


ARTICLE

# Outliving an Empire: Mehmed Ziya, the Former Ottoman Bureaucrat, and His Pension Claim across Post-Ottoman Lebanon and Cyprus in the 1920s

Orçun Can Okan 

Scuola Superiore Meridionale, University of Naples Federico II, Napoli, Italy and Faculty of History, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom  
[orcun.okan@history.ox.ac.uk](mailto:orcun.okan@history.ox.ac.uk)

This article examines how a former Ottoman bureaucrat claimed his retirement pension in interactions with state officials in post-Ottoman Turkey, Syria–Lebanon and Cyprus in the 1920s. Born in Cyprus in 1856 and in Ottoman state service for more than three decades until 1916, Mehmed Ziya had to make renewed efforts to continue receiving his pension until he died in 1936. His troubles were largely due to the need to reconfigure enduring links to the Ottoman state amidst state succession after the First World War. I focus mainly on the diplomatic and administrative correspondence generated by Ziya's initiatives to examine how he sought to address a pressing, quotidian problem. I stress that nationality, as a pivotal category in the reconfiguration of state–subject relations in former imperial domains, played a key role in shaping how Ziya outlived his empire.

In July 1936, Mehmed Ziya passed away at the age of eighty in a village called Pyla near present-day Larnaca on the island of Cyprus.<sup>1</sup> The empire Ziya had served for much of his life, the Ottoman Empire, had been consigned to history over a decade before him. Following defeat in the First World War, the Ottoman state was no longer around to support the former bureaucrat in his old age. Nevertheless, Ziya sought to retain his Ottoman pension. As he tried to continue receiving it through appeals to officials in the new states of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Cyprus, the word 'Pileli', indicating his origins in that small village near Larnaca, remained constant in how he qualified his identity. As different states used different languages and alphabets, this word appeared in official documents variously as PILALI, BILALI and at times even as BELALI (literally 'the troublesome' in Turkish). Perhaps some pun was intended in the last of these spellings, as officials on different sides of the Mediterranean repeatedly had to address Ziya's attempts to retain his pension. In the last twenty years of his life, this former imperial bookkeeper argued his case with the ability of a seasoned bureaucrat and the determination of an old man in need. Although he found the strength to argue and insist, Ziya was constantly vulnerable due to health problems and poverty. It was unlikely that he would succeed in his endeavour, but he kept at it until his death.

In what follows, I historicise Mehmed Ziya's pension claim in ways that neither trivialise nor aggrandise the agency he was able to exercise. In the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire, the lives of many former imperial subjects were still shaped by enduring links to the defunct Ottoman state. In the case of retired bureaucrats like Ziya, this link came in the form of an entitlement to a pension.

<sup>1</sup> This village is now located in the United Nations Buffer Zone between the southern and northern parts of the island of Cyprus. Among the areas inhabited in this buffer zone (by about 10,000 people in total), Pyla is noted by the UN to be currently 'the only village where Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots live side by side'. See <https://unficyp.unmissions.org/about-buffer-zone> (last visited 15 Feb. 2024).

Tracing Ziya's pension claim helps us to interpret how these specific links to imperial structures were reconfigured after the First World War as part of broader processes of state succession. Nationality, as the legal link of an individual to state authority, was a pivotal category in efforts to navigate state succession. It was an essential category, therefore, in shaping Ziya's experiences of the broader political and administrative changes that took place around him.<sup>2</sup> His nationality status remained an issue Ziya had to address in interactions with state officials all the way into his seventies, as the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire continued throughout and beyond the 1920s.

In this article, I propose to distinguish between the dissolution and the dismantling of an empire. With this distinction I aim to highlight the difference between an empire's loss of territory over long stretches of time and a process characterised by regime change and state succession. While Mehmed Ziya lived through many unsettling episodes in the *dissolution* of the Ottoman Empire in his youth, as an old man in the 1920s he experienced episodes in the *dismantling* of Ottoman institutions and practices of governance.<sup>3</sup> Ziya's home island of Cyprus had been taken over in 1878 by the British Empire following the devastating Ottoman defeat in the 1877–8 Russo–Ottoman war. In the decades until 1918, the Ottoman Empire continued to lose territory in multiple regions on multiple continents. However, after the First World War, there were new dimensions to the challenges Ottoman officials like Ziya had to navigate. By the 1920s, rather than a new episode in a series of defeats that shrunk Ottoman territories in a piecemeal fashion, the wholesale dismantling of the empire was underway through the abolition of Ottoman dynastic rule and treaty stipulations that guided state succession.

In contrast to a vast body of relevant literature that revolves around inter-communal conflicts, nationalism(s) and political loyalties, my analysis of Ziya's pension claim foregrounds this context of empire dismantling, state succession and questions of nationality. While ethnic and religious identity featured significantly in his claim, Ziya managed to continue receiving his pension essentially because he was able to overcome obstacles about nationality status. The discussion below illustrates this by approaching the question of imperial afterlives in terms of 'supranational or transnational governance' rather than focusing on 'nostalgia, or on ethnic conflict, or the internal dynamics and memory politics of the successor states'.<sup>4</sup> Employing this approach is essential given the premises of Ziya's pension claim. He needed to initiate and navigate interactions with more than one state, not because he sought payment from more than one source but because his circumstances compelled him to request the understanding and support of more than one state to continue receiving his Ottoman pension.

Ziya had earned his pension in return for services to the Ottoman Empire, and was a retiree residing in Beirut when Ottoman forces withdrew from the city in 1918. He would eventually need to receive his pension from the French Mandate in Syria–Lebanon, not as an Ottoman national but with a new nationality status. What made things especially complex for Ziya was that his

<sup>2</sup> Nationality is the term I employ in this historical context, rather than comparable terms such as citizenship, for example, because the former comes closer to conveying the sense of a legal link to state authority rather than membership in a body politic. For several recent studies that insightfully engage with terms such as nationality, citizenship, subjecthood and legal belonging, see Jessica M. Marglin, *The Shamama Case: Contesting Citizenship Across the Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022); Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, 'Classifying the Cartozians: Rethinking the Politics of Visibility Alongside Ottoman Subjecthood and American Citizenship', *Photographies* 15, no. 3 (2022): 349–80; Daniela L. Caglioti, *War and Citizenship: Enemy Aliens and National Belonging from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> This is a distinction I propose as analytically useful for the purposes of this article. I don't suggest a rigid dichotomy between these two terms, assume fixed meanings for each and employ them as the only available options. Indeed, analyses that work with only one of these terms, say 'dissolution', can also facilitate nuanced, useful interpretations of the 'end' of empires. For instance, see Hendrik Spruyt, 'The End of Empires: Developing a Comparative Research Agenda for Imperial Dissolution in the Modern Era', *Acta Politica* 32, no. 1 (1997): 25–48.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Becker and Natasha Wheatley, eds., *Remaking Central Europe: The League of Nations and the Former Habsburg Lands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.

circumstances forced him to move back to his village in Cyprus in 1919 in search of a less expensive life there with his relatives. After moving back, he would seek to receive his pension in Cyprus. Although he could expect to receive pension payments only from Syria–Lebanon under French Mandate, for reasons elaborated below, Ziya’s return to Cyprus undermined the continuation of these payments because his departure from (what became) Lebanon caused him problems in relation to his nationality. In this situation, nationality for Ziya was far from a technicality to be quickly settled and pushed aside after the Ottoman demise. It was central to navigating a situation shaped by diplomatic interactions and movement across land and sea. Moving beyond country-specific narratives of transition from empire to nation-state is essential for interpreting such situations.

Ultimately, tracing a case like Ziya’s highlights a layer between ‘international’ spheres of interaction and ‘domestic’ dynamics of successor states. Postwar peace conferences were undeniably important in shaping the economic consequences of the war – and of empire – for individuals like Ziya. However, there is still much to be unpacked in terms of *how* those conferences were consequential for former Ottomans in specific, ‘mundane’ situations like Ziya’s.<sup>5</sup> Although it remains by and large neglected by historians, pensions for services rendered to the defunct Ottoman Empire were in fact debated at the peace conference in Lausanne. In addition to highlighting the ‘international’ grounds of postwar peace-making and empire-dismantling, this debate underscores how imperial structures were interpreted differently on those ‘international’ grounds. Even among and within successor states to the same empire, there were significant differences of approach to matters of pension. Ziya’s case illustrates how ‘topics of discussion’ in peace conferences were pressing issues for individuals to navigate in practice, on a daily basis, at intersections of ‘international’ and ‘national’ spheres of interaction. It is these intersections that reveal some of the most striking insights into how an empire was outlived by one of its many servants, a former bureaucrat whose Ottoman world was indeed shaken before but had never quite collapsed the way it did in the 1920s.

