CONTENTS

Introduction

HISTORY AS A MINEFIELD

AROUND THREE o'clock in the afternoon on Tuesday, October 19, 1920, in the small village of Çay, near Gallipoli, a seven-year-old boy named Ferhad ran up to his friends, gesturing with excitement about an artillery shell he had found in the local cemetery. Ferhad could not speak (he is described as *dilsiz*, or "tongueless," in Ottoman Turkish), but fragmentary records in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul allow us to hear his historical voice nonetheless, if only for a moment. The shell, and perhaps Ferhad's disability, were remnants of the First World War. Eight children followed Ferhad to examine the shell. Seventeen-year-old İsmail, the son of Ali of Lemnos, had brought along an axe. İsmail stood over the shell and struck it. The resulting explosion killed him in an instant, along with Hüseyin, the son of Mehmed, and seriously injured several of their friends. İsmail and Hüseyin had survived the First World War, but two years after the armistice, it killed them just the same.[1]

The years 1914–1918 claimed at least two and a half million Ottoman lives, or about 10 percent of the empire's entire population. Only Serbia suffered a higher civilian death rate. The war set ablaze the empire's social fabric and gave birth to radically new political identities. It put into motion developments that have shaped the former Ottoman lands—"the Middle East," as we know it today—for over a century. Much of the history of this period remains buried under the debris of war, and it continues

to be a political minefield no less explosive than the shell that killed the two curious boys that afternoon in the cemetery at Çay.[2]

In 1914 the Ottoman government took the empire to war in order to "save our people and our homeland."[3] But over the next four years that same government killed more of its citizens—men, women, and children—than enemy guns. It allowed hundreds of thousands of people to starve to death, lost perhaps as many as a million men in uniform, and surrendered more than half of its territory. The First World War put an end to a state that, although it had suffered a series of defeats in the two years immediately preceding the war, had governed vast territories and diverse populations for over six centuries. Why was the First World War in the Ottoman Empire so destructive? This book seeks to answer that question and proposes a new interpretation of the war years.

One of the most enduring ideas about the Ottoman Empire is that it was destroyed by the storms of nationalist and separatist movements that swept the world in the nineteenth century. This understanding is often accompanied by a powerful but misleading image of the Ottoman Empire as the "Sick Man of Europe," a state that collapsed in on itself at the end of the war. Another entrenched narrative is that of the empire's inevitable decline, a view that takes the Ottomans' dissolution for granted and renders its demise a logical conclusion to a long history.

Such depictions of the empire served many political agendas, and they continue to do so today, explaining, in part, why they have proved so enduring both in the popular imagination and in much of the scholarship outside of the academic field of Ottoman studies. In the nineteenth century, the imagery of a declining, decrepit empire provided the basis for legitimizing Great Power intervention; the image of the empire's impending implosion could justify military occupation, annexation, and even colonial rule. It also made possible European denial of responsibility for altering the place of Christians and Jews in the empire, indeed, for endangering their membership in a multireligious, multiethnic, and multilingual polity. European powers could make such denials even as they framed such interventions as benefiting the populations they occupied.

The understanding of the empire as sick did not only serve European political agendas. In due course, the same Orientalist imagery of a failing empire proved useful to the state-building and nation-making projects that replaced it after the First World War. The new states defined themselves with their own, national images promising a safe and bright future that set them apart from those of the Ottoman past. It is crucial not to succumb to the temptation of viewing the empire through religious or ethnonational blocks, however. Such blocks first crystallized and later were consolidated only *after* the First World War. In other words, they were molded in the crucible of the war itself, born in blood. They were a product, not a cause, of the empire's dissolution.

