Upon entering World War I, the Ottoman government imposed military censorship on the press to eliminate criticism and anti-war propaganda. As the war progressed, news of Ottoman defeats was strictly censored to protect civilian morale and shape public opinion. War coverage mostly consisted of propaganda and news of victories. When censorship was relaxed towards the end of the war, journalists began criticising issues such as economic policies, corruption and war profiteers. They were also able to openly display a pro-peace attitude and reflect the public’s frustration in their writings.
Introduction

Current historiography on 20th century Ottoman press mostly concentrates on the “press boom” that took place during the first years of the Young Turk Revolution (1908). The Ottoman press during the First World War largely remains unstudied. Although recent scholarship sheds light on the cultural and literary aspects of the Ottoman war experience, a comprehensive study of the history of Ottoman journalism in the 20th century is still needed.

Although the Ottoman press was hindered by strict military censorship and economic difficulties during the Great War, newspaper circulation increased as a result of the public’s need to be informed. The press disseminated state propaganda, justifying the Ottoman entry into the war and reflecting the public’s frustration. This article provides a survey of the Turkish-language press in the Ottoman Empire, focusing on how mass-circulated periodicals covered the war. To contextualize the Ottoman government’s attitude toward the press and censorship, its starts with a short historical summary of the press boom which followed the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Then, after analyzing the main challenges of the press during the war years, it discusses the general characteristics of war reporting and criticism in mass-circulating periodicals.

The Ottoman Press prior to 1914

The Young Turk Revolution in 1908 ended the three-decade long reign of Abdulhamid II, Sultan of the Turks (1842-1918), which was notorious for strict press censorship. After the constitution was proclaimed, Ottoman journalists assumed that censorship was abolished,[1] and the press started flourishing rapidly. Within a few months, hundreds of newspaper licenses were issued.[2] The first year of the revolution was an interregnum that tested both the limits of press freedom and the power of the new regime.[3] A countercoup attempt in 1909 presented the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) with a justification for firmer control of the press. All anti-CUP newspapers that were assumed to have played a role in the countercoup were shut down and a restrictive press law was passed.[4] The Press Law of 1909 was later modified with a series of temporary articles, which made it stricter.[5] In 1913, using the defeats in the Balkan War as a pretext, the CUP eliminated its political rivals with a coup d'état.[6] The CUP government under the “triumvirate” of Enver, Cemal Ahmed (1872-1922) and Talat Pashas closed down oppositional newspapers and exiled dissident intellectuals to eliminate political criticism.[7] Censorship after 1913 was reminiscent of Abdulhamid’s reign. By the time the Ottoman Empire entered the Great War, the CUP regime had already learned the importance and potential dangers of the press by trial and error.

Challenges faced by the Ottoman Press during the War

Censorship
Following mobilization, on August 7 the Ottoman government imposed a temporary law which harshened existing censorship laws. The CUP forbade the publishing of news about the army and the navy, as well as the military capacity and potential war strategies of the empire. The government’s initial plan was to close down all existing newspapers and journals except *Tanin*, the semi-official publication of the CUP, to gain control of the press and prevent anti-war publications. However, Kazım Karabekir (1882-1948), the Chief of Intelligence at the Office of the General Staff, claimed that this would destroy the credibility of *Tanin* and the reputation of the regime. He convinced Ismail Enver Pasha (1881-1922) not to close down the newspapers. A few days later, in addition to the temporary law, a new censorship regulation was issued which required all domestic publications, letters and telegrams to be monitored by censorship commissions in Istanbul and other major provinces. New journals were forbidden during the war. The Ottoman Ministry of War disseminated all war-related news to editors.

The censorship regulation did not clearly define censorable, harmful or punishable material. One of its articles stated: “The elements that will be censored in newspapers are the same as in telegrams and letters.” However, what exactly was subject to censorship in telegrams and letters was not specified. Because of such ambiguities, Ottoman journalists avoided publishing their political opinions, criticizing the government or spreading anti-war propaganda. Anything that could negatively affect civilian morale, including non-war-related news such as train and steamship accidents, was prohibited from being published. The limited number of newspaper pages generally reported military communiqués and war-related news obtained from German and Austrian news agencies. Only optimistic, patriotic, morale-boosting articles were permitted.

