

Fighting under the Same Banner: Memories from the Ottoman Theater of the Great War

Richard Wittmann and Yaşar Tolga Cora

What did it mean to individuals of different ethnic and religious backgrounds to participate in World War I under the Ottoman crescent and star banner? Focusing on a wide array of autobiographical sources including memoirs, letters, diaries, and non-textual forms of life narrative left by the multi-ethnic and multilingual Ottoman soldiers and civilians who aided the war effort, we organized the conference “Fighting Under the Same Banner: Memories from the Ottoman Theater of the Great War” (Istanbul, September 6–8, 2019). The conference took this fundamental question as its point of departure to obtain a better understanding of the personal experiences of Ottomans in the Balkan Wars and the Great War. We thereby aimed to examine how these experiences add to and differ from insights afforded by visual and audio testimonies, as well as the accounts of the Ottoman Empire’s military allies.

The conference was convened by Yaşar Tolga Cora and Richard Wittmann as a collaboration of the Department of History of Boğaziçi University and the Orient-Institut Istanbul, with the invaluable additional support of the Netherlands Institute in Turkey, the German Consulate General Istanbul, and the German Embassy in Ankara. We were very fortunate to be able to hold the conference at three distinguished locations in Istanbul – at the *Kaisersaal* of the German Consulate Istanbul, on the historic campus of Boğaziçi University, and on the property of the Historic Summer Residence of the German Ambassador in Turkey. We are greatly indebted to our two keynote speakers. Eugen Rogan opened up the conference with his keynote address, “Between Loyalty and Disillusion: Arab Memoirs of the Ottoman Great War.” His talk addressed the conflicting attitudes of Arab subjects captured in a range of diaries and memoirs that remain important documents on the Arab experience of the Great War and which served as the primary resource for his lecture. Edhem Eldem, our second keynote speaker, whose contribution is part of the present volume, enlightened us on “The Aesthetics of War: Ottoman Martial Iconography Under German Influence.” His lecture widened the focus of the conference by analyzing the importance of Germany’s “grammar of propaganda” in the design of Ottoman decorations and illustrated material. We are grateful for the dedicated assistance of Hilal Cemile Tümer, Benan Grams, and Christian Hillman in the organization of the conference. This volume is an outcome of this joint endeavor and all its contributions.

Personal narratives have recently begun to attract a remarkable interest among military and social historians of the Middle East in their work on the wars from 1912 until 1918, or to 1923, while the history of the region is being integrated into the development of a global history of *the Greater War*. Leila Tarazi Fawaz's *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Harvard University Press, 2014), Yiğit Akin's *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire* (Stanford University Press, 2018), Eyal Ginio's *The Ottoman Culture of Defeat: The Balkan Wars and Their Aftermath* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and Mehmet Beşikçi's *Cihan Harbi'ni Yaşamak ve Hatırlamak: Osmanlı Askerlerinin Cephe Hatıraları ve Türkiye'de Birinci Dünya Savaşı Hafızası* (Experiencing and Remembering the First World War: War Memoirs of Ottoman Soldiers and the Memory of the First World War in Turkey, İletişim Yayınları, 2019) are just a few such works which utilize personal sources left by Ottoman soldiers to complement the official documents of the belligerent states during these conflicts.

Nonetheless, a great number of memoirs and diaries written by soldiers and civilians of various ethnic and religious backgrounds from the Ottoman fronts and penned in a variety of languages still sit on the shelves of libraries throughout the Balkans and the Middle East – or on private bookshelves – waiting to be discovered and made accessible to a wider audience. By establishing a dialogue between researchers from different academic disciplines and their sources in a variety of languages and genres, this conference contributes directly to the Orient-Institut Istanbul's comprehensive research field on Self-Narratives as Sources for the History of the Late Ottoman Empire.¹

The memoirs of Ottoman soldiers are essential sources not only to understand Ottoman society and its army in times of conflict, but also and above all because they were for the most part produced by the rank-and-file soldiers, rather than the military leadership. With the introduction of a mandatory conscription system for all Ottoman males after the Constitutional Revolution of 1908, military service became a part of daily life for both the soldiers and their families on the home front during the ensuing wars. Thus, autobiographical sources on conscription and the war effort provide a microcosm of the functioning of Ottoman society under these specific, challenging circumstances. They afford rare glimpses into ordinary individuals' views that also throw light on how the relations between different ethnic groups were constituted, shaped, and destroyed during these years. More importantly, unlike many archival sources, they reveal to researchers the fears, anxieties, and aspirations of the Ottoman population in the last decade of the empire.

¹ See <https://www.oiist.org/en/selbstzeugnisse-als-quellen-zur-geschichte-des-spaten-osmanischen-reichs>.

With this in mind, the conference brought together some of the foremost experts working on life narratives from the Ottoman theater of the First World War in order to scrutinize some of the predominant national(-ist) narratives of the Balkan Wars and the Great War and to elucidate the relation between the official representations and first-hand observations of historic events. Like the presentations in the conference, the expanded articles in this volume aim to discuss and comprehend the politics of loyalty in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire, the impact of the war experience on a multi-ethnic army and its civilian personnel, and its repercussions for the construction of independent nation states after the war. They all highlight the experiences of common soldiers, medical and other civilian staff, and their families as opposed to those of the commanding officers and elites, which used to dominate the scholarship on World War I in the Middle East. They also investigate the practices of remembering and writing memoirs of the war period and the impact of the post-imperial political and social landscapes on reconstructing personal experience. Last but not least, some contributions aim to bring in non-textual forms of personal narratives and discuss their potential contribution to the wider understanding of the war experience.

