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INTRODUCTION

Scholars of the Middle East and North Africa are only too familiar with the momentous changes set in motion by the events of World War I. Given the number of new states and political movements that emerged in the war's aftermath, it seems only fair to describe it as "the single most important *political* event in the history of the modern Middle East."[1] Elizabeth F. Thompson recently likened the war's impact on the Middle East to that of the Civil War in the United States.[2] To be sure, the passing of a century hardly proved sufficient for coming to terms with the legacy of either war. In fact, analyses and discussions of World War I in the Middle East have remained highly politicized, in school curricula, in academia, and in popular culture and the arena of public memory. History and historical interpretations are always contested, of course, and there is little reason to believe that accounts of World War I in the Middle East and North Africa will become less so anytime soon.

Important strands of this politicization are directly rooted in the war years. Each of the articles in this special issue points to vital legacies of the war. The depiction of the Ottoman Empire as the victim of western European imperialism, without serious consideration of the empire's own policies and actions, is a view that prevailed throughout the 20th century. It did so especially in the Republic of Turkey, as revealed in Lerna Ekmekcioglu's article in this issue, "Republic of Paradox: The League of Nations Minority Protection Regime and the New Turkey's Step-Citizens." As the new nation was being constructed after 1923, the League of Nations' "minority protection regime," enshrined in the Treaty of Lausanne, "played an important role in the conflicting treatment that minorities have since received in Turkey," yet also "entrenched divisions that had already been formed in the Ottoman Empire during the violence of the preceding decade, including the Armenian genocide." Ekmekcioglu argues that these various legacies have defined the lives of non-Muslim Turkish citizens in profoundly contradictory ways. They were "excluded from a Turkness (*Türklük*) to which they were also forcibly included."

Max Reibman, in "The Case of William Yale: Cairo's Syrians and the Arab Origins of American Influence in the Post-Ottoman Middle East, 1917–19," points to further ways in which the war generated its own dynamics and gave rise to new political visions. His examination of Syrian intellectuals based in Cairo during the war years exposes just how fleetingly the Arab compact with Anglo-French interests materialized during the

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Sharifian revolt against the Ottoman Empire and then vanished. The subsequent Syrian turn toward the United States was ultimately broadcast through the provisions of the General Syrian Congress, adopted on 2 July 1919, which demanded sovereignty but accepted U.S. assistance if necessary. Reibman reminds us that the origins of that turn were rooted in the war years and were linked to British and French policies, of which the Sykes-Picot (and Sazonov) Agreement and the Balfour Declaration were the most prominent. Drawing on the dispatches of William Yale, the U.S. State Department's "Special Agent" in Cairo in late 1917, Reibman traces the "broader evolution of the United States as an instrument of Syrian opposition to partition, Zionism, and integration into a Hashimite-controlled government." I would add that along with the shift toward the United States, as Michael Provence and Awad Halabi have shown, there were attempts to repair relations with Ottoman forces in Anatolia, reflecting the realization that engagements with London and Paris now seemed less promising than those with Ankara and Washington.[3]

Sharif Husayn's break with the Ottoman state and alliance with the British must to some extent be seen as a consequence of famine, and in particular of Istanbul's inability to supply the Arab lands with food. Wedged between British occupying forces in Egypt and Basra, Husayn could not hope for much help from Istanbul after 1916. Alia El Bakri, in "'Memories of the Beloved': Oral Histories from the 1916–19 Siege of Medina," examines the more than two-year siege of Medina by Sharifian forces and the consequent suffering of Medina's civilian population. Based on an oral history archive collected by Ahmad Murshid and published in the 1990s, El Bakri reconstructs conditions in the city through firsthand accounts, arguing that Murshid's collection "contributes to a broader effort to decenter imperial powers' narratives and official histories" and helps to "reshape how the history of the siege is told, filling in gaps produced by the 'forgetfulness' of the dominant narratives."

The famine certainly shaped national identities in Lebanon, where the wartime experience of it has been remembered with deep anguish in memoirs, fiction, and film. Najwa al-Qattan's article, "When Mothers Ate Their Children: Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon," explores Syrian and Lebanese poems, *zajal*, plays, novels, memoirs, and histories to examine both the horrific conditions of life during wartime and the difficulties of later writers to put pen to paper in order to describe that experience. Echoing a theme that also appears in El Bakri's article on the siege of Medina, al-Qattan argues that these writings are often "suggestive of the extent to which the famine itself resists or lacks the coherence of narrativity," revealing how the experience "marked a rupture not only in historical time but also in the ability of language to describe that rupture."

While the Syrian famine is now attracting research by scholars of the Middle East, it has made few inroads into the international historiography on the war. Comparing the naval blockades of Germany and Syria and their respective impacts would seem to be an important next step for scholars interested in globalizing our understanding of World War I. In the German and Habsburg empires, malnutrition and starvation also claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and threatened imperial collapse. During the war years, starvation became a fact of life in many parts of the Ottoman Empire, including Arabia, as El Bakri shows, as well as Syria, Egypt, and eastern Anatolia. The only region of the empire that continued producing food in significant amounts was Aydın province in

western Anatolia, from whence the food, however, was not dispersed across the empire, either by land or by sea.

