

Overview – World War I in the Middle East

The Middle East played a major role in World War I, and, conversely, the war was important in shaping the development of the modern Middle East. One might even say that World War I began and ended with Middle East-related conflicts. (The beginning, the event that formed the immediate cause of the war, was the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a group of Bosnian high school students in June 1914, and that assassination was a direct result of the long process of separating Balkan countries from the fading Ottoman Empire. The end, the last treaty arising from the war nearly five years after it ended, was the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, ending the conflict with Turkey that arose from the failed Treaty of Sevres in 1920 that was supposed to have ended World War I in the Middle East.) Since Middle Eastern issues are so important in World War I, and World War I is so important in understanding modern Middle Eastern history, isn't it surprising that U.S. teachers/students don't study very much about history of the war in that area of the world? (Could it be because most of the significant events in that area occurred without American involvement – mostly before and after the U.S. involvement in the war? Or could it be that we just have a European/American-centered view of the war?) Regardless, here is a brief overview of some of the events and issues of World War I in this key region of the world.

Middle Eastern issues and the origins of the war (why a group of Bosnian teenagers were gunning for an Austrian archduke and what that had to do with the Middle East – and a world war):

If you had been a European or American living in 1914 who was interested in foreign affairs, you would undoubtedly have been debating “the Eastern Question”: the future of the areas that still remained part of the Ottoman Empire. Every educated person living in 1914 knew that, after 600 years as a world power, the once great Ottoman Empire was struggling to adjust to changing times. Many people were calling it “the sick man of Europe” and questioning whether the sick man's death would lead to a major war among the European powers. Yet, people had been worrying about the Eastern Question for the past century and a half. Why was the issue an especially dangerous problem in 1914?

The answers for this are complicated, but three factors in particular are relevant to this discussion. Each of them involves the Great Powers of Europe: Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. (Remember that the U.S. was not yet considered a “great power.”)

First, these powerful European countries were engaged in a race for foreign colonies – in order to expand their economic and political influence. The declining Ottoman Empire contained many areas that they all wanted to control: the Turkish Straits, for example, because of their strategic significance, the Arab lands because of their resources and location along the Mediterranean, and the Balkan Peninsula because of its location in Europe.

Second, two of the powers – Austria-Hungary and Russia – were multi-national empires in a time in which modern nationalism was making their political structure and organization seem very outdated. The Austrian Empire was particularly threatened by Serbian nationalism in the Balkans because Austria-Hungary contained millions of people who spoke some dialect of the Serbo-Croatian language, and some of them were talking of breaking away and uniting them with Serbia. This possibility worried the Austrian leadership, who then wanted to take over formerly Ottoman territories in Europe, like Bosnia. (This was not because the Austrians really wanted more Serbian-speaking people in their empire, but because they *didn't* want Serbia to have those lands and become more powerful.) Russia, of course, priding itself on being the protector of Orthodox Christians, backed up Serbia and its interests. The result: any problem in the Balkans would easily lead to a bigger war between Russia and Austria.

This brings us to the third factor: the newly consolidated alliance system, pitting Austria, Germany, and Italy, on one side, against Great Britain, France, and Russia, on the other. This meant that if Austria were to go to war with Russia, Germany and Italy would back Austria, while Great Britain and France would rush to the defense of their ally, Russia. In other words, everyone knew in 1914 that a small spark could ignite a really big war.

Another thing that “everyone” knew in 1914 was that war was coming and that it would probably begin in the Balkans. Actually, there had been almost continuous conflict in the Balkans for just over a century. Yet far from lessening, the conflicts just seemed to be intensifying in the early years of the 20th century. In 1908 Austria had formally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, a previously Ottoman province that it had occupied since the 1870s. This act had enraged nationalists throughout the Balkans and intensified the hatred between Austria and Serbia. Then, there were the two Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, which involved several of the small Balkan countries and the Ottoman Empire. (Later, some people would dub World War I the “Third Balkan War.”)

