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Ottoman Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–22

During the Great War, Russia captured more than two million soldiers of the Central Powers, including over 50,000 Ottoman officers and enlisted men. While the captured Ottomans included men of other ethnic groups, the great majority were Turks. Most of the prisoners remained in Russia long after the war was over, some as late as 1922.

While there is a large amount of scholarly literature on the POWs of the second world war, fewer studies describe the prisoners of the first world war, and these concentrate mainly on the soldiers of Germany, Britain, France and Austria-Hungary. There have been only a few studies on the prisoners of other nations. Recently, the subject of the Ottoman POWs has provoked some interest in Turkey. However, the publications that have appeared are based on limited sources and have a smaller scope. This article will give an account of their captivity in Russia and draw some preliminary conclusions about their behaviour and Ottoman society itself.

Ottoman participation in the Great War did not result in the same amount of literature as was generated by the ‘lost generation of 1914’ in England or in the other European countries. Nevertheless, the Ottoman, or more correctly the Turkish, experience in the first world war produced a number of notable

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memoirs of captivity. Curiously, unlike in other countries, these memoirs were generally published long after the war; some were even published posthumously by relatives of POWs. It is also curious that the greater number of published memoirs were written by those who were held captive in Russia, though twice as many Ottomans became prisoners of the British. This may be due to the presumably harsher conditions the POWs in Russia faced as compared to those who were imprisoned by the British, and the relative inactivity of the Russian authorities to monitor closely the activities of their prisoners, who well exceeded two million. Significantly, some of the memoirs were diaries kept by the prisoners — almost all junior officers — adding to their accuracy and value as a historical source as compared to memoirs written some time after the events they purport to describe. It is encouraging to note that one of these memoirs has already been translated into English⁴ and has taken its place among other Ottoman captivity literature which can be traced back to earlier centuries. There was, in fact, a modest tradition of similar works in the Ottoman empire. One of the earliest known examples dates from the sixteenth century, but perhaps the best-known example was produced in the seventeenth century; it recounts the captivity of an Ottoman cavalry officer, Temesvârî Osman Ağâ, among the Austrians. Another example is the still unpublished account of seventeenth-century Janissary Süleyman’s experiences in French captivity.⁵ A topical comparison of Süleyman’s account with those of the Turkish officers in Russia reveals a striking continuity despite the gap of almost 300 years. It should be pointed out, however, that Süleyman was more critical of his own society than the prisoners in Russia, who limit their rather mild criticism to first world war leaders of the Ottoman empire.

At the time of capture, the prisoners were most likely confused and uncertain about their future. After being marched behind the Russian lines, Ottoman prisoners were inspected by Russian officers. As the prisoners marched to their initial staging areas, they experienced acts of both kindness and hatred. Those prisoners who passed through areas populated by Turks and other Muslims were watched by tearful eyes.⁶ Sometimes these people, chancing arrest by the Russians, tried to pass food to the Ottoman soldiers. At least one source

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states that similar kindness was also shown by some Russian civilians. Those Turkish soldiers who passed through towns populated mostly by Armenians experienced very different treatment. The marching prisoners were verbally assaulted by native Armenians and sometimes the assaults even became physical. The treatment of Turkish prisoners by Armenians was not all negative, however. Armenians in parts of the Russian empire other than the Caucasus region were usually helpful to the Turks; some even lent assistance to escaping POWs.⁷

Soon after their capture, Ottoman officers were interrogated by Russians. On the whole there was no mistreatment of the Ottomans by Russian soldiers, who perhaps realized that their positions could easily be reversed.⁸ After the interrogation of the officers, the prisoners were marched to the nearest railway connection to be sent to one of the assembly camps. At the train station they were packed into box cars, known to the Russians as teplushki. Each teplushka had two rows of wooden bunks, stacked one above the other. In the middle stood an iron stove. In one corner was a latrine bucket. Teplushki were also used by Russian soldiers, but when transporting POWs, they were filled beyond any reasonable capacity — twice the number they were meant to carry — for journeys that at times lasted for months.⁹ In spite of the stove and the crowded conditions, the temperature inside the teplushki was extremely cold during winter. Whenever wood or coal was available, the prisoners made use of the stoves in the hope of warming themselves. Yet, even when the stove was red-hot, it only warmed its immediate surroundings. The prisoners covered themselves in whatever rags were available, but they continued to shiver nevertheless. Ottoman prisoners, and by implication the Ottoman prisoners alone, were transported in teplushki that were boarded up or locked from the outside.¹⁰

Even more horrifying than the overcrowding and the exposure to the elements endured by prisoners during transport are several documented incidents in which the Ottoman POWs in the teplushki were simply left to their fate. During the winter of 1915, only 200 of 800 Ottoman prisoners being transported to the prison camps in the Priamur district of Siberia reached their destination, the others having died because of cold and suffocation. In another

