

Eugene Rogan's excellent, deeply researched book provides the first full account of a neglected part of the Great War, writes **Lord Lexden**



**The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920**  
By Eugene Rogan  
Allen Lane £25

**W**ell-known sayings often turn out to be inaccurate quotations. The pre-1914 Ottoman (or Turkish) Empire was often referred to as “the sick man of Europe”, a phrase attributed to various statesmen. No one actually uttered the words. The famous phrase derives from a conversation that Tsar Nicholas I of Russia had with the British Ambassador in Moscow in 1853, shortly before the outbreak of the Crimean War, in which Britain fought alongside the Turks against Russia. “We have a sick man on our hands”, said the Russian autocrat. “It will be a great misfortune if one of these days he slips through our hands, especially before the necessary arrangements are made.”

Thereafter, various attempts were made by the great European powers to solve the Eastern Question, as it became known. All of them failed, largely because the rivalry between the great powers prevented an agreed approach (much like the UN today). The “necessary arrangements” to secure a transition from the once mighty, but now ailing empire to a new stable order in its far-flung territories were never made.

The world today lives with the result: chaos and brutality in the Middle East on a scale that is even greater than it endured under the Ottoman Empire, where human life was cheap and atrocities commonplace. In the 19th century, slavery was eventually abolished by the Turkish sultans. Today, it is back in the lands they once ruled.

In the years before the outbreak of the

# Reviews

First World War in 1914, the sick man perked up. Political power in Istanbul passed from an ageing, omnipotent sultan to an able, ambitious and (needless to say) brutal group who gave the world another phrase – Young Turks – and set about modernising the Empire’s decrepit government. They clamped down on those historic communities and races inside the polyglot Empire who wanted greater autonomy within it. The Armenians, who had long suffered as a result of recurrent massacres, were the principal victims.

**“ Page by page, Rogan evokes the horrors of this war, so little remembered in comparison with those endured by other brave men on the Western Front ”**

This excellent, clearly written and deeply researched book by a leading Oxford historian describes the extent of the first modern genocide in a chapter entitled ‘The Annihilation of the Armenians’, which remains an intensely controversial subject with successive Turkish governments vehemently denying any complicity in it by the Ottoman government or its officials.

After careful investigation of Turkish and Arab sources and of material in Ottoman archives, Rogan concludes that “hundreds

of thousands of Armenians and Assyrians died in the deportations that began in 1915”. At least 850,000 were murdered. Many of them had sided with Turkey’s wartime enemies. But “while helping to explain why the Young Turks unleashed such unprecedented violence against their Christian subjects, this in no way justified the crimes against humanity that ensued”, in Rogan’s measured words. The crimes are one of the many terrible legacies of the past which contribute to today’s miseries.

The Western Allies did not wage war against Turkey to assist the subject peoples of a cruel empire. They were drawn into the inhospitable Middle East with its vicious extremes of climate because Turkey – fearing aggression by their ally Russia (and justifiably so) – sided with Germany in November 1914. The Sultan, caliph of the Muslim world, called for jihad against Britain, France and Russia, stirring deep anxiety among the proconsuls of the British Empire – particularly in India. Fortunately for them, the call was not widely answered. Rogan writes: “Had the Ottomans succeeded in their appeal to global Islam, they could have tipped the balance to the Central Powers’ advantage” (ie Germany and Austro-Hungary).

Turkey lacked arms factories and modern communications systems. But with German training and weaponry, formidable armies of brave soldiers took the field under some

Residents of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) gather in Beyazit Square to celebrate the Ottoman Empire's entry into World War I in December 1914  
Below: Turkish soldiers in Gallipoli, 1915



impressive generals, most notably Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the future Kemal Ataturk. In 1915 and 1916 the Turks defeated the Allies at Gallipoli and in Iraq where, in one of the most ignominious events in British military history, an Anglo-Indian army of some 13,300 surrendered at Kut Al Amara in April 1916.

Harsh imprisonment and forced marches killed 70% of those who went into captivity.

A sergeant in the Australian Flying Corps recalled: "It was a horrible sight to see our boys driven along by rifle-butt and whip. Some of them were beaten until they dropped. One naval brigade man never rose again. If you said anything you were whipped yourself." As for the civilian inhabitants of Kut, half of them were shot or hanged and "the trees were dangling with corpses". Page by page and using

contemporary sources, Rogan evokes the horrors of this war, so little remembered in comparison with those endured by other brave men on the Western Front.

In the end numerical and technical superiority tipped the balance in favour of the Allies, who conquered Iraq, Palestine and Syria in 1917-18. At the Battle of Megiddo in September 1918 General Allenby destroyed the Turkish armies, effectively putting an end to the Ottoman Empire after six centuries.

The famous exploits of Lawrence of Arabia played no large part. The repeated destruction of the Damascus to Medina railway by Lawrence and his Bedouin companions caused no more than passing inconvenience, since the Turks quickly relaid the track. The impression of these events embedded in the public mind by Peter O'Toole's famous film is largely myth.

"The Ottoman front", Rogan writes in his final chapter, "proved more influential than contemporaries ever imagined". Britain and her allies expected to defeat Turkey easily. In the event, hundreds of thousands of men had to be diverted from the Western Front and elsewhere, prolonging the war. European empires replaced Turkish rule and created political arrangements that in conjunction with other factors were to condemn the peoples of the Middle East to yet more suffering.

"In the Middle East, more than in any other part of the world," Rogan concludes, "the legacies of the Great War continue to be felt down to the present". This superb book provides the first full account of this neglected part of the world conflict. It has only one shortcoming. There are no maps or diagrams which means that the book needs to be read with a historical atlas to hand. 📖

**Alistair Lexden** is a Conservative peer and historian. This is the latest in a series of book reviews and articles on the First World War which he has contributed to *The House* magazine. All of them can be found in the articles and reviews section of his website, [www.alistairlexden.org.uk](http://www.alistairlexden.org.uk)