

# Prostitution (Ottoman Empire)

By [Çiğdem Oğuz](#)

## Summary

This article focuses on prostitution on the Ottoman home front and the research for it draws upon secondary and primary sources. By focusing on this particular subject, the article highlights the Ottoman wartime government's efforts to reorganize the socioeconomic sphere and the tensions escalated by the harsh circumstances of the war.

## Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Prostitution and the Changing Concept of Prostitution](#)
- [3 Attempts to Control Prostitution](#)
- [4 The 1915 Regulation on the Prevention of the Spread of Venereal Diseases](#)
- [5 Courts-Martial in Charge](#)
- [6 Employment Campaigns to Prevent Prostitution](#)
- [7 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## Introduction

Stability and order on the home front constituted a vital condition for mobilization efforts in the [Ottoman Empire](#). A number of measures issued by the [Ottoman government](#) during the First World War reveal that there was a need to take action against the destructive effects of war on the social tissue of society. This article takes into account [prostitution](#), which was among the primary issues on the Ottoman home front. In the first part of the article, [wartime prostitution](#) will be discussed using both secondary sources and archival documents. Together with a detailed analysis of Ottoman regulation on prostitution, this section attempts to present the tension between legal enforcement and the socioeconomic circumstances shaped by the war. Archival sources are used to trace how court-martials were applied against prostitutes and procurers.

## Prostitution and the Changing Concept of Prostitution

Prostitution is a primary issue in many studies of the home front. Almost all of the belligerent

countries issued provisions aimed at eliminating the war's disastrous effects on women. Controlling [morality](#) and social relationships on the home front was part of governmental efforts to present the purpose of mobilization as defending the homeland's honor. Besides, the spread of [venereal diseases](#) among civilians and soldiers there were increased concerns about [public health](#).

In the Ottoman Empire, neither prostitution nor its regulation was particular to the war.<sup>1</sup> The novelty of wartime was large-scale unregistered prostitution, which came to be considered as part of daily life. The Ottoman intellectual [Ahmet Rasim \(1864-1932\)](#) named this kind of prostitution *fuhş-i cedit*, meaning new prostitution, in his book on old-fashioned prostitution published in 1924. According to Rasim, social circumstances during the First World War paved the way for debauchery in Ottoman society and prostitution took on new forms that penetrated Muslim families.<sup>2</sup> [Ahmed Emin \(1888-1972\)](#), a war witness and author of *Turkey in World War* (one of the first academic books on the topic) asserted that this new form of prostitution was more common among Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire than among non-Muslim ones.<sup>3</sup>

## Attempts to Control Prostitution

Ottoman non-Muslims and foreign passport holders in the [Empire](#) were considered to be the ones who dominated the sex trade.<sup>4</sup> The Capitulations facilitated this trade, as these groups were either exempt or immune from Ottoman law.<sup>5</sup> As early as March 1914, the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent requests to the French, Russian, Italian and Austro-Hungarian embassies asking for special permission to make sanitary visits to the brothels run by the citizens of their countries.<sup>6</sup> The embassies responded positively, under the condition that they be informed of the addresses of these houses and that only doctors should be in charge of the visits. However, only after the unilateral abolition of the Capitulations at the outbreak of the war was the Ottoman government able to finally issue a general regulation to control the brothels and prevent the so-called traffic in white women. [Henry Morgenthau \(1856-1946\)](#), the American ambassador to the Porte, claimed that he led the official prevention action against this traffic, while the Ottoman Finance Minister [Reşad Paşa \(1849-1927\)](#) chaired it and [Bedri Bey \(1888\)](#), the Ottoman chief of police, executed it.<sup>7</sup>

## The 1915 Regulation on the Prevention of the Spread of Venereal Diseases

One of the most remarkable attempts of the Ottoman wartime government was the

declaration of a new regulation concerning prostitution during the First World War. While this regulation revealed the extent of the problem, it also provided for increased official recognition of brothels. In 1915, the government issued a very detailed regulation on prostitution called *The Regulation on the Prevention of the Spread of Venereal Disease*.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the previous brothel regulation of 1884 was limited to certain areas of Istanbul such as Beyoğlu, the new regulation embraced all the provincial areas and defined the legal framework along with detailed prescriptions.<sup>9</sup> As is clear from the title of this regulation, the main purpose was to control the spread of venereal diseases. In order to achieve this task, the regulation attempted to subject brothels to stricter state control and register prostitutes while keeping them under [medical surveillance](#). A variety of fines and punishments were issued for those who violated the regulatory measures.

