Part I: The End of an Empire

Turkey’s People and Geography

Today, Turkey is a country of about eighty million people. It spans the edges of two continents—Europe and Asia—and is considered part of both Europe and the Middle East. Turkey’s geography has shaped its history, contributed to its vast cultural diversity, and continues to affect its role in the world today.

Who lives in Turkey?

Turkey is home to a range of ethnic and religious groups. The term “Turk” has multiple meanings—it is used to describe people that are ethnically Turkish and people who speak Turkish as their first language. It is also used more broadly to describe all citizens of Turkey. Roughly 20 percent of Turkey’s population is ethnically Kurdish. (Kurds are an ethnic group. They live primarily in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, and Syria.) Kurds are concentrated in the southeastern region of Turkey. Other ethnic minorities include Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks.

Over 99 percent of people living in Turkey are Muslim. Most Turkish Muslims are Sunni, and there is also a significant Alevi minority. Religious minorities also include Christians and Jews. Turkish is the country’s official language, and many students learn English as well in school. Kurdish, Arabic, and other languages are also spoken.

What are some important features of Turkey’s geography?

Turkey is often described as the bridge between Europe and Asia. With an area slightly larger than Texas, Turkey’s territory is divided between the two continents. The European territory in the northwest of the country is called Eastern Thrace, and the Asian territory is called Anatolia. Thrace is separated from Anatolia by the Turkish straits—the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles—busy commercial waterways linking the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea.
Much of central Anatolia is a rocky and rugged plateau. The eastern region of the country is very mountainous with an average elevation of nearly five thousand feet. About a quarter of Turkish workers have jobs in agriculture, growing crops such as cotton, beets, grains, hazelnuts, cherries, and apricots. Wheat is grown on the central plateau, while tobacco, olives and citrus fruits are grown along the coast.

The Tigris and Euphrates, major rivers flowing to the Persian Gulf, originate in Turkey. Turkey has built dams for irrigation and energy that cause tension with neighbors downstream, including Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Turkey’s neighbors also include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Greece.

Of its population of about eighty million, close to three-quarters of people live in urban areas, and this percentage continues to grow. Istanbul, Turkey’s booming metropolis, is home to fourteen million people. Previously known as Constantinople and Byzantium, Istanbul was once the capital of the Roman, Byzantine, Latin, and Ottoman Empires. One of the largest cities in the world, it straddles both continents of Europe and Asia, and is divided by the Bosphorus Strait. The country’s inland capital, Ankara, is home to about four million people.

**The Ottoman Empire**

Turkey traces its roots to the Ottoman Empire, a vast empire that encompassed territories far beyond Anatolia and Thrace.

**What was the Ottoman Empire?**

The Ottoman Empire was a multiethnic, multireligious empire ruled by sultans from a single family for over six centuries. At its peak, the Ottoman Empire was one of the most powerful empires in the world. Its territorial boundaries expanded and receded throughout its history from 1299 to 1923. Originally, most subjects were Christian, but as the Ottomans extended their power into Arab territories with large Muslim populations, the empire’s population became more Muslim. Ottoman leaders were Sunni Muslims, and Ottoman law was based partly on Islamic law. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman sultan took on the title of caliph—the spiritual leader of the Islamic world.

The Ottoman Empire stretched into southeastern Europe, across North Africa, and throughout much of the Arabian Peninsula, including Mecca and Medina—two of the holy cities of Islam. The Ottoman navy dominated the waters of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and beyond. Although estimates of the Ottoman Empire’s population vary, historians believe that by the mid-nineteenth century, the empire ruled over thirty-five million subjects.

Major international trade routes crisscrossed the empire, creating a bridge for commerce.
between Europe and Asia. Goods such as silk and spices from the East were transported across Ottoman territory and often shipped from Ottoman ports to Europe. Taxes on these goods provided cash for the empire.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, the Ottomans granted several European powers special rights in order to encourage trade, such as the right to trade without paying taxes. The Ottomans initially negotiated with Europe from a position of power, but with time, European influence over the empire grew. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottomans came to depend on European powers, such as Britain and France, for diplomatic and military assistance. For example, the Ottomans relied on British and French support to challenge their Russian rivals during the Crimean War of 1853-1856.

