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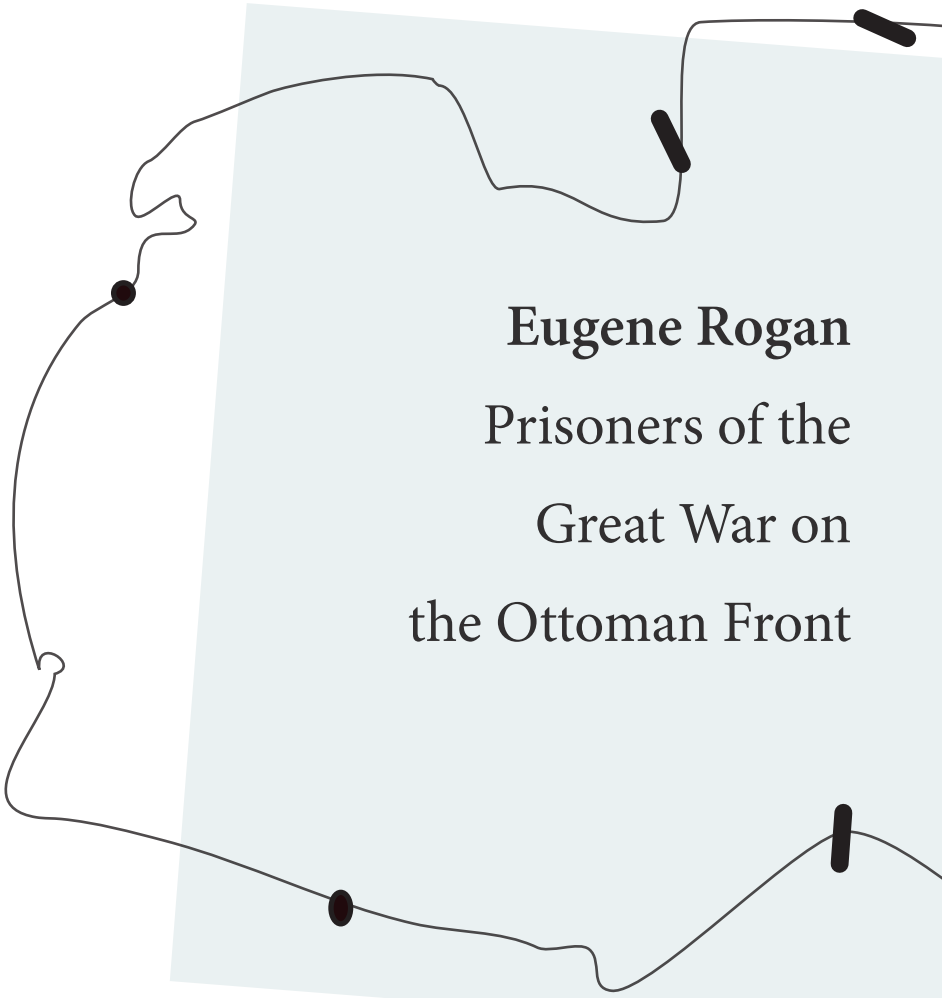

Eugene Rogan
Prisoners of the Great War on the Ottoman Front

Pera-Blätter 33

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Prisoners of the Great War on the Ottoman Front[1]

The war has ended. Where are those who were supposed to return home?
They did not come home, the young men; they remain in captivity.
They have fallen into foreign lands, save them, oh God.
Some remain in wintry places, some remain in summery places.[2]

On the Ottoman Front of the Great War, hundreds of thousands of soldiers from both sides of the conflict saw out their service as prisoners of war. Their lives were none the safer for their distance from the trenches. From the moment of surrender, prisoners were at the mercy of a lethal combination of adversaries: their enemy captors, the elements, and disease.

For each of the warring powers, prisoners were a liability. Injured prisoners vied with their own wounded for limited medical resources in over-extended field hospitals. Able-

1 This essay was first presented as a lecture entitled "Recruiting Prisoners: The Ottomans and the British in the First World War" at Bilgi University, Istanbul, 1 December 2015.

2 Folk song from the Çorum region of Turkey dating to the end of World War I. Cited after Yucel Yanikdag, *Healing the Nation: Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914-1939* (Edinburgh 2013), p. 21.

bodied POWs had to be transported away from the front line before they built up in large enough numbers to pose a security risk. Prisoners provided more mouths to feed and bodies to clothe when quartermasters struggled to provision their own soldiers.

However, both the Ottomans and the British sought ways to exploit enemy prisoners to advance their respective war aims. The Ottomans deployed able-bodied prisoners to labour gangs assigned to infrastructural projects such as railways and roads. More symbolically, both the Central and Entente Powers targeted and recruited disaffected imperial soldiers in a bid to open internal fronts against their enemies. The Ottomans collaborated with their German allies in recruiting Muslim POWs to Sultan Mehmed V's call for global jihad against the British, French and Russian empires, hoping to weaken the Entente war effort through their empires. While Britain and France denounced these efforts as a "jihad made in Germany," the Entente powers were no less active in recruiting Arab Ottoman soldiers in their prisoner camps in Egypt and India to serve with Sherifian forces in the Arab Revolt. In this way, ironically, Muslim soldiers from South Asia, the Middle East and Africa with least cause to fight ultimately served on both sides in the Great War.