The 1915 regulation begins by defining what a prostitute is: "In return for monetary interest or as a habit, those who are working to meet the pleasures of others by having intercourse with more than one man shall be called prostitutes." Places that were occupied by or visited by two or more women for the purpose of prostitution were euphemistically called *public* or *common houses*. The regulation prescribed that so-called pensions or small hotels used for the same purposes should be called public houses as well. Properties meant to be rented or owned for the purposes of prostitution or procuration were called meeting points, like *rendezvous* houses, as in the French case. Furthermore, the regulation considered as prostitution different forms previously not identified as such. For instance, *streetwalkers* were forbidden from wandering around for the purposes of engaging in prostitution, and they had to reside in and be registered at brothels. *Mistresses*, described in the regulation as women who had intercourse only with one man, had to be kept on the records as well.

Spatial restrictions were implemented in order to segregate prostitution from society. While the Istanbul districts for brothels (Beyoğlu and Üsküdar) were to be determined by the municipal police department, in the provinces the provincial administrations were in charge of this. This attempt can be interpreted as an effort to eliminate new forms of prostitution, such as the unregistered one, which were more visible and incorporated into daily life. According to the articles of the regulation concerning spatial provisions, brothels could not be opened next to or opposite *honorable* family households. It was strictly emphasized that brothels should have only one entrance. A door number different from that of regular houses both in size and numerical order was to be hung on that entrance. Prostitutes were not allowed to sit in front of the doors, to present themselves through windows or attract attention by verbal interactions. There had to be shutters to cover the windows of the first floors.

Another section of the regulation detailed the proper registration of brothel owners and their collaboration with the police department. Accordingly, the owners of brothels had to prepare a document listing the identity of the prostitute. This booklet had to include two photos, her name and nickname, as well as her age, place of birth and citizenship and the names of the brothels where she previously worked. The police department would then prepare a new identity paper for the prostitute.

In addition to segregating the location and changing the appearance of brothels, the manner of operation was regulated as well. The 1915 regulation of brothels was no less detailed than those of bureaucratic offices, thus giving the impression of the actual incorporation of prostitution into the body of the state. While the consumption of alcohol with the permission of local authorities was not forbidden, gambling and smoking cannabis were strictly forbidden and brothels who did not comply with these rules were to be closed for an indefinite period of time. Playing [music](#) was not allowed after midnight and before that time, it was not to disturb the people living nearby. The music could also be forbidden if it increased competition among both prostitutes and clients and caused fights.

A considerable number of articles were issued on venereal diseases and sanitary measures. As a first condition for preventing diseases, unregistered prostitution was to be eliminated. In Istanbul, the *Morals Police* was in charge of investigating houses engaging in secret prostitution. In the provinces, the local police was responsible for identifying such houses. Undercover police units were established to investigate illegal brothels and people who encouraged girls, minors and honorable women to take up prostitution. These units would report unregistered prostitutes to the police station, but were not charged with taking measures themselves.

Prostitutes who had venereal diseases were not allowed to work in brothels until they got a [health](#) report that was listed on their identity papers. They were to be examined in a [hospital](#) and stay there until recovery. The expenses for this healthcare were to be met by the owner of the brothel (ten to twenty piasters per day) either voluntarily or by police force. Medical clinics were to be opened in every district and one or two doctors would be in charge, according to need. A special sanitary commission would be established, composed of policemen and doctors. The doctor in charge of examinations was to be rotated every three months. This can be interpreted as an attempt to prevent emotional interactions or attachments between doctors and prostitutes. The doctors in charge had to report on a weekly basis. In the first stage, the government opened six medical clinics in Istanbul following the regulation's requirements. In 1915, a new hospital was opened in Yuksek Kaldirim Street for the diagnosis and treatment of venereal diseases. After two years of operation, the hospital was moved from Galata to Sisli, to the Bulgarian School for Boys,

which was renovated as a venereal diseases hospital with 600 beds.<sup>[10](#)</sup> Before the war Haseki Hospital had operated as venereal diseases hospital with only forty beds.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

