

Other fronts, 1915–16

The Caucasus, 1914–16

The Caucasian front between Russia and Turkey comprised two battlegrounds: Armenia in the west, Azerbaijan in the east. While the ultimate strategic objectives for the Turks were to capture the Baku oilfields in Azerbaijan and to penetrate Central Asia and Afghanistan in order to threaten British India, they needed first to capture the Armenian fortress of Kars, which, together with that of Ardahan, had been a Russian possession since 1878.

A Russian advance from Sarıkamış (Sarykamysh, south of Kars) toward Erzurum in Turkish Armenia in November 1914 was countered in December when the Turkish 3rd Army, under Enver himself, launched a three-pronged offensive against the Kars–Ardahan position. This offensive was catastrophically defeated in battles at Sarıkamış and at Ardahan in January 1915; but the Turks, ill-clad and ill-supplied in the Caucasian winter, lost many more men through exposure and exhaustion than in fighting (their 3rd Army was reduced in one month from 190,000 to 12,400 men, the battle casualties being 30,000). Turkish forces, which had meanwhile invaded neutral Persia's part of Azerbaijan and taken Tabriz on January 14, were expelled by a Russian counterinvasion in March.

During this campaign the Armenians had created disturbances behind the Turkish lines in support of the Russians and had threatened the already arduous Turkish communications. The Turkish government on June 11, 1915, decided to deport the Armenians. In the process of deportation, the Turkish authorities committed atrocities on a vast scale: most estimates of Armenian deaths have ranged from 600,000 to 1,500,000 for this period.

Grand Duke Nicholas, who had hitherto been commander in chief of all Russia's armies, was superseded by Emperor Nicholas himself in September 1915; the Grand Duke was then sent to

command in the Caucasus. He and General N.N. Yudenich, the victor of Sarıkamış, started a major assault on Turkish Armenia in January 1916; Erzurum was taken on February 16, Trabzon on April 18, Erzincan on August 2; and a long-delayed Turkish counterattack was held at Oğnut. Stabilized to Russia's great advantage in the autumn, the new front in Armenia was thereafter affected less by Russo-Turkish warfare than by the consequences of revolution in Russia.

Mesopotamia, 1914–April 1916

The British occupation of Basra, Turkey's port at the head of the Persian Gulf, in November 1914 had been justifiable strategically because of the need to protect the oil wells of southern Persia and the Abadan refinery. The British advance of 46 miles northward from Basra to al-Qurnah in December and the further advance of 90 miles up the Tigris to al-ʿAmārah in May–June 1915 ought to have been reckoned enough for all practical purposes, but the advance was continued in the direction of the fatally magnetic Baghdad, ancient capital of the Arab caliphs of Islām. Al-Kūt was occupied in September 1915, and the advance was pushed on until the British, under Major General Charles Townshend, were 500 miles away from their base at Basra. They fought a profitless battle at Ctesiphon, only 18 miles from Baghdad, on November 22 but then had to retreat to al-Kūt. There, from December 7, Townshend's 10,000 men were besieged by the Turks; and there, on April 29, 1916, they surrendered themselves into captivity.

The Egyptian frontiers, 1915–July 1917

Even after the evacuation from Gallipoli, the British maintained 250,000 troops in Egypt. A major source of worry to the British was the danger of a Turkish threat from Palestine across the Sinai Desert to the Suez Canal. That danger waned, however, when the initially unpromising rebellion of the Hāshimite amir Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī against the Turks in the Hejaz was developed by the personal enterprise of an unprofessional soldier of genius, T.E. Lawrence, into a revolt infecting the whole Arabian hinterland of Palestine and Syria and threatening to sever the Turks' vital Hejaz Railway

(Damascus–Amman–Maʿān–Medina). Sir Archibald Murray's British troops at last started a massive advance in December 1916 and captured some Turkish outposts on the northeastern edge of the Sinai Desert but made a pusillanimous withdrawal from Gaza in March 1917 at the very moment when the Turks were about to surrender the place to them; the attempt the next month to retrieve the mistake was repulsed with heavy losses. In June the command was transferred from Murray to Sir Edmund Allenby. In striking contrast to Murray's performance was Lawrence's capture of Aqaba (al-ʿAqabah) on July 6, 1917: his handful of Arabs got the better of 1,200 Turks there.

