

Civilian and Military Power (Ottoman Empire)

By [Nazan Maksudyan](#)

Summary

The First World War required the most comprehensive mobilization of men and resources in the history of the empire. It transformed the Ottoman state into a more centralized, authoritarian, and nationalist entity. This article explores the impact of total mobilization on civilian-military relations in the Ottoman Empire during the course of the war. Specifically, it discusses the self-empowerment of women as a result of mobilization; forms of cooperation between the government, the public, and wartime philanthropy to aid soldiers and their families; the overall militarization of society; and the appearance of anti-war resistance as a social phenomenon.

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Introduction

The First World War lasted nearly four years for [Ottoman](#) society, from October 1914 to November 1918, and it required the most comprehensive [mobilization](#) of men and resources in the history of the [empire](#). The ways in which the state functioned and intervened changed dramatically. A new relationship between the state and its people was established. For millions of men, this relationship took the form of conscription and long-term military service. For women, it primarily entailed the removal of men from their households and the increasing intrusion of the state into their daily lives.¹

From the outbreak of the [Balkan Wars \(1912-1913\)](#) onwards, men were recruited into the military in larger numbers. In order to provide for the ever-increasing demands of the army,

such as uniforms, shoes, and linen, [women's labor](#) was channeled towards military needs. The [government](#)'s extreme powers of requisition placed agricultural products and animals at the disposal of the Ministry of War. As a result, almost all of the Ottoman society's [resources](#) were channeled into the military effort. Moreover, civilian activities were allowed mostly when they involved fund-raising for military activities or assistance for military families.² Social values themselves became [militarized](#). Yet, the war also expanded the space of action for social actors in their encounters with the state.³

Mobilization

As underlined by [Mehmet Beşikçi](#) and [Yiğit Akin](#), mobilization for the First World War was declared as early as possible and a significant portion of the male Ottoman population was conscripted. The government was careful not to be caught undermanned and underprepared, as it had been during the Balkan Wars. The new Law of Military Obligation (1914) marked a critical milestone in the universalization of military service. The new structure of the army required a large number of additional troops and an efficient conscription system. Observers noted that no one remained outside the reach of conscription except for invalids and the elderly. The impact of mobilization was visible in Ottoman [villages](#) and towns as it disrupted society and the economy. A lack of mechanization, [labor shortages](#), and the requisitioning of animals caused a sharp decrease in agricultural production. By 1916, [food](#) shortages had turned into famine in parts of the empire.

Recruitment to the Ottoman military was different for Muslims and non-Muslims and Turks and Arabs.⁴ The universality of conscription was accepted in principle with the Reform Decree of 1856 (*Islahat Fermanı*), but payment of an exemption fee (*bedel-i nakdi*) became the norm for non-Muslims and they avoided military service in practice until 1909. The [1908 Revolution](#) brought about the rethinking of constitutional rights and obligations, including conscription on a wider basis. The exemption fee practice was abolished in 1909. Expanding the obligation of military service also meant integrating the [Arab population into the military](#). The law of 1914 minimized exemptions and extended military service obligations. However, mobilization was not geographically uniform. Universal military service was mostly achieved in western and central Anatolia but not in eastern Anatolia and the Arab provinces. Units in Yemen and Hejaz were never mobilized and units in Mamuretülaziz, Mosul, and Baghdad mostly remained undermanned due to draft evasion and desertion.

In order to make up for the [losses](#) in the civilian population, the Law of Military Obligation introduced the practice of direct financial aid to soldiers' families in the form of a monthly 'separation allowance,' when their (male) breadwinners were drafted into the army.⁵ The

distribution of aid was riddled with injustices and the corruption of governmental employees at various levels. However, the law gave Ottoman women the right to demand support from the state in the absence of their sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers. Akin's research of hundreds of petitions underline women's self-empowerment during the war. Referring to themselves as soldier's wives and mothers, Ottoman women complained bitterly about [pervasive poverty and hunger](#), state requisitioning and confiscation, and harsh wartime taxation policies. Women often reminded the authorities that their male breadwinners had left them under the protection of the state to perform their military service. Their petitions and telegrams were a new mode of interaction between women and state authorities based on a perceived understanding of mutual obligations and expectations.

