

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 120

### “A Line in the Sand”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Russians were advancing in eastern Anatolia and the British were marching into Mesopotamia. Though the Gallipoli campaign had failed, the Turks still fought tenaciously, and victory seemed a long way away, none of this stopped the Allies from entering into a secret agreement on the post-war Middle East, one that would simply carve up the Ottoman Empire and distribute its territories among the victors, an agreement at odds with what the British were telling the Arabs.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 120. A Line in the Sand.

In the next four episodes, I'm going to lay out the history of the Great War in 1916. I'm going to have to tell that story a little differently from how I've been telling the story of the war so far, because 1916 is a different sort of year. In 1916, the Allied powers will begin coordinating their offensive moves, with an eye toward putting the maximum possible pressure on Germany. That means the moves and countermoves made by the Allies and the Central Powers are all interrelated. I won't be able simply to say, "Here's what happened on the Eastern Front; next week, we'll talk about the Western Front," the way I have been doing, because the moves being made on these fronts, and on the Balkan and Alpine fronts, are increasingly interrelated. Actions will be taken on one front in response to developments on another as part of a larger plan. That's something new, and so it will require a different sort of narrative.

Before I launch into *that* story, though, I need to get caught up on the doings on a few other fronts. We're finished talking about 1915 on the Western and Eastern Fronts, so let's check in on some of the other fronts. I'm thinking specifically of Mesopotamia, eastern Anatolia, and the Alps. And we'll begin with Mesopotamia.

I first mentioned this front back in episode 99, and its significance to the Great War can be summed up in one word: petroleum. As we have seen, the early twentieth century saw the introduction of oil-powered naval vessels, which were faster and more efficient than coal-powered ships. This was a matter of concern to the British. Great Britain has bountiful reserves of coal, but no oil. As long as the Royal Navy ran on coal, it could be confident of its fuel supplies, but an oil-powered Navy will have to look to foreign lands to supply itself.

During the Great War, the only major powers that were self-sufficient in oil production were Russia and the United States. US oil companies also invested heavily in Mexican oil production; in fact, between their US and Mexican operations, the big US oil companies now control 70% of world oil production.

The Royal Navy got most of its oil from those US companies, or from Royal Dutch-Shell, which was a joint British-Dutch company that produced oil in the Dutch East Indies, but the British government did not regard it as in their self-interest to be too dependent on US or Mexican or Dutch oil, which led to the British securing for themselves a concession to produce oil from fields in Iran, or Persia as most English-speaking people called it back then, which led to the creation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1908. That is the forerunner of the company later called British Petroleum or, in our time, just BP. In 1913, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company opened a refinery on the island of Abadan at the head of the Persian Gulf. This refinery was at the time the largest oil refinery in the world, and it produced petroleum products for export via ship through the Persian Gulf.

But Abadan and these British-controlled Iranian oil fields are very close to Ottoman Mesopotamia, and that was a British strategic concern even before the Ottoman Empire entered the war. Southern Iran was regarded as being in the British “sphere of interest,” as they said in those days, and in pre-war British military planning, defense of British interests in the Persian Gulf were assigned to nearby British India. When the Ottoman Empire entered the war on November 5, 1914, Indian soldiers were immediately dispatched to the region, where they seized the Fao Peninsula in southern Mesopotamia, which is adjacent to Abadan. By November 21, this force, the Indian Expeditionary Force “D,” had occupied the Mesopotamian city of Basra, on the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, the main Ottoman port with access to the Persian Gulf. That same month, Sheik Mubarak Al-Sabah, the ruler of Kuwait, a former Ottoman territory now a British protectorate, threw in his lot with the British war effort.

If the goal was to protect the oil fields and the refinery against a potential Ottoman threat, well, mission accomplished. But it didn’t take the British commanders in Basra long to decide that Basra was an unsatisfactory location to set up a defense. It is hot and humid and sits in the middle of salt marshes with few satisfactory roads and no railroads. Trenches are out of the question; you hit water after less than a meter of digging. And the local Arabs who live in the marshes have a reputation for hostility toward outsiders, which the British soon discovered, once they found themselves frequent targets of attacks by Arab irregulars.

In December, a British-Indian force tried advancing upriver to the town of Qurna, which lies at the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates. The Indian troops were able to surprise and encircle the Ottoman garrison there, and the town fell with few casualties.

