

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 99

“Jihad”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In 1869, the Ottoman Sultan Abed el-Aziz granted to the German Crown Prince Friedrich a plot of ground near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem for the purpose of establishing a Lutheran church in the Holy City.

In 1898, the Crown Prince’s son, Kaiser Wilhelm II, visited Jerusalem to dedicate the new Lutheran Church of the Redeemer on October 31, the 381st anniversary of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses.

Wilhelm was well-received in Jerusalem, and it kindled in him an interest in Islam. He would afterward embrace the title “Hadji Wilhelm” and fancy himself the only Christian monarch who truly understood the Muslim world.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 99. Jihad.

If you’ve been listening to this podcast since the beginning, you already well know that Britain and France have the two largest colonial empires in the world. The Russian Empire is pretty impressive, too. Germany, by contrast, has only token colonial possessions in Africa and the Pacific.

When the Great War began, this gave the Allied or Entente Powers a decided advantage. Their overseas possessions provided tax revenue, resources, and sometimes soldiers to help fight the war. But an idea had been percolating around in German government circles for years before the Great War began. We might call it “colonial judo.” And what I mean by that is, maybe Germany can find a way to use her enemies’ colonial empires against them.

There's no shortage of potential. Take Britain for instance. We've already talked for some length about how vexed the British government was by the situation in Ireland. Some Irish were already smuggling in weapons from Germany even before the war broke out. There's certainly room for German mischief here. The French had only recently taken control of the previously independent nation of Morocco—episode 65—and were still fighting against insurgents there. Italy isn't in the war—yet—but she's also fighting insurgents in Libya. The Russian Emperor has been dealing with some major political unrest for at least ten years now, with both liberals and socialists agitating for constitutionalism or socialist revolution. Take your pick.

Germany will explore ways of giving her enemies headaches on all these fronts, but Kaiser Wilhelm and many of his ministers believed Germany's real ace in the hole was Islam. And that brings us to Max von Oppenheim.

Max von Oppenheim was born in 1860 in Cologne to a wealthy family of bankers. He grew up and became a lawyer, but he had a keen interest in archeology and ancient history in the Middle East. He was involved in planning for the Berlin to Baghdad railway and lived in Egypt for thirteen years, from 1896 to 1909. He was a German consular official for some of that time, and got involved in amateur archeological investigations. He wrote up numerous reports on Middle Eastern affairs and sent them to the German Foreign Office, even during the times he *wasn't* on their payroll. He made British intelligence officials in Egypt nervous; they figured he was a spy. Maybe he was.

A couple of lines from a 1906 dispatch to Berlin reverberate eerily in our own time. He emphasized to the Foreign Office that “[w]e must not forget that everything taking place in a Mohammedan country sends waves across the entire world of Islam.” He also predicted that “the demographic strength of Islamic lands will one day have a great significance for European countries.”

In 1914, the number of Muslims in the world was about 270 million. Of this number, only about 30 million of them, or ten percent, were ruled over by fellow Muslims, half of these were subjects of the Ottoman Sultan. Twenty million Muslims lived in the Russian Empire. A further 20 million lived under French rule, most of these in Africa. And a staggering one hundred million Muslims lived in the British Empire, most of them in India or Egypt.

Egypt, you'll recall, has been under British occupation and administration since 1882. In response to the shellings of Russian ports in the Black Sea by ships that were nominally Ottoman but had until recently been the German battlecruiser *Goeben* and cruiser *Breslau*, Britain, along with France and Russia, declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The British at once deposed the existing Egyptian government and created a new one as a British protectorate. Even the fig leaf of nominal Ottoman sovereignty was stripped away; nationalistic-minded Egyptians generally accepted this new arrangement, expecting that Egypt would gain full independence after the war was settled. We'll see about that.