### Witnessing Dissolution and Dismantling

In the long sequence of Ottoman losses of imperial territory, which I frame here as the Ottoman Empire’s dissolution, the 1870s was a critical stage. Following their alliance with the Ottomans against Russia in the Crimean War of 1853–6, the major states of Europe had sought to avert conflict among themselves by upholding the formal territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-1870s, however, separatist pressures in the Balkans evolved into a series of crises in ‘the annus horribilis of 1876’, as described by the historian Edhem Eldem, following which the Ottoman Empire suffered a disastrous military defeat against Russia in the war of 1877–8.<sup>7</sup> While the more immediate consequences of the military defeat were somewhat softened at the expense of Russia at the Berlin Congress of 1878, these years nonetheless marked the beginning of what the historian Amzi-Erdogdular describes as ‘the afterlife of Ottoman Europe’.<sup>8</sup> The Treaty of Berlin and the accompanying international agreements that formed a wider settlement in the period from 1878–81 led to

<sup>5</sup> Interactions with states were particularly consequential in shaping ‘the mundane’ for some social actors such as retired civil servants. One useful way to think about ‘the mundane’ is to ask ‘how people lived within, around, and against the state structures they encountered daily in a time of political uncertainty, economic scarcity, and widespread regional upheaval’. Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 18.

<sup>6</sup> This approach to Ottoman territorial integrity would then change significantly in the period from the mid-1850s to the mid-1870s. See Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 110–23.

<sup>7</sup> The period from 1876–8 also witnessed the first (albeit brief) constitutional period in Ottoman history. According to Eldem, ‘the real loss’ the Ottoman Empire incurred after ‘the sequence of catastrophes that followed 1876’ was that they ‘put an end to the Tanzimat, that period of westernization and reform led by the bureaucratic elite of the empire’. Edhem Eldem, ‘Sultan Abdülhamid II: Founding Father of the Turkish State?’, *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 5, no. 2 (2018): 41–2.

<sup>8</sup> Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular, *The Afterlife of Ottoman Europe: Muslims in Habsburg Bosnia Herzegovina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

huge losses of Ottoman territory in the Balkans, the Caucasus and North Africa.<sup>9</sup> These included Mehmed Ziya's home island Cyprus, which was placed under British administration through a convention signed in the lead-up to the Berlin Congress, in return for a British promise of intervention on the side of the Ottomans in the case of future aggression from Russia.<sup>10</sup>

Mehmed Ziya was in his early twenties in 1878. The roughly three decades of service he rendered to the Ottoman state was mostly under the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II. During this period, the sultan's modernising autocratic rule increased the power of state institutions and strengthened transportation and communication links across distant provinces. Islam gained a new ascendancy in the use and legitimation of power in this 'Hamidian' era, in an empire where Muslims came to constitute an even higher percentage of the population after the displacements that followed Ottoman defeats in the Balkans in the 1870s.<sup>11</sup> Ziya also witnessed the rise to power of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) with the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, which restored a constitutional regime in the empire and ushered in an era of political parties and elections. Aspirations to 'save the state' and revolutionary ideals about liberty, justice and unity were initially shared by Ottomans from various backgrounds who opposed Hamidian 'despotism'. Soon, however, these aspirations and ideals gave way to increased state centralisation and violence amidst competing nationalisms.<sup>12</sup>

Although the Ottoman Empire continued to suffer humiliating defeats from 1908 to 1916, the year Ziya retired in his last position at the directorate of provincial treasury in Aleppo, the empire's ultimate collapse was far from a foregone conclusion. True, if the Ottoman defeat against the Italians in Libya in 1911–12 was injurious, the defeat in the Balkan Wars in 1912–13 was mortifying. But on the eve of the First World War, saving the empire and restoring its political standing were still potent motives for many Ottomans, not least for leading members of the CUP.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in the initial stages of the war,

<sup>9</sup> As part of this settlement, Russia occupied Bessarabia and the provinces of Kars, Ardahan and Batum; Serbia, Montenegro and Rumania gained formal independence; Austria-Hungary occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina and established military control over Novibazar (dividing Serbia and Montenegro); southern parts of the Bulgarian principality (envisioned as much larger in the earlier San Stefano Treaty) became the autonomous province of Eastern Rumelia; Macedonia was restored to the Ottoman Empire but on condition of implementing pro-Christian reforms; the Six Provinces of Eastern Anatolia would remain Ottoman provinces but reforms were to be enacted to protect the Armenians. Hanioglu, *A Brief History*, 121–3. Informal understandings in the course of the Berlin Congress (mainly among French, German and British statesmen) also facilitated the seizure of Tunis by France in May 1881 and the British occupation of Egypt later in 1882. Feroze A. K. Yasamee, 'European Equilibrium or Asiatic Balance of Power?: The Ottoman Search for Security in the Aftermath of the Congress of Berlin', in M. Hakan Yavuz with Peter Sluglett, eds., *War and Diplomacy: The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the Treaty of Berlin* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011), 56–8.

<sup>10</sup> The British goal of securing payback for earlier loans to the Ottomans was among the motives of this takeover. As several studies that are particularly relevant here, see Şükrü Sina Gürel, *History of Cyprus 1878–1960: Colonialism, Nationalism and International Politics (Kıbrıs Tarihi 1878–1960: Kolonyalizm, Ulusçuluk ve Uluslararası Politika)* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 2020 (first publ. 1984)); Andrekos Varnava, *British Cyprus and the Long Great War, 1914–1925: Empire, Loyalties and Democratic Deficit* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); İlia Xypolia, 'Imperial Bending of Rules: The British Empire, the Treaty of Lausanne, and Cypriot Immigration to Turkey', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 32, no. 4 (2021): 674–91.

<sup>11</sup> On the Hamidian era, see Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 17–51; Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); Benjamin Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); François Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II: Le Sultan Calife (1876–1909)* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> On the Young Turks, the CUP and the 1908 Revolution, see Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Noémi Lévy-Aksu and François Georgeon, eds., *The Young Turk Revolution and the Ottoman Empire: The Aftermath of 1908* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017); Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor: The Rôle of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish National Movement, 1908–1926* (Leiden: Brill, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> For more on the wider contexts of these motives, see Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Kate Dannies and Stefan Hock, 'A Prolonged Abrogation? The Capitulations, the 1917 Law of Family Rights, and the Ottoman Quest for Sovereignty during

Ottoman defences did succeed on some fronts, for example in Gallipoli. Yet defeats and losses of territory continued from southern Iraq to northeastern Anatolia.<sup>14</sup> In late 1918, it must have been difficult for Ziya to see that the Allies and Arab forces occupied vast Ottoman territories including Beirut, the home he had chosen for his retirement. Even then, the end Ziya witnessed to the Ottoman rule in Beirut in 1918 did not have to be the ultimate end for the Ottoman Empire as a whole. That ultimate end came about more as a result of what happened after the war.<sup>15</sup>

Following the Armistice of Mudros in October 1918, the defeated Ottomans began to witness Allied (and Allied-supported) occupations in the territories that had still been under their control at the time of the ceasefire. This included the occupation of Izmir by Greece in May 1919, and that of Istanbul, the only imperial capital to be occupied after the First World War.<sup>16</sup> Fuelled by the resentment and concern these occupations caused, especially among the empire's Muslims, a national resistance movement took shape in Anatolia and grew in defiance of the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres that the Ottoman government signed with the Allies in August 1920. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), this movement mobilised and organised resources to fight foreign occupations as well as the Ottoman government, which had declared the movement's leaders mischievous rebels to be executed.<sup>17</sup> After almost three years of fighting in addition to the First World War itself, the government of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT) defeated the Greek army in western Anatolia and signed a new armistice in October 1922 as the victorious side. Following this new armistice, once it was sensed that the Ottoman government in Istanbul entertained the idea of securing a seat at the new peace conference, the GNAT abolished the Ottoman sultanate in November 1922 and sent to Lausanne its own delegation as the only sovereign state authority in Turkey. After long negotiations that necessitated a second round, a peace treaty to end the state of war in 'the East' was finally signed in July 1923.

