

FEROZ AHMAD

**THE YOUNG TURKS
STRUGGLE FOR THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE,
1914-1918**

Preface WW1

This book is a study of the Young Turks and their struggle to save the Ottoman Empire during the Great War of 1914-1918. It is the sequel to *The Young Turks The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics, 1908-1914*. By 1914 the Committee was in total political control of the Ottoman Empire and saw their task as being to recreate the empire after the catastrophic defeats of the Balkan Wars.

The Unionists hoped to do so by avoiding any further wars and ending their isolation by forming an alliance with the Triple Entente composed of England, France and Russia. When they were turndown by the Entente powers, they turned to Germany. Berlin finally signed the alliance after the war had begun in Europe in August. Germany's reason was ideological: the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph could broaden the war by declaring jihad or "holy war" against the Entente powers, causing Muslims to rebel in British India and Egypt, French North Africa, and the Russian Caucasus.

Though the Ottomans were allied with Germany, they believed that the alliance did not commit them to enter the war. But their treasury was empty and the economic situation precarious. Only Germany was willing to give loans, but only on the condition they enter the war. Istanbul was forced to submit and entered the war after the Black Sea incident when Ottoman ships –led by a German admiral– bombarded Russia's ports on 29 October and the Entente declared war on the Ottomans in November. Istanbul declared jihad on the 11th and that turned a European war into a world war, thus extending it by perhaps three years.

These events are discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. The war soon became an existential crisis for the Ottomans when the Entente launched the Gallipoli campaign that threatened Istanbul, a threat that lasted until December 1915. This is discussed in Chapter 3. While the Gallipoli campaign was going on the Ottomans were confronted with another crisis, this time in eastern Anatolia (Chapter 4). There, the Russian army supported by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation began its invasion of Anatolia. The Russian threat continued to grow until revolution broke out throughout Russia in March 1917 and the Russian army disintegrated.

In 1917 the war in Europe turned in favour of Germany and the Young Turks became more confident even though they continued to lose territory in the Arab provinces to the British. But they knew that such losses would not matter when Germany won the war because they would regain lost territory and more at the peace table. Such optimism lasted into August 1918, until the failure of Germany's last offensive. With the failure of the offensive Istanbul was forced to make peace marking the end of the Empire.

The six chapters are chronological. Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the question of "Nationalism and the Great War, 1914-1919", and the Young Turks' policy to transform the Ottoman economy and society while waging war.

This book was completed almost 50 years after the publication of *The Young Turks* in 1969. After completing the thesis, I began to teach history, a fulltime occupation. There were other projects I began to work on, the first emerging as the *Turkish Experiment in Democracy, 1950-1975* in 1975. Other books followed, but the book on the World War was never forgotten. In fact, I collected material on the war whenever I found time. So I owe a debt of gratitude to the libraries and librarians in cities where I found myself: the Butler Library of Columbia University, the New York Public Library; the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.; Harvard's Weidner Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts and the Boston Public Library; the library at the School of Oriental and African Studies and the London Library; and in Istanbul the Belediye and the Beyazit libraries.

Discussion with my friend, Robert Hannigan in Boston helped to understand America and the war; at the time Bob was writing his book on President Woodrow Wilson, which appeared in 2016 as *The Great War and American Foreign Policy, 1914-24*. In Istanbul Professor Yaşar Geyikdağı read the book while in draft form and made suggestions that improved the quality of my work.

Prologue

The term 'Young Turks' was introduced into the political vocabulary of late Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. Prior to that, Europe had used the term 'Turkey' as a shorthand to describe the Ottoman Empire, sometimes as 'Turkey in Europe' to describe the Ottoman provinces in the Balkans, and 'Turkey in Asia' to describe Anatolia and the Arab provinces. The Ottomans did not describe their empire as "Turkey" or themselves as "Turks."

Nineteenth century Europe saw the emergence of a number of political groups who described themselves using the adjective 'young' in contrast to the older, conservative ruling classes. There was 'Young England', 'Young Ireland', 'Young Germany', and 'Young Italy'. But each group was differentiated from the other depending on the specific situation and culture prevailing in that country. Young Ireland stood primarily for Irish independence, Young Germany for liberal, social reform, and Young Italy for unification.

