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# CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE TURKISH EASTERN ARMY UNDER GENERAL KAZIM KARABEKİR'S COMMAND TO TURKISH NATIONAL RESISTANCE AND PEACE-MAKING WITH THE CAUCASIAN REPUBLICS AT WORLD WAR-I AND THE FOLLOWING TURKISH WAR OF LIBERATION\*

(BİRİNCİ DÜNYA VE KURTULUŞ SAVAŞLARINDA KAZIM KARABEKİR KOMUTASINDAKİ TÜRK ORDUSUNUN MİLLÎ MÜCADELEYE VE KAFKAS CUMHURİYETLERİYLE BARIŞIN TESİSİNE KATKILARI)

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**Abstract:** *World War-I was considerably about the territorial partitioning of the Ottoman Empire. The Allied powers of Great Britain and France had offered, apart from their own shares, Istanbul, Turkish Straits of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus, parts of the eastern Black Sea coast-line and of Eastern Anatolia to Russia, while promising Greece the Aegean coast including İzmir (Smyrnia), also planning the establishment of carved-out Armenian and Greek-Pontus states. The Mudros Armistice Treaty of 30 October 1918 and the Sèvres Peace Treaty of 10 August 1920 officialised these*

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*secret arrangements upon the defeat of the Central Powers, whereas the Ottoman Parliament would never ratify the Sèvres Treaty, thereby rendering it defunct.*

*The Turkish National Resistance against the occupying Powers and the surrendering of the Istanbul Government was led by General Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). However, the Eastern Front under General Kazım Karabekir's command deserves the credit for setting the stage at the Erzurum People's Congress of July 1919 for the launching of the Resistance Movement under Mustafa Kemal's leadership in defiance of orders from the surrendering Istanbul Government and against the Allied Governments. Karabekir's military victories leading to the retrieval of all eastern Anatolian territory from the occupying Russian and Armenian forces as well as the protection his forces extended to Azerbaijan against Russian-British-Armenian aggression would win him the popular reputation as the "Savior of the East". His military victories in eastern Turkey and the Caucasus would be sealed by the peace treaties of Gyumri and Kars which he negotiated with Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, drawing current borders.*

**Keywords:** *WW-I, Turkish National Resistance, Eastern and Caucasian Fronts, Karabekir*

**Öz:** *Birinci Dünya Savaşı önemli ölçüde Osmanlı İmparatorluğunun parçalanmasıyla ilgiliydi. İtilâf Devletleri İngiltere ve Fransa, kendi alacakları hisseler dışında İstanbul'u, Boğazlar'ı, Doğu Karadeniz ve Doğu Anadolu'nun bir kısmını Rusya'ya önermişler, Yunanistan'a Ege kıyılarıyla İzmir'i vaat etmek yanında Anadolu'dan koparılacak topraklarda Ermeni ve Rum-Pontus Devletleri kurulmasını öngörmüşlerdi. İttifak Güçlerinin savaştan yenik çıkması üzerine imzalanan 30 Ekim 1918 Mondros Ateşkes ve 10 Ağustos 1920 Sevr Antlaşmaları bu gizli paylaşım anlaşmalarına resmiyet kazandırmış olmakla beraber Osmanlı Meclisinin onaylamayışı sebebiyle Sevr asla yürürlüğe girmemiştir.*

*İşgal güçlerine ve teslimi kabul eden Osmanlı Hükûmetine karşı Millî Mücadele hareketinin Mustafa Kemal önderliğinde başlatıldığı Temmuz 1919 Erzurum Kongresinin İstanbul Hükûmeti ve İşgal Güçlerinin baskılarına rağmen başarıyla sonuçlanmasını sağlayan Kazım Karabekir Paşa komutasındaki Şark Cephesinin İstiklâl Harbinde özel bir yeri vardır. İşgal güçlerine kaybedilen toprakların ilk olarak Rusya ve Ermenistan'dan geri alınması ve komutasındaki askeri birliklerin Azerbaycan'a Rus-İngiliz-Ermeni saldırıları karşısında koruma sağlamış olması Karabekir'e halkın gönlünde "Şark Fatihî" ünvanını kazanmıştır. Karabekir'in Doğu Türkiye ve Kafkasya'daki askeri zaferleri, kendisinin Ermenistan, Gürcistan ve Azerbaycan ile yaptığı müzakereler sonrasında elde edilen ve mevcut sınırları belirleyen Gümrü ve Kars Barış Antlaşmalarının imzalanmasıyla nihai şekline kavuşmuştur.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Birinci Dünya Savaşı, İstiklâl Harbi, Şark ve Kafkas Cepheleeri, Karabekir*

## INTRODUCTION

From the break-out of World War-I in 1914 to the end of the Turkish National War of Liberation in 1922, the Turkish nation fought in Macedonia, Galicia, Romania, Gallipoli, the Suez Canal, Iraq, Hedjaz-Yemen, Syria-Palestine, East-West-North-South Anatolia, and the Caucasia fronts.

During this ten-year period of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire which unfolded with the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, the first Anatolian lands under occupation were to be taken back at the Eastern Front. The Turkish forces would further advance into Southern Caucasus whereupon the agreements signed with those eastern neighboring countries and Russia would confirm the first international recognition of the new Turkish Regime succeeding the Ottoman Empire, thus providing vital moral, material, military, and political support to the Western Front where the final victory was to be won. The short-lived Ottoman Caucasus Islam Army created in 1918 was also supported by the Eastern Front.<sup>1</sup>

The Eastern Anatolia and Caucasus fronts experienced severe fault-line breakages upon the Bolshevik Revolution of 7 November and the Mudros Armistice Treaty of 30 October 1918. Despite the Armistice which deprived the Turkish Resistance Movement of all its territorial retrievals in the Eastern Anatolian and the Caucasus fronts, those lands would be won back before long for the second time from Armenian occupation while, upon the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the new Soviet Government, withdrawing from the war, would also waive the Tsarist Regime's claims on Turkish territory. As was the case in all fronts of the Turkish National War of Liberation, military activities that were closely intertwined with on-going political-diplomatic developments had to be interrupted at times in the Eastern Front as well. Indisputably, the most important development in this process setting the course of the war in favor of Turkey, particularly in the Eastern Front, was the institution of the critical relations between the National Resistance leadership and the Bolshevik Government under the highly volatile circumstances prevailing in the post-Bolshevik Revolution times. In the extremely difficult conditions imposed by the Armistice of Mudros, the uncompromising stance held against the Allied Powers reflects the exemplary sharp diplomatic vision and resoluteness of the National Resistance leadership. The same leadership displayed another example of foresight with regard to the Central Powers' strategies in carefully avoiding the exploitation of the Islamic sensitivities of the Anatolian and Caucasian peoples, a method which the German Administration consistently tried employing through the Ottoman Union and Progress Committee's Prime Minister Talât Pasha and War Minister Enver Pasha.

However, the most important feature of the Eastern Front is that the National Resistance Movement was ignited there.

1 Halil Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti'nin Kuruluş Mücadelesi ve Kafkas İslam Ordusu* (İstanbul: İdil Yayıncılık, 2010).

Kazım Karabekir, who was most closely identified with the Eastern Front and who left a mark in the hearts of the people as the “Savior of the East”, was promoted to Lieutenant General and Commander of the Eastern Front shortly after being assigned to the Eastern Second Army Corps Command Post in Silvan in April 1917, at the age of 35, as a colonel. One of the last brightest Ottoman staff officers, he has gone on the records of history as the leader who cleared the way for the National Resistance with his decisive and efficient stance in Mustafa Kemal’s election to the Congress Presidency and National Resistance leadership at the 23 July-7 August 1919 Erzurum People’s Congress in defiance of an arrest warrant just issued by the Istanbul Government. The Erzurum Congress, which is considered as the launching of the nation-wide uprising against foreign occupation, as well as the succeeding Sivas Congress and the Amasya meetings of September and October, would lay the political and military blueprints of the National Resistance. Therefore, this article mainly focuses on Kazım Karabekir’s military and diplomatic achievements in National Resistance and in the liberation of the Eastern Front, as well as in peace-making with the neighboring South Caucasian countries. The General’s detailed journals have served as the main source of reference for this article.

## **WORLD WAR-I**

### **The Background of the War**

While the fever of nationalism was spreading in the Balkans, the Ottoman Empire lost Western Thrace, Thessaloniki, Macedonia, Albania, and Crete in the two Balkan wars of 1912-13 initiated by Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, and Montenegro.

During World War-I that broke out in June 1914, Britain, France, Russia, Japan, and (later) the US were united as Allied Powers against the Central Powers of the Ottoman, German, Italian and Austria-Hungarian states. Italy would later switch sides and Russia would withdraw from the war as a result of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The Allied war plans, which largely focused on the partitioning of the Ottoman territory, could not be altered despite Ottoman government’s exhausting initiatives with Britain and France who refused to be persuaded against the consistent pursuance of a policy of offering Istanbul and the Straits to Tsarist Russia and the Aegean coast to Greece, as well as creating prospective independent Armenian, Kurdish, and Greek-Pontus States in eastern and northern Anatolia. These rigid commitments of the Allied Powers practically left the Ottoman State with no other option than an alliance with Germany nourishing competitive policies against Great Britain particularly and promising a bright deal to the Ottoman Government.<sup>2</sup> The two outstanding motives behind the mutual clash of pre-War interests were manifest firstly in the conduct of a patronizing Russian Pan-Slavic policy inciting Bulgaria,

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2 Altay Cengizer, *Adil Hafızanın Işığında* (İstanbul: Doğan Yayınları, 2014).

Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia against Ottoman rule since the Balkan Wars, and secondly, in Germany's strategy of controlling the routes passing through Muslim populated Caucasian territory to the riches of the Far Eastern British colonies and the Baku oil resources. Germany would thus tactically set out to exploit her alliance with the Ottoman Empire as the spiritual leader of the Muslim World in its capacity as holder of the status of the Caliphate. This German policy, widely referred to as the "German Jihad", is also known to have significantly involved the instrumentalization of this government's close alliance particularly with the ruling Committee of Union and Progress under the leadership of Prime Minister Talât and the War Minister Enver Pashas and Germany's attempts to convince them to follow Pan-Turkist policies.<sup>3</sup>

### The Ottoman State in World War-I

The two German cruisers Goeben and Breslau which were "sold" to the Ottoman State and renamed *Yavuz* and *Midilli* in accordance with a German-Ottoman secret agreement of 2 August 1914 bombarded, under German Vice-Admiral Souchon's command, Russia's Odessa and Sevastopol ports on 29 October. The Ottoman State thus formally entered the war.

In retaliation of Russia's immediate bombardment of Turkey's Black Sea ports and invasion of Eastern Anatolian lands on 1 November, the Ottoman army repelled the Russian army on 10 November at the First and Second Köprükoy and Azap battles. The War Minister Enver Pasha, pressured by Germany to further advance, launched the hastily planned Sarıkamış offensive on 20 December 1914 resulting in a disastrous defeat under harsh winter conditions. When the battle finally ended in late January, Ardahan and Oltu were once again occupied by Russia, and only 30,000 Turkish soldiers of the 3. Army survived out of 80,000.<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of the Sarıkamış campaign, the 37th and 38th Divisions under the command of Enver Pasha's uncle Halil Pasha and some gendarmerie units set out from Diyarbakır on a campaign against the Russian invasion of Southern Azerbaijan. Encouraged by the liberation of Tabriz on 14 January 1915, Ganja-based independence movements were incited in Northern Azerbaijan. The military imbalance between the Russian and the Ottoman forces at the time, however, would hardly support any realistic expectations from those Ottoman offensives in view of the following figures: while the size of the Russian Caucasian Army numbered 197,000 soldiers and the number of their cannons 386, the size of the Ottoman 3rd Army in the Caucasian front stood at 50,539 soldiers only and the number of its cannons at 180, not to mention the impressive Russian superiority in supplies, clothing,

3 Kerem Çalışkan, *Alman Cihadı ve Ermeni Sürgünü* (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2015).

4 Numbers regarding the losses in the Sarıkamış operation vary. Information contained in the General Staff Archives regarding the 3rd Army operations in the War is closest to the numbers given here. For further information see the following source contained in the archives of the Presidency of the War Department of the Turkish General Staff (Tr. Genelkurmay Harp Dairesi Başkanlığı): *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Kafkas Cephesi 3. Ordu Harekâtı, C. 3* (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1993), 535-536.

subsistence, and training.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the Russian forces would take back Tabriz and initiate their occupation of Eastern Anatolia by the end of January with the tangible involvement of Armenian elements. Furthermore, Erzurum on 16 February 1915, Muş and Bitlis immediately afterwards, Trabzon on 19 April, and Erzincan on 25 July would all fall to the Tsar's forces.

As official acknowledgment of the foregoing Russian occupation, partition of the Ottoman territory was laid out by Allied Powers through a series of secret agreements during the war. Istanbul Agreement of 18 March 1915 between France-Britain-Russia left Istanbul and the Straits, part of the Thrace and the Marmara coasts to Russia. London Agreement of 26 April 1915 between Britain-Russia-France-Italy was essentially designed to solicit Italy's accession to the Allied bloc, so the Antalya and Konya provinces were promised to this country and the continuation of its rule of the 12 Aegean Islands was endorsed. Sykes-Picot Treaty of 3 January 1916 between Britain-France-Russia gave Jordan, including Baghdad (excluding Mosul) to Britain; Lebanon, Syria, Antep, Urfa and Maraş to France; the Straits, the whole of Istanbul, the Eastern Black Sea Coast up to Trabzon and Eastern Anatolia to Russia; the Petrograd Agreement of March 1916 between Britain-France-Russia confirmed Russia's occupation of the Eastern Black Sea coasts; and the agreement signed by exchange of letters in 1916 between the Monarch of Hedjaz Sherif Hüseyin and Britain's Governor of Egypt Mc Mahon promised the Arab leaders independence in exchange for their uprising against the Ottoman rule. Finally, Treaty of St. Jean de Maurienne of 21 April 1917 between Britain-France-Italy appropriated Western Anatolia including İzmir to Italy (Italy would later waive this appropriation in favor of Greece).

Those secret agreements which would later be made public by the Bolshevik Governments had thus left the Turkish Eastern Black Sea, Van, Erzurum, Erzincan, Bitlis, Sivas, Muş, and Elazığ provinces to Russia. The Tsar's armies occupied these provinces with a view to instituting an Armenian state within Russian boundaries. This plan would be pursued in the future by means of arming Armenian bands which would thereafter increasingly intensify their massacre of the civilian Turkish-Muslim population. Other than the Turkish provinces mentioned above, Kars, Ardahan, and Batum (*Elviye-i Selase*, "the three districts") had already been occupied by Russia in accordance with Berlin Treaty of 13 July 1878 signed after the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78.