---

World War I', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 2 (2020): 245–60; Feroz Ahmad, 'Ottoman Perceptions of the Capitulations, 1800–1914', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2000): 1–20.

- <sup>14</sup> There is a rapidly growing literature on the First World War in Ottoman domains. As examples in English that are particularly relevant here, see Tylor Brand, *Famine Worlds: Life at the Edge of Suffering in Lebanon's Great War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023); Çiğdem Oğuz, *Moral Crisis in the Ottoman Empire: Society, Politics, and Gender During WWI* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021); Yiğit Akın, *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Melanie Tanielian, *The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Elif Mahir Metinsoy, *Ottoman Women during World War I: Everyday Experiences, Politics and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's Governorate during World War I, 1914–17* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- <sup>15</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Ryan Gingeras, *Fall of the Sultanate: The Great War and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- <sup>16</sup> As of 16 Mar. 1920, the Ottoman parliament was suspended by force and a formal Allied occupation that would last about three and a half years began. This period has been subject to renewed scholarly attention in recent years. See, for example, the 2022 volume of *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* for a special dossier on occupied Istanbul coedited by Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal and Gizem Tongo; Burak Sayım, 'Occupied Istanbul as a Comintern Hub: Sailors, Soldiers, and Post-Imperial Networks (1918–1923)', *Itinerario* 46, no. 1 (2022): 128–49; Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal and Gizem Tongo, *A Bibliography of Armistice-Era Istanbul, 1918–1923*, *BIAA Electronic Monographs* 12 (London: British Institute at Ankara, 2022); Nur Bilge Criss, *Istanbul under Allied Occupation, 1918–1923* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
- <sup>17</sup> The Ottoman verdict for the execution of Mustafa Kemal, Kara Vasıf, Ali Fuad, Alfred Rüstem, Dr. Adnan and Halide Edib was approved by Sultan Vahideddin on 24 May 1920. Relevant documents are available for reference in Murat Bardakçı, *Collapse and Foundation: Documents of the Ottoman Empire's Collapse and the Foundation of the Republic of Turkey (Yıkılış ve Kuruluş: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Çöküş ve Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin Kuruluş Belgeleri)* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2018), 171–2. Many other leading figures of the movement in Ankara would likewise receive death sentences by mid-1920. Although the struggle between Ankara and Istanbul was crucial in shaping particular afterlives for the Ottoman Empire, it is frequently pushed aside in favour of what are at times rather simplistic emphases on continuity, for various reasons within and beyond Turkey. There is, however, a vast literature in especially Turkish that makes this struggle hard to overlook. For example, see Sina Akşin, *Civil War and Death at Sèvres (İç Savaş ve Sevr'de Ölümler)* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2010).

Together, the abolition of the sultanate and this peace treaty set in motion the wholesale dismantling of the empire. This was different from loss of territory or change in the form of sovereignty over particular provinces. These events set the stage for the empire's dismantling as thoroughly as possible, in a context of state succession steered by new political regimes keen to do away with the Ottoman Empire at its core as well as in the provinces.<sup>18</sup>

Before the dismantling of the empire, former Ottomans, including state officials like Mehmed Ziya, experienced waves of violence and displacement during the empire's long decades of dissolution. In this regard, while Ziya's experiences were similar to other Ottomans' in some ways, they were more particular in some other ways. In the years between 1878, the year when Ziya's Cyprus was lost, and the end of the First World War in 'the East' in 1923, millions of Ottomans, including (but not only) Turks, Greeks, Kurds, Arabs and Armenians, suffered systematic dispossession, displacement and massacres in lands struck by war, famine and plague. Before, during and after the First World War, forced migration and mass violence made particular portions of Ottoman lands increasingly more homogenous in terms of the inhabitants' ethnicity and religion.<sup>19</sup> State officials like Ziya were not immune to these waves of violence and displacement. Ties to an imperial state meant that they could rely on a long-term source of support (at least on paper), but the same ties also meant exposure to migration and violence, often at the very forefront of conflicts in multiple locales. Already by the outbreak of the First World War, leaving home behind in lands that eventually became another country was an experience widely shared among Ottoman officials.<sup>20</sup> Unlike many leading figures of early republican Turkey, however, when Ziya faced defeat and loss again in 1918 he did not have a career to look forward to as a young man. Nor did he share an ethnic identity and native language with a majority population in either Cyprus or what was to become Lebanon. He left and moved not to recuperate and prepare for the next fight, but essentially to live out what remained of his life in peace.

When Ziya learned of the end brought to the Ottoman Empire by the Ankara government and of the peace treaty thereafter signed in Lausanne in July 1923, he had already left Beirut for his village in Cyprus. By that point, the League of Nations centred in Geneva had 'entrusted' France with a mandate over Syria–Lebanon, and Britain with mandates in neighbouring Palestine and Mesopotamia/Iraq.

<sup>18</sup> Although this context of state succession has yet to receive the attention it deserves, 'the end of empire' is examined in various useful ways in the Ottoman context, problematising, also, what that 'end' meant for whom. As some examples in English, cf. Michael Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Hasan Kayali, *Imperial Resilience: The Great War's End, Ottoman Longevity, and Incidental Nations* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021); Christine Philliou, *Turkey: A Past Against History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021); Mostafa Minawi, *Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of the Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> The literature on these interlinked processes is vast and continues to expand rapidly. For some examples that reflect (hopefully to some extent) the diversity of relevant works, see Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821–1922* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995); Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores: Violence, Ethnicity, and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1912–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Uğur Ü. Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Ronald G. Suny, Fatma M. Göçek and Norman M. Naimark, eds., *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Umut Özsü, *Formalizing Displacement: International Law and Population Transfers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Emre Erol, *The Ottoman Crisis in Western Anatolia: Turkey's Belle Epoque and the Transition to a Modern Nation State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016); William Holt, *Balkan Reconquista and Turkey's Forgotten Refugee Crisis* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019); Laura Robson, *The Politics of Mass Violence in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Ümit Kurt, *The Armenians of Aintab: The Economics of Genocide in an Ottoman Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Ramazan H. Öztan and Alp Yenen, eds., *Age of Rogues: Rebels, Revolutionaries and Racketeers at the Frontiers of Empires* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> As the historian Zürcher points out, 'no less than half of the people who led the new republic came from areas that were lost by the empire in the period 1911–13'. Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy and Nation Building: From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk's Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 107. See also Emre Erol, 'The Founding Generations' Representativeness in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (1920–50): Visualizing and Analyzing the Refugee Experience with Digital Humanities', *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 9, no. 2 (2022): 97–101.

In Turkey, a new republic was founded in October 1923, and Ziya expressed deep respect for its leaders as he sought their help in August 1924 with receiving his Ottoman pension. He could expect pension payments only from the French Mandate in Syria–Lebanon, because his habitual residence in Beirut in 1918 had rendered him a national of the state established there and Article 61 of the Treaty of Lausanne stipulated the following: ‘The recipients of Turkish [Ottoman] civil and military pensions who acquire under the present Treaty the nationality of a State other than Turkey, shall have no claim against the Turkish Government in respect of their pensions’.<sup>21</sup> This article did not offer quick solutions to specific cases, but it underscored the centrality of nationality in the evaluation of pension claims. Since the question of where one resided at which point in time was directly linked to nationality status, Ziya knew that his postwar movement from Lebanon to Cyprus complicated his situation. He made significant reference to nationality status and Article 61 in his appeals, as elaborated below. To navigate political transformations with large scope, he needed to apply treaty stipulations to his particular circumstances and claims. He sought strength from these stipulations because they were upheld by international agreements that aimed to regulate a crucial broader process: state succession.

