The Ottoman Empire

Headingtowards disaster

Howa multinational Muslim empire was destroyed bythe firstworld war

The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War

in the Middle East.

“U

NTO us a son is born!” It was with

great excitement that Enver Pasha,

the most powerful of the triumvirate of

Young Turks who ruled the Ottoman Em-

pire, greeted the news that two German

warships had sailed into neutral Turkish

waters on August10th 1914. The Goeben, a

heavy battleship, and the Breslau, a light

cruiser, had bombarded French Algerian

portsatthe startofthe firstworld war, and

were being pursued by French and British

vesselsacrossthe Mediterranean.

The Turks extracted a high price for

granting the ships haven, including recog-

nition oftheirdemandsforthe recovery of

territorieslostin earlierconflicts and finan-

cial help if they entered the war. To avoid

immediate hostilities, though, the Turks os-

tensiblyboughtthe German ships(and the

services of their crews), replacing two

dreadnoughtsthathad been ordered from,

butrequisitioned by, Britain.

Thus did Germany appear to gain a

new ally, and Turkey a protector against

dismemberment. The Ottomans came

fully into the war two months later, when

Germany sent the now Turkish-flagged

Goeben to attack the Russian navy in the

Black Sea. The European war turned glo-

bal, with Indians, Australians and New

Zealanders brought in to fight against Ar-

absand Turks. The conflictwasto prove as

disastrous for the Ottomans as for Ger-

many, ifnotmore so. Amultinational Mus-

lim empire thathad once threatened Vien-

na was broken up; the first modern

genocide, of the Armenians, was commit-

ted; the Arab provinces were parcelled up

into benighted colonial “mandates”; the

foundationsofthe future Jewish state were

laid; and the caliphate, established in the

earliestdaysofIslam, wasabolished.

If Germany’s humiliation at Versailles

setthe stage forGerman revanchism in the

second world war, then the dismantling of

the Ottoman Empire created the festering

sore thatistoday’sMiddle East. “The legiti-

macyofMiddle Eastern frontiershasbeen

called into question since they were first

drafted,” writes Eugene Rogan. “Arab na-

tionalists in the 1940s and 1950s openly

called for unity schemes between Arab

states that would overthrow boundaries

widely condemned as an imperialist lega-

cy.” Nearly a century and several wars lat-

er, the worst exponents of that resent-

ment—the jihadists of Islamic State—have

proclaimed the recreation ofthe caliphate.

The story of how the Ottoman Empire

stumbled into a conflict for which it was

unprepared, how it put up a stronger fight

than anyone expected and howitscarcass

was torn apart are the subject of Mr Ro-

gan’sassured account. Amid myriad books

about the slaughter in Europe, Mr Rogan,

the director of the Middle East Centre at

Oxford University, sets out to tell the story

through Ottoman eyes. Although he does

notalwayssucceed in deliveringthat view-

point, the book stands alongside the best

histories. MrRogan ablyweavesthe think-

ingand doingsofthe politiciansand gener-

alswith theirimpacton the soldiers and ci-

vilian populations. He sketches many

revealing vignettes: Anzac troops rioting

around the brothels of Cairo; soldiers in

the desert struggling to distinguish enemy

combatants from harmless sheep; and a

north African soldier-poet describing the

carnage in a foreign field at Charleroi in

Belgium: “They perished without anyone

reciting the profession of faith for them,

Lords! Theylayexposed to the wild beasts,

eaglesand birdsofprey.”

Mr Rogan offers a nuanced account of

the greaterand lessermoments—the Allied

disaster at Gallipoli, the quagmire at Kut,

the mass-murder of the Armenians, the

Arab revolt, the conquest of Baghdad and

Jerusalem, and the messy political scram-

ble forDamascus.

But he is arguably at his most interest-

ingin hisaccountofthe failure ofwhat the

Kaisercalled Islampolitik, the idea that alli-

ance with the Muslim power, and the au-

thority of the caliphate, would weaken

Britain and France by subverting the Mus-

lim populations of their colonies in India

and north Africa. There were isolated suc-

cesses, including the enlisting of French

north African prisoners-of-war to serve in

Ottoman armies. But despite the call to ji-

had,forthe mostpartMuslim populations

and soldiers remained loyal to their colo-

nial masters. Even the revelation ofAllied

double-dealing to carve up the Middle

East, as detailed in the Sykes-Picot agree-

ment, did not blunt the rebellion of the

Arab Hashemitesagainstthe Ottomans.

The Bolshevik revolution of October

1917, which took Russia out of the war,

mighthave ensured survival oreven some

kind of victory for the Ottomans, by free-

ingup troopsfrom the eastto go south. But

itwassquandered. Theircapture ofthe oil-

fields of Baku left them vulnerable to the

British breakthrough in Palestine. In the

end, Mr Rogan writes, the Ottomans were

more influential than many imagined; in-

stead ofbeingthe weakest linkamong the

Central Powers, theyheld outto the end.

The Ottomanshad lostwarsbefore, but

neverthe empire itself. Thistime it wasdif-

ferent. The demandsimposed bythe Allies

provoked a revolt by Mustafa Kemal, the

hero of Gallipoli, who pushed the Greeks

and Italians out of Anatolia, deposed the

sultan and abolished the caliphate. Turkish

nationalism thussalvaged the rump of An-

atolia. ButArab nationalism wasstillborn;

the promise ofself-determination made by

America’s president, Woodrow Wilson,

was not applied to Egyptians demanding

the end ofBritish rule. Islam wasthe sword

thatthe Kaiserhad hoped to use; instead it

was later grasped by disgruntled, disen-

franchised Muslims against their own rul-

ers, and againstperceived foreign foes.