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Pasha, Talat

By [Hans-Lukas Kieser](#)

Unknown, "Talat" Mehmed (Talaat Pasha, Talat Bey, Talât Paşa)
Politician in the Ottoman Empire; grand vizier
Born 01 January 1874 in Edirne, Ottoman Empire
Died 15 March 1921 in Berlin, Germany

A first father of modern Turkey before Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the driving force of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) during the war, Talat organized the removal of Armenian and other Christian citizens to secure exclusive Turkish power in Asia Minor. Promoted to grand vizier in 1917, he reached the peak of his power when he recovered parts of the Caucasus in 1918.

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1. Career until 1913

Born and raised in Edirne, Mehmed Talat Pasha (1874-1921) found a second home in Saloniki where he co-founded the Ottoman Freedom Society (OFS) that prepared the 1908 Young Turk [Revolution](#).

The OFS merged with the opposition in exile that cooperated with the [Armenian Revolutionary Federation \(ARF\)](#). The first OFS regulation had only allowed Muslims to become members.

Talat's frustrating experience with [parliamentarism](#) in the period after 1908 discouraged his confidence in democratic government. At a 1910 [Committee of Union and Progress \(CUP\)](#) meeting, he declared that henceforth there could "be no question of equality until we succeed in our task of Ottomanising the Empire,"^[1] thus betraying the constitutional ideals of 1908 and embarking toward an Ottomanisation that was soon mixed with Turkism and Turkification. This evolution coincided with Talat's close friendship with [Ziya Gökalp \(1876-1924\)](#), another CUP Central Committee member and spiritual father of a homogenous Muslim Turkish nation. He soon discovered war to be the best method to mobilise and unify such a nation.

A putsch against the increasingly authoritarian CUP rule brought the CUP to the brink of collapse in summer 1912. Embracing a populist and very pro-war attitude, Talat retrieved the party, now in opposition, from its nadir and strengthened his leadership. By encouraging governmental imprudence, he contributed to the outbreak of the [First Balkan War](#), in which a coalition of young post-Ottoman states attacked the [empire](#) and conquered most of the remaining Ottoman realm in the Balkans. When the liberal cabinet considered the capitulation of Edirne, a capital of the early [Ottoman Empire](#), Talat recognized this as an opportunity to overthrow the unpopular rulers. On 23 January 1913, he led a coup d'état, together with [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), thus paving the way for more than five years of dictatorial CUP rule. Talat impressed foreign diplomats, in particular Germans, as an exceptionally decisive, energetic and audacious leader.

2. Leader of a Revolutionary World War Regime

2.1. Concentration of Power

An experienced minister of the interior, Talat presented his opinions to the government as those of the Central Committee, and his decisions to the committee as conditioned by the constraints of the government, in order to push through his will. In this way he dealt also with senior members of the CUP like Dr. [Selânikli Mehmet Nazım Bey \(1870-1926\)](#) and [Bahaeddin Şakir \(1874-1922\)](#). Talat emerged in 1913-1914 as the pivotal *animal politique* in the Ottoman capital.

By the autumn of 1912, Talat and the committee had internalized war psychology and a comprehensive war logic that included domestic coercion and violence. After the Second Balkan War, Enver and Talat had wanted to resume war against [Greece](#) in order to reconquer lost territory. They took advantage of the [July crisis of 1914](#), supported a radical anti-Serbian Austrian policy and approached [Germany](#) for an [alliance](#), threatening an Ottoman dependence on the Entente if refused. Exceptional circumstances allowed them to put [Austria](#) and Germany in *Zugzwang*. Within a few days, both countries had bound their military destiny to that of the Ottoman Empire. Within a few months, they broadened the alliance in terms of content and extended it until 1920.

In late 1914, Talat had emerged as “the foremost partisan of war” for “whom and his disciples this war was *tout ou rien*”, according to insiders who henceforward saw him as the overall decision-maker. They complained of a Germany-centered “war psychology of Talat and his followers.”^[2] Talat had concentrated most power of the CUP and the government in his hands. He successfully kept [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#), a rival in the committee and minister of the navy, at a distance by trusting him with the governorship of Syria and the reconquest of [Egypt](#). Since [Mehmed Cavid Bey \(1875-1926\)](#) had retired out of protest against the war, Talat also headed the finance ministry, although Cavid continued to lead most affairs, in particular the negotiations with Germany for financial assistance and the development of the Baghdad Railway. Enver remained a pillar of the war regime and indispensable, but depended more on Talat than vice versa.