Rather than an event, state succession was a long and multifaceted process that unfolded *across* the former domains of the Ottoman Empire. The interactions former imperial bureaucrats generated as part of their pension claims highlight state succession as a generator of the cross-border ‘international’ dimensions of imperial collapse. This regrettably remains by and large off the radar of studies on transnational and/or international phenomena.<sup>22</sup> As in many other cases similar to Mehmed Ziya’s, it was essentially problems of state succession that generated the need to navigate an imperial afterlife across new borders. In a context where the nation-state form steadily acquired increasing political force and currency, Ziya was nonetheless compelled to initiate interaction across ‘national’ units to solve problems with concrete, material stakes.<sup>23</sup> While he did manage to reach beyond borders with his appeals, Ziya was far from trying to advance a particular ideology, promote internationalist collaboration or contribute to the work of some international institution.<sup>24</sup> In trying to reach beyond borders, Ziya’s aim was not to bring about change in the borders of a nation-state or in the world at large. What motivated him was not hunger for profit or thirst for discovering new horizons. It was his vulnerability in old age, his need, his pressing circumstances in poor health.

Historicising Mehmed Ziya’s pension claim facilitates interpreting the agency of state servants like him. The central figures in narratives on the end of the Ottoman Empire still tend to be military and political leaders, members of affluent families or intellectual figures.<sup>25</sup> Retired civil servants remain at the margins, not least because their agency was often significantly constrained after the demise of their empire.<sup>26</sup> Ziya remained distant to higher echelons of power throughout his career. He did not play

<sup>21</sup> See *The Treaties of Peace 1919–1923*, vol. 2 (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924), 984.

<sup>22</sup> To my knowledge, this still includes even the studies that do acknowledge ‘the continuing relevance of states in investigations into transnational or international phenomena’. See Jessica Reinisch, ‘Introduction: Agents of Internationalism’, *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 2 (2016): 199–200.

<sup>23</sup> Focusing on these interactions is distinct from comparative inquiries into how specific aspects of Ottoman legal norms and administrative practices fared in different post-Ottoman contexts. See, as a recent example of the latter approach, Alexis Rappas, ‘European Imperial Rule through Ottoman Land Law: British Cyprus, the Italian Dodecanese, and French Mandatory Syria’, *Itinerario* 46, no. 1 (2022): 109–27. A vibrant field of inquiry into interactions across former imperial domains is that of studies on borders and borderlands. For some recent examples, see Jordi Tejel and Ramazan H. Öztan, eds., *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918–1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> One can hardly call for his inclusion among (even the aspiring) agents of transnationalism or internationalism, a category that has been usefully expanded in recent historical studies.

<sup>25</sup> For some recent examples, see Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Selim Deringil, *The Ottoman Twilight in the Arab Lands: Turkish Memoirs and Testimonies of the Great War* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2018); Philliou, *Turkey*; Minawi, *Losing*.

<sup>26</sup> In studies on Habsburg successor states as well, bureaucrats (let alone pensioners) seem to have received less attention than military officers. As several studies that are nonetheless particularly relevant to the discussion here, see the

much of a role in a transition from ‘empire to nation(-state)’ in any country. Questions of political allegiance and loyalty do not seem to have been central to his difficulties and dilemmas. Although a bureaucrat with decades of experience behind him by the time he retired, Ziya’s problems of pension were of the kind historians tend to consider as ‘mundane’, ‘everyday’ problems; and the means at his disposal were not much more than those available to ‘ordinary people’.<sup>27</sup> The reference points in Ziya’s appeals for help varied depending on the instance, and at times these did include ethnic and religious identity. However, there was an issue that remained constantly at the heart of his efforts to navigate his vulnerability: his status of nationality.

### Zooming in on the Fundamentals: Nationality as a Pivotal Category of State Succession

Mehmed Ziya’s interactions with state authorities on multiple sides of the eastern Mediterranean underscore that ethnic and religious identity was far from being the sole factor in shaping individual experiences of transition to post-Ottoman regimes. The gist of Ziya’s difficulty in receiving his pension after 1923 involved a type of congruence that states in former Ottoman lands expected by then when evaluating claims to pension for services rendered to the defunct Ottoman Empire. This was the congruence between a pensioner’s nationality and (his/her) place of habitual residence. Ziya was aware that his departure from Beirut to Cyprus caused him trouble in this regard. He spoke to this issue as he appealed for help, even in instances when he expected his ethnicity and religion to be decisively potent reference points for him. To reap the fruits of his claims, he needed to articulate reasons more specific than his ethnic and religious identity. Moreover, different addressees for his appeals were conducive to following different paths when raising a claim. While recourse to Turkish nationalism could make more sense in one initiative, appealing to French justice in the name of humanity could make more sense in another.<sup>28</sup> The dimension that remained constant in Ziya’s claims regardless of the addressee concerned his nationality status. Until the very end of his life, questions about nationality pursued Ziya alongside his financial, logistical and health problems.

Mehmed Ziya certainly ascribed profound meaning to his ethnic and religious identity as he evaluated his problems. In August 1924, he explained to the Ankara government his difficulties with officials of the French Mandate in Syria–Lebanon by expressing his conviction that he was discriminated against because he was a Turk. He appealed to the then Prime Minister İsmet Pasha in Ankara as ‘the Turks’ source of pride’ (*Türklerin medar-ı iftiharı*) and asked the Ankara government to save a Turkish brother from cruelty and indigence at the end of his lifetime ‘for the sake of Turkishness’ (*Türklük namına*).<sup>29</sup> When narrating his reasons for leaving Beirut after the war, he highlighted

---

contributions by Richard Basset, Irina Marin and John Paul Newman in Paul Miller and Claire Morelon eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 117–74; Natasha Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), esp. 356, n.87.

<sup>27</sup> Attention to a more diverse body of social actors has been fruitful in recent histories of late (and post-) Ottoman contexts. For some examples, see Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Mehmet Beşikçi, *The Ottoman Mobilization of Manpower in the First World War: Between Voluntarism and Resistance* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Metinsoy, *Ottoman Women*; Akın, *When the War Came Home*; Tanielian, *The Charity of War*; Nazan Maksudyan, *Ottoman Children and Youth during World War I* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019); Oğuz, *Moral Crisis*; Murat Metinsoy, *The Power of the People: Everyday Resistance and Dissent in the Making of Modern Turkey, 1923–38* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> The politics of petitioning, in which Ziya was evidently not a novice, received significant attention in recent scholarship. As for several particularly relevant examples here, see Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş and Alp Yenen, ‘Petitions, Propaganda, and Plots: Transnational Dynamics of Diplomacy During the Turkish War of Independence’, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 25, no. 2 (2023): 185–206; Natasha Wheatley, ‘Mandatory Interpretation: Legal Hermeneutics and the New International Order in Arab and Jewish Petitions to the League of Nations’, *Past & Present* 227, no. 1 (2015): 205–48; Fruma Zachs and Yuval Ben-Bassat, ‘Women’s Visibility in Petitions from Greater Syria during the Late Ottoman Period’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 4 (2015): 765–81.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Pilelizade Mehmed Ziya to the Prime Minister İsmet Pasha, 26 Aug. 1924, State Archives of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (former Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi; hereinafter BOA), HR.İM. 114/53/1.



financial difficulties that had become unbearable with his wife's poor health. The pension he had been allocated in Ottoman currency was converted and paid to him in new Syrian banknotes, which was frustratingly insufficient to meet even the cost of a month's rent in the city.<sup>30</sup> Yet these descriptions of pressing material circumstances were conspicuously accompanied by a mention of the insults suffered by the Turks and 'the despicable trifling acts by people whom one would call brothers in religion' (*din kardaşlarımız demek olanların mehinane muamelat ve hareketi*).<sup>31</sup> Invoking expectations of ethnic and religious solidarity that were left unfulfilled in Beirut was among the ways in which Ziya alluded to his expectation of diplomatic support from the Ankara government as a Muslim Turk. But of which Muslim Turks was he? After all, the Ankara government's adversaries in the Turkish national struggle included some Muslim Turks as well.

