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German Soldiers in the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1918

Introductory Text to the Exhibition of www.mwme.eu

The objects in the following section of the exhibition will illustrate the presence of German soldiers in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Nevertheless, the Prussian-Ottoman military relations reach back into the 18th century. As requested by the Ottoman Sultans, multiple Prussian military missions were deployed to the Ottoman Empire on the eve of the First World War with the goal to modernize the Ottoman army. Out of the presence of the military instructors during this time emerged diverse points of cultural contact that extended far beyond the specific military context. Especially in the two decades before the First World War, the relations between Germany and the Ottoman Empire increasingly deepened. The two visits of Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1889 and 1898 particularly served as strong catalysts for the mutual sympathies and interests. In connection to this was the German's intensified economic and financial engagement in the Ottoman Empire, to which the prestigious construction of the Baghdad Railway can attest. In the Middle East, the German Reich thus found an operational field for an economically and culturally oriented 'peaceful imperialism'.

Entry into the war

During the outbreak of war in 1914, however, it was unclear how Turkey would align itself. The arrival of the warship 'Goeben' and the cruiser 'Breslau' in the Dardanelles on August 10, 1914 played no minor role in the decision of the Young Turks leadership. The Germans made their ships and manpower, which had just narrowly escaped their English pursuers, available to the Turkish government. A month and a half later, on orders of the war minister Enver Pascha, these war ships bombarded the Russian Black Sea ports and thereby set the stage for the Ottoman entry into the war on the side of the Central Powers. The German Empire expected that the entry of the Turks would have a pull on the entire Muslim world. The Kaiser had already designated himself in 1898 as the protector of all 'Mohammedans'. There was now however the hope that, along with the Sultan's proclamation of Jihad, a greater insurrection would break out in the British and French colonies as well as in parts of Russia. It was not only on the covers of German newspapers that this hope was colorfully portrayed - as seen here on the Leipziger '*Illustrirte Zeitung*' - and yet this ultimately proved to be fallacious.

After the limited numbers of officers, who had frequently come into the country during peace times, the war ushered in the most intensive phase of mutual encounters within the military context. In terms of sheer numbers, over 25,000 German soldiers reached the Ottoman Empire over the course of the war. About 800 of them served directly in the Ottoman army as part of the German military mission. The bulk of German soldiers during the second half of the war had come into Ottoman Empire within the framework of the German *Asienkorps* units. The transport of troops and materials before the end of 1915 was still difficult, but after the capture of Serbia the Central Powers possessed a direct connection between Berlin and Constantinople with the *Balkanzug* (Balkans Express). This train route became the lifeline of the German-Ottoman alliance; it was this route that first enabled the relocation of larger German troop formations to the Ottoman Empire.

German Soldiers in combat

Over the course of the war, German soldiers came into service on nearly all Ottoman fronts and in far parts of the Empire. Germans filled several high positions in the military staff and commandos in the Ottoman Empire, for example the chief of general staff. The Dardanelles front, where the Ottomans had to fend off the invasion of the Entente troops, developed into the main front in 1915. At first, complete German units, even if only small companies, were deployed here for service. The chief of the German military mission General Otto Liman von Sanders became the commander-in-chief of the Ottoman 5th army in this area, that after one year forced the British to pull-out. The Ottoman troops in April 1916, under the leadership of General Field Marshal Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, were able to inflict a devastating defeat on the encroaching British-Indian troops in Mesopotamia at Kut-el-Amara. This success was also appreciated in Germany with the production of vivat ribbons, shown here, which were traditionally worn on clothing for the celebration of victories. Goltz, who had served in Turkey with some interruptions as an instructor since 1883, enjoyed the highest esteem among both the Turkish and German public spheres and still stands today as one of the most important intermediaries between Turks and Germans. He died, however, a few days before the capture of Kut-el-Amara. One year later, as the tide had turned and the British seized Baghdad, plans for the *'Jildirim'* (i.e. flash) army group were developed. The German *'Asienkorps'* was assembled under the leadership of General Erich von Falkenhayn in order to retake Iraq and it was within this framework that many German troop units reached the Ottoman Empire. Because the military

situation in Palestine was taking a more threatening shape, these troops were ultimately deployed to this region as opposed to Mesopotamia. In 1917 and 1918 this deployment was characterized by a continuous defense and in the October of 1918, it finally led to the collapse of the front.

Weapons, Technology, and Transfer of Knowledge

To strengthen the allies, the Germans helped with the modernization of the Ottoman army. The small Ottoman air force, which had existed since 1911 in rudimentary form, was expanded with German personnel and material aide. The German Captain Erich Serno thus became the creator of a new Turkish air force that was based on the German model. Serno additionally designed the Ottoman aviator badges, which was the insignia for the flying personnel after 1914.

