



**Eyal Ginio.** *The Ottoman Culture of Defeat: The Balkan Wars and their Aftermath.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xix + 377 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-026403-1.

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The title of this book may strike one as odd. After all, the experience of defeat had been painfully familiar to the Ottomans for at least two centuries before 1912. To be sure, the practically uninterrupted sequence of lost wars chipped away at the sultans' domains and forced them to undertake a series of increasingly Westernizing reforms. Even the last autocratic padishah and caliph was eventually reclaimed for the Tanzimat as the creator of an Ottoman territorial civic nation.[1] Indeed, the expansion of education and Western influence under Abdulhamid II had been a necessary precondition for the emergence of a larger readership. The relaxation of censorship following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 was another key factor in the lead-up to the traumatic experience of the Balkan Wars. All those changes explain Eyal Ginio's reliance on a dizzying variety of published sources—the press and the memoirs in Ottoman Turkish (including works by Ottoman Armenians and Jews), in Arabic (mostly from British-controlled Egypt), and in Ladino.

But this is my interpretation of “the culture of defeat.” Unfortunately, the author never clearly defines the term but seems to equate it with the discourse of defeat. Recognizing his debt to the studies of the impact of total war on European societies, the author was inspired by “the discourse of loyalty and belonging vs. exclusion and

marginalization as presumably presented during the war” (p. 4). Ginio sees his task as filling the sociocultural gap in the Balkan Wars studies dominated by military and nationalist historians. However, at the same time he references an impressive number of existing high-quality works on post-Balkan Wars feminism, ethnic cleansing, and literary and architectural changes. The author succeeds in treating the Balkan Wars as the key experience of the late Ottoman society, redefining the boundaries of national inclusion and exclusion. This approach is in marked contrast to two existing schools of thought—discussing the Balkan Wars as another milestone in the transition to the Turkish Republic or as an ominous prelude to the world wars of the twentieth century.

The book consists of six chapters, organized thematically rather than chronologically. In chapter 1 “The Balkan Wars and Ottoman Society,” the author rightly emphasizes the outbreak of the First Balkan War in early October 1912. Patriotic fever gripped the Ottoman educated public—both spontaneous and CUP-organized demonstrations marched to Balkan embassies in Istanbul and consulates in the provinces to protest their provocations and aggression. It may be an overstatement to argue that “the public opinion” demanded war on the basis of only Ottoman Turkish and Ladino publications. The impression of Ottoman unity

was diluted by the Islamist press that coached the incipient conflict as the latest stage in the struggle between Islam and Christianity. For a fuller picture, it would have been helpful at this point to explain how the Christian Ottoman press reacted to the war's opening salvos.

However widely shared, the expectations of Ottoman victory were first put on hold in October and November 1912 when the news of defeats was suppressed. Then there was a rude awakening to the reality of the Ottoman military collapse. The mainstream newspapers rather abruptly shifted from anticipating Ottoman triumphs to focusing on anti-Muslim atrocities in the "lost provinces" (p. 48). The reports about Greek-Bulgarian tensions in Thessaloniki brought hopes that the Balkan allies would turn on each other as they had done during the so-called Macedonian Struggle (1903-8). But in Kavalla Bulgarian and Greek nationalist guerrillas joined forces to loot and terrorize the local Muslim and Jewish populations in the power vacuum before the arrival of regular Bulgarian units.

After this brief survey of the Ottoman reactions to the war as it unfolded, chapter 2 breaks them down. This chapter is the heart of the book, hence its name—"The Balkan Wars and the Shaping of the Ottoman Culture of Defeat." All defeated societies are understandably busy with expressing grief, soul-searching, and assigning guilt. The main contributors were Ottoman Turkish intellectuals and veteran officers who tended to use interchangeably "Ottoman," "Turkish," and "Muslim." In their contemporary articles and later memoirs, Arab, Jewish, and Christian authors also tended to write for their linguistic and coreligionist groups. Thus, the Arab writers in the sample displayed much less emotion in regards to the lost Balkan provinces and even to the Muslim expellees, psychologically and geographically remote from their part of the still vast empire.

In Ginio's reading, most authors attacked Ottomanism for the failure to produce a generation

of citizen-soldiers. It was not without an element of self-justification that the Ottoman officers in particular deplored the low morale and the lack of heroes like the defenders of Plevna in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-8. They argued that there should have been a call to jihad to match the religious fervor of the Balkan Christian armies, which allegedly explained their motivation as well as the atrocities they committed in the spirit of the medieval Crusaders.

The Ottoman commentators also tended to describe Ottoman Christian soldiers and civilians as typically untrustworthy and often treacherous. These stereotypes would enable murderous policies during the Great War. Having rejected civic secular nationalism, post-Balkan War publications proceeded to question the central pillar of Ottomanism. Europe no longer deserved to be held up as a development model because the Great Powers failed to intervene and even to clearly speak in defense of the persecuted Balkan Muslims. The alternative was an illiberal communitarian society based on Pan-Islamic solidarity.