The very same appeal by Mehmed Ziya evinces that Islam and Turkishness were categories too broad to be the sole reference points in navigating his situation. As he wrote to the Ankara government in 1924, he considered it worthy of mention that he asked for retirement in his last post in Aleppo in 1916 with 'the idea of withdrawing from the former regime (*idare-i sabıka*) that had become unbearable', and that 'this service coincided with the governorship of Mustafa Abdülhalik Bey who is currently the esteemed minister of finance [in Ankara]'.<sup>32</sup> Ziya knew that his appeal would be evaluated not solely based on his ethnic and religious identity but also based on his past experiences, affiliations and networks of acquaintances. His appeal for help would be best served by a balance between emphasis on familiarities and maintaining distance to some aspects of the Ottoman past.<sup>33</sup> The government Ziya wrote to in August 1924 had abolished the Ottoman sultanate and had a complex history with the CUP that continued to evolve on the basis of close links as well as deep-rooted competitions.<sup>34</sup> Appeals to solidarity in terms of ethnic and religious identity would probably not do much good for Ziya if he were to include in his narratives clumsy eulogies to CUP leaders and/or praises to the Ottoman dynasty. The rapidly evolving political landscape of early republican Turkey set certain boundaries that defined *how* Ziya could deploy his ethnic and religious identity.

These interactions with the Ankara government represent only some aspects of Mehmed Ziya's broader claim-making effort, as archival records also include traces of his correspondence with

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 'Suriye evrak-ı nakdiyesi' is the phrase Ziya uses for what I translate here as Syrian banknotes. In the historical period under study, the currency and calculation method of payments to retired Ottoman pensioners were far from standardised and stable. Ziya was not alone in feeling that the pension he struggled to receive after the Ottoman demise was much less than the amount he had originally been allocated and severely exposed to currency fluctuations.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Mustafa Abdülhalik (Renda) (1881–1956) is one of the towering figures of Turkey's early republican history. In addition to serving as minister of finance multiple times in the period from 1924–34 (and of national defence from 1927–30), he became the longest-serving president of the GNAT (from 1935–46) and served as the acting president of Turkey for one day before İsmet İnönü succeeded Atatürk as the republic's second president. Renda shared with Ziya the experience of leaving home behind after defeat in the late Ottoman era. Before coming back to Istanbul and rising through the ranks of official service, he had left behind his hometown Yanya (Ioannina in present-day Greece) in 1913 to start a new chapter after the Balkan Wars. See M. Abdülhalik Renda, *Memoirs (Hatırat)* (Istanbul: YKY, 2019), 112–19.

<sup>33</sup> In this kind of appeal for help, one might expect stronger references to an overlap of service time with the minister of finance in Ankara, as a source of testimony to good service and integrity at least, but Ziya's tone here resembles a sober acknowledgement of just coincidence. His reference to 'the former regime' that became unbearable for him seems like a reference to the wartime Ottoman regime led by the prominent CUP leaders, from whom it would be hard to disassociate Renda. No mention of Ziya exists in the section Renda devoted in his memoirs to his time as governor of Aleppo. Ibid., 166–88.

<sup>34</sup> By 'deep-rooted' competitions, I mean here the kind of rivalry between, for example, leading figures such as Mustafa Kemal and Enver Pashas (wartime Ottoman minister of war), going back to the period before the GNAT's military victories in Anatolia. See the letters exchanged between the two from Aug. 1920 to July 1921 in Murat Bardakçı, *Enver* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2015), 536–54. Far from limited to individuals, rivalries like these involved groups of people with competing sympathies and competing perceptions of the CUP. For more on power struggles in early republican Turkey, see also Hakan Özoglu, *From Caliphate to Secular State: Power Struggle in the Early Turkish Republic* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011); Ahmet Demirel, *Opposition in the First Assembly: The Second Group (Birinci Meclis'te Muhalefet: İkinci Grup)* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2020 [2nd edition; first publ. 1994]); Erik Jan Zürcher, *Political Opposition in the Early Turkish Republic: The Progressive Republican Party, 1924–1925* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

French officials. Perhaps not surprisingly, his ethnic and religious identity was not an evident reference point for Ziya when he proceeded on that path. When writing to French officials, he protested in a milder tone and humbly begged justice for his ill-fated family ‘in the name of humanity and French justice’.<sup>35</sup> This difference invites reflection on the power relations that shaped Ziya’s interactions with particular states. He seems to have perceived his context of appeal to the Ankara government as more suitable for emphasis on what he was entitled to. Writing in his native language, as a ‘brother’ to his addressees, he could more easily amalgamate requests for favour with claims to rights and entitlements. While he asked for the benevolent favour and help (*lütf ve muavenet*) of the Turkish prime minister, and kissed his hands at the end of the letter to show respect, he also described his pension as his ‘well-deserved, fair share’ (*nasibim ve istihkak-ı sarihim*) for which ‘he consumed half of [his] life’.<sup>36</sup> With the French officials, however, he seems to have written from a different position. Asking for justice in the name of humanity and French justice helped him resist indifference by expanding the scope and relevance of his problem. It compelled attention and support also on moral terms. When appealing to authorities one did not necessarily identify with, perhaps there was something more conducive to foregrounding appeals in the name of humanity – the need for help was profound, indeed, but its request was framed that way also because channels of redress ‘closer to home’ were either absent or severely limited.

While appeals to nationalist solidarity as well as humanity and French justice featured in Mehmed Ziya’s claims, questions of nationality were key to shaping the very grounds of his problems. Ziya’s nationality was certainly not all that there was to his identity, but it was a crucial component of it in interactions with states.<sup>37</sup> Ziya’s legal link to state authority had come undone after the Ottoman demise, and once he left Beirut for Cyprus after the war, reconfiguring that link was more complicated. Ziya was able to receive his pension in Cyprus via an agent in Beirut for several years until the beginning of 1924, but at that point he was requested to present identity papers to prove his Syrian nationality and reside in Beirut to continue receiving his salary.<sup>38</sup> As moving back to Beirut was impossible under Ziya’s personal circumstances, his appeal to the Ankara government in 1924 defended the idea that he should be able to receive his pension regardless of his place of residence. ‘In the special clauses of the Treaty of Lausanne’, he pointed out, ‘it is written that Turkish retirees/pensioners (*Türk mütekaidleri*) in the provinces detached from our Turkey are to be considered nationals of those provinces and will receive their retirement salary from those provinces. It is not obligatory to reside in those (former Ottoman provinces); it is only natural that if one has a right, he has that right wherever he is as long as he does not leave behind his nationality’.<sup>39</sup> Even though he was not a Turkish national in 1924, Ziya hoped that the Ankara government could take an initiative to facilitate a favourable approach to his pension claim from the French Mandate authorities, despite the fact that he was no longer in Beirut where he was supposed to receive his Ottoman pension.

However, in contrast to Mehmed Ziya’s confidence about his Syrian nationality and entitlement to receiving his pension wherever he resided, his move to Cyprus had cast doubt over his nationality

<sup>35</sup> (‘... Je vous supplie [sic] donc humblement, Monsieur le Général, au nom de l’humanité et de la justice française, bien vouloir rendre justice à ma famille malheureuse’). Letter from Mehmed Ziya (Mouhammed Zia) (Larnaca) to the French High Commissioner in Syria and Lebanon (Beirut), 25 Dec. 1924, in Archives Diplomatiques, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Nantes (hereinafter CADN), 1SL/1/V/2508 *Pensions* (subfile no.17).

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Pilelizade Mehmed Ziya to the Prime Minister İsmet Pasha, 26 Aug. 1924, BOA, HR.İM. 114/53/1.

<sup>37</sup> Tracing how nationality shapes experiences of specific hardships, such as those pertaining to pensions, enhances the scholarly understanding of what nationality and citizenship meant in practice – for individuals *and* for states. For examples of particularly relevant scholarly contributions in this regard, see Marglin, *The Shamama Case*; Caglioti, *War and Citizenship*; Marcella Aglietti, ed., *Citizenship under Pressure: Naturalisation Policies from the Late XIX Century until the Aftermath of World War I* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2021); Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal, ‘Resurrecting Legal Extraterritoriality in Occupied Istanbul, 1918–1923’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 54, no. 5 (2018): 769–87; Philippe Bourmaud, ‘Nationality, Internationalism and Colonial Vision in the French Mandates (1920–1946)’ (*Nationalité, Internationalisme et Visée Coloniale dans les Mandats Français [1920–1946]*), *REMMM*, 137 (2015), 75–94.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Pilelizade Mehmed Ziya to the Prime Minister İsmet Pasha, 26 Aug. 1924, BOA, HR.İM. 114/53/1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

status and thus also over his right to a pension from Syria–Lebanon. After receiving Ziya’s appeal, the Ankara government did comply with his request and did write to French officials regarding his case.<sup>40</sup> But the French officials in Beirut and Istanbul would underline to Turkish authorities that ‘no pension could be allocated from local budgets for services prior to 1919 if the persons concerned do not substantiate their habitual residence (*établissement*) in the countries under mandate on October the 30th 1919, and if they have not become nationals (*ressortissants*) of the country under mandate by application of the Treaty of Lausanne’.<sup>41</sup> While Ziya grounded his claims in Article 61 of the Treaty of Lausanne, the significance of stipulations like these were often determined in practice. Where one resided at which point in time mattered a great deal in the implementation of treaty stipulations, not least because this had ramifications in terms of that individual’s nationality status.