In April 1915, the British were able easily to brush off an Ottoman counterattack. The Persian oil fields and the refinery at Abadan are now more than secure, but commanders in the field and in India felt emboldened by their successes so far and couldn't resist the temptation to continue pushing onward. After the humiliation of the Battle of Tanga in German East Africa, just a couple of months ago, London had taken command of operations there. Now Delhi was out to prove that Tanga had been a fluke and that British India could make an independent contribution to the war effort in the only theater where it still held command: Mesopotamia.

In June, an Indian division commanded by Major General Charles Townshend advanced up the Tigris River to the city of Amara. In July, another British-Indian force advanced up the Euphrates River and captured the city of Nasiriyah, the location of the largest Turkish supply depot in the region. Its fall brought all of southern Mesopotamia firmly under British control

But by this time, we are now three months into the fighting at Gallipoli and it is becoming clear that that operation is failing. British commanders hoped to make up the loss of face at Gallipoli with advances against the Turks in Mesopotamia, so Townshend and his force were ordered to continue their advance up the Tigris to the city of Kut-al-Amara, which they captured in late September. Now, Townshend was commanding about two divisions. One of these was needed to guard the ever-lengthening supply line back to Basra; the other did the fighting. This force also included a motley collection of armed river boats that ferried supplies, and which Townshend used adroitly to move troops back and forth across the river to surprise Turkish units with flanking moves.

But as he advanced up the river, more and more boats were needed for the supply runs and the river was getting shallower, which meant the larger boats were forced to drop back. Still, Townshend pressed ahead. What had begun as a limited operation to secure the oil fields of Persia was now morphing into something way more ambitious, a process we today might call "mission creep." There was no strategic reason to take Kut, not unless the intent was to press on toward Baghdad, but that must have begun to look tempting. Baghdad, or Baghdad, was the storied city that had once been the center of the Islamic world and it is still in 1915 the largest Arab city in the world, outside of Egypt.

The final decision to go for Baghdad was made in October. By this time, Bulgaria had entered the war, Serbia had fallen, the Gallipoli operation had failed, and a sense was growing in Delhi and in London that some kind of morale victory was needed in the Middle East to offset all this discouraging news. While there was still no compelling strategic reason to take Baghdad, most leaders in Delhi and London agreed, all the way up to the minister of war, Lord Kitchener, and

the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, that the capture of Baghdad would be a needed boost for British prestige.

But were they underestimating the difficulties. The Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberlain, thought so. So did General Townshend, or at least, that's what he tells us in his memoirs, written after the fact. Still orders were orders, and Townshend began his advance.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman War Minister, Enver Pasha, foresaw the danger to Baghdad and dispatched reinforcements to the Mesopotamian front.

Townshend's advance ran into these Ottoman reinforcements at Ctesiphon, the ancient Parthian and Sassanid capital, which lies about 25 miles south of Baghdad. The result was the Battle of Ctesiphon, which began on November 22, 1915. The Ottoman field commander, Nureddin Bey, had had over a month to prepare his defenses and he had put that time to good use. The Ottoman units were entrenched on flat, arid land that allowed an approaching attacker nothing in the way of cover and the Turks used a combination of artillery and mines to block the British from using the river to their advantage as they had in previous battles.

And so the fight came down to a four-day slugfest. Even though they took more casualties, the Turks substantially outnumbered the British and they held firm. On the morning of the fifth day, the Turkish commander ordered a withdrawal. So you could call this a British tactical victory if you like, but it doesn't take into account that nearly half the Indian force had been killed or wounded. Townshend was in no position to pursue the withdrawing Turks. Neither was he in a position to hold his ground, here in open country hundreds of miles from his supply sources. The Turks, by contrast, had much shorter supply lines that only needed to run as far as Baghdad, and they could be expected to quickly regroup and come back for a rematch, so Townshend had no choice but to withdraw back to Kut. He arrived there on December 3, and was ordered to make his stand.

Just a few days later, the Turks arrived. They left behind just enough of a force to lay siege to Townshend's struggling remnant of a division, while the rest of their force continued its advance and took up defensive positions farther south along the river.

The Siege of Kut lasted until April 1916. Townshend appears to have been quite optimistic at first, but these Turkish soldiers were veterans of Gallipoli; they were battle-hardened fighters who had beaten the British once and were confident they could do it again. The British made repeated efforts to relieve the 12,000 or so soldiers at Kut, including history's first attempt to drop supplies by air, but it was all to no avail. With his soldiers starving, Townshend asked for an armistice to negotiate terms. In exchange for the release of his soldiers, he offered £1,000,000 and a pledge that his soldiers would return to India and not fight the Turks again. The Turks fully understood that they had the upper hand here, and refused to accept anything less than unconditional surrender, to which Townshend eventually agreed.