This book turns those old images on their head. It begins with the observation that the Ottoman Empire was a vital political community in 1914. In Salim Tamari's words, referring to the experience in Ottoman Palestine, "four miserable years of tyranny" in the First World War "erased four centuries of a rich and complex Ottoman patrimony."[4] The many memoirs of those who lived through this period echo Tamari's words. One such example comes from Demetrios Theodore, or Dimitri, as he was known. Dimitri was born in 1904 in Maden, a small town in eastern Anatolia. It was the home of some five hundred Greek Orthodox families and an even larger Armenian Christian population. Greek Orthodox himself, Dimitri recalled that the "spirit of friendship and co-operation in a social order where both the Greeks and the Turks had found their respective places and were learning to live together in harmony was torpedoed during the four years [of] war."[5] Dimitri's memories suggest a profound breakdown in intercommunal relations during the war years. Indeed, the scholar Nicholas Doumanis has noted that so abrupt was the shift in intercommunal relations that recollections of coexistence such as Dimitri's, despite their frequency, have been largely dismissed as nostalgia, treated as a romanticization of a past that, given the bloodshed with which the empire ended, could not have existed.[6]

It is important to situate the First World War in the Middle East within its Ottoman context. The Ottoman government's participation in the war marked a new phase in the empire's 1908 Revolution, a revolution that had

FIGURE 1. Original Caption: "Raft of sheep or goat skin holding Turks and Armenians. Euphrates River, 1903." *Source*: Shishmanian Collection, box 3. Hoover Library and Archives, Stanford University

sidelined the sultan and initiated empire-wide elections to a parliament in Istanbul. Those elections brought to power a revolutionary organization, the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress, or the "Unionists."[7] It was this revolutionary organization that conducted the Ottoman state's policies in the First World War.

The Unionists' revolution had both a foreign and a domestic side. At home, the objective was to remove the authoritarian power of the long-reigning sultan, Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), to promote economic development, and to foster and modernize the unity of the empire's diverse population and thereby secure the empire's territorial integrity. On the international stage, the Unionists were fighting European imperialism. They saw themselves as defending the country against the daily injustices the Great Powers were inflicting on the empire. They called out the hy-

pocrisy of the Great Powers' claims of acting in the name of free trade, freedom, and civilization.

If the First World War was central to the making of the Middle East, however, then the Ottoman Empire was just as central to the making of the conflict. Europe's six Great Powers—Austria-Hungary, Germany, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia—exercised their dominance in the Ottoman Empire through a variety of political and legal instruments, ranging from informal rule to financial control to outright military occupation and colonization. France ruled Algeria (since 1830) as a colony and Tunis (since 1881) as a protectorate. Britain governed Cyprus (1878) as a protectorate and occupied Egypt-Sudan (since 1882). Britain also signed treaties with several leading families in the Gulf region, promising them virtual independence from Istanbul.[8] Austria-Hungary occupied the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 and annexed them in 1908.[9] Russia occupied and annexed the eastern Anatolian territories of Ardahan, Batum, and Kars in 1878, supported independence movements in southeastern Europe (the Balkans), and claimed Istanbul/Constantinople and the Straits waterway as a Russian manifest destiny that would give the tsar's navy access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean. Italy occupied Ottoman provinces in North Africa (Tripolitania, or Libya) and the Dodecanese Islands in 1911 and 1912. Though not under European colonial rule according to international law, much of Ottoman territory was effectively subject to Great Power rule.

Moreover, by 1912, the Ottomans' neighbors Iran and Morocco were divided into spheres of influence, while Afghanistan had fallen to British hegemony already in the late nineteenth century.[10] By 1914 the Ottoman Empire was one of a small number of states in Africa and Asia that, even if deeply circumscribed, could claim to possess a degree of sovereignty.

