

BETWEEN DEATH AND DESERTION. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OTTOMAN SOLDIER IN WORLD WAR I¹

THE LIMITS OF THE SOURCES

For some twenty-five years now, in the large and flowering field of World War I studies, a certain approach to the history of the war has been popular; an approach which is epitomized by Martin Middlebrooks' famous *The First Day on the Somme* (1971) and by the different works of John Terraine. This is the attempt to write the war's social history, to concentrate on the war experience, viewing the experience of the First World War from below, through the eyes of the men who served in the trenches, the people who drove the ambulances, the women who filled the shells in the factories.

In Europe, there is ample material available for this way of writing history: letters and diaries, stories, poems and paintings, autobiographies and oral history. Where the Ottoman Empire is concerned, the situation could not be more different and the reason is a simple one: the vast majority of the common soldiers of the Ottoman army were illiterate². Even as late as 1927, four years after the establishment of the Turkish

¹ Parts of this article have been presented as papers at the conference 'The war experienced' in Leeds, September 1994 and at the 7th conference on the social and economic history of the Ottoman Empire in Heidelberg in July 1995. I am grateful for the critical remarks made by colleagues at these conferences, in particular for those of Peter Liddell, Yigal Shetty, Justin McCarthy and Ercument Kuran.

² There are many testimonies to this effect. See for example Friedrich FRIEDRICH KRESS von KRESSENSLEIN, *Mit den Türken zum Suezkanal*, Berlin: Otto Schlegel, 1938, p. 39.

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republic and a decade after the war, only 10.6% of the whole population was able to read and write. This overall average hid vast differences, however. While of the men in the towns of over 10,000 inhabitants 41.5% was able to read and write, at the other end of the scale only 1.4% of the women in the villages could do so. As between 80 and 85% of the population lived in the countryside and as the vast majority of the recruits were villagers, the most relevant statistic is that of the 11.4% of male villagers who were literate.³ Sometimes non-commissioned officers (sergeants) functioned as the official scribe for a company, writing letters which were dictated to them, but it was more usual for new arrivals from a village to the front to bring the news orally—and for discharged or convalescent soldiers from a particular area to take messages back the same way.⁴ This means that the Ottoman soldier has not left much in the way of written monuments: no letters home, no diaries. Naturalist painting of course was not a Middle Eastern tradition, being frowned upon by Sunni Islam, so we have no sketches. Oral history has come into fashion in Turkey, but only recently—in the last three or four years—twenty years too late to be of much use for the study of the First World War.

We do have a number of sources which tell us something about the conditions in which the Ottoman soldier tried to survive, but with one exception they are typical 'top-down' documents, which view the war from the standpoint of high-ranking officers. There are scores of memoirs and autobiographies both of Ottoman officers (Alı İhsan Pasha Sâbis, Cemal Pasha, Ahmet İzzet Pasha (Furgaç), Selâhettin Adil Pasha, Halil Pasha (Kut), Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Atatürk), Kâzım Pasha Karabekir and others), of German ones (Liman von Sanders, Kress von Kressenstein, Kannengiesser, von Gleich, Guhr, Guse, von Seeckt and others) and even of Austrian ones (Pomiankowski). An important source for the recollections of the members of the German military mission serving in the Ottoman Empire, some 18-20,000 men in all, is the journal *Mitteilungen des Bundes der Asienkämpfer* (Bulletin of the Society of Veterans of Asia), later rechristened *Orient undschau*, and the yearbooks

³ Cavit Orhan TUĞRUGLU, 1927 yılında Türkiye [Turkey in the year 1927], in *Atatürk'ün büyük söylevi'nin 50. yılı semineri Bildirileri ve tartışmaları*, Ankara: Türk Fikir Kurumu, 1980, p. 56. Because the numbers quoted refer to 1927, the villagers concerned are almost exclusively Muslim, the Armenians and Greeks, who had a much higher rate of literacy, having left or having been killed.

⁴ Hans KANNENGIESSER, *The campaign in Gallipoli*, London: Hutchinson, 1927, p. 157.

of the same society, entitled *Zwischen Kaukasus und Sinai* (Between Caucasus and Sinai)⁵.

The complexities of the German-Ottoman alliance have been studied exhaustively, but these studies are essentially diplomatic, not so much military in nature⁶. As far as histories of the Ottoman war effort go, there is the large-scale official history, published by the War History and Strategic Studies Directorate of the General Staff in Ankara⁷, but relatively little in the way of regimental histories or histories of specific battles or fronts, as far as the First World War is concerned. Most efforts in this field in Turkey seem to be concentrated on the independence war which followed between 1919 and 1922, but the First World War does receive some attention in the historical sections (*tarih kısmı*) of the journal *Askerî Mecmua* (Military Journal) published by the Military Press in Istanbul between the wars. 131 publications in Turkish were published until 1955. This amounts to 0.2% of the number of titles on the war published in English, French and German at the time and since then, interest in the war does not seem to have revived to any large extent in Turkey⁸.

In European languages the only detailed history of the Ottoman war is Maurice Larcher's *La guerre turque dans la guerre mondiale* (Paris, 1926). For the economic and social history of the war, Ahmet Emin Yalman's *Turkey in the World War* (Yale, 1930) is indispensable.

The Turkish General Staff archives are almost completely closed to foreigners (and to most Turkish scholars as well). Among the foreign

⁵ A complete collection of the journal is to be found in the library of the Oriental Institute of the University of Bonn, while the university library of Tübingen has a collection of the yearbooks (*Zwischen Kaukasus und Sinai Jahrbuch des Bundes der Asienkämpfer*, Berlin-Tempelhof Deutsche Buchhandlung Mulzer und Cleeman, Vol. 1 (1921), 2 (1922), 3 (1923)).

⁶ Apart from Jehuda L. WALLACH's *Anatomie einer Militärhilfe Die Preussisch-deutschen Militärmissionen in der Türkei 1835-1919*, Düsseldorf: Droste, 1976, which does concentrate on military matters, the other leading studies are: Ulrich TRUMPENER, *Germany and the Ottoman Empire 1914-1918*, Princeton, 1966, and F.G. WEBER, *Eagles on the Crescent Germany, Austria and the Diplomacy of the Turkish Alliance, 1914-1918*, Ithaca, 1970. The pre-war German-Ottoman rapprochement is studied in: C. SULLIVAN, *Stamboul Crossings German Diplomacy in Turkey 1908-1914*, Ph.D. Vanderbilt University, Nashville, 1977.

