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“A personal visit might help to clear the air”: an encounter with Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in the memoirs of a British control officer

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Abstract

The article investigates questions about both British and Turkish memoir-writing and memory on a period as contested and central in the formation of national identity as the Turkish War of Independence, based on a close study of a brief interview between Atatürk and a British Control Officer in Anatolia, Walter Harold Miles, recalled in the latter's unpublished memoirs and which has gone without mention in the extensive and detailed literature on Atatürk's early movements after his arrival in Samsun in May 1919.

Keywords: Atatürk, Walter Harold Miles, Turkey, Britain, War of Independence, Memoirs.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Walter Harold Miles (b. 1890) was a lieutenant serving in the Dorset Regiment in India, which joined the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force in its ill-fated push to capture Baghdad. Like other future intelligence officers, he was captured after the British surrender at Kut in 1916 and taken to Anatolia as a prisoner of war. His resultant familiarity with Turkish led to his appointment as one of a number of control officers who were dispatched with small contingents across Anatolia to supervise the implementation of the armistice agreement with the Ottoman Empire signed at Mudros on 30 October 1918, namely the disarmament and demobilization of the army, restoration of seized property, and settlement of returning Christian refugees.

Six pages of recollections of his service in Turkey are deposited at Leeds University Library, along with a taped interview and several photographs from Istanbul, collected as part of the project of gathering personal testimonies of the First World War carried out by Peter Liddle in the 1970s.² Miles' file is one of dozens of similar sets of personal papers documenting British soldiers' experiences in armistice-era Turkey, comprising letters, diaries and later-written memoirs, that can be found in Leeds and among other collections at the Imperial War Museum, National Army Museum, and numerous local archives around Britain. Together they provide a valuable source of information about occurrences in Turkey and, most significantly, British views and actions in a period where official documents can be found lacking.

What is unique about Miles' short memoir is that it includes an account of a first-hand encounter between a British officer and Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) at the time of the War of Independence which has not been discussed in either English or Turkish-language literature, despite the obsessive attention that Atatürk's movements have been subject to. It is not mentioned in any of Atatürk's collected and published writings and reports from the period³, while it likewise is not attested to by the published memoirs of Atatürk's companions in Amasya, such as Hüsrev (Gerede)⁴, Rauf (Orbay)⁵ or Ali Fuat (Cebesoy)⁶. This article uses

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² Leeds University Library, LIDDLE/WW1/MES/069.

³ *Atatürk'ün Bütün Eserleri* (İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1999-2000), Vol. 1-2.

⁴ Sami Önal, *Hüsrev Gerede'nin Anıları* (İstanbul: Literatür Yayıncılık, 2002).



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Miles’ recollections to reassess Atatürk’s relations with British military officers and the historiographical treatment of such encounters in the Turkish-language literature on the War of Independence. It also considers how the content of British and Turkish memoirs focusing on this period have been shaped by the subsequent successful establishment of the Turkish Republic and Atatürk’s enduring status as its founder.⁷

Atatürk’s encounters with foreigners during the period of the War of Independence have been the source of scrutiny and controversy, spurred on by regular allegations from religious conservative writers, beginning with the former Şeyhülislam Mustafa Sabri, that he was a British agent.⁸ Later Nationalist historiography has in turn emphasised his uncompromising attitude towards the British and the premeditated nature of the national struggle embarked on after his arrival in Anatolia.⁹ This defence of Atatürk’s contact with foreigners follows his 1927 narrative of the war of independence presented in *Nutuk*.¹⁰ Of all the known contacts Atatürk had with British representatives in the period 1918-1922, only those with Robert Frew in Istanbul receive any mention in *Nutuk*, briefly summarised as “*Mister Frew ile İstanbul’da bir iki defa mülakat ve münakaşatta bulunmuştum*”, before reproducing an undated letter in which he warns Frew against his association with Sait Molla and his “*gayri-insani ve gayri-medeni bir tarzda vukubulmakta olan teşebbüslerini*”.¹¹ None of Atatürk’s documented encounters with British officers in Anatolia, such as L. H. Hurst, H. C. Salter, or Alfred Rawlinson, are mentioned. Rather, these encounters entered into Turkish historical discussions largely thanks to the reproduction of British documents in the works of Bilal Şimşir¹² and Gotthard Jaeschke¹³. More recently, Cemal Güven has dedicated a full volume to the investigation of Atatürk’s interactions with foreigners, including Hurst and Rawlinson and other Allied officers and civilians.¹⁴ None of these works have uncovered Miles’ purported encounter with Mustafa Kemal described here, however.

