

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

October 25, 2016

Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 416 pp., \$35.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780674735491.

Adding to the many monographs and events commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the Great War, Leila Fawaz's most recent work, *A Land of Aching Hearts*, brings together a litany of untold narratives and themes of World War I from the perspective of the Middle East and most importantly from the vantage point of "regular folks" (7). Fawaz employs a vast range of sources, from post-war novels to unpublished memoirs and papers, to provide a rich and compelling social history of the Middle East during the war. The stories of *A Land of Aching Hearts* come from the lives lived and challenges faced by nearly every sector of society. Thus, the forgotten voices of soldiers and civilians are recovered, showing how millions faced the worst and managed to survive, sometimes thrived, but also died from the horrors of war. Though the narratives are geographically dominated by what was Greater Syria, Fawaz also addresses the ports and major cities of Egypt, Anatolia, along with Mesopotamia.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the background information that non-specialists will find particularly useful. In Chapter 1, discussion of the social, political and economic shifts in the decades leading up to the war provides context to the uneasiness across society in the Middle East. Fawaz highlights the various religious and ethnic groups that make up the mosaic of the Middle East and how, by the turn of the century, many of the mixed areas faced varying levels of tension due to challenges to the status quo and economic grievances. These tensions often led people to "find strength in their traditional loyalties.... Often, the strongest loyalty was to sectarian identity" (33). Part of the agenda of *A Land of Aching Hearts* is to frame some of the conditions prior to the war, the experiences of the war, and then the aftermath in order to explain their ramifications for the Middle East we know today.

Chapter 2 is particularly important for those unfamiliar with the diverse military fronts scattered across the Ottoman Empire. The chapter is subdivided into summations of the major fronts of the war: Eastern Anatolia, Gallipoli, Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Levant. This is the only part of the book where subsections are clearly noted, which is something that the rest of the book would have benefited from. In each section the major battles and their outcomes are summarized, lending some context to the scope and devastation of the Great War on forgotten fronts. The inclusion of Persia (Qajar Empire) at first seems strange on account of its neutrality as well as the book's focus on the Ottoman Empire and Arab provinces. However, Fawaz demonstrates that Iranians were no less

affected by casualties (particularly from famine) because of the war fought by its neighbors (Russia and the Ottoman Empire).

After setting the stage, the theme of “Living the Great War” in Chapter 3 is introduced by the novel *Shirwal Barbum: Ayyam min safarbarlik* (1993), by Nadiya al-Ghazzi. Fawaz utilizes this novel at numerous points, despite the fact that al-Ghazzi was born nearly two decades after the war. This is part and parcel to Fawaz’s emphasis on the legacy of memory and how it shapes post-war recollections. Alongside al-Ghazzi’s novel, the opening pages of the chapter also introduce another reoccurring figure in the book, namely Turkish feminist Halidé Edib. In her memoir, Edib depicts the anguish faced by families whose loved ones were sent to war. Of this experience, Edib writes, “I have seen, I have gone through, *a land full of aching hearts* and torturing remembrances” (82, emphasis mine). Edib’s close association with Jamal Pasha, notoriously despised by Arabs as the book mentions, and her high social status make her an interesting choice as a narrator of the plight of common folk. Nonetheless, her memoir is an important source for historians. The word *safarbarlik*, “a comprehensive term referring to the wartime tragedy of mobilization, forced displacement, and migration,” is critical for understanding this chapter and the many reappearances throughout the book as a way of describing the shared experiences and heartaches of the peoples of the Middle East. This is exemplified by the novel *Shirwal Barbum*.

Beyond *safarbarlik*, living through the Great War in the Middle East meant, for many, surviving the famine that plagued most of the Empire. Over the past half-decade or so this subject has received decent attention from multiple perspectives by up and coming scholars.¹ Fawaz provides a sufficient synopsis of the multilayered causes for the famine(s). In keeping with the social history approach, she narrates some of the real life experiences of the famine through unpublished material such as a young man named Jean Touma of Dayr al-Qamar (present day Lebanon). Touma’s diary records the 1915 locust plague that ravished Greater Syria and was partially to blame for the famine (95). Hunger, disease, and lawlessness were all aspects that made “living the Great War” so overwhelming for the people of the Middle East and Fawaz poignantly unfolds the devastating accounts of such ordeals through disparate types of sources.

