

*A Crust of Bread, For the Love of God! The  
Ottoman Homefront in World War I*

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### Eastern Provinces of Ottoman Empire - Turkish Armenia - Western Armenia



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In his memoir *Five Years in Turkey*, the head of the German military mission, Otto Viktor Karl Liman von Sanders wrote, “Malaria and dysentery exacted many victims during this hot summer. All hospitals and convalescent homes far to the rear were over-crowded... the Turkish soldiers had no summer clothes, but wore cloth uniforms which might better be called rags... fully three fourths of them had not any underclothing...” (Liman 266). This was the dismal spectacle which greeted the German general after yet another retreat in the face of overwhelming British military superiority, in the last few months of the war in 1918. Although the general’s observation only referenced Ottoman soldiers, it can hardly be expected that the civilian population of the Ottoman Empire fared much better. World War I effected untold misery in the Middle East, and starvation, disease, and intercommunal strife joined forces to wreak demographic havoc in the region. In Greater Syria, for example, massive numbers of civilians perished from the starvation which was the result of wartime rationing, requisitions, floods, the Allied blockade of the coast, and a particularly severe locust plague in 1915. By the end of 1916, Beirut had lost more than half of its prewar population (Gingeras 216, Schatkowski-Schilcher 229). The Ottoman term *safarbarlik* (mobilization), which ordinarily refers to military mobilization, has come to encapsulate the privation and suffering of families during the four long years of war.

Drawing on the formidable corpus of memoir literature left behind by participants in and observers of the war, many of whom were soldiers, physicians, diplomats, archeologists, and missionaries, which constitutes a hitherto untapped gold mine for scholars looking to understand the Ottoman homefront, I argue for the existence of a paradox, in which the Ottoman state

asserted greater control over the civilian population in order to meet the various demands of war, while at the same time remaining woefully impotent in terms of maintaining order and rule of law. Furthermore, I argue that Ottoman civilian experiences differed substantially depending on what region they lived in, whether it was in the Caucasus or Eastern Anatolia, Greater Syria, Western Anatolia, or Mesopotamia. This complicates historical approaches that focus on a monolithic homefront, and also strengthens our understanding of the everyday experiences of ordinary Ottoman civilians who were just trying to get by, whether they lived in the heartlands or the very fringes of the Empire. The story of the Ottoman peasant, nomad, or urbanite, and their myriad sufferings or occasional triumphs should be told just as much as the story of “Great Men”, such as Cemal Pasha, who was the governor of Syria and commander of the Fourth Army. My aim is to unite the story of Ottoman suffering during the war and the complex interplay between Ottoman state and society with the wealth of German accounts which are available. Furthermore, I wish to problematize the notion of the strong state which is frequently taken for granted in the case of war, and indicate some tentative conclusions as to how the Germans reflected state-society relations.

To do a thorough, side-by-side comparison on each of these four regions would be worthy of a dissertation rather than a humble thesis. Therefore, I shall direct most of my attention towards one of these fronts, Eastern Anatolia. I came to decide upon this region, when, throughout the course of my research, it became apparent that in some very surprising ways, conditions in this region were shown to be counter to what I had assumed about life on the home-front. In addition, although there has been a renewed interest in the home-front, particularly in Greater Syria (I discuss this further below), Eastern Anatolia has remained relatively neglected. Most of the sparse historical analyses of the home-front in Eastern Anatolia have focused

overwhelmingly on the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian Genocide had, and continues to have, far-reaching demographic, political, and even moral implications, but it was far from being the singular facet of life in the region during the war. As such, it constitutes an important part of my discussion, but does not dominate it. I should also indicate that because I believe in the value of comparative studies, be they transnational, transcultural, or even intrastate, I will include certain references to conditions on the other fronts, to delineate the differences between the fronts. This will, I hope, give a better understanding of the varied conditions existing across the Ottoman Empire, and challenge the notion of a monolithic home-front.

The structure for this paper will be thematic. I look at the issues of food, transportation, and disease in Eastern Anatolia. Due to the somewhat arbitrary nature of geographical division, the reader may find to his or her surprise that certain places are not where they would imagine; for example, I situate Diyarbakir in Eastern Anatolia as opposed to Mesopotamia. The author has generally attempted to link the cities and villages to “spheres of military influence”. In other words, to continue the example, Diyarbakir is situated in the Eastern Anatolia/Caucasus region because it was the base of operations for the Ottoman Second Army, which participated in the Caucasus campaign.

In discussing the Ottoman state, we should acknowledge that there existed, rather than a single, top-down or monolithic state, several different branches of the state, which entailed a very complex interplay. There was of course the central administration in Constantinople, led by the Committee of Union and Progress, and the provincial or regional governments. Furthermore, we should make the distinction between the military and civil authorities, with the civil authorities performing their duties as functionaries of the provincial governments. The gendarmerie was also typically an extension of the provincial governments, although they

sometimes acted in the capacity of executors of the central administration's will as well. To assume that there was complete harmony between these branches is to misunderstand the interstate relations and levels of cooperation between these branches. Provincial governments could function independently of the central administration, and the civil and military authorities were often locked in a competition over policy and especially resources. Precisely because it was wartime, martial law granted the military authorities the de facto right to assume the responsibility of governing and organizing society. In addition, because the central administration was overwhelmingly concerned with the major questions involved with running a war, it was often left to the discretion of the provincial governors to formulate policy in regards to requisitions, enforcement of the law, and other matters. This divide between military and civil, between provincial and central, is one which had to be negotiated at various points by the Germans. Moreover, although the Committee of Union and Progress was the only party in the government, there were often influential actors outside the official state bureaucracy who were able to direct policy, such as the local notables of the Syrian provinces. Nevertheless, I refer to "the Ottoman state" when talking about one or all of these branches, making distinctions when clarification is in order.

A considerable body of witnesses of and actors in the events which unfolded in the region were "the Germans". The substantial presence of Germans in the Ottoman Empire, particularly as members of a military mission to reform the Ottoman Army, significantly contributed to the Ottoman decision to enter World War I on the side of the Central Powers in 1914. Many of the officers and soldiers who subsequently fought in the Ottoman Army have left behind a wealth of memoir literature dealing with their wartime experiences. Scholars have thoroughly interrogated these sources, primarily looking for ways to understand German-Ottoman political, diplomatic,

and especially military objectives within the broader context of a German-Ottoman alliance. For instance, Mustafa Aksakal has examined the Ottoman quest for an alliance on the eve of the war. However, among these scholarly works, it is Ulrich Trumpener's monograph *Germany and the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1918*, first published in 1968, which has remained as the standard, canonical work (or at least the most comprehensive one) on the subject. Trumpener analyzes the military and diplomatic aspects of the alliance, yet with little attention to other facets which include the social, economic, and even cultural dimensions of the relationship between the Ottomans and their German counterparts.

By contrast, when scholars have looked at the social and material conditions, they have typically relied upon official Ottoman government documents, and paid little attention to the observations made by the Germans throughout the war. Furthermore, most of the scholarly focus has been directed towards Greater Syria. One of the notable exceptions to this rule has been Mehmet Besikci, whose pathbreaking work on the mobilization of Ottoman society is invaluable for understanding the home-front in Anatolia. Nevertheless, the catastrophic dimensions of famine and plague in Greater Syria seem to have attracted the attention of scholars in a way which the other regions of the Empire have not. In this category, some notable works have been written by Ryan Gingeras, M. Talha Cicek, and Linda Schatkowski-Schilcher, all of which deal with the Syrian state and society in the face of disaster. Regarding works which treat the other provinces, one of the best examples available would be Sevket Pamuk's chapter on the Ottoman economy during the Great War in Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison's *The Economics of World War I*. Although technically an economic history, Pamuk does not hesitate to delve into the social aspects of the Great War, paying special attention to the social impact of the food shortages (Pamuk 118, 121, 125). The problem with most of these social histories is that

Ottoman sources are typically given preference, with German sources playing little if any role in the discussion. Moreover, little has been written on areas outside of Syria. With social histories of the Ottoman Empire coming into their own, and with the well-established body of German memoir literature, I think it is high time that these two strands were united in a single analysis of the Ottoman home-front.

