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Aline Schlaepfer & Jordi Tejel

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INTRODUCTION



## Ordinary Ottomans: post-World War I settlements and experiences of the end of empire

Aline Schlaepfer<sup>a\*</sup> and Jordi Tejel<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Near and Middle Eastern studies, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland; <sup>b</sup>Institute of History, University of Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

### ABSTRACT



In the introduction to this special issue, we address the concepts of ordinariness and Ottomanness, and how they intersect within the general context of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>1</sup> Given the already existing scholarship on ordinary groups or individuals in the history of the Middle East, we first position ordinariness as context-specific; that is, we understand it as subjected to various forms of exclusion from the elite. Second, within the framework of the major political changes that characterise the end of Empire we explore ordinariness and how it is embedded in everyday life and practices. We interrogate the capacities of individuals to maintain regularity through ordinary practices, after or despite a disruptive episode. We argue that persisting with everyday life practices despite crisis can serve as a strategy to reclaim spaces of autonomy from power structures. However, we also demonstrate that ordinary individuals, being vulnerable subjects or citizens, are also subject to change. These questions eventually lead us to rethink the debate on ‘continuities and ruptures’ within the post-Ottoman context. We suggest that framing Ottomanness as a time-marker, rather than as an identity-marker (Ottoman-era), allows us to focus on how groups and individuals coped with these changes, rather than attempting to define them.

### KEYWORDS

Ordinariness; everyday life; Ottoman Empire; post-Ottoman era; history from below; social practices; exclusion

There are two major ways of positing ordinariness in historical scholarship. First, ordinariness can be defined by a social divide, for example ‘ordinary’ means outside of the social and political elite, and subjected to various forms of exclusion in relation to a state as a bureaucratic apparatus, a political elite and a territorial centre. Or, the ‘ordinary’, can be located in a nondominant position based on religious, ethnic, professional, gender or age criteria. When historians speak of ‘ordinary men and women’, ‘ordinary lives, subjects, and people’, ‘*ammāt al-nas* or *al-afrad al-adiyyin* in Arabic, they often refer to nondominant individuals or groups (Marufoğlu 2009, p. 17, Choueiri 2013, p. 200, Tahtah 2019, p. 63, Faroqi 2022, pp. 9–15). Therefore, the first dimension of ordinariness implies a relation of power. Secondly, however, ordinariness also pertains to the phenomenon of repetition of a banal practice or task carried out on a regular basis – an uninterrupted routine that often goes unnoticed. As such, the ordinariness of a phenomenon lies in everyday practice, everyday life, everyday language or everyday use (Wittgenstein [1953] 1998, De Certeau [1980] 2011).

These two dimensions of ordinariness – bound to a social context and the un-extraordinary – touch upon two major questions in the context of the collapse of imperial order. Firstly, what did the lives of individuals outside the elite, such as garage owners, craftsmen and merchants, or

**CONTACT** Jordi Tejel  jordi.tejel@unine.ch  Institute of History, University of Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland  
\*Present address: Arab studies, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

families, communities and markets, look like after the end of World War I in the Middle East, and what did ordinary practices consist of? Secondly, how did political change resulting from the extraordinary collapse of the Ottoman Empire affect ordinary lives and practices? In what follows, we particularly interrogate the capacities of individuals to maintain regularity in their ordinary practices, after or despite a disruptive episode such as the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. We argue that the persistence of everyday practices despite the crisis can serve as a strategy to reclaim spaces of autonomy from power structures. However, we also demonstrate that ordinary individuals, being vulnerable subjects or citizens, are also subject to change. A series of questions around the concept of transition eventually leads us to rethink the debate on 'continuities and ruptures' within the post-Ottoman context. We suggest that framing Ottomanness as a time-marker (Ottoman-era), rather than as an identity-marker, allows us to focus on how groups and individuals coped with these changes, rather than attempting to define them.

