Labour, Labour Movements and Strikes (Ottoman Empire/ Middle East)

By Yiğit Akin and Elizabeth Thompson

Summary

As in other belligerent societies, the Great War forced fundamental change in the economies of the Middle East, and so redefined workers' relations with the state. As young men were conscripted away from farms and workshops, other workers were employed in military factories under strict conditions or forced to work by the state in construction, ports, mines, and railroad construction. Because military recruitment created labor shortages, women entered the workforce in ever-increasing numbers, especially in Anatolia. By war's end, workers' distress burst into a wave of strikes and protests that contributed to political revolts.

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Introduction

The Middle Eastern Great War spanned over four years, from October 1914 to November 1918, requiring the most comprehensive mobilization of men and resources in the history of the Ottoman Empire and in recent memory in Egypt. As in other belligerent societies, the First World War created new economic and social realities in the Middle East. The exigencies and demands of involvement in the war led to dramatic changes in the functioning of the state and its relations.[1] Labor, which was regarded by state authorities as critical to the conduct of the war, was directly affected by these wartime changes. Though the war touched the life of nearly every laborer in the region, it is exceedingly difficult to produce a coherent

story of their wartime experiences. Gender, ethnicity, occupation, industry, and level of skill all came together in complex and unique ways to shape the wartime experience of laborers throughout the Middle East. However, as the level of postwar protest suggests, the vast majority suffered greatly.

The Ottoman Empire

Compared to the major belligerents of the war, by 1914, the Ottoman Empire had a significantly underdeveloped industrial infrastructure. Of only 282 factories listed in the 1915 census, 78 produced foodstuffs, 78 were spinning and weaving mills, and 55 were paper and printing mills. Other important sectors included brick, glass, leather, and chemicals. Among the more sizeable of these industrial establishments were state-owned factories, which produced a variety of war materials. In 1915, there were a total of 14,000 workers in all manufacturing enterprises employing ten or more laborers.[2] These statistical figures, although by no means highly accurate, nevertheless provide a useful impression of the country's very modest industrial work force. Apart from these industrial establishments, numerous small-scale workshops, mills, tanneries, etc. were also scattered throughout the empire.

Upon the announcement of military mobilization in August 1914, the Ottoman government took control of railroads, mines, and industrial enterprises owned by foreigners and many Ottoman civilians. It also requisitioned engines, equipment, and raw materials for use in factories critical for the war effort. Under military supervision, these factories took drastic steps to increase production. The state also opened new workshops to manufacture clothes and shoes for soldiers. Despite these measures, however, the empire's limited industrial capacity could not meet the ever-increasing demands of the war. The Ottomans continued to depend mostly on imports from its wartime allies – Germany and Austria-Hungary – for armaments, munitions, and other war materials.

Workers During the War

Wartime economic measures disrupted the domestic labor market in the Ottoman Empire and had dramatic effects on the labor force. Many workers of military age were called up and sent to the war fronts. Realizing that the war would last longer than initially expected, the army drafted many skilled laborers to work in industrial establishments under sanction of martial law. They were not permitted to leave their places of employment or to change employers. While employment in military factories provided shelter from the calamities of the war, skilled workers faced long hours under the extraordinary pressures of wartime demands. Like other Ottomans with a fixed salary, they did not enjoy a significant wartime increase in

pay. According to one eyewitness, even the most skilled workers' daily wages ranged between 15 and 20 *piasters*: "I see it in the state factories that I visit: Our poor workers have all turned into skeletons. They don't have enough energy to stand, let alone work or operate a workbench."[3] As the war dragged on, the government and the army high command took some modest steps to improve the conditions of workers employed in these factories. They received a small raise in February 1917 and were provided bread and occasionally other necessities at subsidized prices. In some cases, pensions were granted to widows and orphans of workers who died during their employment in military factories.