Eventually, something that happened around mid-1925 represented a breakthrough for Mehmed Ziya. The available archival records do not allow for certainty in terms of what made this breakthrough possible, but in the months following his correspondence with Turkish officials and the subsequent correspondence between Turkish and French officials, the question of Ziya’s nationality status was addressed in a way that allowed him to continue receiving his pension without having to move back to Beirut.<sup>42</sup> In 1930, consent was given also to Ziya’s request to receive his pension not through the arduous process of relying on an agent in Beirut but through the French Consulate in Larnaca – which must have been facilitated by the fact that the French Consul considered him by 1930 as ‘an old, honourable national dedicated to our [French] interests’.<sup>43</sup> The Lebanese authorities, on their part, did not object to taking this ‘exceptional measure’ for Ziya.<sup>44</sup> It seems that state officials on both sides of the Mediterranean, in Lebanon and in Cyprus, were attempting to make life easier for the old pensioner. Despite this, Ziya’s nationality status remained a troubling matter for him up to his late seventies.

Nationality remained an issue for individuals like Mehmed Ziya not least because their experiences spanned *across* former imperial territories that gradually became multiple countries. In 1934, Ziya’s pension payments were once again stopped, as administrative requirements in Lebanon forced him to certify his nationality status again. After the French Consul in Larnaca drew Beirut’s attention to ‘the precarious situation’ of the old retiree, he was told by the Lebanese officials that the continuation of Ziya’s pension payments was subject to the receipt of a certificate, to be obtained through consultation with authorities in Cyprus, showing that Ziya did not change his nationality.<sup>45</sup> An issue so essential for Ziya’s livelihood thus remained repeatedly subject to doubt and inquiry. The French Consulate

<sup>40</sup> See the instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara to its Delegation in Istanbul, 4 Oct. 1924, BOA, HR.İM: 114/53/8. For how these instructions were formulated in Istanbul and how they eventually reached the French High Commission in Beirut, see correspondence in Jan.–Feb. 1925, CADN, 1SL/1/V/2508 *Pensions* (subfile no.17). The Turkish finance minister in August 1924, Renda, was a civil administrator who took pride in attending to the orderly payment of salaries allocated to widows, orphans and retirees. Renda, *Memoirs (Hatırat)*, 63–4. This dutiful attitude likely played a role in the Ankara government’s positive approach to Ziya’s request.

<sup>41</sup> See the note presented by the French Embassy in Turkey to the Turkish Foreign Ministry’s Delegation in Istanbul, 26 Aug. 1925, BOA, HR.İM: 114/53/6. This note was based on the information presented to the French Embassy earlier by the French High Commissioner General Sarraill in Beirut on 6 Aug. 1925, CADN, 1SL/1/V/2508 *Pensions* (subfile no.17).

<sup>42</sup> Later, when writing about him in Apr. 1930, the French Consul in Larnaca described Ziya as a ‘Lebanese subject on the basis of the identity card issued by the Lebanese Government on 26 June 1925’ ( *sujet Libanais, suivant la carte d’identité délivré par le Gouvernement Libanais le 26 Juin 1925*). See the letter from the French Consul in Larnaca (Jean Ricard) to the French High Commission in Syria and Lebanon, 30 Apr. 1930, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

<sup>43</sup> See the letters from the French Consulate in Larnaca to the French High Commission in Syria and Lebanon, 30 Apr. 1930 and 10 Dec. 1936, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

<sup>44</sup> See the response by Auguste Adib, Lebanese Minister of Finance and Agriculture, to the relevant letter of the French High Commissioner that his delegate had conveyed earlier, 12 June 1930, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

<sup>45</sup> See correspondence between the French Consul in Larnaca and the French High Commission in Beirut, 9 Apr. 1934, and between the Lebanese Director of Finances Jamil Chehab and the French High Commissioner’s delegate in Beirut, 4 May 1934, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

in Larnaca sent the certificate and nationality form right away, providing also a recap of Ziya's situation, almost as if with a wish to bring a definite end to these recurring difficulties:

Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed has been retired since 1916, and only came to settle in Cyprus since 1919. As he was abroad at the time of the annexation of the island of Cyprus by England, this pensioner cannot obtain British nationality in any way other than through naturalisation. Moreover, since 1925, Mohammed Zia Pilali Ahmed continued to be registered at the Consulate of France and to travel with a passport issued by this Consulate as a French-protected Syrian (*à titre de Syrien, protégé Français*).<sup>46</sup>

This striking description underscores that the situation Mehmed Ziya had to navigate was not simply a change from one nationality to another. The consul's description in 1934 qualified Ziya's nationality status in 1925 through a somewhat ambiguous, precarious category: '*Syrien, protégé Français*'.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, even in cases that did not involve questions of protection, 'Syrian nationality' itself was a legal category that remained inherently unstable in the 1920s and '30s. Questions of nationality were directly related to sovereignty and the latter remained a thorny issue in the context of the League of Nations mandates.<sup>48</sup> There was yet another factor that made Ziya's nationality a complex issue. In the archival records pertaining to the description above, where the French Consul described Ziya's status in 1925 as '*Syrien, protégé Français*', the word *Syrien* was later crossed out and replaced with '*Libanais*', likely in Beirut after the document was received there in May 1934, as there was a Republic of Lebanon in existence since 1926.<sup>49</sup> The nationality Ziya was invited to prove that he did not change in the 1930s was thus referred to as not 'Syrian' but 'Lebanese' nationality. In sum, far from a seamless transition from one nationality to another, Ziya grappled with various categories of nationality that remained in flux for years after the Ottoman demise. It was as if multiple layers of transition followed him in the form of doubts and questions – not necessarily over his political loyalties but especially over his nationality status.

Mehmed Ziya managed to clear doubts over his nationality once again in 1934 and continued to receive his pension in Cyprus, but ultimately, one can hardly argue that he had a reliable source of income in old age. Logistical difficulties in receiving his pension checks and chronic late payments remained causes of difficulty and distress for Ziya for much of the period he outlived his empire. Especially in the last several years of his life, he was constantly in precarious situations. Officials in the French Consulate in Larnaca were often concerned about the poor conditions in which Ziya appealed for help.<sup>50</sup> Chronic delays in his pension payments worsened Ziya's conditions to a degree

<sup>46</sup> See the explanation sent by the French Consul Lacheze in Larnaca to the French High Commissioner de Martel in Beirut, 18 May 1934, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

<sup>47</sup> In the early twentieth century, what it meant to be a French-protected Syrian varied depending on the time and context due to changes in the significance of the term 'protection' as well as 'Syrian'. See Orçun Can Okan, 'Competing to Protect: Repatriation and Legal Protection of Syrians in Istanbul under Allied Occupation (1918–1923)', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 1 (2023): 67–83; Aviv Derri, 'Imperial Creditors, "Doubtful" Nationalities and Financial Obligations in Late Ottoman Syria: Rethinking Ottoman Subjecthood and Consular Protection', *The International History Review* 43, no. 5 (2021): 1060–79; Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 94–124.

<sup>48</sup> 'What nationality did the population of a mandated territory have?' was a question discussed by the historian Susan Pedersen in a very helpful way, in the context of the mandates in Africa; it was a tricky question in the Middle East too. Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 71–3. See also James C. Hales, 'Some Legal Aspects of the Mandates System: Sovereignty; Nationality; Termination; Transfer', *Transactions of the Grotius Society* 23 (1937): 85–126.

