

Teskilat-i Mahsusa (Ottoman Empire)

By [Odile Moreau](#)

Summary

Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa (TM), or Special Organization, was a secret paramilitary intelligence organization under the control of the CUP's inner circle and attached to the Ministry of War. Due to its secrecy, the TM is debated in the scholarship. This article explores two main approaches to understanding the TM as a modern intelligence agency, an institutional organization within the Ottoman state, and a semi-official vigilant band [*çete*]. This article analyzes the TM from its foundation in late 1913 to its enlargement in August 1914 and its reorganization into the Office for Eastern Affairs [OEA, *Umur-i Şarkiye*] in 1915 until the end of World War I.

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Introduction

The *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (TM) is shrouded in an “aura of mystery”¹ due to the secret character of this quasi-military organization. The TM has been mythologized as a heroic organization protecting the [Ottoman](#) state and a tool of suppression of internal [government](#) opponents. Up until very recently, there were only a limited number of academic studies of the TM, due to limited access to primary archival documents. For a better understanding of its role during World War I, this article describes the TM's origins and various activities.

The secret organization established and led by [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#) within the [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#), the ‘*fedai*’, was composed of volunteers ready for self-sacrifice with a *komitaci*-like structure.² Prior to 1908, volunteers represented one of the

branches of the CUP and were directly attached to the executive committee of the CUP.³ Preeminent members became high-ranking officials in the TM a few years later. These volunteers were a well-known group in the Tripolitanian War, deemed self-sacrificing officers [*Fedai Zabitan*]. It was the first model of struggle led at the very periphery of the Ottoman Empire. The period between 1911 and August 1914 could be considered a phase of formation and experimentation for the TM.⁴

Organization

The TM was formally a state organization, an institutionalization of previous networks, such as secret societies, unofficial militias⁵ and translocal networks. Its organization was under the control of the CUP's inner circle and conversely the TM's inner circle controlled the CUP's central committee. During World War I, War Minister Enver Pasha was in charge of the TM's activities without being in full control of them.

From the official foundation of the TM on 30 November 1913 until 25 October 1914, [Süleyman Askeri Bey \(1884-1915\)](#) was in charge of the organization. At the time of its foundation, the TM spied and organized violence in Western Thrace, a territory lost during the [Balkan Wars](#), driven by irredentism and revenge. However, the TM's activities seem to have been hidden behind the official duties of Süleyman Askeri until August 1914.⁶ [Halil Kut Bey \(1881-1957\)](#) briefly directed the TM from November until December 1914 and Cevad [Kızanıklı] Bey from December 1914 until May 1915. During the spring of 1915, the TM was reorganized and guerrilla [warfare](#), its most important *modus operandi*, was abolished. Consequently, by November 1915, the name of the organization was changed to the Office for Eastern Affairs (OEA) [*Umur-i Şarkiye*]. In May 1915, [Ali Başhamba \(1876-1918\)](#) assumed the leadership of the reorganized TM until his death on 31 October 1918. He was replaced by [Hüseyin Tosun \(1875-1930\)](#) until 11 November 1918. When the war was ending and Enver and [Mehmed Talat Pasha \(1874-1921\)](#) had left the Ottoman Empire on 1 November 1918, they assigned Hüsametdin Bey [Ertürk] to be solely responsible for the liquidation of the OEA and its documents.⁷ On 5 December, Hüsametdin [Ertürk] Bey was appointed to manage the transition after the abolition of the OEA to underground organizations, such as the Worldwide Islamic Revolt Organization [*Umum Alem-i İslam İhtilal Teşkilat-ı*].⁸ Nevertheless, it seems that Hüsametdin Bey was never the director of the OEA.⁹

In the top decision-making circle of the TM were Dr. [Selânikli Mehmet Nazım Bey \(1870-1926\)](#), Dr. [Bahattin Şakir \(1874-1922\)](#), Atif Kamal, [Yusuf Rıza Bey](#) and Aziz Bey, the chief of the Security [*Emniyet Müdürü*]. However, in general, Enver Pasha made the final

decisions. The TM and the OEA's main functions were on the war front and not the home front. Among the main leaders were Süleyman Askeri Bey, Ali Başhamba, and Dr. Bahattin Şakir whose role was "to supervise the organization within the Empire".¹⁰

