) and daughters of Ottoman soldiers – in majority Muslims – with the opportunity to earn an honest living and to prevent them from falling into [prostitution](#). During the First World War, the number of impoverished girls and women working in such workshops increased, while their production was increasingly geared towards production for the army. One of them was the *Hilal-i Ahmer Hanımlar Darüssınaası* (Red Crescent Ladies' Crafts Work Home). While its protégées were originally supposed to produce artistic needlework, after the mobilization of 1914 they began preparing "winter presents" for the soldiers.^[11] Other organizations also shifted the production of their workshops to support the army and became important providers for the NDL. Amongst them were the *Türk Kadınları Biçki Yurdu*

(Turkish Women's Tailor's Home), which had been founded in July 1913 to train Muslim Turkish women to become skilled tailors, the *Osmanlı ve Türk Hanımları Esirgeme Derneği* (Organization for the Protection of Ottoman [and] Turkish Ladies), which had been founded during the Balkan Wars to teach Ottoman Turkish women how to contribute to the national economy, and the *Mamulat-ı Dahiliye İstihlaki Kadınlar Cemiyet-i Hayriyesi* (Women's Organization for the Consumption of Local Goods), which also organized several fundraising activities to support the Ottoman soldiers in the field.^[12] Women's committees of local branches of the Red Crescent and the NDL actively and successfully encouraged the public in Anatolia to donate as well.^[13]

Soldiers who had been wounded on the battlefield formed another ready object of Ottoman women's patriotism. During the Balkan Wars, women had joined forces to donate goods to the wounded, to equip hospital wards or even to found and equip complete, small hospitals. Women gathered in several locations to sew bedding, night- and underwear, and bandages. During the First World War, the influx of wounded soldiers from the battlefields into Istanbul was larger than ever before and the activities of women and their organizations accelerated. A committee within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs served as an intermediary between foreign providers of supplies and money and local hospitals. The correspondence between this committee and several women's organizations shows that these organizations played an important role in the allocation of the goods imported by the committee to the various hospitals founded or supported by these organizations.^[14] When the import of goods was no longer possible in September 1916 and the committee was dissolved, supplies seem to have become scarce and the activities of these women and their organizations seem to have diminished.

During the war, the president of the Red Crescent, Besim Ömer Akalın (1862–1940), incessantly but unsuccessfully tried to create schools to train professional [nurses](#). He was able to open up courses for nursing aids, though, which were, amongst others, attended by the wives and daughters of prominent Ottoman civil servants. The semi-public and private organizations were also instrumental in supporting the women and families of the soldiers at war. In 1915, the wives and daughters of high-ranking German and Ottoman (military) officials founded an organization with the sole aim of aiding soldiers' families: *Asker Ailelerine Yardımcı Hanımlar Cemiyeti* (The Ladies' Organization for the Support of Soldiers' Families).^[15]

Ottoman War Industry

On the eve of the First World War, workshops of various sizes were responsible for the largest share of the manufacturing sector together with [home production](#). A limited number of existing mechanized factories, which were partly founded and controlled by the state, were mainly located around Istanbul and some other major cities.^[16] Women's share in the textile production and tobacco industry was relatively large.^[17] This was also the case during the First World War. While a limited number of women was employed as quality controllers of shells and at the state ammunition factory, most

women were put to work to produce textiles for the army.^[18]

Immediately after the mobilization in August 1914, Ottoman authorities tried to increase production of much-needed military textiles. Through newspaper advertisements, the First Army Corps explicitly invited both men and women to assist in the production of “uniforms, military cloaks and fur caps” in army depots or at home.^[19] Army sewing originally seems to have been distributed through subcontractors. Later in the war, the army seems to have taken control by buying up all the materials and opening more army *dikimhane* (sewing workshops).^[20] Under the military authorities, new factories and workshops were established in and around Istanbul, while existing private textile factories were put under their control. The number of women employed in these factories increased, both in absolute as well as in relative terms.^[21] These increases accelerated towards the end of 1916, when Ottoman military authorities succeeded in expanding local production of military textiles through the development of local enterprises, such as the Feshane factory or the factory in Hereke, Izmit, in an effort to replace reduced import.^[22] Both factories started to employ women from 1916 onwards.^[23] In the sewing workshop at the Feshane factory, where all of the factory’s cloth production was processed, 80 percent of the laborers working under male supervisors were women, many of whom were “Turkish” and wearing a facial veil.^[24] They were probably allocated through the *Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyet-i İslamiyesi* (Islamic Organization for the Employment of Women, IOEW).^[25] With this organisation, Ottoman authorities created a successful instrument to tap into the female laborforce needed to work in the new and extended enterprises.

