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Governments, Parliaments and Parties (Ottoman Empire/Middle East)

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After the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) seized power in January 1913, it established a single-party government that dominated parliament from the 1914 elections until the end of the war. The CUP was a party of leaders and factions and not a so-called “triumvirate.” It ruled collectively through bodies like the general assembly and the central committee. At its last congress in November 1918 the committee dissolved itself and seven of its leaders fled on a German U-boat.

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The 1914-1918 Parliament

After the unionist coup of 23 January 1913, the first parliamentary elections in the [Ottoman Empire](#) were held in the spring of 1914. The [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#) emerged as the dominant party from the elections, in which no opposition party participated.^[1] The Liberal Union had

already been closed down and its leaders – Prince [Sabahaddin \(1877-1948\)](#) and Colonel [Sadık Bey \(1860-1941\)](#) – had fled into exile. Apart from its restrictive measures, the CUP owed its victory partly to the popular support it enjoyed due to the following: the recapture of Edirne from [Bulgaria](#) in July 1913, the purchase of the warship *Sultan Osman I*, and the assertive naval policy against [Greece](#). As the British ambassador, Sir [Louis du Pan Mallet \(1864-1936\)](#) noted: “unless some such convulsion as the Albanian movement which drove them from power in July 1912 should again occur, the present Committee government may hope of a longer life.”^[2]

The unionist-dominated parliament consisted of about 240 deputies of which approximately 200 were Muslim, around twenty Greek and twenty Armenian, and a few Jewish. The question of the representation of the Armenian parties – the patriarchate, *Dashnak*, *Hintchak*, and *Ramgaver* – was particularly problematic. The Armenians wanted twenty deputies and demanded legislation that each community or *millet* be represented in the parliament in proportion to its population. The unionists, while willing to concede the twenty deputies, were against the idea of proportional representation, as all deputies and senators were seen as Ottomans. The parliament, which met for the first time on 14 May 1914, was closed by imperial decree on 2 August 1914, and ordered to reassemble on 14 November.^[3] Parliament did not discuss the [July Crisis](#) in any detail, as it did not involve the Ottoman Empire as directly as it did the European powers.

The General Assembly, the Central Committee, and the Cabinet

There may have been an elected parliament, but it no longer made the decisions. In the one-party state, decisions were made secretly within the CUP institutions – the general assembly (*Meclis-i Umumi*), the central committee (*Merkez-i Umumi*), and the cabinet. The general assembly, where policy was discussed, consisted of appointed and elected members. Those appointed came from the central committee; others were elected at the annual congress. The former met monthly, coordinated the activities of the other groups and played the role of a mini-parliament.

A description of the *Meclis-i Umumi* meeting held on 4 May 1914 gives an idea of its role. Interior Minister [Mehmed Talat Pasha \(1874-1921\)](#) presided over the *meclis*, which discussed and accepted the program for the chamber of deputies. It was a formality when the program was brought before the chamber a few days later. It was decided that the parliament would complete this program during the current session and that questions would be discussed in private sessions so as to save time in the chamber.^[4] In his memoirs, [Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın \(1875-1957\)](#) wrote that members of the central committee and some ministers formed a working committee, which also included a few deputies. That is how the general assembly came into being. This body would meet from time to time and discuss the problems of the country and the [government](#).^[5]

Decisions were passed on to the central committee, the highest organ of the CUP. It was chaired by the general secretary or *katib-i umumi*, and this body also dealt with unionists outside the chamber. There were representatives of the party in the provinces who kept an eye on provincial organization

as well as the governors. In a sense this official, the *vekil-i umumi*, was more powerful than the governor, who was also the head of the provincial party. Thus, the CUP had effectively succeeded in establishing a one-party state.^[6]