⁷ Fahri BELEN, *Büyük çatan habinde Türk harbi* [The Turkish war in the First World War], Ankara Genelkurmay Harb Tarihi ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı, 1963-1967, 5 vols.

⁸ Philip STODDARD in his unpublished Ph. D. thesis *The Ottoman Government and the Arabs 1911-1918 A Preliminary Study of the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, Princeton, 1963, p. 231.

archives, the German military archives (Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv or BA-MA) in Freiburg are obviously the pre-eminent source. However, these too have their limitations. The German Empire as such had hardly any national (imperial) groundforces. Only its navy, its airforce and the colonial troops were imperial forces. The rest of the army consisted of the contingents of Prussia, Bavaria, Württemberg and Saxonia, which operated as separate units and were put at the disposal of the imperial general staff in case of war. It follows that the German Empire had no central military archives either. Of the contingents, the Prussian one was of course by far the most important. Unfortunately, 98% of the documents pertaining to the Prussian army were destroyed in an allied airstrike on Potsdam in April 1945. As the large majority of the German officers serving in the Near East was Prussian, this is a great handicap. For the much smaller number of Bavarian officers (among them Kress von Kressenstein), it would be worth consulting the Central Archives of the Bavarian Free State in Munich, in which the documents of the Royal Bavarian Army have been preserved.

I have consulted the political reports from the Constantinople embassy in the Dutch state archives. The Netherlands being neutral, these continue throughout the First World War and sometimes they yield interesting insights.

What all these sources have in common is that they share a 'top-down' vision which keeps us distanced from the realities of the war experience, which see casualties as a manpower problem rather than as something involving pain and death. The only officers who do devote considerable attention to the living conditions of the soldiery are the German medical doctors who served in the empire⁹.

The one source which may be said to give us the soldier's voice — albeit indirectly — is formed by the daily and weekly 'intelligence summaries' of British military intelligence on the Egyptian and Mesopotamian fronts and of the expedition forces in Salonica, the Dardanelles and Persia. These intelligence summaries are based on agents' reports and debriefings of neutral travellers, but also on interrogations of Ottoman prisoners of war (POWs) and deserters, and on letters to Ottoman

⁹ Such as Dr Victor SCHILLING, 'Kriegshygienische Erfahrungen in der Türkei', *Zwischen Kaukasus und Sinai* 2 (1922), 71–89. A detailed study of the German medical service in the Ottoman Empire is Helmut BICKER, *Aeskulap zwischen Reichsadler und Halbmond. Sanitätswesen und Seuchenbekämpfung im türkischen Reich während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Herzogenrath: Murken Altrogge, 1990.

POWs (If this seems in contradiction with the earlier statement about the vast majority of the Ottoman soldiers being illiterate, it should be remembered that relatively many of the POWs and deserters were Armenians and that literacy among the Armenians and Greeks, even in the countryside, was very much higher than among the Muslims)¹⁰

THE OTTOMAN ARMY SIZE AND COMPOSITION

The most amazing thing about the Ottoman army in the First World War is that an army which had been beaten comprehensively by four small Balkan states a year earlier, managed to fight for as long as it did and as well as it did. During the war, the general opinion among the British and French was that this was wholly due to the efforts of the German officers and troops serving in the empire, but in reality it was also the result of the reforms pushed through in the year following the Balkan War by Enver Pasha, the Young Turk leader and Ottoman War Minister and his German advisors and which entailed the retirement of a large number of older officers, many of whom had risen from the ranks, and their replacement with modern educated younger officers. According to German observers, these officers knew the theoretical bases of modern warfare extremely well and thanks to them, the level of staff work in particular was greatly improved. However, often their whole experience had been in the general staff. They now took over units in the field for the first time and thus lacked command experience¹¹. That the army generally performed far better when it defended than when it attacked, was due mainly to the lack of experienced non commissioned officers (NCOs) who could lead and inspire the units. Too many of these had died in the Balkan War of 1912-1913¹².

The army these officers had to lead into battle was burdened with two almost insurmountable problems right from the start: lack of manpower and lack of communications. We shall return to the lack of communications later, in the context of a discussion of the supply situation of the army. Lack of manpower had been a problem for the Ottomans all

¹⁰ The existence of this source was kindly pointed out to me by Dr Yigal Sheffy of the Dayan Center, Tel Aviv. It can be found in the monthly intelligence summaries ref PRO/WO 157/687ff (Egyptian front) and PRO/WO 157/776ff (Mesopotamian front).

¹¹ KRISSE p. 36

¹² KRISSE p. 39

through the nineteenth century, that is to say . once they came up against large conscripted European armies. The Ottoman population, even though it had been growing quite fast over the last thirty years, was still comparatively small: about 19 millions people in the core provinces and if the outlying areas (where no reliable census existed) are included and the undercount of the Ottoman census system is taken into account, perhaps between 23 and 25 millions¹³. Not all of the adult males in this population were equally available for military service, however. The non-Muslims (Christians and Jews, about 20% of the population in 1914) traditionally had paid an exemption tax (the *bedel*). Many Muslims also made use of this possibility, but for them the exemption tax was considerably higher, so those who managed to raise enough money mostly came from among the more affluent town dwellers. From 1909, the Young Turk government had started to enforce the conscription for non-Muslims as well, but in practice the majority of eligible Christians still managed to avoid military service, paying the higher rate Muslims paid. During the war the poorer Greeks and Armenians who could not pay the exemption fee generally were employed in unarmed labour battalions, digging and carrying loads¹⁴. In practice, Christians could not rise above the rank of lieutenant, with the exception of army doctors who held the rank of captain¹⁵.

Not only the Christians were kept separate. As far as I have been able to make out, the units of the Ottoman Army were ethnically uniform up to the level of regiments or even divisions. German officers routinely speak of 'Arab divisions' and 'Turkish divisions'. The British reports do the same. We frequently find statements such as 'the 51st division is composed of good Anatolian Turks and Kurds' and 'the 141st and 142nd divisions are Arab and Syrian'¹⁶. This is only to be expected as regiments had their own regular recruiting areas. There were exceptions—we do find evidence of mixed units—but this most probably was due to the fact that in the last phase of the war many units were so far below strength that they had to be broken up and merged with other ones.

