

Berlin through Arab-Ottoman Eyes in the Wake of Defeat

Umar Ryad

In memoriam Dr. Harun al-Rashid Zeki Kirām (1923–2015)

ABSTRACTS

In this paper, I will study the unpublished diaries of Zeki Hishmat Bey Kirām (1886–1946), an Arab-Ottoman officer and commander of the Bedouin troops in Sinai during WWI, who had ended up in Berlin after he was injured by British fire in 1916. His ego-documents paint a vivid picture of daily life in the German capital in the last years of the war and the early post-war period. The handwritten diaries in my possession, which Kirām to a large part wrote in the Charité hospital in Berlin, are unique because they do not only make a valuable and moving contribution to the literature of WW I. They also offer a glimpse into his interior world and individual experience as an Arab-Ottoman officer in Berlin, as well as how the city was in these distressful times through his eyes. We shall therefore see how an Arab-Ottoman officer had integrated himself in the German capital after the German-Ottoman defeat in the war.

In diesem Aufsatz untersuche ich die unveröffentlichten Tagebücher von Zeki Hishmat Bey Kirām (1886–1946), einem osmanisch-arabischen Offizier und Befehlshaber der Beduinentruppen im Sinai während des Ersten Weltkriegs. Kirām gelangte nach Berlin, nachdem er 1916 durch britisches Feuer verletzt worden war. Seine Ego-Dokumente zeichnen ein vielfältiges Bild des Alltags in der deutschen Hauptstadt in den letzten Kriegsjahren und der frühen Nachkriegszeit. Die in meinem Besitz befindlichen handschriftlichen Tagebücher, die Kirām zu einem großen Teil in der Charité in Berlin verfasste, sind nicht nur einzigartig, weil sie einen wertvollen und bewegenden Beitrag zur Literatur des Ersten Weltkriegs leisten. Sie bieten auch einen Einblick in Kirāms Innenwelt und individuelle Erfahrung als arabisch-osmanischer Offizier in Berlin und zeigen, wie er die Stadt in diesen bedrückenden Zeiten erfuhr. Wir werden gleichzeitig sehen, wie sich ein arabisch-osmanischer Offizier nach der deutsch-osmanischen Kriegsniederlage in der deutschen Hauptstadt integrierte.

My gratitude is due to Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for granting me the Fellowship for Experienced Researchers (2021–2023) at the Centrum für Nah- und Mittelost-Studien, Philipps-Universität Marburg. Special thanks are also due to my colleagues Prof. Dr. Albrecht Fuess, Ms. Stefanie Braun, Dr. Ahmad Sho'ir, Mr. Ibrahim Shaheen, Mr. Anthony Quickel, Dr. Hala Ghoname, Dr. Asem Hefny, Dr. Christian Junge, Dr. Pierre Hecker, and all members of the Centrum für Nah- und Mittelost-Studien for their hospitality.

1. Introduction

The story of the Syrian Ottoman officer Zeki Hishmat Bey Kirām can help us to widen our understanding of the German-Ottoman relationship on the micro-historical level through his interpersonal relationships and his views on German society in Berlin. This article examines his personal and unpublished documents, in which Kirām's subjective 'selfhood' becomes narratively linked to the historical setting of Berlin during the last years of German-Ottoman military collaboration and ultimately defeat in the First World War.¹ Like many of his Ottoman peers, Kirām was trained in the "German spirit", and was thus in a sense a product the military knowledge transfer between Germany and the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² As I have elaborated elsewhere in more detail, Kirām was born in Damascus on May 25, 1886, and died in Berlin on August 17, 1946, after being taken as a prisoner by the U. S. army at the end of World War II.³ He entered the military school in Damascus as a young boy and later pursued his military education at the Ottoman civil and military academy of Istanbul in a career trajectory that was similar to many other members of the Ottoman officer corps.⁴ Kirām became a lieutenant in the Ottoman army at the age of 18 and was soon dispatched to the Balkans to command 800 Muslim soldiers against the Serbian militias.⁵ Kirām was one of the Arab officers of the "the last Ottoman generation," many of whom would take part in the Arab insurgencies after the armistice.⁶ Kirām survived the war but ended up in Berlin in 1917 after being injured in 1916 close to Suez Canal as the commander of pro-Ottoman Bedouin troops.⁷ Despite of his continued interest in the fate of his native Syria, he decided to take up Turkish citizenship, to settle down in Berlin and ultimately to integrate himself into German society. Kirām's ego-documents paint a vivid picture of his and other Ottomans' daily lives in the German capital in the last years of the war and thereafter. The present article focuses on the two years 1918–1920 as a case study about interpersonal Ottoman-German encounters behind the official narrative of First World War alliance. Kirām's handwritten Arabic diaries, which are in my possession, serve as the source base for this study. They are a unique source as a deeply personal contribution to the literature on WWI, offering insightful

1 About the role of diaries in history, see P. Heehs, *Writing the Self: Diaries, Memoirs, and the History of the Self*, New York 2013; I. Paperno, *What Can Be Done with Diaries?*, in: *The Russian Review* 63 (2004) 4, pp. 561–573; J. Hellbeck, *The diary between literature and history: A historian's critical response*, in: *The Russian Review* 63 (2004) 4, pp. 621–629.

2 G. Grūßhaber, *The 'German Spirit' in the Ottoman and Turkish Army, 1908–1938: A History of Military Knowledge Transfer*, Berlin/Boston 2018.

3 U. Ryad, *From an Officer in the Ottoman Army to a Muslim Publicist and Armament Agent in Berlin: Zekī Hishmat-Bey Kirām (1886–1946)*, in: *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 63 (2006) 3–4, pp. 235–268; U. Ryad, *Wathā'iq tijārat al-silāḥ al-al-mānī fi shibh al-jazīra al-'arabiyya* [Documents on the German Arms Trade in the Arabian Peninsula: Readings in the Archive of Zeki Kirām], Cairo 2011.

4 M. Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge 2017, p. 27.

5 Biographical notes written by Kirām in typescript; Zeki Kirām, 'Jāmi' jadīd fi Zagreb [A New Mosque in Zagreb], in: *al-Hurriyya*, Tetuan, 21 March 1942.