The suffering of the Ottomans and the increasingly apparent disorder of Ottoman society was noticed by German<sup>1</sup> observers within the Empire. The sizable presence of these Germans was the historical result of a slow yet steady strengthening of ties between the Ottoman Empire and the German state that had begun in the 1830s. German missionaries established religious schools in the Ottoman Empire, German advisors served on the Ottoman General Staff, and German companies such as Deutsche Bank invested heavily in the Ottoman infrastructure (Fuhrmann 47). Furthermore, starting in the 1830's with Helmuth von Moltke, the Germans often contributed a significant number of military advisors to the Ottoman Empire. The military mission of Colmar von der Goltz in the Hamidian period of the late nineteenth century was critical in the development of a modern Ottoman officer corps, and von der Goltz inspired an entire generation of Ottoman military students with his ideas on the military and the nation. Continuing the precedent, at the beginning of 1914, one of the largest groups of Germans in the Empire was the military mission under Liman von Sanders. Sent by the decree of the Kaiser to the Sultan in 1913 to retrain the shattered Ottoman army in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars, the mission was quickly integrated into the Ottoman military command structure upon the outbreak of hostilities in the Middle East. From then until the end of the war, Germans would participate in practically all Ottoman campaigns, including the Caucasus, at Gallipoli, in Mesopotamia and

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<sup>1</sup> A few of my sources come from non-Germans, but most were connected with the German Empire in some way. Hence, I use "Germans" as an all-encompassing term to refer to all outside observers I discuss here.



Persia, and in Greater Syria/Palestine. Of these fronts, the one in Greater Syria<sup>2</sup> would feature the largest contingent of Germans. This was at first due to the critical importance of the Suez Canal<sup>3</sup>, and later, as a result of the creation of the Yildirim Army Group. Yildirim<sup>4</sup>, which was created after the fall of Baghdad in 1917 for the explicit purpose of retaking that historically important city, was funded with German gold, staffed almost entirely by German officers, and headed by a German general, Erich von Falkenhayn (Liman 173-178). It also boasted the “Asia Corps”, a brigade-sized force consisting entirely of German divisions (Erickson 169-170). The Germans of Yildirim never saw Baghdad. Instead, they were diverted to the Palestine front, where the strategic situation had become exceedingly serious, and where they remained for the rest of the war. At the war’s end, there were almost 20,000 Germans fighting on behalf of the Ottoman sultan (Pamuk 117).

One wonders what these Germans, as well as others, who suddenly found themselves thousands of miles from their homes in a strange and unfamiliar place, thought of their new surroundings and their new allies. One also wonders about the experiences of the ordinary Ottoman civilians, many of whom had their lives rudely interrupted by the harsh circumstances which war and, in some cases, the Ottoman state, forced upon them.

Ottoman-language accounts of the experiences of the ordinary Ottoman civilians during the war years are, outside of the official Ottoman government documents, few in number. Memoirs or diaries which exist are either untranslated, or written by high officials or officers, who tend to ignore the plight of the ordinary Ottoman citizen. The exception would be the

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<sup>3</sup> The fundamental importance of the Suez Canal to the British Empire as a link to India heightened its value as a potential prize of war, which, along with the temptation of regaining a former jewel of the Ottoman Empire, led the Ottoman General Staff and the German High Command to commit considerable forces to the task of seizing the canal.

<sup>4</sup> Yildirim means “lightning” in Turkish. The Germans referred to the Army Group as *Heeresgruppe F*, or “Army Group F”.

relatively recently published *Year of the Locust: The Diary of Ihsan Turjman*, a diary of a somewhat low-ranking Arab officer which miraculously survived the war. The vast majority of this paper relies on the rich body of memoir literature from German officers who served in or commanded various Ottoman armies throughout the course of the war, as well as from German diplomats who acted as liaisons between Berlin and Istanbul. Most of these memoirs remain untranslated from the original German, and were written in the Gothic script which was still used during the Second Reich. All of the translations are my own. These memoirs were typically written in the immediate aftermath of the war, although there continued to be memoirs that were published in the late twenties. In addition, some memoirs of German physicians who served as members of the sanitary or medical corps also exist. While these memoirs form the typical foundation of any account of German-Ottoman relations during World War I, they are not without their limitations. As historian Erik Zürcher puts it, these sources are too “top-down”, and can at times be limited in their ability to give us a sense of the realities of wartime as experienced by civilians and soldiers (Zürcher 169). For example, Liman is rather clinical in his evaluation of the effects of disease and starvation among his troops; to him, and undoubtedly to many other officers, such misery was viewed as less a matter of suffering than a matter of a declining ability to wage war. The rather obvious solution to circumvent the problem of a “top-down” analysis from these “ego documents” would be to include the letters, diaries, and recollections of German foot-soldiers who fought in the Ottoman Empire from 1914 until 1918 (Besikci 25). This is a remedy which is easier articulated than accomplished. The rather pathetic condition of the Ottoman transportation infrastructure suggests that few if any Germans would have been able to send letters back home. Furthermore, the few accounts which may have existed were likely among the 98 percent of all Prussian War Ministry archival material which was destroyed in an

Allied airstrike in 1945 (Zurcher 169). What this means, in effect, is that if a particular source was not published and distributed before 1945, it was most likely destroyed.

This leaves two other types of sources. There exist some journals, such as *Mitteilungen des Bundes der Asienkaempfer*<sup>5</sup>, along with its published yearbook *Zwischen Kaukasus und Sinai*, which in the twenties detailed the recollections of veterans of the Asia Corps in Greater Syria. Also, the Germans would often take photographs, which can give historians pictorial evidence of social conditions during the war in the Ottoman Empire. The remaining available German-language sources are the accounts of missionaries. However, a great many of the missionaries who wrote about the Ottoman home-front focused specifically on the plight of the Armenians; indeed, men such as Johannes Lepsius were among the loudest critics of the Ottoman Empire and its policies. These accounts can still yield insights of the wartime conditions in the Empire, and it is incumbent upon the historian to not deny the “Ottoman-ness” of the Armenian citizens, most of whom were still loyal subjects of the Sultan.

Beyond adding to our knowledge of Ottoman social history, this study also seeks to bolster our understanding of cross-cultural relations; namely, how a foreign population can respond and adapt to an unfamiliar environment at a time of crisis. Notwithstanding the Eurocentric bias of my sources, they permit a transnational look at the wartime experiences as viewed from the perspective of outsiders. Lastly, it is important to understand that the consequences of the German-Ottoman alliance and the resulting break-up of the Ottoman Empire had significant ramifications for the Middle East. The particular course of colonization by the British, the French, and even the Russians, divided peoples, generated artificial political entities, and created intercommunal tensions which gradually developed into the very contemporary conflicts which are currently being played out in the Middle East today. Therefore, in a clichéd yet truthful way,

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<sup>5</sup> It was later called *Orientrundschau*.

this study enables us to elucidate “how we got here.” More particularly, the study of Eastern Anatolia enables a more thorough understanding of the conditions which would pave the way for Mustafa Kemal’s state-building project of the twenties and thirties.

### Food in the Caucasus

In Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus, the relative isolation of many local communities and villages as a result of the region’s topography and geography largely insulated them from the effects of war. The food situation was radically different than in Greater Syria, where famine was already beginning to manifest. In January 1915, as he headed to the city of Sivas, Venezuelan mercenary and officer in the Ottoman Army Rafael de Nogales lodged in the house of the military chief of Gemerek. There, he received a “breakfast in Turkish style, consisting of an omelet swimming in fat and stuffed with almonds, raisins, and pistachio nuts; followed pell-mell by sweet gelatin, pasturma sausages fried with garlic; tea; meringues; a salad of raw onions; fresh strawberries with cream; hunks of cheese saturated with olive oil; ices smelling of rose and violet; and, finally, fried barley or bulgur, the obligatory final dish of every Near Eastern menu” (Nogales 37). This staggering array of dishes, which was unfathomable for an empire already experiencing hardships as a result of the mobilization, seems to have been available, if not typically so, for the elite of the Ottoman Empire. Undoubtedly, as the war went on, such lavish tables became less and less common as resources became scarcer. Nevertheless, this example clearly demonstrated what a meal could aspire to be in Eastern Anatolia.

