

Introduction

This book explores ordinary Ottoman women's everyday experiences of World War I in Anatolia and eastern Thrace until the final peace treaty was signed in 1923. These women were the largest group of civilians on the home front during the war. But there is little knowledge of how they lived and perceived the war. What is even less known is in which ways these women responded to wartime policies and conditions and how their response made them politically important.

For Ottoman society, World War I was the most arduous and bloodiest period of more than a decade of war. Consecutive wars, started with the Tripolitanian War in 1911 and followed by the Balkan Wars, World War I, and the National Struggle (*Milli Mücadele*) devastated both the Ottoman state and society. The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) had begun to hold sway over the empire since the promulgation of the Second Constitution in 1908 and especially after the coup of 23 January 1913 staged by the CUP and its military leader Enver Pasha. After abortive efforts by Ottoman politicians to ally with France and Britain, the Ottomans had no choice but to ally with the Germany. War mobilization started on 2 August 1914 for the Ottoman Empire, after a secret treaty was signed with Germans by Enver Pasha, who believed that this alliance could increase Ottoman territory. Nevertheless, his plans failed during the course of the war.

The first phase of World War I for Ottoman Turkey ended with the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918. It gave the Allied powers the right to occupy any strategic land for their security. Consequently, they occupied Istanbul in two stages: on 13 November 1918 as a de facto occupation and on 16 March 1920 as a de jure occupation. British, French, and Italian troops also occupied Anatolia under the same pretense. In particular, the occupation of Izmir by Greek troops on 15 May 1919 and the Allied powers' plan to divide even Anatolia and Thrace, the core territory of the empire, embodied in the Treaty of Sèvres of 10 August 1920, fueled the National Struggle. From 23 April 1920 onward, there were two governments on Ottoman territories: one in

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Istanbul and the other, of the nationalist forces, in Ankara. The Ottoman parliament in Istanbul could never ratify the Treaty of Sèvres because it had already annulled itself on 18 March 1920 after the occupation of Istanbul. The Ankara government repudiated this treaty and remobilized almost all resources left from World War I against the Allied powers.

For the Ottoman Empire World War I hardly ended with the Peace Treaty of Lausanne on 24 July 1923. Many Ottoman men served as soldiers from 1911 to 1922. For their women and many other civilians on the home front, war caused an unprecedented upheaval in their lives beyond all expectations.

Although ordinary women were among both the main sufferers and crucial actors of this war on the home front as members of soldiers' families, as agents of reproduction of population and national culture, or as part of the workforce, historical studies have conventionally focused on upper- and middle-class or educated women. Taking their experience and activism into account exclusively, scholarly accounts generally have accepted the war years as a progressive phase for the emancipation of Turkish women. However, for the majority of Ottoman women and men, except for some businessmen who acquired privileges from the CUP and Anatolian local notables who managed to grab the properties of the dispossessed and hang on to them after 1923, the war was a disaster.¹

But this does not mean that Ottoman women were only passive victims of wartime sufferings. They struggled for their survival and economic rights, both of which became a part of Ottoman everyday politics in the war years. In the Western context, women's fight for socioeconomic rights and their everyday struggle for survival are acknowledged as an essential component of their movement for citizenship rights.² Unfortunately, ordinary Ottoman women's similar social and economic struggle, which constituted the great part of their World War I experience, remained silenced. The historical accounts of wartime women's experience in the Ottoman Empire have been restricted to women who contributed to the war mobilization or to associational and publishing activities.

It is obvious that the literature on the period severely needs to go beyond this exclusionary history dominated by middle-class and educated women. Ordinary women, as this book reveals, were also historical actors, who had their own subjective goals beyond those imposed on them by the state and society. Their indirect influence in politics through their everyday struggles had an impact on the formation of women's citizenship rights in the long run.

Although ordinary women were not as organized as Ottoman feminists in attaining their political rights, their actions created the background of

the future developments of the Republican period on women's rights and Turkish feminism. The stories of poor women include vital information about the changing social structure, state–society relations, especially women's new and increasing interactions with the state, and the problems that ordinary people endured during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

However, this conclusion is difficult to derive from the existing literature. Until the 1980s, a limited number of works dealt with the social and economic consequences of World War I for Ottoman society.³ Only within the last thirty years have new publications on the issue appeared. Some initial studies emphasized the wartime reforms of the Young Turk politicians or wartime social conditions in the big cities.⁴ But the most informative and comprehensive accounts of the social history of the war period focused on the economic impact of the war.⁵

