The Ottoman Empire

Heading towards disaster

How a multinational Muslim empire was destroyed by the First World War

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The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East. By Eugene Rogan. Basic Books

“UNT0 us a son is born!” It was with great excitement that Enver Pasha, the most powerful of the triumvirate of Young Turks who ruled the Ottoman Empire, greeted the news that two German warships had sailed into neutral Turkish waters on August 10th 1914. The Goeben, a heavy battleship, and the Breslau, a light cruiser, had bombarded French Algerian ports at the start of the first world war, and were being pursued by French and British vessels across the Mediterranean.

The Turks extracted a high price for granting the ships haven, including recognition of their demands for the recovery of territories lost in earlier conflicts and financial help if they entered the war. To avoid immediate hostilities, though, the Turks ostensibly bought the German ships (and the services of their crews), replacing two dreadnoughts that had been ordered from, but requisitioned by, Britain. Thus did Germany appear to gain a new ally, and Turkey a protector against dismemberment. The Ottomans came fully into the war two months later, when Germany sent the now Turkish-flagged Goeben to attack the Russian navy in the Black Sea. The European war turned global, with Indians, Australians and New Zealanders brought in to fight against Arabs and Turks. The conflict was to prove as disastrous for the Ottomans as for Germany, if not more so. A multinational Muslim empire that had once threatened Vienna was broken up; the first modern genocide, of the Armenians, was committed; the Arab provinces were parcelled up into benighted colonial “mandates”; the foundations of the future Jewish state were laid;
and the caliphate, established in the earliest days of Islam, was abolished.

If Germany’s humiliation at Versailles set the stage for German revanchism in the second world war, then the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire created the festering sore that is today’s Middle East. “The legitimacy of Middle Eastern frontiers has been called into question since they were first drafted,” writes Eugene Rogan. “Arab nationalists in the 1940s and 1950s openly called for unity schemes between Arab states that would overthrow boundaries widely condemned as an imperialist legacy.” Nearly a century and several wars later, the worst exponents of that resentment—the jihadists of Islamic State—have proclaimed the recreation of the caliphate.

The story of how the Ottoman Empire stumbled into a conflict for which it was unprepared, how it put up a stronger fight than anyone expected and how its carcass was torn apart are the subject of Mr Rogan’s assured account. Amid myriad books about the slaughter in Europe, Mr Rogan, the director of the Middle East Centre at Oxford University, sets out to tell the story through Ottoman eyes. Although he does not always succeed in delivering that viewpoint, the book stands alongside the best histories. Mr Rogan ably weaves the thinking and doings of the politicians and generals with their impact on the soldiers and civilian populations. He sketches many revealing vignettes: Anzac troops rioting around the brothels of Cairo; soldiers in the desert struggling to distinguish enemy combatants from harmless sheep; and a north African soldier-poet describing the carnage in a foreign field at Charleroi in Belgium: “They perished without anyone reciting the profession of faith for them, Lords! They lay exposed to the wild beasts, eagles and birds of prey.”

Mr Rogan offers a nuanced account of the greater and lesser moments—the Allied disaster at Gallipoli, the quagmire at Kut, the mass-murder of the Armenians, the Arab revolt, the conquest of Baghdad and Jerusalem, and the messy political scramble for Damascus.

But he is arguably at his most interesting in his account of the failure of what the Kaiser called Islampolitik, the idea that alliance with the Muslim power, and the authority of the caliphate, would weaken Britain and France by subverting the Muslim populations of their colonies in India and north Africa. There were isolated successes, including the enlisting of French north African prisoners-of-war to serve in Ottoman armies. But despite the call to jihad, for the most part Muslim populations and soldiers remained loyal to their colonial masters. Even the revelation of Allied double-dealing to carve up the Middle East, as detailed in the Sykes-Picot agreement, did not blunt the rebellion of the Arab Hashemites against the Ottomans.

The Bolshevik revolution of October 1917, which took Russia out of the war, might have ensured survival or even some kind of victory for the Ottomans, by freeing up troops from the east to go south. But it was squandered. Their capture of the oilfields of Baku left them vulnerable to the British breakthrough in Palestine. In the end, Mr Rogan writes, the Ottomans were more influential than many imagined; instead of being the weakest link among the Central Powers, they held out to the end.

The Ottomans had lost wars before, but never the empire itself. This time it was different. The demands imposed by the Allies provoked a revolt by Mustafa Kemal, the hero of Gallipoli, who pushed the Greeks and Italians out of Anatolia, deposed the sultan and abolished the caliphate. Turkish nationalism thus salvaged the rump of Anatolia. But Arab nationalism was stillborn; the promise of self-determination made by America’s president, Woodrow Wilson, was not applied to Egyptians demanding the end of British rule. Islam was the sword that the Kaiser had hoped to use; instead it was later grasped by disgruntled, disenfranchised Muslims against their own rulers, and against perceived foreign foes.