⁷ Hüsamettin Tugac, Bir Neslin Dramı: Kafkas Cefheberinden, Çarlık Rusyasında Tutsaklkıtan Anılar (İstanbul 1975), 105, 107 and 111.
⁸ Öçen, op. cit., 43–51.
⁹ Elsa Brandstrom, Among Prisoners of War in Russia and Siberia, trans. by C. Mabel Rickmers (London 1926), 63; Halil Ataman, Esaret Yılları: Bir Yedek Subayın I. Dünya Savaşı Şark Cephesi Hattıraları (İstanbul 1990), 133. Apparently not all cars had stoves. Ataman comments that it was only after he and his car-mates nearly froze to death that the Russians decided to give them a stove.
case during the same winter, two teplushki arrived in Samara with the doors and windows boarded up. They were left on a side track, and everyone thought they contained food and supplies. Days later when the teplushki were opened, the Russian guards discovered that they contained sixty-eight Ottoman prisoners of whom only eight were barely alive.11

Numerous examples of this nature have been recorded in documents and memoirs. Curiously, there is no indication that anything this extreme happened during the transport of prisoners from other nations. An American diplomat visiting the prison camps in Russia stated in a report that such incidents ‘show the indifference with which the Russians regard the Turks. It must be admitted that the condition of other prisoners of war during transportation is infinitely better.’12

Before being sent to their permanent camps, the prisoners were gathered in assembly camps. The most common assembly camp for the Ottomans was a small island called Nargin in the Caspian Sea, off the coast of Baku. Nargin was one of the worst assembly camps. The prisoners’ barracks were decrepit old stone buildings that were filthy and infested with vermin. At least one source suggests that large numbers of Ottomans died here because of starvation and disease.13

The prisoners who survived the gruelling conditions of the assembly camps and transport ended up in one of the prison camps that dotted the Russian empire. There were not enough of these camps and those that existed did not have enough beds, which were not really beds but only wooden racks. They also lacked latrine facilities. Accordingly, various kinds of buildings were converted into prison camps — former army camps, exhibition halls, prisons, stables, circus buildings, distilleries, abandoned factories and schools.14

Usually the prison camps were located outside a town. Krasnoyarsk, for example, was forty minutes’ walking distance from the town. Holding as many as 35,000 prisoners, the Siberian camps were larger than their European counterparts. Most camps were surrounded by wooden or wire fences that stood between 12 and 15 feet high with sentry towers at intervals. The prisoners were usually kept at large camps, but it was not unusual for officers to end up in large houses commandeered by the Russian government. Most of the largest camps were former garrisons that had housed a much smaller number of Russian soldiers. In such places, the lucky ones were housed in brick or log barracks. The unlucky ones ended up in animal stables and artillery storage buildings. Depending on the crowding, which was almost always a problem, each man had a personal space of between 20 and 28 inches. It

12 763.72114/622.
13 Nargin is a big rock in the Caspian Sea, approximately seven miles from Baku. It was crowded with snakes which sometimes became the only available food for the starving prisoners, as during stormy weather the Russians could not bring food and water. Brandstrom, op. cit., 143–4; Çakıroğlu, op. cit., 19; and Göze, op. cit., 68, 73.
14 Ölçen, op. cit., 67; 763.72114/547; 763.72114/1902; Brandstrom, op. cit., 68–9.
was very common for men to be in physical contact with each other as they slept.\textsuperscript{15}

Housing conditions for the officers were better. In former army garrisons, officers were usually quartered in the Russian officers' barracks. Typically, the officers were not as crowded as the enlisted men. In the earlier years of the war, enlisted men were assigned to serve as orderlies for officers in the prison camps.\textsuperscript{16}

Prisoners were always infested with lice, largely because of the lack of extra underwear. Whenever the prisoners did receive extra underwear — a rare event especially for the Ottomans — they sold it to the peasants in order to purchase tobacco. Others who were missing socks used the underwear as foot rags. It seems that this practice was especially common among Ottomans, Hungarians and Czechs. Every day the prisoners removed their clothing to kill the lice, but their efforts were in vain as the boards and mattresses on which they slept were also infested.\textsuperscript{17} Lice made the prisoners' lives miserable as they could not rid themselves of these creatures. However, they found various ways to deal with them; some burned them, others pricked them with needles. According to a German prisoner, the Ottoman prisoners usually drowned the lice, as they were convinced that drowning assured the slowest death.\textsuperscript{18} Presumably, the creative ways of killing lice was the only way of releasing their stored-up hatred and frustration, for they felt helpless in defending themselves even against these little creatures.