Being the hub of communication and intellectual activity, censorship in Istanbul was stricter than in other provinces. Every day, editors of all Istanbul periodicals had to send sample issues of their journals to the censorship office for approval. Strict censorship, fear of punishment by court-martial, and difficulty in finding subject matter significantly diminished Ottoman intellectual production. Several periodicals therefore shut down. In 1908, 377 periodicals were published in Istanbul and 730 in the Ottoman Empire. By 1918, only fourteen periodicals remained in Istanbul and those in the provinces had also declined dramatically. During the war, the only news source was the “Ottoman National Telegraph Agency”, which collected all war-related news from German and Austrian news agencies.

Economic Difficulties and Lack of Resources

Apart from censorship, lack of resources and economic difficulties undermined the Ottoman press during the war. Since most of their authors and skilled workers were conscripted, periodicals and printing houses had a shortage of staff. A lack of printing supplies was also a major problem. Ink, glue and solvents used to clean printing equipment were scarce and expensive during the war.
Paper shortages also caused newspapers to cease publication. At this time, the Ottoman Empire imported most of its paper from Germany and Austria. Since transportation problems diminished paper supply, most Ottoman dailies only published between one and four pages.[19]

Foreign Pressure

Relying on foreign paper monopolies had political implications. During the war, printing paper was distributed and rationed by the German and Austrian embassies in Istanbul, who sought to gain leverage over the newspapers. In return for paper, newspapers published pro-German and Austrian propaganda. Editors who reported such problems to the Ottoman government were ignored.[20] Owing to economic difficulties, owners of local printing houses relied on foreign capital. Some Istanbul printing houses and newspapers were co-owned by German companies.[21] Journalist Ahmet Emin Yalman (1888-1972) later complained that the Ottoman Empire’s dependence on Germany and Austria resulted in these governments manipulating the Ottoman press and shaping public opinion by spreading their own propaganda.[22]

War Coverage, Propaganda and Criticism

Pro-German Propaganda and Justifications for War

The CUP and Germany supported pro-German propaganda in the Ottoman press in the lead up to the Ottoman-German alliance. Propaganda was distributed before the empire officially entered the war. Following the transference of two German warships, Goeben and Breslau, to the Ottoman navy, the Istanbul press was full of articles praising the German Empire and Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859-1941). Servet-i Fünun, a mass-circulated daily newspaper which was printed by a publishing house co-owned by the Deutsche Orient Bank,[23] published “The Muslim World and the Germans” in its September 7, 1914 issue.[24] According to this article Germany, unlike the Allied forces who allowed their Muslim subjects to be killed in the war, had always been respectful, kind and compassionate towards Muslims. It stated that by “giving away” two warships, Germany had consoled the Ottomans who had been upset over the British confiscation of two Ottoman dreadnoughts. Another article in Servet-i Fünun praised the technological superiority and modernity of the German military as well as the discipline, bravery, and determination of the German soldiers.[25] In its August 12 issue, Tanin congratulated the Ottomans on their new warships Yavuz and Midilli, claiming that the Germans had shown great self-sacrifice in selling the two warships.[26]

In 1914, the Ottoman government’s public justifications for its alliance with the Central Powers intensified. In mid-November 1914, military journals and all the major Ottoman periodicals published the Ottoman Sultan’s call for holy war.[27] The Sultan claimed that hostility from Russia, Britain and France forced the Ottoman Empire to ally with Germany and Austria-Hungary. He asserted that Russia had been undermining the Ottoman Empire for three centuries; and Russia, Britain and
France had been torturing the millions of Muslims living under their rule. Therefore, the lives of those Muslims were now in the hands of Ottoman soldiers.[28] After the Sultan’s declaration, articles rationalizing the empire’s alliance with the Central Powers were published. To justify supporting two Christian Powers in this “holy war”, journalists claimed that Germany and Austria-Hungary had always been friendly to the Ottomans and Muslims.[29] Good treatment of Muslim prisoners by the Central Powers became a common propaganda theme. Sending those prisoners to the Ottoman Empire was presented as evidence of German and Austrian respect for Muslims. In November 1914, Tanin reported that Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan soldiers captured by the Germans were sent to Istanbul where they were given a tour of the Islamic Foundations Museum and served drinks.[30]

