



## When Intelligence Made a Difference

— EARLY 20TH CENTURY —

### The Karakol Organization and The Turkish War of Independence, 1919-1922

by Evren Altinkas PhD

At the end of the First World War, as a result of the Mudros Armistice, the Ottoman State was occupied by the Allies. By May 1919, the Turkish War of Independence started under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. During the armed conflict in Anatolia, the intelligence organizations established by Turks in Istanbul played a very important role in gathering information about the British, French, Italian, and Greek forces and in smuggling weapons, ammunition and people.

Karakol was established in October 1918 by Nationalist Turks in Istanbul, which was under the British occupation.<sup>1</sup> It became a resistance group arising from the dissolved Committee of Union and Progress (CUP).<sup>2</sup> Karakol turned into a clandestine organization that supported the War of Independence that started in Anatolia in May 1919. It conducted intelligence collection and aided the covert transfer of weapons from military warehouses to Mustafa Kemal's forces, as well as the movement of discharged military officers and personnel from Istanbul. Its branches worked independently and were organized according to a seven-person cell system. The names of members were unknown; each was identified by a

number. The names of Executive Committee members were confidential, and the relationships of the Executive Committee with government departments, public authorities, foreigners, the press, political parties, and other individuals were run by five delegates.<sup>3</sup>

There were five divisions within Karakol: (1) Politics, news, and foreign affairs; (2) Army, armament, mobilization; (3) Shipment and communication; (4) Raising money; and (5) Propaganda, personal affairs, and courts. The cadres of troops in Anatolia and around Istanbul were replenished, neighborhood organizations were built in the occupied areas, civilian gangs were set up to protect the Turkish element and to communicate with Anatolia, a smuggling organization was established for passing weapons out of Istanbul stockpiles, and an intelligence division was established to learn the decisions of occupying powers and share this information with the center of resistance in Anatolia. The Fire Brigade battalion, the Gendarmerie battalion, the fortified military stations, and other military units in Istanbul were secretly controlled by Karakol, even though they were officially part of the Istanbul government ruled by the occupying powers.<sup>4</sup> Karakol members infiltrated the headquarters of occupying powers and civil society groups that had been established to collaborate with the occupying powers. Some Karakol members were employed in foreign embassies and copied encrypted messages and plans of occupying powers. Other members of Karakol became members of the Anglophile Society (*İngiliz Muhipleri Cemiyeti*) which, established by some Turks in Istanbul, had close relations with British decision-makers and other occupiers and who discussed plans in their headquarters.

A good example of Karakol's activities is the case of "Letters of Sait Molla to Reverend Robert Frew." Reverend Frew was the minister of the Union



Members of Karakol

1. *Karakol* was the origin of other secret organizations established after it. It had several other names: *Zabitan*, *Yavuz Group*, *Müdafaa-i Milliye* (National Defense) Organization, M.M. Group, *İmalat-i Harbiye* (Military Manufacturing) Group, and *Hamza-Muhamit-Muharip-Felah* Group.

2. Committee of Union and Progress was the political organization that ruled the Ottoman Empire between 1909-1918. It came to power in 1909, a year after the Second Constitutional Period, and the leaders of this Committee were responsible for the entrance of the Ottomans to the First World War as allies of Germany. Allied Powers considered the leaders and prominent members of the Committee of Union and Progress as hostile.

3. İlhan Tekeli & Selim İlkin, *Ege'deki Sivil Direnişten Kurtuluş Savaşı'na Geçerken Uşak Heyet-i Merkeziyesi ve İbrahim (Tahtakılıç) Bey*, Turkish Historical Society, 1989, p. 224.

4. Although the Ottoman Army was demobilized according to the Armistice of Mudros, a gendarmerie force consisting of 50,000 Ottoman soldiers was to remain in order to ensure safety and security.

Church in Istanbul but was also a member of British Intelligence in Istanbul. He had established a network of spies under the Anglophile Society with Sait Molla, the society's president. In early 1920, Karakol members, who were also members of the Anglophile Society (most known name was Topkapili Canbaz Mehmet) copied important letters that included names of collaborators in Anatolia who were pretending to support Mustafa Kemal. Soon those people were arrested and the spy network established by Frew and Sait Molla collapsed.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the leading figures of the Turkish War of Independence were sent to Anatolia by Karakol to organize local resistance movements (Rauf<sup>6</sup>, Bekir Sami<sup>7</sup>).