6 M. Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge 2017, p. 45.

7 See his article "Krieg am Sueskanal", in: *Die Woche*, Berlin, 6 January 1934, pp. 16–18.

glimpses into the individual experience of an Arab-Ottoman officer in Berlin during difficult times. The paper shows how Kirām connected his experience of daily life in Germany to historical events and how he himself could find a place for himself in German society, particularly after his marriage with his German wife Gertrud Neuendorff (1886–1983).

Figure 1: Kirām in Bedouin clothes as a commander of the Ottoman army in Sinai⁸



2. Arrival and Medical Treatment in Berlin

After his injury during the war, Kirām had nine operations in total in Jerusalem, Damascus and at the Charité in Berlin.⁹ He arrived in Berlin on 28 November, 1917. A year later, he would recall his first day in the German capital as very snowy and stormy. He decided to stay in a small guesthouse in Charlottenburg with another Ottoman lieutenant named ‘Āli. After a few days, he moved to Hotel Moltke at the Leipzigstrasse for another week before he moved to the Charité hospital with the help of the Red Cross and what he described as “our miserable Ottoman embassy”.¹⁰

In that hospital, he considered himself lucky to be treated by Professor Geheimrat Otto Hildebrand, a famous surgeon at the Charité, whom he described as “nice and well-mannered, does not speak too much, lenient, and efficient in his profession”.¹¹ He operated Kirām’s leg twice (December 1917 and January 1918), but all attempts to make Kirām’s joint move again were futile. Kirām, a Muslim, gifted him an image with a scene of Jesus Christ from whom patients came to seek cure.

⁸ All photos are from Kirām’s archive.

⁹ U. Verloren, *Krankenhäuser in Groß-Berlin: Die Entwicklung der Berliner Krankenhauslandschaft zwischen 1920 und 1939*, Berlin 2019.

¹⁰ Kirām’s diary, 1917.

¹¹ “Professor Geheimrat Hildebrand”, Kirām’s diary, 1918.

Kirām enclosed his own picture in military uniform with a handwritten dedication in German saying: “curing the patients was one of Jesus’s attributes, which could not be exceeded by any of his other qualities. If you want to see the miracles of Jesus, look at those who submit themselves in all comfort to the hands of his successor, Professor Geheimrat Hildebrand”.¹² In the same period, *Ahmed Tevfik Berkman* (1900–1987), later founder of the Radiotherapy in Turkey, was studying medicine in Berlin. He had tumor and was operated in the Charite by Hildebrand as well. As he was impressed by the impact of radiotherapy on surgery, he initiated radiotherapy in Turkey after his return after the war.¹³

Figure 2: Charité Hospital in Berlin

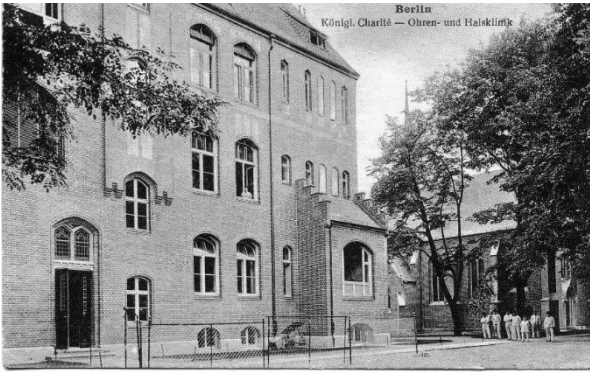


Figure 3: Kirām in military uniform in Berlin

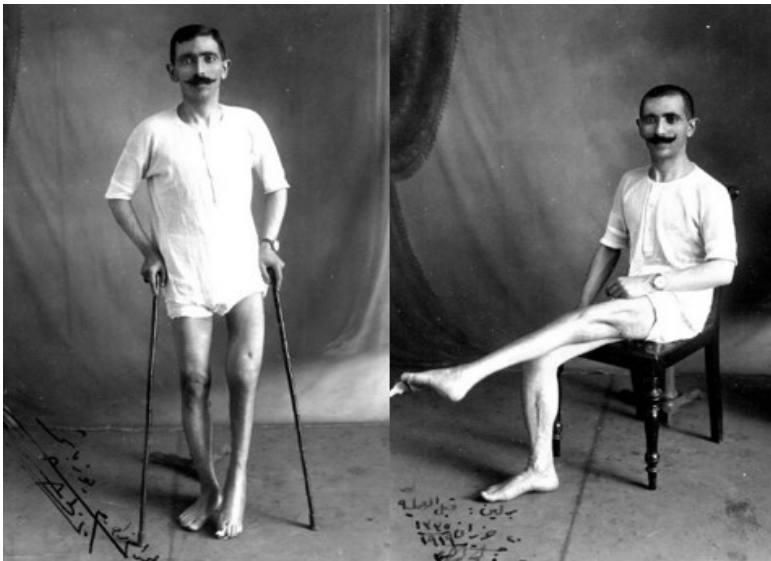


¹² “Professor Geheimrat Hildebrand”, Kirām’s diary 1918.

¹³ I. Böer/R. Haerkötter/P. Kappert, *Türken in Berlin 1871–1945: Eine Metropole in den Erinnerungen osmanischer und türkischer Zeitzeugen*, Berlin/Boston 2012, p. 181.