When these ideas entered the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century, the reformist intellectuals demanded constitutionalism and called themselves the 'new Ottomans' rather than young, perhaps because the idea of youth was frowned upon in Ottoman society where wisdom was thought to reside in mature years. The 'New Ottomans' emerged in the mid-1860s inspired by the ideas of French thinkers like Montesquieu and Rousseau and the French revolution that promoted the ideas of constitutional and parliamentary government. Şerif Mardin described their ideas eloquently in his *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*. When the first experiment in constitu-

tionalism was shelved by Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1878, a group of young intellectuals and academy – trained officers emerged to challenge Hamidian autocracy. They forced the sultan to restore the constitution in 1908 and they came to be called the ‘Young Turks’ and their revolution the Young Turk Revolution. Their organization, the Committee of Union and Progress, dominated Ottoman political life for the next ten years. They seized power in January 1913 and were in power until their defeat in the World War. Thereafter the Young Turks disappeared from Ottoman and Turkish political life.

The term may have disappeared from Turkey’s political vocabulary, but it came to describe factions in political organizations that stood for a radical policy against the centre. There was such a faction in the Indian National Congress in the late 1980 and even talk of such a faction in Donald Trump’s party after he was elected in 2017.

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Crisis: The Gallipoli Campaign and the Threat to Istanbul, November 1914 - December 1915



The rupture of relations in November 1914, first with Russia and then with England and France, sparked off a general crisis that lasted until March 1917; it eased temporarily in November 1915 when the Allied armies abandoned their Gallipoli campaign and began to withdraw. This crisis was marked by the fear of defeat that would not only lead to the very destruction of the Unionist regime, but the end of the Ottoman Empire. That was how the campaigns at the Dardanelles and in eastern Anatolia were perceived when the Ottomans entered the war.

The first task of the Unionists was to provide a united political front both for internal and external consumption. They succeeded in doing so by persuading Grand Vezier Said Halim Pasha not to resign over the Black Sea incident of 28 October 1914. But the Committee failed to prevent the resignation of some other ministers who protested, not against Turkey's entry into the war, but because it was untimely, and because they had not been consulted before such a momentous decision had been made. The resignations of Çürüksulu Mahmud Pasha (Public Works); Süleyman al-Bustani, an Arab deputy from Beirut (Commerce and Agriculture); and Oskan Efendi, an Armenian Deputy (Post and Telegraph) were announced in the press on November 3. However, these resignations had little impact for these men were neither Unionists nor people with public reputations. The resignation of Finance Minister Mehmed Cavid, which the press reported the next day, was a different matter. Cavid was, after all a Unionist of long standing belonging to Ta-

lat's faction; his departure suggested that the consensus within the CUP had broken down. That is why Unionist like Dr. Nazim had tried hard to persuade Cavid not to resign and had even used threats to intimidate him, though to no avail.¹

The resignations had no discernible impact on public opinion, if such a phenomenon even existed in the Ottoman Empire in 1914. Ahmed Emin Yalman, a witness to the era, wrote of a lack of any popular opposition to the war. The people, he noted, were not organized and had no means of voicing their grievances. Turkey was better off in this respect than the other belligerents. She had no organized labor movement, no political opposition, nor any organization representing high intellectual interests and ideas of peace.²

If there was no opposition to war in Istanbul, there was also no spontaneous chauvinism of the type witnessed in the capitals of some other belligerents in August 1914. Nationalism and chauvinism had to be manufactured, as the CUP soon realized. The Black Sea incident was partially motivated by this need: Russia, the aggressive giant to the north, could be more easily sold to the public as an enemy, and turned into a 'national' and the war even a 'religious' cause. Therefore, one of the first acts of the Committee was to organize a crowd to attack and destroy the Russian war memorial in the village of San Stefano –today's Yeşilköy– the symbol of Russian triumph and Ottoman-Muslim humiliation in the war of 1877-1878. The entire anti-Russian demonstration was filmed by army photographers and shown to the public; perhaps this was the first attempt by the Ottomans to use cinema as war propaganda.³

