Middle East Critique

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccri20

The Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa and World War I

Yücel Yiğit

A Balıkesir University, Turkey

Published online: 23 May 2014.

To cite this article: Yücel Yiğit (2014) The Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa and World War I, Middle East Critique, 23:2, 157-174, DOI: 10.1080/19436149.2014.905080

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2014.905080

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
The*Teskilat-ı Mahsusa* and World War I

YÜCEL YIĞIT
Balıkesir University, Turkey

**ABSTRACT** This article seeks to answer four interrelated questions: What was the organizational nature of the *Teskilat-ı Mahsusa* (*TM*)? Was it an intelligence organization or a vigilante band?; What was the political and military context within which the organization evolved?; and What was the role of the organization in World War I? I argue that the TM evolved out of the revolutionary guerrilla activities in the Balkans and became a special force organization during World War I. It evolved in response to a semi-colonial and collapsing Ottoman state with little military capacity to protect its borders. The TM participated in a number of covert operations to instigate Islamic insurrections in India, Africa, and Russia, and its methods included the killing of Muslim as well as Christian opponents of the CUP government during World War I.

**KEY WORDS:** Armenians; Balkan Wars; Committee of Union and Progress; Enver Pasha; Ottoman Empire; *Teskilat-ı Mahsusa*; World War I

One hotly debated issue of World War I is the role of the Ottoman Empire’s *Teskilat-ı Mahsusa* (*TM*). Its activities have been exaggerated and mythologized either as a heroic organization that fought to save the state or as a killing machine that destroyed the Armenians. Vahakn Dadrian, a leading scholar of the Armenian genocide thesis, has argued that the TM was established to carry out the deportation and killing of the Armenians in Anatolia.1 In contrast, Guenter Lewy, who examined Dadrian’s work, concludes that the latter distorted the sources to promote his political position.2 Lewy argues that the TM did not have a major role in implementing the 1915 deportation of Armenians from eastern Anatolia or in the subsequent raids on the convoys of defenseless Armenians that resulted in many of them being killed. Hilmar Kaiser, an expert of the events of 1915, aptly argues:

One should stop thinking of the CUP [Committee of Union and Progress] as a kind of monolithic party. Research on the Armenians in WWI has tended to try to create the impression of a Turkey that was like a small version of Nazi Germany, with


© 2014 Editors of Middle East Critique
a single party and with a poor man’s SS named Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa. I think this is totally wrong; one has to study the Turkish-Armenian case on its own. 3

Other than journalistic publications since the 1990s, academic works, both in English and Turkish, on the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa are scarce due to the paucity of documents on the organization and limited access to Ottoman government archives. Despite the limited information on the TM, there are two main perceptions about the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa. The first depicts it as a modern intelligence agency that was established amid the modernization efforts of the late Ottoman Empire, especially after the establishment of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) regime in 1908. According to this view, the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa was the early foundation of the National Intelligence Organization (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilati [MIT]) of modern Turkey. This view treats the TM as if it were an early example of the modern European intelligence agency, such as the Secret Intelligence Service of Britain. It views the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa as an official and organized body that had a bureaucratic and hierarchical structure along with a specific boundary of operation and mission within the Ottoman state. 4

The second approach to Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa is that it was a çete (vigilante band). According to this view, the TM was a semi-official and autonomous security structure aiming to protect the state from internal and external threats. This view treats the TM as an underground, unorganized, unscrutinized and loosely structured body with patriotic members who were willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of saving the state. However, since the conceptualization of the organization as a çete has negative connotations as well, it also refers to a group of unruly (başbozuk) adventurers who pursued their self-interests outside any set of legal boundaries, activities which contradicted the stated interests of the organization. 5

The common problem in this dichotomous approach to understanding and conceptualizing the TM is that the terms ‘intelligence’ and ‘band’ are considered mutually exclusive as if an intelligence organization cannot adopt a structure and strategies of a ‘band’ and as if a ‘band’ cannot function as an intelligence collecting body. This mutually exclusive understanding is perhaps due to a more important problem: Scholarship has de-contextualized the TM from its own space and time by disregarding the political, military, and socio-economic conditions of the Ottoman Empire within which the TM emerged and evolved.

In his dissertation, Safi provides an excellent analysis of the TM by sparing the organization from conceptual anachronisms and framing the organization within an Ottoman context. 6 In placing the question of what is the TM at the center of his analysis,

6 P. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization.
Safi highlights certain characteristics of the organization. He recognizes that the organization functioned as both an intelligence organization and as a vigilante ‘band.’ He asserts that the organization gathered intelligence to aid its own operations instead of feeding intelligence to outside sources. The organization also disseminated psychological propaganda to win the hearts and minds of Muslim communities in enemy territories, and it engaged in unconventional military ‘techniques[,] includ[ing] raids, ambushes, hit and run, sabotage, etc.’ In the light of this conceptual clarification, I argue that the TM as an official state body mostly was involved in intelligence gathering duties while the TM as the strongest instrument of the Committee of Union and Progress mostly functioned as a vigilante group involving itself in raids, developing and supporting counter-insurgency strategies through organizing local populations against enemy forces, and undertaking counter-terrorism initiatives and assassination attempts against opponents. However, Safi fails to unpack this dual nature of the TM and ignores the context within which the TM emerged and evolved.

