

LABOR HISTORY IN THE OTTOMAN MIDDLE EAST, 1700–1922

Labor History and the Ottoman Empire, c. 1700–1922*

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Abstract

This article surveys the evolution of labor history writing as an increasingly vibrant sub-field of Ottoman history. It addresses labor historians outside of Ottoman history and for their benefit traces why and how workers almost completely were left out of Ottoman historical writing until c. 1970. Thereafter, Ottoman historians have more frequently discussed workers and their histories. At first focusing on organized workers and their relations with the state, these writings then shifted to labor in action. Thus, Ottoman labor history writing paralleled, in many respects, that of other fields of history. More recently, attention has been given to non-guild, non-union labor—including women and children—and its activities in the workplace.

Introduction

The Ottoman Empire, emerging from the Anatolian highlands around the turn of the fourteenth century and enduring until after World War One, is one of the more remarkable states in global history. Born in the borderlands between a dying Byzantium and ephemeral Turkish principalities, the Ottoman rulers forged a new synthesis based on creative flexibility that welcomed all comers and steadily built a rich and powerful state.¹ In c. 1500–1550, this empire arguably was the wealthiest and most powerful state system in the European and Mediterranean worlds. Thereafter, relative to the Atlantic states and economy, it fell on harder times, becoming the “Sick Man of Europe” at the end of the eighteenth century. Although there were significant nineteenth-century successes in rebuilding state and military strength, the Ottoman Empire vanished in 1922. Specialists debate whether this final collapse derived mainly from external, imperialist pressures or internal factors, such as the rise of nationalism. I, for one, take the view that arguments based on the power of nationalism have been overstated; indeed, the empire retained the loyalties of its subjects/citizens until the end.²

The experiences of an empire that survived deep into the age of the nation-state offer labor history comparativists rich alternative perspectives on workers’ culture, everyday life, politics, organization, and activism. During the nineteenth-

century era of imperialism, vast chunks of Ottoman lands in the Balkans were lopped off. In the territories that were Ottoman in 1914—a small part of the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Arab and North African provinces—the Ottoman Empire remained fundamentally independent, although prey to the gunboat diplomacy and indirect financial control of Great Britain and the other western Great Powers. The province of Egypt was an exception, taking a more or less separate course, since 1805, from the central imperial state (remaining all the while under Ottoman suzerainty). In 1882, the distinction between the empire and the province became still greater as Britain occupied Egypt, both militarily and politically. With the exception of Egypt, the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire paradoxically resembled both Japan and China in its freedom of political and economic action.³ Like China, it suffered encroachments on its territorial integrity and foreign interference in its domestic political and economic affairs, and it lacked a big factory industrial base. Like Japan, it enjoyed major power status and genuine autonomy of action in most decision-making areas. By 1914, the Ottoman Empire had recovered to the status of a second-rank Great Power, likely not dissimilar in strength from Russia and Austria-Hungary. In common with many states elsewhere in the world during the nineteenth century, it was restructuring itself on a new basis, reshaping relationships with its subjects/citizens and broadening vastly the scope of its activities and responsibilities.

From its inception until its demise, this was an agrarian empire and economy. Three quarters of the inhabitants lived in the countryside and drew their livings from the soil and agriculturally related activities. Many, often cultivator families, also gained incomes from manufacturing and mining. During the nineteenth century, the basic economic profile remained in place, but there were important changes. Agriculture, especially in Egypt, underwent commercialization, thanks to rising international demand and urbanization, particularly of the port cities. Mining grew impressively, notably in the coal sector of Anatolia that came to employ ten thousand workers. And manufacturing underwent a significant transformation (see below) as it adapted to the industrializing West.⁴

Here, I wish to offer the Ottoman past for the consideration of labor historians, albeit with several caveats before we begin. First of all, I need to confess that the term “Ottoman labor history” is one of convenience, similar to that of “British/German labor history,” and camouflages a host of important regional differences and locally distinctive cultures. Perhaps the flavor of this variety is suggested by the notion that Ottoman workers spoke and left records in a host of mother tongues, including Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, Armenian, Greek, Kurdish, Arabic, and Ladino. Over all of them rested the administrative hand of the Ottoman state, from the archives and documents of which historians derive their data, usually in the Ottoman language. Whether there actually is an Ottoman labor history is uncertain at this point, but it is helpful (and likely correct) to assume so. Here, as should be clear by now, I consider Egypt to be within the purview of Ottoman historians. Since it fell under direct European control while the larger Ottoman Empire retained its independence, its inclu-

sion in Ottoman labor history should help us to isolate the importance of formal colonialism on labor in the Middle East.⁵ The second caveat concerns the actual state of Ottoman labor history studies. As will be clear from the following, it has not quite emerged as a subfield in the way that there are separate labor history subfields in US or British or French history. Also, Ottoman labor history is still powerfully influenced by normative notions, which are based primarily on the state's vision of the role and character of labor. The actual nature of the Ottoman labor experiences remain rather unclear, somewhat less so for the very late period, after c. 1890. Since the baseline of comparison is uncertain and has not yet been established, it is difficult to discuss, much less determine, the evolution of the Ottoman labor force over time.⁶ This is important. For example, it is difficult to analyze the role of guild organizations in the later formation of labor unions, syndicates, and strikes in the early twentieth century because we do not understand the nature of the guilds themselves (see below).

Part A: Workers in Ottoman Historical Writing Until c. 1970

Labor history has been both ignored and mistreated in Ottoman historical writing. While the empire lived, this writing, both by residents of the empire and by foreigners, had been either disdainful of or outright hostile to labor history. During the first half-century of the post-Ottoman period, that is, until c. 1970, these trends continued both in the Turkish- and Arabic-speaking successor states and among scholars in west European countries and the United States. In the Soviet sphere of the Cold War world (for example, Bulgaria), Ottoman workers received more respectful, if sometimes ideologically distorted, attention. Around 1970, finally, writers in the Turkish and Arabic and west European/US circles began focusing some scholarly attention on workers. Here are some details, emphasizing mainly the period after 1700.

