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Postscript to the Mini Dossier on Istanbul, 1918–1923

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Istanbul was the only one of the capital cities of the defeated Central Powers to suffer a military occupation for almost five years between 1918 and 1923. The question posed in this Postscript is whether occupied Istanbul resembled cities within the orbit of the British and French empires of the time? The tentative answer we propose is that Istanbul was a cosmopolitan city turned into a colonial outpost of the British and French empires. Within this context, aspects of the cultural life of Istanbul took on a number of political colourations, examined by the authors whose essays precede the Postscript.

Among the capital cities that endured the long bloodletting of World War I, İstanbul stands out as being particularly unfortunate. It was not only the searing fact of military defeat, stated in black and white in the Armistice of Mudros of October 1918, that the city's inhabitants had to endure. It was also military occupation after the Armistice that left a lasting and galling impression. Of all the capital cities of the Central Powers who lost the Great War, İstanbul was the only one to be occupied by Allied forces, composed of British, French, Italian, and Greek troops (see Figure 1).

That occupation lasted for five years. Over time the city came to resemble a cosmopolitan crossroads, filled with soldiers, sailors, diplomats, and spies, as well as artists, actors, musicians, and scholars from various countries. The same was true for many capital cities in World War II, and as the contributors to this issue of *New Perspectives on Turkey* show in a host of ways, military defeat was a bitter pill to swallow. And yet, what other choice did the city dwellers of Paris or Brussels have in 1940? Food markets reopened, as did schools, theatres, cafés, and restaurants. Life went on, and, after an interim period, various forms of accommodation emerged between the new rulers and the population over which they ruled. So did various forms of resistance, as the articles in this issue attest.

The subject of these four articles is the complexity of the cultural life of the city in this interim moment, separating a lost war from an uncertain peace. Gizem Tongo and Irvin Cemil Schick (2023) show convincingly how important the language of Islam and the grammar of Islamic art were in expressing the twilight zone between war and



Figure 1. British soldiers parading in Karaköy.
 Source: Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation Photography Collection.

peace in İstanbul. Even though many troops in the occupation armies of France and Britain came from the colonies and were Muslims, the military, political, and business elites who arrived to take over the city were Christian. The Greeks among them carried memories of the brutal treatment of their brethren both before and during the war. So did resident Armenians, who, as Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal (2024, 14) notes, “gathered in a small square, where they played a barrel-organ and repeatedly chanted with loud voices ‘Long live Armenia, down with Turkey,’ until police came to disperse them.”

No one had to shout “down with Turkey” to see who ruled İstanbul after 1918. The titular authority lay in the hands of the Sultan, Mehmed VI Vahideddin, but real power lay elsewhere. If he was not just a prisoner in his own palace, his writ, and that of the governments he appointed, ran just as far as the Allies let it run. The Allied fleet docked in his capital city made that point every single day of the occupation. During the first year of the occupation, that demonstration of power sufficed. But with unrest over the occupation mounting, the Allies decided to show who was in charge on March 16, 1920, by imposing on the city a full military occupation, followed shortly by the disbandment of parliament. Until a peace treaty was signed and sealed, sovereignty was in the hands of the occupiers.

At least the city did not have to endure occupation by Russian forces, which had pulled out of the war in 1917. Instead, İstanbul and its environs were flooded by Russian refugees, fleeing from the civil war that had engulfed the new Bolshevik regime. And these unfortunate people were not the only ones who saw in İstanbul a haven from ongoing violence. In 1919–1922, Muslims fled violence in the Greek-occupied Yalova peninsula and Thrace, and Greek and Armenian Christians ran from violence in Turkish nationalist-controlled Anatolia.

The League of Nations sent its Commissioner for Russian refugees (later High Commissioner for all refugees), Fridtjof Nansen, to İstanbul to see first-hand the evidence of a growing humanitarian catastrophe. A Norwegian explorer, scientist, and diplomat, he became one of the three delegates to the General Assembly of the League of Nations chosen to help resolve this grave situation. Haunted by the image of endless streams of refugees entering and leaving İstanbul, Nansen proceeded to work out a way to protect these people. His view was that they could not stay in İstanbul, or in Turkey. They had to be resettled elsewhere. The sooner they were given the opportunity to become farmers and tradesmen again in a stable community, the greater were their chances of survival. It was better, he believed, to move war-torn communities out of a war zone than to locate them in refugee camps in Anatolia (Winter 2022).

As MacArthur-Seal (2024) shows, there was considerable charitable activity in occupied İstanbul, and each ethnic group held concert parties or other events to raise money to help their unfortunate brothers and sisters. This was easier said than done. War conditions had led to runaway inflation, and the upward spiral of prices continued after the war. Feeding the flotsam and jetsam of war in Russia and Anatolia was a very expensive and difficult task.