The entry of Ottomans into the war, untimely from the Empire's point of view, was dictated by the strategic needs of Germany and Austria. Istanbul was only a cog, though an important one, in the vast war machine operated from Berlin, and continued to be so until the end of the war. The Unionists understood this quite well and accepted their role without protest. This explains the timing of Turkey's entry: the Germans, having launched an offensive in Poland in order to relieve Russian pressure on their Austrian allies,

1 Cavid refused to stay in the cabinet, not because of Turkey's entry into war but because he had not been consulted on such a vital issue. However, despite his resignation, he remained *de facto* finance minister and was consulted on virtually every matter related to finance. See his diary in *Tanin*, 26 and 30 Nov. 1944.

2 Ahmed Emin [Yalman], *Turkey in the World War*, New Haven, 1930, 76.

3 Roni Margulies, "Ayastefanos'taki Rus Kilise Abidesi'nin Yıkılışı", *Toplumsal Tarih*, i, 1 January 1994, 40-42.

wanted the Ottomans to launch an attack in the Caucasus so as to tie down Russian troops. General Erich von Falkenhayn, an important policy maker, understood “the decisive importance of Turkey’s joining the struggle” – first as a barrier across munitions supply to Russia, and secondly as a distraction to the military strength of Britain and Russia. It was under German dictation that Turkey struck as early as mid-December against the Russians in the Caucasus. But if both these offensives [the Caucasus and Suez] were tactical failures, they were of great strategic value to Germany by pinning down Russian and British forces’.⁴

The Unionists were convinced, as were the other belligerents, that this would be a short war that would be decided in Europe, and that the Ottoman Empire needed to participate in the conflict so as not to be left out when the future of the world was being decided. Thus Hafiz Hakki Pasha, a prominent Unionist officer, told his men on the Caucasus front that they had to launch an offensive soon if Istanbul were to sit at the peace table in the spring of 1915.⁵

With the hope of an early, negotiated peace based on an inconclusive war, the Unionists tried to put the best possible face on the role they were playing. They talked of regaining Egypt, a province occupied by Britain since 1882, but over which Ottoman governments had never renounced their rights. These rights were regularly specified and enumerated in the *firmans* of investiture of the Khedives of Egypt.⁶ The grand vezierate of Said Halim, a member of the Egyptian ruling family, was designed to strengthen the claim; the appointment of his cousin Abbas Halim Pasha as Minister of Public Works in the war cabinet also helped to reinforce the Ottoman connection with Egypt as well as with the Arabs generally.⁷

By early November, the Ottoman war had acquired the character of a jihad or religious crusade against the Christian powers –England, France, and Russia– which dominated and exploited the world of Islam in Asia and Africa. The call for “Holy War” came in stages. First came the Şeyhülislam’s *fet-*

⁴ Captain B. H. Liddle Hart, *The Real War 1914-1918*, Boston and Toronto, n.d. [1960s?] 117; Fevzi Çakmak, *Büyük Harp’te Şark Cephesi Hareketleri: Şark Vilayetleri Kafkasya’da ve İran’da*, Ankara, 1936, 26.

⁵ Aziz Samih, *Büyük Harp’te Kafkas Cephesi Hatıraları*, İstanbul 1934, 9. In his memoir he wrote that Hafiz Hakki Pasha came to the Caucasus front with Bahaeddin Şakir; the latter was the leader of the *Teşkilat-i Mahsusa* (the Special Organization) the intelligence, propaganda, and paramilitary arm of the CUP.

⁶ *Sabah*, 5 Nov. 1914.

⁷ *Tanin*, 9 Nov. 1914. This appointment was also expected to compensate for the resignation of Süleyman al-Bustani, an Arab minister in the cabinet.

va or religious injunction on 7 November declaring that it was the sacred duty of all Muslims to fight against the enemies of the Sultan-Caliph. On 11 November followed an Imperial proclamation declaring a state of war against the Entente Powers and publicizing, once again, the Porte's version of the Black Sea incident.⁸ On Saturday 14 November a mammoth rally of an estimated 80,000 people in the capital's Fatih district, by the mosque of Sultan Mehmed, the Conqueror of Constantinople, was the culmination off this well-staged drama.