Despite regulatory attempts, there were 2,171 registered prostitutes in Istanbul, while the total number appeared to be 4,000 to 4,500 based on the data that Turkish Sanitary Bureau provided in 1922. Riggs claimed that the difference between these numbers were due both to underage prostitutes who could not be registered and others who worked in private houses.<sup>[12](#)</sup> It should be noted that these numbers correspond to a huge amount in a city with a population of 700,000.

Table 1: The Number of Women who visited Sisli Hospital from 1917-1920<sup>[13](#)</sup>

| Year | Muslim | Christian |
|------|--------|-----------|
| 1917 | 1,416  | 1,096     |
| 1918 | 1,675  | 1,166     |
| 1919 | 1,879  | 1,499     |
| 1920 | 1,785  | 1,347     |

## Courts-Martial in Charge

During the war, the Ottoman government declared [martial law](#) in those parts of the country that were closer to the front lines. In these parts of the Empire, many administrative measures were in the hands of high-ranking military men.<sup>[14](#)</sup> Expelling “unwanted” people such as prostitutes and procurers were among these measures. In this context, people were increasingly banished to inner Anatolia as the extent of martial law widened throughout the war. In the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives one finds much correspondence about exiled prostitutes and their procurers from Anatolian [cities](#) such as Kayseri, Konya and Kütahya. Some of these people were sent to Ankara as a first stop before a final decision was made. Some archival documents written by provincial governors reveal the logic behind the preference of these cities for banishments. Unregistered, illegal prostitutes and “morally weak” people were sent away from central areas to places where there were no railway connections and no administrative difficulties.<sup>[15](#)</sup> For the non-Ottomans, the abolition of the Capitulations broke the years of networks on woman trafficking, prostitution and procuring in

the Empire. After the abolition, possessing a foreign passport no longer brought special privileges. The military measures, including searching houses, banishments, and deportations out of martial territories, further motivated foreign citizens to obtain Ottoman citizenship. However, applications by banished or deported people were rejected immediately on the basis of loose morals.<sup>16</sup>

In many cases, the government's main concern was to prevent the spread of venereal diseases among the soldiers. A military doctor, [Abdülkadir Noyan \(1886-1977\)](#), who served during the First World War on the front lines, asserted in his memoirs that he had to take military measures to combat venereal diseases among Baghdad and Mosul troops. He reported the number of syphilis cases among these troops at 614 and 763 for gonorrhea in 1917.<sup>17</sup>

The families of soldiers were the most vulnerable social group in the war context. Assaults on soldiers' wives and [children](#) became an increasingly visible problem as the war went on. As a reaction, the government applied the death penalty for rapists of soldiers' close relatives.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the government, in contrast to previous wars, paid monthly stipends to the families of conscripted breadwinners.<sup>19</sup> However, due to high inflation and black-market prices, these stipends were not enough. In order to make a living, some women started to engage in prostitution, even with state officers.<sup>20</sup>

## Employment Campaigns to Prevent Prostitution

Many researchers have connected widespread prostitution to the economic hardships brought on by the war. Ahmed Emin pointed out that the uneven distribution of war burdens, the contrast between war-induced impoverishment and easily acquired war wealth, the slim chance of success in the war and the mass [migrations](#) caused by Russian victories were factors contributing to the loosening of morality in society.<sup>21</sup>

In order to prevent the further spread of prostitution, some governmental organizations, such as the Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women, tried to organize employment campaigns.<sup>22</sup> It was also thought that these organizations would supply a new labor force in the economy.<sup>23</sup> In 1917, the total number of working women registered in the society was 24,254 while 7,185 of them were employed in Istanbul.<sup>24</sup> These employees worked mainly in textile factories, manufacturing military uniforms, wool yarn and lingerie. The organizations not only provided jobs but also made marriage compulsory for the women workers starting at the age of twenty. Actively taking part in arranging marriages, the organization provided a

trousseau for the brides and investigated groom candidates with the help of the police department. Women who did not agree to the arranged marriages would lose 15 percent of their salaries or were fired from the organization in case of a further disagreement.<sup>25</sup>

