

Documents on the Ottoman Soldiers' Experiences in World War I

#1 – Ottoman Battlefields in World War I



“Was the Ottoman Empire an Ally of Germany during WWI? Did the War Take Place Only in France?” *Quora.com*.



Özerim, Ipek. "Lest We Forget: Ottoman Empire Bore Heaviest Civilian Casualties during World War I." *T-Vine*. 10 Nov. 2018. [Notice that these troops are dressed for fighting in cold weather.](#)



Arun. "Ottoman Empire in the First World War." 8 Aug. 2019.



Photos of Ottoman troops setting off from Palestine to battle in Egypt. From American Colony in Jerusalem. Desert fighting. "Photograph Album, World War I, Palestine and Sinai." Library of Congress Digital Archives.



Sofuoglu, Murat. "Turkey: A Veteran Nation of Gallipoli." *TRT World*. 22 Mar. 2017. Trench warfare.



Ottoman 3rd Army Winter Gear (ski troops). "Battle of Sarikamish." (Caucasian front) *Wikipedia*.

#2 – Battle of Gallipoli

Excerpt from the diary of Mehmed Fasih (lieutenant in the Ottoman army at Gallipoli)

27 Oct. 1915

...the Captain and I go to inspect damage to our trenches. Machine-gun emplacement (where *Mahmud Can* was hurt) is below ground at the end of a path. The gun is fired from a narrow slit facing the enemy. As if tossed in by hand, an enemy shell penetrated the position from this aperture. The carnage it caused is awful. Six dead lie there. Dismembered, parts of their bodies are intermingled. Blood has drained out of bodies, and chests and arms look like wax. Shins and legs, seared by the explosion, are purple. Some bones have been stripped of flesh. The men's features are unrecognizable. Pitch black...

(At this point *Mehmed Fasih* quotes a poem in now obsolete Ottoman Turkish. A free translation of the verses is offered below.)

Graves, graves...lie open throughout the World,
Lightning has blighted the rose gardens,
Soldiers, soldiers...have become corpses,
Heroes are now carrion for wild beasts.

...As I write this in my diary, relight and smoke tobacco remaining in my water-pipe, and drink up what was left of my coffee when the shelling started. But the horror of what I saw remains before my eyes.

22 Nov. 1915:

Daydream about a happy family and congenial kids. Will I live to see the day when I have some?...O, my God! Will you ever allow such things to be my lot in life?

And what about my soldiers? My beloved children! In what shape are they? Take the sentry at my door. Due to the cold, his shoulders are hunched and his head is buried between them. His legs are huddled, his lips are blue. His nose is running, yet his grip on his rifle is firm. We of the 16th Division, have now been here for 7 months. Due to the torpor of our infamous commander, we are still here. Who knows how much longer we shall have to be here? Meanwhile, those who arrived after us have been relieved long ago. In fact, it is almost as if we had also been rotated. Because none of our original complement remain. We have had 7 batches of replacements so far.

Where are our old soldiers? While we originally had 200 soldiers in each of our companies, we are now down to 50 or less apiece. The rest have been martyred, are missing or have been wounded. Others have had to be evacuated on medical grounds. Which means all the veterans are gone.

Mehmed Fasih, *Lone Pine (Bloody Ridge) Diary of Lt. Mehmed Fasih, 5th Imperial Ottoman Army, Gallipoli, 1915: The Campaign as Viewed from Ottoman Trenches*. Istanbul: Denizler Kitabevi, 1997. 32, 110-112.

#3 – Fighting against Russia in the Caucasus

Excerpt from a memoir by Mehmet Arif Ölçen (Ottoman soldier on the Caucasian front – fighting Russia)

February 13, 1916. The blizzard is continuing in all its fury. The sun has probably risen, but it is impossible to see ten paces ahead. Two days ago, with two companies, we captured Gavur Dagi north of Erzurum, a mountain whose summit rises to ten thousand feet. We will now abandon it. Last night, we took twenty-seven of our men to the hospital because their feet were frozen. The number of men in our unit is decreasing. The blizzard, the storm, two long days and two long nights. We are tired to the point of exhaustion....

As we withdrew, bullets of snow struck our faces like lashes from a whip. We tried to advance, but the wind fiercely resisted each step and we sank into the snow up to our chests. It has been two hours since we left that cold, barren hill, which we captured after fighting for two days and nights under terrible conditions. The snow, however, has not abated for an instant. We can hear the muffled sound of volleys of infantry fire in the distance....

Our three-hour climb had come to an end. We joined the regiment and settled into the trenches that were assigned to us. Bullets flew past our ears and whistled as they pierced the air, like harbingers of a storm that was about to break out over us....Our positions came under fire from the right. The bullets that struck the rocks sent stone splinters flying all about. They spread death as well as lead. I recalled the order that had been sent by the Army High Command: "Your positions represent the honor of the army. They are in the center of the division and are your graves."

Mehmet Arif Ölçen. *Vetluga Memoir: A Turkish Prisoner of War in Russia, 1916-1918*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995.

#4 – The Ottoman Army in Palestine

Excerpt from the diary of Ihsan Turjman (an Arab soldier in the Ottoman Army in Palestine)

Note: The Arabs' growing frustration with the Turkish army officers and questions as to what will happen if the Ottoman Empire falls.