To avoid war between themselves, the Great Powers formed a loose international association styled as the Concert of Europe, which allowed them to coordinate their interests and delineate areas of influence around the globe. As the Great Powers laid claim to various parts of the world, they used diplomacy and the expanding body of international law—which they themselves wrote—to manage what they referred to as the "balance of powers." In the nineteenth century, international law, though not unchallenged,

served to facilitate the relations among the expanding, imperial powers of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan.[11]

By 1914 the Ottoman Empire had confronted the destabilizing arrival of European and American missionaries, merchants, diplomats, and soldiers for over a century. But the experience of suffering under colonialism and oppression was not only an international story. Populations inside the Ottoman Empire—from Diyarbekir in the Ottoman East to Basra in the Gulf, and from Aleppo and Beirut to Mecca and Yemen—could view the Unionist government in Istanbul not as liberators but as subjugators. Much like modern states elsewhere, Ottoman governments in the nineteenth century pursued a capacious control over populations and natural resources. Unsurprisingly, as the state extended its reach, political elites, landowners, tribal chieftains, local communities, women, and workers demanded political freedoms, legal rights, and participatory government.[12]

Thus, in the nineteenth century the Ottoman state found itself under increasing colonial pressure. Foreign powers ruled some of its territories, exercised legal jurisdiction over a considerable segment of the population, dictated the hiring and firing of high-ranking officials, collected directly the profits from products such as salt and tobacco, set import and export tariffs, and could even determine where Ottoman companies could and could not construct railways (e.g., they were prevented from doing so near the Russian border). At the same time, the Ottoman state's aggressive drive for modernizing its realm and centralizing its control over it had its own colonial effects.[13] As in Egypt or China, modern state-building in the Ottoman Empire converged with struggles to keep European (and United States) imperialism out. In the effort to escape foreign control, states all around the world sought to monopolize their domestic resources. In the process, they endeavored to push their legal and physical control into every nook and cranny of society, right up to the edge of its territorial borders. Census counts, military conscription regimes, mandatory education, and new communication and transportation technologies became

key instruments in that pursuit. This form of anti-colonial state-building, intended to keep foreign powers out, could produce in turn its own breed of colonialism.[14] While the Unionists saw themselves as taking up arms against foreign control, inside the empire opposition groups fought their own anti-colonial cause against the very same Unionists.[15] The Ottoman state, first under Sultan Abdülhamid II and then under the Unionists, took the war to its own communities before taking it to the Great Powers. It was this dynamic—the interplay of war, historical memory, and Unionist decision-making—that destroyed the empire in the years of the First World War.

A crucial characteristic of the Ottoman Empire, then, was the presence of a double, or twofold anti-colonialism, but it was not unique to the Ottomans. In China, internal anti-colonialists aimed to overthrow Manchu rule, while external anti-colonialists targeted foreign control, leading to revolution in China in 1911.[16] In Egypt, Colonel Ahmed Urabi led a movement in 1881 against both the khedive in Cairo and British influence. In Iran, revolutionaries established a parliament and a constitution in 1905, challenging both the power of the shah and foreign interests. The Ottoman First World War represented a moment in a longer history that reached back to the first half of the nineteenth century, and it continues to shape the region in important ways today. As in China and elsewhere, Ottoman state and society were "navigating semi-colonialism" in their own vernacular ways.[17] In this respect, for the people of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, the First World War neither began nor ended in the twentieth century.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the sultan's authoritarianism gave rise to a revolutionary age and political dissent across the empire and beyond. Members of the opposition, often collectively called "the Young Turks," forged their movement from places such as Geneva, Paris, and British-held Cairo.[18] On July 23, 1908, at long last, the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution generated a moment of euphoria and hope across the country. It provided for empire-wide elections and the formation of the first parliament since 1878, ushering in an Ottoman Spring. "The country at once sprang to life," reported a young Russian correspondent in *Pravda*, Leon Trotsky, in December 1908.[19]

Across the empire, Ottoman citizens from all walks of life, men and women, girls and boys, members of the empire's various religious communities and social classes, celebrated the promises of the newly proclaimed constitution. The revolution attracted broad popular support for participatory politics and affirmed hopes in the empire's political viability.[20] Speakers at mass rallies invoked the French Revolution. Flags and postcards, many of them multilingual in the various languages of the empire, extolled the revolutionary virtues of freedom, equality, brotherhood, and justice.[21]