The statistics on wartime prisoners at the Ottoman Front vary widely. With each decisive battle, the successful army often took great numbers of enemy prisoners as the price of victory. The greater part of Ottoman prisoners in Russian captivity surrendered in the catastrophic defeats in the Caucasus – in Sarıkamış at the very start of the war, and in Erzurum in 1916. In all, as many as 65,000 Ottoman soldiers fell captive to the

Russians. The Russians dispatched their POWs by train to camps in Siberia. As many as one quarter of POWs died in the overcrowded boxcars before even reaching prison camps. Exposure and disease killed a large proportion of those who survived the train ride. "By the late summer of 1916," Yucel Yanikdag discovered, "at least 64,000 German, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian POWs in Russia had already died from disease."[3]

Aref Shehadeh, a native of Jerusalem, surrendered to Russian forces in Erzurum as one of only eleven members of his regiment to survive. Though he does not state so explicitly in his memoirs, he was almost certainly captured in the Russian conquest of Erzurum in February 1916. His Russian captors transported him and his fellow prisoners to the Krasnoyarsk prison camp in central Siberia where some 3,500 POWs were detained. In his memoirs, written in December 1918, he recalled how the "food conditions and cold were unbearable." Yet as an officer, Shehadeh enjoyed preferential treatment that probably explains his survival. In his memoir, Shehadeh claimed his Russian captors allowed the men to exercise, play football in good weather and perform theatrical productions when confined indoors by the fierce winters. "Later on I was able to put out a satirical newspaper, without authorization, for my fellow soldiers," he recalled. He even fraternized with his Russian captors, visiting them in their homes for occasions like New Year's.[4]

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3 Yanikdag, *Healing the Nation,* pp. 22-25.

4 Salim Tamari, "With God's Camel in Siberia: The Russian Exile of an Ottoman Officer from Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, number 35 (Autumn 2008) 31-50.

Shehadeh's experiences were comparable to those of British officers taken prisoner by the Ottomans. The vast majority of British prisoners surrendered to the Ottomans in Mesopotamia after the siege of Kut in April 1916. According to a British government report published in November 1918, nearly 13,700 of the total of 16,600 British and Indian POWs in Ottoman captivity were seized in Kut. The Ottomans took relatively few prisoners in their other campaigns. Large scale British surrenders were rare in Gallipoli, the Sinai and Palestine, and British sources suggest fewer than 3,000 of their soldiers surrendered to the Ottomans in the other Middle Eastern campaigns combined.[5]

The experiences of British officers differed dramatically from those of common soldiers in Ottoman captivity. After the fall of Kut, the officers were separated from the men and given privileged treatment in captivity for the remainder of the war. E.H. Jones, a young lieutenant imprisoned in the central Anatolian town of Yozgat, detailed how British officers filled their days in captivity. "Our chief problem was how to pass the time," he wrote. "We had four-a-side hockey tournaments and (when the Turks allowed) walks, picnics, tobogganing, and skiing. For indoor amusement we wrote dramas, gay and serious, melodramas, farces and pantomimes. We had an orchestra of prison-made instruments, a prison-trained male-voice choir and musicians to write the music for them."[6] For common soldiers taken at Kut, the "chief problem" was survival. Starved into surrender after four months of siege, most British and Indian soldiers were in a critical condition by

5 "Report on the Treatment of British Prisoners of War in Turkey," Cd. 9208 (London 1918).

6 E.H. Jones, *The Road to En-Dor* (London 1921), p. 123.

the time they entered captivity. Their Ottoman captors made no allowance for their disability and forced them to march across the Syrian desert towards work camps on the Baghdad Railway line. British soldiers were sent towards the Taurus and Amanus mountains where they were to assist German engineers in blasting the tunnels to complete the strategic railway line. Few were strong enough to survive the arduous overland journey across the desert terrain. More than 1,700 of the 2,592 British rank and file who surrendered at Kut died along the way – nearly seventy percent of the total.[7]

These stark statistics are supported by the eyewitness accounts of survivors of Kut. Flight Sergeant Sloss of the Australian Flying Corps recalled: "It was a horrible sight to see our boys driven along by rifle-butt and whip. Some of them were beaten until they dropped. One naval brigade man never rose again. If you said anything you were whipped yourself."[8] While marching "the road of death," Sgt Jerry Long confronted a sympathetic Ottoman officer with his fears: "I told him that our party numbered less than half of the original…and we were beginning to think that the policy of the Turkish Government was to have us marched around until we were all dead."[9]

A minority of British prisoners who survived the march were deployed in work gangs. In Bilemedik, to the north of the Taurus Mountains, Kut survivors met up with "the few hundred" British POWs from the Dardanelles campaign. Three

