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HIST 428: WWI: Final Paper

On a Train to the Turkish Republic

The war was over. Or so he thought. Weary and ill, a young Turkish prisoner-of-war, now released at last after long confinement in a Russian labor camp, sat on a crowded train rattling home in 1918. Upon arrival, he felt unwelcome in a hungry, angry, war-torn land wrought with rebellions, political factions, and desperation. His POW¹ friend, similarly shocked by his arrival in the homeland, wrote to him: “Brother, I had to escape from a new form of captivity...I felt like an uninvited guest in my own country.”² The war was not over in Turkey after all.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the First World War, it seemed that the Sick Man of Europe³ was finally dead. But there was life in him yet—about to be channeled into the building of a new nation-state. The fall of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent rise of the Republic of Turkey are watershed events, irrevocably altering the political landscape of the Middle East and Eurasia. This shift of power did not occur overnight, nor was it without conflict. The “interwar years,” as historians now dub the era between the world wars, were anything but peaceful. To understand how Turkey rose from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, it is essential to look to the leaders of the time. Under whose leadership did the collapsed Ottoman Empire transition into the Republic of Turkey in the immediate aftermath of World War One?

This question can be explored through the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, international

¹ POW: standard abbreviation for Prisoner of War

² Mehmet Ölçen and Gary Leiser. *Vetluga Memoir: A Turkish Prisoner of War in Russia, 1916-1918*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 227.

³ “Sick Man of Europe” was a label given by European powers in the mid-19th century to the Ottoman Empire to describe what they viewed as its decline and backwardness.

diplomacy, the Turkish National Movement and its leaders, and resulting Turkish political state.

The destruction and defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the immediate aftermath of World War One was a messy business. A sprawling empire with hegemony over vast domains, “the Ottoman Empire had endured for more than six centuries before it was finally broken against the anvil of the First World War.”⁴ Ottoman society was diverse—Turks, Arabs, Albanians, Kurds.⁵ Its people came from many faiths: above all Sunni majority and Shi’ite minority Muslims, Christians, and Jews.⁶ This eclectic, enormous, once-powerful empire was in decline long before and during the First World War. Throughout the war, “Newspapers and cartoons mocked the proverbial backwardness and disorganization of the Sick Man of Europe.”⁷ As the war progressed and the Ottomans faced staggering losses by the end of 1917, “the Ottomans had not been defeated, but their Great War ambitions had been narrowed from victory to survival.”⁸

But defeat could not be forever kept at bay. The fall of Aleppo on October 26, 1918 marked a decisive British victory, and the devastation of the Ottoman army in Syria ultimately forced the Ottomans out of the war. On November 13, the Allied fleet—along with its biplanes, warships, and officers—swept into Constantinople,⁹ and the Ottoman capital “lay defenseless before the victorious powers.”¹⁰ Grigoris Balakian, an Armenian priest who had survived the genocide,¹¹ came out of hiding to watch the Allied fleet pull into the harbor. A Turkish boatman, not knowing that his passenger was Armenian, rowed him across the Bosphorus and exclaimed:

⁴ Sean McMeekin. *The Ottoman Endgame: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1908-1923*. (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2015), xix.

⁵ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015), 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michael Provence. *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 102.

⁸ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 353.

⁹ Constantinople and Istanbul are interchangeable names, but contemporaries called the city Constantinople.

¹⁰ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 385.

¹¹ During WWI, The Young Turks oversaw the mass deportation and massacre of Armenians and Christians.

“Effendi! What bad times we’re living in! What black days we have fallen upon! ... Who would have believed that a foreign fleet would enter Constantinople so illustriously and that we Muslims would be simple spectators?”¹² In the city streets, the situation was desperate. In the winter of 1918-19, Constantinople was a “wretchedly demoralized city” – marked by refugees, diseases, food shortages, no coal for heating, and no public transit.¹³ After visiting the city, T.E. Lawrence, also known as Lawrence of Arabia, wrote: “The streets were full of the debris of the broken army, derelict carts and cars, baggage, material, corpses. Typhus, dysentery, and pellagra were rife among the Turks, and sufferers had died in every shadow...”¹⁴ In the capital, “the Ottoman government was in turmoil.”¹⁵ In the middle of the night on November 1, 1918, “the Young Turk leadership boarded a German naval vessel in total secrecy to flee Ottoman domains.”¹⁶ This included the ruling triumvirate—Grand Vizier Mehmed Talat, Minister of War Ismail Enver, former Syria Minister Ahmet Cemal, and four advisors—those “who bore collective responsibility for Ottoman wartime decision-making.”¹⁷ With the CUP¹⁸ dismantled and in exile, and a weak, politically inept sultan left behind in the power vacuum¹⁹, the Sublime Porte²⁰ was left to face the Allies alone. The defeat and breakup of the Ottoman Empire had begun—in which the role of international diplomacy played a tremendous role.

