

TURKISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS DURING THE FRENCH OCCUPATION OF MARAŞ

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Abstract

Motivated by different goals, the Turks, the Armenians and the French entered into a fierce struggle in the city of Maraş during the French occupation from September 29, 1919 to February 12, 1920. During the struggle, the Armenian minority, who hoped for a free state with the support of the French, committed many atrocities against the Turks in order to clear the way to their final goals. They killed many Turks, insulted Turkish cultural and religious values and waged a war of nerves until the final confrontation. The Turks, for their part, tried to maintain the status quo. For this, they wanted the French occupiers to stay out of official matters and leave them to the Turkish public servants. The French, however, motivated by the creation of a large Syrian mandate, aimed to create an independent Armenia in Çukurova and in the Southeastern Anatolia region stretching up to the Taurus Mountains, which serve as a natural barrier and thus buffer zone between Turkey and Syria. For this aim, they supported the Armenian minority in their desire to establish a free Armenia. Thus, mismatching goals and conflicting desires led to deep hostilities that in return led to a bloody confrontation ending in a Turkish victory, the first of its kind in the Turkish Independence War.

Keywords

Turkish-Armenian Relations, French Occupation, Çukurova, Maraş, Turkish Independence War

The French, who had replaced the British forces in Maraş on 29 October 1919, occupied the city and stayed there until their defeat at the hands of the Turks, and their subsequent evacuation from the city on the night of 11/12 February 1920. It was an arbitrary occupation and one in violation of the armistice. It gradually worsened the situation within the city, and eventually led to a bloody struggle between the Turks and the Franco-Armenian alliance, that lasted for twenty-two days from 21 January 1920 to 11 February 1920. It proved impossible to avoid the war and to find a common ground agreed upon by all sides since each side

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had its own goals for which they tenaciously worked to reach, and since the French occupation made many mistakes, which were considered as opportunities by the Armenian minority. The struggle, which was the worst of its kind in the Turkish Independence War in terms of the destruction it brought to the physical and biologic aspects of the city, meant survival for the Turks, success in occupation for the French to further their invasion northward, and hope for the Armenians in establishing an independent state. This paper focuses on the relations between the Turks and the Franco-Armenian partnership in the city of Maraş during the French occupation.

The British occupation of Maraş, which lasted from February 1919 to October 1919, was replaced by a French occupation force, according to an agreement reached between the French and the British on 15 September 1919. The agreement, called the Syrian Convention, brought certain changes to the Sykes-Picot treaty, secretly signed in 1916 between France and Britain while the Great War (World War I?) was being fought. The Sykes-Picot agreement had awarded the French with the whole of Syria, southeastern Anatolia and Musul, and allowed France to freely establish and pursue her imperialistic goals. The treaty began to be questioned by the British as they had gained an upper hand in the region in the aftermath of the war. The British were not happy in particular with the idea of leaving oil-rich Musul within the French sphere of influence and thus sought ways to make changes in the secret treaty. The situation that emerged after the war gave a chance for the British to gain Musul. In this way, the British, in return for Musul, agreed with the French to let them occupy southeast Anatolia in September 1919. The French, for their part, received arable lands on which cotton was growing in great quantities, and thus became able to support the French textile industry by itself.¹

Meanwhile, rivalry between France and Britain over Çukurova and Southeastern Anatolia delayed the signing of a final settlement over the fate of the Ottoman Empire. This delay caused nationalist forces to organize resistance groups all over Turkey to protect their lands against the unjust invasions. In Maraş, too, the English and

¹ Paul du Vêou, *La Passion de la Cilicie, 1919-1922*. Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geunthner, 1937, p. 2. According to Vêou, "Cilicia produced 1.850.000 tons of cereal, of which 1.400.000 tons were exported. The cotton plantations, according to Turkish statistics, covered 3% of the whole region, and produced 250.000 tons of cotton, sufficient enough to support French industry."

French exchange of occupation forces gave new hope for the local residents to believe they could resist the foreign invasions.² In reality, the Turks, whose real homeland was and had been Anatolia, would have agreed to leave Arabic lands to the mandate of the great powers. They were not happy, however, to see any foreign power, no matter how friendly, establishing any type of occupation on their soil. This unhappiness worsened when the foreigners made alliances with minority groups against them. Thus, the British and French occupation in the region received a big resistance from the outset, and this resistance persisted until these lands were liberated from the foreign occupiers. Furthermore, the Armenians who reunited after the war in certain centers, especially in Çukurova, Antep, Urfa and Maraş, had their own agendas as well. Their number in these places reached to 120,000.³ They wholeheartedly welcomed the foreign occupation since they had been hoping for many decades to establish an "independent" Armenia under the tutelage of these foreigners. They had accepted to be an instrument at the hands of the foreigners in return for help in pursuing their goal to establish a state. Thus, it was an alliance between imperialist states and minority groups against the Turks that defined the struggle in Turkey in these years.

The French, whose long-time contemplated Syrian Empire urgently needed the buffer zone and natural defense barriers of the Taurus mountains in the north, and whose growing industry and economy badly required the cottons of Çukurova, preferred to leave Musul under the British rule. As soon as they made the agreement with the British, the French occupying troops moved into these places, bringing with them more Armenian soldiers and militants, who carried deep-seated hatreds towards the Turks. These Armenian forces under the French command had committed many atrocities in Çukurova, which made the French occupation of the region an even more loatheful matter in the eyes of the Turks. Even the French were opposed to the Armenian atrocities, and sent back hundreds of the Armenian legions, but not all of them. Indeed, some French officers and commanders, such as Colonel Brémond, shut their eyes to the atrocities committed against the

² Stanley E. Kerr, *The Lions of Marash: Personal Experiences with American Near East Relief, 1919-1922*. New York: State University Press, 1973, p. xxi.

