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Feminism, philanthropy and patriotism : female associational life in the Ottoman empire

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CHAPTER SIX

*Gendering Labour and Resistance: Female Silk Reelers on Strike in the Summer of 1910**

One of the Ottoman industries which during the nineteenth century had fully been incorporated in the European economic sphere of influence was the silk industry. Due to developments on the international market, the production process had shifted from mainly producing an end product such as silk cloth to the growing of silk eggs and worms and the production of silk thread for the French silk industry. The first investors in the mechanization and industrialization of the production seem to have been foreigners. Moreover, the silk industry felt the results of the financial bankruptcy of the Ottoman Empire directly: the silk tithe went directly to the PDA which thus directly benefitted from any increase in production. The conditions dictated by the international economic relations created the circumstances which led to a series of strikes in the summer of 1910: in July and August 1910 female silk workers in Bilecik, Amasya, Küplü, Adapazarı and Bursa demanding more money and better working conditions pressed home their demands by putting down their tools and forcing factories to close down.

These were not the first strikes of female workers in Ottoman history. Actually, the first experience of labour activism in the Ottoman Empire according to some scholars was a case of “machine-clasm” in 1839 by the female workers of a factory in Slevne who feared that the newly introduced machines would leave them without work.¹ Women were also the principal participants in

* This chapter is based on an article published earlier: Nicole A.N.M. van Os, “Bursa’da kadın işçilerin 1910 grevi.” *Toplumsal Tarih* VII, 39, 1997, 7-10.

¹ Y.S. Karakışla, “The Emergence of the Ottoman Industrial Working Class, 1839 - 1950” in: Donald Quataert & Erik Jan Zürcher (eds), *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, 1839 - 1950*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1995, 19-34, 20.

some of the limited number of strikes in the years up to 1908.² In that year a large number of strikes took place in the direct aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution of July. The revolution created a general spirit of hope for a new and more liberal society in which people were free to express themselves. These hopes, combined with the high inflation rate immediately after the Young Turk Revolution, led to a gulf of strikes in the remaining months of that year.³ The strikers generally demanded higher wages and better working conditions.⁴

To prevent strikes and to curb the activities of workers' organizations instrumental in organizing these strikes the government issued several decrees and laws forbidding strikes at companies for public works, such as the railways, tramways and the harbor.⁵ Despite these laws, workers at other kinds of companies continued to strike, albeit less frequent, up until the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) started to rule with an iron fist in 1913. The CUP, however, had played an important role in the earlier strikes. It functioned as intermediary between strikers, employers and the official institutions more than once in the period 1908 - 1913.⁶ This was also the case during the strikes discussed in this chapter: the strike in Bilecik, which started on 30 July in 1910

² Şehmus Güzel, "Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e işçi hareketi ve grevler," *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1985, III, 803-827. He lists 50 strikes for the period of 1872 - 1907. See for a strike just a few months before the Young Turk Revolution (and lacking in this list and the list of 1908 strikes in the same article): Yavuz Selim Karakışla, "Arşivden bir belge (36): Uşak'ta kadın halı işçilerinin isyanı (1908)" *Toplumsal Tarih*, XVII, 99, Mart 2002, 54-57.

³ Yavuz Selim Karakışla, "The 1908 Strike Wave in the Ottoman Empire," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin*, XVI, 1992, 153-177; Mesut Gülmez, "Tanzimat'tan sonra işçi örgütlenmesi ve çalışma koşulları (1839 - 1919)," *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1985, III, 792-802; Güzel, "Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e işçi hareketi ve grevler." The last article contains lists of the strikes in 1908 and in the period 1909 - 1915.

⁴ See for, e.g. a list of demands and results of the Oriental Railway employees in Salonica in September 1908, the Memorandum of the Acting Consul Mulock (United Kingdom, Public Record Office, Foreign Office Series, 368/231) reproduced in Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of the Turkey, 1800 - 1914*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 51-52.

⁵ "Tatil-i eşgal cemiyetler hakkında kanun-ı muvakkat," *Düstur*, II, 1, 12 Ramazan 1326 / 25 Eylül 1324 (8 October 1908), 88-90; "Tatil-i eşgal kanunu," *Düstur*, II, 1, 22 Receb 1327 / 27 Temmuz 1327 (9 Ağustos 1909), 433-436; "Cemiyetler kanunu," *Düstur*, II, 1, 29 Receb 1327 / 3 Ağustos 1325 (16 August 1909), 604-608. For a German translation of the Tatil-i Eşgal Kanunu see "Ein Streikgesetz in der Türkei," *Österreichische Monatsschrift für den Orient*, XXXV, 1909, 8-9. Güzel describes the contents of both the law on strikes and the law on organizations. Güzel, "Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e işçi hareketi ve grevler," 815-817, resp. 819-820.

⁶ Karakışla, "The 1908 Strike Wave in the Ottoman Empire;" Güzel, "Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e işçi hareketi ve grevler."

and the one in Bursa, which started on 15 August 1910 and was obviously triggered by the former.

This chapter shows how the Bursa silk industry forms a fine example of the increased incorporation of Ottoman economy in the (European-dominated) world economy during the nineteenth century and the consequences of this incorporation. It describes the involvement of Ottoman women in the Bursa silk industry and how these women join forces in a collective action to demand better working conditions. It shows how gender and class are intertwined in the strikes resulting from this collective action and seeks to find an answer to the question whether or not these strikes of the silk reelers can be called “women’s strikes.” It, furthermore, sheds light on the inter ethno-religious relationships within the local silk industry and, subsequently, the labour activism developing within this context.

Silk Reeling in Bursa⁷

The province of Bursa had had a prominent place in the (international) silk production and trade for many centuries. It held an important place in the silk trade between Iran and Florence even before Ottoman times.⁸ Its silk cloth was famous for its high quality and was much sought after at the local, Ottoman market as well as the European market. The production of silk cloth in Bursa as well as in the other centers of production of the Ottoman Empire was highly volatile though, and during the nineteenth century the Bursa region started to lose its leading place in the international market of silk cloth. As a result the production in the Bursa area shifted from silk cloth to silk thread in the nineteenth century.

There were several factors which contributed to this shift taking place. Sumptuary laws in the Ottoman Empire caused a decline of demand at the local

⁷ This paragraph is mainly based on the following works by Donald Quataert: “The Silk Industry of Bursa, 1880 - 1914,” in: Donald Quataert, *Workers, Peasants and Economic Changes in the Ottoman Empire*, İstanbul: the Isis Press, 1993, 92-116 (earlier published in Huri İslamoğlu-İnan (ed.), *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy*, Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1987], 284-299); *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 107-133.

⁸ Halil İnalcık, “The Ottoman State: Economy and Society, 1300 - 1600,” in: Halil İnalcık & Donald Quataert (eds), *Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300 - 1914*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 218-255.

market in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while consumers in Europe started to prefer cotton clothes instead of silk. Furthermore, in the shrinking market the small-scale weavers in Bursa could not compete with the producers in France and Italy who, through the mechanization of the silk weaving process, produced high quality silk cloth at a lower price. The influx of silk products from the Far East, China and Japan, dealt another blow to Bursa as center of silk cloth production. Moreover, while the demand for local products declined, the supply of the raw silk needed also constituted a problem. The buyers of raw silk at the local market had to compete with the French who were not able to meet the demand for raw silk at their own market due to the higher demand caused by mechanization as well as to the onslaught of pests infecting the silk worms in France in the 1850s. When these diseases also reached Bursa, the production of raw silk collapsed, dragging down along what was left of the silk weaving industry. The result was that by 1899, as a French traveler reported, “[t]here exist only a few producers of cloth in Bursa, and the silk reeled in the factories of the city is exported to manufactories abroad.”⁹ After the turn of the century, however, the production of silk cloth increased again, probably due to the increased production of cocoons and the growing world market. The introduction of mechanized looms in 1908 added to a further rise in production. According to Quataert the output in 1910, the year of the strike dealt with, was higher than any time since the 1820s.

