

THE KUTUL AMARE VICTORY AND THE BRITISH SOLDIERS IN YOZGAT CITY

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Abstract: *This article presents the British troops' defeat in the siege of Kut al Amara. This was the second greatest victory won by the Ottomans during the First World War, after Çanakkale¹. We present the war from an objective perspective, touching on some points such as: the military personalities in charge of the campaigns, the progress of the war and the changes that occurred during it, like the imprisoning of the British soldiers in Yozgat City. We used certain documents of the age, like the journals of British prisoners in Yozgat, which allow us to see some interesting and important dimensions to this part of the war. Two-thirds of the British and about a seventh of the Indian prisoners never saw their homes again. Relative to the numbers of men involved, the British losses at Kut dwarf those of the far bigger battles on the Western Front. And some British prisoners were taken to Yozgat City and treated in a humane manner.*

Keywords: *Kut al Amara, Victory, British, Prisoners, War, Yozgat City.*



Figure 1. the Position of Kut

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¹ İsmet Üzen, M.Şah Özcan, *Days of Yozgat (1916-17) of a Kutul Amare War Prisoner* (Major E.W.C. Sandes), paper presented at the 1st International Bozok Symposium, 5-7 May, 2016.

Introduction

The victory of Kut al Amara (Kutul Amare in Turkish), won against the British troops under the command of Major General Charles Vere F. Townshend, was the greatest victory of Ottoman troops in the First World War after Çanakkale. The Ottoman Empire lost World War I and after its defeat it became history, just like the German and Austro-Hungarian empires². During the great war that continued from 1914 to 1918, the Ottoman Army, which had to fight on eight fronts, presented two great victories to military history, with its successes in Çanakkale and then in Iraq at Kut al Amara, as well as major defeats together with its allies.

On April 29, 1916, the British Army surrendered to the Ottomans. This victory, which took place in a region that is now far away from Turkey, could only affect the course of the Great War for a short time³. Due to the wrong decisions of the big headquarters in Istanbul and Berlin ten months later, the British Army's progress and the loss of Baghdad could not be stopped⁴.

Methodology

In this study, whose theme is to shed some light on the forgotten details of the Kutul-Amare campaign, we focused on the memories of the direct participants, historical documents, facts and personal diaries. Some historians argue that the British felt the biggest defeat after the Yorktown defeat in America in 1781, on April 29, 1916 in Kutul-Amare, Iraq. Undoubtedly, the defeat of the British and their allies in Çanakkale, before Kutul-Amare, was more strategically important. A short chronological presentation of the events is necessary at this point.

The Ottoman Empire entered World War I, which began in late July 1914, on the side of Germany, on October 30, the British “Mesopotamian Expedition” having already started two weeks prior. The British and Indian troops – the VI-th Indian Division - set off from Bombay, India. The goal was to take control of the Persian Gulf, to break the Arabian Peninsula and Mesopotamia from the Ottoman Empire, to have Iran, which declared its neutrality, be on the side of Entente States, to preserve British sovereignty in India, and to ensure the relief of allied Russia from the south.

Three days after the Ottoman Empire officially entered the war, the British landed in the Shat-al-Arab region. They did not encounter great

² Edward J. Erickson, *Ottoman Army Effectiveness in World War I: A comparative study*, Routledge, 2007, p. 93.

³ Rogan, Eugene, *The fall of the Ottomans*, London, Penguin Books, 2016, p. 263.

⁴ <http://www.karar.com/yazarlar/hakan-albayrak/su-kizgin-topragin-gunesli-semasinda-890>.

resistance, and after a few days they seized the town of Fav in the Persian Gulf and started to move north and occupied Basra on November 22nd. As Major E.W.C. Sandes, one of the survivors of Kut siege and captivity in Yozgat, observed in his book from 1919, *In Kut and Captivity with the Sixth Indian Division*, “The campaign in Mesopotamia was one which, from the smallest beginnings, expanded and grew till it became one of the principal struggles in the Great War.”⁵

Enver Pasha, the Minister of War and Deputy Commander-in-Chief, appointed Lieutenant Colonel Süleyman as commander of the Ottoman forces in Mesopotamia. One of the prominent figures of the Committee of Union and Progress, Suleyman's military task was to stop the advance of the British with help of the troops of Muslim Arabs in the region and to take back Basra. But his powers and materials were insufficient. The plan that the Arabs should follow the call of jihad by Sultan Mehmet Reşat, who was also the Caliph, did not produce the expected result.