While the War was in process, two developments would make a decisive impact on the balance of powers. The first of these developments was the US entry into the War in April 1917. Apart from the significant impact this development made on the overall situation, it also introduced a new element in the War which concerned the Turkish Resistance Movement: the question

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5 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi...*, 40. For detailed information regarding the comparative situations of the Ottoman-Russian Armies in the Caucasus Front, see: *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Kafkas Cephesi...*



was whether the principle of “self-determination” among the 14 “Wilson Points” announced on 8 January 1918 would theoretically compromise Turkish sovereignty on Eastern Anatolia against Armenian claims based on formerly made promises to “justify” partitioning of Anatolia. The other critical development which played a crucial role on the course of the War would occur in Russia: two major civil wars that had erupted in 1917 February and October would result in the 7 November 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and Tsarist Russia would collapse to be succeeded by an “anti-imperialist socialist” government that negated all the international treaties of the previous period. This development would lead not only to the disbanding of the Russian army and the Bolshevik Regime giving up on the Eastern Anatolia and Eastern Black Sea territories promised to it but would also result in the adoption of the new Bolshevik policy of supporting the Turkish National Resistance Movement. Contrary to Moscow's expectations, however, the new Turkish leadership would avoid adopting a communist regime, disappointing the Bolshevik leadership that would nevertheless continue supporting the new Turkish regime.

## THE EASTERN FRONT

### **General Kazım Karabekir and the First Move towards Liberation in the Eastern Front: the Brest-Litovsk Meetings, the Erzincan Armistice and the Liberation of Erzincan**

Following his assignments in the Balkan Wars, Kazım Karabekir was serving in the Command Headquarters Intelligence Office as a lieutenant colonel when the World War broke out. He was then assigned to the operations in Western Iran, Northern Iraq, and Baghdad, also serving as acting Governor of Basra for a short period. He would later be moved to the Gallipoli Front to fight in the defense of Kereviz Dere against the French. His next appointment was the Istanbul First Army Chief of Staff which would be followed by his promotion and assignment as commander of the Iraqi Front 18th Army Corps where he conducted successful defensive operations against the British forces for a year and a half.<sup>6</sup> By orders he received on 6 April 1917, he was transferred to the 2nd Caucasus Army Corps Command of the Diyarbakir region where he arrived on 16 April 1917.

The 2nd Army Corps headquarters in Silvan was under the command of the 3rd Army Commander lieutenant general in Sivas, Vehip Pasha. The Turkish army was defending the area between the Black Sea and Lake Van with four corps within a formation of two armies and the 2nd Army Corps was defending the 250 km-front covering the South of Lake Van. Kars, Ardahan, and Artvin were left to the Russians since the 1877-78 war, whereas Erzurum, Erzincan,

6 Kâzım Karabekir, *İ. Dünya Savaşı Anıları* (Tr. *Memoirs of World War-I*) (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2011), 529-530.

Muş, Bitlis and Trabzon were under Russian occupation of 1916. When Karabekir set out for a long march on the Silvan, Siirt, Diyarbakır, Ergani, Harput, Arapkir, Eğin, Kemah, and Refahiye route to inspect the area, important political developments were taking place in the Region: The grassroots movements that erupted in Russia resulted in the Bolshevik Revolution on 7 November and in the Brest-Litovsk meetings which started on 15 December 1917 between the Bolshevik Government, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman States, the Bolshevik Government declared its decision to withdraw from the war and from the secret agreements which the Allied Powers had previously signed. The Erzincan Armistice of 18 December signed within this framework resulted in the truce declared between the Ottoman-Russian armies, and Russians began withdrawal preparations out of the Turkish territory. In this new setting in the Eastern Front, which completely changed the scene, Karabekir was transferred on 1 January 1918 from the Second to the *First* Caucasus Army Corps Command.<sup>7</sup> This new assignment covered the wide span of command oriented towards the liberation of Erzincan, Erzurum and beyond. He arrived at his new headquarters in Refahiye on 28 January.

Upon his arrival, Karabekir received the following report from the Erzincan Armistice Russian committee officers hosted at the Headquarters:

“...The Russian troops were withdrawing from the area but the Armenian Tashnak bands were filling in the vacuum and they started massacring the Turks... The Armenians had the capacity to double the army corps that consisted of 50,000 soldiers and it was said that 50 more battalions were on the way. The regular troops and bands were dispatched to the Erzurum and Van provinces. Their stated goal was the establishment of an Armenian State in South Caucasus also including Van, Bitlis, Muş, Erzurum and Iskenderun (in Mediterranean Turkey). The Georgians wanted Western Caucasus. Georgian and Caucasian Russian army corps were expected to ally with the Armenian and Greek bands against the Muslim elements of the Region. The Greek and Ossetian forces were also trying to get organized in divisions. Azerbaijan was looking forward to the arrival of the Ottoman army.”

On the other hand, four Turkish army corps in total were nominally facing five Russian army corps which were significantly superior in terms of weapons, ammunition, food, and supplies. The means left behind by these dispersing Russian troops were being usurped by the Armenian forces. Against this background, the Turkish forces would conduct forward operations with three army corps. The Fourth Army Corps of the Van-Beyazıt area would be positioned on the right flank, Karabekir’s First Caucasus Army Corps in the center towards Erzincan-Erzurum-Sarikamış, and the Second Caucasus Army Corps on the left flank towards Bayburt-Trabzon in the region up to the Black

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7 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 535.



Sea. The First Army Corps had 15 thousand staff corps officers and soldiers, 10 thousand non-combatant components, 94 machineguns, and 53 cannons. The size of the combatant force (especially officers) was limited and subsistence and clothing problems were at the peak.<sup>8</sup> The orders received from the Third Army Commander Vehip Pasha on 23 and 29 January 1918 stated that the operation would commence soon and that, in the framework of the Erzincan Armistice provisions, Russian soldiers would not be maltreated.<sup>9</sup>

On 12 February, the forward operation was launched as planned and Erzincan was liberated the next day from a two-and-a-half-year captivity. The unspeakable atrocities of the Armenian bands; murdered people and burning houses were seen everywhere. Only a handful of people were left of Erzincan's 20,000 Turkish population. The army continued its operation and freed Gümüşhane, Torul, and Vakfikebir on 15 February, Bayburt on 20 February, Trabzon on 24 February, Of, Aşkale and Tercan on 25 February, and Rize on 2 March.<sup>10</sup>

The high value and quantity of food, weapons, ammunition, telegraph equipments, barbed wires, snow shoes, sledges, pickaxes, shovels, various stoves, etc. seized from enemy in Erzincan was impressing. The war spoils thus seized from the prosperous Russian army would temporarily meet the urgent daily 10-ton food and animal feed needs of the Turkish force in extreme hardship and would momentarily lift their morale. Further forward operations, however, could hardly be continued without every time seizing more war spoils in the next battles.

### **The Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty of 3 March 1918 and the Liberation of Erzurum**

Following Erzincan, there were pressing reasons for launching the Erzurum operation as soon as possible. The harsh subsistence requirements of the army which would obviously not allow the luxury of a long wait could have soon reduced the soldiers' high motivation and morale following the Erzincan victory, but more importantly, the increasing severity of the atrocities and massacres of the Armenian bands against unarmed Turkish Muslim population added urgency to the need for a timely offensive. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that the Russian army, which was dissolving after the Bolshevik Revolution, would not revive one way or another and regain its eagerness for land reclamation. On the other hand, Karabekir was of the opinion that the Armenian command was not expecting an attack under harsh winter conditions and had reasons to believe that a surprise attack would do the job.<sup>11</sup>

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8 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 563-566.

9 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 567.

10 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 581-583.

11 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 597-599.

In accordance with the army's forward operation orders, a thorough reconnaissance of the region was undertaken immediately, and the Army Corps started a 160-kilometer march. A line of defense would be established 80 kilometers from Erzincan. As the march column head entered the Mamahatun district, some entrenchment supplies, weapons, and ammunition were seized, although Armenian bands had completely burned this settlement and destroyed all provisions *en route*.

During these later stages of battle preparations, Karabekir received a "personal" cipher telegram from Deputy Commander-in-Chief Enver Pasha on 23 February. The message briefly stated:

"Upon the Bolshevik Revolution, the Caucasian Muslims have decided to establish their independent governments. Our 3. and 6. Armies have already established contact with inner Caucasus and we have organized in Baku... Karabekir is being considered as head of the organization to be established for providing the support the Muslim people have requested from us against Russian and Armenian repression".

It came as a total surprise for Karabekir that he was being asked to consider leaving his current assignment in the middle of the battle to liberate his country from enemy occupation. In his response to Enver, he mentioned the drawbacks of the possibility that openly mobilizing the Muslims in South Caucasus could provoke the Russian-Armenian-Georgian forces to unite against the Ottoman Army, argued that the project could actually be postponed until after securing Anatolian borders or that it could alternatively be performed secretly in similar manner as militia operations, and requested therefore to be excused from the assignment for the time being.<sup>12</sup> Enver Pasha would assign his brother Captain Nuri Bey to the head of the Ottoman Caucasus Islam Army later in June 1918 and promote him to the rank of General in line with the project requirements.

While the operation against Erzurum was advancing, the forward front line that was defined by the army command for Karabekir's army corps was exceeded by 60 kilometers to the north. As the forces advanced, they continued to witness the Armenian bands' atrocities such as in Aşkale where 32 civilian people had been murdered. As the soldiers advanced, subsistence problems were growing too, particularly due to the long-lasting interruptions of the transport of supplies under harsh winter conditions, increasing the urgency for that final strike against Erzurum. In his correspondence with the Army Commander Vehip Pasha, Karabekir reported that the Armenian bands were turning Erzurum into a "fire ground" and "graveyard" every passing moment, whereas his 9th Division alone had grown capable of taking Erzurum fast in an immediate offensive, so there was no reason to postpone the operation any longer. Vehip Pasha approved the plan tentatively but nevertheless criticized Karabekir for advancing on his own initiative beyond army orders. As was the

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12 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 602-604.

case, the next orders from Vehip Pasha would conflict with Karabekir's plans based on ground realities. His advance being stalled and faced with risking his corps, Karabekir reached the point of no return as he expresses in the following words in his journals:

"I have written about these drawbacks and also explained them on the phone. I am now obliged to undertake full personal responsibility and act as the situation necessitates... because in the event of a disaster, the material and moral responsibility will rest only on myself... The army headquarters is 300 kilometers away... I will certainly not deliberately send my soldiers to freeze and starve to death."<sup>13</sup>

On 10 March, Karabekir instructed his staff to be prepared for an offensive and moved out from Erzincan to the front lines. The clashes between the advancing reconnaissance teams and the Armenian forces were now within 10 kilometers of Erzurum. The march continued on steep mountains and deep snow. In the hamlets they could reach in bitter cold, the structures they took shelter in during nights lacked roofs or floors and they generally had to sleep on the ground. Along the path, the abundance and quality of the weapons, ammunition, provisions, fortifications, and transport infrastructure that had been left by the Russian army to the Armenian forces could be observed. This displayed the enemies' sophisticated preparation and determination to invade Anatolia.

Reports received from Army headquarters earlier on 3 March had stated that the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty had been finally signed between the Bolshevik and the Ottoman-German-Austria/Hungarian-Bulgarian governments. This development would drastically change the fate of the War as war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire was formally ending and the Bolshevik government accepted to withdraw from Kars-Ardahan-Artvin and disband its army. What remained to be done now was liberating Eastern Anatolia from Armenian occupation. The march continued in this new high spirit.

On 5 March, they reached Mamahatun and heard shrieks of the residents "still suffering the horrors of the Armenians' spine-chilling murders". The 8-metre diameter hole that was "filled with the Turks' corpses of all ages and both genders" was nauseating. "Only one household had escaped by running to the mountains. The sense of abhorrence I felt witnessing this sight was no match with my feelings even in the bloodiest battles before."<sup>14</sup> Upon arriving at the 9th Division headquarters in Yeniköy in the morning of 7 March, they saw again Russians' excellent infrastructure. The highway and desert/field railroads had already been opened, everywhere was full of piles of rocks, stonebreaker machines and cylinders. The bridges were completed and even a train station had been constructed. Armenians were building fortifications along the Erpik

13 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 611.

14 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 618.

(Yeni Gazi)- Halasur (Malakan)-Garan (Great Dikme Village) line and at the western ridge of Ilıca, and some 2,500 Armenian forces were in contact with the Turkish troops.

On 7 March, Karabekir sent a letter to the Armenian commander in Erzurum by an Armenian prisoner of war. The letter wrote:

“Peace has been negotiated with the Soviet Regime and Russians are evacuating the whole of our country, including our land that they had occupied in the 1877-78 war... our troops are heading towards Batumi and Kars... we have begun exchanging our prisoners of war. Our army corps have positioned around Erzurum to take back the lands where the Russians have withdrawn from... I solemnly warn you to evacuate Erzurum and subsequently the whole of our lands and to withdraw to inner Caucasus by 9 March 1918 evening.”<sup>15</sup>

Karabekir’s strategy was to confront the enemy out in the open outside the wire fences surrounding the city and to enter Erzurum without allowing the enemy an opportunity for defense in the trenches. Both forces of about 5,000 troops were almost equal and Karabekir was certain of the victory. Karabekir informed the Army Command of his plan but it was declined due to it being “not safe enough” and he was ordered to wait for the other two army corps on the right and left flanks to rally on the same line before the final attack. Because this would remove the shock effect of the attack and would consume the soldiers’ subsistence stocks while the massacre in the city would continue to mount each day, Karabekir decided to take on the responsibility and act on his own to execute his own plan. In the morning of 9 March, he moved his headquarters further from Yeniköy to Tazegül. The Armenians had burned down about 100 houses and murdered 30 people including women and children while withdrawing from this settlement of 180 houses.<sup>16</sup>

In the morning of 10 March, the headquarters was again moved to the Alaca Village that had a higher observation position. The Armenian trenches were approached by 10 kilometers. The scene that they saw at this village was the worst of all the disasters they had so far witnessed: “The crying by the side of bayoneted or burnt corpses, the clamors of murdered mothers holding their babies on their bayoneted breasts...” Karabekir tried to console the survivors by handing each of them a silver *medjidie* (Ottoman coin). In the morning of 10 March, the 600 Armenian terrorists who launched an offensive were repelled. At the dawn of 11 March, Karabekir launched the final offensive at all fronts with four infantry regiments. The village of Ilıca was taken at 8 o’clock and Yarımca at 11 o’clock, Gez at 13:15. Shortly afterwards, Armenian forces were withdrawing from all points towards Erzurum. It was understood from the intelligence reports received later that the Erzurum Fortress

15 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 621.