Like the production of silk cloth, silk reeling also went repeatedly through periods of “boom, collapse and factory closings”¹⁰ during the nineteenth century depending on both local and international developments. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the silk reelers largely worked to provide the local silk weavers with silk thread. When the market for silk cloth produced in the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the French market, on the contrary, needed higher quantities of silk thread the Bursa region became the supplier of silk worms, their eggs and cocoons and silk thread instead of silk textiles.¹¹ Between 1845 and 1855, for example, the production of silk thread showed a large increase.¹² This increase was largely established by the use of steam driven

⁹ Marius Renard, *Brousse*, Paris: Plon, 1899, 20.

¹⁰ Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 124.

¹¹ Ayhan Aktar, “Bursa’da devlet ve ekonomi,” in: idem, *Türk Milliyetçiliği, Gayrimüslimler ve Ekonomik Dönüşüm*, İstanbul: İletişim, 2006, 209-247.

¹² In 1845 the first filature was opened. By 1848 there were 5 and in 1855 there were 15 filatures with 40 to 80 basins each and many smaller factories with a total of around 2000 basins

machinery for silk reeling. By 1880 the production had fallen back to 20% of the 1855 production mainly due to various pests which had infected the silk worms. From 1880 onwards the tide turned due to changing market conditions, the input of the PDA and the initiatives of private entrepreneurs. Between 1880 and 1912 the world production of raw silk quadrupled. Bursa was a minor player in the world market, but provided 80% of the total demand of the French silk weaving industries. The main reason Bursa could become the main provider for France was the impetus given by the PDA. As mentioned before, one of the incomes for the PDA to pay back the creditors of the Ottoman Empire was the silk tithe levied in, amongst other regions, Bursa. A higher efficiency in the tax collection increased the income only minimally. It was, therefore, in the interest of the PDA to expand the silk production.

From 1886 onwards the PDA started to get actively involved in the development of sericulture in the Bursa and Izmit areas. To diminish the damage done by the pests, a selection procedure developed by Pasteur, through which the infected silk eggs with the help of a microscope were detected and destroyed, had been introduced in France in 1885. The DPA wanted to introduce this method to the local silk producers and France was asked to send someone to assist in this. An Ottoman Armenian who, with a grant from the Ottoman Empire had graduated from the School of Agriculture in Montpellier, was ready to shoulder this task. Under his leadership, the *Harir Darüttalim*, Silk School, was opened in 1891. The graduates from this institute, who were taught to use the Pasteur method were able to increase the yields of the silk sericulture considerably. Moreover, graduates from the school did not stay in Bursa and the traditional areas of silk sericulture, but also ventured on developing other geographical areas such as Nallıhan, Hendek, Safranbolu and Amasya.¹³ In October 1893 a law was issued requiring persons raising and trading silk-worm eggs and cocoons to have a diploma from the institute or a similar institute abroad. Other measures were taken to stimulate the production of silk-worms. The DPA subsidized the distribution of sixty million mulberry trees and saplings to feed the silk-worms all over the Empire, while the owners of newly established orchards in Bursa were exempted from the tithe for a period of three years. As a

producing 500.000 kilos of silk thread. Régis Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, Constantinople, 1906, 131.

¹³ Blaisdell, *European Financial Control in the Ottoman Empire*, 111; Morawitz, *Les Finances de la Turquie*, 319-321; Rudolf Fitzner, *Anatolien; Wirtschaftsgeographie*, Berlin: Hermann Paetel, 1902, 40-44.

result of these measures, the production of silk cocoons increased and, therefore, the revenues of the DPA also showed an upward curve.¹⁴

While a part of the produced eggs and cocoons were exported as such, most of the production was used locally for the production of silk thread. This meant that the number of reeling institutions increased parallel to the production of cocoons. In the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the production of raw silk quadrupled, while the number of mills rose by more than 50%.¹⁵ By 1900 the silk cocoons of Thrace, approximately 500,000 kilos, were largely reeled in Bursa as well, since there were only two filatures left in Thessalonica to process the production of Thrace and Macedonia.¹⁶ The majority of the mill owners in the province of Bursa in 1906 seem to have been Armenian. The second largest group consisted of Greeks, while foreigners (French) also owned quite some mills. Furthermore, there were some owners with seemingly Turkish names, while an incidental Jewish name occurs. However, the ethnicity of the mill owners varied per location. So, for example, the owners of the five filatures in Mudanya were probably all Greek. In “Djérah” all six mills were owned by Armenians.¹⁷

The number of employees followed the curves of the increasing and decreasing production. Growing numbers of machines and factories led to a higher need of labour in the 1850s, the fall in production diminished the need for workers in the 1880s, while an increasing number of labourers was employed in the last decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁸

¹⁴ Some figures to underline the growth: between 1881-2 and 1906-7, the PDA's income from the silk tithe increased from 17,000 to 125,000 Ottoman Pounds; the total value of silk tithes in “Turkey” increased from 20,000 to 276,000 Ottoman Pounds in that same period, while the total value of the crop grew from 200,000 to 2,765,000 Ottoman Pounds. Blaisdell, *European Financial Control in the Ottoman Empire*, 111. Furthermore, while the Ottoman Empire exported 1,000 *onces* (1 *once* = 25 grams) of eggs in 1891, it exported almost 420,000 *onces* in 1900 - 1 mostly to Persia and Russia; the production of cocoons grew from 3,388,612 kilos in 1891 to 5,132,563 kilos in 1900 - 1901. Morawitz, *Les Finances de la Turquie*, 320-321.

¹⁵ In 1900 there were 88 filatures in the Bursa region with 4,767 basins. By 1906, 131 filatures totaled 7,685 basins. Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, 132-139.

¹⁶ Valérien Groffier, “La Production de la Soie dans le Monde,” *Annales de Géographie*, IX, 44, 1900, 97-118, 108-109. (Consulted through www.persee.fr). The Thessalonians had transferred to the more profitable tobacco processing. Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 177.

¹⁷ Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, 132-139.

¹⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century about 150,000 persons were full- or part-time employed in the silk industry, silk reeling and silk cloth production in the Bursa region. Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 107.

The Gender of Silk Reeling

Girls and women seem to have been the exclusive labour force for mechanized silk reeling from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. In the 1860s, 5,800 out of 6,200 workers at the mills in and around Bursa were female. The remaining 400 workers, males, were notably the directors and engineers.¹⁹

The limited sources available seem to indicate that women had formed the primary work force in the production of silk thread in earlier centuries as well. Although the members of the silk-thread spinners' guild in Istanbul in the mid eighteenth century were all male, it is likely that they used a kind of putting out system in which women and children at home did the actual work.²⁰ This was also the case in Bursa and the surrounding villages in the seventeenth century. A survey of instruments used for silk-spinning found in the court registers and dated 1678, shows that at least 150 out of 299 of them were owned and operated by women. Other spinning wheels, which were owned by wealthy silk merchants or the proprietors of large mulberry orchards, were, according to Gerber, probably operated by the female slaves of the male owners. At that time silk reeling was only done during two months of the year, immediately following the "harvest." Many households raised silk worms and harvested cocoons. It is likely that the women of those households also reeled their own cocoons. Female silk reelers at that time, therefore, came from all classes. The male silk reelers, however, belonged to the poorest class and were men without a steady job. Another document of approximately half a century later, however, refers to "poor women" as the majority of workers in this particular industry.²¹

¹⁹ Donald Quataert, "The Age of Reforms, 1812 - 1914," in: İnalcık & Quataert (eds), *Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300 - 1914*, 759-945; Donald Quataert, "The Social History of Labor in the Ottoman Empire: 1800 - 1914" in: Ellis Jay Goldberg (ed.), *The Social History of Labor in the Middle East*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996, 19-36, 33; Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 127.