This rally was organized by the CUP and bodies affiliated with it like the Committee of National Defence and the Fleet Committee. To give the demonstration a popular image a variety of corporations belonging to trade and artisan organizations also participated. The meeting was given a religious character, beginning as it did with midday prayers and readings from the Quran in the Fatih mosque. There followed a religious-patriotic lecture by Mehmed Seyyid Bey, a reform-minded Islamist deputy who later advised Mustafa Kemal on establishing the republic and abolishing the Caliphate. Finally, there was a discourse given by an official from the Şeyhülislamate, the religious office of the state, on the Jihad injunctions. The rally then ended and crowds marched to the War Ministry, the Sublime Porte, and the German and Austrian embassies and heard speeches by Unionist leaders.⁹

It is worth noting that the ideology being promoted at this point was principally pan-Islamism and not Turkish nationalism, as is sometimes claimed. There was a growing awareness of nationalism among some Unionists manifested in the *Türk Yurdu* group around people like Yusuf Akçura, himself not a Unionist.¹⁰ This group, however articulate, still did not dominate the ideology of the regime. The reason for this was only partly pragmatic and had to do more with the consciousness of both the ruling elite as well as the mass of the people who had to be mobilized. The majority of the people in the empire were Muslims belonging to a variety of ethnic groups and therefore more likely to be swayed by an appeal to religion rather than na-

8 *Tanin*, 12 Nov. 1914; M. Larcher, *La Guerre Turque dans la Guerre Mondiale*, Paris, 1926, 45-7.

9 *Tanin*, 14 and 15 Nov. 1914. Another proclamation of Holy War signed by the Şeyhülislam, former Seyhülislams, and prominent ulema, was published in the press on 26 November. See *Tanin* for the "Beyanname-i Cihad". The paper used the designation 'Amir ul-Muminin' (Commander of the Faithful) to describe the Sultan, a designation used by early and classical Islamic rulers but not often used in modern times.

10 *Türk Yurdu* was the journal that promoted Turkish nationalism. It began publication in 1911 and was edited by Yusuf Akçura, a Kazan Turk from Russia.

tional solidarity. The charisma of the Ottoman dynasty, which united the Sultanate and Caliphate, also facilitated this appeal to religion. Moreover, the appeal to Islamic solidarity was expected to be effective not only in the Arab provinces and North Africa, but also in Iran, Afghanistan, and India, regions where the Germans and the Unionists hoped to foment rebellions against their enemies.

A group of Indian nationalist revolutionaries was brought from Berlin to Istanbul for this purpose. They arrived in September 1914 and one of their leaders, Har Dayal, tried to persuade Enver Pasha to abandon pan-Islamism and adopt nationalism as the ideology of struggle against the Entente. Har Dayal's idea was dangerous for it would have encouraged national movements within the Ottoman Empire as well. Therefore Enver and the Germans dismissed Har Dayal's idea and he returned to Berlin soon after.¹¹

Pan-Islamism remained the dominant mode of propaganda until, at least, the Arab rebellion of June 1916. Perhaps the resignation of Said Halim as Grand Vezir in January 1917 symbolized the final shift from Islam towards Ottoman patriotism. The Unionists placed great hopes in their pan-Islamic schemes, expecting their propaganda to foment rebellions in places like Egypt. However, Enver's appeal to India, though published in a pan-Islamic paper, was aimed at Indians –Hindus and Sikhs– and not just Muslims; and one senses the influence of men like Har Dayal:

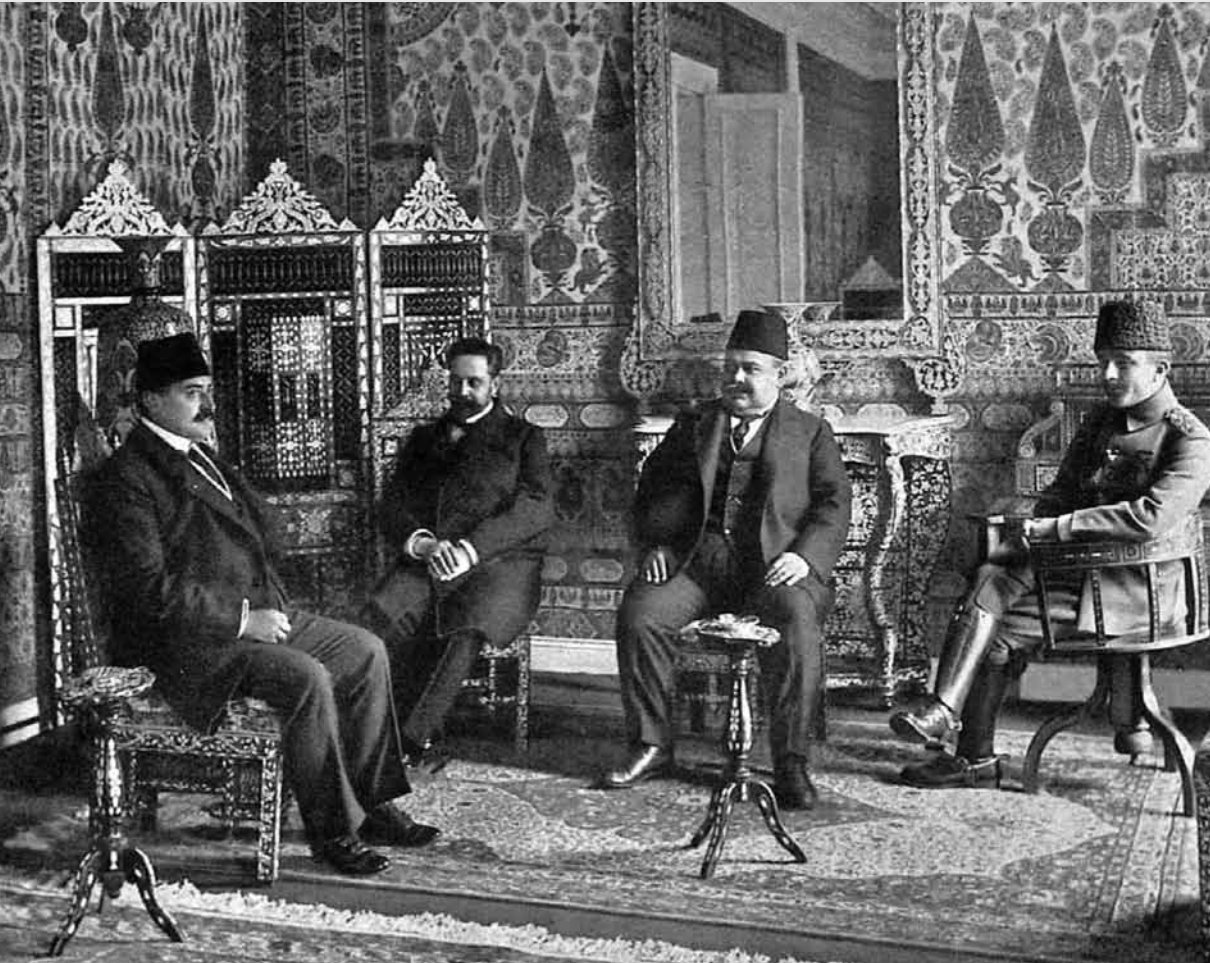
This is the time that the *Ghadar* [rebellion] should be declared in India, the magazines of the English should be plundered, their weapons looted and they should be killed therewith. The Indians number 32 *crores* [320 millions] at the best and the English are only 2 *lakhs* [200,000]; they should be murdered; they have no army. The Suez Canal will shortly be closed by the Turks, but he who will die and liberate the country and his native land will live forever. Hindus and Mohommedans, you are both soldiers of the army and you are brothers, and this low, degraded English is your enemy; you should become Ghazis by declaring Jihad and by combining with your brothers murder the English and liberate India.¹²

¹¹ On the Indian nationalist revolutionaries in Istanbul, see Feroz Ahmad, "1914-1915 Yıllarında İstanbul'da Hint Milliyetçi Devrimcileri", *Yapıt*, no. 6, Aug.-Sept. 1984, 5-15. Hew Strachan, *The First World War: vol. 1, To Arms*, Oxford and New York, 2001, 694ff; Peter Hopkirk, *On Secret Service East of Constantinople: The Plot to Bring Down the British Empire*, London, 2006. See also articles 'Dayal, Har' and 'Hindustan (newspaper)' in 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War.