### The ordinary as the nondominant

Ordinariness is partly defined by exclusion, and is then further defined by whether this exclusion occurs in relation to a state as a bureaucratic apparatus, a socio-political elite, or a territorial centre, and whether the ordinary individual is placed in a nondominant position. In this hierarchical relation, ordinary individuals are either subordinate to, or unprivileged in comparison to, the structure on which they depend (Dalachanis and Lemire 2018, Faroqi 2022, pp. 13–14). In this respect, the urban working class composes a typical group of ordinary individuals, as ordinariness is defined by a social status. This understanding of ordinariness derives from two major influential historiographical trends: the French Annales school and the British neo-Marxists.

The former maintained that it was necessary to resort to particular methods and approaches because accessing the history of the lower classes was impossible. This included investigating the lives of ordinary people through statistical series of demographic data or, for instance, the price of basic foodstuffs. In this regard, according to François Furet, quantitative analysis was the only way to incorporate the anonymous poor into the general historical narrative. As a result, however, the 'subordinate classes remained a silent and disincarnated mass without any personal identity' (Lyons 2010, p. 1). For the British neo-Marxists, the central issue of inquiry was the process of formation of the working class, while seeking to highlight its agency – political movements and collective actions – in the face of elite endeavours (Thompson 1963, Hobsbawm 1971). In both cases, however, individuals and their private lives were, by and large, neglected in analyses in favour of studies that sought to underscore either collective activism or the formation of collective 'mentalities'.

Against this background, in the last two decades or so, the proponents of a 'New History from Below' have suggested a new research agenda that entails exploring three main avenues: re-evaluating individual experience; searching for the private voices of common people; and, finally, considering ordinary people as active agents in the shaping of their own lives. This 'return of the self' (*al-'awda ila al-dhat*) in history, in the words of historian Khalid Tahtah, allowed for previously unexplored elements of society, like the poor, enslaved people, criminals and other marginalised components, to recover historical significance and visibility (2019, p. 63).

In Arab historical studies, too, scholars have since the 1980s emphasised the need to work on sources documenting the lives of non-elite individuals and groups. This movement particularly affected studies on the Ottoman period, for which these documents were not only available but also numerous. Works based on Shari'a court records (*sijilat*), petitions, *awqaf* records, business cards (Rioli 2018) and others, contain extremely valuable details about individuals often invisible elsewhere, especially women, as Fatima Zohra Guechi (2006) and Beshara Doumani (1995) have shown. Historian Hassan Hallak (Hallaq), a leading figure of this social turn in modern Arab history, stresses the importance of these new sources, in his voluminous *Social, Political and Economic History of Beirut and Ottoman Provinces in the 19th Century* (1987). The role played by actors

at the microlevel and outside of the political elite in the emergence of modern cities like Beirut can only be grasped through the close reading of *waqf* foundation records, Shari'a court records, and family archives from the period. For Khalid Ziadeh, too, this new approach fundamentally changed the way modern history was conceived, as it was no longer written from the perspective of external actors, such as bureaucrats, but by various local actors, who challenged power relations and initiated social movements and revolutions (Ziadeh 2017, p. 12). So, while historians of the Ottoman period were quick to adopt the new research agenda, and aptly discussed ordinary individuals' experiences of historical change (Davis et al. 1986, Ze'evi 1998), historians of the (post-Ottoman) contemporary Middle East were still focusing on nationalist struggles against European imperialism (Khouri 1987, Hourani et al. 1993, Gelvin 1998).

More importantly for our discussion, these developments in history demonstrated that ordinariness could be expressed through other nondominant features, such as religion, ethnicity, professional activity or gender, among others (Peirce 2003, Semerdjian 2008). This is exactly where different contributions in this special issue pick up the debate. The ordinariness of Armenians, Jews, Greeks or Muslims discussed in the papers of Nazan Maksudyan, Victoria Abrahamyan, Ellinor Morack and Joel Veldkamp results from an exclusion – on religious grounds – from the ruling elite with which they interact. Similarly, peasants in Kilis in Ramazan Hakkı Öztan's paper, as well as transport entrepreneurs in César Jaquier's work, all embody ordinariness by way of professional activity.