Arab troops, of which there were many, were primarily used for garrison and lines of communication duties, but sheer lack of manpower meant that, increasingly during the war, the Ottoman government had to

¹³ YAI MAN, *Turkey in the world war*, p. 79

¹⁴ Joseph POMIANKOWSKI, *Der Zusammenbruch des Osmanischen Reiches*, Graz Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, 1969 (reprint of the 1928 edition), p. 103

¹⁵ PRO/WO 157/735, 25 May 1918

¹⁶ PRO/WO 157/700, 12 January 1916

use Arabs from Syria and Iraq in front line fighting units (by the end of the war four out of ten divisions on the Palestine front were Arab), but these were considered inferior to the Turkish troops. This showed for instance when prisoners of war were exchanged. The Ottomans used to insist that they be given 'real Turkish troops, not Arabs' in exchange for British troops and offered only Indian troops in exchange for Arabs¹⁷. In Liman von Sanders's opinion the Arab troops were not necessarily bad, but needed 'just but strict command'¹⁸. Kress considered them 'more lively and intelligent, but less reliable' than the Anatolian troops¹⁹. Some of the nomad tribes of the empire, notably Kurds, did contribute to the war effort, but largely as irregular cavalry units which were only loosely attached to the regular army and their usefulness seems to have been extremely limited²⁰. So the burden of military service in the regular units in the front line fell overwhelmingly on the Turkish peasant population of Anatolia, which constituted about 40% of the total population, or nine to ten millions.

After deduction of those who could pay the exemption tax instead, about 100,000 men were called up for military service each year and of these only about three quarters actually joined the army, most of the others being rejected for reasons of health²¹. This meant that the peace-time strength of the army was about 150,000 (two classes). There is a lot of uncertainty about the mobilised strength of the army, but probably the maximum number of men actually under arms at any one time was slightly under 800,000²². Mobilisation, however, was extremely slow and

¹⁷ Halil KUT, *Bitmeyen savaş Kutulamare kâşramanı Halil Paşa'nın anıları* [War without end. The memoirs of Halil Pasha the hero of Kut], ed. by M. Taylan Soğun, İstanbul: Yedigün, 1972, p. 191. This is confirmed on the British side by Aubrey Herbert in *Mons, Anzac and Kut*, London: Hutchinson, 1919, p. 253.

¹⁸ Liman von SANDERS, *Fünf Jahre Türkei* [Five years in Turkey], Berlin: Scherl, 1920, p. 242.

¹⁹ KRESS, p. 39.

²⁰ According to one German witness, the Kurdish troops were totally unreliable and it was impossible to form more regular units out of them because they refused to obey other Kurds, taking their orders only from the Turkish commander-in-chief (Hans-Joachim von LOESCHENBRAND-HORN, 'Der Feldzug der Suleimaniye-Gruppe in Kurdistan im Sommer 1916', *Zwischen Kaukasus und Sinai* 3 (1923), p. 121).

²¹ According to Dr Georg Mayer, who was charged with reforming the Ottoman army medical service in December 1913, syphilis was so widespread that it did not count as a ground for rejection. Instead, the syphilitics were formed into labour battalions (report by Mayer cited in BECKER, *Aeskulap*, p. 42).

²² Maurice LARCHER, *La guerre turque dans la guerre mondiale* [The Turkish war in the world war], appendices 44 and 50. Larcher bases himself on the official statistics

took at least six months to be fully effective. This meant that even after full mobilisation, only about 4% of the population was under arms and on active duty (compared with, for instance, 10% in France, which also had a population nearly twice as big²³). In the course of the mobilisation males between the ages of 19 and 45 were called up. By 1916, however, the age limits had been extended to 15 and 55 respectively and, according to British reports by mid-1917, 12% of the total were between the ages of 16 and 19²⁴. In April 1915, a new military service law tried to reduce the number of exempted males, but it remained possible to pay instead of serving, albeit that the amount was now an astronomical 50 Turkish pounds. Shortly afterwards even the Muslim foreigners resident in the empire were made eligible for military service (under the pretext that they too should take part in the holy war, *cihat*, proclaimed by the Sultan in 1914), but they could buy it off for 45 pounds²⁵. These measures, though undoubtedly lucrative, did little to strengthen the army.

— OFFENSIVE STRATEGY

Neither the Ottoman nor the German military leadership took the manpower problem into account when deciding on the strategy to be followed. Even though lack of manpower in the face of the Russian army was a major headache, the German high command imposed an offensive strategy on the Ottoman government. The German chief of the general staff, von Moltke, told Enver Pasha on August, 10th, 1914 that it was the task of the Ottomans to draw away the largest possible number of British and Russian troops from the European battlefields²⁶. The German military attaché in Istanbul, von Lossow, energetically supported this

released by the Ottoman War Ministry in 1919. The number of 800,000 refers to the number of armed and trained regulars. A much higher number (around 2,000,000) is also mentioned, but this is impossibly high. Indeed, the number given by Ahmed Emin Yalman for the maximum strength of the army, 1,200,000 also seems rather high and probably includes the—often unarmed—territorials and reservists of all types. This is also true for the total number of men called up, which Larcher puts at 2.85 million. All numbers are in fact rough estimates. The British estimates varied a great deal from time to time and from place to place, but the average was 6-700,000.

²³ LARCHER, appendix 45, 48

²⁴ PRO/WO 157/703, 1 April 1916 and PRO/WO 157/704, 12 May 1916. Also. PRO/WO 157/717, 26 July 1917

²⁵ POMIANKOWSKI, p. 242-243

²⁶ KRIS, p. 24

line, but the head of the German military mission in the Ottoman Empire, Liman von Sanders, favoured a defensive strategy²⁷ Enver, whose personal relations with Liman were never good, sided with Moltke and Lossow and the offensive strategy which he opted for from the outset wasted human life on a grand scale The greatest disaster was the ill conceived winter offensive Enver Pasha unleashed towards the Russian fortress of Kars in December 1914 The troops were forced to cross mountain ridges deep in snow and as a result of the combined effects of cold, starvation and typhus, of the 90,000 troops of the Third Army who took part in the attack, only 12,000 survived into spring The attacks on the Suez canal in February 1915 and again in August 1916 and the attempt to round the Russian flank in Eastern Anatolia through an adventurous offensive in Persia, although much less costly, were also irresponsible adventures which brought no tangible results The decision to hold on to Yemen and the Hejaz (with the holy cities of Mekka and Medina) was a purely political one, which left the army stretched out along a thousand mile single-track railway and tied up a large garrison in Medina Finally, the decision to send Ottoman divisions to fight in support of the Austrians in Galicia and of the Germans in Rumania perhaps enhanced Ottoman prestige with its allies, but it was a luxury the country could ill afford

