

Killigil, Nuri

By [Alp Yenen](#)

Killigil, *Nuri*

(Nuri Pasha, Nuri Paşa, Nuru Paşa, (in Azerbaijan: Nuru))

military officer

Born 05 May 1890 in Manastır, Ottoman Empire (today Bitola, Macedonia)

Died 02 March 1949 in Istanbul, Turkey

Summary

Nuri Pasha, younger brother of Enver Pasha, contributed to Ottoman special operations in Libya against Italy before and during World War I. In 1918, he became the commander of the Islamic Army of the Caucasus during the Ottoman advance into the Caucasus. After the armistice, Nuri commanded Muslim bands against Armenians and Bolsheviks in the Caucasus.

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Introduction

Mustafa Nuri Killigil (1890-1949), commonly remembered as the younger brother of [Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), was a major Ottoman commander in the First World War. In an autobiographical sketch, Nuri summarized his war-time career in modest terms as follows:

Soon after the declaration of the Great War, I was assigned to the Tripolitania and Benghazi detachments, where I was appointed ‘Commander of the Africa Groups’ as honorary major general and, two years later, honorary lieutenant general. I remained in this capacity until [...] 1918. In the year 1918 [...], I went to Azerbaijan, having been appointed ‘Commander of the Islamic Army of the Caucasus’. I remained in charge of the mission there until the time of

the armistice.¹

Although Nuri benefitted from Enver's favors in his extraordinary promotions, he distinguished himself as a commander of unconventional [warfare](#) campaigns in the distant frontiers of North Africa and the Caucasus.

Military Career Before the First World War

Nuri received a military education in Bitola and Istanbul, graduating from the Istanbul Military Staff College in 1909.² During his first post, Nuri was part of the Action Army that suppressed the counterrevolution of 1909. Thanks to his marksman skills, Nuri attended a special course at the [Habsburg Empire's](#) Army Shooting School. As a loyal "Young Turk" officer, Nuri was appointed to the politically sensitive Imperial Entourage Company. After the beginning of the [Italian invasion](#) of Ottoman Libya, Nuri travelled undercover to Tripolitania via [France](#) and Tunisia.³ Based in Lebda, Nuri utilized his marksmanship skills and commanded a group of tribal riflemen in hit-and-run missions around the city of Khums and participated in the Battle of Murqub on 27 February 1912. After the start of the [Balkan Wars](#), Nuri took part in the Second Battle of Çatalca and participated in the recapture of Edirne in July 1913. After the Balkan Wars, Nuri was appointed assistant military attaché, first in Rome and then in Vienna, only two weeks before the assassination of [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) in [Sarajevo](#).

Military Campaigns During the First World War: Commander of the Frontiers

Commander of the Africa Groups 1915-1918

After the beginning of the First World War, Nuri was sent on a secret mission back to Libya. Appointed as the Commander of the Africa Groups, he was ordered to join forces with Sheikh [Ahmed al-Sharif al-Senussi \(1873-1933\)](#) and lead an unconventional warfare campaign in North Africa in the name of the Ottoman "[holy war](#)". Accompanied by [Jafar al-Askari \(1885-1936\)](#), Nuri secretly travelled to Libya. To reinforce Nuri's mission, he was given the rank of honorary major (later lieutenant) general and the honorific title of "pasha", even though he had the rank of a captain. In October 1915, an [infantry](#) battalion of the Ottoman army's [Special Organization](#) arrived and regrouped under Nuri's command. Although Sheikh Ahmed remained reluctant to attack British [Egypt](#), various acts of provocation secretly executed by Nuri's staff created tensions with the British. After a series of skirmishes which reached their climax in February and March 1916, the British forces defeated the Ottoman-Libyan rebels. Nuri managed to escape and regroup in Misrata with reinforcements. When

[Sayyid Idris \(1889-1983\)](#), the new leader of the Senussiyya, made deals with [Britain](#) and [Italy](#), Nuri boldly claimed: "I will break the peace that Idris made with the English and the Italians. [...] Tunisia [and] Algeria will be cleared of the French within three months."⁴ Despite his ambitions, Nuri went to Istanbul with a German [submarine](#) in early 1918 to discuss North African affairs but never returned to Libya again.

Commander of the Islamic Army of the Caucasus

The end of the [Russian Empire](#) in 1917 opened a new window of opportunity for an Ottoman advance into the Caucasus. Upon the explicit request of the Caucasian Muslim national delegation, Nuri was appointed as the Commander of the Islamic Army of the Caucasus.⁵ Although being hastily promoted to the position of lieutenant colonel, Nuri was still outranked by many officers under his command and declared again honorary lieutenant general and given the imperial title of Servant of His Sovereign. The "special" mission Enver assigned to Nuri was to capture Baku. Nuri and his staff reached Ganja in Azerbaijan on 25 May 1918. Although Nuri stated that "he was a soldier; did not know politics", he intervened also in the civilian affairs of the newly founded People's Republic of [Azerbaijan](#).⁶ Nuri founded the new Azerbaijan Army Corps and conducted a brutal war of "surrender or annihilation" against Armenian and Bolshevik forces on his way to Baku. Ottoman plans of invasion were kept secret by Enver and Nuri from their German allies, who had their own conflicting agenda in the Caucasus. While a great panic occurred among the Armenians during the siege of Baku, the violent capture of the city took place on 14-15 September 1918. Nuri immediately directed his ambitions on Karabakh in order to create a pro-Ottoman axis of a Muslim buffer zone between the People's Republic of Azerbaijan and the Mountaineer Republic of the Northern Caucasus, but war was lost in late September 1918.