This also applies, perhaps paradoxically, to military professionals, discussed in Thomas Kuehn's paper. The life of Ihsan Hasan Turjman, a soldier in the Ottoman military based in Jerusalem during World War I, is referred to as ordinary by historian Salim Tamari in *The Year of the Locust*, less because his life was uneventful and more because his diary evokes the daily life of thousands of other soldiers like him in remarkable detail (Tamari and Turjman 2015). Similarly, Parsons' political biography of Fawzi al-Qawuqji, based on his memoirs and private papers, sheds light on WW1 and famine from the perspective of an Ottoman officer, who was 'neither wealthy nor poor' (Parsons 2016, pp. 3–37). More generally, a similar figure of the 'ordinary soldier' is celebrated in various war cultures, like the Turkish Mehmetçik Monument located in Polatlı (Ankara Province), or the Monument(s) to the Unknown Soldier (*Nusb al-Jundi al-Majhul*) in Baghdad, among many others around the world, like the British Tommy Atkins or the French *poilu* (Makiya [1991] 2004, pp. 25–29, Baram et al. 2012, pp. 110–112, Akın 2020, pp. 82–96). The trajectory of one ordinary individual – a soldier, a craftsman, a merchant – allows us to encapsulate the trajectories of many others who resembled them, but whose stories have been forgotten or silenced (Trouillot 1995). Put differently, the ordinary soldier plays a symbolic role in the efforts of reconstructing the past of many others supposedly like him.

The ordinary can also be spatially bound: either located outside of the imperial/national administrative centre, or in movement. In Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, Victoria Abrahamyan, César Jaquier and Thomas Kuehn's papers, the location of the actors – far away from the centre or at the margins of a territorial state – excludes them from central decision-making, and, consequently, shapes their ordinariness. Here, spatial ordinariness functions as a tool to overcome methodological problems associated with the persistence of nationalist narratives in historical scholarship. This is particularly true when it comes to the observation of actors operating in peripheral areas such as border zones. Borderlands are spaces where place, identity and power relations intersect over time. Therefore, historians need to explore how the continuous entanglement and conflict between agency (individual strategies) and the constraints imposed on it by embedded structures (the territorial nation-state system, tribal and ethno-religious networks, among many others) shape the evolution of both borderlands and individual identities (Widdis 2015, pp. 175–188). When local and, at times, cross-border dynamics of collaboration between ordinary individuals persisted after imperial collapse, they occasionally resulted in 'unlikely partnerships', as in the case of the first rural settlements for Armenian refugees in the Syrian Jazira (Abrahamyan). These groups' interests must thus be examined

beyond the binary division between the Ottoman state on the one hand, and French (or international, i.e. the League of Nations) colonial rule, on the other.

It should be noted that groups and individuals can embody ordinariness through one of their features and not necessarily in all of them. For instance, in the case of gender, it is true that women who were, say, part of the Ottoman court or of the post-Ottoman ruling elites, were not ordinary from the perspective of their social status. However, female individuals, subjects or citizens, as well as other non-male adult members of a household, constitute a politically underrepresented group, and this places them in a nondominant position. Thomas Kuehn, Funda Soysal and Alp Yenen address the ambivalence of ordinariness in their respective papers by observing the role of families and households during the transitional period, and show how some individuals can, in this regard, be considered partly ordinary. The same applies to some members of religious groups, who can be dominant due to their social status – a Hahambaşı (Chief Rabbi) or an Armenian Patriarch, both appointed by the government in Istanbul after the 1860s – but nondominant due to their status of non-Muslim *millet*s, which excluded them from the religion of the state (*millet-i kahire*).

