Oliver Stein

German Women in the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1918

Even in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Orient was not just a favorite destination for male travelers, but also an alluring land for women. Among them were colorful personalities on the search for adventure and freedom. This brought general renown to some, among them Lady Montagu, Ida Pfeiffer and Isabelle Eberhardt, whose publications still enjoy great popularity today. In the First World War, as thousands of German soldiers headed off to the Ottoman Empire and as many British were underway to Egypt, many women used this opportunity to personally reach these regions. The following essay addresses the German women who found themselves in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. In doing so, the various motives and experiences will be discussed that defined their stay in the Middle East in the times of war.

In 1914, as the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers, an assortment of women were already living there. These were primarily residents of the settler colonies in Palestine, nuns and deaconesses, or wives of diplomats and consuls. The increased German involvement in the region during the years before the war had brought many engineers, tradesmen, archaeologists and also military instructors into the land, some of which had lived in Turkey for years with their wives and children.

While the bulk of women reached the Orient in the wake of their husbands, many single women tried to get employment after the outbreak of war in the now-allied Ottoman Empire. The German general consulate in Constantinople complained at the beginning of 1916 about the influx of requests that they received from Opera singers, actresses, music teachers, educators, and kindergarten teachers. According to the general consulate's assessment, these applications were motivated by entirely fictitious notions about the conditions in Turkey. Therefore the consul requested the Reich Chancellor to undertake action against this.

While such efforts to obtain civilian employment in the Ottoman Empire hardly had a chance of succeeding, the opportunity to come to the Orient in the military's wake increased, above all, during the second half of the war. With the increasing mobilization of women in the First World War, an especially large number of service women were deployed beginning in 1916. Many young women volunteered for service in the Middle East and were stationed as stenotypists in the military administration, as nurses in the soldiers' clubs, or as Red Cross nurses in the military hospitals.

Usually several motives came together in the decision to take part: on one hand the women found the opportunity in their deployment to be able to directly serve their country. At the same time, however, their service - more so than on the Western Front - enabled them to escape their customary surroundings. The journey of these women in the Middle East was simultaneously a journey in independence. The German service women and nurses shared this perspective with their British female counterparts, who expressed their motives for volunteering in dangerous theaters of war during some interviews in the 1960s. What drove them was adventure and the desire to take advantage of the opportunity to travel before beginning their regimented married life, the desire to have and to savor their freedom. In addition to this, some women were also proud to be able to have an occupation with a relatively large amount of responsibility for the first time, to find recognition for this, and to thereby break out of accustomed gender roles.

Among these women's stories are some examples of unconventional steps to occupational emancipation. Thea von Puttkamer, for example, operated as a war reporter in the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile other women bore for the first time in their lives a great organizational and logistical responsibility, for example in the military hospitals or with the setup of a soldiers' club. New scopes of duties did not, however, automatically exclude the possibility that these women would remain in their traditional gender roles. This is especially exemplified through the notes of 21-year-old nurse Hilde Mordtmann, which were published during the war. She saw herself in a motherly role with Turkish comrades, whom she consistently described as 'children'. Mordtmann's success in her ward during this care awakened a 'housewife pride' in her.

The women that had already lived in the Ottoman Empire before the war found themselves now in an especially influential position. Through their language abilities and familiarity with local circumstances, these women quickly adopted the function of cultural intermediaries for the German soldiers arriving in the land. Martha Koch from Aleppo, the wife of a businessman, took a key position: her house became the societal center for all of the German officers traveling through. With her guidance, these men were able to learn a considerable amount about the land and people. Her charitable impact in Aleppo made her a beloved figure among the population so that the Arabs, as one witness reported, were prepared to support German soldiers just for the sake of pleasing her, and she is moreover mentioned in many German soldier testimonials from the Ottoman Empire. However Martha Koch was not a unique case: other women can be identified as influential mediators between the cultures. Among these was the daughter of the military instructor Louis von Kamphoevener, who was

active in Turkey beginning in 1881. Writing with the pseudonym Else Marquardsen, she published a brochure with the title, “The essence of the Ottomans. Guidebook for Orient travelers.” Excerpts from this booklet were authorized by the Bavarian War Ministry and distributed among soldiers so that they might have a well-informed set of conduct codes.

The presence of female compatriots had an enormous emotional significance for German soldiers. They repeatedly described how much it meant to them to experience the familiar feminine care; feelings of home were awakened. According to the state of affairs in March of 1917, there were 18 soldiers’ clubs spread out over the entire Ottoman Empire, and in each of them there had nurses tending to soldiers’ well-being. This occasionally led to more intimate relationships between soldiers and nurses: sexual liaisons and “man-hunting nurses” are sometimes mentioned in soldiers’ testimonials.

A particularity of the Ottoman theater of war was that the Ministry of War had allowed members of the military mission to have their wives come to them during the first half of the war. This special circumstance was due to the peace in which the military mission in the Ottoman Empire had begun. Many women took advantage of this in order to visit their husbands in Turkey, but because these officers became greatly distracted from their service, women’s visits were forbidden in early 1916. Despite this, however, wives still traveled to their husbands. Just in the last year of war, the increasing difficulties of transportation led to the end of this practice. The wife of a military doctor, who was only intending to stay several weeks in Turkish Smyrna, had to stay for eight months with her husband and became active with the Red Cross.

Women’s experiences during their stay in the Ottoman Empire were ultimately diverse. They reached from the traveling wives’ amusing vacation impressions to the nurses’ suffering through serious illnesses, which ultimately claimed many of their lives. Surviving testimonials from these women describe the joys of adventure just as clearly as the difficulties of their service in the Orient. Many tended to romanticize their time of service in the Orient, as exemplified by titles like *Sun Journey through the Eastern World* or *Moonlit Nights in Palestine.* After the war, one nurse wrote of “the deep longing for the afar”, each “wonderful feeling” that, for her, was solely connected with the war years - and here lies a particularly feminine experience of the First World War in the Middle East: for many German women, the stay in the Ottoman Empire was an experience of freedom and adventure.

Sources

- Auerswald, Annemarie von: Mondnächte in Palästina, Berlin [1920].

- Marquardsen-Kamphoevener, Else: Das Wesen des Osmanen. Ein Berater für Orientfahrer (=Kleine Roland-Bücher, vol. 2), München 1916.
- Mordtmann, Hilde: Als ich die Türken pflegte. Erinnerungen einer Einundzwanzigjährigen (=Deutsche Orientbücherei, vol. 19), Weimar 1916.
- Naab, Thea: Drei Jahre in Mesopotamien. Erlebnisse einer jungen Frau, Basel 1918.
- Reuß, Brigitte Prinzessin von: Ein Soldatenheim in der Wüste, in: Frontschwestern. Ein deutsches Ehrenbuch, hrsg. von Elfriede von Pflugk-Harttung, Berlin 1936, pp. 293-298.
- Wolff, Sr. Hedwig: Sonnenfahrt durchs Morgenland, in: Armee-Zeitung Jildirim, No. 1, 19 May 1918.

Citation

Stein, Oliver: German Women in the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1918 (2015), URL: http://www.mwme.eu/essays/index.html