The paucity of attention on Ottoman workers in part derives from the upper and then middle strata origins of most Ottoman-language chroniclers before and during the nineteenth-century expansion of literacy. Similarly, foreign authors were of elite background on diplomatic missions to the Ottoman court, merchants doing business in the empire, or middle-class travelers. Speaking in the most general terms, these Ottoman and foreign writers recorded the deeds of the sultans, the royal family, and the administrative, military, religious, and cultural elites. The stuff of labor history, such as workers' activities and wages, their families and institutions, characteristically were left out—nearly totally (see below)—from this record keeping.

After the Ottoman Empire disappeared in 1922, these prevailing emphases on elite groups continued under the influence of two intellectual traditions, the first of which was orientalism. The past of the Ottoman Empire in general and of its workers has been clouded by the continuing prevalence of Western stereotypes concerning the Middle East. This is a complex story, with roots in the rise of a "Europe" that sought to identify itself as a superior entity and yet was confronted with an extraordinarily sophisticated, powerful, and rich Middle East-

ern neighbor that refused those claims. In the orientalist discourse that consequently emerged in Europe, the cultural, political, and social institutions of the Middle East were falsely asserted to be stagnant, backward, and resistant to change. So, too, therefore, was the economy and those working in it. These notions have been attacked and largely discredited, but their intellectual legacy lives on.⁷ And so, Ottoman history writing of the post-Ottoman period often has little sense of change over time, although this latter characteristic has been fading.

In a sense, the “modernization” paradigm (the second intellectual tradition) that emerged to dominate—both in academic and US policy-making circles—Middle East and Ottoman historical writing in the mid-twentieth century derived from orientalism. Modernization theory essentially argued that change in the Ottoman Empire came from without, namely, from the West. Under the influence both of the modernization school and of the statist tradition already dominant in Ottoman history writing, scholars in the post-Ottoman era explored Ottoman history. Not surprisingly, they found their foci of attention among the westernizing Ottoman elites who were seen as the only agents of change in an otherwise inert and dying social, political, and labor formation. For several decades, in a trend that peaked in the 1960s, scholars reported on the actions of a handful of Ottoman leaders, seen as westernizers.⁸

Given this legacy of writing from the Ottoman and immediate post-Ottoman periods, it cannot be very surprising that Ottoman workers rarely were present in the historical narratives. Their scant appearances, moreover, were marred/marked by a number of alleged characteristics that Ottoman workers were said to possess. First of all, an ethnic division of labor (inaccurately) was presumed to exist among Ottoman workers in which “we can discern distinct differences among nationalities with respect to their choice of occupation, particularly the industrial arts.”⁹ Thus, certain religious and ethnic groups were said inherently to have possessed certain qualities and consequently dominated particular categories of work. Muslims were seen as incapable of commercial activity and inept in manufacturing (except carpet-making); they were suitable only for agriculture, which they practiced in a primitive manner. (Turkish Muslims were said to be good soldiers and tough government administrators.) In non-rural labor, particular non-Muslim groups—such as Armenians, Greeks, and Jews—were said to excel and predominate in specific tasks such as dyeing, textile production, or metal work.¹⁰ Second, the little research being done in labor history until c. 1970 heavily emphasized organized labor that was in the service of the state bureaucracy and military. Nearly uniformly, only workers who were members of guild-like organizations, which followed official dictates regarding provisioning of Ottoman soldiers and subjects, were considered. The focus was upon guild-like bodies (hereafter called guilds) that existed in Istanbul and a number of larger and smaller Ottoman cities, and which frequently provided goods and services to armies on campaign, the palace, and the state apparatus. Thus, thousands of pages of historical texts are devoid of the subjects of labor history, except when their organized lives intersected with the needs of the

state.¹¹ These guilds were considered to be (1) comprehensive in their control of Ottoman urban labor; indeed, some twentieth-century-scholars explicitly argued that no workers existed outside of these structures. In addition, these guilds were considered to be (2) rigidly restrictive and monopolistic; (3) religiously homogeneous; and (4) without political autonomy of any sort. Moreover, it was implicitly assumed, and not really ever discussed, that (5) all the workers were males.¹² And, without a great deal of evidence being presented, it also was assumed that (6) the guilds featured the same apprentice, journeyman, master hierarchy as in western Europe.

The historical origins of Ottoman guilds are not clear. Similarly uncertain are the connections or (dis)similarities between pre-Ottoman guilds in the Middle Eastern region and those in east, central, and/or western Europe, India, or southeast Asia. Several researchers quite early inconclusively explored possible links between fraternal brotherhoods (*ahi*) founded in medieval, pre-Ottoman times and the formation of Ottoman guilds. These brotherhoods flourished in the absence of any state authority and had full political autonomy, but the guilds that came after allegedly were devoid of such autonomy. Unfortunately their work has not been added to in any significant manner during the past half-century.¹³

Thus, Ottoman labor historians during the pre-1970 period considered the guilds as creations of the state, brought into being to facilitate its control and assure provisioning of its needs.¹⁴ Content with describing the links to the state, the scholars studying guilds paid scant attention to how these bodies might have changed over time. Indeed, little was revealed regarding their internal structures. And, since the guilds were considered to be important only insofar as they served the state, the dynamics among members and possible mutual aid functions were left unexplored. Other than these discussions, labor history was confined to a few articles on workers in various government arsenals or factories.