²⁰ Onur Yıldırım, "Ottoman Guilds as a Setting for Ethno-Religious Conflict: The Case of the Silk-thread Spinners' Guild in Istanbul," *International Review of Social History*, XXXVII, 2002, 407-419; Onur Yıldırım, "Ottoman Guilds in the Early Modern Era," *International Review of Social History*, LIII, 2008, supplement, 73-79; Suraiya Faroqhi, *Artisans of Empire: Crafts and Craftspeople under the Ottomans*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, 215.

²¹ Haim Gerber, "Social and Economic Position of Women in an Ottoman City, Bursa, 1600 - 1700," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, XII, 1980, 231-244, 237; Haim Gerber, *Economy and Society in An Ottoman City: Bursa, 1600 - 1700*, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1988, 82-87.

The foreign, European owners of the first silk reeling factories in the Ottoman province of Syria seem to have tried to employ male workers when they established their factories in the 1840s and 1850s. They failed in this effort, because most men simply refused to work in the factories, while those forced by circumstances to accept such a job proved to be unreliable labourers. According to Khater the reason in Syria was that the peasants were “most hesitant to be seen in a factory” because, “[their] identity and honor was tightly linked to tilling a plot of land.”²² In Bursa the foreign factory directors and owners followed a different strategy to find personnel. They hired skilled, French women to entice local, Greek women to come and work outside their homes.²³

Not only in the Ottoman Empire, but also further afield, in countries such as Japan and France, the majority of the workers were women. There are several arguments explaining the predominant presence of women in the silk reeling industries: dexterity, docility and inequality in payment.

“Nimble fingers” formed one of the arguments given by contemporaries as well as by later scholars to explain the female presence in silk reeling and other textile related industries. Women were supposedly better apt to perform tasks requiring a certain delicacy and manual dexterity. Women had, according to this argument, by nature smaller hands and fingers than men and were better trained in delicate work due to their upbringing through which they were taught, for example, to sew or to fulfil other tasks requiring “nimble fingers.”²⁴ Silk reeling indeed was a very delicate process,

in which a filament had to be extracted from the cocoons after the pupae were killed (usually by suffocation). It had to be done quickly, or the delicate cocoons would spoil. As the thread was heavily agglutinated, four or five cocoons were placed in a vat containing warm water, so as to dilute the gum and loosen the main strand. A worker (always a woman) gently brushed the shells, found the ends of a few filaments, gathered them with a slight twisting motion so as to form a continuous, uniform, round strand, and passed it through a guide in order to clean off the gum and dirt. The thread was finally wound on a reel, ready for

²² Akram Fouad Khater, “‘House’ to ‘Goddess of the House’: Gender, Class, and Silk in 19th-Century Mount Lebanon,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, XXVIII, 3, 1996, 325-348, quotation 329.

²³ Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 128.

²⁴ Janet Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan’s Industrialising Economy: the Textile Industry before the Pacific War*, London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, 67-71; Judith G. Coffin, *The Politics of Women’s Work: the Paris Garment Trades 1750 - 1915*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, 36-37.

shipment. (...) The ability and expertise of (the reeler) were pivotal to achieving high quality, for it was up to her to obtain a continuous, durable, and even thread. The operation had to be performed quickly enough that the warmth of the water would not spoil the silk; the right number of filaments had to be joined together to form a thread with the proper thickness; and the thread had to be stretched and twisted delicately, so as to make it strong but smooth. The reeler was customarily helped by a child, who turned the simple machinery for winding the filaments on reels as they were being extracted.²⁵

According to a French observer, the women in Bursa were extremely skilled at this delicate process. They needed approximately eight kilos of cocoons to produce one kilo of raw silk, while in Syria women needed 11 - 12 kilos of cocoons to produce the same amount.²⁶ However, the work itself caused the fingers to become less nimble over the course of the years. Submerging hands in hot, almost boiling water continuously made the skin less sensitive and roughened it. The rough skin could eventually even damage the fragile silk threads.²⁷

Another argument used by, for example, Japanese employers in the silk industry was that women were “more docile and less troublesome than men.” Moreover, rural women were less likely to cause trouble than urban women, who had been exposed to all sorts of new and alternative possibilities, while young women were more obedient than older women. Japanese employers at the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, preferred to hire young, rural women to work in the mills.²⁸ Whether the Ottoman and foreign employers in Bursa and its surroundings used similar arguments remains yet to be researched. The strikes dealt with in this chapter and other strikes involving mainly female employees, such as the strike at the Uşak tapestry workshop or the one at the tobacco factories in Thessalonica,²⁹ however, shows that Ottoman women were

²⁵ Patrizia Sione, “From Home to Factory: Women in the Nineteenth-Century Italian Silk Industry,” in: Daryl M. Hafer (ed.), *European Women and Preindustrial Craft*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995, 137-152, quotation 139.

²⁶ Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, 143. The amount of raw silk extracted from one kilo of cocoons depended not only on the skills of the reeler, but also on the quality of the cocoons. Fitzner, *Anatolien*, 42.

²⁷ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 67-71.

²⁸ Hunter, *Women and the Labour Market in Japan's Industrialising Economy*, 67-71, quotation 71.

²⁹ Karakışla, “Uşak'ta kadın halı işçilerinin isyanı (1908)”; “Der Ausstand der Regiearbeiterinnen in Salonik,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 1. April 1911, 1; “Der Ausstand der Regiearbeiter,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 6. April 1911, 2.

perhaps not as compliant as Japanese employers thought or hoped Japanese women to be.

Employers had another, economic argument to prefer women. In general women were (and are) paid less than their male counterparts. Female labourers, where possible, therefore, were important to secure an added value competitive with other producers in the Ottoman Empire or abroad.

One of the arguments used to justify and explain why women received lower wages was that their incomes were only supplementary to the incomes of male family members regarded to be breadwinners. According to Quataert in an article of his published in 1991 this was also the case in Ottoman society; women's work (and their incomes) were regarded to be an addition to the basic income of a family or household.³⁰

In a later publication, however, Quataert acknowledged that the income of the women working in the silk reeling industries in Bursa was more than just a useful addition despite the "part-time" character of the work.³¹ The factories did not operate the whole year. The length of their closure depended on the production and supply of cocoons, which were also in high demand by foreign silk producers, and on the demand for raw silk. Most factories were operational for about 200 days to eight months per year only. However, the eight months these factories were opened were March through November. This means that the women and girls working in the factories and coming from the villages were absent during the most part of the agricultural cycle of sowing, growing and harvesting. Thus these girls and women were either superfluous and their hands were not needed in their (agri- and sericultural) households or the incomes they generated in the factories were of more importance than the incomes they would potentially generate by working within the household economy. The latter would mean that their income was indeed more than just a useful addition.

Gender was not the only determinant of the work force in mechanized silk reeling in nineteenth century Bursa. There were more factors which seem to have been relevant in constituting that work force. Age, or rather, stage in the life cycle, ethnicity and being rural or urban all seem to have been determining factors which, moreover, shifted over time.

³⁰ Donald Quataert, "Ottoman Women, Households, and Textile Manufacturing, 1800 - 1914," in: Nikki R. Keddie & Beth Baron (eds), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991, 161-176, 165.

³¹ Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 129.

Although the work of women in rural industries is generally qualified as being unskilled, reeling silk definitely required a high degree of skill. To become skilled silk reelers girls started to work as apprentices at an age as early as 10 – 12 years selecting the cocoons. The older ones did the actual reeling: finding the end of a cocoon thread, leading it onto a reel and winding it down.³² The girls worked until they got married to return later after being widowed. It is not clear what age these girls got married in Bursa. However, based on evidence from the mid-twentieth century Duben and Behar suggest that women in rural Turkey at the beginning of the twentieth century married between ages fourteen and eighteen.³³ Married women with families rarely continued working.³⁴ Reasons might have been the loss of dexterity in the course of the years, as mentioned above, or preference of the employers for the supposedly more docile younger girls. Another reason might have been that young, single women were not (yet) responsible for a household to be managed and/or children to be taken care of. Married women, however, probably carried such a responsibility and were no longer able to spend several months per year long working hours outside the home, while also social conventions might have forced them to stay at home.³⁵ There they may have participated in other aspects of the silk industry such as the raising of cocoons and eggs, weaving or even small scale reeling.³⁶

Initially, the workers were recruited from amongst the women in the city of Bursa. When the female population of the city did not suffice to meet the demand for labour, the entrepreneurs tried to meet the increasing need for work

³² Charlotte Lorenz, *Die Frauenfrage im Osmanischen Reiche: mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der arbeitenden Klasse*, PhD thesis, Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin, 1919, 60-61.

