


BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The End of the Ottoman Empire: A Century after the Fall

Reviewed by Chris Gratien  Department of History, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, USA
(c.gr8n@virginia.edu)

The Last Days of the Ottoman Empire: 1918–1922. Ryan Gingeras (Allen Lane, Penguin Random House UK, 2023). Pp. 368. \$47.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780241444320

Imperial Resilience: The Great War's End, Ottoman Longevity, and Incidental Nations. Hasan Kayalı (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021). Pp. 272. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520343702

Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire. Mostafa Minawi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023). Pp. 326. \$90.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503634046

Turkey: A Past Against History Christine M. Philliou (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021). Pp. 294. \$95.00 hardcover, \$32.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520276390

Worldmaking in the Long Great War: How Local and Colonial Struggles Shaped the Modern Middle East. Jonathan Wyrzten (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). Pp. 336. \$120.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9780231186292

A century ago, the Ottoman Empire finally ceased to be after a long reign that stretched back to the late medieval period, and, ostensibly, nobody really missed it. It was once possible to write about the fall of the Ottoman Empire as the overdue culmination of a process that gave rise to independent nation-states. But, increasingly, the empire casts a long shadow on the historiography of the Middle East, and its last days emerge among its most consequential for the future of the region. The same political actors who reshaped late Ottoman politics were integral to the struggle for the post-Ottoman landscape. These individuals included provincial elites from nondominant ethnic groups who, rather than embracing ethnic nationalism, remained Ottomanist in their vision of the region's future until the final moment. Newer scholarship rejects the teleology of the nations that emerged from postwar fracturing, demonstrating that the map was not redrawn by the victors in an instant. It was forged, instead, through armed struggles against European imperial powers and among rival movements that lasted for years. One hundred years after the Ottoman Empire's collapse, historians are still excavating its long-ignored relevance for understanding the modern Middle East, which was buried under the weight of nationalist and Orientalist metanarratives that never questioned the inevitability of its demise.

These are some of the major conclusions one may draw from five new books dealing in different ways with the fall of the Ottoman Empire and its legacy. These works, which form the foundation of this review essay, represent the latest batch of scholarship published as we have passed a century since events like the outbreak of World War I (1914), the Armenian Genocide (1915), Sykes–Picot (1916), the Paris Peace Conference (1919), and the

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the same Creative Commons licence is used to distribute the re-used or adapted article and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use.

Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which formally recognized the Republic of Turkey as the successor to the Ottoman Empire. With each centennial has come a significant revision and expansion of how scholars should understand these moments, and the present works follow in this trend.

In the superbly written *The Last Days of the Ottoman Empire*, Ryan Gingeras re-centers the Ottoman Empire in the half-decade struggle over its future following defeat in World War I. Rather than a definitive break with the Ottoman past, the Republic of Turkey, he shows, emerged from attempts at the reconsolidation of Ottoman lands from 1919 onward. Political divisions that broke down along ethnic lines ultimately played a large role in this outcome, but Gingeras does not accept them as inevitabilities. He places the shifting terrain of local politics within an international context that includes not only familiar Western powers but also transnational anticolonial solidarities. Although momentous battles were fought and new nations forged in the process, Gingeras does not present glorified accounts of the movements that vied for postwar dominance, instead emphasizing the messiness and violence of the conflicts. In doing so, he draws extensively on contemporary primary materials, weaving in insightful discussions of the often irreconcilable sources of the period, a rare treat in a trade press book about the Middle East.

Hasan Kayali's *Imperial Resilience* delves deeper into the inter-Muslim solidarities among the postwar resistance movements, which he approaches not as ethnic nationalisms following separate, predefined paths, but rather as ways of "putting the empire back together again" (p. 80). Kayali's protagonists are "anti-colonial operatives with multilayered identities and allegiances," such as Özdemir (Shafik al-Misri), the Circassian volunteer who led a multiethnic, pro-Ankara mission to northern Iraq in 1922 during the final expansionary stages of the Turkish struggle for independence (p. 138). He argues that even at the signing of Lausanne, "federative or confederative reconstruction" of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab communities of the former Ottoman Empire was a goal of political actors in the region, including many Turkish politicians (p. 171). "Imperial resilience" is a new framework for understanding the fall of the Ottoman Empire, in which the collective imagination of the Ottoman state lived up to and beyond its political death. Although the postwar story has long been one of national awakening and denied self-determination, Kayali's reflections on what his title provocatively bills as "incidental nations" show how the nation-states of the post-Ottoman world, including Turkey, were in some sense imperial creations born out of an era of highly fluid notions of identity.