The war years in the Ottoman Empire saw serious shortages in the skilled labor force in both urban centers and in the countryside. Factories that lost their skilled workers to the military were forced to fill their ranks with unskilled workers or to shut down. Female and child labor were employed in many cases to relieve the wartime labor shortages. Furthermore, the government and the army high command employed rank and file prisoners of war in various jobs throughout the empire, including agriculture, transportation, and railroad construction.

Deportation and massacres of non-Muslim Ottomans contributed to the shortage of skilled laborers. Before the war, in most of the towns throughout the empire, many Armenians and Greeks worked as craftsmen and artisans, producing copperware, pottery, farming tools, shoes, saddlery, and various other articles for local consumption, and were of critical importance to the functioning of local economies. During the war, army units employed a good number of these artisans; however, others were sent to deportation marches in which many of them were massacred. The resulting loss of skilled labor damaged local economies in the provinces, where communities were often deprived of their only blacksmith, saddler, or mechanic. In agriculture, deportations and massacres of non-Muslim landowners and laborers dramatically undermined harvesting and food production, leading to severe shortages especially in Eastern Anatolia.

Owing to the serious shortage of skilled labor, urban workers who succeeded in avoiding conscription enjoyed higher wartime wages. The boatmen and porters who loaded and unloaded vessels, for instance, saw significant monetary gains, in part because their guilds and unions held monopolies and had close ties to the Committee of Union and Progress.[4] In 1918, a porter's monthly salary in Istanbul ranged between 75 and 90 Ottoman *liras*, almost equal to that of a major general.[5]

For most workers, however, wage raises failed to keep pace with the skyrocketing cost of living. Nominal daily wages in coal mining increased from an average of 10.5 *piasters* in 1913 to 60 *piasters* in 1918; in the textile industry, from 6.1 *piasters* to 40 *piasters*; and in

flourmills, from 15.1 *piasters* to 65 *piasters*.[6] But by January 1919, the monthly food cost of an ordinary family living in Istanbul had increased more than 2,000 percent over its June 1914 levels.[7] Many working class families could not maintain their pre-war standards of living. We lack similar data for the remainder of the empire, but trends likely mirrored those in the capital.

Industrial Unrest

The war years did not see any significant strikes, stoppages, or other kinds of collective actions. With the announcement of mobilization in August 1914, the CUP government declared martial law, censored the press, and imposed severe measures to prevent any public assemblies and demonstrations that would disturb the public order. Particularly in the major population centers, the state's control over public life grew stricter. A comprehensive survey of strikes in the late Ottoman Empire, for instance, lists only one strike in 1915, one in 1917, and one in 1918.[8] Unlike other major belligerent countries, industrial workers' organizations were not included in the decision-making process of the wartime administration and did not play a significant role in the conduct of the war.

In the years following World War I, however, trade unions and socialist parties experienced growth in membership, activism, and visibility. Laborers in several sectors took collective action. Bank clerks, tramway employees, and printers all went on strike to increase inadequate wages and improve their working conditions.[9] The year 1919 saw thirteen strikes, and, in 1920, workers put down their tools on ten different occasions.[10] Workers' post-war resentment stemmed primarily from deteriorating living conditions. To a considerable degree, however, it also originated in a sense of inequality, which was reinforced by the conspicuous wartime and post-war lifestyles of the *nouveaux riche*.

Women and the Labor Force

During the war years, women entered the labor force in significant numbers, mostly due to the conscription of male family members and the subsequent decline in living standards.[11] Many factories and military workshops hired women to replace male workers drafted by the army. In the urban centers, women worked in sectors that had previously been reserved solely for males, such as street cleaning. At the imperial capital, a civil society organization, the Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women, was founded under the auspices of the Ottoman minister of war with the purpose of helping Muslim women find employment to prevent their fall into prostitution.[12] Close to 20,000 women found employment through

this organization.