¹² *Cihan-i Islam*, 20 Nov. 1914 given in Government of India, Sedition Committee Report, Calcutta, 1918, 169.

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1918: Year of Hope and Despair



The Unionists were now hopeful about the outcome of the negotiations as well as the war. Britain was no longer as confident as she had been, which seemed evident from Lloyd George's speech at Caxton Hall on January 5. The speech was moderate in tone. He declared that the Entente was not waging a war of aggression against the German people; nor were they fighting to destroy Austria-Hungary or "to deprive Turkey of its capital or of the rich and renowned lands of Asia Minor and Thrace which are predominantly Turkish in race". But he noted that the subject lands of Turkey –Armenia, Arabia, Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia– were "entitled to a recognition of their separate national condition".¹ The Entente had abandoned the idea of expelling the Turks from Istanbul and on January 8 President endorsed these ideas.

The difference between Lloyd George and the 14 Points was that Lloyd George 'was careful not to utter the term self-determination with regard to Ottoman territories' whereas Wilson spoke with less precaution. This difference however, revealed no fundamental conflict. In Balfour's estimation, "President Wilson did not seriously mean to apply the formulation of [self-determination] outside Europe. He meant no 'civilized' communities should remain under the heel of other 'civilized' communities. As to the politically inarticulate peoples, he would probably not say more than that their true interest

¹ A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, London, 2002, 195; Harry Howard, *The Partition of Turkey: A Diplomatic History 1913-1923*, New York, 1966.

should prevail as against exploitation by conquerors”.² Journalists like Yunus Nadi, writing in *Tasvir-i Efkar* (4 January 1918) saw significance in the current discussions at Brest-Litovsk, especially the question of self-determination. If applied to the Ottoman Empire it would have serious consequences.

Ahmed Ağaoğlu, an Azeri from Russian Azerbaijan, took the lead in discussing developments at Brest-Litovsk. He followed the negotiations closely and argued that though a general peace might not be in the offing a separate peace with Russia must be pursued. He viewed the pan-German movement with mistrust because it would neglect Ottoman interests in order to fulfill its own ambitions, and even endanger negotiations in favor of war. Such journalists were willing to move the negotiations from occupied territory to a neutral venue like Stockholm or Copenhagen, if the Russian delegation wanted.

The press opposed the idea of self-determination for the Ottoman Empire unless England was willing to give up India, Egypt, and her African colonies.

Hilal noted on 6 January that the conference had been interrupted because the Russians had wanted to invite the Entente powers to participate. While the Central Powers agreed, the Entente was not receptive. Ağaoğlu commented on the Soviet offer to the Entente allies to discuss the terms of peace and how England and France had responded in the negative. Both countries, especially France, had forbidden their socialists from going to Stockholm to attend the conference. The Ottoman foreign minister, Halil Bey was hopeful that peace would soon be concluded between Russia and the allies and the “road leading to universal peace would soon be opened, despite the crisis in the Entente”. Peace with Russia, concluded Ağaoğlu, would shake the very foundations of the Entente and every effort of Lloyd George and Clemenceau would not be able to arrest the march of peace.

For the next two days (7-8 January), *Hilal* continued to discuss Russia’s request to shift the site of the peace negotiations to neutral Stockholm. But Ağaoğlu rejected this request arguing that Stockholm would be dangerous because of Entente intrigue and he urged the Bolsheviks to make peace before they were overthrown.

On 8 January, the conservatives and the pan-Germans were soundly rebuked for rejoicing at the interruptions of the negotiations. “Count Hertling and others should never forget that the common interests of the

2 Howard, *Partition*, 202; John Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk - The Forgotten Peace March 1918*, London, 1966, 144-7.

Quadruple Alliance are, and must remain, above party interests. They ought to perceive, above the interests of certain classes, the common interests of all the peoples who make up the Central Bloc”.