³³ Duben & Behar, *Istanbul Households*, 75-76; 122-148. This is conform to what Ducousso described for the situation in Syria in 1911: more than 85 per cent of the working force in the silk reeling industry consisted of girls and women aged between seven and fifteen. Gaston Ducousso, *L'Industrie de la Soie en Syrie et au Liban*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1913, 156, as cited in Sarah Gualtieri, "Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis: Women and Syrian Transatlantic Migration, 1878 - 1924," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, XXIV, 1, 2004, 67-78, 76, fn 32.

³⁴ Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, 140, fn 1.

³⁵ Although there is no information on late nineteenth and early twentieth century family patterns in Bursa, Gerber convincingly argues that in seventeenth-century Bursa families were basically simple and not extended or joint as one would have expected. This would mean that married women could not rely on living-in family members to take care of these duties. Haim Gerber, "Anthropology and Family History: the Ottoman and Turkish Families," *Journal of Family History*, XIV, 1989, 409-421.

³⁶ Renard, *Brousse*, 20.

force in the 1850s by attracting more workers from the surrounding villages.³⁷ These girls were brought to Bursa where they worked for a few months during the production season living in dormitories.³⁸ Alternatively, filatures were built in the surrounding villages so the women could live at home and walk down to their work every morning.³⁹ The girls and women employed in the filatures in the villages slept at home, but were woken up early every morning by night watchers hired by their employers and urged to go to their work.⁴⁰

Information on the ethnic background of the women workers is scanty and sometimes contradictory. Initially the (foreign) silk reelers seem to have preferred to employ mainly Greek workers. Later the factory owners also started to hire Armenian women. By 1855, when the potential labour force from these groups became relatively scarce due to the booming of the industry and the workers demanded higher wages, Turkish women started to be recruited as well. Their number and that of Jewish women remained very limited, though. With the immigration of Circassians to the South Marmara from the 1860s onwards, another ethnic group could be added to the potential labour pool.⁴¹ As Muslims, however, they seem not to have been registered as such in the available sources and, therefore, remain rather invisible.⁴²

Greek and Armenian women, on the other hand, seem to have formed the backbone of the working force all through the heydays of the Bursa silk reeling industries until its end caused by the First World War. This seems to be a logical outcome, since the Greek and Armenian mill owners preferred to employ women from their own ethnic background and the majority of the mills were

³⁷ Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, 141.

³⁸ Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 128-129.

³⁹ Quataert, "Ottoman Women, Households, and Textile Manufacturing, 1800 - 1914," 165 and 175 fn. 12. Delbeuf gives an overview of the filatures in the province (*vilayet*) of Bursa, including Adapazar and Izmit at the beginning of 1906. At that time, 38 mills with a total of 2,370 basins were located in the city (*ville*) of Bursa. Bilecik and Adapazar had a relatively high number of filatures as well, 11 (736 basins) and 10 (455 basins), respectively. In other cities the number of filatures was limited: 13 filatures with a total of 768 basins in Mudanya, Gemlik, Bandirma and "Djérah." The remaining 59 filatures totaling 3,329 basins were located in villages. Two of these villages had a relatively high number of filatures: Küplü (10 filatures with 728 basins) and Izmit / Ortaköy (13 filatures with 616 basins). Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, 133-139.

⁴⁰ Bedik, "Amele kızları: bedbahtlık ve felaket," *İştirak*, 6, 20 Mart 1326 (2 April 1910), 81-84.

⁴¹ Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shore: Violence, Ethnicity and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1914 - 1923*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 23-30.

⁴² The French traveler Renard, referred to them in 1899 "[a]lmost all the workers are Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Circassian (...). The Turks are less numerous in these factories. They too slog away, but within the mystery of their homes." Renard, *Brousse*, 20.

owned by Greeks and Armenians. Khater makes an interesting effort to relate population figures to the potential labour pool and draws conclusions based on this.⁴³ However, for the Bursa area this is difficult. For the years for which we have relatively detailed population figures available,⁴⁴ we do not have the numbers of operating mills or basins and *vice versa*.

The labour force at the mills in the province of Bursa (or, Hüdavendigar), we may conclude, consisted largely of unmarried girls (and women) in their teens, who were in most cases Greek or Armenian and had a rural background.

Working at the Mills

Working conditions in the mills were harsh. On 30 July 1910 the workers in the silk factories of Bilecik telegraphed the Ministry of Interior complaining about the hot damp and foul air they had to work in.⁴⁵ They also vented complaints about the harsh manners of the overseers.⁴⁶ According to a telegram sent from the Governorship of the province of Hüdavendigar to the Ministry of Trade and Public Works almost all workers had serious health problems and hated their work due to their poor working conditions. One of the physical complaints was *killet-i istirahatten mütevellid fakrî'd-dem* or, “anemia born out of lack of leisure.”⁴⁷

Basically, the women worked from sunrise to dawn.⁴⁸ Depending on the time of the year this could differ a few hours. According to the socialist *İştirak* the girls and women aged ranging from 7 to 70 worked 15 - 16 hours per day, from 9 to 1 Ottoman time, that is, approximately 5 am until 9 pm, in the summer

⁴³ Khater, “‘House’ to ‘Goddess of the House,’” 343-344, fn 31.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Kemal H. Karpat, “Ottoman Population Records and the Census of 1881/82 - 1893,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, IX, 3, 1978, 237-274, 264; Cem Behar (hazırl.), *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun ve Türkiye'nin Nüfusu, 1500 - 1927*, Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet İstatistik Enstitüsü, 1996, 35; 39-42; 47.

⁴⁵ BOA, DH.MUİ, 120/11, 2 Şaban 1328 (7 August 1910).

⁴⁶ “Hayat ve hakikat: hükümetimizin nazar-ı dikkatine” *İştirak*, I, 2, 20 Şubat 1325 (5 March 1910), 23-26.

⁴⁷ BOA, Dahiliye Nezareti, İdarî Kısım Belgeleri (hereafter DH.İD) 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

⁴⁸ Karl Kaerger, *Kleinasien, ein deutsches Kolonisationsfeld*, Berlin: Gergonne & Cie, 1892 and H.W. Schmidt, *Auskunftsbuch für den Handel mit der Türkei. Kurtzgefaßtes Nachschlagebuch über Handel und Industrie in der Türkei*, Berlin, Leipzig & Konstantinople: Teubner, 1917, both cited by Lorenz, *Die Frauenfrage im Osmanischen Reiche*, 60-61.

season of 1910.⁴⁹ An open letter to the government from allegedly 5,000 female silk workers from Bursa also published in *İştirak* refers to a working day of 17 hours and a break of 20 minutes only.⁵⁰ The workers in the silk factories of Bilecik wrote that they had to work 12 to 16 hours per day.⁵¹ In a telegram sent from the Governorship of the province of Hüdavendigar to the Ministry of Trade and Public Works a few weeks later the author referred to working days of 14 - 15 hours.⁵² Such long working hours were normal and actually sanctioned by the *Mecelle*, the first Ottoman Civil Code, which stated that working hours were limited only by the rising and setting of the sun.⁵³

The initial lack of labour force forced the mill owners to pay a relatively high wage of 10 to 12 *kuruş* per day in the 1850s.⁵⁴ The rise in labour force created by tapping into the rural potential, however, caused the wages to be diminished.⁵⁵ Lack of work due to the silk pests in the second half of the 1860s caused many workers to be laid off and consequently to a further drop of wages.⁵⁶

By the turn of the century not even the most skilled women earned the relatively high wages of the 1850s. Despite the long working hours the incomes were low and irregular. According to a German author, the women earned 3 to 3.5 *kuruş* per day around 1890.⁵⁷ In 1906 apprentices earned 2.5 to 3.5 *kuruş*, while skilled workers received 5 to 7 *kuruş*, which they could increase to 8 *kuruş* through a bonus system, depending on the quality of their work.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ (Azadamard) Satenik Derderiyan, "Amele davası" *İştirak*, I, 12, 1 Mayıs 1326 (14 May 1910), 183-184.

