

Analysis

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Summary: What were the effects of World War I on Turkey and its relations with the world? Even 100 years after, it may still be too soon to tell. Yet, some important domestic and regional questions that Turkey currently encounters can be traced back to the war and its aftermath.

The Legacy of World War I Continues to Linger

by *Ilter Turan*

A Non-Revisionist Loser of World War I

World War I was a traumatic experience for the Ottoman Empire. With armies stretching from Galicia (Ukraine) to Palestine, the Empire lost much territory and was reduced to a smaller state mainly in Asia Minor. The losers were all forced to sign humiliating peace treaties. In Turkey's case, however, before the signing and ratification, a national liberation movement under Mustafa Kemal's leadership challenged the occupation and dismemberment of the empire's Turkish heartland. The Nationalists successfully drove the Russian-backed Armenian, French, and finally Greek forces out, while the Italians withdrew. The Allies rushed the Sevres Treaty through, forcing the Ottoman government to sign it. Ratification, however, was never concluded. Three years later, the Lausanne Treaty, a product of negotiations between parties rather than through imposition, was signed, giving the Turks a treaty that they would respect rather than revise.

The Birth and Consolidation of a Republic

The invitation of the Sultan's government to Lausanne gave the National-

ists the opportunity to abolish the Sultanate, opening the way to the declaration of a republic shortly afterwards. During negotiations, the Nationalists promised that all Turkish citizens would be subject to the same laws with no privileges accorded to any ethnic or religious group, implying that they aimed for a nation-state. The treaty also ended the system of capitulations (unilateral trading privileges to major European powers), allowing the new Turkey to develop its economy.

After Lausanne, the newly founded republic addressed some remaining issues from the war. The Kirkuk-Mosul disagreement with Britain was resolved, if unhappily, by agreement. As clouds for a new war were gathering over Europe in 1936, Turkey was able to replace the Lausanne Treaty with the Montreux Convention, acquiring full sovereignty over the Turkish Straits. The same conditions enticed France to devise a formula whereby Antioch-Alexanderietta, which the French had incorporated into their Syrian mandate, would be returned to Turkey (1938-39).

To sum up, Turkey felt content with the post-World War I arrangements. It focused on reconstructing its economy

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and building a modern, secular nation-state. It did not join the revisionist powers and succeeded in staying out of World War II. Hitler's Germany did not attack it, and therefore the Allies (most notably the USSR) did not come in to liberate it. It joined NATO after World War II and became a part of the Atlantic Community.

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 multi-ethnic and religious empire. The dissolution was a long process that started in the 19th century, accompanied by social uprisings, wars, and assassinations. World War I was a catalyzing event that allowed various actors to pursue their ultimate goals with unbridled determination and force, judging the Empire's survival unlikely. Some won and some lost. Immediately after the war, the key problems in Europe were restoration of stability and economic prosperity. Shortly thereafter, meeting the challenge of revisionism of the war's losers became the top concern. There was no time or energy to address the unhappiness of those that failed to achieve their aspirations and felt that justice (in the way they saw it) had not been served.

The republic, as a more satisfied actor, turned to regime consolidation, economic reconstruction, and social and cultural modernization. These were all inward-looking policies. Interest was in eradicating the imperial legacy rather than claiming it. Competing European powers, on the other hand, in order to prevent it from joining the rival camp in the status quo vs. revisionist division on the continent, chose to accommodate Turkey. In this way, the problems of the First War seemed to get buried in the graveyard of history. As time showed, however, elements of a legacy come and go and get defined and redefined, depending on timing, conditions, events, needs, and psychologies.

The Drive for Ethnic Homogenization: The Kurdish Question

In its efforts at nation-building, the Turkish state, remembering how imperialist powers had used ethnic and religious groups before and during the War to advance their territorial ambitions (e.g. remember the Arab revolt),

turned to ethnic homogenization in affecting national unity. The end product of this policy would be a Turkish-speaking person, preferably a Sunni Muslim, having Turkish political identity. While the reasons for this policy are evident, its failure to fully integrate the population of Kurdish origin into the "nation" has been a perennial problem.

