

War, art and the end of the Ottoman Empire

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Namık İsmail, *Take Another (Al Bir Daha)*, 1917, oil on canvas, 205 × 145cm. © Ankara Museum of Painting and Sculpture.

Five years ago, when I visited Ankara as a PhD student in order to conduct research at the Military Archives (ATASE), I was surprised and somewhat dismayed by the lack of balance between the different catalogues of war-related materials. Whilst documents concerning the War of Independence were catalogued in generous volumes enriched by a detailed list of index terms, all the documents related to the First World War were integrated into a single thin volume without any additional indexing. Given that both wars spanned about four years – 1919 to 1923 and 1914 to 1918, respectively – this imbalance had to be due to the selection procedures by which the documents had been preserved. Furthermore, this apparently ambivalent attitude of Turkey towards the First World War was clearly not limited to questions of collection and cataloguing.

In fact, since its foundation in 1923, the Turkish Republic's attitude regarding the First World War has been rather problematic: the war in general has been either overlooked, as merely the background to the War of Independence that led to the foundation of the Turkish nation-state, or despised as a lost Ottoman cause. Though the

Gallipoli Campaign of 1915 was only one of the nine fronts on which the Ottomans fought during the course of the First World War, it has been singled out for commemoration and celebration, with the aim of emphasising the devotion of ordinary soldiers to the country's salvation and the emerging role of the commander Mustafa Kemal, the future founder of the Turkish Republic and leader of the Republican forces that campaigned against the occupying Greek army between 1919 and 1922. Thus Gallipoli and the War of Independence became the foundation stones of Turkish memory of the first quarter of the 20th century. Heroic and militarist narratives of these two victories were most useful in reviving the country's political culture, which had been humiliated by defeat in 1918 and later by occupation in 1919.

This retrospective construction has also been rooted in the institutional practices of Turkish art history and museology. Turkish art historians and museums alike have often seemed compelled to find alternative settings for Ottoman paintings of the First World War. Whenever I visit public museums in Turkey, I note that most First World War paintings are anachronistically labelled as representations of the War of

Independence. Consider, as one example, Namık İsmail's 1917 oil on canvas *Take Another (Al Bir Daha)*. Although the painting clearly draws on the artist's own experience of fighting on the Caucasian front during the First World War – the front was a total disaster for the Ottoman army and the artist – today the work hangs in the Ankara State Museum of Painting and Sculpture and is captioned 'Artillerymen in the War of Independence' ('Kurtuluş Savaşı'nda Topçular'). Thus, even though paintings from this period are considered among the canonical representations of war in Turkish art, they have often been misidentified as works representing the War of Independence and consequently incorporated into a triumphalist and militarist narrative.

These glitches in archival memory leave unanswered many questions about the development of the art world during the course of the Ottoman Empire's 'final wars' – the Balkan Wars, the First World War and the War of Independence (1912–1923). What changes occurred in terms of art institutions and patronage? How did their ethnic, gender and social compositions change? And how did these transformations affect the understanding and representation of war itself throughout these years of conflict?

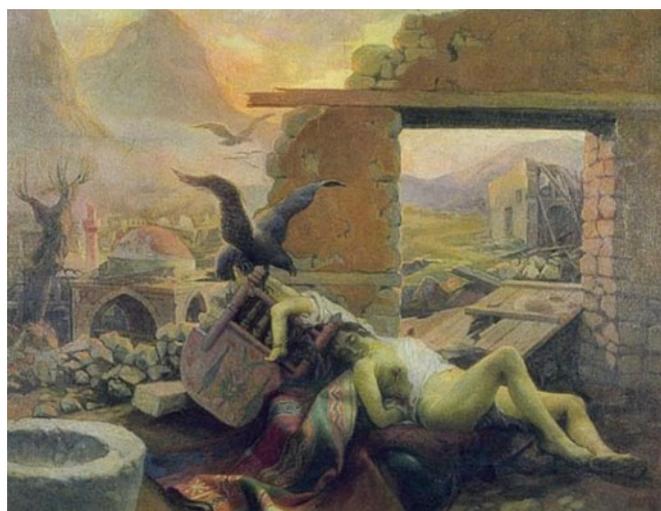
In my doctoral thesis on Ottoman painting during the First World War, I argue that, as the meaning of war changed, so did the artistic representation of ordinary soldiers and civilians in wartime. Firstly, there was a significant break between how conflict was imagined before and during the realities of the First World War. The conflict put an end to the conventions of war painting, which had until this time served either as documents of historical or contemporary military victories (such as the 19th-century battle paintings commissioned by Ottoman sultans) or as propaganda intended to evoke hate and rage against the enemy (like most images produced during the Balkan Wars). Between 1914 and 1918, ordinary soldiers and civilians, and their experience of war, came to form the real heart of the canvases. This war was not fought nobly and glamorously against a malign and brutal enemy; it was grim, deadly and destructive on both the battle and the home fronts.

The research I am currently conducting as a postdoctoral fellow at the British Institute at Ankara is revealing how the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and the 1919 occupation of Asia Minor affected Ottoman intellectual and artistic life. Istanbul during the Armistice period (1918–1923) was a place where 'occupiers', 'the occupied' and 'wanderers' lived together in a state of social and political tension and uncertainty, but also one of intense transnational cultural encounters and possibilities. The arrival of Allied servicemen in Istanbul, with free time and economic resources, attracted large numbers of artists and intellectuals, bringing together Istanbul residents with Armenians and others returning from different parts of the empire alongside new arrivals from Europe. The city soon became a sophisticated and vibrant cultural centre, hosting

concerts, performances, films and art exhibitions organised and attended by Allied soldiers and Ottoman and foreign civilians, including Ottoman Muslims, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Levantines, Europeans and Russians. Meanwhile, anti-militarists, left-wing intellectuals and Spartacists organised the promotion of socialist and Marxian ideas in the city. From these movements emerged an anxious and uncertain but hopeful vision of the post-1918 empire.

Yet for most Muslim Ottoman artists, the occupation and the War of Independence was a turning point. An ambivalent configuration of war, soldiering and the home front in First World War art was soon replaced by patriotic representations of heroic soldiers, civilians and military leaders during and after the War of Independence. In fact, the War of Independence – and by implication the trauma of occupation – were to become dominant themes within post-war visual culture. And the cult of the triumphant military hero, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was a key symbol of this change in the imagination of war after 1919. These representations are another version of war that became – and remains – the dominant imagining of war in Republican Turkish art.

Over the last 14 months, I have located new material in various archives, research libraries and museums, such as the Military Archives (including the aforementioned volumes of the period), the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Ankara) and the Republican Archives (Ankara), as well as the National Széchényi Library (Budapest) and the Centre for Asia Minor Studies (Athens). I hope that this new material, specifically a rich variety of images ranging from photographs to illustrations, cartoons, postcards, posters and easel paintings, and my forthcoming book on the cultural and art history of the late Ottoman Empire (with the working title *War, Art and the End of the Ottoman Empire*) will help to correct the balance between the First World War and the Armistice period, on the one hand, and the War of Independence, on the other, in terms of historical memory.



Avni Lifij, *The Dark Day (Karagün)*, 1923, oil on canvas, 93 × 118cm. © Ankara Museum of Painting and Sculpture.