**How did nationalist movements erode the Ottoman Empire?**

The Ottoman Empire achieved large territorial gains over the course of centuries, despite contests for territory with other empires and foreign powers. It faced additional challenges from within its borders. In the wake of the French Revolution (1789-99), ideas about nationalism spread throughout Europe and among the Ottomans, taking root with many communities in the empire. In the nineteenth century, different groups resisted the authority of the Ottoman Empire and pressed for independence. Serbians led a series of revolts in the early nineteenth century and eventually gained autonomy. Greeks rebelled and won independence in 1829. In 1839, Egyptians battled the Ottomans for control over territory. Nationalist movements would continue to challenge the Ottoman Empire throughout the 1800s and into the twentieth century.

**How did the Ottoman Empire change during the Tanzimat?**

The Tanzimat, which means “reorganization” in Turkish, was an era of government and legal reform from 1839 to 1876. During this time, the empire extended its telegraph network, constructed new roads and bridges,
and expanded trade with Europe. Ottoman rulers standardized the tax system, modernized the military, and changed the system of military conscription.

The Ottomans also expanded educational services and developed a new system of government-run schools. This took the control over education away from religious leaders and put it in the hands of the state. The empire built universities to train doctors, engineers, and accountants.

One of the main goals of the Tanzimat was to create unity and patriotism among subjects of the sprawling empire. Some Ottoman leaders believed that subjects would remain loyal if granted equality. The Tanzimat reforms granted greater rights for religious and ethnic minorities. This was partly in response to pressure from European powers, several of which were concerned about the unequal treatment of Ottoman Christians.

Large-scale migration from rural to urban areas took place during the Tanzimat. Cities throughout the empire boomed in size. Istanbul’s population more than doubled between 1840 and 1890, approaching nearly one million residents. Many people migrated to escape illness and droughts in the countryside or to avoid being drafted into the military. Immigrants migrated to the Ottoman Empire, including large numbers of Muslims that had been displaced by the expanding Russian Empire.

**Why did the Ottoman Empire adopt its first constitution?**

Over the course of the Tanzimat, power became more concentrated in the hands of the central government. During the final years of the Tanzimat, a secret society of young, middle-class intellectuals and bureaucrats emerged, known as the Young Ottomans. The Young Ottomans were determined to limit the sultan’s authority, and pressured him to adopt a constitution that would guarantee the rights of Ottoman subjects.

European powers, such as Britain and France, also pressured the empire to adopt a constitution. Europe had political influence over the empire because the Ottomans had taken out loans from European banks that they could not repay. In 1875, the empire declared bankruptcy, and European powers took greater control over parts of the Ottoman economy.

—Edict of Gülhane, 1839

"The Muslim and non-Muslim subjects of our lofty Sultanate shall, without exception, enjoy our imperial concessions. Therefore we grant perfect security to all the populations of our Empire in their lives, their honor, and their properties, according to the sacred law."

**Religious Minorities in the Ottoman Empire**

To manage a vast and diverse empire that contained significant Christian and Jewish populations, Ottoman rulers gave religious minorities limited power over their own affairs. The Ottomans developed a system of millets, or religious communities. For example, Armenian Christians, Jews, and Orthodox Christians within the empire had their own millets. The empire granted millets the freedom to practice their religion, create their own laws, courts, and schools, and to collect taxes. Religious leaders from the millets reported to the Ottoman sultan, who held ultimate control over all subjects.

Although the Ottoman Empire discriminated against non-Muslims in some ways—for example, non-Muslims were forced to pay a special tax, called a jizya—historians point out that the empire was generally more tolerant of religious minorities than governments in Western Europe and elsewhere at the time. For example, when Spain expelled Jewish residents in 1492, many were welcomed in the Ottoman Empire.
In 1876, the Ottoman Empire adopted its first constitution and created a parliament. But in 1878, less than two years later, the empire returned to being an absolute monarchy. The sultan suspended the constitution, shut down the parliament, and concentrated power in his own hands. Over the next three decades, the sultan took measures to control the press and limit political organizing.