Less founded and at times fantastical accounts of Atatürk’s interaction with British officers have also emerged. In a 1984 issue of the *Silahlı Kuvvetler Dergisi* Kemal İtepe claimed to have met Salter during the Second World War, who told him he had received

⁵ Rauf Orbay, *Cehennem Değirmeni: Siyasi Hatıralarım* (İstanbul: Emre Yayınları, 1993).

⁶ Ali Fuat Cebesoy, *Milli Mücadele Hatıraları* (İstanbul: Temel, 2019).

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the politics of memoir writing regarding the First World War, See Mehmet Beşikçi, *Cihan Harbi’ni Yaşamak ve Hatırlamak: Osmanlı Askerlerinin Cephe Hatıraları ve Türkiye’de Birinci Dünya Savaşı Hafızası* (İstanbul: İletişim: 2019), p. 46-54.

⁸ Mustafa Sabri, *Hilafet ve Kemalizm*, (İstanbul: Araştırma Yayınları, 1992), p. 84-5.

⁹ Alev Çoşkun, *Samsun’dan Önce Bilinmeyen 6 Ay: İşgal, Hüzün, Hazırlık*, (İstanbul: Cumhuriyet Yayınları, 2015), p. 15.

¹⁰ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, *Nutuk* (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1970), Vol. 1, p. 13.

¹¹ Atatürk, *Nutuk*, Vol. 1, p. 301.

¹² Bilal N. Şimşir, *İngiliz Belgelerinde Atatürk, 1919-1938* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1973).

¹³ Gotthard Jäschke, *Kurtuluş Savaşı ile İlgili İngiliz Belgeleri* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1971).

¹⁴ Cemal Güven, *Milli Mücadele’de Mustafa Kemal Paşa’nın Yabancılarla Temas ve Görüşmeleri (Asker, Siyasi Temsilci ve Gazeteciler)*, (Konya: Eğitim Yayınevi, 2012).



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orders to arrest Mustafa Kemal on arrival in Samsun but was dissuaded when he realised that Turkish officers had taken up positions behind the soldiers of the British contingent in readiness to intervene. In the account, Salter takes a motorboat from the pier out to board the *Bandırma*, and is awestruck on coming face to face with Mustafa Kemal, who he greets with the words “my regiment is at your command”, shocking even himself by this act of deference, after which Salter and his men are arrested and sent to prison camps in Anatolia.¹⁵ Another example of such flights of fancy centred on the person of Salter is contained in the book *Milli Mücadele’de Amasya*, by local official and historian Hüseyin Menç, and which follows a description of the same incident in the earlier work *Resimli Amasya*, itself based on the recollections of several local residents.¹⁶ Salter is purported to have visited Amasya in late May, where he attempted to secure the release of Indian military prisoners in the town. Facing non-cooperation from the Mutasarrıf, Salter threatens to deport him to Malta, breaks through the door of the clocktower and hoists the British flag. Then, at the moment the clocktower was surrounded by angry locals, “*bu ilahi heyecanı, Cenab-ı Hak tarafından duyurulmuştu*”, and a storm suddenly struck that tore the flag into pieces and blew them into the Yeşilirmak.¹⁷ Yet another story involving Salter emanates from a 1946 issue of the *19 Mayıs Samsun Halkevi Dergisi*, in which Münir Bulgurcuoğlu provides a first-hand account by Reçber Kadir Taytak who claimed to have listened in on a meeting between Salter and Mustafa Kemal during the latter’s stay in Havza. According to the source, Mustafa Kemal berated the officer for Britain’s support of minorities and their atrocities against the Turkish people.¹⁸ All references to the meeting stem from this single article, though this has not stopped subsequent historians delighting in Atatürk’s harsh response which “*tokat gibi vurmuştu*” the British officer.¹⁹