Postwar Struggles: An Entrepreneur of War

Before the armistice was signed, Enver sent secret messages to Nuri, ordering him to disobey the official [demobilization](#) orders. Once British forces occupied Baku, however, Nuri returned to Istanbul, where he was arrested and handed over to British officials. Deported back to the Caucasus to be court martialed, Nuri's friends rescued him from the Ardahan military barracks. After a debriefing in Erzurum, Nuri went back to Baku with the assignment to secretly organize support for the National Struggle in Turkey. Appointed as the commander of the armed forces by the Northern Caucasus Committee, Nuri commanded Muslim bands in coalition with the Red Army against the White Army in Daghestan. After defeating Denikin, Nuri and his men were ousted by the Bolsheviks. Nuri's attempts to start an anti-Bolshevik uprising in Karabakh were suppressed, forcing him and his cavalry unit to leave the

Caucasus. Back in Anatolia, they joined the Ankara Government's Eastern Army and participated in the Turkish-Armenian War in September 1920. Nuri later devoted himself to reestablishing factories and workshops in Erzurum and Kars, producing military arms and supplies. Nuri retired from the military in November 1921, and was later awarded the Independence Medal for his services during the War of Independence.

Nuri Killigil became a leading arms and weapons industrialist in Turkey, but remained loyal to the political outlook shaped by his frontier experiences. Nuri was an anti-Bolshevik for the rest of his life. Active in [pan-Turkist](#) circles, Nuri proposed a plan to the Nazi regime in 1942 for recruiting Turkic and Muslim legions from Red Army [POWs](#) in order to build a federation of independent Muslim states. During the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, Nuri accepted government contracts from Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon and secretly delivered arms to Arab countries. Nuri Killigil, married to a Turco-Egyptian princess in 1946, died in a mysterious explosion at his arms factory in Istanbul on 2 March 1949—an incident that remains the subject of conspiracy theories in Turkey.

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Notes

1. Nuri Pasha, rough draft of autobiographical sketches, 28 March 1924, Archive of the Turkish Historical Society (in short TTK), Kazım Orbay Papers (in short KO), Box No. 15, File No. 27. [↑](#)
2. Details of Nuri's military career are listed in his dossier at the Archive of the Ministry of Defense, reproduced in Karaköse, Nuri Paşa, appendix, nos. 1, 3, 6-9. [↑](#)
3. Contrary to other accounts, Nuri did not travel with his brother Enver to Benghazi. See: Nuri Killigil's memoirs published as a series in the newspaper Vatan from 26 February 1941 to 12 March 1941, quoted in great lengths in Oral, Atilla: Nuri Killigil, Istanbul 2016. See also: Enver, letter to Nuri, 10 June 1912 [27 May 1328], TTK, KO, Box No. 19, File No. 43. [↑](#)
4. Nuri, letter to Enver, n.d. [summer of 1917], TTK, KO, Box. No. 20, File No. 53. [↑](#)
5. Keykurun, Naki: Azerbaycan İstiklal Mücadelesinin Hatıraları, Istanbul 1964, p. 70-71. [↑](#)
6. Quoted in Hasanli, Jamil: Foreign Policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Difficult Road to Western Integration, 1918-1920. New York 2016, pp. 77-78. [↑](#)

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Citation

Alp Yenen: Killigil, Nuri, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2019-05-27. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11350/1.1](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11350/1.1)

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- [McCollum, Jonathan: The anti-colonial empire. Ottoman mobilization and resistance in the Italo-Turkish War, 1911-1912, thesis, 2018 \(University of California Los Angeles\)](#)

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Author Keywords

North African Front; Caucasus Front; Ottoman Siege of Baku; Ottoman holy war; Pan-Turkism; Pan-Islamism

GND Subject Headings

[Nuri Paşa](#)

LC Subject Headings

[Nuri Paşa, 1881-1949](#)

Key Person(s)

[al-Senussi, Ahmed al-Sharif](#); [al-Askari, Jafar](#); [Idris, Sayyid](#); [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este](#); [Enver Pasha, Ismail](#)

Key Location(s)

[Constantinople \(Istanbul\)](#); [Bitola](#); [Baku](#)

Title

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Author(s)

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Article Type

Encyclopedic Entry

Classification Group

Persons