⁵⁰ "Hayat ve hakikat: hükümetimizin nazar-ı dikkatine" *İştirak*, I, 2, 20 Şubat 1325 (5 March 1910), 23-26.

⁵¹ BOA, DH.MUI, 120/11, 2 Şaban 1328 (7 August 1910).

⁵² BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

⁵³ Gülmez, "Tanzimat'tan sonra işçi örgütlenmesi ve çalışma koşulları (1839 - 1919)," 794.

⁵⁴ Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, 141.

⁵⁵ Quataert, "The Age of Reforms, 1812 - 1914," 909.

⁵⁶ Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 129-130.

⁵⁷ Kaerger, *Kleinasien, ein deutsches Kolonisationsfeld*, as cited by Lorenz, *Die Frauenfrage im Osmanischen Reiche*, 60-61.

⁵⁸ Delbeuf, *De Constantinople à Brousse et à Nicée*, 141.

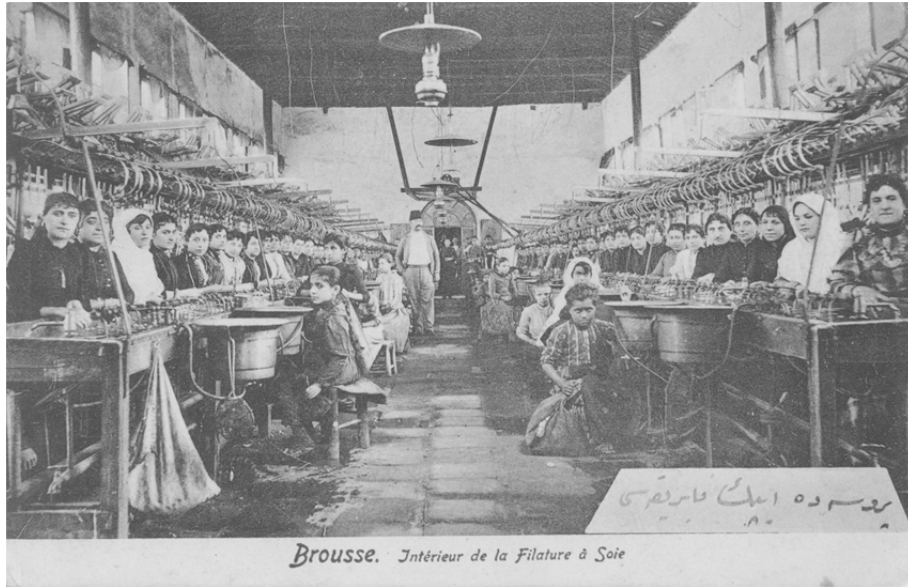


Figure 8 “Bursa. Interior of the Silk Filature.” Judged by their dresses and lack of head covers in the presence of at least one man, it seems that the large majority of the women was non-Muslim.

By 1910 the wages seem to have declined even more. According to the socialist Satenik Derderiyan the daily incomes of the silk reelers varied from 1 to 5 *kuruş*, while of all the workers in “hundred factories, only 150 persons” earned 5 *kuruş*.⁵⁹ The majority did not get more than 2 or 3 *kuruş*.⁶⁰ The open letter of the 5,000 workers refers to a daily wage of 2 to 6 *kuruş*.⁶¹ The workers in the silk factories of Bilecik wrote that they earned 60 *para* to 3 or at most 5 *kuruş* per day and, due to the short seasons, only “ten, twenty, fifty” *kuruş* per year.⁶² The telegram from the Governorship of the province of Hüdavendigar mentioned daily wages which reached “from 100 *para* to 6 *kuruş*.”⁶³

The extremely low wages were the result of mutual agreements on wages by the owners of the filatures in Bursa. The existence of work passes were another

⁵⁹ (Azadamard) Satenik Derderiyan, “Amele davası” *İştirak*, I, 12, 1 Mayıs 1326 (14 May 1910), 183-184.

⁶⁰ “İpek ameleleri hakkında,” *İştirak*, I, 7, 27 Mart 1326 (9 April 1910), 110-111.

⁶¹ “Hayat ve hakikat: hükümetimizin nazar-ı dikkatine,” *İştirak*, I, 2, 20 Şubat 1325 (5 March 1910), 23-26.

⁶² BOA, DH.MUİ, 120/11, 2 Şaban 1328.

⁶³ BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20S1329.

reason the workers did not have any leverage to demand a higher wage by threatening to go and work for someone else as they did in Lebanon.⁶⁴ These passbooks were a kind of *Curriculum Vitae* on which topics such as a worker's working experience and her wages were listed. They served to testify to the holder's reliability, but were also used by the employers to prevent job hopping for better wages.⁶⁵

The working conditions had been bad and wages low for a long time. What triggered the social unrest in 1910, however, were measures related to the collecting of a specific income tax (*temettü vergisi*). One of the goals of the Young Turks (and of Mehmed Cavid when he became Minister of Finances for the first time in June 1909), was to collect more taxes more effectively. It is therefore not surprising that these labourers were for the first time confronted with this tax, or its effects on their net income, under the rule of the Young Turks, while this tax actually had been introduced originally in 1839.⁶⁶

After several revisions the law was meant to levy the profits of commercial and industrial entrepreneurs, craftsmen, and by 1886 also the salaries of civil servants and the wages of journeymen.⁶⁷ The incomes of the peasants in the empire were initially subject to this tax as well. However by 1897 they were exempted from it. Three years earlier the raisers of silk-worms had been exempted, too.⁶⁸ The law and the way it was applied, therefore, were felt to be rather arbitrary. While many groups were exempted officially from this tax, the lack of a well-organized system of tax collection caused others to never, or rarely, pay it.⁶⁹ At the beginning of 1908, however, a new law related to the *temettü* tax was issued.⁷⁰ With this law, which also made women liable to this tax,⁷¹ the central government hoped to generate more income at the central level. The

⁶⁴ Murat Çizakça, "A Short History of the Bursa Silk Industry (1500 - 1900)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, XXIII, 1-2, 1980, 142-152, 151; Khater, "'House' to 'Goddess of the House'," 332.

⁶⁵ Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 128.

⁶⁶ Stanford J. Shaw, "The Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Tax Reforms and Revenue System," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, VI, 4, 1975, 421-459, 428.

⁶⁷ Shaw, "The Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Tax Reforms and Revenue System," 428.

⁶⁸ Quataert, "The Silk Industry of Bursa, 1880 - 1914."

⁶⁹ So it could happen that a factory was suddenly left without most of its workers, because they had been all arrested for not paying the *temettü*. Morawitz, *Les Finances de la Turquie*, 75-76.

⁷⁰ "Loi sur l'Impôt de Temettü," *Journal de Salonique*, 18 Janvier 1908, 1-2; "Loi sur l'Impôt de Temettü," *Journal de Salonique*, 20 Janvier 1908, 2; "Loi sur l'Impôt de Temettü," *Journal de Salonique*, 23 Janvier 1908, 2; "Loi sur l'Impôt de Temettü," *Journal de Salonique*, 27 Janvier 1908, 2.

⁷¹ "Le travail des femmes," *Journal de Salonique*, 24 Décembre 1908, 1.

workers often would not find out whether they were subject to this tax, however, until they suddenly received fewer wages in their hands.⁷² When the labourers at the silk factories found out that this tax and its modifications were going to reduce their meager incomes, therefore, protests rose and unrest was triggered.

