

**Özoğlu, Hakan.** 2021. *The Decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Rise of the Turkish Republic: Observations of an American Diplomat, 1919–1927*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 225 pages. ISBN: 9781474480376.

Reviewed by **Georgios A. Nathanail**  
Duke University, USA  
george.nathanail@duke.edu

One day after the expulsion of the last Ottoman sultan, Said Nursî ascended the fortress overlooking the city of Van. From this vantage point, he confronted a scene of devastation - everything familiar to him had become part of the past. As he gazed at the ruins, the trees appeared to smile at him, as if to say: ‘Look at us too – do not focus solely on the rubble.’<sup>1</sup> The Ottoman Empire had been consigned to history, and upon its ruins, the Turkish Republic was emerging. The collapse of the empire was a gradual process, punctuated by numerous conflicts, and culminating in the First World War. A substantial body of scholarship has examined the decline of the ‘State of Osman’ and the emergence of Mustafa Kemal’s Turkey. It is unsurprising that this transitional period from empire to nation-state continues to fascinate researchers, and Özoğlu presents a particularly insightful interpretation in his book.

The author focuses on the final years of the last Islamic empire in the Middle East and the formative years of the Turkish Republic, as seen through the eyes of American Admiral Mark Lambert Bristol. A naval officer and diplomat, Bristol was a political realist whose perspectives on critical issues during turbulent times were markedly different. This, I believe, is the book’s greatest strength: offering a fresh lens on events that, until now, have been understood differently in international historiography. To provide this alternative perspective, the author draws extensively on a wide range of primary sources. American and Ottoman archival materials are skilfully interwoven to construct a compelling picture of how Bristol – and other Americans stationed in Anatolia – perceived the unfolding events. These sources are embedded seamlessly into the narrative, lending it vividness and maintaining the reader’s engagement throughout.

The book is structured into six chapters. The Introduction clearly outlines the author’s objectives and prepares the reader by providing background on the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the United States up to the First World War, while also evaluating the sources used. Bristol’s reports are significant not only because they offer an alternative view of the declining empire, but also because they reflect the perspective of a representative of an emerging global power. His writings address not only political issues, such as the establishment of an Armenian state or the landing of Greek troops in Smyrna, but also social concerns, including the living conditions of the population in Constantinople.

1 Howard, Douglas. 2017. *A History of the Ottoman Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 327.

Chapter Two offers a thorough examination of the central figure of the book. Admiral Bristol and the trajectory of his life are brought to the forefront, as the author elucidates how Bristol rose through the military and political ranks. The decision to appoint Bristol to Constantinople was not made overnight – an issue the author investigates in considerable depth. The second chapter can be divided into two main sections. The first concerns how others – both supporters and opponents – perceived Bristol. The second focuses on his actions once stationed in Constantinople. It was necessary for him to act through intermediaries and beyond the confines of the Ottoman capital, a challenge that required the creation of appropriate mechanisms – something he undertook only after settling in the city. Even prior to his arrival, Bristol was aware of prevailing American public opinion regarding the Turks. His opposition to the view that the Turks were solely responsible for all the suffering within the Ottoman Empire led many to label him a ‘pro-Turk.’ This point is of particular importance to the book, as the author conducts a highly detailed evaluation of primary sources. The combination of Bristol’s reports with other American and Ottoman documents lends a satisfactory degree of credibility to the admiral’s writings, providing readers with an additional reason to continue engaging with the narrative.

Chapter Three continues to focus on Bristol, placing him within the rapidly shifting political landscape of Anatolia. More specifically, from 1919 onward, the Ottoman Empire was experiencing the final years of its existence, while a new Turkish state was gradually emerging in Anatolia. Bristol was required to maintain diplomatic relations with the Sublime Porte, while also establishing ties with Mustafa Kemal. Kemal soon emerged victorious, founding a new state with its core rooted in Anatolia – although Constantinople remained within the broader political frame. The Treaty of Lausanne confirmed the borders of Mustafa Kemal’s Turkey, a development that did not go unnoticed by the American admiral. Nevertheless, both the personality of Turkey’s first president and the nature of the new regime did not escape critical scrutiny. Bristol recorded his views on the Kemalist regime, thus bringing the chapter to a close.

