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The Ottoman Road to War in 1914

Why did the Ottoman Empire enter the First World War in late October 1914, months after the war's devastations had become clear? Were its leaders "simple-minded," "below-average" individuals, as the doyen of Turkish diplomatic history has argued? Or, as others have claimed, did the Ottomans enter the war because War Minister Enver Pasha, dictating Ottoman decisions, was in thrall to the Germans and to his own expansionist dreams? Based on previously untapped Ottoman and European sources, Mustafa Aksakal's dramatic study challenges this consensus. It demonstrates that responsibility went far beyond Enver, that the road to war was paved by the demands of a politically interested public, and that the Ottoman leadership sought the German alliance as the only way out of a web of international threats and domestic insecurities, opting for an escape whose catastrophic consequences for the empire and seismic impact on the Middle East are felt even today.

MUSTAFA AKSAKAL is Assistant Professor in the Department of History, American University, Washington, DC. His dissertation won the Bayard and Cleveland E. Dodge Memorial Prize for Best Dissertation in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton.

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For my parents

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Author's note

Is it Istanbul or Constantinople? This is a question that may prove vexing to the uninitiated reader, who would be well within her right not to stop there but to ask further. Is it Turkey or Ottoman Empire, Porte or Sublime Porte, Turks or Ottomans, Middle East or Near East, or even the politically neutral eastern Mediterranean? There seems to be no convention without its own set of pitfalls. Historians working in European history have remained true to the parlance of the period, and they have stuck to “Constantinople,” “Turkey,” “the Porte,” “Turks,” and “the Near East.” For historians working in Ottoman history and with Ottoman Turkish language sources, however, this usage, by definition, represents European and, worse, imperialist perspectives. Historians working with Ottoman sources point out that the usage inside the “Well-Protected Domains” (*Memalik-i Mahruse*) was quite different. It was the Family of Osman (*Al-i Osman*), and later the Sublime Ottoman State (*Devlet-i Âliye-i Osmaniye*), not Turkey, and not an “empire,” that governed the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual society of Ottomans, not Turks.¹ Its highest offices were accessed through the famous Exalted Gate or Sublime Porte (*Bab-ı Âli*).

And yet, even in this usage the Ottomanist must concede deficiencies. In its own international correspondence, written mostly in French, the state itself used “Constantinople” and “Turquie.” In the nineteenth century it insisted on being referred to as an empire with an emperor, as in “Sa Majesté Impériale le Sultan” and “Sa Majesté le Sultan Empereur des Ottomans,” on par with European powers. Its own paper money designated the issuer as “Banque Impériale Ottomane.”² Much more important, it seems anachronistic to speak of an “Ottoman government”

¹ See the thoughtful discussion on the occasion of the Ottoman Empire’s seven hundredth anniversary celebration in Christoph K. Neumann, “Devletin Adı Yok – Bir Amblemin Okunması [The State Has No Name – The Reading of an Emblem],” *Cogito* 19 (Summer 1999): 269–83.

² Ibid.

and an “Ottoman cabinet” in 1914 when the major players had explicitly repudiated “Ottomanism” and were set on constructing a government by and for the Turks, and when major dailies and books freely used “Turks” (*Türkler*) and “Turkey” (*Türkiye*). And if Turkish-speakers referred to the capital as Istanbul among a variety of names, about half of the population spoke other languages and used different names. The Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal undertook an official name change from Constantinople to Istanbul in 1930.

Since labeling and categories are no trivial matter in reconstructing decision-making, perceptions, fears, and hopes, I have tried to offer the necessary nuance without also adding muddle; otherwise, I have used the following, inadequate conventions: Ottomans and Ottoman Empire, Istanbul and the Porte, and the Near East. Where I have cited Ottoman published (primary) works I have sought to provide translations of titles in the notes and bibliography. For Ottoman dates, whether expressed in the lunar *hicri* or the solar *rumi* calendars, I have included Gregorian equivalents.

Abbreviations

A.VRK:	Sadaret Evrakı, papers of the Grand Vezirate
ATASE:	Archives of the Turkish General Staff, Ankara
BA-MA:	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, German Federal Military Archives, Freiburg i.Br.
BA-B:	Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, German Federal Archives, Berlin-Lichterfelde
BDH:	Birinci Dünya Harbi, First World War
BDOW:	<i>British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914</i>
BEO.NGG:	Bab-ı Âli Evrak Odası, Nezaretler Gelen-Giden, Document Office of the Sublime Porte, Incoming and Outgoing Correspondence
BOA:	Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Ottoman Archives of the Turkish Prime Ministry, Istanbul
GP:	<i>Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914</i>
MMZC:	<i>Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi</i> , Proceedings of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies
MV:	Meclis-i Vükelâ Mazbataları, Decisions of the Ottoman Cabinet
IBZI:	<i>Die Internationalen Beziehungen im Zeitalter des Imperialismus</i>
PA/AA:	Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Political Archives of the Foreign Office, Berlin
RM:	Reichsmarine, German Imperial Navy
TTK:	Türk Tarih Kurumu Arşivi, Archives of the Turkish Historical Society, Ankara

Glossary

Names in parentheses indicate the individual's full name, even though it was not commonly used. Surnames were introduced in Turkey in 1934.

Auswärtiges Amt, the German Foreign Office, located in Berlin
Bey, title designating high civil or military rank, notable status, or “gentleman”

(Ahmed) Cemal, pasha, 1872–1922, born on Midilli (Mytilene), Navy Minister 1914–18, II Army Commander 1914, IV Army Commander 1914–17

CUP, the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress (*Osmanlı İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), originally formed in 1889 as the Ottoman Union Society at the Royal Medical Academy by four medical students, two ethnic Kurds, one Albanian, one Circassian; the CUP emerged as the leading Young Turk organization and its leaders controlled the government during 1913–18

Enver (İsmail), pasha, 1882–1922, born in Istanbul, War Minister 1914–18

Giers, Mikhail N., Russian ambassador in Istanbul 1912–14

Grand Vezir, *sadr-ı azam*, the first minister in the Ottoman cabinet

Grey, Sir Edward, British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 1905–16

Halil, bey, 1874–1948, born in Milas on the Aegean, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies 1914–15, Foreign Minister 1915–17; later took the surname Menteşe

Jagow, Gottlieb von, German Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 1913–16

Pasha, highest title awarded by the sultan to civil and military officials
(Mehmed) Said Halim, pasha and prince, 1863–1921, born in Cairo, Grand Vezir 1913–17 and Foreign Minister 1913–15

Sazonov, Sergei D., Russian Foreign Minister 1910–16

Sublime Porte (Bab-ı Âli), central offices of the Ottoman government in Istanbul including those of the grand vezirate, the foreign ministry,

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and the cabinet; diplomats and journalists writing in European languages often used “Porte” as shorthand for the entire empire and its government

(Mehmed) Talat, pasha, 1874–1921, born in Edirne/Adrianople, Interior Minister 1909–11 and 1913–18, also Finance Minister 1914–17 and Grand Vezir 1917–18

Maps

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