16 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 628.

commander Armenian General Andranik (Antranik) Ozanyan had decided that night to retreat. The 9th Division launched its final attack in the afternoon and entered the city.

On 12 March 1918, Erzurum was liberated from three years of Russian captivity. Turkish casualties in the last offensive were 14 fallen and 116 wounded soldiers. 35 Russian and 3 Georgian officers and 3 Russian privates were taken prisoner. About 500 Armenians were killed. The Armenian resistance was completely broken on 14 March and cavalry troops captured Horasan on 16 March where many locomotives, 100 wagons and a telephone center were seized in good condition.

During the same days, the 37th Caucasus Division marching from Trabzon along the coast captured Çayeli and Hopa on 10 and 14 March and advanced towards Batumi. As Erzurum was going to be a base for new offensives, it was important for the army to establish a local government and communication channels with the residents, so Karabekir assigned his artillery commander Recep Bey as the city governor and provost marshal. Citizens were called to duty and government and municipality services were restored. The new voluntary militia organization and public order services were soon extended to cover the more remote districts and villages, thus reasonably securing law and order.

The most interesting sources regarding the situation of the Russian army in Eastern Anatolia following the Bolshevik Revolution are reports drawn up by the Russian commanders. Among the writings of the Russian artillery commander Lieutenant Colonel Twerdohlebov regarding Erzurum, these citations from Karabekir's memoirs are striking:

“During mid-December 1917, the Russian Caucasus Army retreated from the front without the supreme military command's authorization... We had only 40 Russian cannoneers left to operate the more than 400 cannons in the Erzurum Fortress... Because discipline could not be secured in the regiment, privates were fleeing, engaging in looting and threatening the officers... Some Armenian soldiers pillaged the home of one of the Erzurum gentry and murdered him. Orders to apprehend the culprits in three days yielded no results... Due to the indiscipline of the Armenian and Georgian soldiers, conflicts were constantly erupting between them and the Russian officers. Russian officers were forced to intervene in the Armenians' oppression against the Muslim people... The day the Armenian Russian General Andranik was assigned to the Fortress command, I received news that the entire population of Tepeköy was murdered by the Armenians. Nobody was arrested despite orders... The Russian officers residing in the Muslim neighbourhood had been forced to move out so that they could not intervene in the murders. The officers resisted but this time it was heard that the massacre was spreading outside the city. I informed the Fortress commander that we

urgently demanded the Armenian savagery and disgrace be stopped, otherwise all Russian officers be dismissed. ...”<sup>17</sup>

The Turkish army which entered Erzurum was once again eye-witness to Armenian atrocities. 1708 Muslims were confirmed murdered in 29 districts of Erzurum only, and everywhere had been torched and wrecked.<sup>18</sup> These words in Karabekir’s diary describe the horrible sight:

“It was as if the Erzurum field railroad station was a graveyard where corpses were thrown outside. We saw two brick buildings full of burnt Turkish corpses. The fortress vaults of Karskapısı were also full of murdered people. Almost nobody was left alive in the Umudun, Sitavuk, Arzuti villages in northern Erzurum.”<sup>19</sup>

Liberation of Erzurum from captivity at such horrible cost nevertheless served as the key to the National Resistance. Erzurum would indeed become the base for further military operations of liberation. This largest center in Eastern Anatolia would soon play another equally important role in paving the way to the national organization of the Independence War at the Erzurum Congress between 23 July and 7 August 1919 which would endorse the authority of the National Resistance Movement leadership.

### **Sarıkamış, Kars, and Beyond**

The forward operation was advancing on the path that was opened by the liberation of Erzurum. From 17 to 23 March, the 3rd Army Corps saved Narman, Varto, Kötek, Hınıs, and Malazgirt from the Armenian bands’ invasion and would shortly reach the pre-1877 borders.

Karabekir was rewarded with the “Second Rank Sworded Ottoman Medal” decoration for his victory in the battle of Erzurum. Notwithstanding this State appreciation, however, the Second Army Commander Vehip Pasha would continue criticizing Karabekir in correspondence dated 21-24 March for taking personal initiatives. Highly demoralized, Karabekir asked for a two month leave, only to be denied by the Army Command. He was further informed that the First Caucasus Army Corps under his command was being placed under the Eastern Group Command, a new formation under Brigadier General Yakup Şevket Pasha. Upset again, Karabekir then requested that the previous offer for his assignment to the Caucasus Islam Army Command be reconsidered but this request was turned down too on grounds that the recently assigned Nuri Pasha had already set off for his new duty post.

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17 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 650-669.

18 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi...*, 143

19 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 677.



Sarıkamış was then the next target in the Eastern Front for the First Army Corps. 5,000 Armenian soldiers escaped from Erzurum were reported to have moved to Sarıkamış, preparing for an offensive against Erzurum joined by Armenian bands who had seized a large amount of high-quality weapons, ammunition, and supplies left behind the deserting Russian forces. Kars, on the other hand, was still occupied by Armenian, Georgian, and Russian forces. Meanwhile, a delegation under the Ottoman Navy Chief of Staff Rauf Bey (Orbay) had commenced peace negotiations in Trabzon on 14 March in execution of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty with the Armenian, Georgian, and Azerbaijani leaderships which had recently separated from the Soviet administration and formed a Trans-Caucasus federal government. Karabekir was worried that these negotiations were being prolonged by the Armenian leadership in order to stall the Turkish offensive so that they could buy time for reinforcement. He was therefore convinced the operation against Kars had to be concluded urgently.

Karabekir warned the Kars Armenian Community leadership and the Caucasus Greek Association in his letters dated 29 March 1918 that the citizens of this region were living under the assurances of the Ottoman State's laws regardless of race and religion, that residents should be strongly advised against accommodating rebellion forces rising against law and order at the eve of the operation the army was about to launch against the Armenian bands who had been committing atrocities against the Muslim people.<sup>20</sup>

Karabekir informed the army headquarters of his operation plan to be launched on 2 April. While the Group Command responded positively, certain alterations were suggested which were not compatible with the ground realities. Indeed, Sarıkamış was a tough target where Enver Pasha's Third Army had suffered a grave tragedy, losing approximately 50 thousand soldiers in early 1915, and the suggestions received from headquarters meant new complications for forces attacking a well-fortified target in the forests defended by the enemy that could inflict considerable losses to charging armies with a small defensive force also benefiting from the advantage of occupying an elevated position. Nevertheless, the operation was already well under way, so Karabekir departed from Erzurum on 31 March to move his headquarters to Horasan. The settlements that they passed through on their path were entirely abandoned by residents. They found Horasan as an "impressing railway station".

"Many locomotives, wagons, workshops, railway switches, road machines and telegraph lines feature a civilized appearance. At every step forward we felt a growing sense of gratitude for the collapse of the Russian Empire."<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, as opposed to the superior physical facilities enjoyed by the Russian army, the Ottoman army did not even possess a single truck, for example, and

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20 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 694, 695.

21 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 702.

it had to count largely on ox-driven carts for transport. Those limitations, however, were still far from reducing the urgency for liberating the motherland in the face of continuing Armenian atrocities. Upon the Army's arrival at the Karaorgan 9th Division headquarters, it was reported that the Armenian bands had recently committed horrendous massacres in 28 villages around Kars where they were gathering forces and sending their families to Gyumri in apparent preparation for a major battle. Armenian activities had indeed visibly intensified on all fronts.

In the operation which was started on 3 April, troops were having difficulties forming a front line against the stubborn natural resistance of forest, snow, and steep terrain. Finally, on 5 April, Sarıkamış was taken without any clashes. The repatriation of that city which Russians had reconstructed so conspicuously was a major gain. Significantly, the railroad that reached Kars and extended beyond was recaptured. Some weapons, ammunition, and a large quantity of food was seized as well.

The next target following Sarıkamış would be Kars. On 8 April, Kağızman and Van were retaken. A major massacre of Muslims by the Armenian bandits was committed there as well.

On 9 April, the Transcaucasus Federal Government declared its independence from Soviet Russia. In an order received on the morning of 11 April, the operation would be halted because the Transcaucasus Government had accepted the Brest-Litovsk conditions and had declared its readiness to evacuate and return the Kars-Ardahan-Artvin districts. However, orders would be reversed immediately, and the operation would be resumed due to on-going conflicts contradicting that commitment.

It was understood that the Armenian defense preparations for Kars were superior compared to Erzincan and Erzurum. The 36th Division's offensive on 19 April at Novo Selim, half-way between Sarıkamış and Kars, proved inconclusive. With the offensive on the morning of 22 April, however, Armenian forces were defeated on all fronts. On 23 April, though, while the final offensive preparations were under way the Group Command ordered again to temporarily suspend the operation: the Transcaucasus Government had accepted all Turkish conditions regarding the return of all the lands lost in the 1878 War and Karabekir was assigned to conduct the negotiations regarding the evacuation of Kars. The operation would thus be paused 2 kilometers from Kars pending the conclusion of negotiations. Accordingly, at 5 o'clock in the morning, the city was put under siege at all fronts. Around 14:00 hours, a Russian-Armenian committee representing the invaders of Kars approached the Turkish lines raising a white flag. During the brief meeting held at the headquarters, they stated that they would surrender the Kars fortress the next day. Meanwhile, in a letter that the new Caucasus Republic Leader Chenkeli had sent to the Army Commander Vehip Pasha, Karabekir's pursuance of the forward operation despite the agreed terms of the truce was protested and a

deadline of one month was requested for the orderly evacuation of the city and its surrender. The same day (24 April), a directive from the Group Commander Şevki Pasha consequently ordered to halt the operation until further notice from the Army. Strangely enough, the enemy had already surrendered that morning as of the next day and Karabekir nevertheless decided to conclude the operation immediately, believing that engaging in the renegotiation of a date of surrender would only mean allowing the enemy more time to finish up the massacre of the Muslim people in Kars. Thus at 8 p.m. on 25 April 1918, the 29th Regiment took the Kanlıtabya, the outer trenches circling the City. At 9 p.m., the First Army Corps First Gunner Battalion entered Kars thus liberating the city from a forty-year captivity. The Russian Fortress commander General Daef surrendered together with 400 Russian soldiers and that many Greek cavaliers and infantry troops. All Armenian soldiers had fled. It was later reported that, apart from the 300 captive Ottoman soldiers found at the fortress, some 2,000 had already been sent to Tbilisi by Russian officers before so as to be spared Armenian maltreatment. One hundred Turkish captives imprisoned by the Russians in the Kars train station were found murdered by the Armenian bands.<sup>22</sup>

With the victory of Kars, all Turkish territory lost in the Eastern Front at the 1878 war was recaptured.

## **INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS IN THE CAUCASUS AND TURKISH INVOLVEMENT**

### **The War Shakes the Caucasus**

As the eruption of the World War-I and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution shook the Caucasus, also raising expectations of autonomy and independence, emergence of the Ottoman Empire from the War as an independent state was also becoming a high priority for the Caucasian Muslim peoples of mostly Turkish origin.

The Caucasian lands, particularly Azerbaijan had long been a focus of interest for Western powers for two main reasons. The first reason was the oil resources of the region. The Nobel Brothers first invested in the Baku oil in 1875 and achieved practically half of the world oil production in 1901, to be joined by the Rothschild family later. Around 65% of the world's oil reserves are known to lie in the Middle-Eastern and Caucasian neighbourhood of Azerbaijan and Turkey, although this was not exactly known at the time. The second important reason behind the Western Powers' interest in the region was the strategic geopolitical location of the Caucasus. Indeed, one of the critical priorities behind the pre-War competition among European powers was access to the economic riches of the Far East. The fast-economic development rate of

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22 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 795.

Germany had led to imperialistic ambitions to challenge British rule in India. This could only be achieved through domination of the routes to Far East, just as it had also been the major incentive behind the German project of “Baghdad Railroad” extending from Berlin through Ottoman territory to the Persian Gulf. The project had been launched in 1888 by the concessions granted by the Ottoman *Sublime Porte* to a German company and plenty of blood would be shed for the protection of this railroad during the War, even though it would never reach its final destination. However, the extension of transport lines would have to continue beyond Ottoman territory also in the Caucasus, which required the German control of this region. Thus, the German strategy was to take advantage of its alliance with the Ottoman Empire holding the status of the spiritual leadership of the Muslim World, the Caliphate. While Great Britain would fight back to protect her domination against such designs, Russia would also resist both before and after the Bolshevik Revolution against any foreign domination of that region which was within their own sovereign power. It was under those circumstances that the other neighboring imperial power Ottoman forces would enter the picture in the name of Ottoman interests and upon the Azeri appeal for support against aggression. World War-I was then to a great extent about European competition on controlling Caucasia as much as it was about partitioning Ottoman territory by European powers. The peoples of Caucasia were consequently put under increasing pressure to organize themselves for protection against both European and Russian aggression as well as against regional hostilities in that chaotic environment, particularly following the Bolshevik Revolution. This fight for survival in various fronts and shifting alliances would eventually result in declaration of their independences.

The first sparks of the war at the Caucasus Front had flared up on 1 November 1914 when the Russian armies attacked the Eastern Anatolian lands. Developments regarding the loss of the greater part of Eastern Anatolia to Russia and the recuperation of those lands by the Ottoman Forces following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution have been addressed in the foregoing paragraphs. However, the Ottoman military operation was not limited to Eastern Anatolia but the War Minister Enver Pasha, urged by his ally Germany and despite his disastrous 1914-15 Sarıkamış defeat, decided to intervene in the Russian occupation of southern Azerbaijan and dispatched the 37th and 38th Divisions under the command of his uncle Halil Pasha and some gendarmerie units from Diyarbakır on a cross-border operation. The seizure of Tabriz on 14 January 1915 sparked some Ganja-centered uprising movements against Russia in northern Azerbaijan and Azeri populated regions of Iran. The Russian Caucasus Army was, however, far more superior to the Ottoman 3rd Army; the Russian fighting force quadrupling the Ottoman forces and the Russian firing power doubling the Turkish firing capacity, not to mention the Russian military infrastructural superiority. The Russian army consequently took back Tabriz in two weeks and started the occupation of Eastern Anatolia jointly with the Armenian forces.

