

Refusing by other means: desertion in the late Ottoman Empire

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Conscientious objection to military service has a long tradition in Europe. Since the reformation in the Sixteenth Century different groups within the family of Protestant churches, such as the Mennonites, Baptists and Quakers, have rejected the Christian doctrine of the “just war” and refused to carry arms and fight for their lords or their countries on the basis of the sixth commandment (Thou shalt not kill) but even more on that of the sermon of the mount, in which Jesus enjoins his followers to turn the other cheek. Pacifism was particularly strong in the United States, a country founded largely by dissenters, among whom there were many who rejected the use of arms outright. The second half of the Nineteenth Century saw the rise of a secular, socialist pacifism in Europe and America, alongside the religious pacifism of long standing.

As long as princes and states relied on professional (or: mercenary) armies, this did not create too much of a problem, but once universal (male) conscription was introduced, beginning with Washington’s draft during the American war of independence and then, on a much larger scale, during the French revolution, the possibility of conscientious objection had to be recognized and circumscribed in rules and regulations, as indeed it was in many countries in Europe. Britain had to follow suit when it introduced conscription for the first time during World War I. As a result, many thousands of men availed themselves of the possibility to be excused military service in all the major European belligerents, even if the main socialist parties supported the war effort of their respective countries. Partly the objectors served the army in non-combatant roles (for instance as stretcher bearers), partly they were assigned “work of national importance”, in effect: hard labour. The Mennonite communities in Russia did both: they worked hospitals and logged timber for the state. A minority of the conscientious objectors was imprisoned, and quite often seriously mistreated. Those who objected on other than religious grounds seem to have been treated especially harshly.

The Ottoman Empire had no indigenous tradition of pacifism, Muslim or Christian. Socialism was a marginal movement, limited to a section of the non-Muslim communities of a few major cities. No wonder, then, that the concept of conscientious objection was entirely alien to the Ottoman elite as well as to the peasant boys who made up the main body of the

conscripted army. But if the concept of refusing to fight on the basis of – religious or political – principle was unknown, the other age-old way for soldiers to show their dissent was not. Far from it: desertion in the World War I Ottoman army assumed proportions completely unknown in the armies of the belligerents of Western and Central Europe at the time.

The size of the problem

All armies engaged in the fighting of the “Great War” encountered the problem of desertions. The German army lost some 130-150.000 deserters, who mostly fled to neutral neighbouring countries (the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden). This amounted to roughly one percent of the 13.5 million men who were drafted during World War I in Germany. Numbers from the other side show the same order of magnitude. During the major campaigns on the Western Front the average percentage of soldiers deserting seems to have been between 0.74 and 0.92 percent, never rising beyond 2 percent.

When we look at the Ottoman army we see a completely different picture. There, desertion became the main reason for the loss of manpower, and thus fighting ability, the army underwent in the second part of the war, more so than the – also appalling losses due to battlefield casualties and contagious diseases. By December 1917, some 300.000 soldiers had deserted and the chief of the German military mission in the Ottoman Empire, cavalry general Otto Liman van Sanders sounded the alarm. In a report on “the present condition of the Turkish army” he had the following to say:

“The Turkish army now has far more than 300.000 deserters. These are not people who go over to the enemy but in the main deserters to the hinterland in their own country, where they pillage, plunder and generally make the land unsafe. Everywhere troops have to be raised to pursue these deserters.”

He then went on to point out that this went a long way to explain the manpower shortages of the armies in the field. The Second and Third Armies on the Caucasus had a combined frontline strength of 20.000 rifles, while the 2000 kilometres of coastline from the Bulgarian border to Alanya were guarded by 26.000 rifles. The Sixth Army (in Northern Mesopotamia) had about 13.000 frontline troops. The only sizeable forces were concentrated in Galicia (two divisions) and on the Palestinian front, where a major British offensive, that would lead to the

loss of Jerusalem the day before Christmas 1917, was impending. Almost all units were severely under strength by 1917 (generally at or below 50 percent).