Usually the presence of guild workers was recorded on two different types of occasions. The first involved times when the state prepared for war. On these occasions, it relied on guilds in the Istanbul capital (and elsewhere) to provide the supplies and materials and often the manpower to process or manufacture these supplies and materials in the field. Here, workers are presented to receive praise or criticism for their role in aiding the state, and then vanish again.¹⁵ On the second type of occasion, workers enter the narrative as participants in protests or revolts against conditions or a particular sultan or high-ranking official. Here, the workers are given some significance because of their intrusion into elite politics. Sometimes they are righteous instruments against administrative injustice, while at other times they appear as irrational actors blindly, often corruptly, lashing out.¹⁶ Once the particular revolt ended, however, the workers faded from historical view.

Part B: Workers in Ottoman Historical Writing Since c. 1970

Ottoman labor history emerged as part of the larger shift in history writing in Europe and the United States. A new generation of historians, born of the de-

mocratization of the university and initially inspired by E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963) and the search for social justice during the 1960s, participated in a larger historiographical shift towards history from below.¹⁷ Many younger scholars turned to the history of the weak and began writing their stories. In Ottoman history, however, this tendency mainly expressed itself in the form of studying economic history, an indirect means of learning about the non-elite groups who are so elusive in the historical record. History from below remained very unusual. The focus on economic history, for its part, produced fine studies about commerce, agriculture, and, to a lesser extent, manufacturing and mining.¹⁸ But there has been little concern for the individuals and groups working in those sectors. Merchants received some attention, but peasants, artisans, miners, and others have not. The narratives of Ottoman history even now are inhabited by few representatives of the popular classes.

A number of factors help account for this state of affairs. The first concerns the tendency to uncritically use the major source of documentation available, the Prime Ministry Archives of the Ottoman state in Istanbul. While stupefyingly rich, they are the creation of bureaucratic and military officials who wrote about what concerned them and their state. Workers appear in the state documents as objects and producers of wealth, but rarely as agents with everyday lives beyond those as taxpayers. These state-generated sources present only one view of the past. Also, the sheer quantity of central Ottoman archive documents often entrapped scholars, causing them to ignore relevant evidence located elsewhere, for example, in provincial locations, Europe, and the United States. Of course, these are problems common to many historical fields. But the achievements of *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life), for example, and of US and European labor history in general demonstrate that the obstacles to good history from below can be breached with considerable success. There is another obstacle to Ottoman labor history writing, one shared with labor historians of Asia, Africa, and others outside of the metropole. Namely, the sources used are often those prepared by authors from a different cultural tradition. These European and American authors—consular officials of the various European governments as well as the Levant Company and other commercial agents—viewed the Ottoman Empire through the prism of their own, different concerns and culture. Thus, Ottoman historians who today are examining those from below have a double disadvantage. First, in common with very many other labor historians, they heavily depend on sources generated by a class distinct from the workers. And second, they also must utilize materials generated not only by a different class, but also of a different and sometimes hostile and condescending culture as well. The obstacles to writing good Ottoman labor history are not insurmountable, but there are obstacles perhaps less frequently encountered by most readers of this journal.

Another factor that inhibits the maturation of Ottoman labor history concerns the nature of history writing that still prevails in most Ottoman successor states. Syrian, Rumanian, Greek, Iraqi, Bulgarian, and Egyptian historians, for

example, have generally been too willing to simply denounce the Ottoman legacy as degenerate, destructive, and, oddly enough, also irrelevant. Thus, at one level, the Ottoman past (and its workers) in general are not seen as worthy of examination. And, at another level, the writing of Ottoman history in these countries has repeatedly been bent to serve the agenda of the new state, which is incorrectly seen to have little, if any, legacy from the Ottoman period. While this tendency is obviously not unique to Ottoman history writing, this situation does seem somewhat worse because, until very recently, there has been little acknowledgement that such is the case.¹⁹ With the emphasis on nation-state formation, there has been little room for the study of workers, except those in the service of the state.

Take, for example, the modern Turkish state, the nature and evolution of which powerfully has shaped the writing of Ottoman history. In the process of its formation from the 1920s to the 1950s, the emerging Turkish republic essentially excluded popular participation. It restricted political activity to a small elite, crushed labor movements and made them illegal, and kept peasants out of the political process. Government and elite suspicion of the popular classes was exacerbated because of the new Turkey's enmity toward the adjacent Soviet Union, self-proclaimed standard-bearer for the workers and peasants of the world. Worker and peasant demands and activities inside Turkey were also easily labeled as communism, and thus dismissed out of hand as dangerous and traitorous to the state. As a corollary, an effective censorship and self-censorship regarding labor history came to prevail in Ottoman historical studies, and not only among Turkish nationals. Ottoman society and economy appeared in an odd light, discussed almost solely in reference to the state, which each docilely served. Hence, the emphasis on guild workers that I discussed above. Just as workers in Turkey (actually) were carefully monitored and overseen, research on Ottoman workers depicted them solely as examples of elaborate governmental control systems and little more. Thus, there has been little labor history writing in Ottoman studies, even with the "old" labor history school emphasis on the shop floor, organized workers, and workers in action. An Ottomanist equivalent to Eric Hobsbawm's *Workers' Worlds of Labor* (New York, 1984), in my view, literally was unthinkable until very recently. Indeed, the study of workers still is a vaguely illegitimate academic enterprise among some Ottomanists.

