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Representing Occupied Istanbul: Documents, Objects, and Memory

Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal
Gizem Tongo

Few of the belligerent nations' capitals could escape the destruction and turmoil of World War I, but Istanbul alone endured a lengthy post-war occupation. Though the Mudros Armistice of October 30, 1918, officially ended Ottomans' participation in the war, it was a brief respite. Two weeks later a convoy of British, French, Italian and Greek warships reached Istanbul (fig. 1), while succeeding conflicts continued to afflict Ottoman and neighboring lands largely unabated until 1923. Overlapping claims to sovereignty, authority, and allegiance on the part of the city's multiple communities and local and foreign powers prolonged the ambiguity and uncertainty facing the residents of Istanbul until the Allies' departure in October 1923 and beyond.

Figure 1: Aerial photo of Istanbul, with Allied warships anchored at the entrance of the Golden Horn. Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation (SVIKV), IAE, FKA_004028.



Despite marking a conjunction in the histories of Ottoman and republican Turkey and European imperialism in the Middle East, the occupation of Istanbul was long marginalized in Anatolia-focused Turkish studies of the War of Independence and largely ignored in academic writing in the former occupying powers. The first academic publication on the occupation, Hüsnü Himmetoğlu's *Kurtuluş Savaşında İstanbul ve Yardımları*, published in 1975, explicitly set out to recognize Istanbul's prominence as a front in the Turkish War of Independence, in reaction against the disinterest in or downright opposition to the national struggle with which the urban population had been associated.¹ Early works by authors outside of Turkey investigating British and French policy towards the defeated Ottoman

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1 Hüsnü Himmetoğlu, *Kurtuluş Savaşında İstanbul ve Yardımları* (Istanbul: Ülkü Matbaası, 1975), 14–20.