Elites everywhere in the Ottoman Empire could expect to host a much more lavish table than could the average Ottoman citizen during the war. Regular Ottoman civilians took notice, and were disgusted with this disparity in means and wealth, especially at a time in which many

were starving. Ihsan Turjman railed at the decadence of his superiors in the Ottoman Army, who, while on leave in Jerusalem, swam “in debauchery and drunkenness” (Tamari 110). What is more, Turjman seethed at the lavish table kept by Cemal Pasha, the governor of Syria, which reportedly cost over 30 Ottoman pounds (Tamari 109). This degree of lavishness at times embarrassed even the Germans. On one of his visits to Yildiz Palace, Kaiser Wilhelm II was “so much taken aback by... [a degree of luxury] that seemed to him so excessive in war time” that he ordered the menus shortened (Bernstorff 184). It is a simple fact that, although famine, disease, and death may have exacted a heavy toll on the civilian population, for all their luxuries the elites of the Ottoman Empire may as well not have taken any notice.

Regarding the poorer classes of Eastern Anatolia, as he passed through the province of Erzurum, starvation was not exactly nipping at the heels of the local Kurdish villagers who Rafael de Nogales encountered. His depiction of the lifestyle of these peasants, many of whom appeared to be trapped in the same customs of the distant past, right down to how they prepared the food, or how they lodged with the animals in the midst of winter for added warmth, provides definite evidence that geographic isolation was often a blessing in disguise (Nogales 50-51). One thing which never ceased to impress the German observers of the region was the relative “backwardness” of the people when compared to the multi-faceted urbanites of Istanbul<sup>6</sup>. Pictures of Kurdish tribal society indicate a highly traditional lifestyle, centered mainly around raising livestock (Endres 48-49). In this treeless landscape, the animals were responsible for warming up the dwellings of these nomads or peasants, which they did either with their body heat, as Nogales observed, or by providing dung which was then used as heating material (Guse 7). When crops were cultivated, it was usually wheat or barley; there was not any shortage of

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Pomiankowski’s description of ‘primitive’ Ankara, or the ‘wild and savage’ Kurdish lands south of Erzincan, pp. 207, 209.

water either (Guse 9). Far away from requisitions (provided they were out of the path of troop movements) and plague, these farmers and nomads may certainly not have been rich, but they were not desperately poor either. As Sevket Pamuk observed in his detailed study on the wartime economy of the Ottoman Empire, “rural areas fared better during the war since most of the rural population cultivated some lands and had direct access to food” (Pamuk 124). Although this was especially true in regards to the empire as a whole, in Eastern Anatolia even the cities were typically able to command resources from the countryside to feed the urban population.

The livestock, mainly used for food and fuel by the Anatolian peasantry, often proved tempting objects for requisition by the military or gendarmerie. Of the unfortunate animals which found themselves pressed into military service, many died from a lack of fodder (Guse 94, 99). However, the requisitions do not seem to have been very heavy, since the presence of farm animals in the region clearly continued unabated. Outside the city of Van, Nogales even noticed that flocks of cows, sheep, and horses roamed the countryside in abundance, which also indicates some ties to a more pastoralist past (Nogales 104). Here, life continued as it had for generations, beyond the reach of the misery which was visited upon much of the rest of the Empire.

This was true even in the very southernmost parts of Anatolia, where there were vast fields of grain in the vicinity of Bismil (Nogales 138). Nogales makes no direct mention of there being any peasants nearby, but the presence of wells and cisterns suggests that these fields were indeed cultivated, and may even have been the source of Diyarbakir’s foodstuffs.

It would seem that one reason why agricultural production in Eastern Anatolia was maintained was as a result of the efforts by the labor battalions to boost crop cultivation. Populations considered “less reliable”, such as the Armenians<sup>7</sup>, were typically assigned to the

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<sup>7</sup> Conditions in the labor battalions were as bad if not worse than those in the Ottoman Army. See Nogales and Besikci.

labor battalions, where they subsequently built and maintained bridges and roads, and when necessary, worked in the fields (Besikci 132). The conscription of men into the army greatly exacerbated Eastern Anatolia's perpetual shortage of labor, and although that process was incomplete, as I discuss below, it nevertheless reduced the number of available farmhands even further. To remedy this shortage of manpower, the Interior Ministry ordered some men from the labor battalions to shore up the agricultural production in areas where there were simply not enough laborers available. Children above the age of fourteen and especially women were similarly organized into ersatz "civilian labor battalions"<sup>8</sup>, and encouraged to either cultivate local fields within their own villages or to lend their services to surrounding areas where additional labor was needed (Besikci 136-137). According to Besikci, this method of directing labor for agricultural production seems to have been widely used in the Third Army zone, which encompassed the Black Sea region and the province of Erzurum (Besikci 136). There also seems to have been some willingness on the part of the Ottoman authorities to repurpose deserters and draft evaders for agricultural work, which became the fate of 3,000 souls, who were sent off to Diyarbakir and Mamuretulaziz in 1915 (Besikci 138).

The fact that there was even an adequate harvest in Eastern Anatolia for at least the first two years of the war suggests two things: namely, that conscription failed to such an extent that there were generally enough men who remained in their villages who could contribute to the sowing and reaping of crops, or that the various Ottoman authorities concerned with agricultural production in the region were efficiently able to direct labor where it was most needed to ensure an adequate harvest. With a lack of conclusive evidence favoring one or the other of these postulates, it is probably best to assume that some sort of combination of these two was

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<sup>8</sup> Labor battalions were technically an unarmed form of military service, and should not be confused for these purely civilian units.

responsible for the significantly more positive food situation in the region as compared to the other provinces of the Empire.

These labor battalions were often exposed to the most terrible working and living conditions, and the fact that many of them were Armenian meant that they were prime targets for elimination once the deportations began in 1915. In addition, even if the Ottoman authorities did not or could not follow through with the orders to kill the Armenian men in the labor battalions, such units were vulnerable to attacks and raids by the bandits which roamed the region. As late as 1917, the Ottoman authorities were unable to deter or prevent these sorties from occurring in places like Nusaybin, which is a district of Diyarbakir (Besikci 134). It is difficult to determine how often these attacks took place, and moreover, how effective attempts to repel them were. With the gendarmerie largely occupied and the Ottoman Army in full retreat until late 1918, it is safe to assume that the bandits had free reign in the region, and whether one labor battalion survived an encounter was largely the result of luck or pluck.

In the city of Diyarbakir, which Nogales passed through on his way to Aleppo after the siege of Van, trade had stultified in some areas and boomed in others. As the war progressed, there was a decreasing demand for luxury items such as silk, and an increasing demand for basic necessities, such as wheat, barley, and fruit, of which there seems to have been no shortage (Nogales 145). This shift in demand was of course partially due to the fact that the Armenians, many of whom were merchants who specialized in luxury goods, had already been deported from the city, leaving local Muslims as the main vendors of foodstuffs. Nevertheless, unlike Greater Syria and Mesopotamia, there was not a diminishing supply of available food sources, and no one seemed to be going hungry. We can only speculate as to how prices fluctuated during



the war, but it seems reasonable to assume that prices climbed, albeit much slower than in other provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

Joseph Pomiankowski, an Austrian attaché to the Ottoman War Ministry, accompanied Enver Pasha on a tour of the Caucasus front in 1916, at which point Erzurum and Trabzon had already fallen to the Russians. The observations of the home front which he made upon visiting the province of Sivas on April 28 are particularly rich, and bear quoting at length:

The area which we passed through was extremely varied, culturally very monotonous, and unspeakably sad. There were squalor-ridden, miserable villages and towns, with relatively few cultivated fields, but [many] meager pastures filled with greatly diminished ram, sheep, and goat herds. For hundreds of kilometers there was no tree or shrub, and there is a punishing, harsh climate, so that the temperature in January and February is regularly 20 or 30 below zero. Here all the forests were chopped down long ago, and there is no firewood to be had, so the peasant has to heat his poorly constructed hovel with goat droppings. Yet, there was no shortage of food anywhere, and in some places we saw a superabundance of crops, which led to hopes of an excellent harvest. (Pomiankowski 207-208).

By the middle of the war, Eastern Anatolia was largely weathering the storm of starvation which had already claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians in other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Whether this was due to the proactive efforts of the authorities to direct the efforts of laborers from various strata towards under-cultivated fields or whether this was the case precisely because of a lack of official interference is an avenue of research which asks to be explored at some future point.

