

Caucasus Front

By [Tigran Martirosyan](#)

The **Caucasus Front** was the area where combat operations between the Russian and Ottoman Empires were conducted from October 1914 until December 1917 as part of the **Caucasus Campaign**, one of the military campaigns in the Middle Eastern theatre of war and the front line where Russian advanced units were deployed to engage opposing Ottoman units.

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The Situation at the Front in 1914-1915

The Ottoman [naval](#) bombardment of Russian ports in the [Black Sea](#) on 29 October 1914, known as the Black Sea Raid, led to [Russia](#) declaring war on the [Ottoman Empire](#). The Russian Caucasus Army crossed the frontier on 1 November in the Bergmann Offensive, capturing Köprüköy. Initially numbering 100,000 men, the army was reduced to 60,000 troops after almost half of the force was transferred to the [Eastern Front](#) following Russian defeats at [Tannenberg](#) and the Masurian Lakes.

Four volunteer units consisting of Russian Armenians,^[1] as well as detachments of Georgians and Caucasus Greeks, fought alongside the Russians. The Ottoman Third Army, which was composed of 150,000 troops, counterattacked on 11 November, and the Russian flanks became vulnerable, forcing a Russian retreat from Köprüköy. The success boosted Ottoman Minister of War [Ismail Enver's](#) (1881-1922) faith in the ability of his troops to achieve swift victory.

On 22 December, elements of the Third Army, numbering 118,660 troops,^[2] began advancing on Russian positions across the Allahüekber Mountains. By 25 December, two army corps had advanced well north of the Russians and began deploying southward to intercept the Russian line of retreat and close the encirclement. However, they were lured into Russian traps. On 2 January 1915, the Russians launched a counterattack at Sarıkamış that cost the lives of 90,000 Turkish soldiers,^[3] including 53,000 who froze to death, and thousands more who died from typhus. Russian losses were placed at around 16,000 killed and wounded. Thoroughly outmanoeuvred by his Russian rivals, Enver blamed the defeat on Armenians, using some Armenian desertions as a pretext, even though Armenian soldiers and officers in the Ottoman army generally fought loyally and bravely.^[4] The Turkish debacle at Sarıkamış triggered the [Armenian Genocide](#), which was begun by the Ottoman state on 24 April.

Throughout the rest of the year, the situation on the front remained relatively calm. In April, roughly 43,000 troops from the Russian Caucasus Army were redeployed to the Eastern Front. These were replenished with only two [cavalry](#) brigades, about half the number lost. To make up for the losses, commander of the Russian army in the Caucasus [Nikolai Yudenich \(1862-1933\)](#) reduced the personnel strength in existing divisions to form seventeen new [rifle](#) battalions, remobilised the [Cossacks](#), which provided ten cavalry battalions, and drew tens of thousands of men from the local militia. After the Allies withdrew from [Gallipoli](#), the Ottoman general staff received the opportunity to reinforce the Third Army with up to sixteen [infantry](#) divisions, which were involved in fighting^[5] in preparation for a spring offensive. In December, Yudenich formulated a plan for a pre-emptive strike on Erzurum, to begin the following month.

The Situation at the Front in 1916

In the euphoria of celebrating the defeat of the Allied forces in Gallipoli, the Ottoman general staff believed that Erzurum would stand impervious to Russian assault. The staff allocated seven divisions freed from Gallipoli to the Caucasus but delayed their departure until February. But already between 10 and 19 of January, Russian forces launched a daring attack at Erzurum, outflanking KöprükÖy, 53 kilometres east of Erzurum, and reducing the amount of Ottoman manpower there. The commander of the Third Army, [Mahmud Kâmil \(1880-1922\)](#), set up a line of defence that depended on characteristics of the terrain rather than on trench lines manned by infantrymen. As the line deteriorated, his soldiers retreated to Erzurum where, with more troops and fortress [artillery](#), they hoped to put up a stiffer fight. The fighting resulted in 20,000 Turkish [casualties](#), 10,000 Russian casualties and 2,000 Russians with severe frostbite.^[6]

The general offensive on the forts of Erzurum began on 10 February when the Fourth Caucasian Rifle Division ascended the slopes of the Kargapazar ridge. On 14 February, the division began its descent. It linked up with the II Turkistan Corps at the Karagöbek fort and began an advance on the Tafet fort. Outflanked, the Ottomans evacuated Tafet and dropped back. On 15 February, they blew

up several forts and evacuated the Çoban-dede fort. Russian troops entered Erzurum the following day. The Ottoman losses were placed at 10,000 killed and wounded, with 5,000 taken prisoner.

Russian losses included 1,000 killed, 4,000 wounded, and 4,000 lost to frostbite.^[7] Enver ordered the V and XVI Corps and the Fifth Infantry Division – formed into the Second Army – to march on Erzurum. However, by the time the army arrived, the Russians had consolidated their gains and were able to withstand the counteroffensive.

In April, Yudenich divided his forces in two. One column moved north and captured Trabzon. After the Ottoman attempt to retake the town failed, the Russians counterattacked on 2 July striking at Erzincan, 140 kilometres south of Trabzon. The second column headed south towards Bitlis and Muş in eastern Anatolia. Between 2 March and 24 August, Russian forces overwhelmed the Ottoman Second Army and pushed it back deep into Anatolia. Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938), the commander of the XVI Corps, counterattacked and retook Bitlis and Muş, halting the Russian drive into Mesopotamia, where a link-up with the British could encircle Ottoman forces. However, further advances to recapture Van were stopped at Gevaş, south of Lake Van, and by late September, the Ottoman counterattacks had ended. By the end of 1916, the Russians were in control of a large tract of eastern Anatolia, stretching for nearly 355 kilometres from Trabzon to Bitlis.

The End of Hostilities in 1917

The imminent Russian advance into central Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia was halted after the February Revolution, and the disintegrated Russian Caucasus Army was replaced by Armenian irregular units and the Allied expeditionary mission “Dunsterforce”. The departure of Russian troops gave the Ottomans the opportunity to recover the pre-war frontiers. On 5 December at Erzincan, they signed an armistice with the Transcaucasian Commissariat, the region’s first independent government, which formally ended the fighting in the Caucasus. Despite this, the Turks continued offensive operations, taking advantage of the fact that the Caucasus Front had effectively ceased to exist as a cohesive theatre of operations. The signing of a peace treaty at Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918 between the new Bolshevik government of Russia and the Ottoman Empire put an end to all hostilities.

Tigran Martirosyan, University of Amsterdam

Section Editor: [Pınar Üre](#)

Notes

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7. † Ibid., p. 363.

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Citation

Martirosyan, Tigran: Caucasus Front (Version 1.1), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.11428/1.1](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11428/1.1).

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