Having belabored (!) what's wrong with Ottoman labor history, let me now examine its character and achievements over the past decades. To begin with, since the late 1960s and early 1970s, there has been a greater willingness to see workers as actors in their own right and not merely as extensions of the state. Also, the blatant stereotyping regarding the alleged ethno-religious division of labor is being discarded, although the process is halting and incomplete. Research has shown that particular divisions of labor in one town or area are quite different in other communities, even those quite nearby. Thus, Armenians perhaps dominated cotton cloth weaving in one community, while Muslim Arabs predominated in a second, and Turks together with Greeks and perhaps also Ar-

menians controlled the same craft in a third location. And sometimes, no one group prevailed. Hence, there are divisions of labor that are particular to a place but not to the empire as a whole. Here, Kırılı's analysis (below) of the importance of chain migration in determining who controlled a work site is important. In addition, Ottoman historians have been examining a number of other important issues including: the class struggle and formation of the working class; the nature of the guilds; international competition and the transformation of Ottoman labor; the importance of unorganized labor; and the importance of women.²⁰

Some encyclopedic works in Turkish first focused on the search for the working class, an important sub-theme of Ottoman labor history and a familiar one to readers of this journal. This search has several manifestations, including the focus upon labor that, late in the Ottoman period, organized into unions and syndicates, and labor in action—familiar themes among earlier generations of US labor historians. Appearing at a time (the 1960s) when labor sympathies often were personally dangerous to hold in Turkey, the first works chronicled and described the labor strikes that occurred between c. 1860 and 1914. A breakthrough study appeared in 1970 detailing the formation of workers' and leftist organizations in the late Ottoman, early republican Turkish eras. In a similar vein, a mid-1980s study traced the story of Egyptian factory workers' (ultimately unsuccessful) struggle against the state and capital. These and other works, including a more thorough analysis of late nineteenth-century Ottoman labor unrest that appeared in the early 1990s, share several concerns.²¹ Theirs was an emancipatory narrative, with a viewpoint from the Left of labor as a liberating, progressive movement. This group focused on workers in action, often engaged in strikes, and, as a corollary, on those organizing or about to form labor unions or syndicates. And, also as a corollary, some writers were concerned about the success or failure of the workers in the political arena, in their ability to wrest political power from the state nomenclatura. On the one hand, that search for an Ottoman working class likely was chimerical. After all, the so-called "working class" has existed for only a brief period in world history, and many labor historians now agree that labor does not necessarily evolve naturally toward a form of self-conscious, organized, big factory work. Rather, such workers globally are the exception. Indeed, as many of the above works have demonstrated (contrary to their explicit intent), organized Ottoman factory workers seeking political power have been the exception, and formed the minority of the actual Ottoman work force. Factory workers of every sort formed a tiny fraction of the non-agricultural work force. The "real story" where most of the actors are present lies elsewhere in the period of concern here (since 1700); it often involves unorganized workers in small-scale work sites. On the other hand, we should not abandon the study of the Left and of workers in action, since those activities have shaped late Ottoman history. They do constitute vibrant examples of workers as agents of change, as participants in struggles that helped shape both the character of the labor force and the Ottoman state itself.

Since 1970, the reality of guilds has become somewhat more nuanced and complex, but there are still enormous uncertainties. Case studies from differ-

ent regions have demonstrated that guilds were often religiously mixed organizations, consisting of varying mixes of Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Indeed such heterogeneity appears commonly and can no longer be seen as odd or unusual. Also, the Ottoman terms translated as guild—such as *lonca*, *esnaf*, and *ta'ife*—have come under greater scrutiny. In the nineteenth century, *esnaf* was perhaps the most commonly employed term.²² Use of the term *esnaf* as a shorthand reference for nineteenth-century guilds has become very problematic since research has revealed important differences in its meaning over time and place. Sometimes being in an *esnaf* meant membership in a hierarchical organization that had officers, fixed prices, and maintained a community chest that offered assistance to sick members and widows. Such *esnafs* sometimes were sub-divided by city district. But even in such cases, it is unlikely that guilds fully enveloped the labor force of the particular community. Guilds were very important in some, but not all, Ottoman towns and cities of significant size. The presence of tightly organized guilds in Istanbul, the imperial capital, is now being acknowledged as somewhat idiosyncratic and atypical, a response to the special needs of this huge and politically sensitive center.²³ Other *esnafs* have been shown not to possess these organizational and functional features. In some locations (including the Istanbul neighborhoods studied by Kırılı), the term *esnaf* sometimes contained little meaning beyond a place of business or being in a particular profession, not unlike membership in a chamber of commerce. The Kırılı contribution in this volume demonstrates that tightly organized guilds in the capital coexisted with *esnafs* that may have had no organizational structure whatsoever. Some of these existed only in the minds of state officials, as a tax collection convenience for the state. Persons recorded together in a tax register labeled the “X *esnaf*” might never have met, much less participated in communal actions. That is, in some cases, the term *esnaf* meant only to pay taxes for engaging in an economic activity. Equally, such an *esnaf* register might have been a roster of those possessing the legal right to carry out that craft or service.

Various guilds enjoyed real political autonomy in many provincial locations—the Balkans (Seres), Anatolia (Bursa), and the Arab provinces (Damascus)—and it is likely that some did in imperial Istanbul itself. Whether these different guild forms are part of an evolutionary scale or are concurrent but different forms is unclear. The latter is likely the case. At the same moment that guilds of varying forms and structures existed in numerous towns and cities, guilds apparently were absent in other urban areas with similar demographic and manufacturing profiles. Since all these cities were ruled by the Ottoman regime, such variations suggest that the local culture, not state policies, primarily shaped labor structures.²⁴ This issue seems important. If guilds were neither omnipresent nor homogeneous in form and if labor indeed possessed different structures and forms in the various areas, can guilds be central to our efforts to construct an “Ottoman labor history”? In the end, it is likely that the Ottoman guild *system* is more the illusion of historians than historical reality. We need to look to such factors as local labor traditions, market conditions, and (as the

contributions by Kırılı and Chalcraft demonstrate) chain migration from the provinces. And we need to problematize still further the term *esnaf*.

