

Mehmet Beşikçi

The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012). XIII + 346 p.

The fifty-second volume of the now classic Brill series on the Ottoman Empire and its Heritage is a study by a young scholar on a crucial aspect of the logistics behind the Ottoman war effort during World War I. Given the relative dearth of solid scholarly works on Ottoman participation in the Great War, this is obviously a most welcome contribution to an understudied moment of late Ottoman history. Yet the specificity of the subject treated makes it even more invaluable. Indeed, as the title clearly indicates, this is an in-depth study of one particular and completely ignored aspect of the conflict, that of the mobilization and conscription of men to meet the challenge of a war that very rapidly grew out of proportions.

Given the fact that the Great War ended with a total collapse of the Empire in the wake of a series of military defeats, one could expect that this study should address the issue of a major failure. While it is to a large extent true that M. Beşikçi's monograph is a detailed account of one of the major reasons behind this final Ottoman defeat, one should certainly not come to the hasty conclusion that this vision corroborates an already existing belief in the available literature. On the contrary, one needs to remember that the dominant discourse tends to emphasize the fact that the Ottomans were defeated *despite* a massive and loyal contribution to the war effort. Failure is therefore explained in purely military terms, as the result of poor leadership and strategy—as in the case of Enver Pasha at Sarikamış—; as the consequence of the backstabbing treachery of certain ethnic and religious communities, especially the Armenians and the Arabs; or more generally, as the inevitable outcome of the military, technological, and economic superiority of the Entente powers, combined with insufficient Axis, especially German, support. Obviously, this is a dominantly Turkish national(ist) vision, further incensed by an epic and heroic rendering of a few Ottoman victories, especially at Gallipoli, which has the invaluable advantage of providing a linkage to the hagiography of Mustafa Kemal Pasha [Atatürk], the founding father of the Turkish nation born out of the ashes of the Empire.

In that sense, M. Beşikçi's work is a powerful iconoclastic blow to the legend of the Turk as a "born soldier." It very intelligently and critically assesses the way in which the Unionists tried, managed to a certain extent and up to a certain point, but ultimately miserably failed, to use propaganda and ideology to serve their ambitious plans. Even more importantly, it reveals how this whole process gradually focused on the only element that was considered to be

trustworthy and dependable: the Anatolian Muslim population. This was the climax of a feeling that had built up among the ruling elite through decades of frustration at the sight of a decaying empire, territorial losses, and growing western encroachment. In an atmosphere of rising paranoia, Muslim resentment against non-Muslims was further reinforced by the surge of nationalist or autonomist claims among some of these communities. Abdülhamid's autocratic regime was a crucial turning point in this escalation, as it inaugurated a systematic and state-sponsored policy of oppression, violence, and massacre against certain groups, most notably the Armenian population. In that sense, the Unionists were following the lead of their predecessor and nemesis. The Great War, however, brought the Armenian 'question' to an extreme degree of irrationality and inconsistency as the government started by trying to submit a reluctant community to conscription; made sure that once incorporated, they would be neutralized in menial and subservient positions; and finally decided that they would simply be eliminated, through deportation and/or extermination.

It needs to be emphasized, therefore, that beyond the question of military organization and logistics, M. Beşikçi's work reveals with unprecedented clarity one of the most fundamental processes behind the formation of the Turkish nation and the continuum thus established between the last decade of the Empire and the early Republican period. True, the argument is not new, but it would be hard to find a better and clearer demonstration of this crucial ideological turn away from a somewhat inclusive imperial ideology to a national discourse of exclusion and discrimination. As the author himself puts it, rather than seeing the War of Independence as an extension of World War I, it may well be more accurate to say that "the Turkish National Struggle actually began during the Great War" (p. 315).

In short then, *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War* is a truly remarkable and original contribution to the history of one of the most traumatic moments of the protracted collapse of the Empire. By combining a thorough and detailed study of the logistics of the war effort with a subtle and insightful analysis of the period's ideological underpinnings, Mehmet Beşikçi has managed to bring forth a solid and rich narrative of the crucial but dark process of transition from empire to nation. It could be said that most of the processes described in terms of conscription, mobilization, indoctrination, reward and punishment, ethnic and religious screening, or regarding the use of irregulars could have benefited from a broader chronological perspective reaching back to some of the earlier modern wars fought by the Ottomans: the Crimean War of 1854-1856, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, and, of course, the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913.