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Italy and the Italian front, 1915–16

Great Britain, France, and Russia concluded on April 26, 1915, the secret Treaty of London with Italy, inducing the latter to discard the obligations of the Triple Alliance and to enter the war on the side of the Allies by the promise of territorial aggrandizement at Austria-Hungary's expense. Italy was offered not only the Italian-populated Trentino and Trieste but also South Tirol (to consolidate the Alpine frontier), Gorizia, Istria, and northern Dalmatia. On May 23, 1915, Italy accordingly declared war on Austria-Hungary.

The Italian commander, General Luigi Cadorna, decided to concentrate his effort on an offensive eastward from the province of Venetia across the comparatively low ground between the head of the Adriatic and the foothills of the Julian Alps; that is to say, across the lower valley of the Isonzo (Soc

a) River. Against the risk of an Austrian descent on his rear from the Trentino (which bordered Venetia to the northwest) or on his left flank from the Carnic Alps (to the north), he thought that limited advances would be precaution enough.

The Italians' initial advance eastward, begun late in May 1915, was soon halted, largely because of the flooding of the Isonzo, and trench warfare set in. Cadorna, however, was determined to make progress and so embarked on a series of persistent renewals of the offensive, known as the Battles of the Isonzo. The first four of these (June 23–July 7; July 18–August 3; October 18–November 4; and November 10–December 2) achieved nothing worth the cost of 280,000 men; and the fifth (March 1916) was equally fruitless. The Austrians had shown on this front a fierce resolution that was often lacking when they faced the Russians. In mid-May 1916 Cadorna's program was interrupted by an Austrian offensive from the Trentino into the Asiago region of western Venetia. Though the danger of an Austrian breakthrough from the mountainous borderland into the Venetian plain in the rear of the Italians' Isonzo front was averted, the Italian counteroffensive in mid-June recovered only one-third of the territory overrun by the Austrians north and southwest of Asiago. The Sixth Battle of the Isonzo (August 6–17), however, did win Gorizia for the Italians. On August 28 Italy declared war on Germany. The next three months saw three more Italian offensives on the Isonzo, none of them really profitable. In the course of 1916 the Italians had sustained 500,000 casualties, twice as many as the Austrians, and were still on the Isonzo.

Serbia and the Salonika expedition, 1915–17

Austria's three attempted invasions of Serbia in 1914 had been brusquely repulsed by Serbian counterattacks. By the summer of 1915 the Central Powers were doubly concerned to close the account with Serbia, both for reasons of prestige and for the sake of establishing secure rail communications with Turkey across the Balkans. In August, Germany sent reinforcements to Austria's southern front; and, on Sept. 6, 1915, the Central Powers concluded a treaty with Bulgaria, whom they drew to their side by the offer of territory to be taken from Serbia. The Austro-German forces attacked southward from the Danube on October 6; and the Bulgars, undeterred by a Russian ultimatum, struck at eastern Serbia on October 11 and at Serbian Macedonia on October 14.

The western Allies, surprised in September by the prospect of a Bulgarian attack on Serbia, hastily decided to send help through neutral Greece's Macedonian port of Salonika, relying on the collusion of Greece's pro-Entente prime minister, Eleuthérios Venizélos. Troops from Gallipoli, under the French general Maurice Sarrail, reached Salonika on October 5, but on that day Venizélos fell from power. The Allies advanced northward up the Vardar into Serbian Macedonia but found themselves prevented from junction with the Serbs by the westward thrust of the Bulgars. Driven back over the Greek frontier, the Allies were merely occupying the Salonika region by mid-December. The Serbian Army, meanwhile, to avoid double envelopment, had begun an arduous winter retreat westward over the Albanian mountains to refuge on the island of Corfu.

In the spring of 1916 the Allies at Salonika were reinforced by the revived Serbs from Corfu as well as by French, British, and some Russian troops, and the bridgehead was expanded westward to Voden (Edessa) and eastward to Kilkis; but the Bulgars, who in May obtained Fort Rupel (Klidhi, on the Struma) from the Greeks, in mid-August not only overran Greek Macedonia east of the Struma but also, from Monastir (Bitola), invaded the Florina region of Greek Macedonia, to the west of the Allies' Voden wing. The Allied counteroffensive took Monastir from the Bulgars in November 1916, but more ambitious operations, from March to May 1917, proved abortive. The Salonika front was tying down some 500,000 Allied troops without troubling the Central Powers in any significant way.