

The Decline of the Ottoman Empire & The Birth of Modern Turkey

THE 19c: During the 1800s, the Ottoman Empire, the ruling government of much of the Islamic world since the 15c, grew weaker in relation to Europe. Slowly the Empire began to lose its lands in North Africa and the Balkans to European powers and nationalist movements. At the same time, Western cultural and economic influence grew in some parts of the Middle East. The "Age of European Imperialism" brought further losses of territory until, by 1914 at the beginning of World War I, the Ottoman Empire consisted only of Turkey, Palestine, Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula. The region controlled by the Ottoman Turks began to lose its vitality for several reasons. After the European explorations of the 1500s, the bulk of world trade shifted from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. Furthermore, the Islamic civilization, which once overshadowed Europe in its scientific and cultural achievements, ceased to keep pace with scientific, political, and industrial developments in Europe. Muslim societies now became more concerned with matters of religion. By the mid-1800s, Europeans called the Ottoman Empire the "Sick Man of Europe" and looked at its territories with hopes of expansion. Each European power, however, feared that a collapse of the Empire would enable another European nation to take over Ottoman lands and become the major political and military power in Europe, thus upsetting the balance of power there.

In addition to external pressure from European powers, the Ottoman Empire was weakened by internal dissension. Each of the diverse ethnic and religious groups within the empire's borders sought more control over its own affairs. In the Balkans, for instance, many of the people were both non-Turkish and non-Muslim. Eastern Orthodox Christians formed a majority of the population, and different ethnic groups—such as the Slavs and Hungarians—voiced louder cries for independence.

Attempts at reforms on the part of the Ottoman Sultans, however, only created more upheaval. Ottoman religious leaders and conservatives [fundamentalists] opposed the reforms, while liberals demanded more. At the same time, nationalist groups thought the reforms neglected their demands.

In 1876, after an unsuccessful attempt to reform the monarchy, ABDUL-HAMID II assumed leadership as the new Sultan. He reversed all liberal reforms, becoming an AUTOCRATIC ruler who repressed all opposition to his government. His rule, though harsh, held the empire together while European influence in the Middle East increased as the European powers, especially Britain, France, Austria, and Russia, gradually began to take over parts of the Ottoman Empire in Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Algeria, the Balkan Peninsula, Persia, and the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula in Aden.

An important nationalist movement arose in the Ottoman Empire in response to this erosion of Ottoman control over its former lands. Although the Empire's core in Turkey, Palestine, Syria, and Arabia remained free of European control, many Turks believed that the autocratic rule of the Sultan restricted their freedom as much as rule by a foreign power. Although the Sultan took on military advisors from Europe and allowed European nations to build railroads in Ottoman territory, he did not respond to demands for political change.

THE YOUNG TURKS, 1908-1914: From the 1870s the Ottoman Empire faced a series of setbacks. The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 forced the Ottomans to let go of several territories. The empire's holdings in the Balkans were reduced to no more than Albania and Macedonia. In 1912 and 1913 two Balkan wars led to independence for Albania and to Macedonia's becoming part of Greece. Within the empire these losses set off a series of constitutional crises.

In 1908 Young Turk army officers rebelled. They forced Abdul-Hamid to restore the constitution and call together a parliament. For a time it appeared as if Turkey would finally have a liberal government. But the Young Turks succeeded no more than Abdul-Hamid in holding back the tide of collapse.

In 1909 Abdul-Hamid encouraged Muslim conservatives to rise up against parliament. This rebellion was put down by the army. Abdul-Hamid was then overthrown and sent into exile. The constitution of 1876 was restored with a free legislature and a new sultan, Muhammad V. This sultan was a figurehead, however. He had no real power. The Young Turks struggled for basic democratic rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and the press. Nevertheless, they were faced with the old problem of nationalism within the empire. The Balkan wars of 1912-1913 had resulted in crushing losses. Arabs, Armenians, Lebanese, and Syrians were all calling for independence. As their demands increased, the Young Turks adopted harsher measures. In 1913 a group of politically minded army officers within the Young Turk movement seized power. They aimed to prevent the empire's collapse. Through ruthless means they sought to put down opposition in the center and borderlands.