In the introduction to the two-volume *Ordinary Sudan, 1504–2019: From Social History to Politics from Below*, historians Elena Vezzadini, Iris Seri-Hersch, Lucie Revilla, Anaël Poussier and Mahassin Abdul Jalil make a similar point when they argue that the distinction between rulers and ruled is not always easy to define. For this reason, they stress that restricting the definition of ordinariness to an exclusion from power is a limited approach (2023, p. 8). In fact, ordinariness is relational and anchored in a specific social environment. One can be ordinary according to one person in one context, and elite according to someone else in another. Taking the example of slavery in Ottoman history, Soraya Faroqhi discusses the example of elite enslaved people, or *kul* of the sultan, in relation to non-elite slaveries. Their high status gave them immense power over other slaves and less powerful segments of society. Yet, at the same time, their status vis-à-vis the Court was one of subjection. High-ranking women of the sultan's harem inhabited a similarly ambivalent relation of power, on one hand, with respect to less influential women, and, on the other, as a politically unrepresented group (Faroqhi 2022, p. 25). Particularly in the context of imperial collapse, these relations of domination can be overturned, as in the case of Ellinor Morack's paper on Greek-Turkish relations, where she uses the metaphor of the 'hunter who becomes the hunted'. The ambivalence of these individuals' positions, between dominant and dominated, can arguably be applied to most individuals depicted as ordinary. Against this backdrop, when Funda Soysal and Alp Yenen propose the notion of 'precarious privilege' to describe the position of the relatively wealthy Salonican family members whose trajectories are examined in their contribution to this special issue, they readily express their awareness that individuals are seldom entirely powerful, nor powerless. In this special issue, we would like thus to emphasise that ordinariness is a slippery notion that needs to be located within a 'spectrum of ordinariness' rather than within a systematically binary opposition or fixed status.

### The ordinary as everyday life

In 1993 (1986), Paul Dumont examined the everyday practices of an Ottoman bureaucrat and palace translator, the son of a minister who received his secondary education at the Imperial College of Galatasaray at the beginning of the twentieth century. Between 1901 and 1909 (at least), Said Bey recorded many aspects of his everyday life, that of his wife and other members of the household, in a series of almanacs, preserved by his descendants. These included daily expenses, meetings, meals, errands, seasonal and cultural activities, the salaries of servants, among many other items. Due to the nature of the documents preserved, much less is known about Said Bey's status – apart from the fact that he was a member of the Superior Health Council – than about the flavour of his daily existence. While Said Bey was no ordinary man but a Muslim, Turkish-speaking male member of the imperial state elite, these notebooks document the ordinary, everyday

nature of his life. In this context, *ordinariness* is embedded in a practice carried out on a regular basis by any individual, regardless of his or her social status.

In this discussion, philosophers and cultural anthropologists identify interesting perspectives. Scholars have focused on a variety of rituals, such as carnivals, and identified breaches in the temporal and social order during them, where the social or religious boundaries of the normal order of social life momentarily collapse. Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin writes that ‘the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival’ (Bakhtin [1929] 1984, pp. 122–123). Inspired by his work, anthropologist Victor Turner identifies what he calls the ‘anti-structure’ of the *carnivalesque*, a ‘betwixt and between’ moment when the boundaries of the normal order of life momentarily collapse, and when the extraordinary happens (Turner 1969 [1977], p. 95). There, the carnival is a metaphor for the interruption of the normal course of time, practices and routines, and conversely, the ordinary is located outside of the realm of change, or disruption, and specifically defined in opposition to the extra-ordinary. The ordinary thus pertains to everyday practices, everyday life, everyday language or everyday use (Wittgenstein [1953] 1998, p. 38, De Certeau [1980] 2011, p. 23).

However, while ordinary practices belong to all groups and individuals, they are not entirely devoid of a social dimension. In *The Practice of Everyday Life (L'invention du quotidien)*, Michel de Certeau questions the purpose of ordinary practices and asks why some people maintain them. He identifies in particular a conscious ‘art of practice’, in which ordinary practices constitute a tactic or strategy to reclaim spaces of autonomy from power structures, and in opposition to them. So, while ordinary practices appear to be part of the natural and depoliticised order of things, they can in fact act as a deliberate, yet concealed, act of resistance, or of ‘refusing the instructions’ (De Certeau [1980] 2011, p. 46, Ahmed 2019, p. 199, transl. ours). In this sense, ordinary lives and practices can function as seemingly insignificant yet powerful acts of resistance against a given order. In his contribution to this special issue, César Jaquier makes a similar case about local actors and drivers along the Baghdad-Damascus route, who, by arguing to divert traffic from one route to another in order to benefit local economies, reclaimed spaces of financial agency. Likewise, in Nazan Maksudyan’s paper, the ‘archival act’ of the Armenian scientist Johannes Jacob Manissadjian to refer to his own work as one of mere curator or ordinary cataloguer of objects, despite the ongoing Armenian genocide, can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the idea of catastrophic change.