As an outcome of this conference, the articles in this special issue of *Archiv orientální* focus on the Ottoman Empire and primarily aim to make a significant contribution to the scholarship on World War I. Despite their focus on the experiences of the Ottomans and their allies during the war, several themes resonate beyond the geographic and temporal borders of the Ottoman Empire and are in close dialogue with the wider scholarship. One such theme is the process of writing autobiographies and questions related to the nature of autobiographical writings and memoirs. Mehmet Beşikçi, who is among the pioneers of memory studies of World War I in Turkey, discusses issues related to the study of memoirs by low-ranking officers in the Ottoman army in his contribution to the volume. By doing so he not only gives voice to a particular group of individuals from a non-elite background, but also addresses the broader limitations of the predominant focus on the “big men’s narratives” in the field of autobiography and memory studies, a point which is covered in many of the articles in this issue. Erol Köroğlu’s presentation at the conference, unfortunately not included in this volume, focused on another central issue of autobiographical writings, namely that of “the oscillation of [an] autobiography between fact and fiction.” Köroğlu’s presentation approached autobiographical works as docu-novels, which in his words “display a delicate and curious plot structure as complicated as a good novel,” and thus showed the indispensable contribution that cross-disciplinary approaches to the field offer in order to take account of the literary aspects of life writings. Further contributions in the volume

bring to our attention certain issues related to the nature of autobiographical sources and ego documents. For instance, Charalampos Minasidis's article in this volume utilizes oral history accounts alongside memoirs, which not only underlines the variety of sources in the field of autobiography studies but also brings into the discussion the differences between oral testimonies and written autobiographical accounts. Likewise, Naz Vardar's presentation at the conference, also not part of the volume, utilized sound recordings of POWs from internment camps and highlighted the performative aspects of ego documents. Her presentation not only underlined the heuristic potential of different types of source, but also introduced new methodological approaches and research questions to the field.

Some of the abovementioned concerns and contributions about autobiographical writings cut across other major themes. For instance, a focus on narratology does not eliminate the role of the historical context within which the memoirs were penned. Benjamin Fortna's article departs from the impact of the time period within which the self is presented while also centering his contribution around the problem of the place of readership and retrospective writing, addressing – alongside some other contributors – questions of the autobiographical pact.

Fortna's article also brings into discussion female authorship and particularly women's memoir writing, which is connected to another universal theme in autobiographical writings: gender. The articles by Nicole van Os, Eyal Ginio, and Yaşar Tolga Cora each approach gender from different perspectives. Van Os's article, with its focus on female autobiographers and their experience of the war, touches upon pivotal questions regarding women's autobiographical writings in general as she challenges the manly narratives of the war. Her conclusions have a higher resonance with the ways in which historians construct the narratives of war from male narrative(s). Indeed, the articles by Ginio and Cora shed light on masculinity as they work on case studies of individual soldiers whose participation in the war and narratives of the events were constructive processes in the making of their manliness. Yet, with their focus on members of ethnic groups which were not dominant in society, they bring to our attention not only the intricate interplay between war-making and masculinity, but also how categories of social distinction were knit together with ethnic identities and sociopolitical hierarchies.

Speaking of hierarchies, Orientalism is yet another theme that cuts across different articles and has a resonance in the field. Articles by Johann Strauss, Kent Schull, and Gábor Fodor in this volume, and the paper presented at the conference by Richard Wittmann, tackle this issue from different angles and by examining different media. Strauss focuses on representations of the "other"

in photographs and postcards, Schull examines sketches of a k.u.k. military officer, and Fodor opens up the world of less-studied Hungarian sources, whereas Wittmann traced the other in the autobiographical renderings of a young German soldier in the “Orient.” Yet, these works add to the growing Orientalist critique in the broader scholarship – through a discussion of the presence of the friendly other in the article by Strauss, in the limits of an Orientalist gaze in the case of a unique artist and his paintings in Schull’s article, in the ideas about the friend and even the brother “other” in the Hungarian accounts examined by Fodor, and through the naïveté in the account of a young soldier who presented himself to his readers in the style of a tourist exploring a far-away, exotic land rather than as a combatant, as described by Wittmann.

The special issue also includes three review essays addressing the growing body of scholarship and writings on the Greater War in Turkish by experts in the field. Review essays by Gizem Tongo, Talha Çiçek, and Toygun Altıntaş aim to bring this body of literature to the attention of non-Turkish speaking scholars. All three discuss the contributions of the works while also evaluating them in a broader context by situating them within wider historiographic trends and national politics.

We also found it apt to round off the volume with the insights of Abulhamit Kırmızı. In his epilogue, Kırmızı addresses the individual contributions of each article to the scholarship. While doing so, Kırmızı discusses the potential benefits of the growing number of autobiographical works related to the study of World War I. Yet, he also warns researchers about the challenges posed by an expanding corpus of World War I studies while pointing out new directions and questions for research. The conference and the special issue of “Fighting Under the Same Banner: Memories from the Ottoman Theater of the Great War” cannot hope to achieve more than to develop a fruitful discussion and suggest new and promising avenues for research in the fields of life writing and the history of World War I on the Ottoman fronts.

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