



# The Long Shadow of the Great War Looming over Turkey

Edhem Eldem

## ► To cite this version:

Edhem Eldem. The Long Shadow of the Great War Looming over Turkey. Winning peace the end of the First World War : history, remembrance and current challenges, German Federal Foreign Office, pp.75-81, 2019, 978-3-00-062688-3. <hal-03860773>

**HAL Id: hal-03860773**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03860773v1>**

Submitted on 18 Nov 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

## The Shadow of the Great War Looming over Turkey

*Edhem Eldem*

The memory of World War I, indeed of the entire period between 1911 and 1924, undoubtedly plays a central ideological role in contemporary Turkish politics. Turkey's unique position between victory and defeat has shaped attempts to define national narratives of the period, and oscillate between two important components of nationalism: pride and victimization. To be sure, these "revisionist" understandings of the past have ultimately served to obscure the complexity of the historical events.

To say that World War I cast a long shadow on Turkey, and on those regions surrounding it which were formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, would be an understatement. Anybody familiar with the way Turkey has handled—and still handles—history would know that any event deemed of some importance in the grand narrative of Turkish history is bound to play a significant role in the present, most likely on a political and ideological level. World War I is certainly no exception.

The difficulty, however, arises from the fact that this is a two-way process. The past affects the present, but more often than not, it is the present that ends up shaping the “national” perception and understanding of the past, thus going counter to the most basic rules of historical causality, if such a thing really exists.

With respect to World War I, there is no doubt that much of what happened in the region ranging from the Balkans to the Middle East between 1911 and 1924 is still at the center of political and ideological debates in Turkey. An interesting and very recent example would be the way in which the present government—the Justice and Development Party (AKP), singlehandedly run by its leader, President Erdoğan—has systematically tried to reduce the 1924 Treaty of Lausanne to a defeat—a sellout, as it were—that could have been avoided, and which led to the unnecessary loss of some territories, especially Mosul and the Aegean islands. The question, however, has practically nothing to do with a genuine reconsideration of historical facts and data. The only motive behind this “revisionist” approach is political; it feeds on the present government and its leadership’s desire to belittle and deny a diplomatic victory associated with the Kemalist regime, while at the same time bringing a most welcome touch of irredentism.

There is some irony behind this pseudohistorical clash of competing national narratives. The Kemalist balancing act consisted in showing that Mustafa Kemal Pasha had been a successful Ottoman commander, especially at the Dardanelles, but that he eventually had to do away with the decrepit empire to resuscitate the nation through

the republic. On the contrary, the AKP's Turco-Islamic nationalism strives to connect back to the Ottoman past, if possible by bypassing, minimizing, or taming the Kemalist interlude. This can be done by stressing the national hero's Ottoman identity, and by concentrating on the early years of the national struggle, when political and ideological emphasis was still strongly marked by allegiance to Islam and the Caliphate. What both these visions of the past have in common is their essentially ahistorical nature. For the Kemalists, World War I was treated as a rupture to mask embarrassing continuities; for the present government, it is proof of a glorious continuity occulted and interrupted by Kemalist mythology.

It is not surprising that both dominant ideologies in Turkish politics should clash over this particular period. Any historian would agree that the decade or so of violence that swept over the region played a central role in the reconfiguration of its major actors. Among these, Turkey holds a prominent place, due to its rather ambiguous fate compared to others. Much of it had to do with loss and destruction, of course, as suggested by the traumatic event of the Ottoman Empire's collapse in 1918 and the consequent imposition of the Treaty of Sèvres, marking its partitioning and occupation.

It should not be forgotten that this collapse was a long and protracted process, with extremely tragic consequences for all the populations involved. The Ottoman Empire was at war for much longer than just the duration of the Great War. From the Italian aggression against Ottoman Tripolitania in 1911 to the victory of Kemalist forces against the Greek invasion in 1922, twelve years of uninterrupted warfare had drained the empire of its last resources and energy, ending any hope there might have been for its survival or revival. The deportation and annihilation of the Armenian population during the war brought an unprecedented degree of homogenization to the empire, thus prefiguring one of the principles of the republic. The population exchange with

Greece in 1923–1924 carried this process one step further, reducing the non-Muslim population of the country to an infinitesimal proportion, which would continue to drop steadily in the following decades.

Yet, despite—and partly because of—all this suffering and destruction, a new Turkey emerged victorious out of this process, following the nationalist upheaval led by Mustafa Kemal, the victory over Greek occupation forces in 1922 and the ratification of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which overturned the harsh conditions of Sèvres. In short, Turkey offers a rare example of a defeated actor who ends up being treated as a victor. Compared to other actors in the region who were liberated only to fall under a form of mandate or protectorate (Syria and Iraq), whose hopes of national independence were rapidly crushed (Armenia and Kurdistan), or whose ambitious bid for power ended in catastrophe (Greece), Turkey most certainly got the best of all deals.