Here, the repetition of the ordinary practice or task carried out on a regular basis and as part of an uninterrupted routine is of particular importance. While not comparable to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, recent events in the Middle East allow us to substantiate this argument. In the aftermath of the deadly series of earthquakes that struck Turkey and Syria in February 2023, a viral video from Antakya circulated on Twitter. The video shows an antique dealer by the name of Mehmet Serkan Sincan (Instagram Acc. @Nostaljikantakya), who routinely opens his shop and displays various items, while sweeping the sidewalk and removing the dust caused by the earthquake rubble, in an empty street. There is almost no background noise except for the song ‘Wish you were here’ by Pink Floyd, playing on an old cassette player. When asked by a journalist about his acts and apparently surprising attitude, Sincan answers: ‘This is normal, classical life for us ... So we have returned to normal’ (Azhari 2023). Sinan’s choice to repeat and renew his working practices despite the collapsing environment foregrounds the need or the intention of ordinary people to continue practicing an activity after a tragic interruption.

Similar queries led Thierry Boissière and Yoann Morvan to address the question of continuities and discontinuities from the perspective of the ordinary. In *Un Moyen-Orient ordinaire*, they deplore the fact that the Middle East is often examined from the perspective of war, conflict or crisis – in their own words, like a ‘problem that should be solved’ (Boissière and Morvan 2022, pp. 11–16). Consequently, existing scholarly narratives have tended to neglect, if not entirely omit, the uneventful. In focusing their attention on consumption habits and mobilities, they shed light on the everyday life within the framework of social and professional interactions behind the scenes of the crisis, and ask what remains – or persists – of these practices after an episode of

violence. And in the postface to the volume, Hamit Bozarslan draws on the concept of the bazaar economy that he borrows from Clifford Geertz (1978) in order to understand the resilience of ordinary markets and merchants to economic crises. He then proposes to look at the phenomenon from the perspective of an articulation between two opposing dynamics: one based entirely on flexibility and adaptability (what he calls the rhizome effect) and the other on rigidity and the constant reinforcement of legal or political norms (the hard core). In other words, Bozarslan answers that there is often both an element of change and one of continuity. According to him, interdependence between flexibility and rigidity is what allows individuals to face and cope with continuous changes (2022).

### Continuities and ruptures in (Post-)Ottoman spaces

In this regard, the story of Meir Basri, a Jewish Baghdadi economist who was a child when the British army first occupied Baghdad in 1917, is revealing. In his memoirs, *Rihlat al-'Umr (A Life's Journey)*, Basri describes the family chaos that followed the news of the impending arrival of the British: his father and uncle had a business importing weapons from Istanbul to the old city of Baghdad (Khan Za'rur) for Ottoman soldiers based in the city. Once the British had arrived, they spent the night transforming their swords into kitchen knives in order to hide all evidence of their mercantile connections with the Ottoman army, while at the same time being able to continue their business.

In this story, Basri's family intended to sell an object for a purpose other than that for which it was originally created. The 'misuse of the object' – or queer use, in the words of Sara Ahmed – indicates two parallel strategies (Ahmed 2019). One is to maintain an economic practice despite a changing environment, and the other is the will to adapt to the new context. On the one hand, the concealed recycling of an ordinary object is reminiscent of De Certeau's dimension of strategies of ordinary resistance against change. But on the other hand, the decision to stop the initial practice shows its acceptance. While these two strategies – one of change, one of continuity – may first seem at odds with one another, they share a common purpose: they are intended to secure the survival of a working practice considered beneficial.