In *Worldmaking in the Long Great War*, Jonathan Wyrzten pushes the scope of this story even further, encouraging scholars to overcome "Mashriq myopia" in the history of World War I, which he carries nearly to the outbreak of World War II (p. 18). The struggles over the post-Ottoman landscape are part of Wyrzten's broader survey of postwar conflicts in which local movements contested European imperial visions, and in so doing shaped the map of the modern Middle East and North Africa. Wyrzten convincingly argues that throughout the 1920s the postwar map remained fluid, despite the neatly drawn lines of peace agreements. He does so by casting light onto political projects that he consistently categorizes as "emerging polities," such as the Rif Republic in North Africa, whose storied resistance to Spanish and French colonialism was exemplary of how postwar states and borders in the Middle East and North Africa region were forged through an extended experience of armed struggle (p. 123). It is very refreshing to read histories that will be familiar to students of the period, such as recounting of the successful Turkish National Pact and the defeated Syrian National Congress, alongside descriptions of the Sanusi movement, various Kurdish resistance struggles, and even the founders of Saudi Arabia. Such movements are typically segregated by various national historiographies and might be assumed to have little in common with one another, but, as Wyrzten shows, they are worth exploring in concert. By shedding new light on the would-be margins of this region and proposing a new periodization in which postwar political formations remained contested into the 1930s, the overarching narrative of *Worldmaking in the Long Great War* will prompt instructors of modern MENA survey courses to rethink their syllabi.

Alongside these studies, a recent pair of microhistories reflect how scholars are reimagining the end of empire through biography. Christine Philliou's ambitiously titled *Turkey: A Past Against History* studies the life and writings of Refik Halid Karay, an oppositional figure from the Second Constitutional period. Philliou follows Refik Halid's career through the First World War, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, an extended period of exile, and his final rehabilitation at the end of the 1930s. Refik Halid was eventually branded a traitor, after blocking the telegrams of Mustafa Kemal at the behest of the occupied Ottoman government in Istanbul, and sided against the idealistic nationalist movement in his writings. His story offers a window onto political opinions that were discredited and silenced in the new Republic of Turkey. It is against this backdrop that Philliou shows how Refik Halid embodied the concept of *muhalefet*, or "opposition," which was less about opposing a single, rival political platform and more about a political habitus of critique that was open to a privileged segment of the late Ottoman intelligentsia. Philliou's translations of, and commentary on, his acerbic and humorous writings are a pleasure to read, and her portrait of him as a self-fashioned underdog contrasts with other biographies that center on pivotal political and military figures. Yet Refik Halid does not emerge as an insignificant and unserious political figure. His jokes, Philliou contends, "were the antidote to, if not the antithesis of, political authority in the twentieth-century Ottoman Empire and then in Turkey" (p. 209). Through the lens of opposition, *A Past Against History* ultimately offers a unique perspective on Turkey's "empire to republic" political history, from late Ottoman constitutional movements to its shaky democratic transition, and is a must-read for students of the period.

Mostafa Minawi's *Losing Istanbul*, meanwhile, is the most thought-provoking of the five works under consideration in this essay. Minawi's protagonists are Shafiq al-Mu'ayyad Azmzade and his nephew, Sadik, whom he argues belonged to a class of "Arab-Ottoman imperialists" in the empire's capital during its last decades. The Azmzades rose to prominence as governors in 18th-century Syria during a period of Ottoman decentralization, cultivating a local power base that would, in turn, position members of the family to enter the imperial elite during the centralization efforts of the empire's final century. Minawi charts their move from Damascus to Istanbul, from the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (r. 1876–1909) through the constitutional period after 1908 to World War I and its aftermath, which severed the newly augmented ties between the Ottoman capital and the Syrian provincial elite. With the fall of the empire and the creation of new nation-states, Arab Ottoman imperialists like the Azmzades, who remained invested in the idea of the Ottoman Empire until its final days, were erased from Arab nationalist historiography, or "depicted as proto-nationalists, whitewashing a long history of their participation" in the Ottoman imperial project (p. 216). Through the Azmzades, Minawi examines the contradictory position of imperial insiders whose regional and ethnic affiliations increasingly cast them as outsiders. Students of the modern Arab world should find inspiration in this original and thoughtful deep dive into a prominent Damascene family and their severed ties with Istanbul.