³ André-N. Mandelstam, *La Société des Nations et les Pussances devant le Problème Arménien*. Paris, 1926; Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 36.

Turks because they received part of the spoil looted from Turkish villages and homes.⁴ In any event, the occupation of Çukurova and southeastern Turkey was creating growing problems, and the region was becoming more and more unbearable for the resident Turks.

During the English occupation there had been no notable events, except for the prevention of a Turkish attempt to send arms and ammunition to Antep from depots of military enclosures in Maraş.⁵ The British, who treated the Turks awkwardly at the beginning, quickly realized their mistake and began to act properly to deal with the different groups in the city. They acted very carefully not to interrupt the Turkish governmental and daily life that had been going on for centuries. They also seemed to understand Turkish character and the Turkish extreme love and devotion for their national and religious values. Thus, even though the British initially tried to act more on the side of the Armenians by generously letting the Armenians register every type of complaint against the Turks, in some cases leading even to the arrests of prominent men such as the ex-governor of the city, Kemal Bey, and sergeant Emirzade Ali (who were tried in Aleppo, found not guilty and later released as free persons⁶), the British were quick to see the reality and the true nature of things. They grew less naïve about the motivations behind the Armenians' accusations against the Turks. Furthermore, most of the British occupation forces were made up of Muslim soldiers from India. These soldiers did not have much difficulty in building up better relations with the Muslim Turks, and this subsequently prevented any unwanted problems between different groups of the city.

Unlike the British, however, the French, who reached Maraş on 29 October 1919, served to increase the tensions between the Turks and the Armenians, as well as between the occupation forces and the Turks.⁷ The French had neither the knowledge of the social, cultural and religious ways of the local Maraş residents, nor

⁴ Yaşar Akbıyık, *Milli Mücadelede Güney Cephesi (Maraş)*. Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1990, p. 277; Süleyman Hatipoğlu, "Çukurova'da Fransız-Ermeni İşbirliği (1918-1921)," *Sömürgecilik Hareketlerinde Fransa ve Anadolu'da Fransız-Ermeni İşbirliği*. Elazığ: Fırat Üniversitesi, 2003, p. 50.

⁵ Hüsamettin Karadağ, *İstiklal Savaşında Maraş*. Kahramanmaraş: Kurtuluş Müzesi Kurma ve Yaşatma Derneği, 1994, p. 11.

⁶ Ahmet Huyki Saral and Tosun Saral, *Vatan Nasıl Kurtarıldı: Nur Dağlan, Toroslar, Adana, Maraş, Gaziantep ve Urfa'da Yapılan Kuvayı Milliye Savaşları*. Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası, 1970, p. 154; Karadağ, *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ Adil Bağdadlılar, *Uzunluk: İstiklal Harbinde Kahramanmaraş*. Kahramanmaraş: Kervan Matbaası, 1974, p. 45; Yalçın Özalp, *Mustafa Kemal ve Milli Mücadelerin İlk Zaferi*. Kahramanmaraş: Belediye Yayınları, 1984, p. 40-41.

the desire and effort to learn them. They not only failed to appreciate the national traits of the Turks, but also openly and foolishly displayed an occupier's pride, which was deeply resented by the Turks. They cared very little about the ideas of others especially those of the Turks. They thought they would do whatever they wanted. They acted as though they did not know, or did not want to know, that the Turks had always had a free life and had never bowed before tyranny and suppression of any foreigners throughout their history. Thus, the French failure to fully appreciate the Turks' character and love for freedom, flag and homeland created incurable hostilities between the French occupation and the Turks within the city.

In addition to their lack of understanding and appreciation of the real situation within the city, the French made a grave mistake by allying with the Armenian minority against the Turks. In order to be respected and successful in a foreign land as a ruler, the French failed to appreciate one of the most basic rules: impartialness in acts towards the occupied groups. They openly showed their desire to support the Armenian minority, which was indeed asked for by the Armenians even before the French forces came into Maraş. Claiming that their lives would be in danger after the British evacuation of the city, the Armenians had written letters to the French military authorities and sent emissaries including Armenian Catholic bishop Avedis Arpiarian to the French High Commissioner Georges-Picot to urge them to occupy Maraş before the British departure from the city.⁸

While the Armenians of the city were seeking a way to speed up the French occupation, the Turks dreaded it, as they were aware of the French treatment of the Muslims in Çukurova. They had received abundant reports about French and Armenian atrocities committed against the Muslims, such as attacking women, killing children, burning villages, insulting Turkish and Islamic values and banishing a large number of Turks to the mountains.⁹ These reports not only horrified the people of Maraş, but also forced them to prevent similar misfortune from knocking on their door. They attempted to do this by sending protest letters signed by hundreds

⁸ Akbiyik, *ibid.*, p. 277; Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 61.

