

THE COLLAPSE OF AN EMPIRE

HOW THE GREAT WAR DEFEATED THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

1914 — 1922

Politics, finance and logistics, 1914-1922

A DEFEAT DECIDED BEHIND THE FRONT

The Ottoman army was not simply beaten in the field. The state that fed, paid and governed it disintegrated first.

- Ottoman forces won at Gallipoli and Kut, yet the empire still ended the war dismembered.
- Total war exposed a fiscal system dependent on foreign credit and a rail network too thin to supply distant fronts.
- Wartime rule by the Committee of Union and Progress radicalised policy and hollowed out political legitimacy.
- Defeat was therefore cumulative: money, food, transport and consent gave way before the armies did.

01

THE STATE THAT WENT TO WAR

An empire already contracting, indebted and politically improvised in 1914.

THE INHERITANCE OF 1914

TERRITORY LOST

The Balkan Wars of 1912-13 stripped away most European provinces and displaced hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees.

DEBT ADMINISTERED

The Ottoman Public Debt Administration, run by European creditors, collected major revenues on bondholders' behalf since 1881.

CAPITULATIONS

Legal and tariff privileges for foreign nationals limited the state's power to tax trade and protect industry.

ENTERING THE WAR ON CREDIT

- A secret alliance with Germany was signed on 2 August 1914, days after the July crisis broke.
- The requisition of two British-built battleships, paid for by public subscription, inflamed opinion; the German ships Goeben and Breslau were transferred to Ottoman colours in reply.
- Enver Pasha's bombardment of Russian Black Sea ports in October forced the decision to belligerence before the state was ready.
- War was entered to escape partition and recover lost standing — a gamble that required German subsidies from the outset.

02

POLITICS WITHOUT BRAKES

How a wartime triumvirate replaced constitutional bargaining with command.

RULE BY TRIUMVIRATE

ENVER PASHA

War Minister — architect of the German alliance and of the disastrous Sarikamish offensive.

TALAT PASHA

Interior Minister, later Grand Vizier — directed the deportation policies of 1915.

CEMAL PASHA

Navy Minister and governor in Syria — presided over requisition, repression and famine relief failures.

Parliament met rarely; martial law, emergency decree and party networks displaced ordinary politics.

CONSENT UNRAVELS IN THE PROVINCES

- Requisitioning of grain, animals and labour turned the state into a predator in the eyes of many rural communities.
- Public hangings of Arab notables in Beirut and Damascus in 1915-16 destroyed the CUP's standing among provincial elites.
- The Arab Revolt of 1916, backed by British money and arms, opened a second political front in the Hejaz.
- Mass deportation and the destruction of the Armenian population removed communities central to trade, crafts and revenue, and shattered the empire's claim to be a common home.
- Desertion became endemic: by 1918 deserters far outnumbered men remaining in many formations.

THE JIHAD THAT DID NOT COME

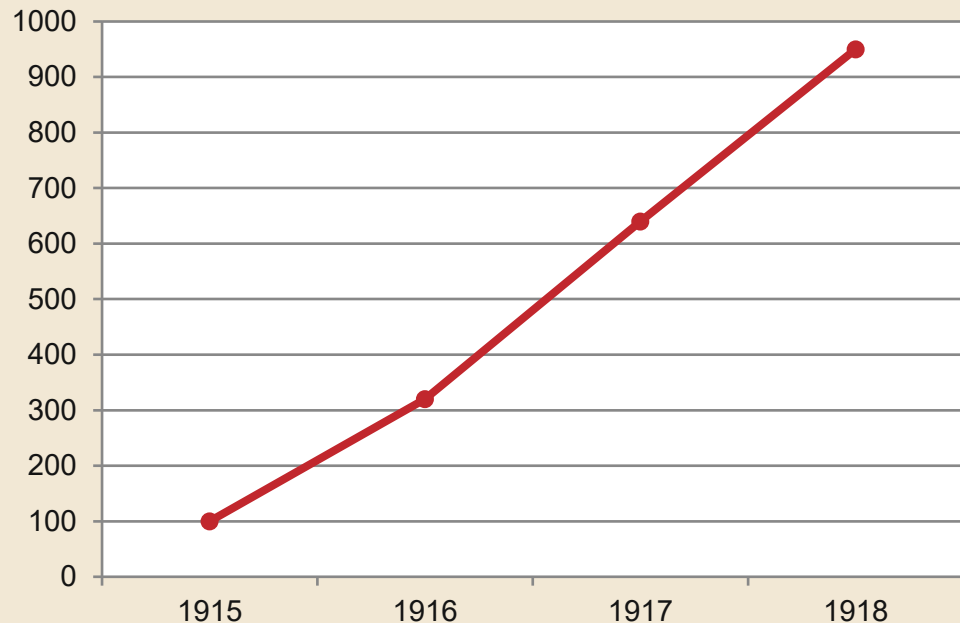
- In November 1914 the Sheikh ul-Islam proclaimed a jihad, urging Muslims under British, French and Russian rule to rise against their rulers.
- The appeal was widely read as German-inspired, and the sultan-caliph's authority suffered for being visibly enlisted in a European alliance.
- No mass rising followed: Muslim troops continued to serve in the Indian Army and in French colonial units throughout the war.
- Sharif Hussein of Mecca, guardian of the holy cities, instead joined the Allies in 1916 — one Muslim authority answering the caliph's call to arms with revolt.
- Pan-Islamic solidarity proved weaker than local loyalty, dynastic ambition and imperial pay.

