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Bereavement and Mourning (Ottoman Empire/ Middle East)

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This article explores bereavement and mourning in the post-war Middle East with a focus on official state efforts to commemorate the conflict. Due to the nature of the source material, the article deals most extensively with commemoration by the Turkish and Armenian governments, but begins with a short section on foreign memorialisation in the Middle East, and concludes with a brief overview of Great War commemorative efforts by Arab states.

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Introduction

This article explores bereavement and mourning in the post-war Middle East with a focus on official state efforts to commemorate the conflict. There is unfortunately scant academic work on the subject. In part, this is due to a relative dearth of official memorials, monuments and ceremonies in the region when compared to, for example, Western Europe. There are, however, multiple fruitful avenues of research and more archival work can and needs to be undertaken to understand the

variegated ways in which MENA (Middle East and North Africa) governments have commemorated the war.

Even with a lack of source material, this paper covers a hundred years of history and two caveats must be made. First, an enduring trauma resultant from the myriad tragedies of the Great War even today transcends national boundaries. Apart from that connection, however, Middle Eastern memories of the war often lack uniformity. For example, there is the great divide between Turkish and Armenian official memory on the subject of [genocide](#). Moreover, one can discern nostalgia for the Ottoman past in certain countries and more ambivalent, even hostile, perspectives in others. Even within polities, divisions exist on what events and persons should be remembered and in what manner. Readers should thus be aware that there is no homogeneous Middle Eastern “memory” of the war and there are divergences that cannot be fully explored here.

Second, as this article focuses on official commemorations, it does not deal substantively with grassroots memorials or phenomena such as digital memorials. More significantly, it does not describe the numerous “memories” borne out in memoirs, diaries, novels, poems, and folkloric ballads and laments created during and after the war, even if it is in these sources that bereavement and mourning can be best discerned. That said, readers should keep in mind that it is frequently impossible to disentangle the personal from the national, earnest bereavement from an arguably more cynical sort. For example, many peasant ballads and laments are now ensconced in national imaginations, and, in some cases, have been used to bolster positions that are at variance with their original anti-war and anti-state tenor.^[1] Particularly in recent decades then, we have seen personal tragedy incorporated into national myth and made to serve government narratives.

Foreign Memorialisation in the Middle East

Foreign efforts to commemorate World War I in the MENA region largely predate their domestic equivalents and often served as models. While there were nominal French and German commemorative activities, this section focuses on the exhaustive work of [Britain's Imperial War Graves Commission \(IWGC\)](#), which was established to memorialize the empire's Great War dead and missing, no matter their race, ethnicity, religion or place of origin.^[2]

The IWGC constructed memorials and cemeteries on or near battlefields as well as in any country where imperial servants had died. It was then a truly global project. In the MENA region, the IWGC constructed memorials and cemeteries that in modern-day Turkey, Iraq, [Egypt](#), Israel and the Occupied Territories of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, [Azerbaijan](#), Oman, Algeria, Tunisia and the Sudan. Permission to occupy these sites was either granted to the IWGC by British authorities in colonies and mandates or extricated from foreign governments via formal agreements, as was the case with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that created the Republic of Turkey. The sites were secured in perpetuity, and maintenance remains the responsibility of the IWGC's successor, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC).

IWGC cemeteries and memorials were meant to be uniform in their architecture, thereby affording equality to all subjects while still attempting to acknowledge their diversity and varied religious rites.^[3] Nonetheless, IWGC cemeteries did inevitably vary according to context. In Palestine, for example, indigenous Arab motifs were included.^[4] This does contrast, however, with some elements of IWGC design at Gallipoli, where certain areas were remade in reminiscence of a British village and sporadic efforts were made to “Australianise” the landscape.^[5] British subjects made numerous pilgrimages to IWGC sites after the war. The majority travelled to the Western Front,^[6] but some also visited parts of the former Ottoman Empire.^[7] Due to the Second World War, pilgrimages to such sites in the Middle East and elsewhere came more or less to a halt and would wax and wane in subsequent decades. Spaces such as Gallipoli, however, have grown into heritage tourist sites visited by both nationals and foreigners.

Turkish State Commemoration

Turkey has worked to commemorate the Great War more than any other country in the Middle East, albeit somewhat belatedly and selectively. Commemorative efforts have focused on the 1915 Battle of Gallipoli and its martyrs (*şehitler*) who supposedly sacrificed themselves for the Turkish nation. There are a number of reasons for this focus on Gallipoli, but perhaps the most important include Gallipoli being one of the few major Ottoman Great War victories and its location on what would eventually be Turkish soil. Hence, commemoration of the battle was never focused on bereavement and mourning, but rather, like many other commemorative efforts around the world, on exalting the nation and its cult of fallen soldiers.

