

Ottoman Empire/Middle East

By [Yücel Yanıkdağ](#)

Summary

During the Great War, the Ottoman Empire fought on several major and minor fronts, both in the Middle East and in the Balkans. Although initially seen as a military liability by its allies and a weak enemy by its foes, Ottoman armies delivered some heavy blows to the Entente powers, mainly the British. Yet, by 1918, the military was battered beyond recognition. Ottoman civilians did not fare any better: they suffered and died by the millions due to war, deportation, massacre, disease, and famine.

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Introduction: “Ten-Year War” and the Ottoman Great War

As the conflict that ended the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire, the First World War changed the political, social, and demographic landscape of large parts of the Middle East. Its industrial

shortcomings aside, in some ways the Great War became more of a “[total war](#)” for the Ottoman Empire than it did for other belligerents. At times it became nearly impossible to distinguish between the military front and the home front. The war also led to large-scale internal displacement and forced deportation and killing of certain ethnic groups who were perceived or portrayed as an “internal security risk.” Yet, despite the scale and uniqueness of the Ottoman Great War (1914-1918), the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922) overshadowed it for many decades in the nationalist historiography of the Turkish Republic. This historiography treated the beginning of the struggle for independence in 1919 as a major break from the Ottoman past. Eventually, other nationalist historians and intellectuals, ignoring chronology, started to treat the [Battle of Gallipoli](#) as if it belonged with the War of Independence. In this view, Gallipoli foreshadowed what was to come and became a “prototype” of the War of Independence. In the later 20th century, historians started to highlight continuities between the late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. Consequently, some scholars forwarded the view that the Great War was part of a continuous “Ten-Year War” that started with the [Balkan Wars \(1912-1913\)](#) and ended with the end of the War of Independence. It is true that only brief respites existed between these wars and that this longer view highlights important continuities from one war to another. However, as was true of the earlier nationalist historiography, the “Ten-Year War” view also ignores the significance and uniqueness of the Great War when seen as a “mid-point” in a longer series of wars.¹

Historical Background

The men who led the [empire](#) into the Great War in 1914 rose to positions of power as a result of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. Revolting against the autocratic rule of the reigning Ottoman Sultan, [Abdülhamid II, Sultan of the Turks \(1842-1918\)](#), revolutionaries restored the constitution (suppressed since 1878) and inspired Ottomans of different ethnicities and religions with hope that they might unite together to build a brighter future. Enver Bey, later known as [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), a young officer and the [revolution's](#) hero, and his fellow revolutionaries referred to themselves as Unionists because they belonged to a secret organization called the [Committee of Union and Progress](#) (CUP). Dreams of a unified empire were quickly dashed, however, as Austria-Hungary [annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) and [Bulgaria](#) declared its *de jure* independence. The [Italian invasion of Ottoman Libya in 1911](#) confirmed that the great powers had no interest in seeing a revitalized Ottoman Empire. Then the Balkan Wars broke out.²

In October 1912, [Montenegro](#) declared war on the Ottoman Empire. A week later, Bulgaria, [Serbia](#), and [Greece](#) joined forces with Montenegro in a concerted attack on Ottoman territories throughout the Balkan Peninsula. Forced to fight on multiple fronts, the Ottomans

suffered a crushing defeat. By November 1912, Bulgarians had besieged the old Ottoman capital of Edirne and come dangerously close to the capital city of Istanbul. Arguing over the spoils of war, in the summer of 1913 the Balkan allies turned against each other. Taking advantage of the attacks by other powers on Bulgaria, Ottomans recaptured Edirne. Although the Great Powers, predicting an Ottoman victory, had declared at the beginning of the war that the territorial gains made during the war would not be permanent, in light of the Ottoman defeat and loss of territory, they now recognized the Balkan states' territorial gains. The Great Powers' double standard and their own political isolation did not, of course, escape the notice of the Ottoman leadership and public. By the end of the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman Empire had not only lost much of its manpower and military equipment, but also nearly 33 percent of its territory and 16-20 percent of its population.³ In 1911, Ottoman Balkan territories stretched from the Black and Marmara Seas to the Adriatic Sea through Thrace, Eastern Rumelia, Macedonia, Kosovo, and [Albania](#), but by 1913 only eastern Thrace remained in Ottoman possession.

The total defeat in the Balkan Wars, or the "Balkan War Tragedy" (*Balkan Harbi Faciası*) was indeed traumatic. Territories that had been under Ottoman rule since the 14th century were lost during the fighting. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of soldiers died or became [prisoners of war](#) and millions of Ottoman Muslims (ethnic Turks and others) suddenly found themselves under unfriendly foreign rule and worse, as victims of ethnic cleansing. As many as 600,000 (or 27 percent) Muslims of Ottoman Europe died or were killed. Immediately after the war, through forced or voluntary migration to escape persecution another 400,000 civilians arrived in the 33 percent smaller Ottoman Empire. The streets of Istanbul were flooded with destitute Balkan [refugees](#). The Balkan defeat and the situation of the refugees weighed heavily on the Ottoman leaders and public as the empire entered the First World War. Among both the populace and political leadership – many of the leaders of the CUP, for example, hailed from the Balkans – the defeat and how the refugees were treated by the victors produced a deep sense of humiliation, violation, and victimhood. While the Balkan Wars had ended, the conviction among the political and military elite, as well as the "aggrieved public", was that war was necessary to avenge the humiliating defeat.⁴

The Balkan Wars' domestic political repercussions were also catastrophic. The Unionists, who had been driven out of power by a cabinet change in July 1912 during the First Balkan War, turned the tables against Grand Vizier [Mehmed Kâmil Pasha \(1833-1913\)](#) when his government proposed abandoning the besieged city of Edirne to the Bulgarians. In response to the proposal, Enver Bey and a group of armed Unionists forced Kamil Pasha to resign in an armed coup on 23 January 1913. After this takeover of power, a single-party CUP rule began under the leadership of Grand Vizier [Mahmut Şevket Pasha \(1856-1913\)](#). When he was

assassinated only five months later in June 1913, the CUP further tightened its grip on power through [censorship](#) and the harsh repression of all opposition.⁵