The high point of the Ottoman war effort of course was the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 After the repulse of the Franco-British attempt to force the straits by naval force alone had ended in a totally unexpected Ottoman victory, the Ottoman army just managed to block the allied attempt at a breakthrough overland on the Gallipoli peninsula There can hardly be any doubt that this was a great strategic victory which gave the empire a new lease of life (or prolonged its misery, whichever way you choose to look at it) The victory over first the British fleet and then the allied expedition force was a tremendous morale booster for the Ottomans, but in the long run it broke the back of the army The Dardanelles campaign cost the Ottomans nearly 90,000 dead and 165,000 wounded and sick (by their own official figures which are certainly an underestimate)²⁸, almost all of them from the best equipped and most

²⁷ Cf POMIANKOWSKI, p 57

²⁸ Figures given in Robert RHODES JAMES *Gallipoli* London Pan 1974 p 348 Rhodes James estimates the actual number of casualties at about 300 000 Liman gives the rather optimistic estimates of 66 000 dead and 152 000 wounded (LIMAN p 135)

experienced divisions in the army. In spite of the carnage at the Dardanelles, the Ottoman army reached its peak numeric strength at the beginning of 1916, the year the British General Sir Charles Townshend had to surrender to the Ottomans at Kut al-Imara, but in terms of quality the damage caused by Gallipoli could not be repaired. After 1916, quality went down and numbers started to dwindle. When the unfortunate Third Army in Eastern Anatolia had to face attacks by much superior Russian forces in terrain where neither its supply trains nor its medical service could follow in the winter of 1916, it was thrown back and lost both Trabzon and Erzurum. Following the defeat a large part of the Third Army simply melted away. According to one source, the Third Army alone had 50 000 deserters at this time²⁹.

The Second Army lost about two thirds of its strength (over 60,000 men) on the southern section of the same front (the Muş-Bitlis area) in the winter of 1916-1917³⁰. As a result the total number of combatants went down to 400,000 in March 1917 and 200,000 in March 1918. When the armistice was signed in October 1918, less than 100,000 troops remained in the field³¹.

DISLEASB

This dwindling of the numeric strength of the army was due mainly to two causes: disease and desertion. Malaria, typhus, typhoid, syphilis, cholera and dysentery were rampant³². Especially in winter the ubiquitous lice carried in clothing and upholstery caused typhus to spread all along the routes to the front, killing soldiers, Armenian deportees and Muslim refugees alike. Among the Ottoman troops casualties were very high. Without treatment, the disease killed about 50% of those affected. Even among the Germans, who were very well catered for by their own medical service, mortality was 10%. The delousing ovens built by the Germans were excellent, but they remained inoperative a lot of the time due to lack of firewood, which also hampered the heating of washing water³³. Summer saw the spread of malaria, which was especially bad

²⁹ POMIANKOWSKI, p. 225

³⁰ LIMAN, p. 240

³¹ LARCIER, appendix 50

³² Cf. YALMAN, *Turkey in the world war*, p. 81

³³ SCHILLING, p. 75-76. PRO/WO 157/735, 26 April 1918

along the Black Sea coast and the Bosphorus, in some places in Anatolia (such as Ankara and Konya) and, most of all, around Adana and Iskenderun—an area through which all of the troops destined for the Mesopotamian and Syrian fronts had to pass. In late summer and autumn, cholera, caused mainly by contaminated drinking water, was the great killer³⁴. In the dry months the soldiers drank from the remaining stagnant pools and besides, they preferred defecating close to open water because it was customary to wash afterwards. Syphilis and gonorrhoea were also widespread, with Istanbul, Izmir and Beirut being mentioned specifically as sources from which the infections spread. These venereal diseases were treated in the battalions and sufferers were not hospitalised³⁵. The German army surgeons, through efficient inoculation programmes, but even more through the introduction of basic hygiene, managed to bring down the number of sick soldiers quite drastically where they were active, but the Ottoman medical service often lacked even the most basic materials. Especially in the first two years of the war, practically all medicines and equipment had to be imported. The biggest problem of all, however, was the lack of sufficient and healthy food. This made the troops vulnerable to diseases and it made recovery in hospital very difficult. We shall return to the food problem shortly, but the combined effect of the factors mentioned here was that nearly seven times as many men died of illness as died of wounds during the war³⁶. One report on the Third Army (Eastern Anatolia) says that in March 1917 its hospitals held 16,956 sick as against 1,340 wounded³⁷.

DESERTION

In terms of loss of available manpower, however, desertion was an even bigger problem for the army than was disease. Over the years it became a problem of unmanageable proportions. By December 1917 over 300,000 men had deserted³⁸. By the end of the war the number stood at nearly half a million. Most of these deserters as a rule did not go over to the enemy, although especially in the second half of the war the

³⁴ SCHILLING, p. 88.

³⁵ PRO/WO 157/735, 1 March 1918.

³⁶ LARCHER, appendix 51, p. 602.

³⁷ PRO/WO 157/713, 8 March 1917.

³⁸ LIMAN, p. 241.

number of Armenians and Arab who deserted to the British increased sharply. Most recruits fled while en route to the front, or from the army on the march, especially when they passed close to their home town or village. They roamed the countryside, living off the land and turning into robber bands. Further troops had to be detached in ever greater numbers to deal with the insecurity these bands created behind the front-lines³⁹. The population often sympathised with the deserters and hid them in their homes⁴⁰. When deserters were caught, they generally were punished only lightly and returned to their units as soon as possible in order not to deplete the strength of the army any further. As early as May 1916 we find a report by the Dutch embassy that the army has replaced prison sentences with corporal punishment in the field in order not to deplete the strength of the army further⁴¹. Only rarely do we find reports of deserters being executed, but the army did try to make it difficult to desert. Troops, especially those consisting of Arab recruits, were mistrusted so much that they were sometimes brought to the front unarmed, and under armed escort of Turkish guards⁴². In Palestine and Syria, Beduins were offered a reward of five Ottoman pounds for every deserter they captured and returned⁴³.

PAY, ARMS AND EQUIPMENT

Both the vulnerability of the troops to disease and their tendency to desert were increased immeasurably by the lack of basic care for their welfare: the troops were ill-paid or not paid at all, worn out marching, undernourished and badly clothed—all factors which made them susceptible to disease and desertion. Time and again lack of pay and lack of food are mentioned as reasons to desert in the British reports⁴⁴.

³⁹ LIMAN, p. 241.

⁴⁰ Felix GUSE, *Die Kaukasusfront im Weltkrieg bis zum Frieden von Brest*, Leipzig: XXX, 1940, p. 92.