Deputies elected to the parliament—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—hailed from all parts of the empire. A multitude of new parties, associations, and publications advocated unity and conciliation among the empire's ethnic groups under the banner of "Ottomanism."[22] One such organization, the Ottoman Democratic Party, proclaimed that "today the government of Turkey [*Türkiye hükümeti*] and the Ottoman nation consist of Turkish, Arab, Albanian, Kurdish, Armenian, Greek Orthodox [*Rum*], Jewish, Bulgarian, and many other different elements. All elements are in unity and alliance with each other."[23] Unionists and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the largest Armenian political organization in the prerevolutionary era, worked together closely in the aftermath of the 1908 Revolution, at least initially.[24] For the first time in thirty years, there would be empire-wide elections to send representatives to the Assembly of Deputies, the lower house of parliament, known as the Meclis-i Mebusan.[25] Winds of democracy, it seemed, had swept away the sultan's police state.

Fulfilling the promises of the revolution, unsurprisingly, proved to be a highly contentious process. Hundreds of publications and public fora exercised their newfound freedoms of speech and association. They fueled the campaigns of new political parties and prominent individuals. Electioneering spoke to the needs of constituents, but it could also generate identitarian politics as parties and candidates sought to distinguish themselves from competitors. As in any election, parties and candidates appealed to voters by making claims to offer them true representation, or at least better representation, than their rivals.[26] Representative politics could be simultaneously inclusive and divisive.

For most people around the world in 1914, the words "the Middle East" would not have meant very much. Its cognate siblings, "the Near East" and "the Far East," had been in use as geographical descriptors for several decades, but "the Middle East" as a phrase to designate the territories of the Ottoman Empire came into common usage only in the years immediately following the First World War, and then primarily in diplomatic parlance. All three "Easts"—Near, Middle, and Far—reflected a division of the world that made sense only when gazing out the windows of the British Foreign Office in London. The labels were imposed by outsiders, and even today the designation "the Middle East" has "few claimants" from within the region itself.[27] The region's renaming from the Ottoman Empire to the Middle East, however, was an act not only of Eurocentrism but also of erasure. It hid from memory the existence of social and political institutions that had fostered relatively stable relations over a vast and diverse geographical region for centuries.

Notably, the empire's inability to resist the concerted military prowess of the European Great Powers in the nineteenth century has been equated to the empire's wholescale dysfunctionality. The fact that the empire was outgunned, however, did not mean it had run its course. To the contrary, it retained cultural and political vibrancy despite its military weakness. For the sake of argument, if the Ottoman Empire could not stand up to the combined forces of Great Power armies, neither could, say, Switzerland or Spain in the early twentieth century, though they were never put to the test in the same way. What we do know is that Italy's invasion of Ottoman Libya in October 1911, despite its brutality, elicited a rather different response from the Great Powers than the violation of Belgian neutrality in August 1914.

Be that as it may, this book takes seriously the empire's potential viability that was destroyed in the First World War. A different future for the empire was also on the table, one that kept alive and extended the empire's history of a multiethnic and multireligious society. That potential, too, was a principal casualty of the war. It spelled disaster for the people of the Ottoman Empire during the conflict and, arguably, ever since. The empire before 1914 was not "a multicultural paradise," as one scholar has reminded us (and no place could have been described as such in the early

twentieth century).[28] But its dissolution in 1923 did not put an end to the problems facing the people of the region. While there is no place for nostalgia—after all, the empire treated its people with so much violence—it is doubtful whether the states that replaced it resolved the challenges that confronted the people of the Ottoman Empire in 1914. The new states, too, proved largely unable to foster domestic peace, forge fair and representative government, deliver economic prosperity, and stay out of military conflict. Ethnic and religious difference, for one, remained a central feature of politics, and, in this respect at least, the empire arguably proved more capable in managing diverse populations than the states that took its place. If there can be no nostalgia for the empire, then neither can there be triumphalism over the arrival of the nation-states. Both state forms engendered mass violence.