A large problem in the first year of war consisted in the provision of weapons and ammunition for the Ottoman army. During the most materially intensive combat in the Dardanelles, the Ottoman Empire did not possess its own armament industry and after the transport lines in the Balkans were blocked, they were also unable to receive the necessary amount of supplies from the Central Powers. For this reason, Germany sent many officers, engineers and other specialists to Constantinople in order to build ammunition factories. One of these specialists was Heinrich Frank, who, as the military operational manager of the Navy arsenals' bullet factory, passed on his knowledge to the Turks. His two service IDs also visually testify to how the service for this group of Germans in the Ottoman Empire was work that straddled two cultures: his German-speaking identification shows him in German officer uniform while the photograph on his Ottoman document features him wearing a Turkish fez.

The transfer of knowledge and technology from Germany to the Ottoman Empire consistently required adjustments. This can be seen in the German-produced steel helmet that shows modifications for its usage among the Ottoman troops. Introduced in 1918, the helmet lacks the standard eyeshade, so that Muslim soldiers could keep their helmets during their ritual prayers.

As exemplified through advertisements for cars and planes, the war and the presence of German soldiers in the Ottoman Empire also simultaneously offered German industry a welcome opportunity to distinguish itself more strongly among the Turkish markets. That these ads could lack cultural understanding is shown through a brandy manufacturer's advertisement, whereby a German and an Ottoman officer are seen together enjoying their alcoholic beverages - the Muslim prohibition of alcohol is completely ignored.

Topography, Disease, and Experiences of Violence

In the meantime, German soldiers were confronted with conditions that were, in part, utterly foreign to them. For instance, the Ottoman Empire contained great expanses of land, such that the distance from Constantinople to Baghdad corresponded to that between Berlin and Constantinople. With such a massive area, the transportation system was completely insufficient. The strategically important Baghdad Railway was still unfinished for large stretches of land. The construction of tunnels through the Taurus Mountains and at other parts of the track proceeded under a high amount of pressure. Field railways and cars often had to serve as alternative methods of transportation for these tracks. However the soldiers had to use camels or, in Mesopotamia, Keleks, which were archaic rafts that stayed afloat using inflated animal skins.

The unaccustomed climate rankled with the soldiers. The rate of disease among them was high - an especially high number of them fell ill with infectious diseases like Typhus and Malaria or even with Syphilis. It was no exception in Sinai or Mesopotamia to have 20-30% of the German units sick. However while the sanitary care in the German *Asienkorps* was at a relatively high standard, the Turkish sanitary conditions were catastrophic: the Ottoman army had 460,000 deaths due to disease alone. Epidemics and hunger also claimed the lives of countless of victims among the Ottoman civilian population. For the German soldiers that were constantly witness to this misery, the sight of suffering and death subsequently belonged to the defining experiences of their service in the Middle East.

The sight of the gallows, where those accused of being spies, deserters or usurers were hung and displayed publicly, was among this kind of witnessing. In far stretches of the Ottoman Empire, Germans became witnesses of the Armenian Genocide, carried out by the Young Turks beginning in 1915 under the pretense that the Armenians were traitors. Because the maintenance of the alliance took highest priority for the German political leadership, it raised a timid and therefore ineffective objection to the murders. The soldiers in the area, however, registered the death of the Armenians on the marches in the desert with horror; some of them tried to help. Their later memories contain a legion of harrowing reports. Simultaneously, however, a part of the soldiers despite their sympathy with the Armenians adopted the Turkish justifications for the deportations.

A Travel Experience

German soldiers' experience of war in the Ottoman Empire was altogether characterized by sharp contrasts. While the unbounded violence and ubiquitous death represents one side of their

experience, the personal testimonials of the soldiers also consistently contain the narrative of war as a beautiful and interesting journey. It is unmistakable that the majority of the Germans stationed in the Ottoman Empire perceived their time of service there as one in which they could witness an unfamiliar culture and nature. The necessity to cross great stretches of land, and to accept the long waiting times to get to their destinations, intensified a touristic behavior. This is reflected through bathing fun as well as in the efforts to become acquainted with Ottoman and ancient Near Eastern culture. Ancient sites like Palmyra or Babylon were favorite destinations for German soldiers. It was at these locations that they could also encounter German archaeologists carrying out research and preservation measures - often as official military assignments.

