

August 2020

## Book Review: Ottoman Women during World War I: Everyday Experiences, Politics, and Conflict

Deniz Zeynep Leuenberger  
*Bridgewater State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Zeynep Leuenberger, Deniz (2020). Book Review: Ottoman Women during World War I: Everyday Experiences, Politics, and Conflict. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(6), 498-499.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss6/35>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. ©2020 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## **Ottoman Women during World War I: Everyday Experiences, Politics, and Conflict.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Deniz Zeynep Leuenberger<sup>2</sup>

The historical discourse related to the Ottoman Empire is largely silent on the lives of women. From this perspective, *Ottoman Women during World War I: Everyday Experiences, Politics, and Conflict* is especially powerful and important because it focuses on the lives of ordinary women and it tells their story in spite of the limited availability of written narratives by and on women from the period. The book is an exploration of the day to day lives of women from poor families, providing a detailed, rich, and carefully researched historical perspective. The book gives voice to the experiences of soldier's wives and mothers and to women filling labor gaps in areas such as agricultural labor, nursing, and textile work. It provides evidence of the foundational role of women in the survival of their families, neighborhoods, and communities. The work pulls the reader into the individual lives of families and the painful stories of their war experiences while supporting those narratives with relevant and thoughtfully chosen data.

Using public records, poetry, and petitions, often written by paid scribes on behalf of women who were themselves largely illiterate, the book ties together the personal lives, battles, and struggles of Ottoman women on the home front. Given the lack of journals and other written documents by poor Ottoman women during World War I, the methodology is especially resourceful. Although middle-class and elite women were sometimes literate, keeping journals and writing poetry, the primary source for written evidence on poorer women comes from public petitions and records (pp.6-7). These documents, most likely written on behalf of women with government grievances by professional scribes, are useful evidence of their struggles and experiences. The author acknowledges that there are cons with the use of these documents, including a prescribed structure, impossibility of interviewing subjects as follow up, and the loss of voice in the translation from oral narrative to text (pp.7-8). These are, of course, challenges in any history of non-biographical and non-elite experiences, which are less likely to be documented formally and in writing. What is surprising is the detail and passion apparent in these documents, which provide the reader the opportunity to connect with individuals in the past, often at their most vulnerable times.

While histories of elite and middle class women provide insight on the evolving political and social environment for Ottoman women during World War I, the stories of poor women inform the reader about critical changes in the "state-society relationship" and explain problems through from their perspective as they experienced the collapse of an empire (p.3). The histories of poor women's advocacy, although their activism may be less organized than that of elite women (p. 5), reveal the foundation for women's rights that become a hallmark of Ataturk's nationalist movement. The book asserts it is because the lives of wealthy and middleclass women were entirely different than those of poor women, that the stories of the poor are an important addition.

---

<sup>1</sup> Reviewed book citation: Metinsoy, E. M. (2020). *Ottoman Women during World War I: Everyday Experiences, Politics, and Conflict*. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Academic Degree: PhD. Title: Chief of Staff and Vice President for Planning and Strategy, Professor. Contact Details: Bridgewater State University, E-mail: dleuenberger@bridgew.edu.

Before entering into chapters on Ottoman women's struggle for access to food, soldiers' pensions, housing, and safe workplace environments, the author first introduces the experiences of women in Europe and the USA during World War I. This allows the reader to not only understand the experiences of Ottoman women in a larger context, but also for a comparison in terms of work experiences, access to food, and formal relationship to the military. The carefully researched chapters that follow unfold the tragedies of women facing hunger and starvation, homelessness, and complete loss of income. What is intriguing about the work is that the author does not only discuss the misery of war, but also the fight of individual women, even those with very little means, to challenge government corruption and negligence (p. 53). Because several of the grievance petitions were also recorded with their resolutions, the reader is able to learn the outcomes for women and their families.

The book also does not hide some of the real tragedies of war. Over four-fifths of Ottoman citizen deaths during World War I were the deaths of civilians, with the largest burden felt by the poor, many of whom who lived in the countryside and had little access to alternative government support systems (pp. 30, 36, and 41). Details of pensions, payments following death, and food allocations also demonstrate that poor wives and mothers of conscripted soldiers fared very differently than the wives and mothers of officers (p. 41). The poor had little access to bread, milk, coal, and wood and death due to starvation or cold was not uncommon (p.46). The high cost of living and limited ability of poor women to find fair payment for their work created few options for women (pp. 85, 86, 117, and 118).

Relevant to researchers of the current period, included in the discussion is the nature of caring and unpaid labor and of paid, government sponsored work during World War I. As these ten years of war follow a long line of other wars in the region in close succession, there is no alternative but to transition women into agriculture, nursing, and production for the war effort (pp. 117-118). Prior to this period, most labor by women was unpaid, within the household or in family agricultural work. Textile work, spinning silk, rug weaving, and embroidery work was paid piece work, but was completed in the home and sold through middlemen in the marketplace (p.118). With most "of age" males serving in the military, women temporarily filled some of their labor roles, although at lower pay. The impact of this work on women's rights following the war is an important theme within the book.

*Ottoman Women during World War I: Everyday Experiences, Politics, and Conflict*, while full of carefully researched statistical and qualitative evidence, is also an engaging work that will absorb the reader's interest. It not only tells the story of a select group of women, but also familiarizes the reader with each subject. The reader will learn her name, names of the members of her family, the ages of her children, and the stressors she faces. The book will be of special value to those interested in women's experiences in World War 1 and in the Ottoman Empire. It also provides deep insights into women's caring and voluntary labor in that era. Finally, it is a window into the dignity of "ordinary" women, in their poverty, loss, and suffering, fought for their rights, for their families, and for their survival.