The TM had a general director, an administrative board of three members, three provincial branches, an administrative correspondence desk, an accounting financial desk, and a few couriers for connection between the TM and the War Ministry. Administrative changes affected the TM in its transition to the OEA in early May 1915 when Ali Başhamba assumed command of the organization. Established by Enver Pasha after the declaration of mobilization, the TM's Supervisory Council [*Merkez Heyeti*], which was secret, was eliminated.¹¹ This marked the end of the TM's bands. In fact, the Ottoman state did not allow any group to be formed from the third week of January 1915 onwards.¹²

Most of the officers of the TM and the OEA were CUP members, including and especially individuals from the Balkans and Caucasus who had fought against the Balkan *komitacis*¹³ experienced in counter-insurgency tactics. Voluntary groups included both military officers and pro-CUP civilian volunteers. Among the participants were immigrants and [refugees](#) [*muhâcirs*], released prisoners, pardoned brigands, deserters, *çete* members, and young people below the draft age. Prisoners were mainly used on the Caucasian front as were men of Caucasus origins.

The TM's finances came from two main sources. First, the TM received a discretionary allocation from the secret fund of the War Ministry. Due to the lack of state funds, the Association of National Defense [*Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti*] allotted sometime additional funds. Second, financial and technical support came from the German Military Mission and the German Intelligence Services. Nevertheless, the organization encountered financial difficulties.

Main Activities

The TM's intelligence activities consisted of collecting information about enemy forces (for example, in [Egypt](#)) and focused more on tactical and operational levels.¹⁴ Nevertheless, intelligence gathering activities always remained secondary in importance. Its field reports were mainly dispatched to army commanders.

TM bands were mostly independent from the regular army, causing tension with the regular command structure. These guerrilla bands were in some cases reinforced by regular military resources, such as officers, [artillery](#), and even entire regular units. A regular officer in charge

of the overall command directed the special missions that involved control mechanisms from the regular army.¹⁵

The Role of TM in World War I

The TM served on all fronts, in various regions such as the Caucasus, Iraq, Palestine, [North Africa](#), and even in the Balkans. Involved in ethnic cleansing against Greeks in Thrace and the Aegean littoral in 1913 and 1914, during the spring of 1914, the TM's activities focused on the Izmir region, where Enver Pasha asked Captain [Eşref Kuşçubaşı \(1883-1964\)](#) to establish a branch. Eşref prepared a report advocating the ethnic cleansing of non-Muslim [minorities](#). During spring and summer months in 1914, the ethnic cleansing of the Rûm began. The TM carried out this task using economic boycott, settlement of Muslim refugees, and violent attacks.¹⁶

From August 1914, the enlarged and empowered TM contributed to the Ottoman war strategy and commenced activities on the [Caucasian Front](#) to draw the [empire](#) into war.¹⁷ In September 1914, the TM established the East Anatolian Operation Office in Trabzon and appointed Yusuf Rıza Bey as the head of the TM's office in Trabzon. In one month, Rıza Bey recruited about 1,000 men. At the same time, Bahattin Şakir and Ömer Naci Bey arrived in Erzurum. During the fall of 1914, the TM conducted an aggressive campaign to arouse anti-Russian feelings among the Muslim population especially in the former provinces of Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi. One of its first operations, the [Sarıkamış Campaign](#) (December 1914), then took place in the Caucasus. This disastrous enterprise saw the cancellation of joint German-Ottoman projects of conquering Iranian [Azerbaijan](#) and provoking rebellions in [Afghanistan](#), Central Asia, and [India](#). However, the TM's bands continued to operate on the Caucasus front until the end of World War I.¹⁸ In April 1915, Russian forces advanced into Eastern Anatolia, captured Malazgirt and Van, and prepared for a big winter offensive. Simultaneously, the British were advancing in Iraq and captured [Kut](#) on 3 June 1915. There were problems on the Egyptian front and [Italy](#) seemed to join the Entente powers. The deportations and massacres of the Armenian and Greek populations in Anatolia began exactly at that time because the Unionist government was persuaded that the Armenian and Greeks nationalists were on the side of the enemy and thus a strategic threat. The Ottoman authorities decided to deport the entire population from the Eastern Front into Syria, and some TM units played a major role in this deportation.¹⁹