Today, beyond a small group of specialists, the war as *experienced* in the Ottoman Empire remains largely unknown. In most Western histories, the war is typically portrayed as a peripheral stage on which the main actors were outsiders: Germans declaring jihad, Australians and New Zealanders perishing on the Gallipoli Peninsula, Sykes and Picot divvying up the Arab lands (into future British and French "mandates"), T. E. Lawrence lighting the spark for the so-called Arab Revolt, and Lord Balfour pledging British support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."[29] In the commonly accepted Western narrative, the one aspect of the war in which Ottomans themselves played an active role is the Armenian *Aghet* ("The Catastrophe") or the *Medz Yeghern* ("The Great Crime"), known to historians (although not to most Turks) as the Armenian Genocide. And yet, all of these wartime events—significant as they are—too often appear as separate dramas, isolated from each other rather than part of a single Ottoman story.[30] The empire, however, was at war as a whole, against the world and against itself.

For the people of the empire, disparate experiences of the war produced disparate legacies and memories. In the new ethnonational limbs of the old multiethnic empire, an imperial past became repackaged as national memory: the history of the empire became remembered as the history of the nation. For Armenians, the memory of the imperial past became subsumed under the great national trauma of genocide. For the empire's

Arab lands, the war was overshadowed by the era of Anglo-French colonial rule. For Kurds and Palestinians, in Kurdistan and Palestine, the war came to signify the birth of their statelessness. Amid these tragedies, for Turks, the war became remembered as a national triumph: the Ottomans lost an empire, the Turks won a nation.

