

THE FIRST WORLD WAR HUNDRED YEARS LATER

The Turkish Republic, along with a number of other states in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, represents the end product of the dissolution of multiethnic and multireligious empires. In contrast to other defeated nations of the First World War, it has appeared like Turkey had successfully addressed many of the problems it encountered during the War; or in its immediate aftermath. As time has shown, however, elements of a legacy sometimes disappear and then later reappear; they are defined and redefined, depending on the times, conditions, events, needs, and psychologies. Accordingly, this article explores the direct and indirect effects of the legacy of WWI on Turkey's contemporary developments.

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Writing about the French Revolution during its bicentennial, Robert Darnton reminded the reader that most of the ideas that became popular and were implemented after the revolution had, in fact, been around for a while but found neither full expression, nor a chance at implementation, until after the revolution had occurred. The Revolution was like a dam breaking loose, opening the way to change.¹

The First World War also constituted a watershed event in ending the two major continental multiethnic empires in Europe (Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire) and leading to a major transformation of another (Russia) into a communist state, which only helped delay a similar fate seventy years later. The French Revolution brought about pendular movements of change and restoration on many fronts, rather than change in a unilinear fashion. Similarly, the First World War produced contradictory outcomes, the most significant of which was, of course, the Second World War.

This article does not propose to look into the various consequences of the First World War and its long term effects on the global system, but will be confined to personal observations on the legacy of WWI on Turkey. Specifically, what were the ramifications of this war on Turkey and its relations with the world? As history is an ongoing process in which events of a hundred years ago continue to influence contemporary developments in direct and indirect ways, it may be “too soon to tell.”² Nevertheless, as this article shall try to clarify, the peace Turkey has enjoyed during the last century –as well as some of the questions it has encountered domestically, in its region, and in the world in general– can be traced to the First World War and its aftermath.

A War of Unfulfilled Expectations

The Ottoman Empire entered the War with the hope of recovering lost territories. The presence of Ottoman armies in Galicia (Ukraine) and Palestine during the war, only a couple of years after the Balkan Wars in which Bulgarian and Greek forces threatened to wrest away much of what remained in European Turkey, can only be explained by a *grandiose* dream. The dream was that with powerful allies, some of the lost territories of the Empire could be recovered, and its status as one of the major actors of European politics could be restored. Yet, a look back at the history of the Ottoman Empire during its last century reveals that the multiethnic structure of the Empire was under constant challenge from the rising tide of nationalism.

1 Robert Darnton, “What Was Revolutionary about the French Revolution,” *New York Review of Books*, 19 January 1989.

2 This famous quote comes from Zhou-en-Lai, who presumably responded to a question by the American President Richard Nixon about the effects of the French Revolution. It has been suggested that the reference was to the student riots of 1968 in France that were later joined by workers. Clearly, however, attributing the reference to the original French revolution sounds more humorous and, of course, contains a grain of truth.

Those nationalities that aspired to independence often made common cause with imperialist powers. The latter only took advantage of this social-economic-political force called nationalism to achieve their own ends; they did not create it.

Ottoman rulers and intellectuals recognized the powerful unifying force of nationalism in the domain of politics; in fact, Ottomans experimented with creating their own brand of nationalism, albeit with little success. First, they tried to consolidate their diverse population into a unified Ottoman nation. However, this synthetic configuration failed. Given that non-Muslims demonstrated the most separatist tendencies, Ottoman rulers, in

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particular Abdülhamid II, promoted Islam as a unifying force. But after Muslim Arabs also began to display nationalistic proclivities, the Turkish element in the nation started to explore ethnic bases for their identity. Initially falling under the influence of the “pan-movements” of the Germans and the Slavs, pan-Turkism rose to prominence. However, Ottoman defeat in the First World War led to the adoption of a more modest, territorially-based nationalism in the lands that remained in Turkish hands.³

The event that removed the weight of the Empire from the shoulders of the Ottoman ruling elite, releasing the forces of Turkish nationalism and directing it toward the construction of its own nation-state, is the First World War. The Ottoman defeat and the loss of much of its territory, compounded by the occupation of areas such as, the entire Aegean region, much of the Mediterranean including Antalya, Mersin, Adana, Antep, and Maraş, Eastern centers like Kars and Ardahan, and, of course, Istanbul, the capital of the Empire and others that constituted the Turkish heartland, not only marked a definitive end to the dreams of restoring the Empire, but also strengthened a territorially-based nationalism that led to the belated emergence of a Turkish nation-state.

The Empire Loses its War, the Nationalists Win Theirs: The Roots of Turkey’s Non-Revisionism

Having lost much of its territory at the end of the War, the Empire was reduced to a small state mainly in Asia Minor. The victors had forced all losers to sign humiliating peace treaties, epitomized by the Versailles Treaty with Germany. The victors

³ For more elaboration, see: İter Turan, *Cumhuriyet Tarihimiz* [A History of the Turkish Republic] (Istanbul: Çağlayan, 1969), pp. 20-35.