During the second Ottoman offensive of the Suez Canal Campaign, the TM was in charge of recruiting a supporting tribal army. After the failure of this expedition, it moved to fight against the [rebellion](#) fomented by [Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz \(-1931\)](#). Major [Mümtaz Bey](#)

(1859-1925) and Eşref Kuşçubaşı Bey, at the beginning, planned to operate only with TM units and local tribes. They enlisted one of the major sheikhs, Rashid of Samar. The new commander of the Hejaz region, [Ömer Fahreddin Pasha \(1868-1948\)](#), organized his strategy around his regular units and managed to defend the holy city of Medina for one and half years until January 1919.²⁰

The TM's operations were conducted inside the Ottoman Empire and particularly on the periphery, as well as in [neutral](#) countries, for example in [Spain](#), and in the colonies of the Entente powers. Enver Pasha sent a small Ottoman military mission to Spain to collaborate with the German Embassy in Madrid and prepare the ground for a general uprising or a mass insurrection in Morocco. During World War I, the Spanish zone in Northern Morocco was utilized to foment hostilities against the French forces. In addition, the TM formed volunteer units such as the Druze Voluntary Detachment led by [Amir Shakib Arslan \(1869-1946\)](#) with 110 men recruited from Mount Lebanon who were attached to the Hejaz Campaign Force.²¹

The TM participated in covert operations to foment Muslim insurrections mainly in the colonial territories of the Entente powers, [Great Britain](#), [France](#), and [Russia](#). These clandestine expeditions to [Persia](#) and Afghanistan, Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Tripolitania, Morocco, and India in coordination with German agents who also took part in the missions aimed at encouraging rebellion and conducting guerrilla warfare. [Ömer Naci \(1878-1916\)](#) and Ruşeni were appointed to instigate resistance in Iran. Another mission composed by [Süleyman Şefik \(1860-1946\)](#), [Hüseyin Rauf Orbay \(1881-1964\)](#), and [Mehmet Ubeydullah \(1858-1937\)](#) was sent to Afghanistan. Both were concerned with stirring up rebellions in India, a colony of the British Empire. In the Caucasus, Bahattin Şakir and Rıza fought against Russia. Another group led by Taher was sent to Spain to struggle against the French North African colonies by stirring up revolt, especially in Morocco.²²

In Tripolitania, the TM was particularly successful and had a well-functioning alliance with the religious brotherhood, the Sanusiya, and the local forces, due to the permanence of the “self-sacrificing officers” [*Fedai Zabitan*] between 1912 and 1915 fighting against Italian occupation after the Ouchy Peace Treaty (October 1912). From July 1915 and the entrance of Italy on the side of the Entente, Seyyid [Ahmad as-Sharif as-Sanusya \(1873-1933\)](#) acted in coordination with the TM.²³ [Nuri Killigil Pasha \(1890-1949\)](#), the younger brother of Enver Pasha, and Major [Jafar al-Askari \(1885-1936\)](#) tried to organize the tribal warriors into conventional units and to attack western Egypt to incite rebellion. They led two major operations. The first in November 1915 was the occupation of Sellum which was recaptured by British troops in March 1916. The Sanusiya, with the support of the local population, captured the towns of the Western Oases stretching from Siwa to Farafra and Bahriya

between April and June 1916. A British expedition retook the region in February 1917.²⁴ The OEA subsequently only led operations against the Italians in Libya. These Ottoman-led attacks combined with the Ottoman Suez Canal Campaigns against the British forces and targets, promoted fear among the British troops in Egypt. For example, immediately after the fall of Sellum, several Egyptian officers and soldiers deserted.²⁵ It may be said that in Tripolitania, the TM generated considerable nuisances for the European colonial forces.