This narrative imperative to emphasise the unity of the Turkish population and their national leaders and the hostility they both showed to and faced from British representatives has distorted memoirs of the period in more subtle ways. The same effects have coloured interpretations of Atatürk’s later meetings with Rawlinson, who visited Mustafa Kemal in

¹⁵ The rest of the story is equally remarkable: Salter decides to settle with his family in a tobacco growing village in Anatolia where he lived until the outbreak of the Second World War forces his return to England to serve in the RAF, leading to his encounter with İntepe. There was indeed an H. VOL. Salter working in the Directorate of Allied Air Cooperation and Foreign Liason during the Second World War and so it may be that such a meeting did take place. An Ottoman Bank record from 1913 also shows that Salter had indeed worked as a tobacco trader in İzmit, but whether he continued this life after the armistice period, and whether it was İntepe or Salter that was responsible for the exaggeration of his story, remains unclear.

¹⁶ Ahmet Demiray, *Resimli Amasya: Tarih, Coğrafya, Salname-Kılavuz ve Kazalar* (Ankara: Güney Matbaacılık ve Gazetecilik, 1954), p. 132-133.

¹⁷ Hüseyin Menç, *Milli Mücadele Yıllarında Amasya: Portreler – Belgeler* (Ankara: Yeşilirmak Yayınları, 1992), p. 10. This same account is uncritically reproduced, minus the act of god, in Mehmet Okur, *Milli Mücadele’de Karadeniz Bölgesi’ne Yönelik İngiliz Faaliyetleri* (Ankara: Genel Kurmay Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2006), p. 94.

¹⁸ Münir Bulgurcuoğlu, “Milli Mücadelenin İlk Günlerinde Havza”, *19 Mayıs Samsun Halkevi Dergisi*, p. 22-3.

¹⁹ Erdal Aydoğan, *Samsun’dan Erzurum’a Mustafa Kemal* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 2000), p. 79.



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Erzurum on 9 July 1919 and several more times in the days following, with Turkish sources focusing on Mustafa Kemal’s harsh rebukes of the officer during their meetings, while Rawlinson made no such complaints.²⁰ Such issues do not only cloud Turkish accounts. The weight of retrenchment at Lausanne and diplomatic rapprochement with the Turkish Republic from the 1930s onwards is apparent in many of the later written memoirs of British officers who served in Turkey, including Miles, who was keen to stress that he “was witnessing, though dimly realizing, the rebirth of a nation”. Given this retrospective appreciation of the significance of the events he was involved in, it is not impossible that Miles either invented or embellished his encounter with Mustafa Kemal, as this article will proceed to investigate.

Concerningly, Miles appears to have confused numerous dates in his retelling. He notes that he left Istanbul in January 1919, travelling first to Adapazarı and then to Bolu, where he inspected the local prison and ordered the release of several Christians, before arriving in Samsun in March. It is here that he was informed of and witnessed the arrival of Mustafa Kemal in the city, who he “was enjoined to assist in every way in my power”. Contradicting this timeline, he then recounts leaving Samsun on 15 March and arriving in Merzifon two days later. Given that British and Ottoman official documents record Miles as having met Mustafa Kemal on 21 May in Samsun and arriving in Merzifon on 4 June, the dates of his departure (and possibly his arrival) either refer to an earlier journey or are simply mistaken. He also erroneously recalls having been informed that Mustafa Kemal’s was travelling, not as an inspector of the 9th army, but on a “‘mission of reconciliation’ between the Turks and their Christian subjects”, perhaps confusing his mission with that of the heyet-i nasiha which were sent to Anatolia from the capital with such a purpose.