The CUP, the World War, and the German Alliance

The general assembly and the central committee made decisions collectively and sent them to the cabinet. The cabinet, in turn, acted on the decisions. Thus, on 1 July 1914, [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#) was sent to Paris, at a time when [France](#) was seeking improved relations with the Ottoman Empire. However, Cemal's visit took place two days before Prime Minister [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) and his foreign minister, [René Viviani \(1863-1925\)](#), left for Russia for consultations about the July Crisis. On 13 July, Cemal only met [Pierre de Margerie \(1861-1942\)](#), *directeur politique au ministere des affaires étrangères*. As he did not receive a positive reply, he saw it as a "veiled refusal" of his proposal for an [alliance](#). Thus, Cemal returned to Istanbul empty-handed.^[7]

The French response disappointed the unionists because they wanted to end their isolation with an agreement with the Entente powers. This was not achieved, so they decided to turn to Berlin and Vienna. But here too, they received a negative response. The CUP did not give up and War Minister [Enver Ismail Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#) approached Ambassador [Hans von Wangenheim \(1859-1915\)](#). On 22 July, the ambassador wired Berlin that Enver Pasha had asked for an alliance. Enver is said to have "warned the ambassador that if Turkey were rejected by the Triple Alliance, she would turn at once to the Triple Entente."^[8] The next day, Grand Vizier [Said Halim Pasha \(1865-1921\)](#) told Ambassador Wangenheim that Istanbul wanted an alliance only against Russia and not against France and England. On the basis of these reports, on 24 July, [William II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) ordered that Enver's approach be followed up.

The situation in Istanbul became tense with the outbreak of the Austro-Serbian war. Many saw it as a third [Balkan war](#), but some Istanbul papers, such as *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* (31 July 1914), predicted a general European war. The general opinion in the CUP was that the empire should stay out of any war, though its action would depend on the decisions of the Balkan states. On the same day, *Stamboul* reported that Finance Minister [Mehmed Cavid Bey \(1875-1926\)](#) had postponed his trip to Paris *sine die* thus giving up any hope of a French loan and an alliance with the entente. By 1 August, predictions of a general European war had come true. [Germany](#) ordered general mobilization and sent ultimatums to St. Petersburg and Paris, and the next day to [Belgium](#).

On 2 August, a small group within the CUP concluded the secret German-Ottoman alliance. When Grand Vizier Said Halim Pasha read the terms of the agreement, Cavid was stunned, but "other friends were delighted" and exclaimed that "we are forming an alliance with a great state."^[9] Cavid's remark about reaching an agreement after the war had broken out had no effect on them. [Halil Menteşe \(1874-1948\)](#), who had been informed of the discussions in mid-July, told his informants,

Said Halim Pasha, Talat and Enver: “As all our initiative with regard to the English and the French have brought no results, if you can form an alliance with Germany on condition that it will be activated only against Russia, you will have done a great service to the country.”^[10]

Later Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın wrote that “until that date” (unfortunately, no date is given), no one in the central committee had seen the treaty. He wrote that objections came more from the central committee than the cabinet. The small group that signed the treaty feared that the terms might become known. When Hüseyin Cahit saw the treaty at the foreign ministry, he discovered that the Ottoman Empire had gained nothing of significance from the treaty. The Germans had not committed themselves to the Ottomans in any real sense. At the next general assembly meeting, Hüseyin Cahit gave his opinion, noting that the Germans were not even going to incur the cost of the Ottoman war effort. The porte could have raised the question of capitulations and the annexation of territory after the war. His proposal to renegotiate the terms of the treaty was approved by the CUP’s general assembly and difficult discussions were reopened to complete the alliance between the porte and Germany.^[11] The grand vizier who had signed the treaty did not believe that it bound Turkey to enter the war on the side of the Germans. He repeatedly told entente ambassadors that Turkey would never participate in the war.^[12]

There was a reason why the unionists were divided on the question of which alliance to join. The moderate majority would have preferred to form an alliance with [Britain](#) and France. Such an alliance reflected their conservative world-view that favored a constitutional monarchy and a reformed rather than revolutionary socio-economic structure. They saw the empire’s future in being part of the world market dominated by Britain. But the radical minority – the “war party” – preferred the alliance with Germany.