Townshend himself was well treated and was shipped to a comfortable imprisonment in Constantinople. The rest of his force were not so well treated, and thousands would die in Turkish captivity.

It was the largest single surrender in British military history and a second humiliation at the hands of the Turks. The British feared these defeats would lead to renewed calls for jihad from Constantinople and unrest among Muslims in Persia and British India, and so they became even more determined to take Baghdad. But before that could happen, the logistical problems needed to be sorted out. The port facilities at Basra would need to be upgraded and more boats brought in to navigate the rivers. All this will take time, and it won't be until the end of 1916 that the British will be ready to try again.

But even as the starving survivors of the Siege of Kut were being force-marched off to captivity in Baghdad, British and French diplomats were already putting the finishing touches on their plan to carve up the corpse of the Ottoman Empire.

[music: "The Roast Beef of Old England"]

In early 1915, as the British prepared their Gallipoli campaign, Entente diplomats were hard at work behind the scenes. The British hoped to seize control of Constantinople and the straits that connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean in that campaign, but if you've been listening to this podcast from the beginning, you well know that Russia has been trying to win control of this very same strategic waterway for a long time now, and, ironically, it has been British policy to deny Russia control of the straits for just as long.

But times have changed. Britain and Russia are now allies, and Russia is demanding that *she* be granted control of the straits after the war. The British and the French acquiesced in this demand and worked out a secret agreement with the Russians that would give them what they wanted in exchange for territorial concessions elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire. The French would get Syria, a region they have had an interest in for over fifty years now, ostensibly out of a sense of kinship with the Catholic minority living in what today we would call Lebanon. Britain would get a larger sphere of influence in Persia, which she regards as valuable both for Persia's oil reserves and as a buffer to shield British India. The disposition of Palestine—the Holy Lands—was a tricky question, since all three Entente powers had an interest in it, as did the Muslim Arabs, so it was decided to set that problem aside to be resolved later.

Meanwhile, the British High Commissioner to Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, was engaged in negotiations with Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, toward the goal of instigating an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Recall that the British have repelled an Ottoman offensive against the Suez Canal, and have advanced their own forces as far east as El-Arish in the Sinai. An Arab revolt would complicate the Turkish defense of the Middle East and smooth the way for British offensives in Mesopotamia and from Egypt. In exchange for Arab assistance, McMahon offered British support for an independent Arab state after the war, a single, unified state that

would basically encompass everything south of Anatolia, east of Egypt, west of Persia, and as far south as the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. The only exceptions would be the Mediterranean coast of Syria, which France already had a claim on, and Kuwait and Aden as British protectorates. And maybe British-occupied southern Mesopotamia, for the sake of protecting those British petroleum interests in Persia.

Hussein readily agreed to these terms. He would declare himself King in Mecca on June 10, 1916, and begin a revolt against the Turks.

That's a story we're going to have to come back to in another episode, but for now I'll just note that even as those informal discussions with the Sharif were in progress, the British and the French continued secret negotiations between themselves through the fall of 1915 and into the spring of 1916. By May 1916, the two countries reached what history knows as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, after the British and French diplomats who were most closely involved. Under this agreement, the French and British endorsed a much different division of Arab lands in the Middle East. The northern boundary of the promised Arab kingdom would be much farther south than anyone had suggested to Sharif Hussein, over 200 miles farther south, in fact. North of this boundary would be a swath of British-controlled territory, running from the Palestinian coast on the Mediterranean all the way through southern Mesopotamia to the Persian border.

Farther north, another line was drawn beginning at the Mediterranean coast at about what is the border between Israel and Lebanon in our day. This line then takes an irregular northwestern path across Arab lands, through northern Mesopotamia and on to the Persian border. North of this line would be French territory, which the British consented to because this French territory would serve as a useful buffer between British and Russian interests. You'll recall that there was some friction between the British and Russian imperial claims before the war.

This French territory would extend all the way north into the Taurus Mountains in Anatolia. The Russians then gave their assent to this agreement, in exchange for British and French assent to Russian control of the straits and the chunk of Eastern Anatolia they had already occupied. It was also agreed to give Italy a concession on the Aegean coast of Anatolia near the island of Rhodes and the Dodecanese, which are already Italian occupied, as you'll recall. I've posted a map at the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), if you'd care to have a look. The map lays out exactly what was agreed to.

