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Review of *The Ottoman Army and the First World War* by Mesut Uyar

**Michael Tyquin**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

between Ireland and Great Britain, saw wartime recruitment as breaking the mould of pre-war recruitment, and down-played the importance of religion. In contrast, Bowman, Butler and Wheatley argue that, at least in nationalist Ireland, 'the mould of pre-war recruiting patterns was not broken' (p. 203), with wartime recruitment remaining mainly working-class, unskilled and urban. More widely, the authors point to Irish recruitment being 'materially lower than that of the rest of the UK' (p. 236), with a 'gulf' not only between Britain and Ireland, but also within Ireland along several fracture lines: Ulster and the south/west, urban and rural, Protestant and Catholic, and unionist and nationalist. In each comparison, the former had significantly higher levels of recruitment and both politics and religion were central to this 'disparity of sacrifice' (p. 236). Moreover, it is in this chapter that the book's reach beyond Irish history will be felt most strongly. Although its conclusions are primarily relevant to Ireland, by holding an Irish mirror to Britain, it has the potential to inform debates on UK recruitment as a whole.

RICHARD S GRAYSON

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

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**Meysut Uyar, *The Ottoman Army and the First World War*. London: Routledge, 2021. Xviii + 499pp. + illustrations + maps. ISBN: 978-0367471774 (hardback). Price £120.00.**

*The Ottoman Army and the First World War* is a thorough analysis of the Ottoman Army on all fronts during the Great War. It describes its operational military history and military effectiveness during that war, and it is difficult to disagree with Uyar in his assessment that Western historiography has for too long ignored the so-called peripheral campaigns of the war.

He reminds us that in 1914 it was by no means a foregone conclusion that the Ottomans would join the Central Powers. Once committed, the author contends that the First World War exposed Ottoman unpreparedness, having taken no steps prior to the war to secure stocks of food, fuel or munitions. Another of the book's themes is the constant interference of Germany's High Command and Ottoman acquiescence to both its strategic vision and its demands.

Western scholars have long struggled with access to Turkey's war archives, let alone the translation of both old and modern Turkish. If only for this reason Uyar's book is

tremendously important for those interested in the Ottoman contribution to the First World War. The footnotes contain some archival material which sees the light of day for the first time. There is an extensive and up-to-date bibliography providing a handy synthesis of non-English language sources, although the author has not included Klaus Wolf's 2020 in-depth study of the German-Ottoman Alliance.

Uyar highlights the problems found in the wake of army reorganisation when, in 1911, 'triangular divisions were established but insufficient attention was given to doctrine and combat services support, which were ignored. He details the vastly over-stretched military resources of the Ottoman Empire in the lead-up to and subsequent prosecution of the First and Second Balkan Wars.

The author examines the genesis of German military advisors and support. Initially the German alliance appeared to provide security against the territorial aspirations of both greater and lesser powers. But the optimism of the German High Command in using pan-Islamism as a force multiplier soon foundered on the reality of regional and tribal politics. In the body of the text, it is refreshing to see that Austro-Hungarian units and armaments deployed to Turkey receive more than a passing footnote. Little-known Ottoman contributions to Macedonia, Galician and Romania are also included in this study.

While the Ottoman Army of 1914 was far more representative of the empire's population than that of any other period, it lacked well-trained NCOs. This hindered the effectiveness of mobilisation and the sudden appearance of tens of thousands of new recruits. In this the empire was not alone. The British Dominions shared a similar experience. The Ottoman Army was initially hampered by the total absence of aviation assets and any organisation to manage line of communications issues. In addition, much heavy equipment and weapons had been lost in the Balkan Wars (1912/13). Unfortunately, the Ottoman High Command made no systematic effort to resolve or at least reduce the impact of these problems. Lack of a good road and rail network did not help matters. In 1914 the Ottoman Army was burdened by the inheritance of a dying empire: rampant corruption; inefficiency and inadequate lines of communications; and hopelessly inadequate medical and veterinary care.

There was an abysmal lack of understanding in Berlin of not only the cultural and political mores of its Ottoman ally, but the challenges facing a collapsing empire from 1917 onwards. We learn too that as early as April 1914, senior German advisors worked actively to deny Ottoman officers positions of influence and kept them uninformed of developments on the Western Front. The author also highlights fundamental tactical flaws in General von Sanders' initial defence plan for the Dardanelles in March-April 1915, where his interference further exacerbated tensions between the Ottoman staff and their German advisors.

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The Ottoman Army never recovered from its manpower losses during the Dardanelles Campaign, especially the death of experienced junior officers. The war was a constant search for manpower (both for fighting and for a labour force), and a search for resources. The Ottoman Empire would face the same privations and black markets in food that its allies experienced from 1916. The author provides an interesting statistic, namely that at least three soldiers were allocated to gather and transport the food needed to keep one combatant alive and ready at the front line. This vexing problem of fodder supplies was never resolved. More generally, the efficient allocation of scarce resources was not a strong feature of the Ottoman General Staff and the civilian population across the empire was largely neglected.

Overarching Ottoman strategy appeared to gamble on success in the Caucasus, no matter at what cost to recapture lost territorial possessions and to create buffer states.

It is the discussion of these campaigns that highlights the need for more maps when many intricate operations are canvassed across various theatres. Those maps which have been produced often have place names which are difficult to read and lack a distance scale. The author occasionally uses some sources uncritically, particularly Birdwood's *Khaki and Gown* which is cited widely, while simple typographical errors, that are hard to excuse in such an expensive book, cause distractions for the reader.

Uyar argues that throughout the war, the empire was highly responsive to its ally's demands and needs despite its own frequent and grave crises. He concludes that for the Ottomans, the First World War was an imperial war from beginning to end against a backdrop to the Central Powers Alliance. The Ottoman Army, forced during the war to fight on eight fronts, proved remarkably resilient to the end, but was let down by poor political and military leadership in Constantinople.

This book is a long overdue addition to the modern historiography of the First World War

MICHAEL TYQUIN  
Consulting Historian, Australia

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