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The Ottoman Empire and the Armistice of Moudros

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Each year Turkey has a day of national mourning on the Tenth of November. This, however, has nothing to do with the celebrations and commemorations going on all over Europe one day later. The Tenth is the anniversary of Mustafa Kemal Pasha Atatürk (1881-1938), Turkey's first president and the Eleventh of November carries no special meaning in the Turkish collective memory.

For the Ottoman Empire the end of the First World War came on 31 October 1918. It was triggered by the almost simultaneous collapse of the Macedonian and the Palestinian fronts. The Allied attack on the Macedonian front, which started on 15 September, resulted in a breakthrough when whole regiments in the Bulgarian army simply left the trenches and revolted. Two weeks later, on 29 September, Bulgaria was forced to sign an unconditional armistice, that is to say: with the terms to be established unilaterally by the Allies. The collapse of the Bulgarian front left European Turkey, including the Dardanelles and the capital Istanbul open to attack and the Ottomans had no means of defence left as this section of the front was held by less than five weak divisions.⁽¹⁾

On the Palestinian front, Allenby's forces has broken through on 19 September. The Ottoman forces had to beat a hasty retreat to the north of Aleppo, losing two thirds of their strength.⁽²⁾

While these two collapses made the Ottoman military position untenable, one can say that the real cause of the collapse was total exhaustion. The Ottoman Empire was essentially an agricultural state which had thrown itself head over heels into something which turned out to be an industrialized war. The result was that, while the empire proved able to put a large and fairly modern conscripted army into the field, it was not really capable of supporting it adequately. Means of transport were completely insufficient. Troops had to be moved on foot and supplies by ox-cart or truck over primitive roads, often for weeks on end. As a result, food, clothing (especially shoes) and medical care were totally inadequate, especially on the more distant fronts and diseases like typhus and cholera spread like wildfire, while malaria and scurvy were omnipresent. The conditions in the army affected morale to the extent that, by the end of the war, the army numbered over 400.000 deserters (most of whom deserted on the way to the front). In October 1918, the army numbered about 100.000 men, or only 15 percent of its peak strength reached in early 1916.⁽³⁾

Conditions in the army were very bad, but as the needs of the army overrode everything else, the living conditions of the civilian population were if anything worse. Official consumer price inflation during the war was 400 percent, but many articles were available on the black market only, where prices were, of course, much higher.⁽⁴⁾ Shortages of food and fuel made life particularly hard in the cities. Apart from the "normal" dislocation brought about by the war and the mobilization, the persecution of the Armenian and Greek communities also had a detrimental effect on the economy, as the commercial and professional middle classes of the empire hailed to a very high degree from these communities.

To sum up the situation: by mid-1918 the empire was exhausted militarily, economically, financially and morally. Public discontent, especially with the very visible corruption and profiteering on the part of the protégés of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (C.U.P.), was rising fast. The Committee recognized this and reacted by lifting political censorship and relaxing its hold over parliament, to allow criticism of profiteers and corrupt officials to be vented.⁽⁵⁾

The breakthrough in Macedonia convinced the Young Turk leadership, and especially Grand Vizier Talât Pasha

(who had witnessed the chaos in Bulgaria on his return from Berlin) that the war was lost. The cabinet decided to ask for an armistice and, pinning its hopes on President Wilson's "Fourteen Points", it approached the Americans through Spain's mediation on 5 October. When no reply was received and the British and French troops in Thrace kept moving steadily forward, approaching the Maritza river, the Young Turk cabinet resigned on 8 October. It was succeeded by a cabinet headed by one of the Ottoman Empire's top military officers, Marshal Ahmet Zet Pasha (Furğaç), who was trusted by the Young Turks as a nationalist, but had never been a member of the C.U.P. himself. His cabinet, which took office on the 14th, was politically neutral, including a small number of important C.U.P. politicians, but none of the people who were closely identified with the war-time policies of the committee.

