

Kara Kemal

By [Burak Aslanmirza](#)

Bey, Ahmed Kemal

(Kara [Dark] Kemal, Nargileci [Water Pipe Smoker] Kemal, Küçük Efendi [Little Master])

Ottoman politician and statesperson

Died 27 July 1926 in Istanbul, Turkey

Summary

Ahmed Kemal was one of the leading members of the Committee of Union and Progress. Between the years of 1908-1918, he led the establishment of many professional associations and became the architect of the national economy project.

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Introduction

Even though the biggest trump card of the [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#) in making the 1908 Revolution possible was its military resources, its ability to lead the Empire into a radical social transformation came from its efforts to create and develop economic, ideological, and political resources especially after the 1908 Revolution. As part of its strategy to extend its legitimacy among the lower segments of society, both in İstanbul and in the provinces, the CUP introduced various socio-political instruments such as clubs, schools, social aid societies, cooperatives, paramilitary youth organizations, women's associations, local newspapers, and magazines.

The importance of Kara [Dark] Kemal, whose real name was Ahmed Kemal, within the CUP stemmed from the fact that he organized the lower and middle-income Muslim-Turkish *esnaf* [trader, artisan, and labor groups] and gathered a huge amount of economic capital to the CUP. This contribution made him one of the most important allies and partners of [Talat Bey \(1874-1921\)](#), the most influential leading figure of the civilian wing of the CUP.

Life before World War I

Kara Kemal was born in Istanbul in 1875(?), the son of Arif Bey, Telegraph Director of the Secretariat of the Ottoman Sultan [*Mabeyn Telgraf Müdürü*]. He worked in the Ministry of Post and Telegraph [*Posta ve Telgraf Nezareti*] as a postal officer. With the advantage of his position, he distributed banned Young Turk publications smuggled from abroad. In 1906, after the CUP's reorganization as a centralized movement, he was appointed as the Clerk-in-Charge [*Kâtib-i Mesûl*] of the Istanbul Branch by the Committee Center at Thessaloniki.

Due to his fondness for hookah, he was a regular in coffeehouses, which led him to develop good relationships with *esnafs*. Through various *esnaf* networks, he achieved significant success in politicizing the public sphere on behalf of the CUP. Following the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, Kara Kemal worked with the members of the Istanbul Branch to establish *esnaf* associations. With the initiatives of the branch, the CUP's clubs organized some public night schools with trade and banking courses. By taking advantage of the national agitation generated by the boycott movements, which began against the Austro-Hungarian and Greek products in 1908 but then expanded to the economic activities of Ottoman non-Muslims, they made efforts to concentrate the economic surplus in the hands of Muslim-Turks. During this period, Kara Kemal transformed the old Ottoman guild institution, whose main functions during the 19th century – the Ottoman Empire's integration into the global capitalist order – had been lost, into modern professional associations and made them central to the policy of creating a national bourgeoisie.

After the 31 March Incident in 1909, a general uprising against the Young Turk regime within the capital city, Kara Kemal had the opportunity to show how his networks could be useful also in social policing. He conducted a detailed investigation in Istanbul to determine who was involved in the uprising and how, preparing a list for the CUP's Headquarters [*Merkez-i Umûmî*]. As a result of all his efforts, Kara Kemal had access to such extensive social and economic networks that Talat Bey finally had him elected as a member of the Headquarters at the 1912 General Congress to benefit from his power in politics as well. Subsequently, he remained one of the most significant Unionist leaders until his death.

Kara Kemal was one of the decision makers in the CUP's action to overthrow the cabinet by force on 23 January 1913 by benefiting from the widespread unease created by the catastrophic Ottoman defeat in the [First Balkan War](#), referred to as the Sublime Porte Raid. He placed some armed members of *esnaf* associations at strategically located coffeehouses in order to secure the road on which prominent Unionists would walk to the Sublime Porte. Furthermore, under his command, these groups occupied the Post and Telegraph Administration in the Sirkeci region and cut off all the government communication lines.

At the 1913 General Congress of the CUP, the Istanbul Central Branch under Kara Kemal's supervision was granted an extensive autonomy from the rest of the Committee, unlike the other centers in the provinces thus paving the way for Kara Kemal to carry out his socio-political and economic agenda more freely. Kara Kemal began to be called "the Little Master [*Küçük Efendi*]", following Talat Bey, "the Grand Master [*Büyük Efendi*]."

Role during the War

At the beginning of World War I, Kara Kemal was assigned to Trabzon to constitute a branch for the Special Organization [*Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*]. He worked on the organization of the Caucasian Revolutionary Society, which aimed to damage the Russian army from behind the front. Then, he returned to Istanbul and resumed his project of creating a national bourgeoisie composed of Muslim-Turks.

During the war, with the disruption of global supply chains, the [Ottoman economy](#) began to close in on itself as in the other parts of the Europe, and exorbitant price increases occurred especially for daily essentials due to the high demands from the army. The state needed to intervene in the free market which had been disrupted by the harsh conditions of the war. However, instead of preventing market speculation, the Unionists brought it under their control and aimed to use it for Kara Kemal's project.