Overcrowding and insanitary conditions in the camps resulted in diseases that took a heavy toll on the prisoners. Typhus, typhoid fever and cholera were the major killers, but other epidemics also developed. At one time or another every camp had a typhus epidemic. In some cases, the Ottomans brought the disease with them from the Caucasian front.\textsuperscript{19}

Following their capture, the officers, usually starting at the assembly camps, were separated from the enlisted men. Differences in treatment set the imprisoned officers apart from their men. The Russian government paid captured junior officers 50 rubles, staff officers 75 rubles, and generals 100 rubles a month; corresponding salaries were paid by the Sublime Porte to its Russian prisoners.\textsuperscript{20} The officers, however, had to purchase their food from the Russians, whereas the men received theirs free.

The prisoners usually kept to their own nationality. In other words, Ottomans lived with Ottomans, Germans with Germans, but there were cases of mixed nationalities, as some camps contained only a small number of

\textsuperscript{15} Brandstrom, op. cit., 68; 763.72114/2548; 763.72114/1088; and 763.72114/1702.
\textsuperscript{16} 763.72114/1088; 763.72114/622.
\textsuperscript{17} 763.72214/2548; Hereward T. Price, Boche and Bolshevik: Experiences of an Englishman in the German Army and in Russian Prisons (London 1919), 125; and Tugac, op. cit., 89.
\textsuperscript{18} Dwinger, op. cit., 247–8.
\textsuperscript{19} 763.72114/1915; 763.72114/1702.
\textsuperscript{20} Tahsin Iybar, Sibirya'dan Serendib'e (Ankara 1950), 35; Åsaf, op. cit., 25; Brandstrom, op. cit., 76.
Ottomans. Officers intermingled with the officers of other nations. While it has been suggested by Gerald H. Davis that tension existed among the different nationalities, there is no evidence in the consulted sources to suggest that Ottomans were party to such conflicts. In fact, when the first Ottoman prisoners arrived at the Moscow assembly camp they were welcomed by all, especially the Austrians, who helped the Ottomans secure blankets from the camp authorities. In another camp, the Germans invited the Ottomans to a tea party to celebrate the victory at Gallipoli. On another occasion the Austrians invited the Ottomans to a birthday party in honour of Emperor Karl. Visits of this sort seem to have been commonplace among the prisoners.

Relations among the different nationalities represented in the Ottoman army, however, were rather uneasy. The most noticeable and frequent friction was between Arabs and Turks, perhaps because the Arabs were the second largest group after the Turks. It seems that after the fall of Baghdad to the British, and the Arab revolt in the Ottoman empire, relations between the two groups became more strained; the special treatment the Arab officer prisoners received from the Russians simply added to Turkish resentment. At one camp in European Russia, some of the non-Turkish members of the Ottoman army co-operated with the Russian soldiers in charging black-market prices for foodstuffs. These opportunists who made money by gauging their fellow prisoners, were soon 'stopped' by the Turks. One Turkish officer commented on the opportunists by quoting Cicero:

'O bastard children of the Romans! There are no longer real Romans among you, for a bastard generation has appeared from the Romans who mixed with the foreign people of the countries they conquered.' Those who co-operated with the Russian sergeant were the bastard children of Turkey.

Mirroring Ottoman society, the troubled relations among the different ethnic groups with their competing nationalisms and agendas in the Ottoman empire permeated the lives of the POWs in Russia. It is not likely that every Turk felt the same as the above-quoted officer. Nevertheless, as tempers ran high, frustration grew with boredom and the Arab Ottomans continued to receive better treatment, the difficulties between the two groups could only get worse.

Unfortunately, we do not have enough information on the enlisted men in the Ottoman army to conclude with any certainty that similar ethnic problems existed among them. If there were any ethnic problems between the Turkish

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21 763.72114/820 contains the number of prisoners in some Siberian camps. The camp at Barnaul, for example, contained one Turkish officer.
24 Ökçen, op. cit., 117; idem, Vetluga Memoir, op. cit., 108.
and the Arab enlisted men, it most likely was not very pronounced. The concept of nationalism had little appeal at this time among the Turkish and Arab peasants, who identified more closely with religion — Islam — than with nationalist ideology. It is possible, however, that ethnic tension existed between the Muslims and non-Muslims on a small scale; there could not have been very many non-Muslims among the Ottoman POWs, since they often served in labour battalions and many even managed to evade conscription altogether.

Although it seems to have been altered considerably by captivity, there was at least one other division within the Ottoman army. Since the late nineteenth century there had been friction between the mektepli (from the school) and conservative alaylı (from the ranks) officers, some of whom were illiterate. After the 1908 Young Turk revolution, which was organized by the mektepli officers, a good number of the alaylı were retired or demoted. Some of those alaylı officers who remained in the army became POWs along with the mektepli officers, and the friction between the two groups continued even in Russian POW camps.