Although propagandistic works on Turkish heroism at Gallipoli were produced in the early republic (1923-1938), memorialisation at Gallipoli in that period was meagre and the few Turkish memorials and cemeteries on the peninsula were outnumbered and outsized by IWGC and French sites that would become, in some senses, models for future Turkish memorialisation.^[8] Likewise, official ceremonies on the peninsula were small and held inconsistently. It is not until the 1940s that we see a Turkish memorial construction boom. While other areas around Turkey (e.g. Erzurum) also saw the construction of Great War memorials, Gallipoli remained the state’s favoured site.^[9] Beyond national ceremonies, Gallipoli began in the 1950s to be framed as a site of joint pilgrimage, with the Turkish government using the peninsula as a venue to host select foreign powers against whom they had fought in the war.

In the 1960s, the government finally opened a grand Turkish memorial on the peninsula to match the British and French structures there. The Çanakkale Martyrs Memorial immediately became the main site for Turkish ceremonies and remains so today. Although bereft of adornments when opened, plaques, monuments, statues, and a symbolic cemetery now populate the complex. In the 1970s, Gallipoli was established as a national historical park and tourist site. Nonetheless, official Turkish ceremonies there were irregular and scantily attended until after 1990 when the 75th anniversary

commemorations attracted immense foreign crowds and international attention. Turkish pilgrims and tourists to Gallipoli have increased dramatically in the 2000s as the centennial drew near and the government promoted the site and its value to the nation.

Turkey now holds annual Gallipoli ceremonies on 18 March, 24 April and 25 April. The latter two have become the basis for modern versions of joint pilgrimages. Since 2002, 18 March - the anniversary of the Ottoman naval victory at Gallipoli - has been officially designated as Martyr's Day, linking that triumph with a number of other wars/battles from Ottoman and Turkish history, including the ongoing Turkish-Kurdish conflict. For a time, Martyr's Day would also be commemorated in Great War *Türk Şehitlikleri* (Turkish Martyr Cemeteries) in former Ottoman lands such as Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, pointing to greater acknowledgement of other Ottoman Great War battles, but nonetheless orienting commemoration of them around Gallipoli.^[10]

Commemorating the Genocides

In the aftermath of the war, and despite the efforts of many individuals and groups, the 1915 Armenian Genocide went largely unacknowledged by the major powers. Under the aegis of the USSR, even the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic made no real efforts to commemorate the trauma.^[11]

Scholarly interest in the events of 1915 arose in the 1960s when genocide was emerging as its own field of study.^[12] 1965 also marked the 50th anniversary of the genocide and unofficial commemoration services were held across the globe on 24 April 1965. In Armenia's capital, Yerevan, ceremonies gave way to unprecedented protests, with the memory of the genocide linked to Armenian desires to reclaim lands lost to Turkey as well as to the Azerbaijani Republic.^[13] Following decades of Soviet repression of such memories and desires, officials finally relented and commissioned an official memorial to the genocide in the capital. The 4,500 square meter Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Complex was opened in 1967, and an appending museum would be added in 1995.^[14] It serves as the main memorial to the genocide and the site of state commemorations.

From the 1970s to 1980s, Armenian demands for recognition increased as did Turkish state denials.^[15] In Armenia, in the face of continued Soviet repression, further memorials were commissioned and funded at local levels.^[16] In 1987, another enormous demonstration connected the genocide with the conflict over Karabagh, and 100,000 Armenians marched to Tsitsernakaberd to protest the continued killing of Armenians by Turks (Azerbaijanis were labelled as such).^[17]

The range of factors that led to greater international recognition of the genocide cannot be covered here, but the above-mentioned events played a significant role and spurred the construction of memorials in Armenia and all over the world, including the Middle East. For example, approved by the Syrian government in the 1980s and consecrated in 1991, the Armenian Martyrs' Memorial

Church in Deir Zor became a major pilgrimage site for Armenians. It was, however, destroyed during fighting between the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front in 2014.^[18] In addition to these official sites, we can add countless unofficial sites, graveyards, churches, ruins, and caves (all included under the label *ziyarets*) that serve as loci for pilgrimages.^[19] Many of the sites that existed in Turkey, however, have been destroyed by Turkish governments.^[20] Finally, there are also monuments to Armenian heroes who fought the Ottomans or took vengeance upon them in the war's aftermath. For example, monuments to the man who assassinated Mehmed Talat Pasha (1874-1921), Soghomon Tehlirian (1896-1960), can be found in Yerevan and cities as far away as Fresno, California.