Kirām and other military patients were obliged to leave the Charité on 31 March, 1919 to another military hospital situated in the *Leibniz-Gymnasium* at *Mariannenplatz* 27. All patients were to be transferred in a big vehicle, which Kirām described as “a huge dark grey box”, resembling a box where people preserve their fish or meat. In that big van, patients could not move easily; and they would become sicker than they actually were. It was dark inside as if it were the dark inside of the “whale” where Prophet Jonas was imprisoned. Kirām, fearing to leave the van sicker than he entered, refused to get in the car and instead took a taxi.¹⁴ The state of the other military hospital, as Kirām described it, was miserable even in comparison with a “stable for horses and cows”.¹⁵ Kirām decided to leave this hospital and rented rooms at different hotels and guesthouses, continuing his medical check-ups and electric massage at the Charité. By this time, the Ottoman authorities decided that all wounded Ottoman soldiers had to return to the Ottoman Empire, but due to his severe wounds Kirām was allowed to stay in Berlin, receiving a monthly allowance of 900 marks. However, the Ottoman embassy refused to pay for his medical treatment in the Charité suggesting him to be operated by the Red Cross.¹⁶ After several complaints, they finally decided to pay a monthly amount of 600 marks as pension and 720 marks as operation costs.¹⁷

Figure 4: Kirām before the amputation of his leg (20 June 1919)



14 Kirām's diary, 31 March 1919.

15 Kirām's diary, 1 April 1919.

16 Kirām's diary, 4 May 1919.

17 Kirām's diary, 10 July 1919.

As the state of his leg quickly deteriorated, it ultimately had to be amputated to save his life.¹⁸ On the night of the operation, after smoking his cigarette, Kirām observed the Islamic ritual ablution, prayed and recited the Qur’an until he fell asleep.¹⁹ After the operation, Kirām was surrounded by his future wife Gertrud and another German friend, Frieda Müller. They showed great sympathy for his loss, and took care of him after the operation. When Kirām looked at himself and did not find his limb, he sarcastically told the doctor with tears in his eyes that they could “cook” his thy and eat it for dinner if they liked.²⁰ After a few weeks, Kirām felt much better and the wound started to heal. Tischer company for artificial limbs designed for him a leg prostheses, and he remained disabled the rest of his life.²¹ Germany witnessed a growth of artificial limbs technology during WWI in order to “re-arm” and “recycle” the disabled.²²

3. Between Arabness and Ottomanness: Perceptions of Germany and the Ottoman Empire

Kirām was a keen observer and showed himself interested not only in the fate of the Ottoman Empire but also in learning as much as possible about Germany and Berlin. After his arrival in Berlin, Kirām used French as his language of communication but soon started to learn German. It is interesting to see that one of the early German songs he learnt was the traditional lament lyrics of the German armed forces, “Der gute Kamerad” (“The Good Comrade”), written by the poet Ludwig Uhland (1787–1862) in 1809. In 1825, the composer Friedrich Silcher (1789–1860) set the poem to music, based on the tune of a Swiss folk song.²³ Kirām copied the poem verbatim twice in his diaries. The poem describes the emotions of a soldier seeing his comrade besides him killed by a bullet. The lyrics must have emotionally touched Kirām, reminding him of the loss of his comrades on the battlefield in Sinai.

In general, Kirām appreciated Germany as a “civilized” nation, but fierce in its nature and manners. For him, Germans were not more intelligent than the Ottomans, but with the difference that the Germans “polish their silver”, whereas the Ottomans damage their “gold” and leave it to “rust”. With few exceptions, the Germans, including their Kaiser, were also an economizing people. According to Kirām, they rather take than give and hardly show any gratitude to their givers. The Germans only cherish work, and “even dogs”, Kirām wrote, “would not get their food without working, for example guar-

18 Kirām’s diary, 16 June 1919.

19 Kirām’s diary, 2 July 1919.

20 Kirām’s diary, 4 July 1919.

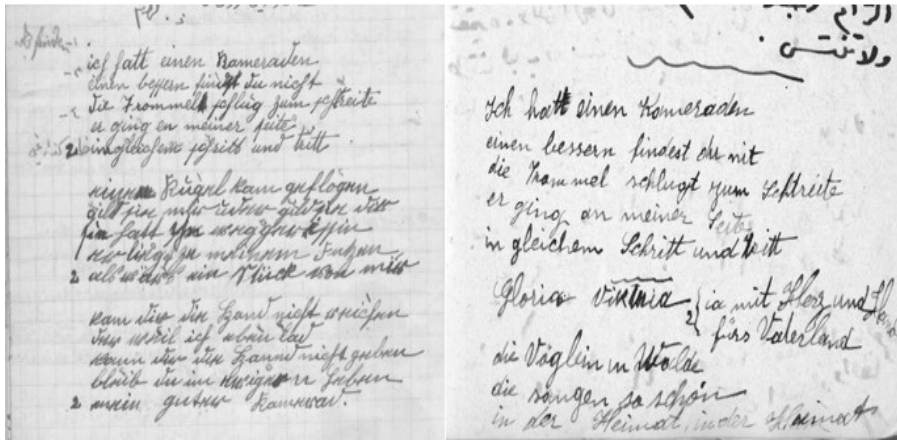
21 Kirām’s diary, 10 July 1919.

22 H. R. Perry, *Recycling the disabled Heather R. Perry Army, medicine, and modernity in WWI Germany*, Manchester/ New York 2014.

23 L. Marretta-Schär, Silcher, (Philipp) Friedrich, in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 23, ed. S. Sadie, London 2001, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y1Z1y2PSNw&msclkid=509fb4c9cd4f1eca32ca777a57db07e> (accessed 10 May 2022).

ding houses or dragging wagons.” Kirām concluded that the Germans apply the proverb “Ohne Fleiß, kein Preis” in their lives and love their jobs as much as the French love their nation, but the Arabs and Turks love their “ass filled with filth”.²⁴

Figure 5: “Der gute Kamerad” in Kirām’s handwriting (28 kanun al thani, 1918)²⁵



Kirām was a regular visitor of Berlin cafés, theatres, and the Opera with his Ottoman friends and several German women. The first café to visit with his Ottoman military fellows was the above-mentioned Café Zentral. He found the Café Imperator (Friedrichstraße 67) to be the best among all cafés in Berlin. One of his favourite was also Haus Vaterland in Berlin, which existed in a multi-use building, including a large cinema, constructed in 1913 at Potsdamer Platz.²⁶ During one of his visits, Kirām estimated the number of visitors in that café as 2000; among them many German soldiers in uniform.²⁷

The Berlin Zoo was close to the hospital and easy for him to visit with his wheelchair. He was impressed by the large number of statues for famous German leaders, poets, musicians, knights, and kings. In the past, he said, the zoo was a place of “shivering

24 “Akhlaq al-al-Almaniyyin wa mā iktastabtu minhum” (The manners of the Germans and what I have learnt from them), Kirām’s diary 1918.