After all, Germany possessed one of the strongest armies and most developed industries in the world. The radical minority was deeply influenced by Germany's self-image as “the very embodiment of vitalism and technical brilliance.” The war for Germany, according to this image,

... was to be a war of liberation, a *Befreiungskrieg*, from the hypocrisy of bourgeois form and convenience, and Britain was to her the principal representative of the order against which she was rebelling. Britain was in fact the major conservative power of the *fin-de-siecle* world...^[13]

The moderate majority lost because the entente not only refused their offer of alliance, but even refused to give the porte badly-needed loans. Even though the radical minority was able to sign the treaty with Germany, the majority in the cabinet as well as the two consultative committees – the central committee and the general assembly – were able to prevent Turkey’s early entry into war.

Parliament was closed by imperial decree on 2 August 1914 and on the same day, the cabinet made the decision to mobilize. The moderates in the cabinet, whose spokesman was Cavid Bey, only wanted partial mobilization. But the war party, led by Enver, won.^[14] On 4 August the Russian ambassador, [Mikhail Nikolayevich von Giers \(1856-1924\)](#), reported that he had been told by the

grand vizier that the cabinet had decided to remain neutral. But the straits had been mined to prevent the violation of Ottoman [neutrality](#).^[15] With mobilization, there came [press censorship](#).

Britain's confiscation of the two ships being built in Britain for the porte on 2 August and the arrival of the German ships, the *Goeben* and *Breslau* on 10 August strengthened the war party. Berlin controlled the Ottoman army, thanks to its military mission, and now the navy. But few in the CUP wanted to enter the war; the majority hoped for a short war that would end in a German victory by Christmas or spring 1915, and they hoped to come out on the winning side. After the arrival of the *Goeben* and *Breslau*, Berlin began to pressure Istanbul to join the war. But the CUP held back. It was the porte's bankruptcy that forced it to enter the war. England and France refused to lend the Ottomans money and Berlin offered to do so provided the porte entered the war. Cavid rightly concluded that "...Germany will definitely not give us money without our participating in the war."^[16]

The Black Sea Incident: The Ottomans Enter the War

Even after German gold entered the porte's treasury, the CUP held back. It was the Black Sea incident of 29 October, engineered by the Germans and the war party, that eventually led the Ottomans to war. The Russian ambassador was instructed to ask for his passport, but agreed that Britain and France might present an ultimatum to the porte demanding the immediate withdrawal of the German military and naval missions. If the porte agreed, war with the Ottomans would be avoided. In the cabinet, Cavid, supported by other neutralists, insisted that this was the only way to avoid war. He proposed an offer to the entente ambassadors that would include the withdrawal of the fleet into the Bosphorus for the duration of the war, not to consider a break in relations a declaration of war, and not to engage in any hostile action. These terms were unacceptable to the entente; even if they had been accepted, it is doubtful if Cavid could have sold them to the war party.^[17]

The principal concern of the war party was to paper over the cracks in the cabinet so as to convince the public that the cabinet was united. A divided cabinet would suggest that there were differences over the Black Sea incident with implications that Istanbul had been at fault. Therefore, it was vital to persuade the grand vizier, Said Halim Pasha, not to resign. In order to do that, the interventionists went through the motions of being moderate and conciliatory, as though seeking a formula to avoid war. By 5 November, the entente was officially at war with the porte. The Ottomans' imperial proclamation declaring a state of war against the entente came only on 11 November. Now at war, the principal task of the CUP was to provide a united political front both for internal and external consumption.