Turkish [literature](#) during the First World War and in its aftermath is full of stories of moral degeneration and debauchery.<sup>26</sup> However, the occupation of Istanbul by the Allied Powers marked the peak point as the background for these literary works. Inspired by the tragedies of these years, the themes of this literature included assaults against Muslim women by Allied soldiers, the huge economic inequality between rich and poor and catastrophes of Ottoman families. When the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, repeated attempts were made to rectify the [social cost of the war](#) years.

## Conclusion

Analyzing recurring wartime phenomena such as prostitution, and state attempts to handle it, provides a vantage point for the ongoing social, economic and moral transformations of the time. To begin with, the nationalization of the economy through the unilateral abolition of the Capitulations enabled the Ottoman wartime government to regulate its own socioeconomic realm. In the chaotic atmosphere of the war, it was possible to implement a project to design the economic and private spheres of the Empire, including prostitution. The abolishment of the Capitulations combined with the proclamation of martial law constituted a significant moment for the prevention of prostitution. Through suspending Constitutional rights, precisely the ones regarding the protection of private property, the government and local authorities gained more power to eliminate “undesirable” people in the Empire. These wartime peculiarities constituted an opportunity for the Ottoman authorities to “clean up” the home front, especially in the martial law areas. Morality became a concrete requirement, an eligibility condition to identify those who deserved Ottoman citizenship. On the other hand, employment campaigns for Ottoman Muslim women aimed at curbing economic hardships were believed to be the main reason for the increasing prostitution. At war’s end, it was clear that Ottoman society was no longer the same as it had been before. The foundation and characteristics of the [social](#) and [economic structure](#) were deeply shaken. Prostitution was one of the indicators of the social depression as the contemporary writers expressed it. Together with the so-called Armistice Period, the traumas of the war years would shape the founding of the Turkish Republic.

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## Notes

1. See Özbek, Müge: The Regulation of Prostitution in Beyoğlu 1875-1915, in: Middle Eastern Studies 46 (2010), pp. 555-568. [↑](#)
2. Rasim, Ahmed: Eski Fuhuş Hayatı. Fuhuş-i Atik [Prostitution in Old Times]. Istanbul 2007, pp. 209f. [↑](#)
3. Emin (Yalman), Ahmed: Turkey in the World War, New Haven 1930, p. 244. [↑](#)
4. Bali, Rifat: The Jews and Prostitution in Constantinople 1854-1922, Istanbul 2008, p. 11. [↑](#)
5. Wyers, Mark David: "Wicked" Istanbul. The Regulation of Prostitution in the Early Turkish Republic, Istanbul 2012, p. 88. [↑](#)
6. BOA (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives) HR. İD. 1585/41 1914.6.9. [↑](#)
7. Wyers, "Wicked" Istanbul 2012, p. 89. [↑](#)
8. Emraz-ı Zühreviyenin Men'i Sirayetine Dair Neşr Olunan Nizamnameye Mütalâk Talimatname [Regulation on the Prevention of the Spread of Venereal Diseases]. İstanbul 1915. A shortened Turkish translation of the regulation is also available in: Alyot, Halim: Türkiye'de Zabıta. Tarihi Gelişim ve Bugünkü Durum [The City Police in Turkey. Historical Development and Current Situation], Ankara 1947, pp. 570-586. Among the first studies on this subject, see Toprak, Zafer: İstanbul'da Fuhuş ve Salgın Hastalıklar [Prostitution and Epidemic Diseases in Istanbul], in: Tarih ve Toplum 7/39 (1987) pp. 159-168. [↑](#)
9. Wyers, "Wicked" Istanbul 2012, p. 67. [↑](#)
10. Toprak, Zafer: İstanbul'da Fuhuş ve Zührevî Hastalıklar, in: Türkiye'de Kadın Özgürlüğü ve Feminizm (1908-1935) [Women's Liberation and Feminism in Turkey], İstanbul 2015, p. 138. [↑](#)
11. Riggs, Charles T.: Adult Delinquency, in: Johnson, Clarence R. (ed.): Constantinople Today. A Study in Oriental Social Life or The Pathfinder Survey of Constantinople, New York 1922, p. 364. [↑](#)
12. Riggs, Adult Delinquency 1922, p. 363 [↑](#)
13. Based on the data that Riggs provided, see Riggs, Adult Delinquency 1922, p. 366. [↑](#)
14. Shaw, Stanford: The Ottoman Empire in World War I, volume I, Ankara 2006, p. 172. [↑](#)
15. BOA DH.EUM.5. Şb. 9/26 1333 Ra 29. [↑](#)
16. These applications can be found in the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives, for example see DH.SN.THR. 69/68 1334 N 14, DH.İ.UM. 29-1/4 1333 S 13. [↑](#)
17. Noyan, Abdülkadir: Son Harplerde Salgın Hastalıklarla Savaşım [My Fight against Epidemic Diseases during the Last Battles] , Ankara 1956, pp. 92f. [↑](#)
18. Akın, Yiğit: The Ottoman Home Front During the World War I. Everyday Politics, Society