In the following chapter, the central ‘figures’ are the Armenians and the Greeks – or, to be more precise, issues concerning the Armenian and Greek communities are examined from Bristol’s perspective. Before addressing these matters, the author informs us of what Bristol knew regarding the image of the ‘Turk’ in American public opinion. In fact, the admiral believed that this image had been shaped by propaganda, and that, viewed from a different angle, it could be deconstructed. Regarding the Armenians, two major issues emerge. The first concerns the massacres of the Armenian population in Anatolia, spanning from the late 19th century until 1922 – with particular focus on the events of 1915, which are of special interest both to readers and to Bristol himself. The second issue – arguably the most compelling part of the book – is the attempted establishment of an Armenian state following the defeat of the Ottomans. The United States, and more specifically its president, continues to play a significant role in this effort to this day. Indeed, Bristol acknowledges this, although he was opposed to the idea of founding an Armenian state. The same applies to the Greeks, who pursued the annexation of certain territories to Anatolia, beginning with the landing of the Greek army in Smyrna in May 1919. The second key issue concerns the violence between

Greeks and Turks from 1919 to 1922. Was the Greek army a ‘benevolent’ occupying force in Ionia? This question continues to preoccupy many scholars, and Bristol offers an intriguing response. Finally, the author does not overlook another contentious topic in international historiography: the burning of Smyrna in September 1922. The ‘pearl’ of the Aegean met a tragic fate at the end of the Greco-Turkish War, as violence swept through the city and surrounding villages. It is important to note that while Bristol acknowledges that large-scale acts of violence were committed by the Ottomans against both Armenians and Greeks, his principal argument is that atrocities occurred on all sides. Among the ruins of Van – viewed from the city’s fortress by Said Nursî – lay the stories of people of all ethnicities and religions of the Ottoman Empire.

Chapter Five is of particular interest, as it deals not only with strictly political issues but also with matters affecting the daily lives of the population in Ottoman cities. How did the inhabitants of the Ottoman capital live at the end of the First World War and in the immediate aftermath of the Empire’s capitulation? The data presented by the author – drawn from Bristol’s reports on daily life in Constantinople and the cost of living – are revealing of the conditions that prevailed at the time. However, thanks to his system of informants, Bristol was also able to form a picture of the non-Muslim populations in other Ottoman coastal cities, both during and after the War of Independence. He believed that these non-Muslim communities should be integrated into the new state with full rights – an outcome that ultimately did not materialize, as events took a different turn. This chapter also addresses Bristol’s perspective on the dissolution of the Ottoman dynasty and the abolition of the caliphate – a new reality that he felt needed to be documented. Particularly noteworthy is the section on the financial underpinnings of the War of Independence, which stands out as a valuable area for further investigation. Every war depends on available economic resources, and in the case of the Turkish War of Independence – a conflict fought on multiple fronts – it is essential to learn more, especially given the precarious postwar financial state of the Ottoman Empire. The new regime, as is well known, was built around the figure of Mustafa Kemal. Bristol provides insights into both his private life and his political views, contributing further depth to the chapter.

The book is certainly not a biography of Bristol – rather, it is much more than that. It offers a fresh perspective on pivotal events that led to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, as seen through the writings of an active and perceptive diplomat. Bristol remained closely attuned to reality and consistently sought to uncover the less visible dimensions of events. As such, the benefits of the work are manifold. On one hand, it allows us to understand how an American official assessed the sweeping political transformations taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean. As an emerging global power, the United States had a vested interest in acquiring detailed knowledge about sensitive regions, and through Bristol, it was able to gather crucial information and develop relationships with the new regime. On the other hand, the book engages with issues that are central to both Greek and Turkish historiography, offering what I believe to be a new perspective on historical events. The integration of primary sources is essential for addressing a range of key questions, and this work contributes meaningfully to this direction. It enables researchers to access

numerous primary documents – many of which are presented in their original form – while maintaining a clear and coherent structure throughout. Özoğlu's book constitutes a valuable contribution not only to Ottoman and Turkish history but also to the broader fields of international political and diplomatic historiography.