The CUP regime that ruled from 1913 to 1918 has been described as a triumvirate of Enver, Cemal, and Talat Pashas, although they were only the most visible members of a larger CUP inner circle that made many decisions collectively. [Mehmed Talat Pasha \(1874-1921\)](#) became Minister of the Interior; in 1917 he also assumed the post of the Grand Vizier. Enver became Minister of War in late 1913. Cemal was Minister of the Navy and commanded the Fourth Army during the war.⁶

The July Crisis, the Search for Allies, and Entry into the War

The CUP ruled in diplomatic isolation for a year before the [July Crisis](#), but they had also learned the lesson of isolation during the Balkan Wars. The [assassination](#) of [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) in Sarajevo and [Austro-Hungary's](#) ultimatum to Serbia prompted the Young Turks to search for allies among the great powers. Despite rumors that they approached the Entente for an [alliance](#), they preferred [Germany](#). However, the German Foreign Office turned down their first proposal because it viewed the Ottomans as a military liability. When the CUP threatened to turn to the Entente, however, [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) personally intervened on their behalf. Grand Vizier [Said Halim Pasha \(1865-1921\)](#) offered the terms of a secret alliance, which was signed on 2 August, bringing the Ottomans into the Central Powers.⁷ On the same day, [Britain](#) confiscated two Ottoman [dreadnoughts](#) commissioned from a British shipyard with money raised by the Ottoman Navy League through public donations.⁸ This angered many Ottomans and helped turn public opinion against Britain.

With the treaty still secret, the state issued mobilization orders on 2-3 August under a policy of armed [neutrality](#). Most Ottoman leaders who knew of the alliance hoped to postpone Ottoman entry into the war as long as possible, due to slow mobilization and the possible threat posed by Bulgaria. But the 10 August arrival of two German naval ships – [Goeben and Breslau](#) – in the Dardanelles Strait made armed neutrality difficult to maintain. The ships were transferred to the Ottoman navy and renamed *Yavuz* and *Midilli*. Technically, the crew joined the expanded German military mission in the Ottoman Empire under Major General [Otto Liman von Sanders \(1855-1929\)](#). On 27 October an Ottoman naval detachment, led by the *Yavuz* and commanded by Admiral [Wilhelm Souchon \(1864-1946\)](#), sailed into the Black Sea with orders to engage the Russians.⁹ From 29-31 October, Ottoman vessels bombarded Russian ports and sank Russian vessels. The Russians responded by crossing the Ottomans'

eastern frontier in Anatolia on 1 November. The Ottomans were now at war against the Entente. Defying the German view of them as a liability, the Ottomans managed to remain on the field as an effective fighting force until late 1918.

The performance of the Ottoman military is all the more impressive when its shortcomings and primitive infrastructure are considered. With a land area nearly five times the size of Germany and [France](#), the Ottoman Empire had only 5,759 kilometers of single-rail lines.

Germany, France, and even [India](#) had nine to eleven times as many kilometers of railways.^{[10](#)} Worse, there was no connection between the eastern and western parts of Anatolia by rail. Military units leaving Istanbul took nearly two months on foot to reach the Caucasus front. Nor was the Ottoman economy, mismanaged and dependent on foreign credits, war-ready. The [communication](#) network, mainly [telegraph](#), was also insufficient. Recent education reforms had not yet lifted the literacy rate above 7 percent.^{[11](#)} The Ottoman armies had just over 2,400 doctors, or less than one-tenth of the number of doctors in the Germany army. Some 12 percent of them died during the war.^{[12](#)}

Mobilization and Recruitment

In the early summer of 1914, the Ottoman army stood roughly at 150,000, but during the four years of war 2,873,000 men were mobilized. This represented approximately 12 percent of the empire's estimated population of 23 million. This was no small feat, and even the British applauded it as "a great achievement" in 1918.^{[13](#)} (A 1932 study by Colonel Baki of the Ministry of War Archives adjusted the number of men mobilized to 3,059,205.^{[14](#)}) The strength of the regular officer corps was so inadequate in the fall of 1914 that the War Ministry re-hired the recently dismissed *alaylı* (literally, from the regiment) officers, who had risen through the ranks based on seniority rather than military training or merit. As the casualties among junior officers mounted, Military Academy cadets were immediately assigned to units as brevet lieutenants, while senior cadets of military secondary schools and graduates of civilian high schools became officer candidates after brief combat training.^{[15](#)}

Because the Ottomans lacked the bureaucratic infrastructure to conduct a reliable census, universal male conscription had been impossible to achieve. Many non-Muslim Ottomans had remained outside of the system by purchasing their way out through official exemptions (*bedel-i nakdi*).^{[16](#)} But in 1909 the state ordered the conscription of all eligible male Ottomans regardless of religion. During the war, however, non-Muslim conscripts – largely Armenians and Greeks – were mostly assigned to unarmed service in "labor battalions." Some non-Muslims, including Armenians, served as armed soldiers at the front; likewise, some Muslims

served in the “labor battalions.”¹⁷ By 1914 nearly all exemptions – even for well-placed Muslims – had been eliminated.¹⁸

At first, mobilization orders required all eligible men between the ages of twenty and forty-five to report to recruitment stations. Within a year, the minimum draft age was reduced to eighteen and the maximum raised to fifty. Initial recruitment proved almost too successful: so many men showed up that the existing military structure could not absorb them all. Unable to supply conscripts with food, uniforms, and arms, the state required that each new recruit bring along enough food to feed himself for five days. Similarly, the uniform shortage was only partially alleviated by asking men to bring “appropriate” clothing and shoes, which meant that many soldiers fought in civilian clothes and wore sandal-like rawhide peasant shoes (*çarık*). Still, in many cases, even in the harshest of conditions, soldiers lacked appropriate shoes or clothing.¹⁹

