

Ottoman Empire During World War One

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Abstract

The World War One led to fierce battles in the Middle East between the Allied power and the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was dragged into the war by Young Turks and Germany and the empire was not ready for the war. The Ottoman Empire had been in continuous war before the start of World War I and was exhausted. However, the Ottoman Empire fought on several fronts during the World War One and proved herself at the battles of Gallipoli and Kut Al Amara. The Empire was later defeated by the Allies and lost its Middle Eastern Territories. The article has mainly used secondary sources for the research

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Introduction

Most people remember World War I as the "Great War" and the war to end all wars. It was the 'battle of trenches' and the ceaseless butchering of men on all sides. The Western front is generally remembered as the vital episode of the war. The Middle Eastern theatre of war was also an important episode of the First World War. World War one resulted in the birth of modern Turkey, Palestinian-Israeli conflict has its roots in World War One, the crisis in Iraq, Syria comes from border drawn in WWI, the issue of Kurdistan comes out of WWI (Adeli). The Ottoman Empire fought on several fronts during the World War One and being an empire that spanned three continents, it was vulnerable on several fronts. The Ottoman rule was negligible in the Middle East where local rulers were appointed with the consent of the Sultan in Istanbul. This method of delegating powers to the local rulers had worked well for the Ottomans for centuries but it was prone to rebellions as it happened in Egypt under Muhammad Ali and in Arabia under Sharif Hussein.

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World War One was a war that the Ottomans could have avoided. At the beginning of World War One the Ottoman Empire had been at constant war since the Italian-Turkish War (1911) and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). The Ottoman Empire had been dubbed as ‘The Sickman of Europe’ and like a dying man it was exhausted. Nevertheless, Ottoman Empire proved themselves to the Allies at Gallipoli and Kut Al Amara (In Iraq), later on succumbing to the Allied forces.

Prelude to the War

Before the World War One, Ottoman Empire was behest with a series of internal and external challenges. A group of intellectuals and army officers known as the Young Turks had assumed power in a coup d’etat in 1908. The Young Turks forced Sultan Abdul Hamid II to abdicate in favor of Mehmet V. The loss of European portion of Ottoman Empire had alarmed the Young Turks and they wanted to stop the disintegration of the empire. The Young Turks embarked upon rigid Turkification and Centralization within the Ottoman Empire. They promoted the use of Turkish as the official language of the empire over Arabs in the schools and public administration of the Arab provinces (Rogan, P-164). The reforms of Young Turks enraged the minorities in the empire who had hoped for autonomous rule within the Ottoman Empire. The Balkans Wars (1912-1913) had revealed the real weakness of the Ottoman Empire. The European possessions of Ottoman Empire like Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro defeated the Ottomans. It showed to other European Powers that the Ottomans were infact a decaying Empire. It had lost territories and it’s economy was in a state of collapse, people and army demoralized and exhausted (Woods).

The Young Turk leadership had sympathy for the Germany and it would prove catastrophic for the empire. Enver Pasha (Minister of Defense) was in particular a great admirer of Germany. He had spent time in Germany as a diplomatic attaché and admired the German army. Enver was impressed by Germany’s military prowess, and he argued forcefully that Germany alone could provide the protection against further European encroachment (Rogan, p-165). Neither Britain nor France was willing to collaborate with the Ottomans. In the 18th and 19th century Britain had favored the Ottomans to maintain the balance of power in Europe. France had occupied the Ottoman territories of Algeria , Morocco and Tunisia and had colonial aspirations in the Middle East. Russia was long seen as the mortal enemy of the Ottomans with real ambitions of conquering Constantinople and the Ottoman territories. Germany was the only power with no colonial ambitions in the Middle East. The Germans had formed friendly relations with Ottomans even before the

war. The Baghdad-Berlin railway was an example of the close relations between Germans and the Ottomans. The Kaiser had, “worn a fez on state visits, he was nicknamed Haji Wilhelm, rumors circulated that he had become a Muslim,” (War in the Middle East).

Initially the Germans were doubtful whether the Ottomans could be of any force during the war. However, the Germans realized that the British Empire was at her weakest in her colonies. They thought that the British and French Empires could be destabilized from within by an Ottoman call for Jihad. The British Empire ruled millions of Muslims in Colonies and the Ottoman Sultan was recognized as de-facto ruler by majority of the Muslim World. The Ottoman entry into war would open up several fronts in the war and would engage Allied forces thus releasing pressure on the Germans. The Ottoman Empire controlled the important straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles which were of strategic importance during the war.