The question of guilds and their fate when confronted with competition from abroad has occupied some attention and debate, specifically, the transformation of Ottoman guilds with the influx of textile imports from India during the eighteenth century and the rising tide of European textiles and other goods. This debate, moreover, has been made more complex because the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were also an era of profound crisis for the Ottoman state and economy, in ways that are not always related to the issue of international competition. The original argument—that under the impact of the West both Ottoman guilds (wherever and in whatever form they existed) and manufacturing collapsed and disappeared—is being modified. During the era of internal crisis and mounting international manufacturing competition in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, guilds in several important cities became more structured, hierarchical, and restrictive than they had been in the past.²⁵ In Damascus, textile guilds fell into extreme internal conflict: Guild masters, themselves squeezed for profits, pressured their journeymen, who finally revolted and struck against their masters.²⁶ (See also the contribution by Zarinabaf-Shahr.) The ultimate fate of guilds varied considerably. Until the end of the empire, manufacturing guilds remained important in Istanbul and numerous towns and cities of the Anatolian, Balkan, and Arab provinces.²⁷ For example, in the latter region, transformed craft guilds at Damascus and other locations survived with significant memberships into the period of French and British occupation after World War One.²⁸ Elsewhere, however, guilds and crafts declined or collapsed altogether. For example, the famed guilds of Angora mohair weavers in Ankara and of wool cloth makers in Salonica completely disappeared when confronted with west European competitors.

As these destructive processes took place, other profound transformations were reconstructing the Ottoman labor force. Craft replaced guild. In addition, the manufacturing work force became decreasingly male, urban, organized, and workshop-based. Ottoman workers were increasingly female, outside of any formal labor organization, and located in the rural countryside, in homes as well as workshops. On the one hand, labor with some or all of these features—female, unorganized, and rural—had long been present and did not appear *de novo* with European capital and trade in the Ottoman lands. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, merchants were organizing putting-out networks that operated outside the jurisdiction of the guilds and of the state. During the eighteenth century, artisans fled of their own accord from one important manufacturing center (Tokat, in northern Anatolia) to smaller towns and villages to lower their production costs. In this case, the flight was sparked not by foreign competition, but the heavy and insensitive hands of Ottoman tax farming officials.²⁹ Female workers who supplied guilds with processed materials, such as the mohair spinners of Angora/Ankara in the eighteenth century, were a routine part of the Ottoman manufacturing scene. (See the contribution by Zarinabaf-Shahr.)

However, and visibly so by the early decades of the nineteenth century, the

importance of manufacturing labor that was non-guild, female, and rural accelerated dramatically. The number and significance of artisan-shopkeepers—who likely had characterized Ottoman manufacturing—declined while that of artisans working under the control of others rose concomitantly. Take the shoemakers of imperial Istanbul, for example. The industry had nearly disappeared by c. 1850, but more than recovered in the subsequent fifty years. By then, the shoemaking guilds were largely gone. But local shoemakers had not only regained the Istanbul market, but exported to the provinces, including Egypt.³⁰ They now worked in decentralized workshops under a master-owner. Merchants placed orders and provided the materials. Each workshop employed five to fifty male and female workers, each engaged in a quite specific task, working for very low wages. More generally, let us take the textile sector. As elsewhere in many areas of the globe, textile production was the leading manufacturing sector, and is used here to illustrate the patterns of Ottoman manufacturing labor. By the nineteenth century, most workers spun and wove for the domestic market. (The famed Ottoman textiles had disappeared from international markets.) Two examples will suffice here. At well-watered Trabzon on the Black Sea coast, women wove silk cloth and printed head scarves for merchants, while at Aleppo on the edges of the Syrian desert, girls and women worked for male master weavers. In the export industries, the patterns of female labor working for others are still more clear and impressive. Two export-oriented industries, silk reeling and carpet making, grew impressively after c. 1830. At the late Ottoman peak of the silk industry, more than 30,000 young girls and women spun silk, mainly in western Anatolia Bursa and in the Lebanon. Unusually for the Ottoman world, these silk workers labored in mechanized factories, whereas most Ottoman labor found work outside “factories.” In the carpet making industry, there were 60,000 workers in all phases of the industry in 1914, including wool preparation, dyeing, spinning, and knotting (weaving). Before the vast commercial expansion of the industry that began in c. 1830, women and men, in homes and workshops, carried out the crucial task of knotting more or less equally. At that time, most knotters in one area might be men while women dominated nearby. But as Ottoman and foreign merchants scrambled to meet skyrocketing demand, they recruited only women (increasingly non-Muslim) to knot the rugs. In both the domestic and export sectors, rising female labor meant cheaper labor input and lower final costs. Thus, Ottoman textiles remained globally competitive, but at the price of the greater exploitation of (increasingly female) labor.

Thus, guilds in manufacturing declined in significance during the later Ottoman period when guild masters seem less important, while merchants became more visibly active in the control of production and labor. On the contrary, their importance in the transport sector increased both in absolute numbers and in terms of their relative importance in the organized labor force. Ottoman transport guilds were possibly more cohesive in 1900 than they had been for centuries. Indeed, by focusing only on textiles and manufacturing, scholars risk missing a dynamic part of the Ottoman labor story. Transport workers have received some

attention in Ottoman labor history. (See the contribution in these pages by Chalcraft.)³¹ Ottoman commerce increased some sixteen-fold in the nineteenth century, offering a powerful stimulus to the growth of the transport labor force. As the nineteenth century proceeded, ambitious construction projects rendered a number of Ottoman ports—including Izmir, Alexandria, Port Said, Salonica, Beirut, and Izmir—accessible to the increasingly large and capacious steamships. To these flocked thousands of men for employment in the expanding ports, as stevedores, boatmen, and (in the case of the Chalcraft article) coal heavers. At imperial Istanbul, there were patterns of transport labor migration that dated back centuries, bringing workers from eastern Anatolia as well as the Black Sea coast for work that lasted from a single season to many years. In this case, the transport workers lived communally in bachelor quarters, intermittently visiting their homes and families before permanently returning to the village. But in Salonica, also an old, well-established port city, the porters were drawn from the local population and resided in the city with their families. Beginning in 1908, the Young Turk political elites built alliances with port workers in many Ottoman cities, using them as instruments of political power and intimidation. This coalition is reminiscent of an earlier one in Ottoman history, that between the Janissaries and the urban workers.³²