The state made a variety of appeals to the public to join the war effort. Islamic discourse provided an important justification for the call to arms. When the Sultan as caliph [declared a jihad](#) in mid-November 1914, he was using Islam as a method of propaganda to appeal to all Muslims within and outside the empire, including non-Turks like Arabs, Kurds, and Circassians.²⁰ However, since one-fifth of the empire’s population were non-Muslims, the sultan needed to appeal to them as well. The fact that the empire was allied with Christian powers to fight against other Christian powers presented another possible complication. Contrary to Orientalist views, jihad’s multiple meanings turned it into a call for social mobilization of Muslims and non-Muslims alike to defend the homeland against those who threatened it.²¹

The state also asked civilians to contribute to the financial mobilization of the empire. This was done through internal borrowing (*dahili istikraz*), especially at the end of the war, and through requisitioning foodstuffs and beasts of burden from the civilian population to feed the troops and their animals and to transport materiel. The home front was thus integrated into the war effort in an unprecedented practice of total war.²²

Enver Pasha was Chief of the General Staff, but he may have lacked the necessary experience and patience to handle the highly technical duties of such a position. He therefore appointed Colonel [Friedrich Bronsart von Schellendorf \(1864\)](#) as First Assistant to the Chief of the General Staff. Working with Ottoman general staff officers as branch chiefs, von Schellendorf became the de facto Chief of the General Staff, especially after the [Sarikamis Campaign](#) (22 December 1914 to 17 January 1915). Enver’s increasing reliance on German

staff officers provoked protest from high-ranking Ottoman officers. These officers acknowledged the superiority of German military thinking, but they pointed out that Germans did not understand the Ottoman military or have the necessary language skills.²³

The War

From 1914 to 1918, the Ottoman military fought on four intensive fronts: the Caucasus, the Dardanelles (Gallipoli), Sinai-Palestine, and Mesopotamia-Iraq. They also fought on less intensive fronts both independently and with the Central Powers: Arabia-Yemen, Iran, [Azerbaijan](#), [Romania](#), Galicia, and [Macedonia](#).²⁴

Category	Number	Remarks
Number of men mobilized	2,873,000-3,059,205	From Erickson and Baki
Combat dead	243,598	Total dead and missing: 771,844
Missing in Action	61,487	
Died of disease	466,759	
Total wounded	763,753	303,150 seriously wounded
Prisoners of War	217,746-242,746	From Yanıkdağ, Prisoners of War (Ottoman Empire) , 1914-1918-online.
Estimated deserters	500,000	From Beşikçi

Table 1: Ottoman Mobilization and Casualties²⁵

The Caucasus Front

The Russians originally adopted a defensive stance, with plans to occupy the high ground at the border and to wait for the Ottomans. However, they then decided to move into Ottoman territory and met the Ottoman Third Army, led by [Hasan İzzet Pasha \(1871-1931\)](#). Although he defeated the Russians at the Battle of Köprüköy, Hasan İzzet failed to wipe them out. Finding him too cautious, Enver sacked Hasan İzzet and took personal charge of the Third Army in the field.

On 18 December 1914, Enver launched the Third Army into offensive action. The plan was for about one-third of his forces to attack the main Russian forces, with the rest moving in two separate columns to capture the town of Sarıkamış. This would not only cut the Russians off from their supply base, but would also encircle them. But efforts to capture Sarıkamış collapsed due to harsh weather conditions and poor roads. Ottoman soldiers were ordered to withdraw over the Allahuekber mountain range, instead of going around it. Many thousands of ill-clad soldiers froze to death in heavy snow and record-low temperatures.²⁶ Against the advice of his subordinates, Enver refused to retreat. The Russians quickly launched an attack on 2 January 1915, encircling a part of the retreating Third Army. They took thousands of men and over 200 officers prisoner. The Sarıkamış Campaign thus ended in a self-inflicted disaster. On 22 December the Third Army had over 118,000 soldiers, but by the end of the campaign only 8,900 remained.²⁷

The remaining few thousand soldiers of the Third Army were hit by an outbreak of typhus in early 1915. Complete Ottoman defeat opened more of eastern Anatolia and the Black Sea coast, including Trabzon, to a Russian invasion through 1915-1916. Finally, in December 1917 the two sides signed the Erzurum Armistice Protocol as Russian troops disbanded and retreated back into [Russia](#). In many localities the Russians were replaced by the Armenian National Army and militia groups. By early 1918 the Ottomans were on the offensive again, and by the end of March the Third Army had crossed the pre-1914 frontiers. Instead of consolidating the gains in 1918, Enver decided to push into the Caucasus and Iran with his newly raised "Army of Islam" and the Ninth Army.²⁸

The Dardanelles (Gallipoli)

Protecting the long-distance southern approaches of Istanbul, the Dardanelles Strait and the Gallipoli Peninsula had been a fortress command – Dardanelles Fortified Zone Command – for centuries. The string of forts was old and many of their guns were outdated, but the men in charge knew the area well and how best to defend it against amphibious operations.

Britain's 3 November 1914 bombardment of the [forts](#) only served to remind the military command of the vulnerability of the area. A group of 500 German naval experts arrived to help the zone commander rectify some of the weaknesses. All available men worked to improve seaward defenses and build roads and interior communications as more Ottoman troops and limited quantities of German war material started to arrive in the area. In the meantime, additional minefields were laid across and parallel to the straits. On 18 March 1915, the Anglo-French navy attempted to pass into the Marmara Sea by employing minesweepers and by heavily shelling Ottoman fort positions. While these were mostly

silenced by noon, the flotilla still faced shells from well-hidden Ottoman howitzers. As Entente battleships pulled aside to make room for minesweepers, three struck mines and sank instantly, one after the other. After three more battleships suffered damage from mines and [artillery](#) fire, the attack was called off. With very light casualties on their side, the Ottomans had scored a major victory against the Entente force. On 24 March, the Fifth Army was mobilized under the command of Liman von Sanders, who arrived on the peninsula the next day.²⁹ As the defeated allies prepared to invade Gallipoli, the Ottoman side prepared for their landing.