Empires at War

Enver Pasha wanted to delay the Ottoman decision to join the War as long as possible. However, the Ottomans were dragged into the war just as the Europeans were by the temptations of a short war. The Ottoman Empire was seeking allies that would guarantee the security of the empire. A seemingly insignificant incident pushed the Ottomans into the war and the German Camp. The Ottomans had ordered two ships (dreadnoughts) from Britain before the World War. Winston Churchill as the First Lord of Admiralty refused to handover the ships to the Ottomans. Two German war ships (Goeben and Breslau) were pursued by Royal Navy and took anchor in Turkish Waters. The Germans cleverly offered the ships to the Ottomans thus forcing them to declare war on the Allies. Enver Pasha had also entered into a secret treaty with Germany on Aug 2nd 1914. The treaty promised German military advisors war material and financial assistance in return for an Ottoman declaration of war (Rogan, p-165).

The Caucasus Campaign

The Ottomans entered the World War One on 29th Oct, 1914 when the Ottoman fleet shelled the Russian ports on the Black Sea. Thereafter, the fate of the empire was sealed and it was at war with Britain, France and Russia.

On 31st Dec. 1914, Enver Pasha took the command of the campaign in the Caucasus. The campaign proved to be a disaster for 100,000 strong Ottoman army. The harsh terrain and the logistics of the war were ignored and proved to be a great catastrophe for the Ottomans and Enver Pasha. His troops were forced to bivouac in the bitter cold. They ran short of food. An epidemic of typhus broke out with routes blocked by the winter snow, and they lost their

way in the tangled mountain passes (Fromkin p-129). Only a handful of forces managed to reach Sarikamish (Eastern Anatolia) and they were easily defeated by the Russians. Enver lost more than eighty six percent of his army and it was a defeat of extraordinary proportions and a national catastrophe. The campaign showed the general ineptness of Enver Pasha who dreamed of Napoleon like manoeuvres and of conquering India.

The defeat in Caucasus was blamed entirely on the Armenians and it was alleged that the Armenians helped the Russians during the war. The Young Turks considered the Armenians as a security threat and thus began a mass deportation of the Armenians to the Syrian desert. Retribution was brutal, resulting in the Armenian massacre, sometimes considered the first genocide, in which Armenians were deported to Syria. Famine, disease and murder resulted in one to two million Armenian deaths (Rupert, p-22). The Armenian massacre is still a contentious issue in Turkey and the Turkish state contends that the atrocities were committed by lower level officials and the number were not at such a grand scale.

Suez Canal and Kut Al Amara

Djemal Pasha took command of Ottoman troops in Syria and marched toward Egypt to launch a surprise attack on Suez Canal.. Egypt was a protectorate of Britain and Suez Canal was of great strategic importance during the World War One. Djemal's forces finally managed to reach the banks of Suez Canal but were so out of touch with the methods of war that majority of troops couldn't cross the canal. The British with better fortifications and firepower easily repulsed the attack. In the battle and subsequent rout, 2,000 Ottoman troops- about 10 percent of Djema's forces- were killed. Djemal ordered a retreat and kept on going all the way back to Syria (Fromkin, p-131).

Kut Al Amara was a mud village near Basra that gave birth to scenes of famine and heroism during the war. The British had sent an Indian expeditionary force to secure the oilfields of Abadan (Iran). The force commanded by General Townshend began a long march towards Baghdad and defeated feeble Turkish resistance along the way. As the Indian and British forces went upstream along the Tigris river the Turkish resistance began to grow and Townshend decided to make a stand at Kut Al Amara. Kut Al Amara was surrounded by water on three sides, Townshend dug in and entrenched himself in a fortress like position. The Turks surrounded the village and thus began the Siege of Kut that would last for 146 days. The thousands of Indian and British forces had to suffer extreme hunger, heat, diseases and floods. Repeated attempt by London to free the forces failed and even money

was offered to find a solution. Twenty three thousand casualties were suffered by the British forces to rescue them from Kut (Fromkin, p-223). Finally Townshend accepted defeat and he was taken as a prisoner while many of his soldiers served as labour during the war.

Dardanelles and Gallipoli

The Russians asked the Allied to attack the Turks and open another front to ease the pressure on the Russians. In Britain Winston Churchill regularly lobbied for another front in the war and wanted to end the futility of stalemate on the Western front. Churchill's plan was to attack the straits of Dardanelles, destroy Turkish resistance and capture Istanbul. The plan was to take Ottomans out of the World War with one bold stroke and defeat a key German ally.