Even for relatively well-to-do families whose male members were conscripted into the army, privations became an everyday facet of life. War, the disappearance of male members of the household, and the accompanying economic impoverishment usually brought a decline in social status, which, in turn, compelled women to work in various sectors of the urban economy for long hours and very low wages.[13] The abundance of female labor made employers increasingly unwilling to negotiate over wages or working conditions. Female workers who normally received half the salary of male workers continued to be poorly paid throughout the war.

Egypt and Iraq under British Occupation

Most workers in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire experienced the war much as those in Anatolia. Inhabitants of southern Iraq and Egypt, however, lived much of the war under British occupation. While the British did not conscript Arab soldiers, they forced more than a million peasants into labor brigades, while suppressing workers' wages. British military requisitions, like the Ottomans', caused food shortages and inflation that further depressed real wages. At war's end, workers staged strikes and joined political protests against Britain, leading to the emergence of modern labor movements and the spread of socialist and communist parties.

Egypt

Egypt was an industrial and agricultural center of the Middle East. Cairo's industries employed 20,000 workers in cigarette and textile factories, sugar refining, and other facilities. Another 12,000 worked at the Egyptian State Railways, which linked the rich fields of the Nile Valley to the port of Alexandria. Thousands more worked in construction and other modern industrial sectors. However, in August 1914 the onset of war interrupted Egypt's export trade. More than 20,000 workers were laid off in the industrial, transport, and construction sectors.

In November 1914, Britain and the Ottomans declared war, and Egypt became the British military's supply center in the Middle East. The following month, Britain declared a protectorate over Egypt, severing it from the Ottoman Empire. The British then reorganized Egypt's economy to supply military needs not only in the Middle East but also on the Western Front in Europe. Cotton was king in Egypt, representing 92 percent of Egypt's exports in 1914. For the next four years the British expropriated the crop for the Allied war effort. They promoted expansion of cotton cultivation (at the expense of food crops) while forcing landowners to sell the crop at below-market prices. Meanwhile, the British also requisitioned

food crops for military use at depressed prices.

Beginning in 1915, the British conscripted more than one million Egyptian peasants, along with their draft animals, into the Labor Corps and the Camel Transport Corps. In the eyes of Egyptians, this violated Britain's pledge not to conscript Egyptians into the military. British officials bribed village chiefs to round up peasants against their will. They shipped forced laborers far from their families to work in Salonika, at Gallipoli, in Palestine, and even on the docks at Marseille, France. Egyptian laborers loaded and unloaded ships, dug trenches, laid railroad tracks, and transported supplies across hostile landscapes in support of British troops. Many were killed and wounded in the Gallipoli campaign and the defense of the Suez Canal from Ottoman attacks. Reports of hard labor, poor food, and rampant disease made the Corps infamous in Egypt.[14]

These and other British policies caused labor shortages and effectively reduced workers' wages by driving up the price of food and clothing. Peasants, desperate to buy food, sold their wives' jewelry en masse, driving the price of gold down. Peasant debt resulted in a wave of foreclosures, forcing them from the land. Jobs in military-related industries did not alleviate the effect of wartime layoffs in the cities. Wages failed to keep up with inflation. In Cairo, the cost of living for a typical poor family tripled between 1914 and 1919. As a result of military-induced food shortages, many Egyptians faced hunger by 1918.[15]

World War I temporarily reversed the fragile gains made in labor organizing prior to 1914.[16] At the outset of the war, Egyptian workers staged protests against massive layoffs. An estimated 1,500 workers marched in Alexandria on August 31, chanting, "We want bread! We want work!" In Cairo, many jobless workers marched and attacked bakeries and food shops. British officials responded with mass arrests and laws prohibiting labor unionization, assembly of more than five persons, and suppression of the organization of labor unions. Censorship was severe. In 1916 the British police chief of Cairo ordered the arrest of unemployed men, out of fear that "free time gave them the opportunity to work against the government."[17]

Even so, workers managed to stage wildcat strikes and other forms of protest, as in the demonstrations over hunger in the summer of 1915. The uneven effects of the wartime policy, however, caused tensions among workers. In July 1915, hunger protests gave way to complaints that "foreign" workers (Greek, Italian, Jewish) received higher wages and better treatment. A wave of strikes by cigarette workers in Alexandria between August 1917 and April 1918 marked the height of labor mobilization during the war.