7 Arnold Wilson, *Loyalties Mesopotamia, 1914-1917* (Oxford 1930), p. 140.

8 Imperial War Museum, Private Papers of J McK Sloss MSM Australian Flying Corps, doc. 13102.

9 P.W. Long, *Other Ranks of Kut* (London 1938), p. 103.

hundred British prisoners were deployed to assist in constructing a light railway line between Ankara and Erzurum. In Afion Kara Hisar, an important railway junction in Anatolia, some 400 British soldiers mixed with 200 Indians and a handful of Russian and French prisoners working on the line. Other POWs were put to work in Ottoman factories.[10]

The British POWs were weak and ill by the time they reached the railway line. The Armenian priest Grigoris Balakian, himself a survivor of the Armenian genocide, described the condition of the first column of 200 British and Indian POWs to reach the Bahçe railway station in the Amanus Mountains in the summer of 1916:

> Their legs were covered with wounds and sores; they were dirty and desiccated … their cheekbones were protruding, their eyes withdrawn deep into their sockets. The Indians were practically naked, some with just a few rags on their heads, according to their custom; in the darkness, an illusion of moving ghosts.
> 'Are there any Armenians among you? … Give us a piece of bread … We haven't had anything to eat for days.' We were dumbfounded that they spoke English ... that they were British … distant friends sharing our fate, asking us for bread … What an irony, indeed!

The Ottoman and German engineers gave the survivors of Kut one week's food and rest to restore their physical strength before putting them to work. Balakian claimed some 1,600

10 "Report on the Treatment of British Prisoners of War in Turkey," Cd. 9208 (London: H.M.S.O. 1918).

British and Indian troops made it to Bahçe while he was there.[11]

The mortality figures for Indian soldiers taken prisoner at Kut are less precise. The Ottomans separated Indian Muslim from the other prisoners for preferential treatment, in the hope of recruiting them into Ottoman service, as will be discussed below. Like their British comrades, non-Muslim Indians were also marched to work sites and suffered high mortality rates. By war's end, of 13,672 British and Indian officers and men who surrendered at Kut, 2,611 were confirmed dead and 2,222 were "untraced" and presumed dead – a mortality rate of thirty-five percent.[12]

By the time of the armistice in October 1918, the British were openly accusing the Ottomans of atrocities against prisoners of war. "The history of the British prisoners of war in Turkey has faithfully reflected the peculiarities of the Turkish character," a British government report argued:

> Some of these, at any rate to the distant spectator, are sufficiently picturesque; others are due to the more dead-weight of Asiatic indifference and inertia; others again are acutely and resolutely barbarous. It has thus happened that at the same moment there have been prisoners treated with almost theatrical politeness and consideration, prisoners left to stare

11 Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1918* (New York 2009), pp 294-98.

12 Wilson, *Loyalties Mesopotamia*, p. 140; "Report on the Treatment of British Prisoners of War in Turkey," Cd. 9208 (London: H.M.S.O. 1918).

> and die through simple neglect and incompetence, and prisoners driven and tormented like beasts.[13]

The British contrasted their own "civilized" treatment of prisoners, in compliance with international regulations, with the "barbaric" treatment meted out by the Ottomans. In course of the war, the British claimed to have captured 150,000 prisoners on the Ottoman Front. Judging from surviving Turkish accounts, Ottoman soldiers were at most risk at the moment of their capture. They suffered beatings and death threats until handed over to British authorities. Even British first-hand accounts confirm that surrendering Turks were threatened with the bayonet. Private Robert Eardley of the Lancashire Fusiliers got between a comrade and a wounded Turkish soldier who was trying to surrender. "Here you get out of my way – he has killed my mate and I am going to stick him," the Lancashire soldier growled. Eardley put himself at risk in preventing the Briton from killing the defenceless Turk. A similar scene was repeated in Gaza, when two Australians of the camel corps found a wounded Ottoman soldier in a trench. "Bayonet the cow," yelled the first camelier. "No, give the poor devil a chance," cried the second.[14] A soldier's life lay in the balance at the moment of surrender.

Once in prison camps, Turkish prisoners claimed to receive good treatment. This is confirmed by reports published by the Red Cross after inspection of British prison camps in

13 "Report on the Treatment of British Prisoners of War in Turkey," Cd. 9208 (London: H.M.S.O. 1918).

14 Both anecdotes are recounted in Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (London 2015), pp. 199, 331.

Egypt, India and Burma. The inspectors concluded that Turkish prisoners were "fed well", "clothed well", faced no corporeal punishment or forced work, and were well provided with medical treatment.[15] While Yucel Yanikdag argues that as many as 10,000 Ottoman soldiers died in British hospitals, with pellagra (a nutritional deficiency) a major killer, it seems likely that many Turkish soldiers were probably suffering from malnutrition when captured.[16] The Red Cross reported mortality rates in British POW camps of between one and three percent.