In recent years, another group of scholars started to explore Ottoman mobilization efforts and war propaganda.⁶ Social and economic problems stemming from the war – such as food shortages, poverty, migration, and epidemics – also started to attract attention, though in limited manner.⁷ The wartime migrations and the population exchange between Turks and Greeks that followed the war have been examined in recent years.⁸ Undoubtedly, all of these works provided partial and indirect knowledge on Ottoman women by focusing on the social and economic conditions and the state policies that surrounded and affected them. However, ordinary women's experience and their response to the war have remained one of the least-known subjects of the Ottoman-Turkish history.⁹

Regarding specific accounts of ordinary Ottoman-Turkish women during the war years, a few earlier studies motivated the writing of this book. First, an article written in 1918 by Charlotte Lorenz, “Die Frauenfrage im Osmanischen Reiche mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der arbeitenden Klasse” (The women's question in the Ottoman Empire with special reference to the working class), which discussed Ottoman working-class women, is one of them.¹⁰

Yavuz Selim Karakışla's book *Women, War, and Work in the Ottoman Empire: Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women, 1916–1923* also revealed Muslim women's entry into professional life in large numbers by being employed through the Ottoman Women's Employment Islamic Society (OWEIS) (Osmanlı Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyet-i İslamiyesi) during World War I.¹¹ Furthermore, Nicole A. N. M. van Os wrote on pensions for soldiers' families in her article “Taking Care of Soldiers' Families: The Ottoman State and the *Muinsiz Aile Maaşı*.”¹²

Leaving aside these few studies, even feminist scholars have remained silent about ordinary Ottoman women. Works concerning Ottoman

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women's struggle for their rights during the late-Ottoman and early Republican period have mainly focused on a limited number of women writers, reforms in women's education, women's associations founded for patriotic and philanthropic goals, women's journals and periodicals, and changes in women's clothing.¹³ Surely, these works revealed that Ottoman women, though limited to the upper class and a small number of educated women, exerted considerable effort to attain some rights and acceptance prior to the Republican reforms concerning women.¹⁴ They especially showed that Turkish women did not attain their political rights only as an "endowment" of the Republican politicians.¹⁵ However, women's direct involvement in organized movements or publishing activities was accepted as the main criterion of being historical and political agents.¹⁶

Instead, from the 1970s onward, feminist historians in Europe and the United States have produced works on a wide spectrum of gender issues, although largely restricted to the Western context.¹⁷ Revisionist works of some Western feminist scholars on the experiences of women during World War I underlined not only the emancipation of women through their contribution to the war mobilization but also the negative impact of the war on women in terms of economic problems, wartime patriarchal pressure, and violence.¹⁸

A close look at the negative impact of the war shows that there was a great divergence between the real conditions of poor women and the depiction of them in the official discourse and press as "the honor of the country" and "devoted helpers of the country." Yet, despite this negative impact of the war on Ottoman women, Turkish women were symbolized as the self-sacrificing "mothers of the nation." Literature on World War I and the subsequent National Struggle emphasized women's contributions to the war and their patriotic activities by taking the official sources and the limited number of middle-class women's magazines for granted. What the historical writing generally has meant by the concept of "women's agency" is either their self-denying contributions to the war effort or their intellectual activities. Neither the conflicts between ordinary women and the Ottoman state, and, later on, the nationalist forces, nor the women's discontent with wartime measures, propaganda, and socioeconomic conditions or women's appropriation of these for their self-interests have been problematized and explored in detail.¹⁹

Methodological and theoretical problems inherent in Ottoman-Turkish historiography impeded in-depth research on the subject. Studying ordinary women's World War I experience primarily requires refuting a single "womanhood" and embracing the fact that women's war experiences varied according to their social status.²⁰ During this war,

ordinary women's everyday actions, although different from elite women's associational or publishing activities, were part of politics as well. However, to conceive their everyday life as a realm of politics, it is imperative to accept that there are multiple public spheres comprising disadvantaged classes of the society rather than one single public sphere which is constituted by middle-class educated groups.²¹ These public spheres might even be in conflict with each other.²² Therefore, the war experiences of a middle-class and a poor woman might be completely different and in opposition. Belinda Davis convincingly shows this by studying ordinary German women in Berlin during World War I who found ways to participate in politics with their resistance to the wartime shortage of food. She shows how poor women in Berlin, called "woman of lesser means," who received no financial help from the state, unlike the "soldier's wife," became active agents of street protests and everyday politics.²³