⁹ Stanford J. Shaw, "The Armenian Legion and Its Destruction of the Armenian Community of Cilicia," in *The Armenians in the Late Ottoman Period*, edited by Türkkaya Ataöv. Ankara: The Turkish Historical Society, 2001, p. 157-170.

to the Allies' High Commander in Syria and the Sultan to prevent the French occupation forces from coming into the city.¹⁰ They stressed in one of these telegrams that they learned the bad news from the already French occupied places with "excitement and sadness." They deeply felt that there was no need for the French to occupy their city and that the public had a great hatred of them because of the atrocities they had committed in Çukurova. They also stated that the French occupation would be a "second Izmir," creating undesirable events, of which the Turks would not be held accountable from the start.¹¹

The French, who seemed to be determined to support the creation of an independent Armenia in Çukurova and vicinity under her protectorate, did not pay enough attention to the rising Turkish anger towards their occupation. One of the causes of Turkish extreme anger was coming from France's use of Armenian legionaries and militant-volunteers, who served under her uniforms to establish "peace and tranquility" in the region. In fact, these Armenians, who had always had an idea of cleansing the region from all things Turkish in order to enrich their goals, made raids on Turkish villages, insulted, and killed Muslims.

The Armenian soldiers, who had been trained and equipped by the Allies to fight against the Turks, served for both the French control of the region and the Armenian desires for independence. The French occupation forces contained thousands of such soldiers. These Armenian soldiers, who had been created while the Great War was being fought in 1916, had been called as the *Légion d'Orient*. They were mostly drafted from among those Armenians who had risen up in Musa Dagħ in 1915, prisoners of war captured from Turkish military services, and others coming from the United States and Europe. Their training had started when Armenian leaders, especially Bogus Nubar Pasha, made the suggestion to the Allies to fight against the Turks in battlefields in the hope of receiving their help for their separatist aspirations. The French, whose military power was not large enough to occupy places received by the secret Sykes-Picot agreement, found this suggestion suitable to their after-war policies, and believed that they could use

¹⁰ Bilal N. Şimşir (ed.), *İngiliz Belgelerinde Atatürk, Nisan 1919-Mart 1920*. Ankara: TTK, 1992, belge no, 79; Karadağ, *ibid.*, p. 13. Protest telegrams sent by many places showed a coordinated anger against the French occupation of Maraş, Antep and Urfa.

¹¹ *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri (1918-1919)*, vol. 2, Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2002, dokument no, 41.

these Armenians in Çukurova and in southeastern Anatolia. Thus, these Armenians received military training in Cyprus for two years before they were used against the Turks in the South. "Indeed, the legion was intended to form only the advance guard of the main body of occupation troops and these were late in arriving, so that for two months two battalions of Armenians represented the only Allied force in Cilicia."¹²

The Armenian force in the French occupation "consisted of four battalions of 4,368 soldiers and 66 officers."¹³ In addition, out of six units of French occupying forces of Çukurova led by General Gouraud, three were Armenian volunteers among whom many had belonged to militants of the separatist Hinchak and Tashnak groups. Furthermore, under the command of General Duffieux, there were 1,000 Armenian legionnaires. These Armenian forces were armed with the latest weapons and guns, and burned with desire for revenge. The Turks referred to them as "Armenian vengeance units".¹⁴

When the French occupation forces entered Maraş on 29 October 1919, it contained two battalions, one made up of Armenian volunteers wearing French uniforms, and the other being a French battalion consisting of mostly French and Algerian soldiers.¹⁵ According to another source, the occupation force initially consisted of 1,000 French, 400 Armenian and 500 Algerian soldiers.¹⁶ Moreover, a government document states that the number of Algerians was 40 while the number of Armenians was around 3,000.¹⁷ Publishing news on the constantly growing occupation force in Maraş, *Hakimiyet-i Milliye* stated that the occupation force contained 2,000 French, mostly Senegalese, plus Armenians.¹⁸ According to another document, around 90 percent of the occupation force was made up of Armenians, among which were large numbers of Armenian militants from Adana and

¹² Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 30-35. According to Kerr, the legion fought for the first time against the Turkish forces on 19 September 1918 under Allenby's command while the Allies captured the Heights of Arara.

¹³ Shaw, "The Armenian Legion," p. 157.

¹⁴ Kemal Çelik, *Milli Mücadele'de Adana ve Havalisi, 1918-1922*. Ankara: TTK, p. 72.

¹⁵ Genelkurmay ATASE Başkanlığı Arşivi, *Baş Faaliyetleri Koleksiyonu*, Klasör No:1162, E/Y Dosya No, 53/81, belge no, 2.

¹⁶ Bağdadlılar, *ibid.*, 45.

¹⁷ T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, *Documents on Massacre Perpetrated by Armenians*, Ankara, 2001, document no, 40.

¹⁸ *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 13 Kanunuevvel (Aralık) 1335/1919.

Erzurum. These created much fear among the Muslims, who closed their shops lest their properties be looted by these Armenians.¹⁹ It was obvious that most of the occupation force was made up of Armenian legionaries, and rest was made up of Algerian and Senegalese colonial soldiers.²⁰

As soon as the French set foot in Maraş, the Armenians living in the city began to show their dark side. As the French were entering the city, the Armenians, who had been living in Maraş and who had come to the city after the armistice, showed great joy and celebrated the coming of the French occupying forces by joyfully shouting, applauding and making parades. They screamed, "Live the Armenians! Live the French! Death to the Turks!"²¹ They were perhaps overly happy and joyful as they thought they were being offered a chance by the French to actualize their longtime-contemplated dreams of establishing a "free" Armenia. They continued to shout within the city crying out "Long live Cilicia, Armenia! Let those who are jealous go blind!"²² As one Armenian, Nishan Saatjian, said, they felt that their "joy and enthusiasm reached a peak ... These were happy days, to end too soon!"²³

It would be normal to expect that the Armenians would resent the foreign occupation of their homeland, on which they had shared a long history dating back to the eleventh century, even if they had had difficulties for the proceeding several decades because of their separatist actions. Instead, the Armenians relied overly on the French and openly showed their antagonism towards the Turks. Receiving hope and encouragement from the French occupation and especially from the Armenian soldiers within the French occupation force, the Maraş Armenians began to insult, threaten and mock the Turkish values. They considered the coming of the French occupation forces as the start of "good days and deliverance" for them.²⁴ The Armenian public figures of the city met in Kherlakian Agop's house, and decided to help the French.