This is what allows Turkey's narratives of the period to navigate so comfortably—and ambiguously—between the two crucial components of nationalism: pride and victimization. Gallipoli can pop up at any moment as a proto-national victory against the Great Powers, but it can also feed the paranoid and xenophobic constructs of Turkish nationalism. Likewise, the treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne can easily be manipulated along the same line to glorify Turkish martyrdom and victory in the face of Western imperialism.

On a somewhat broader level, this ambiguous stand between defeat and victory also explains why the Turkish perception of the region is often tainted with the temptation of irredentist and/or expansionist dreams. Much as illusions of grandeur sometimes reach the point of claiming that “we” lost the war because of the Germans, the argument that the Middle East was redesigned disregarding, and even against, Turkey's interests has led to recent adventures in the region, sometimes with appalling consequences. Such simplistic constructs have relied on a very naïve and biased understanding of the history of Otto-

man presence in the region, whereby the local populations thrived and prospered under the empire's benign and magnanimous rule until the advent of Western imperialism and Zionism, failing to understand to what extent Istanbul had lost its hold over this region during at least the last century of its existence. This vision has left Turkish politicians juggling the still persistent image of the "backstabbing Arab" with that of an entire region whose only wish was to return to a lost *pax ottomanica* under Turkey's leadership.

It seems that the real impact of this strange mix of defeat and victory—in that particular order, of course—is that Turkey has been able to get away with much more than its fellow "losers" ever could. Despite claims to the contrary, the Unionist cadres of World War I remained pretty much intact during the early years of the republic. More importantly, the violence and cleansing exerted during the war against (especially) non-Muslim communities constituted a base and to a certain extent a blueprint for the republic, which continued on the path of national homogenization under the cosmetic mask of secularism. Timid efforts at imposing some form of accountability for war crimes were rapidly swept away by the sudden reversal of the situation and Turkey was granted the privilege of a *tabula rasa* on which to build its modernist national project.

In light of all these events and tragedies, it seems reasonable to claim that the shadow that World War I still casts on present-day Turkey cannot be reduced to a tug of war between the two major wings of Turkish politics today. Much of it has to do with unsolved and unspoken issues, with skeletons in the closet, which neither of the two factions is willing and likely to address. Ironically, the present government's claim to continuity with Ottoman times—albeit for all the wrong reasons—is opening up new perspectives regarding the origins of authoritarianism and of oppressive state-society relations in Turkey. That the Young Turks and the Unionists may have been at the origin of the republic's ideological foundations has already been convincingly

argued in the past decades. It may be time to consider the possibility that the authoritarian regime that seems to be resurfacing today harks back not only to the early years of the republic, but as far back as Sultan Abdülhamid's (1876–1909) dismantlement of the timid attempts of Tanzimat statesmen and bureaucrats (1839–1876) at setting up a rule of law.

Yet one cannot help but wonder whether the real problem of World War I's dark shadow over Turkey does not lie in the main difference that sets this particular country apart from the other major actors of the time, namely the fact that it did not undergo the trauma and destruction of World War II. While this is certainly not something that one could wish for, the temptation is strong to see some form of correlation between Turkey's frequent drifts away from democracy and its very different historical development from World War II to the present. Aside from not having been part of the horrors that led to the "never again!" reaction that lies behind the political (re)construction of Europe, Turkey's relatively smooth transition from a single-party authoritarian regime to a democradura under military and judicial tutelage meant that the country was once again given a free pass, with the blessing of the US, during and after the Cold War.

So, does it really make sense to revisit World War I and its immediate aftermath in order to understand the problems and failures of the world today? Given that the main actors of the conflict were unable to maintain the peace settlement and were at each other's throats in an even more destructive war within only two decades, does this not already sufficiently condemn the way in which the Versailles process was handled and the weakness of the institutions that were supposed to maintain the peace?

Of course, the question may be more relevant when viewed from the perspective of the "peripheral" participants in World War I, including Turkey, considering that they were either spared from the direct destructive effects of World War II, or that they were only indirectly

involved in it through colonial processes. The (in)famous Sykes-Picot Agreement is still often cited as the main cause of much of the chaos and evil unleashed throughout the Middle East in the past decade or so. While there is evidently some truth to this line of reasoning, it is doubtful that the problems encountered in the region can truly be reduced to some misinformed choices that were made a century ago, especially when viewed against the abundance of errors and abuses committed in the decades following decolonization.

I have no doubt that revisiting World War I and its immediate consequences is a necessary and even indispensable historiographical exercise, especially in those cases where ideology and politics have ended up obscuring historical events through denial and “creative” historical narratives. Nevertheless, I am afraid that an analysis of current conflicts through this particular lens is likely to divert our attention from a score of subsequent and partly unrelated events with much greater impact on the present situation in the region.