By way of comparison, the rest of the Ottoman Empire faced a very different situation. As I have already alluded to, most of the scholarship on the Ottoman home-front has zeroed in on the plight of Greater Syria, a region which was subject to the most terrible famine in the war years. During the famine, which initially affected only the coastal areas, people were reduced to “scrounging for grain in the excrement of animals”, consuming locusts, eating grass and freshly sprouted weeds, as well as lemon- and orange-peels (Kayali 1125, Schatkowski-Schilcher 230-

231). The famine was, as Schatkowski-Schilcher convincingly argues, largely the result of a perfect storm of factors, chief among them a severe locust plague and the British blockade. The presence of a naval blockade can explain why catastrophe struck the coast first, before it spread inwards. In 1915, when more than 100,000 had already died in Lebanon alone from starvation, the interior of Syria had a bountiful harvest (Williams 153). This picture had changed within a year. By the end of 1916, the people of Damascus were increasingly used to going without bread for days (Schatkowski-Schilcher 238). The Syrian administration tried numerous methods to alleviate the misery of the poor, with varying degrees of success. Soup kitchens were established in the cities, although they sometimes only catered to Muslims (Nogales 304). One of the main reasons why the government was unable to decisively rectify this circumstance was because they were unable to command the distribution of grain. Farmers, fearing the artificially low prices of grain set by the government, refused to sell their harvest, which drove up prices astronomically, a tactic also favored by speculators (Schatkowski-Schilcher 239). In the city of Urfa, where Jakob Kuenzler, a Swiss missionary, worked in the German hospital, this practice resulted in the ten-fold increase of grain within the space of four months (Kuenzler 76). Such a dramatic price change would almost certainly have pushed the price of grain far beyond the reach of the ordinary Ottoman citizen.

With the hands of the government effectively tied, people often had to rely on informal, familial networks, as Ihsan Turjman, the young Ottoman private stationed in Jerusalem, did, in order to survive (Tamari 142). When the absolute last option was exhausted, the people wasted away. Werner Steuber, a German physician who was part of the sanitary corps which was attached to Yildirim, was appalled by what he saw: “only in British India” had he “seen such pictures of hunger and death”, where people who were little more than skin and bone simply laid

down and waited for death to come (Steuber 81). Worst of all, what little grain remained was the exclusive property of the military. Steuber poignantly indicates this fact: “The cruel whip of war lashed the unfortunate country, and it was a common sight to see women and children who had died of starvation right next to the trains filled with grain destined for the military” (Steuber 91). In an unfathomable, cruelly ironic way, the land of plenty became the land of empty.

Much less has been written about Mesopotamia. What immediately stood out to the author was that, of the few accounts of civilian life in the region, all were unsparing in their depiction of Mesopotamia as brutally poor. Joseph Pomiankowski, who passed through the city of Mosul during one of his tours in 1916, had this to say about that “miserable city of 40,000 occupants”:

The poverty of the people of Mosul was unspeakable and so drastic, all the more because with the exception of a few civil servants and officers, there was no wealthy class. The dogs were without exception skeletally thin and mangy, like I had never seen before. (Pomiankowski 212-213).

The population of Mosul suffered an appalling famine, the details of which still have yet to be researched. Another piece of evidence which elucidates the plight of Mosul is a German photograph, which can be found in Steuber’s excellent account of Yildirim. This photograph shows a mass grave of freshly dead civilians, with the caption “victims of famine in Mosul” (Steuber 49). Steuber himself, while mainly discussing his experiences in Syria and Palestine, remarks in passing that, “in Mosul the authorities had to hang a restaurant proprietor and his daughter, because they were using the flesh of starved children for food” (Steuber 79). Circumstances were evidently dire in Mosul as well, although the reasons for why the famine reached crisis levels there as well have yet to be established.

Eastern Anatolia was largely fortunate in its food situation, in that it was able to avoid a major catastrophe faced by the other parts of the empire.

### Transportation in the Caucasus

If the people of Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus were not afflicted by a lack of food, the transportation infrastructure was another matter. There were no major arteries of transportation or rail lines in much of the region, and climatic conditions often “rendered impassable” the few roads which connected the cities of Eastern Anatolia together (Nogales 40).

The specific reason for this lack of development was the reluctance of Russia in allowing the Ottomans to build any kind of infrastructure which could possibly facilitate troop movements in the east; in other words, Russia did not grant the Ottoman Empire the right to build any railroads in the east (Pamuk 124). What this meant, in effect, is that the cities too were typically isolated from one another, especially in winter, and any kind of activity requiring transportation was subject to the most inconvenient sort of delays. For example, there was only one, paltry, unpaved, dirt road from the major Ottoman port of Trabzon to the critical fortress-city of Erzurum (Neulen 52). As one German diplomat put it, it took 35 days for a single hand-grenade to travel from Istanbul to Eastern Anatolia (Neulen 52). As one might expect, this state of affairs affected first and foremost the military, making troop movements and resupply of the front substantially more difficult. Some of these roads were too narrow even for the use of ox-carts, which blasted the prospects of the Ottoman government purchasing ox-carts from the peasants of Diyarbakir (Liman 129). Whether the Ottoman authorities would have paid in gold or simply issued receipts of the amount owed by the government, a common enough practice which effectively legalized theft, is unclear. What is clear is that when roads were built during this

period, they were primarily used for military purposes. Pomiankowski even implies that the only reason roads in Eastern Anatolia were constructed was in preparation for vice-generalissimo Enver Pasha's tour of that theatre (Pomiankowski 196). With regard to the civilian sphere, although one would think that commerce slowed down considerably as a result of the lack of a comprehensive transportation infrastructure, trade reportedly continued unabated in the city of Erzurum (Nogales 44). This suggests that trade and consumption of goods, especially essentials such as grain, took place on a rather localized scale, with not many connections being forged with the other provinces of the Empire, or even with other cities in the same region. Nevertheless, the fact that there was even a semblance of normalcy in a city which quartered the Ottoman Third Army is an encouraging indication that the government was not a wholly disruptive influence on the civilian population.

#### Life and Death in the Caucasus: The Arbitrariness of Power

However, to say that life was merely "business as usual" in Anatolia and the Caucasus was also incorrect. The Ottoman civilian and military authorities in the Erzurum and Diyarbakir provinces took advantage of their status as enforcers of the law to take what they could get their hands on, either for their own personal gain or for the upkeep and maintenance of their soldiers. Passing through the villages, these bands of soldiers could be as destructive as locusts, raiding houses and bazaars, and destroying anything they could not carry with them (Nogales 121). Naturally, not all military leaders were as heavy-handed as Khalil Bey, who sacked and burned the Kurdish villages of Ambar and Gundesh on the very weak pretext of attempted theft by the villagers (Nogales 122). However, such actions must clearly have left the impression on some observers that the Ottoman authorities were very arbitrary in their actions if not wholly tyrannical. It should also be noted that although this particular example of the Ottoman state

reasserting its authority over the lawlessness of the east seems in keeping with other accounts of repression or state violence, it would be worth taking Nogales' claims of Khalil Bey's misdeeds with a grain of salt. In addition to a sort of personal antipathy which marked his relationship with the commander, Nogales also devoted much of his time in his memoirs to developing the narrative of an elaborate plot to snuff out his life, merely because he had seen things which "no Christian should have seen." Nevertheless, such an account gives us an indication of how the Ottoman authorities could and sometimes did act, and although requisitions typically met with the approval of the German or non-Ottoman observers, these brazen displays of power were met with a much cooler response.

#### Life and Death in the Caucasus: Disease

In the seemingly well-run cities of Erzurum and Diyarbakir, as well as elsewhere in the Anatolian plateau or Caucasus, disease became a terrifying scourge. One unintended side-effect of quartering the Third and Second Armies in these two cities was the close proximity between the military and the civilian populace. Housed and clothed in an appallingly insufficient manner, the soldiers rapidly succumbed to the disease, which enabled it to further spread like wildfire throughout the rest of the city. As early as March 2, 1915, the German consul to Trabzon, Dr. Bergfeld, claimed that "the daily death rate [was] between thirty and fifty" (Liman 49). Although it is unclear whether this statistic refers to the deaths only among the soldiers, prevailing conditions were such that it would not have been possible for the Ottoman authorities to contain or isolate the spread of the disease. Once the soldiers fell sick, the civilians invariably followed suit. Therefore, if the above statistic only refers to soldiers, it is a reasonable assumption that the rate of death among all humans in Trabzon would have been in excess of fifty people a day.