Striking for Better Conditions

According to a small message on the front page of the *Levant Herald and Eastern Express* more than thousand women workers of the silk factories in Bilecik had gone on strike at the end of July demanding for a higher pay. The three-lines item also reported that due to the strike the factories were closed down.⁷³ Twelve factories in Bilecik were left idle because the women wanted their pay to be raised from five to six *kuruş* according to *Tanin*.⁷⁴ However, in a telegram to the Ministry of Interior the actual reason shows to be the levying of the *temettü* tax which caused the workers to get paid less. Due to this tax 1,500 workers put down their work on 30 July. The women signing the telegram, which was dated 4 August, urgently asked for a solution, because a week without payment had left them destitute and they wanted to get back to work.⁷⁵ A few days later, on 8 August, the *Levant Herald and Eastern Express* reported a strike of 800 women with similar demands, a pay rise, at the silk factories in Amasya.⁷⁶ The same day *Yeni İkdam* told its readers that the women not only wanted higher wages, but also less working hours.⁷⁷ Also the women in Küplü and Adapazarı had gone on strike. One of the reasons for the women in Küplü to strike was that they did not want to pay the *temettü* tax they were charged with, either.⁷⁸ “Some persons” actively involved in those strikes had instigated the silk workers in Bursa to also put down their tools by writing pamphlets and giving conferences.⁷⁹ Allegedly,

⁷² “L’Impot de Temettü,” *Journal de Salonique*, 13 Fevrier 1909, 1.

⁷³ “News items,” *Levant Herald and Eastern Express*, XXXIX, 178, 1 August 1910, 1.

⁷⁴ “Bilecik’te tatil-i eşgal,” *Tanin*, 1 Ağustos 1910, 3. See also “Kadın amele’nin grevi,” *Yeni Gazete*, 19 Temmuz 1329 (1 August 1910), 3.

⁷⁵ BOA, DH.MUİ, 120/11, 2 Şaban 1328 (7 August 1910).

⁷⁶ “News items,” *Levant Herald and Eastern Express*, XXXIX, 184, 8 August 1910, 1.

⁷⁷ “Tatil-i eşgal,” *Yeni İkdam*, 8 Ağustos 1910, 3.

⁷⁸ “La grève générale dans les filatures de Brousse,” *Stamboul*, 18 Août 1910, 3. BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

⁷⁹ “Notes de Brousse: la grève des fileuses,” *Stamboul*, 22 Août 1910, 3.

the Armenian organization *Hinchak(yan)* (Ring of Bell)⁸⁰ was the motor behind these strikes. A man named Setrak was accused of stirring up the strikers and a warrant was put out for his arrest.⁸¹ According to Henri Rol, the author of an article in *La Turquie*, a French newspaper published in Istanbul, this Setrak was a utopian socialist belonging to “the class of strike cultivators (*grèviculteurs*), so numerous in other countries and which lived on the exploitation of the worker’s class.”⁸²

The strike in Bursa started on 15 August 1910. According to the journalist of *La Turquie*, Henri Rol, a “horde of filature workers” headed by “four or five women of ill repute, adorned with jingling, false trinkets” went through the streets of Bursa going from factory to factory and convinced the workers to join in and close down their workplaces. Five factories, only, were left alone because they were situated just outside of their route.⁸³ *La Turquie* reported on the strike for the first time on 16 August. Another French and Istanbulian newspaper, *Stamboul*, received a telegraph on the strike and referred to it on 18 August.⁸⁴ That same day also the Ottoman Turkish *Sahab* newspaper informed its readers with a short note on the strike,⁸⁵ followed one day later by *Yeni Gazete*.⁸⁶ Subsequently, the German and French newspaper *Osmanischer Lloyd / Lloyd Ottomane* reported extensively on the strike in a feature article on its front page giving information on the number of strikers, the demands of the strikers and the way the strike developed.⁸⁷

The available sources give different numbers of active strikers. According to *Tanin* the Bilecik strike initially involved more than 1,000 girls and women from all 12 factories in the town.⁸⁸ *Stamboul* referred to approximately 2,500 strikers

⁸⁰ This party was founded in 1887 in Geneva by a group of young Armenians and which claimed to be social-democratic. Its ultimate aim was to liberate and unite Turkish, Russian and Persian Armenia and turn it into an independent state. See for an extensive discussion of this organization and its (changing) ideas: Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, especially Chapters 3-5.

⁸¹ BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

⁸² Henri Rol, “Grève de fileuses de Brousse,” *La Turquie*, 23 Août 1910, 2.

⁸³ Henri Rol, “Grève de fileuses de Brousse,” *La Turquie*, 23 Août 1910, 2.

⁸⁴ “La grève générale dans les filatures de Brousse,” *Stamboul*, 18 Août 1910, 3.

⁸⁵ “Bursa’da tatil-i eşgal,” *Sabah*, 18 Ağustos 1910, 3.

⁸⁶ “Tatil-i eşgal,” *Yeni Gazete*, 6 Ağustos 1329 (19 August 1910), 3.

⁸⁷ “Der Streik der Spinnerinnen,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 20. August 1910, 1.

⁸⁸ “Bilecik’te tatil-i eşgal,” *Tanin*, 19 Temmuz 1329 (1 August 1910), 3. See also “Kadın amele’nin grevi,” *Yeni Gazete*, 19 Temmuz 1329 (1 August 1910), 3.

in 48 factories by the middle of August.⁸⁹ Both *Yeni İkdâm* and *Osmanische Lloyd*, however, stated that initially 3,000 girls and women working in the thread mills were on strike. The reporter of the latter newspaper expected workers from other factories to join in shortly, though.⁹⁰ *La Turquie* wrote that 6,000 Turkish, Greek, and Armenian workers from filatures in Bilecik, Aşağıköy, Kupa (?), Başköy, Söğütü, Vezirhan and Lefke had put down their work.⁹¹ Those who wanted to continue working were obstructed, what resulted in fights during which windows were broken and a few persons were arrested.⁹² Non-strikers were not able to go to their work unless escorted by police. Furthermore, there were two gendarmes waiting at the door of every factory whose workers did not participate in the strike.⁹³ Thus, non-strikers at these factories were able to continue working.⁹⁴ The Armenian journalist Dikran Kelekyan mentioned regretfully that the strike was only hitting the Ottoman-owned factories, while work at the foreign-owned factories continued.⁹⁵

What demands did the strikers have? As mentioned above, the immediate cause seems to have been the *temettü* tax. According to an investigation of the Governorship of the District Ertuğrul after the Küplü strike was terminated, however, this was not the real reason. The real reason was that the workers wanted a raise in their wages.⁹⁶ According to *Stamboul*, too, the workers in Bursa referred to the “tax on profits” as only one of the reasons to strike. However, there were more issues besides their primary demands of less working hours and higher wages.⁹⁷ The strikers demanded a raise of 20-25%, or, approximately 10 *kuruş* per month.⁹⁸ Furthermore, they wanted a break of at least one hour

⁸⁹ “La grève générale dans les filatures de Brousse,” *Stamboul*, 18 Août 1910, 3.

⁹⁰ “Der Streik der Spinnerinnen,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 20. August 1910, 1; “Brusa grevi,” *Yeni İkdâm*, 21 Ağustos 1910, 3.

⁹¹ “Une grève de fileuses,” *La Turquie*, 16 Août 1910, 1.

⁹² “La grève générale dans les filatures de Brousse,” *Stamboul*, 18 Août 1910, 3; “Der Streik der Spinnerinnen,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 20. August 1910, 1.

⁹³ “Der Streik der Spinnerinnen,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 20. August 1910, 1; “Notes de Brousse: la grève des fileuses,” *Stamboul*, 22 Août 1910, 3.

⁹⁴ “Zum Spinnerinnenstreik in Brussa,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 27. August 1910, 1.

⁹⁵ D[ikran] K[elekyan], “Bursa Seyahatından,” *Sabah*, 20 Ağustos 1910, 1.

