World War I and the Ottoman Empire

As is true for many of the powers engaged in World War I, the war fundamentally changed the shape of the Ottoman Empire. Victorious states partitioned the empire, thus causing its end. During the war, separatist nationalist movements, such as those of the Arabs and Armenians, intensified their activities. In reaction to the foreign occupation of Ottoman lands and the burgeoning separatist movements, a Turkish national resistance movement emerged in 1919–1922 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk that drove the occupation forces back, toppled the sultanate, and created the modern Turkish Republic.

Outbreak of World War I

Following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in June 1914 by a Serb nationalist in Sarajevo, Austria-Hungary demanded that Serbia stop pro-Serbian separatist activity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia's refusal to cooperate ignited the war in which five major European powers were soon involved. As a result of their prewar commitments and collective defense agreements, two sides were formed. On one side there were Germany and Austria-Hungary (Central Powers), and on the other were Britain, France, and Russia (Entente Powers—the United States joined them in 1917). The Ottoman Empire initially stayed out of the war. But on August 2, 1914, Enver Pasha (1881–1922), minister of war and perhaps the strongest personality in the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) government in Istanbul, signed a secret agreement with Germany that pledged that the Ottoman Empire would enter the war alongside the Central Powers.

The pretext needed for the Ottoman Empire to enter the war was given when two German warships, Goeben and Breslau, entered Ottoman waters on August 11, 1914 to escape the British Mediterranean fleet. British demands that the Ottomans either confiscate the ships and detain the crews or force them out of Ottoman waters were rebuffed by the Ottoman government. Istanbul announced that it had purchased the two ships and had renamed them Yavuz and Midilli. The crews were dressed in Ottoman uniforms and Admiral Wilhelm Souchon was appointed commander in chief of the Ottoman navy in the Black Sea. When Souchon, under direct orders from Enver, bombarded Russian bases along the Black Sea and sank Russian ships on October 29, the Ottomans had officially entered the war.

The Ottomans were forced to fight on several fronts during the war. Their meager resources, further decimated during the Balkan wars (1912–13), and poor infrastructure hampered efficient troop transfer from one side of the empire to the other. The Ottomans also had to fight the Russians in Europe (Galicia between July 1916 and August 1917, Romania between August 1916 and May 1918, and Macedonia between September 1916 and March 1917) on the side of the Germans, Austrians, and Bulgarians. Consequently, apart from victories in Gallipoli and Kut al-Amara, the Ottoman armies had very little to show in the battlefields. They were overrun by the Russian armies until a revolution broke out in Russia in 1917, and by the British forces until the end of the war.

Gallipoli

Even today the battle at Gallipoli is a great moment in Turkish popular memory and psychology. In Turkish historiography, it is considered the starting point of modern Turkish history. Not only was the victory of the Ottoman forces against the British and French one of the most notable during the entire war, it also produced a local hero who would subsequently become the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

In February and March 1915, the British and the French attacked Gallipoli, the gate to the Dardanelles, with the goal of capturing Istanbul. The original plan was to engage the Ottomans and relieve Russia, which was being attacked by German-Austrian armies in the west and Ottoman armies in the east. The initial naval operation failed on March 18. On April 25, however, the British and the ANZACS (Australia–New Zealand Army Corps) embarked upon an amphibious attack on the Gallipoli peninsula that led to a relentless and wearisome trench war lasting nine months. Finally, in January 1916, the British and the ANZACS were forced to withdraw.
Mesopotamia

During the initial phases of the war, the British attacked the Ottoman positions in Fao (present-day Al-Faw, Iraq) and Basra, which they captured in November 1914. They then launched a major offensive on Kut-al-Amara, further up the River Tigris on the way to Baghdad, simultaneously with their attack on Gallipoli. General Townshend captured the city in May 1915. He moved further northward in September, but was stopped eventually by the Ottoman forces under the command of Nureddin Pasha at Selmanpak. Townshend retreated to Kut in November, awaiting new reinforcements for another attack on Baghdad. However, the Ottoman forces in Mesopotamia, now under the command of Field Marshal von der Goltz who had replaced Nurettin Pasha, besieged Townshend's forces in January 1916. After a number of attempts by British forces to break the siege, Townshend capitulated on April 29, 1916. After the surrender of Townshend, the British appointed General Stanley Maude as the commander of the British forces in Mesopotamia. General Maude attacked Kut in December 1916 and captured the town on February 23. He continued with his advance northward and on March 11 he entered Baghdad. Fortunately for the Ottomans, Maude did not march on Mosul.

Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia

In the Caucasus, during the initial phases of the war, the Ottomans carried out an operation around the Ottoman town of Kars, close to the Georgian border. The plan was to march toward the Caucasus and incite Russian Muslims to rise up against the czar. However, the operation failed badly around the small and strategic town of Sarikamish. The Ottoman forces were deployed in difficult terrain in the middle of winter, costing the lives of some 70,000 soldiers in December 1914. After the military fiasco in Sarikamish, the entire eastern Anatolia was left open to Russian attacks.

Turkish historians argue that the Ottomans had to deal with an Armenian revolt in Van in April 1915, and that many Armenians in eastern Anatolia had been collaborating with the Russians, either providing them with intelligence or actually joining the ranks of the Russian military and Ottoman authorities had started a systematic campaign of arresting Armenians suspected of collaborating with the enemy. The Armenian uprising in Van impelled the Ottoman government to take further measures, and in May it ordered the relocation of the Armenians from the war zone to Syria and Lebanon. This proved to be a difficult task. The relocation was carried out at the height of the war, while the Ottomans were fighting the British, French, and the ANZACS in Gallipoli; the British in Mesopotamia; and the Russians in eastern Anatolia. Therefore, the Ottomans could not spare sufficient regular forces to supervise the relocation and provide the necessary security to the Armenians. Armenians were robbed, harassed, and killed by bandits and army deserters. Many Armenians, like the Ottoman soldiers who accompanied them, perished due to bad weather conditions, poor transportation means, and starvation. The number of people who lost their lives during this forced relocation is subject to heated debate between Turkish and Armenian historians. Turkish historians put the number as low as 200,000, while Armenian historians put it as high as 2,000,000. The Tehcir, or deportation, as it is known in Turkish historiography, with its various aspects—including the intent, the figures, and the consequences—is still in need of unbiased scholarship.

The Russians continued their advance and took control of eastern Anatolia by 1917, when they eventually withdrew, not because of Ottoman military successes but because of political turmoil in Russia. Once Russia's participation in the war ended in March 1918, the Ottomans were able to retake eastern Anatolia. The Ottomans abandoned their operations in the Caucasus only after the Mudros Armistice was signed in October 1918.

Sinai and Palestine

In January 1915 Cemal Pasha (1872–1922), one of the three powerful leaders in the CUP government, carried out an operation in the Sinai that was aimed at cutting off the Suez Canal and taking Egypt from the British. As on the eastern front, this operation failed, and the Ottoman forces retreated to Palestine in February 1915. Cemal launched another offensive in Palestine in July 1916, but Cemal's forces were again defeated in August. In 1917 the British attacked; General Allenby's forces captured Gaza in November and entered Jerusalem on December 8. In the meantime, Husayn al-Hashimi, the Sharif of Mecca, had come to an agreement with the British to prepare an uprising in June 1916. The Arab revolt continued until 1917. Even though the Arabs did not inflict major casualties on the Ottomans forces, they cut the communication and transportation lines, making the defense of Hejaz difficult for the Ottomans. In February 1918 Allenby marched on Jordan. On September 25 Allenby captured Nazareth and a week later he took Damascus. Finally, on October 25, he conquered Aleppo, thus ending his Syrian campaign. The Ottoman forces retreated to Adana and waited there until the Mudros Armistice was signed at the end of October.
End of the War and the Demise of the Empire

Allenby's successes in Syria terrified the Ottoman government. However, it was British general Milne's march toward Istanbul following the defeat of Bulgaria that forced the Ottomans to seek an armistice. Finally, on October 30, the Ottomans and the Allies signed the Mudros Armistice that effectively ended World War I. Until a final settlement could be reached, the Ottoman territories, except for central Anatolia, were occupied by the victorious powers.

World War I was the last war that the Ottomans fought. The war exhausted almost all imperial resources. Even though the Ottoman forces were supplied with modern German military equipment and personnel, the lack of food, water, and clothing that they experienced proved almost as fatal as the enemy's bullets. Moreover, the lack of sufficient communication and transportation facilities hampered the Ottoman war effort to a considerable extent. Finally, desertions from the army were another problem that the government had to deal with. It not only decreased Ottoman manpower, it also caused social unrest in the countryside because a considerable number of deserters turned into bandits during the war.

After the war was lost, the CUP resigned and a new government was formed. The new government in Istanbul started negotiations with the occupying powers for a final agreement. Meanwhile, Mustafa Kemal left Istanbul and led a resistance against occupation in Anatolia. Kemalist forces fought the occupying powers for three years and in November 1922 a ceasefire between the warring parties was established. Eventually, an international conference was convened in Lausanne, and in July 1923, at last, an understanding was reached between Turkey (the sultanate was abolished by the Ankara government in November 1922) and the Entente powers. Accordingly, the Western powers recognized the new Turkish state and withdrew all their forces from Turkey. In October 1923, a republic was proclaimed in Turkey and a new state emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

Further Information


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