In light of the seeming correlation between the presence of soldiers and epidemics, it would only seem natural that where there were higher concentrations of soldiers, the rate of death and debility from disease was far greater. This is an observation which was confirmed by contemporaries, such as Felix Guse, who was the Chief of General Staff in the Ottoman Third Army, which was garrisoned in the fortress-city of Erzurum. In a time when many cities in the Empire were scrambling to combat the various sicknesses thrust upon them, conditions in Erzurum were among the very worst the empire saw during the war: “pestilence, typhus, spotted fever, dysentery, and recurring fever wreaked havoc” in the city, claiming the lives of soldier and civilian alike (Guse 57-58). Those responsible for the care and curing of the sick and infirm were in no less danger, with two German nurses in the city of Erzurum succumbing to the disease in the spring of 1915 alone (Guse 59). Once these various plagues began to gather momentum, the disease was unstoppable. As Ryan Gingeras wrote, “Erzurum’s basic medical facilities were so overwhelmed that patients who had died of disease were ultimately piled up in tents ‘like heaps of wood.’” (Gingeras 119). Although it is difficult to estimate precisely how many people fell victim to these epidemics in Erzurum, several thousand would be a rather conservative estimate.

In this instance, as in the coming year, which I discuss below, the Ottoman authorities were powerless to halt the spread of the disease, let alone treat those who were already infected. The presence of German physicians suggests a dearth of qualified or adequately trained Ottoman medical personnel. Furthermore, based on the haphazard manner in which corpses were disposed of, it is possible to get a sense of the sheer number of casualties, as well as the impotence of Ottoman efforts in disposing of the dead. Either there was a lack of personnel who were able to bury the dead (most men having already been drafted into the Ottoman army), or people were dying so quickly, that the demand for gravediggers simply could not keep up with the steadily

piling of bodies. In any case, Erzurum was struck with a rate of infection and death from disease which was equal to if not greater than the number of deaths from disease in Greater Syria or Mesopotamia. Felix Guse stood as a living testimony to the horrific scale of the epidemic in Erzurum. He was infected in the winter of 1916 with typhus, and narrowly avoided death with an eight-week furlough to Germany. Unfortunately, Ottoman soldiers and civilians rarely had such an opportunity to escape, which predictably contributed to a significantly elevated number of casualties within the local population.

The medical predicament did not improve as the war continued. By the very end of 1916, there were an estimated five-to-six thousand sick people in the city of Diyarbakir, where the Ottoman Second Army was quartered, according to a German surgeon, Dr. Schilling, and in the city of Elazig, 900 people per month became casualties of disease (Liman 132). On his tour of the east, Pomiankowski dispassionately remarked that it was only possible to “maintain a respectful distance” from the village of Nusaybin, which was in the clutches of fever (Pomiankowski 211-212). To make matters worse, waves of “cholera, typhus, and spotted fever” washed over the city of Sivas in 1916, which caused a further decline in the number of the local population (Pomiankowski 225). There is no account of what measures the Ottoman government undertook to stem the tide of death, especially in light of the fact that both doctors and available hospital spaces were probably few and far between. To further exacerbate matters, some Ottoman physicians, lacking the necessary understanding of the import of cleanliness in the hospital, did not sterilize their instruments after an amputation, and transported the patients’ food in the same carts used to move corpses to the designated places of burial (Nogales 91). If there was ever a way to ensure the continued presence of pestilence, such practices were surely it. Faced with such a crisis, the best the Ottoman authorities could do was find a way to dispose of



the bodies quickly, and away from public spaces. With regard to the lack of available personnel, the Ottoman provincial governors were more than happy to accept the help of German or American missionaries, who far from proselytizing, often performed various medical duties in the hospitals. The fact that the Ottomans were forced to rely upon outside help in order to mitigate the disastrous extent of the various epidemics evinces administrative inadequacy; in other words, the Ottoman state was too weak to help itself. This inability to cope with the prevailing circumstances had a heavy cost; in the entire month of February 1917, the Ottomans lost forty-two surgeons to typhus (Liman 157).

It was in the cities where the vast majority of the pestilence occurred. As I have shown elsewhere in regards to the food situation, geographic isolation provided a layer of protection to the many smaller villages in Eastern Anatolia from the harsh side-effects of war. However, the appearance of soldiers who were passing through these small settlements could make life more difficult. In mid-February 1915, in the province of Erzurum, Nogales, observed that the Ottoman soldiers, who were freezing in the middle of a harsh winter, often had to sleep “in filthy huts, in the company of dying men, and of men infected with typhus” (Nogales 41). This quartering of soldiers in the dwellings of civilians was an established practice, and we can imagine that this must have been nothing short of disruptive to the lives of these civilians, many of whom would have had a difficult time providing for themselves and their own families alone, and would certainly not have shared a house with soldiers afflicted with various diseases, had they a choice in the matter. Although this example does not explicitly mention any recalcitrance on the part of the civilian host, the memoirs of Nogales are rife with instances where the would-be unwilling host, usually the mayor of the town, is encouraged to surrender his living space at the point of a

Mauser pistol<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, this practice of quartering sick soldiers exemplifies how the transmission of disease might have occurred in the countryside. The fact that this was in the countryside, however, meant that even if the civilian occupants of these huts became infected, it is unlikely that the disease would have spread far beyond the reaches of the small village.

There is generally a perception that the state extended its grip on the civilian population in order to meet the needs of war, a perception that is not without merit. This phenomenon was not unique to the Ottoman Empire, but existed in all states which were in the midst of war. Civilians were expected to give up some of their belongings, supplies, or space, so that the brave askers could defend the Empire. Even though many outside observers did not question the necessity of these “requisitions,” there was not a general realization of the potential danger posed by housing sick soldiers with otherwise healthy civilians.

Although typhus or “spotted fever” was primarily responsible for these epidemics in Anatolia, Rafael de Nogales noted that there were swarms of locusts in the area around Bismil, which he claims to be responsible for the proliferation of cholera, due to the rotting bodies of the locusts contaminating wells and other water sources (Nogales 138). However, no other source mentions an outbreak of cholera in the region, and unlike the locusts of Syria, there is no indication that these locusts decimated the crops. This further supports the notion that in most of Anatolia, starvation was not something which most of the population had to contend with.

Similarly, the Ottoman state was unable to contain or mitigate the spread of disease in the other parts of the empire. In Mesopotamia, the Euphrates and Tigris became breeding grounds for all manner of plague and pestilence. In February 1915, fifty people a week died of river-borne plague in Baghdad (Gingeras 128). Pomiankowski reported a mass of flies, so dense and all-encompassing that it was impossible to even sit down to regular meal (Pomiankowski 214). It

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Nogales pp. 217.

would seem that the extreme heat and humidity of the region was well-suited to the development and proliferation of pestilence.

In Syria, disease made its presence felt much like in Eastern Anatolia. Aleppo, called “the devil’s frying pan” by Werner Steuber, was purported to have a hot and dry enough climate that disease (especially malaria) would be unable to proliferate (Steuber 48). This was grossly incorrect, as it turned out. Long before German soldiers ever contracted malaria and spotted fever, the civilians of Aleppo were afflicted by these plagues. In 1915, a typhus epidemic began in Aleppo. By the end of the year, the disease was claiming 500 people a day (Williams 154). The arrival of the Armenian deportees, many of whom were already infected with various disease, exacerbated the problem. Despite the appallingly high casualty rates (60% in the case of typhus), some Armenians survived long enough to further transmit the disease to the indigenous population of the city (Kaiser 201). Rafael de Nogales contends that, as a result of this transmission, 35,000 people died in Aleppo from the summer of 1916 to the summer of 1917 (Nogales 179). 40,000 people in Aleppo also contracted spotted fever, and entire villages perished from this disease (Schilling 74-75). In a long chain, stretching from Aleppo to Mosul, villages experienced casualty rates as high as ninety percent, and Nogales estimates that within the space of a year and a half, roughly two million Muslims died of typhus alone in the region of Syria (Nogales 180, 266). In all, this was an incredibly dismal picture, and shows if nothing else the sheer inability of the Ottoman state to mount an effective response to a crisis of such catastrophic proportions. What is worse, hunger and disease went in hand. A lack of food weakened the body’s immune system, which made it easier to become infected. According to Nogales, the Germans even had a word for it: “hunger typhus” (Nogales 272).