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Greeks and the Armenians. The nationalists succeeded in driving out the Russian-backed Armenians, the French, and finally the Greek forces in a war of national liberation that lasted nearly three years. Early on, the Italians had decided not to continue their occupation of some coastal areas in the Mediterranean and had withdrawn their forces.

The nationalist successes opened the way to new negotiations. Before it was ratified and became international law, the Sèvres Treaty of August 1920 was replaced by the new Lausanne Treaty, signed in July 1923.⁴ In contrast to Sèvres, in which the defeated Ottoman State had yielded to the dictates of the Allies, Lausanne was a product of negotiations between parties, not a unilateral imposition. The Turks managed to achieve conditions of peace they found acceptable. The new Turkish state began its life with a treaty that it preferred to respect than revise.

A peace treaty that Turkey could live with explains why Turkey, in contrast to other losing parties of the First World War, did not join the revisionist powers led by Germany and take part in the Second World War. The few outstanding issues that were either postponed or not settled to Turkey's satisfaction at Lausanne –the status of Mosul-Kirkuk, the Turkish claims to the Sandjak of Antioch-Alexandrietta, and Turkey's desire for full sovereignty on the Turkish Straits– were addressed and solved through either international adjudication (Mosul-Kirkuk) or negotiations (the Sandjak and the Straits). Turkey's success in keeping out of the Second World War not only spared it from devastation, but also from being “liberated” by the Soviet Armies. It also made it possible for Turkey to become a member of the Atlantic Community after the Second World War.

⁴ There are two major works on Lausanne for those who are interested: M. Cemil Bilsel, *Lozan* [Lausanne], 2 volumes (İstanbul: Ahmet İhsan Matbaası, 1933); Seha L. Meray, *Lozan Barış Konferansı: Tutanaklar-Belgeler* [Lausanne Peace Conference: Records and Documents] (Ankara: Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi, 1969).

The Birth and the Consolidation of the Republic

The Allied invitation of the Sultan's government to Lausanne in the hope of benefiting from the differences that existed between the Nationalists and the Imperial government inadvertently presented the Nationalists with the opportunity to abolish the Sultanate, paving the way for the declaration of a republic. Many issues that required international consensus to solve were settled at Lausanne with the Nationalist government that had conducted the war of national liberation. This allowed the Republic that was born a few months later to enter its existence without major revisionist claims.

The agreements reached at Lausanne have proven fundamental in shaping various aspects of the emergent Republic. With the exception of Mosul-Kirkuk (eventually left to Britain's Iraq mandate)⁵ and Antioch-Alexandretta (which joined the Republic in 1939),⁶ the borders recognized at Lausanne—some of which confirmed earlier agreements with individual countries—continue to be the territorial boundaries of the Republic today.

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At Lausanne, in addition to the questions of territorial borders (Mosul-Kirkuk and the Sandjak of Antioch-Alexandretta), several other issues proved to be thorny. These included the status of the Turkish Straits, the termination of capitulations (unilateral trading privileges extended to major European powers), the protection of religious minorities, and the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey.

Capitulations were ended while the Republic assumed some of the Ottoman debt. The experience of the capitulations among the Turkish political elite was translated into a fear of foreign capital that has taken generations to overcome. The exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, which resettled the Greek Orthodox people of Turkey (other than those who were residents of the province of Istanbul in 1919 and the islands of Imbros and Tenedos, later renamed

5 See: Ömer Kürkçüoğlu, *Türk-İngiliz İlişkileri* [Turkish-British Relations] (Ankara: Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi, 1978), pp. 275-299.

6 For a detailed study see: Serhan Ada, *Türk-Fransız İlişkilerinde Hatay Sorunu* [Hatay Question in Turkish-French Relations] (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi, 2005).

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Gökçeada and Bozcaada respectively) in Greece in return for Muslims (other than those of Western Thrace and some islands) in Greece, was a painful experience for those who were subject to it. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that the stable and generally, if not always, friendly relations between Greece and Turkey owes much to the “removal” of this major source of mutual suspicion.

Two other questions –the status of the Turkish Straits and the protection of non-Muslim minorities– are important enough that they deserve more detailed treatment.

