

END OF AN EPOCH

By Nermin Menemencioglu

Late in September 1918 the Grand Vizier Talât Pasha returned from a visit to Berlin deeply depressed. The mood in the German capital had been one of imminent defeat. Indeed, rather than urge their allies to produce a final effort, the Germans seemed anxious for Bulgaria and Turkey to seek an armistice, so that the ostensible reason for their plight should appear to be that these had abandoned the war.⁽¹⁾

This was precisely what Bulgaria was about to do. When the return train stopped at Sofia station, Talât Pasha was informed by both the Ottoman and the Bulgarian personalities awaiting him that the Bulgarian front had collapsed. The burly Grand Vizier reeled under the impact and exclaimed, 'I wish I had not lived to hear this news!' He was pale and confused on arrival in Istanbul, but managed to put off the journalists waiting for him with a joke or two before he went off, first to the offices of the Committee of Union and Progress and then to the Palace, to give the Sultan his report. 'All is over,' he confided to his intimate friends on the way.

On the 2nd of October Fethi (Okyar), Minister of the Interior, resigned from the cabinet. The entire cabinet presented its resignation on the 8th.

Reluctantly bowing to the inevitable, Enver Pasha (for he, perhaps alone, still had moments of optimism) sent the army command and different units a message informing them, as Chief of the General Staff of the Army Command (a change introduced in his title by Vahdetin, who did not wish to share that of Commander-in-Chief with anyone) of the end of the war. At the same time he sent out a farewell message as retiring Minister of War. Some higher officers were moved to reply,

assuring him of their loyalty. In spite of everything his prestige remained high, especially with those officers whom he had promoted in carrying out his army reforms, but also with the comrades of his Military Academy days and of his Union and Progress activities.

The dashing young 'Freedom hero' about whom the nation had been singing patriotic songs since the revolution of 1908 became Minister of War on 3 January 1914 by the simple expedient of announcing to the then Grand Vizier Prince Sait Halim Pasha that he wanted the job. 'Are you not a bit young?' asked the startled Grand Vizier, and when he saw the confirmation of the news in a newspaper Sultan Mehmet Reşat is said to have exclaimed, 'He is much too young!' To be sure the daring young man knew that he was backed by many officers and by members of the CUP, though it is not certain that Talât, then Minister of the Interior, was enthusiastic about the idea. At the same time he was promoted to the rank of Pasha, and a few days later was appointed Chief of Staff and Vice-Generalissimo of the army (the Sultan holding the rank of Generalissimo theoretically).

The only person who seemed surprised at these lightning promotions was General Otto Liman von Sanders, head of the German military mission which, after length negotiations, had had its contract signed in November 1913 and had arrived in Istanbul on 14 December.

The mission was assigned offices in the War Ministry, where Izzet Pasha was an old friend of von Sanders. Early in January Izzet Pasha did not appear at his own office and sent von Sanders word that he was 'ill'. The German general went to visit him at his residence the next morning and learned that he had had to resign.

Late the next day von Sanders was visited at his office in the Ministry by Enver, resplendent in a general's uniform, who informed him that he was the new Minister of War. (2)

'Soon friction arose between Enver and myself,' comments von Sanders.

Enver straight away began the wide-sweeping reform of the army expected of him. Older officers were replaced by young men, and those constituting a possible danger to the Unionists by men in favour of them. Over a thousand officers were involved in these changes.

Apart from rejuvenating the army command, the idea was to separate it completely from politics, a problem persistent^{ly} present in Turkish public life. Those officers who insisted on playing a political role were to be ruthlessly eliminated from the army. Curiously enough, the person effecting these changes was himself so politically active that in the war years he came to be considered a member of the 'Triumvirate' which exercised dictatorial powers in the country. His name was generally cited in second place, Talât, Enver and Cemal, but he may well have been the most important of them, thanks to his control of the army.