Civilian Efforts to Sustain the War

Philanthropic involvement in the public sphere had been tied to military engagements throughout the extended period of wars after 1908. The Young Turk regime exerted strict control over associational life and civil society and attempted to shape voluntary initiatives. When the [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#) seized power in 1913, it tried to control existing organizations by forcing them to cooperate and coordinate their activities with semi-public organizations such as the Fleet Society (*Donanma Cemiyeti*), the National Defense League (*Müdâfaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti*) and the [Ottoman Red Crescent Society](#) (*Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti*). Indeed, these semi-official civil society associations that organized aid to improve the living standards of soldiers and their unsupported families characterized the public sphere. Given the limits of state welfare, the Ottoman government relied on the efforts of civil society organizations to support soldiers' families. In that respect, philanthropic organizations helped the continuation of the war, not only by organizing relief for civilians on the home front, but also by collecting aid, producing materials, and [boosting morale for soldiers](#) on the front lines.

The Women's Society for Helping Soldiers' Families (*Asker Ailelerine Yardımcı Hanımlar Cemiyeti*), founded in January 1915 on the initiative of the wives and daughters of high-ranking Ottoman and German military officers and officials, was quite vocal and active among these associations.⁶ The Society organized fund-raisers and collected donations. The money obtained was used to purchase food for the organization's target group, the families of soldiers, especially those without a breadwinner (*muînsiz*).⁷ The Society distributed food products from their several branches to soldier's wives who applied and could prove their right to assistance. Despite enormous publicity in the press, their activities were limited to Istanbul and were discontinued in November 1916 due to difficulties in the procurement of food. Still, the number of persons registered to receive aid totaled 65,491 (between 24

January 1915 and 28 November 1916).⁸ Most importantly, through this association, the state incorporated the wives of its military and civil elite into its welfare organizations and channeled their officially supported activities into the war effort.

The National Defense League (NDL, *Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti*) was also very active, especially in propagating [nationalistic](#) ideals and enthusiasm for the war effort. The semi-official character of the NDL was obvious and its organic ties with the government were quite visible. The NDL circulated the idea that the home front was essential in supporting the war effort. It underlined the significance of supporting the civilian population and the families left behind.⁹ In addition to assuming governmental and municipal welfare activities such as running soup kitchens or opening workshops for the employment of women, the NDL organized important fund-raising campaigns to support the military.¹⁰

Several other organizations, such as Women's Section of the Red Crescent Society (*Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti Kadınlar Heyet-i Merkeziyesi*), the Society for Aid to Needy Soldiers' Families (*Muhtaç Asker Ailelerine Muavenet Cemiyeti*), and the Ottoman Women's Committee for National Defense (*Müdafaa-i Milliye Osmanlı Hanımlar Heyeti*) sought to mobilize patriotic and religious sentiments among the female population and raise support for soldiers' families.¹¹ The Islamic Society for the Employment of Women (*Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyet-i İslamiyesi*) was especially important in encouraging the recruitment of women and [children](#) in the [urban](#) manufacturing sector, which produced entirely for the military.¹² The Society secured jobs for approximately sixty thousand women in its three workshops, producing cloth, uniforms, woolen undergarments, shoes, water bottles, and underwear for the army.¹³ These workshops not only secured new employment opportunities for women, but also channeled women's labor into the war effort.

In order to sustain enthusiasm for mobilization and '[total war](#)' at the societal level, the CUP government and its semi-official voluntary organizations made extensive use of welfare measures. Collaboration between government and the public sphere became manifest in the field of philanthropy. These activities played a crucial role in the mobilization of civilian population for the war effort and as a form of [propaganda](#).