The new cabinet immediately made another attempt to open negotiations with the Allies, this time by sending General Townshend, who had been held as a prisoner of war on the island of Prinkipo near Istanbul since the fall of Kut in 1916, to meet with Admiral Calthorpe, the commander of the Mediterranean Station of the Royal Navy, whose squadron lay at anchor in Moudros harbour on the island of Lemnos. Five days after the start of Townshend's mission, on the 23d, Calthorpe informed the Ottoman government that he was empowered to negotiate on behalf of the Allies. That Admiral Calthorpe was empowered to negotiate on behalf of the Allies in spite of the fact that the supreme naval command in the Mediterranean had been in French hands throughout the war, amounted to recognition of Britain's dominant role in the Ottoman war theatre.

The next day the Ottoman delegation, consisting of Lieutenant Colonel Sadullah (Chief of Staff of the 8th Army), (Secretary General at the Foreign Office) and Hüseyin Rauf Bey (Navy Minister and head of the delegation) left for Moudros, where they arrived on the 26th. The Ottoman delegation was armed with cabinet instructions, which, considering the hopeless situation of the Ottoman army, seemed to display a certain lack of realism. They agreed to the opening of the straits, but demanded that foreign warships should not remain in the Marmara Sea for more than a day; claimed full responsibility for the maintenance of law and order and rejected any foreign interference and the landing of troops; demanded the preservation of Sultanate and Caliphate and accepted only administrative (but not political) Allied control in the occupied (that is: Arab) provinces, and even demanded financial assistance for the Empire.⁽⁶⁾

The actual negotiations took place aboard Calthorpe's flagship "Agamemnon" in Moudros harbour. Although the admiral made it known right at the start that he had a fully worked out set of conditions agreed by the Allied governments and that no substantial alterations would be acceptable, the talks lasted for four days because the Ottoman side did what it could to mitigate some of the toughest conditions. In doing so it tried to remain in touch with the cabinet in Istanbul, but this proved very difficult. Attempts of a British cable ship to lay a connection to Çeme on the Anatolian mainland failed because of bad weather, so the delegation had to communicate by wireless transmissions to the Ottoman wireless station in Okmeydani (Istanbul). They only managed to get instructions regarding the Allied conditions on the 29th and again on the 30th. The Ottoman worries, as reflected in these instructions, centred on three points:

1. While they were forced to accept that the fortifications on the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus would be occupied, they tried to get assurances that this occupation would be executed with British and French troops, without participation of the Italians and particularly the Greeks.
2. The Ottomans wanted guarantees that the capital Istanbul itself would not be occupied.
3. They were extremely worried about possible abuse of articles seven and twenty-four of the armistice agreement. Article seven stated that, when faced with a situation in which their security may be endangered, the Allies would have the right to occupy any strategic point, while article 24 said that, in case of disturbances in the six "Armenian" provinces, the Allies reserved the right to occupy any part of these provinces. In Ottoman eyes, these articles opened the door wide for attempts by Greek or Armenian nationalists to provoke Allied interference. They therefore requested that article 24 in particular should be kept secret. This, however, was rejected by Admiral Calthorpe, who pointed out that the principles laid down by President Wilson made secret diplomacy of this kind a thing of the past.⁽⁷⁾

In the end the Ottoman delegation decided to accept the 25-point armistice text without major alterations, even though it did not have full authorisation to do so. It did, however, persuade Admiral Calthorpe to write a personal letter, intended only for the eyes of Rauf Bey, the Grand Vizier and the Sultan, in which he promised on behalf of the British government that only British and French troops would be used in the occupation of the Straits fortifications. In addition he said that he had strongly recommended to his government that a small

number of Ottoman troops would be allowed to stay on in the occupied areas as a symbol of sovereignty. Finally he said that he had conveyed to his government the urgent requests of the Ottoman delegation that no Greek troops be allowed to land either in Istanbul or Izmir and that Istanbul should not be occupied as long as the Ottoman government could protect Allied lives and possessions there.⁽⁸⁾

The delegation left the "Agamemnon" on the evening of 30 October and reached Izmir by noon the next day. After telegraphic communication with Istanbul they now received the cabinet's approval for the signature of the armistice.