Meantime, while independence movements in Northern Azerbaijan were coming to life, the representative of the Azeri Turks' secret organization *DİFAİ* (the Defense Committee of all Caucasian Muslims) in Ganja Amir Arslan Han met with Enver Pasha in Erzurum in February 1915 and requested support for the idea of establishing an independent confederation that comprised Baku, Ganja, Yerevan, Terek and Daghstan. Enver Pasha responded positively, provided that Russian intervention could be avoided. This initiative is known to be the first ever move towards independence in Caucasia.<sup>23</sup>

The Armenians, on the other hand, were busy working on ways and means of exploiting opportunities against Ottoman territory and interests. As a matter of fact, even before the war broke out, the Russo-Ottoman protocol signed on 8 February 1914 under the pressure of European powers had called for the initiation of "reforms" to protect the interests of the local Christian population in eastern Turkey. Those reforms would be executed under the supervision of two regional governors to be appointed by European powers. In a subsequent letter dated 5 August 1914 by the Armenian Catholicos of Etchmiadzin to the Russian Governor General of the Caucasus Vorontsov-Dashkov, the Armenian spiritual leader suggested the annexation of the "Armenian" eastern Anatolian provinces to Russia and putting them under the rule of an Armenian regional governor with a broad authority. The Russian bureaucrat would turn down the suggestion on grounds that measures amounting to further territorial expansion might not look too good for them "internationally" against their standing tactic to continue defaming Turks, but he would also state that the Armenian concerns would be addressed in any case.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the Russian invasion of the Eastern Anatolia provinces and the increased Russian violence committed against the Caucasian Muslim people were already more than serving Armenian aspirations of domination including ethnic cleansing. The Laz and Adjara populations of 52,000 settled at the Georgian border, for instance, had been massacred by the Russian army in early 1915 on grounds that these people were "sympathetic" to Ottoman policies.<sup>25</sup> In another instance, Russian forces invaded Iranian Azerbaijan and entered Hemedan, Kazvin, Esfahan, and Kirmanshah in November 1915 to cut off the Baghdad railway so as to undermine German-Ottoman influence in Iran. The 13th Ottoman Army Corps took action but failed and retreated. On the other hand, it appeared that Russia never considered an independent Armenia outside Russian borders as it was explicitly underlined in a diplomatic note delivered to the British and French Ambassadors in Petersburg on 17 March 1916 by the Russian Government. France also opposed the establishment of a "greater Armenia" comprising the whole of eastern Turkey and additionally including ancient Cilicia in the Anatolian Mediterranean region, which France considered her own area of interest.

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23 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi*..., 34.

24 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi*..., 35.

25 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi*..., 37.

In the face of growing Russian-Armenian pressure at this stage, Azerbaijani intellectuals started getting organized and pursuing efforts to inform the public in Istanbul and European capitals about the problems they were experiencing. Among many such organizations operating in Azerbaijan, the more widely known were the Ganja National Committee, the Caucasus Society of Benevolence (*Cemiyeti Hayriye*), the Azerbaijan Youth Organization, as well as the Social Democrat Charity Party (*Himmat Partisi*) led by Nariman Narimanov and the *Musavvat* (Equality) Party, established in 1904 and 1911 respectively. The Caucus of the Caucasian Muslims was convened by the Muslim National Council between 15-20 April 1917 to be followed in Moscow by the First Congress of all Muslim Peoples of Russia between 1-11 May 1917.

### **The Bolshevik Revolution, Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and Russia's Withdrawal from the War**

Political developments gained momentum upon the people's uprisings of Russia on 12 March and in October 1917. In the face of the complete dissolution of the Tsar's army and administration, the region fell into absolute anarchy. The interim Prime Minister Prince Lvov was pressed to turn the Tsar's authority over to a five- person Transcaucasus Committee composed of Russian-Azerbaijani-Georgian-Armenian representatives which would never manage to live up to the pressing challenges. In their continued search for decentralized solutions to administrative problems, the Russian interim government decreed on 9 May 1917 to appoint Armenian governors to rule the occupied eastern Turkish provinces of Van, Erzurum, Bitlis, and Trabzon. Further encouraged by those developments, Armenians declared in a congress convened in Tbilisi in October 1917 their decision to establish a "Greater Armenia" comprising Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia and they also instituted an "Armenian National Parliament" as well as an "Armenian Council".<sup>26</sup> Contrary to their claims, however, the localities inhabited by a majority of Armenian population at the time were limited to Etchmiadzin, Gyumri, Novo Beyazıd, Zengezur, and Shusha (Karabakh), while even in Yerevan the Turkish/Azeri population's ratio until the World War-I was to stand at 83%, only to drop to 5% as a result of ethnic cleansing by the end of the War.<sup>27</sup>

Vladimir Lenin's 7 November 1917 declaration of "Russian Peoples' Manifest"<sup>28</sup> calling for self-determination encouraged the people of Caucasus to establish their own states, but Lenin's pledge would soon be reformulated to rule out independence outside Soviet territory. Under those circumstances, the problem of developing relations amongst the people of Azerbaijan, Georgia,

26 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi...*, 62.

27 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi...*, 133.

28 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi...*, 78-80. To view the text of the Turkish versions of Vladimir Lenin's "Russian Peoples' Manifest" of 24 November 1917 and Joseph Stalin's "Appeal to All Toiling Moslems of Russia and the East" of 3 December 1917, please see: Akdes Nimet Kurat, *Türkiye ve Rusya (1798-1919)* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi DTCF Yayınları, 1970), 649-652.



and Armenia independent from Moscow became a more urgent issue while the continued advance of the Ottoman Army was emerging as an increasingly relevant development to follow. As tendencies grew in Azerbaijan to close ranks with the Ottoman Administration, Ottoman authorities also considered the important role which could be played by the Turkish-Muslim people of the Caucasus in the protection of Ottoman interests against Russian and British imperialistic plans in the region. Those Ottoman aspirations were also closely shared by Germany from the point of view of their own interests.

On 28 November 1917 following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian-controlled Transcaucasus Committee gave way to an independent Transcaucasus Commissariat<sup>29</sup> composed of Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Armenian representatives. Meanwhile, military clashes had already been suspended between the Ottoman and Russian armies upon the Erzincan Armistice Agreement of 18 December 1917.

### **The Caucasus Turkish-Muslim Peoples' Appeal to Ottoman Protection, Establishment of the Ottoman Caucasus Islam Army**

Russian-British supported Armenian and Georgian forces had begun filling in the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the Bolshevik army from the stage. A British-French Mission in Tbilisi was engaged in a plan to put together an Armenian-Georgian army corps to replace Russian soldiers who had deserted the front and two divisions were formed by south Caucasian Russians and Armenians. It was also widely told that, taking advantage of this authority gap, Armenians were planning an imminent large-scale massacre against the Muslim population. These developments were precipitating the national independence movements and added urgency to the Muslim peoples' need for defense. On 17 December 1917, local national militia disarmed the Russian soldiers in Ganja and drove them out. In January 1918, the Ganja National Committee sent a military delegation to the 3rd Army Commander Vehip Pasha formally appealing for protection<sup>30</sup> and initiated the establishment of a national army. However, the Armenian-supported major Bolshevik massacre in Baku between 31 March-1 April resulted in the tragic loss of some ten thousand Azerbaijanis. The Baku Bolshevik Soviet that had taken over the government in Baku was by then entirely seized by the Bolsheviks and Armenians, so the Azeri population would start a mass exodus to Northern Caucasus, mainly Ganja, which was declared the new capital tentatively replacing Baku.

The land-mark development in the War at those times was the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 3 March 1918 whereby the Bolshevik Government declared its decision to withdraw from the war, dissolve its army, and start peace talks. This new Russian position would radically alter the balance of powers in the

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29 Kurat, *Türkiye ve Rusya (1798-1919)*, 84.

30 Kurat, *Türkiye ve Rusya (1798-1919)*, 106.

region as well as raise the momentum for search of national solutions. The formation of the Ottoman Caucasus Islam Army (OCIA) also took place during those developments. Enver Pasha decreed on 5 April 1918 the establishment in Azerbaijan of an army corps formed of three infantry divisions of three regiments each. He first offered the commander of the Second Army Corps Kazım Karabekir to take command of this new formation but Karabekir declined in the face of the urgencies dictated by his current responsibilities in freeing Eastern Anatolia from Russian and Armenian occupation.<sup>31</sup> The new Army Corps would then be commanded by Enver Pasha's brother Captain Nuri who would be promoted to the rank of general. The emerging Ottoman strategy was to make a move for the establishment of a friendly independent buffer Southern Caucasian State so as to keep Russian threat at a distance, if possible. The Ottoman administration also considered this occasion as a timely opportunity to gain influence in the Caucasus perhaps in partial compensation for the vast Ottoman Arab territory just lost to European powers. Another important development in the region was the self-abrogation of the Transcaucasus Commissariat on 22 April to declare an independent, democratic, and federative Transcaucasus State. The new State's primary task would be to revitalize the peace negotiations in Batumi which had been previously initiated with the Ottoman Empire in Trabzon on 14 March within the framework of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty provisions, which the Armenian and Georgian parties had been undermining.

In this heated atmosphere, the Azerbaijan National Council announced the independence of Azerbaijan during the historical Tbilisi meeting of 27 May 1918. Georgia and Armenia would follow suit on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The independent Transcaucasian State would thereby come to an end. The first independent Azerbaijan coalition government formed under the presidency of non-partisan Feth-Ali Han Hoyski immediately decided to unite with Turkey but the Ottoman Minister of Justice and Head of the Administrative Court Halil Mentеше heading the Turkish delegation in Tbilisi declined the offer, explaining that such a move "would be accepted neither by friendly nor hostile parties", but Turkey would nevertheless always be prepared to lend any assistance needed to support the new independent State of Azerbaijan. The Treaty of Friendship signed on 4 June<sup>32</sup> indeed envisaged the armed support of the Ottoman Government to Azerbaijan in the case of Azerbaijan's request and it also contained a "most-favored nation" clause. Having thus enjoyed its first diplomatic recognition, the new Azerbaijan Government immediately requested armed assistance from Turkey following the signing of the treaty.<sup>33</sup> The Turkish-Azerbaijan National Council and Government would then move from Tbilisi to Ganja on 16 June.

31 Kurat, *Türkiye ve Rusya (1798-1919)*, 113, 245. (Establishment Regulations of the Ottoman Islam Caucasus Army Corps)

32 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Karton No. 560, as quoted by: Kurat, *Türk-Rus İlişkileri (1798-1919)*, 662-666.

33 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi...*, 182-184.

## **Karabekir's Forces Enter South Caucasus**

The Ottoman Eastern Army commander Karabekir, who had just freed Erzincan, Erzurum, Sarıkamış, and Kars from enemy occupation left Kars on 1 May 1918 and received orders on 3 May to launch an operation against Tbilisi. He was to dispatch simultaneously a division to Tabriz against a British-supported Armenian invasion but the advance of the Ottoman forces in this operation necessitated controlling Gyumri which was *on route* and holding the strategic railroad intersection. The army advance patrol teams reported that the perimeter of Gyumri was recently fortified and that the Gyumri fortress was well reinforced. The Armenian forces would defend Gyumri with 6,000 soldiers and 20 cannons. The 11th Division was tasked with the taking of Gyumri, three squadrons of the 28th Regiment from the 9th Division and the 107th Reserve Regiment were to provide back-up support. The offensive launched on 13 May resulted in the seizure of Gyumri and a large area of its surroundings on 16 May. The locomotives and the 30 wagons operating on the railroad connecting with Kars would remedy a huge transport problem of the Ottoman army. A significant amount of war and food supplies were also seized. The clashes continued for four days against the Armenian forces which had grouped around Karakilise and Başabaran. On 20 May, Karabekir moved his headquarters from Kars to Gyumri. Armenia's second biggest city after Yerevan, Gyumri was thus taken.

Gyumri and its surroundings had been ruled by the Shirak, Seljuk, Karakoyunlu, Aqqoyunlu, Ottoman, and other Turkish clans throughout history. The region was occupied by the Russians following the 1977-78 War and Armenian populations were settled from the surrounding regions while Muslim families were uprooted from their hometowns. Just recently, on 19 April 1918, nearly 3,000 Turks trying to flee Gyumri to Azerbaijan through Ahilkelek were brutally murdered. Thus, the first thing Karabekir did after entering the city was to secure the 250 Turkish households left in Gyumri. He appointed a certain Cihangiroğlu İbrahim Bey from the local gentry as district governor of the Muslim neighbourhood. A security operation would also be launched against Ahilkelek, due to the latest massacre which had taken place there.

## **The Batumi and Gyumri Treaties with Azerbaijan-Georgia-Armenia; Establishment of the Eastern Armies Group Command**

On 26 May Georgian, and on 28 May Azerbaijani and Armenian independent Republics were declared and the Northern Caucasus Federative Government had ended.

In the instructions Karabekir received from the Army Command on 1 and 4 June, it was reported that understanding for a peace agreement had been reached with the Georgian and Armenian delegations at the Batumi negotiations within the framework of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the maintenance

of the territory Ottoman forces had seized was recognized and it was agreed to commence negotiations for the execution of conditions of peace. It was also understood that the Armenians and Georgians were enjoying Germany's patronage, and in light of these developments, except for the Ahilkelek operation, a forward campaign upon Yerevan and Tbilisi was to be suspended for the time being.

The Ottoman Government signed peace agreements in Batumi with the Georgian Government on 4 June, and with the Armenian and Azerbaijani Governments on 11 June. In the agreement concluded with Georgia, the Brest-Litovsk borders had been exceeded as the Ahiska and Ahilkelek sub-districts along with Batumi were left inside the Ottoman boundaries. Just as in the agreement with Georgia, the agreements to be signed with Armenia and Azerbaijan would also recognize the borders prior to the Ottoman losses at the 1877-78 war with Russia. Georgia and Armenia recognized the Ottoman Empire's right to utilize the Caucasus railroads until the end of the war. Nationals and representatives of the enemy states of Turkey would be expelled from those countries. Tbilisi and Yerevan would each provide for the services of a *mufti* who would refer in sermons to the Ottoman Sultan's name as the Caliph of the Muslim World. The Ottoman-Georgia-Azerbaijan oil agreement of 4 June 1918 concluded that petrol would be pumped to Turkey through the Baku-Batum pipeline, a project which Turkey would pursue and finally materialize later in that century. Despite the agreements, however, Armenia and Georgia would consistently raise objections on grounds that those instruments were actually signed under duress, conveying their complaints to Germany. The actual establishment of the Ottoman Caucasus Islam Army under Nuri Pasha's command happens to take place at those times. The Ottoman Empire's ally Germany, concerned about the compromise its own interest in the Caucasus petrol would suffer by the Ottoman forces' continuing advance in the region, would not hesitate to support the Georgian and Armenian complaints. As for Russia, which had not raised any objections to the Trabzon and Batumi negotiations, would categorically object to the Ottoman annexation of Batumi.