International relations between the Ottomans and the western powers were nothing new. Even in the midst of WWI, negotiations took place. In 1916, the Sykes-Picot Agreement—a secret agreement between the United Kingdom and France, with Russian support—laid out the

¹² Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 386.

¹³ Alan Palmer. *The Decline and Fall of the Ottoman Empire*. (London: John Murray, 1992), 244.

¹⁴ T.E. Lawrence. *Revolt in the Desert*. (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 326.

¹⁵ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 381.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 387.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 381.

¹⁸ The CUP was the Committee of Union and Progress, politically aligned with the Young Turks from 1906.

¹⁹ The Allies’ weak puppet sultan, Mehmed VI (Vahdettin), reigned as the last sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

²⁰ Sublime Porte: the central government of the empire, also known as the Ottoman Porte, High Porte, or Porte

plan for how to divide up the Ottoman Empire, assuming that it would fall. Although British officials initially played no part in the secret partition plans, they were soon pulled into the flock of vultures.²¹ Immediately after the Ottoman defeat in 1918, the Armistice of Mudros on October 30 officially ended hostilities and closed the curtain on the Middle Eastern theatre of World War One. Elements of the Armistice of Mudros concerned the Ottomans: “the Armenians were mentioned twice, a reminder to the Ottoman authorities that they would be held accountable for war-time crimes against humanity.”²² In fact, the Ottoman government soon set up military tribunals to try and punish those who perpetuated the Armenian massacre—to focus the condemnation of the world upon the Young Turks, not all of Turkey.²³ In the immediate wake of the allied victory, the partition of the Ottoman Empire began according to the earlier Sykes-Picot and other wartime allied agreements. It was no small matter for this empire to fall. In spite of its diversity, the Ottoman Empire as a whole shared a common sense of community, identity, pride, and a majority Muslim faith, with Christian and Jewish minorities protected by the sultan—so “a great deal more was therefore at stake... than the mere disposition of real estate.”²⁴

The French, British, Russians, Greeks, Italians, and briefly even the United States all swept in to carve up the Middle East and “claim their share of the Ottoman carcass.”²⁵ “Victors in war are rarely magnanimous,” and the peace terms imposed were harsh.²⁶ In 1919-20, Britain and France started to partition the Ottoman region through proxies. They tried to set up “various types of quasi-colonial client states.”²⁷ So vicious was the competition between European powers that U.S. President Wilson was called in to mediate in 1919, since Americans were

²¹ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 359.

²² *Ibid.*, 382.

²³ *Ibid.*, 387.

²⁴ Sean McMeekin. *The Ottoman Endgame*, xix.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 413.

²⁷ Efraim and Inari Karsh. *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 108.

viewed as “being untainted by imperial ambition in the region.”²⁸ But the Senate shelved the issue and the U.S. backed out of intervention.²⁹ In one final round of negotiations, Great Britain, France, and Italy met in April 1920 to resolve contradictions between the various previous agreements.³⁰ The result was the Treaty of Sèvres in May 1920, for which “the terms...could not have been worse for the Turks.”³¹ The draft peace treaty left the Turks with very little territory; even Istanbul was offered to the Turks only if they upheld their end of the peace treaties.³²

From looking at international diplomacy, it appears that European allied powers were the main actors on the stage, leading and determining the postwar Ottoman situation to advance their imperial expansion and aspirations.³³ But there is more here than meets the eye. Professor of Middle Eastern and World War One history, Sean McMeekin, argues: “In our postcolonial age, imperialism and long-dead imperialists are easy targets on whom one can safely assign blame... Sykes and Picot are stand-ins for the sins of Britain and France... [but] the partition of the Ottoman Empire” was ultimately not settled until a multinational conference in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1923, “at which the dominant figure looming over the proceedings was Mustafa Kemal, the Turkish nationalist.”³⁴ Who was Kemal, and who were the Turkish Nationalists?

Until his father died, Mustafa Kemal³⁵ was raised in a relatively prosperous middle class family.³⁶ In 1896, he graduated from the military preparatory school in Salonica and moved to Istanbul, where he enrolled in one of the most prestigious schools in the empire, the Royal Military Academy. Already a rebel by nature, he was exposed to radical nationalistic ideas at the

²⁸ Sean McMeekin. *The Ottoman Endgame*, 419.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 422.

³⁰ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 392.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 392.

³² *Ibid.*, 393.

³³ *Ibid.*, 404.

³⁴ Sean McMeekin. *The Ottoman Endgame*, xviii.

³⁵ Mustafa Kemal Pasha is typically referred to by his original last name, Kemal. He is also referred to by the surname given to him after he became president, Atatürk, meaning “Father of the Turks.”