Once again, parallels appear immediately between capital cities in the two world wars. Refugees fled into capital cities and other urban centers. In World War I and in its aftermath, inflation hatched black markets, particularly in the Central Powers, in which price rises were four or five times as high as they were in Allied countries. Having access to global sources of food supply, from which the Ottomans were deprived by the Allied blockade, and operating more effective regimes of price controls, the Allied countries were better than their enemies in defending the living standards of their working populations in wartime.

Since what economist Amartya Sen termed the capabilities and functionings of civilians were better maintained in Allied capital cities than in İstanbul, Berlin, Vienna, or Sofia, so were standards of health (Winter 1997). On both sides, though, refugee flows brought both misery and disease with them. Those who landed in İstanbul suffered from all kinds of infirmities and spread them to the local population. They did not have to bring a black market with them, though; it was already there, and thrived (as always) on military occupation and local criminal expertise.

İstanbulular – residents of the city – who had the means tightened their belts for years. Those with less made do as they could. In part, that meant putting up with the reality of occupation, police surveillance, and regulations of the hours that businesses could keep, as MacArthur-Seal (2024) shows. The occupation forces had to be provisioned and entertained while off duty, both of which fueled local businesses and banks, and gave the city's nightlife and underworld a fresh injection of cash.

Above all, occupation means indignity. At times, it entailed relatively minor matters, but at other times, the tension between occupied and occupier could (and did) erupt into violence. Some of it was political, some of it strictly material in character. People knew much more clearly what they were against rather than what they were for. Over time, the Sultan, Vahideddin, lost his authority and public support to those who set up a new capital city, Ankara, the new center of resistance, a place which embodied defiance. Gizem Tongo and Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal have illustrated in a public exhibition in İstanbul on urban life in the city under the last

Sultan, Vahideddin, discredited by his subservience to his British protectors (MacArthur Seal and Tongo 2022). On November 17, 1922, Vahideddin left İstanbul for a life of Mediterranean exile.

The same fate awaited the other deposed monarchs and emperors. In Germany in November 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II was deposited unceremoniously by the German army at the Dutch border, where he handed over his sword to a shocked Dutch border guard. Wilhelm remained in exile in the Netherlands for the rest of his life. Kaiser Carl of Austria refused to abdicate in 1918. He did renounce his political role first in the Austrian and then in the Hungarian part of his realm, then changed his mind. The Allies banished him to Madeira, where he died of Spanish flu in 1922. Eighty years later he was beatified by the Vatican, as a model Christian. Ferdinand I of Bulgaria abdicated in 1918, but his imperial line continued until the communists abolished it in 1946. Unlike the Romanoffs, all the other imperial rulers of the Central Powers escaped with their lives. Vahideddin was one of the lucky ones.

In surveying this landscape of upheaval, we confront an issue of importance in the cultural and political history of İstanbul, alongside many other cities of the time. The question is whether the occupation of İstanbul by Allied troops was any different from the occupation of other Mediterranean cities. Was occupied İstanbul different from occupied Cairo, the imperial nerve center of British rule in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond? The Bosphorus mattered to the British and French, not less than did the Suez Canal, but not more, either. And control of the Bosphorus had the added advantage of helping Britain and France support their intervention in Russia to overthrow the Bolsheviks. We now know that that effort was doomed to failure, but in 1920, no one had any idea how far west and south the Bolshevik revolution would spread. İstanbul was a strategic site of significance in the immediate post-war years.

In effect, what we need to explore is whether military occupation of predominantly Muslim-inhabited İstanbul was any different from the colonial occupation of Cairo, or Alexandria, or a host of other Muslim cities in the Middle East and beyond. Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, Jerusalem – all are ancient cities with important archeological sites nearby. All had French and British troops stationed there as occupying troops, then as troops enforcing League of Nations mandates. Was their behavior with respect to archeological sites any different from those that Ceren Abi and Nilay Özlü explore in the late Ottoman Empire with respect to the Topkapı Palace in İstanbul and many other sites (Abi 2024; Özlü 2024)? Did the propensity of French or British archeologists to exercise their *mission civilisatrice* in Cairo lead to them to “preserve” ancient artefacts by transferring them to Paris or London more rapidly than they were to do when sifting through archeological finds in İstanbul?

The tentative answer to this question is probably no. The mindset of the British, French, Italian, and Greek occupiers of İstanbul after 1918 was no different from that of the colonial or Mandatory authorities in other Middle Eastern cities or of those further afield in India or Africa. They could not but follow what they took to be their civilizational calling that enabled them to whitewash, at least to their own satisfaction, their record of exploitation and domination elsewhere in the world. If Joseph Conrad was right, when he wrote that all of Europe made the Mr Kurtz of the *Heart of Darkness*, then all of Europe made his equivalents in occupied İstanbul too. What so incensed the Turkish elite – who imagined the Empire as a full member of the

European concert of nations – was that under occupation between 1918 and 1923, they were being treated in effect as a colony.¹