¹⁹ *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri*, vol. 2, belge no, 51; Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁰ "The 22 Days of Marash," vol. 30, p. 387. According to this work, although the Armenian legionaries were greater in number in the French occupation, the French restricted their action and tried to control them from harming the situation in the city.

²¹ Bağdadlılar, *ibid.*, p. 45; Özalp, *Mustafa Kemal...*, p. 40-41; Ahmet Eyicil, "Fransızların Maraş'ı İşgali," *Madalyalı Tek Şehir Kahramanmaraş Dergisi*, no. 8 (12 Şubat 1991), p. 14; Saral, *ibid.*, p. 157.

²² *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri*, vol. 2, belge no, 61.

²³ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁴ Karadağ, *ibid.*, p. 14.

They had their young people wear French uniforms and patrol the streets,²⁵ aiming to frighten the Turks, who very much feared the possibility of being put under the rule of the Armenian minority.²⁶

Unlike Armenian joy and happiness, the Turks, whose sacred values had been violated, and whose confidence in a peaceful future had been destroyed by the relentless Armenian propaganda and attacks,²⁷ went into a gloomy and thoughtful mood. They began contemplating how to rid themselves of uncertainties and of the enemy occupation. They knew that if the French were thoroughly settled in the city they would lose all hope of living in freedom, and of being free from the Armenian insults and attacks that had already started in the first days of the French occupation. The fear began to be solidified by unfortunate events following the French occupation. On the second day of the French occupation, the city witnessed one of the two most important events that prepared the grounds for the eventual confrontation between the French and the Turks.

The first event took place in the Uzunoluk quarter of the city, where several Turkish women wearing headscarves and coming from a public bath began to be insulted and attacked by some Armenian volunteers wearing French uniforms. These soldiers told the women not to wear headscarves anymore since the city no longer belonged to them but to the French. They physically tried to remove their veils. Seeing that their women were being attacked by the Armenian soldiers, a few Turks sitting at a nearby coffeehouse attempted to save the women but they were fired on by the soldiers and two of them were wounded. Upon witnessing the commotion, a Turk who had a milk shop nearby and who worked in the Ulu Mosque as *muezzin*, came to the scene and fired his revolver over the soldiers, wounding one of them fatally. According to an Armenian account, the incident happened when an Armenian soldier "intoxicated by several samples of *raki*, tore the veil from a Moslem woman coming from the bath. In the commotion which followed, someone shot and killed an innocent legionnaire—not the guilty one."²⁸ This man who fired the gun was Sütcü İmam and the incident came to be called as the "Sütcü İmam Incident."²⁹

²⁵ Akbıyık, *ibid.*, p. 279.

²⁶ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁷ Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri, vol. 2, belge no, 54.

²⁸ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁹ Saral, *ibid.*, p. 159; Documents on Massacre Perpetrated by Armenians, document no, 40; Karadağ, *ibid.*, p. 15-16; Bağdadlılar, *ibid.*, p. 49; Özalp, *İlk Zafer*, p. 43-45.

Ultimately the story became an inspiration and heroic tale for the Turks to deepen their thoughts towards defending the city against the occupation. Many protest letters were sent from all over Turkey to the Allies' High Commissioners and to the Ottoman government, condemning Franco-Armenian atrocities committed against the Turkish women and men in Maraş and Çukurova.³⁰

The Sütçü İmam incident, which has come to symbolize the defense of Maraş, was recorded somewhat differently when the incident was investigated by authorities. According to the report, the Armenian soldiers wearing French uniforms insulted two Turkish women, namely Elife and Fatma, on the same street but in different places. The Armenians tried to remove their veils but upon intervention of people in the vicinity and of the police, the incident was calmed. However, as the Armenian soldiers were leaving the scene, some Muslims followed them and a fight broke out between them. In this commotion, Hacı İmam, who either had a gun or was given a revolver at the time of the incident, fired on the Armenians, wounding one of them fatally.³¹ In any event, the Sütçü İmam incident was the first in many deadly confrontations between the Turks and the Armenians.

Caring little of the Turkish thoughts and expectations, the French increasingly pushed for developments in the wrong direction by becoming more and more despotic in their hold over power within the city. They increased pressures on the Turks after the Sütçü İmam Incident, including ordering the Turks to give up their weapons. While encouraging the French to unarm the Turks, the Armenians were at the same time strengthening their churches and arming themselves.³²

Encouraged by the French the Armenians continued to increase their attacks against the Turks and Turkish values. The French could not prevent Armenian attacks, which cost many Turkish lives. For example, a cousin of Sütçü İmam was found dead after obviously having been tortured, including having his ears cut off.³³ Several Turks who went to collect wood in Ahır Dağ were killed. A gendarmerie soldier who tried to prevent Armenians from seizing

³⁰ *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri*, vol. 2, belge no, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 75, 76, 77 and 81.

³¹ *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri*, vol. 2, belge no, 77.

³² *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri*, vol. 2, belge no, 55.

