

BOOK REVIEW

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SALGIN HASTALIKLARDAN ÖLÜMLER (THE DEATHS FROM EPIDEMIC DISEASES IN 1914-1918)

Prof. Dr. Hikmet ÖZDEMİR

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This book, written by Prof. Dr. Hikmet Özdemir, has resulted from a study of various sources in Turkey and other countries. Supported with detailed analyses, it sheds light on the facts regarding the military and civilian losses from epidemic diseases during the First World War in a region extending from the Caucasus to Mesopotamia. Although the book mainly concentrates on the research of deaths resulting from epidemic diseases between 1914-1918, it supplies explanatory information regarding the earlier periods as well. It notes that for armies epidemic diseases can sometimes be more dangerous than the enemy itself and that, in some other cases, armies have benefited from epidemic diseases because an epidemic could weaken and cripple the enemy forces defending a beleaguered city to the point that the surrender of the city would become inevitable. It points out that in the old world not only commodities, thoughts and techniques but microbes too circulated among communities, and diseases played an important role in shaping history since they were one of the main causes of human death. The losses that armies incurred are listed in tables in the book that consists of 12 sections. When the data is analysed, it becomes evident that the struggle against diseases and the prevention of their dissemination is or should be a part of war strategy. For example, typhoid fever epidemics broke out in all armies fighting in the European Fronts during the First World War. However, as the book emphasizes, while the number of those who contracted typhoid fever was very high in Austria, France and Germany, that figure was quite low in the American Army due to regular vaccinations and the utmost care and concern given to sanitation. When one closely examines the situation in the Ottoman Army one sees that during the Russo-Ottoman War in 1877-1878, the Balkan

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Wars in 1912-1913 and the First World War, famines broke out, affecting a large part of the army; and that more Ottoman soldiers died of cholera, typhoid fever and dysentery than in combat. Successive wars played an important role in the spread of epidemic diseases at that time. Dwelling on the destruction caused by diseases during the Russo-Ottoman War in 1877-1878 the book stresses that the Muslim population was fleeing from the areas occupied by the Russian Army to those Anatolian provinces controlled by the Ottoman Army, Istanbul among them; and that masses of them perished of epidemic diseases along the route and in the cities where they took refuge.

The diseases that broke out in Istanbul among these displaced people in 1878, for example, had quickly gained epidemic proportions, seriously threatening public health in the city. Epidemic diseases caused major destruction during the Balkan Wars as well. Over 30,000 soldiers contracted cholera in 1912 and one-thirds of them died. The impressions of Leon Trotsky on the situation in the Balkans are mentioned in the book as well. Trotsky cites the following lines from the letter of a civil servant: “ A dreadful situation! To tell the truth, it breaks one’s heart to see from time to time that innocent Turkish villagers, civilians, are being killed, their property and other possessions seized and their wives and children faced with starvation. About 2,000 Turkish migrants perished from starvation between the cities of Radovich and Stip, most of them women and children, really only because of starvation...” (Page: 66).

The primary steps the Ottomans took to fight with epidemic diseases in the empire were aimed at improving preventive medicine. They founded a medical school and a quarantine organization. With the outbreak of the First World War, civilian physicians, pharmacists and dentists between the ages of 20 and 45 were drafted into the army on August 1, 1914. The most important step taken in the fight against epidemic diseases in the Ottoman Empire was the foundation of the Ministry of Health. At the beginning of the First World War, the name of the Ministry of the Interior was changed into the Ministry of the Interior and Health. The book provides information on the Assembly debates on the draft budget of the Ministry of Health and, in that section, it refers to a 1918 speech delivered by Artin Boşgezeyan, a deputy of Halep (Aleppo).

Another subject debated at the Assembly between the years of 1914-1918 was the locust invasions that were a serious cause of destruction and famine in the realm, especially in Syria. The Assembly debated plans to offer rewards varying

from 250 piasters (kurush) to 1000 piasters to encourage people to report the incoming locust hordes as soon as they spotted them.

In the section of the book titled “The White Crescent” striking information is given about deaths from epidemic diseases in the Ottoman Army. For example, Eric Jan Zürcher stated that during the First World War, the death rate from disease was around 50 percent in the Ottoman Army. That rate was no higher than 10 percent in the German Army. The death rate from epidemic diseases in the Ottoman Army was incomparably higher than in the armies of other countries. The Third Army of the Ottomans had suffered the biggest losses in this regard. The Third Army, deployed in Eastern Anatolia, lost 116,000 men due to the epidemics alone. The overall loss of the Ottoman Army due to the epidemic diseases was 388,000 men according to the hospital records. That figure does not include the deserters who died during the epidemics. It is not known where and when died those deserters that had contracted epidemic diseases. A highly interesting observation is made in the book in the following vein: These “military deaths from disease” figures and rates can be applied to the civilians (that is, to the groups of Muslims and Christians that had been on the move in the same regions at that time) for an approximate estimation of their losses from disease.