This agreement was inconsistent with what McMahon had discussed with Sharif Hussein, but Hussein didn't know that, since the Sykes-Picot Agreement was a closely held secret at the time he began his revolt. And before the fighting ends, Britain will have taken additional measures inconsistent with both these agreements. The result will be what I believe the British would call "a right mess." But don't worry; you can be sure that capable diplomacy will eventually sort it all out. And by that I mean, expect this to be the source of bitter and intractable conflict in the Middle East for the rest of the century.

[music: *The Capture of Kars*]

Let's wind the clock back to the beginning of the year now and allow me to remind you that in the fall of 1915, the Russian Emperor Nikolai took personal command of the military. He is currently spending most of his time with Stavka, the Russian military headquarters, which is currently located at the city of Mogilev, which in our day lies in eastern Belarus. The Emperor has left the Empress Alexandra to look after things in Petrograd during his absence.

The previous commander-in-chief of the military, Archduke Nikolai, the Emperor's cousin, has been reassigned to command of the Caucasus Front. The Archduke and his Chief of Staff, Nikolai Nikolayevich Yudenich—yes, I know it's getting hard to keep track of all of these Nikolais, but bear with me—the Archduke and his Chief of Staff pondered what it meant for the Caucasus Front now that Bulgaria had joined the Central Powers, Serbia had fallen, and the British had withdrawn from Gallipoli. What they figured it meant was this: there was now a line of communication open from Germany to Turkey, which would allow German arms and ammunition to flow into Anatolia, and there was also a veteran Turkish army on Gallipoli that was no longer needed to fight the British there and could be redeployed.

The prospect of experienced Turkish reinforcements armed with modern German weapons turning up on the Caucasus Front seemed very likely to both Nikolais. The only disadvantage the Turks had was that old problem of inadequate roads and railroads. It would take months for the Turks to redeploy and take advantage of the situation, which led the Russian commanders to conclude that the time to go on the offensive was right now.

And so they did, in January 1916. You'll recall that the Turks under Enver Pasha had tried an offensive the previous year and it had failed due to the harsh weather in the highlands of eastern Anatolia, episode 99. But this offensive would be different. The Russian army was better trained and equipped for winter warfare. The Russians had trucks to help keep their units supplied as they advanced. They even had airplanes for reconnaissance. On the other hand, the Ottoman Third Army opposing them had been neglected for this past year, as the fighting on Gallipoli occupied most of the Ottoman Army's resources and attention. The Third Army was understrength, undersupported, and it crumbled in the face of the Russian offensive. The Russians entered the fortified Turkish city of Erzerum, formerly the site of the Third Army's headquarters, on February 16 and the city of Trabizon on the Black Sea in April. Turkish counterattacks over the rest of the year did not avail, and by the end of 1916, the Russians were deep enough into Turkish territory to threaten central Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia.

[music: Overture from *La Forza del Destino*]

I haven't had much to say about the fighting on this front since Italy entered the war, almost a year ago now, except to note that the opening of a new front along the border between Italy and Austria turned out not to be the game changer the Allies were hoping for. Austria had been struggling in May of 1915, yes, but she had managed to put twenty divisions onto the Italian

frontier, against Italy's thirty-five, which was good enough to hold the line, especially when you consider that this line mostly runs through the Alps, the most rugged mountains in Europe. For over two thousand years, the Alps have served as something like a huge natural fortification able to keep Italians safely in and non-Italians safely out of Italy, not always successfully, to be sure.

In the first days of combat on this front, the Italians were unable to make more than token gains in the mountains, and it quickly became obvious that the path to victory did not run through the Alps. What else to do then? Well, the obvious alternative is for the Italians to press eastward from the far northeastern corner of their country into what in our time is the nation of Slovenia. This route would take the Italian Army to the city of Trieste, the fourth largest city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, not to mention Austria's most important port and the largest Italian-speaking city outside the borders of the Kingdom of Italy. To take Trieste would be a blow to the Austrians and a great victory for Italy, as it would bring more of *Italia irredenta*, unredeemed Italy, into the Italian nation.

The most ambitious and zealous of Italian nationalists saw Trieste as just the first step. The eastern coast of the Adriatic rightfully belongs to Italy; why not take it all? And once the Italian Army has advanced far enough east, it can make a left turn around the eastern edge of the Alps and march on Vienna itself.