Actually, there were promising signs of something like that emerging during the Balkan Wars, as detailed in chapter 3, "Regeneration, Revenge, and Regaining Honor." Quite a few foreign Muslims volunteered to join the Ottoman army. They came from as far away as Afghanistan, India, and Egypt. Many more sent donations to the Ottoman Red Crescent, especially from the Indian and Egyptian branches of the same. Such relief organizations also served as a socially acceptable avenue for Ottoman elite women to participate in national mobilization.

Ironically, to realize this Pan-Islamic potential most Ottoman commentators pointed to examples of recovery and revenge in European history—Prussia after 1806 and France after 1870 or Russia during the Mongol domination. But Japan eclipsed Europe as a model of a successfully modernized contemporary society that preserved its traditions and sovereignty. Surprisingly, Bulgaria also in-

spired admiration. While its soldiers were decried as ruthless thugs in the Ottoman Turkish press, many Ottoman officers in their diaries on the front or in Bulgarian captivity extolled their military preparedness based on patriotic education. While Bulgaria was “the chief model,” Serbia also received grudging praise while Greece got no credit at all. Sadly, the vision of a strong Ottoman nation unified through required schooling in Ottoman Turkish clashed with the Arab advocacy of greater decentralization.

The Arab autonomists must have been worried not only about the pro-Turkish bias of Ottoman educational reformers but also about the government-sponsored Pan-Turk youth organizations mentioned in chapter 4, “Children in the Ottoman Literature of Defeat.” It was natural for the defeated empire to imitate the victorious nation-states even though their ethnocentric logic was hardly compatible with Ottoman diversity.

One element of reformed patriotic education was to instill into Muslim children a love for commerce. The next chapter, “The Project of the National Economy,” argues that the Balkan Wars ended the debate between the supporters of private capital and those of state-sponsored development. Dirigism became the order of the day since both the Ottoman commentators and statesmen were now determined to free the national economy from domination by European capitalists and their local non-Muslim junior partners. Ginio argues that they were more obsessed with foreigners than with the deeper causes of backwardness.

The Ottoman Greeks in particular were the target of criticism and persecution. Their “treason” was symbolized by Georgios Averoff, an Ottoman-born Greek who had made a fortune in Alexandria allegedly ripping off “gullible Muslims.” He willed the funds used to purchase for the Greek navy the Italian-built armored cruiser “Averoff” that disrupted Ottoman communications in the Aegean in 1912-13. In 1913, the Sublime Porte more or less openly sponsored economic

boycotts of Christian and Jewish merchants with the goal of creating a Muslim bourgeoisie as the foundation of national regeneration (*intibah*).

More insidiously, such boycotts often went hand-in-hand with “daily harassment” in the provincial centers of Eastern Thrace such as experienced by the Jewish community in Dimetoka following the withdrawal of the Bulgarian troops in the Second Balkan War. Flooded by complaints, the central government distanced itself from the local Ottoman authorities and instead focused national attention on the celebration of the retaking of Edirne. The event was scripted in the imperial and Islamic spirit to serve as the legitimating symbol of the beginning of Ottoman revival and of the Young Turk regime’s rightful claim to the inheritance of the sultans.

In other studies of this period, there is too much emphasis on this moment of optimism. Demobilized soldiers ensured an economic upsurge in late 1913 and early 1914. The transatlantic car and airplane craze finally reached and transformed Constantinople, soon infecting Anatolia and Syria. After recent misery and humiliation, the Ottoman future looked bright again.[2] If that was the case, then it is hard to understand why so many Ottoman Turkish soldiers shot their Christian comrades in the back in the very first Ottoman campaign of the Great War described later in the same book.[3] In his conclusion, Ginio rightly stresses the ominous legacy of the Balkan Wars—the Ottoman elite became determined to modernize the state to save the empire, to resist the West, and to avenge the defeat, increasingly marginalizing non-Muslim and non-Turkish minorities and not shying away from ethnic cleansing and eventually, genocide.

In sum, the Ottoman “culture of defeat” seems to be more fragmented than the total war culture in European societies following the Great War. The inclusion of Ottoman Christian publications would definitely strengthen this impression. Another limitation is the paucity of archival sources,

but that is understandable given the focus on discourse analysis. Overall, Ginio's book makes an important contribution to both European and Middle Eastern studies, skillfully rescuing the experience of the Balkan Wars without ignoring their longer-term effects.

#### Notes

[1]. Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London: I. B.Tauris, 1998).

[2]. Eugen Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: the Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 28-31.

[3]. Rogan, *Fall of the Ottomans*, 105-106.

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