⁴¹ Erik Jan ZURCHER, *Welngelichte kringen? De politieke berichtgeving van de Nederlandse ambassade in Istanbul in de eerste wereldoorlog* [Well-informed sources? The political reports of the Dutch legation in Istanbul during World War I], *Sharqiyyat* 1/1 (1988), p. 78. This is confirmed by Pomjankowski, who says that one stroke equalled two days of arrest or one day of incarceration (POMJANKOWSKI, p. 243).

⁴² PRO/WO 157/724, 15 February 1918.

⁴³ PRO/WO 157/713, 3 March 1917.

⁴⁴ For instance: PRO/WO 157/700, 4 January 1916; 157/723, 10 January 1918; 157/735, 25 April 1918.

Theoretically, the soldiers were paid 5 kuruş a month during the first year and 10 a month during subsequent years⁴⁵, but in reality they were paid very irregularly. Sometimes pay was in arrears for three months⁴⁶.

On the whole, the troops seem to have been well armed, although the weapons came in all shapes and sizes. Guns and rifles were of many different vintages and calibres. The armament was improved when the Germans started equipping the Ottomans with rifles taken from the Belgians after the occupation of Belgium and from the Russians after the German victories at the Mazurian lakes in Eastern Prussia⁴⁷. The only problem was the lack of ammunition, especially for the artillery, as most of this had to be imported from Germany and Austria.

If the troops were relatively well armed, the same cannot be said for the rest of their equipment. Footwear seems to have been an especially serious problem, which is mentioned time and again in the reports. It was not unusual for Turkish troops to fight—and march—barefoot or with their feet covered in rags⁴⁸. The fact that the Russians who were captured on the eastern front all turned out to be wearing boots was a tremendous source of envy for the Ottoman soldiers⁴⁹. As a matter of fact, the war is still known as ‘the barefoot war’ in Syria today⁵⁰. Reports describe how on the Palestinian front no new shoes had been available for almost a year. As a last resort, the troops in the front line were given yellow Beduin slippers, which were bound to the feet with thongs. Those on garrison duty had to make do with shoes made of straw, with wooden soles⁵¹. Nor was the situation much better where uniforms were concerned. Most soldiers were dressed in rags⁵². In March 1918 one deserter said that the troops on the Palestinian front had not received new clothing for fifteen months⁵³. The Turkish journalist Falih Rifki Atay, who served under Cemal Pasha on the Fourth Army staff in Syria from 1915 to 1918, vividly describes the contrast between the lack of everything on the Ottoman side and the plentiful supplies

⁴⁵ PRO/WO 157/700, 4 January 1916

⁴⁶ PRO/WO 157/700, 4 January 1916

⁴⁷ PRO/WO 157/700, 21 January 1916 and 157/701, 3 February 1916

⁴⁸ Cf. Ali İhsan SABİS, *Hatıralarıım Birinci dünya harbi* [My memoirs: The First World War], İstanbul: Nehr, 1991, Vol. 3, p. 331

⁴⁹ Mehmet Arif OLCEN, *Vetluga İmağı*, Ankara: Umit, 1994, p. 38

⁵⁰ I am indebted to my colleague Dr Dick Douwes for this observation

⁵¹ PRO/WO 157/725, 10 March 1918

⁵² PRO/WO 157/724, 17 February 1918

⁵³ PRO/WO 157/735

over which the British disposed. Soldiers halted in the middle of the battlefield, under intense enemy fire, to rob dead British soldiers of their boots and, in at least one incident, an Ottoman regiment after a successful attack on a British trench, returned unrecognisable, because the soldiers had exchanged their own rags with British uniforms, taken from the dead (most of them did not take to the short trousers worn by the British, though)⁵⁴

FOOD AND FODDER

There was no overall shortage of food, in spite of the fact that the production of foodstuffs dropped by 40% during the war, mainly due to lack of manpower. In fact, the German army reckoned that the Arab provinces produced enough grain to support the local population and the armies on the Palestinian and Mesopotamian fronts. Anatolia had a wheat surplus. Syria had adequate supplies overall except after the disastrous locust plague of 1915⁵⁵. Throughout the war, the Ottoman Empire exported wheat to the Central powers as payment for deliveries of armaments. Thus, theoretically at least, the army should have been adequately fed.

Official figures at first sight support this idea. The official daily rations of an Ottoman soldier consisted of 900 grams of bread, 600 grams of biscuit, 250 grams of meat, 150 grams of bulgur (broken wheat), 20 grams of butter, 20 grams of salt⁵⁶.

The reality was very different. Although it varied a great deal it was never anywhere near as good as these figures suggest. Each year the government would announce the percentage of the harvest of basic foodstuffs (mainly wheat and barley) which it would need. On the average this was between 40 and 50%, 10% of which were collected as tithe, the rest being bought, but at official prices, not against market value. Because the actual purchase of wheat and barley was decentralised and done by the commissariat of each army, and because transport was such a tremendous problem, the food situation of the different armies varied

⁵⁴ Falih Rıfki ATAY, *Zeytinadağı*, Istanbul: Varlık, 1964 (5th impression), p. 191.

⁵⁵ Cf. the report by General von Seeckt in Jehuda L. WALLACH, *Anatomie einer Militärlieferung: Die Preussisch-deutschen Militärmissionen in der Türkei 1835-1919*, Düsseldorf: Droste, 1976, p. 263.

⁵⁶ PRO/WO 157/735, 29 May 1918.

enormously, depending on whether they were close to, or far away from, grain producing areas⁵⁷. This was the case, for instance, on the Palestinian front, where the troops on the east bank of the Jordan in as-Salt were supplied from the rich grain growing area of the Hawran, while the troops to the west of the Jordan in Nablus and Jaffa went hungry. The amount of bread the troops were given daily, for instance, is given as follows in different reports :

at the Dardanelles in 1916 : 900 grams

at the Palestinian front in 1918 : 350-600 grams

in Damascus in 1918 : 500-600 grams

in Haifa in 1918 : 900 grams

in Mesopotamia in 1918 : 300 grams

When and where wheat was scarce, bread was made of wheat mixed with barley or ground beans. In addition to the bread, the troops generally received two warm meals a day, one in the morning and one in the evening. These meals consisted of flour soup or bulgur. Sometimes there was meat or stew, but a ration of meat once a week seems to have been the rule and in outlying stations it could be once a month. When there was meat, it had to be shared out among a lot of people : according to one report the daily supply was one ox or four sheep for 450 men. Most often, though, the meat was camel meat, as dead camels were not in short supply. Unlike the officers, who had their field kitchens and cooks, the men were catered for by sergeants, who, with the help of a couple of men from each company, doubled as butchers and cooks. Of course, food had to be cooked and bread had to be baked—with wood. Officially each soldier was entitled to 700 grams of wood a day, but we find one report of a mess officer on the Palestinian front which gives a picture of the difficult reality. He, a man called Abdullatif, threatens to resign as he has never received more than 300 grams of wood per soldier and the supply is now down to 100 grams. He does not know how the food is to be cooked⁵⁸.