As the mouthpiece of the CUP, Tanin was instrumental in disseminating pro-German and CUP propaganda. It was also an important (though not always reliable) news source for other newspapers. It frequently published stories on government orders. Yalman, who had become the editor-in-chief of Tanin in 1914, was once ordered by the CUP administration to publish a forged interview with Enver Pasha. The purpose of the interview was to refute rumors that non-Muslims in the empire would be forcefully conscripted although they had paid for an exemption. Despite never meeting Enver Pasha, Yalman wrote as if he had interviewed him, by adopting Enver’s political perspective. Since Enver Pasha normally shunned interviews, Yalman’s forged work caused a lot of public excitement. The next day, Tasvir-i Efkar, another major Istanbul daily, published the whole interview, complete with a lengthy commentary.[31]

This false interview became a turning point in Yalman’s career, making him the first European wartime correspondent. The German government had asked the CUP to send a Turkish journalist to the German war-front to spread its own propaganda through the Ottoman press. Having been impressed by Yalman’s “interview”, Enver Pasha sent him to Berlin to fill this position. In Berlin, Yalman enjoyed privileges as the “Turkish comrade-in-arms.” While other reporters had to work from specified locations and were refused the right to travel, he was permitted to visit both Eastern and Western Fronts.[32] He even flew over the trenches in a German reconnaissance aircraft[33] and dined with General Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934).[34] Yalman worked as a war reporter for two months in the summer of 1915. His Tanin reports describing German patriotism and German army successes endorsed the idea of imminent German victory. Yalman’s articles generated discussion in Istanbul and reached the headlines of other major newspapers.[35]

The press struggled with rationalizing the presence of Ottoman soldiers outside of the empire’s borders. At the beginning of the war, Ottoman state propaganda was mostly based on emphasizing self-defense. When General Hindemburg sent the XV corps of the Ottoman Empire to Galicia, Ottoman newspapers initiated a propaganda campaign.[36] An article in the War Journal (Harp Mecmuası) claimed that the Battle of Galicia aimed to prevent the Russians from accessing the Mediterranean through the Balkans. Therefore, it could be seen as a continuation of the Battle of
Gallipoli. This journal also published patriotic stories and poems devoted to the “honorable Ottoman soldiers in Galicia”, who served their country by fighting the Russians. Istanbul dailies published translations of articles from German and Austrian newspapers praising the Ottoman soldiers. An article in Tanin claimed that a German war reporter who saw the XV corps was astonished by the outstanding competence and discipline of the Ottoman soldiers. This reporter was also surprised by these young soldiers’ high level of education and fluency in French and German. Tanin published other translated articles describing the hope that the arrival of the Ottoman soldiers in Galicia created.

War Reporting

In addition to the mass circulation of newspapers such as Tanin, Tasvir-i Efkar, Ikdam, Sabah and Servet-i Fünun, bi-weekly and bi-monthly military journals also played an important role in war reporting and spreading state propaganda. The Navy Journal (Donanma Mecmuası) published articles praising the military power of the Ottoman Empire and its allies, as well as war statistics and news from all European fronts. It also regularly published short reports under the title “war calendar.” During the Gallipoli Campaign, it published battlefield photographs and poems and illustrations of war. War Journal was the Ottoman military’s main propaganda journal during the war. It too published photographs of Ottoman soldiers, war prisoners, and weapons captured from the enemy, as well as patriotic poems and stories. The Ottoman Ministry of War also ensured economic support for War Journal. At a time when most journals were struggling to find paper, it was printed on high-quality glazed paper. War Journal was instrumental in visually documenting the Ottoman perspective of the Great War, especially the Battle of Gallipoli. The photographs of Ottoman soldiers published in this journal inspired writers and poets and contributed to the formation of a Turkish nationalist literary corpus.