On March 5 1914 Enver married a princess of the Ottoman dynasty, to whom he had been officially engaged for some time: Naciye Sultan (3) daughter of Süleyman Efendi, the sixth son of Abdül Mecit, and therefore the niece of Abdül Hamit, Mehmet Reşat and the heir to the throne Vahdettin - all older sons of the same monarch. Enver thus became a damat, a son-in-law of the reigning family. His bride Naciye Sultan was only fourteen at the time of the marriage, a rather spoilt young girl who was accustomed to have her every whim satisfied and to spend money extravagantly.

The engagement had been based only on the exchange of photographs. The nikâh, signing of the marriage deed, also took place without the couple having set eyes on each other. On Enver's insistence the princess visited him in hospital, where he lay recovering from an appendicitis operation in December 1913.

At first the couple lived in Naciye Sultan's house in the elegant suburb of Nişantaş, where the wedding, a rather sumptuous affair with separate meals served for the men and women guests, had taken place. After six months they moved to an independent mansion in Kuruçeşme, on the Bosphorus, with a separate summer house on the hills above.

Here at Kuruçeşme, except for tours of inspection, Enver Pasha lived the war years, in a luxury to which his wife was accustomed but which he had never known before. It was here that the American Ambassador, Henry Morgenthau, visited him, 'an extremely neat and well-groomed object', when he was nursing an infected toe, wondering a little at the splendour of his surroundings, in great contrast to those of Talât Pasha, then Grand Vizier, who lived in an 'old, rickety wooden three-story building' in a modest quarter of the city, with a ^{te}legraph instrument on a wooden table in the livingroom to remind him of his past. (4)

In August 1914 Enver created the rather mysterious Special Organization (Teskilatı Mahsusa) composed entirely of volunteer officers, most of them his followers for some years past. The organization was under his control, and furnished with secret funds from the War Ministry. Its first head was Süleyman Askeri, a son of Vehip Pasha, veteran of guerilla warfare in Thrace and member of the CUP before 1908. The aims of the Special Organization were

never very clear, any ^m more than those of Enver Pasha himself. As Galip Vardar, an active member of the Organization, put it, 'No one could follow the imagination of Enver Pasha. It was useless to try to fathom it. He flew up in the skies, never coming down to earth.' (5)

The grandiose plans of the Organization were to 'create trouble', on the one hand for England, particularly in India and Egypt, and on the other in the Trans-Caucasian lands of Russian Tsardom, with a view to effecting their union at some later date to the Ottoman Empire. Were Enver's aspirations Pan-Turkish (or Pan-Touranian)? His biographer, Şevket Süreyya Ağdemir, states firmly that they were not. Before all else he was an 'Ottomanist', an advocate of the Ottoman conception of empire. If anything, he was under the influence of Abdül Hamit's Pan-Islamic activities, for he was himself deeply religious and believed in the unifying strength of Islam. Pan-Turkism was more a matter of policy, to be used as a reinforcement when needed. (6)

The emphasis was on enlarging the Ottoman Empire, rather than saving the Turks who lived outside it. They were 'brothers', it is true, but also they were potential subjects, all the more so since they shared the same religion.

The Teskilat was amply financed, and as soon as Turkey entered the war it spread its activities in many lands. Its special agents were aided by bands of irregulars, rather like those who had fought in Thrace before the revolution of 1908, of which Süleyman Askeri had been a member. These agents committed acts of sabotage in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Others concentrated in Arab lands and helped create dissension with the judicious distribution of Ottoman gold where it was thought to be most effective. Still others operated in the Balkans. (7)

Two active members of the Tenkilat were the brothers Esref and Sami (Hacı Sami) Kuşçubaşioğlu, sons of Abdül Hamit's head falconer, Hacı Sami was particularly active in the area in which Enver Pasha was to end his life.

Though it may have been vague in its aims, the Teskilatı Mahsusa is proof of a certain continuity in Enver's manner of thinking - the thinking which led to his Caucasian campaigns, and eventually to his Turkistan adventure.