Whenever possible, the soldiers complemented their diet with dates, figs, raisins or olives, but on the whole the diet contained very little in the way of vegetables or fruit and scurvy therefore was a serious problem, with soldiers' teeth falling out and large sores forming in their

⁵⁷ PRO/WO 157/735, 29 May 1918.

⁵⁸ These data come from several different reports : PRO/WO 157/700, 16 January 1916; 157/724, 9 February 1918; 157/725, 14 March 1918; 157/735, 25 April 1918.

mouths or even through their cheeks⁵⁹ According to one report, 20% of the army was affected by scurvy⁶⁰

On the eastern front the food shortage was exacerbated by the deportation and massacre of the Armenian population, which created an agricultural wasteland in the very area where the Ottoman army had to operate⁶¹ In Western Anatolia the food situation was badly affected by the deportation of Greeks from the coastal plains in 1915⁶².

Animals of course suffered as much as people, as feeding the tens of thousands of camels, oxen, mules and horses in areas where grazing was impossible, proved an almost insurmountable problem

Everywhere, the troops in the front line were better fed than those on garrison or lines of communication duty. It has to be remembered, though, that even they were better off than the civilian population, especially in the towns. The overall food situation seems to have been worst in the winter of 1917-1918. From the spring of 1918 onwards, the effects of the armistice with Russia and the opening of the Black Sea began to be felt and the harvest of May-June 1918 was exceptionally good almost everywhere⁶³.

TRANSPORT—THE BIGGEST PROBLEM OF ALL

The one single factor which, more than anything else, was responsible for the disastrous supply situation was lack of transport facilities Before the war the empire had been dependent on the sea for internal transport of bulk goods and the British blockade now made shipping impossible anywhere but in the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara Even in the Black Sea shipping, for instance of coal from the Ereğli coalfield, was often interrupted by the actions of the Russian fleet

The railways were totally overburdened. There were only 5 700 kilometers of railway (one kilometer per 304 square kilometers of territory — the figure for France was one in ten and for India one in sixty)⁶⁴. They were single track everywhere and the key connections between Anatolia and the Arab provinces through the Taurus and Amanos mountain

⁵⁹ BUCKER, p 126, 167

⁶⁰ PRO/WO 157/715, 10 May 1917

⁶¹ POMIANKOWSKI, p 165

⁶² A report by Mayer in BUCKER, p 59

⁶³ WO/PRO 157/753 *passim*

⁶⁴ YALMAN, p 85

ranges had not been completed yet (the crucial tunnels through the Taurus were only finished by September 1918). The railway was normal gauge down to Rayak (east of Beirut) and low-capacity narrow gauge from there southwards. This meant that supplies imported from Germany or Austria (for instance: almost all artillery shells) had to be unloaded and reloaded seven times before they reached the front: first they had to be shipped across the Bosphorus and put on the train at Haydarpaşa on the Asiatic shore; then they were taken by train to Pozantı, carried by trucks or camels across the Taurus ridge; reloaded on board a train in Gulek and taken to Mamure (a stretch of railway that was within reach of British naval guns) and then loaded onto camels to cross the Amanos range, or—after the completion of the tunnels through the Amanos in early 1917—put on open narrow gauge carriages to be carried through them. The completion of the tunnels through the mountains was delayed by six months when the deportation of the Armenians, who made up almost all of the skilled workforce, was ordered in 1915⁶⁵. They were replaced in part by British POWs who had been captured in Mesopotamia. East of the Amanos range, the camels or narrow gauge carriages had to be unloaded and the supplies reloaded aboard a normal train in İslahiye; this train then went as far as Rayak, where everything had to be unloaded and reloaded again because of the change from normal to narrow gauge rolling stock. The British computed that the line from Rayak to the front at Beersheba could handle a maximum of nine light trains a day⁶⁶. No wonder, therefore, that it often took between four and six weeks to get from Istanbul to the Palestinian front by rail and seven to get to the front in Mesopotamia⁶⁷. The fact that all of the fronts were fed through the bottleneck of Istanbul also made the supply situation extremely vulnerable, as was shown when the ammunition depot in Haydarpaşa blew up on 6 September 1917. 12 ammunition dumps, and oil and petrol tanks exploded and all of the stocks of rubber and medical supplies as well as 300 freight cars went up in smoke. This delayed the start of the ‘Yıldırım’ operations for months⁶⁸.

⁶⁵ KRÜSS, p. 30

⁶⁶ PRO/WO 157/700, Appendix III, January 1916

⁶⁷ BECKER, p. 66, PRO/WO 157/703, 12-18 April 1916

⁶⁸ BRÜCKLER, p. 63. The Yıldırım operations (code named ‘Pasha II’ by the Germans) was a plan for the concentration of a Turkish German force the size of an army group in Northern Syria for an attack on Baghdad. When the situation on the Syrian front became very threatening later in 1917, the project was abandoned and the force was directed south, to the Palestinian front instead.

In Anatolia the railway to the East extended some sixty kilometers beyond Ankara and ended at Çerekli. From there to Erzurum, the main Ottoman fortress in the East, was 35 days marching⁶⁹. Efforts to extend the railway towards Sivas were underway but remained unfinished by the end of the war. The Eastern front (always optimistically called the 'Caucasian front') was supplied mainly from the railheads at Ulukışla and Rasulayn, both about a month's marching away from the frontline at Erzurum.

There was an acute shortage of locomotives (Turkey had only 280 of them) and of coal to stoke them with. Instead the locomotives had to be fired with dwindling supplies of wood and large sections of the olive groves in Syria were cut down for this purpose⁷⁰. Wood being bulkier than coal, the locomotives had to stop frequently to refill their bunker and they had to reduce speed in order to save fuel. Thus, the 200 kilometer stretch from Aleppo to Homs took 26 to 28 hours and from there to Rayak another ten to twenty⁷¹. Damascus-Aleppo took three to four days as opposed to 17 hours before the war⁷². Carrying capacity was insufficient (troops were transported sixty men to a freight car)⁷³ and freight cars often were allocated on the basis of corruption and political influence.