Quite aside from microbial forms of pestilence, locusts also constituted a plague for the people of Syria, and especially in Palestine, which seems to have endured the worst part of the locust plague. Kress von Kressenstein vividly describes the incomprehensible destruction wreaked by these creatures in the environs of Hebron (Kress 119). In Jerusalem too, Ihsan Turjman gives a firsthand account of how the invasion affected the city:

Locusts are attacking all over the country. The locust invasion started seven days ago and covered the sky. Today it took the locust clouds two hours to pass over the city. God protect us from the three plagues: war, locusts, and disease, for they are spreading through the country. Pity the poor. (Tamari 94).

#### Life and Death in the Caucasus: Crime and Desertion

The isolated nature of Eastern Anatolian communities was rather conducive to various criminal activities, such as banditry and brigandage. The Ottoman authorities seemed powerless to put a halt to such a widespread phenomenon, which typically entailed the basic formula of robbery followed by murder. Even an officer in the Ottoman Army such as Rafael de Nogales found that his status would not protect him from the predations of these bandits. As Nogales sardonically remarks, “Human life was held lightly in those regions then,” and any person who had anything worth stealing was a tempting target (Nogales 127). At least some of the would-be bandits were deserters from the Ottoman Army, although they were themselves often targets of other bandits, particularly local Kurdish or Bedouin tribesmen, who made a living off robbing these deserter bands (Nogales 129, Besikci 272). The main method of keeping brigands in check appeared to be the punitive expeditions of the sort undertaken by such men as Khalil Bey, which seemed to have done little other than disrupt the lives of villagers who were in all likelihood innocent. Beyond such expeditions, it fell to the lot of passing retinues of Ottoman soldiers to defend themselves from these bandits at their peril.

Deserters from the Ottoman Army in particular became a recurring social problem, as demonstrated by their partaking in brigandage and other criminal activities. Many of the deserters formed bands, and traversed the mountainous terrain of Eastern Anatolia in search of sustenance (Reynolds 136, Besikci 271). It seems fairly evident that the single largest wave of desertions occurred in the aftermath of the catastrophic defeats against the Russia Caucasus Army in 1915 (Besikci 258). The Ottoman state was fairly energetic in its efforts to rein in these deserters, with somewhat positive results. For example, in 1916, “about the middle of August the Third Army reported the capture of 13,000 deserters. The prefect of Sivas had engaged to apprehend and collect 30,000 deserters in a short time” (Liman 130). Aside from putting a halt to the destabilizing activities of these social deviants, the Ottoman state desperately needed manpower to fill the ranks of its armies. This relatively simple explanation may account for why the Ottoman state pursued the capture of deserters with a determination not always seen in other endeavors. One consequence of this was that the gendarmerie was much too occupied with catching would-be deserters to be able to clamp down on the non-deserter bandits who roamed the mountains and valleys of Eastern Anatolia. Moreover, the fact that the gendarmes were often sent to the front to fill the ranks of the Ottoman Army meant that there were even less of them policing the interior, preventing banditry, or capturing deserters (Besikci 297). Security on the home front was more tenuous than ever, and between deserters, tribal brigands, and even rapacious gendarmes, some Ottoman civilians really were between Scylla and Charybdis due to the inability of the Ottoman state to maintain order. This inability would only be exacerbated by other developments, and the loss of prestige, let alone legitimacy, among the local population would make a defense of the region more difficult (Endres, “Die Ruine”, 138).

The only other instance where it is possible to see the continued presence of Ottoman authorities is in the case of the gendarmes who were in charge of organizing the deportations of Armenians. War brought unparalleled sectarian strife to Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus. Beginning with the siege of Van in 1915, massacres against men, women, and children on both sides became a common feature of life in the region, with former neighbors turning against one another. Kemal Cicek, who uses official state documents in his analysis of Armenian violence in the Caucasus theatre, estimates that within the first nine months of the war, more than 120,000 Muslims lost their lives to roaming Armenian bands<sup>10</sup>, although this could be a conservative figure (Cicek, Kemal 829). I treat the Muslim experience during the war further along in the paper; the following pages will be devoted to addressing the massacre and deportation of the Armenians in Eastern Anatolia.

Typically, as Nogales points out, the instigators of these murderous rampages against the Armenians were not simply fanatical bands of Kurdish or Turkish tribesmen, but the Ottoman gendarmes themselves, all of whom were very often driven by the prospect of material gain (Nogales 60, Besikci 169). In fact, the Ottomans made a point of emphasizing that the seizure and retention of all booty or confiscated goods was *helal*, a ploy which proved a source of encouragement to many gendarmes or volunteers (Reynolds 119). Typically, “booty” consisted of items which had been requisitioned, a fact which provided a semblance of legitimacy to these actions, even when they often were unfairly directed at the Armenians and extended to items which could not serve any purpose for the war effort. In any case, gendarmes and irregular volunteer groups often worked in tandem to eliminate the Armenians. For example, during the siege of Van, the Ottoman authorities enlisted the help of Kurdish tribesmen, who by their own

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<sup>10</sup> For an idea of the extremely gruesome atrocities committed by the Armenians against the Muslim population, see Cicek, Kemal pp. 830-831.

admission had come to the aid of the beleaguered Ottoman military detachments in the hope of looting the town (Nogales 75). This practice of mustering Kurdish irregulars or “volunteers” has its origin in the Hamidiye formations of the late nineteenth century. Their purpose was two-fold: to maintain order or at least suppress any domestic threats (i.e., the Armenian unrest or separatism), and to supplement the regular forces of the Ottoman Army. It is estimated that at the beginning of the war almost 50,000 irregular volunteers were deployed among the various fronts, but especially in Eastern Anatolia, where the Third Army operated (Besikci 180).

Those outside the established tribal recruitment mechanisms also proved useful to the Ottoman authorities. Reformed criminals and bandits, or any ‘influential prisoner’ who had the capability and connections to form his own band of volunteer fighters, were coopted by the state in its never-ending search for manpower (Besikci 166-167). Although this may have temporarily solved or at least ameliorated the Ottoman Army and gendarmerie’s declining number of men in the field, it would prove to be a double-edged sword, particularly for the civilian population.

The Ottoman state’s reliance upon irregular, tribal militias to crush the rebellion in Van and fight alongside the Ottoman Army against the Russians is an indication of several things: the scant availability of regular Ottoman detachments, and, more importantly, the Ottoman authorities’ willingness to resort to unorthodox methods by channeling the potentially destructive impulses of the irregular militias into an endeavor which also accomplished the goals of the state. To put it another way, the Ottoman authorities partially negated the potential problem of banditry or competition with non-state actors by giving these tribesmen the incentive of loot and pillage in Van and the rest of the region instead.

Mehmet Besikci has argued that the “state [became] more centralized, authoritarian, and nationalist” to address the pressing needs of wartime (Besikci 1). However, he also contends for

the existence of a paradox, in that although the state strengthened its grip by intensifying its demands on the civilian sphere, it also ultimately became dependent upon the people (or at least upon certain segments of society), and was forced to maintain some semblance of legitimacy (Besikci 7). The give-and-take nature of this relationship has not been widely recognized in the historiography of the Great War in the Middle East, and it is generally assumed that the state assumed a posture of entitlement to food, supplies, manpower, and labor, without delegating authority, power, or influence in return. However the Ottoman authorities to some extent had to rely upon certain groups to fill the ranks of their armies (e.g., irregulars) or stem the tide of pestilence (e.g., physicians and missionary relief personnel). This was especially the case in regions where, as Besikci puts it, the Ottoman state's "level of infrastructural development" or "demographic control mechanism was poor" (Besikci 9, 116). To put it plainly, the state simply did not have the administrative resources or bureaucratic framework necessary to enact regular conscription in Eastern Anatolia, which perfectly explains why the state came to rely upon these tribal formations. However, such an arrangement was effectively tantamount to making a deal with the devil.

