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From Sultanate to Republic

Kevin Jackson

12/18/14

Dr. Bethany Hicks

World at War

The Turkish Revolution exemplifies the rise of the nation-state and signified the complete destruction of the old order in the Middle East. The currents of thought and the political developments that rose to prominence in Turkey's formation have had long-lasting implications. The entire once-Ottoman world has had to come to grips with nationalistic movements, democratization, and the relation between faith and state. The Young Turk movement provided a demonstration of what modern nationalism could accomplish, both in positive terms of inclusion and modernization and also in terms of ethnic and religious exclusion.

By the time World War I began in Europe, the Ottoman Empire was an antiquated and dying system. Though merely a shell of its former glory, the Empire was once a dynamic and powerful force. The center of imperial power was originally found in the Sultan, who ruled a centralized system. Merit systems proved beneficial to the entire government organism. The Empire's economic strength came through control of Central Asian and Middle Eastern trade routes. The Sultan presided over an expansionistic Empire that required border growth in order to avoid stagnation.

The Ottoman Empire was a multinational affair, including areas in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe. It included Christian communities as well as a Muslim majority. The Empire's religious cohesion was found through a Muslim system in which the Sultan was upheld as the "protector of Islam." The official religion of the government was Islam, but religious minorities also had a place within society. Non-Muslim minorities held separate *dhimmi* status that included a special tax. In addition to the tax, the Ottoman *devshirme* system mandated that a certain portion of the minority population be rendered to the Sultanate as slaves. These slaves often enjoyed high social standing as janissaries fighting in the service of the Empire. Under the millet system, minority groups were allowed a certain amount of self-

rule. As long as their leaders remained accountable to the Sultan's government, they were left to follow their own faith in relative peace. On the whole, the Empire was relatively assimilationist and tolerant.

Over time, however, the Empire proved incapable of adapting to the challenges of the twentieth century. Its economic advantages were undermined by the development of alternate trading routes and partnerships between Asia, Europe, and America. Ottoman territory was bypassed in favor of these new routes, to the detriment of trade. Meanwhile, European powers began to expand. The Ottoman Empire itself underwent decentralization, damaging its standing as a global power. It also began to sink into corruption.¹

As the sultanate became more and more out of step with modernity, revolutionary forces began to stir in Turkey. The Young Turks were determined to limit or overthrow the sultan, ending the outdated and dictatorial Ottoman system. In 1906, a Society for the Fatherland and Liberty emerged in Damascus. Founded by a group including an army officer named Mustafa Kemal, the group spread to other cities. Eventually it was subsumed into the Ottoman Liberty Society, which constituted one branch of the Young Turk movement. The Young Turks' July Revolution was the beginning of the end for the Sultanate. In 1908, army officers stationed in the Balkans began an uprising with the goal of establishing constitutional government.² Turkish history was at a turning point.

The Young Turks issued a "Proclamation for the Ottoman Empire" outlining their vision for the government. Their agenda was one of democratization, secularization, and nationalism. The Proclamation begins with the statement that "The basis for the Constitution will be respect

¹ "Ottoman Empire (1301-1922)." British Broadcasting Corporation. Copyright 2014. Accessed 12/18/14. http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/ottomanempire_1.shtml.

² George W. Gawrych. *The Young Ataturk: From Ottoman Soldier to Statesman of Turkey*. ISBN 978-1-178076322-4. I.B. Tauris: New York, 2013. Pg. 18-20.

for the predominance of the national will.” Accordingly, the Young Turks set out to establish majority rule rather than royal prerogative as the basis of political power. The third article bolsters this principle by establishing universal suffrage. The ninth article establishes equal treatment before the law for all citizens.

The equal treatment principle also extended to other ethnic and religious groups. With equal treatment, however, came identical duties and responsibilities before the state. Where the Sultanate recognized differences between religious communities, the new government would not. All ethnic and religious groups were to be treated equally, and were to be equally subsumed into the new nation-state. While still guaranteed freedom of religion, minority communities could no longer expect to be granted special status based on nationality or faith.