In the meantime, the Sarıkamış Operation, which started on December 21st 1914, under the command of Enver Pasha, ended with defeat. The Suez Channel Operation under the command of Cemal Pasha failed (14 January 1915). On both fronts, the Ottoman armies withdrew.

The efforts of Suleyman on the Iraqi Front also failed. He committed suicide after the failure of his attack against the British in Shuayibe, which resulted in great losses (14 April 1915).

Colonel Nurettin Bey (also known as Sakalli Nurettin Pasha or Nurettin Ibrahim Konyar) was then appointed as the commander of the Iraqi Front.

A second British Division arrived and General John Nixon, commander of all troops, advanced further into Mesopotamia up on the River Euphrates, to Naisirya. The other division, the 6th (Poona) Indian Division, under the command of Major-General Charles Townshend advanced 160km along the River Tigris to Amara, capturing it on 4 June 1915. From Amara Townshend pushed on to Kut, where he entered on 28 September 1915, having inflicted heavy losses on the Turks. By mid-November, his division was only 40km from Baghdad.

As major E.W.C. Sandes says: “Up to October 1915, the resistance offered by the Turks had always been overcome with comparative ease ...; and there seems no doubt that our troops had established a considerable moral ascendancy over the enemy. ... The seizure of Baghdad in 1915 would have been a terrible blow to Turkish prestige, second only to the capture of Constantinople.”⁶

⁵ E.W.C. Sandes, *In Kut and Captivity with the Sixth Indian Division*, London, John Murray, 1919, p. 2.

⁶ E.W.C. Sandes, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

The critical situation in Iraq was viewed with concern at the headquarters in Istanbul and Berlin. In mid-October 1915 Enver Pasha reinforced the troops in the region and put them under the command of General Colmar von der Goltz (Goltz Pasha), one of the German officers who was most familiar with the Turkish army.

Baron von der Goltz was in command at the Battle of Ctesiphon, where the British Mesopotamian army was stopped from advancing to Baghdad. However, the battle was a draw, as both sides retreated from the battlefield. Suffering heavy losses, Townshend decided to retreat to Kut. With the British retreating, Goltz turned his army around and followed them down the river. When Townshend halted at Kut, Goltz laid siege to the British position.

Goltz died on 19 April 1916, in Baghdad, just two weeks before the British in Kut surrendered. The official reason for his death was typhus, although apparently there were rumors that he had been poisoned⁷. Following the death of Goltz, Halil Bey was promoted to the rank of brigadier general on April 22. He was 33 when he became Army Commander and Governor General of Iraq. The 6th Army under Halil Kut Pasha, also repelled the British troops sent to save the army besieged in Kut. In early January, two Indian divisions, known as the Tigris Corps, were despatched under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Fenton Aylmer to relieve Townshend's forces. Tigris Corps's 19,000 troops fought their first major action at Shaik Saad, where 22,000 Turks had set up defences along the River Tigris. The Turks having retreated, Aylmer reached Hanna, about 16 km from Kut. However, he was unable to break through during the Battle of the Wadi and the Battle of Hanna between 13 and 21 January 1916. Further attacks by the relief force in March and April all failed with heavy losses. In attempting to rescue the men at Kut, the relieving force suffered around 23,000 casualties.

⁷ Barker, A.J., *The First Iraq War, 1914-1918: Britain's Mesopotamian Campaign*. New York, Enigma Books, 2009, p. 228.



Figure 2. Ottoman and British officers (Halil Pasha and General Townshend, no. 1 and 2 in the first row)

Since the beginning of April, all the successive British rescue operations had failed. Realizing that he could not get the help he was expecting, Townshend wrote a letter to Halil Pasha on April 26 and offered to meet in the middle of the Tigris River to discuss the conditions of the city's surrender. Halil Pasha accepted the offer and the interview took place at Townshend's boat. The British demanded that they be allowed to withdraw to the south after surrendering the city. In return, Townshend and his subordinates would not oppose the Ottoman Empire in the war, but they would deliver all the weapons and ammunition they had intact. They also offered to give Halil Pasha a check of 1 million pounds. The general said that the check would be addressed to the bank that Halil Pasha wanted, and that he was given authorization from the British government to give it. Halil Pasha rejected the bribe as a joke. He refused to accept any of the other offers, saying that at the end of the months of bloody warfare, they were inevitable, that they did not need any weapons and ammunition, and that they could destroy them as they wanted. This arrogance angered Halil Pasha very much, and the meeting was interrupted.⁸