By keeping their Ottoman prisoners in humane conditions, the British could claim to be upholding international regulations. Yet they had an interest in winning over the good will of some of their POWs. The British hoped to extract useful intelligence from enemy prisoners and interrogated many prisoners, and were more likely to secure cooperation through good treatment. Yet the British, like their German adversaries, increasingly came to see their Muslim prisoners of war as potential propaganda assets. The Germans and Ottomans worked actively to recruit colonial Muslim soldiers captured from Entente armies, to given added strength to the Sultan-Caliph's call for Jihad. The British emptied their Ottoman POW camps of Arab prisoners in a bid to encourage Muslim recruits to the

15 "Turkish Prisoners in Egypt: A Report by the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross," (Geneva 1917) and "Reports on British Prison-Camps in India and Burma visited by the International Red Cross Committee in February, March and April 1917 (London 1917).

16 Yanikdag, *Healing the Nation*, pp. 25-26.

Sharifian army in the Arab Revolt, to "rob the Jihad of its principal thunderbolt," in the words of George Antonius.

The recruitment policies pursued by the British and the Ottomans played on religio-national ties to turn potentially disaffected subjects against their imperial masters – North Africans against France, Indians against Britain, Arabs against the Ottomans. Yet the change in colours did little to advance the personal or communal interests of those prisoners persuaded to defect to former enemy ranks. Those soldiers who served on both sides of the trenches suffered twice the warfare with little or no gains to show for their sacrifice, and little trust or appreciation from either of the armies they served.

Germany pressed their Ottoman ally to turn Europe's Great War into a global jihad by getting the Sultan, in his role as Caliph, to reinforce the declaration of war with a call for holy war. Knowing how pan-Islamic and national movements in the Caucasus, India, Egypt and North Africa agitated against Russian, British and French rule, the Germans believed jihad to be a secret weapon that might make a decisive contribution to winning the war on the Western Front by provoking uprisings against the Entente powers through their Muslim colonies.

The Germans had some success in their efforts to win Muslim enemy combatants over to a jihad against Britain and France. They recruited Islamic activists like Shaykh Salih al-Sharif to the cause. Born in Tunis to Algerian exiles from French rule, Salih al-Sharif was an Islamic scholar and descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Salih al-Sharif left his native land in 1900 in protest against French rule. The Tunisian activist came to the attention of the Young Turk leadership

in the Libyan War in 1911, where he served under Enver. It was Salih al-Sharif who reportedly declared jihad against Italy, giving the war its overtly religious overtones. Enver, already impressed by the power of Islam to mobilize resistance to European encroachment, recruited the Sharif to his intelligence organization, the Teşkilat-i Mahsusa.[17]

In 1914, Salih al-Sharif moved to Berlin where he joined a new propaganda unit under the German Foreign Ministry, the Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient.[18] The Tunisian activist visited the Western Front to appeal directly to Muslim soldiers fighting for Britain and France across the trenches. He drafted a number of pamphlets, published in both Arabic and Berber, which were dropped over enemy lines in areas held by North African soldiers, along with news of the Sultan's declaration of Jihad. A number of North African soldiers deserted from French lines in response to this overtly Islamic appeal.[19]

As the Germans began to take Muslim prisoners on the Western Front – some 800 by the end of 1914 – they created a special POW camp called Halbmondlager at Wünsdorf-Zossen, near Berlin. The camp's German commanders spoke Arabic with the prisoners. Camp food was fully compliant with Islamic dietary requirements. The camp even had an ornate mosque, paid for by Wilhelm II himself, to provide for

17 James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge 2006), pp. 36-43; Peter Heine, "Salih Ash-Sharif at-Tunisi, a North African Nationalist in Berlin During the First World War," *Revue de l'Occident Musulman et de la Mediterranée* 33 (1982) 89-95.

18 Tilman Ludke, *Jihad made in Germany: Ottoman and German Propaganda and Intelligence Operations in the First World War* (Münster 2005) pp. 117-25.

19 Heine, "Salih Ash-Sharif at-Tunisi," p. 90.

the spiritual needs of Muslim POWs – and to prove the Kaiser's good intentions towards the Muslim world.

Ahmed bin Hussein, an elderly farmer from Marrakech, was one of eight Moroccan soldiers who surrendered to German forces in the battlefields of Belgium in the opening weeks of the war. From the moment the men declared they were Muslims, the Moroccan soldier claimed their German captors "showed us due respect.... Everybody was patting our shoulders and giving us food and beverages." As a Muslim POW, he was dispatched to the Halbmondlager where he was treated with care and his religious dietary restrictions were respected. "They even made a favor for us, and gave us a kitchen. Pork was not to be given to us. They gave us good meat, pilaf, chickpeas etc. They gave three blankets, underwear, and a new pair of shoes to each of us. They took us to the baths once in every three days and cut our hair."[20] The conditions in camp were no doubt an improvement over what he had experienced in the French army and at the front.