<sup>49</sup> Above-quoted explanation from the Consul Lacheze in Larnaca to the French High Commissioner de Martel in Beirut, 18 May 1934, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed), end of the first paragraph on page 2.

<sup>50</sup> Scores of reminders were sent to the French High Commission in Beirut to alert them about the destitution of Ziya. In Sep. 1930, for example, Beirut's attention was explicitly drawn to Ziya's 'precarious situation'. See the 'very urgent' letter

that was impossible to turn a deaf ear to. ‘Every time the payment is late’, wrote the French Consul Ricard in October 1931, at yet another instance of asking his colleagues in Beirut for the timely dispatch of Ziya’s pension check, ‘the pensioner asks me for an advanced payment that is difficult for me to deny him’.<sup>51</sup> Already by late 1931, Ziya had asked if his pension payments could be sent to him with intervals of two months rather than three as he had initially requested, given that he was now living practically from day to day.<sup>52</sup> By 1934, he was struggling to survive. In all likelihood, logistical difficulties and chronic delays in his pension payments exacerbated his health problems. When Ziya passed away in July 1936, his pension check for the month of June had not arrived. Neither had the one for May.<sup>53</sup>

### Zooming Out: Thinking across Empires and across Former Imperial Domains

Paying attention to the pensions of former imperial bureaucrats involves higher historiographical stakes than we might assume at first glance. The pension-related debate at the Lausanne peace conference underscores that a pension for services rendered to a defunct empire was not a technical matter to be discussed solely by the experts of a particular empire’s finances and administrative structures. In January 1923, remarks by the Albanian delegate Frasheri ignited a debate in Lausanne that ultimately involved not only the specifics of Ottoman pension schemes but also stipulations in other peace treaties that sought to address similar problems in the cases of other defunct empires as well.<sup>54</sup> As the conference at Lausanne convened after a series of conferences with similar goals, there were precedents for comparison. A postwar context that stretched up to 1923 thus shaped the thinking of at least some ‘peacemakers’ at Lausanne, such as the French delegate Bexon in the case of pensions, as they referred to stipulations in the treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain-en-Laye when expressing views on an approach they considered more consistent and even-handed.<sup>55</sup> This way of thinking, *across* treaties and empires, was manifest in the pension-related debate at Lausanne.<sup>56</sup> For retired civil servants like Mehmed Ziya, debates like this were significant in shaping the consequences of the war and empire. For historians, they are significant also as revealing windows onto the broader, interconnected contexts of peace-making and empire-dismantling after the First World War.

At Lausanne, at the heart of the comparison between pension-related stipulations in different treaties was the method of structuring pension funds, such as the capitalisation versus the repartition of contributions from state officials.<sup>57</sup> With references to pension systems employed in the German and Austro-Hungarian empires as well, it was debated whether or not the Ottoman state had a separate pension fund based on the capitalisation of contributions collected from officials who could now claim those contributions from Turkey. Eventually, it was accepted that the prevalent system in the Ottoman Empire was one of repartition rather than capitalisation; a system that did not entail the transfer of officials’ contributions to a distinct central fund that benefitted the Ottoman treasury at

---

from the French Consulate in Larnaca to the French High Commission in Beirut, 11 Sept. 1930, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

<sup>51</sup> Letter from the French Consulate in Larnaca to the French High Commission in Beirut, 9 Oct. 1930, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

<sup>52</sup> Letter (very urgent) from the French Consulate in Larnaca to the French High Commission in Beirut, 31 Dec. 1930, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

<sup>53</sup> By the time Mehmed Ziya died on 7 July 1936, he had been waiting on his pension payments for the last two months and seven days. See the correspondence between the French Consulate in Larnaca and the French High Commission in Beirut, esp. between 11 July and 10 Dec. 1936, CADN, 1SL/5/202 *Pensions, Etats des Services* (subfile Mohamed Zia Pilali Ahmed).

<sup>54</sup> Seha L. Meray, trans., *Lausanne Peace Conference: Minutes, Documents (Lozan Barış Konferansı: Tutanaklar, Belgeler)*, Set 1, Vol. 3 (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1969–73), 273–83.

<sup>55</sup> Although he did not specify which specific articles he had in mind, it was the French delegate Bexon who brought these treaties to the centre of the debate. See *ibid.*, 279–80.

<sup>56</sup> In the particular context of this pension-related debate too, therefore, it makes sense to discuss the Treaty of Lausanne as ‘the last treaty’, as in Michelle Tusan’s recent book, for example. Michelle Tusan, *The Last Treaty: Lausanne and the End of the First World War in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

<sup>57</sup> Meray, trans., *Lausanne*, Set 1, Vol. 3, 279–80.

the expense of those officials and their new countries of nationality. It was thus considered unfair, contrary to claims by the Albanian delegate, to expect Turkey to pay the pensions of former Ottoman officials who acquired the nationality of a state other than the one in Turkey.<sup>58</sup> Attention to these common frameworks of thinking about imperial structures help question reductionist portrayals of the Ottoman Empire as an inherently backward, archaic entity that did not belong to the twentieth century.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, particularities such as those in structures of pension funds underscore that empires in the early twentieth century were not identical bureaucratic machineries that mobilised and managed resources in a single, uniform ‘imperial’ manner with the same implications for all imperial subjects.<sup>60</sup>

It is noteworthy that not everyone around the negotiation table at Lausanne ascribed the same significance to the pension-related debate. The Greek delegate Venizelos, for example, stated that the issue was of no concern to Greece, as ‘the great majority of the Turkish [Ottoman] officials are Turkish, Syrian, Arab, or Albanian Muslims’.<sup>61</sup> The debate at Lausanne was driven mainly by the claims raised by the Albanian delegate and the counterclaims of the Turkish delegate who found himself in a position to respond. The Albanian delegate pursued the matter knowing that a considerable number of former Ottoman officials had become Albanian nationals. One can only speculate how the debate would have evolved if a vocal presence was allowed in the negotiations to delegates from the former Ottoman ‘Arab provinces’, where the number of former Ottoman officials still alive in 1923 was far from insignificant. It is clear, in any case, that while the matter was not seen as a pressing issue in some successor states to the Ottoman Empire, in some others it was impossible to push aside.<sup>62</sup> In the debate at Lausanne in January 1923, and later debates at the GNAT in Ankara when this issue came up, the Turkish position was based on the principle of making payments to retirees within the new national borders of Turkey but not to those who remained beyond those borders.<sup>63</sup> Yet, as evinced by cases like that of Mehmed Ziya, even when there was no legal obligation for them to intervene, this did not mean total indifference for Turkish officials. Complexities of individual lives often proved too difficult to boil down to basic principles and treaty stipulations. This is, at least

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Historical studies on the Ottoman Empire covered significant distance in problematising similar reductionist portrayals within broader time frames. For several useful overviews, see Cemal Kafadar, ‘The Question of Ottoman Decline’, *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 4, no. 1–2 (1997–8): 30–75; Alan Mikhail and Christine Philliou, ‘The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 4 (2012): 721–45; Olivier Bouquet, ‘From Decline to Transformation: Reflections on a New Paradigm in Ottoman History’, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları/The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, 60 (2022): 27–60.

<sup>60</sup> Even the Ottoman pension systems for military officials and civil servants were not identical and uniform. These systems have been subject to useful monographs in Turkish recently, but separately. For instance, see Nursel Manav, *Pension Funds of the Ottoman Civil Administration: Its Establishment and Activities (1880–1890) (Mülkiye Tekaid Sandığı: Kuruluşu ve Faaliyetleri [1880–1890])* (Ankara: TTK, 2017); Yunus Özger, *The System of Retirement in the Ottoman Army and the Military Pensions Fund (1865–1923) (Osmanlı Ordusunda Emeklilik Sistemi ve Askeri Tekaid Sandığı [1865–1923])* (Istanbul: IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Meray, trans., *Lausanne*, Set 1, Vol. 3, 280. This statement by Venizelos is highly significant not only in terms of the words he chose to qualify the identities of Ottoman officials, but also in terms of the image such a statement projected for Greeks within the Ottoman Empire, as subjugated (if not oppressed) outsiders in a polity governed essentially by ‘others’.