And then there's India, the crown jewel of the British Empire. I have been deplorably remiss in not talking more about India on this podcast, especially since—here's a fun fact—this podcast gets more downloads from India than any country outside North America. So, hello there India. I haven't forgotten about you, I promise. It's just that at first, I felt I needed to wait until after the Great War to begin talking about India in detail. Now I feel that we're going to have to talk at least a little bit about India sooner than that, but India is a huge topic and I'm not fully prepared yet, so for now let's just say that India is unquestionably an important component of the British Empire and take note of the fact that trade between India and the British Isles is crucial to both, which in turn makes Egypt important, because that's where the Suez Canal is.

Most of the Muslims in the Russian Empire are found in the Caucasus or central Asia. These are isolated and undeveloped regions, and the Turkic peoples of central Asia have a long tradition of stubborn independence and resistance to outside rule, not to mention occasionally producing conquerors like Tamerlane. Besides being Muslim, and therefore a minority religion in the Russian Empire, they are also ethnically related to the Turks of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1914, the Russian Empire's Muslim subjects were exempt from conscription into the military. These Muslim subjects were not keen on serving in the armed forces of their Christian overlord, and the Emperor and his ministers were even less keen on handing out weapons to young Muslim men and teaching them how to be soldiers. Anyway, everyone knows the one problem Russia is never going to have to face is a manpower shortage, am I right?

Even before the July Crisis had fully played out, Kaiser Wilhelm was already thinking about how Germany might turn Muslim resentment to her advantage. As early as July 30, the day the British foreign secretary first warned the German ambassador that Britain would enter the war if Germany attacked France—episode 78—the Kaiser wrote his ministers a memo that included these words: “Our consuls in Turkey and India, our agents, etc., must rouse the whole Muslim world into wild rebellion against this hateful, mendacious, unprincipled nation of shopkeepers; if we are going to shed our blood, England must at least lose India.” And on August 2, the day Germany's mobilization began, Chief of Staff Moltke queried the Foreign Office about fomenting revolution in India and Egypt.

Yeah, about that. Fomenting revolution in India and Egypt sounds good on paper, but Germany will shortly be under a blockade, and there are no land routes available to smuggle arms and ammunition into Egypt or India. And Germany can't really spare a lot in the way of arms and ammunition right now anyway.

But the situation changed once the Ottoman Empire entered the war as Germany's ally. Ottoman territory extends all the way to Egypt and Persia, which is almost to India. The Empire also borders on the Russian Empire, just at the place where there are a lot of Muslims. Unfortunately for the Germans, Serbia and Montenegro are aligned with the Entente Powers and Romania and

Bulgaria are neutral, which means Germany doesn't have a land route available even to Constantinople. Not yet.

But don't overlook what the Ottoman Empire can do on its own. It has an army, and although the Ottoman military's recent performance has been nothing to brag about, Europe still remembered the days when the Turks were fearsome foes, laying siege to Vienna and terrorizing the Mediterranean coastlands, and they were not prepared to count the Ottomans out just yet.

Yes, the Empire has recently been humiliated in the wars against Italy and in the Balkans. But the Young Turks had been addressing the army's problems. Sleepy gray-haired aristocratic officers were being replaced with new men: younger, more energetic, trained by the Germans. It would take the Empire six months to mobilize, and it could only mobilize about 800,000 soldiers, which was a much smaller percentage of the total population than countries like France and Germany were managing, and it was because Constantinople was wary of its unhappy minorities, especially the Christians, the Greeks and Armenians, but also the Jews and the Arabs. Basically anyone who wasn't ethnically Turkish.

But that still left the soldiers from the Empire's core provinces in the Anatolian highlands: sturdy peasant farmers, fierce in their loyalty to the Empire, and earnest in their devotion to the Compassionate One.

[music: "Leylim Ley"]

Which brings us to the Empire's soft power, reflected in the fact that it is the world's largest and most powerful Muslim nation. The Ottoman Sultan claimed the title of Caliph, a Muslim spiritual leader, based on the Empire's position as the world's pre-eminent Muslim state as well as the fact that the Empire ruled the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Now, anybody can claim the title of caliph, and a lot of anybodies do. How much your claim means depends on how seriously the Muslim world takes it, and how seriously they take you. Of course, for the Ottoman Sultans, this claim was politically useful. They could use it to put God's imprimatur on whatever they wanted to do, and it was also a useful tool in international relations. For example, whenever the Russians started getting pushy and claiming to speak for the Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire, the Sultan could answer by claiming to speak for the Muslim subjects in the Russian Empire. So there.