When we now try to gauge the immediate popular reaction to the conclusion of the armistice, we have to make a clear distinction between the Muslims of the empire and the Christian communities.

The latter were elated. This should cause no surprise. The loyalty of the Greek and Armenian communities to the Ottoman state was in grave doubt even before the war and the ethnic policies of the wartime government, which resulted in the deaths of up to eight hundred thousand Armenians and the flight and expulsion of hundreds of thousand of Greeks, had caused both communities to look upon the Allies as liberators. This had been clear even in 1915, when foreign observers in Istanbul noted the great hopes entertained by the Christians of an Allied breakthrough in Gallipoli and their disappointment when that failed to materialize.⁽⁹⁾ It was also apparent in the way the Allied commanders were greeted when they entered Istanbul after the war. When General Franchet d'Esperey, the French commander of the Armée de l'Orient (the army of Salonica) entered Istanbul, he rode on a white stallion donated by the Greek community and the whole Christian part of the city (Pera, or modern Beyolu) was decorated with Greek, Italian, French and British flags.

The Ottoman government was well aware of these sentiments. When the delegation returned to Istanbul on 1 November, Rauf Bey was met by a group of newspaper editors. He agreed to speak to them, but only off the record. He emphasized the delicacy of the situation and implored the editors to avoid publishing anything that could raise tensions between the communities or give the Ottoman Christians (*malûm unsurlar* or "certain elements") an excuse to start disturbances and call in the help of the Allies under article 7. The newspapers complied and anyway, from the next day there was another issue which diverted public attention from the armistice: the flight, during the night and aboard a German submarine, of the wartime leaders Enver, Talât and Cemal. When word of their flight got out on 2 November, the cabinet (which still contained a small number of former members of the Young Turk Committee of Union and Progress) was accused of conniving at their escape. It was the sign for a general assault by the press on the Committee and its wartime policies, in which all the anger and disappointment of the public was vented.⁽¹⁰⁾

Reactions among the Muslim population varied. Those who bore responsibility for the conduct of the war, such as the leading echelons of the Committee and the members of parliament, were of course disenchanted with the formal recognition that the war was effectively lost, but public opinion seems to have been relieved, rather than anything else, by the armistice.⁽¹¹⁾ One can point at several reasons for this.

The main reason obviously was the fact that the war had finally ended. The war had never been popular. A defensive war against the Russians could count on a great deal of popular support, but war against the British and the French, who had enormous prestige and cultural influence among the urban Ottoman elite, even when the empire was linked politically to Germany, was seen by many as unnatural and even suicidal. The hardships endured during the final years of the war had dissipated what enthusiasm there had been.

Another reason for relief lay in the comparison between the armistice of Moudros and the armistice imposed on Bulgaria just before, which amounted to an unconditional surrender of that country. Seen in that light, the conditions of the Ottoman armistice were favourable in that they left the defeated empire with a qualified independence and some dignity.

The fact that the empire survived *as an empire* with the revered institutions of the Sultanate and Caliphate intact was a consolation. Looking back from where we are, the Ottoman Empire is only one of the great continental empires to disappear in the wake of World War I, but we should not forget that in 1918 the Ottoman dynasty, unlike that of the Romanovs, the Habsburgs or the Hohenzollerns, did manage to hang on to its throne.