<sup>62</sup> The Albanian delegate Frasheri was certainly not willing to push the matter aside; he asked the Ankara government to be held responsible also for the Ottoman maladministration of pension funds if such funds ceased to exist over time. Meray, trans., *Lausanne*, Set 1, Vol. 3, 279.

<sup>63</sup> In early Mar. 1923, when the Turkish delegates to Lausanne were back in Turkey in the interval to the negotiations, the delegate Hasan Bey (deputy of Trabzon in the GNAT) summed up the Turkish position on pensions as follows (which met with approval): ‘There is no coming to us for pension if, [say], one is Syrian and has roots/[bonds] there (*Suriyeli olup da, oraya bağlı olup da*). There is also no becoming our subject for pension. We give [pensions] to those in our country, we don’t give to those who are not. He can get it from wherever he wants’. Taha Akyol and Sefa Kaplan, eds., *Discussions over Lausanne in Closed and Public Sessions: Minutes of Negotiations over Lausanne in the GNAT (Açık ve Gizli Oturumlarda Lozan Tartışmaları: TBMM’de Lozan Müzakereleri Tutanaqları)* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2021 (first publ. 2013)), 484.

in part, why there is still much to be learned from *how* principles and treaty stipulations were experienced and navigated in specific cases.

Indeed, even a case as complex and abundantly recorded as Mehmed Ziya's falls short of capturing all the different layers of political transition that shaped former Ottomans' pension claims after the First World War.<sup>64</sup> Ziya was a former servant of the Ottoman state who had already retired by the end of the war. He was claiming a pension in the 1920s in return for the services he had rendered to a defunct empire. His story did not include affiliation with the short-lived regimes of the postwar period from 1918 to 1923, such as Faisal's Arab Kingdom in Syria.<sup>65</sup> Not only in Syria–Lebanon but also elsewhere in the post-Ottoman Middle East, political uncertainties of the years between the 1918 Armistice and the establishment of the League of Nations mandates would later result in pension-related disagreements that reflected the dynamics that shaped these new regimes. In Iraq, for example, around the same time Ziya was trying hard to continue receiving his pension, a British financial commission considered it erroneous that service to the Ottoman government between the Armistice in 1918 and King Faisal's accession to the throne in Iraq in 1921 could count for a pension in Iraq.<sup>66</sup> The British commission's approach to this three-year period was evidently different from that of many Iraqi officials who had served the Ottoman state earlier in their careers and who had a more intimate awareness of the difficulties and dilemmas of the period. This awareness likely made them more tolerant than British officials as they evaluated what service could count for a pension in Iraq and what could not.

Across, and also within, the new borders, therefore, different views on recent political transitions shaped different perspectives on pension-related questions. Those claiming a pension struggled with these competing political perspectives as well as with the evolving domestic and international legal frameworks of nationality. This was not an easy combination to struggle with, especially since many pensioners like Mehmed Ziya carried with them a legal link to state authority that remained somewhat imperfectly reconfigured for years after the Ottoman demise. A modest sum of money that they needed in old age often became troublesome reminders of the imperial pasts they carried with them to new eras.

## Conclusion

How much of a 'winner', then, was Mehmed Ziya in his struggles? How 'successful' was he in navigating 'everyday realities of post-imperial life'? The audacity to venture into assessing his 'success' can perhaps be forgiven if the effort is a genuine one to offer a balanced assessment. It was no small achievement in itself that Ziya used his bureaucratic experience and argumentation skills to convince his interlocutors to help him in the first place. In the 1920s, one could hardly take for granted the

<sup>64</sup> Analysing problems of state succession facilitates tracing these different layers of transition, which in turn facilitates seeing beyond the anthropomorphism embedded in assumptions of strict division between the 'life' and 'death' of imperial states. Unlike cases of private succession that involve the death and disappearance of a human being, in cases of state succession the state disappears as a legal being but its physical components, such as territory and population, do not. Emre Öktem, 'Turkey: Successor or Continuing State of the Ottoman Empire?', *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 24 (2011): 563–4. Distinction between different types of 'death' and succession can facilitate critical engagement also with 'ghosts of empire', as discussed in, for example, Aline Schlöpfer, Philippe Bourmaud and Iyas Hassan, 'Ghosts of Empire: Persistence and Claims of Ottomanity(ies) in Post-Ottoman Spaces', *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (REMMM), 148 (2020): 33–56. Schlöpfer also leads an exciting research project at the University of Basel, tracing 'Ottoman afterlife' mainly through politics of remembering and forgetting in the Arab East: <https://nahoststudien.philhist.unibas.ch/de/forschung/forschungsprojekte/ottoman-afterlife-in-jordan-and-iraq/> (last visited 15 Feb. 2024).

<sup>65</sup> Pension for services rendered to this regime would be an issue in its own right in Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate. See the relevant correspondence, esp. that dating from Mar. 1921, in CADN, ISL/1/V/2508 *Pensions* (subfile *Pensions à accorder aux anciens officiers licencié de l'armée Chérienne*).

<sup>66</sup> See 'Report of the Financial Mission appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to enquire into the Financial Position and Prospects of the Government of Iraq, 1925', printed for the use of the Colonial Office, May 1925, The National Archives, CO 730/91/20848, 42–3.

availability of interlocutors willing to listen to claims about income earned in return for services to the defunct Ottoman Empire. This was an empire against which the French, the British, the Arab as well as the Turkish republican officials in Ankara had fought; an empire that was in severe disrepute as backward, corrupt and oppressive. His need to move from Beirut back to Cyprus, moreover, placed him in a truly complex situation. It was despite these difficulties that Ziya managed to receive his pension until his death. Yet, he remained vulnerable throughout the process. He could hardly rely on a stable relationship with the officials of any given state in the 1920s and '30s. For much of the two decades of his retirement, he was in precarious situations. Moreover, in the process of claiming his pension across borders and in interactions with multiple states, a change seems to have occurred in the nature of the money he was able to receive. Rather than a stable source of income he earned in return for past services, it was as if his pension had become a benevolent act of charity. As if it were a favour done to him so he could survive a bit longer, it had come to resemble a kind-hearted blessing for which he was expected to remain in gratitude to those in positions of authority.

There is a key question to be asked in relation to a change of this kind: which aftermaths of war and empire were more conducive to the ascription of political significance to claims about resources after the First World War? Even as one successfully navigated hardships and maintained a grip on certain resources, this 'success' could be accompanied by profound losses, including loss of ground in terms of inhabiting a rights-based discourse vis-a-vis state authority – a crucial loss in terms of building relationships of citizenship rather than nationality as subjecthood. In the aftermath of the Ottoman demise, to what extent could men like Mehmed Ziya really demand forcefully, and to what extent could they only accept?<sup>67</sup> Many former Ottoman state servants like Ziya did not live the final years of their life in a country where they could confidently hold a successor state accountable for what they deserved as part of esteemed relationships of mutual obligations and expectations. Perhaps this was a predicament that took a toll not solely on them. How these state servants could (and could not) sustain confident claims to merit and rights likely shaped not only their experiences of outliving an empire but also the very grounds on which states in former Ottoman territories evaluated the deserving and the undeserving.

**Acknowledgements.** I am grateful to Anna Ross and Jean-Michel Johnston for including me in the Imperial Afterlives research network in 2021, and for sharing with me truly helpful feedback on early drafts of this work. I am also thankful to all the participants of the network meetings in 2022, to Gia Caglioti and John-Paul Ghobrial for inspiring conversations on related issues, to the three anonymous reviewers of the article, and to Emile Chabal and the entire production team of *Contemporary European History*. For research support, I would like to thank the Social Science Research Council, the Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations at Koç University, and the Scuola Superiore Meridionale, University of Naples Federico II. The shortcomings, as always, are entirely my own.

<sup>67</sup> Consider in this regard historical studies on the development of a political language centring mutual obligations based on the 'debt' states incurred to those whose services it relied on in the past. Albeit a study focusing on a very different context, see for example Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 63–107.

**Cite this article:** Okan OC (2024). Outliving an Empire: Mehmed Ziya, the Former Ottoman Bureaucrat, and His Pension Claim across Post-Ottoman Lebanon and Cyprus in the 1920s. *Contemporary European History* 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777324000225>