The highest ranking religious scholar in the Empire was the Grand Mufti of Constantinople, who was a state official and whose judgments carried the authority of the Ottoman Caliphate. On November 14, 1914, just nine days after the Entente Powers declared war on the Empire, the Grand Mufti issued a fatwa declaring jihad against them all: Britain, France, Russia, even Serbia and Montenegro, and warned Muslim subjects in those countries that taking up arms against the Central Powers meant consignment to the fires of hell. The fatwa was translated into many languages and circulated across Africa and Asia.

And...not much happened. The caliphal authority of the Ottoman Sultan proved to be even more limited than had been thought. In India and Egypt, local clerics issued their own fatwas proclaiming that Muslim subjects of the British Empire were obligated to remain loyal to their rulers and to fight for the British, if and when called upon.

Oh, well. The Ottoman war minister, Enver Pasha, wasn't ready to give up yet. The declaration of jihad might still be worth something, he figured, it was just that the Central Powers couldn't count on one fatwa doing all their work for them. But if the fatwa were the chink in the stone, perhaps the Ottoman Army could be the hammer that shatters it.

But where to begin? To the Empire's southwest lay Egypt and the Suez Canal, the British Empire's jugular vein. That might seem tempting, but an offensive aimed at capturing the canal would be a logistical nightmare. It would require the attacking army to march more than a hundred miles across the Sinai desert, some of the harshest and most unforgiving land in the world. That march would take as long as two weeks, and the army making it would have to be ready to fight as soon as it reached its goal, because the British have already begun shipping in soldiers from Australia and New Zealand to defend the canal. And the army making that march would have to carry along everything it needs for the march and for when it goes into combat on the other side: arms and ammunition, food and supplies, even water.

The Ottoman Empire is hopelessly bereft of railroads or good roads. Just amassing the needed supplies and equipment in Palestine to get the operation going is a huge and difficult undertaking. So, okay. We'll work on that one. What are our other options?

In the southeast of the Empire lay the Persian Gulf. Since 1900, this region has become increasingly important to the British as petroleum becomes increasingly important to the British. The island of Britain has huge coal reserves, which have powered the Industrial Revolution for over a hundred years now, and fueled the Royal Navy for the past fifty years. But coal-powered ships are on their way out. Oil-powered ships are the latest thing. And Britain, unlike Russia or the United States, doesn't have any domestic sources of oil.

One of the ways the British addressed their increasing dependence on petroleum was by developing oil reserves at the Persian Gulf. The British exercised influence in Iran and in the Persian Gulf emirates and used this to secure the region and guarantee Britain a supply of petroleum through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, the forerunner of the corporation we know today as BP. When you think about the growing importance of this region to British naval interests, you begin to understand why Russian meddling in Iran or German plans to build a Berlin to Baghdad railway made the British so twitchy.

Just weeks after the Great War began, the British began moving Indian soldiers to the Iranian port of Abadan, the nexus of oil pipelines in the region, where petroleum is loaded and shipped off by sea. Abadan lies on the Iranian side of the Shatt-al-Arab, the river that flows from the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates into the Gulf. On the other side of this river is Ottoman-

controlled Mesopotamia, so you might think, here is a place where the Ottoman Army might do some mischief. But there are similar logistical problems. The Ottoman Fourth Army is stationed in Baghdad, so that's something. But the Berlin to Baghdad railway is not finished yet, making it hard to ship in equipment, supplies, and reinforcements, and once you get your equipment and supplies to Baghdad, it's still a long march to Abadan, where the wide river and the salt marshes make offensive operations a challenge.