However, to further complicate the matter, Meir Basri adds that while his father and uncle first strived to maintain the family business, in the long run, the commercial tradition ended:

With the end of the Turkish era in Iraq, when the commercial channels opened to Europe and Japan, they [my father and uncle] could not adapt to the new situation and their business went bankrupt. This is the reason why the next generation in our family avoided business careers. We became state employees, teachers or doctors. (Basri 1991, p. 13)

Here, the generational shift within the family calls into question the capacities of vulnerable men and women to continue their practices after an interruption, because of an unstable context, and despite their will to do so. Although this episode is not representative of the behaviour of all ordinary individuals in the face of uncertainty, it certainly does constitute one example of the various ways and strategies that people put in place in similar circumstances marked by fluidity and change. In other words, what we often call 'the context' does not necessarily determine the choices, actions or attitudes of all individuals. The effects induced by dramatic political changes and lasting periods of upheaval should not only be examined in light of their relation to time and space; scholars should also consider individual and collective perceptions, actions and strategies in the face of such shifting and diverse contexts.

Historians have long sought to understand the transition from empire to nation-state across the region, and in particular elaborating on the theme of continuities and change. In a first stage of history-writing about the Middle East, the dominant Arab, Turkish nationalist and colonial narratives have focused on complete rupture with previous political structures. These narratives attempted to erase the Ottoman heritage in politics, culture and education, as if processes of modernisation (modern education, health and politics, among others) had not occurred in the Ottoman empire

that surrounded these societies. In order to shape national futures, the imperial past needed to be consciously forgotten, neglected and, to a certain extent, hidden (Méouchy 2002, Méouchy and Slugett 2004, Aksakal 2014, pp. 17–33, Pedersen 2015, Rogan 2015, Ouahes 2018). More recently, however, scholars have paid more attention to the dynamics of *transition*. As shown by Michael Provence's study on Arab insurgency during the interwar period, examining the political trajectories of actors who lived parts of their adult life during the two periods – imperial and national – necessarily implies some sort of continuity, despite undeniable expressions of disruption, and even despite the desire of some of these individuals to forget about their own pasts (Provence 2017, Minawi 2023).

In particular, the ways in which individuals reclaimed or rejected Ottoman heritage in identity-making have given rise to a number of studies in the past few decades (Yilmaz and Yosmaoglu 2008, Alleaume 2010, Houry 2010, Mills et al. 2011, Göçek 2012, Ginio and Kaser 2013, Schlaepfer et al. 2020). The choice to preserve, or to continue to identify with, Ottomanness differed, occasionally among members of the same family, as the example of the Damascene al-'Azm (or Azmzade) family after the imperial collapse, examined by Mustafa Minawi, shows. Some opted to quickly 'reinvent themselves' (Minawi 2023, p. 180) and redefine their identities. For instance, Talib Mushtaq, an Iraqi diplomat who was educated in Istanbul before he returned to Iraq in search of work opportunities, recalls in his memoirs a train ride from Istanbul to Aleppo during which he met two Arab nationalists from Iraq. He explains how this event was enough to convince him of the necessity of Arab nationalism: 'We had been Ottomans until that moment, but we became Arab with an identity among the nations, a state among the states, and a flag among flags' (Wien 2006, p. 30, citing Mushtaq 1968, p. 52). Others, however, preferred to either remain Ottoman loyalists long after the end of Empire, or emphasised the hybridity of their identity in the long run. While analysing the diary of Amir Adil Arslan, the Syro-Lebanese Arab nationalist and brother of the well-known politician Shakib Arslan, written between 1934 and 1953, Juliette Honvault shows that more than two decades after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Arslan's diary still expressed different layers of identity, highlighting both Arab and Ottoman origins (Honvault 2010).

Similarly, Benjamin Fortna adds of language and education in the early Turkish Republic, that 'transition often entail(s) change, both superficial and profound, and it would be wrong to deny any number of important modifications between imperial and republican culture. Yet (there are) a remarkable series of continuities' (Fortna 2011). Orçun Can Okan makes a similar argument in his work on the claims made by former Ottoman citizens whose lands now lay in the territory of neighbouring countries. The newly-established borders in the Middle East after World War I did not bring about an immediate division of former Ottoman territories into complete units with hermetically-sealed domestic spheres. Rather, they served, 'key purposes in implementing state succession and regime change in lands previously subject to Ottoman imperial rule' (Okan 2022, p. 60).