In earlier parts of its history, the republic has encountered Kurdish uprisings, and more recently an insurgency in the form of an ethnically based Marxist-Leninist terrorist movement, the PKK. While reasons for Kurdish political assertiveness have varied over time, the drive for ethnic homogenization on the part of the Turkish government has been a major stimulus for Kurdish reaction. The fact that many people of Kurdish origin have gone along with the government policy has tempered the challenge. Urban, mass-based, and capable of mobilizing international support, however, the PKK has proven to be resilient and a challenge to Turkey's domestic peace and prosperity. With growing democratization, it is only recently that Turkey has come to recognize that a "political solution" needs to be sought. The search continues.

The Muslim and Non-Muslim Minorities

The strategy of nation-building in which Sunni Islam is a tacit part of the identity being built has placed another question before Turkey's political and bureaucratic elite:

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what to do with the non-Sunni Muslim and non-Muslim populations? Muslim minorities, it was hoped, could be persuaded over time to become Sunnis. As for the non-Muslims, Lausanne included guarantees for the Greek Orthodox and the Gregorian Armenians regarding their practice of religion and education of children. Jews were offered a similar arrangement but decided they did not need it. Many non-Muslims, prompted by the sometimes unfriendly policies of the government, have emigrated. It is only recently that the Turkish government has come to appreciate that not only should the remaining non-Muslim population feel more comfortable but their community institutions and their cultural monuments should be better protected. The search continues there too.

The Armenian Question: No Compromise in Sight

Armenians lived in many parts of the empire but in larger numbers in Eastern Turkey. Nowhere did they constitute a majority. During the end of the 19th century, Armenian nationalism burgeoned, along with other nationalisms. Czarist Russia and the French instigated and/or developed relations with Armenian movements, hoping to have an additional resource for their colonialist expansionism. After the empire entered the war against Russia, Czarist forces joined Armenian irregulars and marched into northeastern Turkey. The Armenian irregulars, undisciplined a force as they were, inflicted considerable harm on the lives and property of the Muslim population.

Before the Russians turned to invading the more southerly parts of the region, the Ottoman government decided to force the migration of civilian Armenians, whom it did not trust, to Syria. Many died from hunger and disease; others were killed in robberies. Some made it to their destination, impoverished and exhausted. Some later joined the French army that occupied some major southern Turkish cities but they had to withdraw in the face of a Turkish military challenge. By the end of the war, few Armenians had remained in the areas which the Armenian nationalists had thought of as a homeland.

What happened, why it happened, who was responsible for it, how many people perished, did the Ottoman government order the killings, what to call the events, and many other questions constitute contentious issues between Turks and

the Armenian state, the Armenian church, and the Armenian diaspora. The only thing that is known for sure is that in mutual killings, large numbers of people, both Armenian and Muslim, perished. A century later, the debate has become ever more intense. Sadly, it has not proven possible to find a common ground on which persons of both nations can share their grief and work together to ensure a better future.

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East is East and West is West, and Shall the Twain Meet?

To establish a distinct national identity for its own population, the new republic de-emphasized commonalities with the Muslim-Arab populations while emphasizing its Asian roots and its links with Europe. The Arab Revolt during the war, which made a common cause with the British against Ottoman rule, helped only reduce the pain of such departure. Furthermore, because former Ottoman territories in the Middle East fell initially under British or French control and later under Soviet influence, Turkey displayed little interest in the developments in the region. This distancing gradually ended after 1980 as Turkey became more market-oriented and the Cold War ended. It accelerated with the ascent of a “mildly Islamist” government in Turkey. Turkey had left the Middle East behind. Nowadays, it is trying to get reacquainted.

A century after the beginning of World War I, its legacy continues to haunt all nations that were a part of it. Turkey is no exception.

About the Author

İlter Turan is a professor of political science at Istanbul's Bilgi University, where he also served as president between 1998-2001. His previous employment included professorships at Koç University (1993-1998) and Istanbul University (1964-1993), where he also served as the chair of the International Relations Department (1987-1993), and the director of the Center for the Study of the Balkans and the Middle East (1985-1993). Dr. Turan is the past president of the Turkish Political Science Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee and a vice president of the International Political Science Association (2000-2006). He is a frequent commentator on Turkish politics on TV and newspapers.

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