A parade of Muslim activists passed through the Zossen camp to promote Jihad propaganda among a (literally) captive audience. The Tunisian activist Salih al-Sharif was a frequent visitor and edited an Arabic-language newspaper for inmates called, appropriately enough, al-Jihad. A number of North African activists and notables visited the camp to meet the inmates and win them over to the Central cause. These guest speakers lectured inmates on why fighting with the Allies was

20 From the interrogation transcript by the Ottoman authorities preserved in the Turkish military archives in Ankara, reproduced in Ahmet Tetik, Y. Serdar Demirtaş and Sema Demirtaş, eds, *Çanakkale Muharebeleri'nin Esirleri – Ifadeler ve Mektuplar* [Prisoners of the Gallipoli Campaign: Testimonies and Letters], vol. 1 (Ankara 2009), pp. 93-94.

an act against religion, and why joining the Ottoman Jihad against the enemies of Islam (i.e. Britain and France) was a religious duty.

Hundreds of POWs volunteered for the Ottoman army – among them the Moroccan farmer, Ahmed bin Hussein. After he had spent six months in captivity, the Moroccan soldier claimed that a German officer visited the camp, accompanied by an Ottoman officer named Hikmet Efendi. "Whoever wants to go to Istanbul," they instructed, "raise [your] hand." Twelve Moroccan and Algerian soldiers, Ahmed bin Hussein among them, volunteered on the spot. "Others were afraid," the Moroccan recalled, and remained behind. The volunteers were given civilian clothes and passports and sent on to Istanbul to join the Ottoman war effort.

It is impossible to say how many Muslim prisoners volunteered for Ottoman service out of conviction and how many for the opportunity to get out of a POW camp. Whatever their motives, a steady stream of Indian and North African soldiers left Germany for Istanbul to join the Sultan's war against Britain and France. Mobilized for a second time, as Muslim rather than colonial soldiers, they would re-enter the rapidly expanding world war on its Middle Eastern fronts.

The experience of the Moroccan farmer, Ahmed bin Hussein, gives some sense of the way colonial Muslims were received:

> We came to Istanbul… We stayed at the Ministry of Defense for three months. Sergeant Osman took care of us. We used to tour around the city all day and come back to the Ministry of Defense at night to sleep. Later the Germans took all 12 of us. They took us to Aleppo, Damascus, and to al-`Ula.

Though the Ottoman interrogation document is not dated, it would appear that Ahmed bin Hussein and his comrades were sent to reinforce the Ottoman army in the Hijaz against the British-supported Arab revolt in the autumn of 1916. Judging from his account, it sounds as though the German-led force was overwhelmed by Hashemite forces:

We engaged in a battle against the Arabs at a place a day's distance from Jeddah. We fought for four days. Sami Bey and a gendarmerie officer were wounded. A German officer died. We had no water or food for four days. Later, the Sharif arrived. He showed the way and took his men away. Then we came to Istanbul without any harm.

By the time Ahmed bin Hussein told his story, he was once again a POW – but this time in Ottoman hands. The fact that his account is preserved in an interrogation document demonstrates how little trust the Ottoman authorities had in their North African recruits' loyalties. Yet if Ahmed bin Hussein knew the reasons for his detention, he gave no clue in his interrogation. He completed his story:

> 50 German soldiers and 5 officers came with their commander. We went to the Department of Defense from Haydarpasha together with Sami Bey. He placed us in a guesthouse. We stayed there for 20 days. Then they imprisoned us. We have been in the prison for 16 days now. We are in a miserable condition.[21]

A large contingent of North African recruits was sent to Mesopotamia, to reinforce Ottoman positions during the siege of Kut. According to American records, some 3,000 North African volunteers reached Baghdad in April 1916 where they

21 Tetik, Demirtaş and Demirtaş, Çanakkale Muharebeleri'nin Esirleri, pp. 93-94.

encamped near the recently surrendered British prisoners from Kut.[22] The Algerians attempted to fraternize but the British were suspicious and rebuffed their efforts. P.W. Long, a British sergeant, noted how "they claimed to be our friends" but the Britons "did not accept their overtures."[23] What Long could not have appreciated was how well the Algerians understood the British prisoners' plight from their own recent experiences of capture and detention. No doubt the Algerians still felt some lingering sympathy for the men with whom they had once been allied while still soldiers in French service.

No sooner were they in Baghdad than many of the North African soldiers questioned their decision to change colors. A number of Algerians called on the American consul in Baghdad to seek his help. "Some say they came on the promise of the Sultan that they would be treated splendidly and that they would fight against 'unbelievers'," Consul Brissel reported, "while other say they were sent here by the Germans. However, they all unite in saying that they were deceived."[24] There was little the American consul offer the North African volunteers in Turkish uniform, aside from giving them small sums of money. Many were subsequently dispatched to fight against the Russians on the Persian frontier.

As already noted, most of the British and Indian soldiers who surrendered at Kut faced death marches and forced labour. By stark contrast, Indian Muslim POWs were the target of particular favor as an extension of Ottoman jihad policies.

22 Long, *Other Ranks of Kut*, p. 33.
23 Ibid.
24 United States National Archives, Department of State, Record Group 84, Baghdad vol. 25, Brissell report dated Baghdad, August 9, 1916.