At war's end, however, workers joined other Egyptians in turning their discontent with food shortages and inflation into protests against British rule. The 1919 Revolution erupted in March, when nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul (1859-1927) was arrested and deported. In response, Egyptian peasants waged a two-month rural insurgency featuring attacks on railroad stations as a symbol of British authority. A popular song expressed anger at the British army for confiscating food, draft animals, and peasant men into the Labor Corps: "Woe on us England, who has carried off the corn [wheat], Carried off the cattle, Carried off the camels, Carried of the children, Leaving us only our bare lives. For the love of Allah, now leave us alone!" Workers on urban tramways, on the railroads, and in ports and utilities also staged months of strikes. By the end of 1919, they had organized a dozen new trade unions. The labor movement was reborn.[18]

Iraq

While less research has been done on wartime workers in Iraq, British sources suggest they faced stresses similar to Egyptians. On 21 November 1914, the British Indian Expeditionary Force captured the southern port of Basra. Its aim was to secure control of the Persian Gulf and especially the petroleum fields nearby at Abadan. The city of Basra prospered: merchants profited from military purchases and workers found jobs at the expanded port. Those outside of Basra, however, did not benefit as much. As the British moved north – towards the capture of Baghdad in March 1917 – they siphoned food supplies and forced rural workers into railroad and road construction at low wages. Meanwhile, artisans' incomes plummeted due to the influx of imports from the British Empire, especially the Indian Ocean basin. Small merchants suffered from increased freight costs, due to Britain's control over river travel.[19]

Britain soon became the largest employer of Arabs, with more than 40,000 employed by 1918—in addition to 32,000 Indian laborers and civil servants imported from the subcontinent. The Arab Labour Corps was despised much as its Egyptian equivalent was. Workers were dragged away from their homes by village and tribal chiefs who received British rewards. Farms were left uncultivated for want of laborers. Sheep herds dwindled.

Rural workers suffered as well. From 1915, British political officers in the tribal regions of southern Iraq bought the loyalty of tribal chiefs by granting them land once owned by the Ottoman crown. At the same time, thanks to the extension of railroads built by forced labor, the British imposed new taxes on rural populations, even in famine-threatened areas north of Nasiriya, where farmers had been hurt by Britain's diversion of the Gharraf River. When tribes resisted paying taxes, the British sent in gunboats and dropped bombs from airplanes in May 1918 and February 1919. According to a February 1919 report, tenants on those lands were

reduced to sharecroppers who barely eked out a living.[20]

As in Egypt and Ottoman territory, military requisitions disturbed local economies and caused hunger. From November 1917, the British imposed strict rationing regimes in Baghdad and other southern cities, due to food shortages much like Egypt's. The last year of the war was the worst. Despite inflation, wages remained fixed at 1917 levels. Workers in most Iraqi cities faced famine.

In contrast to Egypt, Iraqi labor had not been organized before the war, so there were no organized labor strikes during the war. However, we do have a record of resistance to British policies. In 1916-17, British intelligence reported that "a sort of miniature French Revolution" was taking place in the region of Muntafik, centered on the town of Nasiriya, as peasants rebelled against landlords. Tax collectors were also shot. "There is no doubt that this labour question has been a great cause of dissatisfaction amongst the tribes," wrote a British officer in the Iraqi district of Samawa, in October 1918.[21] Similarly, religious leaders in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala organized protest, as did tribal leaders in the south, against forced labor. They were angered not only by food shortages, but also by the unevenness of tax collection: most taxes were collected in towns, and some local leaders won seemingly unfair exemptions from the British.