I was honored by the invitation to offer my perspective on these five important books, and although this review cannot do justice to the achievements of each of these works, nor does it provide sufficient space to quibble with the authors on matters of fact or interpretation, I would like to highlight what this body of work is saying as a whole about the end of the Ottoman Empire. The works covered in this review essay are all published by accomplished scholars in the field of Middle East studies. Four of the five books are second monographs by research university faculty, and *The Last Days of the Ottoman Empire* is the sixth book by its prolific author. As such, these works are representative of where an influential segment of the field stands on the end of the Ottoman Empire. These authors read, cite, and generally agree with each other on many subjects.

Each of these works reflects a major shift on the role that nondominant groups played in the historiography of the late Ottoman Empire and the remaking of the Middle East. Our authors transcend the frame of nationalist narratives to show how communities marked by forms of ethnolinguistic and communal difference appear as actors with diverse motives

that shaped the outcome of postwar conflicts. They consider processes of confessionalization and racialization that show potential for thinking about this transformative period in the Middle East alongside other regions of the postwar world. In *Imperial Resilience*, for example, Kayalı offers an astute rereading of how race and belonging were articulated in the 1920 National Pact (*misak-ı milli*) that laid the foundation of the Turkish resistance movement. He argues that the *misak* came to be seen as symbolizing a commitment to a Turkish national and, indeed, racial identity through a combination of anachronism and distortion of the text with its subsequent transliteration into modern Turkish. To the extent that race is invoked in the document, Kayalı persuasively argues that it encompassed a more capacious Muslim identity in which Islam united different Ottoman communities in implicit juxtaposition with common Christian adversaries (pp. 123–27). This insight reframes the terms on which the modern Republic of Turkey was founded prior to the state-driven Kemalist project that redefined Turkishness over the two decades that followed.

Race, likewise, is deployed effectively as a category of analysis throughout Minawi's portrait of the Arab Ottoman imperialist Azmzade family. Their in-between position as both imperial elite and ethnolinguistic minorities within the Ottoman Empire proves fertile ground for interrogating shifting notions of difference that were relevant well beyond the upper echelons in which they operated. In the late Ottoman context, "the signifier Arab was not a neutral term denoting a judgment-free place of origin but a practice meant to other through an ethno-racial label in an increasingly ethno-racially differentiated Ottoman Istanbul" (p. 179). In *Losing Istanbul*, the category of "Arab," which in Turkish (Arap) overlaps with racial blackness in some contexts, sits at the center of increasingly irreconcilable issues of identity that culminated in the persecution and even execution of Arab Ottoman notables during the First World War. Through figures like Sadik Azmzade, who traveled in the Horn of Africa and recorded candid impressions of the people and places he encountered, and maintained a household with enslaved or formerly enslaved people of African descent, Minawi shows how members of this Arab elite thought of themselves as "White," not only like the European nations that came to dominate the politics of the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire but also the Muslim elite who governed the empire during the Hamidian and Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) eras (pp. 130–54). In doing so, he attends to details sometimes overlooked as marginal or even inconvenient, because the analytical category of race has not often been thought of as a central question of Ottoman history.

While Muslim political actors constitute the implicit focus of each of these works, they also reflect increasingly meaningful engagement with the histories of non-Muslim groups within the story of the empire's fall. Greeks and Armenians often served as seditious foils to the Turkish national movement in earlier scholarship. Their status as victims of imperial violence and ultimately genocide was either downplayed or rationalized by historians who toed the line of Turkey's official state narrative. The scholarship of the "centennial turn" has largely rejected such denial or erasure, and in Gingeras's survey non-Muslims appear not only as victims of state violence but as more fully fleshed-out actors. These individuals include the Ottoman Armenian army officer Kalusd Sürmenyan, and Karnig Panian, who survived the Armenian Genocide and spent part of his childhood at the infamous Antoura orphanage. We also find an attempt to account for the motivations and experience of visions that vied with the Turkish nationalist movement over the future of Anatolia, such as the failed project of an Armenian national homeland in Cilicia. Doing so adds to the like-minded critiques of Wyrzten and Kayalı, who urge us not to write the histories of the period as if the outcomes of these struggles were all fait accompli.

