

Collapse of the Ottoman Empire



Sultan Mehmed VI departing from the backdoor of the Dolmabahçe Palace after the sultanate was dissolved November 1st, 1922.

*Information copied from the “New Zealand History” website¹

- ❖ The armistice of 31 October 1918 ended the fighting between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies but did not bring stability or peace to the region. The British were in control of Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia (Iraq), and British, French and Greek forces stood ready to march across the Bulgarian border and occupy Ottoman Thrace and Constantinople. The Sultan, Mehmed VI, feared he would be deposed. The Allies, however, knew he was a figurehead and hoped that his retention would help ensure post-war stability.
- ❖ Stability was badly needed. The Young Turk government had collapsed in the days leading up to the armistice. Many had all fled the country to seek sanctuary in Germany. Across what was left of the empire civil infrastructure, already badly strained by years of war, began to disintegrate. Law and order broke down completely in many places. Simmering ethnic and religious tensions erupted into violence and large numbers of deserters turned to banditry and roamed the countryside. The Allies marched into Istanbul with the intention of taking control of large areas of Anatolia. Their pretext was the restoration of order, but this plan also reflected the terms of the peace settlement they were drafting. It was clear that the post-war Ottoman state would not even cover all of Anatolia. This prospect horrified most Turks, for whom Anatolia was their heartland.

¹ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/ottoman-empire/collapse> [15 October 2018]



Figure 1. The division of the Ottoman heartland by Allied Powers through the Treaty of Sèvres, 1920.

- ❖ Squabbling among the Allies delayed the signing of the peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire, which was negotiated at Sèvres in France, until 10 August 1920. The treaty confirmed French and British possession of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq, in the guise of League of Nations mandates. The treaty effectively gave the Greeks possession of eastern Thrace and 'Ionia' (western Anatolia); the Italians got the Dodecanese Islands and a 'zone of influence' in south-western Anatolia. To the east, the Armenians were given an independent state taking in much of eastern Anatolia, while the Kurds were granted an ill-defined autonomous region and promised a referendum on independence. The Ottoman state's army was limited to 50,000 men and its navy to a dozen coastal patrol boats; it could have no air force at all.
- ❖ As Turkish attitudes began to harden, the interim Ottoman government came under increasing pressure from the Allies to suppress the nationalist groups. In the end they were reluctantly forced to act. In the face of this crackdown, on 23 April 1920 the nationalists convened a Grand National Assembly in Ankara, deep in central Anatolia. They elected Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as its first president, effectively establishing an alternative government. This triggered a short but brutal civil war, which ended only when the details of the Treaty of Sèvres were publicised in August. The harshness of its terms destroyed what little credibility the interim Ottoman government had left. Turks of all political persuasions began to unite behind the Grand National Assembly, which completely rejected the treaty. A showdown with the Allies seemed unavoidable.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