After much deliberation a naval attack on Dardanelles was accepted . The British and French fleets attacked the Turkish positions along the narrows on 9th Feb, 1915. Initially the attack worked well and the heavy bombardment silenced the Turkish forts and small Turkish resistance. The alarm bells rang in Istanbul and the people began to leave the Ottoman capital. However, the cracks in the strategy appeared when several Allied ships hit the mines in the straits. The Turks were at the end of there ammunition and had barely minimum mines that were laid in the straits. The attack stalled the Allied advance as “ five allied ships were sunk and 700 Allied sailors died; a stunning victory for the Turks.” (Carouse, p-22). The Turks had repulsed a major Allied attack and the ‘Sick man’ was not ready to die yet. As a result of Dardanelles fiasco Churchill lost his post as First Lord of Admiralty.

The failure at Dardanelles led to the Gallipoli campaign. The naval bombardment of the straits didn't work out and the British high command decided to make a breakthrough by amphibious landings on the beaches of Gallipoli peninsula. The strategy was defective in a sense that it hadn't taken account of the difficult terrain, the ravines, cliffs and had greatly underestimated the Turkish fighting capabilities and resilience.

The initial landing force on 25th April 1915 consisted of 18,100 men in the ANZAC (Australia and New Zealand) Corps, 16,800 French and 27,500 British (Sheffield). The Australian and New Zealand corps landed at beach (later named ANZAC Cove) that would lead to defining the identity of both the nations. The surprise element of the war had been lost and the Turks were waiting at the cliffs. One out of three Allied soldiers were gunned down before landing on the beaches. After a day of fighting the Allies had only managed to get a few meters on the beaches with terrible losses. Initially the ANZACS repelled Turkish defenses and the running Turks were stopped by Mustafa

Kemal who asked them to resist. Gallipoli proved to be the making of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as a war hero. Sidelined by the Young Turk leadership before the war, Gallipoli was an opportunity that made a legend of Mustafa Kemal. He issued a stark command to the Turkish soldiers, “ I don’t order you to attack, I order you to die, by the time we are dead, other units and commanders will come up to take our place.” (The First World war)

For the next few months a trench like warfare started just like the Western front. The conditions were horrific with the stench of dead soldiers and disease and hunger made it one of the most brutal battles of the World War One. The Allied attempt to force a breakthrough and dash at the cliffs ended in failure. The Allies could have won an easy, bloodless victory by their surprise attack: but 259 days later when they withdrew in defeat from their last positions on the bloodsoaked beaches of the Dardanelles, it emerged that they had lost one of the costliest military engagements in history (Fromkin, p-184). More than half a million soldiers fought on the beaches of Gallipoli and both Allies and Turks each suffered a quarter of million casualties.

Defeat and The End of an Empire

The 1917 Russian Revolution led to the withdrawal of Russia from the World War One. The Bolsheviks exposed the secret treaty of Sykes-Picot between Britain and France for the division of the Middle East. The Arab Revolt of 1916 also contributed to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The Arab revolt began on Feb 5, 1916 and led by Sharif Hussein of Mecca in collusion with the British. The Revolt began from Hijaz (Saudi Arabia) and the Arabs quickly captured Jeddah and Mecca but failed to capture Medina because of strong Ottoman presence. The British agent and adventurer T.E Lawrence played a vital role in rousing rebellion among the Arabs against the Ottoman empire. In July 1917, Sharif’s son, Amir Faysal took Ottoman port of al-Aqaba (in Jordan) (Rogan, p-169). On 11th March 1917 the British captured Baghdad and on 11th Dec 1917 Jerusalem. In 1918 an Arab army of about 8,000 led by Faysal and assisted by General Edmund Allenby took Damascus. The Ottoman army retreated from Aleppo into Anatolia, the exact same place where they had begun conquest of Arab lands nearly for centuries ago. The total number of Ottoman losses in the World War War were horrific. Estimates put the number of soldiers killed in action at 325,000----- 400,000 died of disease bringing the total number of Ottoman combatants who died to almost 800,000 (Finkle, p-364).

Conclusion

The Ottoman empire was not prepared for World War One and being an agricultural country it had to fight a industrialized war. Despite the apparent weaknesses of the Ottomans they were surprisingly successful in the beginning of the World War one. The Allies expected the Ottomans to be weak opponents but at Kut Al Amara and Gallipoli the Turks inflicted shattering defeats on the Allies. Gallipoli proved that the Turks were as courageous and heroic as the British, French and the ANZACS. Nevertheless, the Young Turks decision to join the World War One was a grave blunder. The Young Turks inability and incompetence ultimately led to the defeat of Turks. It can be said that the Ottoman Empire was in decline and to hold onto the empire during and after the war would have been practically impossible.

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