After returning to his headquarters, Halil Pasha received a second letter brought by a parliamentarian and an officer. This officer was the famous spy T.E. Lawrence, who was tasked with revolting the Arab world against the Ottoman Empire. In the new letter, the amount of money

⁸ The diary of Gertrude Bell, another British spy and officer working in Egypt and Irak for the British government and who was in Basra at the moment of the surrender, mentions this episode, saying that Lawrence and Aubrey Herbert had come from Cairo especially for this, being authorized by the government to offer up to 2 million pounds for lifting the siege, a most degrading attempt, which was doomed to failure from the start. (cf. *Gertrude Bell – Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations*, by Georgina Howell, London, Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2015 p. 252)

offered was doubled and this time it was foreseen to be given to the Ottoman government⁹. The other offers were the same. Halil Pasha stated that he did not want to spend time with such negotiations at this meeting which was held on 28 April and reiterated his demand for unconditional surrender. The explosion sounds from the city that night showed that the British had destroyed all their weapons and ammunition before surrendering.

A British officer from the city later announced that they had surrendered. Halil Pasha ordered the 3rd Regiment Commander Nazmi Bey (Nazmi Pasha / Nazmi Solok, one of the commanders of the War of Independence) to prevent the Arabs in the city from attempting to plunder and disturb the British.

Halil Pasha went to the city after publishing the victory order entitled "Orduma". General Townshend and all officers had gathered at the headquarters at the request of Nazmi Bey, who had taken over the city. 5 generals, 481 officers and 13,300 soldiers (some sources give these numbers slightly different) had surrendered.

Townshend welcomed Halil Pasha in his room and handed out his sword and two pistols. Halil Pasha gave the weapons he had taken back to the British general. He met with the other generals who surrendered together with Townshend and said that they would be the guest of the Sultan.

The news of victory was greeted with enthusiasm throughout the Ottoman Empire. After the Dardanelles, another great blow was received by the British. In the same way, there was a festive atmosphere in Germany. Kaiser Wilhelm had a day off in schools. Goltz was considered a war hero and a victor. As he had imagined, he was unable to advance German influence to India through Iran, but the dangerous British enemy thus kept a large amount of military power outside Europe for a long time, allowing Germany to breathe on the Western front. On the evening of April 29, a ceremony was held in Baghdad. Ottoman officers and soldiers marched with torches to the tomb of Marshal Goltz. At the ceremony held in front of the tomb, the garrison commander symbolically gave the commander the title of victory. But this was the last gesture of the German presence and contribution to the war.

⁹ Fromkin, David, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, New York, Macmillan, 2009, p.201.



Figure 3. Illustration of the Surrender of Kut

Aftermath of the victory

Halil Pasha ordered the German officers in the headquarters and troops to disappear during the take-over of Kutul-Amare. Goltz Pasha and the Germans were not mentioned in the news about the victory in the Ottoman newspapers. The Ottoman government was trying to spread the air that the victory was only the work of the Turks. After Goltz's death, the relations between the Turkish and German officers in the army had deteriorated. After the victory, it got worse. Turkish officers, especially Halil Pasha, were suspicious of the activities of the Germans here and in Iran. After the Kutul-Amare victory, the dreams of possessing Iran were revived both in the Ottoman and German general staff. Halil Pasha observed that the British would not give up on moving to Baghdad and that they were preparing for this purpose in the south. But Enver Pasha insisted and sent Halil Pasha to Iran with most of the

forces in his hands. Iraq and Baghdad were weak in the face of the rapidly recovering and growing British army. On 14 December 1916, the British started moving north again. In the following 3 months, the progress of the British was slowed down, but could not be stopped. The inevitable collapse of the Ottoman army and its allies had now begun. In March 1917 the British occupied Baghdad.

The British historian James Morris described the loss of Kut as "the vilest conditional surrender in British military history"¹⁰. This defeat aroused a huge indignation in the British press and public opinion and the government was obliged to institute a parliamentary investigation¹¹.