The Opposition in Exile

A united front was essential in order to wage a war for the very survival of the empire. There was no opposition to the CUP within the empire. But the liberals in exile, led by Prince Sabahaddin, were in

Paris and Cairo appealing to the entente to overthrow the CUP, the “accomplices of Germany.”^[18] On 6 November 1914, Sabahaddin wrote an anti-unionist letter to [Mehmed V, Sultan of the Turks \(1844-1918\)](#) from Paris. At the outbreak of war, he sent telegrams to the porte from Paris recommending neutrality. After the Ottoman Empire entered the war, he went to Athens where he was in touch with the unionists through Ambassador [Galip Kemali \(1873-1960\)](#). To one of his telegrams, Talat answered: “There is no reason for the anxiety you express. Await the future with a calm heart. If you so please, you may even come to Istanbul...”^[19]

During the [Gallipoli Campaign](#), when the situation was critical in Istanbul, Sir [Mark Sykes \(1879-1919\)](#) interviewed Sabahaddin in Athens, where he proposed that they carry out a coup in the Ottoman capital and make a separate peace.

...He stated that his party had suffered a great deal at the hands of the Committee and the Germans that a great many of its leaders were in prison... However, he considered his party strong in the [Smyrna](#) garrison, numerous in Constantinople and popular among the masses of the Turkish people... His hope was to obtain assistance from the Allies, provoke a military revolution in Smyrna, extend it to Constantinople, overthrow the existing government and make separate terms of peace with the Allies; his idea being that with a revolution at the capital, Turco-German resistance at the Dardanelles would collapse.^[20]

By the end of 1915, the liberals' hopes were dashed following the failure of the Gallipoli Campaign. Throughout the war, the unionists presented a united front and spoke with one voice. The declaration of the state of siege in the capital on 23 February 1915 further limited political activity and strengthened the hand of the military wing against moderate civilians like Said Halim, Cavid, and Hüseyin Cahit. In October 1915, the pro-entente Said Halim resigned as foreign minister, leading to the appointment of Halil who was more acceptable to both the war party and Berlin.^[21]

Parliament reopened on 28 September 1915 after a seven-month break. The mood was upbeat and the chamber proposed that a delegation be sent to the sultan to congratulate him on the victories of Ottoman arms. On 5 October, War Minister Enver Pasha came before the chamber and gave an optimistic account of events, praising the Ottoman army. The army came in for even greater praise after the entente evacuation of Gallipoli on 9 January 1916.^[22]

Important Cabinet Appointments and the Congress of the CUP, 1917

Throughout 1916, when the army defended eastern Anatolia against the Russian advance, the parliament remained passive and the CUP continued to rule collectively. But on 2 February 1917, [Kara Kemal \(1868-1926\)](#), a leading member of the party, proposed to the central committee that this was an opportune moment for the CUP to assume total responsibility and Talat, who was the committee's accepted leader, ought to form the new cabinet. The proposal was accepted and Kara Kemal agreed to inform Enver. The committee also agreed that Said Halim would be made *Khedive* once [Egypt](#) was liberated.^[23] Said Halim resigned on 3 February 1917 and Talat was elevated to the

rank of pasha and appointed grand vizier. He assumed office at a critical phase of the war: Germany had declared unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) on 1 February 1917; [Baghdad fell](#) on 11 March 1917; there was an English offensive in Palestine; and there was the problem of banditry and insecurity in the countryside. Only the outbreak of [revolution](#) in Russia in March eased the situation, bringing with it a promise of an early peace.^[24]

The CUP was finally in total control under a trusted and respected leader all factions. There was a tame parliament with perhaps one dissident voice in the senate, that of [Ahmed Rıza \(1858-1930\)](#), one of the founders of the CUP in Paris. But his was a lone voice without support. He only became important when the new sultan, Mehmed Vahdeddin or [Mehmed VI, Sultan of the Turks \(1861-1926\)](#), came to power in July 1918. After the deposition of [Abdülhamid II, Sultan of the Turks \(1842-1918\)](#) in 1909, his successor, Mehmed Reşad or Mehmed V, had been an ornamental, constitutional sultan, doing the will of the CUP. Vahdeddin, on the other hand, was known to be anti-CUP and was determined to regain his authority from the CUP. For the moment, however, the committee was in charge. For example, the decision to sever diplomatic relations with [America](#) was taken after a long discussion in the central committee and the cabinet. But the question was not debated in the parliament, which was not in session during much of the war.^[25]