Indian Muslim officers received the best treatment. They were separated from their British and Hindu colleagues, housed in Baghdad's most comfortable accommodation, given fine food and cigarettes, and taken to the city's mosques for prayer. "The Turks seem to be getting at them," Colonel Bell Syer, an English officer, noted with justified suspicion.[25] In August, 1916, the local press in Iraq noted that Sultan Mehmed V had granted an audience to seventy Indian Muslim officers taken prisoner at Kut. Claiming that the officers were unwilling warriors in "the campaign against the Empire of the Caliph," the Sultan returned their swords as a mark of his personal respect. "This imperial favor so affected them," the newspaper reported, "that they all expressed their wish to serve the Empire."[26] If true, this meant that the Ottomans had succeeded in recruiting nearly all Indian Muslim officers taken prisoner in Kut (there were only 204 Indian officers, Hindu and Muslim combined, taken prisoner at Kut).

These brief examples demonstrate how the Germans and Ottomans cooperated in recruiting colonial Muslim troops to their jihad war efforts. Their efforts met with some success. The fact that the Halbmondlager raised a full brigade of North African recruits for the Ottoman war effort in Mesopotamia

25 Imperial War Museum, diary of Lt. Col. L.S. Bell Syer, entry of May 14, 1916. See also papers of Major T.R. Wells, who claimed the Turks showed "favouritism" to Indian Muslims (8 May and 4 June 1916); and the diary of Reverend Spooner, entry of May 17 1916.

26 The article, taken from the *Sada-i Islam* newspaper of 29 *Temmuz* 1332 (August 11, 1916), is preserved among the papers of the U.S. Consulate of Baghdad, U.S. National Archives, Baghdad vol. 25. The British official history acknowledged the Sultan received British Muslim officers and restored their swords, but claimed the Ottomans arrested "those who refused" to serve the Sultan. E.J. Moberly, *The Campaign in Mesopotamia* (London 1923-1927) vol. 2, p. 466.

and Persia was no minor achievement. Yet the experiences of Ahmad bin Husayn and his colleagues who served in the Hijaz, and of the North Africans billeted to Baghdad, suggest these recruits never enjoyed the full confidence of their Ottoman commanders. They were deployed more for their symbolic capital than for their military value, and at the slightest reversal on the battlefield were suspect in the eyes of their German and Ottoman commanders alike.

The British were no less engaged in recruiting among their Ottoman POWs than were their Central Power adversaries. The British needed Muslim defectors from the Ottoman army to undermine the credibility of the Sultan's jihad. The matter came to a head in the Hashemite-led Arab Revolt, which erupted in the summer of 1916.

In their wartime alliance, concluded in 1915-1916 through an exchange of letters between Sharif Husayn of Mecca and Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, the Hashemites had persuaded the British that they could raise the Arabs in rebellion against the Ottomans from Mesopotamia through Greater Syria and the Hijaz. It was the same war plan as pursued by the Germans and Ottomans – to weaken their adversaries by encouraging internal rebellions in their empires. As the Central powers hoped to weaken the British and French on the Western Front by inciting colonial uprisings in India, Egypt and North Africa in the name of jihad, the Entente powers sought to capitalize on Arab discontent with Ottoman rule to provoke an internal conflict within the Ottoman Empire that would weaken the Turkish war effort in the name of Arabism. But by the summer of 1916, following Cemal Pasha's clampdown on Arabists in Greater Syria,

the Hashemites were unable to manage more than a local rebellion in the Hijaz, drawing on unreliable Bedouin irregulars and a tiny regular army. It was the kind of rebellion that the Ottoman commander in Madina was more than capable of suppressing with the garrison at his disposal, and with regular re-supply from Damascus via the Hijaz Railway.

By the autumn of 1916, the Ottoman army in the Hijaz threatened to defeat the Arab Revolt. The British viewed the prospect with dread, fearing victory in the holy cities of the Hijaz would lend credence to the Ottoman call for jihad. War planners in London, Cairo and Simla weighed the risks of sending British troops to reinforce the Hashemites. The Government of India argued that the introduction of British troops into the Hijaz would provoke a violent reaction from Indian Muslims – "infidel" soldiers "desecrating" the sacred soil of the Hijaz to fight the faithful legions of the Caliph. The Arab Bureau in Cairo believed the Sharif's forces on the verge of collapse and that an Ottoman triumph in Mecca would critically discredit the British in their Muslim colonial territories. Either way, the British feared their Hashemite ally's vulnerability in the Hijaz risked fanning the flames of the global jihad they were determined to extinguish. The compromise position was to reinforce the Sharif's army with Muslim volunteers.

The natural recruiting ground for Muslim soldiers was the British POW camps in India and Egypt.[27] In the course of interrogating Arab Ottoman prisoners, the British encountered many committed to the Arabist cause, including the Iraqi officers Nuri al-Said and Ali Jawdat, captured in the Mesopota-

27 Eliezer Tauber, *The Arab Movements in World War I* (London 1993), pp. 102-17.

mia campaign, and Jafar al-Askari, an Arab officer taken prisoner near the Libyan frontier in the Sanussi campaign. The Sharif's declaration of Arab independence was enough to convince many of those officers to disavow their loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan and join the Hashemite revolt.