**What was the Young Turk Revolution?**

After the turn of the century, opposition to the sultan grew among young military and law students in the Ottoman territory of Macedonia. In 1908, these students, later known as the Young Turks, organized under the name of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and led a local rebellion in July against the government. They demanded that the constitution be restored and that all citizens be granted the same rights, regardless of religion or ethnicity. The Young Turks believed these principles would modernize the empire, while protecting it from internal separatist movements and foreign threats.

“*Hürriyet, müsavat, uhuvvet, adalet* [liberty, equality, fraternity, justice].”

—A motto of the Young Turk Revolution

Support for the CUP and its vision of a constitutional government grew in the Balkans. Fearing that the CUP would lead a revolt in the capital, and following the assassination of several government officials, the sultan agreed to reinstate the constitution on July 24, 1908.

In the year following the July revolution, parliamentary elections were held. At this time, the CUP did not want to officially enter politics, seeing itself as a military organization in charge of protecting the constitution. Instead, the CUP pressured the sultan and newly elected members of parliament to carry out its reforms. The government passed laws granting greater political freedoms and opened schools throughout the empire to make education more accessible.
How did the Ottoman public respond to the Young Turk Revolution?

In the wake of the revolution, the streets of Istanbul and other Ottoman cities filled with celebrations. Many Ottomans welcomed the new liberties and social changes: the creation of new political parties, newspapers, and magazines, and more freedom to organize and create associations. Women’s organizations formed, and foreign sports, such as soccer, became popular. With the sultan’s censorship lifted, the empire experienced a burst of public discussion and debate about its future.

Yet not all subjects welcomed the changes the CUP brought to the empire. For example, the CUP took away the jobs of tens of thousands of members of the “old regime,” including the sultan’s network of spies and many high-ranking military officers. The CUP also wanted to lessen the role of religion in government. Although the CUP did not completely abandon religious law, many of the laws adopted were secular, or nonreligious. This was met with resistance from some members of Ottoman society.

Why did the CUP become increasingly authoritarian?

In April 1909, a group of religious soldiers and students led a revolt in Istanbul. They disagreed with the secular laws enforced by the CUP and demanded strict adherence to Islamic law. CUP supporters in parliament fled the capital. The military intervened, allowing politicians to return to parliament and enact a series of laws to crush the opposition. The laws severely restricted freedoms of association and speech.

Why did the CUP carry out a coup in 1913?

In the years after the Young Turk Revolution, the empire suffered dramatic losses. Italy declared war in 1911 and captured Libya, a territory of the Ottoman Empire. During the First Balkan War of 1912, the Ottomans lost nearly all of their European lands as the Bulgarians, Serbians, Greeks, and Montenegrins took control of Albania and Macedonia. Between 1908 and 1913, the empire lost control over nearly half of its territories and the five million people who populated these regions. The total population of the empire decreased to nineteen million.

The CUP did not want to lose more territory, prompting its leaders to carry out a coup d’état (a sudden seizure of power) in 1913. Three of the Young Turk leaders—Ismail Enver, Mehmet Talaat, and Ahmet Cemal—took control of the government and military. Under the leadership of the “Three Pashas,” or the “Triumvirate,” the CUP reformed the military with the help of Germany and organized support among the population and government officials.

In the eastern part of Anatolia, the possibility of Russian expansion fueled the CUP’s fears of rebellion by the Ottoman Armenian populations living there. These concerns would grow over the course of World War I.
World War I and the Armenian Genocide

World War I (1914-1918) ultimately destroyed the Ottoman Empire. In the early months of the war, the empire allied itself with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These three powers became known as the Central Powers in World War I. They fought the Allied Powers—Russia, France, Great Britain, Italy, and the United States.

How did World War I affect the empire?