Railroads, for their part, came to employ several tens of thousands of workers as (almost exclusively European) capital built a modest network in most of the empire but, in Egypt, one of exceptional density. Foreign capital in railroad construction and the technological requirements skewed formation of the labor force in ways that are familiar to labor historians in many other areas of the globe, including the United States. These foreign corporations, in recruiting white-collar employees who worked in the offices and stations, hired about equal numbers of Europeans and Ottoman Christians. In soliciting workers for employment on the trains, engines, and in the repair shops, they overwhelmingly hired Ottoman Muslims.³³

More generally, this stratification pattern of Europeans and non-Muslims at the top of the job hierarchy and Muslims at the bottom prevailed in the European-capitalized enterprises that proliferated in the late Ottoman period. These enterprises formed the modern sector of the Ottoman economy, and included steam-powered flour mills, breweries, food processing plants, textile mills, banks, railroads, steamship lines, and utility companies. Altogether, these employed well over 100,000 employees and workers—persons who were participating in a labor stratification the opposite of that prevailing in official Ottoman circles where Muslims had dominated and non-Muslims had been in a subordinate position. We cannot know which pattern would have prevailed in the end; Ottoman labor and Ottoman society at large were in transition from one form of hierarchy to another, but the evolution was halted by the destruction of the Ottoman Empire after World War One.

Here, let me return to and amplify some points of the preceding discussion regarding the declining and rising fortunes, respectively, of guilds in the manufacturing and transport sectors. In July 1908, the “Young Turk Revolution”

toppled the autocracy of the ruling sultan, promising a new era of justice and equality.³⁴ A “strike wave”—of more than 110 recorded strikes—erupted in numerous Ottoman cities. This strike wave indeed crystallizes the evolution of Ottoman labor to that point. As many as half of the strikes were in sectors just created by foreign capital (especially railroads, the modernized ports, and in the new food processing factories). In these sectors labored both Ottoman subjects and workers (and employees) from west, central, and east Europe. These foreigners clearly helped establish unions and syndicate forms of organization that organized the strikes in these sectors. But a large number of strikes also occurred among workers such as bakers with longstanding ties to the guilds. A task for Ottoman labor historians is to identify the workplace culture that framed and mobilized, within several weeks, strikes among workers of so many different occupations and locations. How were the frameworks of mobilization connected to the actually remaining structures, or vestiges or memories of structures, of the Ottoman guilds? And did union and syndicate forms of organization intersect with the existing Ottoman forms? The evolutionary path such hybrid organizations may have taken is difficult to see because the Ottoman state stepped in to co-opt or crush the strikers and passed legislation restricting strikes.³⁵ Shortly thereafter, World War One erupted and then, in 1922, the Ottoman Empire vanished.

Following are three contributions to Ottoman labor history—by Chalcraft, Kırhı, and Zarinebaf-Shahr. The article by Chalcraft will be seen as the most focused on exclusively labor history topics, while those by Kırhı and Zarinebaf-Shahr demonstrate that Ottoman labor history often is still enmeshed in larger issues concerning social and economic history and has not quite attained the status of a separate sub-field within Ottoman history. The general applicability of these studies is uncertain since the main geographic focus of all three is Istanbul and Cairo, great capital cities of an empire and a very rich province. At the least, we can compare their findings with those of the labor history of London, Paris, St. Petersburg, Vienna, and perhaps Berlin.

Chalcraft takes as his focus a group of workers created by European capital and action, similar to some earlier research on labor in the port works, railroads, and other foreign corporations in the Ottoman world. Like the port workers and stevedores of Istanbul, these coal heavers were unskilled workers in the emergent transport sector that expanded so rapidly in the later Ottoman period. Thus, in common with these earlier works, he reminds us that textile workers are only part of the story of nineteenth-century labor. But he departs from these studies in an important way: For him, worker protests derive more from the ongoing political transformation of the state than emerging capitalist relations of production. And so, he seeks to uncouple those protests from capitalism, and instead emphasizes their connection to the state-building efforts then occurring in Egypt. For Chalcraft, labor history is not necessarily progressive. Workers can and do find themselves trapped. And yet, he shows, they adroitly maneuvered in the spaces created by the evolving state. Changes in the state triggered transformations in the nature of workers’ grievances. As the state adopt-

ed a reformist, centralizing agenda, the coal heavers appealed to these same goals to obtain redress of their own grievances. Refreshingly, he is able to use the workers' own voices, as expressed in petitions to the state, in his analysis.