In the book the number of Ottoman Armenians who were subjected to a forced relocation in 1915 due to security reasons is given as 500,000. The book goes on to say that, meanwhile, taking advantage of the Russian occupation of Eastern Anatolia, the Russian Armenians forced, in the years 1916-1917, one million Muslims to flee from the Caucasus and from Eastern Anatolia to central parts of Anatolia that were more secure.

As the book points out, during the First World War, some 1.5 million Christians and Muslims were on the move in the central and southern regions of Anatolia and in the war zones such as the Caucasus, Çapakur (Bingöl), Iraq and Syria. During the First World War, the number of deaths –in this order– from typhus, dysentery and malaria was very high indeed in the Ottoman Army. The highest death toll occurred in the Third Army because that army was deployed in regions with high mountains where winters were long and harsh, and the front could not be accessed except by a few macadamised roads. Furthermore, the soldiers were not dressed appropriately for that kind of climate and problems were encountered in the procurement of food supplies. Therefore, in the Third Army the number of those who died due to diseases was 28 times higher than that of those who died

in combat. The Third Army established its military build-up in Erzurum and around it. The men who travelled there from their hometowns to join the Third Army had come from far-away regions on foot and were deprived of effective lice treatment both on the road and when they finally joined their military units.

As it is emphasized in the book, the real tragedy regarding diseases occurred in the wake of the battle of Sarıkamış. Typhus, typhus exanthematic and dysentery caused the Third Army a second disaster after Sarıkamış. The typhus epidemic broke out in East Anatolian provinces months before the Ottoman government decided to relocate part of Armenian population to an area far from the Russian-controlled war zone on the grounds of protecting the Ottoman transportation lines and for security reasons since revolts had broken out in Zeytun, Van, Muş, Sivas and Şebinkarahisar. (Page 205)

The book contains excerpts from Justin McCarthy's work, "Death and Exile", by Justin McCarthy that underlines the tragedy the entire population of the empire, Muslim and Christian alike, endured during the First World War. One of these excerpts boil down to the following: "We hear that things have gone right only for a very few of those migrants, Muslims and Armenians, that had to set out from Eastern Anatolia or the Caucasus. It can be assumed that these people were in a worse situation than those that had become migrants in Western Anatolia or in Europe around the same time. Throughout the First World War there were no camps in East Anatolia to accommodate the Muslim migrants. The State Commission for Migrants made everything in its power to provide help and protection to the migrants, but to what extent a state could possibly provide relief to one million migrants when it was incapable of even dressing its own soldiers properly? (Salgin Hastalıklardan Olumler [Deaths From Epidemic Diseases], pp. 242-243)

Epidemic diseases decimated armies in wartime and caused civilians to perish en masse. The fact that 25,000-30,000 Armenians had died of diseases such as typhoid fever and dysentery during their transfer from various parts of Anatolia for the purpose of relocation between the dates of June 9, 1915 and Feb. 8, 1916, was evidenced in the course of a study conducted in the Ottoman Archives in 2001.

It has been determined that, during the war years, a significant number of Ottoman Armenians emigrated from the Imperial territories and became citizens of

other countries. In fact, French physicians named “*Maladie Armenienne*” the illness that broke out among the convoys of Armenians emigrating from the Imperial territories via Mediterranean routes. Later on, when this disease was observed in some other communities as well, communities living around the Mediterranean basin, the aforesaid name was abandoned in favour of “*Periodic Illness*”. (PP. 245-246) Epidemic diseases were observed in the convoys of the migrating groups during their passage through Anatolia. In the book, it is emphasized that in a dispatch sent to the Governorship of Konya On Nov. 2, 1915 it was stated that of 200 Armenians, all were ill, 50 of them seriously; that many of them had contracted dysentery and malaria; and that they needed to be settled in uninhabited houses immediately. In 1915 several types of epidemics –including a typhus epidemic-- broke out in the Syrian Front. Typhus exanthematic broke out in Syria and Palestine. While the German army units could protect themselves thanks to preventive measures, the Turkish units were vulnerable to this disease due to famine and war weariness; and many Turkish soldiers succumbed to the disease as a result. Epidemics spread in Aleppo as well, and, because of the outbreak of typhus in the Armenian convoys in the city, the authorities assigned a 500-strong battalion of “military laborers” (that had been building the Aleppo Barracks) to the task of completing the half-finished French Hospital in the Cemile (Jamila) district of the city. The building was completed in one week and was opened for service as a hospital with a capacity of 850 beds. (Page 247) Under the leadership of Cemal Pasha, a state of siege was declared towards the improvement of the medical conditions in the fight against the epidemics ravaging the army and the civilians in Aleppo. Thus, efforts were made to contain the epidemics by way of a quarantine and medical treatment.