What Will Be the Fate of Palestine in This War?
Jerusalem, Sunday, March 28, 1915 [Gregorian],
15th of Mart 1331 [Ottoman fiscal],
Jammadi Awwal 1333 [Hijri]

This evening I went to visit Khalil Effendi Sakakini, in the company of Hasan Khalidi and Omar Salih Barghouti....Our conversation revolved around this miserable war and how long it is likely to continue, as well as the fate of this [Ottoman] state. We more or less agreed that the days of the state are numbered and that its dismemberment is imminent.

But what will be the fate of Palestine? We all saw two possibilities: independence or annexation to Egypt. The last possibility is more likely since only the English are likely to possess this country, and England is unlikely to give full sovereignty to Palestine but is more liable to annex it to Egypt and create a single domino ruled by the khedive of Egypt. Egypt is our neighbor, and since both countries contain a majority of Muslims, it makes sense to annex it and crown the viceroy of Egypt as king of Palestine and Hijaz.

Rumors abound in the street today. We heard that the English fleet has bombarded Haifa and that several English frigates crossed the Dardanelles and reached the Sea of Marmara. Even if this item is not true, it will soon be realized, since the Dardanelles have been hammered [by Allied ships] and cannot resist the British fleet forever.

My Job with Commander Ruşen Bey
at the Commissariat
Monday, March 29, 1915

....Soldiers were seen stealing wood from our land in *Karm al A'raj*. Not satisfied with dead wood, they started tearing branches from our olive trees. Who can we complain to? The officers claim they cannot control their subordinates. Of course not. Officers are busy in the taverns getting drunk; then they go to the public places [brothels] to satisfy their base needs.

The Hanging of Soldiers at Jaffa Gate
Tuesday, March 30, 1915

On my way to the Commissariat this morning I met Uncle Sa'd Eddin Effendi Khalili. He asked me if I had heard about the hanging of two soldiers at Jaffa Gate. They were sentenced to death by hanging, it is claimed, because they deserted their company. What is a soldier supposed to do? The army pays each soldier 85 piasters a month and expects him to survive on it. Even then, most soldiers have not been paid one matleek since the General Call [November 1914]....

I Am Ottoman by Name Only,
The World Is My Country
Friday, September 10, 1915

[Cemal Pasha] issued an order, communicated by phone to the Commissariat Wednesday evening at 5:30 P.M. It became known that many of those employed in the department of censorship, as well as the local police force and gendarmes, had been recruited from the local population. He therefore ordered that no members in the armed forces be allowed to serve in their [home] regions....

...I was at a loss about what to do. I have too much dignity to plead exemption for myself, for I prefer to go to the front than to beg for mercy.

However, I cannot imagine myself fighting in the desert front. And why should I go? To fight for my country? *I am Ottoman by name only, for my country is the whole of humanity.* Even if I am told that by going to fight, we will conquer Egypt, I will refuse to go. What does this barbaric state want from us? To liberate Egypt on our backs? Our leaders promised us and other fellow Arabs that we would be partners in this government and that they seek to advance the interests and conditions of the Arab nation. But what have we actually seen from these promises? Had they treated us as equals, I would not hesitate to give my blood and my life – but as things stand, I hold a drop of my blood to be more precious than the entire Turkish state.

“The Diary of Ihsan Turjman.” In *Year of the Locust: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past*. Salim Tamari and Ihsan Salih Turjman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 90-91, 93, 132-133.

#5 – Ottomans in Egypt (Sinai Campaign)

Excerpt from the writings of George Abel Schreiner (a war correspondent of the Associated Press of America, who observed and wrote about events in the Ottoman Empire)

Beersheba, a prosperous town of the ancient province of Idumea, was the southern base of operations for the advance on Suez....

The soldiers themselves suffered much hardship. The crowding in the tents was unspeakable; the water-supply almost as inadequate as the medical service, which consisted chiefly of volunteer Red Crescent societies – among them a unit of twenty German nurses sent by the American College of Beirut. Medical supplies, such as they were, had been taken from the different mission hospitals and pharmacies of Palestine – these “requisitions” being made by officers who knew nothing of medical requirements and simply scooped together everything in sight. As a result, one of the army physicians told me that in Beersheba he had opened some medical chests consigned to him and found, to his horror, that they were full of microscopes and gynecological instruments – for the care of wounded soldiers in the desert!

Visits of British aeroplanes to Beersheba were common occurrences. Long before the machine itself could be seen, its whanging, resonant hum would come floating out of the blazing sky, seemingly from everywhere at once. Soldiers rushed from their tents, squinting up into the heavens until the speck was discovered, swimming slowly through the air; then followed wholesale firing at an impossible range until the officers forbade it. True to the policy of avoiding all unnecessary harm to the natives, these British aviators never dropped bombs on the town, but – what was more dangerous from the Turkish point of view – they would unload packages of pamphlets, printed in Arabic, informing the natives that they were being deceived; that the Allies were their only true friends; that the Germans were merely making use of them to further their own schemes, etc. These cleverly worded little tracts came showering down out of the sky, and at first they were eagerly picked up. The Turkish commanders, however, soon announced that anyone found carrying them would pay the death penalty. After that, when the little bundles dropped near them, the natives would run as if from high explosive bombs.

George Abel Schreiner. *From Berlin to Bagdad: Behind the Scenes in the Near East*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1918. 40-42.