At war's end, workers contributed to anti-British protests. While the existing literature terms the 1920 Iraqi revolt a tribal affair, it is clear from the record that the tribes acted as virtual labor movements in channeling the discontent of workers with wartime stress. Protest first erupted in the southern Euphrates river valley, where British policies had dislocated tribal economies and yoked workers to military construction projects. Discontent flared into armed revolt in the summer of 1920, after the League of Nations awarded Britain a mandate to retain rule over Iraq. Among the list of demands issued by southern tribal leaders was the removal of British political officers who had imposed taxes and facilitated recruitment of forced labor.[22]

Conclusion

The First World War was an unprecedented war experience for the peoples of the Middle East. It blurred and even obliterated the boundaries between two distinct realms, the "military" and the "civilian", with far-reaching consequences for the labor force. Many laborers were employed in military factories under strict conditions. Those conscripted into armies faced similar discipline, hard work as well as injury and death. In the meantime, women entered the workforce in ever-increasing numbers. In the Ottoman Empire, the state's wartime policies regarding labor also crippled local economies. Along with other policies, the

disruption of the domestic labor markets, conscription of artisans and craftsmen, and the deportation and massacre of non-Muslim laborers pushed local economies into a deep recession. It would take several decades for the regimes established in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire to overcome these detrimental effects.

Labor movements flourished after the war across the Middle East. In Egypt and Iraq, while the British defeated the revolts, they set the stage for a more popular style of mass politics in the early postwar period. Workers articulated economic grievances in new languages of constitutional rights, national sovereignty, and the collective rights of labor. Communist and socialist ideas, once circulated only among elites, infiltrated the upper ranks of workers. For example, Comrade Fahd (1901-1949), the future leader of the Iraqi Communist Party lived in wartime Nasiriya and Basra, where he obtained communist pamphlets from Indian workers. Socialist ideas also spread into Anatolia, Syria, and Iran through the Caucasus at war's end. These ideas found fertile ground among workers freed from pre-war patriarchal controls by wartime economic policy and now re-united around political goals.[23]

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Notes

1. For more details on this process, see Akın, Yiğit: The Ottoman Home Front during World War I. Everyday Politics, Society, and Culture, PhD dissertation, Ohio State University 2011. ↑
2. Ökçün, Gündüz (ed.): Osmanlı Sanayii 1913, 1915 Yılları Sanayi İstatistiki [Ottoman industry. Industrial Censuses of 1913, 1915], Ankara 1997, p. 20. The 1915 survey did not include industrial enterprises in Syria and Iraq. ↑
3. Pertev, İbrahim: Beylik Fabrikalarda Amele Yövmiyeleri [Workers' wages in state factories], in: Sanayi 42 (31 Kanun-u evvel 1334): pp. 196-97, transcribed in Toprak, Zafer: Türkiye'de Milli İktisat (1908-1918), [National Economy in Turkey, 1908-1918], Ankara 1982, p. 415. For similar observations about the workers employed at the Zonguldak Coalfield during the war, see Quataert, Donald: Miners and the State in the Ottoman Empire. The Zonguldak Coalfield, 1822-1920, New York 2006, pp. 216-23. ↑
4. Emin [Yalman], Ahmed: Turkey in the World War. New Haven 1930, p. 153; Toprak, Zafer: İttihad-Terakki ve Cihan Harbi. Savaş Ekonomisi ve Türkiye'de Devletçilik [Committe of Union and Progress and the Great War. War Economy and statism in Turkey, 1914-1918], Istanbul 2003, p.160. ↑
5. Toprak, İttihad-Terakki ve Cihan Harbi 1982, p. 160. ↑

