

Andrew Sorensen

Oxford Scholars

World War I

7 November 2018

The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and its Legacy

World War I spanned entire continents, and engulfed hundreds of nations into the deadliest conflict of human history. A conflict of such scale naturally proved to be a catalyst for unprecedented change. An incredibly important, yet often overlooked aspect of World War I is the Eastern theater. The extent and consequences of the Ottoman Empire's involvement in the First World War are often not well understood. The war brought about the end of over 400 years of continuous Ottoman rule, forever changing the geopolitical and economic reality of the Middle East. Today, the Middle East remains a region wracked by political chaos and constant war; much of this can be attributed to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the resulting division of its territories.

The Middle East is a land of remarkable cultural and ethnic diversity, with a history of powerful civilizations spanning millennia. From the Assyrians and Achaemenids to the Macedonians and Romans. The Ottoman Empire was formed amid this diverse backdrop, under the shadow of ancient civilizations. The empire started as a group of Nomadic Turkish tribes, who slowly absorbed the territory of the former Byzantine Empire. In 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks, becoming the new capital. Under the rule of Suleiman the magnificent in 1500's, the Ottoman Empire expanded to its maximum extent, spanning three continents and encompassing the Balkans, Asia Minor, Middle East, Egypt, and Northern Africa. For the next

350 years this vast territory remained under the firm control of the Ottoman sultanate, providing these diverse regions a certain level of stability.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, the Ottoman Empire declined, slowly overtaken by its more dynamic European neighbors. The empire was perpetually viewed as the “sick-man of Europe”: backwards, undeveloped, and feeble. The deterioration only worsened during the nineteenth century, despite a valiant modernization attempt known as the “Tanzimat reforms”, which sought to modernize the army, establish modern factories, and adopt secular laws. Greece became the first Balkan state to officially secure independence from Ottoman rule in 1830, followed by Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria in 1878 following the disastrous Russo-Turkish war 1878.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire faced a host of external and internal threats. In 1908 Egypt was seized by the British, followed four years later by the Italian invasion of Libya, the last Ottoman province in North Africa. At the same time, the Balkan League of Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro also declared war on the Ottomans, driving the empire to the gates of Constantinople. In only 5 years, the Ottomans had been decisively defeated in three major engagements and lost millions of former subjects. The collapse of the six decade old empire seemed inevitable.

In the midst of these devastating military setbacks, the Ottoman political system erupted into chaos. Sultan Abdulhamid’s increasingly autocratic rule aroused considerable resentment among all levels of Turkish society, creating the Young Turk movement. The Young Turks consisted of students, civil servants, and army officers who favored the return to a constitutional government. In 1908 The Young Turks revolted, overthrowing the Sultan and establishing a new

constitution. A second coup placed the Ottoman Empire firmly under the control of three men, known as the “three pashas”. This new centralised and idealistic leadership sought to maintain Ottoman power and territorial integrity at all costs. This new centralized rule often came into conflict with the Arabian provinces of the Ottoman Empire, sowing further discontent.

The new triumvirate believed that the greatest threat to Ottoman territorial integrity was Russian empire. Ottoman and Russian enmity ran deep, as the Russians sought control of a warm water port in the Black Sea (namely, Constantinople and the Dardanelles). The Ottomans needed a stronger European ally for protection. With Britain and France already allied with Russia, Germany was the natural choice. On August 2, 1914, Germany and the Ottoman Empire secretly entered into an alliance. Three months after the start of the first world war, The Ottoman Empire would enter the conflict that would ultimately decide bring about its demise.

By declaring *jihad*, the Ottomans managed to raise an army of over 2.8 million men, stationed along all of the empire’s vast frontiers. The Ottoman Empire’s entry into World War I turned the conflict into a truly global war. Large and bloody campaigns were fought in the caucasus,, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and the Sinai, involving soldiers from India, New Zealand, Australia, and North Africa. Despite the weakness of the Ottoman Empire, the Entente powers still significantly underestimated both the scale and ferocity of the Turkish and Middle Eastern theatre of the war.

After several successus in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the British moved to strike the Ottomans , thereby breaking the blockade in the Bosphorus. The British invasion, supplemented by thousands of Australian and New Zealand troops, was met by the Ottoman fifth army, commanded by Mustafa Ataturk. After eight months of brutal fighting, the British army was

repulsed. Of the nearly 1 million casualties, 450 thousand were British while over 350 thousand were Ottoman. The dramatic yet costly victory at Gallipoli completely redefined the Ottoman theatre of World War I, and helped give rise to the man who would eventually found modern Turkey: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Despite this initial Turkish success, the war quickly turned back to the allies favor, driving back Ottoman forces on all fronts. A failed Ottoman advance into the Russian caucasus in 1915 was repelled, costing the lives of nearly 100,000 Ottoman soldiers. Russian forces, totaling about 200 thousand men, advanced into Eastern Anatolia against fierce Ottoman resistance, taking the city of Trabzon in 1916. Meanwhile, British forces moved North in Mesopotamia and the Sinai. With British support, King Hussein of Mecca formed the kingdom of Hejaz and fought to overthrow Ottoman rule in Arabia. The Arab revolt greatly aided British military operations, and by 1917 the cities of Baghdad, Gaza, and Jerusalem had been captured.

On October 30, 1918, the signing of the Armistice of Mudros ended the war in the Middle East. The war had cost the Ottoman Empire nearly 1.5 casualties, and over 1 million British and Russian casualties. The Ottomans were forced to disband their navy and air force, and surrender all remaining territory outside of Anatolia. The next month, British, French and Italian troops occupied the city of Constantinople, marking the final defeat of the Ottoman Empire.

With the subsequent collapse of the Ottoman government, the former regions of the empire were divided amongst the victorious entente powers. The partitioning of the Ottoman Empire had already been planned by Britain and France at the start of the war through a series of agreement, the most important of which was the Sykes-Picot agreement. This agreement divided

former Ottoman lands into separate British and French spheres of influence, and largely decided the borders of the modern Middle East. Under mandates from the League of Nations, Britain was granted the mandate of the new states of Mesopotamia, later called Iraq, Palestine, and TransJordan. France was granted Syria and Lebanon. These new borders, however, often ignored centuries of cultural and religious differences in the Middle East. They were nothing more than artificial lines drawn in the sand, yet they would inevitably decide the course of Middle Eastern politics.

Now, exactly one century later, the instability of the Middle East remains one of the strongest legacies of the first World War. The haphazard and arbitrary division of the remains of the Ottoman Empire, fueled by the self-interest of Britain and France, has consistently undermined the stability of the entire region. Syria is currently engaged in a violent civil war, Iran