The typical translation of Teşkilat-i Mahsusa as Special Organization also needs to be deconstructed. Philip Stoddard was one of the earliest scholars to translate TM as ‘Special Organization’ back in the early 1960s. He justified doing so because the three leading members of the CUP (Enver, Cemal, and Talat Pashas) each established their own organizations, and the TM was Enver’s enterprise. Thus, Stoddard refers to the ‘personal’ or ‘private’ aspect—mahsusa—of the TM. While Teşkilat can be translated literally as ‘organization,’ translating ‘mahsusa’ as ‘special’ gives a different connotation than translating it as ‘private’ or ‘personal’. Thus, it is perhaps problematic even to try to translate Teşkilat-i Mahsusa into other languages, for this decontextualizes its meaning from its own space and time within the Ottoman context. For this reason, this study prefers to use TM instead of translating it as ‘Special Organization.’

Overall, the question of what the TM was in terms of its nature, organization, and tactics is important. Earlier scholarship had ignored this question, but Safi’s and Stoddard’s studies shed light on this issue. Yet, these studies focus mostly on the conceptual, and perhaps methodological, weaknesses in the literature. A more fundamental and crucial question, which is more theoretical than conceptual, needs to be explored as well: Why and under what conditions do state elites decide to establish organizations such as the TM? What would this tell us about the nature of such a state with regard to its capacity and power? Without raising this fundamental theoretical question, deeper contextualization of the TM would be unsuccessful. Turning attention to the concept of ‘state capacity’ not only would help us understand the nature of the TM but also improve our knowledge of the founding psyche of TM within the context of a weakening state and state power. Is it the weak or the strong state that seeks to establish such an organization upon formal and informal legs? Or is the formation of such organizations a result of an ineffective state? Placing the TM within this theoretical framework would lead us to better insights in understanding and explaining the emergence of the organization and its evolution over time. We also would be able to understand its background, mentality and discourse, which were built on ‘saving and protecting the state’ in reaction to domestic peripheral

---

7 Ibid, p.136.
8 Both Stoddard and Safi translate Teşkilat-i Mahsusa as Special Organization.
9 Stoddard, The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, 1911 to 1918, p.1.
insurgencies on the one hand, and external intervention into the domestic affairs of the Ottoman state on the other hand. While the first threat caused traumatic territorial losses for the empire, the second threat caused the loss of both internal and external sovereignty for the Ottoman state.

In the light of these questions, this study has four interrelated arguments. First, it argues that without understanding the komitaci counter-state insurgency experiences of the Ottoman state in the Balkans prior to the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, understanding and explaining the background psyche of the TM would be incomplete. Second, this study turns attention to the state of the Ottoman Empire especially after its defeat in the Russian War of 1877–1878 and the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. Since the Ottoman state was in decline and came to the terms of the failed state in the post-1878 era, placing the TM within this context of the Ottoman state would reveal the foundational reasons of the TM. Thirdly and most particularly, this study specifically looks at the relationship between the CUP and the TM within a conceptual framework. Lastly, it will elaborate and critique the arguments of some scholars who assert that the TM played a major role in the massacres of Armenians during World War I. The purpose here is to establish the nature of the relationship between the CUP and the TM by analyzing the relationship between the Unionist fedais (self-sacrificing volunteers) and the TM in particular. Overall, while the TM fulfilled diverse and sometimes conflicting functions due to the changing circumstances of the state and needs of the political elite, the organization mostly functioned as special forces to foment insurrection against imperialist European powers, or to prepare the local Muslim population for guerilla fighting, and also to raise Muslim political consciousness against colonialism in Libya, Afghanistan, the Central Asian khanates, as well as against the British-led insurgency in Arabia and Russian activities in the Caucasus. In an attempt to shed light on these arguments, this study makes use of documents in the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul, the Republican Archives in Ankara, the ATASE Archives of the Turkish Chief of Staff, and relevant secondary sources.

Establishing Ottoman Intelligence Institutions and the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa Mindset

The Ottoman Empire since its inception often resorted to the service of certain entities and groups to carry out intelligence gathering duties, particularly those geared toward military purposes. Yet, this modus operandi obviously lacked the institutionalization that came to characterize intelligence agencies in the twentieth century. The first steps toward institutionalizing intelligence services were taken during the Tanzimat period (1839–1878), when reformist statesmen restructured nearly all the state institutions in the Ottoman Empire in a bid to increase bureaucratic efficiency.

During the Tanzimat period, the first and important step toward creating an efficient form of intelligence service was taken with the creation of Hafiyelik Teşkilati (HT, the Organization for Espionage) under the control of the Zaptiye Nezareti (ZN, Ottoman Police Ministry). This first secret intelligence service, with expressed interest in homeland

---

security, was established during the reign of Sultan Abdulmecit (1839–1861). Yet the arbitrary operations of the HT, such as random arrests, detentions and ever-increasing lawless methods necessitated some changes to revamp the image of the secret service. Accordingly, in order to establish a European style secret intelligence service in the Ottoman Empire, Sefels Soldenhof, a secretary of the Ottoman Embassy in Paris, was tasked to investigate the organizational structure of the French intelligence service. Based on his report, the secret service was reorganized, and Civinis Efendi, on the recommendation of the British ambassador, Stratford Canning, became the first head of the TM. 12