6. Eldem, Vedat: Harp ve Mütareke Yıllarında Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Ekonomisi [The Economy of the Ottoman Empire in War and Armistice Years], Ankara 1994, p. 55. Except for the coal mines in Ereğli, all other statistics were provided by companies in Istanbul. ↑
7. Ibid., p. 49. ↑
8. Yıldırım, Kadir: Osmanlı'da İşçiler (1870-1922). Çalışma Hayatı, Örgütler, Grevler [Workers in the Ottoman Empire (1870-1922). Labor life, organizations and strikes], Istanbul 2013, pp. 282-83, 366. ↑
9. Ülker, Erol: Sultanists, Republicans, Communists. The Turkish National Movement in Istanbul, 1918-1923, PhD dissertation, University of Chicago 2013. ↑
10. Yıldırım, Osmanlı'da İşçiler 2013, pp. 366-67. ↑
11. For more details, 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 (2014): pp. 12-35. ↑
12. Karakışla, Yavuz Selim: Women, War and Work in the Ottoman Empire. Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women, 1916-1923, Istanbul 2005. ↑
13. For the wartime struggles of a young mother and wife who lost her husband during the war and had to work in an army workshop stitching uniforms for soldiers, see Orga, İrfan: Portrait of a Turkish Family. London 1950. ↑
14. Salim, Latifah Muhammad: Misr fi al-Harb al-`Alamiyah al-Ula, 1914-1918 [Egypt in the First World War, 1914-1918], Cairo 1984, pp. 254-64; On mistreatment, see Ruiz, Mario: The Egyptian Labor Corps. Online: https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/world-war-i-in-the-middle-east-discussion/2012-seminar/web-projects-2/mario-ruiz/. ↑
15. Salim, Misr fi al-Harb 1984, pp. 184-91; Beinin, Joel and Lockman, Zachary: Workers on the Nile. Princeton 1987, pp. 84-88. ↑
16. Chalcraft, John T.: The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories. Albany 2004, pp. 145-90; Beinin and Lockman, Workers on the Nile 1987, pp. 80-82. ↑
17. Salim, Misr fi al-Harb 1984, pp. 178-79, 345. ↑
18. Ibid., pp. 171-82; Beinin, Joel: Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East. Cambridge 2001, pp. 86-90; Beinin and Lockman, Workers on the Nile 1987, pp. 83-120. ↑
19. Atiyyah, Ghassan R.: Iraq 1908-1921. A Socio-Political Study, Beirut 1973, pp. 220-24. ↑
20. Ibid., pp. 233-59. ↑
21. Ibid., p. 253; see also pp. 239-49, 252; Ulrichsen, Kristian Coates: The First World War in the Middle East. London 2014, pp. 119-46, 174-77; Haj, Samira: The Making of Iraq 1900-1963. Albany 1997, pp. 27-31. ↑
22. Atiyyah, Iraq 1908-1921 1973, pp. 338-46; Tripp, Charles: A History of Iraq. Cambridge

2002, pp. 40-45; Visser, Reidar: Basra. The Failed Gulf State. Munster 2005, pp. 66-69. ↑

23. Batatu, Hanna: The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq. Princeton 1978, pp. 367-410; Beinin and Lockman, Workers on the Nile 1987, pp. 88-120, 137-54; Botman, Selma: The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1919-1970. Syracuse 1988, pp. 1-5; Thompson, Elizabeth F.: Justice Interrupted. The Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East. Cambridge, MA 2013, pp. 181-87; Couland, Jacques: Mouvement syndical au Liban 1919-1946. Paris 1970, pp. 77-125; Ismael, Tareq Y. / Ismael, Jacqueline S.: The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon. Gainesville 1998, pp. 3-24. ↑

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External Links

- Akın, Yiğit / Gratien, Chris / Yılmaz, Seçil: World War I and the Ottoman Home Front, 23 August 2013 (Ottoman History Podcast) (Audio)
- Orga, İrfan: Portrait of a Turkish Family, London 1950 (HathiTrust) (Book)
- Ruiz, Mario: The Egyptian Labor Corps, World War I in the Middle East and North Africa (Georgetown University) (Article)

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