WORLD WAR I: In the years before World War I, the Ottoman Empire was gradually drawn into Germany's camp. Germany had been a major world power since its unification in 1870. German leaders dreamed of a Berlin-to-Baghdad railway. The German Kaiser (emperor) sought to extend German influence throughout the Middle East—and to challenge Britain wherever possible. After 1905 tensions in Europe reached a fever pitch. The race to build larger armies with the latest weapons increased. And Germany's aggressive claims for world power status nearly resulted in war on more than one occasion before 1914.

With France and Russia allied against a growing German military threat, Turkey shifted toward the German camp. After all, Russia had been the chief Ottoman enemy for centuries. For their part, the Russians were happy to see the Straits connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean in the hands of a weak sultan. Control of the Straits by Germany was another matter, however. The instability in the Balkans remained a source of serious international concern. It would be the direct cause of World War I because it made Russia and Austria want to seek influence there. When war finally broke out in the summer of 1914, it was the first conflict since the time of Napoleon to involve all the major European powers. World War I signaled disaster and the end of the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire joined forces with Germany and Austria-Hungary to form the CENTRAL POWERS. Britain, France, and Russia formed the group called the ALLIED POWERS. Eventually the United States, Italy, China and Japan joined the Allied side, but they did not participate in the conflict as it spread to the Middle East. The spoils of war to be awarded to the winners of this conflict were strategic sea routes, new territories economic gains of additional markets, and the extension of their defense positions around the world. The British government wanted the support of the Arabs in the war because Britain had much to lose in the Mediterranean region if the Arabs joined forces with the Ottoman Empire. The Arabs within the Ottoman Empire saw the possibility of becoming independent nations after the war if they allied themselves with Britain and if the Allied side won the war. The British agreed to give the Arabs their independence after the war if they fought with the British against the Turks. World War I brought an end to the Ottoman Empire, and a new re-mapping of the Middle East took place. The British and French armed forces took control of the lands formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, and, like a giant pie, the Empire was carved into select pieces and shared among the Europeans. Many of the important conflicts in this region today, however, can be traced back to the social and political changes that occurred between 1800 and 1918.

HUSSEIN-McMAHON CORRESPONDENCE: In 1914 Britain declared that Egypt was her protectorate which meant that Britain was pledged to protect and defend Egypt. The British had helped finance the building of the Suez Canal (which was completed in 1863) which linked the Red Sea with the Mediterranean. Britain, therefore, wanted to protect her economic and military interests in Egypt. During the war, Egypt was to serve as the base for all British military operations in the Middle East. Many soldiers and much equipment were located in the "ancient land of the pharaohs". Sir Henry McMahon was the British High Commissioner and represented Great Britain in Egypt. Sherif (mayor) Hussein of Mecca was the leader of the Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula, who were still considered to be a part of the Ottoman Empire. These two men began a series of communications known as the Hussein-McMahon Letters or Correspondence. In these letters, Britain promised Hussein an independent Arab state at the end of World War I if the Arabs would revolt against the Ottoman Turks. Hussein and his two sons, Faisal and Abdullah, wanted an independent Arab state, but were hesitant about trusting the British. The area the Arabs wanted to establish as independent was to include the present-day countries of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine (today, Israel), Jordan, Iraq, and parts of Saudi Arabia (including Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Gulf States). In 1915, the Ottomans hanged eleven leaders, both Muslims and Christian, for revolting against the Ottoman government in Lebanon. In 1916, 22 Arabs were hanged in Lebanon and Syria. Hussein then declared Arab independence, broke away from the Ottoman Empire, and joined Britain in the war against the Sultan.