There were two major differences between İstanbul in the period 1918–1923 and other capital cities under imperial rule. The first was that the victors in the war did not have the cash or the conviction to maintain their already existing colonial rule in Africa and Asia *and* to pay for the roughly 100,000 troops it would take to suppress the opposition to the colonial carve up of Anatolia they proposed in the Treaty of Sèvres. And consequently – here is the second difference – the British chose to rely on a satellite army to do its imperial work for it. There was very little public support in Britain or in France for military action in Turkey. And yet, the Greek army was still prepared to launch a military operation that Britain and France could no longer afford to see through themselves. The French (and the Italians, who also occupied part of İstanbul) wanted to wash their hands of the whole mess surrounding the presence of Greek troops and officials in Smyrna. The British were not so quick to give up the game; Lloyd George stood by his Greek allies, and yet he was able to offer words rather than the financial credits the Greek army needed desperately. After Britain's ally Eleuthérios Venizélos was defeated at the polls, the hardliners around King Constantine had their way, and decided to crush Turkish resistance to the punitive Treaty of Sèvres by themselves. They gambled that the British would not let them stumble their way to a crushing defeat. They rushed into a military expedition for which they had insufficient finance and logistics, and, unsurprisingly, their military forces wound up falling apart on the battlefield of Dumlupınar in August 1922 (Winter 2022).

Colonial power elsewhere was never exercised by a coalition of the blind the way the Greek campaign in Anatolia was run between 1919 and 1922. What Britain (belatedly) and France (hastily) decided was both that they could live with the new government installed in Ankara, and that they could readily find ways to do business with the new Turkey. In effect, they gave up on Greek dreams of empire as well as on their own dream – spelled out in the failed Treaty of Sèvres – of partitioning Turkey, and focused instead on expanding their imperial domains through League of Nations mandates over lands the new Turkish state had renounced.

In sum, the framework within which the cultural history of İstanbul developed in the period 1918–1923 was colonial in essence, though transnational in practice. Following in the wake of the Allied navies came musicians, thespians, and entertainers of all kinds. Their performances resembled those in other capital cities, but with one reservation. No one knew how long they would be there. A kind of tentative peace in the city unfolded between 1918 and 1923. It was unsteady because its foundations were temporary. There was violence not far away, giving daily life an uncertain tension that could be suppressed but not denied for long. When the Allies saw in late 1922 that they had to recognize the sovereignty of the new government in Ankara, they called a peace conference to be held in Lausanne. It was signed on July 24, 1923. When the Allies left, so did many of the people who had flocked to occupied İstanbul over the previous years and a large proportion of its long-established Christian communities.

¹ Thanks are due to Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal for advice on this and other points.

Recently, historian John Horne (2019) has urged cultural historians to bring politics back into the core of their research. The writers in this issue have answered the call. Politics of many kinds is evident in the artistic realm that Tongo and Schick (2023) explore, in the archeological domain studied by Abi (2024) and Özlü (2024), and in the musical world described by MacArthur-Seal (2024). This is hardly surprising, since military occupation infuses even the most intimate events and many cultural activities with menace and opportunities alike.

In the period 1918–1923 the politics of peacemaking was protracted. It had many false starts and reversals. It was accompanied by a kind of *modus vivendi*, the creation of a space of accommodation between collaboration with the occupiers on the one hand, and armed resistance to their presence, on the other. This third way was captured in Özlü's (2024) description of French soldiers saluting Vahideddin on his way through his palace gardens in the Topkapı Palace. Who was in charge here? The same question arose in another small incident. One of the Sultan's entourages was annoyed that the French organized Bastille Day celebrations in this imperial capital city. What Raymond Williams (1961) termed the structure of feeling of living under occupation is embedded in the ambiguity of these two gestures: surface respect for Vahideddin by saluting him, matched by Republican condescension for (or surface tolerance of) the Sultanate, in marking the violent overthrow of the French monarchy. This is the time of what Erez Manela (2007) calls the "Wilsonian moment," when democracy and self-determination were the order of the day in İstanbul as elsewhere. And yet what kind of democracy was possible in a country under military rule? Self-determination became the watchword of the resistance movement in Turkey after 1922 (Baba and Winter 2022), and it was embodied not in the reconfiguration of the old order but in total regime change. Between 1919 and late 1922, occupier and occupied lived together and encountered each other in a state of unstable equilibrium, until in 1923 the old regime vanished into thin air.

To paraphrase Rudyard Kipling, when the captains and the kings departed, what was left was both the same city, and a very different one. The cosmopolitan character of İstanbul could not be undermined by something as evanescent as military occupation for five years. Some foreigners and many people from the Greek and Armenian community left; others took their place. The government moved east, and started down a long and meandering Westernizing road. What it failed to do was to replace the autocratic regime of Vahideddin with a pluralist, multi-party, and multi-ethnic democratic order. The "self" embodied in self-determination in the new Turkey was the vision of one man, Mustafa Kemal, embodied in the new order he constructed after 1922.

One matter deserves special note. What *İstanbulular* learned from war and occupation between 1914 and 1923 was that the next time around, the best way to approach a general military conflagration is to stay out of it. There would be no second occupation, no second *modus vivendi* with foreigners in power, no second liberation. One was more than enough.

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