³⁶ M. Şükrü Hanioğlu. *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 19.

RMA.³⁷ He believed fervently in promoting Turkish identity, and opposed “the Westernization of the army.”³⁸ During World War One, he distinguished himself in battle and became the “hero of Gallipoli and the nation’s most respected military leader.”³⁹ When the empire fell to the Allies, Kemal did not take the blow lying down. Ordered on a mission to Samsun to demobilize Ottoman troops following the armistice, Kemal refused to obey his command—and fled to Anatolia instead, where he set up his base in Ankara and led an uprising in May 1919.⁴⁰ He capitalized on the widespread opposition to treaty terms and resentment to foreign armies on Turkish soil. The “Turkish National Movement he launched rivalled the Ottoman government in Istanbul in representing the political aspirations of the Turkish people.”⁴¹ Facing the full force of the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, the Porte believed that cooperation with the victorious powers was its only option, and hoped that by submitting to the treaty, the empire could get better terms in the long run.⁴² The Turkish National Movement, on the other hand, believed that the Ottomans would never recover territory if they surrendered to the partition terms.⁴³

Kemal had to make a decision—and fast. In his later speech to the Turkish people, recalling the events, he asked: “Whose existence was it essential to save? And with whose help? And how? Therefore, what could be a serious and correct solution? In these circumstances, one solution alone was possible, namely, to create a New Turkish State, the sovereignty and independence of which would be unreservedly recognized by the whole world.”⁴⁴ The Porte charged Mustafa Kemal and the other nationalist leaders with high treason, sentencing him to

³⁷ Ibid., 32.

³⁸ Ibid., 38.

³⁹ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 393.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 394.

⁴³ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 394.

⁴⁴ Kemal Atatürk. “The Great Speech.” (1927), *The Great Speech*. (Ankara: Atatürk Research Center, 2005), 9.

death from a distance.⁴⁵ The ultimate breaking point came when, on August 10, 1920, the Porte agreed to the Treaty of Sèvres, signing away the Turkish nation to partition. The Porte split with the nationalists, and from then onwards, Kemal sought to crush the treaty and the Porte that signed it.⁴⁶ “Kemal’s decision to fight on... was a gamble, but a very well-calculated one”⁴⁷— and by 1922, after the savage Turkish War of Independence on three fronts that crushed Armenian, French, and Greek armies, “the Kemalists achieved total victory over all foreign armies in Turkey.”⁴⁸ Having proven itself in battle, the Kemalist government was here to stay.

How did the western powers view Kemal and the Turkish National Movement? “The outward attitude of the Allied governments was one of relative unconcern,” but behind the scenes, the Americans and British in particular were concerned because they regarded the “Kemalist movement as a revival of the C.U.P. in different plumage.”⁴⁹ In reality, however, the “Nationalist Movement was independent of the Young Turks in its origins.”⁵⁰ Kemal knew that he could sway neither the Turkish population nor the western powers as long as the popular military heroes of the CUP loomed large. He “understood that once the CUP leaders disappeared from the scene, he would become one of the men of destiny for the empire’s Turkish population... although a member of the CUP, he had stayed out of politics and played no role in the military blunders and civilian massacres committed by the CUP leadership after 1914.”⁵¹ As he distanced himself from the Young Turks and CUP, Kemal sought one of his major diplomatic goals—“to secure the friendship of the United States.”⁵² While he criticized the West behind

⁴⁵ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 394.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sean McMeekin. *The Ottoman Endgame*, 465.

⁴⁸ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 395.

⁴⁹ Paul Helmreich. *From Paris to Sèvres The Partition of the Ottoman Empire at the Peace Conference of 1919-1920*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), 233.

⁵⁰ Paul Helmreich. *From Paris to Sèvres*, 230.

⁵¹ M. Şükrü Hanioglu. *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*, 84-85.

⁵² Ibid., 123.

closed doors, walked a fine diplomatic line, even inviting the U.S. to visit Turkey.⁵³

After the bloody Turkish War of Independence, the Turkish National Movement signed an armistice with Greece in October 1922. The Allies' puppet sultan, Mehmed VI, was exiled. A few weeks later, on November 1, the Grand National Assembly abolished the sultanate permanently, and transferred sovereignty from the Porte to the Kemalist government in Ankara. In July 1923, Kemal sealed his victory with an international treaty signed with the victorious powers in Lausanne, Switzerland. And "on the strength of that international recognition, the Turkish Republic was proclaimed on 29 October 1923, with Mustafa Kemal as the new country's first president."⁵⁴ The Turkish Parliament dubbed him with the surname Atatürk, meaning literally 'father of the Turks.'⁵⁵ The Ottoman Empire had perished; Turkey was born.