In the month it took for the Entente invasion force to return, the Ottomans continued to improve road networks and fortifications and camouflaged troop encampments and artillery positions. Despite his recent arrival, Liman von Sanders took much credit for “rationalizing and solidifying the defensive arrangements” in Gallipoli. His version of his role in the preparations has been repeated by various European historians to this day; however, Turkish official accounts point out that the Ottomans were implementing plans drawn up by their own staff during the Balkan Wars.³⁰

Although Ottoman forces were ready for battle, they had no idea where the main enemy force would land, even as the British and French were landing at six different locations on 25 April. The Area Command, independent of the Fifth Army, expected the main attacks to come at the tip of the peninsula Seddülbahir (Cape Helles) and in the Kabatepe (Gaba Tepe) region. Liman von Sanders believed that the Bolayır-Saros region was the most likely main landing site. The Area Command’s predictions were correct. Entente invaders landed at Seddülbahir and Arıburnu (Anzac Cove). [Mehmed Esad Pasha \(1862-1952\)](#) took charge of the fighting at the southern tip of the peninsula around Seddülbahir, while Lieutenant Colonel [Mustafa Kemal Bey \(-1938\)](#) – later Atatürk – met the [Anzacs](#) coming ashore at Arıburnu. In a few cases, Ottoman commanders either acted on their own initiative without consulting Liman von Sanders or openly disregarded his orders.³¹

Entente forces at first simply clung to five beachheads; they later gained some ground and attempted to break out. The Ottomans largely repulsed their advances, with heavy losses on both sides. Ottoman forces proved unable, however, to drive the enemy back into the sea. On the evening of 6 August, the British landed at Suvla Bay in an attempt to conquer the dominating high ground on the Küçük and Büyük Anafarta ridgelines, behind the area where Ottoman troops engaged in Arıburnu-Anzac Cove. Britain’s forces, growing to five divisions, nearly overwhelmed the small Ottoman force in Suvla. Liman von Sanders rushed in reinforcements and handed the command of the newly created Anafarta Group to Colonel Mustafa Kemal, whose counterattacks drove back the British.³² Further British attacks in late

August also failed and exhausted both sides.

In September 1915, Bulgaria joined the Central Powers and thereby opened a new route for material assistance from Germany. By the time much-needed Germany artillery ammunition arrived in November, however, the Entente command had decided to abandon Gallipoli. They completed a secret evacuation of Suvla Bay and Ariburnu (Anzac Cove) on the night of 19-20 December 1915 and of Seddülbahir (Cape Helles) on 8-9 January 1916. Retreating Allies burnt some materiel, but left behind a large amount of supplies. Some historians have remarked that the evacuation was the sole Entente success of the whole campaign.³³

The Allies had committed 489,000 men to the campaign, outnumbering Ottoman troops most of the time. The Ottomans had also suffered from significant shortages of artillery shells. Total casualty figures are still disputed on both sides. Officially, on the Ottoman side 56,643 men died, 97,007 were wounded, and 11,178 men were missing in action. British casualties totaled 205,000 men with 43,000 dead or missing. On the French side the casualties amounted to 47,000.³⁴

Ottomans on European and Balkan Fronts

The Entente withdrawal from Gallipoli liberated Ottoman soldiers for action on other vulnerable fronts. However, Enver Pasha consented to demands of the German General Staff to move Ottoman troops farther into Europe – to Galicia, Romania, and Macedonia – instead of concentrating them on the empire's own vulnerable borders. Russia's Brusilov Offensive of June 1916 dealt a powerful blow to the Austro-Hungarians. New threats emerged in August 1916, when Romania chose to ally with the Entente. This opened new fronts against Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria and threatened the German supply route to the Ottoman Empire. Despite that risk, both high-ranking Ottoman commanders and Liman von Sanders opposed Enver's decision. They believed that the British in [Egypt](#) and Mesopotamia were a bigger threat and that sending the Ottomans' most experienced and best equipped forces to Europe would put the empire in grave danger.³⁵

Mesopotamia-Iraq

British hostilities on the Mesopotamia-Iraq front started in early November 1914 when they attacked the old fort at Fao, the key to the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Because the Ottoman force was small, the British Indian Army quickly advanced north to capture Basra on 20 November and Qurna on 9 December 1914. In January, Enver Pasha belatedly sent reinforcements under the command of Lieutenant Colonel [Süleyman Askeri Bey \(1884-1915\)](#).³⁶ On 12 April he launched an ill-fated attack on the British camp at Shaiba. After

suffering many casualties and a reported mass surrender, the Ottomans withdrew 120 kilometers up the river.³⁷

General [Charles Townshend \(1861-1924\)](#), the new commander of the British Indian Army in Mesopotamia, decided to move further up the river. On 28 September 1915, his forces captured the thinly defended [Kut al-Amara](#).³⁸ However, more Ottoman reinforcements had just joined the newly formed Sixth Army, now led by [Mehmed Nurettin Pasha \(1873-1932\)](#). As Townshend moved towards Baghdad, he met Nurettin Pasha at Selmān Pak (Ctesiphon). Their battle on 22 November 1915 resulted in heavy casualties on both sides. By 25 November the British were forced to retreat to Kut al-Amara as the Ottoman forces slowly pursued them. Nurettin not only besieged Kut, but also repulsed a British relief force coming up river. On the Ottoman side, Nurettin was replaced by [Halil Kut Pasha \(1881-1957\)](#). Townshend held out for months as his supplies slowly depleted and his men died of starvation, typhus, and other diseases. He finally surrendered to Halil Pasha with his 13,309 men and officers on 27 April 1916.

However, during the summer and fall of 1916, Britain significantly expanded its forces in lower Mesopotamia – even as Enver diverted Ottoman troops to Europe. Between December 1916 and February 1917 the British advanced up river to recapture Kut el-Amara. Outnumbered and outgunned, Halil Pasha abandoned Kut al-Amara. Continued neglect by the Ottoman Ministry of War forced Halil to surrender Baghdad to the British on 11 March 1917.³⁹

Sinai-Palestine-Syria

Soon after the British landed troops in Basra, Ottoman forces based in Syria-Palestine and under the command of Cemal Pasha opened up yet another front in late 1914: Sinai-Suez. Three Ottoman divisions secretly marched across the desert to cross the canal and seize Ismailia from the British. Relatively well-supplied and provisioned Ottoman forces travelled by night to avoid detection, and they surprised the British defenders on 2 February 1915. However, during the crossing of the canal, men untrained in water-crossings panicked and alerted the British side. Although they established a bridgehead on the western bank, they could not hold it. Cemal Pasha called off the attack and withdrew in an orderly fashion. While the attack failed, the shock of its secrecy and boldness may have held the British back from venturing out for a year.⁴⁰ This suited Cemal well, as he had to send some of his forces to Gallipoli.