25 Kirām’s diary, 28 January 1918, 20 November 1918. Original lyrics: „Ich hatt’ einen Kameraden/Einen bessern findst du nicht/ Die Trommel schlug zum Streite/Er ging an meiner Seite/ In gleichem Schritt und Tritt. / Eine Kugel kam geflogen/Gilt’s mir oder gilt es dir?/Ihn hat es weggerissen/Er liegt zu meinen Füßen/Als wär’s ein Stück von mir. / Will mir die Hand noch reichen/Derweil ich eben lad/Kann dir die Hand nicht geben/Bleib du im ew’gen Leben/Mein guter Kamerad!”

26 The building was completely burnt in the summer of 1953 during the East German strike and protest. According to historical descriptions, the lower floors contained a 1,196-seat cinema, and Café Piccadilly, which could accommodate about 2,500 guests serving “gastronomic sensations.” The café was decorated with marble and lavish wall and ceiling paintings R. Green, The City and Entertainment: Coney Island and Haus Vaterland, in: J. P. Kleihues/C. Rathgeber (eds.), Berlin/New York: Like and Unlike: Essays on Architecture and Art from 1870 to the Present, New York 1993, pp. 210–23.

27 Kirām’s diary, 13 October 1918.

wilderness,” but it has now become a park for lovers, poets, and photographers. At night, it changed to be a place for all imaginable “sins” between men and women, of which “traces could be seen in the morning under the seats of the park”.²⁸ Accompanied by his female friend Frieda Müller, Kirām was also invited to attend a religious gathering by the Herz-Jesu Jugend (Heart of Jesus for Youth), which aimed at consolidating the Christian faith in the hearts of youth and children. The hosts for that meeting welcomed Kirām and gave him a booklet with hymns in German so that he could recite with them in the chorus with piano music. Kneeling to the ground, one of them was loudly telling the attendees about the miracles of Jesus that he cured the patients and changed the wine into water. A polemical theological debate started when it became known that Kirām was a Muslim. The discussion was rather stereotypical as it included topics related to the differences between Christianity and Islam, such as the divinity of Jesus, the Islamic views on his prophethood, his miracles, and a comparison between Jesus’s virgin birth and the fatherless birth of Adam, among others. Kirām believed that his Islamic arguments rendered his Christian counterparts speechless as they had no answers to their logic.²⁹

Kirām was generally more critical of Ottoman soldiers than of their German counterparts. When Kirām arrived at the Charité, he shared a room with another Ottoman captain (*yüzbaşı*) named Fahmī Ya‘qūb, whom he described as “straightforward in his talks, but without good manners.” His constant arguments with the German staff left a bad impression of Ottoman officers in Kirām’s eyes. Referring to another Ottoman captain, who often came to visit Ya‘qūb, Kirām lamented that the Ottoman army employed officers who were not even able to write a letter to their family in a proper language.³⁰ In contrast, Kirām was in contact with many German reserve officers in Berlin, who were, in his opinion, well-versed in knowledge and the arts. Although Kirām remarked that in the last years of the war the German army had lost much of its discipline, he praised that German officers used to put on fine clothes and associated themselves only with well-mannered women, and refraining from showing any bad behaviour.³¹ On the other hand, Kirām noted that Ottoman officers, as soon as they saw “prostitutes” (he used the Arabic slang term *sharāmīt*) alongside the lanes, would run to take them to any café. After drinking one or two glasses of wine, they would kiss and hug the girl before leaving the café while his “sword” (referring to the male organ) was raised at his side. At the same time, Ottoman officers would remain for two or three years in the country without learning enough German to communicate with educated people.³²

As an injured Ottoman military abroad, Kirām frequently visited the Ottoman Embassy in Berlin for his official papers. In general, Kirām was upset about the state of the embassy, since there was no single Ottoman or oriental sign at its gate or inside the

28 “Jinīnat al-ḥayawanāt” (The Zoo), Kirām’s diary, 1918.

29 Kirām’s diary 23 February 1919. Kirām repeated some of these arguments to his future wife’s family during one of his visits, Kirām’s diary, 2 March 1919.

30 Kirām’s diary, 1918.

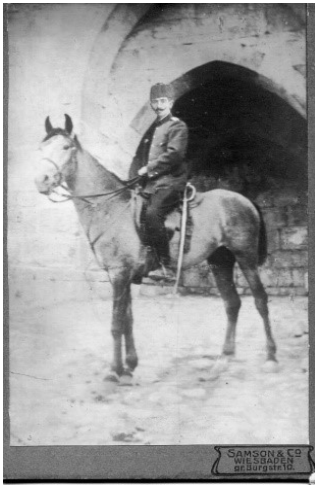
31 Kirām’s diary, 1918.

32 Kirām’s diary, 1918.

building, as compared to other consulates of other states showing their national symbols. He observed that Ottoman employees put on European hats, its furniture consisted of broken or crooked chairs, and the carpets on the ground were European with no oriental emblems. When he once entered the toilet, he became disgusted how dirty it was. Everything was broken and spiders were filling the window. All these were indications for him that everything was certainly going to collapse into pieces.³³ In addition, Kirām did not like the employees, since they were in his view ill-mannered and corrupt. As Ottoman diplomats in Berlin, they used to take arbitrary decisions, just as other Ottoman policy-makers in Istanbul who were the cause of the “deterioration of the kingdom, religion and everything”.³⁴ Their support for Ottoman officers in Berlin was miserable as compared to the support they offered for their own military personnel in the consulate or those employed in German factories who filled their pockets with thousands of liras by their “trade in gold”.³⁵ In contrast, wounded officers like Kirām received their pension from Istanbul only after a long bureaucratic process of appeals.³⁶

It is remarkable that in the first year of his stay in Berlin, Kirām wrote his diary in Ottoman Turkish but shifted to Arabic with the looming of German-Ottoman defeat. This may be seen as an indication of his inner struggle between Arabness and Ottomanness in the post-war period.

Figure 6: Kirām on his horse in military uniform



33 Kirām's diary, 1918.

34 Kirām's diary, 12 October 1918.

35 "Akhlaq al-al-Almaniyyin wa mā iktastabtu minhum" [The manners of the Germans and what I have learnt from them], Kirām's diary, 1918.