As the war progressed, military censorship became stricter. War reporting consisted of sharing the victories of the Ottomans and their allies. In the newspapers, Ottoman victories were celebrated vigorously. The Battle of Gallipoli was widely represented in the press. The government invited Turkish journalists and authors to Gallipoli, where they wrote about the battlefront. Conversely, journalists either presented the defeats as victories or simply ignored them in order to prevent the decline of civilian morale. For example, the failure of the Ottoman raid on the Suez Canal was not mentioned in the newspapers. The Caucasus Campaign was also highly censored. In particular, the disastrous results of the Battle of Sarıkamış (Sarikamish) were largely kept hidden from the public. While the Ottoman army was retreating in Sarikamish, Tanin published an article entitled “Great Victory” on 4 January 1915, claiming that the Ottoman army had captured 2,400 Russian soldiers and won an absolute victory. A week later, the same newspaper published an official communiqué of the Ottoman Army’s Headquarters, stating that the Russian press was lying about the Ottoman defeat at the Battle of Sarıkamış.
Despite strict press censorship, news of defeats was quietly spreading in the empire, especially through returned sick and wounded Ottoman soldiers. While the Caucasus Campaign was underway, the authorities implemented a crackdown. In December 1915, Tasvir-i Efkar officially announced that despite the prohibition on spreading false news and malicious rumors during the war, these crimes were still being committed. Perpetrators would now be punished by court martial. A list of the names of fifteen perpetrators accompanied the article. The article concluded by stating that anyone who disturbed public peace would be severely punished by the authorities.\[50\]

**Dissenting Views in the Press**

Since the war took longer than expected, social and economic conditions on the Ottoman home front began to deteriorate and access to food and health services grew increasingly difficult. Inequalities in food distribution, economic corruption, and the emergence of war profiteers in urban centres increased negative sentiment among the public.\[51\] Towards the end of 1916, some journalists felt the need to raise criticism about these problems. In order to freely criticize the government’s economic policies, Yalman parted ways with pro-CUP Tanin and transferred to another mass-circulated newspaper, Sabah.\[52\] In his memoirs, Yalman writes that because employees at the censorship office were frustrated by widespread corruption, they did not censor his articles targeting the government’s economic policies. At the same time, the CUP government realized that criticism in the press could be a “safety valve” to release public tension, and therefore turned a blind eye to dissenting views.\[53\]

As the press slowly turned into an outlet for public frustration, readership of some newspapers increased. Yalman’s criticisms in Sabah caused the circulation of the newspaper to quintuple in three months. With a circulation of 15,000, Sabah became the second most read daily newspaper in the empire after Tasvir-i Efkar.\[54\] Vakit, which started publishing in October 1917, also became very popular and rapidly acquired readership after revealing a corruption scandal concerning the distribution of the sugar imported from Austria.\[55\] Karagöz, a satirical journal which had until then strictly avoided criticizing the government’s wartime policies, started publishing cartoons about inflation and war-induced poverty.\[56\]

When the CUP started to lose its political power during the final year of the war, press censorship was loosened to some degree. On 8 June 1918, the government officially declared political censorship abolished. Military censorship, on the other hand, would continue.\[57\] This meant that Ottoman intellectuals were officially free to raise criticism on a number of non-military-related issues. The CUP administration, especially Mehmed Talat Pasha (1874-1921), encouraged the members of the opposition to express their discontent in the newspapers.\[58\] The main reason behind this was the CUP’s desire to prevent a public upheaval by releasing some of the public frustration.\[59\] After censorship was officially loosened, the Ottoman press was able to openly display a pro-peace attitude. Papers published articles discussing the opportunities for peace almost every day. Minority
newspapers also supported the mass-circulating newspapers in their pro-peace stance. This was the only period during the Great War when dissenting views and political criticism were to some extent reflected in the Ottoman press.