Nuri al-Said, the future prime minister of Iraq, led the first detachment of Arab Ottoman volunteers from the POW camps of Egypt to the Hijaz on August 1, 1916. His friend and colleague, Jafar al-Askari, remained in Egypt and actively recruited more volunteers from Arab Ottoman prisoners held in British camps in Egypt. Askari's first recruitment effort was in the Heliopolis Camp. Located in a new suburb of Cairo, the camp was built to accommodate 15,000 inmates, though in January 1917 the Red Cross reported just under 4,000 Ottoman prisoners in residence. According to the Red Cross report, conditions in the camp were healthy and hygienic, with each prisoner fed a mixed diet of bread, meat, vegetables and tea, and given two complete sets of clothing. The Red Cross commissioners left with "an excellent impression of Heliopolis Camp."[28] Did good treatment under the British make Arab Ottomans more willing to change sides? When Askari arrived to recruit soldiers for the Hashemite cause, the British guards assembled their POWs on a large parade ground.

There I delivered an impassioned speech, urging them to volunteer for the Sharifian Army so that they could play their part in ridding their countries of foreign domination, and so that they could become citizens of independent sovereign countries under the flag of King Hussain. My words had an electrifying effect on the men. Many of them clamoured to

28 ICRC, "Turkish Prisoners in Egypt."

enlist at once and be transported to the Hijaz without further ado.

Askari next visited the POW camp in Maadi, another Cairo suburb. The Red Cross reported 5,556 non-commissioned officers and men – Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Jews from Palestine and Mesopotamia, and a large contingent taken prisoner at Gallipoli. The Red Cross noted: "The prisoners have every opportunity for practicing their religious observances. For the Mahometans a small mosque has been built, round which they spread their praying carpets. Some of them read the Koran regularly; others seem indifferent. Despite differences of race, origin, and even of religion, good feeling prevails among the prisoners and quarrels are very few in number."[29] Askari was less successful in Maadi than he had been in Heliopolis, noting that "only a few joined up despite my best oratorical efforts… That was chiefly because there was a considerable number of Turks intermingled with the Arabs at Maadi, and they acted as something of an antidote to my exhortations – my eloquence," he concluded, "was of no avail."

Askari made his third recruitment visit to the Sidi Bishr camp in Alexandria, which was reserved for officers and their orderlies. In January 1917 the Red Cross found 430 officers and 410 orderlies detained in Sidi Bishr. "The Turkish officers take their meals in two dining-rooms, each of which seats 150," the Red Cross commissioners recorded. "The tables are covered with cloths; the china and plate are suitable." Many of these officers were people Askari had known personally before the start of the war. "We talked and exchanged views

29 ICRC, "Turkish Prisoners in Egypt."

but they were not keen to join, as they were fearful for their futures and anxious about what might befall their families at the hands of the Turks." Askari did not force the issue with those who expressed reluctance to join.[30]

Shortly after completing his tour of the camps in Cairo and Alexandria, Askari renounced his own commission as an Ottoman officer and applied to join the Sharif's army. He made the standard vow of all soldiers crossing sides, pledging to his British captors that "from the time I joined the Arab Army till the end of the War, I would not join any enemy of Great Britain, nor would I bear arms against her."[31]

In addition to the Arab Ottoman prisoners held in Egypt, the British had detained thousands of captives in POW camps in India. British recruiters for the Hashemite Arab Army turned to these men next. Ali Jawdat, an Ottoman Arab officer captured in the battle of Nasiriyya on the Euphrates, was held by the British on parole within the city of Basra. Jawdat first learned of the Arab Revolt through his British captors, who recruited him to join the Hashemite Arab Army. He volunteered on the spot. As Jawdat and two colleagues boarded ship for the Hijaz, his British captors asked if he would be willing to visit POW camps in India on his way to the Hijaz, "to take with us all those prisoners who wished to join us on our jour-

30 Jafar Al-Askari, *A Soldier's Story: From Ottoman Rule to Independent Iraq* (London 2003), pp. 110-11.
31 Ibid.

ney [to join the revolt in the Hijaz]. We welcomed the idea," Jawdat noted.[32]

Upon arrival in Bombay, Jawdat was taken to Sumerpur in Rajputana (modern Rajasthan). The Red Cross found the camp contained "3,366 Turkish prisoners of war, mostly Muslims, among whom Mesopotamian Arabs predominated" when they visited in March, 1917. Much like British camps in Egypt and the Halbmondlager near Berlin, the British POW camp in Sumerpur offered halal food, a small mosque and clean accommodation. Some of the British prison officers spoke Arabic while others relied on Armenian translators.[33] Here Jawdat found numerous recruits for the Arab Revolt:

> We were introduced by the Camp Commander to a number of officers who were members of the [secret Arabist] `Ahd Party … and enrolled some 35 officers who demonstrated their nationalist sentiments, as we recruited some 350 soldiers from among the Arab prisoners there.