In Iraq, the TM was directed by Süleyman Askeri, appointed by Enver Pasha to lead the 38th division of the Ottoman army. He arrived in Baghdad with the Osmancik volunteer battalion, an elite unit, in December 1914. After recruiting an army of Bedouin irregulars, he fought against the British and the [Indian Expeditionary "Force D"](#) which had captured Basra on November 1914. Süleyman Askeri recruited an irregular force of some 17,000 Arab and Kurdish tribesmen. He did not remain in Baghdad and directed all the operations on the battlefield. However, he experienced a heavy defeat at the battle of Shu'aybah forest on 12-14 April 1915 and committed suicide immediately after.²⁶ This battle brought an end to the use of unconventional warfare against regular forces, especially without popular support.

The CUP used the TM as a tool to eliminate its political opponents during World War I. Scholars continue to disagree about the role of the TM/OEA in the Armenian massacres of 1915-1916. While those scholars who argue that the widespread massacres against Armenians constituted [genocide](#) maintain that the TM was a key actor in these events,²⁷ Taner Akçam, for instance, considers that the CUP Central Committee, and the TM it set up to carry out its plan, deliberately attempted to destroy the Armenian population in Anatolia.²⁸ According to Akçam and others, the leaders of the CUP appointed Bahaeddin Sakir to command TM units and to direct the operations in Eastern Anatolia. The massacres of Armenian Ottomans began at the end of November/beginning of December 1914 at the border of Eastern Anatolia. The TM and its armed bands, comprised of Circassians, Kurds, and Lazs, participated in the deportation and killing of Armenians on the road during their transportation. Some band members acted as gendarmes or, at least, wore the uniform. The historian Hilmar Kaiser's analysis challenges the direct relationship between the TM units and the CUP authorities by showing that the TM units in the Diarbekir region stood under the command of the Ottoman military and were not answerable to CUP leaders in the region.²⁹ Another group of scholars denies that the TM had a significant role in the massacres in Eastern Anatolia. They argue that the evidence for the TM's essential role in the Armenian massacres is based on the Andonian's papers, a source considered by some scholars to be unreliable.

Propaganda

The TM devised [propaganda](#) in enemy territories, advocating [Pan-Islamism](#) to gain the support of the Muslim population for the Ottoman Empire. Pan-Islamic propaganda was an important element in the effort made by the Central Powers in general. Anti-Entente propaganda tried to convince Muslims of the Ottoman Empire's inferiority in military armament and of its inability to win the war. Tracts were composed in Istanbul, Berlin, Madrid, etc. and published in various languages such as French, Arabic, Tamazight, Urdu, Persian, and Hindi. Among the authors of the propaganda pamphlets was the Shaykh [Salah Sharif at-Tunisi \(1869-1920\)](#). However, the TM experienced difficulties in bringing all of the [propaganda](#) material into the colonial territories of the Entente powers. The propaganda activities of the TM nevertheless increased the paranoia of British and French authorities, especially in North Africa, which could be viewed as a psychological achievement. In addition, propaganda was spread among captives and refugees in the [Prisoner of War](#) camps in Germany.

Conclusion

The TM was a hybrid organization that acted both as an intelligence organization and a militia, difficult to control due to the lack of discipline among the bands. The TM evolved from a local organization acting only in Western Thrace and Macedonia from October 1913 until August 1914 into an organization conducting activities in various regions and part of the Ottoman war strategy.³⁰ In fact, the organization was attached to the Ministry of War at the outbreak of World War I. In 1915, its name was changed to the OEA after the abolition of guerrilla-band warfare, its most important mode of operation.