As can be discerned from available memoirs and documents, this was the extent of the divisions within the Ottoman army. For comparison, it is useful to consider the distinctions within the German and Austro-Hungarian armies as studied by G.H. Davis. He shows, for example, that there was a sharp social contrast not only between the officers and the enlisted men, but also among the officers themselves; the socio-economic separation between the officers of aristocratic and bourgeois families was quite distinct. In contrast, the division within the Ottoman army did not have socio-economic roots. Whereas the class differences among the POWs of other nations were distinct, the differences in class structure of the Ottoman officers and men were somewhat blurred, as the Ottoman empire itself lacked an explicitly identifiable class system. In fact, in many cases officers in the Ottoman army had a peasant or other modest background. The army was a place that was open to men of talent from any background.

While there does not seem to have been a socio-economic separation between the Turkish officers and enlisted men, there was certainly a physical barrier erected by the Russian camp authorities. Because of the relative lack of contact and the fact that the common Ottoman soldier, lacking education, did not leave anything in the way of memoirs, we do not have much information about the enlisted men. It is doubtful, for example, that any sort of inter-
national gatherings, such as the ones among officers, took place among the men with much frequency. In addition, unless they were allowed to take advantage of language classes offered in some camps, the Ottoman enlisted men did not speak the languages of other prisoners and, unlike the officers, they were expected to work. The work alone probably left little time to do much else. The men’s jobs could be inside the camp, like building and repairing barracks and other facilities, or outside it. In order to make up for the labour shortage created by mobilization, Russian officials used the prisoners in various areas to help minimize the shortage. In general, those Ottomans who worked outside the camps became factory workers or farm hands.

Although a good percentage of the enlisted men worked, many of the officers and some of the men found themselves with a great deal of free time on their hands. In order to give their lives some semblance of normality, they devised activities to fill their time. In contrast to the skills they acquired at the front, many of the skills they gained in the prison camps had long-term benefits and could be marketable in a civilian society. Perhaps the most common activity among Ottoman officers was learning foreign languages — German, French, Russian and Hungarian — from their fellow prisoners on an individual basis. Each man was happy to teach or learn from another in order to pass the time. In return, the Turks taught Turkish to other prisoners. One officer states that about 60–70 per cent of the Turks in Krasnoyarsk learned at least one language. Learning Russian occurred primarily among those who lived in the private houses in towns. In some large prison camps, the prisoners also founded schools. The school at Novonikolaiievsk offered courses in 14 different languages, including Turkish, Hebrew and Esperanto.

Prisoners’ activities were not limited to academics, and even included fine arts, craftsmanship and entertainment. Some played chess and became members of chess clubs; others drew or painted. One Turkish officer, Mehmet Arıf, won the first prize in a painting competition in the town of Varnavino in central Russia. Having never built or played a lute, the same officer crafted one by using his pocket knife, several pieces of wood, glue and string. Impressed by Mehmet Arıf’s lute, another Turkish officer in the same camp offered to teach him to play the instrument. Some prisoners learned to play other musical instruments, while those who already knew how to play organized musical groups. In fact, in the Siberian camp of Krasnoyarsk — perhaps the most culturally active of all the Russian prison camps — Ottoman

30 763.72114/2367; Fahrettin Erdoğan, Türk Ellerinde Haturalarım (Istanbul 1954), 95.
31 Tugaç, op. cit., 29; Ataman, op. cit., 122, 140; Dwinger, op. cit., 213; Ölcen, op. cit., 88, 90; Āsaf, op. cit., 39; Başkâtipzâde Ragıp Bey, Tarıbi Hayatım (Ankara 1996), 94; Report of Donald A. Lowrie, 11 June 1917, Donald A. Lowrie Papers, University of Illinois, University Archives, Box 1.
32 Ölcen, op. cit., 84–5, 87–8, 157.
officers founded a musical group that gave a number of concerts. Another group established a somewhat short-lived theatrical group. Concerts and plays put on by the Turkish groups at Krasnoyarsk took place in a clubhouse which was a remodelled stable adorned with murals of Istanbul painted by the prisoners. These types of activities not only helped to pass the time, but also reinforced the prisoners’ identification with the homeland they had not seen for some time.

The prisoners also had camp newspapers. These were, of course, printed by hand. There is a strong probability that every large camp had an Ottoman newspaper at one time. In Krasnoyarsk, for example, a paper called Kurtuluş (Liberation) was quite popular with the prisoners. It featured not only news from home and about the war, but also articles on the ethnography of Central Asia and the history of the Turkic peoples. It seems that some of the most popular articles and editorials were nationalistic in nature, pointing to the appeal of Turkish nationalism among the officers. Most of the large camps had libraries established by the Swedish Red Cross and the YMCA. Almost all books were in German, but could be used by Ottoman officers who could read that language. Also, some prisoners who were permitted to leave the camps managed to find books and newspapers in Crimean Tatar and occasionally material published in Ottoman.

The prisoners organized sports clubs and scheduled regular competitions. Among the most common sports were football (soccer), gymnastics and running. Although the Ottoman prisoners had no team of their own, some played in the teams of other nations, especially with Hungarians and Austrians. The football games at Krasnoyarsk, for example, usually took place on Sunday evenings, and all Ottomans came out to support the players.