And so, Enver Pasha's thoughts turned to the northeast, where the Ottoman Empire borders on the Russian Caucasus. The Empire already had an army stationed here: the Third Army, the one that had previously served in Macedonia and whose officer corps had formed the backbone of the Young Turks. Enver himself had come out of the Third Army.

Russia has been expanding into the Caucasus for a hundred years now, at the expense of Iran and the Ottomans, and most recently during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877. Here is where much of Russia's petroleum reserves lie. And here the Russians must deal with a mix of ethnic groups. Many were Muslim; others were peoples like the Georgians and Armenians who had clung stubbornly to their Christian faith. Russian rule came as something of a relief to the Christians; to the Muslims, not so much. In the Balkans, the expansion of Christian rule following the Balkan Wars had led to a sorting out of previously mingled communities, as we have seen. Orthodox Slavs and Greeks moved out of Ottoman-controlled lands and into Christian-controlled lands, while Muslim Turks moved in the other direction. As a result, the city of Constantinople lost its Christian majority and now has a Muslim majority. Similarly, Christian Armenians in Turkey moved to Russia when they could. Turkic Muslims in the Caucasus moved—or were deported—to Turkey.

Armenian Christians living in the Ottoman Empire were second-class citizens. They experienced the same kinds of hardships as the Slavic and Greek minorities in the Balkans. But the Armenians don't live in the Balkans. They are not Europeans. They live in northwestern Turkey and Caucasian Russia, and got correspondingly less attention from the European Great Powers. Nevertheless, as the Ottoman Empire weakened and the Turks felt put upon by Christian Europe and Russia, the Armenians paid the price. Modern ideas of nationalism and constitutionalism led Armenians to agitate throughout the late nineteenth century for legal reforms that would recognize their rights. Many Turks, including the then-Sultan Abdul Hamid II accused Russia and other foreign powers of fomenting this Armenian unrest as a way of further weakening the Empire and struck back savagely, massacring Christian minorities, particularly Armenians, by the hundreds of thousands from 1894-96.

But now, Enver Pasha saw a way to turn the tables on the Russians. A Turkish army marching into the Caucasus armed with Mausers in one hand and the Grand Mufti's fatwa in the other would surely inspire uprisings of Turkic Muslim peoples across the Caucasus and central Asia, who would flock to the Ottoman cause. Thus reinforced, this pan-Turkic army of liberation might march all the way to British India and then begin the work of liberating Muslims there.

That's pretty ambitious, but to Enver Pasha it began to seem doable once he finally finagled the Empire's entry into the war. The Russian Army of the Caucasus was stationed along the Ottoman border and was supposed to be about 100,000 strong. But after the Battle of Tannenberg, Grand Duke Nikolai began tapping the Army of the Caucasus to reinforce Russia's European fronts. When Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire on November 2, Stavka, the Russian high command, advised the commanders of the Army of the Caucasus that they should expect no reinforcements and that the army should hunker down in a purely defensive posture for the winter. Winters are very cold and harsh on the Anatolian Plateau, and even worse in the mountains, where a snowstorm can dump a meter or two of snow on you overnight. If you listen to other history podcasts, you may already know that these mountains have bedeviled armies since ancient times. Only an idiot would plan an offensive through here in the winter.

An idiot, or Enver Pasha. And I suppose I might add to this list Georgy Bergmann, commander of the First Caucasian Army Corps, who interpreted the order "hunker down into a defensive posture for the winter" to mean, "advance rapidly into Turkish territory." That's what he did, and it wasn't long before he began running into Ottoman units. After a few days of heavy fighting, the Russians were forced to withdraw.

It wasn't a huge victory, but it was a victory for an army that hadn't seen many in recent decades. Ottoman morale soared. Russian morale plummeted. By December, the remaining Army of the Caucasus was only about half the size of the now reinforced Ottoman Third Army, and Enver Pasha took this early success as a sign his army was ready to launch a winter offensive.