The Turkish Straits Become First International and then Turkish

As the Ottoman Empire began to lose territory to the Russians, the Black Sea ceased to be a Turkish Lake. Starting with the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, which ensured the free passage of Russian commercial vessels, the use of Turkish Straits initially constituted an issue of contention between the Turks and the Russians, and eventually with other major European powers as well. Understandably, the critical issue did not concern commercial vessels, but naval vessels. The rules regulating the passage of naval vessels varied according to which treaty was cited, but the typical rule was the closing of the Straits, i.e. the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, to all navies other than the Turkish navy during peace time. As shall be recalled, the failed attempt of the Allied navies to cross the Turkish Straits (Dardanelles campaign) had produced one of the Ottoman epics of the First World War. The ceasefire at Mudros that ended the war for the Ottomans, however, not only took away any pretension of Ottoman sovereignty regarding the regulation of passage through the Straits, but also opened them to all naval vessels.

At Lausanne, in a separate convention, Turkey reluctantly ceded that the Straits would be demilitarized and run by an international commission. Soon, however, Turkey’s peaceful revisionism became manifest on this issue. At the Disarmament Conference in London in 1933, Turkey raised objections to its inability to enjoy sovereignty on the Straits and asked for a revision of the existing regime. A conference that met in Montreux in 1936 agreed to turn over sovereignty to the Turkish Republic, and also allowed Turkey to set up military defense of the area. During

peacetime, the Straits would be open to all commercial vessels but limits would apply to naval vessels based on their type, tonnage, weapons system, and whether or not they belonged to a littoral state of the Black Sea.

Despite efforts to change the rules often led by Russia and other littoral states, especially after the Second World War, the Montreux regime has survived. Turkey has fiercely guarded its sovereignty, but fully aware that this necessitates responsible administration of the international waterway. Major powers, on the other hand, have not found a basis for agreeing if and how the Montreux Convention should be modified.⁷

From Ummah to Nation: Protecting the Minorities

The negotiations concerning the protection of minorities were particularly difficult. The Ottoman system allowed each religious community to run its own schools and matters relating to civil law including marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In the domains of commerce and criminal law, a variety of laws and court systems—some of which were run by foreign governments under capitulatory privileges—had evolved over time to limit Ottoman sovereignty. During the negotiations, the Western powers insisted on provisions that would ensure the protection of the rights of minorities. In order to break tradition from the system that crippled Ottoman rule, representatives of the nationalist government rejected designating particular guarantees or privileges for minorities. Instead, it was promised that all citizens of Turkey would be subject to the same laws, regardless of religion or ethnic affiliation.

The implications of the position of the Nationalist government may not have been sufficiently appreciated at the time, but given that all laws were to be applied equally to all citizens, the principles upon which laws were based needed to be non-religious. Soon after the war, the Nationalist government proceeded to implement a series of reforms for civil, criminal, and commercial laws that were based on the principles of Roman law, rather than on the Shariah. These changes all became part of the strict laicization of policies, which, taken together, aimed at redefining the political community in national rather than in religious terms, and transferring the source of political legitimacy from the Divine to the nation.

A strong drive for laicization characterized the policies of the Republic for a good part of its history. However, the relationship between religion and politics in Turkey has continued to be problematic. The republican political and bureaucratic elites

⁷ The evolution of the regime of the Turkish Straits is examined in detail in: Ferenc A. Vali, *Turkish Straits and NATO* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972), pp. 18-81.

accepted Sunni Islam and becoming a native speaker of Turkish as a tacit part of the national identity.⁸ This posed the question of what to do with not only the non-Muslim populations, but also non-Sunni Muslims. The latter, it was hoped, would be gradually absorbed into the majority; however, they have not. This constitutes a source of domestic tension, particularly under religiously conservative governments. Regarding the non-Muslim minorities, the letter of the Lausanne Treaty was observed, in that those minorities covered by the treaty –i.e. Greek Orthodox, the Armenians, and Jews– could practice their religion and maintain private primary and secondary parochial schools in which they could educate their children. The institutions such as foundations that would enable schools and churches to survive were not allowed to flourish however, and emigration was encouraged through often discreet and occasionally in direct ways. It is only recently that the Turkish government has come to appreciate that the remaining non-Muslim communities should be made to feel more secure and that their community institutions and cultural monuments should be better protected. The end of the Empire as a result of the First World War opened the doors to a secular nation-state, but the weight of history and earlier tradition has prevented the change to fully run its course.

The Armenian Question: No Compromise in Sight

In addition to the general problem of minorities, the First World War left a legacy often referred to as the Armenian problem, a problem for which no conclusion seems to be in sight. Armenians lived in many parts of the Empire, but in larger numbers in Eastern Turkey. Toward the end of the 19th century, along with other nationalisms, Armenian nationalism also burgeoned. Czarist Russia and France instigated and/or developed intimate relations with Armenian movements, hoping to have another ally in their colonialist expansionism into the lands of the Ottomans. After the Empire entered the war with Russia, Czarist forces, joined by Armenian irregulars, marched into Northeastern Turkey. The Armenian irregulars, an undisciplined force, inflicted considerable harm on the lives and property of the Muslim populations that were in their way, hoping that these territories would become a part of a future independent Armenia.