On the 9th, Ağaoğlu concluded that Copenhagen might well be a better location to hold the negotiations than Brest-Litovsk. He pointed out that the Porte had certain reservations while discussing peace proposals with the Soviets. She had made the acceptance of certain principles [self-determination] providing other belligerents, namely the Entente powers, accepted them as well. Their rejection of Russia’s invitation to the peace conference had altered the situation and freed the Porte from any engagements.

The Soviets could now conclude a bilateral peace treaty with Turkey and needed to work with the Allies to force the Entente to accept the principles they had outlined. The principle of self-determination threatened England and France rather than the Allies. The Germans became impatient and issued an ultimatum, stating that the discussions would take place at Brest-Litovsk or not at all. But Talat Pasha made a statement at the negotiations declaring that he did not attach much significance to the crisis. This kind of thing was to be expected.³

The major problem that the Unionists faced was reconciling their war aims with those of Germany and that proved an impossible task. Count Ottokar Czernin, who succeeded Count Istvan Burian as Vienna’s foreign minister, noted that on 23 December the Ottoman delegation

declared that they must insist on one thing, to wit, that Russian troops should be withdrawn from the Caucasus immediately on the conclusion of an agreement, a proposal to which the Germans would not agree, as this would obviously mean that they would have to evacuate Poland, Courland, and Lithuania at the same time, to which the Germans would never consent. After a hard struggle and repeated effort, we at last succeeded in persuading the Turks to give up their demand....⁴

In short, the Ottoman delegates were forced to accept the Russian occupation of their territory in eastern Anatolia so as in to permit Germany to continue occupying lands which had been part of the Russian Empire.

German interests always took priority in the negotiations even if that meant delaying the signing of the peace treaty which Istanbul needed so bad-

³ *Tanin*, January 8, 1918.

⁴ Count Ottokar Czernin, *In the World War*, London, 1919, 223.

ly. Ahmed Nesimi complained to Ambassador Johann Bernstorff about that on 23 February, but that made no difference to Berlin's behaviour.⁵

Istanbul was the subordinate partner, even a client, the role of which had always been to further German strategic and political interests in the war. When the German military high command wanted to pursue its expansionist policy at the expense of Russia, the Ottoman army was encouraged to advance into the Caucasus. Later, it was ordered to withdraw. The Turks objected to being manipulated in this manner and again protested to Ambassador Bernstorff in Istanbul. He noted in a dispatch: "Being allied to the Turks it is not easy for us to tell them that we consider them politically inferior and unworthy of any acquisition of territory...."⁶

During this period, Istanbul press's attitude towards Russia changed from day to day. In November and December 1917, the Bolsheviks had been glorified as an element of sanity in an insane world. By January 1918 they were patronized for their idealism and sometimes described as insane. They were praised for overthrowing Kerensky and the Constituent Assembly; but that is where their usefulness ended. New states were emerging out of old Russia and the Bolsheviks in no way represented them. They were to be congratulated for having dissolved Tsardom which had threatened Turkey, Germany, and Austria for centuries. It was more important for Turkey to make peace with these new states which would respect the national rights of others.

Early in February 1918, when peace with Russia was fast approaching, the Istanbul press again became friendly towards the Bolsheviks, the attitude being: whatever criticism one may make of the Bolsheviks, they were doing their best to bring the war to an end. In February, *Tanin* was even sympathetic to the internal problems of the Bolsheviks: "If it was easy for the Bolsheviks to conclude peace with us it was not easy for them to establish internal peace; civil war will continue of a long time in Russia. These problems will have a reaction for us; but we must be patient regarding Russia's internal affairs as have been regarding the question of war and peace".⁷ On the same day *Hilal* was bewildered by the Soviet approach to peacemaking. But it wrote that the approach was sincere because the Bolsheviks had given orders to demobilize and the peace treaty was a mere technicality.

5 Johann Bernstorff, *Memoirs of Count Bernstorff*, New York, 1936, 226-7. That is to say if Ambassador sent Ahmed Nesimi's complaint to Berlin!

6 *Ibid*, 233. Letter to Stumm, Undersecretary of State for foreign affairs in Berlin.

7 "İkinci Sulh" (Second Peace), *Tanin*, February 12, 1918.