THE ARAB REVOLT: The Arab forces carried on a revolt in the desert. Sherif Hussein was the leader and was assisted by British Colonel T. E. Lawrence (known as "Lawrence of Arabia"). Lawrence was sent to train the Arab tribes in modern warfare techniques, especially in the use of explosives. With the knowledge, the Arabs concentrated on destroying the Hejaz Railroad, the main means of transportation and communication from the northern Arab countries to the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. It was also the route used by Muslim pilgrims going to Mecca on pilgrimage. The line ran from Damascus, Syria through Jordan to Medina, Saudi Arabia, for a distance of 810 miles. Hussein and Lawrence led striking forces against the railroad, destroying or damaging much of it. They were successful in this venture and continue to harass the Turkish

troops along the railroad line. This work of dynamiting the train tracks was so successful, that the railroad remain in disuse until 1955 when It was finally repaired.

THE SYKES-PICOT AGREEMENT (1916): Little did Sherif Hussein realize that the British government was making secret agreements with other Allied nations at the same time that he and Sir Henry McMahon had come to terms. The Sykes-Picot Agreement divided the spoils of World War I between France and Great Britain. France would gain control over Syria and Lebanon; Britain over Iraq, Jordan, and later Palestine. No mention was made in the agreement of the creation of any Independent Arab nations. Hussein continued to trust the British until after the war. He then realized that the British had no intention of keeping their part of the original bargain as mentioned in the Hussein-McMahon Letters, and that the Western powers were planning to stay in the Middle East after the war.

THE BALFOUR DECLARATION: Theodor Herzl established the ZIONIST government In 1897 This movement was an effort by the Jews of Europe and the world to re-establish themselves In their historic homeland, Palestine. Remember, they had been forced to leave their traditional homeland in the first century by the Romans and lived In DIASPORA for over 1900 years. When World War I broke out, the Zionist movement gained momentum and the Jews continued to demand that they be allowed to return to their homeland. Theodor Herzl wrote a book, The Jewish State (Der Judenstaat), in which he warned the Jews that they would someday be "destroyed by those in whose countries they currently lived. According to him, their only hope for survival and freedom from persecution, was to create a modern nation of their own, where they could live In peace and freedom. In 1917, LORD ARTHUR J. BALFOUR, Foreign Minister of Great Britain, wrote the famous BALFOUR DECLARATION. This declaration supported the Zionist movement and the immigration of Jews to Palestine. However, the British needed financial assistance and turned to several rich Jewish leaders of the Zionist movement. One of these leaders was the head of the richest banking family in Europe, LORD ROTHSCHILD. It is to him that Sir Balfour wrote the declaration, knowing that immigration of Jews to Palestine could not fully be supported by the British government after World War I was over.

THE END OF WORLD WAR I: The British began military operations in the Middle East in 1914 at the beginning of the war. Egypt was the "launching pad" for the Allied forces In the Middle East. By 1916 Sherif Hussein had vowed to help the British against the Ottoman Turks. In December of 1917, British troops under General Allenby drove the Ottomans from Jerusalem. The British were in control. In 1918, Prince Faisal and his Arab troops entered Damascus, Syria with Colonel Lawrence. The Ottoman Empire was crumbling fast. German and Turkish forces were meeting defeat on all of the war fronts. On October 13, 1918, the Ottoman Empire signed a treaty with the British ending World War I in the Middle East.

The mandate system of control, introduced after World War I, was a means of the newly formed League of Nations, to handle the territories of the losing side during the war. The idea of a MANDATE was that the League would give a territory to one of the Allied winners to administer, but not to fully own. They would continue to administer these territories until the League felt that the peoples living there were prepared to rule themselves. At this point, the Allied mandate power would leave, and, the territory would become an independent nation. Britain and France, however, viewed the mandates as a way of keeping control and influence over their strategic regions In the Middle East.

THE BIRTH OF MODERN TURKEY: Faced with occupation by the Allies in 1918, the Turks resisted strongly. They drove the Greeks and Western Allies out of Turkey. The Turks were helped in this by the Soviet Union. Under the leadership of Mustapha Kemal, the Turks kept their hold of Asia Minor. They continued to hold both sides of the straits. This included Constantinople. For over two years the Turks waged war against Greece, their traditional enemy. Peace did not return until 1922.