Paradoxically, while some aspects of domestic Turkish politics altered radically, many remained unchanged. Prior to its fall, "the empire was necessarily highly decentralized...in some areas government was in the hands of feudal lords, in others of governors appointed by the Porte."⁵⁶ The new Turkish Republic sought to organize and centralize.⁵⁷ Under the leadership of Atatürk and the nationalists, Islam was eliminated as the essential ideological pillar of legitimacy holding up the Ottoman state, and Turkey's new legitimacy was built upon secular nationalism and Kemalism.⁵⁸ In fact, there was a sort of "quasi-religious quality of the personality cult that sprang up around Mustafa Kemal Atatürk during his lifetime and has persisted in quarters of Turkey to this day."⁵⁹ In many respects, the new president altered the political landscape. "As a political leader, Mustafa Kemal began with apparently little theoretical knowledge of politics,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 395.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ David Fieldhouse. *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ M. Şükrü Hanioglu. *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*, 160.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1-2.

state, and administration,” yet he governed the great new state adeptly.⁶⁰ Even while privately despising much of western society, he idolized French revolutionary ideals.⁶¹ Turkey was changing. In a clean break from the past, “no leading Ottoman politician served the new Republic. Nor, indeed, did any ministers who held office under the Young Turk regime. Most were already dead.”⁶² Even so, lesser members of the old CUP gained trivial positions.⁶³ The “...battlefield defeat, armistice, and enemy occupation presented a dilemma to Ottoman elites in government and the military.”⁶⁴ To hold onto a sense of identity, most tried to preserve their attachment to the Ottoman state, and went to Istanbul or Anatolia.⁶⁵ Most common soldiers returned home to their former towns and farms.⁶⁶ The Ottoman Turkish dynasty left a deep legacy of well-educated bureaucracy, civil servants, professional officer corps, civil codes of law—and “in many parts of the old Ottoman Empire, local government was little changed until mid-century.”⁶⁷ The Ottoman Empire was gone, but much of its infrastructure and culture remained. By 1922, the Ottoman empire had vanished, “but its living citizens, officers, bureaucrats, buildings, roads, memories, habits, culture, archives, and offices remained.”⁶⁸

Through looking at the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, international diplomacy, Kemal’s Turkish National Movement, and the resulting Turkish political system, it is clear that powerful leadership brought a new nation-state from the ashes of a dying empire. Although many leaders and nations, both internationally and domestically, influenced the politics of the Ottoman Turks in the immediate aftermath of World War I, Turkey ultimately rose as a direct result of the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁶¹ Ibid., 109.

⁶² Alan Palmer. *The Decline and Fall of the Ottoman Empire*, 266.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Michael Provence. *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 141.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Alan Palmer. *The Decline and Fall of the Ottoman Empire*, 266.

⁶⁸ Michael Provence. *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, 141.

leadership of Atatürk and the New Nationalists. Apart from very minor border modification, “it is testimony to Kemal’s success as a statesman that the borders drawn at Lausanne in 1923 have endured until today.”⁶⁹ Western historical studies often focus on the diplomatic actions of the Allies, pointing to their imperialist ambitions for the situation created in the Middle East. While it is true that the western powers played a significant role in carving up the Middle East during and after World War One, to end there is to miss the bigger picture. Atatürk and his Turkish National Movement created lasting change. Ironically, most of the borders drawn with western treaties were and still are unstable areas, “and yet the borders of Kemal’s Turkish Republic, forged by blood in the field—not on paper by faraway diplomats—have proved to be just as solid as those of Turkey’s southeastern neighbors are porous.”⁷⁰ “Turkish child of future generations,” spoke Atatürk, “it is your duty to save the independence of the Turkish Republic.”⁷¹ Turkey has continued its legacy of power and conflict. The postwar settlement borders “have proven remarkably resilient—as have the conflicts the post-war boundaries have engendered.”⁷² Often ignored in the study of World War One, the Ottoman front proved more influential than contemporaries ever dreamed, and played a tremendous role in the making of the modern Middle East. The Ottoman front, with its battlefields sprawling over multiple continents, “turned Europe’s Great War into the First World War.”⁷³ The legacies of the Great War shaped the Middle East and continue to be felt to the present day. When that young Turkish prisoner-of-war left Russia and returned home at last in 1918, little did he know that while he rode a train to the dying Ottoman Empire, his people, metaphorically, were on a train to the Turkish Republic.

⁶⁹ Sean McMeekin. *The Ottoman Endgame*, 487.

⁷⁰ Sean McMeekin. *The Ottoman Endgame*, 486.

⁷¹ Kemal Atatürk. “The Great Speech,” 716.

⁷² Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 405.

⁷³ Eugene Rogan. *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 406.