Militarization of Society

1913 was a decisive year in the transformation of the politics of the post-1908 era into a single-party authoritarian regime after the CUP coup. The humiliating defeat during the Balkan Wars led Ottoman authorities to initiate radical [military reforms](#) in order to establish the military as the ruling political group. Men with a military background filled the

government and many state positions. Moreover, the CUP portrayed the new law of conscription (requiring each and every able-bodied Ottoman man to serve in the military) as essential to the survival of the empire. A [militarist](#) ideological disposition, inspired by Marshal [Colmar von der Goltz's \(1843-1916\)](#) idea of the creation of the 'nation in arms' (*millet-i müsellaha*), was very strong within elite circles and the CUP. The NDL aimed to popularize this militarist ideology through public demonstrations. Figures such as Black (*Kara*) Fatmas or legends such as the 120 children spread the idea of the sacredness of military sacrifice for non-belligerent segments of the Ottoman society, especially women and children.¹⁴

[Youth](#) were not exempt from the sweeping militarization of [daily life](#). The CUP government aimed to increase its capacity for social control and penetrate further into society through the establishment of [paramilitary](#) youth organizations. Their chief aim was to spread ideas of heroism and patriotism among boys and their training program envisioned military exercise and drill for pre-military age students.¹⁵ In 1916, the scouting organizations were united under the name *Genç Dernekleri* (Youth League) and became part of the War Ministry's military hierarchy.¹⁶ The League would not only make the mobilization effort permanent, but also serve as a readily visible [propaganda](#) medium to arouse support on the home front.

[Atrocity](#) propaganda and boycotts played the defining role of military engagement in civil relations.¹⁷ Propaganda aimed at mobilizing the home front contributed to the militarization and nationalization of the masses. Çetinkaya has suggested contextualizing Ottoman atrocity propaganda within the framework of 'total war' and as a battlefield in its own right. It played a vital role in the demonization of enemies (both within and without) and, thus, in legitimizing the elimination of non-Muslim communities.¹⁸

The divide between the actual fighting and the home front blurred for many during the war. Although Ottoman Anatolia appeared geographically distant from the front lines, except during the [Gallipoli](#) campaign, if one includes the rebellions, [occupations](#), deportation, massacres, and lawlessness reigning throughout the empire, the war took place mostly on the home front. Significant portions of Anatolia were occupied between 1914-1917, much of [Iraq was occupied](#) by 1915, the Hejaz was in a state of rebellion as of 1915, there were anti-deportation rebellions in Van in 1915, and war raged through Palestine from 1917 onwards. The deportation and massacres of non-Muslims, especially the Ottoman [Armenians](#), brought another dimension to the home front experience. As the state waged a war against its own citizens, (Muslim) civilian populations became perpetrators and took part in both violence and looting. Enmity and fighting was transferred from the war front to the home front.

Anti-War Sentiments in Ottoman Society

Heavy governmental restrictions on freedom of speech and the dominance of semi-official civil society organizations closed possible channels for raising anti-war public opinion in Ottoman society. A very strong anti-war sentiment existed nonetheless in all segments of society, even if it did not turn into an organized and associational [pacifist](#) movement.¹⁹ Anti-war stances were in most of the cases implicit, verbal, and individual. They took the form of 'war fatigue' and desertion for soldiers; deprivation, exhaustion, and longing for peace for the society at large. In rare occasions, there were open and public demonstrations against the war. Women from different cities of the empire organized resistance against the war mostly in the form of food riots. In the very first months of the war, women in Erzurum organized an anti-war demonstration, which observers described as 'extraordinary'. Women waited in front of the governor's house for hours, throwing stones at the building, to request that the governor send a telegram to Istanbul defying the war.²⁰ There were other riots in 1915, followed by one in March 1916 which was quite impressive.²¹ A group of women broke into railway yards whence [troop trains](#) were about to leave, shouting protests against sending the men 'to go to their death'. They threw themselves on the rails in front of the trains. The authorities refrained from using force to remove them, fearing a mutiny among the soldiers.

