

CSSH NOTES

Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

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Since 2014 we have been inundated by “commemoration books” about the Great War. Some are good and others not so good. Then again, how do you retell a story and make it interesting when everyone already knows the end? In this conjuncture Leila Fawaz’s book stands out as a veritable *tour de force*. What we have is something that is a real first—a comprehensive and brilliant *social history* of the Great War in the Middle East. Although Fawaz gives a very competent and succinct account of the actual course of the campaigns and battles of the war, the book’s strongest feature is its insider’s view of how the daily lives of ordinary people in the Levant were affected by developments over which they had little or no control. In this regard, the most striking chapters are those that reveal a world of unpublished memoirs, personal recollections, and novels that have appeared only in Arabic, and the book’s greatest strength is its presentation of this human dimension.

The stories of people who resisted, collaborated, or died are told with sympathy but without appeal to cheap sentimentality. Themes are masterfully woven together, such as how people reacted to hunger, especially in Lebanon, the region of the empire that suffered the most intense famine in proportion to its small population, and how young men resisted conscription or deserted *en masse* from an army they never felt to be their own. In her use of many diaries, private papers, and personal communications to her Fawaz opens a window unto a hitherto little known aspect of life during the war.

Everybody loves a good spy story, and this book abounds in rich detail of espionage and counterespionage. We are taken into the lives of figures like Bechara al Buwari, a Lebanese businessman who became the spymaster for the French based on the island of Arwad, the French naval base just off the Syrian coast. Likewise his counterpart Aziz Bek, Cemal Pasha’s counterintelligence chief, is the one to furnish a list of the uncomplimentary epithets that the locals used for Cemal, starting with the famous *Al-Saffah*. Aziz was also realistic enough to tell Cemal that the population of Lebanon was “in its entirety against us.” This is no surprise given how Cemal treated them.

Thus some of the harder hitting pages of the book come when Fawaz deals with Cemal’s oppression of the local population and his execution of the Arab intellectuals and politicians that amounted to a veritable eliticide. Yet here, too,

we are given a balanced account of how some locals were ready enough to collaborate with him and even turn a quick profit. This is particularly difficult to present well since the story is a well known one full of nationalist clichés and pitfalls that Fawaz’s mature scholarship manages to sidestep. The most important part of this sorry tale, she tells us, is in its formative influence on the collective memory of future generations of Arab historians whose “predominant view ... remains one of weariness about the last two decades of Ottoman history.” Particularly after the hangings in Beirut and Damascus, “a point of no return” was reached in Arab-Turkish relations (252). She is completely right, and to this day the “days of the Turks,” *eyyam atrak*, are a hateful memory for the average Lebanese.

Another point that must be mentioned is that Fawaz brings into the picture those men who have been hitherto much neglected in the scholarship of the region during the war: the South Asian troops of the British Empire who found themselves fighting someone else’s war.

My one minor quibble is with the title, or rather its source. The formulation “The land of broken hearts” is taken from the memoirs of Halide Edip, a well known Turkish nationalist who was involved in causing many such broken hearts, particularly in her collaboration with Cemal in the Islamization and Turkification of Armenian orphans in Lebanon. Indeed Fawaz does point out that she was “among those who defended Jamal Pasha.”

In sum, Leila Fawaz has provided us with a magisterial and highly readable study that will no doubt become standard reading for years to come.

———Selim Deringil, Lebanese American University

On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

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Émile Durkheim’s observation in 1905, “It is the rhythm of social life that is the basis of the category of time,” was unusual for a turn-of-the-century European. It might have been less remarkable elsewhere in the world. Inhabitants of Bombay and Beirut, Calcutta and Cairo showed themselves better able to conceptualize multiple temporal frames of reference than did exponents of Western modernity. In Vanessa Ogle’s words, “Europeans were slow to develop the same imaginary flexibility of abstraction and ability to juggle different times that those at the core of modern globality had displayed all along.”

Like Ogle, the historian of Egypt On Barak occupies the front line of a renewed “temporal turn” in the humanities and social sciences. This attentiveness to time is perhaps the first real vogue for the topic since the outpouring of classic texts such as Alfred Gell’s *Anthropology of Time* (1992) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Much of the new interest, including the work of