

## **The Young Turks and the Ottoman Nationalities: Armenians, Greeks, Albanians, Jews, and Arabs, 1908-1918**

*Feroz Ahmad*

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This volume, short and rich in primary source material, focuses on the relationship between the Ottoman central government (Istanbul) and the empire's various nationalities during the fateful 1908-18 period. Istanbul's struggle to address enormous political and military challenges, European involvement, and the rise of nationalism and ethnic/religious resentments are duly covered. The book is well organized with a dedicated section for each nationality. Except for the Greek and Armenian struggles through WWI, which is covered in a single chapter, each nation's history is covered in two periods: 1908-14 and 1914-18 (except the Albanians). Ahmad impartially re-constructs these nationalities' history in order to detail all aspects of the challenges that they faced and posed to Ottoman governance.

In the chapter on the Armenians, Ahmad discusses the political interactions of such Armenian organizations as Dashnak with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and their coalitions with various political groups. The Kurdish-Armenian "land question" tensions, which dated from the Sultan Abdulhamid period, continued to rise. Ahmad's portrayal also gives us a glimpse of British and French involvement in the Armenian community's issues. Russia's policy would change in 1912 from one of keeping good relations with the CUP to supporting the Armenians and Greeks against Istanbul. The Balkan Wars and the Ottoman defeats revealed its vulnerabilities as well as the weakness of the CUP's centralization policies.

Istanbul was aware of the problems in Anatolia, especially between the Kurds and the Armenians, and understood the necessity of resolving the prob-

lems; however, it was equally incapacitated to provide a remedy. Increasing Russian involvement, such as encouraging the Kurds in eastern Anatolia to become bolder, aggravated the situation. While the Kurds initially had the upper hand in armed violence, over time and especially after 1913, the Armenians began responding with arms. The CUP reform attempts to satisfy Armenian demands led to more Kurdish violence and, in return, more armament of the Armenians. In an attempt to advance the Armenian reform, Istanbul appointed two Christian European inspectors-general to govern eastern Anatolia's Armenian-populated provinces; however, this ended on the eve of WWI.

The Greek minority did not develop a cohesive nationalist movement, but it did play a role in the political rivalries of post-1908 constitutional regime by seeking to restore their rights and privileges as the Greek Orthodox *millet*. The Balkan War and especially the influx of Muslim refugees dramatically increased Greek-Muslim tensions. Communal relations continued to sour after the war as Muslims boycotted Greek businesses and the Muslims who had remained in the Balkans were persecuted by their new Christian rulers. The Orthodox patriarch took a stronger position of petitioning Istanbul in defense of the Greek minority, whereas the CUP's primary concern was to maintain social order and peace. Greece's occupation of the islands and the refugee problem kept tensions high and the boycott continued, despite the CUP's attempt to end it. Ahmad successfully portrays the government's weakness outside of Istanbul, relating that provincial governments and the eastern region's tribal structure were practically free to do as they wished in their local affairs.

The Albanians' nationalist struggle revealed itself on the matter of alphabet. While the more reformist Albanians preferred a switch to the Latin alphabet, Istanbul viewed this as an attempt to secede. Opposition to centralization and the imposition of new taxes resulted in the 1909 uprising, which only calmed down after major government concessions, including allowing the Latin alphabet to be used and a general amnesty for the rebels. Further negotiations brought no permanent resolution of Albanian demands, and the nationalists declared an independent Albania after the outbreak of the Balkan War in 1912.

Focusing on CUP-Armenian relations during WWI, Ahmad notes that the downturn came only in January 1915, due to the increasing pressure of war on both the eastern and the western fronts. He argues that the Armenian rebellions in Van and Zeytun were nationalist uprisings seeking liberation. While the government labeled these as treachery, "that is not how historians today ought to interpret such struggles" (p. 80). Ahmad emphasizes the significance of the Entente's Gallipoli landing as regard the CUP's passage of the Tempo-

rary Relocation Law, which did not specify any ethnic group. The battle for the Dardanelles caused so much fear in Istanbul that preparations were made to move the imperial seat to Edirne or Konya.