Under Mustapha Kemal a revolutionary plan was realized. In 1923 the sultanate was done away with. This event marked the birth of the Turkish Republic. As you recall, the Ottoman Empire had been organized according to religious communities. The new Turkish Republic was founded as a national state with the Turkish people sovereign. The people were given the right to vote, and a parliament was set up. The president of the republic was granted strong powers.

The creation of the Turkish Republic created difficulties for many Turkish residents. Certain minority groups in Turkey had been persecuted during Ottoman times. One of these groups, the Armenians, had suffered greatly at the hands of the Turks. The persecution began in the late 1800s and culminated in the Armenians' forced deportation in 1915. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed or died as a result of the expulsion. This has been called the first genocide (deliberate, organized mass murder of a racial, cultural, or political group) in the twentieth century. Once in power, the leaders of the new Turkish Republic tried to make the nation mainly Turkish. As a result, about 1.4 million Greeks were forced to move from Turkey to Greece. In exchange, about 400,000 Turks living in Greece were forced to move to Turkey. This exchange caused great hardship for both peoples. It burdened the Greek and Turkish governments with a crippling refugee problem. Greeks who had lived in Asia Minor since the time of the Byzantines were uprooted from their homes. But the forced exchange of peoples did enable the Turkish Republic to become mainly Turkish.

RELIGION AND STATE ARE SEPARATED IN THE TURKISH REPUBLIC: For the first time in any Muslim country, church and state were separated. The Turkish Republic declared religion a matter of private belief. All religions were to be tolerated. The government was reorganized on secular lines. New laws were written, based on a European model—the Swiss Code—rather than on the *Qur'an*. For the Islamic world, this alone was a revolutionary change.

Mustapha Kemal outlawed polygamy. He urged women to stop wearing veils and called for them to seek public office. He called for his people to wear Western clothes, and he made the use of the Western alphabet the law. Turks who could read and write with the Arabic alphabet now had to learn to do so with the new alphabet. At the same time illiteracy was greatly reduced. Turkey adopted the Western calendar and the metric system. People were required to select a family name for themselves. Kemal himself took the name Atatürk, meaning “Father of the Turks”. He moved the capital to Ankara, in the center of Asia Minor. Constantinople, the former capital of the Ottoman Empire, was renamed Istanbul.

Atatürk had mines, railroads, and factories developed for the new republic. Most of these industries were owned by the government. Lands once owned by Greeks were given to landless peasants. Certain businesses were taken over by the government. Railroads and telegraph lines linked the nation. And, while Atatürk accepted aid from the Soviet Union as a means of limiting Western influence, he put down communism. For Atatürk, the Turkish revolution was to be a purely Turkish achievement. And he often used severe methods to achieve his ends.

After Atatürk's death in 1938 Turkey shifted several times between democratic and military rule. But the state's planning and the modernization Atatürk had started continued. With United States help after World War II, Turkey successfully fought a Communist takeover. In 1952 Turkey became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This military alliance includes the United States, Canada, and most of the democratic countries of western and southern Europe. Turkey has allowed U.S. military bases within its borders. With its 700,000 soldiers, Turkey's armed forces are the second largest in NATO.

Present-day Turkey faces many problems. One is Turkey's continuing foreign policy dispute with Greece, its neighbor and fellow member of NATO. The dispute is about control of the island nation of Cyprus. Greece and Turkey each supports its own ethnic group in the conflicts between the Greek Cypriot majority and the Turkish Cypriot minority. In 1983 the Motherland Party came into power in free elections. It put an end to military rule, although the military still has considerable influence. In recent elections at the end of 2002, an Islamic nationalist party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), had 34 percent of the vote, paving the way to form a single party government. How it will rule Turkey and where it will take the country in the future is unknown. One thing is certain—because of its geographic position between Europe and West Asia/Middle East, Turkey has an important role to play in global politics today.