Finally, there was a widespread belief in British fair play on the one hand and in the promises of a new world order based on the principles enunciated by President Wilson on the other. Quite a few members of the

Istanbul bourgeoisie enthusiastically joined the "Society of the Friends of England" or the "Wilsonian League" after the war and there was much talk of the benefits of an American mandate.⁽¹²⁾

Perhaps the most striking point, when one reads the contemporary declarations and speeches where the armistice is discussed, is this: the armistice was not in itself seen as unjust or unacceptable even by those nationalist Young Turk officers who would go on to lead the national resistance movement in Anatolia and eventually to found the Turkish Republic. There were clear worries about the elasticity of articles 7 and 24 and as early as November 1918 the population in those areas which might be disputed by the Greeks (in the west) and the Armenians (in the east and south) was being mobilized to resist those claims, but the armistice as such was not a bone of contention among the Ottoman elite. There was no feeling, as there was to be in Germany, of betrayal or injustice. The reason why this is striking, lies in the way we have been conditioned by Turkish historiography to look at this era contrasting the defeat of 1918 with the triumph of 1922 (which resulted in the armistice of Mudanya and then, in 1923, the peace of Lausanne). Armistice, occupation and the treaty of Sèvres with its complete dismemberment of the Ottoman state and huge concessions to Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, Italians and French now all seem part of one dark page in Turkish history. That Hüseyin Rauf Bey, the chief of the Ottoman delegation in Mudanya, emerged as the leader of the political opposition against Atatürk in the young Turkish Republic after 1923 and that he was purged in a political trial in 1926, gave added impetus to the tendency to see the armistice as a piece of treason, to which no true Turk could or should have put his signature.⁽¹³⁾

In reality, the immediate reaction to the armistice on the part of the Ottoman Muslims was generally one of relief and hope. It was not the armistice as such, but the Allied policies after its conclusion which turned public opinion against the Allies and eventually persuaded the majority to throw in their lot with the nationalist resistance: the decision to allow Greek troops to land in Izmir in May 1919 and the occupation of Istanbul in March 1920. When we read the speeches and declarations of Mustafa Kemal Pasha Atatürk and other resistance leaders from this period, we see that these are full of complaints and indignation about the way the Allies, especially the British, abused and exceeded the terms of the armistice.⁽¹⁴⁾

Notes

1. Fahri Belen, *Birinci Cihan Harbinde Türk Harbi. 1918 Yı Hareketleri. Beinci Cilt*, Ankara: Genelkurmay, 1967, p. 205.

[The Turkish War in the First World War. Operations of the Year 1918. Volume 5].

2. Belen, p. 204.

3. Erik Jan Zürcher, Little Mehmet in the Desert: the war experience of the Ottoman soldier, in: Peter Liddle and Hugh Cecil (ed.), *Facing Armageddon. The first world war experienced*, London: Leo Cooper/Pen and Sword, 1996, 230-241.

Erik Jan Zürcher, Between Death and Desertion. The Ottoman Army in World War I, *Turcica* 28 (1996), 235-258.

4. Zafer Toprak, *Türkiye'de Millî ktisat*, Ankara: Yurt,

5. Ahmed Emin [Yalman], *Turkey in the World War*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930, p. 265.

6. Belen, p. 209.

7. The Turkish source on the negotiations is the serialized version of Rauf [Orbay]'s memoirs, published in *Yakın Tarihimiz*, Ankara: Türkp petrol, n.d, volume 1, p. ; volume 2, p. 16-18; 48-50; 80-82. [Our Recent History].

8. Text in *Yakın Tarihimiz*, Vol. 2, p. 49.

9. Cf. Lewis Einstein. *Inside Constantinople. A Diplomatist's Diary during the Dardanelles Expedition*, London: John Murray, 1917,
10. *Yakın Tarihimiz*, Vol. 2, p. 82, 144-146.
11. Belen, p. 215.
12. Tarık Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasî Partiler*,
13. Erik Jan Zürcher, *Opposition in the Early Turkish Republic. The Progressive Republican Party*,
14. See for instance Mustafa Kemal Pasha's speech on his arrival in Ankara in November 1919, in ...