After the Ottoman victory in Gallipoli, the reinforcements started to return to Syria-Palestine, encouraging Cemal Pasha to take the offensive again. In July 1916, he ordered an attack on

the British forces in Romani to push them back towards the Suez Canal. Led by German Colonel [Friedrich Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein \(1870-1948\)](#), the attack failed, forcing the Ottomans to pull back and form a defensive line between Gaza and Beersheba. They successfully repulsed the British attacks on Gaza on 26 March and 14 April. Disappointed by the defeat in the Second Battle of Gaza, the British High Command replaced General [Archibald Murray \(1860-1945\)](#) with [Edmund Allenby \(1861-1936\)](#). Allenby cautiously built up his forces and improved lines of communication and logistics for another attack on Gaza. In the Second and Third Battles of Gaza, the British employed [tanks](#) and nearly 10,000 [chemical shells](#) (chlorine, phosphine, and lachrymatory gases) for the first time in the Middle East.⁴¹

The Ottoman defense was weakened before the Third Battle of Gaza due to controversy over the new Yıldırım (Thunderbolt) Army Group. In response to the dire situation in Iraq and Palestine, Enver Pasha had appointed German General [Erich von Falkenhayn \(1861-1922\)](#), who had just arrived in Istanbul with a German combat support group, as Yıldırım's commander. Ottoman officers (including Cemal Pasha and Mustafa Kemal) welcomed the German support group, but opposed Falkenhayn's command. Mustafa Kemal did not want to serve under Falkenhayn. Cemal feared that his authority in Palestine would be superseded and he disliked the Yıldırım's strategic plan. In response, Enver relieved Cemal of command in Palestine and reassigned him to a supportive role in Damascus.

In late October 1917 – before Yıldırım was fully formed and while infighting among officers still raged – Allenby launched the Third Battle of Gaza and Beersheba. While the Ottomans expected a direct attack on Gaza, a massive British force surprised the thinly defended Beersheba. They soon forced the Ottomans to abandon Gaza amid much chaos.⁴² This defeat started an Ottoman withdrawal back towards Jerusalem, the battle for which lasted from 16 November to 8 December 1917. Allenby's strategy was built around mobile cavalry units and combined infantry-artillery operations. Throughout the campaign he employed deceptive operations to confuse the Ottomans about where the main attack would take place. Ottoman defenses collapsed and they suffered heavy casualties. The commander in Jerusalem, [Ali Fuat Pasha \(1882-1968\)](#), defied Falkenhayn's advice and chose to abandon the city in order to save his remaining troops.⁴³

A respite during the winter and spring of 1918 gave the Ottomans some time to reorganize their forces. They replaced Falkenhayn with Liman von Sanders, which alleviated some of the ill-feeling between the Ottomans and Germans. But Yıldırım was now a much smaller force with significant shortages of food, fodder, ammunition, water and other supplies. On 19 September 1918, Allenby attacked with a massive and well-supplied army. The rapid movement of his Desert Mounted Corps, protected by massive artillery fire, led to a major

defeat for the Ottomans in the Battle of Nablus (Battle of Megiddo). The Ottomans gave up roughly 20,000 prisoners. Allenby encircled the Ottoman forces and took many more prisoners when Liman von Sanders decided to defend Damascus instead of withdrawing north. Ottoman forces under Mustafa Kemal Pasha may have withdrawn and fought back in a more orderly fashion, but Aleppo was still lost on 25 October 1918.⁴⁴

The Arab Revolt

British forces in Palestine and Syria were aided by Arab and Bedouin soldiers who had revolted against the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman-appointed custodian of the two holy cities in the Hejaz, [Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz \(-1931\)](#) and Sharif of Mecca, first approached the British High Commissioner Sir [Henry McMahon \(1862-1949\)](#) in Egypt about the possibility of British support for an anti-Ottoman Arab revolt in April 1914. Assisted by his sons and later kings [Faysal I, King of Iraq \(1885-1933\)](#) and [Abdullah, King of Jordan \(1882-1951\)](#), Husayn's negotiations with the British lasted several months before he declared the revolt on 5 June 1916. Cemal Pasha's repressive rule in Syria and his harsh treatment of Arab nationalists accused of treason during the war likely helped Husayn gain followers once the rebellion was declared,⁴⁵ while British subsidies helped him to attract even more followers. In the Hejaz, Husayn's forces captured a number of large towns (although not Medina), defended by [Ömer Fahreddin Pasha \(1868-1948\)](#). [Thomas Edward Lawrence \(1888-1935\)](#), one of a number of Entente personnel working with the rebel forces, convinced Prince Faysal to coordinate his attacks on the Ottomans with the British strategy in Palestine. The Ottomans abandoned Damascus at the end of September 1918. Although Allenby's forces reached the city first, they were ordered to allow Faysal to enter ahead of them as "liberator".⁴⁶

The "War Economy"

When the war broke out in 1914, the Ottoman Empire already suffered from an external debt of 140 million pounds. It also had a predominantly agrarian economy and was perhaps the least industrialized of the belligerent countries. The 1913 Ottoman Industrial Census showed that within the borders of what became modern Turkey, there were only 600 manufacturing establishments with ten or more workers. Manufacturing was largely based on artisanal forms and the empire was heavily dependent on imports of manufactured goods, which was made much more complicated by the war.

