

Sarıkamış, Battle of

By [Tigran Martirosyan](#)

The Battle of Sarıkamış, from 22 December 1914 to 17 January 1915, was a major engagement between the Ottoman and Russian armies on the Caucasus Front. The outcome of the battle resulted in a decisive Russian victory. The Ottoman army suffered heavy losses from which it would not fully recover during the remaining years of war.

Table of Contents

- [1 Background](#)
- [2 Strength in Fighting Numbers](#)
- [3 Ottoman Plan of Attack](#)
- [4 Course of the Battle](#)
- [5 Casualties](#)
- [6 Aftermath](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Background

Sarıkamış was a district centred on the chief town of the same name in Russia's Kars province adjacent to the Ottoman border. The area was considered a gateway to Russian Transcaucasia, where Ottoman Minister of War [İsmail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#) hoped to retake the provinces of Kars, Ardahan, and Batum, which were lost during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878). From Sarıkamış, Enver intended to advance on Tiflis, Russia's administrative centre in the [Caucasus](#), and then march further north to incite a revolt among the local Muslim populations against Russian rule.

[Russian war planners](#) assumed that the Ottomans would desist from launching an attack amid snow-capped mountains without the benefit of proper roads. They envisaged active defence of the lines twenty-five kilometres deep in Ottoman territory, which were secured during the Bergmann Offensive, the opening engagement on the Caucasus Front.

Strength in Fighting Numbers

The Ottoman Third Army was organised in three Corps: IX, X, and XI. To reinforce the offense, a special force was placed in the hands of German Major Christian August Stange. The force was raised from the 3rd [Infantry](#) Division, consisting of two battalions of the 8th Infantry Regiment and two [artillery](#) batteries.^[1] [Hasan İzzet \(1871-1931\)](#) was put in command of the Third Army. It is estimated that the Ottoman manpower ranged from 75,660 to 95,000 men.^[2]

The main grouping of the Russian Caucasus Army was organised in Sarykamyshskii detachment consisting of I Caucasus and II Turkestan Corps. Its strength, according to various estimates, ranged from 53.75 battalions and thirty-four *sotnias* (a [Cossack](#) unit of 100-150 persons), or under 50,000 men, to sixty-one battalions and ninety *sotnias*, or under 60,000 men, to as many as

64,000 troops^[3] with a small reserve at Kars, the province's capital of the same name, numbering around 14,000. The detachment was placed under the command of Georgii Bergmann (1854-1929). Russian forces were supported by four Armenian volunteer *druzhinas*, or squads, each numbering from a few hundred to 1,000 Russian Armenians.

Ottoman Plan of Attack

Enver began planning an attack on Sarıkamış after the Ottomans forced a Russian retreat from Köprüköy, a border town captured on 2 November in the Bergmann Offensive. The plan involved a single envelopment using three army corps, while Stange's force pressed a subsidiary advance on Ardahan, eighty-six kilometres north of Sarıkamış, from Batum. The XI Corps was to make a frontal attack across the Pasin valley and pin down the Russians so they did not fall back to Sarıkamış. The IX and X Corps, marching by their left, were to fall on the Russian right flank and rear in the vicinity of Sarıkamış. To achieve this, the X Corps had to overrun the Oltinskiĭ detachment near Oltu, fifty-five kilometres north-west of Sarıkamış, cross the Allahüekber Mountains, and then cut the railway from Sarıkamış to Kars. The IX Corps was to take Bardız, thirty-two kilometres north-west of Sarıkamış, and, aided by the elements of the X Corps, draw a noose around the Russian forces at Sarıkamış.

Success depended on all four units achieving their mission objectives on time and in force, which in turn required careful coordination of troop movements in an area where almost no communications existed. Chief of the German Military Mission Otto Liman von Sanders (1855-1929) pointed out the risks of traversing mountain trails over high ridges in the depths of winter and dubbed the operation "difficult, if not wholly impracticable."^[4] For his part, İzzet remarked that his troops were not trained for a winter assault in the mountains and required cold weather gear and winter ration scales. Enver forced İzzet to resign and assumed direct command. To speed the advance of the troops, Enver ordered his soldiers to abandon their overcoats, tents and marching order packs with bedding and cooking equipment.

Course of the Battle

On 22 December 1915, Russian troops came under major attack. The X Corps commanded by Hafız Hakkı (1878-1915) managed to skirt around the Russian right flank and took Oltu the following day. Meanwhile, the troops of the IX Corps hauled themselves through mountain passes and deep snowdrifts towards Sarıkamış. Without tents and firewood, thousands died of exposure. On 25 December, Hakkı's troops began the toilsome march across the Allahüekber Mountains to unite with the IX Corps. One-third of the corps died of exposure before they reached the distant approaches to Sarıkamış. At the extreme left wing, Stange's force took Ardahan, threatening to cut off the Russian retreat to Kars.

After arriving at Sarıkamış on 24 December, Deputy Commander of the Russian Caucasus Army Alexander Myshlayevskii (1856-1920) assumed the threat to town to be immediate and ordered a general retreat. He eventually yielded to Chief of Staff Nikolai Yudenich (1862-1933), who insisted that the retreat might lead to disaster. Little did Myshlayevskii know that the Ottoman forces that reached Sarıkamış were in a lamentable state. The two divisions of the X Corps could put rather less than 12,000 men in the line. The IX Corps could muster not more than 6,000 men and less than twenty guns. These depleted units faced a Russian force of about 14,000 men, dug-in, with reinforced contingents of artillery and [machine guns](#).