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From the beginning of the war Enver Pasha gave his attention to the fighting on the Russo-Turkish frontier, but with disastrous results for the Turkish armies. The campaign of Sarıkamış, December 1914 - January 1915, resulted in the loss for the Third Army not only of most of its artillery, but also of 75,000 men out of a total of 95,000 - dead, wounded or sick (a great number due to frostbite) prisoners or deserters.⁽⁸⁾ Winter conditions in that part of the country were particularly severe, the snow often reaching a man's height, the roads few and rendered impassable. The soldiers were clad in summer uniforms, their rations frequently consisted merely of flat bread. The intolerable conditions brought about an increasing number of desertions, often aided by neighbouring villages which provided a refuge for those fleeing from the battlefield. Many of the deserters organized themselves into bands, or çete, which roamed the countryside, raiding here and there.

Throughout the period the local population of these areas was in a state of constant upheaval, towns abandoned, whole villages completely burnt out and their inhabitants, whether Christian or Moslem, massacred by the corresponding enemy. The Turkish Armenians

joined the Russians as 'volunteers' and fought against Turkey. After the campaign of Sarikamış there was a wholesale massacre of the Moslems in the province of Kars. And after the advance of the Russians on Erzurum in February 1916 the territory of some 250,000 Turks fell into Russian hands, though it was previously 'cleaned by the retreating Turks of every sheep, cow and horse, of all hay, barley and wheat, and of all housing accomodation.' (9)

Especially rigorous weather conditions during the winter of 1916-17 virtually put a stop to fighting on the Eastern Anatolian front, though not to the disintegration of the Turkish army groups there which lost several thousand more men in that time: 'All corps had been reduced to the strength of divisions, divisions to that of regiments, and regiments to that of battalions or even companies.' (10)

By the spring of that year, it was the Russians' turn. After the Kerensky revolution crowds in Moscow demonstrated their dislike for 'imperialist' wars and shouted, 'We do not want the Dardanelles.' (11) Thousands of Russian soldiers began to 'demobilize' themselves, eager to abandon the war and return to their homes. With the Bolshevik revolution and its promise of redistribution^ution of the land, this movement was accelerated.

On the afternoon of 26 November 1917 the Germans received the Soviets' formal proposal for an armistice. Lengthy negotiation took place at Brest-Litovsk (ironically enough, the Germans were hosts to the Russians in territory captured from them). The actual treaty was not signed until 3 March 1918. It returned to Turkey the sanjaks of Kars, Ardahan and Batum which Russia had annexed in 1878, with the proviso of a popular plebiscite. Meanwhile the sanjaks were reoccupied by Turkey.

While the negotiations for the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk were going on, a Trans-Caucasian Federation was set up, comprising the three very different countries of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. This Federation sent delegates to a separate conference with Turkey which met at Trebizond (Trabzon) on the 14th March. On 6 April the Trans-Caucasian delegates were presented with an ultimatum demanding their acceptance of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which, after frantic telegrams to Tiflis, they consented to.

With Soviet hegemony not yet fully established and Russia's Caucasian dependencies in a turmoil, the time seemed ripe to Enver for a renewal of his aspirations in the direction of Azerbaijan, and 'the projection of Pan-Islamic revolt against the British into Afghanistan, northern Persia and northern India'.⁽¹²⁾ For this highly sensitive manoeuvre, much of it dependent on opportunity, Enver needed leaders capable of understanding his half-expressed motives. These he chose from his own family. His uncle, Halil Pasha, had already been appointed commander of the group of armies in the East. Enver now appointed his half-brother Nuri to the command of the Army of Islam, which, when established in Azerbaijan, was to be reinforced by local detachments.

Nuri, then in Tripolitania, was only a lieutenant-colonel. In the event his rank was raised to that of Pasha by an imperial ferman. His army was to be under the over-all command of Halil Pasha. These two members of Enver's family were to be in entire control of the operation.

Travelling with a small staff of about 25 officers via Syria, Iraq and Persia, Nuri reached the Aras River on the boundary between Persia and the Caucasian territories on 3 June, 1918, and by the 8th

was in the town of Genje, which he had chosen as his head quarters. (13)

The Army of Islam then consisted of about 6,000 Turkish regulars and nearly twice that number of Azeri volunteers. (14)

Azerbaijan itself had declared its independence on 28 May, along with Armenia and preceded on the 26th by Georgia.