The Assyrian Genocide does not receive the same attention as its Armenian counterpart. Certainly, Armenians and Assyrians acknowledge each other's traumas as genocide,^[21] and some memorials commemorate both genocides simultaneously, along with that of the "Hellenes." But differences between their experiences, and important religious divisions within the Assyrian community, make a unified commemorative effort a thorny issue.^[22] Nonetheless, some recognition was afforded the Assyrian experience in the 2000s.^[23] Memorials have since been built in Syria, Armenia and many other global locales. There is even a memorial in Diyarbakir, Turkey, although that edifice was commissioned by the town's Kurdish mayor and explicitly acknowledges "all the massacres that took place since 1915".^[24] As with the Armenian Genocide, there has been strong opposition to these memorials' construction from the Turkish government and some Turkish citizens.^[25]

Armenia and Turkey: Duelling Centennials

The Great War centennial received nominal attention in most MENA countries, but not so in Turkey and Armenia. Both countries focused on commemorating events of 1915, and while the reason for Armenia's focus on that year is obvious, Turkey's was multi-faceted. Certainly, the 1915 Battle of Gallipoli had long been privileged in national consciousness, resulting in an enormous publicity campaign, multiple ceremonies as well as drastic alterations of the commemorative space of the peninsula in the run-up to 2015. Gallipoli's memory, however, was being mobilized on fronts too numerous to delineate here. For instance, the battle served, as always, as a marker of Turkish national identity, but the nature of that identity was in flux, with Gallipoli increasingly employed by the AKP government as a clarion call for a new kind of national unity based on an idealized vision of Ottoman multi-ethnic harmony.

More contentiously, however, there is evidence to suggest that Gallipoli's centennial was being used to distract domestic and global attention away from the genocide centennial (see, for example, statements by then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu).^[26] The Turkish government also commemorated the Battle of Sarıkamış for the first time in 2013. The battle in winter 1914-15 close to the current Armenian border constituted a devastating defeat of Ottoman forces by the Russian military with the aid of Armenian volunteer units. Taner Akçam claimed that Sarıkamış was being

used as a Turkish equivalent to the genocide whereby “Muslim losses at Sarikamis [sic] get compared with the Armenian-Christian losses of 1915”.^[27]

As regards centennial commemorations, the many claims that the Turkish government moved ceremonies to 24 April only in 2015 are erroneous, as they had been occurring on both that date and 25 April for many years by that point,^[28] but the size and scope of the 24 April commemorations were significantly larger in 2015. Moreover, Turkey’s leader extended invitations to delegates from over one hundred countries to attend the Gallipoli anniversary on 24 April (Turkey and Armenia’s leaders exchanged invitations), and there appeared to be competition over which country would attract the highest profile delegations.^[29] The Turkish government also allegedly pressured [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#) – for whom Gallipoli is likewise significant – to withhold recognition of the genocide lest they be denied the space necessary at Gallipoli for their thousands of pilgrims.^[30] In all, one could discern a clear Turkish state campaign to use Gallipoli and other Great War battles to overshadow the genocide centennial.

Both centennials proceeded largely as planned, but while the 24 April Gallipoli ceremonies occurred, unofficial genocide commemorations organized by non-state Turkish actors took place at Istanbul’s Taksim Square and in Diyarbakır.^[31] Public acknowledgements of the genocide by Turkish citizens had been increasing for several years, although a partial disjunction between the government and its constituents perhaps always existed.^[32]

Conclusion: A Dearth of Memory?

Outside of Turkey and Armenia, official Great War commemorations in the MENA region are difficult to locate. But in conclusion I would like to highlight four more efforts, all different in nature and scope. First, Lucia Volk outlined the case of Lebanon’s Martyrs Day (6 May) that was created to commemorate Arab nationalists executed by [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#) during the war.^[33] In Beirut, Martyrs Square was built and became the site of a revolving cast of memorials and monuments as well as for ceremonies and protests. But with independence and eventually civil war, the square would come to serve new purposes beyond Great War commemoration.^[34] Consequently, the dead of 1916 have joined a long line of martyrs ensconced in Lebanese national consciousness.^[35]

Second, James Gelvin has noted [Faysal I, King of Iraq’s \(1883-1933\)](#), who at the time was King of the Arab Kingdom of Syria, attempts to create a Syrian heroic-tragic myth of the war in order to bolster the new kingdom and its legitimacy. While the works commissioned by the government no doubt made some impact, official ceremonies were, like the kingdom itself, not to last.^[36] The available evidence then does not point to extensive state commemorative activity in Syria and Lebanon. It should be noted, however, that other key events from the war are actively remembered in these locales at more grassroots levels. For example, the “Great Famine” devastated civilian

populations, but the dead are not acknowledged in state ceremonies. Rather, they are mourned by individuals and communities through songs, poems, novels, and other cultural work.^[37]

