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BOOK REVIEW

Görkem Akgöz, *In the Shadow of War and Empire: Industrialisation, Nation-Building, and Working-Class Politics in Turkey*. Studies in the Social History of the Global South. Leiden: Brill, 2024. xvii + 374pp. 4 maps. 32 figures. 1 table. Bibliography and index. Open Access, €140.61 hbk. doi [10.1163/9789004687141](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004687141)
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In the Shadow of War and Empire focuses on the themes of nation-building, class formation and modernization in Turkey from the nineteenth century onwards as experienced by the workers themselves. It culminates in a narrative which dismantles a nostalgic history, often told, of state factories and early republican industrialization between the 1920s and 1950s. This period of supposed harmony between the benevolent state and patriotic workers was a key moment in the process of the proletarianization of the population and the creation of an oppressive labour regime. State factories were important and contested sites for this history. The book focuses on one such site, the Bakırköy Cotton Factory, which was established in an industrial zone in Istanbul, known to some foreign observers in the nineteenth century as the ‘Turkish Manchester’.

Akgöz works through a wealth of primary sources, from oral history interviews and archives to state documents, newspaper accounts, expert reports, trade union papers, travelogues, memoirs and, most importantly, the workers’ files from the factory archives. Through these archives, the factory site emerges in this book as an ideal space for, in Akgöz’s words, ‘the integrated interdisciplinarity of an all-encompassing history of capitalism’ (p. 326), as a locale where class is formed and capital is reproduced.

Akgöz’s study begins with late Ottoman efforts to create an industrial zone in the capital city of Istanbul to rival the major industrial centres in the Global North and especially in Britain. The first chapter invites the reader to explore the early industrial geography of Istanbul. Although based largely on secondary sources and some occasional travel writing, it is a succinct synthesis of the literature on Ottoman industrialization and its impact on the capital city. Greater engagement with more recent work on nineteenth-century Istanbul would have made it a stronger story about Istanbul as well.

The second chapter analyses the early republican macro-history of state-led industrialization and the populist imagination that sought to revitalize late Ottoman industrial sites, most notably the Bakırköy factory (which was now producing the prestigious ‘Sümerbank’ cotton), to build new ones and to reframe these efforts as part of the construction of the young Turkish nation. Here, we read about foreign experts – Soviets, Germans and Americans – and how the Turkish political elites saw the nation’s predicament in (proto) dependency terms in the 1930s.

The third chapter, entitled ‘Smokestacks of Atatürk’s minarets’, is one of the most successful in the book, in which the author argues for a spatialized understanding of industrialization and reveals the uneven geographies of Turkish capitalism and class formation in the early republican period. While factories represented industrial modernity, civilization and the project of nation-building for the ideologues and rulers of the new nation, their site selection was controversial, especially concerning the labour markets to which they had access. It is in this chapter that women’s place in this labour history is most clearly articulated.

Chapter 4 looks at shop-floor industrial relations, showing that workers exercised a multitude of methods to resist the central plans to rationalize and discipline production, including, but not limited to, absenteeism and high turnover. Urban historians reading this chapter will particularly enjoy the detailed analysis of the architectural make-up and the technological infrastructure as factors in shaping these shop-floor relations of production. At the end of the chapter, Akgöz also addresses the issue of working-class housing in Istanbul and the development of the *gecekondu* (the Turkish neologism that literally means ‘built over a night’) phenomenon, that is, slums in the outskirts of Istanbul formed due to massive immigration to the city. Her insights into the impact of the Bakırköy factory on the making of Zeytinburnu as a working-class, *gecekondu* neighbourhood demonstrate the importance of a labour history perspective on the emergence of urban spaces.

The book is especially commendable for the variety of scales it utilizes, oscillating between the global, the national, the regional, the micro – that is the factory floor – and within that, the body of the individual worker. It is at its best when the author zooms in and brings to the fore the textured details of the lives and struggles of these workers. Chapters 5 and 6, in this vein, concentrate on the stories of individual workers, as they negotiate with the factory management devising various strategies, or embark on diverse political journeys, heavily influenced by their workplace experience. Together with the previous chapters, these overturn the narrative of either a helpless or endlessly grateful working class and shows the contentious nature of shop-floor workplace relations.

The book is also insightful about how the factory site is crucial to the reproduction of urban space, in Istanbul and beyond. Urban historians, not only of Turkey but of the Global South would find in this book fruitful areas of intersection between the histories of labour and the urban. It hints at, but does not fully develop, the need to introduce urban space as a crucial analytical category for labour history, and vice versa. As a result, the urban historian reading this meticulous book is left wanting more theorization and exploration of the role of cities in the specific histories of the making of the working class. Perhaps that is what a good book should achieve: inspiring others to explore what it implies but does not fully pursue.

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