The CUP's annual congress was the overall decision-making institution. Until Salonika was lost to Greece in 1912, the congress meetings had been held in secret in that city. Thereafter, the congress moved to Istanbul. Its first wartime meeting was held on 18 September 1917. The congress opened under Talat Pasha's presidency and, after his report had been heard, he was re-elected president. Deputies and senators who were present in Istanbul, as well as special delegates from the regional clubs in the provinces, attended the congress meeting. After the annual report, the floor was thrown open to discussion on all current events as well as on questions that might arise before the parliamentary groups during the session due to begin in six weeks.^[26]

There were discussions in parliament, such as the ones on the war after the Bolsheviks seized power. But decisions on war and peace had already been made elsewhere. However, on this occasion, Selahattin Cimcoz, deputy for Istanbul, perhaps the first Ottoman deputy to call himself a socialist, made a speech and called for immediate peace.^[27] There were other discussions on peace but they were a formality as far as policy was concerned. But Foreign Minister [Ahmed Nesimi \(1876-1958\)](#) gave regular details on the negotiations at [Brest-Litovsk](#), for example in parliament on 23 February 1918.^[28] Finally, the peace treaty with the Bolsheviks was signed at Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918 amid much rejoicing in the parliament. Only [Ağaoğlu Ahmed \(1869-1939\)](#), a deputy who hailed from the former [Russian Empire](#), was critical of the government's policy regarding the [Caucasus](#) with its Muslim, Turkic population.^[29]

At the session of 4 March, it was decided to prolong the life of the current parliament since it was neither possible nor desirable to hold a general election during the war. The bill was passed on 11 March: the chamber adopted a motion from the government to amend Article 69 and prolong the

term of the deputies until the situation permitted a new election. That is how the situation remained until the Ottoman defeat on 30 October when the armistice with Britain was signed at Mudros.^[30] The CUP held its last congress, marking its dissolution, on 1-5 November 1918. Seven of its leaders escaped from Istanbul on a German U-boat to the Crimea.^[31] A new chapter opened in Ottoman-Turkish history.

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Notes

1. ↑ According to many contemporary observers, including [Ahmed Emin \[Yalman\] \(1888-1972\)](#), a journalist, the 1914 election was a one-party election. Yalman, Ahmed Emin: *Gördüklerim ve Geçirdiklerim, 1888-1918* [What I Saw and Experienced, 1888-1918], volume 1, Istanbul 1970, p. 198.
2. ↑ The National Archives (TNA), Richmond, FO 371/2143/23213, Mallet to Grey, 21 May 1914.
3. ↑ The opening of parliament was postponed on 14 November 1914 for one month once the country was at war.
4. ↑ *The Orient*, volume 18, 6 May 1914, p. 172.
5. ↑ Yalçın, Hüseyin Cahit: *Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın'ın 50 Yıllık Siyasi Hatıraları. Meşrutiyet Devri ve Sonrası* [Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın's 50 Year Political Memoirs. The Constitutional Period and After], in: *Halkçı (Yeni Ulus)*, 13 June 1954 - 31 December 1954. Yalçın himself was a deputy who participated in the general assembly.
6. ↑ Tunaya, Tarık Zafer: *Türkiye'de Siyasi Partiler, 1859-1952* [Political Parties in Turkey, 1859-1952], Istanbul 1952, p. 199. See also Tunaya, Tarık Zafer: *Türkiye'de Siyasi Partiler. İkinci Meşrutiyet Dönemi, 1908-1918* [Political Parties in Turkey, 1859-1952. Second Constitutional Period, 1908-1918], volume 1, Istanbul 1984, which is devoted to the Second Constitutional Period.
7. ↑ Fulton, Bruce: *France and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, in: Kent, Marian (ed.): *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, London 1984, p. 161. Stamboul, 28 July 1914.
8. ↑ Wangenheim to Foreign Ministry, July 22, 1914 cited in: Weber, Frank G.: *Eagles on the Crescent. Germany, Austria, and the Diplomacy of the Turkish Alliance, 1914-1918*, Ithaca and London 1970, pp. 62-63; and Howard, Harry N.: *The Partition of Turkey. A Diplomatic History 1913-1923*, New York 1966, p. 84.
9. ↑ Cavid Bey, Mehmed: *Meşrutiyet Devrine ait Cavid Bey'in Hatıraları* [Cavid Bey's Memoirs of the Constitutional Period], in: Tanin, 30 August 1943 - 22 January 1946.
10. ↑ Mentеше, Halil: *Eski Meclisi Mebusan Reisi Halil Mentеше'nin Hatıraları*, in: *Cumhuriyet*, 9 November 1946. The memoirs were later published as *Menteşe, Halil: Osmanlı Mebusan Meclisi Reisi Halil Mentеше'nin Anıları* [The Memoirs of Halil Mentеше], Istanbul 1986.