Third, there are state commemorations that focus on events or persons somewhat tangential to the war itself. For instance, although not technically commemorating the conflict, the Jewish National Fund planted a memorial forest in honour of Arthur Balfour (1848-1930), author of the 1917 Balfour Declaration, in Mandate Palestine in 1928.^[38] Although commemorated only sporadically in the past, the centennial of the Balfour Declaration was marked by the Israeli government in November 2017; Palestinian groups worked to counter such efforts.^[39] Finally, there exist present-day attempts by groups outside the region to acknowledge the Great War contributions of MENA peoples. For example, the travelling exhibition, *Forgotten Heroes: North Africans and the Great War, 1914 – 1919*, was created by a Belgian foundation and claimed to be the first to commemorate North African soldiers who served with the British and French.^[40]

More such efforts might be unearthed or forged as the study of the Great War in the Middle East continues apace, but there does appear to be an overall dearth of official memorialisation activity in the region when compared with some other areas. Again, that should not be taken as a sign that the Great War is absent from Middle Eastern memories, individual or collective. The war had a deep and lasting impact on the people of the region and hence it is remembered in a number of ways that occasionally conflict with European and North American understandings of the war as a tragic yet ultimately heroic endeavour. Marked by mass death, famine, defeat, colonization, the imposition of borders, and the introduction of radically new ways of life, it is apparent that many in the region do not seek to recall the Great War with that common mix of mourning and exaltation characterized by so many commemorative efforts today. Nonetheless, the immense amount of commemorative material produced by individual authors, artists and citizens testifies that the Great War was and is remembered in the Middle East, even if governments did not always consider it worthy of state commemoration.

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Notes

1. ↑ For more on war ballads and laments, see: Akin, Yiğit: *When the War Came Home. The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire*, Stanford 2018; Svazlyan, Verjiné: *The Armenian Genocide. Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors*, Yerevan 2011.
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3. ↑ Fuchs, Ron: Sites of Memory in the Holy Land. The Design of the British War Cemeteries in Mandate Palestine, in: *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004), pp. 644–6.
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5. ↑ Unwalla, Pheroze: Re-Imagining Gallipoli. Imperial Pasts and Foreign Presence in a History of Turkish National Remembrance, 1923-2013, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London 2014, p. 159; Scates, Bruce: *Return to Gallipoli. Walking the Battlefields of the Great War*, Cambridge 2006, p. 40.
6. ↑ Lloyd, David W.: *Battlefield Tourism. Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919–1939*, Oxford 1998, p. 95.
7. ↑ Unwalla, Re-Imagining Gallipoli 2014, p. 170.
8. ↑ Ottoman soldiers were more likely to be buried in mass graves, although a small number of them were buried with recognition in individual marked graves or in German cemeteries. Fuchs, *Sites of Memory* 2004, p. 650.
9. ↑ Unwalla, Re-Imagining Gallipoli 2014, pp. 195–6.
10. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 132.
11. ↑ Suny, Ronald Grigor: *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else. A History of the Armenian Genocide*, Princeton 2015, p. 368.
12. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 368–9.
13. ↑ Karlsson, Klas-Goran: Memory of Mass Murder. The Genocide in Armenian and non-Armenian Historical Consciousness, in: Mithander, Conny / Sundholm, John / Troy, Maria Holmgren (eds.): *Collective Traumas. Memories of War and Conflict in 20th-century Europe*, Brussels 2007, p. 33.
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15. ↑ Karlsson, *Memory of Mass Murder* 2007, p. 29.
16. ↑ Self-Defense Battle Memorial of Artsiv Vaspurakan in Agarak village, Armenia, issued by The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, online: http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Memorial.8/current_category.52/memorials_detail.html (retrieved: 3 January 2017).
17. ↑ Karlsson, *Memory of Mass Murder* 2007, pp. 34–5.
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22. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 112–3.

23. † Pierpaoli, Paul G. Jr.: The Assyrian Genocide, in: Bartrop, Paul R. / Jacobs, Steven Leonard (eds.): *Modern Genocide. The Definitive Resource and Document Collection*, Santa Barbara 2015, p. 50.
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29. † For an overview of official Turkish reactions to the genocide centennial, see Macleod, Jenny: The Gallipoli Centenary. An International Perspective, in: West, Brad (ed.): *War Memory and Commemoration*, New York 2017, pp. 89–101.
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33. † Also see Zach, Fruma: Transformations of a Memory of Tyranny in Syria. From Jamal Pasha to 'Id al-Shuhada', 1914–2000, in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 48/1 (2012), pp. 73–88.
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