36 "Sifārat al-'uthmāniyyin fi Berlin" [Ottoman Embassy in Berlin], Kirām's diary, 1918.

In the first months after his injury, Kirām obviously still held pro-Ottoman feelings. During his stay in the hospital in Damascus, for example, he gifted the Ottoman army with nine sandbags made of the blankets with which he used to cover himself time in Sinai as a contribution to the “greatest jihad” to save the nation and *umma*.³⁷

This pro-Ottoman feeling started to vanish in Kirām’s writing in the last year of the war and thereafter. He blamed the German-Ottoman defeat in the war, which had cost him his leg primarily on the Ottoman leaders Enver Paşa (1881–1922), Mehmed Talaat (1874–1921), and Mehmet Cavit Bey (1875–1926). According to Kirām, they had dragged the empire to war on the side of the Germans. Kirām labeled the Committee of Union and Progress, to which these three belonged, the “Committee of Hypocrisy and Decline” (Arabic: *Jam‘iyyat al-Nifāq wa-l-Tadannī*) for demolishing the nation and submitting the country to the hands of foreigners. After deposing Abdülhamid II (1842–1918), whom Kirām regarded as oppressive but wise, they had appointed Mehmed V Reşād (1844–1918), who was according to Kirām an old and “crazy” man without knowledge and intelligence.³⁸ Istanbul known in Ottoman as *the “Home of Happiness”* became for Kirām now the “Home of Decay” (*Dar al-Kharāb*).³⁹

For Kirām, the withdrawal of the German army in the second half of 1918 meant that the German “lion” had become a “hungry and terrified cat.” He observed that the German public was thrown into a “sea of grief,” cursing politicians and those who had caused the war.⁴⁰ As to the Ottomans, Kirām lamented that they would face the worst fate after the war. They were obliged to sign a separate peace treaty in London, which would give Syria to the French, Palestine to the British.⁴¹ He correctly expected that the remaining Turkey would become merely a country with eight million peoples living on a piece of land in Anatolia, whereas the Arabs would get their independence at the cost of remaining divided into various states. Kirām expressed his anger at Jamal Pasha who “gouged the eyes of Turkey and made it completely blind”, while Enver Pasha “put his head in the ass” of the Germans by blindly following them politically.⁴² Reading the news in Berlin about the division of Arab lands between the British and French colonial powers, Kirām’s hatred of the Turks increased. But when the British forces, supported by Faisal’s Sherifian Force, captured Damascus on 1 October 1918, Kirām was frustrated that British flags were raised in his homeland. “What a scandal and a shame!”, he wrote, “this nation has nobody who would procure its political or military affairs.”⁴³ He not only bemoaned the loss of Syria and Iraq to the British, but also expressed his deep concern about the impact of such a “black history” of defeat on future generations. “Let us live in illusions”, he

37 Al-Muqtabas, 8 May 1917; Al-Sharq, 10 May 1917.

38 Kirām’s diary, 25 March 1919.

39 Kirām’s diary, 12 October 1918.

40 Kirām’s diary, 31 October 1918. See, for example, D. T. Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War*, London 2006.

41 G. Dyer, *The Turkish Armistice of 1918: 1: The Turkish Decision for a Separate Peace, Autumn 1918*, in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 8 (1972) 2, pp. 143–178.

42 Kirām’s diary, 31 October 1918.

43 Kirām’s diary, 12 October 1918.

sarcastically went on, “eat illusions, be satisfied by illusions, while the wolves eat us up with realities while our eyes are open.”⁴⁴ He wished to return to his home country but not to see any French or British in Arab lands.⁴⁵ It is perhaps a result of these ambivalent feelings that Kirām ultimately stayed in Berlin while retaining Ottoman and later Turkish citizenship for unknown reasons.

4. Making Choices and Starting a New Life

As hinted at before, the strong-willed Kirām quickly became more familiar with his German surroundings and started to build relations with people in Berlin, especially young women. In the medical department of the *Charité*, he met a nurse named Elise and another employee with the name of Emilia. He described Elise as almost 30 years-old, tall and slim, and having auburn hair. Although she was kind to Kirām, he saw her as blatant and mostly of sharp temper and fluctuating in her emotions, which made her sometimes into a lovely friend and sometimes into a “biting dog”. She was also a talkative person who used to divulge secrets of others easily. However, Kirām used to invite her out, for example, to visit the opera house, which left a huge impression on him because of its wonderful sculptures and statues. As to Emilia, she was tall with blue eyes like a “cat,” but “corrupt in morals” and known for often changing her boyfriends. She was also sharp-tempered and rash, but regretted her excessive responses quickly. Thanks to their regular conversations, Kirām’s knowledge of German improved rapidly.⁴⁶

In August 1918, his German barber introduced Kirām to the thirty-five-year old Catherina Lorenz, who wanted to learn Turkish. As a translator and a good typewriter, Catherina knew French and English and helped Kirām in his study of German as well. She even proposed to marry Kirām, but he did not reply positively to the proposal as he reported. She was also jealous when Kirām would talk of Gertrud (his future wife) and other women. Nevertheless, during Christmas he presented her with a marble plate decorated with four birds, an image of two hearts and a beautiful black pencil. In return, she gifted him two beautiful books, one on poetry and the other one containing copies of famous paintings from all over the world. Catherina translated some of Kirām’s poems and in early 1919 they embarked on translating a Turkish novel into German and French.⁴⁷ In the same year, another German woman named Frieda Müller was employed to serve the *Fahrstuhl* (elevator) in the *Charité*. She helped Kirām many times in the elevator and they used to sit in the garden of the hospital where she washed and ironed his clothes in return for money. She was in her twenties, beautiful with blue eyes and auburn hair. Kirām found her to be always polite, trustworthy, sociable and kind. They

44 Kirām’s diary, 12 October 1918.

45 Kirām’s diary, 11 February 1919.

46 “Schwester Elisa & al-Bint Emilia”, Kirām’s diary, 1918.