Politically speaking, too, the dismemberment of the Ottoman state led to a series of crises in internal governance, most notably within ruling structures of the non-Muslim *millet* communities. On the one hand, 'the legacy of the ethnoreligious organisation of the Ottoman Empire was by no means entirely eradicated, and continued to shape notions of polity and community long after the fall of the Ottoman state' (Tejel 2012, p. 89). The hybridity of this new model is what Paul Rowe has named the 'neo-millet system' (Rowe 2007). But on the other hand, its collapse led to a political void that took decades to fill. In some cases, even, it never did, and resulted in the community's total disappearance, as Joel Vedlkamp argues in his contribution on Jews in Aleppo, and L. Carl Brown concludes, somewhat more bluntly: 'Never total change, never total continuity' (Brown 1996, p. 8).

While the debate on continuities and ruptures has been instructive, existing accounts tend to focus on the experiences of the empire's elites, in so far as they related to the course of politics in new national capitals. In this special issue, however, we examine the lives and experiences of ordinary Ottomans whose voices, paths and personal trajectories are often left out in these existing top-down historical narratives. In other words, we aim to question how 'transitional ordinary Ottomans' – as opposed to the elites – experienced the end of the Empire. Were ordinary groups, individuals or

practices more prone to continuity and more resilient than the central political elite? And how were ordinary practices affected by these changes? Is it true that the further away groups are from the collapsing imperial structure, the less they are impacted by disruption? Or, on the contrary, were ordinary individuals, who were more vulnerable subjects or citizens, more subject to change, as Meir Basri's swords and knives story suggests? And most importantly, how 'Ottoman' can somebody remain in a post-Ottoman era and can he or she be defined as Ottoman at all, considering the strong connection the word 'Ottoman' has with a state apparatus, administration and political elite – from which the ordinary individual is often excluded?

In this regard, Jordanian historians Hind Sha'r and 'Abdallah al-'Assaf provide useful epistemological tools for us to think about experiences of the end of Empire beyond the issue of Ottoman legacies. In the introduction of a book on the history of the city of Zarqa, published by the Jordanian Ministry of Culture, the author stresses the necessity of examining local sources 'dating back to the Ottoman era' (*ta'ud ila al-'ahd al-'uthmani*) or the 'Ottoman period' for scholars to better understand modern Jordanian history (Abu al-Sha'r and 'Assaf (al-) 2013, pp. 5–6). By intentionally avoiding the use of Ottomanness as an identity-marker and, instead, framing it as a time-marker relevant to what ensued, they relocate the debate to a different and perhaps more fruitful discussion. In fact, examining what happened both before *and* after the imperial collapse – without asking whether a given element should or should not be identified as Ottoman – allows us to focus on how groups and individuals coped with these changes, rather than attempting to define them. We therefore encourage the use of 'Ottoman-era' rather than 'Ottoman' when possible.

### Ordinary archives

The aforementioned story of the Istanbul townsman Said Bey, a man known to be a relatively wealthy member of the Ottoman state elite and whose private notebooks almost exclusively documented his everyday life, shows how the nature of documents shapes history-writing. The archive does not allow us to shed light on his role as a member of the Superior Health Council. However, it can be used as a model to better understand the work, employment, consumption and leisure practices of a typical middle-class urban household. Said Bey is therefore a good example of how history *can* be written. Sadly, however, this man is hardly representative of the sources usually available to historians through archives. Indeed, a major problem that historians still face today is the relative absence of the perspectives, practices and aspirations of ordinary men and women. While ordinary individuals compose the majority of the population, they often depend upon the structure that makes them – or makes them not – visible. And because ordinary practices are often considered unworthy of attention, they either go unnoticed, or are not documented at all. At best, ordinary lives and practices appear as 'fleeting shadows and elusive ghosts' (Choueiri 2013, p. 200). But social historians worldwide have given more and more importance to alternative historical sources, in order to overturn the trend. The popularity of Jacques-Olivier Boudon's *Le plancher de Joachim* (2019), in which the historian analyses the testimony of a nineteenth century French carpenter who himself documented the everyday life practices of his family and employers by writing under the floorboards of a castle he worked on, is a good illustration of that phenomenon (Kalifa 2017).