Although some scholars claim that Sultan Abdulaziz (1861–1876) neglected the HT, Sultan Abdulhamit II (1876–1909) deemed it crucial to the success of his rule, leading to its revival as the Yıldız Teşkilati (YT), or the Yildiz Intelligence Service. 13 However, after the CUP came to power, the Yildiz Intelligence Service was abolished and its archives were destroyed. It should be noted that the reason behind the destruction of the organization was not simple hostility toward the reign of Sultan Abdulhamit II. Rather, there was concern about the potential leakage of intelligence information, which could reveal the secret relations of the Yildiz Intelligence Service with people who were close to the CUP or influential in military and politics. To overcome this fear and to eliminate the possibility of exposing information about the activities of spies, the YT archives were set on fire in the backyard of the Harbiye Nezareti [Ministry of War]. The destruction of these files prevents researchers from gaining reliable and better information, at least in some sense, about YT activities. After abolishing the YT, it intelligence-gathering duties temporarily were transferred to the Emniyet-i Umumiye [Police Department], directed by Miralay Galip Bey. 14 The CUP members, influenced by German military institutions and culture, considered the existence and operation of a secret intelligence agency as vitally important for successful military operations, and they quickly decided to establish a new organization, leading to the formation of the TM. This new organization was different in its institutional norms, operational strategies, and the close relations among its members, all of whom shared the same goal of saving the state and had been socialized within the insurgency and counter-insurgency context of the Balkans.

The TM functioned more like a ‘special forces’ unit than a typical intelligence service. Also, the functions of the TM varied according to changing dynamics and the needs of the state in the Balkans and the Caucasus. The TM’s duties ranged from intelligence gathering to local militia activities, such as preparing the groundwork for easier maneuvers of Ottoman armies in enemy territory, creating çetes to initiate guerilla warfare, or simply gathering information about the enemy forces. In an attempt to improve its operational capabilities, the TM obtained financial and technical support from German intelligence services. Unlike the YT under the Hamidian regime, however, the TM came under the
control of many individuals with a komitacı mindset.15 A komitacı was a member of one of the counter-state guerrilla organizations that emerged in the Balkans after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and set the pattern for the national-independence struggles in the Balkans. The komitacı repertoires of activities punctuated the political struggles in the Macedonian insurgency, and these radicalized revolutionary groups with separatist intentions formed secret and irregular political-military networks to undermine state authority. These revolutionary networks freely resorted to tactics of rebellion, assassination, and political organization of local groups to fight against Ottoman rule. These tactics, when deployed on behalf of Ottoman rule, contributed positively to Ottoman war efforts as evidenced during the Tripolitanian War of 1911–12, the Balkan War of 1912–13, the First World War, and the Turkish War of Independence (1919–23). Due to this komitacı mindset, TM strategies cannot be considered as solely an intelligence agency.

**Contextualizing the CUP and the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa**

The CUP’s ‘identity was informed by the fear that the Ottoman state would collapse and the Muslims would be colonized by major European powers.’16 This CUP fear, no doubt, was embedded in the experiences of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies in the Balkans, especially after the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, which created an international political system based on the (presumed) principle of national homogenization.17 After 1878, the rise of the Balkan insurgent komitacıs against the Ottoman state, such as the Albanian komitacıs in 1880, the Macedonian komitacıs in 1896, along with other counter-state insurgencies such as that among Armenians in 1896, convinced the Ottoman military and political elites that conventional war-making strategies would be insufficient to fight them.18 Thus, the Ottoman counter-insurgency tactics imitated the counter-state komitacı organization and mindset that involved unconventional military activism along with a loosely-knit network of volunteer fighters with self-sacrificing capacities (fedai). The early CUP members that saving the state would be possible through a komitacı-style struggle.

However, imitating the Balkan komitacı struggle as a means of saving the state was also related directly to the weakening capacity of the Ottoman Empire in military and economic affairs. After the Treaty of Berlin, the Balkan insurgencies exposed the Ottoman state’s military and economic weakness in trying to control revolutionary circles across the Balkans and in the Caucasus. As a result of violent activities by these popular komitacı grups, its

---


18 E. Erickson, Template for Destruction.
authority, and the the fear of complete disintegration became the major source of concern for the state elite. Yet, the Ottoman state had very limited financial and military resources to soothe this existential threat. Overall, the Treaty of Berlin, as Hakan Yavuz underlines:

triggered a series of processes that led to the demise of the Ottoman Empire by weakening its institutions, undermining its legitimacy, and creating an indefensible territory in the Balkans and Anatolia. Moreover, the treaty exposed Ottoman weaknesses and encouraged peripheral minorities to use them as an opportunity to carve out a state of their own. This created a sense of anxiety among Muslim population over the future of the state and encouraged the search for a new source of legitimacy, which resulted in the construction of a Muslim-only nation.19