47 “Bint Lorenz (Girl Lorenz)”, Kirām’s diary, 1918.

also exchanged their photos as a sign of “pure compassion which is not contaminated by any animalistic [lust]”.⁴⁸

As for his general impression of German women in their daily life, Kirām witnessed with astonishment that they were expected to work just like men in many of the same jobs. He noted that they were liberated and went out to seek work from the age of 12 years onwards, with the exception of a few women belonging to elite families, who stayed at home. Especially in times of war, some women worked in physically demanding professions, such as in factories, labs, storages, sales, and coalmines. Consequently, a few women started wearing male clothes in public. Even some prostitutes, Kirām went on, had another job during the day, while they served men for money secretly at night. Kirām expressed the view that although this kind of liberty affected the morality of many German women, there were still enough women of good upbringing and morality. He thus disagreed with other Ottoman officers in Germany who thought that marrying a German woman meant to give up one’s own oriental principles.⁴⁹

Kirām met his future wife Gertrud Neuendorff for the first time in 1918 in a bookshop situated on Karlstrasse, where she worked. Kirām visited the bookshop looking for study materials with the purpose of writing a German-Turkish dictionary. He described her as a “thirty years old lady, tall and slim, with nice blond hair and a lovely face [...], delicate in her talk, with small eyes and a bright bosom and neck”.⁵⁰ During their first meeting, Kirām immediately invited her for a coffee together after her working hours; she blushed, but accepted his invitation. They met first at Café Zentral in Friedrichstrasse, followed by meetings almost every Friday. Kirām was impressed by Gertrud’s chastity and upbringing. Their friendship soon developed into a feeling, which he described as a “pure” love with no inclination to any bodily lust. Around this time, Kirām was supposed to return to Istanbul, which made her very sad to the degree that she decided to travel after him and find work in Turkey or Syria if needed. For that reason, she even started to learn French.⁵¹ They did not leave to Syria in the end after Kirām solved the problem of his pension and the costs of his medical treatment at the embassy.

Kirām soon became convinced that Gertrud was the right marriage choice for him.⁵² On New Year’s Eve 1919, Gertrud visited Kirām in his room wearing her finest clothes. He was impressed by her beauty, manners and intimacy to his heart. After having dinner, they went out for a drink at a café. During that night, while music was playing, Kirām put his head on the chest of his beloved Gertrud while smoking his cigarette. A German comedian came on the stage and started for an hour to mock the Kaiser, von Hindenburg, political parties and other German leaders. Kirām admired this “solid” freedom,

48 “Bint Fahrstuhl Frieda Müller” [The girl of the elevator Frieda Müller], Kirām’s diary 1918.

49 “Ahwal al-banāt in almānya” [The state of girls in Germany], Kirām’s diary 1918.

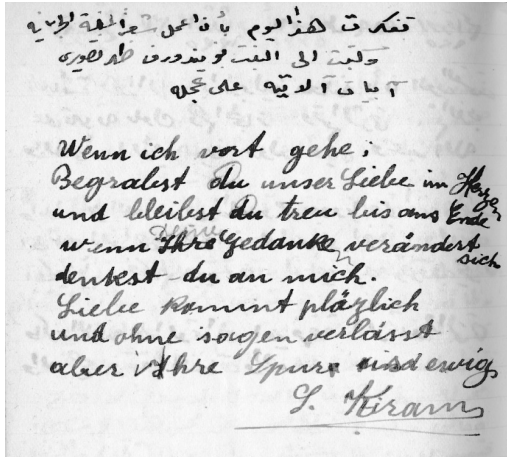
50 “Bint al-Maktabah Gertrud Neuendorff” [The Girl of the Bookshop], Kirām’s diary, 1918.

51 Ibid.

52 Kirām’s diary, 31 January 1919.

which he hoped to exist in Ottoman lands one day.⁵³ In Kirām's diary, we find love poetry to Gertrud in German.

Figure 7: One of Kirām's love poems in German to his future wife Gertrud



On 1 February 1919, Gertrud introduced Kirām to her mother and two sisters at home. He described her mother as “a welcoming and literary person” and also expressed his sympathy for Gertrud's sisters.⁵⁴ During another visit, he brought a chicken as a present, which he happily shared with the whole family.⁵⁵ In these economically difficult post-war times, Kirām's Ottoman pension gave the financial means to take care of his new life in the German capital.

5. Witnessing Political Unrest and a Revolution in Berlin

Kirām was an eyewitness of many political events in Berlin that followed the German-Ottoman defeat in the war. In this fall of 1918, German military leaders became almost sure that Germany was losing the war. They urged the liberal Prince Max von Baden (1867–1929), who briefly served as the last chancellor of the German Empire, to form a new democratic government that should be entitled to settle an armistice with the Allies. Von Baden was not able to control the German navy that insisted on fighting rather than surrender. As a result, demonstrations broke out in various German cities against Kaiser Wilhelm and the government, which quickly led to the abdication of the Kaiser.⁵⁶

⁵³ Kirām's diary, 1 January, 1919.

⁵⁴ Kirām's diary, 1 February 1919.

⁵⁵ Kirām's diary, 3 March 1919.

⁵⁶ See, for example, R. Gerwarth, November 1918: The German Revolution, Oxford 2020; L. Machtan, Prinz Max von Baden. Der letzte Kanzler des Kaisers, Berlin 2013.