Politically, “Enver could not do anything if not together with Talat,” as reads Cavid's diary and, analogously, German correspondence.^[3] In this vein, since the CUP's nadir in fall 1912, Talat had taken the lead on “national issues” as diverse as the January 1913 coup, the recovery of Edirne (July 1913), the expulsion of [Christian Rûm](#) (June 1914), the alliance with Germany (2 August 1914), the abolition of the capitulations (September 1914) and the abrogation of the international reform agreement for eastern Asia Minor, the so-called Armenian reforms (December 1914).

2.2. Armenian Genocide

By 1913 the Armenians were held responsible for an imminent third “Macedonia” in eastern Anatolia, after the real [Macedonia](#) had been almost entirely lost in the First Balkan War. The conflict with the [Rûm](#) in western Anatolia was to take on international dimensions. In the eyes of the CUP, the loss of Macedonia resulted from foreign interference and octroyed reforms. Unresolved security concerns and land issues in the eastern provinces had led Armenian leaders to turn to European diplomacy and demand the reforms promised in Article 61 of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin.

A reform agreement, which included international control and was backed by [Russia](#) and Germany, was signed on 8 February 1914, and to be implemented during the summer. It had far-reaching consequences for Talat's administration of domestic affairs since it gave all population groups a share in the administration. War offered Talat the opportunity to annul the agreement, cancel other foreign privileges in domestic affairs and start irregular [warfare](#) in the [Caucasus](#) and northern [Iran](#). The committee now held a chauvinist stance towards foreigners in general and Ottoman Armenians in particular, whom it accused of collaboration with the Entente during what it considered to be its total, domestic and international struggle for survival and sovereignty.

After defeat in the Caucasus, in [Iraq](#) and at the Suez Canal, a first military success on 18 March 1915 against a naval breakthrough attempt at the Dardanelles boosted the committee's self-confidence. German leadership and expertise were decisive. In mid-April 1915, a confident Talat impressed the German journalist [Emil Ludwig \(1881-1948\)](#) by learning German and talking about a post-war future in which German specialists would help build up the country. The minister of the interior argued that Turkey had entered the war in order to secure its independence.

A few days later, in ciphered telegrams from 24 April to the provincial governors and the army, he defined the situation in Asia Minor as that of a general Armenian rebellion and of revolutionary committees that wished to establish self-determination and thus must be eliminated. Agencies of Talat's ministry not only arrested the Armenian elites throughout the country, but organized the [removal of most Armenians](#) from eastern Asia Minor and western Anatolia in addition to the province of Edirne.

Armenian houses were systematically handed over to Muslim migrants (*muhacir*) and Armenian assets transferred to an exclusively Muslim economy. Asked by Ludwig in mid-August about negative economic consequences, Talat replied that “we replace all empty places quickly by Turks. [...] We are not cruel, but only energetic.”^[4] Cavid wrote in his diary that Talat and a few of his companions set out “to annihilate not only the political being, but the existence itself of a whole [Armenian] nation”, and thus Ottomanism was “replaced by a thoughtless and blindfold nationalist current.”^[5]

2.3. Grand Vizier

Grand Vizier Prince [Said Halim Pasha \(1865-1921\)](#) was not a preeminent CUP statesman. When deciding in favor of official war in October 1914, Talat and Enver bypassed him. In fall 1915, Talat convinced him to retire from the foreign ministry in favor of Halil *Menteşe* Bey (1874-1947). When Talat was appointed as pasha and grand vizier on 4 February 1917, at last the real CUP head led Ottoman Turkey and a full-fledged CUP cabinet. The press praised this development as the culmination of a history of Turkish salvation starting in 1913. Talat raised hopes for peace and rule of law in a country stamped by war, famine, chaos, corruption and a general breakdown of public confidence.

For the first time in the history of the 20th century, the head of a revolutionary committee presided over an empire together with his longtime companions. Talat's program pressed for the reconstruction of the economy, better supply and more modern education and civil law. Although using Islamic vocabulary, he stressed European civilization and promised justice and “thorough and fundamental revolutions” for the post-war period.^[6] He aspired to preside over a reconstructed and internationally recognized state at Germany's side. The alliance of August 1914 had put the Ottoman Empire on equal footing with Germany and Austria, giving the CUP new self-confidence.