During the war, famine struck communities across the Ottoman Empire. Shortages in food supplies meant that many people could not afford to eat. Starvation and illness were also widespread in the military—typhus, cholera, scurvy, and malaria devastated troops. Four times as many soldiers serving in the Ottoman army died due to starvation and untreated wounds than from combat.

British forces, with the assistance of their Arab allies, drove Ottoman armies out of most of the empire’s Arab provinces. In the East, Ottoman forces faced Russian troops that were vastly superior in numbers and equipment. Regions of Eastern Anatolia shifted between Russian and Ottoman control. As the border shifted, large populations of Armenian civilians and other minorities in the eastern provinces were caught in the fighting.

Why did the Turkish-Armenian conflict escalate in Eastern Anatolia?

In 1915, Russia made substantial gains into Ottoman territory in Eastern Anatolia. The CUP government feared that minority groups in the region, especially the Armenians, planned to revolt against the empire with the help of Russian forces.

In April, at the same time that many Armenians were fighting on behalf of the Ottoman Empire, a group of Armenian separatists carried out a series of attacks against Ottoman military positions and communication lines in the East.

How was the Armenian Genocide committed?

April 24, 1915 marked the start of the Armenian Genocide. The Ottoman government ordered the arrest and deportation or execution of over two hundred Armenian politicians, religious leaders, and businessmen in Istanbul. Ottoman officials who resisted the deportation process were replaced. CUP officials claimed that the Armenians planned to revolt and destroy the Ottoman Empire. This accusation produced widespread public support for the government’s actions.

“The great trouble with the Armenians is that they are separatists.… Because they have relied upon the friendship of the Russians, they have helped them in this war.… We have therefore deliberately adopted the plan of scattering them so that they can do us no harm.”

—Ismail Enver Pasha, as recounted by Henry Morgenthau, U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire

By 1923, 1.5 million Armenians—over two-thirds of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire—had been killed, deported, or forced into the desert where they starved to death. To this day, the Turkish government denies that these deaths were a genocide and claims that the Armenians were among the many people displaced and killed in the violent chaos of World War I.

“They asked all the men and boys to separate from the women. There were some teen boys who were dressed like girls and disguised. They remained behind. But my father had to go…. They killed [the men] with bayonets at the end of their rifles.… Many of the women could not take it, and they threw themselves in the River Euphrates, and they, too, died. They did this killing right in front of us. I saw my father being killed.”

—A survivor from Konya (a city in central Anatolia) recalling a 1915 massacre
During this time, the Ottoman Empire carried out massacres against other ethnic minorities as well, including Pontian Greeks and Assyrians.

**Why did the Ottomans admit defeat in World War I?**

By the end of 1918, the Ottoman army was battered and stretched thin across multiple fronts. The army’s numbers had shrunk to one hundred thousand, only one-sixth of its size at its peak strength during the war. Over four hundred thousand soldiers had deserted. The population of Anatolia suffered a wartime death rate four times higher than that of France and Germany. The empire’s borders had receded, and Allied forces were closing in on Istanbul.

In October 1918, the Ottomans signed the Armistice of Mudros to end the war. Allied ships anchored in the waters surrounding Istanbul and off the coast from the sultan’s palace. The armistice specified areas of the Ottoman Empire that were to be occupied by the Allies. It also gave the Allies the right to intervene militarily in Armenian provinces “in the case of disorder.”

The French occupied sections of southeastern Anatolia, Italians a region of southwestern Anatolia, and the Greeks Eastern Thrace and western Anatolia. The Allies took control of railways and the telegraph system, claimed access to Ottoman ports and waterways, and demanded the demobilization and disarmament of most Ottoman troops. The Ottoman government was left in place, but power over Anatolia rested with the Allies.

**The War of Independence**

After World War I, many CUP leaders fled the country to avoid prosecution for the crimes they committed against Armenians. Other CUP leaders remained, vying for power with opposition parties and the sultan. Most Ottomans accepted the terms of the armistice and were relieved that the war had ended. Yet in the years after the agreement was signed, public opinion turned against the Allies, largely because the Allies violated the terms of the armistice. For example, Greece pushed further into Ottoman territory in 1919, invading İzmir, a city in western Anatolia. This sparked public outrage and mass demonstrations broke out in Istanbul.
Why did a national resistance movement emerge in Anatolia?

