

# FROM ENEMIES TO ALLIES TURKEY AND BRITAIN, 1914-1952

## CONFERENCE REPORT

The British Institute at Ankara research project, From Enemies to Allies: Turkey and Britain 1914-1952 held its inaugural workshop, investigating Anglo-Turkish engagement during the First World War, on 1-2 April 2016 in partnership with the Uluslararası Stratejik Araştırma Kurumu in Ankara.

One of the objectives of the workshops was to bring policy makers and historians together, and accordingly the audience included diplomats from the South Sudan, Somali, Thailand, Peru, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Turkey, military officers, and numerous academics among more than 70 listeners.

The conference was opened by former Turkish ambassador to the United Kingdom and president of USAK, Özdem Sanberk, who made reference to twists and turns of Anglo-Turkish relations while emphasising their continued importance and expressing his continued optimism about the at times challenged relationship between the two countries.



The first panel dealt with aspects of Anglo-Ottoman relations on the outbreak of the war. Camille Cole, from Yale University, presented part of her doctoral research on transport and infrastructure on the Tigris, where British and British Indian companies and engineers played an ambiguous role as both agents of Ottoman modernisation and British imperial aspirations. Piro Rexhepi, an incoming fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of

Religious and Ethnic Diversity, examined how pan-Islamists connected British India and Ottoman Albania, where a war time pro-Ottoman uprising frustrated Allied plans for the new state. Ambassador Altay Cengizer, the director general of policy planning at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a published historian, argued that the Ottoman empire had no choice but to

enter the war on the side of the Central Powers, an issue that would be debated throughout the conference. Cengizer made his case on the basis of readings of diplomatic exchanges with Britain, Russia, Germany in the summer of 1914, and concurred in the CUP assessment that the Entente offer of territorial integrity could not be trusted given Britain and France's promises to reward Russia and potential Balkan allies.

Richard Moore, the current British ambassador to Turkey made a short speech recounting his meeting with some of the last surviving veterans of the Gallipoli campaign and elucidated some of the complexities of empire and resistance through reference to his family's history of both anti-imperialist activism and services to the state.

The evening keynote lecture was delivered by Eugene Rogan, whose recently published "The Fall of the Ottomans: the Middle East during the First World War, 1914-1920" is perhaps the most comprehensive regional study of the war. Rogan elucidated the similarity of experiences in the Ottoman and British trenches, drawing on the diaries and letters of the soldiers of both empires fighting in Gallipoli and Mesopotamia.

The second day of the conference moved forward chronologically to deal with the war and its immediate aftermath. Sevtap Demirci of Bogazici university provided a useful overview of the Ottoman road to war and the formative clash between the British and Ottoman Empires at Gallipoli, echoing Altay Cengizer's emphasis on the inevitability of Ottoman participation in the conflict. Turning to Syria and Egypt, M. Talha Çiçek,



Newton Fellow of the British Academy at SOAS and assistant professor at Istanbul Medeniyet University, elaborated on how the call to jihad was used to motivate Ottoman Muslim soldiers in Syria in preparation for an attack across the Suez Canal, which Çiçek claimed to have been a genuine plan for invasion, rather than the "exploratory offensive" that it was defended as after its failure. Çiçek's research shows how Ottoman religious propaganda became an important means to counteract the dread that many in the province felt at the outset of the conflict, a point raised in Eugene Rogan's previous lecture, and reveals Ottoman commitment to the concept of jihad that others have dismissed as a German imposition. Ayhan Aktar, professor at Istanbul Bilgi University, showed how a British official history that sought to downplay Ottoman successes in the Dardanelles succeeded in shaping Turkish accounts of the sinking of the Battleship Bouvet in subsequent decades, until underwater investigations of the wreck and his own research revealed the true cause of its sinking. Warren Dockett, a research fellow at the University of Cambridge, demonstrated the durability and depth of Winston Churchill's relationship with Ottoman and Turkish elites and his affection for the country, revealing a more complex and nuanced understanding of Churchill's views of the Ottoman Empire.

Charles Laderman from the University of Cambridge examined the decision by the United States not to declare war on the Ottoman Empire during World War One, exploring the extent to which President Woodrow Wilson's suspicions of Allied, particularly British, motives in the Near East

coloured his diplomacy and how the U.S. government, supported by the American missionary lobby, withstood pressure from its domestic critics, led by Theodore Roosevelt, for an American-Ottoman war. Selçuk Esenbel, professor emeritus at Boğazici University, then illustrated the important role played by Japanese representatives, another British ally that nonetheless remained neutral towards the Ottoman Empire, in mediating relations with the defeated Ottoman government and providing a channel through which to enter discussions with the resurgent Turkish national movement in Anatolia.



David S. Katz, professor at Tel Aviv University, spoke about Arnold J. Toynbee, whose relief work saved many lives and whose newspaper articles helped push public opinion in favour of Turkey. It was also on his way home, travelling the Orient Express, that Toynbee had the idea of how to organize would become his famous *A Study of History*, the dozen volumes which made him a household name throughout the English-speaking world

and put him on the cover of *Time* magazine, crowned by the popular press as the greatest historian of his day. Matthew Ghazarian a doctoral student at Columbia University, and Ozan Arslan, professor at Izmir University of Economics, both presented on the Caucasus, one of the most complex theatres of the late war, where Bolshevik, White Russian, Ottoman, British, Armenian and Georgian forces variously held and lost ground. Arslan provided a detailed account of Ottoman expansion into the space ceded by post-revolutionary Russia and how ambitions in Central Asia, like those in Egypt discussed by Çiçek, were supported through sectarian propagandising. Ghazarian showed how control of the region's important oil resources drove events if in a rather unexpected way, with the obstruction of exports rather than the extraction of resources seeming to motivate imperial policies.

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