³³ Saral, *ibid.*, p. 159; Bağdadlılar, *ibid.*, p. 49; Karadağ, *ibid.*, p. 15-16; Özalp, *Mustafa Kemal...*, p. 43-45.

the governor's building, together with many ordinary Turks who were only passing on the streets at the time, were killed by Armenians.³⁴ In addition, an Armenian priest named Pascal Maljian reported that an Armenian militant fired on Maraş notables sitting in a cafe. He then threw a German-made grenade killing around twenty and wounding another twenty Muslims.³⁵ With these killings, the Armenians sought to subdue the Turks and break their will to resist against Armenian plans of establishing an independent Armenia, as premeditated by their militant organizations, such as Hınçak and Taşnak, and by their prominent leaders, such as Bogos Nubar Paşa, an Armenian politician from Egypt, Aram Baghdikian, president of the Armenian National Union, and Hırlakian Agop, an Ottoman ex-deputy from Maraş.³⁶ These Armenian leaders were also given encouragement by the foreign leaders, such as French Foreign Minister Briand, who had promised support for the establishment of an "independent Armenia" in the region.³⁷

According to Armenian accounts, the French did not want to gain real victory, which could only be achieved by arming the Armenians. They tried to limit the armed Armenians and acted carefully not to let them gain adequate firepower. Nevertheless, the Armenians of Maraş did not refrain from action. They created the Armenian National Union, consisting of representatives of the political parties and other Armenian dignitaries of the city. The Armenian National Union discussed defense plans and gathered volunteers. It armed and trained these volunteers, who were in turn supervised by a French officer.³⁸ These moves are real proof of the Armenian desire to get rid of the Turkish existence within the city.

Despite their seemingly desperate and unfortunate way of life, the Turks still carried a hope of getting rid of the French occupation from the city. In order to do this, they even made suggestions to the Armenians to come together to defend the city against the foreign occupation; to combine Turkish and Armenian efforts to reach a friendly understanding to live in peace and harmony, and

³⁴ *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 20 and 24 Mayıs 1336 (1920); *Documents on Massacre Perpetrated by Armenians*, document no, 40 and 43; *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkiler*, vol. 2, belge no, 51 and 61; Akbıyık, *ibid.*, p. 279; Özalp, *Mustafa Kema...*, p. 45-48.

³⁵ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁶ Mandelstam, *La Société des Nations...*, p. 57-58; Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁷ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁸ "The 22 Days of Marash...", vol. 30, p. 388. This source claims that while there were 30.000 Turkish chetes in and around Maraş, the Armenian volunteers did not develop to a well-armed state. Very few of them had rifles.

to maintain this friendship while curing past hatreds.³⁹ Their offer was unfortunately not accepted by the Armenians. The Armenians had undergone "a profound cultural renaissance" at the hands of European and American missionaries,⁴⁰ and had been brainwashed by revolutionary and separatist groups, and thus could not appreciate the value of the Turkish offer in the struggle against their common enemies of European imperialism and French occupation. Thus, the Armenians refused not only to ally with the Turks, but even to stay neutral in a struggle between the Turks and the French.⁴¹ Instead, they sided with the occupation forces, in a mistaken hope to be more independent and happier. The Armenian choice of siding with the French occupation further offended the Turks, who considered their move as a betrayal.

Secret killings, psychological pressures, and a worsening French occupation, were coupled with open attacks by the Armenians and French on the Turkish flag-one of the most admired symbols of the Turks, signifying freedom, life and existence. When the French military governor of Osmaniye came to Maraş to "improve" the quality of the French occupation, he acted as an agent of the Armenians, trying to satisfy all Armenian desires, including pulling down the Turkish flag which flew on the citadel of Maraş. On 26 November 1919, when he first entered into the city, the Armenians, including women, children, and elderly, welcomed him with a large crowd, and chanted songs of freedom while cursing the Turks.⁴² Furthermore, after André was named as the governor of Maraş, he tried to intervene in Turkish official affairs by demanding rooms within the governor's building and by seeking control over official and unofficial affairs, which indeed was the order of the high commissioner Georges-Picot who wanted to establish a complete control over the official affairs.⁴³ He "had made a mess of things and mishandled the situation until trouble, which had been brewing for a few months past, came to a head."⁴⁴ The local residents of Maraş found these actions as unacceptable burdens, since these

³⁹ *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri*, vol. 2, belge no, 85.

⁴⁰ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. xx.

⁴¹ "The 22 Days of Marash: Papers on the Defense of the City against Turkish Forces, January-February 1920," in *The Armenian Review*, vol. 31 (Spring 1978), p. 65.

⁴² ATASE, Klasör No:1162, E/Y Dosya No, 53/81, belge no, 2-3; Akbıyık, *ibid.*, p. 122; Bağdadlılar, *ibid.*, p. 53; Karadağ, *ibid.*, 19;

⁴³ Kerr, *ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁴ Şimşir, *İngiliz Belgelerinde Atatürk...*, belge no, 126.

new rules were putting them under the direct control of an occupation which they had never asked for.

Without considering the consequences of his actions, Major André ordered to take steps toward establishing a tighter control in the city, disregarding Turkish warnings and demands for leaving governmental jobs to be handled by the Turkish officials as had previously been done, even under the British occupation. The irresponsible actions of André created a dangerous mood in the city. On 30 November 1919, Turks who had gathered in the Ulu Mosque to perform the Friday prayer, demonstrated against the French occupation and raided the castle, forcefully pulling down the French flag and hoisting the Turkish flag before going to perform the prayer.⁴⁵ As an Armenian eyewitness, Dr. Harutuen Der Ghazarian, wrote, "So a crowd of about 1,000 Turks took heart and climbed the hill where, despite Andre's orders, they raised the Turkish flag. This incident triggered the events that began on January 21."⁴⁶ After offering Friday prayer on the spot, the crowd marched on the government building, where they beat up an Armenian and a Circassian, named Sitki, who was coming from Osmaniye as the commander of gendarmeries of that place.⁴⁷ However, as soon as the Turks put things back in their rightful place by both raising the Turkish flag on the castle and warning the French not to intervene in the official matters, they went to their houses, making no more demonstrations. As one renowned Maraş resident, Ali Sezai Efendi, told André after the incident, they only wanted peace, not fights with anyone, as long as their national symbols and customs were respected.⁴⁸ According to a document telegraphed by the thirteenth army subdivision, Major André forcefully removed the Ottoman governor from his seat and named himself as the governor, with the help of Kadir Paşa, a Maraş personage, and his sons, Şükrü and İhsan, along with others who had been loyal to the Sultan, and, who had also been disturbed by the rapid progress made by the Nationalists.⁴⁹ The Maraş residents