Witnessing these events, Kirām understood that Germany would become a republic like the United States. On 9 November 1918, he saw red flags hanging in many places in the city, while former flags of the *Kaiserreich* were removed from buildings. German soldiers also started to remove its emblems from their hats and *field caps*. Many people put a red band on their chests as a sign of the Social Democrats. On 10 November 1918, Kirām heard increasing shots and saw that cars carried killed and wounded demonstrators to the hospital every five minutes. The situation of shooting escalated at night, especially at Potsdamer Platz, close to the Kaiser's Palace and the Zoo. The Social Democratic Party seized the newspaper *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, which Kirām received, and changed its name into *Die rote Fahne*. The Kaiser and his family finally departed to the Netherlands for good. "This universe," Kirām wrote, "is not everlasting for anybody. History repeats its days, and it shows us miracles every day."⁵⁷

Figure 8: Front page of *Die rote Fahne*, 9 November 1918



When the situation calmed down, Kirām decided to go out on the street to witness the events himself. He noted desperate German people and bullet holes in the walls of buildings, bemoaning the situation of Germany as follows:

*Alas! Germany, which was able to fight the world proving that they were men and 'lions', is now falling down such as a 'parachute' hit by a bullet or a 'lion' in a trap. They are indeed men, but harsh in politics. Their soldiers could bear hunger, cold, heat and nakedness better than any soldier of other nations. Germany does not know the love of nation (watan) or religion. It only enjoys the love of professions. The love for work includes everybody [...].*⁵⁸

57 Kirām's diary, 11–12 November 1918.

58 Kirām's diary, 16 November, 1918.

In the first week of January 1919, a second wave of protest took place when a group of Spartacist revolutionaries challenged the Weimar Government (5–12 January 1919). In a power struggle between the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), hundreds of thousands of workers went on strike and demonstrated in the centre of Berlin.⁵⁹ On Monday January 6, Kirām heard the sounds of heavy fire-shots and shells from his place in hospital. The next day, many newspapers, trams and trains stopped; and looting, robbery and murder took place everywhere as if there was no government in the city. Hospitals filled with wounded people.⁶⁰ The shots increased in the neighborhood of the Charité, making Kirām feel that he was back on the battlefield. Kirām was keen on getting out to the street to see the events by himself. He noted in disbelief:

*the Germans were civilized and advanced with the military power and the Kaiser's authority, but once this power was removed, looting and murder occurred, stripping people of their comfort [...]. This was unbelievable in the case of Germany.*⁶¹

Kirām's witnessing of political events was not limited to the hospital bed but sometimes interrupted his daily life. On March 13, 1920, a certain Herr Küfner, owner of an antiquarian shop in Berlin, phoned Kirām in the bookshop, which Kirām had opened together with Gertrud, informing him about a coup against the government. This coup is known as "Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch", attempted by Wolfgang Kapp (1858–1922), a nationalist German civil servant, and General Walther von Lüttwitz (1859–1942), a commander in the Reichswehr. This short-lived coup failed because the majority of the civil servants, labour unions and the German public did not support the putschists.⁶² Together with his then fiancé Gertrud, Kirām closed their bookshop and went out to see the events of which he provided a detailed description in his diary. Close to the Reichstag, they saw that the building was surrounded by machine guns and that there were many armed people among the protesters. Moving to Brandenburger Tor, they noticed that people were pouring into the place in great numbers. A big number of automobiles were carrying many protesters and were throwing anti-government pamphlets. Kirām saw a heavy tank, which "the British invented during the Great War". On the other side, armed military forces and the police were parading on both sides. Before getting into the tram heading home, Kirām and Gertrud carefully passed by Unter den Linden and Französische Straße seeing the same armed crowds.⁶³

59 See, for example, M. Jones, *Founding Weimar. Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–19*, Cambridge 2016; O. Luban, *The Role of the Spartacist Group after 9 November 1918 and the Formation of the KPD*, in: R. Hoffrogge/N. LaPorte (eds.), *Weimar Communism as Mass Movement 1918–1933*, London 2017, pp. 45–65.

60 Kirām's diary, 7 January 1919.

61 Kirām's diary, 25 January 1919.

62 See, for example, H. Hürten (ed.), *Der Kapp-Putsch als Wende: Über Rahmenbedingungen der Weimarer Republik seit dem Frühjahr 1920*, Opladen 1989.

63 Kirām's diary, 11 March 1920.

Figure 9: Kirām's diary, 11–17 March 1920.



In Berlin, electricity supply was switched off, and nothing worked anymore. Arriving in the bookshop, there was neither electricity nor gas as well. Kirām and Gertrud lit their candles, cooked a pan of lentil soup on coal and decided to sleep in the bookshop.⁶⁴ Kirām and Gertrud returned home, while the strike continued for the next days. Neither trams nor trains were working and those who had bicycles were the luckiest in the city because they could easily move.⁶⁵ For fear of the uncertain situation and the shortage of food, Kirām and Gertrud began to economize their meals.⁶⁶ By 27 March 1920, the putsch had collapsed, but Anarchist groups affiliated to the Social Democratic Party, started to attack owners of shops and other rich Germans. Kirām complained that the government did not take proper actions against these “dirty gangs”. He reiterated anti-

64 Kirām's diary, 13 March 1920.

65 Kirām's diary, 17 March 1920.

66 Kirām's diary, 21 March 1920.

socialist feelings writing: “as the president now would become a shoemaker, owner of a drugstore and a bakery or a mattress-maker, civilized and elite people would bemoan the epoch of the Kaiser.”⁶⁷ For him, the educated and civilized people did not earn what a street-cleaner would earn. Every time they asked for a wage raise, prices higher ran higher.⁶⁸

6. Marriage and Family Life in Post-war Berlin

Kirām’s intercultural and interreligious marriage with Gertrud Neuendorff was certainly the most important gateway to his societal integration in Germany in the interwar period. This was actually Kirām’s second marriage after his divorce from his wife at home, whose name was Yumniyya, upon her family’s request during war time. After his injury and loss of his money, Yumniyya had agreed to family pressure and asked Kirām for divorce, which he arranged via the Ottoman embassy in Berlin.⁶⁹ On 5 July 1920, Kirām married Gertrud with the blessing of Hafız Şükrü (1871–1924), the then imam of the Ottoman embassy in Berlin, who concluded their Islamic marriage. On the day of his marriage with Gertrud, Kirām remembered his first wife with tears in his eyes. His choice for Gertrud was neither to compensate for his happiness with his first wife, nor to satisfy his intimate desire as a man for a woman; but because he found her different from all other European women he saw in Germany due to her good education, manners and chastity.