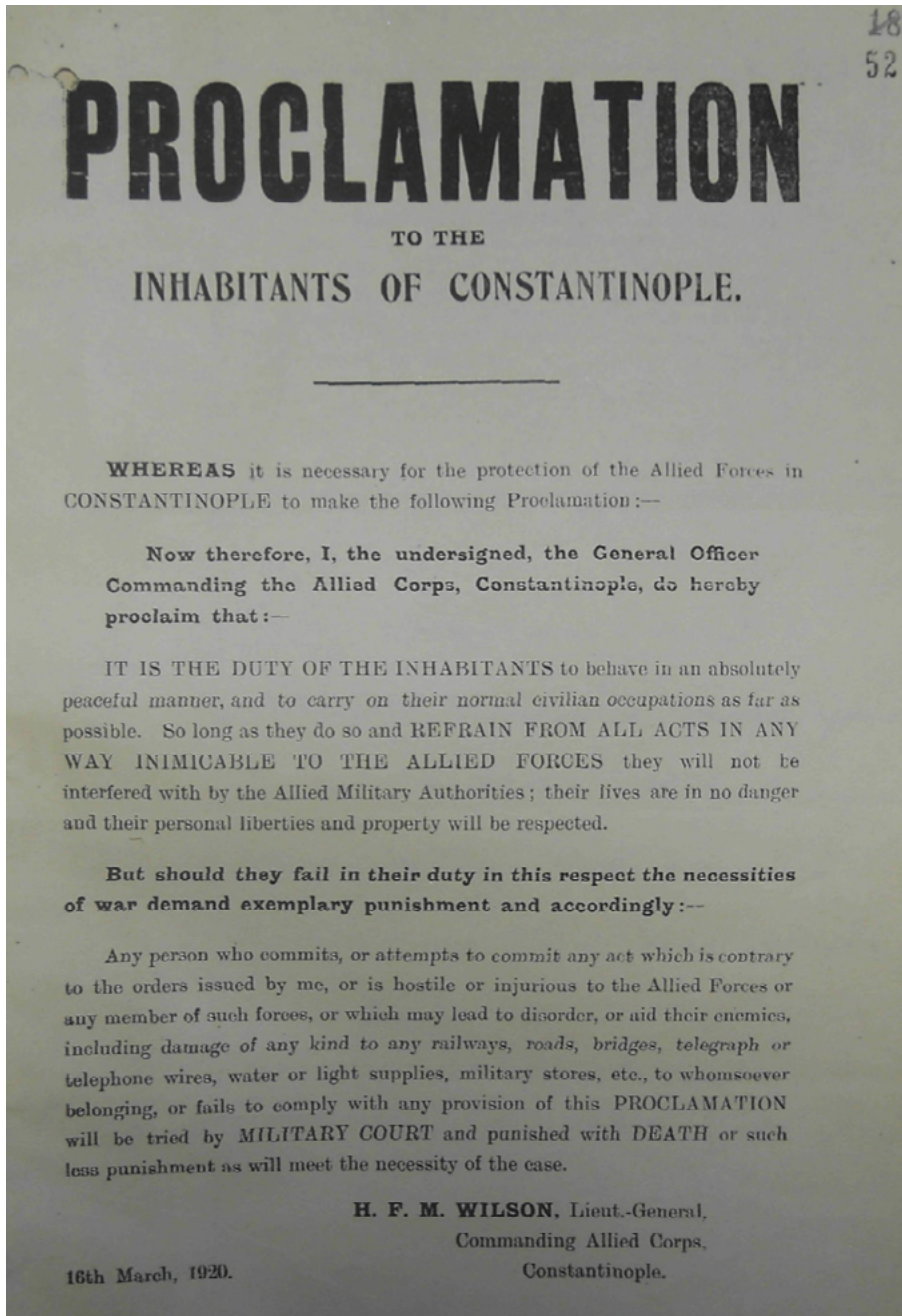


Figure 2: H. F. M. Wilson, "Proclamation to the Inhabitants of Constantinople," March 16, 1920. The National Archives, UK, FO 371/5046.

empire, meanwhile, tended to focus on diplomatic decision making with little attention on developments in the city itself or concentrated on the longer enduring occupations of the Ottoman Empire's former Arab provinces.²

In the past three decades, the increased accessibility of archival resources and burgeoning interest in late Ottoman history and its integration into global historiographical trends have begun to overcome Istanbul's parochial place within histories of the period. Following the

² For example see Paul C. Helmreich, *From Paris to Sèvres: The Partition of the Ottoman Empire at the Peace Conference of 1919-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974); John Darwin, *Britain, Egypt and the Middle East: Imperial Policy in the Aftermath of War, 1918-1922* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

Figure 3: Turkish troops crossing the Galata Bridge on October 6, 1923. Photograph: Namık Görgüç. Cengiz Kahraman Collection.



appearance of landmark studies by Stéphane Yerasimos and Nur Bilge Criss in the 1990s,³ scholarship on Istanbul during the post-Armistice period has expanded and diversified, informed by transnational, social historical, and feminist approaches crossing the city's different classes and communities.⁴ These efforts have been buoyed by the wealth of relevant sources available, both in Turkey and internationally, which make the post-Armistice years among the best-documented phases in the city's history.⁵

Public commemoration of the occupation of Istanbul centers on two symbolic events: The “Şehzadebaşı Baskını” on March 16, 1920, when one of the operations carried out as part of the official occupation of the city (fig. 2) resulted in the death of several Ottoman soldiers;⁶ and the Liberation Day of Istanbul on October 6, 1923, when Turkish forces entered the city after its evacuation by the Allies (fig. 3).⁷ In 2005, a ceremony for the soldiers killed in the Şehzadebaşı Baskını was held, stated to be the first since 1958, and has been repeated most years since.⁸ The 2020 centenary of the official occupation was also marked by an edited volume published by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality,⁹ but the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic postponed other planned events and conferences. Istanbul's Liberation Day has been more consistently commemorated, with large military parades and street decorations organized on its first anniversary in 1924,¹⁰ and smaller scale ceremonies, including the con-

3 Stéphane Yerasimos, ed, *Istanbul, 1914–1923: Capitale d'un monde illusoire ou l'agonie des vieux empires* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1992), which was also translated to Turkish: Yerasimos, ed., *İstanbul 1914–1923: Kaybolup Giden Bir Dünyanın Başkenti ya da Yaşlı İmparatorlukların Can Çekişmesi*. Trans. Cüneyt Akalın (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1996). Nur Bilge Criss, *İşgal Altında İstanbul: 1918–1923* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1993). Criss' book, based on her PhD thesis, also appeared in English: Criss, *Istanbul under Allied Occupation, 1918–1923* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

4 Among others, Elif Mahir Metinsoy, *Mütareke Dönemi İstanbulu'nda Moda ve Kadın (1918–1923)* (Istanbul: Libra Kitapçılık ve Yayıncılık, 2014); Zafer Toprak, *Türkiye'de Yeni Hayat: İnkılap ve Travma 1908–1928* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2017); Lerna Ekmekçiöğlü, *Recovering Armenia: the Limits of Belonging in Post-Genocide Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Dimitris Kamouzis, *Greeks in Turkey: Elite Nationalism and Minority Politics in Late Ottoman and Early Republican Istanbul* (London: Routledge, 2020); Erol Ülker, *Mütareke'nin İlk Yıllarında İstanbul'da Direniş ve Sol* (Istanbul: Sosyal Tarih Yayınları, 2020); Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal, *Britain's Levantine Empire, 1918–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); and Ari Şekeryan, *The Armenians and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire: After Genocide, 1918–1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

5 Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal and Gizem Tongo, *A Bibliography of Armistice-Era Istanbul, 1918–1923* (London: British Institute At Ankara, 2022).