The Gyumri negotiations conducted by Karabekir representing the Ottoman Empire envisaged, apart from the foregoing issues, disarming of the Armenian bands in the regions where the Ottoman army was deployed, guaranteeing fair treatment to Muslim people, exchange of the prisoners of war, and improvement of migrants' conditions. Karabekir's assignment in Gyumri would thus be concluded at the signing of the peace protocols with the new independent Armenian Government on 13 July 1918.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, Armenians in Ganja organized a battalion of 600 and began threatening the Muslim people on 8 June. The 5th Division of the Second Caucasus Army Corps launched an operation to suppress this threat in Ganja

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34 For the Peace Protocol texts, please see: Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 867-884.

and jointly with the local Azerbaijani local militia disarmed the Armenian battalion on 13-14 June. The 5th Caucasus Division from the Eastern Armies Group was also commissioned to support the Caucasus Islam Army. In another front, a regiment of the Fourth Army entered the Iranian provinces of Tabriz on 12 June and Orumiyeh on 31 July. The 5th Caucasus Division captured the Shemahi-Hajikabul line of Azerbaijan from Bolshevik forces in July and took Baku from the British and Armenian forces on 16 September in battles that lasted two months. On 8 October, the 106th Infantry Regiment and the 9th Caucasus Regiment commanded by Colonel Cemil Cahit Bey took Karabakh in a joint operation with the 1st Azerbaijani Division. The Ottoman losses in the Baku battles reached a thousand. Bolshevik Russia meanwhile kept insisting on holding Baku and the German-Russian agreement signed to that end on 27 August provided for the deployment of Germany's influence on Ottoman administration to stop the Ottoman Army from advancing beyond the Kars-Ardahan-Artvin line which the Brest-Litovsk Treaty had left within Ottoman boundaries. According to the Russo-German agreement, Germany would receive in return a quarter of the Baku petrol shares. The Ottoman administration would strongly protest this agreement and failing to stop the Ottoman forces' advance towards Baku, Germany would offer as a last-ditch attempt to enter the city together with the Ottoman forces, only to be refused again.<sup>35</sup>

On 7-9 June, Vehip Pasha (subsequently Enver Pasha's uncle Halil Pasha) was assigned to the command of the Eastern Armies Group, a new formation in the Eastern Front, and Karabekir's 1st Caucasus Army Corps would be attached to this army on 28 July. Karabekir's new orders from the Eastern Armies Group was to deploy his 9th Division to control the region south of Yerevan covering Nakhchivan (Nakhichevan) while the 11st Division would once again intervene in Tabriz. Just promoted to the rank of major general, Karabekir consequently proceeded to move his army corps headquarters to Nakhichevan and arrived there on 7 August. He would however decline the suggestion of the Army Commander Halil Pasha to proceed further towards Tehran due to the risks such a move would cause at times when the Ottoman armies were suffering tragic defeats in other fronts.<sup>36</sup>

### **Karabekir's Forces in Nakhchivan**

Following the Bolshevik Revolution and the collapse of the Russian administration and army Nakhchivan, disconnected from the Azerbaijan mainland due to its geographic position, found itself in a struggle for survival. As conveyed in the detailed memoirs titled *Aras Şahittir (Aras Witnesses)*<sup>37</sup> of Lâtif Hüseyinzade, a resident intellectual who was eye-witness to the

35 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi...*, 214.

36 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 885.

37 Lâtif Hüseyinzade, *Aras Şahittir* (Bakü: Nurlan, 2001).

developments of that period, the Turkish Muslim National Committee of Nakhchivan established in 1918 assumed governance of the Mehri, Ordubat, Culfa, Shahbuz, Sherur, and Dereleyaz districts and the surrounding regions. The National Committee declared military mobilization when Armenian armed bands reinforced from Yerevan were heard of terrorizing Muslim villages in March and preparing for a large-scale Muslim ethnic-cleansing of the region. Those Armenian bands had indeed conducted on 30 March-1 April a major massacre in Baku, inciting the National Committee to send a delegation to Turkey for seeking armed support.

Kazım Karabekir, who was then fighting Armenian forces in Eastern Anatolia met with the Nakhchivan delegation in Sarıkamış. In his letter of 4 April 1918 addressed to the National Committee President, he promised support to Nakhchivan and in the following days, Lieutenant Halil Bey who was stationed in Eastern Beyazıt was dispatched to the Shahtahti district of Nakhchivan together with some officers and soldiers. Artillery commander Hüsni Bey and cavalry officer Osman Nuri Bey were also sent to Nakhchivan. Their mission was to support the forming and training of a Nakhchivan national army. The Armenian community leaders they invited to Shahtahti for discussing the continuation of the cease-fire failed to appear. Meanwhile Turkish forces under Karabekir's command, having just liberated Erzincan, Erzurum, Sarıkamış, and Kars from occupation had crossed the border river Arpaçay and entered Gyumri, advancing towards Yerevan. These developments raised the morale of the Nakhchivan people and forced the Armenian bands to retreat. However, news circulated early June indicated that the Dashnak (Tashnak) Armenian general Andranik had crossed the Nakhchivan borders with his army of 15,000 and started massacring the Muslim people, looting their property and burning their villages. The same bands were organizing attacks on the Ottoman Army, too. In reaction to these developments, Karabekir initially conveyed a warning in letters he sent on 27 and 29 June to the Armenian Army Corps Commander General Nazarbekov which yielded no positive outcome.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, on 5-6 July 1918, the Turkish army crossed the Sorsu Bridge at the salt mines hills (*Duzdağ*) at the outskirts of Nakhchivan and attacked the Armenian troops with artillery fire, forcing them to flee.

The Nakhchivani people raised the Turkish flag in the city upon the entry of the Ottoman army and decided that Nakhchivan would apply for annexation to the recently announced South-Western Caucasus Republic of Kars. According to Hüseyinzade's recollection, Karabekir Pasha's entry into Nakhchivan in the first week of August was welcomed with enthusiastic celebrations. Mobilization was declared and efforts to establish a national army were expedited. Karabekir declared Nakhchivan as the "Gate to the East", a definition which has ever since been held high in Nakhchivan.

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38 Karabekir, *I. Dünya Savaşı Anıları*, 900-902.



It was reported in early September that in revenge of this defeat, the Armenian commander Andranik's bands were advancing to capture neighboring Tabriz in Iran with the support of a British unit there. Karabekir's troops mobilized once again and the British-Armenian forces were driven out of Tabriz, Turkish troops returning to their headquarters in Nakhchivan. Karabekir's observations as conveyed in his memoirs indicate a particular tendency for sympathetic relations with Iran and Russia among the politically dominant Nakhchivani circles of Persian Khans and clergy.<sup>39</sup>

Peace was finally achieved in Nakhchivan. The intellectual community of Nakhchivan was, however, after something more and they wanted their own independent republic. The Turkish army's liberation of Baku on 16 September and Karabakh on 8 October had further encouraged the citizens. This optimistic environment led at the end of October to the declaration of the Nakhchivan-Aras Turkish Republic. The first government formed under the presidency of Emin Bey Nerimanbeyov by the new national council would immediately proceed with urgent administrative arrangements. Meanwhile, deliveries of weapons, ammunition, equipment, and military wear from Turkey had been started and hundreds of Nakhchivani youth were being sent to military schools in Turkey. Cultural and educational activities in the young Republic were being restored. People's economic well-being was improved, and the war-stricken buildings were being repaired. The new government would later join on November 30 the short-lived South-Western Caucasian Republic of Kars.

However, these happy days would not last for long. In accordance with the 30 October 1918 Mudros Armistice Treaty provisions, Karabekir and his troops would depart from Nakhchivan amidst sad send-off ceremonies. Karabekir would however leave behind his well-trusted officers Halil, Hüsnü, and Veysel Beys together with some 400 Turkish soldiers and 20-30 officers.

Following the withdrawal of the Turkish army, the Armenian attacks would resume. In December 1918, the Dashnak bands stormed the Uluhanlı, Gemerli, Vedibasari, and Sederek villages and began advancing towards Nakhchivan, only to be stopped again by the Turkish army back-up forces from Turkey.

Recognizing that they could not take Nakhchivan by force of arms, the Armenian Dashnak leaders would then resort to an international campaign appealing for political support from the Armenian communities in Britain, France and the US. Thus, during the first days of 1919, a British general arrived in Nakhchivan together with some 50-60 officers and stated that according to recent international agreements Nakhchivan was thereafter put under his command. He began interfering in the domestic affairs of the Aras-Turkish Republic, demanded that the Turkish soldiers leave Nakhchivan, hauled down the Turkish flags and attempted to withdraw Turkish currency from circulation. The local people would put on a fierce public reaction and the Turkish soldiers

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39 Kâzım Karabekir, *Günlükler (Journals)*, C. 1 (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2009), 542.

were not allowed to leave. But pressure would continue to mount, and a certain General Thompson sent after the previous British general arrived this time to convey the message that “in accordance with the decisions of the three great powers, Nakhchivan was given to Armenia”. (Some sources state that the British forces actually occupied Nakhchivan the day following the departure of Karabekir’s forces on 17 November).<sup>40</sup>

Early in May 1919, a third British general named Davy (or *Davie?*) arrived with a unit of Hindu soldiers under his command and repeated that Nakhchivan was given to Armenia. Following these developments, the Armenian forces sent from Yerevan seized control of the Nakhchivan administration. But with the determined resistance of the people and the Nakhchivan armed forces, first the British general and his army, then the Armenian bands retreated from the city. The next visitors were a US congressional delegation presided by General Harbord who were sent on a fact-finding mission but would present a report generally confirming the Muslim identity of Nakhchivan and the Armenian pressures there. General Harbord would also meet with Karabekir Pasha later in Erzurum and convey his similar findings to the Congress.

Nakhchivan would not be able to resist for long against this pressure. The Soviet Red Army would eventually enter and take over Nakhchivan in mid-July 1920 and establish on 28 July a new government under the Soviet Union, the “Nakhchivan Soviet Socialist Republic”. The same development had occurred in Baku as well. During the course of these events, the current Head of the Nakhchivan Government Turkish Army Commander Veysel Bey left Nakhchivan together with his soldiers. The khans of Nakhchivan took refuge in Iran.

Not long after, Nakhchivan was attacked again by Armenian bands. Political and military situation in the Caucasus was, however, being reshaped by Karabekir’s army once again defeating the invading Russian and Armenian forces in Eastern Anatolia and advancing towards Yerevan. The Yerevan Government would request a cease-fire and Armenian aggression against Nakhchivan would be stopped again. This development would end up with separate agreements to be signed between Turkey and Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, namely the 3 December 1920 Gyumri, 16 March Moscow and 13 October 1921 Kars Agreements. Nakhchivan’s autonomous status under Azerbaijan and the inviolability of its borders were thus confirmed under Turkey’s guarantee. Developments regarding these international instruments will be taken up in the following chapters.

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40 Bal, *Azerbaycan Cumhuriyetinin Kuruluş Mücadelesi...*, 228.

## THE MUDROS TREATY OF ARMISTICE AND THE END OF WORLD WAR-I

While the Turkish armies were pursuing their forward operations in the Eastern Anatolian and Caucasus fronts beyond the borders prior to 1878, negative reports were being received from the Palestine and other fronts. The Central Powers were defeated at the end of the four-year war and were signing treaties of surrender. The Ottoman Empire, which was also defeated along with its allies, had lost 200,000 men just in the Eastern Front during those four years. The losses of the Russian armies in that front were close to 147,000. The Ottoman Government of Istanbul also signed the Mudros Treaty of Armistice on 30 October 1918 with Britain, France, Italy, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro, thus ending the war. General Karabekir accordingly received orders in Nakhchivan on 31 October to disband the headquarters of the First Caucasus Army Corps and move to Istanbul.

In accordance with the ruthless conditions of the Treaty, the Turkish Straits would be occupied by the Allied Powers, ports, railroads, and shipyards would be opened to the occupying forces, the Ottoman Army would be reduced to 50,000 soldiers and disarmed excluding domestic security purposes and border patrolling, military supplies and transport vehicles would be handed in, the Allied Powers' and Armenian captives held by the army would be unilaterally returned outright, Ottoman soldiers in North-Western Iran and the Caucasus would immediately withdraw, Allied Powers would intervene in the case of any disorder in the eastern "Armenian" region (Erzurum, Van, Bitlis, Sivas, Elazığ, Diyarbakır), and State telegraphic communication would be confiscated. The country was being completely taken hostage under foreign occupation and rule, and all the territorial retrievals won in the Anatolian Eastern Front and Caucasia at huge sacrifices were being written off. On 24 December, British forces occupied Batumi, too, forcing the Turkish forces out. The Mudros Treaty officialized the previous secret plans to partition Ottoman lands and Istanbul would be consequently occupied by Allied Forces in November 1918. Britain would further invade Kars, Samsun, Eskişehir, İzmit, Afyon, Irak, Urfa, Antep, Maraş, Merzifon; France some regions in Adana, Mersin, Dörtyol, Zonguldak, and Thrace (France would later take over Urfa, Antep and Maraş from the British); Italy would occupy Antalya, Muğla, and Konya; and Greece would invade İzmir and its vicinity. In his address on 8 November in the House of Commons, the British Foreign Minister Lord Curzon would state that "the Armenian, Greek, Kurdish, Arab and Jewish communities had been saved from Ottoman oppression."

The other Central States would soon surrender, too: Bulgaria by 29 September 1918 Thessaloniki Treaty, Austria-Hungary by 3 November 1918 Wilaquste Treaty, and Germany by 11 November 1918 Rethandes Treaty of Cease-Fire. The war would officially end with Germany signing 28 June 1919 Versailles, Austria-Hungary 10 September St. Germain, Bulgaria 27 November 1919 Neully, Hungary 6 June 1920 Trianon, and the Ottoman Empire 10 August 1920 Sèvres peace treaties.

## POST-MUDROS: EASTERN FRONT IN THE NATIONAL RESISTANCE FOR INDEPENDENCE

### Seeds of the National Liberation War Are Sown

The Ottoman Prime Minister *Grand Vizier* Talat Pasha and Minister of War Enver Pasha resigned on 15 October 1918 and fled Turkey on 2 November.