Ingenious as such a solution was, there were a few shortcomings. Much like the Hamidiye of the past, these militia formations were only useful to the state insofar as they could terrorize the Armenians and fight off the Russians. Beyond that, the Ottoman state's ability to direct the violence and aggression of these irregulars was tenuous at best. Provisioning the volunteer fighters was achieved by granting them access to military stores *as well as* the right to collect "donations" from the civilian population (Besikci 169). The result was what one would expect, with the volunteers wielding their connection to the Ottoman government like a state-sanctioned pass to help themselves to whatever they could get, from basic items such as food and clothing to



money and jewelry (Reynolds 50, Besikci 169-170, 269). Whether the volunteers faced victory or defeat, it is a fairly safe bet that they never lost an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of the civilians. More problematic than the material losses which they inflicted was the violent manner in which they went about pursuing material gain. Villagers were regularly terrorized by the volunteer bands, and it certainly did not help that although some volunteers may have been legitimate 'warriors' in the tribal sense of the word, many were also career criminals; bandits, robbers, and murderers (Besikci 199-200). It must be recognized that the Ottoman state took a gamble by enlisting these men, and the fact that they mainly functioned as armed thugs nominally connected to the Ottoman state does not reflect well upon this chosen course of action. Even hopes that these irregulars would solely direct their attention to suppressing the Armenian threat proved to be somewhat unfounded. Non-Armenian civilians also became the victims of robbery and pillaging by these irregulars, and it is no surprise that many of these attacks occurred precisely where the concentration of these volunteer bands was largest: in the province of Erzurum (Besikci 201). Furthermore, the Kurdish irregulars were notoriously unreliable, and if the hostilities did not very quickly yield material benefits, their sustained interest in "employment" would begin to wane. For example, the Third Army, which originally boasted roughly twenty-thousand Kurdish volunteers, had fewer than three-thousand remaining at the close of 1915 because of desertion (Besikci 197). As has already been discussed, deserters often turned to banditry to 'make ends meet', as it were. We can therefore assume that the incidences and frequency of these ex-volunteers and deserters attacking the civilian population only increased throughout the duration of the war.

Although it is unclear whether this practice was widespread beyond the region of Eastern Anatolia, it nonetheless demonstrates one of the ways in which the Ottoman state had to

negotiate with non-state actors, as a means of overcoming its own weakness, whether it was having missionaries work in hospitals or, in this case, repurposing would-be bandits for a lengthy siege. The key problem, however, was that the Ottoman state was effectively investing authority in centrifugal forces which were largely inimical to centralized rule.

In regards to the general course of the Armenian Genocide, Armenian men were in much more immediate danger than the women and children, and were the first to be singled out for massacring. Those who were in the Ottoman Army were reassigned to the labor battalions, where the death rate was appallingly high due to exposure to the elements and the lack of sufficient rations; less than half a kilo of bread a day, according to Nogales (Nogales 53-54). Although these men were put to work transporting goods and working on the local infrastructure, the rate at which these unfortunates expired was such that nothing lasting ever seemed to be accomplished.

The violence was not limited to the cities, but extended out to the countryside as well. Entire villages were razed, and the inhabitants either murdered or deported. Curiously, in the cities Ottoman authorities made the special category of economically useful Armenians, selecting some for work in the military workshops. Cevdet Bey, who was governor of Van, murdered as many as fifteen thousand Armenians in the course of a single day in the city of Bitlis, while sparing Armenian artisans, who were put to work in the military workshops (Nogales 133). This practice of sparing those with essential skills, which was also followed in Syria, seems to have been fairly consistent with the Ottoman state's prioritizing of the war effort above everything else. Armenians who had similarly irreplaceable skills, especially doctors, were excluded from the general deportation orders (Gingeras 179). In this manner, a very select few were spared the devastation which found many other Armenians.

The Interior Ministry designated that the provinces of Erzurum, Van, and Bitlis should be emptied of its Armenian inhabitants; after the men had been killed, the women and children were to be sent to Deir ez-Zor in the Syrian Desert (Gingeras 169). At least, that was the plan. The mortality rate in these deportee caravans was so high, it may be more appropriate to consider them death marches; in all likelihood, very few ever made it that far. If disease, hunger, or thirst did not rob these innocents of their lives, bandits or the “bearded gendarmes” who guarded the caravans generally did, although only after they succeeded in extorting every last lira from the unfortunate Armenians (Gingeras 173, Nogales 136). The banks of the Euphrates in particular became a killing field of sorts, and many Armenians were drowned or massacred there, with their bodies piled up by the hundreds; the unlucky survivors wandered aimlessly in search of “a few stalks of grass in order to still their hunger” (Reynolds 152). In this horrific orgy of death, the only hope many deportees had was that a passing outsider would be able to rescue them. In fact, on several occasions, this is exactly what happened, with Nogales using his pistol in order to coerce the gendarmes into releasing the would-be victims (Nogales 61). However, for the vast majority of deportees, death was slowly but surely awaiting them. Even those who were initially spared remained at risk for being deported or killed at a later time. The Ottoman state was appallingly efficient in the extermination of the Armenians.

Aleppo, where the deportees were usually collected before continuing to the Syrian Desert, proved to be a hotbed of disease and death for the Armenians. In the course of a single day, more than 110 Armenians expired due to the privations they had endured (Gingeras 172). Some Armenians were lucky enough to avoid the terrible fate which awaited them in the Syrian Desert by “working in one of the factories established by Cemal Pasha, where in return for manufacturing clothes for the army they received one loaf of bread and one bowl of soup a day”

(Cicek, Talha 123). This option was not available to many if not most, and for the unlucky ones death came surely if not swiftly.

This rather tragic episode in Ottoman history does raise the question of complicity, and whether or not it is possible or accurate to paint the Ottoman provincial administration in broad strokes as uniformly rapacious and unfeeling in their following the directives of the central administration. In fact, in at least one instance, an Ottoman official expressed (by action if not by words) a certain uneasiness about the Armenian deportations. Tahsin, the governor of Erzurum, was sufficiently uncomfortable with the current state of affairs that he attempted to exclude women, children, and the sick from the deportation orders (Gingeras 179). It is difficult to gauge how exceptional Tahsin's actions were among other Ottomans in positions of power and influence, or whether or not these actions had any long term impact in rescuing certain segments of the Armenian population from the devastation. As stated above, it was not uncommon that Armenians who escaped the deportations by virtue of some special skill or exclusion were later sent on regardless. Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that Tahsin's actions had little to no impact in the long term as far as limiting the extent of the deportation orders.

Once the Armenians were deported, the Ottoman authorities had to contend with the issue of dispensing with the property left behind. Liquidation Commissions were formed, and many Ottoman officials, from the lowest gendarme to a provincial governor, such as Mehmet Resid of Diyarbakir, were able to enrich themselves off of houses and other forms of real estate, jewelry and other personal items of value, and, of course, money (Gingeras 178, Kuenzler 59). Even in the midst of war, disease, and death, it seems that some Ottomans could not resist the opportunity to make some extra lira. Many looted their Armenian neighbors' abandoned houses, which were subsequently rendered uninhabitable, due to the fact that these looters would pull

wood from the structures of these houses to use as firewood, a scarce resource in Eastern Anatolia (Gingeras 175, Neulen 52). Much like the banditry and brigandage which plagued the region, these instances of theft went largely unanswered by the Ottoman authorities, and the situation largely devolved into a race of who could reach and catalogue the property first.