They sailed from Bombay in early September 1916 and were greeted by Nuri al-Said on arrival in the Red Sea port of Rabigh.

However, as in Egypt, not every Ottoman Arab POW was committed to the Arabist cause. After these first detachments of ideologues set off, the British emptied their POW camps in Egypt and India to ship potential recruits to the Hijaz campaign – with very mixed results. Two ships set off from Bombay at the end of November 1916 carrying 90 officers and

32 Ali Jawdat, *Dhikrayat, 1900-1958* [Memoirs, 1900-1958] (Beirut 1967), pp. 37-40.

33 "Reports on British Prison-Camps in India," pp. 18-24.

2,100 men. When the ships arrived off Rabigh, Sharifian recruiters were dismayed to find that only six officers and 27 enlisted men agreed to join the Arab Army. The rest either had no wish to make war on fellow Muslims, or feared Turkish retribution for their treason if they were captured. After ten days of persistent effort by Arab recruiters, the transport ships continued up the Red Sea to deposit their unwilling recruits in POW camps in Egypt.[34]

As more Ottoman Arab soldiers were taken prisoner in Iraq, more volunteers were dispatched from POW camps in India. In August, 1917, officials in British India reported that 23 officers and 284 enlisted men in POW camps had sworn loyalty to the Hashemite cause. And on 5 September 1917, some 84 officers and 470 regular soldiers were shipped from India to the Hijaz.[35] Yet when they learned that they were to be trained in Egypt, the volunteers rebelled. They had agreed to serve only under Sharif Husayn. All efforts to train the POW volunteers foundered, and their unit abandoned as a failure.[36]

These failings notwithstanding, Arab officers and soldiers who abandoned Ottoman service in favour of the Sharif's cause made a contribution to the Revolt that exceeded their limited numbers. Their military training and their fluency in Arabic recommended them for both training and commanding Bedouin recruits. Yet their limited numbers meant they were insufficient to deal Ottoman forces a decisive defeat in the Hijaz. The Arab Army proved unable to take the strategic

34 Tauber, *Arab Movements in World War I*, pp. 105-06.
35 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
36 *Ibid.*, pp. 118-21.

railway garrison town of Ma`an, let alone defeat the 11,000-man garrison in Medina. Yet it was enough for British purposes, to counter the Ottoman jihad appeal, to uphold the Arab Revolt, and recruit such willing Arabs as prevented the British from having to send in reinforcements of their own.

As the Great War drew to a close, the symbolic significance of Muslim POW recruits began to wane. Ottoman losses across several fronts in the course of 1917 – in Baghdad (March), Aqaba (July), Gaza (November) and Jerusalem (December) – laid to rest German hopes and British fears of a global jihad dragging the Entente to defeat through their empires. Yet the suffering of prisoners of war from both sides of the conflict would endure until well after the armistice.

Some, like Aref Shehadeh, took advantage of political reversals to escape. Shehadeh and his comrades seized on the confusion provoked by the Bolshevik Revolution to escape from their prison camp. He travelled to Manchuria, Japan, China, and India, finally reaching Egypt by the time the Ottomans signed the armistice on 30 October 1918. E.H. Jones, the British lieutenant from Kut who described the leisure of officers held prisoner in Yozgat, feigned insanity to secure his repatriation to Britain. Yet he too only secured deliverance by the time the armistice was concluded.

The North African soldiers who abandoned French military service to volunteer for the Ottoman army faced numerous hurdles as the war drew to a close. Those who had been posted to Baghdad refused to retreat with the Ottomans and chose to surrender to the British instead. The Druze prince Shakib Arslan noted in his memoirs that the North African prisoners “asked the English to intercede with France for their

return [to their native lands] and an amnesty [for desertion] and God knows what became of them."[37] The British treated the North Africans as prisoners of war rather than as deserters, leaving to the French the ultimate decision on their fate. At war's end, the French detained the North African deserters in special centres for the demobilization of colonial soldiers. According to a French memo dated 21 August 1918, those whose loyalty was in doubt were prohibited from returning to Africa or fraternizing with Muslims in France.[38]

In the final analysis, the dangers and suffering of prisoners on all sides of the Ottoman Front had much in common. The hardship of Ottomans in Russian camps matched that of allied soldiers in Ottoman camps, with high mortality rates in transit, poor medical facilities, inadequate food and clothing. The relatively good treatment of detainees in German and British camps reflected their adherence to international regulations governing the treatment of prisoners of war. It might also have reflected their wish to secure the cooperation of some detainees, particularly colonial prisoners, in their keeping. It is hard to see the recruitment of POWs as anything more than an extension of the suffering of some of the most unwilling combatants in the Great War – colonial Muslims who fought on both sides of the trenches for other people's wars.

37 Shakib Arslan, *Sira Dhatiyya* [Autobiography] (Beirut 1969), pp. 123-24.

38 Thomas DeGeorges, "A Bitter Homecoming: Tunisian Veterans of the First and Second World Wars," (Ph.D. dissertation Harvard University, 2006), p. 45.

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