Kırlı's contribution is important for the light it sheds on the actual content of the term *esnaf*, on the question of what constitutes a worker, and on the subject of labor history. In his work, *esnaf* members include those who owned the means of production and employed others as well as those who did not. Some who did not own instead rented their shops from third parties and employed others. Still other members, notably boatmen and porters, did not require such shop spaces, did not add value to a product, and lived solely from the labor of their bodies.³⁶ It is likely that most of those producing goods and services in the general Ottoman world fell into these categories of Kırlı's *esnaf*. As already stated, *esnaf* in this sense may indicate only tax paying status. Whether or not they were members of a formal guild structure, however, is a different matter. Guilds over time probably became decreasingly common in the craft sectors and increasingly so in transportation (where unions/syndicates/associations began to emerge). Kırlı, significantly, also illustrates the crucial role of labor migration in the life of the imperial capital and as a determinant in labor patterns. Here he challenges and refutes the hoary notion of an ethnic/religious division of labor. People worked together in his Istanbul neighborhoods not because of shared religion or ethnicity, but because they came from the same village or town in the provinces. As he puts it, regional allegiances are central for understanding the composition of the work force at a particular work site. His analysis of the connection of the Janissary military corps, instigators of a host of Istanbul revolts during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to Muslim shopkeepers similarly adds much to Ottoman labor history. Kırlı's evidence that Janissaries were commonly shopkeepers overturns assumptions that they were linked only to propertyless urban workers, and forces us to reconsider the nature of their insurrections and the role of labor in Ottoman political history between 1700 and 1826, when a sultan destroyed the Janissary Corps. And finally, his discussion of gardeners reveals the importance of this group in the urban workforce and, to boot, offers a wonderful picture of the complex rural-urban life in one of the largest cities in the world at the time. Here is much grist for the comparativist's mill.

Zarinebaf-Shahr's article contributes both to Ottoman women's history and labor history. It helps to normalize women as workers and ordinary, everyday participants in the economic life of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman elite and higher-ranking women so far have received the bulk of the attention from scholars, although the outlines of women's participation in the workforce are becoming somewhat clearer. There is still considerable apathy or resistance to women workers' history, in part because of the nature of Ottoman history writing in general and because so much energy in Ottoman labor history has been expended on the organized workforce, which (apparently) systematically excluded female workers. And so, her analysis of women workers, shopkeepers, and economic agents fills important lacunae. Her material is doubly important, for much of it

concerns the eighteenth century, allowing us to compare earlier patterns with those of the better-known subsequent era. She vividly illustrates the fear that guildsmen held of female workers outside their organizations. More specifically, the complaints of journeymen against women workers may suggest the power of merchants or the changing role of masters in organizing production. Her revelations of the divisions between journeymen and masters within guilds during the eighteenth century offer evidence that otherwise has been scarce in Ottoman labor history scholarship.³⁷ Thus, she adds considerably not only to our picture of women workers in (textile) production, but also the mechanisms used by Ottoman manufacturers to meet domestic and international competitors. In the process, she helps us to better understand the role, importance, and activities of the labor force in the Ottoman economy after 1700.

NOTES

* My thanks to Mel Dubofsky, Tom Dublin, and the Ottoman labor history seminar at Binghamton University for their helpful comments.

1. Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922* (Cambridge, 2000).

2. *Ibid.*, 186–90.

3. After 1882 and until 1914, when the tie to the Ottoman Empire was severed as Britain declared a protectorate, Egypt, in most senses of the term, was a British colony.

4. Halil Inalcik with Donald Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914* (Cambridge, 1994).

5. Whether or not later nineteenth-century Egypt should be considered still Ottoman is a bit of a conundrum for specialists, as suggested just above. Since the career of Muhammad Ali Pash (d. 1848), Egypt in some but not all respects functioned as an independent entity. It remained nominally under Ottoman suzerainty after the British occupation of 1882, until the British declaration of a protectorate in December 1914. In many respects, however, Egypt remained closely tied to Istanbul and the two labor histories are often similar. The inclusion here is intended to promote closer comparisons between the researchers in the Egyptian provinces and the Ottoman Empire as a whole.

6. A notable exception, which is both richly detailed and provocatively analytic, of earlier Ottoman guild history is Eunjeong Yi, “The Istanbul Guilds in the Seventeenth Century: Leverage in Changing Times” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2000).

7. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (New York, 1978) was the opening salvo in the attack on such stereotypes. While orientalism has faded, no paradigm has emerged to frame discussions in Ottoman and Middle East history.

8. Notably, Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London, 1960), and later editions.

9. A 1917 account by A. J. Sussnitzki in *The Economic History of the Middle East, 1800–1914*, ed. Charles Issawi (Chicago, 1966), 115. Halil Inalcik, in a number of studies dating from the early 1960s, pointed to a vital and active Muslim participation in trade and industry, and directly contradicted the prevailing assumptions about the division of labor. See his works cited in the bibliography of his contribution to Inalcik with Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*.

10. For a more detailed presentation and critique, see Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 1993), 7–15.

11. Of course there are exceptions. Some writers, usually non-Ottomans, were interested in economic topics and wrote about workers. Usually, however, these characterizations were laced with the stereotypes described below.

12. H. A. R. Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, vol. 1, 2 parts (London, 1950–1957). But see the fine critique of most of these points in Yi, “The Istanbul Guilds.”

13. See the various works by Franz Taeschner, for example, “Futuwwa, eine gemeinschaftsbildende Idee im mittelalterlichen Orient und ihre verschiedenen Erscheinungsformen,” *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 52 (1956):122–58. Cemal Kafadar is currently

working on this subject of guilds and their origins; for his earlier efforts, see “Yeniçeri-*Esnaf* Relations: Solidarity and Conflict” (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1981).

14. For example, see the studies by Gabriel Baer, “The Administrative, Economic and Social Functions of Turkish Guilds,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1 (1970):28–50; and Gibb and Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*. For an argument that guilds are a product of Middle Eastern social needs rather than state requirements, see Bernard Lewis, “The Islamic Guilds,” *Economic History Review* 8 (1937–38):20–37.

15. There is a considerable body of literature in Turkish. In English, see Mehmet Genç, “Ottoman Industry in the Eighteenth Century: General Framework, Characteristics, and Main Trends,” in *Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500–1950*, ed. Donald Quataert (Albany, 1994), 59–86.

16. For example, see S. J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *A History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1976–1978).