This was all part of the Young Turk’s general agenda of national unification. The Proclamation designated Turkish as the national language for both government and schools. Free education under government oversight was another item on the Young Turk agenda. Public schools and colleges were to allow students of any nationality to attend, but were to operate in Turkish. Private schools would also be required to teach Turkish and would also be held accountable to the central government. The new societal order required a “homogenous and uniform” Turkish educational system.³ The Young Turks wanted a state built on the principles of modernity. There was, however, some tension intrinsic to the movement. The Young Turks needed to accommodate the national and ethnic minorities living in Ottoman territory, yet they also needed the new state to be centralized and to operate exclusively in Turkish. This tension between centralization and national diversity would create grave issues for the nascent state.

³ “Proclamation for the Ottoman Empire”. Modern History Sourcebook. Fordham University. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1908youngturk.asp> Date accessed: 11/17/14. From "The Young Turks," trans. A. Sarrou, in *Civilization since Waterloo*, Rondo Cameron, ed. (Paris, 1912), pp. 40-42.

Rather than attempt to violently suppress the revolution, the government acquiesced. By 1914, the Sultan was powerless and the Young Turks had consolidated their hold on the government through the Committee of Union and Progress. New philosophies were coming into play. Secularization, with an accompanying alteration in the relationship between sexes, was on the horizon. Men and women were to finally have equal rights as citizens. The Islamic dress code was no longer to be encouraged for women. Polygamy in the royal family was to disappear. Rationalism was to take hold in public discourse. Science, not Islam, was to provide answers to social ills. Religion was to be relegated to private life, while Social Darwinism and materialism were to move to the forefront in society. All this was, of course, still mostly theoretical. Nevertheless, it was the ethos of the Young Turk movement as they sought to take their place in modern Western civilization.⁴

Modern Western civilization, however, was facing a debilitating crisis. In the face of World War I in 1914, the Ottoman Empire chose to join the Central Powers. The hope for the Empire was to recoup its recent losses, preferably through expansion into Central Asia. It brought very little to the alliance. Its far-flung, decentralized provinces did not contribute a great deal in terms of manpower or war material. Some of them were even inclined to hope for an Ottoman defeat that might result in independence for their nations. Arabia chose to join the Allies, launching effective attacks on Ottoman troops. The Empire's infrastructure, particularly in terms of transportation, simply couldn't handle military mobilization. Major gaps in railways made troop movements extremely slow. Germany and even Austria-Hungary ended up sending troops to the Empire to alleviate these weaknesses.⁵

⁴ Gawrych, 20-21.

⁵ Strachan. Pg. 80-84, 91

The nature of German intervention and Ottoman conduct of the war created controversies that have lasted to the present day. Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, published a memoir in 1918 under the title *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*. The memoirs were primarily written to demonstrate “that the Germans deliberately planned the conquest of the world.”⁶ To that end, he describes the diplomatic struggle between himself and the German ambassadors for influence over the Ottoman government. The German role, however, is no longer particularly controversial. Now that we have survived the Second World War and the Cold War that followed, the accusation that the Kaiser was planning world domination seems exaggerated and irrelevant. The Kaiser’s historical notoriety has been permanently eclipsed by the Fuhrer’s. The Armenian genocide that Morgenthau describes, however, has taken on even more perceived relevance in the wake of the Holocaust.

Morgenthau, very much a man of his times, describes the genocide in a chapter entitled “The Turk Reverts to the Ancestral Type.” In the wake of the Allied retreat from the Dardanelles, Morgenthau wrote that Turkey had escaped civilizing Western influences and reverted to its true, barbaric nature in “an almost classical instance of reversion to type.” Having framed the experience in racially-charged language, Morgenthau goes on to describe the massacre of Armenians. He sees the massacre as being religiously motivated; the Muslim Turks simply didn’t see value in the lives of Armenian Christians. He accuses the Young Turk government of having abandoned its professed egalitarianism and of seeking a nation where only Turks would be allowed to live. He describes it as an attempt to kill all of the Armenian

⁶ Henry Morgenthau. *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*. “Preface.” Doubleday: Garden City, 1918.
<http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/wwi/comment/morgenthau/Morgen01.htm>.

population, except for some women and children who were to be taken for breeding purposes.⁷ According to Morgenthau, the massacres were directly and unequivocally organized and executed by the Turkish government under Ismail Enver. The massacres as he reports them were systematic and included widespread, meticulously planned torture. He claims that the deportations were planned in such a way as to ensure the deaths of most of the 1,200,000 people involved. The government forced the Armenians to travel on foot, with a wasteland as their ultimate destination. The government then enlisted the help of gendarmes, civilians, Kurds, and even convicts to assist in the slaughter of the Armenians along the way. His contact in the Turkish government simply explained it as a response to Armenian economic success coupled with treasonous behavior.⁸