⁴⁵ ATASE, Klasör No:1162, E/Y Dosya No, 53/81, belge no, 2-4; Bagdadlılar, *ibid.*, p. 60-62; Karadağ, *ibid.*, p. 19; Özalp, *Mustafa Kemal...*, p. 54-55; Ahmet Eyicil, "Bayrak Olayının Düşündürdükleri," *Madalyalı Tek Şehir Kahramanmaraş Dergisi*. 72. Yıl Özel Sayısı. Yıl 9, sayı 9, (12 Şubat 1992), 45-48.

⁴⁶ "The 22 Days of Marash: Papers on the Defense of the City against Turkish Forces, January-February 1920," in *The Armenian Review*, vol. 31 (Spring 1978), p. 64.

⁴⁷ Saral, *ibid.*, p. 159-153.

⁴⁸ Şeyh Ali Sezai Efendi, "Maraş'ın Şekerli, Hatuniye, Bostancı, Kuytul Mahallerinden Mürekkebb Şubenin Reisi Olarak Bilfiil Teşkilatı Yaparak ve Milli Müdafa ve Harb Safahatından Bulunarak Yazdığı Tarihçeden İcab Eden Yerlerin Hülâsasıdır," Unpublished Manuscripts.

⁴⁹ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 70.

also resented the French use of Muslim soldiers such as Circassians and other Caucasian immigrants from Osmaniye. They took it as interference in the internal affairs of the state.⁵⁰

The flag incident showed that the Turks did not want to increase tensions in the city. They merely desired to have a secure life under their own administration, not wanting to attack the Armenians or even the French occupation, which became quite objectionable after this incident. The flag incident showed that the Turks were starting to believe in acting in harmony to defy the French occupation, and of course this eventually became fully realized.⁵¹

According to Armenian and American accounts, the flag incident did not take place as it was claimed since it was contrary to the French military tradition. They state instead that the French flag never flew from the citadel, but rather that only Dr. Mustafa and some nationalists raised both the Turkish flag and a green flag and then fired into the air, creating commotion within the city. These sources further write that the incident let the Turks insult the Beyazidzade for his obedience to the French and the Dayızade for his preach to obey the French.⁵²

The French, finding it hard to suppress the Turks, began to seek new options to strengthen their occupation. For this, they not only encouraged the Armenians within the city, but also sent arms to the Armenians living in Zeytun and other villages. They were planning to use the Armenians for a bigger goal, which had two parts: one was to reach Sivas and the other to diminish the Muslim population in the region in order to intensify the Armenians⁵³ and thus create their buffer state between Turkey and Syria.

The French occupation forces, which contained Armenians and which were made up of small patrolling units of a couple of hundred soldiers, often went into Turkish villages where they attacked and killed people, assaulted women and looted what they could. Despite these horrific attacks, the Turks usually sought help from government officials. They did not resort to their own guns

⁵⁰ *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri*, vol. 2, belge no, 82.

⁵¹ "The 22 Days of Marash," vol. 30, p. 390; Kerr, *ibid.*, 71.

⁵² Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 71; "The 22 Days of Marash...", p. 66. According to Dr. Ghazarian, Bayazidzade "Shukri and Kadir Pasha put the Armenians to the sword" when the fighting broke out, which somewhat sheds doubts on the accusation of their cooperation with the occupation forces.

⁵³ *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeni-Fransız İlişkileri*, vol. 2, belge no, 95 and 96.

unless there was no other hope of defending their lives, honor and properties.⁵⁴

The growing unpopularity of the French occupation forced the Turks to find a solution for their miseries. They knew that if the French were allowed to do whatever they wanted to do, they would obliterate all Turkishness within the city and, then, they would leave the city to the total control of the Armenians, who were looking forward to having any opportunity to establish a free state. Thus, even in the beginning of the French occupation, the third army division centered in Sivas protested the French and started to establish a resistance in and around Maraş. For that reason, some renowned figures from Maraş, including Dr. Mustafa, who had received his degree from military medical schools in Istanbul, went to Elbistan to coordinate the communication between the local resistance and the National Forces headed by Mustafa Kemal in Sivas. Dr. Mustafa and other leaders of the national defense organization tried to stock arms and ammunitions for use against the occupation when the time came.⁵⁵ Indeed, perfectly predicting the future in advance, Mustafa Kemal had successfully stocked "arms and ammunition in various cities of Cilicia such as Maraş and Aintab for possible use in the future"⁵⁶ while he was commanding the Ottoman armies in Syria toward the end of the Great War. These national defense forces, that had provided a base for Mustafa Kemal to save the country, played important roles against the foreign invasions. Eventually, they led to the establishment of an organization called the Committee for the Defense of Rights headed by Arslan Bey in Maraş. This national defense organization successfully appealed to the Turks who wholeheartedly supported it with all their means. In Maraş, several such organizations were organized separately at the start but in a short time of their establishment, they combined their power to act together to defend the city.⁵⁷

Moreover, the Maraş National Forces had well-constructed ties and lines of communication with the town of Pazarcık, where Kılıç Ali, the chief representative of Mustafa Kemal, and Göksun, where Yörük Selim, another chief representative of Mustafa Kemal who

⁵⁴ *Hakimiyet-i Milliye* 24 Kanunusani 1336.