But how could Ottoman women, mostly illiterate and long secluded in their households, also be political agents during World War I? The answer lies in how and why women's daily life and those aspects of their lives called "private" were of political importance for the state. As Elizabeth Thompson writes, the boundary between public and private is more blurred, especially in the Middle Eastern context.²⁴ Partha Chatterjee also claims that political conflict over women in colonial societies appears much more in households than outside.²⁵ Moreover, according to many feminist scholars, influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of "social control," even in the Western context, the division between public and private is actually socially constructed.²⁶ Indeed, as Nira Yuval-Davis claims for the modern welfare states, there is "no social sphere which is protected from state intervention."²⁷ Since these modern states needed to regulate families in order to increase their demographic and economic power, women's role in the family as mothers, their bodies, and their morality gained a political importance.²⁸ This was particularly critical during World War I, when women's productivity, reproduction of population, and assistance to war mobilization were indispensable. According to Kathleen Canning, during this war, due to their exploitation at work or their poverty and hunger, German women realized that their bodies became "sites of intensified intervention and regulation" of the state. This forced even ordinary women to have closer contact with the state and consequently to develop a kind of political consciousness.²⁹

Ottoman women also had similar wartime problems, which forced them to deal with state bureaucracy much more than ever before and led them to fight for their rights in everyday life. Their everyday struggle to survive and defend their rights constituted a part of wartime politics.

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Theoretical and methodological origins of this everyday politics can be found in the “history from below” approach of British Marxist historians like E. P. Thompson, especially his work *The Making of the English Working Class*, which is a history of ordinary people.³⁰ Rather than giving priority to institutional and formal politics, these scholars examined working-class people’s seemingly nonpolitical behaviors – such as popular culture, crime, violence, riots, and popular protests – as a way of engaging in politics.³¹

Just like the British Marxist historians, scholars of “subaltern studies,” too, emphasized that the struggle of ordinary people did not show itself in formal politics³² but was exhibited much more in their self-seeking or self-defensive actions in everyday life.³³ These actions, which James C. Scott conceptualizes as “weapons of the weak” and “everyday forms of resistance,” generally take the form of foot dragging, poaching, squatting, tax evasion, pilferage, theft, cheating, rumor, folk songs, folk poetry, and jokes.³⁴ These mostly informal political means were used also by ordinary women in pursuing their interests and indirectly influenced state decisions by compelling the ruling circles to modify their policies and practices concerning women.

The *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) historians also emphasize the political potential of alternative, everyday informal actions in the context of the working-class politics, like clandestinely seeking even the smallest economic interests to the disadvantage of the entrepreneurs.³⁵ Therefore, everyday life and seemingly nonpolitical activities can be analyzed politically,³⁶ and regardless of ordinary people’s objectives they can have an impact on formal politics. Likewise, Ottoman women’s everyday struggle for allocation of resources might be accepted as part of a forgotten Ottoman politics.

Indeed, as Dorothee Wierling states, the everyday-life history is “a fertile field” to study power struggle in gender relations.³⁷ However, as Joan W. Scott shows for working-class history and Lila Abu-Lughod for subaltern studies, scholars who study poor and ordinary people have long remained silent on women’s agency.³⁸ Unfortunately, it is legitimate to claim that even in these studies on the everyday politics of ordinary people, the wife of “the unknown soldier,” that is, the ordinary women, is less known.³⁹ But it is possible to unveil some of this mystery for Ottoman women, as this book undertakes.

However, unveiling this is easier said than done. It is particularly difficult to reach ordinary women’s historical experience with all of its aspects due to methodological problems. Since ordinary people leave behind nearly nothing for writing the history of their everyday life, historians need to seek new sources and methods.⁴⁰ This is especially true for

ordinary Ottoman women, most of whom were illiterate. Reaching their experiences in Ottoman archives is like solving a puzzle. Even when scholars search the archive catalogs for the Turkish word for “woman” (*kadın*) they do not receive the expected results, because during World War I Ottoman women were catalogued as “the family” (*aile*) of men, as civilians, or as soldiers. The Ottoman state attached a partial importance to women in terms of their critical roles in the family. Finding the existing sources on women is also difficult because they are scattered in various catalogs of archives in different cities. For instance, the research for this book required working in three national archives in Istanbul and Ankara, and there are still various local archives which might be useful for unearthing local histories.

The women’s press of the time, too, might not bring about in-depth knowledge of ordinary women, because most of the issues in the wartime women’s journals reflect first of all the problems of middle-class or elite women of the time rather than lower-income women’s daily survival struggles.⁴¹ Furthermore, many of the Ottoman women’s periodicals contain misleading articles penned by Unionist male authors writing under female pseudonyms.⁴²

Consequently, new sources, such as state agents’ reports and women’s petitions and telegrams submitted to the state bureaucracy, are vital for understanding the experiences and voices of ordinary women. However, one of the main challenges in working with these official documents is finding ordinary women’s real voices and experiences in them.