Morgenthau's account was one of the first and most notable examples of Western opinion on the Armenian genocide. After the rise and fall of Nazism, Morgenthau's depiction of Aryan Armenians being massacred by inferior Turkic barbarians seems rather problematic. Yet the Holocaust remains the point of reference from which Westerners tend to view all genocides, including the Armenian one. To modern eyes, Morgenthau's account has a distinctly double-edged effect. On the one hand, his views on Turks are blatantly racist; yet on the other hand he accuses the Turks themselves of committing racially motivated crimes. Morgenthau's glorification of Aryan peoples is alarming as a prelude to the Second World War, yet so is the Turkish government's pursuit of ethnic cleansing.

Today, the Turkish government presents a very different narrative from that offered by Morgenthau. The government is very aware of the potential for comparisons between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust. In a list of facts on Armenian allegations of genocide,

⁷ Morgenthau, "The Turk Reverts to the Ancestral Type".

⁸ Morgenthau, "Talaat Tells Why He Deports the Armenians".

the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that “the Holocaust bears no meaningful relation to the Ottoman Armenian experience.” In defense of this statement, the Ministry states that the Jews, unlike the Armenians, were not guilty of revolt. The Ministry also alleges that the Armenians, unlike the Jews, were guilty of massacring their fellow citizens. Furthermore, the Ministry states that Armenians “with pride committed mass treason” in collaborating with Russia to revolt against the central Ottoman government. The Ministry also presents Armenian collaboration with Nazis as further evidence that the Armenian experience during World War I is not comparable to the Jewish experience during World War II.⁹

The Turkish government’s account of the Armenian experience does acknowledge that large numbers of Armenians, including noncombatants, died. However, it maintains that Turkey lost even more people in World War I and that this negates the allegation that a genocide was committed. It maintains that radical Armenian groups began to wage war against the Ottoman central government. It was in response to this that the government attempted to move Armenian populations away from the Russian front. “However, under war-time conditions exacerbated by internal strife, local groups seeking revenge, banditry, famine, epidemics, and a failing state apparatus... all combined to produce what became a tragedy.” The high death toll, according to the government, is not due to attempted ethnic cleansing but to conditions beyond anyone’s control.¹⁰

Whether one concludes that the Turkish government was committing premeditated slaughter or making the best of a bad situation, the end result remains the same. Nationalistic

⁹ “The Armenian Allegation of Genocide: The issue and the facts”. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Copyright 2011. Accessed 12/18/14. <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-armenian-allegation-of-genocide-the-issue-and-the-facts.en.mfa>.

¹⁰ “The Events of 1915 and the Turkish-Armenian Controversy over History: An Overview”. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Copyright 2011. Accessed 12/18/14. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-events-of-1915-and-the-turkish-armenian-controversy-over-history_-an-overview.en.mfa.

sentiment on all sides ensured that the multinational system over which the sultans had presided would no longer be possible. The Young Turks' attempts to centralize the Ottoman Empire would result in a one-nation solution.

In the wake of the Allied occupation of Turkey, Sultan Mohammed VI issued a proclamation on the mistreatment of Armenians. His brief expression of regret was the dying gasp of multinational Ottoman government. The responsibility for the Armenian incident was laid at the door of "certain political committees." The Sultan explained that investigations had been impossible immediately after the events, but that they were now being authorized. Tellingly, he says that "the mutual slaughter of sons of the same fatherland have broken my heart." His statement affirms the position of mutual guilt that seems the modern Turkish government seems to affirm. By referring to Armenians as "sons of the same fatherland," however, he attempts to preserve the multinational system that was on the brink of collapse.¹¹

The occupation of Turkey by the Entente powers set in motion the final dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and unintentionally the creation of the Republic of Turkey. National resistance to the Allies began to organize under the direction of army officers including Mustafa Kemal after the occupation began. When Greece sent an occupying force along with 120,000 colonists to Anatolia, guerilla resistance intensified. The arrival of Greek forces in Izmir provoked the beginning of a new war. With Istanbul under Allied control, Mustafa Kemal began to form a provisional government in Ankara. Set up in opposition to the sultan's regime, Kemal's government eventually became established as the Grand National Assembly.¹²

¹¹ Sultan Mohammed VI's Proclamation of 6 December 1918". Posted 22/08/09. Accessed 11/17/14. From *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. VI*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni 1923*. http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/mohammedvi_proclamation.htm.