6 Serpil Sürmeli, “Şehzadebaşı Karakolu Baskını ve Olay Mahalline Giren İlk Gazete Tevhid-i Efkâr,” *Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 45 (2010): 103–116.

7 Mahir Aydın, *İstanbul Kurtulurken* (Istanbul: İlgi Kültür Sanat, 2011), 20.

8 Murat Bardakçı, “Unutmadık Töreni,” *Hürriyet*, March 17, 2005.

9 Nur Bilge Criss, ed., *100. Yılında İstanbul'un İşgal Günleri* (Istanbul: Kültür A.Ş., 2020).

10 Hüseyin Kalemli, “İstanbul'da İlk 'Kurtuluş Bayramı' Kutlamaları,” *Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 62 (2018): 109–142.



Figure 4: "Widows with Starving Children" (Johnson, *Constantinople To-day*, 1922).

struction of triumphal arches, music and speeches at Taksim square, held each year since.¹¹ Still these events have attracted nothing on the scale of the sustained public attention around other anniversaries tied to World War I and the national struggle, such as the defense of Çanakkale (March 18), more recent efforts to celebrate the Ottoman victory at Kut Al Amara (April 29), or engrained public holidays including Atatürk's landing at Samsun (May 19), the opening of the Ankara parliament (April 23), and the declaration of the republic (October 29).

The passing centenaries of the Allies' arrival, official occupation, and evacuation present a timely moment to revisit the diverse individuals, events, and movements whose interactions defined the city between these dates. Preserving the complexity of urban politics, society, and culture against the attractive teleology of national liberation is difficult, however. Dom-

¹¹ "İstanbul'un Kurtuluşu Taksim'de Kutlandı," *İBB*, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.ibb.istanbul/arsiv/38208/istanbulun-kurtulusu-taksimde-kutlandi>.



Figure 5: Mehmed Ruhi (Arel), watercolor showing Allied officers in Istanbul, displayed in 1919. Doğan Paksoy Collection.

inant historical narratives continue to render life in the occupied city insignificant beyond well-known acts of oppression and resistance. The impossibility for so many individuals to retain prominence or even physically remain in the city into the early republican era has obscured the intrinsic significance and potential of their activities and made their historical investigation still more challenging, as archives and memories documenting the period were dispersed to multiple locations around the world.

Our aim as curators of the exhibition *Occupied City: Politics and Daily Life in Istanbul 1918–1923* (*Meşgul Şehir: İşgal İstanbul’unda Siyaset ve Gündelik Hayat 1918–1923*), held at the Istanbul Research Institute (IAE) from January 11, 2023 onwards, has been to make a selection representative of these enduring and lost lives in the occupied city from among these diverse sources, ranging from official documents to memoirs, the contemporary press, paintings, films, music, and photographs. The exhibition draws from the growing IAE collection of photographs taken by soldiers and civilians and important published works from the period, such as the 1922 social survey *Constantinople To-day* (fig. 4) and cultural commentary and guide *Constantinople Cameos*.¹² These are supplemented with items from other collections in Turkey, France, Britain, Greece, Armenia, Russia, and further afield. Documents from the Imperial War Museum and National Archives in the United Kingdom highlight Britain’s efforts to control the city streets and manage relations with its often-dissentious Allies; police reports from the French Service Historique de la Défense reveal inter-Allied attempts to control crime; memoranda from the Sismanoglio Megaro Sakulidis Library of the Greek Consulate-General at Istanbul evidence the charitable organizations of the Ottoman Greek community; petitions and reports archived in the Ottoman Presidential Archives highlight discontent with social changes in the city and detail complaints against the actions of Allied personnel; newspaper articles in English, French, Ottoman Turkish, Armenian, and Greek reflect the revitalized press of Istanbul; musical programs, recordings, and the memoirs of musicians reveal the polyphonic sounds of city; films, photographs, and reports from American, Russian, and Ottoman Muslim and Christian charitable agencies document efforts to aid multiple groups of refugees, orphans, and war-wounded; and paintings (fig. 5) and exhibition reviews tell of the encounters of artists and gallery goers after periods of military service or forced displacement.

