7.5: The Eastern Front and the Ottoman Empire

Things were different in the east, however. In contrast to the essentially static nature of trench warfare on the Western Front, the Russian, German, and Austrian armies in the east were highly mobile, sometimes crossing hundreds of miles in an attempt to outflank their enemies. The Russian army fought effectively in the early years of the war, especially against Austrian forces, which it consistently defeated. While Russian soldiers were also the match of Germans, however, Russia was hampered by its inadequate industrial base and by its lack of rail lines and cars. The Germans were able to outmaneuver the Russians, often surrounding Russian armies one by one and defeating them. A brilliant Russian general oversaw a major offensive in 1916 that crippled Austrian forces, but did not force Austria out of the war. In the aftermath, a lack of support and coordination from the other Russian generals ultimately checked the offensive.

By late 1916 the war had grown increasingly desperate for Russia. The Tsar’s government was teetering and morale was low. The home front was in dire straits, with serious food shortages, and there were inadequate munitions (especially for artillery) making it to the front. Thus, the German armies steadily pushed into Russian territory. A furious defense by the Russian forces checked the German advance in the winter of 1916 - 1917, but the war was deeply unpopular on the home front and increasing numbers of soldiers deserted rather than face the Germans. It was in this context of imminent defeat that a popular revolution overthrew the Tsarist state - that revolution is described in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire, long considered the “sick man of Europe” by European politicians, proved a far more resilient enemy than expected. In 1908, well before the war began, a coup of army officers and political leaders known as the Committee of Union and Progress but more often remembered as the “Young Turks” had seized control of the Ottoman state and embarked on a rapid program of western-style reform (including a growing obsession with Turkish “racial” identity at the expense of the Empire’s other ethnicities). With war clouds gathering over Europe in 1914, the Young Turks threw in their lot with Germany, the one European power that had never menaced Ottoman territories and which promised significant territorial gains in the event of a German - Turkish victory.
In 1915 British forces staged a full-scale invasion of Ottoman territory which rapidly turned into an outright disaster. In a poorly-planned assault on the Gallipoli Peninsula near Constantinople, hundreds of thousands of British Imperial troops (including tens of thousands of Australians and New Zealanders recruited to fight for “their” empire from half a world away) were gunned down by Turkish machine guns. In the months that followed, British forces failed to make headway against the Ottomans, with the Ottoman leadership rightly judging that the very survival of the Ottoman state was at stake in the war.

![Image of a poster with the title "The Trumpet Calls" and a caption: Figure 7.5.1: An Australian propaganda poster calling for volunteers.]

In 1916, however, British forces focused their strategy on capturing the eastern stretch of the Ottoman Empire: Mesopotamia, the site of the earliest civilization in human history (and which became the country of Iraq in 1939). The British made steady progress moving west from Mesopotamia while also supporting an Arab nationalist insurgency against the Ottomans from within the Ottoman borders. By 1917 Ottoman forces were in disarray and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire looked all but certain.

Even as British and French politicians began plans to divide up the Ottoman territory into protectorates (dubbed “mandates” after the war) under their control, however, the Young Turk leader Mustafa Kemal launched a major military campaign to preserve not Ottoman but Turkish independence, with the other ethnicities that had lived under Ottoman rule either pushed aside or destroyed. In one of the greatest crimes of the war, Turkish forces drove hundreds of thousands of Armenians from their homes across deserts to die of abuse, exhaustion, hunger, and thirst when they were not slaughtered outright. To this day, the Turkish government (while admitting that many Armenians died) denies what historians have long since recognized: the Armenians were victims of a deliberate campaign of genocide, with over 600,000 killed.