11. ↑ Yalçın, Hüseyin Cahit: Tarihi Mektuplar, in: Tanin 64, 13 December 1944.
12. ↑ Ibid., 14 December 1944.
13. ↑ Eksteins, Modris: Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age, New York 1989, p. xv.
14. ↑ Tanin, 1, 2, 3 August 1914; Menteşe, Hatıraları 10 November 1946.
15. ↑ Bayur, Yusuf Hikmet: Türk İnkılabı Tarihi [History of the Turkish Revolution], Ankara 1953, p. 63.
16. ↑ Cavid Bey, Hatıraları 12 November 1944; Bayur, Tarihi 1953, pp. 188-191.
17. ↑ Heller, Joseph: Sir Louis Mallet and the Ottoman Empire. The Road to War, in: Middle Eastern Studies 12/1 (1976), p. 34.
18. ↑ Fua, Albért / Nevzad Refik: La Trahison du Gouvernement Turc, Paris 1914.
19. ↑ Ziya, Şakir: İttihat ve Terakki Nasıl Doğdu? Nasıl Yaşadı? Nasıl Öldü? [How the Committee of Union and Progress Was Born, How it Lived, and How it Died], in: Son Posta, 6 October 1934.
20. ↑ TNA, FO 371/2486, Mark Sykes's interview with Prince Sabahaddin, Mark Sykes to Major-General C. E. Calwell, C. B., Director of Military Operations (June 1915). See also A Letter from Prince Sabaheddine to Lord Kitchener, in: The Near East (5 November 1915), p. 15.
21. ↑ Sabah, 25 October 1915; Bayur, Tarihi 1953, pp. 399-401.
22. ↑ Sabah, 23 October 1915; Bayur, Tarihi 1953, pp. 362-368. See also Meclis-i Millimizde Şanlı Bir Gün, in: İkdam, 11 January 1916; Enver Paşa'nın Beyanatı, in: Tasvir-i Efkâr, 12 January 1916.
23. ↑ Ziya, Şakir: İttihat ve Terakki, in: Son Posta, 29 December 1934.
24. ↑ Ibid., 12 January 1935.
25. ↑ Bayur, Tarihi 1953, pp. 102-103.
26. ↑ 333 [1917] Kongresi, in: Tanin, 19 September 1917. The congress ended on 24 September 1917.
27. ↑ Meclis-i Mebusanda Sulh Meselesi, in: Tasvir-i Efkâr, 4 December 1917; Bayur, Tarihi 1953, pp. 104-108.
28. ↑ Yunus, Nadi: Harb ve Sulh Meselesi Mecliste, in: Tasvir-i Efkâr, 24 February 1918.
29. ↑ Tasvir-i Efkâr, 4-5 March 1918; Bayur, Tarihi 1953, p. 139.
30. ↑ Text in Mears, Grinnell: Modern Turkey. New York 1924, pp. 624-626; Mango, Andrew: Atatürk. The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey, New York 1999, pp. 182, 189.
31. ↑ Tunaya, Siyasi Partiler 1952, pp. 407-418; Ziya, Şakir, İttihat ve Terakki, in: Son Posta, 12 April 1935.

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