In adopting touristic behavioral patterns, soldiers were concerned with collecting or buying souvenirs. Carpets were an especially beloved gift. There are, however, other curiosities like a lighter made out of cartridge brought back after the war by the aforementioned leader of the ammunition factory in Constantinople. Another example is a highly complex Turkish coffee service that a German officer had specially produced for him in Baghdad.

Like on all fronts, contact with the homeland was of highest importance for soldiers. The field post provided the most important link back to Germany. In the face of the long distances within the Ottoman Empire, airplanes were also employed for the transport of the post. Aside from this, there were also soldier's homes and officers' messes where soldiers could not only relax, but also where they had an opportunity to withdraw from foreign surroundings into something familiar, and where they could be assured by their own culture. Soldiers especially valued the Christmas celebrations in the Islamic Middle East: as seen here, carefully designed brochures and menus were arranged for these occasions.

In the wake of the German troops, German women also came to the Ottoman Empire. These women were primarily Red Cross nurses or aides that were deployed to military hospitals, soldiers' homes, or German military offices. Additionally, until 1916, it was permitted for members of the German military mission to have their wives visit them in the Ottoman Empire.

Cultural Communication

During their service in the Ottoman Empire, German soldiers typically came into close contact with their Ottoman comrades and members of the civilian population. Particularly the officers of the military mission, who themselves donned Turkish uniforms, were tightly bound to the

Ottoman structures and worked daily with Turkish superiors and subordinates. The cooperation was a cultural challenge for both sides, which began at the level of understanding. Although several officers learned Turkish at the Berlin seminar for Middle Eastern languages, or had taught themselves some of the language, mostly the communication was only possible using interpreters or with the predominant foreign language in the region: French. Often these conditions led to communication problems that became fertile ground for misunderstanding and distrust. The significant cultural differences between Germans and Turks or Arabs frequently became clear in their mutual dealings. For example, while the Germans considered the Middle Eastern approach to time to be incompatible with the principles of warfare, the Germans' impatience appeared to be crude and impolite to the Turks. This also applied to the Prussian-German language of command: the Turks interpreted the orders as insulting, while German soldiers, hearing the prolonged Middle Eastern styles of communication, often tended to assess their Turkish brothers-in-arms as being neglectful of their duties.

Respective differences in mentality and communication markedly affected the military cooperation at the base and on the front. Two oppositional basic patterns are detectable from the behavior of German officers: a group of officers rigorously attempted to apply German rules to the Turks, which typically led to significant dissatisfaction for both parties. Another group - and this was the majority of the officers who stayed longer in the Ottoman Empire - assumed throughout their dealings that the specific conditions in the Middle East were given and ineradicable. Among their comrades, these men were known as being '*vertürkt*' ('turkishized'). This position, so open to compromise, proved to be markedly more promising for success. Simultaneously, these officers however also ran the risk of sliding from a position of cultural competence into one of resignation.

The End in 1918 and Afterwards

Although it was the English offensive that ultimately led to the collapse of the Ottoman front, cracks in the mutual alliance surfaced even before this time: the war goals and interests of both powers had drifted further and further apart from one another. At the end of October 1918, the Ottoman government finally signed the Armistice of Mudros. From that point on, the German Supreme Army Command's goal was to repatriate the German troops from the Ottoman Empire as quickly as possible, which at the end of the war, was about 13,500 men. In November, some of these men were evacuated in ships to Odessa, while others were interned by the British and

first left Constantinople at the end of January 1919 by crossing the Mediterranean. German soldiers who ended up in English war captivity during the fighting found themselves in Egypt: in Heliopolis, nearby Cairo, was a large prisoner of war camp where one captive produced the model of the complex, seen here. Being the last German soldiers in the Middle East, these soldiers came home towards the end of 1919.

Soon after the war, German soldiers began to recollect their time in the Ottoman Empire with the brightest of colors. Many assessed the encounter with the Middle Eastern culture as an enriching cultural experience, despite all of the terrors and hardship in this theater of war. Even their judgment of their Turkish comrades became increasingly more positive. In 1919, veterans had already formed an affiliation called *'Bund der Asienkämpfer'* (League of Asian Warriors). In the organization's newsletter, it is particularly clear how this veteran's league differed from others of its kind: aside from personal war memories, the critical analysis of the society, politics and culture of the Middle East adopted a central importance. However, as seen through reunions like that of the former members of the Ottoman Ordnance Department, the sense of camaraderie was also maintained among the *Asienkämpfer*. This also applies, to a certain extent, to the German-Turkish encounters: personal wartime connections with a 'brother in arms' proved to be long-lasting and even until the 1960s, German and Turkish veterans of the World War came together for group meetings in both countries.

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