¹² Gawrych 61-68, 81-84, 101-107.

The Grand National Assembly was founded on April 23, 1920. The Republic of Turkey was officially founded on October 29, 1923. Mustafa Kemal was reelected as president for the rest of his life. Under his leadership, Turkey underwent major reforms in an effort to modernize and secularize. In 1922, the Assembly formally abolished the Sultanate and two years later the Caliphate followed. Turkey abandoned the Islamic calendar in favor of the international one. In 1928, the Assembly adopted a new alphabet for Turkish.¹³ In addition, the new Republic made surnames mandatory. Accordingly, Mustafa Kemal adopted the name Ataturk, the name by which he is primarily known today. The reforms cumulatively served to bring Turkey into modernity and to institute it as a secular nation-state. Ataturk hoped to foster a sense of “the Turkish nation [and] national sentiment... with human sentiment... not with religious sentiment.” The system was, however, limited in terms of democracy. Ataturk presided over a one-party state, making reforms easier to accomplish but also suppressing various strains of social and political discourse.¹⁴

The system was doubtless made more palatable by the fact that it was founded in the midst of a war against Greek occupation forces. The war for independence lasted until the Lausanne Peace Treaty was signed on July 24, 1923. With Greek troops no longer stationed on Turkish land, the Republic was free to develop as a “new Turkish State based on national solidarity.”¹⁵

The Young Turk movement and the foundation of Turkey are an important case study in modern nationalism. The Republic’s departure from every semblance of Islamic practice in government created tensions that have lasted to the present. Many hope that Islam will be

¹³ “Biography of Ataturk.” Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism. 2005. Accessed 12/18/14. <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN,31350/biography-of-ataturk.html>.

¹⁴ Gawrych, 214-15.

¹⁵ “Biography of Ataturk”.

included as a part of national discourse going forward, but Turkey remains decidedly secular in contrast to many of its former Ottoman neighbors. Its tendency to authoritarianism in government has also proven difficult to reverse. In 2005, a law was passed making it illegal to be found “publicly denigrating Turkishness, the Republic, the Parliament ... the Government, judicial institutions, military or security organizations of the state.”¹⁶

The government’s defensive posture certainly extends to discussion of the Armenian genocide. If denigration of the government is illegal in the present, logically this would extend to the formational years of the Republic as well. The situation is exacerbated by the anti-Turkish tone taken by some commenters, notably Henry Morgenthau. By framing the context in terms of racially-defined civilized and barbaric peoples, Morgenthau makes admitting to genocide tantamount to a confession of racial inferiority and of possessing a temperament unsuited for modernity. Given Turkey’s ongoing efforts to increase engagement with the Western world, it is understandable that the government would want to deflect such accusations as much as possible. In the wake of the Holocaust, it has become even more necessary to avoid public associations with genocide. The Turkish government holds a very positive, almost mythical view of the Young Turk movement. Genocide in the early years of Young Turk rule would severely compromise that image both at home and abroad.

The Young Turk movement thus seems to exemplify modern nationalism in both its noble aspirations and its internal tensions and imbalances. Its nationalistic emphasis on the Turkish people and language ensured that there was little place left in the system for others. For the Armenians, this proved fatal. For other ethnic minorities like the Kurds, the tension is simply

¹⁶ “Turkey: Government Amendments Will Not Protect Free Speech.” Human Rights Watch. 04/17/08. Copyright 2014. Accessed 12/18/14. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/04/16/turkey-government-amendments-will-not-protect-free-speech>

a part of life.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Turkish Republic did create a viable, independent system out of the ashes of the antiquated Sultanate. It brought about increased democracy, gender equality, and an educational emphasis that have made modern Turkey a remarkably prosperous and stable country. As Turkey undergoes political transformations and struggles, it will be interesting to note how various groups choose to remember the formative years of the Young Turks and their nascent Republic.

¹⁷ Though not in the scope of this paper, more research on ethnic minorities in Turkey in World War I and War for Independence contexts would be helpful. The relationship between Arab nationalism/separatism and Turkey's own bid for national self-determination would be illuminating, as would an examination of Armenian, Greek, and Kurdish nationalist movements.