The roads were so primitive that the lorries which the Germans and Austrians sent in considerable numbers constantly broke down. According to Yalman, even ten years after the war their wrecks could still be encountered everywhere along the roads in 1930⁷⁴. Where the roads were adequate, the lorries ran at a maximum speed of 30 kilometers per hour⁷⁵.

There was a lack of transport animals. The Ottoman Empire bred excellent riding horses and useful, albeit small, pack horses, but draught horses had to be imported⁷⁶. For draught animals, the army mainly relied on oxen (one heavy gun needing eight) or mules. For carrying it relied on camels. It had between five and ten thousand (the estimates vary) of

⁶⁹ PRO/WO 157/701, 19 February 1916

⁷⁰ Kress, p. 170. Pomiankowski also mentions this fact.

⁷¹ PRO/WO 157/725, 3 March 1918

⁷² PRO/WO 157/700, 7 January 1916

⁷³ YALMAN, p. 86

⁷⁴ YALMAN, p. 88

⁷⁵ PRO/WO 157/700, 20 January 1916

⁷⁶ KRISS, p. 42

these animals in service behind the Palestinian front alone. But they were reared by the Arab Beduin and these had to be paid in gold. Paper money was unpopular everywhere and in the settled areas those who refused it faced heavy penalties, but the Beduin could not be coerced in this way⁷⁷. Anyway, from 1916 onwards many of the Arab tribes were in open revolt. Even before the standard of revolt was raised by the Sharif of Mekka in June 1916, the most important tribal federation in Syria, the Anazi, were already refusing to sell camels to the army. The Shammar, more to the east, did deliver camels in large quantities, but they could not cross Anazi territory. Hence, 'shaggy' or Anatolian-type, camels had to be brought in from the north, taking up more precious space on the railway⁷⁸. The condition of the army camels seems to have been quite bad, the animals being overworked and underfed⁷⁹.

CORRUPTION

As a result of the lack of transport facilities, not only the availability, but also the price of foodstuffs differed widely (in 1916 wheat was over six times as expensive in Istanbul as it was in the central Anatolian grain growing area of Konya), so fortunes could be made by those who managed to get hold of freight cars – and a government permit to use them⁸⁰.

Corruption was widespread and encouraged by the fact that army commanders received the money for their army as a lump sum, with complete discretionary powers as to how to spend it—as one German observer put it: 'on food for his troops, or on building a cinema'⁸¹. Officers, who had the right to buy a certain amount of flour from government stocks, often managed to get extra supplies which they sold on the market.

The graft on the part of government employees was only to be expected. The war years were a time of high inflation (the cost of living

⁷⁷ PRO/WO 157/701, 3 February 1916

⁷⁸ PRO/WO 157/700, 20 January 1916.

⁷⁹ PRO/WO 157/713, 2 March 1917 A deserter's statement of 5 March that over 80 per cent of the camels at the front had died, does not seem credible

⁸⁰ The problems with the food supply and the attendant corruption are discussed in an (as yet unpublished) paper by Selim İLKIN and İlhan TLKELİ, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun I. dünya savaşındaki ekonomik düzenlemeleri içinde iktisat, ve Kara Kemal Bey'in yeri* [The place of supply minister Kara Kemal in the economic organization of the Ottoman Empire during World War I], which was graciously sent to me by the authors.

⁸¹ von Seeckt in WALI ACH, p. 263.

index in Istanbul more than quadrupled) and salaries were low. In addition, several different extraordinary levies were imposed, which were subtracted consecutively from the salaries: 25% 'war fund'; 5% 'red crescent fund'; 5% 'aviation fund' and 5% 'defence of the faith fund'⁸².

As a result of the combined effect of disease and desertion, the actual strength of most of the units by 1917 was at or below 50% of their nominal strength, battalions numbering 300 to 400 rifles, regiments 800 to 1,500 and divisions between 2,500 and 4,000⁸³. Kress, in a report he wrote to army group headquarters on October, 20th, 1917, described how a division (the 24th) departed from Istanbul-Haydarpaşa with 10,057 men to arrive at the Palestinian front with only 4,635. 19% of the men had been admitted to hospitals suffering from various illnesses, 24% had deserted and 8% had not returned from leave or had been press ganged by other divisions⁸⁴. Other reports indicate that a loss of about 50% between Istanbul and the front was not unusual⁸⁵.

THE VOICE OF THE SOLDIER

The numbers do indeed tell a tale, a tale of extreme hardship which again makes one wonder at the ability of this army to keep on fighting so well for so long, but still the voice of the Turkish soldier remains largely unheard. While the prisoners of war and the deserters tell us something about what the soldiers had to go through and how they coped, they do not tell us much about the psychology involved, or in other words about morale. It is a striking fact that in spite of the horrendous conditions there were no significant mutinies at all among the regular troops. Indeed, sometimes British reports, while stating that morale was very low among the civil population, say that it was high among the troops. But what exactly did this mean?

One authentic expression of feeling on the part of the soldiers we do have, is contained in the songs which were popular in the trenches. Many of these were older than the war itself. Sometimes the melodies were older and new lyrics were added, reflecting experiences of '14-'18.

⁸² PRO/WO 157/701, 25 February 1916.

⁸³ SÁBIS, p. 332.

⁸⁴ KRESS, p. 266.

⁸⁵ PRO/WO 157/703, 20 April 1916.

This is the case with, for instance, the *Çanakkale Tuksusu* (Dardanelles Song), one of the best known of them all. Even when the songs were new, they reflected the experience of the past hundred years rather than of the war itself.

The great wars against the Russians of the nineteenth century (1828-1829, the Crimean War, the disaster of 1876-1878) and the attrition caused by continuous small-scale warfare against rebel bands and tribes in places as far apart as Albania and Arabia, meant that those who were unfortunate enough to be conscripted into the Ottoman Army and who did not have the means to buy off conscription, had very little chance of returning alive.

The prevailing sentiment in the lyrics of the songs is therefore nearly always that those who went on campaign had no chance of returning and that they would die in some far off desert, the symbol for this feeling and for the idea that young lives were being wasted to keep some unknown faraway area within the empire, is the Yemen.