Similarly, family archives, papers and collections, such as those discussed in the contributions of Funda Soysal and Alp Yenen, or ego-documents such as autobiographical anecdotes (*maqamat*) or memoirs – the latter used in Victoria Abrahamyan and Ellinor Morack's contributions – as well as bio – and hagiographies allow us to examine previously unexplored segments of a society. Likewise, the study of individual and family correspondence and family books sheds new light on the subjective experience of migration and the diaspora context (Nazan Maksudyan), while also informing us more generally about the daily lives of ordinary individuals.

Traditionally, ego-documents were mainly used to illustrate either the evolution of 'collective mentalities' or general arguments, thereby neglecting their epistemological status in their own right (Ruggiu 2014, p. 14). Against this backdrop, social historians have demonstrated that,

indeed, ego-documents constitute a precious material with which we can, on the one hand, explore a wide range of thematic approaches and, on the other, propose a way of countering top-down historical narratives. Notwithstanding this, because letters, memoirs, diaries, family books or travelogues are written to be read, they are not simply open windows through which the historian can discover the real thoughts and lives of their creators or main actors. Like any other historical source, ego-documents need to be contextualised and equally importantly, they must be critically analysed in relation to series of similar texts in order to better understand the conditions under which they are produced. It is only through the combination of these operations that we are able to tackle not only the apparent banality of some frequent formulations, but also the silences and disguises in these documents (Chartier and Jouhaud 1989, pp. 53–79). With these methods, the historian is able to (partly) restore the agency of ordinary trajectories.

Ego-documents, however, are not the only way for historians to delve into the ordinary lives of individuals and groups. Borderlands scholars, for instance, use a wide range of records (correspondence, statistics, land claims, penal pursuits, etc.) exchanged by border authorities that account for the everyday practices – border crossings, raids, smuggling, conflicts over land property, among many others – in the peripheral zones of the Middle East (Ateş 2013, Ellis 2018, Aras 2020, Tejel and Öztan 2022, Tejel 2023). By doing so, they underscore social dynamics that are very often unknown in the political centre (Thomas Kuehn, Ramazan Hakkı Öztan).

Finally, cultural studies and material history have also emphasised the importance of non-written sources, such as oral testimonies and objects, as potential avenues of access to ordinariness. In the 1970s, for instance, proponents of the ‘narrative turn’ suggested that oral testimony was a key tool to trace the history of the invisible and the subaltern (Portelli 1997). As a result, a series of initiatives to collect oral stories emerged in different contexts, including in the Palestinian diaspora as a way not only to produce a counter-narrative regarding the *Nakba* or Catastrophe of 1948 but also to compensate for the lack of Palestinian written records due to political constraints and their physical destruction (Sayigh 1994, Palestine Remembered *s.d.*, Nakba Archive 2002). Unsurprisingly, this was followed by scholars developing an interest in studying the material culture of Palestinians. They used this as a resource to shed light on a national identity that was endangered by the long-lasting effects of forced displacement (Sherwell 1996, pp. 293–303, Kawar 2011). Be that as it may, the whole historical profession has a role to play, because all these sources need historians behind them to make them accessible to contemporary readers. In the long run, the rising number of professional historians, such as Alp Yenen and Funda Soysal, who are researching and publishing material on their own families contributes to better insight into and visibility of ordinary lives and stories, as both historians and descendants (Field 2022).

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## Notes on contributors

*Aline Schlaepfer* is an Associate Professor at the University of Geneva (Arab studies) and the PI of the project “Ottoman afterlife in new Arab states” (University of Basel). She is the author of *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad. Discours et allégeances, 1908-1951* (Brill 2016). Her work focuses on the intellectual, social and political history of the Ottoman Empire in Arab spaces, the history of Jewish-Arab and Arab-Turkish relations, nationalism and minorities in Arab spaces.

*Jordi Tejel* is Research Professor of contemporary history at the University of Neuchâtel. His research focuses on border relations, nationalism, minority issues, and trans-imperialism in the Middle East. He has notably authored *Rethinking*

State and Border Formation in the Middle East: Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi Borderlands (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), and co-edited Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

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