The war's outbreak created a panic in the Istanbul market and disrupted government finance, resulting in the postponement of debt payments, the implementation of special war taxes (*tekalif-i harbiye*) and requisitions, and a significant reduction in salaries for civil and military officials. During the war years (1914-1918), the cost-of-living rose by a factor of eighteen. In

comparison, in Britain and France the cost of living doubled and in Germany almost tripled. In Istanbul, the price of potatoes (one *okka*, roughly 1.2 kg) went from 1 kuruş in July 1914 to 36 kuruş in January 1918. During the same period, the price of rice increased from 3 kuruş per *okka* to 95 kuruş. Poverty became so widespread that even people on fixed salaries, such as government officials, became impoverished.⁴⁷

The empire's limited rail network not only created major problems for troop supply and movement, but also for [food](#) distribution. [Transportation](#) problems caused by inadequate railway worsened after the Russian navy bombed the coal works on the Black Sea coast and intercepted transport ships. The Ottomans now had to import coal from Germany in order to run their trains. The imports were insufficient and so Ottomans turned to wood as fuel, especially in southern Anatolia and Syria.⁴⁸ This meant that fruit or olive trees, which provided food and livelihood for people, were cut down.

Harsh winters, the 1915 locust invasion, and other natural disasters also reduced food supplies. By 1916 wheat production had fallen by 30 percent. State policy at its best provided short-term relief; at its worst, it aggravated shortages and suffering among soldiers and civilians. The state attempted to establish supply agencies to provide the public with some basic items such as bread, but these efforts spun out of control, especially in Istanbul. The "system of war agriculture" had a limited effect. The 1916 Agricultural Obligations Law made those few existing large corporations in urban areas responsible for cultivating specific amounts of land. The law also required all farmers to cultivate a minimum amount of land based on the number of oxen they owned. The government asserted the authority to force citizens to work on farms facing labor shortages due to mobilization. In some instances, the army organized women's battalions to serve in the agriculture industry.⁴⁹ A Ministry of Provisioning was created, but only in the last year of the war.

Food shortages were a serious problem for the military. Whether due to transportation problems or lack of available food, soldiers on the Caucasus and Syria-Palestine fronts frequently complained about going hungry while fighting. Military doctors reported various hunger and nutrition-related diseases – namely scurvy but also war/hunger edema.⁵⁰ Human hunger meant that the amount of barley or other foods given to military animals used for pulling [artillery](#) had to be reduced. Tired and hungry animals could thus not perform their jobs; some even became food for hungry soldiers. Food shortages were the reason some men deserted. One officer remembered that "it was possible to see soldiers killing their friends just for a piece of bread."⁵¹ This adversely impacted the military's ability to fight the war.

In Istanbul, CUP policies also undercut the food supply. Party bosses created monopolies for

importing and distributing scarce commodities. These monopolies and privileged access to railcar space and shipping permits were then granted primarily to Muslim-Turkish merchants and entrepreneurs who had close connections to the party. *Milli İktisat* (National Economics) was a pillar of the nationalist effort to create a national Muslim-Turkish bourgeoisie. Proponents of *Milli İktisat* believed that foreigners and non-Muslim Ottomans dominated the economy. Because the state created the conditions for war profiteering, its attempts to regulate it were not very successful. War profiteers also existed in the Arab provinces, where they made a mint on grain speculation.

Finally, another major reason for food shortages was the state's decision to deport and relocate large populations during wartime.⁵² In large areas of Anatolia, farms were left untended because farmers had been driven away. Other people simply left their villages and fields in certain parts of Anatolia to escape war and Russian invasion.

The Home Front: Women, Orphans and Civilian Mortality

As the foregoing sections noted, both the mobilization of all men of military age and the [deportations of Armenians](#) were extremely disruptive for society (of course, they were much worse for Armenians) and had dire consequences for the economy during the war. Although certain exemptions had previously been possible, this war's heavy demand for soldiers led, for the first time, to the conscription of men who were the sole breadwinners for their families. By taking away families' main breadwinners, mass mobilization drained rural areas of manpower and forced many women to perform labor-intensive tasks on their own, which significantly reduced families' productive capacities. The number of women in the urban workforce expanded, but they had to work long hours for very low wages. Soldiers' wives and mothers, perhaps more than others, had more of an emotional and material burden to bear on their own. The state offered financial aid to these families, but that aid did not keep up with the rising prices, and the system was fraught with problems. Some civil society organizations also helped destitute soldiers' families. In demanding financial help, employment, protection against further military confiscations of their produce, or justice against corrupt officials, women found themselves in frequent contact with state officials. They were subjected to a variety of policies and regulations, but they were not passive observers. By drawing attention to the sacrifices of their husbands and sons, they were also able to negotiate with the state.⁵³

The suffering of soldiers' wives and mothers was part of a much larger pattern and experience of suffering in the Ottoman Empire during the war. Man-made and natural disasters killed many thousands of civilians in all parts of the empire. In December 1914,

Baghdad suffered from a series of major floods, which destroyed thousands of houses and left tens of thousands of inhabitants homeless. This was followed in early 1915 by the bubonic plague, which reportedly killed between forty and fifty people a week through January-February 1915. [Diseases](#) killed not only the locals, but also foreign officials and their relatives, who tended to live in much better and isolated environments. There was even a cholera epidemic in a number of regions, including in Istanbul, during the war.⁵⁴

While we do not possess separate famine related estimates of death for eastern Anatolia, which also suffered severely, it is estimated that 500,000 people died of disease and starvation in greater Syria alone. During the war this area and Palestine suffered both from a locust plague and famine. Although Arab nationalists at the time mainly blamed the Ottomans, Ottoman officials argued that the Entente blockade of coastal Syria and Lebanon caused the famine. German sources support the Ottoman position, but they also show that while the Ottomans under Cemal Pasha's command tried to deal with the situation by shipping emergency food supplies and setting up soup kitchens, some of his policies might have aggravated the situation, mainly due to accident and ineptitude. There is good evidence that the British and French used the famine raging in the area "as a weapon of war."⁵⁵ [Ali Fuad Erden \(1883-1957\)](#), who was Cemal Pasha's chief of staff, noted in his memoirs that

at nights, the peace and silence in Beirut could be disturbed only by the whimpers of those dying of hunger. In fact those voices would not last long, as the poor people would die soon. Before dawn...the dead from the night were collected and heaped on carts ... and carried to a ditch opened to bury all of them together.⁵⁶

