




BOOK REVIEW

**CAN NACAR. *Labor and Power in the Late Ottoman Empire: Tobacco Workers, Managers, and the State, 1872-1912* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019). 202pp. \$99.00 cloth. ISBN 9783030315580; also in paper (\$16.99) and as an e-book (\$16.99).**

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Since the interventions of Donald Quataert between the 1980s and the early aughts, labor history has played an important role within the historiography of the Ottoman Empire. In his 2019 book, Can Nacar (a student of Quataert) analyzes social tensions within the late Ottoman tobacco industry, thereby building on this lineage. The book is ambitious, covering a forty-year period and surveying a large geography including Istanbul and the empire's two largest tobacco-production centers, Samsun and Kavala. Central units of analysis in *Labor and Power* are class dynamics and labor unrest in Ottoman centers of industry.

In chapter one, Nacar argues that workers in warehouses and factories of the Régie Company, the domestic tobacco monopoly, were not passive in the face of changing economic and political circumstances (2-5). Instead, workers challenged the management structure that determined their wages and quality of life. The book demonstrates that workers were aware of the processes which created social discrepancies in the Ottoman Empire and actively challenged them. While the Thompsonian concept of moral economy is not substantively employed in the book, Nacar depicts experiences in the workplace as the basis for a political identity. Class is therefore central to the book's analysis. However, Nacar does not shy away from discussing alternative political identities that vied for workers' fidelity.

Conflicting ambitions for the political future of the Ottoman Empire were crucial to the experience of those employed in tobacco. Nacar points to the ongoing Patriarchist-Exarchist split amongst Orthodox Christians in the Balkans, as well as anti-Austrian and anti-Greek boycotts by Ottoman



Muslims, as significant forces within the industry (11-12, 28-34, 50, 105, 119, 165-66). Sectarianism and nationalism, therefore, both hampered efforts at activism and unionization across communitarian boundaries. It remains unclear though whether Nacar sees this as a one-way street in which nationalist and sectarian activism had an impact on the economy or whether the tobacco industry or other economic sectors had an effect on these political movements as well. The book's conclusion provides an important epilogue to this history by showing that tobacco workers' activism took on new life in the less heterogeneous contexts of post-war Greece and Turkey (169-77).

Each chapter discusses important aspects of social life within the industry. Chapter two provides a historical overview of Ottoman tobacco, relying mostly on previously underutilized reports of the Ottoman, British, and American governments. Increased demand for tobacco internationally turned Ottoman cities "in Anatolia and the Balkans. . . into major tobacco processing centers" (44). The American sources used in this chapter are especially welcome: the relationship between American tobacco companies and their suppliers in the Ottoman Empire has been so far woefully underexplored by American and Middle Eastern historians alike.

While the first two chapters constitute the book's historical framing, other chapters present deeper analysis of social dynamics in the industry. Chapter three opens with reference to the influential work of Michael Burawoy (47). In the 1970s and 1980s, Burawoy was at the forefront of an ethnographic methodology, which intended to shed light on consent within the factory setting. Although unable to recreate Burawoy's ethnography approach in historical analysis for obvious reasons, Nacar interprets historical sources through a similar theoretical lens. He demonstrates that workers in the Régie factories of Istanbul and Kavala consented to the profit-making efforts of their managers within labor hierarchies based on skill and cultural norms. Tobacco workers – categorized as semi-managerial *denkçis* (balers) and lower-ranking *pastalcis* (pickers) – provided their employers with profits while mutually depending on one another to make their own wages and to advance within this hierarchy (57).

Whereas chapter three explores shop-floor dynamics in different regional production centers, chapter four is an analysis of the political dynamics of labor protests over unemployment and low wages. Market disruptions in İskeçe and Kavala adversely affected workers who, in 1904 and 1905, protested the fact that they bore the brunt of market instability while, at the same time, Istanbul faced another tobacco labor crisis due to increased mechanization in the Régie factory (80-96). In the aftermath of these protests, Régie administrators accepted claims of ignorance as a legitimate basis for political pardon in cases of disruptive labor unrest. While the discourse surrounding ignorance became a means of resolving disputes, disturbances to productivity were too risky for such social actors to re-enter the workplace (102-03). With such insights, this chapter contributes to the historiography of vagrancy and crime in the late Hamidian period and sheds light on attempts made by the Régie Company to manage political crises.

Chapters five and six are analyses of unionization efforts and labor protests in Istanbul, Kavala, and Samsun after the constitutional revolution in 1908. Nacar points to the Régie factories in each of these places as sites for the politicization of labor and emphasizes the swift response of Régie administrators and government representatives (111-31). Although official restrictions were placed on labor activism and unionization by the summer of 1909, these became part of ongoing political debates about what constituted Ottoman public-service industries. As such, the Council of State and the Grand Vizierate disagreed on the fundamentals of financial policy in the Second Constitutional Era (143-46).

Together, these two chapters demonstrate that labor power increased during the Second Constitutional Era. Nevertheless, this power – having been achieved through unionism and labor protests – was fragile as it depended on the exceptional market conditions of 1909-12 (167). Herein lies a crucial shortcoming of the book. Nacar demonstrates that the success of labor activism was limited by external factors such as fluctuations in international demand, local productive capacity, and regional political economy. A theoretical discussion of the relationship between agency and structure, however, is largely absent. The historiographical debates over the extent to which structure and agency are mutually defined are ongoing and have direct bearing on the analysis of social unrest provided in this book so it would have been beneficial for Nacar to consider the contributions of *Labor and Power* to that literature.

This does not, by any means, take away from the significant intervention made in *Labor and Power*. The book adds to debates about the relationship of class to sectarian and national identities and highlights the significance of labor activism to political debates in the Second Constitutional Era. It will be an important milestone in Turkish labor history for years to come.