Of course, religion and prayer held a special place among the prisoners. Although many officers questioned blind faith, several participated in religious activities. In Krasnoyarsk, 30 out of 400 Ottoman officers fasted during the month of Ramadan. This is a remarkably high number considering the scarcity of food and the need to eat whenever food was available. Prisoners who were kept at camps near towns with Tatar or other Muslim populations usually obtained permission from camp authorities to go to the town mosque, where they were always welcomed by fellow Muslims. Sometimes they

33 Ataman, op. cit., 143; Iybar, op. cit., 37; and Çakıröz, op. cit., 24.
34 Ataman, op. cit., 143; Tugaç, op. cit., 124; Göze, op. cit., 75. Another paper, Niyet (ironically meaning ‘no’ in Russian and ‘purpose’ in Turkish), was published (edited) by Mehmed Asaf and travelled to various camps in European Russia with its publisher. Asaf, op. cit., 91–2.
35 Letter dated 17 July 1917, Lourie Papers, Box 1; Tugaç, op. cit., 59; some of the more available Tatar newspapers were Terciman and İşık. Ataman, op. cit., 121; Yusuf Akçura, Rusya Üseri Murahhası Yusuf Akçura Beyin Raporu (İstanbul 1919), 26. A group of prisoners in Vetluga managed to buy a subscription to Terciiman. Asaf, op. cit., 44–5.
were joined by the Muslim Bosnians — who had been Ottoman subjects until 1908 — of the Austro-Hungarian army.37

While Islam may have fostered close relations among Muslims, it also made them more marginal by setting them apart not only from their captors, but also from their fellow non-Muslim prisoners. In towns and cities where there was no significant Muslim population, the Friday prayers of Ottomans attracted immense attention. Civilians, including Russian priests, from nearby towns were permitted to watch them pray. In areas where the indigenous population had little, if any, exposure to Turks, the peasants imagined the Turks to be subhuman and demonic. Such perception was likely rooted in Tsarist propaganda because the Ottoman empire was Russia’s traditional enemy. In some areas, the Russian peasants and townspeople were amazed to discover that the Turks did not have tails and horns. The Austrians observed, for example, that the Russian ill-treatment of the Turks was religiously motivated.38 It is likely that such occurrences fostered a sense of unity among the Ottoman prisoners; the less they could blend into local communities, the more they were forced to rely on each other. No doubt Islam — like any other religion — offered the POWs emotional support and helped them to endure difficult circumstances, as their existence was uncertain and precarious; in other words, Islam enabled them to accept disappointment, frustration, suffering and death.

Interaction with local people and the extra-curricular activities of the prisoners helped them escape the worst effects of a psychological disorder known as barbed wire disease. Very few prisoners who had been in the camps for over six months escaped this condition. The disorder showed itself in varying degrees, from easy excitability to an introspective, apathetic condition. It was characterized by irritability, restlessness, memory failure, difficulty in concentrating, moodiness, general depression and nightmares. The effects of barbed wire disease were exacerbated by the 1) impossibility of being alone; 2) uncertainty about the duration of captivity; and 3) absence or irregularity of communication from home.39 Certainly, Ottoman prisoners were not immune to the disease and some of them had to be transferred to mental hospitals, in some cases never to return.40

The effects of barbed wire disease did not end with captivity. There are no psychological studies on the Ottoman veterans of the Great War; however, by consulting existing case studies on American prisoners of war in the second world war and Korea who suffered from similar conditions, we can understand the long-term effects of captivity on the Ottoman prisoners. These case studies concluded that former POWs frequently developed health problems

37 Ataman, op. cit., 140; Tugac, op. cit., 51–4; Ásaf, op. cit., 17; Akçura, op. cit., 53.
38 GÖZE, op. cit., 76–7; Ataman, op. cit., 127, 177–8; Çakröz, op. cit., 18; Ásaf, op. cit., 127, 132; Ölçen, op. cit., 135; and Hans Weiland, In Feindeshand, op. cit., 1, 233.
40 Ataman, op. cit., 141, 152, 165; and Göze, op. cit., 73.
identified as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other psychological maladies after their release. The symptoms of PTSD are chronic anxiety, recurring thoughts of trauma, sleep disturbance, substance abuse and eating disorders, and family problems. Follow-up studies also show that more than half of those affected still showed persisting symptoms of the disease after 40 years.41

Arguably, some former Turkish POWs also continued to suffer from PTSD or other effects of captivity after they returned to their homeland. Conceivably, a comparison could be made between the Ottoman POWs in Russia and the Turkish POWs in Korea, who proved themselves to be remarkable survivors under harsh conditions, to suggest that the Ottomans in Russia were also resilient. However, some differences, namely the length of captivity, which was in most cases several times longer for the Ottomans in Russia, make the comparison difficult to maintain.