Initially, the [government](#) unilaterally revoked the economic and judicial capitulations granted to the citizens of European states. Then, to solve Istanbul's food problems, the Special Trade Board [*Heyet-i Mahsusa-i Ticariyye*] was founded under the direction of Kara Kemal. Thanks to its commercial activities, this board reached a total profit of 273,374 Ottoman liras in a few months. Kara Kemal created two separate *waqf* foundations to manage this profit as the capital for building several national joint stock companies. Meanwhile, to promote more Muslim-Turks, many conferences were organized in provincial CUP clubs. Some small and medium size national banks were also created in big Anatolian cities like Izmir and Konya. The forced deportation and massacre of Ottoman Armenians in the course of 1915 and 1916 also facilitated the realization of Kara Kemal's project of creating a Muslim-Turkish bourgeoisie. This was due to the fact that the properties and businesses of the Armenians were also transferred to Muslim entrepreneurs in Anatolia. As a result, while the total numbers of joint stock companies operating until 1908 was 86, their numbers between 1908 and 1918 reached 236. In addition to these companies, the economic activities of Muslim-Turks were further expanded by the cooperative initiatives launched by Kara Kemal. In 1917, the Profiteering Prohibition Board [*Men-i İhtikâr Heyeti*] was established to combat speculation; however, it targeted mostly non-Muslims and significantly weakened the competitors of the emerging national bourgeoisie.

Kara Kemal took his place among the leaders of the Turkist Unionists who gradually took total control of the CUP through February 1917. As a member of a delegation consisting of [Talat](#), [Ziya \(1876-1924\)](#), [Hüseyin Cahid \(1874-1957\)](#), [Dr. Nazım \(1870-1926\)](#), [Halil \(1874-1948\)](#), and [Hacı Adil \(1869-1935\)](#), he participated in secret meetings organized after the 1916 General Congress, that is, from the end of September 1916 until around April 1917, at the Red Mansion [*Kızıl Konak*], the Headquarters of the CUP, to formulate a comprehensive program for a systematic Turkification policy. The ethnic, religious, demographic, socio-economic, intellectual, socio-cultural, and socio-political Turkification policies, which had been carried out in a scattered manner by some of the prominent Unionists up to this time, were opened to discussion in terms of the aims and objectives of the CUP. Consequently, a consensus was reached on many topics, and Turkism evolved into the ruling ideology. With the gradual resignation of the Islamist wing of the Unionists from the cabinet, who were represented by [Pirîzâde İbrahim Hayrullah Bey \(1839-1934\)](#), the Minister of Justice, [Ürgüplü Mustafa Hayri Efendi \(1867-1921\)](#), the Sheikh-ul-Islam, and [Prince Said Halim Pasha \(1863-1921\)](#), the Grand Vizier, the government fell completely into the hands of the Turkist leaders by February 1917.

Although Kara Kemal and his circle had played the leading role in the national economy, a military cadre had also intervened in the economy during the war. The coordination of the economic activities carried out to provide [food](#) for the army was ensured by [İsmail Hakkı Pasha \(1890-1954\)](#), the Director of the Quartermaster Department under the Ministry of War, and he mostly challenged the activities of the civilian groups around Kara Kemal. To put an end to the duality and merge all the accumulated capital, with the initiative of [Cavid Bey \(-1926\)](#), the Minister of Finance in the Talat Pasha's Cabinet, the Bank of the Ottoman National Dignity [*Osmanlı İtibâr-ı Millî Bankası*] was established in 1917. Moreover, following other European countries, the government established the Ministry of Food in 1918, and Kara Kemal was appointed as its first minister. However, due to the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from the war, Kara Kemal held this position only two months.

After the War

With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the cabinet resigned on 8 October 1918. On the same day, the CUP held a meeting and abolished itself. Some of the Unionists who held great responsibility during the war such as Talat, Enver, and [Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#), Dr. Nazım, and [Dr. Bahaeddin Şakir \(1874-1922\)](#) fled abroad. Although the remaining Unionists established the Renewal Party [*Teceddüt Fırkası*] in place of the CUP, it could not survive long because of the pressure from the British and French governments and the Ottoman Freedom and Accord Party [*Osmanlı Hürriyet ve İtilâf Fırkası*].

Kara Kemal stayed in Istanbul and, together with [Kara Vasıf \(1871-1931\)](#), founded a secret society named *Karakol* (a pun meaning Guard and/or “Dark” Section), whose foundation was based on the *esnaf* associations and the Special Organization, to engage in the delivery of arms, ammunition, and people willing to work for a national struggle to Anatolia, and also to gather intelligence on the Entente forces. The members of *esnaf* associations such as porters, boatmen, and cartermen worked together under this society. Muslim-Turk capitalists in Anatolia, who had been strengthened by the state during the war, also provided the main financing necessitated by the national struggle.

Although Kara Kemal was arrested and exiled to Malta to be tried for war crimes, he managed to escape and joined the resistance movement in Anatolia. However, after a while, he fell out with [Mustafa Kemal Pasha \(-1938\)](#), the main leader of the movement, and remained in the opposition wing of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara. With his former colleagues such as Cavid, Dr. Nazım, and [Kör Ali İhsan Beys \(1870-1940\)](#), they tried to reestablish the CUP with a new program centered on the idea of professional representation. However, their attempts to revive the CUP did not yield any results. Finally, when their names were implicated in an assassination attempt against Mustafa Kemal Pasha in Izmir in 1926, an arrest warrant was issued for Kara Kemal and his friends to be tried by the Independence Court [*İstiklâl Mahkemesi*]. At a police raid to arrest Kara Kemal, he was found dead. Although it was announced by the press that Kara Kemal had committed suicide, it has not yet been verified to what extent this information reflects the truth.

Burak Aslanmirza, Kocaeli University

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- [Foster, Zachary J.: World War I and the Ottoman Empire. The Arab Provinces \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Audio\)](#)
- [Hanioğlu, Şükrü M. \(in Turkish\): İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti \(Committee of Union and Progress\), 2001, \(TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi\), \(Article\)](#)
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[Burak Aslanmirza](#)

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