Karabekir Pasha returned to Istanbul on 28 November 1918 on a ferry via Trabzon. Entry into Istanbul through the Bosphorus decorated with British and French flags was tragic. Karabekir had been offered the position of Chief of Armed Forces General Staff by Prime Minister İzzet Pasha but he declined the offer, stating his determination to be reposted back to the Eastern Front. İzzet Pasha would in fact soon resign to be replaced by Fevzi Pasha (Çakmak) on 23 December. During the week of Karabekir's arrival at Istanbul, he visited the War Minister Abdullah Pasha, Undersecretary of that Ministry, and his close friend Colonel Ismet Bey (İnönü), the Chief of Armed Forces Staff Cevat Pasha and former Premier İzzet Pasha. On 6 December, he was given audience by Sultan Vahdeddin. The single-most issue Karabekir consistently underlined in these meetings was the assignment of all young generation commanders to inner Anatolia for the national resistance movement that had to be launched against occupying powers. Accordingly, he insisted to be reassigned to the Eastern Front. Indeed, on 13 March, he received orders of his next assignment as commander of the new 15th Army Corps in Eastern Anatolia which had replaced the previous 9th Army consisting of two army corps. Meanwhile, his transfer was to be tentatively put off due to an absurd situation probably arisen as a product of the Mudros Treaty of Armistice that involved the revoking of the promotions given for achievements in battlefields, which meant that Karabekir would be demoted from general to lieutenant colonel. The problem was eventually settled, and he paid a farewell visit on 11 April to General Mustafa Kemal. At this historical meeting, Karabekir shared with Mustafa Kemal the strategy he thought was vitally important to follow, which was the initiation of the national resistance movement by first securing the Eastern Front. This naturally meant immediately ending the occupation of the Armenian bands who had been fast rearming and then shifting the forces to the Western Front to confront the Greek army. Karabekir insisted that Mustafa Kemal also immediately move to Erzurum under the pretext of a proper assignment in order to lead this movement and to lay the foundations of the national resistance there. Once Karabekir arrived at his command post, he would make all necessary preparations for the plan.<sup>41</sup> Karabekir's assessment of the situation was that the Allied Powers were not too forthcoming to engage in a war in Anatolia mainly because their armies and public were suffering from combat fatigue after four years of World War-I, as was clearly manifested in widespread desertions as well as the articulation of those public sentiments

41 Kâzım Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz (Our War of Liberation)*, C. 1 (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2008), 17.

in European media. Furthermore, the conflict that emerged amongst them at the January 1919 Paris Conference regarding the interpretation of the Wilson Principles of “self-determination” had resulted in appropriating İzmir and its vicinity to Greece from Italy, which meant the liberation war would fundamentally be fought against the Armenian bands in the east and probably the Greek army in the west. Meanwhile, ideas for future action circulating in Istanbul seemed to lack any optimism or energy for an independence-based solution to be won by national armed resistance, the more favorite tendencies being compromising with the British to save at least some small territory, or accepting a British or American mandate, or embracing Bolshevism and allying with Moscow, or simply dismissing any such plans and just waiting-out the future developments as they came.

The first reactions to the Mudros Armistice were to come from Eastern Anatolia and South Caucasus. On 28 October 1918, the Meskhetian Provisional Government and on 3 November the Aras-Turkish Republic in Nakhchivan were declared. On 5 November, the Kars Islam Council was convened to declare on 18 January the South-Western Caucasus Government of Kars-Ardahan-Batum-Ahıska-Nakhchivan, Ahilkelek, Etchmiadzin, the south of Yerevan, Kağızman, and Oltu. This government would however be brought to an end with the British forces invading Kars on 13 April 1919 and its representatives would be exiled to Malta.

Karabekir would reach Trabzon on 19 April 1919 and the 15th Army Corps headquarters in Erzurum on 3 May. He would first contact the influential civil rights NGO's, the Trabzon Society of the Protection of Rights and the Erzurum Society of the Defense of Rights, which were both very pessimistic. Karabekir explained to them that the Allied Powers had no intention of fighting a war in Anatolia but would instead push the Greeks and Armenians to war promising the Greeks İzmir and vicinity in addition to a Pontus state on the Black Sea coast and the Armenians their own state in Eastern Anatolia. Karabekir warned the local NGO's that many military elements had definitely infiltrated into the Greek population being resettled in the region, that they would set to work primarily to disarm the Turkish army and militia organizations in accordance with the Mudros provisions, for which reason a determined resistance had to be put up against pressures for disarmament, and that the blueprints of a national strategy would soon be laid in a congress to be attended by the people's representatives in Erzurum. Before long, Karabekir would indeed face pressures from the Mudros Treaty observers French and British officers in Trabzon and Erzurum to surrender weapons and ammunition, clear out the barracks and turn over the army corps headquarters. Those demands would also be often reiterated by the Ottoman Ministry of War, only to be declined every time by Karabekir. The Mudros Treaty observers were apparently exhausted by the Turkish commander's consistent non-compliance with the Mudros provisions and it was reported in this connection that the commander of the Allied Forces' observation mission in Erzurum Lieutenant Colonel

Rawlinson (the nephew of Great Britain's Foreign Minister Lord Curzon) had told some Erzurum public representatives that Erzurum could indeed be left to them if they would eliminate or somehow banish Karabekir Pasha but failing this, their city would remain within the borders of a future Armenian state.

Karabekir found his army corps in reasonably good condition, although the evacuation of the army from Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi had demoralized them. In his directives to his army corps, he ordered them to be ready for an offensive and categorically refuse all demands to surrender bolt handles, ammunition and sheaths of their weapons, prisoners of war and some Turkish officers to the British, as well as resist pressures to abolish the military and administrative structures.

### **Mustafa Kemal Arrives at Samsun, the Erzurum and Sivas Congresses Convene**

On 15 May 1919, the Greek invasion of İzmir began.

On 19 May, Brigadier General Mustafa Kemal, in his capacity as imperial honorary aide-de-camp and the 9th Army Troops Inspector, set foot on Samsun and moving to Havza, met his comrades-in-arms Admiral Rauf (Orbay), Generals Ali Fuat (Cebesoy), and Refet (Bele) there to make an assessment of the situation. In his memoirs, Karabekir wrote:

“I was so jubilant that M. Kemal Pasha had finally arrived. This was what I had been anticipating for the last one month... I had already made my mind up in Istanbul to bring him to power and support this plan through with all the power I had...”<sup>42</sup>

M. Kemal and his friends moved to Amasya on 21-22 June and published a memorandum that would constitute the main strategy of the Resistance Movement for Independence:

“As the government has failed to fulfil its responsibility towards taking necessary measures to liberate the homeland from occupation, the Erzurum and Sivas congresses will be convened with the participation of three delegates from each province to represent the national will regarding the future strategy to be adopted.”

Mustafa Kemal's passage to Erzurum would be on 3 July. Meanwhile, the Minister of Internal Affairs Ali Kemal had outlawed in his circular order of 18 June the Nationalist Forces Movement.

Upon his arrival at the Eastern Front, Mustafa Kemal Pasha issued directives for the army to be ready for a pre-emptive offensive at the Armenian-Greek bands or the Allied forces. Karabekir differed from this approach on the

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<sup>42</sup> Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 33.



grounds that he was not really expecting an offensive from the Allied Forces, and launching a pre-emptive strike could unnecessarily antagonize the Western public opinion and might even incite an Allied military reaction. Thus, he argued in his correspondence that the current strategy should be limited to regular security operations against the Armenian-Greek bands violating domestic law and order. He also drew attention against some current trends of acknowledging Bolshevism, arguing that on the contrary, it was of paramount importance that the liberation war be conceived and pursued as a *national* movement launched in Anatolia, not ruling out however in this process following an amicable stance towards the Bolshevik administration while preserving absolute neutrality as regards their regime. He shared these views on several occasions with Mustafa Kemal and they reflected the specific attentiveness which would be closely observed throughout the national resistance war to the due consideration of Western public opinion and the Bolshevik leadership's political sensitivities. Mustafa Kemal's following words in his telegram of 22 September 1922 addressed to Karabekir regarding these issues would indeed confirm the diplomatic caution that was maintained even after winning the war: "Notwithstanding our incontestable military potency, we still choose to remain prudent and temperate in politics and diplomacy."<sup>43</sup>

Two days after Mustafa Kemal's arrival at Erzurum, the Minister of War Ferit Pasha in the course of their six-hour telegraphic conversation on 5 July requested that Mustafa Kemal put an end to his "off-duty" activities and immediately return to Istanbul. In a consequent correspondence with the Palace secretariat on 8 July, upon Mustafa Kemal's insistence on his objections to Government policies, he would be discharged from duty on the spot. With Mustafa Kemal's simultaneous announcement of his resignation, his military career under the Ottoman regime would come to an end at the age of 38. According to the memoirs of Admiral Rauf Orbay, he and Karabekir immediately congratulated Mustafa Kemal for his principled decision and Karabekir declared at that historical moment his continued allegiance to him and the commitment of his army corps to remain under his command.<sup>44</sup> That critical junction at the outset of the liberation movement was thus safely negotiated through. The next day, Karabekir was assigned by the Government to the position of Third Army Inspector replacing Mustafa Kemal.

Once the crucial question of Mustafa Kemal's relationship with the army was thus cleared despite his dismissal from his military position by the Istanbul Government, preparations for the people's congress could be expedited. Apart from the Government's pressure, another serious obstacle was the obstructions of the Allied Powers' military observation mission which General Karabekir had to deal with on a daily basis while he was preparing the internal political ground for the congress. He was thus busy networking to sort out some problematic issues with local leaders and delegates in early negotiations

43 Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 1286.

44 Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 78.

regarding the items to be included in the agenda and the decisions expected to be reached, foremost, Mustafa Kemal's election to National Resistance leadership. Meanwhile the British military mission commander Lieutenant Colonel Rawlinson visited Mustafa Kemal, too, on 9 July to mention the prospects of an Allied armed intervention unless the congress was suspended.

Having thus done away with his military titles and uniform, Mustafa Kemal was elected Chairman of the Erzurum People's Congress and leader of the National Liberation Movement at its opening session on 23 July. This was an achievement which had never been taken for granted in an assembly composed of delegates from diverse walks of life representing a wide spectrum from religious to militia, intellectual, or bureaucratic backgrounds, most of whom had not met or known Mustafa Kemal before. However, pressure from the Istanbul Government would escalate during the congress (prior to which the governor of Erzurum had fled the city) and Karabekir would receive on 26 July an inquiry from the Ministry of War demanding an explanation on what measures were being taken by the armed forces against the convening of an illegal conference. Karabekir's brief reply was "I am protecting it."<sup>45</sup> Karabekir would continue resisting the persistent orders from the Damat Ferit Government (Ferit was the Sultan's son-in-law as alluded to in his title "*damat*", meaning "the groom") to prevent the happening of the Erzurum Congress and its follow-up in Sivas. The instructions he would eventually receive from the Ministry of War on 30 July would demand that Mustafa Kemal and Rauf (Orbay) Bey be immediately arrested and sent to Istanbul. In his long and detailed historical reply on 1 August, Karabekir explained the terrible condition the country was in, and strongly criticized the Government's continuing directives to mitigate and disarm the army and discharge the bright commanders in accordance with the provisions of the Mudros Treaty on surrender. He reported in conclusion that: "He did not see anything contradictory with the country's high interests and laws in Mustafa Kemal's and Rauf Bey's activities... the state and conditions prevailing in the country certainly did not allow their arrest ... and any such action could lead to catastrophic consequences". He also circulated his reply within the army corps.

The Erzurum People's Congress was concluded on 7 August with the following declaration:

"The Province of Trabzon and all eastern provinces are an integral part of the country. The Country's defense as well as the protection of the Caliphate and Sultanate are secured under the power of the Nationalist Forces and the rule of national will. The boundaries of the country are the boundaries prior to the Mudros Treaty of Armistice and any kind of invasion and offence will be defied. The establishment of a separatist

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45 Karabekir, *Günlükler*, 612.

Armenian, Greek or any other state will not be allowed. The equal rights of the non-Muslim citizens are under the legal assurances of the State but no religious groups will be granted privileges.”

The Congress named a ten-member Representative Committee under the presidency of Mustafa Kemal with his close comrades in the movement Kazım Karabekir, Rauf Bey, and Bekir Sami Bey also on this committee. The decisions of the committee were conveyed to the Istanbul Government, as well.

The People's Movement of Resistance for Liberation was thus launched.

In the days following the Congress, at his farewell visit to Karabekir, the British Lieutenant Colonel Rawlinson repeated his threats against the army corps' resistance to disarmament. Karabekir would simply reply that it was an internal matter and the Mudros observation missions had no authority to intervene in.

The subsequent Congress of the Country-wide Resistance Organizations of Anatolia and Thrace convened in Sivas again under the presidency of Mustafa Kemal during 4-11 September 1919 would essentially confirm the decisions of the Erzurum Congress at a larger representative scale.

### **Obstructions Continue: Provocation of Separatism and Religious Reactionism by Foreign Powers**

Like the Istanbul Government, the British were also profoundly concerned by developments of the national movement and resorted to stirring separatist tendencies and also provoking the army against the Kurdish population by circulating rumors of Kurdish uprisings in Sivas and Harput. In a related development, intelligence reports would reveal a 7-point secret agreement signed between Prime Minister Damat Ferit and the British Government on 12 September 1919 placing the Straits under British authority and deciding on the establishment of a carved-out independent state of Kurdistan, as well as on the aversion of national movements and the renouncement of Turkey's entire jurisprudence over Egypt and Cyprus.<sup>46</sup> This “Kurdish separatism” conspiracy would be averted by Karabekir through dialogue with the Kurdish gentry which invalidated the uprising rumors. However, there was still another instrument the Istanbul Government and the British were jointly deploying against Mustafa Kemal and Karabekir, which was the provocation of religious reactionary dynamics by spreading rumors about those leaders' “anti-caliphatism, ungodliness and bolshevism”. It was also known that the British were simultaneously provoking the Bolshevik revolution tendencies in Anatolia to weaken National Resistance. Karabekir was additionally facing accusations of “forcefully recruiting the youth to arms for a hopeless war.” The National Resistance Movement leadership would indeed face serious

46 To view Mustafa Kemal's telegraph to the 15th Army Corps regarding this issue, please see: Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 442.

problems of desertion and reactionary uprising attempts in the future, mainly provoked by these rumors. The US stance, on the other hand, turned out to be somewhat different from other Allied Powers. The US policies were essentially based on President Wilson's 14-point principles regarding "self-determination of peoples" but were rather focused on humanitarian missionary activities providing health and education support to Christian communities of the region. Regardless of efforts by those who were keen about taking advantage of such ideas as "self-determination" in favor of their plans to claim territory from Ottoman Empire, the National Resistance leadership was not really worried due to the actual majority of the settled Muslim-Turkish culture and population in the lands that the Armenians were claiming rights to. On the contrary, the Resistance leadership viewed humanitarian services with sympathy. When the fact-finding US Congressional mission under General Harbord's leadership arrived in Erzurum on 25 September in response to the pressure of the Armenian lobby in the US, Karabekir would provide the visiting delegation with extensive information regarding the demographic and historical structure of the region and the developments in the Eastern Front. The report that the committee would thus produce for the US Congress would essentially confirm the Muslim-Turkish indigenous cultural and demographic predominance in the region as well as the Armenian atrocities during the war but also the determination of the Turkish people's and army's organized national resistance for the liberation of their motherland. Subsequently visiting Yerevan, General Harbord is reported to have advised his Armenian counterparts to *handle their matters in Erzurum with the Turks instead of soliciting assistance from the West* (interestingly enough, this piece of conversation would be later be disclosed to Karabekir during negotiations of the Gyumri Treaty by his Armenian counterparts). The US would refrain from signing the Sèvres Treaty of 20 August 1920 that would practically enslave the Ottoman Empire and largely partition its territory amongst the winners of the war.