It was a bit of a generalisation on Liman's part to say that desertion was to the back of the front only. There had been desertions of Armenian soldiers to the Russian forces in the Caucasus at the start of the war (something that led to the general disarming of Armenian soldiers from February 1915 onwards) and in 1917 and 1918 the numbers of Armenians and in particular Arabs who crossed the lines to the British in Palestine and Mesopotamia increased sharply. Tribal forces, whether Kurdish, Turcoman, Persian or Arab, seem to have been particularly prone to pack up and disappear, sometimes changing sides in the process. Nevertheless, desertion to the hinterland or during the march to the front was and remained the main feature. According to Liman, every single division that was transported or marched to the front lost thousands from its original strength. Bavarian officer Kress von Kressenstein in October 1917 reported that the 24th Division that had left Istanbul with 10,057 men had arrived at the Palestinian front with only 4,635. Nearly a quarter of the soldiers in the division had deserted before it reached the front. The other losses were due to disease and poaching on the part of other units. In Syria extreme coercion had to be used, with Arab soldiers sometimes being marched to the front in chains.

By the end of the war the number of deserters had further increased to nearly half a million, a number far higher than that of the soldiers remaining in the field. This is a number over three times that of the deserters from the far larger German army. Where European armies lost between 0.7 and 1.0 percent of their total mobilised strength to desertion, the percentage for the Ottoman Empire is at least twenty times as high. In view of the generally recognised martial qualities of the Turks ("excellent soldier material", according to Liman von Sanders, an opinion reflected in the memoirs of many of his colleagues) one has to ask why this should be so. We shall come back to this question later.

In Turkey, of course, World War I had a sequel in the shape of the War of Independence (*Milli Mücadele*). This war was waged both by irregular volunteer forces, collectively known as the "National Forces" (*Kuvayi Milliye*) and the remnants of the regular Ottoman army. The political and military leadership in Ankara was faced both with the deserters' problem it inherited from the world war, which had resulted in a countryside infested with armed bands, and with a continuing problem of desertion in its own forces. As early as July 1920 the

assembly debated a proposal to introduce “independence tribunals” (*İstiklal Mahkemeleri*) to combat desertion. In his address to the assembly, the representative of Konya, Vehbi Bey, emphasized the scale of the problem:

“The desertions in the army, all of our friends know about them. They put two hundred men on a train in Konya, but only thirty arrive in [Afyon-]Karahisar. A column of three hundred soldiers is down to a hundred and fifty three days later...”

He also pointed to the fine line between a “National Forces” guerrilla band and a band of brigands. Deserters from the national forces could easily turn into armed robbers because “they hailed from robber bands who relied on their weapons anyway. One moment they are National Forces, but when they cross the border of Karesi province, they’re robbers once more.”

Over the summer of 1920 the number of desertions kept on growing and by September 1920 the assembly was ready to take action. At the insistence of the government and Chief of Staff Fevzi Pasha a Law on Deserters (*Firari Kanunu*) was enacted on 11 September and the Independence Tribunals were instituted and given unrestricted authority to enforce the law. Two weeks later the tribunals were also given jurisdiction over cases brought under the “High Treason Law” (*Hiyaneti Vataniye Kanunu*).

The reasons

Why did so many Turkish soldiers desert, even though they were considered good soldiers and (as was pointed out to them many times) there was a specific Quranic injunction (8:15-16) against leaving the battlefield? In 1917, Liman primarily blames the policies of the army. Since the beginning of the war training had been neglected. Depleted units had been brought up to strength with raw recruits. Units were constantly being broken up and reassembled and therefore lacked cohesion and team spirit. Soldiers also did not know or trust their officers and had very little idea of what was going on. “They only knew that they were being sent somewhere where things were going wrong.”

In Liman’s eyes the disastrous supply situation, as a result of which many soldiers went hungry, played only a secondary role. There is reason to doubt this assessment. However much he may insist (on the authority of Ahmet İzzet Pasha) that desertion was not a

hereditary trait of the Turkish army and that it was entirely unknown until quite recently, the reports we have on the mobilisation for the Balkan War in October 1912 seem to suggest otherwise. British consuls report that conscripts had reported for service at the depots in large numbers, but that after a few days march, when supplies ran out, the hungry troops started to desert in droves. Consistently supplying the troops in Palestine, Mesopotamia and Eastern Anatolia with food, medicines, clothing and even cooking fuel proved beyond the means of the Ottoman state and hunger and disease were widespread, so if lack of provisioning was a reason to desert in 1912, it must certainly have been so five years later.