⁵⁵ Saral, *ibid.*, p. 158; Kerr, *ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁶ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 67.

had encouraged and ordered locals to resist foreign invasions in Çukurova and surrounding places, was located.⁵⁸ The organizations that were prepared by not only the city folk but also peoples of the surrounding villages were making plans to resist the French occupation. They divided the city into ten parts to organize small fighting units commanded by ex-officers of the Ottoman Army. Furthermore, the Turks successfully manipulated the French weaknesses originating from their failure to gain the confidence of the Turks and to learn about the geographic aspects of the region. These elements helped the Turks to cut off easy access of the French supplies.⁵⁹

While the Turks were making preparations to defend their city against the occupation, the Armenians were not simply awaiting their fate. They were also organizing fighting units made of seven voluntary groups, who were trained by Armenians such as Setrak Kherlakian, formerly a major in the Ottoman Army, and Avedis Seferian, a graduate of the Turkish Military Academy in Istanbul. Moreover, these Armenians were being trained and supervised by French officers. The French were commanding Armenian volunteers who were armed by the French in their quarters.⁶⁰ Thus, both the Turks and the Franco-Armenian alliance were making preparations for a final confrontation, which was expected by both sides. Though the French several times met with dignitaries of both communities to seek an understanding, they failed to reach a peaceful solution that would be acceptable by all sides. Neither the Turks nor the Armenians seemed to have had a great desire for peace as long as both sides had not reached the goals mentioned above, and as long as one side's certain victory was gained.

Any hope of living together within the city disappeared when the French commander, General Quérette, invited official and non-official dignitaries of Maraş to his headquarters to make a final offer to put the Turks under total submission. He accused them of allying with the *chetes*, who were the national forces stationed in strategically important places between İslahiye-Antep and Maraş, in order to paralyze communication lines of the French occupation force. General Quérette proposed that the local forces cooperate with him to punish these *chetes*. He also wanted them to fully obey

⁵⁸ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁹ Saral, *ibid.*, p. 166-169.

⁶⁰ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 68-69.

the rules being issued by the occupation, and leave the city under the French rule. The Acting governor and others rejected these offers,⁶¹ and as such, the governor of the district, head of the gendarmerie and some others came to be labeled as 'dangerous men'.⁶² Thus, after the meeting the French general arrested these "dangerous" men, including the acting governor of the city, the commander of the gendarmerie, and held them as hostages until their submission before the occupation was realized. The arrests of five Turkish dignitaries⁶³ along with the increasing French pressure sparked armed confrontation. Understanding their weak and fragile position and the French occupation force's illicit action after these arrests, the Turks feared an imminent establishment of solid French rule in the city.⁶⁴ In righteous defense of their existence, the Turks began to defend their homes against heavy bombardments inflicted on them from the French controlled areas.⁶⁵ A telegram sent by the local Maraş residents read, "Under the Armenian artillery, machine gun and bombs, one of the most distinguished places of our homeland flows in fire and blood." The Turks called the fighting as the "struggle for survival"⁶⁶ for which they determined to continue until they ended all wrongdoings of the Armenians and reached total salvation.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, not only rivalry between the Allied states over the spoils of the Ottoman Empire but also French willingness to leave Çukurova and Southeastern Anatolia in return for security in Syria and economic rights in Çukurova, as agreed upon by many negotiations between Mustafa Kemal and the French statesmen, the French occupation forces lost their courage to be more resolute against the defenders. The nationalist forces, on the other hand, had been very carefully organized by Mustafa Kemal and were comprised of skillful commanders and courageous soldiers on the fields, which resulted in the defeat of the French forces in many places. Maraş was the first of these victories. As the first victory over a wide ranging occupation, which threatened to root out the

61 "The 22 Days of Marash....," p. 65.

62 Véou, p. 87.

63 "The 22 Days of Marash....," p. 51.

64 *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 2 Şubat 1336 (1920).

65 *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 24 Kanunisani (Ocak) 1336/1920.

66 *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 2 Şubat 1336 (1920).

67 *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 11 Şubat 1336 (1920).

Turkishness in Anatolia, the victory in Maraş had a great importance in the broader national struggle. The victory belonged to the people of Maraş, who lost lives, homes and properties, and most importantly to Mustafa Kemal and his key role in organizing the national forces to get rid of the enemy on all fronts. The struggle in Maraş, after all, gave hope and confidence for the rest of the nationalists to chase the enemy out of the country. According to Kerr, Maraş "was the first major battle of the Turkish War of Independence, a war which ended in the expulsion from Anatolia of all foreign armies and the overthrow of the sultanate by Mustafa Kemal."⁶⁸

The Armenians, who had finally lost all hope of establishing an Armenian supremacy with the help of French occupation forces, as the latter disgracefully left them behind and evacuated the city on the night of February 11, 1920, sought mercy and understanding from the Turkish authorities, who readily extended a shield over them by ceasing combat. While the French, who had pledged "protection" of the Armenian minority, had in fact "shamefully betrayed" them and had left Maraş in secret,⁶⁹ the Turks ended hostilities and started helping those who remained. In return for Turkish understanding, the Armenians sent telegrams to Mustafa Kemal and the Turkish Grand National Assembly praising the Turkish state and thanking them for Turkish mercy. They admitted and confessed that they had hoped for safety and protection from the "chivalric" French, but they were ultimately hurt during the French occupation. However, they received protection and kindness from the Turks.⁷⁰

As the French departed from the city, which had almost destroyed by fire, artillery and other means, law and order was established. The Turks of the city felt in their hearts an "eternal" honor, though their city was in ruin and though they needed immediate aid, some of which was sent from Sivas. The Armenians left behind were secure after their weapons were collected.⁷¹ Some 9,700 Armenians stayed in several compounds under the watch of the Americans, who were serving in the Near East Relief.⁷²

⁶⁸ "The 22 Days of Marash...", vol. 30, p. 389; Kerr, *ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁶⁹ Kerr, *ibid.*, p. xxii.