Clearly, not all former POWs suffered from PTSD, and some of them went on to hold influential positions in modern Turkey. Bedüüzaman Said Nursi, an inmate of Russia's Kostroma POW camp for two and a half years, later became perhaps the most influential religious thinker and reformer in Turkey. Some years after his return, Said Nursi stated that, while his Russian captors had allowed him to gather a congregation for prayer, the secularist Turkish Republic refused him the same right.42 Albeit in British captivity during the same war, two other former POWs — Cemal Gürsel and Cevdet Sunay — came to hold high political positions, as the fourth and fifth presidents of Turkey respectively.

The existence of barbed wire disease did not prevent the prisoners from developing relationships with local Russian and Turkic peoples. Once they realized that the Ottomans did not have subhuman features and provided that they could overlook religious differences, the Russian people were generally helpful and friendly toward the Ottoman prisoners. Consequently, in places where it was easier for Ottoman POWs to interact with the populace, a great number of friendships and even love affairs developed. While there is no evidence of Turks marrying Russians or staying in Russia, several thousand prisoners of other nations stayed in Russia to start new lives. The Turks, however, married Central Asian women who returned to Turkey with the former POWs.43

Turkic peoples, especially Tatars, assisted the Ottoman prisoners in many ways. While most helped the Ottomans escape by providing passports, civilian

42 Serif Mardin, Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey (Albany 1989), 89, 91.
43 Ataman, op. cit., 180–1; ìAf, op. cit., 50ff; Ölçen, op. cit., 98, 154ff, 166–7; Çakıröz, op. cit., 57; Davis, 'The Life', op. cit., 164.
clothing and safe houses, others made sure that the corpses of Ottoman soldiers who died during transport to camps and were left by the Russians near train tracks received a proper Islamic burial, or collected and donated money to the prisoners. In some cities with significant Turkic populations, small organizations were established for this very purpose. The presence and assistance of the Turkic peoples must have also given the Turkish prisoners much needed moral support by showing them that they were not totally isolated. No doubt the presence of the Turkish prisoners in Russia brought increased awareness to the Turkic peoples about the Ottoman Turks.

The POWs also became involved in the internal conflicts of Russia. After the Bolshevik revolution, the regulations governing the prisoners became more relaxed and they were allowed to leave their camps temporarily. Soon, when a chaotic Russian civil war erupted, some Turkish prisoners found themselves embroiled in it, as they helped the Turkic peoples in numerous ways. Some trained and organized militia units to fight against the Bolsheviks in Central Asia and the invading Armenians in Azerbaijan. A good number of officers who ended up in Central Asia became teachers at local schools. Their presence and activities surely influenced the feelings of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia toward the Ottoman empire and the Turkish republic.

As can be imagined, the Russian revolution had a considerable effect on the lives of the POWs, who had mixed feelings about the revolution. Some celebrated because they thought that it would bring an end to the war, but others were pessimistic and indifferent. When the Bolsheviks came to power, they declared the POWs free citizens and guests of the Russian people. The joy of the officers was short-lived, however. The Bolsheviks soon declared them class enemies, cut off their salaries and promised only to give them food. The quantity and quality of the food they gave deteriorated over time. Instead of bread they gave flour. The small amount of questionable meat they provided was rotten. Because of the civil war, prisoners found it safer to stay in the prison camps, find jobs in nearby towns, and establish their own businesses or find alternative ways of making money to buy food.

The Bolsheviks increased their propaganda activities among the prisoners, and offered 200 rubles and food to those who would join their international units. Although large numbers of Hungarians, Austrians and Germans joined the Bolshevik units, no large numbers of Ottomans seemed to have enlisted to warrant an acknowledgement. One of the Bolshevik tactics was to use Ottoman civilians who sympathized with their cause. For example, Mustafa Suphi, an Ottoman journalist who was in exile in Russia when the war broke

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46 763.72114/3599; Ataman, op. cit., 138, 145; Dwinger, op. cit., 227, 250; Ölcen, op. cit., 130ff, 142, 160ff; and Iybar, op. cit., 38–9.
47 763.72114/3599; Krammer, op. cit., 243–7; Volgies, op. cit., 57.
out, joined the Bolsheviks. With Bolshevik backing, Suphi published a propaganda newspaper called *Yeni Dünya* (New World), which he sent to prison camps that held significant numbers of Turkish POWs. He also travelled to a number of prison camps to gain followers. In the end, he established the *Türk Kızıl Alayı*, or the Turkish Red Brigade, of about 1000 men. In 1920, Suphi and others, including about 20 Turkish POWs, founded the Turkish Communist Party in Baku. There is some indication that a group of these prisoners-turned-communists was dispatched to Turkey in 1920.48

Although some Turks joined Suphi’s Red Brigade, the great majority of Turkish soldiers showed no interest in communism. In explaining this behaviour we must look at several factors that set the Ottomans apart from their fellow POWs. Whereas the class difference between the aristocratic officers and the enlisted men of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies was sharp, the differences in class structures of the Ottoman officers and men were much less clear; as we have already noted, the Ottoman army was open to people from all walks of life. Thus, the Bolshevik slogan that the officers were class enemies did not find much following among the Ottoman prisoners. Another possible explanation for this might be that the common Ottoman soldier was uneducated but respected those, such as his superiors, who were educated. When the enlisted man, who saw his officer as an educated man not as a blood-sucking aristocrat, was confronted with the question of class differences, he may have simply referred the question to the officers.

