



When the War Came Home: The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire

By Yiğit Akın

Stanford University Press, 2018. 320 pp., Paper. £74 (Hardback).
ISBN-10: 1503603636

Reviewed by Mustafa Aksakal

Associate Professor of History & Nesuhi Ertegin Chair of Modern Turkish Studies, Georgetown University

The opinions expressed in this review represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

In this deeply-researched and engaging work Yiğit Akin takes a close look at the Ottoman home front during the First World War. Divided into six chapters, the book examines the political effects of the Balkan Wars, mobilisation in 1914 and the lives of conscripts, the war's impact on the economy, especially on agricultural life and production, military requisitioning, the role of women and altered family structures, and, in the final chapter, the destruction of Anatolia's Armenian population and the influx of Ottoman refugees from territories occupied by Russian forces. The study is based on sources drawn from the Ottoman Prime Ministry's Archives, laws and regulations adopted by the ruling Committee of Union and Progress, minutes of the deliberations in the Chamber of Deputies (*meclis-i mebusan*) and the senate (*meclis-i ayan*), and a broad array of the growing list of diaries and memoirs recounting personal experiences of the First World War. In addition, and in a way no other recent study has done, *When the War Came Home* draws on folk songs and poems revealing the everyday hardships and tragedies faced by ordinary Ottomans in wartime.

Akin, Associate Professor of History at Tulane University, unpacks a compelling story. How, he asks, did the Ottoman Empire manage to fight four long years in a global war – a war waged by highly mechanised armies fuelled by industrial manufacturing, a war fought from the air and under the sea – despite the fact that the empire of the Ottomans had just suffered military defeat in the Balkans and despite the fact that it took up arms against industrialised powers at a time when it possessed an economy dominated by agriculture? The empire's low rate of industrialisation, its rudimentary road and railway networks, its limited access to energy sources, and its comparatively smaller manpower meant that the empire had to mobilise its human and material resources on an unprecedented and, indeed, devastating scale. It is not as if no one saw this coming. Cavid Bey, the much-respected but perhaps also much-ignored Minister of Finance, early on issued warnings regarding the high cost the war would claim: "This state does not have the capacity to keep eight hundred thousand soldiers under arms. They would go hungry and naked" (54). And many did. To prevent this from happening, military requisitioning and war taxation came down hard on the empire's subjects. This all-out mobilisation, according to Akin, distinguished the First World War from the Ottomans' other military conflicts but also set apart the war experience of the Ottomans, as the only

power with an agriculturally-based economy, from the other major belligerents.

To fight such a massive conflict as the First World War, the Ottoman state transformed the nature of the empire and its people by force and forever. Akin uses petitions to explore how state and citizens interacted with each other in new ways as a result of the war. Many of these petitions were written by wives and mothers of conscripts demanding assistance in navigating the dreadful conditions created by the government's wartime policies. The line between battle front and home front often blurred and at times the two arenas merged. Those who did much of the planting, tilling, and harvesting now put on uniforms, when available, and were marched or hauled away. Agricultural production, meant to feed both soldiers and civilians alike, plummeted because the number of agricultural workers had decreased and also because growers had now less incentive to produce any crops certain to be taken away by requisition authorities. The dramatic increase of paper money in circulation meant that it consequently became completely worthless. In early 1916, a group of women admonished the government that the army's purchase of their food was a death sentence: "With bank notes in our hands we will starve to death" (155).

In the final chapter Akin discusses the refugee and deportee question together. He draws attention to the great number of Muslim refugees who fled the eastern Anatolia region from Russian advances. He also shows how they were treated differently than the Armenian population. While the state struggled to manage the influx of several hundred thousand Muslim refugees, it sought to provide them with food, shelter, and transportation. In contrast, the Armenian population was uprooted permanently in a bloody deportation campaign, with no hope for return.

At war's end, Falih Rifki (Atay), an officer in Cemal Pasha's Fourth Army and later a prominent journalist and politician in the Turkish Republic, insisted that "Those who want to tell us about a battlefield, should first tell us about its home front" (191). Akin has done so admirably. *When the War Came Home* tells a story of the Ottoman First World War not of triumph leading to the foundation of the new Turkish state but of suffering and imperial disintegration. His book is an important contribution to a new generation of scholarship that has not only deepened our understanding of the Ottoman First World War but that has fundamentally transformed it.