

**Genio, Eyal.** *Osmanlı Yenilgi Kültürü: Balkan Savaşları ve Sonrası.* İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları. 2022. 438 pages. ISBN: 9789750533051

Reviewed by **Ayça Baydar**  
Kastamonu University  
333297@alumni.soas.ac.uk

It is well established that warfare has played the central role in shaping identities of nations as a mobilizing force. In the Turkish case, the Balkan Wars were not only a harbinger of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, but also a series of catastrophic events that fundamentally reshaped its society. For the Muslims of the Empire who lost their homes in the Balkans it meant transforming from the dominant into a “dominated” nation – from *millet-i hākima* to *millet-i mahkūma*. This in turned triggered a strong emotional response from Ottoman intellectuals shaping their discourse around notions of grief, aggression, anxiety, and shame. Eyal Genio’s work examines the period that spans the axis of this emotional turbulence, growing nationalism, and cultural divide. Going beyond military history, his study aims to understand how the trauma of defeat transformed the cultural arena and finally redefined the boundaries of the nation. His study focuses on the chosen period through the eyes of Ottoman intellectuals, officers, teachers, children, and women, emphasizing the human dimension of the Balkan Wars. By doing so, he does not limit himself to a singular narrative, but presents the voices of the various religious societies which include Muslims, who partly had conflicting agendas and ideologies, Jews, and Christians all in several different languages.

The book has six chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. In chapter one, Genio compares the war discourse before and after the conflict noting that the Ottoman publicists were hopeful and even eager for the coming war. He then argues in the following chapter that these publicists were shocked by the humiliating result. The shock of defeat made them ponder its causes and draw lessons from them to save the Empire by overcoming its deficiencies. Although there were contradictory perspectives among intellectuals, the author draws main lines and common threads of the defeat clearly outlining these discourses. One of the main answers they suggested for the enemies’ success was the “betrayal” of the non-Muslims, not only as a form of cooperation with the enemy during the war, but also by lacking a sense of belonging and devotion to the Ottoman nation. Ultimately, this would be seen as proof of the failure of Ottomanism. Moreover, it had been claimed that civic Ottomanism was not affective to motivate the Muslim soldiers either. At the beginning of the war the Ottoman side did not proclaim *cihād*, however, the defeat showed the importance of the *cihād* rhetoric to mobilize its soldiers for a common cause. In fact, religious propaganda was discovered as a successful instrument not only to mobilize the home front but to also gain international support from the Muslim world against its Christian enemies. In accordance with this development, the war would start being depicted as a battle between the “Cross and the Crescent”, and the defeat as an assault for the whole Islamic

world. This religious discourse was utilized intensely especially during the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922).

Another dimension of advocating Muslim solidarity within the Empire was atrocity propaganda. As the first major total war of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkan Wars would cause catastrophic consequences for its civilians who were subjected to various kinds of hostilities from deportations to massacres. These atrocities followed by the influx of refugees coming into Anatolia from the Balkans were living proof that Muslims were suffering at the hands of the Christians. Thus, the pain of their co-religionists was used as propaganda tool to forge Muslim unity which would alienate the Empire's non-Muslims and divide its society into "us and the other". This narrative inevitably provoked the sense of hate from enemies both inside and outside the Empire.

In chapter three, Ginio explores how Ottoman intellectuals instrumentalized these feelings and employed the discourse of revenge to awaken (*intiḥāb*) the society and thus revive and rejuvenate it. This rejuvenation of the nation necessitated the ideological mobilization of the masses which would in turn result in women and children becoming the main agents of the reconstruction of the Turkish nation. While children were expected to serve the Ottoman cause as devoted soldiers, the mission of women was to construct a national economy by running the boycott campaign against non-Muslims, as examined in chapter four and five respectively. In the broader context of nation-formation, he discusses the involvement of women and children within its patriotic activities, triggered by the trauma of the Empire's defeat. In this sense, the consecutive chapters can be read as a good account of the processes of what Miroslav Hroch calls the transitions from Phase A – scholarly interest – to Phase B – patriotic agitation.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, women and children's active engagement on the home front changed their roles in society. Children, in addition to being victims of the war, also became the central agents. The Balkan Wars improved the status of women in particular, creating a public space as patriotic citizens of a national community. Deniz Kandiyoti calls it 'patriotic feminism' arguing that 'women's 'patriotic' activities legitimized both their greater mobility and their visibility'.<sup>2</sup>

Ginio's work further provides perspectives on the non-Muslims' experiences and perceptions of the defeat. Chapter five further discusses exclusion of non-Muslims from the Ottoman nation and the subsequent discriminatory measures they faced. Furthermore, he focuses on the implications of the national economic policies to which they were subjected as he demonstrates through several examples how non-Muslims, even those who had not taken part in the war, faced discrimination on a daily basis in its aftermath. The author argues that the 'traitor narrative' was not a tool to take revenge on non-Muslims for their cooperation with the enemy during the war, but in fact was used to reshape the boundaries of the nation. Non-Muslim populations were defined

- 1 Hroch, Miroslav. 1985. *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1991. 'End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey'. In Kandiyoti, Deniz (eds.). *Women, Islam and the State*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 22–47. Here: 28–30.

as the “other” and were thus stigmatized as the “enemy within”. This put them in a position where they had to prove their loyalty to the state in order to avoid insecurity. Chapter six, for example, illustrates the pressure on the Greeks, Jews, and Armenians after the liberation of Edirne to refute the allegations that they had supported the Bulgarians during the occupation. Therefore, even the ostensible loyalty of non-Muslims proved insufficient as their very existence ultimately posed a security threat.

The anxiety of being under constant threat from enemies within is one of the main components of Turkishness, which resulted in the aggressive exclusionist policies towards the Christian populations. Ginio argues that this anxiety and anti-Christian narrative of Turkish nationalism was formulated around the loss of the Balkans and can thus be understood within the framework of the “culture of defeat”. One of the valuable contributions of the book is to show the dilemma of Ottoman intellectuals, as the modernist and westernized political elite were disappointed with the indifference of Europe towards Muslim suffering during the Balkan Wars. They discovered that the Turks were outside European political boundaries, whilst the intellectuals recognized themselves as part of a “civilized Europe”. This identity crisis thus led them to look for alternative role models like Japan. However, Europe and its modernity remained a source of inspiration for the intellectual elite despite their anti-Christian sentiment, a dichotomy still dominant within the Turkish political discourse. *Osmanlı Yenilgi Kültürü – the Ottoman Culture of Defeat* – based on substantial primary sources widens our understanding of the Balkan Wars’ role as triggering change and provides an important work of reference not only for academics but also for the general readers who are interested in the late Ottoman Empire and the history of the Balkans.