Islamic Organization for the Employment of Women

The IOEW was founded in June 1916 on the initiative of Ismail Enver Pasha (1881–1922), at that time the minister of war.^[26] Although its main aim was “to protect women by finding them work and by making them accustomed to making a living in an honorable way,” it was also a means to find hands to increase the production of military goods.^[27] The IOEW primarily employed women in its own workshops, whose production was almost exclusively geared towards war-time needs.^[28] The organization also served as a mediator between women looking for work and employers looking for labor: it was responsible for a large part of the increase in the female labor force in military industrial enterprises after 1916. In 1916–1917, for example, 863 women were employed through the organization at the military footwear factory in Beykoz.^[29] German journalists visiting this factory in December 1917 were, according to the [Ottoman newspaper](#) *Tanin* (Echo), surprised by the high number of women and girls working at this factory.^[30]

While the organization was still advertising to find 200 women to work at the Eyüp Sultan Clothing Factory and the Feshane factory as late as June 1918,^[31] the termination of orders from the army and the NDL at the end of the First World War consequently led to a decrease in the labor force

employed by the organization in 1919 and the eventual closing of its workshops.^[32]

Labor Battalions

The Ottoman soldiers – and civilians – also had to be fed. During the first year of the war the total area used for agriculture declined by more than 50 percent. This decrease continued in the years 1915–1916.^[33] One reason for the initial decline was that the large-scale mobilization took place during the harvesting season. Another one was that villagers lowered their production to sustenance level out of fear of confiscation, as had been the case during the Balkan Wars. The Ottoman Empire had, moreover, lost fertile lands with large farms during these wars. The deportation of large proportions of non-Muslims also contributed to the decline in production. Natural disasters such as draughts and locusts added further to the problems. While local food production thus declined, the provisioning was, moreover, gravely hampered since routes to the traditional suppliers of agricultural products within the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas had been severed.

Several measures were taken to restore and improve local production levels. [Germany](#) and [Austria-Hungary](#), which both hoped that the Ottoman agricultural production would also feed their soldiers, gave technical support to develop irrigation works and assisted in mechanizing the agricultural sector.^[34] According to the *Mükellefiyet-i Ziraiye Kanun-u Muvakkatı* (Provisional Law on Agricultural Duty) issued in September 1916, all Ottomans, male and female, fourteen years and older whose normal activity was farming and who were exempted from active military service could be called upon by the Ministry of Agriculture to work in agriculture.^[35] A regulation issued in October 1917 worked out the details.^[36] The effects of these regulations remain unclear, but (local) authorities could also tap into other sources of labour, amongst them the Workers' Battalions, which fell under military control and as such were regular army units.

Worker's Battalions consisted mostly of unarmed men – mainly non-Muslims – who for various reasons did not participate in the armed struggle, but worked in (military) factories, on infrastructural projects or, for example, in the agricultural sector.^[37] Two women's battalions were formed by [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872–1922\)](#) as auxiliaries within the Fourth Army: the first one in May 1917 to work in agriculture, the second one in June 1918 to produce cloth for the army.^[38] In July 1917 Enver Pasha ordered the formation of a Women's Workers' Battalion within the First Ottoman Army through the mediation of the IOEW.^[39] Although interest remained limited and several practical problems occurred, the military propaganda periodical, *Harb Mecmuası* (War Magazine), published photographs showing the women doing agricultural work and constructing a road.^[40] Having drawn quite some attention abroad as well, the Battalion was dissolved again in January 1919, only a year after it had started its activities.^[41]

Female White-Collar Workers and Civil Servants

The mass mobilization of the male workforce combined with the measures taken by the Ottoman government to nationalize the economy accelerated the entrance of educated, urban Ottoman Muslim women to white-collar jobs. Through its policy of *Millî İktisat* (National Economy), the government tried to diminish the share of non-Muslims in the Ottoman economic sphere and to enlarge that of Muslims. While the [deportations of non-Muslim in 1915](#), through which many of them were forced to transfer their possessions at below-market prices to Muslims, formed a major drive behind the success of this policy, the Ottoman government also took other measures through which Muslim entrepreneurs and women were favored. In March 1916, the Ottoman government prohibited the use of all languages except Turkish as the means of communication for all companies, including foreign ones. Thus, new opportunities were opened for Ottoman Muslim women who had had some education and knew Turkish and one or more foreign languages. Subsequently the School of Commerce opened a successful special branch for girls. The IOEW, like other women's organizations, employed women in administrative functions. It also served as an intermediary to allocate students of the School of Commerce as interns to financial and commercial institutions.^[42]

Although Ottoman women had been working in public service before as midwives, prison guards or teachers, the war opened new positions as civil servants to them. Enver Pasha, for example, did not hesitate to ask his colleagues at the Ministries of Interior and Education whether they perhaps had positions which could be filled by the many IOEW applicants with some level of education.^[43] By January 1918, *Die Neue Türkei* stated that more than a thousand "Turkish" women and girls were working as office workers in either public or private institutions.^[44]

Conclusion

When a large number of Ottoman males were called to arms during the First World War, Ottoman authorities did not hesitate to tap into the potential reservoir of female workers. The networks of the three major semi-public organizations and the CUP, which reached into the farthest corners of the empire, proved to be instrumental in creating a direct connection between the more affluent, patriotic women in the [towns and cities](#) of the empire who wanted to contribute to the war and an army in need of goods and money. They also helped the authorities to exert control over any organizations established through private initiatives. The many workshops initiated by both the semi-public and private organizations to educate impoverished women and girls and to provide them with an honorable income thus geared their production to serve the army. The IOEW was one of the most successful instruments in this respect: it not only employed women in its own workshops, but also served as an employment agency allocating women to the much-needed replacement industries. To what degree women took over the work of men in agriculture remains to be researched, but the effort of the IOEW to employ (urban) women in agriculture remained unsuccessful. The entrance of Ottoman Muslim women into the service sector was, particularly in the field of commerce, more stimulated by the measures taken to nationalize the economy than by war.

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Citation

van Os, Nicole: *Women's Mobilization for 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/ie1418.11287](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11287).

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