YEMEN AND THE 'YEMEN SONGS'

After the Ottoman reoccupation of the Yemen and its capital, Sana'a, in 1872 the country remained unruly, with major insurrections in 1882, 1898 and 1904. The cost of the constant harassment by Arab bands to the Ottoman army varied from a few hundred to a few thousand casualties a year all through this period, while the major rebellions really caused large scale slaughter. The 1904-1905 rebellion caused the death of 30,000 out of 55,000 Ottoman troops. 1910-1911 saw another rebellion, with the mortality rate again going up to between 30 and 50 a day. It is clear, therefore, that the Yemen had earned its bloody reputation.⁸⁶

'Yemen songs' form a category in themselves and one which became very popular, especially with the troops serving in Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. There is at least a dozen with names like 'Does grass grow in Yemen?', 'The Band is Playing', 'The Mobilisation Song', 'The Exercise Song', 'No Water Flows in Yemen', 'No Cloud in the Sky', 'On the Road to Yemen', 'In the Desert of Yemen' and, of course, 'The

⁸⁶ These data are taken from John BALDRY, *Al Yaman and the Turkish Occupation 1849-1914*. *Arabica* XXIII (1976) p. 156-196.

Yemen Song'⁸⁷. The feelings expressed in these songs are not startlingly original, but they are telling: There is no heroism here, and no patriotism. Nor do the songs express the kind of dogged determination of contemporary Western front hits such as 'Pack up your troubles' or 'Keep right on to the end of the road'. More than anything they express a feeling of homesickness, hopelessness and doom, of being sacrificed. In the eyes of the people who sang these songs, being called to the colours was a death sentence. At the same time the songs breathe an atmosphere of resignation⁸⁸. So perhaps that is what the relatively high morale of the Ottoman troops was about: a feeling that they had nothing to lose as they felt they were as good as dead anyway. Perhaps it was this that gave them their ability to fight so well, especially when on the defensive, in the face of overwhelming odds.

THE DEATH TOLL

In many cases, of course, they were right about their chances of survival. There is much that is not clear about the casualties of the Ottoman army. Probably about 325,000 Ottoman soldiers were directly killed in action⁸⁹. The number of wounded is given variously as slightly over 700,000 or about 400,000. The latter number may indicate those permanently injured when the war ended, while the former probably refers to the number of people registered in field hospitals. Of the latter, nearly 60 000 died from their wounds. The number of soldiers who died of various diseases was nearly seven times as high at over 400,000. How many people were still ill when the war ended, is unclear. So the 'net loss' (to

⁸⁷ 'Yemen songs' are published in a number of collections of folksongs, for instance in Mehmet OZBEK, *Folklor ve türkülerimiz* [Our folklore and songs], Istanbul Otiken, 1975.

⁸⁸ That this was the prevailing sentiment is attested by GUSE, p. 92.

⁸⁹ Larcher gives the following numbers: killed 325,000; wounded 400,000; missing, deserted, prisoner: 1.5 million. Becker (p. 441) gives several different estimates, of which one has the same numbers for total strength, killed and wounded, but an unrealistically low 250,000 for missing/prisoner. This apparently does not count deserters among the missing. Another estimate (by Wicker) cited by Becker gives a total of 1.6 million for the number of soldiers the empire put into the field. This must refer to the number effectively serving rather than the number of those called up. Wicker gives the number of persons killed as 300,000 and that of the wounded as 600,000.

The official Turkish data, cited by Ahmet Emin (p. 252), give the numbers for sick (over 3 million, of whom over 400 000 died) and wounded (nearly 712,000, of whom nearly 60,000 died) but these numbers are hardly exact.

use the slightly cynical term of the British reports) may have been 785,000. To this number over 250,000 people missing or captive and roughly half a million who had deserted, must be added.

These numbers mean that for an Ottoman soldier the risk of dying, both from wounds and from disease, was very much higher than in any of the European armies. Of the 1,037,000 battlefield casualties, 385,000 or 37% died (325,000 killed in action plus 60,000 who died on wounds in hospital). To put this percentage into perspective, we can compare this number to the well-documented British and Franco-British losses in some of the most notoriously murderous campaigns of the war (where mortality was much higher than average). Of the casualties sustained on the famous first day of the Somme offensive in 1916, 33% were fatal; for the Flanders campaign of 1917 the number is 25% and for the atrocious Gallipoli campaign it is 'only' 16%. And this, unlike the Ottoman total, includes persons missing in action.

Of the number of admissions to field hospitals for various illnesses (if that is the way the number of sick given in the Ottoman statistics should be read), a total of over 3 million 400,000 ended in death. This means that, quite apart from battlefield casualties, about one seventh of total mobilised strength of the army succumbed to disease—a percentage unheard of on the western front. Of the diseases, malaria was by far the most widely spread, but dysentery and typhus were the greatest killers.

These numbers make dismal reading. On the other hand, it has to be said that the Ottoman soldier had an infinitely better chance than any soldier on the Western Front to escape the mass slaughter of the front altogether by deserting. One has to agree with Larcher that the desertion of over half a million men must have constituted a major factor in the success of the Turkish struggle for independence between 1918 and 1922. Not that all of the deserters of 1914-18 willingly or enthusiastically served Mustafa Kemal Pasha, but instead of sacrificing themselves in an ultimately doomed cause, through their desertion they had lived to fight another day—when it really mattered for the survival of an independent Muslim Turkish state in Anatolia.

E.J.Z.

Erik Jan ZURCHER, *Between Death and Desertion The Experience of the Ottoman Soldier in World War I*

The article depicts the experience of the common Ottoman soldier during the First World War. Bad clothing, undernourishment and lack of adequate medical care led to widespread hunger, disease and thus to large scale desertion. The main cause of the misery of the troops was the lack of transport in the Empire, but corruption and an adventurous strategy which took no account of the realities of the situation, also played an important part. While the Ottoman and German officers' memoirs and reports as well as the British intelligence summaries had given us interesting glimpses of the life in and behind Ottoman trenches, the mentality of the Ottoman soldier who kept on fighting among such horrors remained somewhat of a mystery.

Erik Jan ZURCHER, *De la mort à la désertion L'expérience des soldats ottomans durant la première Guerre mondiale*

Cet article rend compte de la situation du simple soldat de l'armée ottomane durant la première Guerre mondiale. La pénurie de vêtements, de nourriture, de soins médicaux engendra la faim, la maladie et, finalement, une importante désertion. Si la misère des troupes était essentiellement due à l'absence de moyens de transports à travers l'Empire, la corruption et une stratégie aventureuse au mépris des réalités n'y eurent pas moins leur part. Les mémoires et relations des officiers ottomans et allemands, les rapports des services secrets britanniques nous ont livré d'intéressants aperçus de la vie dans et derrière les tranchées ottomanes, mais nous connaissons mal jusqu'à présent l'état d'esprit du soldat ottoman qui continuait à se battre dans des conditions aussi horribles.