The Young Turks had established special relations with Azerbaijan for some time before. In September 1918 a delegation from Turkistan arrived in Istanbul with an eight-page report (dated 16 September). (15) This was a request, addressed directly to Enver Pasha, for union with 'the great Turkey'. It is no wonder that Enver took himself as the saviour of distant lands. The feelings aroused in him by such requests and the flamboyant language in which they were made may help to explain, says his biographer Aydemir, why 'later on, when all his hopes faded, he chose the route that led to Turkistan. This report may well have been the inspiration for his enterprise. (16)

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The resignation of the Talât Pasha cabinet was followed by nearly a week of suspense. Sultan Vahdettin (who had ascended the throne on 3 July 1918, on the death of his older brother Mehmet Reşat) at first chose Tevfik Pasha, then Ambassador to London, to be Grand Vizier. Tevfik Pasha duly returned to Istanbul, but was unable to form a cabinet. Finally, on the 14th October, a short-lived cabinet was formed by Ahmet Izzet Pasha, who had been Minister of War before Enver and was known to be strongly opposed to Turkey's entrance in the war.

The main task of the Izzet Pasha cabinet was to sign the Armistice

of Moudros which ended Turkey's participation in the war on 30 October. Rauf (Orbay) Minister of Marine and one-time heroic commander of the cruiser Hamidiye led the Turkish delegation. But earlier than Moudros, on 20 October, the cabinet proclaimed a political amnesty which made it possible for exiled dissidents to return to the capital and set up activities such as the formation of new parties and the publication of newspapers inimical to the previous Unionist government.

As the world disintegrated around him, Enver's thoughts turned to a future for himself. It was all very well for Talât Pasha to declare that 'our political life is at an end', but Enver was only thirty-seven, and full of boundless energy. Surely there was something to be done across the Russian frontier, some sphere of activity in Azerbaijan and beyond? To this end he sounded his half-brother Nuri Pasha and his uncle Halil Pasha.

The messages, marked 'Secret, person-to-person and urgent', were almost identical. To his uncle he wrote: 'For the time being, as I would find it distressing to remain without any definite work to do, I am thinking of perhaps travelling to Azerbaijan, and if I find that there is work to be done, settling there for good. What is your opinion?' And three days later, to his half-brother: 'If nothing important to do turns up here, so as not to feel too distressed it occurs to me that I might come to Azerbaijan and work both there and in the northern Caucasus. What are your views on this subject? Can something be done?' (17)

Halil Pasha replied promptly, opposing the plan: 'Without help from our government and the presence of our soldiers among them, these people are quite incapable of doing any efficient work.' In his belief it was sufficient to entrust Nuri with carrying on the

The reply was unequivocal enough, but throughout his career Enver asked others for their advice in regard to a given action, and having preceded the request by reaching a decision, often enough based on fragmentary knowledge of the problems involved stuck to it obstinately, disregarding the negative opinions expressed by men who were more experienced than he was. It was to be so in this case, as in others to follow it.

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The CUP was due to hold its congress on 5 September, the anniversary of its foundation, and to this effect delegates from the provinces converged on the capital. But the congress was unable to assemble for some weeks. It could not very well meet while the CUP President, Grand Vizier Talât Pasha, was away visiting various European capitals and sounding Turkey's allies, added to which the political situation at home was growing increasingly critical.

At last the congress was convened on the 1st November and some 120 Unionists assembled in the CUP main building at eleven o'clock in the morning. The poet Mehmet Emin (Yurdakul) was elected president of the congress.⁽¹⁸⁾ The opening address was given by Talât Pasha. It was a frank exposé of the events which had led to the defeat of the UP government:

'Our policy has been defeated. Therefore it is not possible for us to retain control of the government in whatever way. For this reason we have resigned as a cabinet, and here and now as well are resigning our posts in the central administration of the Society (Cemiyet), and handing over our rights to the true and legal owners, the members of this congress.'⁽¹⁹⁾