The February 1917 [Russian revolution](#) abolished the rule of the tsar, the Ottomans' archenemy. The November 1917 Bolshevik revolution changed the field of forces in favor of the Central Powers. Talat's power and prestige culminated in spring 1918, when the Russian army had retired from Erzincan, Erzurum and the southern Caucasus, and the [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#), followed by the [Batumi treaties](#), reversed the 1878 loss of Batumi, Ardahan and Kars. This was an unprecedented diplomatic victory in late Ottoman history. The Ottoman army advanced far beyond the frontier of

Brest-Litovsk and seemed to realize its 1914 [pan-Turkist](#) and [pan-Islamist](#) visions.

Talat and Enver still feared that Armenians in [Armenia](#), one of three new Caucasian republics, would conspire for a “[Bulgaria](#) of the East.” Enver therefore wanted “to completely eradicate” the new Republic of Armenia, but made do with its “extremely weak and unviable form”.^[7] Talat and Enver introduced their radical anti-Armenian logic into the Caucasus, thus contributing to Armenian despair and the bloody polarizations of 1918-1920 in that region. They feared that Germany would insist on the return of Armenian survivors to Anatolia during peace negotiations after the war.

3. Exile, Death and Legacy

While in Berlin in September 1918, Talat realized that the war was lost. Back in Istanbul, he withdrew from the office of grand vizier and, before seeking exile in Berlin, defended his policies at the last CUP congress. He argued that in order to achieve unity during an unavoidable war, crimes and corruption had to be tolerated. Then, as well as in his 1919 memoirs, he euphemized his own role in entering the war and the crimes during war.

Talat, the CUP, and the CUP press considered the war to be “truly a war of salvation and liberation” without which the country could not “be purified from evil” to “gain national and economic independence”^[8] and celebrated the victory at [Gallipoli](#) as an “eternal gospel of the Orient's salvation”^[9] against exterminatory Western enemies. Years before [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk \(1881-1938\)](#), this discourse of national salvation and revolution shaped modern Turkish narratives.

Talat was the head of an empire at war both internally and externally. He embodied the soul and spirit of a CUP post-1913 right-wing revolutionarism that abandoned efforts for consensual negotiation of a social contract based on the 1908 constitution. He believed in a natural struggle for survival, and in this spirit he engineered a Muslim “national body” in Asia Minor and Thrace. He was killed by an Armenian seeking revenge in Berlin in 1921. From exile, he supported the struggle led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), his heir who, after his victory, abstained from the empire and the alliance with political Islam in favor of an Anatolia-centered Turkism.

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Notes

1. ↑ PAAA, R 13197, German Ambassador Marschall von Bieberstein to Auswärtiges Amt, 20 October 1910.

2. † Minister Cavid, a friend of Talat, conversing with Ottoman Deputy Krikor Zohrap, 3 November 1914. Sharourian, Albert (ed.): *Diary of Krikor Zohrap. Collected Works [in Armenian]* IV, Yerevan 2003, pp. 401-402.
3. † Cavid, Mehmed Bey: *Meşrutiyet Rûznamesi [The Diary of the Constitution]*, Ankara 2015, p. 128; cf. German Ambassador Bernstorff to A. Gwinner, 1 January 1918 in: Bernstorff J. H.: *Erinnerungen und Briefe*, Zurich 1936, p. 138.
4. † Ludwig, Emil: *Eine Unterredung mit Talaat Bey*, in: *Berliner Tagblatt*, 21 August 1915.
5. † Cavid, *Meşrutiyet Rûznamesi* 2015, p. 135.
6. † MMZC III, 2, pp. 181-182, session of 15 February 1917. Cf. “Kabinenin Programı” [The Program of the Cabinet], in: *Tanin*, No. 2939, 16 February 1917.
7. † Enver to the commander of the Third Army Vehib Pasha, 9 June 1918. Facsimile in Reynolds, Michael: *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908-1918*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 166-167.
8. † “İttihâd ve Terakki 1333 ‘Umûmî Kongresi: Dünkü İctimâ” [The 1917 Committee of Union and Progress: Yesterday's Meeting], in: *Tanin*, No. 3151, 19 September 1917, pp. 1-3.
9. † Albayrak, Muzaffer / Ozyurt, Ayhan (eds.): *Yeni Mecmua Special Issue* 18 March 1918, Istanbul 2006, pp. 13-14.

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