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# War Losses (Ottoman Empire/Middle East)

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The Ottoman Empire's entry into the First World War turned out to be disastrous for the Empire and its people as a whole. The Empire was underdeveloped, with a primitive economy and a sparse population. It lacked the most vital communication and supply infrastructure which its army would desperately need in a state of war. These factors, combined with the incompetent conduct of war, diseases, famine, wholesale and poorly handled enforced migrations and intercommunal violence, contributed to both military and civilian losses. The Ottoman territories of Anatolia, Syria and Iraq, especially, suffered the heaviest civilian losses during the war.

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## Introduction

As is the case with most of the countries that fought in the First World War, the number of military and civilian losses of the [Ottoman Empire](#) still remains unclear. There has been a considerable amount of research and discussion regarding the military losses and their causes during the war. Therefore a scholarly consensus about the total number of military losses is partially achieved but one cannot say the same about the civilian losses. The absence of reliable statistical data on the Ottoman wartime population prevents the researchers from making a healthy estimate on the

subject. Also, apart from some minor exceptions, no record was kept by the authorities regarding the civilian loss of life during the war. Without such source materials, any estimate to be made on the subject is bound to be mere guesswork.

## Military Losses

The Ottoman Empire mobilized a total of 2,850,000 people between the years 1914 and 1918.<sup>[1]</sup> The first official figures on the military losses of the Ottoman Empire came shortly after the armistice. On 30 January 1919, the Ottoman government announced the military losses of the Empire as being 2,290,000. The Ottoman war dead were estimated as 325,000, of which 85,000 were combat related and 240,000 were due to diseases. The total number of permanently wounded, sick and missing added up to 1,965,000.<sup>[2]</sup> However, in the late 1920s, Ahmed Emin [Yalman] (1888-1972), who was allowed to see the records kept by the Medical Department of the Ministry of War, found a much higher figure for the total number of the Ottoman war dead. For nine Ottoman armies, three independent army corps, independent units in distant fronts (Asir, Hejaz, Yemen) and enlistment stations, Emin estimated the death toll at 535,137, of which 466,759 were disease related and 68,378 were combat related.<sup>[3]</sup>

Table 1: Total Numbers of Sick, Wounded, Dead Soldiers in Nine Ottoman Armies<sup>[4]</sup>

	<b>Reported Sick</b>	<b>Reported Wounded</b>	<b>Deaths from Sickness</b>	<b>Deaths from Wounds</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year of War</b>	409,560	225,537	57,462	21,988
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Year of War</b>	853,079	314,936	126,216	21,986
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Year of War</b>	947,075	48,667	133,469	8,081
<b>4<sup>th</sup> Year of War</b>	844,878	122,697	84,712	7,407
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,054,592</b>	<b>711,837</b>	<b>401,859</b>	<b>59,462</b>

A more recent estimate on disease-related deaths was made by historian Hikmet Özdemir who analyzed the statistical data, which had been compiled shortly after the war from military hospital records by the Army Medical Department. This new study provides a more accurate picture about disease-related deaths except several undocumented deaths by disease that did not make the list. The figures are considerably lower than Ahmed Emin's estimates. Though it may be considered a

reliable source for disease related losses, however, this data does not provide accurate information about combat losses.<sup>[5]</sup>

Table 2: Military Losses According to the Hospital Records<sup>[6]</sup>

<b>Hospitalized sick</b>	<b>Hospitalized Wounded</b>	<b>Deaths from Diseases</b>	<b>Deaths from Wounds</b>	<b>Combat Deaths</b>
2,431,511	556,232	330,796	19,841	62,240

Table 3: Number of Cases of Various Diseases and Deaths due to These Diseases<sup>[7]</sup>

<b>Disease</b>	<b>Number of Cases</b>	<b>Number of Deaths</b>
Malaria	461,799	23,351
Dysentery	147,000	40,000
Intermittent Fever	103,000	4,000
Typhus	93,000	26,000
Syphilis	27,000	150

Regarding combat losses, Turkish General Staff's official campaign histories provide relatively accurate numbers for most of the engagements. These numbers include killed in action, wounded in action and missing in action. Edward J. Erickson's consolidated estimate of these numbers may be considered reliable, as he compiled all the available data from the official campaign histories.<sup>[8]</sup>