### Life and Death in the Caucasus: The Refugees

Aside from more material considerations, one of the reasons why the Ottoman bureaucracy took such energetic measures concerning the property of the Armenians was the pressing issue of the Muslim refugees. One of the major side-effects of the war in Eastern Anatolia, which seems to have been largely neglected by historians of the First World War in the Middle East, was the massive displacement of Muslims from their homelands, primarily as a result of the fighting in Eastern Anatolia. The 1916 winter offensives of the Russian Caucasus Army, whose numbers were bolstered by Armenian auxiliaries, against Erzurum, Erzincan, and Trabzon, set off a mass exodus of Muslim refugees, many of whom ended up in Istanbul by the time the war was coming to a close. From the perspective of the Ottoman state, it was the perfect solution that these refugees should be housed in homes which were formerly the property of the Armenians (Gingeras 177). However, there seems to be little evidence that the Ottoman authorities gave much thought to how this would be accomplished from a logistical standpoint: how the refugees would be gathered and then distributed among the various provinces or localities where there were “vacancies”, and then actually granted the right or deed to their new abodes. If the government did in fact have a systematized method of organizing housing for these refugees, which seems highly unlikely, then it is abundantly clear that there was not enough manpower or resources to implement this scheme in an orderly fashion. This is unsurprising, given that by 1917 roughly 800,000 people had been displaced by war (Gingeras 176). The

government simply could not cope with the care of such a massive number of refugees, whom, despite their official status as “loyal subjects”, endured the same privations that the Armenian deportees did<sup>11</sup>. From lack of shelter, food, or proper medical care, it is possible that as many as 600,000 Muslims died due to these hardships brought on by involuntary migration (Gingeras 178, 181, Pomiankowski 209). It is extremely difficult to determine how many Muslim families were successfully resettled, but given the immense number of casualties, we can expect that the Ottoman state was little more effective in parceling out Armenian land than in its efforts to provide the refugees with basic necessities and protection. Werner Steuber found that more than a thousand of these refugees, who were dying of cholera, had been stuffed into the halls of Hagia Sophia, which indicates a lack of available space for accommodating the sudden influx of these refugees (Steuber 40). There is something very tragic about the idea of Hagia Sophia, the jewel of Istanbul, being reduced to an immense waiting chamber where the invalid slowly expire. Because the Germans had a predilection to poetic forms of description and expression, it would not be surprising if Steuber was commenting on the sad state of the empire with this image. The suffering of many Muslims in Eastern Anatolia, whether Kurdish, Turkish, or Circassian, is one of the untold stories of World War I historiography.

#### The Later Years of the War and Conclusion

Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus did not initially face all of the same privations which many of the other Ottoman regions had to contend with. Although the transportation infrastructure was generally inadequate, and the Ottoman authorities were toothless in their efforts to combat the various typhus epidemics, the food situation generally remained the same as in prewar times, and trade continued uninterrupted. The greatest cause of mortality during this

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<sup>11</sup> For a brief account from a witness who saw both the Armenian deportees and the Muslim refugees, see Reynolds pp. 155.

period was the Armenian deportations, which aside from the staggering loss of human life would have a profound impact in the coming years. As Nogales indicated, the Armenian merchants constituted an important part of the local economy, in spite of the fact that the majority of their trade was in luxury items. Their subsequent removal in all probability caused a decline in the local market, due to the absence of both potential sellers and consumers. Pomiankowski, on his spring 1916 tour of Eastern Anatolia with Enver Pasha, observed that otherwise well-ordered towns had fallen silent with the absence of the Armenians, and in particular Diyarbakir seemed empty with the loss of “35,000 souls” (Pomiankowski 210-211). This observation poignantly demonstrates the significant impact which the removal of the Armenians had on the livelihood of the cities of Eastern Anatolia.

Few sources discuss the state of the Ottoman home-front in Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus beyond 1916. What may be the last survey of the state of affairs there comes from Liman von Sanders, whose pessimistic assessment bears repeating at length:

The land in which [the Second Army] was stationed was depopulated and desolated by the expulsion of the Armenians. All economic conditions of course were greatly impaired. A large part of the fields remained untilled. There were no mechanics and all establishments requiring technical workmen were standing still... On account of defective sanitary arrangements spotted typhus carried off thousands. Fuel was lacking for heating the delousing establishments or the wards of hospitals. There were sufficient medical supplies [nearby], but they could not be brought up on account of lack of means of transportation (Liman 156).

Clearly, then, things only got worse as the war progressed. However, due to the lack of available sources, which is itself the result of rapidly changing conditions brought on by the Russian invasion and the subsequent Ottoman liberation of Eastern Anatolia, it is necessary to enter the realm of speculation. If a large part of the fields remained untilled, due to the loss of the farmers (whether they succumbed to disease, deportation, or became refugees) who tilled them, this would naturally entail a significantly smaller harvest, which in turn could translate to

starvation in places where the harvest was barely sufficient in previous years. In the countryside, conditions did deteriorate, and some Ottoman tribesmen “were reduced to eating grass, mud, and coal” (Reynolds 167, Kuenzler 69). Requisitions from the military might also have further complicated things. Areas or cities which were previously able to feed themselves might now have found that, after requisitions, there was too little left to sustain the local population. These speculations appear to be borne out by Pomiankowski, who notes that, by late 1916/early 1917, there was a serious shortage of wheat in Eastern Anatolia, and rations had to be reduced from one-half to a third (Pomiankowski 263-264). The deportation or massacres of the Armenians also took its toll on the population of skilled laborers or craftsmen, and despite the efforts of some authorities to spare those who were economically useful, most if not all were killed or deported, if they had not already succumbed to the diseases which, three years in, the Ottomans were still unable to control. In the areas occupied by the Russians, Armenian auxiliaries terrorized the local Turkish and Kurdish population practically at will, committing acts of both robbery and massacre, despite Russian entreaties to treat the civilian population fairly (Reynolds 194). However, much like Kurdish bandits were not above extorting money or food from other Muslims, Armenian villagers also suffered from the requisitioning of grain, taxes, or manpower by the Armenian irregulars; one villager complained that life was just as bad under the yoke of his fellow Armenians as it was under the perceived iron fist of the Muslims (Gingeras 167).

To exacerbate matters in the region further, the lack of an adequate transportation structure prevented the movement of essential items, medicine and food, to places where they were desperately needed. This is usually a prelude to famine. When a society is unable to balance out the unevenness of resources in one area or another by some sort of redistribution, any catastrophe will quickly spiral out of control. In Erzurum there is some indication that the Russians brought



with them considerable stores of supplies, and although it is unclear whether any portion of these stores would have been handed out to the civilian population, it is a possibility which cannot be dismissed out of hand, especially given that the Russians considered themselves as at least nominally responsible for maintaining order and ensuring the security of the populace, if not necessarily their wellbeing (Reynolds 199). Nevertheless, it is only reasonable to assume that by the beginning of 1917 the home-front in Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus had started to experience the very problems which had already plagued the other regions of the empire for two years by this point.

The home-front in Anatolia faced conditions which at times differed considerably from the other provinces. The region's terrain in many ways acted as a shield for the civilian population, and the lack of an advanced transportation infrastructure entailed ersatz isolation for many villages. As a result, this meant that life continued uninterrupted for these nomads and peasants. In addition, one of the greatest differences with the other regions of the empire was the adequate if not plentiful supply of grain available. Starvation was not a facet of life in Eastern Anatolia, and the labor shortage did not seriously impede the ability of the peasants to cultivate a substantial harvest.

However, the privations of wartime did manifest themselves in other ways. One of these was disease, the spread of which the Ottoman state seemed perennially unable to contain or treat. Another was banditry and social unrest, itself a feature of the mountainous and semi-lawless landscape of the east, which became exacerbated with the desertion of soldiers from the Ottoman Army in droves. The Ottoman state attempted to mitigate the problem of desertion by concentrating on catching deserters on the one hand, and by offering incentives for military service to tribal elements on the other. Both solutions met with varying degrees of success, as

evinced by the huge number of deserters who simply disappeared into the mountains and the unruliness of the tribal militias.

The refugee crises were also largely unique to the region of Eastern Anatolia in comparison with the other parts of the empire. The vilayets of Erzurum, Bitlis, Van, and Diyarbakir were largely emptied of their Armenian inhabitants, which resulted in the almost complete eradication of an Armenian presence in what would soon become the Turkish Republic. At the same time, however, developments in the region resulted in the considerable migration of Muslim refugees out of the region towards Western Anatolia.

The Ottoman state was clearly able to direct the course of some events more than others, as shown by their differing responses to an epidemic versus the mobilization of the rural population, to the care of Muslim refugees versus the deportation of the Armenians. Where it could, it acted energetically and deliberately; in other instances, it was sanguine and helpless, and had to rely on outside assistance. The Germans were responsible for providing some of this assistance, although it would be untrue to claim that the Germans were behind the administrative successes of the Ottoman state.

These Germans were witnesses not just to developments on the front, but to developments and conditions on the home-front. Many of them had never been outside of Germany before, and this curiosity for their new surroundings shows through in their memoirs. Yet many scholars continue to underutilize these sources, which may be a consequence of the implicit assumption that these authors were far more concerned with the movements of armies than the condition of the civilian population. It is the author's hope that our understanding of the Ottoman home-front will continue to expand, and that scholarly interest may be directed to hitherto ignored theatres of war, such as in Mesopotamia.

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