Vehbi Bey, in 1920, also enumerates what he sees as the causes of desertion. Firstly he blames the officers, some of whom are traitors who only look after their own interests; secondly he says that the villagers have witnessed for seven years how they were killed, while the urban notables returned as heroes and that they wanted to see that reversed for once (*“Bu kerede biz gazi, kasaba eşrafi şehit olsun diyorlar.”*); finally, the fact that the soldiers were sick and hungry and dressed in rags was a great injustice, reminiscent of the days of Abdülhamid II. How could a soldier be expected to do his duty under those circumstances?

If uninspiring leadership and sheer misery were the driving forces behind the mass desertions, the Ottoman soldier also had opportunities to escape that his European counterparts lacked. In countries like Britain, France or Germany soldiers were under constant surveillance from the moment they reported to the depot. They were moved to a staging post close the front by train. Once in the front line they had little opportunity to escape, as the densely populated hinterland was patrolled constantly by a vigilant military police on the lookout for “stragglers.” In the Ottoman Empire, by contrast, the troops were slowly moved thousands of kilometres through sparsely populated terrain, marches of a month or more not being exceptional. Many soldiers used the opportunities this afforded them. In Liman’s words “they jump out of the train just like they flee from the marching columns in complicated terrain or from the camp.”

If they had the chance, most took their weapons with them. If they had rifles and ammunition and could keep out of the hands of the gendarmes, they could set up bands that controlled small parts of the countryside. If they had none, they would stay as guests in the villages they moved through. Deserters could do that because the population often sympathised with them. This is perhaps the most important difference with the situation in the European countries

during World War I. The Ottoman Empire may have been involved in a modern, industrialised war that forced it to mobilise all of its resources, but its war effort was not accompanied by a modern mobilisation of the population through effective propaganda and indoctrination. In Britain, a deserter had to live in hiding, because outside perhaps his closest family circle he could not count on any support. Government, media, parties and ngo's – they all made a joint effort to strengthen the resolve of the population by impressing on it the idea that the war was the ultimate test of strength, the battle between good and evil and a matter of national survival. In this climate, conscientious objectors were despised as “shirkers” and the soldiers, many of them volunteers of 1914, who by 1916 had had enough and simply could not face the trenches anymore, were seen as cowards and traitors. They quite simply had nowhere to go. In the Ottoman Empire an effort was made, with German assistance, to set up a propaganda machine, but it barely reached into the (almost completely illiterate) countryside and by and large failed as an effort at mobilisation. Villagers felt more akin to the peasant lads on the run than to the state or the army. That seems to have been true also for the “national struggle” after World War I but the leadership of the national movement was ready to employ extreme coercive measures to stem the flow of deserters. The Independence Tribunals did their work and unleashed a campaign of terror in 1920-21. Harsh punishments were meted out to deserters who were caught. Hundreds were executed. Others were sentenced to hard labour, prison or public whippings. Deserters who were ordered to report but failed to turn up within two weeks, brought hardship upon their families. Their property was confiscated, with their families being deported and interned in prison camps.

The Independence Tribunals struck terror into the hearts of the population and lowered the rate of desertion to such an extent that the Turkish nationalists could muster the 120.000-strong army that won the battle of the Sakarya in September 1921. This was of course the major turning point in the war of independence, but even this great victory gives a mixed picture, when looked at from our point of view: there are many reports of volunteers joining the colours from all over Anatolia, but a British report quoted by Stanford Shaw also tells us that even during this epic three-week battle there were 10.000 deserters, eight percent of the total strength, but compared to the state of the army in 1917-1920, that could be considered a success for the state.

As you may know, the major European belligerents (including the former dominions of the British Empire) have now all pardoned those soldiers that were executed for desertion or

cowardice during World War I, in recognition of the fact that they had been taxed beyond endurance. France and Germany had already done so and Britain and Canada joined them in 2001 and 2006 respectively. Ottoman deserters received a general pardon in December 1918 from the sultan's government, but to the best of my knowledge the Turkish deserters executed on the orders of the Independence Tribunals in 1920-22, have not so far received a pardon.