12 Clarence R. Johnson, ed., *Constantinople To-day; or, the Pathfinder Survey of Constantinople; A Study in Oriental Social Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1922); E.W. Brigg and A.A. Hessenstein, *Constantinople Cameos* (Istanbul: British Chamber of Commerce, 1923).

Through the choice and critical reading of these varied materials, it is hoped that visitors come to understand the political hierarchies and dynamics at play, the social struggles facing the existing and newly arrived urban population and the varied cultural responses to the peculiar circumstances of the occupied city. These three themes structure the main rooms of the display, linked by a corridor that gives a chronological overview of relevant dates in the city and beyond, a useful means by which visitors can (re)familiarize themselves with the dense happenings in the period. Within each room, subthemes concentrate materials that intend to show the relation of different individuals and institutions to a given topic. This multi-vocal approach aims to move beyond the elite male personalities whose biographies have been central to the prevailing public understanding of the history of this period and present the city in its wider ethnic, gender, and class diversity.

Inevitably, however, a physically constrained exhibition space cannot hope to represent comprehensively the complex society and convoluted structures of a major city under multinational occupation. The selection of some documents and objects necessitates the exclusion of others. This is especially the case given the wealth of materials generated by the city's residents and occupiers, but this abundance should not obscure the unevenness of the material and documentary record. Poverty, violence, and marginalization prevented many Istanbul residents from leaving behind any testimony, material or textual, while political persecution drove others to silence or exile. Continued political sensitivities around the occupation period exacerbate these absences. We hope that this exhibition will provide an opening for broader public discussion of ways to remember and reconcile plural tellings of this period and encourages further research to fill remaining gaps in the occupation's historical and material record.

In order to initiate this process, the preparation of the exhibition proceeded with the participation of six consultant researchers with complementary expertise in Istanbul's history. In the articles that make up this special dossier each consultant foregrounds objects, institutions, or individuals represented in the display. The stories of these selected items—posters, newspaper articles, and reports—and the people who produced, consumed, and exchanged these artefacts reveal the challenges of implementing and responding to military occupation, as well as broader individual and collective efforts to reshape the politics, society, and culture of the war-weary city.

Ekaterina Ayyün's article "What Russian-Language Publications Tell Us about Refugee Life in Occupied Istanbul" explores the burst of newspapers, almanacs, and calendars published in Istanbul by Russian-speaking émigrés. This wide variety of media such as the guidebook *Russkij v Konstantinopole/Le Russe à Constantinople* (1921) and the almanac *Russkaja Volna* (Russian Wave, 1920–1921) are essential readings for understanding refugees' new lives in Istanbul and their responses to the difficulties they faced there.¹³ Amidst unemployment, poverty, housing, and discrimination, refugees were entrepreneurial and creative, turning to food, art, literature, music, theater, and dance to survive and maintain communal life. The refugees' onward journeys from Istanbul to cities in Europe, the Americas, and Asia dispersed exile communities, bringing with them memories of occupied Istanbul that fed into the creative works produced in new environments.

Lerna Ekmecioglu's "Mourning Bliss: Remaining Armenian(s) in Occupied Constantinople" reflects on the situation of Armenian orphans who were gathered in Istanbul in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide. Her focus is a largely unstudied report, richly illustrated and more than 500 pages, published in 1920 by the Armenian National Relief Organization (Azkayin Khnamadarutyun).¹⁴ Founded in February 1919 with the aim of centralizing humanitarian efforts on behalf of Armenians, the organization joined foreign charities such as American Near East Relief and the British Lord Mayor's Armenian Relief Fund in delivering

13 *Russkij v Konstantinopole, Le Russe à Constantinople* (Istanbul: Tipografiya "Pressa," 1921); Anatolij Bournakine and Dominic Valery, eds., *Al'manah Na Proschaniye / The Farewell Almanac / L'Almanach Nos Adieux (1920–1923)* (Istanbul: Imp. L. Babok & fils, 1923).

14 *Azkayin Khnamadarutyun Enthanur Deghegagir, Arachin Vetsamsya, 1919 Mayıs 1–31 Hoktemper* 1919 (Istanbul: Hovagimyan, 1920).

aid to the surviving Armenian population. Ekmekçioğlu illustrates how orphans came to symbolize “the past and the future” of the community, representing both “death and war and life and revival.” The detailed information provided in the report about each orphan, including details of where they were born and their current locations in the city, is particularly valuable given that many would again be displaced at the end of the occupation period, dispatched by ship to places including Greece, the United States, and Canada.