In the empire's Arab lands, half a million civilians in Syria, one out of eight, starved to death. The general factors that converged to produce the famine are well known. Ottoman state policies of confiscating grain and conscripting working-age men, the Anglo-French naval blockade of the Syrian coast, the destruction of agricultural crops by locusts on a massive scale, hoarding and profiteering of the available grain supply by merchants, and Mount Lebanon's silk- rather than food-based economy all contributed to the making of the disaster. And yet, we still know very little about how these individual factors played out, and even less about how they interacted with each other to shape the overall process.

Here Melanie Schulze Tanielian, in "Feeding the City: The Beirut Municipality and the Politics of Food during World War I," has taken on the subject of the Beirut municipal government's efforts to provision the city with food. The municipality's work was described only gingerly in the local press, which appeared under the watchful eye of Istanbul's military authority on the spot, Cemal Pasha. Local power holders sought to demonstrate their relevance to both the local population and the Ottoman state but often found their hands tied. Tanielian argues that "focusing on food allows us to move beyond the 'catastrophe and aftermath' paradigm toward a modes-of-resilience analytic, illustrated in fierce political competitions over loyalties."

The emotional climate in the Ottoman Empire on the eve of the war played a determining role not only in the decision-making process from August to November 1914 that led to the empire's entry into the war, but also in how the war was fought. In Istanbul and in Anatolia, where most Ottoman refugees from the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Crimea had settled since the wars of the 19th century, the predominant perception of the empire was one of a people under attack. This outlook was fueled, as Y. Doğan Çetinkaya shows in "Atrocity Propaganda and the Nationalization of the Masses in the Ottoman Empire during the Balkan Wars (1912–13)," by concerted efforts of the state as well as of nonstate associations and publications. Çetinkaya explores the collection and dissemination of narratives on atrocities committed by Christians and Christian powers against Ottoman Muslims. This genre of "atrocity propaganda" appeared almost immediately following the 1908 revolution and the lifting of Hamidian censorship laws, and intensified with the wars of 1911 and 1912–13.[4] Çetinkaya suggests that scholarship in Turkey on the wars of the late Ottoman and early republican eras has "tended to concentrate on the atrocities (*mezalim*) endured by Muslims at the hands of Christian armies," and thus might in some ways "be considered a continuation of the atrocity propaganda that emerged during the Balkan Wars."

The six articles examine some of the transformative processes spawned by the war. Their findings help us articulate in clearer terms what we mean when we point to World War I as a pivotal event. Even if scholars of the Middle East needed little convincing of the critical role played by the war, many questions about these years have been addressed only recently. The wave of new work did not emerge in anticipation of the war's centennial commemoration this year, but rather is a result of new questions historians have been willing and—thanks to newly accessible sources and archives, and different political winds—able to explore. Fresh investigations into state policies, civilian life, ethnic and religious minorities, soldiers, children, agriculture and the environment,

and the art, literature, and memories of the war have many new things to tell us about the formation of the modern Middle East. So far these studies have focused primarily on the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, with less work appearing on the Maghrib, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.[5]

The war of 1914–18 differed from the Ottoman Empire's geographically limited wars of 1911 and 1912–13, and from all of its other modern wars since the 18th century. It affected all parts of the empire and its entire civilian population, from the Black to the Red Sea. Over the course of four years, the state conscripted ever more men into the army and into labor battalions. While its military machinery was devouring a generation of teenage boys and men, the home front, too, became a battlefield on which men, women, and children fought famine, locusts, disease, and Ottoman extractive policies. The state struggled from the very beginning of the war to keep its troops fed, clothed, equipped, and moving, in the face of severe transportation and logistical problems and scarcities of coal. Out of a total Ottoman population of twenty-one million, some three million men were mobilized. Of those, over 770,000 died in combat and of disease, half a million deserted, and some 250,000 were captured and taken prisoner.[6] A recent calculation put the number of military and civilian deaths from 1914 to 1923 for Egypt, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire at approximately 5 million.[7] Such numbers are useful in giving us a sense of the magnitude of the war's impact, but they also tend to have the effect of numbing our faculties to the horrors they are meant to capture. The new scholarship helps us get beyond the numbers and labels toward a more comprehensive understanding of the war and its many legacies.

NOTES

[1]James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 182.

[2]Thompson also remarks that the "Ottoman defeat in World War I caused the defeat of constitutionalism." Elizabeth F. Thompson, *Justice Interrupted: The Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 9.

[3]Michael Provence, "Ottoman Modernity, Colonialism, and Insurgency in the Interwar Arab East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011): 205–25; Awad Halabi, "Liminal Loyalties: Ottomanism and Palestinian Responses to the Turkish War of Independence, 1919–22," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41 (2012): 19–37.

[4]See also, in this regard, Çetinkaya's book on *The Young Turks and the Boycott Movement: Nationalism, Protest and the Working Classes in the Formation of Modern Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); and Pamira Brummett, *Image and Imperialism in the Ottoman Revolutionary Press, 1908–1911* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000).

[5]This body of scholarship is too voluminous to recount here, but for a discussion of the war's historiography focusing on Turkey, see Alexandre Toumarkine, "Historiographie turque de la Première Guerre mondiale sur les fronts ottomans: problèmes, enjeux et tendances," in *Histoire@Politique: Politique, culture, société* (January–April 2014): 1–20 (http://www.histoire-politique.fr).

[6]Yücel Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation: Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914–1939* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 16–20.

[7]James L. Gelvin, "World War I and the Palestine Mandate," in *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77.