If this background context of the Ottoman state and society in the post-1878 period (which did not change during the rule of Abdulhamit II) is not understood, then any analysis of the TM and the nature of its relationship with the CUP would be incomplete. If the Ottoman state had been strong enough, in a Weberian sense, to maintain the legitimate use of violence in its own hands, then CUP leaders would not have embraced either the komitacı tradition or the TM. Once the logic of a security organization using komitacı tactics had become acceptable, recruitment into the TM was very inclusive, including even prisoners, because the organization relied heavily on volunteer participation.20 From 1878 until its demise, the Ottoman Empire was arguably what some scholars would term a ‘failed state.’ Those academics (who) write about ‘failed states’ contend that are unable ‘to control territory, borders, and internal legal order and security, and lack the capacity or will to provide services to the citizenry (typically due to some kind of large-scale institutional collapse).’21 The Ottoman Empire after the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) lacked the power to provide internal security or defend itself against external interventions. This is why a combination of fear, disorder, and secrecy in the struggle against internal and external threats shaped the CUP psyche in general and that of the TM in particular. If we ignore the prevailing political and military context in which the komitacı mindset emerged, we cannot understand the dual nature of the organization (acting as both an intelligence organization and a vigilante group). In conclusion, the TM ‘was the anti-imperialist resistance structure of the weak . . . Ottoman state that had four goals: organizing guerilla warfare (gayri nizami harb) against occupying forces, preparing Muslim communities behind enemy lines for rebellion, and collecting intelligence for the purposes of building the military and, if necessary, assassinating those whom it deemed to be a threat to the security of the state.’22

**Making sense of the Teskilat-ı Mahsusa within the CUP framework**

The CUP’s Balkan branch took over the political decision-making apparatus and shaped its secondary institutions such as the TM. In other words, understanding the TM requires

---

19 M. H. Yavuz, Warfare and Nationalism, pp. 49–50.
20 P. Safi, The Ottoman Special Organization, p. 143.
22 M. H. Yavuz, The Politics of Security and the Teskilat-ı Mahsusa, unpublished manuscript, a copy of which the author provided to me.
the understanding of the context of the Balkans and the CUP structure and its self-defined function as the savior of the state and the liberator of the lost territories. As its organization grew in scope, the CUP naturally ran into difficulties in controlling the actions of, and the relations among, its members. As a result, the Merkez-i Umumi (The Central Committee) in Salonika devised some measures to enable the coordination of CUP activities and to regulate the relations among its members. In the event of disobedience, for instance, the committee usually threatened the member in question with assassination, reminding him of the oath of obedience he took before becoming a member of the committee. Yet, such practices fell short of solving the extant discipline problems. Therefore, the CUP established within its ranks a secret organization called ‘fedai’—that is, volunteers ready to sacrifice their lives for the committee. These fedais all believed that the Ottoman state was in existential danger, along with the Muslim presence in Anatolia, and it was only the CUP that could save the state and the Muslims from total annihilation. The Central Committee chose the fedais, whose practices played important roles overall, particularly since: (1) They controlled and regulated those who earlier had acted independently of the Central Committee; and (2) they spread fear and terror among the non-members. While the idea of the fedai drew its inspiration from the Balkan komitacı practices, which were characterized by their clandestine cell structure and violent activities, the post-Balkan environment played a formative role in the TM’s evolution. This idea of establishing such a secret service agency was rooted in the experiences of the founder of the organization, Enver Pasha, who understood the significance of a komitacı-like structure from his armed struggle with fellow soldiers in the Balkans. Thus, the Balkan counter-insurgency experience formed both a cognitive map of action and the identity of the TM recruits.

These incredibly skilled cadres of TM officials shared similar experiences in the Balkans, and they also shared the same belief that the European powers were determined to end the Ottoman state. This perception of the existential threat brought these young men together ‘to save the state.’ Accordingly, they actively engaged in trying to protect the Ottoman state from all major instances of external intervention that progressively was weakening the capacity of government institutions. These events included: The 1908 Balkan crisis, which resulted in the lost of Bulgaria, Crete, and Bosnia; the Albanian rebellion (1910); the Italian invasion of and war on Libya (1911); the Balkan War (1912–1913); the reconquest of Edirne from Bulgaria; and the establishment of the Provisional Government of Western Thrace (Garbi Trakya Hükümet-i Muvakkatesi). The TM inner circle—Enver Pasha, Suleyman Askeri Bey, Kuscubası Esref, Sapancağı Hakkı, Kara Kemal, İzmitli Mumtaz, Yakup Cemil and Omer Naci—all had crucial roles in the Balkan Wars and the Bâb-ı Ali Raid (January 23, 1913). Enver Pasha shaped the TM’s inner dynamics. The defeat in the Balkan Wars forced the Ottoman military to go through a major transformation and modernization process. Since the German military structure informed these modernization projects, Enver Pasha wanted the Ottoman military to have its own intelligence and counter-intelligence units just like the German military. Moreover, the Ottomans’ catastrophic defeat in the Balkan War forced the Ottoman military to realize the importance of military intelligence and counter-insurgency.

Enver Pasha’s directives established the TM on November 30, 1913. The TM also was called Umur-i Sarkiye Dairesi [Department of eastern affairs] or Sube-i Mahsusa in official documents. Despite the fact that there is an official date of its foundation, the leadership and active members of the TM clearly had been active in earlier war-zones, carrying out counter-insurgency work by organizing local people to resist occupation. Due to these activities by key TM members even before its official foundation, some scholars claim that the TM was established much earlier than 1908. However, this debate over the foundation date indicates that the TM as an organization evolved out of earlier komitaci practices. It was created to check and control the counter-insurgency strategies of the state. Moreover, the weakening Ottoman state realized the value of komitaci-like organizations for defending the homeland. Because key TM members were active during the First Constitutional era, some scholars have claimed—inaccurately—that it was operational during the Tripolitanian War of 1911–1912 and the Balkan War. In this regard, they view the CUP’s seizure of power as the immediate context for the TM’s foundation. The name of the organization first was suggested by veterinarian Rasim Bey, and the headquarters of the organization was located in the district of Nuri Osmaniye on Şeref Street. The TM’s expenditures were funded through discretionary allocation, but there were also instances when funds were collected directly from the public due to the lack of state funds. For instance, correspondence from the Ministry of Interior Affairs to the Vilayet of Karesi on November 15, 1915 noted that 283,104 kurus collected in Balikesir by the Müdafaa-i Milliye Cemiyeti for the TM was not yet sent to the organization, and the ministry wanted to know the reasons for the delay. Other documents suggest some provinces sent aid in kind. When the funds were sent late, Ottoman correspondence to local provinces had a harsh tone of warning. For instance, the deputy to the governor of Erzurum, Cemal Bey, said, ‘TM cannot operate on mere promises,’ it needed funds to function.