Artemis Papatheodorou’s “The Hellenic Literary Society at Constantinople between Ottomanism and Greek Irredentism” examines the final years of the Hellenic Literary Society. Founded in 1861, the work of the society had come to encompass many cultural fields, including philology, archaeology, and anthropology, and expanded its membership from an Istanbul Greek Orthodox core to include figures from other religious and linguistic communities, including, among others, the Levantine architect Alexandre Vallauray and Muslim architect Kemaleddin Bey. The shift in the political climate that accompanied the occupation, however, as Papatheodorou shows, led the society to shed its Ottomanist inclinations and adopt a Greek nationalist irredentist vision. Attempts to backtrack as the Grand National Assembly assumed authority in Istanbul could not save the society, which had its building and library confiscated before being formally closed in 1925.

Ceren Abi’s “Cooperation and Contestation: Cultural Heritage in Occupied Istanbul” investigates the archaeological excavations of Istanbul’s historical sites which were conducted in particular by French occupation forces. Work at two Byzantine sites, namely Gülhane and Makriköy (present day Bakırköy), in proximity to newly established French barracks were prioritized in particular. The management of cultural heritage, including archaeological ruins and still standing monuments like Hagia Sophia, was politicized in line with the dynamics of the occupation. The involvement of an occupying force in the excavations created unease among the Ottoman cultural elite who, as Abi emphasizes, were adamant “to protect the city’s antiquities and monuments,” sentiments that persisted through World War I and the occupation. Still, scholarly research involved the collaboration of Ottoman Imperial Museum officials such as Halil Edhem and Makridi Bey with outsiders connected to the occupying powers, such as Jean Ebersolt, whose *Mission archéologique de Constantinople* documents French excavations in the period.¹⁵

Erol Ülker’s “A Social Democratic Party in Istanbul during the Post-Armistice Years” focuses on the revival of the labor movement and socialist politics after their suppression at the hands of the Committee of Union and Progress. Ülker describes the short-lived attempt to unite the multiple socialist parties that (re)emerged in occupied Istanbul around an agenda that spanned the city’s multi-ethnic proletariat, but which broke down in advance of the elections of late 1919. The socialist struggle thereafter moved to direct industrial action, centered on Istanbul’s extensive tramway network. The conditions of occupation had a direct impact on the tramway’s management and worker conditions: the concession’s Franco-Belgian proprietors exerted influence on the Allied High Commissioners in the city, while Allied officers both mediated in the labor dispute and threatened to break any attempted strike in case of failure. Photographs of meetings from the city’s press capture workers’ engagement in labor organization as they sought to manage increasing living costs and assert agency against company bosses, occupying forces, and an ineffective local administration.

Claire Le Bras’ “Policing and Security in Occupied Istanbul” examines the rapidly expanding remit of the Allied police in the city. Initially tasked with the supervision of the Ottoman police, Le Bras traces how the service took on new responsibilities with each Allied initiative: soon overstretched officers were involved in the control of passports, customs, and sanitation. The increasing stakes of police control heightened tensions between the Allies, which they attempted to resolve by the allocation of positions on control committees, the complexities of which are illustrated with diagrams preserved in the French military archives. All the while, the legitimacy of these interventions, as the armistice, formal occu-

15 Jean Ebersolt, *Mission archéologique de Constantinople* (Paris: Leroux, 1921).

98 pation, Treaty of Sèvres and finally the recognition of the sovereignty of the Ankara Grand National Assembly shifted the legal landscape, remained in doubt. The expanding role of the inter-Allied police reveals more general dynamics of the occupation, in which the Allies were both reluctant to assume colonial responsibility for the city while at the same time convinced that the safeguarding of their troops could only be secured by the direct control of broad areas of urban governance.

These short articles indicate just some of the new directions in which research on the occupied city is now developing. Conferences and workshops held in the past two years at the University of Michigan, Scuola Superiore Meridionale in Naples, University of California, Berkeley, Salt and Boğaziçi University, and the Hrant Dink Foundation have brought together a larger group of scholars working on the period, whose ongoing collaborations are likely to generate major additional studies. As has been witnessed in the development of literature on World War I since 2014, the centenary of the occupation has provided an impetus to diversify approaches and uncover new source materials for the study of the city. It is hoped that the resulting publications and efforts at public outreach, such as the present IAE exhibition, will help to create a richer, more nuanced, and widespread understanding of the occupied city.