The TM managed to exert a psychological impact and was more successful in creating fear and tension than in military matters. Still, its military operations achieved some results. For example, in North Africa and especially in Morocco, subversion diverted France's sending more troops and local soldiers to the [Western Front](#). Even though the organization was abolished on 30 October 1918, it continued to carry out [paramilitary](#) and intelligence activities.³¹ In order to further our understanding of the TM, we must better investigate the relationship between the CUP, TM, and OEA.

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Notes

1. Tunaya, Tarik Zafer: Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler [Political Parties in Turkey], vol. III,

- Istanbul 2015, p. 339. ↑
2. Enver founded the Group of Patriotic Officers [Fedai Zabitan Grubu] during the Tripolitanian War. ↑
 3. Safi, Polat: The Ottoman Special Organization – Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa: An Inquiry into its Operational and Administrative Characteristics, Ph. D Thesis, Bilkent University, Ankara 2012, p. 88. ↑
 4. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization 2012, p. 23. Raymond H. Kevorkian dates the foundation of Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa to the summer 1914. Cf. Kevorkian, Raymond H.: La première phase de la destruction: déportations et massacres (avril-août 1915), in: Conseil scientifique international pour l'étude du génocide des Arméniens, Le génocide des Arméniens, Paris 2015, p. 48. ↑
 5. Band warfare was in fact used by the CUP from 1906-1908. ↑
 6. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization 2012, p. 324. ↑
 7. Yiğit, Yücel: Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa and World War I, in: Middle East Critique 23/2 (2014) p. 170. ↑
 8. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization 2012, p. 280. ↑
 9. Ibid., p. 231. ↑
 10. Hanioglu, Şükrü: Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks 1902-1908, New York 2001, p. 143. ↑
 11. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization 2012, p. 259. ↑
 12. Ibid., p. 261. ↑
 13. Yücel, Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa and World War I, p. 167. ↑
 14. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization 2012, p. 66. ↑
 15. Uyar, Mesut and Erickson, Edward J.: A Military History of Ottomans, Westport, CT 2009, p. 249. ↑
 16. Fortna, Benjamin: The Circassian. A Life of Esref Bey, Late Ottoman Insurgent and Special Agent, London 2016, pp. 131-135. ↑
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 20. Uyar and Erickson, A Military History of Ottomans 2009, pp. 252-253. ↑
 21. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization 2012, p. 204. ↑
 22. Moreau, Odile: La Turquie dans la Grande Guerre. De l'Empire ottoman à la république de Turquie, Paris 2016, pp. 155-159; Moreau, Odile: Aref Taher Bey: an Ottoman Military Instructor bridging the Maghreb and the Ottoman Mediterranean, in: Moreau, Odile and

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23. Stoddard, Philip H.: The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, a Preliminary Study on the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa, PhD thesis, Princeton University 1963, pp. 76-78. ↑
24. Stoddard, The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, p. 112. ↑
25. Uyar and Erickson, A Military History of Ottomans 2012, p. 252. ↑
26. Stoddard, The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, p. 127. ↑
27. Kaiser, Hilmar: The Extermination of Armenians in the Diarbekir region, Istanbul 2014, p. 9. ↑
28. Akçam, Taner: A shameful act, The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility, London 2007, p. XIV. Dadrian, Vahakn N.: The Role of the Special Organization in the Armenian Genocide during the First World War, in: Panyi, P. (ed.): Minorities in Wartime: National and Racial Groupings in Europe, North America and Australia in Two World Wars, Oxford 1993, pp. 58-63; Dadrian, Vahakn N.: The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus, Providence, RI 1995; Akçam, Taner: "Ermeni Meselesi Hollonmustur": Osmanlı Belgerine Göre Savaş Yıllarında Ermenilere Yönelik Politikalar, 7th edition, Istanbul 2016, pp. 168-180. Dündar, Fuat: Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi, Ittihad ve Terakki'nin Etnisite Mühendisliği (1913-1918), Istanbul 2008; Kévorkian, Raymond: Le génocide des Arméniens Paris 2006. ↑
29. Kaiser, The Extermination of Armenians 2014, p. 363. ↑
30. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization 2012, p. 246. ↑
31. Ibid., pp. 324-325. ↑

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