Even though the organization served legally at home and abroad, it also conducted some covert operations in the name of the CUP. The TM was the official intelligence agency of the Ottoman Empire during CUP rule, but it was also an underground organization that carried out the clandestine missions of the CUP. However, the CUP seemed to have wielded direct influence on the TM, particularly since the organization was run by the CUP’s top decision-making circle, including Dr Nazım, Dr Bahattin Şakir, Atlı Kamci, Rıza and Police Chief [Emniyet Umumi Müdürü] Aziz Bey. The final decision always was given by Enver Pasha despite the internal power struggle within the opposition groups against him. Talat Pasha, in particular, wanted to influence the TM. For example, he wanted CUP officials with military backgrouds to be transferred to the TM so that the CUP would feature more civilian representation. Upon the failure of the armed wing, Talat

24 M. Balçılolu (2011) Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa ve World War I 165
26 H. Pehlivanlı, Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa, p. 286.
27 BOA DH. KMS. 35- 22/2; BOA DH. I.UM. 92-2.
28 BOA DH. I.UM. E.5-/99.
29 BOA DH. ŞFR. 444/9.
30 P. Stoddard, The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, 1911 to 1918.
Pasha came to the belief that the TM should engage in more civil political measures. However, Enver Pasha and Bahattin Sakir Bey argued that the armed wing was necessary for the defense of the homeland. In this regard, Talat Pasha had limited power over the TM’s daily activities. During World War I, it was the Minister of Defense who was in full control of TM activities, and the main function of the organization was on the war-front, not the home-front. Talat Pasha’s relatively passive role in TM during World War I also was rooted in his civilian background, particularly when compared with Enver Pasha. The latter, coming from a military background, was still giving directions to the TM when he was abroad and expected its operatives to be loyal to him just as if he were to return to Anatolia very soon.

This civil and military divide went back to the Bab-ı Ali Raid of 1913, which resulted not only in the capture of the central government but also in the establishment of the TM out of the CUP’s former secret body. After the Bab-ı Ali Raid, those coming from a military background, headed by Enver Bey, began to gain the upper hand among the CUP cadres at the clear expense of the civilian faction. Thus, while Said Halim Pasha, Talat Pasha, Kara Kemal and Cavit Bey continued to represent the CUP’s civilian wing, the military elites began to be the major decision makers.

Since before the TM’s official establishment in 1913, its key members had been active in the CUP as its underground cadre, and they played a number of political roles during the crisis periods. Some scholars also argue that the TM was the CUP’s clandestine ‘hand,’ and it was used to silence its opponents and keep the CUP in power. Indeed, before the revolution of 1908, those who would become key TM members carried out numerous counter-insurgency operations in the Balkans to defend state authority and undermine insurgency strategies of revolutionary komitaci circles. With the restoration of the constitution, the underground cadres had roles in the assassinations of opposition figures and became actively involved in the 1913 coup. They played similar roles in the organization of the active resistance in Tripolitania against the Italian invasion, in the reconquest of Edirne from Bulgarian forces, and in the establishment of the Provisional Government of Western Thrace. Relevantly, the safety measures and precautions put in place by Enver Pasha and Kuscubasi Esref in the chaotic atmosphere right after the assassination of Mahmud Sevket Pasha on June 11, 1913, which was carried out by members of the Freedom and Unity Party [Hürriyet ve İtilaf Partisi] six months after the Bab-ı Ali raid, once again illustrated the unique secret intelligence capacities of the Unionists. These examples also clearly show that the CUP’s underground section and the key TM leaders were the same people. Thus, the TM was the secret hand of the CUP to be used against its domestic opponents and also a special forces-like, semi-military structure to defend the state and homeland. Tarik Zafer Tunaya, a leading scholar of the CUP, described the TM as an institution closely connected with the CUP:

The TM has a special place in the history of the CUP. It represents the key characteristic of the CUP members as komitaci, self-sacrificing, activist to carry out cover operation, and their power of imagination. Thus, due to these characteristics,

---

the TM was unified with the CUP and played a critical role in those events that shaped the fate of the CUP. The TM had an aura of mystery and it also bore the stamp of the experiences in the Balkans.  