In addition to anti-war protests that were mainly organized by women, the [Ottoman press](#) had a visible pro-peace attitude. Especially towards the end of the war, columnists discussed nothing but peace and they no longer regarded the continuation of the war as legitimate.²² Moreover, notable Ottoman intellectuals assumed an anti-war stance. Though a pacifist rejection of the war was very rare in late Ottoman society, the [writings](#) of [Abdullah Cevdet \(1869-1932\)](#) and [Tevfik Fikret \(1867-1915\)](#) were exceptional expressions of an anti-war public opinion. In a poem written in 1915, Tevfik Fikret criticizes the war, the Ottoman Empire's participation, and the CUP. He describes the pain, misery, and deprivation caused by the war in his verses on soldiers dying for nothing, bloody corpses decomposed on the front, groaning wounded soldiers left behind, destroyed villages, [orphans](#) crying and begging, etc. After recounting these wretched scenes, he openly curses an officially declared 'holy war'.

Damn you 'holy war'

You are the one soiling heavens and earth

Damn you, damn you tragedy of war

You are a blow to humanity, the burden of war.²³

Abdullah Cevdet also wrote '*Black Sun*', an openly pacifist poem, in July 1915 with the "inspiration of the Çanakkale Killing (*kıtal*)". The terminology he used for the publicly renowned glory of the Ottoman army made his pacifist stance towards the war clear and he invites the humanity to be ashamed of killing and sick of dying (*öldürmeden utan, ölmeden usan*).²⁴ '*Black Sun*' was only published in December 1918 due to [censorship](#).

From ordinary women to public intellectuals, from deserting soldiers to officers fatigued by the war, there were masses of 'individual objectors' in Ottoman society during the First World War. Although they could not put up a collective pacifist resistance against an armed and militarized government, anti-war expressions in late Ottoman society deserve further research.

Conclusion

The most significant consequence of the First World War in shaping civilian-military relations was the militarization of all facets of Ottoman life, especially politics, the economy, and society. Militarization meant, among other things, the precedence of military authority over the civilian in state affairs; allocation of all the country's resources to military engagements; the embrace of military values not only by men-in-arms, but by the entire civilian population; and the redefinition of educational policy along military lines. For civil society initiatives, militarization forced fund-raising and philanthropic activities to be linked to the armed struggle. For petitioning wives and mothers, it transformed women's self-definition with reference to their male relatives-in-arms. In this new societal configuration, the army occupied a central position and continued to do so in several post-Ottoman nation-states.

Nazan Maksudyan, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient

Notes

1. See 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. ↑
2. From the 1908 Revolution onwards, Ottoman civil society flourished. The philanthropic activities of private schools and foundations (such as those run by foreigners), non-Muslim organizations, churches and synagogues, and, to some extent, nationalist organizations retained some element of independence until the First World War. ↑
3. See Beşikçi, Mehmet: Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War:

Between Voluntarism and Resistance, Leiden 2012. ↑

4. See Beşikçi, Ottoman Mobilization 2012, pp. 96-103, 130-133. ↑
5. See van Os, Nicole A.N.M.: Taking Care of Soldiers' Families: The Ottoman State and the 'Muinsiz Aile Maaşı', in: Zürcher, Erik J. (ed.): Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia, 1775-1925, London 1999, pp. 95-110. ↑
6. They included the wife of the director of public security, Nuriye Canbolat, the wife of the director of the Printing Office, the wife of Weber Pasha, and the wife of general director of the police, İrfan Bedri. Asker Ailelerine elimizden gelen her türlü yardım en büyük vazifemiz [It is our greatest duty to provide any kind of help to soldiers' families], in: Tanin, no. 2176, 11 Kanunusani 1330 (24 January 1915). ↑
7. Asker Âilelerine Yardımcı Hanımlar Heyeti [Women's Committee to Aid Soldiers' Families], in: Servet-i Fünûn, 1234, 15 Kânûn-ı sâni 1330 (28 January 1915), p. 179; For a detailed account of the activities of the society, see van Os, Nicole A.N.M.: Aiding the Poor Soldiers' Families: The Asker Ailelerine Yardımcı Hanımlar Cemiyeti, in: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Türkiyat Mecmuası 21/2 (2011), pp. 255-89. ↑
8. Based on a report sent to the General Secretariat of the Red Crescent (Hilâl-i Ahmer) in 1919, Türk Kızılayı Arşivi, 988/4, 22 Haziran 1335 (22 June 1919). ↑
9. See Beşikçi, Ottoman Mobilization 2012, p. 75. ↑
10. Polat, Nazım H.: Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti [National Defense League], Ankara 1991, pp. 71, 85, 213. ↑
11. Toprak, Zafer: The Family, Feminism, and the State during the Young Turk Period, 1908-1918, in: Eldem, Edhem (ed.): Première rencontre internationale sur l'Empire ottoman et la Turquie moderne, Istanbul 1991, pp. 441-452, 447. ↑
12. See van Os, Nicole A.N.M.: Nurturing Soldiers and Girls: Osmanlı Kadınları Cemiyet-i Hayriyesi, in: Abacı, Nurcan (ed.): Papers of VIIIth International Congress on the Economic and Social History of Turkey, Morrisville 2006, pp. 213-218. ↑
13. Göçek, Fatma Müge: From Empire to Nation: Images of Women and War in Ottoman Political Cartoons, 1908-1923, in: Melman, Billie (ed.): Borderlines: Genders and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930, New York 1998, pp. 47-72, 51; Karakışla, Yavuz Selim: Women, War and Work in the Ottoman Empire: Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women, 1916-1923, Istanbul 2005. ↑
14. For further information on Black (Kara) Fatmas see Kutluata, Zeynep: Geç Osmanlı ve Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi'nde Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Savaş: Kara Fatma(lar) [Gender and War in the Late Ottoman and Early Republican Era: Black Fatma(s)], in: Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar [Feminist Perspectives in Culture and Politics], 2 (2007). <http://www.feministyaklasimlar.org/ozet/?postid=476>. For further information on the legend of 120 children, see Altınkaynak, Erdoğan: Sarıkamış Harekatı ve Çevresinde Oluşan Destanlar, Hatıralar [Sarıkamış Campaign and Legends and Memories that

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15. Toprak, Zafer: II. Meşrutiyet Döneminde Paramiliter Gençlik Örgütleri [Paramilitary Youth Organizations in the Second Constitutional Era], in: Tanzimattan Cumhuriyet'e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi [Encyclopedia of Turkey from the Tanzimat to the Republic], Istanbul 1985, pp. 531-536; Beşikçi, Ottoman Mobilization 2012, pp. 226-232. ↑
 16. Köroğlu, Erol: Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity: Literature in Turkey During World War I, London 2007, pp. 59-61. ↑
 17. See 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. ↑
 18. See 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. ↑
 19. Maksudyân, Nazan: 'Öldürmeden utan, ölmeden usan!': Geç Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Savaş Karşısı Hissiyatın Açık ve Örtük Dışavurumları ['Be ashamed to kill, get tired of dying': Manifest and Latent Expressions of Anti-War Sentiments in the Late Ottoman Empire], in: Toplumsal Tarih [Social History] 180 (December 2008), pp. 34-41. ↑
 20. Turkish Women Revolt, in: New York Times, 14 December 1914. ↑
 21. Riots Reported in Turkey, in: New York Times, 6 March 1916. ↑
 22. Koloğlu, Orhan: Aydınlarımızın Bunalım Yılı 1918 [1918: Our Intellectuals' Year of Depression], Istanbul 2000, pp. 37-8. ↑
 23. 'Lanet sana! Ey 'harb-ı mukaddes', / Sensin bütün ekvânı eden böyle mülevves / Lanet sana, lanet sana ey haile-i harb, / İnsanlığa bir darbesin, ey gaile-i harb!' See Fikret, Tevfik: Bütün Şiirleri III (Collected Poems III), Istanbul 1984, pp. 247-287. ↑
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External Links

- [Beşikçi, Mehmet: Mobilizing Military Labour in the Age of Total War. Ottoman Conscription Before and During the Great War](#), in: Zürcher, Erik-Jan (ed.): [Fighting for a Living. A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500-2000](#), Amsterdam 2013, pp. 547-580 (JSTOR) (Article)
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