Many Ottomans dreamed of ejecting the occupying forces and reclaiming control over the region. As early as 1918, local resistance groups, called Societies for the Defense of National Rights, sprung up in Anatolia and Eastern Thrace. Their mission was to keep the Muslim-majority, non-Arab portions of the empire intact. They objected to Allied plans to divide the empire and resisted Greek and Armenian advances into Ottoman territory. They also criticized the sultan for bowing to the demands of the Allies. A military officer named Mustafa Kemal would emerge as a leader of this growing national resistance movement.

Who was Mustafa Kemal?

In May 1919, the sultan ordered Mustafa Kemal to oversee the disarmament of the Ottoman armies in Samsun, a city on the Black Sea. Kemal was a successful commander during World War I and a hero for his victory in the Battle of Gallipoli. He was a member of the CUP, and had also participated in the Young Turk Revolution. He would later take the name Atatürk, which means “father of the Turks.”

Kemal disobeyed the sultan’s orders and began to organize nationalist resistance groups to oppose the Allies. After Kemal refused to return to the capital, the government in Istanbul and the Allies fired him. But Kemal had gained the loyalty of the military. Many officers chose to support Kemal’s resistance movement and ignored Allied orders to disarm and demobilize.

How did Ankara become the capital of the national resistance movement?

Mustafa Kemal brought together local and regional organizations into a more unified, national movement. In 1919, representatives of resistance groups from throughout Anatolia attended regional and national congresses. By January 1920, the nationalists controlled the Ottoman parliament in Istanbul, having
achieved broad public support and success during elections. This caused alarm among the Allies.

In March 1920, the British occupied Istanbul and began arresting and exiling prominent nationalists. Kemal invited members of parliament to Ankara, the hub of the nationalist movement, and called for the creation of a new government. Elections were held, and the new parliament, called the Grand National Assembly, convened in Ankara in April 1920.

The rift between Istanbul and Ankara widened rapidly. Resistance leaders pledged that they did not intend to take power away from the sultan, and that they only wished to liberate him from the grasp of the Allies. But the wary sultan, under pressure from the Allies occupying Istanbul, sent military forces to suppress the resistance movement. Smaller rebellions from within the population also challenged the nationalists. Nationalist leaders created special courts, called Independence Tribunals, to silence their opponents.

How did the Treaty of Sèvres carve up the Ottoman Empire?

While the nationalist movement gained momentum, the victors of World War I negotiated the fate of the defeated Ottoman Empire. Nearly two years after achieving victory, the Allies finalized a peace treaty in August 1920. The peace treaty, known as the Treaty of Sèvres, dealt harsh terms to the Ottomans and transformed much of the empire’s territory into mandates controlled by the Allies.

France gained control over Syria and Lebanon, and a zone of influence in southeastern Anatolia. Britain received mandates in Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Trans-Jordan. Italy obtained control over territory in southern Anatolia along the Mediterranean coast and inland. The Treaty of Sèvres gave Ottoman territory in Europe and much of western Anatolia along the Aegean coast to Greece. It also called for the creation of an independent Armenia and an autonomous Kurdistan.

Istanbul and the surrounding straits and waterways were designated as international
zones. The Ottomans kept direct control of only central and northern Anatolia, much of it rugged and mountainous terrain.

How did an independence war establish the new country of Turkey?

Although the sultan’s delegates signed the Treaty of Sèvres, resistance forces rejected the treaty and refused to accept the partition of Anatolia. When Greece sent more troops to Anatolia to enforce its terms, a full-scale war erupted, lasting from 1920 to 1922. The other Allied powers had little interest in or public support for waging another war in the region. Italy and France reached agreements with the nationalists, but Great Britain armed and supported Greek forces.