By 1914 Bosnia was a center of unrest, especially among the small educated part of the population, most of whom were young people in their teens and twenties. (Many Bosnians were illiterate, so high school students – and the few young people studying at universities in other countries – were the intellectual elite of Bosnia.) These young people wanted political and social change – and they wanted change FAST! The Young Bosnia movement, a loose collection of secret societies, sprang up in local high schools – and its members sought connections with like-minded South Slavic (“Yugoslav”) young people within Austria-Hungary and Serbia. (Note that all Bosnians speak a dialect of the same language as the Serbs, and Bosnians of the Orthodox Christian religion, then the largest group in Bosnia, even considered themselves to *be* Serbs.) With no army or government of their own, these youthful revolutionaries knew that change could only come about through an intervention of powerful countries like Russia or Britain. In their view, the only way to get this intervention would be in the event of a crisis. Many of them believed that the quickest way to provoke a crisis was through political assassination – assassinating an Austrian political leader would lead to Austrian intervention in Bosnia, which would lead to Russian intercession in Bosnia’s behalf. It seemed to make perfect sense,

especially when news got out that the heir to the Austrian throne would parade through the streets of Sarajevo on a day that would particularly offend the Serbs: the anniversary of the day on which they had lost their independence to Ottoman conquerors. (You can imagine that much of the population of Bosnia would be outraged to see a parade by *another* conqueror on that day of mourning!)

The assassination of Franz Ferdinand was not the work of one – or even two – students: it was a conspiracy that directly involved dozens of people and indirectly involved many, many more. Six young people (five of whom were high school students between the ages of 16 and 19) went to the parade carrying weapons and intending to kill the royal visitor; others assisted or at least knew about the plot; a number of officials from Serbia (one of whom was a member of the government of Serbia – though he was acting without the authorization of his government) supplied the weapons and other assistance.

No one was surprised that the assassination took place and that it led to a war! However, it was a great shock to the students involved in the plot – and to most other people at the time – that the war turned out to be so long and so incredibly bloody. The killing of the archduke and his wife set off a chain of events: Austria attacked Serbia; Russia backed Serbia; the alliance system came into play pulling Britain and France in on Russia's side and Germany in on Austria's. Not to be outdone, the Ottoman Empire joined in too – on the side of the Central Powers (Germany, Austria). The Great War had begun.

The Middle East during the war (from military campaigns to hunting locusts, from an Arab revolt to the Armenian genocide):

The Middle East was directly involved in World War I, and so it was affected by the war in all aspects of life. The most immediate impact was on young men: Turks, Kurds, Armenians, Arabs and others fought as part of the Ottoman army. They fought against Russian troops along the northeastern border of the empire and against Anzac (Australian, New Zealand) troops in the Turkish straits (the great battle of Gallipoli). They fought British troops – from Great Britain itself and the British commonwealth – along with troops from various parts of the empire (India, Africa), that massed in Egypt and campaigned throughout the Arab lands (Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Arabia, Iraq). Although the Ottomans won a number of important battles (such as Gallipoli), they also lost a lot of men. In addition to combat, all the forces fighting in the Middle East – on both sides – struggled with disease (spread by war) and scarcity of water and supplies. Ottoman commanders, fighting to protect their own territory, also had to contend with local administrative issues, such as an infestation of locusts in Palestine.

In addition to all this, the Ottoman Empire – along with other multi-national empires such as its ally Austria-Hungary and its enemy Russia – found itself facing internal unrest from its national minorities. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain used Arab dissatisfaction with Ottoman rule to the advantage of the Allied cause – the “divide and conquer” approach. First, they made a deal with the Arabs. As early as 1915, Britain had opened negotiations with

Sharif Hussein of Saudi Arabia, promising Hussein that after the war, he would rule a large Arab country that would presumably include most of the lands between Persia and Egypt (including today's Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries). Hussein led a revolt, assisted by a young, Arabic-speaking British officer named T.E. Lawrence (later called "Lawrence of Arabia"). Neither man realized that the Western powers had no intention of honoring their commitments to the Arabs. As early as May 1916, France and Britain signed the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement in which they made plans to divide the Arab lands into French and British spheres of influence. Further, in 1917 the British signed the Balfour Declaration, indicating an acceptance of the idea of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. The inconsistency of these plans is obvious: within two years, the West had promised the territory of Palestine to three different parties: the Jews (then a small minority in Palestine), the Arabs (under Sharif Hussein), and the British!

Although the Ottoman Empire, throughout its long history, had had a generally good track record with regard to human rights (long-standing tolerance of its Jewish and Christian populations), the pressures of the world war and the rise of modern nationalism led to the worst kind of wartime abuse: genocide. Since the rise of nationalism, there had been tensions between the Ottoman government and the Armenian population, and sporadic persecutions of Armenians had occurred since the late 19th century. With the pressure of a world war, some members of the Ottoman government looked at the Armenians with increased distrust. After all, many Armenians lived near the Russian border (a combat zone), and because both Armenians and Russians were Christians, the Ottomans suspected that the Armenians might ally with the enemy of the Ottoman state. In 1915 Ottoman forces began rounding up Armenians, especially in the eastern part of the country. Between 1 and 1 ½ million Armenian men, women, and children died – either killed directly or marched across eastern Turkey and into the Syrian desert, where they died of disease and starvation. This is considered the first modern genocide in world history; unfortunately, it would not be the last.