Again, let me emphasize, this is rugged terrain. There are no railroads and only primitive roads. The Third Army was based at the town of Erzerum, more than a hundred kilometers west of the Russian border, and a thousand kilometers east of the nearest railroad. And again, the logistical problems of moving an army to such a remote region and then keeping it supplied are daunting.

Enver Pasha pressed ahead anyway. He'd been studying strategy with the Germans, and he had come up with his own version of the Schlieffen Plan. The main body of the Third Army would attack the Russians head on at the town of Sarikamis. But a corps of two divisions would first execute a sweeping left hook around the Russian position and turn up in the Russian rear in the middle of the battle, on December 25.

It looked good on paper. As long as your paper doesn't take into account the fact that winter is setting in, or that we're talking about terrain that's more than a thousand meters above sea level in the lowlands, rising up to mountain passes that go over three thousand meters. And for this operation to work, the left hook has to arrive at just the right place at just the right time. These two divisions, which were never properly equipped for the job, had to march across a high plateau through snowfalls so deep the soldiers were forced to abandon some of their equipment,

and temperatures that dropped into the minus thirties. And at those temperatures, it doesn't even matter whether I'm talking Celsius or Fahrenheit.

More than a third of Enver Pasha's left hook died during that two day march. The Russians held off the Ottoman attack, then counterattacked in January. After the fighting was done, ninety percent of the Ottoman Third Army was dead, wounded, or Russian prisoners. By spring, what was left of the Third Army was too feeble to resist another Russian offensive.

There were a substantial number of Russian Armenians fighting on the Russian side, and some Armenian defectors from Turkey as well. The effect these Armenian fighters had on the Battle of Sarkamis is debatable, certainly the effect was nowhere near as great as the weather, but a humiliated Enver Pasha seized on the idea that Armenian treachery was to blame for the disaster. Now that the Russians were advancing virtually unopposed into eastern Anatolia, where most of the Ottoman Empire's Armenian subjects lived, the army and the government turned on them as traitors. As poorly trained, second-string soldiers were rushed to the Anatolian front, Constantinople was sending out directives warning army commanders to be wary of Armenian insurgents.

[music: *Adagio in G minor*]

As the Russians advanced toward the city of Van in April, soldiers searched Armenian homes for weapons. These searches, conducted as they were by these same poorly trained, second-string, not to mention demoralized and undersupplied soldiers, quickly turned into lootings and then into random slaughter. Armenians in Van rose up in revolt against the Ottomans. The government of Constantinople responded by arresting hundreds of leading Armenians in the capital and deporting them to Anatolia, none too gently. Almost all of these deportees would soon be dead.

In May, the Russians took Van and were happy to set up a provisional Armenian government there. Armenians who could, flocked to sanctuary behind the Russian lines. Talaat Pasha, another of the Three Pashas and the Ottoman interior minister, pushed through a law to deal with the Armenian unrest. It authorized the army to deport Armenians from Anatolia to the provinces of Syria and Mosul.

The number of Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire who were forcibly relocated as a result of this new law was easily more than a million, and it may have been more than two million. The Ottoman Council of Ministers authorized the army to, in their words, "crush without mercy any attack and all resistance."

Long columns of civilians marched across Anatolia on the Empire's inadequate roads toward Syria, or were shipped there in railroad cars. Witnesses at the scene reported a dearth of able-bodied men among the civilians, suggesting they were being killed on sight. Rape was rampant and young girls were taken or sold as sex slaves. Hundreds of thousands of Armenian civilians

avoided the deportation by fleeing behind the Russian lines. Half of them died of disease or starvation.

Given the inadequate roads and rails in the Empire and given that the Empire had already proved itself incapable of adequately feeding and supplying even its own soldiers, the results were inevitable. Eyewitnesses reported heaps of bodies strewn by the sides of the roads. Disease, starvation, and brutal treatment at the hands of the army all took a heavy toll. When the survivors, who were accustomed to living in the chill mountains of Anatolia, arrived at the concentration camps in the Syrian desert, little or nothing had been done to provide for them. Aggravating the situation were the Allied blockade and a poor harvest in Syria that year, leading to food shortages.

