

Before the Nation: Cilicia as a battle ground for competing forms of communality 1908-1922.

Cilicia was a province in the Ottoman Empire placed at the cross-road between to-days Turkey and the Arab Middle East in the north-eastern corner of the Levant. It was also an economic hub based on modern modes of production and commerce that pulled large number of migrants from all areas around the Eastern Mediterranean. In the wake of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 Cilicia increasingly became the battleground between competing forms of communality challenging the existing pattern of inter-communality. In 1919 Cilicia's official status changed from being a province in the Ottoman Empire to become a mandate under a French administration that intended to turn the former Ottoman province into an Armenian homeland and a showcase of French civilization, not unlike British plans to make Palestine a Jewish homeland. However, on 20 October 1921 strong resistance among the local Muslims finally forced the French to hand over the province to the Turkish nationalist government in Ankara.

The tradition of communality and its formal structures were anchored in Ottoman modes of governance and official identity politics which were based on confession. The major confessional groups were Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Armenians. The power of the local - the town or the village – too constituted a force of important influence on communality and identity formation producing very different forms of interaction between the various confessional groups.

Communality in Cilicia was also influenced by shifting policy lines emanating from the political centre in Istanbul and later Paris, by economic globalization, great power ambitions and nationalism. Nationalism entered the Ottoman space in earnest in the wake of the Greek revolution in 1821, it fostered secession, foreign intervention and attempts by the Ottoman state find new ways of inclusion to stem these challenges and to garner support of the state.

This lecture will identify the fault-lines that split the various communities – or were bridged to achieve inter-communality - discuss their meanings and how they changed. It will also reflect on the afterlife of Cilicia's various communities in the settings of a post-Ottoman world where nationalism became the dominant official mode of defining the relationship between society and state.