Ahmad successfully argues that the Relocation Law targeted the Greeks of western Anatolia as much as it did the Armenians. While admitting that atrocities did occur during the relocation process, he points out several factors that need to be kept in mind here: Istanbul's weakness in enforcing its orders in most provinces, the existence of a few local governors (of Kutahya, for instance) who protected the Armenians, the role played by German generals in commanding the army and decision-making processes, the Russian army's advances, and the general expectation of a quick end to the war that would allow the deportees' immediate return.

Ahmad reemphasizes the role of the Gallipoli campaign on the Armenian relocation, arguing that as the British retreated and the fear of an Entente victory faded by the end of 1915, the pressure on the Armenians was also weakened and relief efforts were initiated. Although Russian expansion continued in the eastern provinces, which gave hope to Armenian nationalists, the Bolshevik revolution also enabled the return of the Ottoman armies and the Armenians lost whatever claim they might have on eastern Anatolia. Ahmad points out that as Russia retreated, the Armenian regiments massacred the local Turkish population. He also argues the relations between Istanbul and the Armenians were improving after the Batum Treaty was signed. Despite continuing tensions following the Mudros Armistice, Ahmad cites reports of Armenians peacefully returning to their homes in Anatolia.

While Ahmad's stance on the Armenian issue would certainly anger the "genociders," his arguments, all based on primary source material (as selective it may be), raises new potential perspectives in understanding this complex and very contentious issue. Greek animosity and the Dardanelles campaign need to be considered as aggravating factors that led the CUP to haphazardly implement extreme measures in a very disorganized, and in many instances inhumane, way, a reality that gave way to the massacre of Armenian civilians in Kurdish revenge attacks or by the unendurable road conditions of forced exile.

Ahmad covers the Jewish minority in the late Ottoman period. According to him, the Jews differed from the other nationalities because they had no political nationalist aspirations. In fact, some prominent CUP members belonged to this community. He narrates the careers of several of them to show that the Jews were, overall, committed supporters of Istanbul under the CUP. They were not ardent supporters of Zionism and served in the military, where they proved to be just as dedicated as the Muslim soldiers. Although Zionism remained a problem for Istanbul, Ottoman Jews supported

the official anti-Zionist stance and promoted Ottoman interests in Europe throughout WWI.

Arabs did not constitute separate millet, but were divided along religious lines. The post-1908 constitutional regime brought a sense of democracy by redefining voting districts and representation. Ahmad argues that what emerged from this was not Arab nationalism, but localism. Local issues became arguments for political disputes and rivalries. He refutes the arguments that Arab nationalism arose as a response to the CUP's Turkification policies on the ground that the CUP did not have a strong control over governance during most of the 1908-18 period. Only in 1913, after the catastrophe of the Balkan Wars increasingly revealed its lack of control, did Istanbul accept major Arab nationalist demands for reform. Among these were official recognition of Arabic as the region's official language and language of education, and a stronger representation of Arabs in local and central governance. Ahmad points out that the CUP had steadily lost its political leverage in the Arab territories by the beginning of WWI, which caused deteriorating conditions and a further loss of authority there. Sherif Huseyin, the Ottoman governor of Makkah, only revolted after 1916 and with British support.

Ahmad insists that the breakup of the nationalities and the empire's disintegration must be viewed as these internal nations' struggle for independence and the decolonization of an empire. However, this argument ignores the role of European powers in establishing nationalist organizations, their unfulfilled promises of independence, and their incitement of nationalist uprisings. As exemplified in many instances, but especially in that of the Arabs, it is hard to argue for a widespread nationalist awakening and popular demand for independence among many of these nationalities. Ahmad points out detailed examples of Armenian cooperation with the CUP until WWI as well as Arab demands for more rights, not independence.

Overall, this book is a critical contribution to the historiography of the Young Turk period and the Ottoman Empire's final decade. Students of the Middle East and WWI will find a rich description of the tensions between the empire's nationalities and the CUP government. Scholars of the empire and the Middle East will find the insights that it brings to each nation's struggle and challenges, as well as the abundance of primary source material employed, very useful. This valuable addition to the literature is a must read for anyone with an interest in the Ottoman Empire, WWI, the Middle East, or any one of the empire's various nationalities.

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