During and after the Great War, a number of people suggested that the Ottoman empire did not care for its prisoners.49 These criticisms are warranted. First of all, the Sublime Porte appeared to have made a mistake by delegating the Spanish ambassador in St Petersburg as its representative and protector of the Ottoman prisoners in that country. In reality, though, it had no other choice; the officials of the USA, Sweden and Denmark were overloaded with obligations to other nations. The Spanish ambassador had no more than two people available to him to act on behalf of the Ottoman government in this capacity. In all fairness to the Spanish government, however, it must be admitted that the Porte was not always forthcoming with funds, and without money little could be done.


The efforts of the Porte and Hilal-i Ahmer Cemiyeti (Ottoman Red Crescent) to involve the American government in helping the Ottoman prisoners did not produce any results. In December of 1915, for example, the director of Hilal-i Ahmer, Professor Bessim Ömer, asked the American government whether its officials in Russia would supply information regarding the needs of the Ottoman prisoners so that money and needed supplies could be sent through the German Hülfaktion agency in Harbin, China. The American officials advised Bessim Ömer to take up the matter with the Spanish embassy. During the negotiations of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, a representative of the Hilal-i Ahmer, Yusuf Akçura, travelled to Russia to assist the Ottoman POWs. Because the Czechoslovak Legion controlled access to Siberia at that time, Akçura and his two assistants were able to visit only the camps in European Russia. They gave money, clothing, books and newspapers to the Ottoman prisoners. Soon after the Treaty was signed, Akçura arranged for hundreds of Ottomans to return to Turkey.

Representatives of the imperial Ottoman government, as well as the Nationalist government, which was established in Ankara in 1920, visited the prisoners. In 1920 Ismail Suphi Bey, the deputy from Burdur, visited prisoners in Tashkent. He asked them to remain and help the peoples of Central Asia. Before departing, he promised to send them money, which soon arrived from the Moscow ambassador of the Turkish Nationalist government. The statements of Suphi Bey were curious. Presumably, the Nationalist government wanted to keep the prisoners there to foster closer relations and interaction between the Turks of Central Asia and Anatolia. In fact, a report by an official of the Nationalist government suggested that as late as 1921 additional teachers and officers be sent to Central Asia. Close relations between the two areas would have been unwelcome for Russia — because of its interest in this area — and England, because of the areas’ and the Turkish officers’ approximate closeness to India and Afghanistan. Since the Ankara government knew that the British, who were now occupying the Ottoman capital of Istanbul, were always worried that the Turkish prisoners could slip into India and provoke a Muslim rebellion, it might have wanted to keep the prisoners there as some sort of pressure against the British. Also, because of the civil war in Russia, the prisoners would have to be returned by sea, which raised the risk of their capture by the Greek navy operating in the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea as part of the Greek invasion of Turkey.

50 763.72114/1241; 763.72114/1067.
51 Ölçen, op. cit., 136, 236–7, 160–1; Åsaf, op. cit., 95. When Akçura returned to Istanbul he presented a report of his activities in Russia. Akçura, op. cit., 12, 24, 26ff.
52 Çakıröz, op. cit., 60.
53 Kazım Karabekir, İstiklal Harbimiz (Istanbul 1988), 918.
55 In fact, this happened more than once. In April 1921, a Japanese ship carrying 1004 Turkish prisoners was intercepted by the Greek navy. The prisoners spent months on the ship as the
Another reason why the Porte was not as forthcoming as Germany and Austria-Hungary for its prisoners was economic. During the war, the Ottoman government was financially limited; in fact, its war effort depended on German financial assistance. Thus, the prisoners were not given a very high priority as the country fought for its survival. The Hilal-i Ahmer was not as developed and financially able as the Red Cross organizations of other countries.