### **The Last Meeting of the Ottoman Parliament, Declaration of the National Pact and Establishment of the Grand National Assembly**

Although Mustafa Kemal and his friends had severed relations with the Damat Ferit Government of Istanbul, they still pursued a policy of keeping their contacts alive as much as circumstances allowed in order to expand the political basis of the resistance movement. The Amasya meetings conducted on 20-22 October between Prime Minister Ali Rıza Pasha Government's representative Navy Minister Salih Pasha and Mustafa Kemal, Rauf and Bekir Sami on behalf of the Representative Committee of the Resistance Movement are significant in this regard. Known for his sympathy towards national resistance, Ali Rıza Pasha had replaced the previous Premier Damat Ferit who had to resign on 30 September failing the prevention of the Erzurum and Sivas Congresses. Salih Pasha's cabinet on the other hand included members who had been in active

contact with the Nationalist Forces. Indeed, the protocols signed at the conclusion of the Amasya meetings rejected enemy occupation, external patronage, and concessions to the minorities while recognizing the credentials of the All-Anatolian Society for the Defense of Rights and deciding to convene the Ottoman Parliament *Majlis* (which the Sultan had abolished on 21 December 1918) outside of Istanbul for serious safety concerns. With this protocol, the Anatolia resistance movement was formally recognized by the Ottoman Government although Damat Ferit's return to power as head of government between 5 April-17 October 1920 would lead to the rupture of relations again.

The last Ottoman Parliament which indeed convened according to the Amasya protocols but in Istanbul declared the "National Pact" on 28 January 1920 by unanimous vote. The six-point manifesto which would serve as the constitutional guidelines for the resistance movement was authored in line with the decisions of the Erzurum and Sivas Congresses and declared *the principles of self-determination for the future of the regions populated by people of Arab origin under foreign occupation at the time the Mudros Treaty of Armistice was signed, as well as for the legal status of Western Thrace, organization of a referendum likewise if necessary in Kars-Ardahan-Batum, and the rejection of the imposition of any restrictions on Turkey's full political-judicial-fiscal sovereign independence*. The last Ottoman Parliament thus having achieved this historical task in its last meeting would be raided and abolished by British forces on 16 March 1920. 145 deputies identified with the Nationalist Forces were arrested and exiled to Malta. Among them were former Prime Minister Sait Halim Pasha, Speaker of the Parliament Halil (Menteşe), ministers, governors, commanders such as Rauf (Orbay), and renowned intellectuals and authors such as Ziya Gökalp and Hüseyin Cahit. On 10 April, the showpiece military commissions instituted under the pressure of occupying Powers to investigate the Armenian massacre claims executed the innocent Boğazlayan District Governor Kemal Bey. The abolishment of the parliament would actually result in leaving the National Resistance Representative Committee as the sole representative of the national will and would thus clear the way to the establishment of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara on 23 April 1920. Among the members of this new legislative body would be Karabekir Pasha as a deputy for Edirne.

### **The Military and Diplomatic Fronts Get Activated**

Hardly two years having passed from Mustafa Kemal's and Karabekir's transition from Istanbul to Anatolia, the political and military infrastructure of National Resistance was put in place, its strategy was determined, and preparations were initiated to repatriate the eastern provinces. As contained in Karabekir's memoirs, based on the agreement between Karabekir and Mustafa Kemal at their earlier meeting in Istanbul and also according to the negotiated conclusions of the Erzurum-Sivas Congresses, the national resistance military

strategy was conceived as first securing the Eastern Front and then concentrating forces in the Western Front for a final strike.

A significant aspect of the military and diplomatic operations conducted in the Eastern Front was acting in dialogue with the Bolshevik army that was preparing for military intervention to reinforce its sovereignty in the southern Caucasus. In the same vein, it was important to negate the tactics of the Allied Powers to provoke the National Resistance leadership into going to war against Russia, as much as diverting the Armenian and Georgian military capacities from their aggressive plans against Turkish territory to defensive priorities against Russian threats. This strategy of constant dialogue with Russia was the opposite of the policy pursued by the Istanbul Government, which was mainly leaning towards various Western mandate plans. On the other hand, possible initiatives the Armenian committees could take to approach Moscow in search of support for their plans regarding eastern Anatolia had to be closely watched as well. In consideration of this last item, initiation of the eastern offensive was gaining urgency from a humanitarian aspect as much as for military purposes as the atrocities that were being committed all along against the Muslim community under Armenian occupation continued unhindered. Indeed, in his letter addressed to the Armenian Republic Command in Yerevan on 22 March 1920, Karabekir had reminded that, only in February, in the regions of Shuragel, Akbaba, Zaruşat, and Çıldır, 28 Muslim villages had been destroyed, more than two thousand of the population had been massacred, young women were kidnapped, the ones that were able to escape had frozen to death in the mountains, so he demanded measures to be taken to stop those crimes.<sup>47</sup> On another level, it was necessary to be alert against the designs that could have been lurking behind the recent rumors forged by Britain to the effect that “the new Turkish regime would be recognized by the Allies if it turns out to be a republic”, so that the Resistance leadership might be incited to give up on the operation to be imminently launched against the Armenian bands in turn for a recognition. Meanwhile, reactionary uprisings supported by Britain and spreading to include Samsun, Sivas, and Tokat created another element of pressure on the Eastern Army which was being forced to allocate resources for dealing with that problem as well. Karabekir was convinced that diplomatic negotiations with the Allied Powers would yield no positive outcome because the Allied Powers were really going through their weakest post-war times and all they were doing was trying to buy a few months’ time to conclude their campaign in the Western Front. He would consequently send a report dated 4 June 1920 to the Grand National Assembly along those views underlining that the issue was not to be impeded any longer and the operation had to be launched immediately so that the situation did not get more complicated and the forces are transferred to the Western Front as soon as possible where they are urgently needed.<sup>48</sup>

47 Gnkur. Harp Tarihi Dairesi Arşiv no. (Gen. Staff Military History Archives) 1/105, Dosya no. 10

48 Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 860-861.



Ankara finally gave the operation green light on 6 June and Karabekir immediately set out to step up preparations. In a directive he received on 22 June, however, he was ordered to halt the operation upon Georgii Chicherin's offer for mediation with Armenia. Nevertheless, the Armenian bands' bombardment of Muslim villages in the South of Yerevan on 11 June and their advance towards Nakhchivan and Oltu on 21 June had already nullified all excuses against the initiation of the Turkish operation against Sarıkamış. Karabekir was increasingly worried about more waste of time and took action for at least reinforcing his current positions. He sent a platoon from the 11th Division in Bayazıt to Shahtahtı in Azerbaijan so as to support Nakhchivan, he further had Oltu occupied by a division, and held the strategic points of the Allahuekber Mountains north of the Bardız Mountain by the 9th Division. He also began fortification of positions beyond the 1878 boundaries. However, attempts for a dialogue with the Bolshevik administration were still proving fruitless and the Turkish delegation would return from Moscow on 17 July without signing an agreement. As a large part of the Bolshevik army in Azerbaijan had recently been shifted to the Polish front, it was understood that the Red Army's capability of occupying Armenia and Georgia was currently weakened, and Moscow would impede a unilateral Turkish operation in that direction.

Meanwhile, on 24 May 1920, Sultan Vahdettin decreed the execution of Mustafa Kemal Pasha (together with Ali Fuat Pasha, as well as active intellectuals such as the Adnan and Halide Edip Adivar couple). However, the Greek army also kept advancing in the Western Front invading Balıkesir on 30 June and Uşak on 9 August. Domestic uprisings were spreading as well. Under those exceptionally difficult circumstances, responding to the urgent requirements to support the Western Front with an army division proved an impossible mission for the Eastern Army, as it would create great risks in the East. Benefiting from the forces under the command of Nuri and Halil Pashas who had fled to Azerbaijan from Istanbul and Batumi and where they had been arrested was also out of the question. Furthermore, the uprising that Nuri Pasha had instigated in Ganja against the Bolsheviks, which would result in a tragic failure, also contradicted the National Resistance diplomacy that was trying hard to establish a dialogue of cooperation with Moscow.

### **The Sèvres Treaty and Beyond: National Resistance on the Rise, the Retrieval of Sarıkamış and Kars**

On 10 August 1920, the Sèvres Treaty of Peace was signed between the Ottoman Government and the Allied Powers. The treaty, which amounted to the suicidal surrender of the Ottoman Empire, simply confirmed the Mudros provisions currently in force, transforming the Allied Powers' *de facto* occupation from a state of armistice into a status of sovereignty. The greater part of İzmir, the Aegean coast and Thrace were thus given to Greece and the size of the Turkish armed forces was to be reduced to fifty thousand. Moreover,

Armenian and Kurdish states would be established in Eastern Anatolia. Armenia immediately signed the treaty, although it was not a member of the Allied Powers, nor party to the peace conference. The same day, Armenia also signed a peace agreement in Moscow with the Bolshevik Government. As the Sèvres Treaty would not be ratified by the Ottoman Parliament, however, it would legally become null and void and would go down in history as the only peace treaty of World War One which failed to come into effect.

Meanwhile, Moscow had still not been convinced into signing a bilateral agreement with Ankara while the National Resistance leadership was anxious for the preservation of this cooperation as, significantly, transfer of Russian arms and financial aid to the Resistance forces continued via Nakhchivan through Karabekir's intermediary. That particular period during Resistance is also known to have embraced tendencies sympathetic towards the Bolshevik ideology under the introduction of "Islamic Communism in Anatolia", which was treated with "controlled" tolerance. This movement was more or less initiated by the announcement of Turkey's *İştirakiyun* Organization on 10 September 1920 under the leadership of Mustafa Suphi in Baku, but it was followed by the "official" Turkish Communist Party established on 18 October 1920, obviously for ensuring the closest possible supervision of the movement. Thus, by Mustafa Kemal's orders, practically all top political leaders including Karabekir, Fevzi (Çakmak), İsmet (İnönü), Ali Fuat (Cebesoy), Refet Bele and some other dignitaries signed in as co-founders of this new political party. Enver Pasha would also soon join the movement announcing his own party, the People's Council Party in Batumi in March 1921. These currents would, however, be very short-lived and brought to an end towards the end of 1921 to the dissatisfaction of Moscow.<sup>49</sup> The chances of a joint operation on Armenia with the Bolshevik army were, however, still growing thinner, and Karabekir Pasha, serving as the "Eastern Front Commander" since August, would increasingly insist on an early offensive so as to pre-empt the possible entry of the Bolshevik army in the three provinces of Kars-Ardahan-Artvin, the *Elviye-i Selase* under any circumstances. His point of view was approved by Mustafa Kemal.<sup>50</sup>

As of Autumn 1920, the National Resistance Movement would be gaining momentum with the military successes supporting diplomatic initiatives.

On 12 September 1920, Armenian forces would once again charge against the Turkish 9th Division. An enemy fleet was spotted off-shore İnebolu in Black Sea sailing towards Trabzon on 6 September. On 12 September a Greek division, and on 14 September a Greek force of 5,000 were reported to have landed at the Black Sea coast. Running out of patience largely consumed during the standby that had stalled the offensive already for four months, Karabekir finally decided to launch the operation. The counter attack in the 9th Division

49 Mete Tunçay, *Türkiye'de Sol Akımlar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2009).

50 The summary of this correspondence is found in: Karabekir, *Günlükler*, C. 1, 671.

front on 13 September was a success and Armenian troops were repelled. The forward offensive plans were finally approved by Mustafa Kemal Pasha on 20 September with instructions that the first stage of the offensive be extended to the Kars-Kağızman-Noviselim-Merdenik line, and that Karabekir send a delegation to Tbilisi to secure the neutrality of the Georgians.<sup>51</sup>

Sarıkamış was taken back on 28 September and Karabekir's headquarters were transferred there. Kağızman was next to be retrieved on 1 October but the Armenian attacks had not yet been stopped. As a result of the offensive launched at the 9th Division front on 13 October Beşkaya and the powerful outer positions on the east-west extension of Kars were captured. With the final offensive of 28 October, Kars was captured on 30 October 1920. 1150 Armenian soldiers were taken prisoners. Among them were the War Minister Araratov, Chief of Defense Vekilov, Kars Fortress Commander Primov, a civilian minister, three generals, six colonels and about fifty officers. A large number of weapons and ammunition were seized. The Turkish army had lost nine men and 47 soldiers were wounded.

The message received from the Grand National Assembly Defense Minister Fevzi Pasha on 31 October 1920 read Karabekir's promotion to lieutenant general. He was 38 years old at that time.