⁹⁶ BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

⁹⁷ “La grève générale dans les filatures de Brousse,” *Stamboul*, 18 Août 1910, 3; BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

⁹⁸ “Der Streik der Spinnerinnen,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 20. August 1910, 1; BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911). This means that the wages paid were 40-50 *kuruş* per month, or, indeed, less than 2 *kuruş* per day.

instead of the habitual 20 minutes.⁹⁹ Finally, they had demands such as changes in the *réglementation du travail*, more flexibility in hiring workers and the ability to work without having to show their “passbook” to the employer.¹⁰⁰

The demands, thus, were in effect directed at two different parties. On the one hand, the women wanted the government to exempt them from the tax. When this demand was not met, they turned to the employers and asked for a raise in pay. For the women, the outcome would be the same: a higher net income.

The Governorship of Hüdavendigâr seems to have been sympathetic to the needs of the strikers. It repeated a request it had sent a year earlier to the Ministry of Trade and Public Works¹⁰¹ to investigate the working hours and the wages paid, pointing out that the working conditions of the labourers had not changed and that they feared that these would lead to serious health and social problems.¹⁰² The Council of State, to whom the Ministry had forwarded the previous request, had turned down all the demands for an investigation into better working conditions arguing that neither a reduction of working hours, nor increase of wages was favorable for a country that was economically trying to develop itself.¹⁰³ In this statement of the Council of State the ideas of the CUP are reflected. According to an article published in December 1908 in the newspaper *İttihad ve Terakki* “the laws which are appropriated by many European countries and which have a socio-political content are of no other use but causing losses to the employers.”¹⁰⁴

The owners of the mills simply declined all demands of the workers. They defended their decision stating that the harvest had been bad and that there was a lack of raw materials.¹⁰⁵ This was indeed the case. While the harvests of silk cocoons had been rather high in the years before, the results of 1910 had proved to be disastrous. By July 1910, when the harvest was finished, the figures showed

⁹⁹ “Der Streik der Spinnerinnen,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 20. August 1910, 1; Quataert, “The Silk Industry of Bursa, 1880 - 1914,” 111.

¹⁰⁰ “La grève générale dans les filatures de Brousse,” *Stamboul*, 18 Août 1910, 3; BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

¹⁰¹ BOA, BEO (Ticaret Nafia), 3630/272209, 17 Şaban 1327 (3 September 1909).

¹⁰² BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

¹⁰³ “İpek ameleleri hakkında,” *İştirak*, I, 7, 27 Mart 1326 (9 April 1910), 110-111. BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

¹⁰⁴ Toprak, *Milli İktisat – Milli Burjuvazi*, 85-86.

¹⁰⁵ “La grève générale dans les filatures de Brousse,” *Stamboul*, 18 Août 1910, 3. BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

a decline of 45-50% compared to 1909.¹⁰⁶ On 20 July, therefore, the factory owners had sent a joint letter to the Governor of Hüdavendigar with the request to ask the government on their behalf for permission to import cocoons in order to keep the factories up and running and to prevent 15 – 20,000 workers from losing their income. They had also asked for a tax exemption on these imports.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the factory owners agreed with the Council of State that if they would give in to the demands of the strikers, they would lose the competition with producers elsewhere. They would only be able to meet the demands if the government issued regulations for a decrease of working hours and an increase of wages pertaining to the whole of the Ottoman lands, or, at least to the whole province of Hüdavendigar.¹⁰⁸

Since the owners of the mills refused to recognize any representative body of the workers in the form of a union or strikers' committee and the workers' demands, therefore, fell on deaf ears, the workers placed their hopes in the state institutions.¹⁰⁹ With their leaders at the head, the workers marched to the Municipality where they were turned away. They were told that only if they sent one or two representatives the Municipality would be willing to listen to their grievances.¹¹⁰ Subsequently, they turned to the Provincial Governorship and asked for its help as intermediary in addressing the (central) government.¹¹¹ Upon this request, the Provincial Governorship of Hüdavendigar sent another telegram to the Ministry of Trade and Public Works reiterating the bad working conditions of the factory labourers and asking for a reinvestigation by the Council of State.¹¹²

Meanwhile, there were new developments in Bursa. As mentioned above, not all workers had joined in the strike. On 18 August some of the strikers seem to have repented their participation and wanted to return to their work.¹¹³ Some of them were even ready to accept a lower pay.¹¹⁴ According to *Osmanischer Lloyd* an increasing number of strikers turned against the Hinchak organization, since

¹⁰⁶ "2me lettre du comité de Brousse," *Revue Commerciale du Levant*, Juillet 1910, 186.

¹⁰⁷ "La récolte séricicole et les filateurs," *La Turquie*, 26 Juillet 1910, 2; BOA, BEO (Maliye), 3788/284042, 26 Receb 1328 (2 August 1328).

¹⁰⁸ BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

¹⁰⁹ "Der Streik der Spinnerinnen," *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 20. August 1910, 1.

¹¹⁰ "La grève générale dans les filatures de Brousse," *Stamboul*, 18 Août 1910, 3.

¹¹¹ "Der Streik der Spinnerinnen," *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 20. August 1910, 1; BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

¹¹² BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

¹¹³ BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

¹¹⁴ Henri Rol, "Grève de fileuses de Brousse," *La Turquie*, 23 Août 1910, 2.

it could not live up to the expectations raised regarding the material support it would give.¹¹⁵ One of the leaders of the strike, who addressed the crowds at the Koza *Han* was not applauded, but instead had water melon rinds thrown at him.¹¹⁶ The lack of sufficient leverage forced the Hinchak Organization to leave the role of mediator to the CUP in Bursa. On 21 August *Yeni İkdâm* reported that the strike was ended because the “board of administrators of the Bursa province” had mediated between the strikers and the factory owners which had resulted in a promise that the demands of the workers would be taken into account.¹¹⁷ This announcement of the end of the strike seems to have been somewhat premature. On 22 August, only 600 of the strikers went back to work.¹¹⁸ Although they do not give much information on the intermediary work of the CUP, its involvement was according to the newspapers instrumental in the actual termination of the strike on 25 August.¹¹⁹ Obviously, the manufacturers gave the undertaking “to increase the wages by about ten percent and diminish the working hours from fourteen to ten and a half hours per day.”¹²⁰ A telegram of 76 silk workers from Bilecik dated 9 November 1910 seems to indicate, furthermore, that the CUP convinced the workers that the *temettü* was a just taxation. The workers wrote that they “accepted” the levying of *temettü*.¹²¹ By that time, however, the law had been revised. Since many felt the law was unclear – it was at the same time a business tax for companies and an income tax for individuals – and unfair – inhabitants of Istanbul and foreigners were exempted –, it had been modified in Fall 1910 based on the critical comments of the Chamber of Commerce in Istanbul. One of the modifications was that individuals had to pay 3% over their yearly income

¹¹⁵ “Zum Spinnerinnenstreik in Brussa,” *Osmanischer Lloyd / Lloyd Ottomane*, 27.8.1910, 1.

¹¹⁶ “Notes de Brousse: la grève des fileuses,” *Stamboul*, 22 Août 1910, 3.

¹¹⁷ “Brusa grevi,” *Yeni İkdâm*, 21 Ağustos 1910, 3.

¹¹⁸ “Zum Spinnerinnenstreik in Brussa,” *Osmanischer Lloyd / Lloyd Ottomane*, 27.8.1910, 1.

¹¹⁹ “Bursa’da tatil-i eşgal,” *Sabah*, 29 Ağustos 1910, 3; “Ende des Spinnerinnenstreiks,” *Osmanischer Lloyd / Lloyd Ottomane*, 28.8.1910, 1; “Sozialismus in Anatolien,” *Osmanischer Lloyd / Lloyd Ottomane*, 31.8.1910, 1; “Brousse, 25 Août,” *Journal de Salonique*, 28 Août 1910, 1.

¹²⁰ “Sozialismus in Anatolien,” *Osmanischer Lloyd / Lloyd Ottomane*, 31.8.1910, 1. The undertaking of the factory owners seems to be extremely generous: 10% increase in pay combined with 25% decrease in working hours would effectively mean a raise in payment of more than 45%.