Besides the economic and political reasons already put forward for the seeming lack of interest in the Ottoman POWs in Russia, there is one more plausible and contributing factor: the very nature of the Ottoman empire itself. It has been considered, since the time of its foundation at the very end of the thirteenth century, a perfect military society, a society where the individual has been subordinated to the group, and the groups to the state. That is, the group, and ultimately the state (empire) was more important than the individual. Therefore, as the empire fought for its very survival, it expected every individual to make sacrifices in that direction. This factor explains certain things which the other reasons are less likely to explain. For example, some of the returning and escaped POWs observed an indifference on the part of the authorities to their plight at the time of their return; some had to prove that they had been prisoners; others were treated coldly and had to wait around moneyless while arrangements were made to accommodate them. In fact, it seems that the behaviour of the Ottoman authorities is not particular to the Great War; we can see a similar reception of hundreds, if not thousands, of POWs returning from captivity in the Balkan Wars. Yet, if the British reports are to be believed, the Hilal-i Ahmer was used by the Young Turks as a channel for clandestine payments and as a means to communicate with their agents in foreign countries. Clearly then, the Ottoman government’s behaviour towards the prisoners cannot be defined as intentionally cruel. Rather, it was a reflection of the government’s nature. Both the Islamic and Turkic traditions relating to prisoners of war clearly state that the ruler must do all that is possible to rescue its prisoners, including the non-Muslims in the army, from foreign captors. It is unlikely that the government would have deliberately ignored the two traditions and undermined its own legitimacy just when it needed the support of every Ottoman citizen.

As already mentioned, the soldiers of Germany and Austria-Hungary enjoyed the protection and assistance of not only the USA, but also the


56 This idea is very similar to that offered by Ali N. Ölçen in the prologue of the English version of Vetluga Memoir.
58 Erik Jan Zürcher, The Unionist Factor (Leiden 1984), 77.
Swedish Red Cross. Due to the reasons already given, there were no entities adequately protecting the Ottoman prisoners. Even when the Ottoman government was able and willing to send financial aid, it often failed to reach the prisoners, as it was intercepted by various corrupt officials in Russia.\(^{60}\) The Russians, perhaps driven by the religious difference of their traditional enemy, as the Austro-Hungarians also suggest, clearly took advantage of what seemed like the Ottoman government's lack of interest in its soldiers in Russia and treated them with indifference and cruelty.\(^{61}\)

It is likely that a high number of Ottoman prisoners died of starvation, cold and disease during their captivity in Russia. Unfortunately, this is an area in which reliable statistics are lacking; what evidence we have is contradictory. Due largely to the chaotic nature of the war on the Caucasian front, the Ottoman government did not have reliable statistics concerning its losses. In fact, it believed that only about 21,000 of its soldiers became POWs in Russia. The Russians give the number of POWs at 64,509, with a less than 1 per cent casualty rate, the lowest among the nations represented there. The Austro-Hungarians, however, put the number at about 51,000, with a 20 per cent casualty rate, that being the highest.\(^{62}\) Clearly, we can disregard the Russian statistics as unreliable; POWs — suffering from hunger, cold, maltreatment and disease — would have died in higher numbers. It is likely that the casualty rate was much closer to the number provided by the Austrians. As noted earlier, some Ottomans were already infected with one of the diseases that were rampant on the Caucasus front at the time of their capture.

Finally, after surviving the terrible ordeal of captivity in Russia, the Ottoman prisoners returned to their homelands. Some returned to countries that had not existed before the war, others, especially the Turks, to a country much limited and devastated by war. Some of the repatriated and escaped POWs ended up fighting another war, the War of Independence against the invading Greeks. There must have been more than a few who became prisoners once again, thus exacerbating the effects of barbed wire disease.

The prisoners returned to their homelands with what they had learned and experienced during their years of captivity in Russia. Presumably they also bore the marks of long captivity, which in some cases may have remained with them for the rest of their lives. Perhaps others became stronger individuals as a result of their experience. We found out from their experience that the Ottoman army suffered from some of the same divisions as Ottoman society itself. In general, the different ethnic groups — namely, Turks and Arabs — did

\(^{60}\) Price, op. cit., 143; Åsaf, op. cit., 85.

\(^{61}\) Price, op. cit., 143; Ataman, op. cit., 104; 763.72114/2367. Ottoman treatment of Allied POWs was no better; most likely it was worse. Aj. Barker, *Neglected War* (London 1967), 286–303.

not get along and the Ottoman officer corps still suffered from a generational division. The POWs also became vehicles for cultural and ideological exchange between different nations. Although we are unable to trace their activities in Turkey, more than a few POWs became adherents to communism, whether for its promise of class equality or because they found its anti-colonialism stance appealing while their country was being invaded by colonialist powers. Certainly, they also helped to establish closer relations and renewed cultural links between the Turkic peoples in Russia and the Turks of Turkey. While captives in Russia, the POWs might have been used by government officials as tools of diplomacy. Finally, it has been argued that it would be wrong to conclude that the Ottoman government intentionally neglected its prisoners in Russia because it did not match the level of aid that Germany and Austria provided for their POWs. Understanding the attitude of the Ottoman government toward its prisoners in other countries requires the consideration of political, economic and cultural factors that shaped its behaviour.

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