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Oxford Publishing

R. Gingeras, "An empire unredeemed: tracing the Ottoman's State's path toward collapse," chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* edited by Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, (2015), 4 p.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/56428>

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An Empire Unredeemed: Tracing the Ottoman State's Path towards Collapse

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The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire

Edited by Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson

Subject: History, Colonialism and Imperialism Online Publication Date: Nov 2017

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.3

Abstract and Keywords

Ottoman rule ended without the consent of most Balkan, North African, Levantian, or Mesopotamian citizens. The establishment of post-Ottoman borders, states, and cultures took place in the wake of foreign conquest. The chapter explains how ending the Ottoman Empire was not necessarily a natural outcome of the First World War. Additionally, Mustafa Kemal/the National Assembly could have maintained the Ottoman mantle and preserved the notion of an empire in Anatolia. Greece's invasion and occupation cemented the National Movement's claim that it represented a Muslim and Turkish majority. De-Ottomanization, for the most part, was not decolonization; nationalism or popular agency had little to do with lands removed from the sultan's domain. However, when looking specifically at the development of nationalist political cultures in the aftermath of 1918, it is clear that the violence unleashed had a profound impact upon perception of the Ottoman legacy.

Keywords: Ottoman empire, Turkey, Mustafa Kemal, Kemalist, Young Turks, Middle East, First World War, violence

Introduction

When Mustafa Kemal assumed the podium in the inaugural session of his Grand National Assembly, he did so in the service of the sultan and the Ottoman state. His first speech before the body in April 1920 offered no indication of his eventual preference for republican government. The occasion instead was used to summarize the injuries and humiliations the Ottoman state and the Turkish nation had endured since the end of the First World War. Istanbul's occupation by the war's victors had made the sultan a prisoner in his own palace. The self-proclaimed Grand National Assembly in Ankara had been founded in response to the Allies' decision to dissolve the imperial parliament, an act that was clearly meant 'in principle to discard the sovereignty of the Ottoman state.' 'After a seven-hundred-year existence of grandeur and majesty,' the empire now 'stood at the edge of extinction.' Yet he remained confident that the Almighty remained with them and that the loyal remnants of the imperial army, 'our unfailing forces', would win the day and liberate the sultan and his lands.¹

Mustafa Kemal's pretensions of loyalty and faith in the empire were discarded within less than three years of this speech. By the time Istanbul was freed from foreign occupation in November 1922, the Ankara government had abolished the Ottoman monarchy and compelled the sultan to seek refuge abroad. Ironically, Turkey's future president did not immediately render any great indictment upon the empire's fall. It instead fell to his surrogates to declare the Ottoman state officially—and deservedly—dead. On the day before the sultanate was formally abolished, the National Assembly entertained a motion condemning Istanbul's last high officials as traitors. There was no more talk of the empire's greatness. Supporters of the motion instead decried the Ottoman state as one defined by 'several centuries of ignorance and debauchery.'² Sovereignty no longer rested with the monarchy, but with the Turkish nation, a polity long suppressed by the sultan.

The National Assembly's decision to disown the empire was not one made without some deliberation. It is likely that leaders such as Mustafa Kemal began to dismiss the Ottoman state's survival in advance of the body's first session in Ankara. From the vantage point of 1922, such a conclusion had not always been obvious, nor was it one reached with ease. Imagining a future without the sultan, and the empire he embodied, was the product of a number of cataclysmic events. The audacity eventually required in establishing a republic premised upon an imagined community of 'Turkish' citizens required changes to what many had previously thought was impossible or preferable. Wars and international treaties were certainly crucial in speeding the end of the Ottoman Empire. Yet there were still other factors that compelled many of the empire's most loyal citizens to conceive of a future without the sultanate.

Pinpointing the moment when the Ottoman Empire ceased to be a viable state is a precarious proposition. There were clear symptoms of the empire's disintegration as the modern age unfolded. The state's receding frontiers provided the most obvious indication of the mortal dangers facing Ottoman rule. Defeat in war and the loss of territory

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compounded rampant levels of poverty and disorder in multiple corners of the empire. The government's sovereignty appeared to grow ever weaker in the face of increased Western interest in the empire's economy and solvency. Still others could point to the lack of public confidence in the guarantees of imperial citizenship. The means by which the government came to define 'Ottoman-ness' often confounded residents throughout the empire. Doubts and debates about the government's policies or posturing at times were cause for intense intercommunal fighting.