Among these sources, women’s petitions and telegrams sent from provinces can be considered as a way of communication between them and state institutions. Nevertheless, since most Ottoman women were illiterate, other people frequently wrote on their behalf. Petitions in the Ottoman Empire were nearly always written by professional scribes (*arzuhalci*) who used letter-writers’ guides (*münşeat*) that explained petition-writing rules. These scribes had guilds and they used official papers for petitions that were sold at a certain price. Consequently, most Ottoman petitions had a uniformity in many of their expressions and in their form that makes finding the petitioners’ direct voices problematic.⁴³ Nevertheless it is still “possible to determine what was the influence of the professional scribe” and “what is the voice of the real petitioner” in these petitions. This is so because at least they give an idea of the demands and complaints, names, and some living conditions of the petitioners.⁴⁴

In their petitions women often referred to their poverty, hunger, and helplessness. These expressions were largely due to the harsh reality these unfortunate women were trying to describe. Nevertheless, it was also part of the formulaic vocabulary typically used in the Ottoman petitions of the

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time. Similar expressions that helped to gain as much sympathy as possible were also used by women in other geographies and periods. Rather than being “a language of subservience,” they helped manipulate the authorities to achieve a desired end.⁴⁵ For instance, during World War I not only the state bureaucracy but also many women frequently used the expression “soldier’s family” to define themselves. In fact, they often used words emphasizing their sacrifices for the empire, the sultan, the nation, the religion, and their strong attachment to the country and the state. Their narratives, especially in the petitions and telegrams they sent to the state’s departments, share some of the nationalist, religious, and patriarchal discourses of the state elites. Women emphasized, for example, their motherhood, piety, and chastity. Women petitioners frequently underlined the martyrdom (*şehitlik*) of their sons and husbands to show the contribution of their men to the war effort. Martyrdom had originally been defined as dying for the religious faith of Islam. During World War I, however, the Ottoman state, claiming to wage a Holy War (*cihad*), accepted any Ottoman soldier who died for the country on the battlefield or any official in war-related state service as a martyr, regardless of his religion. Nevertheless, in their petitions women frequently mentioned that their men died for their state, country, and religion.

Does this language of the petitions mean that women were under the full control of the state’s propaganda? Undoubtedly, some women faithfully believed what they wrote in their petitions. They sometimes negotiated and collaborated with the authorities. However, the use of official terms by ordinary people may also have been a resistance practice intended to legitimize their demands and complaints.⁴⁶ Selecting those words serving their own goals in a dominant discourse, ordinary people can reinterpret and strategically use it.⁴⁷ In that sense, even defining oneself as a “soldier’s family,” as the state previously defined them, could be a part of women’s communication strategies and their search for justice from the state or their attempts to acquire some state assistance. Therefore, this similar language can be thought as an element of ordinary women’s everyday politics rather than as proof that these women accepted the war propaganda.⁴⁸

Another shortcoming of the official documents is that women’s expressions in them might have gaps and biases. Although they are written documents, they share weaknesses similar to those of interview transcriptions used by oral historians. Even in interviews made today with living women, self-censure and distortions are common, since women often prefer remaining silent on their own interests and experiences when these are different than men’s, that is to say, the experiences of the dominant male culture.⁴⁹ For those Ottoman women who died long

ago, therefore, no interview is now possible, and for those who left only a few written documents, it is still difficult to learn their real war experiences and perceptions. Therefore, the historian has to predict what these women had thought and done in the past. In order to control possible flawed or distorted information, the researcher has to make verifications by examining different categories of sources at the same time. For this purpose, contemporary literature and the memoirs of contemporary observers are quoted in this book to understand women's wartime problems. Nevertheless, these works are mostly written by men and could be politically prejudiced. The literature after 1923, especially, constructs the past in the light of Republican nationalism and the reforms of the postwar years. But when used cautiously, these literary works reveal historical facts or women's perceptions that are barely found in archives or that are bridging the gaps of archival documents.⁵⁰

Another source for finding the voices of ordinary women is the popular culture. Forms of oral communication, such as popular songs and folk poems, can also reveal the perceptions and everyday experiences of ordinary people, who mostly cannot record these in written sources.⁵¹ Therefore, in this book, popular folk songs, poems belonging to poor women or that mention their problems, and anonymous poems appearing in the humoristic press of the time have also been quoted to present women's everyday experiences more accurately.

Finally, it is admittedly difficult to examine or use all archive sources in a preliminary study like this. There are numerous other documents in Turkish and foreign archives on ordinary Ottoman women that could not be cited, due to this book's physical limits. Various instances can be given for almost all arguments and cases here presented. However, with those selected, which can be regarded as the tip of the iceberg and not isolated cases, it is possible to reach a general picture of ordinary women's war experience. Brought together, these archive sources give important details on how Ottoman women survived World War I and vital clues on their hidden power.