Table 4: Combat Losses<sup>[9]</sup>

<b>Killed in Action</b>	<b>Missing in Action</b>	<b>Died of Wounds</b>	<b>Wounded (Permanent)</b>	<b>Wounded (Total)</b>
175,220	61,487	68,378	303,150	763,753

A considerable number of Ottoman prisoners died in captivity. During the war, the majority of the Ottoman prisoners of war were kept in British and Russian camps. A small number of Ottoman military personnel was taken prisoner by the French, Italians, and Romanians. Most recent studies put the total number of prisoners at between 200,000 and 250,000. Of those prisoners, roughly 10 percent died in captivity. According to British sources, a total number of 10,738 Ottoman prisoners

out of 150,040 died in British captivity. Russian sources give the total number of Ottoman prisoners as 64,505. The same sources claim that only 582 Ottoman prisoners died in Russian captivity. This figure is obviously wrong. Austrian sources give the number of Ottoman prisoners who died in Russian captivity as 10,000.<sup>[10]</sup> It is safe to assume that at least 20,000 Ottoman prisoners in total died in captivity, though a more accurate estimate is still to be made.

## Civilian Losses

There is no accurate figure regarding the Ottoman population at the outset of the war. The estimates about the Ottoman wartime population were based on the census records dated 1906. These records were far from being reliable and were updated in 1914, after the Empire had lost most of its territories in Europe and all the territories in Africa. The records show the total population of the Ottoman Empire in 1914 as 18,520,016, of which 15,044,846 were Muslim and 3,475,170 were non-Muslim.<sup>[11]</sup> It is unclear how accurately the influx of the Muslim refugees from the Balkans and the loss of the Muslim population who were left behind had been reflected in the updated data. In addition to the unreliability of these statistics, no record of civilian deaths was properly kept during the war in any part of the Empire, including Istanbul. Also, when we bear in mind that regions such as Syria, Iraq and Hejaz, were all lost at the end of the war, and that the first modern census of the remainder, Anatolia and Thrace, had been taken in 1927, we do not have any data about a post-war population at our disposal to make even a simple deduction.<sup>[12]</sup> This makes it impossible to properly calculate the Empire's civilian war losses during the war.

Of all the regions of the Ottoman Empire, the heaviest loss of civilian life occurred in Eastern Anatolia. Those regions endured fierce battles between the Ottoman and Russian armies and faced the most violent kind of intercommunal warfare. With the Russian invasion, 1,604,031 Muslims were officially registered as refugees who fled west. Those who died along the road from hunger, disease or massacre, numbered 701,166.<sup>[13]</sup> The total number of Muslims who died in Eastern Anatolia is estimated at around 1,500,000.<sup>[14]</sup> It can be assumed that [disease](#) and starvation were among the major factors contributing to these numbers.

The Armenian losses in the region also reached staggering numbers throughout the war. The total number of Armenian deaths during the war is still a matter of dispute among scholars. Disease, starvation and [massacres](#) on the road claimed the lives of 600,000 to 1,500,000 Armenians during the mass deportation of this [minority](#) who numbered between 1,300,000 and 2,000,000 before the war.<sup>[15]</sup> Combined with the losses suffered by the Assyrians, which cannot be estimated properly, the war ended with the effective eradication in Anatolia of two minorities who had been rooted there for millennia.<sup>[16]</sup>

The population in the west was not exempt from the horrors of war. In Western Anatolia, an estimated number of 200,000 Greeks died during forced relocations and in [labor battalions](#).<sup>[17]</sup> The

total number of Muslim dead in Western Anatolia could never be known.<sup>[18]</sup> Most of the deaths in Western Anatolia might have been caused by disease. Limited recorded data shows that in Western Anatolian towns, even ordinary diseases could not be cured and caused death in all the cases. Of all the cases of various diseases, mortality rate was close to 90 percent.<sup>[19]</sup> Even though we don't have any recorded statistics, as the 1918 Flu Pandemic ([Spanish Flu](#)) swept through the world, the Ottoman Empire was known to have been greatly affected.<sup>[20]</sup>

Syria was another region that suffered horribly during the war. About 500,000 people died of starvation and disease. Starvation, the main reason for those deaths, was the result of the Allied [naval blockade](#), the ineptitude of Ottoman officials governing Syria and natural disasters, such as the locust plague of 1915 and the east winds of 1916, both of which had a destructive effect on [harvests](#).<sup>[21]</sup>