On 29 December, a division of the X Corps assaulted Sarıkamış, while two other divisions attempted to descend towards the railway. Russians counterattacked and threw the Ottomans back. Frustrated with the results of the day's fighting, Enver came up with a surprise night attack, which nonetheless failed to take the town. On 30 December, the units of the II Turkestan Corps moved up into positions overlooking Bardız, from which the Russians could bring shellfire onto the Ottoman advance base. During 1 and 2 January 1916, the IX Corps was cut off from Bardız and the survivors surrendered. Enver barely managed to escape capture by a Russian patrol near Kızılkilise, forty kilometres south-west of Bardız.

On 3 January, Siberian Cossacks drove Stange's force out of Ardahan. On 8 January, two days after he was put in command of the Sarykamyshskii detachment in place of Bergmann, Yudenich formed an attack group to destroy Ottoman forces at Bardız. Three separate columns conducted an encircling manoeuvre and took the town on 11 January. In the meantime, a Russian counteroffensive launched south of Sarıkamış dislodged the XI Corps. The last skirmishes took place from 15 to 17 January, when small contingents of the X Corps continued to offer resistance to the Cossacks near Oltu.

Casualties

Turkey's official history lists 23,000 killed, 10,000 more died in the XI Corps area, 20,000 died due to frostbite and [disease](#) behind the frontline, and 7,000 [captured](#).^[5] However, Liman von Sanders maintained that only 12,000 men of the original 90,000 of the army came back.^[6] German Chief of Staff of the Third Army reported that only about 30,000 men had returned, placing the number of prisoners at 3,500 and the number of buried corpses at 11,000.^[7] In contrast, Quartermaster-general of the Russian Caucasus Army placed the number of buried corpses at 28,000 around Sarıkamış alone.^[8] A Russian General Staff officer suggested that the Third Army lost 70,000 people out of a total of 90,000, including up to 30,000 who froze to death.^[9] A French Commandant estimated that the losses totaled 90,000 men, with the combined forces of the Third Army amounting to only 12,400 men in late January.^[10]

Most sources place the losses of the Russian Caucasus Army at around 20,000 people, of whom about 6,000 died due to frostbite, or at 16,000 killed and wounded and 12,000 sick, the majority from frostbite.^[11] Turkey's official history lists 32,000 Russian casualties, including 2,000 to 3,000 taken prisoner.^[12]

Aftermath

After his return to Constantinople on 9 January, Enver devoted his energies to conceal the truth and to represent the defeat at Sarıkamış as nothing more than a local setback. In reality, the defeat was the result of dilettante preparatory work which, combined with the conditions of topography and climate in which the offensive was launched, had deprived the Ottomans of their superiority of force. Enver cared little about considering all the scenarios of the Russians' reaction to envelopment in actual combat. He failed to keep adequate operational reserves and had no sufficient field services to alleviate the hardships faced by his soldiers in blizzard winds at altitudes approaching 3,000 metres.

Enver's most contemptible act, however, was not the concealment of truth, but the attempt to attribute the defeat to Armenian "treachery", rather than to his own dreadful errors. Using as pretext some Armenian desertions, he chose to conveniently forget about Turkish deserters, "of which 12,000 were collected in Erzurum in early January."^[13] Sarıkamış stoked the Ottoman government's pre-existing paranoia about the disloyalty of their Armenian subjects and served as a prelude to the [Armenian Genocide](#).

Tigran Martirosyan, University of Amsterdam

Section Editor: [Erol Ülker](#)

Notes

- ¹ ↑ Erickson, Edward J.: *Ordered to Die. A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War*, Westport et al. 2001, pp. 54-55.
- ² ↑ See Akbay, Cemal: *Birinci Dünya Harbi'nde Türk harbi. Kafkas cephesi. 3ncü ordu harekâtı* [Turkey's war in the First World War. Caucasus Front. Operations of the Third Army], Ankara 1993, p. 384; Korsun, Nikolaï Georgievich: *Pervaia mirovaia voïna na Kavkazskom fronte. Operativno-strategicheskiï ocherk* [The First World War in the Caucasus Front. An Operational-Strategic Sketch], Moscow 1946, p. 37; and Liman von Sanders, Otto: *Five Years in Turkey*, Annapolis 1927, p. 40.
- ³ ↑ See Korsun, *Pervaia mirovaia* 1946, p. 33 (for Sarıkamış sector of operations only) and Akhatkin, Kronid Zosimovich: *Sarykamysh [Sarıkamış]*, in: *Voennyi sbornik Obschestva revnitelei voennykh znaniï i kruzhkov vysshego voennogo samoobrazovaniïa* [Military Reports of the Society of Devotees of Military Knowledge and Study Clubs of Higher Military Self-education] 6 (1925), p. 114 (excluding units in Oltu sector of operations).
- ⁴ ↑ Liman von Sanders, *Five Years in Turkey* 1927, p. 39.
- ⁵ ↑ Akbay, *Birinci Dünya* 1993, p. 535.
- ⁶ ↑ Liman von Sanders, *Five Years in Turkey* 1927, p. 40.
- ⁷ ↑ Guse, Felix: *Die Kaukasusfront im Weltkrieg bis zum Frieden von Brest*, Leipzig 1940, pp. 49-50.
- ⁸ ↑ Maslovskiï, Evgeniï Vasil'evich: *Mirovaia voïna na Kavkazskom fronte, 1914-1917* [The World War in the Caucasus Front, 1914-1917], Moscow 2015, p. 123.
- ⁹ ↑ Korsun, *Pervaia mirovaia* 1946, p. 37.

10. ↑ Larcher, Maurice: La guerre turque dans la guerre mondiale, Paris 1926, p. 389.
11. ↑ See Korsun, Pervaia mirovaia 1946 p. 37 and Maslovskiĭ, Mirovaia voina 2015, p. 120.
12. ↑ Akbay, Birinci Dünya 1993, p. 536.
13. ↑ Guse, Die Kaukasusfront 1940, p. 50.

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