Indeed, the entire TM membership was comprised of young patriotic military officers who had fought together in the Balkans and organized local resistance movements against Balkan komitacis. Also, needless to say, the common characteristic among all these officers was that of being pro-CUP in orientation. Thus, the defining characteristics of Balkan komitaci defined an ordinary member of the TM as well. They were very successful in counter-insurgency tactics but had very little training on how to gather critical intelligence. Esref Kuscubası argued, ‘coordination, ideology, and fundraising rarely interested these members of the TM. They were men of action and did what they were ordered to do.’ In fact, TM members had had almost no proper education, and they often carried out active military service instead of undertaking any training in intelligence gathering or analysis. Yet, TM operative units were formed in different parts of the country beginning in December 1913, and these were mostly voluntary groups that included both military officers and civilians who were pro-CUP and had some shared political experience against local opposition groups. Thus, the boundary between the CUP and the TM was not thin and in some cases did not exist at all. Trusted local CUP members would constitute the local branch of the TM. Thus, the TM drew its manpower from CUP volunteers who had previous experiences in the CUP as well as from military personnel who had been referred by higher ranking officers. For instance, the undersecretary of the Ministry of War, Mahmut Kamil Bey, sent a letter to the Ministry of Interior Affairs that the regiment commander, Bekir Sıdkı Efendi, could not cover his daily expenses and requested help so that he could begin commercial activities and cover his expenses. While there were instances of high-level intervention to secure the welfare of TM members, at times there also existed certain problems that emerged in the execution of the TM missions on a local level. For instance, according to a document sent from the Ministry of Mail, Telegraph and Telephone to the Ministry of the Interior, the telegraphs that were sent by TM commanders no longer would be accepted by the Ministry of Mail, Telegraph and Telephone. It is important to note that this document referred to the TM as a militia corps attached to the Local Governments [Hükümet-i Mahalliye]. These exchanges indicate that the TM was a state institution as much as it had deep connections in society via the CUP. It was a ‘boundary security structure’ between state and society, between the formal and informal. It was a special unit of the state as much as a CUP band.

34 ATASE Arşivi, K.1844, D.78, F.72; ATASE Arşivi, K.1846, D.43, F.79.
37 BOA DH. İUM. E-103-44/2.
38 BOA DH. İUM. E-5-24.
The close relationship between the CUP and the TM also can be observed in broader economic policies. Both collaborated to ease the detrimental impact of capitulations and to nationalize the Ottoman economy. In this regard, Kara Kemal Bey mobilized the handicraftsmen in Istanbul and established firms that ran through local funding. Celal Bayar, who served in the TM branch in Izmir, similarly sought to nationalize the domestic economy of Izmir. Even though both Kara Kemal Bey and Celal Bayar were primarily Unionists, they were also responsible for commercial operations in the TM.

A close examination of the TM’s internal structure reveals that the organization was under the control of the CUP’s inner circle. Thus, the TM’s inner circle also controlled the CUP’s central committee. These men sought to save the Ottoman Empire and also to support anti-imperialist movements in the Muslim world. One of the TM’s fundamental missions was to organize an Islamic rebellion against the British Empire in India, Afghanistan, and Iran. Externally, Omer Naci and Ruseni Beyler were assigned to Iran; Suleyman Seffik, Rauf Orbay and Ubeidullah Bey were assigned to Afghanistan; and Bahattin Sakir and Riza Bey were assigned to the Caucasus to struggle against the Russians. Internally, Cemal Azmi Bey, the former mutasarrif [sub-governor] of Rize (who was a.k.a. 'the cruel sub-governor' i.e., sopalı mutasarrıf), was assigned as the governor of Trabzon province, which Russian forces had invaded in 1915. Since these CUP fedais functioned in the sphere of influence of the Third Army units, there often were instances of confrontations and shows of power between the two structures. For instance, Bahatttin Sakir Bey, as the CUP inspector, was in conflict with the Commander of the Third Army, Vehip Pasha. In this regard, the relationship between the Empire’s officials and the TM members was both contentious and collaborative.

After Talat Pasha’s cabinet resigned, the new government under Ahmet Izzet Pasha signed the Mudros Armistice with Britain on October 30, 1918. The CUP leadership left the country for Germany on November 1, 1918. After the surrender, the opposition in Istanbul wanted the CUP leaders to be court-martialed, hoping such such a trial would cleanse the state institutions of accusations that they were involved in the Armenian massacres and also win sympathy for the Ottoman state at the Paris Peace Conference. In fact, in November 1918 the Fifth Office of the Ottoman Parliament interrogated CUP central committee members to account for the failures during the war and explain the TM’s role in the deportation and massacres of Armenians. Minister of Interior Fethi Bey informed the deputies that it was not only Christians but also many Muslims who suffered, and that these Muslim communities suffered even more than Armenians, Greeks and some Arabs. Even after the capital was occupied by British forces, some Muslim deputies challenged the description of events presented by minority (Christian) deputies, and the former defended government policies during the war as militarily necessary measures that were taken against those Christian minorities who openly had collaborated with the enemy.

40 BOA DH. I˙.UM. 29-43/1.
forces, especially Russia. Deputy Ilyas Sami Bey of Mus challenged the events of 1915 as a one-sided killing, insisting instead that there was a ‘mutual killing’ on both sides. Ilyas Sami Bey briefly summarized the destructive nature of Armenian nationalism and then briefed deputies about the Armenian uprising in Van that had resulted in the massacre of 70 percent of the Muslim population there. He identified the Van rebellion as the turning point in the Armenian question and argued that after the massacre in Van, a cycle of violence went on until the end of the war. He argued that not a single state, even Britain in the case of Ireland, could tolerate rebellion or collaboration with the enemy. However, Deputy Matyos Nalbantyan of Kozan challenged Ilyas Sami Bey, saying that the state cannot target entire ethnic groups due to the acts of some komitaci groups.