War, disease, famine, deportations, and massacres resulted in the deaths of adults and [children](#) alike, but they also left many thousands of children orphans. Many Muslim children were placed in orphanages during the war; some eighty-five orphanages housed about 10,000 such children. Known as the "children of the state," during the war, Enver Pasha wanted to send as many of the male children as possible to Germany as apprentices. They would acquire various skills there and upon return they would train a new generation of workers in the empire. However, Germany agreed only to a few hundred boys.⁵⁷ Many Armenian children also became [orphans](#) during the deportations. Talat Pasha's own notes show that 10,269 Armenian orphans were placed either in orphanages or with Muslim families.⁵⁸ The intention was to assimilate these children into Ottoman Muslim households - Turks, Kurds, and others. Scholars rightly argue that these children and young women were not "adopted" but actually "abducted."⁵⁹ After the war, those children who could be found or identified were rescued by Armenian and other aid organizations. However, many still

remained with Muslim families. Yet, they did not necessarily forget their Armenian roots even if they were raised as converted Muslims in Turkish, Kurdish or other non-Turkish households.⁶⁰

Civilian suffering and death on the home front did not end in November 1918 when the First World War ended. The National Struggle started in 1919 and continued until 1922 as the defeated empire – and the newly developing nationalist resistance led by Mustafa Kemal – faced an invasion of its Anatolian heartland by France, [Italy](#), [Greece](#), and England. The continued state of war added to the devastation of 1914-1918 and makes it difficult to separate civilian casualties of the first four years from the next four years (1918-1922). During these eight years, 20 percent of the population of Anatolia died or were killed. Yet another 10 percent was lost to emigration, while nearly half of those who managed to survive these years became refugees. In greater Syria mortality rates during 1914-1918 stood at 18 percent, but unlike Anatolia these deaths were famine-related. The scale of this mortality rate of 18-20 percent for Anatolia and greater Syria, a combined area nearly four times the size of the United Kingdom, becomes even starker when compared to the population losses of France and Germany, which stood at less than 5 percent each.⁶¹

Ottoman Armenians

Called *tehcir* (deportation) by some and “genocide” by others, the deportation and killing of Armenians during the Great War is a polarizing subject. The brief survey here cannot do justice either to the subject or to the existing extensive scholarship, but an explanation of the main arguments of some scholars is presented. Various publications may be roughly divided in two opposing sides.

The first group of scholars generally argues that the Ottoman state decided to deport Armenians to Syria in 1915 because they rebelled against the state and helped the invading Russians in eastern Anatolia; therefore, they constituted an existential threat to the Ottoman Empire. Justin McCarthy, who espouses this view, argues that the Ottoman state decided to remove Armenians because of their collaboration with the Russians. In 1915, after the defeat in Sarıkamış, Anatolia was open to further Russian invasion and “Armenian revolutionary groups had ...begun their rebellion ... [and were] killing Muslim villagers...” The Ottomans, he writes, expecting an ethnic cleansing of Muslims, deported Armenians living in eastern Anatolia to Dayr al-Zor, an inhospitable desert region in Syria.⁶² Approaching the problem from the perspective of military history, Edward J. Erickson describes the Ottoman state in 1915 as facing “an existential danger to national security in wartime” due to the activities of “Armenian revolutionary committees and rogue insurgent groups.” He sees the deportations

as “the outcome of a rapidly escalating and deliberately tailored regional counterinsurgency campaign.” For him, the state’s “Western-style counterinsurgency” intended to separate Armenian insurgents from their bases of support. He maintains that of the 1.5 million Armenians in the empire before the war, some 350,000-400,000 of them “remained in their homes.”⁶³ For him, this is an indication that Ottoman policy was not to exterminate Armenians everywhere, but only to deport those in areas where they were deemed to be a threat to supply lines. For this group of scholars, the mass death of Armenians was an unfortunate result, due not to deliberate attempts by the state to kill them, but to harsh conditions, disease, starvation as well as rogue elements who attacked refugee convoys along the road. However, as we discover in the following paragraphs, sometimes these “rogue” elements collaborated with state agents.

Opposing scholars challenge the assertion that Armenians constituted an “existential threat” to the state; Taner Akçam notes that reports of many Armenian rebellions were either fabricated or exaggerated.⁶⁴ The “security measures” argument is also undermined by the wider pattern of deportations. Erickson implies that those Armenians in the western Anatolian provinces were left undisturbed. This is not the case. For example, in April 1915, hundreds of leading Armenians living in Istanbul were deported and then finally executed. Similarly, Fuat Dündar argues that by July 1915, deportation regions came to include the western and central Anatolian provinces of Ankara and Eskişehir, among others.⁶⁵ Because of his narrower focus on Ottoman military counterinsurgency, Erickson acknowledges that his study excludes the looting and massacres of Armenians while staging or during transport, which he confirms, did happen. But other “security measure” authors do not answer adequately why the deportees, including elderly women, who clearly were not up to the task of marching on foot, were included and were given very little time before they had to abandon their homes. Or, if the attacks and killings of Armenians were committed by non-state rogue elements during staging or transport, why the state did not take adequate security measures to protect the convoys in its custody against those groups? One might also ask about the choice of Dayr al-Zor, a desert landscape impossible to cultivate, as the final destination for hundreds of thousands of people.