Conclusion

The press in the Ottoman Empire was marked by military censorship and propaganda. Ottoman periodicals published between the years 1914-1918 are important historical sources for scholars studying the CUP’s pro-German and pro-war propaganda efforts during the First World War. The photographs published in the military periodicals are also important primary sources documenting the Ottoman perspective of the war. Other propaganda material in the press, such as poems and patriotic stories, are important literary sources that contributed to the formation of Turkish nationalist literature during and after the war. The public’s frustrations about the war can also be traced by analyzing the mass-circulating newspapers that were published after 1916.

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Notes

1. † Although censorship was not officially abolished, newspaper editors decided to abolish it unilaterally, and refused to send copies of their journals to the censorship office. Yosmaoğlu, İpek K: Chasing the Printed Word. Press Censorship in the Ottoman Empire 1876-1913, in: Turkish Studies Association Journal 27/1, 2003, p. 32.
2. † Iskit, Server: Türkiye’de Matbuat İdareleri ve Politikaları [Press Administrations and Policies in Turkey], Istanbul 1943, p. 144.
4. † Iskit, Türkiye’de Matbuat İdareleri ve Politikaları 1943, pp. 154-155.
5. † Yosmaoğlu, Chasing the Printed Word 2003, p. 35.
7. † Kabacalı, Alpay: Başlangıçtan Günümüze Türkiye’de Basın Sansürü [Censorship in Turkey from its Beginning to Today], Istanbul 1990, p. 93.
9. † Kabacalı, Başlangıçtan Günümüze Türkiye’de Basın Sansürü 1990, p. 94.
10. † Köroğlu, Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish identity 2007, p. 13.
11. † Kabacalı, Başlangıçtan Günümüze Türkiye’de Basın Sansürü 1990, pp. 94-96.
12. ↑ Ibid, p. 98.
23. ↑ Tokgöz, Matbuat Hatıraları 2012, p. 367. In his memoirs, Ahmet İhsan Tokgöz, the owner of Servet-i Fünun and the printing house in which it was printed, describes his German partners’ investment motivations.
24. ↑ İslamiyet ve Almanlar [Islam and the Germans], in: Servet-i Fünun, 7 September 1914.
26. ↑ Büyük Bir Muvaffakiyet [A Great Victory], in Tanin, 12 August 1914. The difference between the approaches of these two newspapers is worth mentioning. While Servet-i Fünun, which was co-owned by a German company, described how the two ships were given to the Ottomans by Germany, Tanin noted that the Ottoman government purchased them for 80 million German Marks.
28. ↑ Beyannname-i Hümayun [Imperial Declaration], in Servet-i Fünun, 13 November 1914.
29. ↑ Müttefik Hükümetler Arasında [Among Allied Governments], in: Tanin, 16 November 1914.
34. ↑ Ibid, p. 243.

37. Ibid, p. 50.


40. Ibid, pp.56-57.


42. See Biyıklı, Mustafa (ed.): Donanma Mecmuası Çanakkale. 5-18 Mart Zaferi ve Bir Destanın Hatira Panoramı [Navy Journal Gallipoli. The Victory of March 5-18 and the Memory Panorama of a Legend], İstanbul 2011, pp. 84-122.


44. Ibid, p. 76.

45. For all Gallipoli-related news published in Ikdam, see Çulcu, Murat: İkdam Gazetesi’nde Çanakkale Cephesi [The Gallipoli Front in the Newspaper Ikdam], İstanbul 2004.

46. Köroğlu, Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity 2007, p. 83.


49. Ibid, p. 83.

50. Öğün, Tuncay: Toran Gazetesi Örneğinde Osmanlı Basınında Kafkas Cephesi’nin İlk Ayları ve Sarıkamış Harekatı [The First Months of the Caucasian Front and the Battle of Sarikamish in Ottoman Press, the Example of Turan Newspaper], in: TYB Akademi Dergisi, May 2014, pp. 69-70.


54. Ibid, pp. 266-267.


57. Koloğlu, Aydınlarımızın Bunalım Yılı 2000, p. 44.

58. Ibid, p. 46.

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