The epidemic diseases that broke out during the migrations of the Muslims from the East Anatolian provinces of the Ottoman Empire – migrations that took place in two different periods— during the First World War, were responsible for a considerable number of deaths. The first wave of Muslim migration started upon the Armenian revolt in the city of Van and ended in the summer of 1915 when the Russians retreated from the area. The second period began with the Russian invasion of 1916. And the more westerly or southerly cities on which the Ottoman Army had a stronger grip, became filled with the Muslim migrants coming from the eastern parts of the realm. A series of cholera epidemics broke out among the Muslim migrants between the dates of Aug. 15, 1916 and Dec. 18, 1917. The medical records of the Ottoman Army list the shortcomings of the drive to resettle the Muslim migrants who had fled towards the inner parts

of Anatolia from the Caucasus and from the occupied Ottoman cities during the First World War. The book provides samples of these medical reports as well.

Famines caused deaths in Syria and Lebanon during the First World War. The King of Spain wanted to send wheat to the people of Lebanon as a gift. Although Cemal Pasha approved it, the British War Cabinet opposed the idea. It has been claimed that during the war Cemal Pasha deliberately abandoned the Christian population of Beirut and Lebanon to starve to death. In reality, Cemal Pasha did everything in his power to provide food aid to the Muslim and Christian peoples of Lebanon, Beirut included. However, large numbers of people perished from starvation because the wheat supply did not arrive in time. The British Armada sank the barges and sailboats that were transporting food for the people of Lebanon (and, in this context, of Beirut) and imposed a blockade. In accordance with the war propaganda, the deaths resulting from epidemic diseases in various regions were portrayed to the public as “victims of the massacres staged by the Muslims against the Christians”.

The book includes some striking quotes from Justin McCarthy’s work along the following lines: “No less than 40 percent of the Muslim population that were living in the provinces where the first clashes took place upon the onset of the war (such as Van, Bitlis and Erzurum) had perished by the time the war ended....The world has known all along how much the Armenians suffered. Now it is time for the world public opinion to consider also how much the Muslims in eastern Anatolia suffered and what kind of ordeal, what a horrible disaster they went through. As the Armenians, the Muslims too were subjected to massacres and perished from starvation and diseases in mind-boggling numbers. The Muslim deaths deserve to be commemorated as much as the Armenian deaths.” (Death From Epidemic Diseases, pp. 272-273) As of Nov. 1917 the Russian Army retreated from Anatolia and upon the request made by the newly established government in Russia a cease-fire agreement was signed on Dec.16, 1917 in Erzincan. Armenian militiamen staged massacres against the remaining Muslim population on the Eastern Front after the withdrawal of the Russian Army. To prevent further massacres the Turkish Forces re-launched an operation on Feb. 12, 1918 in the course of which a number of soldiers froze to death. When the Turkish Forces entered the city of Erzurum on March 12, 1918, the half of the city’s population had been annihilated by the Armenian militia. (PP. 325-326)

Another point emphasized in the book regarding the fight against epidemic

diseases is that following the disastrous epidemics of 1915 the duty of fighting with the epidemic diseases where the Third Army was deployed, was assigned to the Army Medical Corps; and that in 1917 the Army collected and took care of the children that were orphaned and left destitute due to migrations, saving the lives of many of them.

As it is explained in the book in general terms, the deaths from epidemic diseases during the First World War and in its immediate aftermath accounted for an important part of the civilian and military losses that occurred in the Ottoman geography. While the population of the UK and Germany increased between the years of 1911 and 1922 and that of France decreased merely by 1 percent, the population of Anatolia decreased by 30 percent. Ten Percent of the population emigrated and 20 percent perished. As the book says, people with various religious and ethnic backgrounds all suffered during the First World War and a massive number of deaths occurred due to unfavourable health conditions. Although the book titled “Deaths From Epidemic Diseases” contains too many details at some points, it constitutes a good source for those researchers that want to conduct detailed studies into a specific period of time in history.