Among the scholars who see a deliberate attempt to annihilate Armenians, the general argument is that the minor uprisings were exaggerated or fabricated to use as a pretext to deport Armenians collectively. However, Taner Akçam also writes that there was real fear initially that Armenians would somehow assist in the dismemberment of the empire. It is no coincidence, he argues, that the decision for deportation was made on 24 April 1915, the day before the land attack on Gallipoli, just as the empire’s continued existence seemed most questionable. At that point, it became a situation of “do or die” in the minds of the leaders.⁶⁶

He and others write that after confiscating Armenian property and separating and killing the men who were not already conscripted into military labor service, the women and children were forced to march on foot over vast distances under harsh conditions to a desert location in Syria. Once the decision for deportation was made, they note, the CUP leadership did not really intend for them to reach their final destination and survive. Akçam, using Ottoman documents, focuses on the CUP's goal of ethno-religious homogenization of Anatolia, which included reduction or annihilation of Armenians. In fact, he argues, the Armenian case was not an isolated act, but rather part of a demographic policy against both Muslim non-Turks (Kurds) and against the Christian population of the empire — Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians.⁶⁷ He (as well as Donald Bloxham, [Hans-Lukas Kieser](#) and others) argue that what might have started out as real fear about the future of the Ottoman state was turned into something that amounted to genocide through gradual escalation and radicalization.⁶⁸

Estimates of the Armenian dead also range significantly. Akçam states that estimates “swing between 600,000 and 1.5 million.”⁶⁹ Raymond Kévorkian argues that approximately 1.3 million Armenians died.⁷⁰ Fuat Dündar, who also uses Ottoman Ministry of Interior documents, writes that of the 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians, only 55 percent remained alive by the end of the war. In resettlement in Zor or elsewhere, one of the policies the state followed, argues Dündar, was to make sure that the number of settled Armenians did not exceed 10 percent of the Muslim populations living in the same region.⁷¹ For Akçam the “10 percent” policy is actual evidence that the state intended to annihilate most of the deported Armenians because only through killing could more than 1 million be turned into 10 percent of the local population of 1.68 million.⁷²

Ayhan Aktar and Abdulhamit Kırmızı's study of Diyarbakır province shows the active collaboration between the province's governor and the supposedly “rogue” elements who killed the refugees. By examining agrarian issues and the allure of the confiscated Armenian property, they highlight how the governor was aided by willing locals — including “Kurdish usurpers” (“*mütegalibe*”) and tribal leaders — in the elimination of nearly all of the 56,166 Armenians of Diyarbakır.⁷³

While the Governor of Diyarbakır and officials from different areas might have been more than willing to deport and even arrange for the killing of Armenians, there were others who did not participate and refused orders for deportation.⁷⁴ They were usually removed and replaced. There were also those who witnessed the plight of the deportees with empathy, if only from a distance and without interfering. A madrasa-graduate Ottoman soldier, passing

through the south Anatolian town of Islahiye just east of the Amanos (now Nur Dağları) Mountains on his way to the Iraq front, encountered destitute and hungry Armenians — “largely women and children, and [only] some men whose numbers could be counted by hand” — who were barely surviving in clearly inadequate tents. The day before, in January 1916, he had passed through Hasanbeyli, “a majority Armenian” town near Islahiye, which was now “largely empty.” Locals told him that in the forested steep hills surrounding the town, there were once “unburied and abandoned corpses of Armenians by the thousands.” But by 1916, “they had been completely devoured by wild animals.” These “killings,” the soldier wrote, “had taken place during the deportations (*tehcir ve icla*).” He continued: “Truly, as we passed through the valley, one sensed the smell of blood, injustice, and evil (*kan kokusu, zulüm ve şer*).”⁷⁵

The post-war Ottoman government set up courts-martial to try in person or in absentia those wartime leaders and others who were accused of crimes against Armenians. Proceedings and documents of the courts, along with Ottoman Ministry of Interior documents, have been utilized by scholars to show the destructive intent of the deportations. In these trials, Ottoman state officials referred to the treatment of Armenians in the empire during the war as “crimes against humanity.”⁷⁶

How to refer to the deportations and killings of 1915-1916 has been another matter of debate. “Genocide,” a term invented in the 1940s, is the preferred description by a number of scholars but a sticking point for others. Obviously, those who view the deportations as a “security measure” reject it completely. Yet, there are those who generally accept the scale of destruction of the Armenian community and even the radicalized intention of the CUP leadership, but for whom the term genocide presents problems. The key issues seem to be “destructive intent” and the question of motive.⁷⁷ For them, “acceptance of the events of 1915 as an instance of ethnic cleansing, *avant la lettre*, is much less problematic.”⁷⁸

Armistice of Mudros

Perhaps more than the defeat in Palestine and Syria, it was the collapse of the Bulgarians at Salonica in early September 1918 that convinced the Ottomans to explore an armistice. As the British threatened Thrace and Istanbul, the Ottomans entered negotiations. On 30 October 1918 they signed an armistice on the deck of the battleship *Agamemnon*, moored at Mudros on the Island of Lemnos. After the [armistice](#), the British moved to occupy Mosul against the provisions of the treaty as fighting continued in the Caucasus and in the Hejaz (western Arabia). However, Fahreddin Pasha, the defender of the holy city of Medina, refused to surrender. First he asked for a direct written order from the Sultan himself, but once

something along those lines arrived, he stated that he would only surrender to an “Allied Commander” and not to the “insurgent” Sharifian Arab forces. Finally, Fahreddin was arrested by a group of “rebellious” officers under his command and handed over to Abdullah’s forces on 9 January 1919.

Conclusion

By early November 1918, the victors occupied the Ottoman capital of Istanbul. France and England also directly occupied or controlled the former Ottoman provinces or territories of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine; moreover, France and Italy also occupied south-eastern and south-western Asia Minor respectively. In May 1919, Greece was given a green light by Britain to invade western Anatolia, starting with the city of [Izmir](#). The Ottoman government signed the Treaty of Sèvres in August 1920, which created Entente zones of influence and occupation in most of Anatolia, the independent state of [Armenia](#), and the British and French mandates of Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. However, while the occupations continued and mandates were created, the treaty was never ratified. The Turkish nationalist resistance movement, developed under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal in Ankara, rejected it. What triggered the resistance was the Greek invasion, leading to what came to be known as the War of Independence. For a while, two competing governments existed; the Sultanate was based in Istanbul and largely controlled by the occupying forces, while the nationalist government was based in Ankara. The Turkish nationalist victory in 1922 against the occupiers eventually resulted in a more favorable Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. The nationalist assembly in Ankara voted to abolish the sultanate in November 1922, and the last Ottoman Sultan left the country later that month. On 29 October 1923, the Turkish Republic was declared.

Yücel Yanıkdağ, University of Richmond

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