### **Karabekir's Gyumri Operation and the Gyumri-Moscow Treaties**

On 3 November, Karabekir left the defense of Kars in charge of a volunteer Samsun battalion of 1,000 men and started the Gyumri operation. Armenian troops were driven away until the west ridges of the city. When the Armenian Government's peace offer of 3 November reached Karabekir on 6 November, it was too late to stop and Gyumri was surrendered to the Turkish army on 7 November. Upon the Armenian government's rejection of the truce conditions<sup>52</sup> contained in the diplomatic note of the Ankara Foreign Office that Karabekir delivered to the Armenian side on 8 November, Karabekir transferred his headquarters to Gyumri and occupied some positions to the east of Arpaçay River. Armenian forces consequently evacuated the district of İğdır on 12 November and retreated to the north of Aras River. Finally, on 17 November they declared their acceptance of all truce conditions. The cannons and rifles seized from Armenian forces were immediately sent to the Western Front. The Gyumri Treaty that was signed as a result of the 25 November-3 December 1920 peace negotiations conducted by Karabekir leading the Turkish delegation concluded the return of Kars and its region back to Turkey; Armenia's withdrawal of its signature from all international agreements instituted against Turkey (including the Treaty of Sèvres); delimitation of Turkey's eastern border with Armenia along the line that reached the Aras River and Çıldır Lake;

51 Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 984-985.

52 Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 999.

mutual recognition of equal rights with other citizens in both countries for people of Armenian and Turkish origin; establishment of diplomatic relations and mail-telephone-telegraph lines between the two countries as soon as possible; recognition by Armenia of the local autonomy to be decided through self-determination accorded to the Nakhchivan province of Azerbaijan under Turkey's assurance; Turkey's assurances to assist Armenia if so requested by that country against foreign aggression; and Armenia's assurances to refrain from importing weapons and to downsize its armed forces as envisaged in the treaty whereupon the Turkish army would evacuate Armenia. Three outstanding consequences of the Gyumri Treaty for the Turkish National Resistance were *Armenia's recognition of the Ankara Government, the Treaty of Sèvres losing its validity as a result of Armenia's withdrawal of its signature, and the delimitation of the Turkey-Armenia border*. The day following the conclusion of the Gyumri Treaty, the Red Army would occupy Armenia, establishing the Armenian Soviet Republic to be included into the Soviet Union. The Treaty of Gyumri would not come into force as the new Soviet government would suspend its approval procedure but the subsequent treaties of Moscow and Kars, respectively on 16 March 1921 and 13 October 1921, would endorse the provisions of Gyumri in its entirety. The first country to recognize an independent Armenian state that Russia had never supported had thus been Turkey under the Ankara Government.

Upon the completion of the Red Army's occupation of South Caucasia at the end of 1920 and its entry into Georgia on 1 February 1921, Karabekir's troops also took action and reclaimed the eastern-most provinces of Ardahan and Artvin on 23 February. The neighboring Caucasian districts of Ahilkelek, Ahiska, and Batumi were subsequently captured as well. Thus, the strategic frontier lands of the "Three Districts" Kars, Ardahan and Artvin "*Elviye-i Selase*" which were left to Turkey by the Brest-Litovsk and Batumi treaties were actually taken back in addition to the three Caucasian districts, nullifying the Mudros and Sèvres borders in the Eastern Front.

Meanwhile on 10 January 1921, with the First İnönü battle won in the Western Front, Greek advance was temporarily stopped. In South Anatolia, too, National Resistance forces drove away the combined forces of the French and their Armenian "Eastern Legionaries". Military successes in Anatolia were followed by the activation of political and diplomatic initiatives. The first Constitution of the National Resistance Movement was promulgated on 20 January 1921 instituting a parliamentary government in Ankara based on unity of powers. Having realized that the Treaty of Sèvres could not be imposed on Turkey by military means, the Allied Powers decided to convene a conference in London between 23 February and 12 March and invited the Grand National Assembly Government Foreign Minister Bekir Sami Bey separately from the Ottoman delegation hoping to be able to successfully "market" a slightly amended treaty. The conference ended inconclusively as the Turkish delegation categorically rejected the Sèvres in its entirety, but the Turkish side

significantly profited from the conference as the status of the National Resistance Government was endorsed through the recognition of the credentials of its delegation by the Allied Powers. The Turkish delegation also took advantage of the conference by formally informing the participants of the National Pact.

During these developments, dialogue was finally established between the Parliamentary Government and Moscow, embassies were mutually opened, and the Moscow Treaty of 16 March 1921 was concluded. The Treaty which was signed by the Economy Minister Yusuf Kemal Bey in the name of the Ankara Government ruled the rejection by the parties of any international instrument (consequently the Treaty of Sèvres as well) that one of the parties had already rejected; Soviet Russia's support of the Turkish National Resistance Movement and recognition of the boundaries contained in the National Pact; maintenance of the Kars-Ardahan, and Artvin provinces within Turkey but inclusion of Batumi-Ahiska-Ahilkelek into Georgia; recognition by Moscow of the treaties that Ankara had signed with Armenia and Georgia; and continuation of the Soviet Russia's assistance to Ankara in gold and weapons. Turkey's eastern borders were thus guaranteed, and the Grand National Assembly Government was formally recognized by Russia.

### **Military and Diplomatic Activity Continues: The Sakarya Battle, Treaties of Kars and Ankara**

Following the Greek army's defeats at the 10 January and 31 March İnönü battles at the Western Front, the progress it had made by occupying Afyon, Bursa, Kütahya, and Eskişehir between 10-24 July was stopped and reversed upon the Turkish army's definitive victory under Mustafa Kemal's command in the Sakarya Battle of 23 August-13 September.

Having achieved its military objectives, the Eastern Front Command would pursue its diplomatic strategy. As the new Soviet republics were not parties to the Moscow Treaty, Armenian, Georgian and Azerbaijani delegations together with the Turkish and the USSR delegations would meet once again in Kars in October. The 13 October 1921 Treaty of Kars<sup>53</sup> that Kazım Karabekir negotiated and signed as head of the Turkish delegation essentially endorsed the previous Gyumri and Moscow Treaties, once again confirming that Nakhchivan, populated by a majority of Azeri Turks, would preserve its status as an autonomous republic within Azerbaijan. With the conclusion of the Treaty of Kars, the final formality needed to formalize Turkey's eastern borders and the agreed conditions of peace between Turkey and its eastern neighbours was fulfilled. Elsewhere in Anatolia, the Treaty of Ankara signed with France on 20 October 1921, a week after the Treaty of Kars, was the first sign of the disintegration of the occupying forces against National Resistance in the

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53 Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 1126-1136.

Western Front. The scandalous exile of nationalist Turks to Malta would also be ended on 1 November and those individuals who could not be duly prosecuted so far in the absence of any evidence on their involvement in the so-called Armenian atrocities (the “Armenian Genocide”, as it later came to be propagated in the third quarter of the century), would be exchanged with the British prisoners of war held by the Turkish government (amongst them Lord Curzon’s nephew Lieutenant Colonel Rawlinson). Fifteen Turkish captives in Malta had however already lost their lives there while twenty of them had managed to escape.

Shortly after World War-I, the former Ottoman Prime Minister and pioneer of the German alliance Talat Pasha would be assassinated in Berlin on 21 March 1921, and the former Navy Minister and Commander of the Palestine Front Cemal Pasha in Tbilisi on 21 July 1922, both by Armenian terrorists. To complete that particular episode of Armenian assassinations, former Minister of War and Germany’s foremost ally Enver Pasha would also be killed in eastern Bukhara on 4 August 1922 during his Pan-Turkist uprising campaign against the Bolsheviks at a raid conducted by a Red Army platoon under the command of Hagop Melkumyan, a junior Armenian officer.

### **The Turkish Victories That Concluded the National War of Liberation: The Dumlupınar Battle, the Great Offensive, the Mudania Armistice, and the Treaty of Lausanne**

*Gazi* (the title “holy warrior” bestowed upon Mustafa Kemal along with the rank of Field Marshal by a Grand National Assembly ruling of 19 September 1921 upon his victory at the Sakarya Battle) Mustafa Kemal Pasha would strike the final blow at the Dumlupınar “Commander-in-Chief’s” Battle of the Great Offensive on 26-30 August 1922 in the Western Front, thereafter the Greek army would be terminally driven to the Aegean Sea at İzmir on 9 September. The Sakarya and Dumlupınar Battles, which entirely reversed the doom of the Western Front, were vitally reinforced by the Eastern Front in support of an army that was fighting a last-ditch war in great deprivation against hugely more superior armed and equipped Greek forces. Indeed, throughout the span of one year from 1921 August on, the 3rd, 11th, and 13th Eastern Army Divisions, the Hakkari Brigade, and 22 German fighter planes received from Russia as well as an impressive amount of mostly Russian weapons (130 cannons, 13 thousand rifles) and ammunition (18 thousand artillery and 33 million infantry bullets, 133 thousand bombs, 27 tons of gun powder)<sup>54</sup> seized during the wars in the east and dispatched from the Eastern Army would make a shockingly devastating impact on the enemy and thus a decisive contribution to final victory.

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54 *Türk İstiklâl Harbi, C. 3, Doğu Cephesi (1919-1921) (Turkish War of Liberation, Vol. 3, Eastern Front (1919-1921))* (Ankara: Gnkur. Harp Tarihi Dairesi Başkanlığı, Gnkur. Basımevi, 1965).



The Mudania Armistice signed with the Allied Powers on 11 October would stop the armed conflict and establish the maintenance of Eastern Thrace (including Edirne) within Turkey's boundaries.

As for the political costs incurred upon Allied Powers by the victories of the Resistance forces, following Great Britain's War Minister Winston Churchill who was forced to resign after his defeat against Col. Mustafa Kemal at the Gallipoli campaign of 1915-16, the British Prime Minister Lloyd George would be the second British politician in a row to resign from office on 19 October 1922 as a result of the failure of British policies of invading Anatolia during World War-I and the National Resistance. However, Greece had the biggest share of political casualties among the Allied Powers. The leaders of the *coup d'état* which toppled the Greek government days after their defeat in Asia Minor tried and sentenced five former politicians and the commander general of the Greek Army to death penalty on charges of treason and war crimes. The sentence for former prime ministers of the war times D. Gounaris, P. Protopapadakis, and N. Stratos together with former Minister of War N. Theotokis, former Foreign Minister Baltadjis, and former Commander General of the Greek Armed Forces Gen. Hadjianestis was executed on 30 November 1922. The untold reality was that many of those individuals were actually on the record for their opposition to the war in Asia Minor but were practically taken prisoners of British policies.

The post-war period in Turkey was the birth of a new country and regime with the introduction of ambitious reforms to shape a young democracy. On 1 November 1922, the Sultanate would be repealed. Furthermore, the Treaty of Lausanne signed on 24 July 1923 would mark the final diplomatic victory of the National Resistance Movement against the invading forces. The Alliance Powers would leave Istanbul on 6 October 1923 and the new Republic of Turkey would be declared on 29 October 1923. The Constitution of 10 April 1924 would lay the ground for the democratic and secular reforms to be soon put into force.

### **The Strategy Of The National Resistance Movement Was Implemented In Its Entirety**

The "Conqueror of the East" Kazım Karabekir Pasha would be elected representative of Edirne in the 1922 Parliamentary elections and as Istanbul deputy in 1924. He would devote himself therefrom to the democratic progress of the new republican regime and would consequently resign from the First Army Command in 1924 to take the helm of the oppositional Progressive Republican Party. His party would be shut down on 3 June 1925 and his parliamentary mandate would end on 1 March 1927. He would retire from military on 1 November 1927 to enjoy a late opportunity in life to raise a family, also focusing on completing the writing of his memoirs until 1939 when he would be re-elected as an Istanbul deputy in the parliament. His mandate

would be renewed for nine years at the subsequent elections. He would be named the Speaker of the Parliament on 5 August 1946, the second State position after President Inonu, but passed away on 26 January 1948 while in office.

## CONCLUSION

Viewing the Turkish National Resistance Movement during and after World War-I basically from the angle of the Eastern and Caucasus fronts, this article underlines the following features of the Resistance Movement: the tactical proficiency in the military, political and diplomatic strategy conducted in coherence with uncompromising compliance with norms of legitimacy and in determined defiance of surrender, the democratic understanding in subjecting the military struggle to national will, and the sacrifice borne in valuing diplomatic opportunities despite the heavy costs incurred by the resulting prolongation of the war. In his memoirs *İstiklal Harbimiz* (Tr. *Our Liberation War*), Kazım Karabekir most strikingly emphasizes in the following words another outstanding feature of the Liberation War, representing an established State legacy regarding the devotion to honest, full, and brave dialogue on state affairs within the National Resistance leadership at the cost of all possible personal responsibility as may be demanded by the requirements of the situation:

“... Our Liberation War has thus been concluded in unanimity of our views, although we have had disputes with Mustafa Kemal Pasha due to some differences of opinion regarding our military, executive and political approaches during those four years in our common fight for the freedom of our people. But it has been an exceptional privilege to be able to move towards eventual victory in consensus and cooperation for success... Mustafa Kemal Pasha... knew perfectly well ... that I was a man of my own voice and that the sole motive ruling my thoughts was the high interests of our People and State. From now on... I would be better disposed to demonstrate to him on a face-to-face basis the genuineness in my thoughts...”<sup>55</sup>

Despite these heart-felt wishes, the ruthless rules of the revolution would again come into play in time, parting these two comrades-in-arms and close friends, imposing on them perhaps one of the heaviest moral tolls out of all other personal sacrifices they had endured during the national war.

This article has made a between-the-lines attempt to allude to some of the secrets behind the victory achieved in this fight for a people's rise from its ashes after the loss of their empire was signed to a coalition of all the current powers in the world. A number of those secrets should be searched in the

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55 Karabekir, *İstiklâl Harbimiz*, 1290.

exceptionally lofty merits, endless devotion, and brilliant achievements of the cadres led by the 20th century's great leader Mustafa Kemal who resurrected under the most unexpected and unfavorable conditions the national identity of a people which had been systematically suppressed by the theocratic Ottoman Monarchy.

Before concluding this article, which was authored in full recognition that there are almost no aspects of the National Resistance Movement left untapped, it should be worth quoting the following observation of US President Bill Clinton in his address to the World Leaders at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in November 1999 that the author personally witnessed to: "Turkey currently stands to play at the outset of the 21st century the critical role which it already played in molding the fate of Europe for the 20th Century."

Revisiting the experience that this country has gone through a century ago should still be infinitely valuable in understanding the secret codes and the standing rules behind the ongoing competition of international powers in Turkey's region.

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In the January 1923 issue of the New York Times, this photograph was published with the comment "A handful of Turks challenging the world". This photograph, taken during the maneuvers being held when the Lausanne negotiations had run into difficulties, was meant to give the message that "If no progress is achieved in Lausanne, we are ready to fight again."



Kazım Karabekir Pasha.





Kars, 1918.



Inspection of troops being transferred from the Eastern to the Western Front.





Atatürk and Latife Hanım in a meeting with the people in İzmir in 1923.



Karabekir's wife İclal Hanım and children.