03

THE ECONOMICS OF EXHAUSTION

Paper money, lost revenue and a transport system that could not deliver.

FINANCING A WAR IT COULD NOT AFFORD

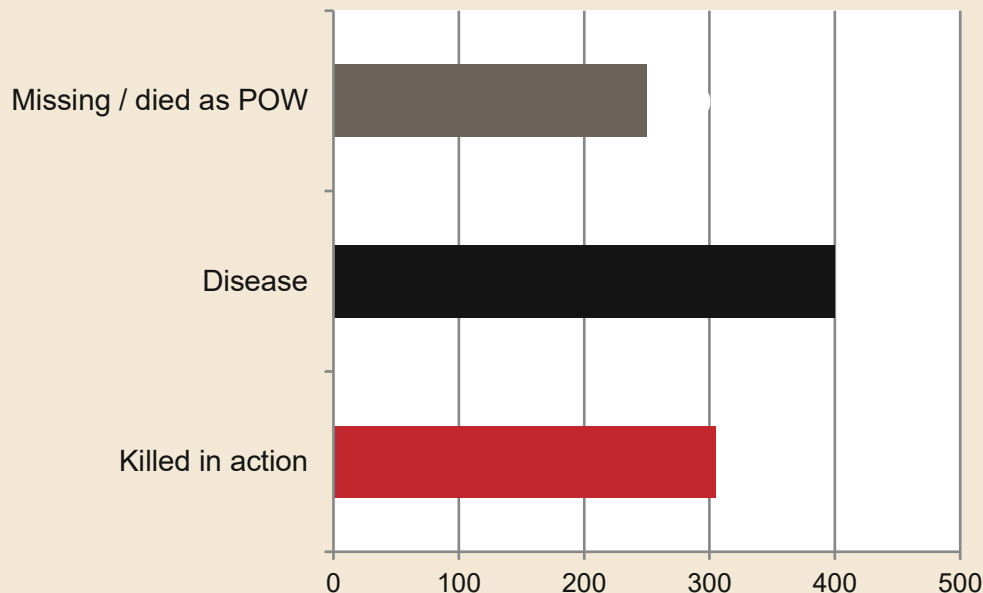


- Ordinary revenues covered only a fraction of war costs; the shortfall was met by German advances and unbacked note issue.
- Prices in Istanbul rose many times over between 1914 and 1918, wiping out fixed salaries and soldiers' pay.
- Grain requisition at fixed prices drove production underground and fed a large black market.
- Figures shown are illustrative of the trend rather than an exact series.

AN EMPIRE WITHOUT A RAILWAY

- The Baghdad Railway was still unfinished in 1914; gaps through the Taurus and Amanus mountains were only closed late in the war.
- Troops and supplies moved for weeks on foot and by pack animal to reach Mesopotamia, Palestine and the Caucasus.
- Coal and shipping shortages in the Black Sea crippled Istanbul's fuel supply and its factories.
- The Allied blockade cut imports of machinery, chemicals and medicine that the empire could not produce itself.
- Distance, not enemy fire, destroyed much of the army's strength before it reached a battlefield.

ATTRITION BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD



- Disease — typhus, dysentery, malaria — killed more Ottoman soldiers than combat did.
- Civilian mortality was worse still: famine in Greater Syria and Lebanon killed several hundred thousand people.
- Estimates differ substantially between historians; the pattern, not the precise figure, is the point.
- A shrinking manpower pool made every further mobilisation harder to sustain.

04

ENDGAME AND PARTITION

From Mudros to Lausanne: the empire ends, a republic begins.

THE FRONTS GIVE WAY, 1918

SEP 1918

Allenby's breakthrough at Megiddo destroys Ottoman armies in Palestine; Damascus falls.

OCT 1918

Bulgaria's surrender severs the land link to Germany and exposes Istanbul itself.

30 OCT 1918

The Armistice of Mudros ends hostilities and opens the Straits to Allied fleets.

NOV 1918

The CUP leadership flees abroad; Allied forces occupy the capital.