After the victory of Kutul-Amare, Halil Pasha addressed the 6th Army with the following message:

"Lions! Honor and glory to the Ottomans, I congratulate your victory by kissing all of your pure foreheads. Praise be to Allah Almighty for giving us a happy case in our history since two hundred years. Look at the grandeur of God, the first time that in the history of the British state it was defeated by the Turkish bayonet. The war which has been going on for two years has not shown such a bright case.

My army has killed 350 officers and 10,000 soldiers in the face of both Kut and the armies who came to rescue Kut. But today, in Kut, 13 generals, 481 officers and 13,300 soldiers are taken over. The British forces, who came to the rescue of this army, returned 30,000 casualties. Looking at these two differences, there is a big enough difference to astonish the world. History will be at a loss in finding words to write this event. Here is the second victory of Ottoman persistence that broke the British stubborn after Çanakkale. This victory, which we won with our bayonet and chest alone, is the bright beginning of our success in the face of our new evolving situation. I call this day a Kut holiday."

¹⁰ in *Pax Britannica*, vol. 3, *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat*, London, Faber and Faber, 1978.

¹¹ Davis, Paul K., *Ends and Means: The British Mesopotamian Campaign and Commission*, London and Cranbury N.J., Associated University Presses, 1994.



Figure 4. the second Victory after Çanakkale

The British prisoners in Yozgat

We see from the memoirs of the British soldiers held prisoners in Yozgat, how the victories of Canakkale and Kut commanded the respect of the Western world for Tukey, and especially for the humanity of the Turkish soldiers, as we well know that it is not easy to command respect from one's prisoners. For example, Major Sandes begins his account of the prisoners' march from Kut to Yozgat thus¹²:

"In a corner of the map of Europe, south of the Black Sea, is a blank white area of Asian territory, which attracted little attention till the Germans upset the world. That desolate expanse is Anatolia. Travellers could probably describe the position of Smyrna, and possibly even of Angora; and they might have heard of Konia. But what of Afiun Karahissar, Yozgad and Sivas? Yet Anatolia is a remarkable country, inhabited by a peculiar people – a country full of historical associations...". He then continues admiring the character of the Turkish soldiers: "The Anatolian peasant, who becomes the Turkish private soldier at the bidding of Constantinople, is brave, good tempered and wonderfully hardy.... He dreads the power of the clique at Stamboul, who hold his destiny in their hands. But he is a *man*, and as such commands respect."¹³

However, the cruelty or, "the indifference to suffering" specific to the Turkish soldiers is apparent in the description of the surrender of the Kutul Amare garrison to the Turkish army, in 1916: "The annals of the British army do not record a greater tragedy than this surrender.... Three out of every five British soldiers who surrendered at Kut died before release."¹⁴

¹² E.W.C. Sandes, *Tales of Turkey*, London, John Murray, 1924, p. 1

¹³ Ibidem, p. 3

¹⁴ ibidem, pp. 9-10

Major Sandes is not the only one praising these soldiers. A Spanish mercenary who held a high position in the Turkish administration, Raphael de Nogales, wrote in his account of the war, *Four Years Beneath the Crescent*, that¹⁵: “The indomitable courage or fanaticism, call it what you will, and the traditional boldness of the Osmanli, frequently during the World War offered sublime examples of that ferocious endurance which, from time immemorial, has made them famed as one of the most valiant and most warlike nations of the Old World.”

The prisoners’ caravan arrived in Yozgat 2 months after the surrender at Kut, “having travelled nearly 2000 miles over desert and mountain”¹⁶, after passing and staying in Baghdad, Aleppo and many other places, on 30 June 1916 at 10:00.

The Turks had prepared two large detached houses for the prisoners. According to Major Sandes, these buildings, which belonged to the well-off Armenians, were confiscated at the end of 1914. On the walls of the various rooms there were small niches and pictures of Christian religion. The wooden ceilings and cabinets of these houses were carefully constructed.

Some parts of the ceiling were carved with intricate ornamentation.

Everything showed that the former owners were rich and well educated. Especially in many parts of Yozgat, there were empty houses and they were about to collapse. It was said that the owners of these empty houses were Armenians.