At the same time that millions were suffering, others maintained their wealth and comfort, or found new business opportunities, sometimes using questionable ventures. In Chapter 4, the many untold stories of entrepreneurs and profiteers of the war highlight the markedly divergent ways they “charted their own path to survival” (159). Interestingly, Fawaz points to the war and the profiteering as a turning point towards class consciousness in some parts of the region. Many of the examples come from Beirut and its surrounding areas which limits the perspective slightly. Part of the profiting from the war came by way of espionage, and much of the chapter records the stories of Syrians who gathered intelligence for British and French officials. For example, the anecdotes of the French protégé Bechara al-Buwari highlights his work as a spy as well as in “local entrepreneurship” (150) as compared to others who seemingly used intelligence gathering for more pragmatic reasons.

¹ Many of these works are in dissertation form. For example, Aaron Tylor Brand, “Lives Darkened by Calamity: Enduring the Famine of World War I in Lebanon and Western Syria” (American University of Beirut, 2012), Lindsey Cummings, “Economic Warfare and the Evolution of the Allied Blockade of the Eastern Mediterranean: August 1914-April 1917” (Georgetown University, 2015) and Melanie Tanielian, “The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon (1914-1918)” (University of California, Berkeley, 2012).

The next two chapters, Chapters 5 and 6, notably switch focus from citizens to the experiences and hardships of soldiers. This also means that Greater Syria (particularly present day Lebanon) becomes less important and regions such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Palestine, and Anatolia receive greater attention. What makes writing the history of Ottoman soldiers during the Great War so difficult is the lack of sources. According to Fawaz, the Ottoman conscripted military was comprised of a disproportional amount of rural subjects (nearly 80 percent) and an estimated 11 percent literacy rate (161). All of which means that the historical paper trail is limited.

In Chapter 5, the issue of conscription and *safarbarlik* for Ottoman soldiers reappears, but it becomes evident that “hardship was not shared equally” because of the many exemptions, especially for Ottoman Jews and Christians (163). The vast majority of troops came from the Anatolian peasantry. Fawaz points out that for the Ottomans the Great War was just one of many wars fought over a fifty-year span. In addition, from 1912 to 1922 the Ottomans were in a state of constant war, often without basic supplies and clothing. The onslaught of wars and the harsh conditions they faced, namely hunger and disease, resulted in a steady stream of desertion, which only heightened the need to mobilize more troops. By the time of the Great War, Ottoman soldiers knew that soldiering meant a death sentence. The harshness of soldiering is evident by the fact that more soldiers died of infectious disease than combat-related fatalities (200). This bleak reality was exemplified in the lyrics of the songs sung by the soldiers, which lacked sentiments of heroism or patriotism and instead stressed the fact that they had no chance of returning home (199-200).

In Chapter 6, Fawaz shifts from the perspective of Ottoman soldiers to British colonial soldiers from South Asia. In this case, the battles and trenches of Mesopotamia were the main stage for Indian soldiers during the Great War. Beyond the shared trials and tribulations faced by soldiers on both sides, the Indian soldiers encountered the addition of “a mixture of socioeconomic hardship and ideological pressure” (216). Part of the ideological pressure came through the efforts of Ottoman officials to galvanize Muslim Indians through Pan-Islamic rhetoric of loyalty to the Ottoman caliph. This certainly struck fear among the British, but it was generally unsuccessful. Whether fighting alongside Arabs in Palestine, suffering in the trenches of Mesopotamia, charging the Ottomans in Gallipoli, or encountering cosmopolitan urbanites in Cairo, the South Asian soldiers’ experiences deepened “a long-standing connection between the two regions” (232).