⁷⁰ Akbıyık, *ibid.*, p. 281-282.

⁷¹ *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 16 Şubat 1336 (1920).

⁷² Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 181.

According to Bagdikian, "Eastern Cilicia was a pawn in the game being played by the French and the Kemalists; and Marash was sacrificed to the conflicts among the Powers."⁷³

The residents of Maraş suffered heavily from the more than twenty day battle. They lost half of their city, 200 died and 500 were wounded.⁷⁴ Indeed, Turkish losses have been estimated at somewhere between 200 and 4,500, while the French lost between 800-1,000 and the Armenians suffered some 8,000 to 11,000.⁷⁵ The number of losses on all sides, the devastation of the city and the duration of the war are enough to give an idea of the seriousness of the conflict.

The Armenians who were left behind sent a telegram to the Ministry of Internal Affairs stating that their youths had been forced by the French to obey their orders and attack the Turks. It also stated that the French had been responsible for the deaths of thousands of Armenians. After their evacuation, the Armenians received protection and security from the national forces.⁷⁶

Conclusions

The armistice years and the aftermath of the Great War, were chaotic years for all sides in Turkey since the victors failed to agree promptly on any acceptable agreement for all sides in the Turkish Empire. The failure occurred because of an increasingly fierce rivalry over the Ottoman legacy. With clashes of interests of all sides, a weak Ottoman government filling the post in Istanbul was unable to manage things, because it was under the close surveillance of the victors and because a growing nationalist movement headed by Mustafa Kemal challenged its sphere of influence. Thus, these years turned out to be eventful ones for all sides, that is, the imperialists, the Turks and the minorities in Anatolia. It was a time of struggle for the Turks to stay independent and alive against an enlarging imperialism, and against the minority groups who thought that the time had come for them to establish their own state at the expense of the Turks. The imperialists, on the

⁷³ "The 22 Days of Marash...", vol. 30, p. 393.

⁷⁴ *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 21 Şubat 1336 (1920).

⁷⁵ ATASE, Klasör No:1162, E/Y Dosya No, 53/81, belge no, 2-13; Akbıyık, *ibid.*, 213, and 219; Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 195.

⁷⁶ *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, 21 Şubat 1336 (1920).

other hand, were after their prestige to spread their economic, social, cultural, military and religious desires.

The city of Maraş witnessed all the developments and suffered hardships of the armistice years, too. Ethnically, it had a mixture of residents, including a large Armenian minority. Geographically, it was located on a very important strategic place, being on a passing point between Syria and Anatolia. While the Armenians speculated that this place would be proper to realize their wish to establish a free Armenia, the French saw it as an opportunity to create a buffer zone between the Syrian mandate and also to build up an economically viable region for French industry. Both the Armenian minority and the French imperialists relied on Turkish weakness and acceptance of their fate. In order to weaken the Turks and force them to accept their desires, they aligned together against the Turks.

In Maraş, the Turks had to face an alliance of a minority group with whom they had spent many centuries under their rule, and an imperialist occupation of forces whom they had never asked to enter their city. All sides had their own agendas, and they did not have a common ground upon which to meet. With so many different desires of these different groups, it was virtually impossible to avoid going to war. Thus, as soon as the French occupied the city, the Turks, on one side, and the Franco-Armenians, on the other, began to attack each other. The Turks demanded a continuation of the *status quo* under their administration, and feared from massacres, which they felt would be committed by the Armenians backed by the French.

The Armenians, who had been in open revolt with the state for many decades and who were seeking vengeance for the suffering of the Great War years because of their temporary resettlement in the south, thought that the time for them to establish a free state had come. In order to achieve their long-time goals, they chose to ally with the occupation and attack the Turks because realization of their dream would be possible only if they got both the support of the French and the subjugation of the Turks. Serving in the occupation force with a large number, they succeeded in securing French support, but the subjugation of the Turks in the city was not an easy task. Though they attacked the Turks, and insulted Turkish cultural and religious values, they could not succeed in subjugating the Turks. Indeed, their attacks and insults came to stiffen the Turks' determination to resist against these attacks and insults.

The French who had failed to find an acceptable balance between the Turks and the Armenians made a significant mistake by allying with the latter. Their occupation began to be a despised matter for the Turks from the start. Thus, the French received a growing pressure from the Turks, who received the backing of Mustafa Kemal, head of the nationalists.

Because of differences in desires, goals and expectations of all sides, the French occupation in Maraş solved nothing but instead created a big problem which eventually led to a bloody conflict that ended with the victory of the Turks in February 1920. During this bloody confrontation, the city was virtually destroyed, thousands of lives from all sides were lost and the Armenians had to leave their ages-old homes forever. The victory gave a renewed aspiration for the Turks to get rid of the invaders who had invaded many parts of their state.