Figure 5. Yozgat City houses for the British Prisoners

¹⁵ Rapahel de Nogales, *Four Years Beneath the Crescent*, London, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926, p. 21

¹⁶ Sandes, *Tales of Turkey*, p. 82

Of the two houses allotted to them, the senior officers decided to use the lower one, captains and lieutenants gathered in the upper building. The Turks placed guards outside the entrance doors of the houses. They did not have permission to enter and exit the prisoners' house, except to go out to get water. The houses had red tiled roofs and numerous windows. The walls, which are made of stone, rubble and mud, are very thin and are approximately 23 cm. wide. The interior and exterior of the buildings were whitewashed. The houses were thoroughly cleaned and swept. In fact, finding the house in such a situation had been a good surprise for the prisoners. The rooms in the upstairs house were with floors and wooden ceilings. The cabinets were built into the walls.

There was a large garden next to the building, which was formerly used as a hospital and accommodated by senior officers. This garden later became the exercise area of the prisoners.

There was no oven in the kitchen. Later, the prisoners made their own furnaces with kerosene can and mud. There were 63 people in the house where the author first settled. Considering that the ones sent to Yozgat are about 100 people, it is understood that there are 30-40 people in the other house. The main flaw in the inadequate arrangements for the comfort of the prisoners was that there was no furniture in the house. There was no furniture in the rooms of the senior officers' home, and the chairs, tables, and cedar in the dining room were laid by the contractor.

One trivial discovery made by a British officer in an empty house opposite their camp speaks about the inherent sadness of war: "The hillside opposite the camp was covered with the ruins of empty Armenian houses, and one of the Turkish guards was in the habit of boasting of the part he had himself taken in the murder of those wretched people. In one of the larger houses an officer found some notebooks containing translations from Armenian into French, written in a childish hand – the last, probably, that the unhappy child ever made. Alas that this world should hold such tragedies!"¹⁷

The Turkish commander in charge of captives in Yozgat was Major Kazım Bey. At his disposal was a young Mülazım-ı Sani (First Lieutenant), a captain and an interpreter. Kazım Bey was responsible for approximately 100 British officers. According to Major Sandes, Kazım Bey was hostile to the prisoners and ignored their wishes or letters. He carefully avoided contact with the prisoners and did not even visit them for the first few months. The author describes Major Kazım Bey as an old school, under-educated person who hated all Europeans. Some of the Turks who had some knowledge of French could understand some of the prisoners' wishes without the help of an interpreter. However, the commander's dark-

¹⁷ Sandes, *op.cit.*, p. 79-80.

skinned captain did not speak any French but spoke fluent Spanish. Moise Eskenaz, the Jewish interpreter, in his 20s, was very short. Wearing a sergeant uniform, Moise was fluent in Turkish, French and English, and spoke some German. He didn't hesitate to take bribes like chocolate or biscuits.

There were about twenty Turkish soldiers as guards at the disposal of the British soldiers, and they lived in a small house next to the house of the senior officers. As time passed, Turkish guards became friendlier. Corporal Ahmet counted the prisoners in his rooms every morning. The corporal and a soldier would knock on the door before entering the room, saying good night and good night and counting. Usually both would say good night in the morning in courtesy, but later learned the right words.

Differences between the ways of thinking of Turks and Englishmen are presented with a keen observation. For example, the British are much more accustomed to physical exercise than the Turks, and the prisoners in Yozgat wanted to go out and have walks in the city, to the amazement of the Turks, who did not understand, why they need exercise if they have food, rest and a warm atmosphere in their houses¹⁸. Finally, the prisoners are granted permission to go out for walks, and eventually start hockey and football games. The Turkish officers and their children come to see the games, and eventually participate in events together with the British prisoners: "In time the *mülazim* himself was so imbued with the spirit of sport that he joined in one or two mild games of football; and in the winter, when the snow was thick, he once led his men in a snowball fight against the British officers and orderlies. I do not think that he really enjoyed these new adventures, but that a spirit of emulation seized him and prompted him to rivalry with us."¹⁹

Then, the major records that, at Afion Karahissar, in 1918, the British officers lived in two separate camps, and had matches of Rugby football. As there was much rivalry between the camps, the matches were "fast and furious", and major Sandes recalls that the Turkish commandant, one Muslum Bey, wanted one day to see a match. "He came, accompanied by his faithful interpreter, and watched the match with interest. Whenever a particularly vigorous tackle was made, or the scrum collapsed in a writhing mixture of arms and legs, he was loud in his applause, though any skilful play passed without comment. But at the end he remarked: "I am a *bimbashi* who (Allah be praised!) has been in many wars and seen much bloodshed. But never have I seen a more desperate battle than this which

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 89

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 92

you call football. The officers have indeed fought well. Are many wounded?”²⁰

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