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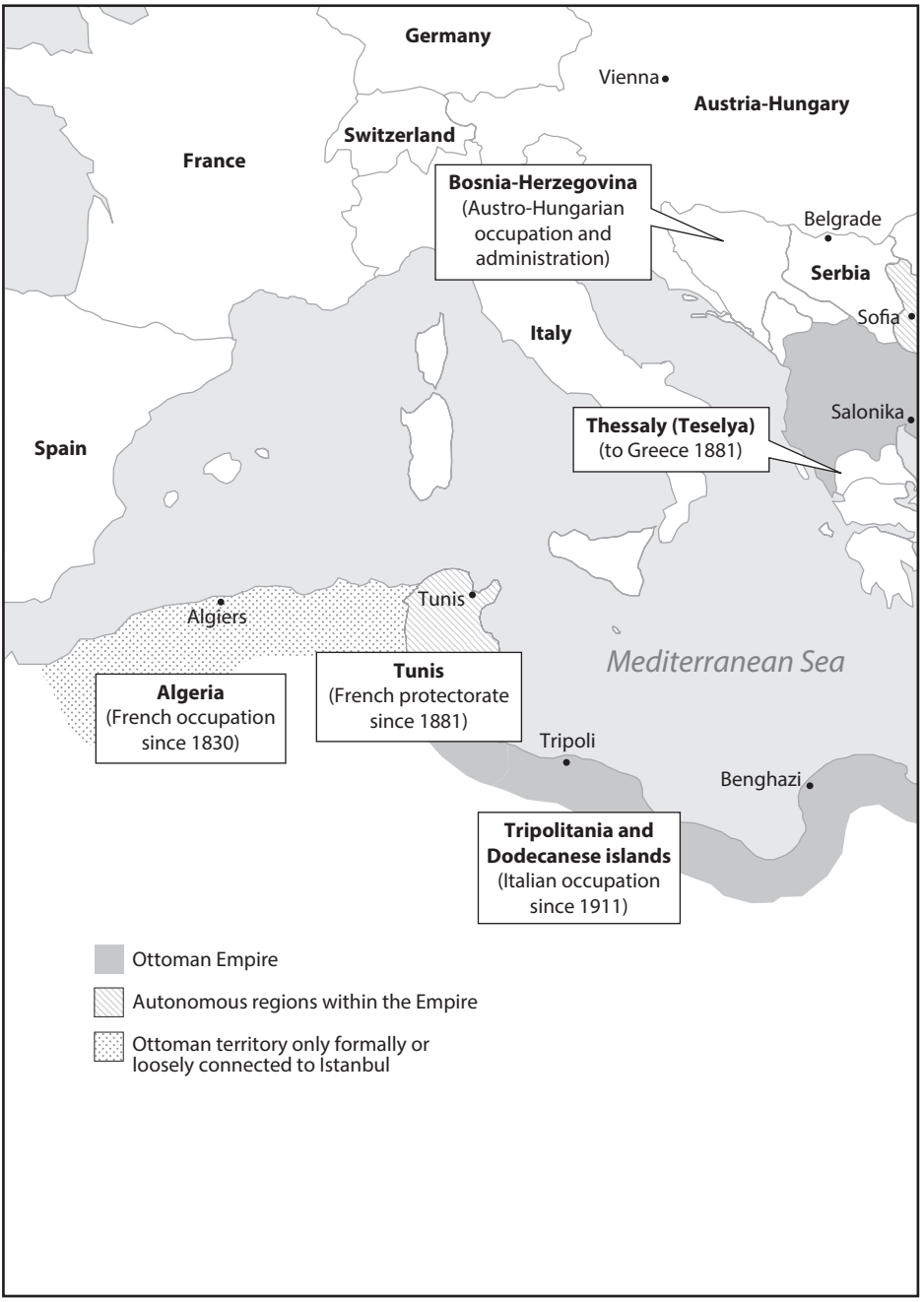
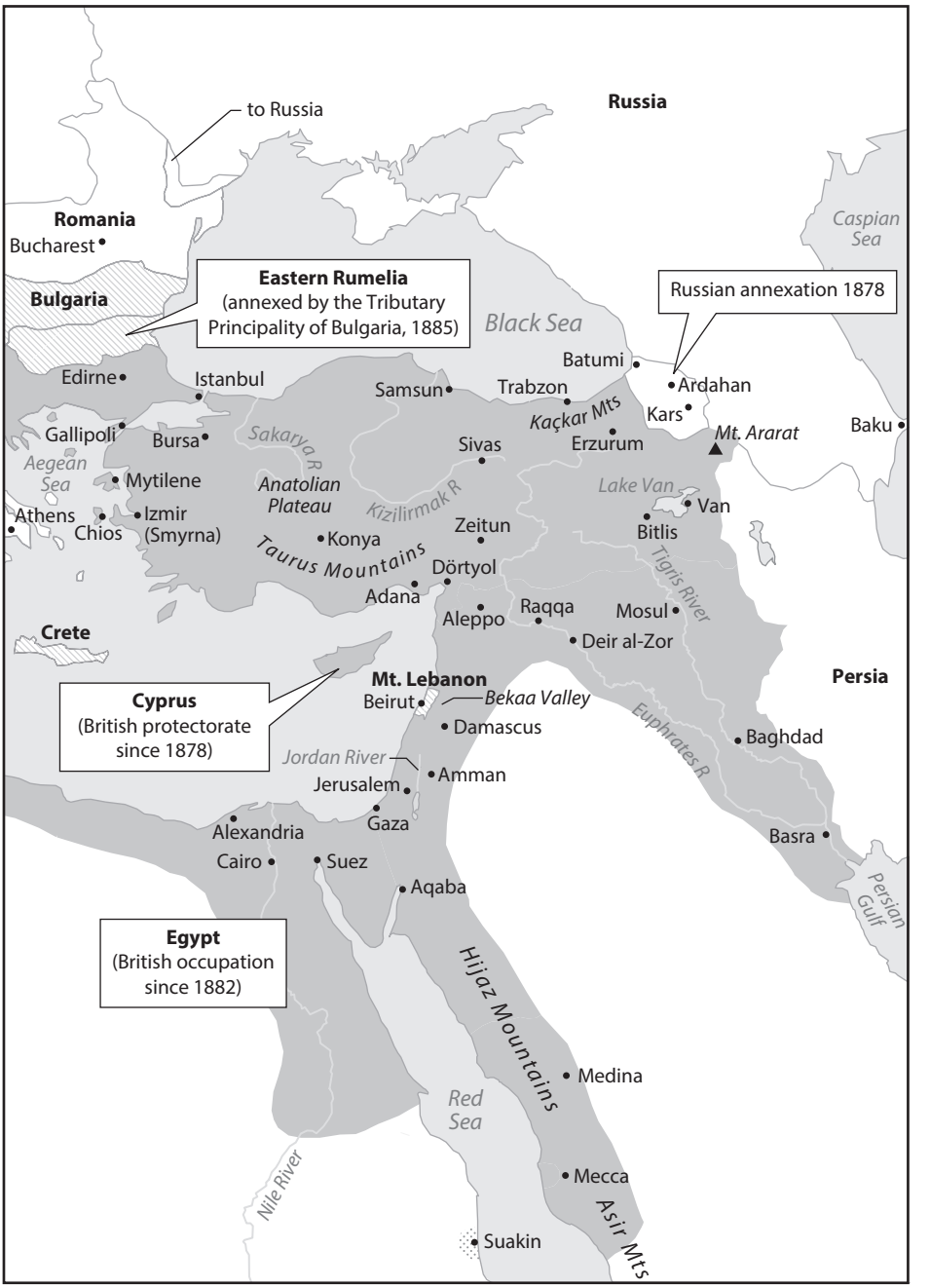
On October 29, 1914, in the dark of night, a small fleet of German and Ottoman ships crossed the Black Sea, converged on several Russian port cities—Novorossiysk, Odessa, and Sevastopol—and, without a declaration of war, opened fire. They sank the gunboat *Kubanetz* and the minelayer *Pruth* and took three Russian officers and eighty-three members of the crew prisoner. Interior Minister Talat—perhaps the single most powerful Ottoman wartime figure—then claimed, falsely, that Russia had shot first. "The lying is excellent," a German officer who participated in the raid recorded in his diary.[31]