Prime Minister Said Halim Pasha’s testimony in the investigation is a striking example that gives a picture of the revolving doors of ‘secrecy’ and ‘denial’ in the intelligence service. When asked about the vicious attacks triggered by the TM, he replied: ‘These issues have nothing to do with the Bâb-ı Ali and the government … In other words, the government had no say in the decision-making process on these matters.’ Similarly answering another question about whether he knew about the TM’s activities: ‘I learned about it after all that has happened.’ And then he said: ‘I insistently and repeatedly asked Enver Pasha to abolish the TM immediately, since it was involved in illegal and unacceptabled activities. There was no point in asking for explanations from the Ministry since it either did not answer the questions or brushed the matter aside.’ Thus Said Halim Pasha noted his lack of influence over the TM, even though he was Prime Minister.

Other prominent and respected political figures whom the Meclis-i Mebusan interrogated included men such as Minister of Justice İbrahim Bey, Minister of Education Şükru Bey, Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Nesimi Bey, President of the Meclis-i Mebusan Halil Mentese Bey, and Minister of Finance Cavit Bey. They all asserted those issues pertaining to the deportations and massacres in the war zones were a military matter and therefore such questions should be addressed to those concerned. Cavit Bey noted in his defense: ‘the allegations made by your office against the government are completely false because these matters are not the products of governmental decision making.’ These examples demonstrate that the CUP ministers who were serving in the Council of Ministers [Meclis-i Vükelâ] since the official date of the TM’s establishment either did not have much information about the TM or they refused to acknowledge the relationship between it and the government. All of these ministers argued that initially they were not aware of the TM’s existence but that they had tried to abolish the TM once they had learned about the organization. While they did not accept any responsibility for the TM’s activities, they kept pointing out that the Ministry of War [Harbiye Nezareti], especially Enver Pasha, was responsible for the TM’s activities. These former ministers were not wrong to blame Enver Pasha, because as the Deputy Commander-in-Chief he was the sole official who established the TM and who later ordered its disbandment. In effect, the TM’s legal existence was limited to his term in office.

44 Ibid, p. 115.
46 Ibid. p. 161.
48 Ibid, p. 175.
However, in the subsequent trials of the Divan-ı Harbi Òrﬁ (Courts-Martial) in 1919, some CUP members argued the exact opposite of what the former cabinet ministers had claimed about the TM. These military courts, which the new government established after the Ottoman defeat in World War I, accused the CUP government of serious crimes, including the massacres of both Greeks and Armenians. Under pressure from the victorious powers, especially Britain, the government decided to convene military tribunals for CUP leaders accused of killing Ottoman Christians. In these politically charged courts, some officials tried to link the TM to the killings of Christians. The public remained very sceptical of these politically charged courts and many believed that the trials were motivated by personal vengeance and also instigated by British officials. Following the Greek occupation of Izmir, many people turned against these political trials that functioned under the British command.

Defense lawyer Celalettin Arif Bey argued that the TM was an Ottoman imperial special force outfit, and its personnel were civil servants as well as military officers who were paid by the government. Likewise, Mithat Sukru Bleda, Ziya Gokalp, Cevad Bey and Atıf Bey all proclaimed that the TM was supported, directed and paid by the government. It is not surprising that Sadrazam Talat Pasha, Mithat Sukru Bleda, Ziya Gokalp, Cevad Bey and Atıf Bey, all wrote in their memoirs that the TM was an official state organization. Also, for example, Cevad Bey, in his defense, described the existence of CUP members in both government offices and on the battlefront as national service based on patriotism. He flatly denied the alleged link between a secret underground organization and the CUP.

Dadrian, who established Armenian genocide studies, described the TM as the CUP’s main instrument to destroy the Armenians. Dadrian argues that the TM’s mission ‘was to deploy in remote areas of Turkey’s interior and to ambush and destroy convoys of Armenian deportees’ since its ‘principal duty was the execution of the Armenian genocide.’ However, Stoddard’s important 1963 PhD dissertation, which is based on extensive research of Ottoman documents about TM activities, rejects this characterization of the TM and argues instead that it operated like a special forces outfit that acted against separatism and Western imperialist expansionism. In fact, the archives of the Turkish General Staff Military History and Strategic Studies Directorate in Ankara [Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Genelkurmay Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlıgı Arşivleri]

---

53 Koçak, Hey historian, speak as much as your documents allow you!, pp. 178–189.
56 P. H. Stoddard, The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, pp. 1–2, 52–58.
has published since 2005 numerous documents that support Stoddard’s conclusion.\textsuperscript{57} For example, according to the 27-volume study of the Turkish Army in World War I, there were five TM groups on the Russian-Ottoman front. Yucel Guclu treats the TM as ‘somewhat equivalent to the Ottoman special forces, for the period 1914–22.’\textsuperscript{58} Indeed, on the basis of an eight-volume publication of the ATESE [Chief of Staff Military History and Strategic Research Archives], one could conclude that the TM acted on many occasions as the special forces of the empire and was hardly involved in the deportation of the Armenians. These military reports are important documents for understanding the prevailing conditions of the empire during World War I. Justin McCarthy, a leading scholar who has utilized the Ottoman archives extensively, argues that the ‘reports of Ottoman soldiers and officials were not political documents or public relations exercises. They were secret internal reports in which responsible men relayed to their governments what they believed to be true.’\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, the military reports challenge the allegations about the TM’s role in the relocation and massacres of the Armenians.\textsuperscript{60}