Miles and his small party of “two other officers, 3 batmen, 3 grooms, and an Armenian interpreter” were far from the only British presence in the region. More than one hundred Indian soldiers had been dispatched to Samsun in March, and there were also other British officers in the city, like F. G. Levien and the former Vice Consul at Erzurum, L. H. Hurst, whose reports on the arrival and early activities of Mustafa Kemal are well known in the historiography of the War on Independence.²¹ Miles’ presence in the city and his appointment as control officer for Sivas was noted in Mustafa Kemal’s 20 May report to the Harbiye Nezareti, in which he lamented the effect on public opinion of the dispatch of British soldiers to points in the interior and asked that it be limited to whatever extent possible.²² The two first met on 21 May, along with Hurst and Salter, who Mustafa Kemal wrote had asserted that the Ottoman government was in need of foreign supervision for some years to come.²³ On the following day, Mustafa Kemal messaged the Erkan-i Harbiye-i Umumiye Riyaseti informing them that Miles was soon to depart Samsun with a contingent of troops, while other officers

²⁰ Güven, *Milli Mücadele’de Mustafa Kemal Paşa’nın Yabancılarla Temas ve Görüşmeleri*, p. 48-9.

²¹ Salahi R. Sonyel, "1919 Yılı İngiliz Belgelerinin Işığında Mustafa Kemal ve Milli Mukavemet", *Türk Kültürü*, p. 85, Kasım 1969, p. 86-87.

²² Mustafa Kemal’den Harbiye Nezaretine, 20 Mayıs 1919, *Atatürk’ün Bütün Eserleri* (İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1999), Vol. 2, p. 313.

²³ Mustafa Kemal’den Makam-ı Sadaret-i Uzmaya, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri, BEO.4575.343090, 21 Mayıs 1919.



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were to be sent to Amasya and Tokat.²⁴ Hurst’s brief mention of the meeting in his report to Arthur Calthorpe, the British High Commissioner in Istanbul, simply noted that Kemal was “preceding into the interior on a tour of inspection and with the object of maintaining tranquillity”.²⁵

Further intelligence gathering by British officers in the region, however, soon convinced them that Mustafa Kemal was coordinating protests and resistance to Allied policy and encouraging animosity towards local Christians, or what Miles termed in his memoirs “a campaign of pan-turanianism and Jihad by means of speeches in Mosques and market squares”. Miles, Hurst and their fellow officers’ reports were instrumental in leading the British High Commission and military command to press their Ottoman counterparts to demand Mustafa Kemal’s return to Istanbul on 8 June 1919, orders he defied until the Cabinet announced his removal from his post on 23 June.

In part because of the heavy presence of British troops, Mustafa Kemal departed Samsun on 25 May, relocating his command inland to Havza. He was followed by Hurst, who left Samsun on 1 June, having decided to travel to the town after hearing reports of meetings and arrests of Greeks in the area. The following morning, he met with Mustafa Kemal who “received me correctly” and told of his plans to visit Amasya in the coming days.²⁶ Hurst then travelled on to Merzifon, where he met with members of the American mission who expressed their concern regarding developments in nearby Greek villages and the arming of the local Muslim population.²⁷ The mission, composed of a church, college, and hospital, was under the protection of Indian troops who had been based in the town since mid-March. Hurst sent Captan Levien to intercept Miles, who had recently departed Samsun, and ask him to join him in Merzifon, where he arrived on 4 June. In Miles’ memoirs, he remembers meeting the “Vice-Consul” on the road, confusing Levien with Hurst, and does not mention Hurst’s presence in the city thereafter, where he claims to have arrived on 18 March, again evidencing his confusion with dates.

The situation in Merzifon appeared critical to the British officers present in the town. In his memoirs, Miles recalls being told by a member of the mission that the “atmosphere of tension throughout the populace closely resembled that preceding the other tragedies”. With 50 rifles and two machine guns “nothing more than a temporary deterrent”, and two weeks’ worth of food and no secure water supply, Miles gave a dim assessment of the mission’s chances should it come under assault. Hurst’s report mentions the organisation of precautionary measures, such as moving food into the hospital on the site and filling the

²⁴ Mustafa Kemal’den Erkânıharbiye-i Umumiye Riyasetine, 22 Mayıs 1919, *Atatürk’ün Bütün Eserleri*, Vol. 2, p. 321.

²⁵ Hurst’tan Calthorpe’e, 21 Mayıs 1919, FO 371/4157.

²⁶ Hurst’tan Calthorpe’e, 12 Haziran 1919, FO 371/4158.

