

The Rise and Fall of the Young Turks and the C.U.P.

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The Committee for Union and Progress, more commonly known as the Young Turks, was a prominent force in the fostering of modernity in Turkey. The Young Turk revolution, and the reign of the C.U.P. government was a distinct period in history. The irony of the C.U.P.'s rule is that the authoritarian regime that they overthrew was essentially replaced by the C.U.P.'s own authoritarianism. The path that the Young Turk government took to undermine their own revolution is both fascinating and unique.

In 1878, after Sultan Abdül Hamid II dissolved the Ottoman Parliament and suspended the 1876 constitution, remnants of the Young Ottoman reformists fled to Paris to continue their efforts, which were now aimed at the restoration of the constitution.¹ With the harsh repression of Abdül Hamid II's rule in full effect, disaffection and dissent flourished especially among those who were educated in Westernized schools.² These students spread their dissent underground, and especially influenced the Ottoman military; these dissidents became known as the Young Turks, who grew in number and power throughout the 1890s. Abdül Hamid II began to react to increased desire for immediate

¹ Morgan Philips Price, *A History of Turkey: From Empire to Republic*, (London: Ruskin House, 1956), 81.

² Helen Chaplin Metz, ed., *Turkey: a country study*, 5th ed. (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1996), 27.

reform after 1896, when a Young Turk plot to overthrow the Sultan's government was betrayed.³ In 1897, becoming more cautious, Abdül Hamid II began to increasingly repress reformist movements, including the Young Turks:

But as terrorism and the attacks of the Young Turks increased, the sultan became more and more suspicious, extending the activities and power of his police, watching over the bureaucrats more intensely than ever, spreading fear even among this grand viziers, and centralizing authority and power in the palace to such an extent that no one could act without direct permission.⁴

Abdül Hamid II's policies only galvanized dissent, however, due to increasing reformist influence, the army's desire for reform grew, and the Ottoman military became the center of the Young Turk movement. After graduating from the War Academy in January of 1905, then-Lieutenant Mustafa Kemal (who would later be known as Atatürk) organized a reformist group in Damascus known as *Vatan* (trans: Fatherland), which aligned itself with Young Turk ideology.⁵ *Vatan* would then become *Vatan ve Hürriyet Cemiyeti* (trans: fatherland and liberty), and move to Salonica (now Thessaloniki in Greece), which became the main center of revolutionary fervor.⁶ There, Young Turk groups joined with Kemal's group under the moniker of "The Committee For Union and Progress."

The C.U.P. had unified revolutionary sentiment, which by now had spread to the general populace. Mary Mills Patrick, who at the time was President Emerita of Constantinople Woman's College in Istanbul, recalls how the entire population, even women, were involved in the revolution: "Women helped everywhere. No policeman or spy could attack a Turkish woman, and anything could be concealed under her full robes and behind her veil—

³ Roderic H. Davison, *Turkey* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 99.

⁴ Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. 2, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 264.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

documents and books, and even the alert expression on the face of a love of freedom.”⁷ With the people of Salonika and Istanbul on their side, the Young Turks could begin their revolution.

In 1908, the army in Salonika marched on Istanbul, and forced Abdül Hamid II to reinstate the constitution. Having been supported by various nationalities, the revolution was followed by “mass demonstrations without equal in the Empire’s long history” as most subjects found solidarity with their comrades in revolutionary spirit: “‘Henceforth,’ they said, ‘we are all brothers. There are no longer Greeks, Jews, or Moslems; under the blue sky we are all equal. We glory in the name of Ottoman.’”⁸

Elections were held in November of that year where the C.U.P. won all but one seat of all the *millets*.⁹ Immediately, the new government began to reform the Empire, changing article 113 of the constitution, which gave the sultan extensive powers.¹⁰ The C.U.P. also abolished the secret police, and the growth of a free press.¹¹ However, the C.U.P. would then face two main trials that would impede its reforms: opposition in the Ottoman Parliament, and war.

Like many revolutions, the Young Turk revolution soon faced violent opposition, primarily from those who benefited from the monarchy, and traditionalist Muslims who opposed increased secularization.¹² However, being that the Third Army of Salonika remained in Istanbul to protect the revolution, the counterrevolution was put down and it ultimately failed. However, opposition to the C.U.P. also took form through the creation of other political parties. Essentially, the country was divided by the meaning of “Union,” as the

⁷ Mary Mills Patrick, *Under Five Sultans*, (New York: The Century Company, 1929), 203.

⁸ Patrick, *Under Five Sultans*, 206.

⁹ Shaw and Shaw, *History*, 273; Metz, *Turkey*, 27.

