

**Eser, Ümit. 2024. *Ethnic Cleansing in Western Anatolia, 1912–1923: Ottoman Officials and the Local Christian Population*.** Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 312 pages. ISBN Hardback: 9781399533249.

Reviewed by **Şahin Yıldız**

International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture (GCSC) and Eastern European History Department (OEG), Justus Liebig University Gießen, Germany  
sahin.yaldiz@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

As Aristotle asserted, humans are inherently political beings (*zoon politikon*). However, it is essential to acknowledge that Turkish historiography has never been that deeply politicized since Kemalist era. This politicization presents significant challenges in navigating and interpreting historical sources within a framework often dominated by nationalist discourses. With this book, the readers will see a good example of how the history is contested.

Ümit Eser's book represents a bold attempt to challenge the dominant narratives of Turkish nationalist historiography by offering an alternative perspective on the catastrophic events of 1912–1923. While the author aims for objectivity, the narrative's critical stance toward existing historical accounts is consistently apparent, positioning it as a counter-narrative rather than a purely detached analytical study. This raises critical questions about its methodological distinction from the often amateurish nationalist histories produced during the early Republican era. Beyond its stated goal of deconstructing the mainstream Turkish historical narrative and examining archives from an 'other' perspective, the book fails to establish a clear structural or theoretical advancement over the narratives it seeks to critique. One of its most significant shortcomings is the lack of a deterministic perspective in analyzing the events of this period. Out of many examples, the discussion of the Great Fire of Smyrna in 1922 and the destruction of Greek and Armenian neighborhoods remains incomplete without a comparative analysis of the 1917 Great Fire of Thessaloniki, which predominantly devastated Muslim and Jewish areas and facilitated the city's transformation into a Hellenic space. This omission suggests a missed opportunity to fully situate events within their regional and transnational contexts, which could have further enhanced the book's analytical depth.

Furthermore, the book inadequately addresses the sociological and economic dimensions of the mass migration of Muslim refugees from the Balkans and the Caucasus to Western Anatolia following the Balkan Wars. While the trauma narratives carried by these refugees and their impact on local communities are briefly mentioned, they are not explored in sufficient detail. The recollections of the newcomers have never been mentioned in the book. The atrocities committed against Orthodox Christians are reductively attributed to the political agenda of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), without a deeper examination of the underlying socio-economic tensions rooted in mass-migration, loss of Ottoman territories. For instance, the class divisions between non-Muslim business owners and Muslim laborers, exacerbated by the influx of refugees and the resulting economic instability, are oversimplified as mere economic

resentment rather than being analyzed within a broader structural framework. These theoretical and contextual gaps limit the book's ability to provide a nuanced understanding of the period. While it represents a courageous effort to challenge official historiography, its lack of methodological rigor and deterministic analysis ultimately hinders its contribution to the field.

The book's failure to adopt a holistic approach to the region significantly limits its analytical depth. By excluding critical factors such as the tensions arising from the Cretan Revolt, the Balkan Wars, and the activities of non-Muslim brigands, the narrative reduces the complexities of the period to the political machinations of a few 'elites.' This oversimplification is reflected in the author's reliance on subjective terminology, such as 'agitator Unionists,' 'Unionist conspiracies,' and 'menace of nationalists,' which appears to be driven by a desire to challenge the master narrative of Turkish historiography. While the author incorporates certain memoirs and reports preserved in archival materials, they notably avoid accounts that might reveal the mobilization of local Muslims or the motivations behind atrocities against non-Muslim heritage. The selective use of sources, focusing predominantly on Turkish actions, limits the portrayal of retaliatory violence and aligns the narrative with a critique of Kemalist Turkey's nationalist discourse and myth-building policies. Including a broader range of perspectives could have provided a more comprehensive understanding.

On the other hand, the book does provide a structured and insightful analysis of the economic motives behind the Muslimization of capital, offering a valuable perspective on the economic roots of hostility toward non-Muslim communities in the late Ottoman Empire. However, this section focusing on economic dimension largely reiterates arguments already well-established in foundational works by scholars such as Feroz Ahmad and Erik Jan Zürcher, who have extensively documented the political motivations of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) following the Young Turk Revolution. While the book does offer some valuable insights into the local implementation of CUP policies, a more thorough exploration of these regional dynamics would have strengthened its contribution to the historiography of this period.

