

Ian Lyster (ed.), *Among the Ottomans: Diaries from Turkey in World War I*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011

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Among the Ottomans offers a fascinating new look at World War I as it comprises two diaries from two generations of the same family. The editor has brought together the memoirs of his grandmother, Marie Lyster, a British citizen who remained in Istanbul throughout the war and had to endure various forms of hardship and deprivation, and those of his father, Henry Lyster, who fought in the war and assumed key posts in the occupied Ottoman Empire.

Marie Lyster's diary commences on 22 February 1916, and offers insights on being a "belligerent" in wartime Istanbul. Marie goes through extreme difficulties during the war, yet these difficulties are, interestingly, less related to her being a citizen of a hostile country (the American passport Marie possesses does not make life easier for her) than to the overall conditions endured by the entire population of the city. Marie's diary entries reveal that there was no systematic maltreatment of the so-called belligerents in Istanbul, although from time to time they were subjected to certain security measures such as the sealing up of houses and shipping out "a whole lot of people" to a nearby island to keep them out of the sight of the visiting German Kaiser (34). In fact, Marie talks in several instances of the tolerance of the Ottoman authorities, including gestures such as exempting foreign nationals from the 10 pm curfew so they could attend the midnight mass in Christmas (14).

Marie's detailed account of her struggle for survival in war-torn Istanbul provides an in-depth glimpse into life on the Ottoman home front during the war. From her frequent references to the price of food, we understand that, while there was a greater availability during the first year of the war, shortages arose in time, and rising prices made it increasingly difficult for individuals to sustain their subsistence. For instance, in her first diary entry on 22 February 1916, Marie writes, "so far we have not paid for bread at fancy prices." (1) In the following months, however, she points to frequent price hikes, and in August she writes about the "danger of having no bread." (8) Eventually, in January 1917, she informs us that prices are going up twice a day, causing "a certain feeling of terror in the atmosphere." (16)

In order to meet her needs, Marie does all that she can; she teaches English, rents away the spare rooms in her apartment, sells her valuables (including an autographed photo of Garibaldi), and trades in her husband and sons' old clothes. In the meantime, Istanbul suffers from epidemics, water shortages and rapidly spreading fires, which do not directly affect Marie but

evidently increase the psychological pressure on her. As the end of the war approaches, another menace casts its shadow over Istanbul in the form of frequent air raids by enemy aircraft. Over a period of less than two months in 1918, Marie witnesses five waves of air raids.

Within the pages of her diary, one does not find evidence of Marie showing animosity towards the people of the empire. She is critical of the Ottoman government's policies, but at the same time she sympathizes with the men and women on the street, with whom she is sharing the same unfavorable conditions. When she sees Ottoman soldiers, she feels heartbroken, asking herself, "how many will return to their homes?" (26) When she encounters women sweeping the roads because there are no men left to do the job, she thinks that "they too are to be pitied." (27) Her empathy for the disadvantaged, however, takes an anti-Turkish turn after the war; she observes Ottoman Greeks like her maid "who were turned out of their homes which were occupied by Turks," (68) and her resentments against Turks began to surface. On 8 November 1918, she writes:

During the last four years we were treated as '*giaours*' (Christian infidels). Even in public conveyances they shoved and hustled us knowing that we could not retaliate. Now the Greeks think it is their turn and do not lose an opportunity of letting them hear and feel it. (68)

Marie Lyster's diary ends on 2 December 1918, and the entry is about her reunion with her sons in Istanbul, one of whom is Henry Lyster, author of the second diary in *Among the Ottomans*. Henry's diary, however, should be read with caution, not only because he wrote it from memory at a later stage of his life, but also because he wrote as an officer with military and political responsibilities. It is hence highly likely that he was more inclined to interpret events from his own perspective instead of narrating them as they occurred.

Two stories told by Henry Lyster attract our attention at once. One of them adds to a plethora of recently popularized theories about British attempts to bribe the Sublime Porte to join the war on the Allied side. Henry Lyster confirms this suggestion and goes on to say that it was he who was supposed to courier the money to the Empire via France, if only Germany had not intervened and offered Turkey two million gold pounds against Britain's ten million Turkish pounds (88–89). The second story is related to the devastating explosion at the Haydarpaşa train terminal in 1917 where wagons full of arms and ammunition destined for southern fronts were destroyed. Henry does not write about this incident in his own diary, but the editor tells us that he had scribbled about it in Marie's diary, next to her entry about the explosion. Accordingly, Henry claims that it was British spies who

planted bombs on the railway tracks to sabotage the transfer of supplies were intended for use “against General Allenby’s advance in Palestine.” (32) In both cases, Henry Lyster offers interesting pieces of information, and it is the duty of the conscious reader to check them against historical data and alternative sources.

During the war, Henry Lyster fought first in the Dardanelles, and was later posted to northern Greece where he supported the local militia against the Bulgarians and witnessed the Allied retreat towards Salonika. These parts of his diary offer valuable insight into the inner dynamics of Allied operations in what Western military historiography considers “peripheral” theaters of the war. Lyster’s post-war career, first as the military governor of eastern Thrace and later as chief intelligence officer in İzmit, is more interesting still as it sheds direct light on the role of the British as an occupying force in the struggle between the nationalist forces led by Mustafa Kemal and the troops loyal to the Sultan. The British initially support the loyalists, but, as the French and the Italians side with the nationalists and the Greeks land in İzmir, they realize that the tide has turned. Lyster writes that this turn of events was “the end of the ‘loyal’ army which was supposed to clear Turkey of the Kemalist danger,” and he is sent to “parley” with the nationalists. (135) After this pivotal moment, Henry’s diary reveals how the British gave up their attempts to stop the nationalists and accepted the flow of events, eventually leaving Turkey for good.

There is unfortunately only a minimal amount of intersection between the two diaries. Although the two individuals are from the same family, their narratives do not meet; they remain stories from two separate worlds. This lack of engagement between the two narratives does not diminish the book’s value, but the errors in the background provided by the editor seriously threaten to do so. Ian Lyster states twice that İstanbul was conquered by Seljuk Turks (xi, xxviii) whereas it was the Ottomans who captured İstanbul; that Sultan Murat V ordered arms from Germany in the 1880s (xxv) whereas he was on the throne only for three months in 1876; that Turkey declared war on Russia in August 1916 (xxxv) whereas it was in November 1914, and by August 1916 most of the fighting between the Ottoman and Russian empires was over; and that the Republic of Turkey was proclaimed on 1 November 1922 (xxxvii) whereas on that date the sultanate was abolished, and the Republic was proclaimed on 29 October 1923.

The Lysters’ narratives provide a unique perspective by two individuals, one civilian the other military officer, who are foreigners, yet both in a position to observe the events defining the final years of the Ottoman Empire as an insider. The diaries promise a fantastic read for those interested in World War I and the demise of the Ottoman Empire. In the introduction, readers are advised to read only those sections where the editor

provides background on the Lysters, and rely on alternative sources for historical information.

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