¹⁰ Shaw and Shaw, *History*, 278.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹² Metz, *Turkey*, 27.

three main opposition parties (the Liberal Party, the Liberty and Conciliation Party, and the Muhammedian Union) and the C.U.P. all differed on their choice of the main contemporary ideologies of Westernism, Islamism and Turkism, each which aimed to unite the diverse empire in different ways.¹³ In this way, the C.U.P., despite gaining overwhelming support in the revolution, faced considerable opposition to their governance.

While the C.U.P. was facing trouble at home, outside enemies took advantage of the Ottoman Empire's instability and declared war. Directly following the 1908 revolution, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia. That same year, Bulgaria declared full independence; in 1911 Italy declared war to seize Libya, and the first Balkan War broke out in 1912.¹⁴ This strain on the Empire's political capital made the C.U.P.'s domestic troubles grow, and many subjects lost faith in the government after losing most of the Empire's European territory in the 1912 war. This had a catastrophic effect on the fledgling democracy: "To prove successful the Young Turkish Revolution needed ten years of peace: instead it got twelve years of war."¹⁵

This weakness of the government, coupled with the even stronger role of the military allowed the overthrow of the democracy by the C.U.P. leadership in 1913, creating the military dictatorship ran by the "triumvirate" of Enver Pasha, Jemal Pasha, and Talaat Pasha.¹⁶ War between the newly independent Balkan states broke out in the same year, and Enver Pasha (who as Minister of War had most power) was able to regain Erdine from Bulgaria.¹⁷

¹³ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964).

¹⁴ Metz, *Turkey*, 27.

¹⁵ Ernest Jaksch, quoted in Price, *History of Turkey*, 85.

¹⁶ Metz, *Turkey*, 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 28.

The First World War came on the heels of the Second Balkan War. Having lost Italy as an ally, Germany courted the Ottomans for an alliance. Enver Pasha strongly desired a German ally, and the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers.¹⁸ Although supporting the rule of the military dictatorship, the war and its long length continued to direct funds away from development. More importantly, the war and the coup of the triumvirate created an exclusionary ideology which weakened the empire, and hastened it towards the Armenian Genocide:

The Turkish revolution [at this point] destroyed Ottomanism and Pan-Islam, two conceptions of state and society that would have permitted Armenians to continue to exist as a separate community of the Ottoman Empire and replaced these with the political myth of Turkish nationalism. The new political and social construction of 'Turk' excluded all minorities, but especially the Armenians from the new dispensation. When the Great War broke out and the Ottoman Empire joined Germany against Russia, the excluded Armenians came to be viewed as internal enemies, threatening the continued existence of Turkey, and for that reason, they had to be destroyed.¹⁹

The emergence of Turkish nationalism as a substitute to the optimistic Ottomanism of 1908 proved catastrophic for the Empire, as excluded nationalities such as the Arabs conspired against the empire during World War One. While the war could have been a unifying factor for the empire, just as the revolution was, it instead tore it apart by excluding non-Turkic populations.

This ideological decision was most catastrophic for the Armenians in eastern Anatolia. Because the Armenian nation was split primarily between The Ottoman Empire and their nemesis, Russia, the C.U.P. dictatorship held the generally peaceful Armenians in extreme distrust and hatred. When an

¹⁸ Davison, *Turkey*, 99.

¹⁹ Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

opportunity arose to show that the Armenian conspiracy existed, Enver Pasha moved to systematically exterminate the population:

Enver claimed that an Armenian conspiracy existed and that an generalized revolt by the Armenians was imminent. During the winter months of 1915, as the shattered Ottoman army retreated towards Lake Van, a massive deportation of as many as 2 million Armenians was undertaken in the war zone. It shortly degenerated into a massacre, as ethnic Turks and Kurds descended on Armenian or slaughtered refugees along the road. The most conservative estimate put the number of dead at 600,000, but other sources cite figures of more than 1 million.²⁰

To this day, the Turkish government does not recognize the Armenian Genocide. At the end of the Great War, the Triumvirate fled Turkey to avoid prosecution for war crimes, some of which were related to the Armenian genocide. Talat and Jemal, who fled to Germany, were killed by Armenian nationalists in 1921, and Enver was killed in Central Asia fighting the Bolsheviks.²¹

The C.U.P., and the Young Turkish Revolution was an ultimate failure. Rather than fully modernizing and liberalizing the Empire, the Ottoman state ironically fell back into another authoritarian dictatorship. However, after the final treaties of the First World War, Mustafa Kemal would lead another revolution, not to salvage a failing empire, but to forge a new republic in Turkey. Nonetheless, the rise and fall of the Young Turks exhibits the successes and failures of revolution.

²⁰ Metz, *Turkey*, 30.

²¹ *Ibid*, 31.