After concluding the official civil marriage in the municipality, Kirām and Gertrud were welcomed home with flowers presented by family and friends. Kirām put three Ottoman flags on the table. The imam arrived and changed his European hat putting on his religious attire which was a purple garb with medals on his chest, and a white turban. A Protestant vicar came to attend the Islamic ceremony, but not to conclude a Christian marriage. Two Egyptian medical students acted as witness for the marriage contract. After the Islamic marriage, Şükrü recited verses from the Qur’an, and the protestant vicar delivered a speech which made the attendants cry. The imam explained the meaning of marriage in Islam followed by various speeches by family and friends. As it was an Islamic marriage, Kirām asked Gertrud’s family neither to play music, nor to dance. Kirām thought that the imam did not drink wine and warned him that the drinks on the table were a mixture of wine, sugar and berries. Kirām, who used to drink wine himself, was shocked when the imam started to drink saying that the nature of wine changed in that form, which makes this drink allowed from a religious point of view.⁷⁰

67 Kirām’s diary, 31 March 1920.

68 Ibid.

69 Kirām’s diary, 5 July 1920.

70 Ibid.

Figure 10: Gertrud Neuendorff



The Berlin of Kirām's time witnessed a vivid history of Muslim émigré activism, boasting numerous Muslim publications and established Muslim institutions throughout the interwar period.⁷¹ Kirām's relocation to Berlin after the war and his stay in Germany opened the gate to a rich professional and political course of life. He obtained a degree in dentistry at the Faculty of Medicine at Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität in Berlin 1925 with a thesis under the title: "Mund- und Zahnpflege bei den mohammedanischen Völkern" (Mouth and tooth hygiene of the Muslim peoples).⁷² In partnership with his wife, he started a business partnership in summer 1919 by opening a bookshop under her name at Karlstrasse.⁷³ Kirām also founded a publishing house in Berlin under the name 'Maktabat al-Sharq wa-l-Gharb al-'Ilmiyya fî Berlin' (Morgen- und Abendland Verlag, Berlin).

71 M. Kramer, *Islam Assembled: The Advent of the Muslim Congresses*, New York 1986, p. 159. About the history of Muslims in Berlin, see, for instance, G. Höpp, *Arabische und islamische Periodika in Berlin und Brandenburg 1915–1945: Geschichtlicher Abriß und Bibliographie*, Berlin 1994; G. Höpp/G. Jonker (eds.), *In fremder Erde, Zur Geschichte und Gegenwart der islamischen Bestattung in Deutschland*, Berlin 1996; G. Höpp, *Texte aus der Fremde. Arabische politische Publizistik in Deutschland, 1896–1945. Eine Bibliographie*, Berlin 2000; M. S. Abdullah, *Geschichte des Islams in Deutschland*, Graz et al. 1981.

72 Zeki H. Kirām-Bey, *Mund- und Zahnpflege bei den mohammedanischen Völkern*, Berlin 1923. See, Zeki Kirām, *Qamûs al-Tesrih latini-'Arabi: Vocabolarium anatomiae latine-arabice & Qamus Tesrih latine-türkge: Vocabularium anatomiae latine-turcice*, Berlin 1923.

73 Kirām's diary, June 1919. The bookshop was registered as Morgen- u. Abendland Akad. Buchhand under their both names in Berliner Handels-Register: Berlin 1921–1931, p. 294 (https://digital.zlb.de/viewer/image/34457317_1930/312/ [accessed 28 July 2022]).

Figure 11: Their bookshop in Berlin



In September 1920, the newly married couple received their first male twin, Aḥmad and ‘Alī who unfortunately died as immature. Accompanied by an unnamed Egyptian friend he registered their names at the municipal department in Charlottenburg and went to bury them under a tree in a graveyard. At the graveyard, the above-mentioned imam Hafız Şükrü was waiting for them where they prayed for the children after their burial.⁷⁴ Two years later, she welcomed their son Harūn al-Rashīd († 2015), who had kindly donated the archive to me in 2006.

Figure 12: With their own son Harūn al-Rashīd



74 Kirām's diary, 13 September 1920.

Kirām furthermore became a ‘mediator’ in economic and military deals between Germany and the Muslim world as part of a transnational Muslim and Arab network. Together with like-minded others, he worked for the unification of Arabs and Muslims and the elimination or minimization of direct western colonial domination in the Muslim world. The religious and political activities within such networks were orchestrated by many great Muslim figures throughout the Muslim world, such as the Syro-Egyptian Muslim scholar Sheikh Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935), the founder of the well-known journal *Al-Manār* (“The Lighthouse”, 1898–1940), the Lebanese Druze prince Shakib Arslan (1871–1946), who was later banished to Switzerland, among many others.⁷⁵ In the 1920s and 1930s, Kirām also played a significant role as an agent in German arms deals with the Muslim world, mediating with the authorities of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan, especially in the Yemeni-German arms deals during the lifetime of Imam Yahyā (1869–1948).

7. Conclusion

As eyewitness accounts, Kirām’s diaries allow us insights into the self-perception of an Arab and Ottoman in Berlin, his experience of German life and key historical events and developments of the last years of the war and the post-WWI period. The diaries are therefore not only about Kirām’s individual story, but also include other related individuals and groups that appeared in his narrative of German social life. We have further identified how Kirām’s Arab origin in the Ottoman army in WWI fostered his particular ideas and notions about German society and culture on the one hand, and his intense relationship with his Ottoman identity after the Ottoman-German defeat on the other. The loss of the war, the political behaviour of the CUP, losing his leg in Berlin for the sake of the nation, and the corruption of the Ottoman consulate in Berlin were all reasons for Kirām to hate the Turks.

Kirām’s diaries are unique due to the scarcity of sources about the lives of individual Ottoman officers in Germany in the interwar period. The study of his individual life as an Ottoman officer on the basis of his family archive can serve to exemplify the lives of thousands of anonymous Ottomans in the German capital after the First World War.⁷⁶ It is most probable that he did not intend to write his diaries for an audience, but for himself to remember. The diaries shed light on how Kirām’s life in post-war Berlin was shaped in relation to his new informal networks and interpersonal relations. German women occupied a great part of his diaries. His narratives record intimate glimpses of his life as an Ottoman officer, which resulted in his marriage with a German lady and in building a new personal and professional life in the German capital.

75 E. Tauber, Rashīd Riḍā as pan-Arabist before World War I, in: *The Muslim World* 79 (1989) 2, pp. 111–112.

76 Idea based on M. García-Arenal/G. Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe*, Baltimore/London 2003, p. XVI.