17. See the introductions in Zachary Lockman, ed., *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East* (Albany, 1994); Ellis Jay Goldberg, ed., *The Social History of Labor in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO, 1996); and Donald Quataert, ed., *Workers, Peasants and Economic Change* (Istanbul, 1993).

18. See Inalcık with Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* for a summary of economic historiography. Ottoman women’s history is still in its infancy; see Madeline Zilfi, ed., *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era* (Leiden, 1997).

19. An interesting effort to place history writing in Turkey in its historical context is Halil Berktaş, “The Search for the Peasant in Western and Turkish History/Historiography,” in Halil Berktaş and Suraiya Faroqhi, eds., “New Approaches to State and Peasant in Ottoman History,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 18 (1991):110–84, esp. 137ff. Also see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, 1997).

20. A host of important topics remain unaddressed or have been scarcely touched upon, including, for example, peddlers.

21. Oya Sencer, *Türkiye’de işçi sınıfı* (Istanbul, 1969); Mete Tuncay, *Türkiye’de sol akımlar* (Istanbul, 1967), and various later editions; Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile* (Princeton, 1987); Yavuz Selim Karakışla, “The 1908 Strike Wave in the Ottoman Empire,” *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 16 (1992):153–77. See also the sources cited by Chalcraft in his article in this volume of *ILWCH*.

22. See Donald Quataert. “Ottoman Workers and the State, 1826–1914,” in *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East*, ed. Lockman, 23–7. Earlier, *ta’ife* may have been more commonly employed. See Yi, “The Istanbul Guilds.” Labor historians need to examine the relative frequency of the various terms over time and whether or not changing usage reflects the mounting presence or absence of organized, hierarchical structures. If *esnaf* indeed is the more common late Ottoman term, is this merely a vocabulary change, or does it reflect more profound alterations in the nature of the Ottoman work force?

23. Even there tight state control cannot be assumed. For autonomous guild actions in seventeenth-century Istanbul, see Yi, “The Istanbul Guilds.”

24. Here I can list only a few of the works. Suraiya Faroqhi has been notable for her early efforts at history from below, both that of women and of workers. For more recent contributions, see her “The Fieldglass and the Magnifying Lens: Studies of Ottoman Crafts and Craftsmen,” *Journal of European Economic History* 20 (1991):29–57; and also Faroqhi, “Eighteenth Century Ottoman Craftsmen: Problematiques and Developing Sources” (unpublished paper, c. 1998). Also, see two collections important for their introductions and contributions: Lockman, ed., *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East*; and Goldberg, ed., *The Social History of Labor in the Middle East*. Also, Onur Yıldırım, “Craft Guilds in the Ottoman Empire (c. 1650–1826)” (unpublished research paper, Binghamton University, 1990), 13.

25. Faroqhi, “Eighteenth Century Ottoman Craftsmen.” In addition, she argues that these guilds concentrated labor in relatively large workshops.

26. Sherry Vatter, “Militant Textile Weavers in Damascus: Waged Artisans and the Ottoman Labor Movements, 1850–1914,” in *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1839–1950*, ed. Donald Quataert and Erik J. Zürcher (London, 1995), 35–57.

27. Sherry Vatter, “Journeyman Textile Weavers in Nineteenth-Century Damascus: A Collective Biography,” in *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Edmund Burke III (Berkeley, 1993), 75–90, and sources therein.

28. This is one of the major conclusions of Quataert, ed., *Workers, Peasants and Econom-*

ic Change. For a more recent and comprehensive treatment of the shift from guild to craft, see John Chalcraft, “Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2001).

29. Yüksel Duman, “Notables, Textiles and Copper in Ottoman Tokat” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, Binghamton, 1998).

30. The Istanbul case is from Quataert, ed., *Workers, Peasants and Economic Change*. Chalcraft, “Crafts and Guilds in Egypt,” tells a very similar story of the Cairo shoemakers.

31. Quataert, ed., *Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire*, focuses nearly solely on textiles. For transport workers, see Donald Quataert, “Labor Policies and Politics in the Ottoman Empire: Porters and the Sublime Porte, 1826–1896,” in *Humanist and Scholar: Essays in Honor of Andreas Tietze*, ed. Heath Lowry and Donald Quataert (Istanbul-Strasbourg, 1993), 59–69; and Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 1983). And also see Chalcraft, “Crafts and Guilds in Egypt.”

32. For example, Robert Olson, “The *Esnaf* and the Patrona Halil Rebellion of 1730: A Realignment in Ottoman Politics?” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17 (1974):329–44.

33. Quataert contribution in Inalcik with Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*. Also, this hiring pattern was replicated in the hiring patterns of the 6,000-person work force employed by the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, created to oversee Ottoman state repayment of foreign loans after 1881.

34. The deteriorating economic conditions in which the revolution occurred have been ignored nearly totally and scholars have emphasized only its overtly political origins. See Donald Quataert, “The Economic Climate of the ‘Young Turk Revolution’ of 1908,” *Journal of Modern History* 51 (1979): D1147-D1161. This article is reprinted in Quataert, ed., *Workers, Peasants and Economic Change*, 49–62, and sources therein.

35. Yavuz Selim Karakışla, “The Strike Wave,” 153–77, and also his “The Emergence of the Ottoman Industrial Working Class, 1839–1923,” in *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey*, ed. Quataert and Zürcher, 19–34.

36. Well worth further study is the question of ownership of the boats and relations between the boat owners and boatmen if these were not the same. On the related issue of migratory labor, see, Christopher Clay, “Labour Migration and Economic Conditions in Nineteenth-Century Anatolia,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (1998):4, 1–32.

37. See also Yi, “The Istanbul Guilds.” See also Vatter, “Journeyman Textile Weavers”; and Vatter, “Militant Textile Weavers,” which offer a rich analysis of such conflicts during the nineteenth century.