

States of Cultivation: Environment and Empire in the Late Ottoman and French Mandate Eastern Mediterranean

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Abstract

The final decades of the Ottoman Empire and the period of the French mandate in the Eastern Mediterranean coincided with a period of global innovation in agricultural technologies. These developments were the forerunners of the methods and machines that would create the “green revolution”—the increased expansion of global crop production in the late 20th century. As government officials and technocratic elites experimented with new strategies to augment revenue from agricultural production in increasingly marginal environments, they also sought to grapple with the more substantial capital outlays required by these technologies. In the eastern Mediterranean where a potentially abundant agricultural harvest—the main source of revenue—could be abruptly devastated by a lack of well-timed rains or destructive insects and rodents, attempts to intervene in and change existing land tenure, credit-lending, and tax collection arrangements had the potential to wreak havoc, leading to inadequate seeds and sustenance not to mention increasing indebtedness and loss of land.

In this talk, I examine how the processes set in motion to increase revenue from agriculture’s varied natures interacted with local environments to create unexpected impacts and, at times, consequences counter to what administrators claimed to have envisioned. I argue that the new extractive demands imposed in particular on marginal environments for cultivation would have long-lasting consequences for the development of the region’s social and economic dynamics. Following World War I, these dynamics would continue to play out after the imposition of the French mandate in the region. The exigencies of colonial rule which aimed to reorient the region’s production towards raw materials for export and metropole industry while viewing rural environments as repositories for surplus metropole capital led to increased turbulence in rural areas and desperate straits for many cultivating communities as well as urban moneylenders and landowners. The rural landscape created by late Ottoman reforms set the stage for an era of mandate rule during which environmental concerns became increasingly key points of contestation and anti-mandate mobilization.

Bio

Elizabeth Williams is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. She received her Ph.D. from Georgetown University. Her research spans the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on environment and empire in the eastern Mediterranean during both the Ottoman and French mandate periods. Her work has most recently been supported by an eleven-month Kluge Fellowship at the Library of Congress.