¹²¹ BOA, DH.MUI, 107/11, 17 Zilkade 1328 (20 November 1910).

beyond 3,600 *kuruş* only.¹²² The tax-free foot thus having been raised to 3,600 *kuruş* per year, it was unlikely that any of the women involved in the strike were by then liable to this tax.

The very generous promises of the manufacturers – the effective increase of payment of 45% –, however, seem to have been void. Immediately after the strike ended, by the end of August, the mills, which normally would have been opened until November, closed down due to the lack of raw materials. The telegram of the 76 workers from Bilecik and the subsequent telegram of the Governor of Hüdavendigâr may be an indication of the financial problems of the factory owners because of the bad harvest. By the end of November, more than 670 workers had not yet received their full wages despite mediation of the government.¹²³

Although the strike had ended by 25 August, the discussion between the state offices on the possibility of regulations regarding the improvement of working conditions for the labourers continued. The request of the Governorship of Hüdavendigâr resulted in a correspondence between the Ministry of Trade and Public Works and the Ministry of Interior which continued for several months. Finally, in February 1911, the Governorship of Hüdavendigâr received an answer from the Ministry of Trade and Public Works. The Ministry of Interior informed the Governorship that it would like to include other provinces with similar industries in such an investigation. This required “a rather large directive (*nizamname*) based on thorough researches” which would take quite some time. While waiting for this directive to be drawn, it asked the provincial administration to act as an intermediary doing justice to both sides in the dispute, which had been ‘solved’ almost half a year earlier.¹²⁴

We do not know what the provincial governorship did after this. However, from an article in the *Kadınlar Dünyası* published in 1914 we can understand that the conditions for female workers in the silk industry had not really improved. Neither had their wages been raised.¹²⁵

¹²² “L’Impôt de Temettü,” *Journal de Salonique*, 23 Janvier 1909, 1; “La loi sur le Temettü,” *Correspondance d’Orient*, 1 Octobre 1910, 302; “La loi sur le Temettü,” *Correspondance d’Orient*, 15 Octobre 1910, 334-336.

¹²³ BOA, DH.MUİ, 107/11, 17 Zilkade 1328 (20 November 1910).

¹²⁴ BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 20 Safer 1329 (20 February 1911).

¹²⁵ “Sanayi’de sefalet-i nisvan,” *Kadınlar Dünyası*, II, 140, 25 Nisan 1330 (8 May 1914), 2.

Conclusion

The strikes of the silk reelers in the Bursa region in summer 1910 were quite traditional in both the demands involved and the way they developed. The strikers demanded better pay and an improvement of their working conditions. When the demands were not met by the employers, the strikers turned to the provincial governor for help. In this case, the governor, obviously, felt sympathetic to the demands of the strikers and forwarded their requests to the central government in Istanbul stressing the poor working conditions. On the other hand, he represented that same State and had to restore public order which he did by providing police assistance to those continuing or returning to work. Despite the fact that the CUP at the central level had been instrumental in issuing the anti-strike laws and in the increase of taxes levied, the strikers turned to its local branch for arbitration. Although the accounts of the discussions between the local CUP intermediaries, the strikers and the other parties involved, are not available, their brokerage resulted in the end of the strike in Bursa.

When the CUP had issued laws aiming at curbing social unrest including anti-strike laws in 1909, this resulted in a decrease of the number of strikes. More than three strikes in one month in different regions but in the same branch, therefore, are remarkable. The most obvious conclusion is that there must have been a connection between them. Could this connection be the Hinchak organization which is referred to in the archival documents? And, if this is the case, could we refer to these strikes as part of an early development of trade unionism with the Hinchak acting as the trade union behind the workers? Earlier strikes seem to have started without any strong leaders more or less spontaneously amongst workers, upon which syndicates arose to represent the strikers without any funding to financially support them.¹²⁶ Mostly, therefore, they were short lived. In this case, there seems to have been a kind of organization in place before the strikes started. Hinchak seems to have promised funding for the strikers, but was not able to live up to its promises. Were these strikes an effort of Hinchak to establish or advertise itself as a syndicate? According to *Osmanischer Lloyd* this outbreak of strikes, indeed, was the result of activities of Armenians who had been introduced to socialism while living in

¹²⁶ Karakisla, "The 1908 Strike Wave in the Ottoman Empire," 168-169.

Europe and wanted to convince factory workers all over the Ottoman Empire to join them in this movement.¹²⁷

Or did the Hinchak aim to raise a national(ist) conscience amongst Ottoman Armenians through labour activism similar to the nationalist and socialist Armenian organizations in Russia and the Caucasus as Ronald Suny describes?¹²⁸ Since the Hinchak organization was, besides socialist, also nationalist and thus aiming at particularly Armenian workers (and peasants), the choice to start a strike in this particular industry, where a large part of the factory owners and workers was indeed Armenian, was probably not a coincidence. On the other hand, the available sources do not reveal any evident distinction between the targeted factories or strikers based on ethno-religious background. Further research in Armenian and Greek sources might reveal more regarding this aspect of the strikes. They may also tell us more on the role of other authorities important in the daily lives of the workers, namely the clergy. Knowing that the churches were able to exert considerable political and social power over their communities,¹²⁹ it is not unlikely that they were in one way or another also involved in the disputes between the entrepreneurs and the workers.

Was there a gender aspect to these strikes? It is clear that Setrak and the Hinchak organization which seems to have been behind him, were probably more interested in the fact that these women were workers exploited by capitalist factory owners than in their being women. And although mainly women workers were involved, their demands did not differ from the demands of other, male strikers before them: an increase of income and better working conditions. There are no indications of specific requests related to their gender. Despite the mentioning of “anemia due to lack of leisure time,” for example, there is no reference to the effects of a heavy work load on their reproductive powers. Nor are there any other statements that stress the workers being female. The terms “young girls” and “women” could, without any further change in the content of the documents, have been replaced by “young boys” and “men.” The lack of gender specific demands allowed the owners of the factories to completely ignore the fact that the strikers were women and to use therefore a purely economic argumentation to reject their demands: their position in a highly competitive, international market.

¹²⁷ “Sozialismus in Anatolien,” *Osmanischer Lloyd*, 31. August 1910, 1.

¹²⁸ Suny, *Looking toward Ararat*, Chapter 5.

¹²⁹ See e.g. Khater, “‘House’ to ‘Goddess of the House’,” for examples in the Syrian case.

Can these strikes be called women's strikes? Yes and no. Ottoman subjects, both male and female, had a long tradition of writing petitions to their rulers demanding justice. The strikers in Bursa, therefore, did not hesitate to write to the authorities with their demands when they felt they were treated unjustly. It remains unclear whether the women sent the telegraphs on their own initiative or not. Even if they were prompted to send them by males, the latter must have realized they were standing in a long-time existing tradition by doing so: while the Ottoman subjects had been used to addressing the Sultan in seeking protection against unjust local authorities, as citizens they now addressed the government to be protected from unjust, capitalist entrepreneurs.

While the telegraphs the women sent, thus, can be regarded as a continuation of an old tradition, the strikes also carry a different, new aspect. Not only did women get together in a joint action beyond the limits of their own working place to even include several towns in Western Anatolia, they also went public in a very visible way: they took to the street and publicly protested their exploitative employers. In this respect gender was of particular relevance: not because of their demands, but because of their carrying their labour resistance into the streets, into a public space meant for men. The women who dared to thus speak out publicly and showed some initiative were, in one of the newspapers, downgraded to "four or five women of ill repute, adorned with jingling, false trinkets." By these remarks the group of women protesting in the streets, which was consisting of substantially more than four or five women, were effectively killed socially for trespassing the social space assigned to them: women going through the streets loudly voicing their demands could simply not be honorable women! Still, they succeeded in getting their voices heard as far as Istanbul and their demands discussed within the Council of State.