PARTITION AND ITS UNDOING

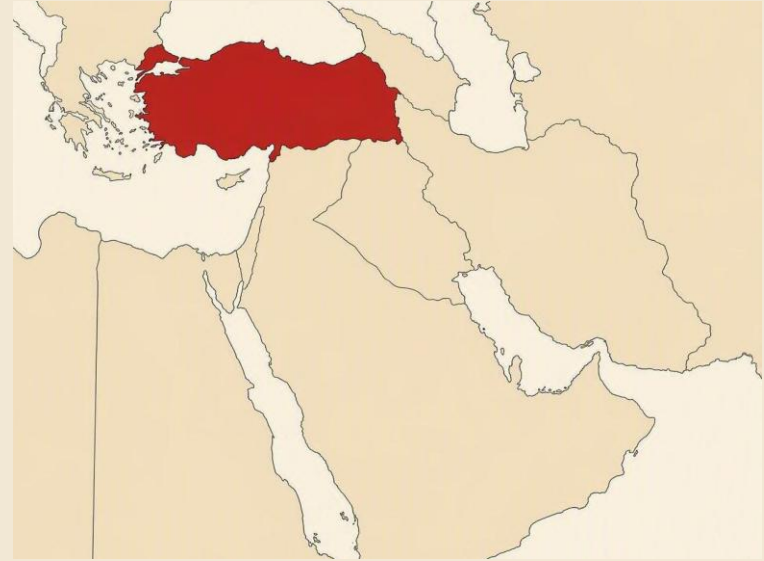
- Wartime agreements — the Sykes-Picot understanding of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 — had already promised Ottoman lands to others.
- The Treaty of Sevres in 1920 dismembered Anatolia itself, assigning zones to Greece, Italy, France and Britain.
- Greek landings at Smyrna in 1919 ignited a national resistance movement under Mustafa Kemal.
- Victory in the war of independence forced renegotiation: the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 fixed the borders of the new republic.
- The sultanate was abolished in 1922 and the caliphate in 1924 — the empire ended twice, militarily and politically.

AN EMPIRE ERASED FROM THE MAP



1914

Anatolia, Greater Syria, Mesopotamia and western Arabia under Ottoman rule.



1930

The Turkish republic within the borders fixed at Lausanne; Arab lands under British and French mandate.

Schematic maps, not to scale: shaded areas show approximate extent, not exact frontiers.

THE CALIPHATE AFTER THE EMPIRE

- Defeat cost the caliph custody of Mecca and Medina, held by the Ottomans since 1517 and passed to the Hashemites and then, by 1925, to the house of Saud.
- The Khilafat movement in India mobilised millions in defence of the caliphate, briefly binding Muslim and Indian nationalist politics together.
- The sultanate was abolished in 1922 and the caliphate in 1924, ending the office that had claimed leadership of Sunni Islam for four centuries.
- No successor claim commanded consensus, leaving a vacancy that shaped Islamic political thought for the rest of the century.
- In Turkey the new republic pushed religion out of law, education and public office; elsewhere, Arab lands passed under Christian imperial mandate.

THE ARGUMENT OVER AUTHORITY

- Abolition in 1924 removed the institution that had anchored Sunni political theory, forcing an open argument about where legitimate authority now lay.
- Rashid Rida argued for a reformed caliphate led by qualified scholars, reviving the office rather than abandoning it.
- Ali Abd al-Raziq countered in 1925 that the Prophet's mission was religious rather than political and that Islam prescribed no particular form of state; the book cost him his post at al-Azhar.
- A caliphate congress in Cairo in 1926 broke up without agreement, confirming that no single claimant could speak for the whole community.
- Muhammad Iqbal and others read the Turkish republic as evidence that Muslims would now have to think in terms of nations rather than a universal empire.

FROM DEBATE TO MASS MOVEMENT

- With no imperial centre, initiative passed from dynasties and scholars to organised movements operating inside the new nation-states.
- Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood at Ismailia in 1928, in the shadow of British control of the Suez Canal Zone and of the lost caliphate.
- Its programme treated Islam as a complete social order rather than a private faith, answering both colonial rule and the secular direction of the new states.
- Schools, clinics, mosques and workers' associations built a mass membership that conventional parties could not match.
- That combination of welfare provision, education and political demand became the template for Islamist movements across the region for the rest of the century.

WHY THE WAR WAS DECISIVE

FISCAL

No independent tax base and no access to capital markets meant the war was fought on borrowed money and printed paper.

POLITICAL

Emergency rule by a narrow party clique destroyed the coalition of peoples that made the empire governable.

MATERIAL

Sparse railways, no heavy industry and a tight blockade set a hard ceiling on what its armies could achieve.

LEGACY

The state that failed the test was replaced, not restored — a national republic on a fraction of the territory.