²⁷ Kemal Arı, “Mustafa Kemal Paşa’nın Samsun’a Çıkışında Tespit Ettiği İlk Bulgular ve Bir Raporu”, Hikmet Öksüz, Mehmet Okur, Bahadır Güneş, ve Ülkü Köksal, eds., *100. Yılında Mondros Mütarekesi ve Karadeniz’de Milli Mücadele Uluslararası Sempozyumu* (Trabzon: Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2019), Vol. 1, p. 390.



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cisterns with water.²⁸ Miles and his fellow officers’ activities in Merzifon were cast in a less favourable light by Mustafa Kemal. In a report of 5 June sent to the Prime Ministry he noted the continual contact between Greek and Armenian bandits and British and Americans in the town,²⁹ while in a further report to the Harbiye Nezareti he set out his suspicions that arms were being shipped to the mission and noted the presence of four British officers who he suspected of organising bands of militia together with delegates of the Armenian patriarch.³⁰ Both Hurst’s reports and Miles’ memoirs meanwhile emphasise their attempts to deter any attack and deescalate communal tensions in the region, for which purposes they sent patrols of Indian soldiers through the town and organised a meeting with the kaymakam, müftü, kadı and other locals to impress on them the importance of communal harmony and orderly conduct. A demonstration against the landing in Smyrna held on 9 June was reported to have proceeded in a peaceful fashion, for which Hurst credited these pre-emptive actions. Again, later histories have emphasised the degree of confrontation surrounding these events, even while no such complaints appear in British sources.³¹

Hurst left Miles in Merzifon, departing for Samsun on 10 June. He was robbed on his return journey, leading him to request headquarters to either evacuate officers from interior posts or send sufficient reinforcements to ensure their security. According to Hüsrev Gerede, the incident caused a significant fall out with the British which led in part to the decision to move to Amasya on 12 June, beginning a critical period in the organisation of the national resistance movement.³² In Miles’ memoir, he recalls having received news of the incident on Saturday and departing for Amasya the following morning, deciding that “a personal visit might help to clear the air” with Mustafa Kemal. The weekend following Hurst’s departure fell on the 14-15 June. However, Calthorpe later reported to the Foreign Office that an unnamed British officer had met with Mustafa Kemal on 22 June, which seems the most likely date of their encounter given that it too was a Sunday. The tone of the meeting, in which Mustafa Kemal “claimed that occupation of Constantinople, Smyrna and Adalia were in violation of Armistice. He hated Germans and had never been connected with Committee [of Union and Progress] but he was bitterly disappointed by proceedings of Allies”, is in keeping with the account given in Miles’ memoirs.³³ If the date of Miles’ meeting with Mustafa Kemal was indeed 22 June, then he had arrived on the heels of the Amasya discussions between Rauf, Ali Fuat and Mustafa Kemal, which had concluded the previous night.

Miles’ brief account of their encounter proceeds as follows:

²⁸ Hurst’tan Calthorpe’ye, 12 Haziran 1919, FO 371/4158.

²⁹ Mustafa Kemal’den Sadaret Makamına, 5 Haziran 1919, *Atatürk’ün Bütün Eserleri*, Vol. 2, p. 361.

³⁰ HR. SYS, 2633/2, 10 Haziran 1919.

³¹ Bkz. “İngiliz subay ve askerlerinin yüzüne karşı gür sesle haykırmışlardır”, Menç, *Milli Mücadele Yıllarında Amasya*, p. 59; “İngiliz Subay ve askerlerinin yüzüne doğru haykırdığı gündür”, Mehmet Kılıç, *Amasya Tamimi ve Protokol*, p. 78.

³² Önal, *Hüsrev Gerede’nin Anıları*, p. 36.

³³ Calthorpe’den Curzon’a, 8 Temmuz 1919, *Documents of British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, Seri 1, VOL. 4. Available online at <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1922975946>.



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“In Amassia I found Mustapha Kemal ensconced in a school³⁴, I gate-crashed the sentry at the door & found him sitting at a desk in the middle of the room. He stood up with his hand raised to a bell push hanging from the ceiling. We talked in French for 5 mins & then he relaxed & said “Parlez vous Français”. We continued our conversation & he was quite frank. He said he had always been friendly towards the British, but now by allowing the Greeks into Smyrna we had broken faith with them. I replied that the Greeks as allies were occupying an area of strategic importance. My sympathies were entirely with him. He said that he had heard that we were sending troops to Merzifun & begged me to cancel the move. He said that he would resist such a move with a division now in position. I realized that I must immediately contact the troops & guide them through to Merzifun.”