**Conclusion**

Academic studies on the TM are still very limited, yet this does not mean that its emergence and evolution in the context of the late Ottoman Empire cannot be analyzed through a critical lens that seeks to highlight some theoretical and conceptual issues. This study has brought some important theoretical and conceptual questions to attention through an analytical perspective on the TM by referring to primary archival documents and secondary sources. First, this study problematized the mutually exclusive understanding of the TM based on the distinction between an intelligence agency and a special operations group. As discussed above, the TM was involved in diverse and wide-ranging activities that went beyond the gathering of information on the one hand, and an unregulated secret military unit on the other hand. Second, by placing the TM in the theoretical context of state capacity, this study has shown that the TM came into being due to weakening state capacity in the post-1878 period, and that the TM must be understood within a political and military context of insurgency and counter-insurgency komitaci events. Thirdly, the relationship between the CUP and the TM has been discussed in the context of the period before and during World War I. Finally, this study has elaborated critically the debates over the role of the TM in the Armenian massacres of 1915–16.

The TM was established just before the outbreak of World War I, and its objectives included wide-ranging issues. CUP elites created the TM, and then Enver and Talat Pashas gave it its final form. Despite their major disagreements on the nature of the organization, these rivals sought to minimize their differences with respect to the TM’s operations. Even though the TM was formally a state institution, the CUP Central Committee became the arbiter in the process of deciding whether the TM would operate under Talat Pasha’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Y. Guclu (2009) Will Untapped Ottoman Archives Reshape the Armenian Debate?, *Middle East Quarterly*, 16 (2), pp. 35–42.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Erickson, Armenian Massacres, pp. 67–75.
\end{itemize}
Ministry of Interior or Enver Pasha’s Ministry of War. When Enver and Talat Pashas left the Ottoman Empire after it lost in World War I, they assigned Husamettin Erturk as the sole person responsible for the TM and its documents.

The inability of the TM to cope with the constraints of domestic and external politics makes it necessary to consider the socio-political context in which the TM members operated. Its leaders had prior experience in local resistance movements in the Balkans, and this impacted their cognitive map, as well as informed their political conduct. The TM was a political arm of CUP leaders, who represented various ideologies, the most important being Ottomanists, Islamists, and Turkists. All three ideologies aimed to save the state by emphasizing a shared Islamic identity. While the CUP elites instrumentalized these three ideologies, their ideological orientation changed depending on the region and the on-going power struggles within the CUP’s internal organization. Within this framework, the TM should be regarded as a ‘special forces’ group that acted as an extension of the governing party, which regarded itself to be the guardian of the state.

More critical research is necessary to understand and explain the TM with more concrete historical pieces of evidence. However, future research on the TM through theoretical and conceptual lenses is also necessary to establish comparative perspectives with similar organizations in other imperial and contemporary contexts. Through comparative analysis, we can understand better why and under what conditions state elites see organizations such as the TM as necessary for the survival of the state when they fear the possibility of collapse of the state. These theoretical questions are very likely to shed light on the black boxes of late Ottoman historiography by taking this era beyond nationalist paradigms and political controversies.

Acknowledgements

I began research on the *Teskilat-ı Mahsus* when I was a visiting scholar at the University of Utah. M. Hakan Yavuz tirelessly worked with me to set the framework of this article and read several drafts. This article is an outcome of a major book project I am writing together with Professor Yavuz. I would like to give special thanks to Serhun Al for his theoretical insights and questions. I also thank Brad Dennis, Ilker Aslanpe, Can Ozcan, Nihat Ali Ozcan and Ramazan Hakki Oztan for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this article.

References


Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi Dahiliye Nezareti Evrakı, [Prime Ministry’s Ottoman Archives]: DH. KMS. 35-22/2; DH. I.UM. 92-2; DH. I.UM. E-103-44/2; DH. I.UM. E-5-24; DH. I.UM. E-5-99; DH. I.UM. 29-43/1; DH. ŞFR. 444/9; BOA DH. ŞFR. 444/27; DH. EUM. 2.ŞB, 39-14/33; DH. EUM. 2.ŞB, 39-14/34; DH. EUM. 2.ŞB, 39-14/29; DH. EUM. 2.ŞB, 39-14/14; DH. EUM. 2.ŞB, 39-14/33. Istanbul, Turkey.


Çiçek, H. (2007) *Dr. Bahattin Şakir: İttihat ve Terakki’den Teskilat Mahsusa’ya Bir Türk Jakobeni* [Dr. Bahattin Şakir: A Turkish Jacobin from the Committee of Union and Progress to Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa] (İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları).


Hicdżiılmaz, E. (1994) *Osmanlı’dan Cumhuriyet’e Gizli Teskilatlar* [Secret Organizations from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic] (İstanbul: Kamer Yayımlarları).

———. (1996) *Belgelerle Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa ve Kasusluk Örgütleri* [Teskilat-ı Mahsusa and Espionage Organizations with Documents] (İstanbul: Kamer Yayımlarları).


Tansu, S. N. (1957) *İki Devrin Perde Arkası* [Backstage of Two Eras] (İstanbul: İlişkiler Sanat Yayınları).


Vardar, G. (1960), in: N. Tansu (ed.) *İtilaf ve Terakki İçinde Dönenler* [Incidents within the Committee of Union and Progress] (İstanbul: Yeniden Yayınlar Yayınları).

