Yiğit Akın’s book, *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans’ Great War and the Devastation of an Empire*, is a well-researched and sophisticated study of the impact of the Great War on Ottoman politics, society, and culture. Arguing against nationalist perspectives that highlight wartime Ottoman pride and sacrifice, the book places ordinary men and women and the horrific suffering and death that they endured at the forefront of the narrative.

At the same time, the author elaborates on the political and military developments that provide crucial context for the events at home. In fact, the linkages between (constantly changing) wartime policies in Istanbul and the experience of Ottoman civilians is central to this study, for its author insists that the war blurred the lines between the military and home fronts and brought civilians into a new, brutal, and intimate contact with the state. Military action took place inside the borders of the empire, and civilians and soldiers in the hundreds of thousands crossed paths, particularly in Anatolia, as refugees—new and old—and deportees moved along roads clogged with conscripts, armies, and deserters. Most crucial, the state imposed unprecedented and debilitating demands on the human and material resources of society and aggressively deepened its reach over the bodies and minds of its citizens. In the process, it altered notions of civic identity and citizenship.

The book is comprised of six chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. It weaves a single analytic narrative that expertly links wartime decisions made by the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) government in Istanbul both to the crucial context of Balkan and great power politics and to the socioeconomic and cultural impact of these policies on people’s lives. In chapter 1, “From the Balkan Wars to the Great War,” Akın provides a succinct argument for the impact of the Balkan Wars (1912-13) on Ottoman Great War policies. The remaining five chapters of the book are thematically organized. Chapter 2, “From the Fields to the Ranks,” offers a fascinating look at Ottoman mobilization that, beginning three months before the empire’s official declaration of war in October 1914, harvested men in the hundreds of thousands in a process so disorganized and harsh, it came to define the horrors of the overall war experience. Chapter 3, “Filling the Ranks, Emptying Homes,” considers the state’s attempts at linking the war and home fronts through a sophisticated propaganda machine, including the promotion of the cult of the heroic Ottoman soldier; it also considers resistance to conscription, which became a “field of contestation” (p. 83). Chapter 4, “Feeding the Army, Starving the People,” considers how, despite its weak finances and underdeveloped infrastructure or perhaps because of them, the government launched a series of measures to relentlessly extract and transport every resource from Ottoman society, whether in the form of food, animals, goods, or taxes. Ottomans experienced this process of provisioning as an insatiable “official brigandage” (p. 113) that “obliterated the boundaries between the military and the civilian” (p. 112) and left most people in poverty and despair. In chapter 5, “In the Home: Wives and Mothers,” Akın depicts the suffering of Ottoman women as mothers, wives, and desperate breadwinners, insisting on registering this gendered dimension of the Ottoman war story. He argues that the war also brought Ottoman women, both urban and ru-
ral, into close contact with the state, giving rise to new understandings of gender roles and social expectations. In the sixth and final chapter, “On the Road: Deportees and Refugees,” the author analyzes the policies behind and the experience of Muslim war refugees and the Armenian Genocide.

Akın’s book is an important contribution to the scholarship on both the Ottoman Empire at war as well as the field of World War I studies. It makes judicious use of a rich array of divergent primary sources, most compelling, a strong collection of folk songs, poems, and contemporaneous accounts. In addition to numerous official reports, policy directives, and newspaper articles, including propaganda pieces, his sources include foreign diplomatic correspondence and missionaries’ reports and diaries. These sources are expertly integrated into a sociocultural study that is both historically contextualized and deeply grounded in the scholarship on the Great War, both Ottoman and European.

The book ties different aspects of the totality of this war by moving seamlessly among different orders of analysis. At the political level, he effectively traces the government’s constantly evolving wartime policies–reactive, determined, contradictory at times, and always ready to sacrifice every human and material resource to the war effort, including its decision to engage in a project of “demographic engineering” (pp. 10, 164, 193), both regarding the management of millions of old and new Muslim refugees in Anatolia and the extermination of its Armenian population. At the military level, he insists on linking both the huge losses of men on the Russian and Gallipoli fronts to the panicked drive to recruit. At the economic level, he clearly elaborates on the facts and figures of the Ottoman military and wartime economy, including the impact of overtaxing the population (and the overland roads and rails), and the hardship and economic losses resulting from conscription policies that cancelled the sole-support exemption, progressively raised and lowered the ages of recruitment, and deprived whole villages of men and agricultural labor.