Still, nothing about the events preceding the abolition of the sultanate necessarily made the empire's collapse inevitable. Amid lingering uncertainties, there were stubborn numbers of Ottoman citizens willing to cast their uncertainties aside. On the contrary, the last century of Ottoman history can be justifiably described as an era of political vibrancy and exuberant reform. Due to the immense efforts expended in trying to transform the empire's institutions and political climate, many Ottomans found reasons to look upon the beginning of the twentieth century with hope. Material and political changes taking place in the capital and in the provinces suggested that the empire was rapidly becoming more modern and more worthy of international respect and admiration. The one event that helped solidify this sense of optimism was the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. As an episode that reintroduced representative government and constitutional order to the state, the revolution seemed to promise greater democratic engagement and stability for the whole of the empire. The revolution's main party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), compelled large swaths of the population to believe that they, a group mostly comprising young officers and bureaucrats (collectively known as Young Turks), could effect substantive change in the capital. Even as disillusionment with the emerging Young Turk regime spread, arguably the majority of Ottoman citizens could not envision the empire's collapse. All understood that the sultanate's fall would represent a catastrophe of inordinately violent and destructive proportions.

Four successive wars—over Libya, the Balkan Wars, World War I, and the Turkish War of Independence—catalysed the empire's demise. The outcomes of each of these conflicts resulted in more than just the empire's contraction and the deaths of thousands of combatants. Fighting along the state's periphery drained invaluable resources from the economy and heaped untold hardships upon civilians. Losing battles, and wars in turn, drained confidence from notable members of Ottoman society and led many otherwise loyal citizens to contemplate alternatives to the sultan's rule. For many leaders of the CUP, defeat had a radicalizing effect upon how they perceived the empire and its future. In the hopes of rooting out potential sources of treason and consolidating the imperial state and nation, the Young Turk government struck out violently against large segments of the population. The results of these policies, which included the mass displacement and murder of hundreds of thousands, rendered a deep divide between citizens and the government, as well as within provincial communities. For citizens who found themselves conquered and incorporated into new states and territories after 1918, the memories of these final years of war undermined any residual desire to see imperial rule over their communities or lands restored. While the most fundamental institutions of the Ottoman Empire may have survived the end of the First World War, large numbers of the state's

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remaining citizens, including many of its principal leaders, began to doubt the sultanate's viability. Sultan Mehmet VI Vahiddedin's tainted rule did much to condemn the royal family as a governing institution. With Woodrow Wilson's promise of independence for dominant nations within the dying Ottoman world, many of the empire's surviving leaders and notables, including Mustafa Kemal, found new inspiration to fight on. Though nominally committed to saving the sultan and his regime, Kemal and his followers tended to depict their 'national struggle' as one rooted primarily in the emancipation of 'Muslims and Turks'. The bitter severity of the Turkish War of Independence, which was punctuated by egregious acts of state and communal violence, deepened this nationalist assertiveness while undermining the last vestiges of communal Ottoman culture. Final victory in 1922 allowed Turkey's first president to dismiss any pretention of restoring the empire. Though they had once been the empire's most loyal servants, Turkey's founding leaders quickly repudiated the Ottoman past. There would be neither eulogies nor nostalgia in the decades that followed the sultanate's collapse. For all that, the empire, as both a state and nation, formed an irredeemable legacy.

To find a singular premise explaining why the Ottoman state collapsed, it could conceivably begin with struggles over the meaning of imperial reform. Arguments that raged over how centralized the state was supposed to be helped frame many of the contentious policies and actions of the empire's last governments. Questions over banal matters of governance (such as taxation and land rights), as well as deeper, emotive issues, such as the empire's 'national identity', created deep fault lines between citizens, depending upon the belief that the central government held a unique right to determine policy or even lead the debate. Those who supported a highly centralized government—one that was entitled to define the nature and content of Ottoman citizenship—largely won out in shaping the governing philosophy. The CUP's insistence upon a unitary vision of the state and nation deepened the political divide between the government and its opponents and led to outright acts of dissident violence and state oppression. As the threat of war and conquest loomed larger, Young Turk leaders increasingly identify 'Muslims and Turks' as both the foundation of the Ottoman nation and the true basis of the state's legitimacy. This ultra-nationalist turn by the Young Turks, as well as the physical damage wrought during the wars of the early twentieth century, helped condemn the empire as a failed endeavor in the eyes of both loyalists and dissidents alike.