In *A Past Against History*, Philliou provides an excellent example of how the Armenian Genocide appears as more than an episode of mass violence, positioning it as an effective lens through which to understand the internal dynamics of the Ottoman political class. As the consummate opposition figure within the Ottoman political establishment, Refik Halid spent the war years in exile in Anatolia and provided a rare eyewitness account of a

massive fire in Ankara, which Philliou describes as “part of a systematic arson policy designed to facilitate the seizure of assets and real estate from Armenian communities” (p. 83). She includes a complete translation of the vivid account, making a precious new addition to courses on the modern Middle East or World War I that rely heavily on translated primary sources (pp. 115–18). Unlike other authors of the period, Refik Halid did not seek to justify the mass killing of Armenians and “after the fact, he provided subtle but scathing criticisms of such policies” (p. 179). Criticizing this dimension of Ottoman policy during the war, however, seems to have been beyond the bounds of his circumscribed dissidence. In fact, Dr. Reşid, one of the most notorious figures in the historiography of the Armenian Genocide, emerges as one of Refik Halid’s advocates during the period. “The ambivalent dissident was both disappointed by the unfulfilled promise of constitutionalism and repulsed by the perversion of constitutional values he was seeing around him,” Philliou writes of her protagonist. “Yet he was willing to consort with all manner of officials within the Unionist regime while in exile” (p. 81). This contradiction, she notes, “leads one to ask what it meant to be a dissident intellectual, if ‘the opposition’ was silent in the face of the genocide” (p. 85). There were certainly Ottoman political figures—and not only non-Muslim ones—who actively opposed the CUP or used their positions to subvert aspects of the policies that caused the displacement, dispossession, and death of so many. But what this episode effectively illustrates about *muhalefet* is that, however incisive Refik Halid’s criticisms might have been, he rarely adopted stances that could be genuinely characterized as radical.

In crafting these new additions to the literature on the end of the Ottoman Empire, each of our five authors has marshaled an impressive range of sources and historiography. Only when they are read side by side does it become apparent that the 1918–23 period may be uniquely hamstrung by political lore and the deeply entrenched national narratives these authors seek to challenge. The role of women in the texts exemplifies this tension. They rarely appear, and when they do, it is as members of patriarchal households, discursive constructs, or simply in the abstract category of “women” sharing a largely passive historical experience. However, one woman repeatedly mentioned by the authors is Halide Edib Adivar, the Turkish intellectual, novelist, and nationalist figure. This common reference would suggest that Halide Edib was an exceptional figure, but, in fact, the immediate postwar period witnessed the large-scale political mobilization of women as activists, humanitarians, heads of household, and even guerrilla fighters (Gingeras briefly discusses this; p. 109). Of course, women need not enter the conventional political roles of men to enter history, but what most stands out about the absurd idea that Halide Edib was virtually the only Ottoman woman with a first and last name during this period is that she actively wrote herself into history in a rather defensive memoir conspicuously published in English. The historiographical figure of Halide Edib, as she appears in these works, is symptomatic of a larger issue with the limited manner in which the topic of the end of the Ottoman Empire and the remaking of the Middle East has been conceived and the role played by elite memoirs and histories in shaping it.

In contrast with some of the other “centennial” work dealing with the period leading up to World War I, the war itself, and the political transformations of the interwar period, the present books engage only superficially with social history perspectives, despite their authors stressing the importance of such work. Gingeras writes, “painfully few studies of the post-1918 years delve into the experiences of those who were not general or great statesmen.” To tell of the empire’s fall without deference to local conditions,” he elaborates, “ultimately is a disservice to the richness of the Ottoman experience as a whole” (p. 22). In taking the historiography to task, Gingeras offers glimmers of those experiences, primarily in the form of the occasional mention of the devastating impacts of the First World War on the whole of Ottoman society that serve as a backdrop for an account driven by violence, combat, and political negotiation. The human story of the war becomes lost in the political story of the book’s final chapters about the postwar conflicts. The dissonance is amplified by evocative images that could have offered counterbalance if not left to speak for themselves with little visual analysis or contextualization.