- and Culture, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Ohio State University 2011, p. 167. ↑
19. 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. 96f. ↑
  20. Akin, pp. 166-167. ↑
  21. Ahmed Emin (Yalman), Turkey in the World War, 1930, p. 239. ↑
  22. Karakışla, Yavuz Selim: Women, War and Work in the Ottoman Empire. Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women 1916-1923, İstanbul 2005, pp. 168-169. ↑
  23. Ibid., p. 171. ↑
  24. The society published a report in 1917, see Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyet-i İslamiyesi [Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women], İstanbul 1334, cited in: Sümer, Tülin: Türkiye'de İlk Defa Kurulan Kadınları Çalıştırma Derneği [The First Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women in Turkey]. in: Belgelerle Türk Tarihi Dergisi, Vol. 10 (1968) p. 61. ↑
  25. Ahmed Emin (Yalman), Turkey in the World War, 1930, p. 236. ↑
  26. For discussions on how Ottoman literature dealt with the theme, see Behar, Cem / Duben, Alan: İstanbul Households: Marriage, Family and Fertility 1880-1940. Westernization and New Family Directions: Cultural Reconstruction, Cambridge 2002, pp. 194-239. Alev Sinar Çılgın gives a review of the works on childhood memories and memoir-novels on World War I period, see Çılgın, Alev Sinar: Savaşın Gerçek Kurbanları: Çocuklar [The Real Victims of the War: Children], in: Savaş Çocukları Öksüzler ve Yetimler [Children at War Orphans], Naskali, Emine Gürsoy / Koç, Aylin (eds.) İstanbul 2003, pp. 347-360. ↑

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- [Toprak, Zafer: \*\*Türkiye'de kadın özgürlüğü ve feminizm, 1908-1935 \(Liberation of women in Turkey and feminism, 1908-1935\)\*\*, Istanbul, 2015: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları.](#)
- [Wyers, Mark David: \*\*'Wicked' Istanbul. The regulation of prostitution in the early Turkish republic\*\*, Istanbul, 2012: Libra Kitapçılık ve Yayıncılık.](#)
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## External Links

- [CERI Center for International Studies: Gender and Genocide in the Ottoman Empire, 15 April 2015 \(Soundcloud\) \(Audio\)](#)
- [Johnson, Clarence Richard \(ed.\): Constantinople To-day or The Pathfinder Survey of](#)

[Constantinople. A Study in Oriental Life, New York 1922 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)

- [Polat, Ayse: WWI and Prostitution. The Banned Story of a Prostitute Woman, World War I in the Middle East and North Africa \(Georgetown University\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Sebah & Joaillier: Yüksek Kaldırım street and Galata Tower, one of the oldest brothel districts in Ottoman Istanbul, 1890 \(Gettysburg College\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Toprak, Zafer: The Family, Feminism, and the State during the Young Turk Period, in: Premiere Rencontre Internationale sur L'Empire Ottoman et la Turquie Moderne, Istanbul 1991, pp. 441-452 \(academia.edu\) \(Article\)](#)

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