“The Greeks are the people of the future in the Eastern Mediterranean…. They represent Christian civilization against Turkish barbarism.”

—British Prime Minister Lloyd George, 1919

Nationalist forces battled the Greeks on the western front and Armenians in the East. The War of Independence was also a civil war between loyalists of the Istanbul government and nationalists supporting the government in Ankara.

Ultimately, the war resulted in a crushing defeat for Greece and a triumph for those who would establish the new country of Turkey. The Allies invited delegates from both Istanbul and Ankara to negotiate a new peace treaty that would replace the Treaty of Sèvres. Leaders in Ankara responded by abolishing the sultanate (position of sultan) in November 1922 and proclaiming the government of Ankara to be the official government. The last Ottoman sultan, Mehmed VI, left Istanbul on a British warship, and a delegation from Ankara traveled to negotiations in Switzerland. Led by İsmet İnönü, the Ankara delegation set out to negotiate an agreement that would expel occupying forces, reclaim territory, and establish the sovereignty of the new country of Turkey.

What terms did Turkey agree to in the Treaty of Lausanne?

The Treaty of Lausanne, signed in July 1923, restored some of the territory to Turkey that had been taken away by the Treaty of Sèvres. The treaty drew boundaries very similar to the boundaries of modern-day Turkey. The Allies withdrew their occupation forces, and the treaty recognized the government in Ankara to be the official government of Turkey, instead of the Ottoman government in Istanbul.
The treaty also called for a massive population exchange—based on religion—across the newly established borders. Four hundred thousand Greek Muslims were forced to move to Turkey, while 1.2 million Orthodox Christians in Turkey were forced to move to Greece. Both the Turkish and Greek governments supported this exchange.

"From the First of May, 1923 a start will be made with the forced exchange of Turkish citizens of Greek Orthodox faith who live on Turkish soil with the Greek citizens of Muslim faith who live on Greek soil...."

—The Treaty of Lausanne

What were the effects of the population exchange?

The population exchange had dramatic effects on individuals who were uprooted from their homes and relocated to foreign and unfamiliar places. People were displaced from communities their families had lived in for generations. The transition was difficult for many. For example, some Turkish-speaking Christians were sent to Greece, and Greek-speaking Muslims sent to Turkey.

The exchanges also reshaped the populations of each country more broadly. In 1913, the territory that would become Turkey had a population that was 20 percent Christian. By 1923, this number had decreased to 2.5 percent. The drastic changes brought about by the population exchange followed a longer trend of Anatolia becoming less diverse. During the 1877-1878 war with Russia and the Balkan Wars, hundreds of thousands of Muslim migrants had come to Anatolia, and during World War I, many Christian Greeks and Armenians had fled Anatolia or were killed. A more Muslim and Turkish Anatolia would have lasting...
effects on the cultural and religious landscape of the new country.

“In a land where Muslims, Christians, and Jews had coexisted since ancient times, the combined effect of war, ethnic cleansing, and the Turkish-Greek population exchanges was to reduce the non-Muslim communities outside Istanbul to vestigial remnants.”

—Historian Carter Vaughn Findley, 2010

Despite these changes, the new republic was still home to populations of non-Muslim and non-Turkish minorities.

What did Turkey look like in 1923?

The country of Turkey emerged in 1923, battered by years of war. From the outbreak of World War I in 1914 to Turkish independence in 1923, 20 percent of Anatolia’s population had died from a range of causes, including battle, famine, disease, and genocide. Ten percent more had fled the country, and about half of the population had been displaced from their homes within Anatolia. Shortages of food and fuel made life challenging. The economy had suffered a major blow, and infrastructure was damaged. Defeated Greek armies destroyed railways and bridges as they retreated through western Anatolia. Much of the economy had been dominated by Christians, who worked in industries such as banking, hotels, railways, and cotton and silk production. These industries suffered after much of the Christian population fled or was forcibly displaced.

But Turkey had successfully rejected the demands of World War I’s victors. Having reclaimed its Anatolian heartland and the city of Istanbul, Turkey set out to craft a new government and society.