Iraq was another region that turned into a battlefield during the war. But there is no estimate regarding the civilian losses there. We can only assume that, like other regions of the Empire, disease and starvation caused the majority of deaths. Epidemics started in Baghdad, as early as November 1914, because of major floods.<sup>[22]</sup> Also, the civilians were directly affected by combat in places such as [Kut al-Amara](#). During the Siege of Kut, which lasted for five months, 247 civilian residents of the city perished.<sup>[23]</sup> The Ottoman Army faced a number of [rebellions](#) in 1915, in towns such as Najaf, Karbala, Al-Kufa, Al-Shamiyya and Tuwayrij. Army units were sent to deal with those rebellions and fierce fighting occurred in those towns, causing significant collateral damage.<sup>[24]</sup> Finally, there were punitive expeditions conducted by both the Ottoman and British armies on Arab tribes, most of which possibly resulted in numerous non-combatant deaths.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Conclusion

Roughly, more than two thirds of the Ottoman military personnel became casualties during the war. It is obvious that the Ottoman army fought a war, not only against the enemy forces, but also against epidemics. For every soldier who died in combat or of his wounds, two soldiers died of diseases. The destructive effect of the diseases on the army did not appear to have been taken under control during the war. As the war ended, Ottoman military dead was around 650,000.

While the mortality rate at the frontline was appalling, on the home front it was no different, if not worse. In addition to widespread starvation and diseases, hundreds of thousands of Muslim [refugees](#) died while trying to flee the Russian army and Armenian bands in Eastern Anatolia. More than a million Greeks and Armenians were forced to move out of their homes. They were forced to travel long distances under extremely harsh conditions, facing constant attacks. Only a small number of them survived the war. They died of diseases and hunger or were massacred on the road. Although it is hard to estimate the civilian loss of life during the war, with the current estimates at hand, it could be no fewer than 3,000,000. With a huge part of its Muslim and Christian population dead,

demographics of Anatolia had been altered dramatically. The effect of the Muslim losses would be seriously felt during the Turkish War of Independence and later, while building the modern Turkish Republic out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. For the Armenian people, it was a disaster, which violently ended their presence in Anatolia. And finally, for the Greeks, it paved the way for a similar fate, which was to come a few years later.

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## Notes

1. ↑ Beşikçi, Mehmet: Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Osmanlı Seferberliği [Ottoman Mobilization in the First World War], Istanbul 2015, p. 121.
2. ↑ Larcher, Maurice: Büyük Harp'te Türk Harbi 3. Cilt. Tali Dar-ül Harekâtlar ve Harbin Neticesi [Turkish War in the Great War Vol. 3. Secondary Theater of Operations and the End of the War], translated by Mehmed Nihad, Istanbul 1927, p. 138. This exact figure is also cited as the total number of the Ottoman military losses in Turkish General Staff's Official History of the First World War. Koral, Necmi et al. (eds.): Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi Osmanlı Devri. Birinci Dünya Harbi İdari Faaliyetler ve Lojistik X ncu Cilt [History of the Turkish Armed Forces. Ottoman Period. Administrative Activities and Logistics in the First World War, vol. X], Ankara 1985, p. 510.
3. ↑ Ahmed Emin's figure for the combat-related deaths appears not to have included the killed in action but the wounded who later died at hospitals. Emin, Ahmed: Turkey in the World War, New Haven 1930, pp. 252-253.
4. ↑ Emin, Turkey in the World War 1930, p. 252.
5. ↑ Özdemir, Hikmet: The Ottoman Army 1914-1918. Disease and Death on the Battlefield, Ann Arbor 2008, pp. 123-124.
6. ↑ Özdemir, The Ottoman Army 2008, p. 124.
7. ↑ Emin, Turkey in the World War 1930, p. 253.
8. ↑ For engagements that lacked a casualty figure in the official campaign histories, he made estimates based on the nature of the engagement. Erickson, Edward J.: Ordered to Die. A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War, Wesport 2001, p. 239.
9. ↑ Erickson, Ordered to Die 2001, p. 241.
10. ↑ Yanıkdağ, Yücel: Healing the Nation. Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914-1939, Edinburgh 2013, pp. 19-20.
11. ↑ Karpat, Kemal H.: Ottoman Population 1830-1914. Demographics and Social Characteristics, Madison 1985, pp. 188-189. Shaw, Stanford J.: The Ottoman Census System and Population, 1831-1914. in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 9/3 (1978), pp. 325-338.
12. ↑ For the first Turkish census see Emin, Turkey in the World War 1930, p. 298.