Before the Russians turned to invade the more Southern parts of the Empire, the Ottoman government decided to relocate the local Armenian population –which it no longer trusted– to Syria. Relocation was to be achieved through forced migration, most often on foot. Many died on the way from hunger and disease; others were killed in robberies; some made it to their destination impoverished and exhausted.

⁸ See: İlder Turan, “Religion and Political Culture in Turkey,” in Richard Tapper (ed.), *Islam in Modern Turkey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), pp. 31-55.

Some among them later joined the French army that was occupying several major Turkish cities in the South with the hope of incorporating them into their newly acquired Syrian colony. The French forces later withdrew in the face of Turkish military resistance. By the end of the War, in lands that the Armenians had thought of as their homeland, few Armenians remained.

What happened, why it happened, who was responsible for what, how many people perished from which community, did the Ottoman government order the killings, how these events should be named and many other questions constitute issues of contention between Turks and the Armenian State, the Armenian Church, and the Armenian diaspora. The only thing that is known for sure is that large numbers of people, both Armenian and Muslim, perished. A century later, the debate has become even more intense. Sadly, it has not proven possible thus far to find a common ground for both nations to share their grief and to ensure a better future.

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The Drive for Ethnic Homogenization and the Kurdish Question

Another legacy with origins in the War is the Kurdish Question. The founders of the Republic inherited a population that was mainly Muslim and mostly Turkish-speaking, but that did not necessarily conceive of itself as constituting a Turkish nation. These founders therefore faced a challenge of nation building. Remembering how imperialist powers had used ethnic and religious groups to advance their own territorial ambitions, they turned to ethnic homogenization in building a nation. The end product of this policy would be a Turkish-speaking person, preferably a Sunni Muslim, identifying him/herself as “Turkish.” While this policy has been, on the whole, successful in constructing a national political community, it has failed to integrate the parts of the population of Kurdish-origin, producing the so-called “Kurdish problem.”

The Republic encountered Kurdish uprisings in earlier parts of its history, but these were more religious in content. More recently, the Republic has been challenged by a rurally-based, Leninist terrorist movement: the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers’ Party*). The reasons for Kurdish political assertiveness have

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varied over time, but the Turkish government’s drive for ethnic homogenization has been one of the potent stimuli that have instigated Kurdish reactions, particularly in recent times. The fact that many people of Kurdish origin have gone along with the state policy has tempered the challenge. Mass-based with powerful urban extensions and highly capable of mobilizing international support, however, the PKK has proven resilient, posing a challenge to Turkey’s domestic peace and prosperity

as well as its international standing. With growing economic prosperity and a concomitant sense of confidence, as well as advances in democratization, it is only recently that both succeeding Turkish governments and the Turkish public have come to recognize that a “political solution” needs to be sought.

Turks and Kurds fought together during the First World War and in the War of National Liberation. Kurdish aspirations were briefly expressed at peace conferences but then forgotten. They have not, however, disappeared, and the search for accommodating them continues. In short, the legacy of the First World War lingers on also in this domain.

Conclusion – Problems Disappear and Reappear

The Turkish Republic, along with a number of other states in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, represents the end-product of the dissolution of a multiethnic and multireligious empire. Dissolution was a long process that continued throughout the 19th century, accompanied by social uprisings, wars, and assassinations. The First World War was a catalyzing event that allowed its various actors to pursue their ultimate goals with unbridled determination and force, judging correctly that the survival of the Empire was unlikely. The key problem for Europe after the War was the restoration of stability and economic prosperity. Shortly afterwards, meeting the challenge of revisionism posed by the defeated forces of the war became the central concern. All other questions became secondary.

By launching a successful war of national liberation and replacing the Sèvres Treaty with a new one at Lausanne, the Turkish Republic was a more satisfied actor. Despite the fact that it could not recover Kirkuk and Mosul, which the British added to their

Iraq mandate, it shied away from revisionism and instead turned to regime consolidation, economic reconstruction, and social and cultural modernization. These were internally directed policies aiming to break away from the imperial legacy in favor of developing a nation-state in the form of a republic. Aware of Turkey's geostrategic importance, on the other hand, competing European powers each pursued policies to prevent Turkey from joining the rival camp. It is under these conditions that Turkey was able to regain its sovereignty over the Turkish Straits and to incorporate the Sandjak of Antioch-Alexandretta into its national territory in 1939 by a public referendum in which joining Turkey was heavily favored.

In contrast to other nations defeated in the First World War, it appeared that Turkey had addressed many of the problems encountered during the War or in its immediate aftermath with success. As time has shown, however, elements of a legacy sometimes disappear and then reappear; they are defined and redefined, depending on the times, conditions, events, needs, and psychologies.