Akın’s close look at how these broad political, military, and economic realities translated into social upheaval and suffering is exemplary. He probes the destruction of the fiber of the family and the crisis it generated among Ottoman women and details the hopeless treks of refugees and the agony of Armenian deportees. Arguing that the CUP government was fully aware of the importance of mobilizing the hearts as well as the bodies of its citizens, he explores its (novel) Islamic discourse, its insistence on Ottoman (and Muslim) victimization, and its efforts in propagating the wartime cult of Mehmetçik, or “Little Mehmet,” who embodied the new “patriotic identity” of the ordinary Ottoman soldier (p. 83). Against this official propaganda, Akın evocatively makes heard the voices of lament and sorrow expressed in the ballads and accounts of the period. And he insists that the war transformed Ottoman notions of citizenship, including women’s notions of civic identity.

Akın often references the war experiences of other World War I belligerents, inviting readers to take a comparative approach that highlights the unique both in comparison to others’ experiences and to the historical experience of the Ottoman Empire. He effectively adapts important insights from the huge field of World War I studies to the specificity of Ottoman history. For example, he argues for the “totalizing” (p. 5) effects of the war on Ottoman society, insists on integrally linking the war and home fronts, pays attention to the question of gender, and explores the cult of the Ottoman soldier. At the same time, he reminds us of the specificity of the Ottoman experience, and particularly the factors that intensified the suffering of civilians. The empire had just emerged from a recent and debilitating war; it fought on four different fronts, all of which were inside its borders; it underwent debilitating blockades (made deadly by an underdeveloped road and rail systems); and its economy was in shambles. He acknowledges the butchery of war everywhere, including the suffering of civilians, but singles out the Ottoman experience for the extent of its refugee problem and the state’s descent into ethnic cleansing and extermination.

Akın’s discussion of the Armenian Genocide is noteworthy in the way that it is integrated into the history of the Ottoman war, including the CUP’s broader schemes for “demographic engineering.” While he is emphatic that the government’s management of Muslim refugees was “categorically different” from the plans regarding Armenians that began with deportations and “gradually radicalized over time, assuming genocidal proportions” (p. 164), he argues that they were both “orchestrated to reshape the empire’s demographic structure” (p. 163) and reflected the CUP’s post-Balkan Wars understanding of demography: the crucial role of human resources in war and the unreliability of non-Muslims in wartime leading to prewar policies of “unmixing populations” (p. 165).

Akın’s analysis of the CUP’s politics of religion is nuanced and contextualized. He showcases the centrality of religious discourses and imagery in the construction
of soldiering as a "sacred duty" (p. 80). Tracing to the Balkan Wars Ottoman appreciation of the power of religion in fanning patriotism, he insists that wartime Islamic discourses were used to safe-guard the survival of the empire. Equally noteworthy is his close study of Ottoman war propaganda through plays, sermons, speeches, songs, and poems, including a poem written by the sultan. It looks at the manufacturing of the cult of the ordinary soldier and notes the new rhetoric regarding the families left behind.

Akın’s discussion of mobilization (and the provisioning policies of the state) as lived experience is compelling for its evocation of the sights and sounds involved in the abrupt and terrifying changes it brought to everyday life. Mobilization, or the seferberlik, which started in August 1914, meant the overnight appearance of colorful posters in newspapers and on public buildings and of town criers and drummers calling men to arms; it also meant the disappearance of men (as well as animals) from villages and urban centers, and of harvests rotting in the fields. Indeed, the three-month mobilization period was so crushing in its impact that “seferberlik” became the war’s name across the empire.

In his analysis of the Ottoman home front, Akın highlights both the suffering involved and the growing agency of urban and rural women. Mass mobilization (and particularly the abolishment of the sole-breadwinner exemption) led to “oceans of sorrow” (p. 55) and endured in collective memory. At the same time, the new intrusiveness of the state in women’s lives, including the separation allowance for military families, introduced novel elements in state-family relations based on a new "politics of sacrifice" (p. 157). He looks at petitions and telegrams (often collectively written) by wives and mothers to officials regarding their hardships and expectations in order to detail the extent of women’s suffering as well as to demonstrate their civic engagement and resistance.

Akın’s study of the Ottoman civilian experience of the Great War brings to life a rich trove of sources. The book’s strong research base, its sophisticated and multidisciplinary analysis, and comparative approach make it a valuable addition to the lively field of Ottoman Great War studies and to the broader scholarship on the history of the Great War.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52159

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.