The Middle East and the peace settlements after the war (division, foreign occupation, renewed war, population exchanges):

It must have been obvious even before the armistice ending the war was signed in November 1918 that the Ottoman Empire had lost the war. Its European territories had already been lost; its Arab territories were falling away; its population was exhausted – and depleted – by three wars over the last six years. However, the settlement that followed the war – the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 – was so harsh that it must have come as a shock to people in the Middle East.

The Treaty of Sevres was created mainly by Britain and France. (The U.S. had withdrawn from the international peace negotiations, while Russia had fallen into revolution and civil war.) Middle Eastern leaders were mostly excluded for the decision-making process.

According to the Treaty of Sevres, the Arab lands were separated from the Ottoman Empire, but that did not mean that Arab nationalists got the large, independent Arab state that

they expected. Except for the Kingdom of the Hijaz, which became independent (and several years later joined with other territories to become part of Saudi Arabia), the Arabs did not achieve real independence. Instead, France and Britain divided the region among themselves: the French declaring a “mandate” over Syria and Lebanon; Britain a mandate over Iraq and Palestine.

The Kurdish people were even more disappointed by the settlement. After some initial talk of creating a small Kurdish state (from territories that are now part of Turkey), plans for even a limited Kurdistan were soon scrapped. Kurdish lands were divided among Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Today, the Kurds are the largest group of people in the world without their own country.

It was in Turkey, however, that opposition to the Treaty of Sevres led to another war. The treaty was a totally unacceptable blow to Turkish nationalists. They might have accepted the fact that the treaty ended the Ottoman Empire and took away all its Arab territories (which must have seemed inevitable). However, they could never accept that the treaty divided Turkey itself. Greece, Italy, and France occupied sections of Turkey-proper, the Turkish Straits were put under international control, and France and Britain were considering giving large sections of territory to the Kurds in the southeast and the Armenians in the northeast. It was especially galling when Greek occupying forces marched in – after all, Greece had been under Ottoman rule, not the other way around!

The revolt against the Allies, which began even before the ink was dry on the Treaty of Sevres, became known in Turkey as the “War of Independence.” Led by Mustafa Kemal, later called “Atatürk,” the fighting caused the Allies to withdraw occupying forces from Anatolia. In 1923 the Treaty of Lausanne finally ended the last conflict that was part of the First World War. The borders of today’s Turkey came about as a result, to the bitter disappointment of Armenians and Kurds – and Greeks. The resulting population exchanges – forced expulsions of ½ million Turks (Muslims) from Greece and of 1 ½ million Greeks (Christians) from western Turkey – became part of the agreement, and this policy set an unfortunate precedent for future international settlements.

Aftermath:

The First World War would have a lasting effect on the Middle East. Millions died. In fact, after 11 years of warfare from the Balkan Wars through the Turkish War of Independence, so many young Turkish men died that in parts of Anatolia women outnumbered men by 5-1. Total Ottoman population losses may have reached 5 million people if one counts death in combat, death from disease (including the Spanish influenza), the Armenian genocide, and the expulsion of peoples during the Greek-Turkish population exchanges.

There were lasting political effects as well; one can even say that the roots of many contemporary conflicts in the Middle East go back to the Great War and the settlements that

came out of it. The ongoing enmity between Armenia and its neighbors Turkey and Azerbaijan can be traced directly back to the Armenian genocide and Turkey's refusal to acknowledge it. Over the past century, Kurdish unrest has been an ongoing issue in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, sometimes flaring into outright warfare, revolution, and even genocide (for example, Iraqi measures against its rural Kurdish population in the 1980s). Bloody civil wars in Lebanon and, most recently, in Syria – as well as conflicts in Iraq - are rooted in political and social issues that developed or were intensified during the mandate period that resulted from the First World War treaties. Finally, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, probably the greatest, most continuous source of unrest in the Middle East, has been greatly accelerated by wartime promises and post-war policies.

It is generally acknowledged that World War I was a transformative event in world history, possibly the single greatest catalyst for change on a global scale, marking the end of 19th century institutions and the beginning of a new era. This statement is especially true in the Middle East. Studying the Great War in that area of the world raises important military, social, political, and health issues that even one century later, continue to affect the world in which we live.