That proved to be a little more ambition than the Italian Army was capable of fulfilling. Advancing eastward into Slovenia would mean attacking through a relatively narrow bottleneck where the border with Austria runs between the Alps to the north and the Adriatic Sea to the south. Just a few miles east of the border and parallel to it, in Austrian territory runs a river south from the Alps to the sea. It is called the Soča River in Slovene or the Isonzo River in Italian. About ten miles from the sea, the Isonzo valley widens into a plain that slopes upward to the east and onto the Karst Plateau. Here is the traditional passage between Italy and the Balkans, and here is the ideal location for an Italian offensive into Austria.

The difficulty is, it's so ideal that no Austrian commander could miss it, and so here is where the Austrians set up their strongest defenses. The Italians attacked here in June 1915, just weeks after entering the war, in what history calls the First Battle of the Isonzo. It sank into the swamp. A few weeks later, the Italians tried again, in what history calls the Second Battle of the Isonzo. That sank into the swamp. Two months later came the Third Battle of the Isonzo. That burned down, fell over, then sank into the swamp. But the fourth one...no. Actually the Fourth Battle of the Isonzo failed just as badly as the first three.

I probably shouldn't be kidding around about this, because by the end of 1915, the cumulative casualty count was about 200,000 Italian soldiers and about 130,000 Austrian soldiers and nothing to show for it except that the Italians had advanced about a mile into Austrian territory. They held the high ground overlooking the Isonzo River and the town of Gorizia, but that was all they had to show for their efforts.



I've mentioned before that sometimes more than one Great War battle was fought in the same place, and we have to resort to numbers to tell them apart. We've already seen the First and Second Battles of Ypres, for example. But this site holds the record, because depending on how you want to count them, there will be about a dozen Battles of the Isonzo River before the war ends. And as you can infer from the fact that they all have the same name, no progress is going to be made.

Why did these Italian offensives fail repeatedly, even though Italy had numerical superiority? Well, there are a few reasons. The Italian Army was ill-equipped. You've heard this story before with Great War armies. There weren't enough weapons to go around, and soldiers can't fight very well without them. This army was particularly short on artillery, which is *the* offensive weapon in Great War combat. The Italian Army hadn't yet rebuilt its stockpiles from the war with the Ottomans over Libya, and Italian industry couldn't manufacture artillery shells and other ammunition fast enough to keep up with the demand.

And then there was the Italian commander-in-chief, the 65-year old Luigi Cadorna, who has been called "one of the most callous and incompetent commanders" of the Great War, which is saying something. Cadorna was a strict disciplinarian, who sacked dozens of his own generals over the course of the war, and oversaw the courts martial of thousands of Italian soldiers and the executions of about 750, which was more than any other army. But in terms of his military thinking, Cadorna was a staunch advocate of, you guessed it, frontal assaults against entrenched enemies armed with modern weapons. And so, the war on the Italian front will grind along inconclusively. For a while yet.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and thank you, Martin, for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you have a few bucks to spare and would like to become a patron, or make a one-time contribution, visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), and click on "Help the Podcast."

I'll be taking next week off to catch my breath, but the podcast will return the week after and begin the four-week series on the Great War in 1916 that I have been promising you. I said before it would be a five-episode series, but here is a rare instance of me overestimating how long a topic is going to take. I think now that we can get this one done in four.

So I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we begin the year 1916 by considering the overall situation and examining the war plans of the Allies and the Central Powers. The Central Powers will get a leg up on the Allies by beginning the 1916 campaign season unexpectedly early, at a place called Verdun. England's Best Sword Knocked from Her Hand, in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned how the British General Charles Townshend, was sent off to comfortable imprisonment in Constantinople following his capture at the Siege of Kut. He became friends with Enver Pasha, attended court functions at the Sultan's palace, and spent the

rest of his time living in a nice house on an island in the Sea of Marmara. He spoke well of the Turks and his treatment, and even wrote repeatedly to his wife Alice, trying to persuade her to come join him. She refused and warned him that his praising the Turks wasn't doing his reputation in Britain much good. He didn't take the hint and continued to praise Enver Pasha and the Turks publicly, even going so far as to criticize the British military for its treatment of Ottoman prisoners. After the war, he returned to Britain expecting a warm welcome, and was surprised and hurt that he got nothing of the kind. What he got was the cold shoulder from the Army and resigned his commission in 1920 after they had made it clear his military career was finished. What was left of his reputation was ruined when the stories of how badly the Turks had treated his soldiers became public. He died in 1924, at the age of 63.