13. † There must have been more refugees who did not register but simply fled their homes (Shaw, Stanford J.: *The Ottoman Empire in World War I, Volume II*, Ankara 2008, p. 993).
14. † Justin McCarthy estimates the total number of Muslim civilian losses in those regions, between the years 1914 and 1922, as 1,600,000. Since most of the fighting between 1918 and 1922 took place in the west and calm reigned in Eastern Anatolia during those years, we can assume that this figure shows, almost entirely, the deaths during the First World War (McCarthy, Justin: *Death and Exile. The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922*, Princeton 1999, p. 339).
15. † The total number of deportees is still unclear. But Talat Pasha's personal papers give a figure of 935,367, see Bardakçı, Murat: *Talât Paşa'nın Evrak-ı Metrûkesi [The Remaining Documents of Talat Pasha]*, Istanbul 2009, pp. 108-109. This figure, of course, cannot be accepted at face value because Talat Pasha's records do not include data about deportations from certain provinces such as Erzurum, Bitlis, Van or Trabzon which had already been ordered to clear out their Armenian populations during the initial deportations. And, those records also do not include the deportations that took place after they were prepared in 1917. See Sarafian, Ara: *Talaat Pasha's Report on the Armenian Genocide*, London 2011, pp. 8-9. Ahmed Emin puts the pre-war population of Armenians between 1,300,000 and 1,500,000. He claims that 600,000 perished during the war. See Emin, Turkey in the World War 1930, pp. 217-222. Another Turkish source claimed that 800,000 perished in labor battalions and during the deportation, see Bayur, Yusuf Hikmet: *Türk İnkılâbı Tarihi Cilt III. 1914-1918 Genel Savaş. Kısım: 4. Savaşın Sonu [History of the Turkish Revolution Vol. III. The Great War 1914-1918 Section 4: The End of the War]*, Ankara 1983, p. 787. Raymond Kevorkian's estimate of the total Armenian population, based on the Armenian Patriarch's own censuses taken in 1902-1903 and 1912-1913, is 1,914,620. See Kevorkian, Raymond: *Ermeni Soykırımı [Armenian Genocide]*, Istanbul 2015, pp. 388-393. Again, according to Kevorkian's estimate, only 543,600 Armenians returned to their homes after the war, see Kevorkian, *Ermeni Soykırımı* 2015, p. 1046. Fuat Dundar's estimate of the total number of Armenian losses during the war is 664,000 (Dundar, Fuat: *Crime of Numbers. The Role of Statistics in the Armenian Question*, New Brunswick 2010, p. 151).
16. † Reynolds, Michael A.: *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908-1918*, Cambridge 2014, p. 155.
17. † Bayur, *Türk İnkılâbı Tarihi* 1983, p. 787.
18. † Justin McCarthy's estimate for the Muslim dead in Western Anatolia (1,250,000) includes all deaths between 1912 and 1922. McCarthy also includes the deaths that occurred in Thrace in this number, so it can be assumed that the majority of those deaths occurred during the Balkan Wars and the Greek occupation from 1919 to 1922 (McCarthy, *Death and Exile* 1999, p. 339).
19. † Özdemir, *Ottoman Army* 2008, p. 97.
20. † Özdemir, *Ottoman Army* 2008, p. 93.
21. † Çiçek, Talha: *War and State Formation in Syria. Cemal Pasha's Governorate During World War I, 1914-1917*, New York 2014, pp. 232-236. See also Schulze-Tanielian, Melanie: *Food and Nutrition (Ottoman Empire/Middle East)*, in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, edited by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10322.
22. † Majd, Mohammad Gholi: *Iraq in World War I. From Ottoman Rule to British Conquest*, Lanham 2006, p. 399.

23. † Majd, Iraq in World War I 2006, pp. 215-216.
24. † Rogan, Eugene: The Fall of the Ottomans. The Great War in the Middle East 1914-1920, London 2016, pp. 218-219.
25. † One such expedition was launched on 14 May 1915, to punish Bani Turuf Arabs, who mutilated the British wounded (Majd, Iraq in World War I 2006, p. 233).

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