The theme of cooperation and disaffection closes out *A Land of Aching Hearts* in its final chapter. The opening paragraphs of Chapter 7 are better suited for an introduction. Fawaz lays out the importance of re-conceptualizing the “Great War” as more of “a series of local and regional engagements than as one epic conflagration” (234). As such, collective memory on a local scale is important for how we understand the social history of the Great War in the Middle East. Those who wrote of their experiences during the war, whether in autobiographies or memoirs, rarely spoke in terms of the grander political happenings. The war was an occasion for strengthening the “sense of familial and sectarian belonging” that lasted well after the war (236). Belonging to a community, a sect, and a nation increasingly became important and differed slightly depending on the level of foreign rule (the British in Egypt for example). The burgeoning nationalism in the Arab provinces and dissatisfaction with Turkish rule led to rising alienation.

There was no figure who exemplified the Arab source of alienation quite like Jamal Pasha, governor of Greater Syria. Fawaz dedicates several pages detailing contemporaneous accounts and later memories related to Pasha from the perspective of Arab subjects in Greater Syria. Of Pasha’s many policies and actions, it was the tribunals and hangings of

Arab dissidents in Beirut and Damascus in 1915 and 1916 that produced the greatest consternation. These hangings loom large in the history and folklore of present day Lebanon as a “national epic” (247). To Fawaz’s credit, she introduces readers to some of the revisionist history and more nuanced approaches by current historians seeking to understand Jamal Pasha and the Young ‘Turks/Committee for Union and Progress’ (CUP) roles in ostracizing Arabs in Greater Syria. This helps to balance some of the early Arab nationalist historiography even if “the predominant view, however, remains one of weariness about the last two decades of Ottoman history” (252).

The latter half of Chapter 7 and the Epilogue move the narrative into the post-war era, first with the Mandate era and then to the larger issue of collective and individual memory of the war. For the majority of the population in the Middle East, then and now, the Great War was not worth the countless sacrifices. As compared to Europe, “the reliving and commemoration of the Great War – have already begun in the Middle East, but it is still a young industry” (279). Fawaz takes a pessimistic view of the situation a century after the war, suggesting that “the world of 1900 has its appeals, the greatest of which is that people of the region then still had hope” (284).

Fawaz closes with an exhortation to historians to pay closer attention to the “sometimes muffled voices” of unnamed heroes (284). In *A Land of Aching Hearts*, Fawaz demonstrates how this is possible by utilizing a vast array and types of sources. The use of novels published several decades after the war may seem questionable to some at first. However, it only strengthens the argument for conceptualizing history through the prism of collective memory. This is one of the overarching themes of the book. The nations of the Middle East are still struggling with the ramifications of the Great War on all fronts. Much is made of the Sykes-Picot Agreement as an explanation for the troubles facing the region, and for good reason. Fawaz reminds readers that other political, social and economic forces were brewing before the agreement, some of which can be explained by the circumstances and conditions of those who lived through the war.

For students and scholars interested in the Middle East during World War I, this book serves as a counterbalance to works that focus on the political and military affairs of the war. The book’s accessibility as a source for further study is slightly diminished by a lack of bibliography. As previously stated, the lack of subsections in the chapters creates, at times, muddled narratives and causes repetition. As one can expect from a seasoned scholar such as Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts* succeeds in bringing to light the experiences of civilians and soldiers struggling to survive in a region that is often forgotten and rarely studied in relation to World War I. These experiences reveal both the overwhelming resiliency and cruelty of humanity in wartime. By documenting these stories, a few previously “muffled voices” speak to us one hundred years later. Certainly, there are many more voices waiting their turn to share their ordeals and hardships with those who have ears to hear. The focus on Greater Syria in *A Land of Aching Hearts* indicates that much more needs to be uncovered in regards to “living” through the war in places such as Basra and Baghdad, just to name a few.

Matthew A. Sharp
Ph.D. Student (Arabic and Islamic Studies)
Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilization
University of Pennsylvania

© 2016: Matthew A. Sharp

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Sharp, Matthew A., Review of *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War*, *SCTIW Review*, October 25, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1302>.

ISSN: 2374-9288