

Fear and Trembling in the Mediterranean: The Cretan Civil War and Breakdown of Ottoman Rule, 1895-98

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Crete witnessed an increasing number of violent incidents between its Muslim and Christian population. During the three-year-long disturbances, hundreds died, many more were wounded, a huge number of olive trees were destroyed, and tens of thousands of Cretans were internally displaced, many of whom eventually abandoned the island for safer shores across the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Cretan conflict, in its limited historiography, has mostly been treated as a nationalistic revolt against Ottoman rule. With the help of documents from Ottoman, Greek, Cretan and European archives, I reinterpret the strife as a civil war between Muslims and Christians from 1895 through 1898.

The Cretan civil war destroyed countless lives. The devastation, however, was also transformative. It provided many with an opportunity to acquire vast amounts of land in abandoned villages. It, therefore, altered the old Ottoman pattern of land tenure, that is, Muslim minority in possession of more land than Christian majority. In light of this transformation, I discuss several aspects of the conflict, which I argue are crucial in understanding its denouement. First, both Muslims and Christians attempted to remedy the highly volatile situation in their country. As with the turmoil, the distrust between them deepened as well. Eventually it fatally damaged any remaining willingness to compromise on establishing an autonomous administration in the island. Second, the Great Powers of Europe carried out a collective military intervention with a view to put an end to the chaos. This turned out to be only a limited and timid policy amounting to occupying a narrow stretch of land along the coast. In addition to demonstrating how this further complicated the imbroglio, my paper examines Europe's aversion to encounter rebels on Crete's mountainous terrain. Third, tens of thousands of refugees fleeing their villages across the island took refuge in cities. It was through their wretched lives as refugees that the civil war made its painful impact felt on a great number of people. My paper investigates their plight as another dimension of the humanitarian crisis and discusses the role they played in the evolution and conclusion of the disturbances in the region. The Cretan conflict not only triggered a war between the Ottoman Empire and Greece in 1897 but also caused extreme anxiety across the Balkans, for the fear was widespread that it carried the potential to disrupt already fragile balance of power in Southeast Europe. Therefore, in my paper, I highlight the larger regional repercussions of the crisis by situating the strife in its broader Mediterranean and Balkan contexts.