Consternation reigned in the congress. It was clear that the Allies would soon be occupying Turkish territory, including Istanbul, and that one of their first tasks would be to seek out prominent members of the Union and Progress and accuse them of leading the Ottoman government to fight with the Central Powers. Several Unionists felt that the members of the Triumvirate and three or four other important members of the CUP should leave the country before they had to submit to this fate. It was said in some circles that Enver, who had not attended the congress, was barricaded in his residence at Kuruceme and determined to die fighting rather than fall into the hands of the Allies. Rahmi Bey, the famous governor of Izmir, was given the task of persuading him that remaining in the country might have dire consequences for the present government and that it was to Turkey's advantage that he should absent himself 'temporarily'. (20)

This Quixotic attitude would be in keeping with his character, for he was known to be personally brave to the point of foolhardiness. But at the same time, we know that he had been thinking of leaving the country before the congress took place, and that he had written to Halil Pasha and Nuri Pasha in order to consult them about the feasibility of migrating to Azerbaijan. He was perfectly capable of contradictory thoughts, and of moving in two directions at once.

At some unspecified date before his departure he summoned Colonel Hüsamettin Ertürk, of the Special Organization, to his Kuruceme residence. Whether the conversation actually took place as reported in Ertürk's memories or whether some details were supplemented après coup as events developed, it is impossible to say.

According to the Colonel, Talât Pasha, Cemal Pasha and Kara Kemal Bey, the notorious Minister of Supplies, were present at this conver-

sation, and Enver placed the Colonel in charge of the Special Organization in Istanbul and informed him of the impending flight of the Triumvirate. The rest of the group was to go to Berlin, but he intended to join the Turkish armies in the Caucasus, then go on to Moscow, for he felt the Bolsheviks, enemies of the imperialist powers, would support the Turkish cause. (21)

The Special Organization was to be known from then on as the General Islamic Revolutionary Organization, and its central committee was to meet in the near future in Berlin. Talât Pasha, Dr. Bahaettin Şakir and Nazım Bey were to form the nucleus of this committee.

'I listened,' says the Colonel, 'filled with admiration for these boundless illusions, this incredible energy. But there was no doubt that these were indeed illusions.' (22)

TÜRKİYE SOSYAL TARİHİ ARASTIRMA MERKEZİ

NOTES

- (1) Ş.S.Aydemir, Makedonya'dan Orta Asya'ya Enver Paşa, Vol.III, 476.
See also T. Çavdar, Talât Paşa, bir Örgüt Ustasının Öyküsü, 424.
- (2) Liman von Sanders, Five Years in Turkey, 6.
- (3) For wives and daughters of the Ottoman dynasty, the title 'Sultan' followed the name. Princes were known as 'Efendi'.
- (4) Morgenthau, Secrets of the Bosphorus, 74 and 91 ff.
- (5) Yazan Samih Nafiz Tansu, anlatan Galip Vardar, İttihat ve Terakki İçinde Dönenler, 275.
- (6) Aydemir, op. cit. Vol. II, 482. See also Landau, Pan-Turkism in Turkey, a Study in Irredentism, 28.
- (7) Tansu - Vardar, op. cit. 174-177 and 185-186.
- (8) Allen and Muratov, Caucasian Battlefields, 284.
- (9) M. Philips Price, War and Revolution in Asiatic Russia, 186.
- (10) Allen and Muratov, op. cit., 436-437.
- (11) Ibid, 457.
- (12) Ibid, 468.
- (13) See Aydemir, op. cit. Vol.III, 379-383.
- (14) Allen and Muratov, op. cit. 479.
- (15) Aydemir, op. cit. Vol. III, 455-497.
- (16) Ibid, 457.
- (17) Text of correspondence given in Aydemir, op. cit. Vol.III, 466ff.
- (18) Zeki Sarıhan, Kurtuluş Savaşı Günlüğü, Vol. I, 19.
- (19) Çavdar, op. cit. 430. See also Aydemir, op. cit. Vol.III, 479-482.
- (20) Cemal Kutay, Atatürk Enver Paşa Hadiseleri, 18.
- (21) Sami Nafiz Tansu, anlatan Hüsamettin Ertürk, 2 Devrin Perde Arkası, 173-179.
- (22) Ibid, 175.