The Ottoman government's exit from the war was equally stealthy. Four years later, almost to the day, on November 1, 1918, Talat and several other strongmen who had conducted the war, climbed quietly aboard the German torpedo boat *Ro1*, which sped north from Istanbul into the Black Sea. Talat and his comrades' plan, on reaching Odessa, was to disembark "incognito," as the report—marked "to be destroyed"—indicated.[32] The Ottoman leaders, once all-powerful, had become fugitives.

Huddled together on the deck of the *Ro1*, Talat and the top brass of the Ottoman wartime government—War Minister Enver, Fourth Army Commander Cemal, Trabzon's Governor Azmi, Police Chief Bedri, the intelligence operative Dr. Bahaeddin Şakir, the Committee of Union and Progress party secretary Midhat Şükrü, and the chief of its Central Committee, Dr. Nazım—contemplated their next move. Enver favored joining Bolshevik revolutionaries in Central Asia.[33] Talat urged a period of hiding in Europe, waiting for tempers to cool and dust to settle: "Justified or not," he growled, public sentiment stood against them, and they now faced arrest and trial for their wartime policies, including, according to the Entente (the governments of Britain, France, and Russia), the crime



MAP 1. The Ottoman Empire, 1878.



of "killing the empire's Armenian population."[34] Most of the men, and some of their wives, found temporary refuge in Berlin.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 tells the story of the Unionists' fight for sovereignty and the Ottoman Empire's entangled place in the global colonial order. Chapter 2 examines the social fissures that began bursting inside the empire, first slowly in 1914 and then rapidly under the weight of global war. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the Ottoman army's first major campaigns—the first an offensive into the Russian Caucasus, the second an attempted push across the Suez Canal into Egypt—and the domestic consequences of the failure of both. Chapter 4 explores the diminishing availability of food in the empire and the making of famine in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Chapter 5 begins with the first military deportations of Ottoman Armenians that morphed into the categorical and violent uprooting of the empire's entire civilian Christian Armenian population. Chapter 6 follows the thickening of opposition groups that sought to resist the heavy hand of Unionist rule.

It is to the war that destroyed the Ottoman Empire and gave rise to "the Middle East" that we now turn.

INDEX

Pages indicating maps, figures, and tables are shown in italics.