A number of German military advisors were eyewitnesses to these horrors, but for political reasons, the German government took no action, and the reports did not become public until after the war. But neutral American diplomats could and did report what they had seen to the US ambassador to the Sublime Porte, Henry Morgenthau. Morgenthau was a Jewish American born in Germany and appointed to the position by President Woodrow Wilson. And by the way, he was also the grandfather of Barbara Tuchman, author of *The Proud Tower* and *The Guns of August*, two books which inspired this podcast.

Morgenthau collected reports, passing them on to Washington, and unsuccessfully pressed the Ottoman government to soften its policy toward the Armenians. American newspapers picked up on the story, especially the *New York Times*, since Morgenthau was friends with that paper's publisher, Adolph Ochs.

Morgenthau helped establish the Committee on Armenian Atrocities, an American charity set up to aid Armenian victims. Eventually, Morgenthau would find working with Ottoman officials "intolerable" (that was his word), and he resigned his ambassadorship in 1916.

The exact number of Armenians who died is hard to pin down. Even figures on the pre-war Armenian population of the Empire are iffy. But it's safe to assume the number is more than a million, and may be two million.

In modern times, the word "genocide"—which did not yet exist in 1915—is invoked to describe these deaths. The usage is controversial in some quarters, especially in Turkey, where officials have been known to initiate criminal prosecutions against Turkish citizens for speaking up about the atrocities.

The argument against using the word "genocide" comes down to a dearth of evidence that the campaign against Armenians was conceived from the beginning for the purpose of eliminating Armenians as an ethnic group. We can split hairs over the definition of genocide all day, but I'll just note this: no one is denying that appalling numbers of Armenians were killed and brutalized. No one denies that acts of the Ottoman Army, ordered and instigated from Constantinople itself,

were responsible. The defense relies on a lack of documentation that this outcome is what officials in Constantinople intended from the beginning.

That's a pretty thin reed to hand your defense on. When you take people into custody and move them long distances, you're taking responsibility for their wellbeing, too. You'd better be prepared to guarantee their safety. If you can't guarantee they'll have food and water and shelter and that your own hungry and miserable soldiers won't attack them, then you'd better not move them. What you don't get to do is go ahead and try to move them anyway, and then, when the inevitable happens, shrug your shoulders and say, "Oops. Didn't mean to do that." No matter what your definition of "genocide" might be.

The difference between a unit of soldiers and an armed gang comes down to discipline. And discipline comes from above.

And in saying this, I'm giving the Ottoman government the benefit of the doubt on the intent question. I'll leave the last word to Henry Morgenthau, who was there, discussing these deaths with Ottoman ministers while they were happening. He would later write:

"The real purpose of the deportation was robbery and destruction; it really represented a new method of massacre. When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact."

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and thanks to Matt for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to become a patron too, visit our website at historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the Patreon button. Patronages start at just \$2 a month, or you can make a one-time contribution by clicking on the PayPal button. Thank you as well to everyone who has left a rating or review at the iTunes store, and if you haven't done that yet, that's another way to support the podcast. Your rating and review will help new listeners find us, listeners who hopefully will enjoy the show as much as you do.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to Africa, and examine how the Great War is affecting the political situation on that continent. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Back in the dark days of November and December 1914, when the Russian position in the Caucasus looked desperate, Grand Duke Nikolai put out a call to his British allies to do something about the Ottoman Empire. To launch some form of attack that would force the Ottomans to divert soldiers and resources away from the Caucasus.

As we saw, the Russians managed to turn the tide on their own, but the call for aid was not forgotten. The British war minister, Lord Kitchener, didn't feel that enough of the British Army could be spared from the Western Front for any diversionary action against the Turks, but the

First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, began looking at maps of the Dardanelles. A strike there would be bound to shake them up in Constantinople, right...? We're going to have to keep an eye on that part of the world as well.

[music: Closing Theme]

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