During his return journey to Merzifon, Miles recalled seeing a group of Turkish soldiers digging a trench across the Amasya-Samsun road in preparation for such resistance. Mehmet Arif in his memoirs notes that Mustafa Kemal ordered that incursions inland from Samsun were to be resisted before his departure.³⁵ The purported transcription of a speech given to the people of Amasya by Mustafa Kemal also contains a call to resist the arrival of further British troops.³⁶ Refet, who remained behind in Amasya after Mustafa Kemal’s departure, indeed sent warnings that British troop movements from Samsun would face resistance, leading the Ottoman government to issue a counter-order allowing their passage.³⁷

Miles was not the last British officer to visit Amasya. Lieutenant Col. Ian Smith arrived on 7 July, where he interviewed Refet, who defended Mustafa Kemal’s disregard of orders to return to Istanbul.³⁸ It may be that Smith’s visit lies behind a further account derived from local oral sources of an unnamed British officer who came to the city in July 1919, when he was supposedly surrounded by angry locals and “*bu duruma karşı ister istemez boyun eğmek zorunda kaldı*”, was detained before being escorted back to Havza a week later.³⁹ There are no official records of any such detention of a British officer until March the following year, when Lieutenant Forbes was arrested in the town, a fate which also befell Colonel Rawlinson in Erzurum.

Until their arrests, British officers were confident enough to make many more journeys with small parties to coastal and interior towns of Anatolia: Hurst’s replacement as Relief Officer at Samsun, J. P. Perring, visited Terme, Ünye, Niksar, Erbaa and Amasya in July and Ünye, Fatsa, Ordu, Giresun, Trabzon, and Rize in October. Miles himself was reposted to Bandırma, while other British officers remained in Ankara, Eskişehir, Konya and elsewhere

³⁴ Mustafa Kemal is recorded as residing in the Saraydüzü Kışlası (a building of which has now been reconstructed in a new location to serve as a museum in the city). The school Miles refers to may have been the town’s Mekteb-i idadi, which had been constructed in the grounds of the palace-cum-barracks and which had been used by the military during the First World War, see Emre Kolay, “Arşiv Belgelerin Işığında Amasya Mülkiye İdadi Mektebi Binası”, *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 12:64 (2019), p. 318-328.

³⁵ Mehmet Arif, *Anadolu İnkılabı: Milli Mücadele Anıları (1918-1923)* (İstanbul: Arba, 1987), p. 28.

³⁶ Demiray, *Resimli Amasya*, p. 135-136.

³⁷ John de Robeck’ten Curzon’a, 28 Ekim 1919, FO 406/41, Şimşir, *İngiliz Belgelerinde Atatürk*, Vol. 1, p. 177.

³⁸ Ian Smith’dan Calthorpe’e, 13 Temmuz 1919, FO 371/4158, Şimşir, *İngiliz Belgelerinde Atatürk*, Vol. 1, p. 51.

³⁹ Demiray, *Resimli Amasya*, p. 141.



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for many more months.⁴⁰ Indeed, it was only the rupture brought about by the formal occupation of Istanbul that forced their withdrawal and ended temporarily the possibility of dialogue between representatives of the British government and adherents to the National Movement, as prior meetings between Mustafa Kemal and Hurst and Rawlinson, and Miles and his memoirs, attest. The encounters these men and their comrades had with Turkish officers and officials suggest that the hostile remarks and actions focused on in much autobiographical and historical writing about the early months of the War of Independence have been frequently exaggerated and over-emphasised and require more careful treatment by the present generation of historians.

⁴⁰ See Hasan Ali Polat, “Millî Mücadele’yi Başlamadan Engellemeye Yönelik Bir Teşebbüs: İtilaf Devletleri’nin Mütareke Hükümleri Uygulamasını Tetkik İçin Anadolu’ya Gönderdikleri Subaylar”, *TYB Akademi*, 27 (2019), p. 119-121.