In *Worldmaking in the Long Great War*, Wyrzten similarly stresses the importance of “non-elite groups” like “the middle class, workers, rural resistance movements, refugees, peasants, women’s groups, or Islamists during and after the war” in his critique of the “standard narrative” that the British and French unilaterally imposed their will on the postwar Middle East (p. 16). He follows through on the promise to center rural spaces, expanding the standard cast of actors to include rural and tribal notables. However, beyond acknowledging the clear participation of peasants and pastoralists in the major political developments of the period, the narrative remains rooted in a chain of political events in which daily life is secondary and often absent. As in the works of Gingeras and Kayalı, weight is given to establishing geopolitical, rather than social, context. Change is expressed through the movements and maneuvers of armies and politicians more so than social and cultural processes. An emblematic passage concerns an exchange between the Ikhwan and Ibn Saud that suggests central political questions in the making of the Saudi state were the issues of grazing rights and access to water, in this case, as they related to desert posts constructed along the border with British-controlled Iraq. Wyrzten, notably, places emphasis on their invocation of jihad rather than expanding on the context of their pastoralist practices, even though most readers would be far less equipped to interpret the latter (p. 241).

Overall, these frames lack the intimacy of some of the newer World War I scholarship and are not primarily books that delve deep into the human experience, in which people live, love, laugh, cry, struggle, survive, and reflect upon the times they inhabit. Although they offer revisions to some of the dominant narratives, they largely operate within familiar frames, source bases, and temporalities of political history. The uninitiated reader of these works would come away with the impression that history consists of political decisions taken by men who either were or made themselves important, even though the authors warn against framing the Middle East in such terms.

The biographical and microhistorical approaches of Minawi and Philliou compare somewhat favorably in this regard. They contain moments that are touching and, in the case of Philliou, funny. They spend much less time reframing material that has been covered by scholars elsewhere and focus more on developing new ideas with which the field can engage going forward. Yet, these counterhistories of figures who came out on the losing end of internal struggles within the Ottoman elite also may prove limited in their insights about broader social history. They are windows onto that history but from a very specific vantage point, that of elite families who left behind the rich documentation of their own stories that allows us to delve into their everyday lives. This is not to say that their protagonists were untouched by the war period: Refik Halid was exiled multiple times and Shafiq al-Mu’ayyad Azmzade was executed for treason. Nonetheless, if the gravity of the human story of the collapse of a centuries-old empire is lost between the lines of the political accounts offered by Gingeras, Wyrzten, and Kayalı, it is weakened by the distance that Minawi and Philliou’s protagonists maintained from the most fundamental collective experiences of the period by virtue of their privilege.

Although these shortcomings do not undermine the authors’ core arguments, there are ways in which they reflect more than particular sensibilities about history-writing. The lack of attention to material and social history in these books obscures, at times, what might have motivated people to participate in the struggles of the end of empire beyond abstract political visions and narrowly defined self-interest. For example, although war is a principal subject, these works have little to say about how the armies under consideration recruited, equipped, compensated, and fed their fighters, much less their relationship with the broader noncombatant populations. How and why did people beset by hunger, disease, and displacement continue their political struggles as their families, communities, and worlds were falling apart? The centennial scholarship of the 1914–18 period of World War I took readers away from the battlefield to delve deeper into the social and cultural experience of the war for ordinary people. There is ample source material through which to explore the social and cultural history of the 1918–23 period as well, but it appears to be

more intensely mired in the received narrative of elite political history. Diving deeper into the dynamic landscape of the press in the immediate postwar period and examining the transformation of compatriotic aid initiatives like the Red Crescent would be two sites of possible expansion that align with the sources, themes, and questions of these authors.

One hundred years after the end of the Ottoman Empire, its historians have issued a much-needed corrective to the nationalist and Eurocentric historiographies that erased the diversity of local actors in the Middle East and shrouded many of its most important events in myth. They have shown that the Ottoman context matters for the telling of modern history; however, there is still much work to be done to expand our understanding of this period beyond elite political history. Given the immense importance of the long World War I period for every modern nation-state in the region and the field's investment in combating skewed and dehumanizing representations of their modern societies, it remains work worth doing. The way we write about conflicts and political movements in the past shapes how they are perceived and portrayed in the present. The centuries-old state that refused to die is part of the enduring allure of the Ottoman Empire. There is no doubt that publishers and readers will continue to be drawn in by the political drama that accompanied the collapse. But to understand its legacy, historians must continue to excavate the experiences of the ordinary people who lived through it and whose descendants still grapple with the consequences today.