The book, at several points, exhibits terminological inaccuracies and inadvertently replicates some of the flaws found in official historiography, particularly in its treatment of local bandits and irregulars. The author, while emphasizing the role of bandits and army deserters, employs problematic terminology, such as referring to them as 'efes and their gunmen' (p. 216) or characterizing them merely as individuals seeking to profit from warfare (p. 7). These descriptions are both historically and terminologically imprecise. The term 'zeibeks' (or 'zeybeks') is the more historically accurate and widely used designation, rooted in a brigandry tradition that dates back to the 17th century in Western Anatolia. This term appears consistently in Ottoman archival records and oral histories, reflecting their established social and cultural significance. The book's assertion regarding the 'social banditry' aspect of these groups could benefit from a more thorough engagement with the extensive academic literature on the *zeibek* tradition and its socio-historical characteristics. Both archival evidence and oral recollections from rural communities in Western Anatolia contradict this claim, as they vividly preserve memories of specific bandits and their motivations. For instance, figures such as Küçük

Hüseyin Efe and Sökeli Cafer Efe are remembered not only for their actions but also for their alignment with war profiting (the first one) and nationalist sentiments (second one), illustrating the complex interplay between banditry and political mobilization. By overlooking these nuances, the author misses an opportunity to critically engage with the collective memory of these communities, which remains largely untapped in academic research.

Furthermore, the author's selective use of primary sources undermines the work's credibility. The heavy reliance on European narratives, which are often difficult to assess for objectivity, alongside occasional references to Muslim sources, creates an imbalanced portrayal of events. For example, the author cites political remarks by nationalist Unionists (p. 195) to support his arguments, while also presenting isolated cases, such as the signatures of a *mufti* and *evkaf* officials on a document expressing gratitude to Greek occupiers (p. 8), as evidence of broader Muslim sentiment. This approach is methodologically flawed, as it extrapolates from exceptional cases to make generalized claims. Such a methodology would be akin to citing Papa Eftim (Pavlos Karahisaridis) as representative of the Karamanlides' support for nationalist cadres between 1919 and 1922, which would be an oversimplification of a highly complex historical reality. By failing to critically evaluate the representativeness and context of these sources, the author weakens the analytical rigor of the work and limits its contribution to the historiography of this period.

The book's treatment of demographic engineering during the Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey contains significant inaccuracies, particularly in its characterization of the Turkish state's settlement policies. The author erroneously claims that the state carefully ensured non-Turkish-speaking refugees did not exceed 20% of the population in villages, neighborhoods, or cities in Western Anatolia. Historical evidence, however, contradicts this assertion. Numerous settlements, including Marmara Island (inhabited by Cretan Greeks), Davutlar and Akköy in Aydin (also Cretan Greeks), Bağarasi in Aydin (Pomaks and Tatars), Gözsüz in Tekirdağ (Aromanians), Tırilye in Bursa (Cretan Greeks), and Mursallı in Aydin (Albanians, Valaades, and Patriot Greeks), were predominantly or entirely populated by non-Turkish-speaking refugees, many of whom continue to speak their native languages today. This oversight suggests a less comprehensive engagement with the demographic realities of the period, which could impact the reader's perception of the book's accuracy on this issue.

Additionally, the book suffers from an opaque referencing methodology. In numerous instances, the author describes events in Western Anatolia without providing clear citations to archival sources, leaving readers unable to verify claims or explore the evidence further. This lack of transparency detracts from the work's academic rigor and limits its utility as a scholarly resource.

In summary, while the book is commendable for its bold attempt to challenge Turkish nationalist historiography – a goal that is indeed necessary – it falls short of delivering an objective, well-researched academic product. The book's focus on challenging established narratives sometimes appears to take precedence over a more detailed nuanced analysis that could have further emerged from the archival work. A more holistic approach, incorporating the 'post-memory' of subsequent generations and

allowing readers to draw their own conclusions, would have significantly strengthened the work. Such an approach would have been particularly valuable in the context of Turkish academia, where denialist narratives remain prevalent. Ultimately, the book could have further strengthened its contribution by offering an even more balanced and academically robust critique of nationalist historiography.