As historian Sukru Hanioglu writes,

“the central political struggle in the Turkish portion of the empire soon became one for leadership of the Turkist movement, which had been decapitated by the exile of the CUP's inner circle and whoever seized the mantle of Turkism would become the natural leader of the struggle against partition.”<sup>8</sup>

Mustafa Kemal had already established strong ties with leading Karakol members in Istanbul between November 1918-May 1919.

Mustafa Kemal [see photo next column]<sup>9</sup> joined the CUP in October 1907 with membership number 322. He drew the attention of the leaders of Committee, especially Enver Pasha,<sup>10</sup> by defending the thesis that army officers should not be involved in politics at the CUP Congress to be held in 1909. In his memoirs, Mustafa Kemal claims that the leaders of the Committee had plotted his assassination after this Congress. In fact, leaders of the Committee, aware



of an initiative led by Mustafa Kemal that brought together officers under a secret structure to propagandize the thesis he defended at the 1909 Congress, “exiled” him from Istanbul to Tripoli, and later as a military attaché to Sofia. Moreover, despite Kemal's heroism and success at the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915, leaders of the Committee did not appreciate him or make his achievements public, and instead again sent him away to the Eastern front. As the leaders of the CUP fled the country after the end of the war while the government turned a blind eye, Kemal and his entourage, the secondary and ignored members of the Committee, became the primary beneficiaries of the resulting power vacuum.

Karakol played an important role in the appointment of Mustafa Kemal as the Inspector (chief) of the Ninth Army Troops Inspectorate to reorganize the remaining Ottoman military units and to improve security in Anatolia. Despite concerns about former CUP members in Istanbul, Karakol's connections helped Mustafa Kemal secure assignment without interference by the occupying powers. Karakol members explained to the Minister of War, Mehmet Shakir Pasha, and the Grand Vizier, Damat Ferit Pasha,<sup>11</sup> that Mustafa Kemal was not a Unionist. He would serve the interests of the government and the occupying powers. Halil (Kut) Pasha, one of the leading figures of CUP (and also the uncle of Enver Pasha) also confirms this in his memoirs:

5. More information about Frew and Sait Molla and the collapse of their spy network can be found in: Samih Nafiz Tansu, *İki Devrin Perde Arkası*, İlgi Kultur Sanat Yayıncılık, 2011; Feridun Kandemir, *Milli Mücadelenin Başlangıcında Mustafa Kemal: Arkadaşları ve Karşındakiler*, Yakın Tarihimiz Yayınları, 1964; Selahaddin Güngör, *Atatürk'e Kafa Tutanlar*, Hadise Yayınevi, 1955.

6. Rauf (Orbay) was an officer in Ottoman Navy and he was known as the captain of the cruiser Hamidiye during the First Balkan War. On October 30, 1918, he signed the Armistice of Mudros as the Minister of Navy. He is the one who established the connection between Karakol and Mustafa Kemal.

7. Bekir Sami (Günsav) was a Turkish career officer. He organized the scattered and multi-headed national resistance movement in Western Anatolia into a unified front in coordination with Mustafa Kemal.

8. M. Sukru Hanioglu, *Ataturk: An Intellectual Biography*, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 94

9. Photo of Mustafa Kemal is from <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/mustafa-kemal>.

10. Enver Pasha was an Ottoman military officer and a leader of the Committee of Union and Progress. He was considered as the “Hero of the Second Constitutional Revolution in 1908.” The Ottoman Empire was called “Enverland” by the Germans during the First World War. “Pasha” was a high rank in the Ottoman political and military system, similar to a British knighthood.

11. The titles of Minister of War and Grand Vizier are unique in Ottoman state structure. Ministry of War was established in 1826. The Ministry was responsible for procurement, peacetime military affairs, and mobilization and promotions. Grand Vizier was the de facto prime minister for the Sultan in the Ottoman State structure. Grand Vizier had absolute power of attorney and was dismissible only by the Sultan himself.





Map of Modern Turkey. Source: AdobeStock

“As Unionists in Istanbul, we considered that Mustafa Kemal would be a great candidate to organize the local resistance movements in Anatolia into a centralized structure and to coordinate the relations between Karakol and Anatolia.”<sup>12</sup>

Before May 1919, Turkish nationalists smuggled weapons and members of *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Special Organization)<sup>13</sup> into Anatolia to initiate local resistance, operating under the names of *Kuvay-ı Milliye* (National Forces)<sup>14</sup> and *Müdafaa-i Hukuk* (Defense of Law).<sup>15</sup> In the majority of unoccupied towns in Anatolia, the former offices of the CUP changed their names to *Müdafaa-i Hukuk*. After Mustafa Kemal’s arrival in Anatolia, the various national resistance movements quickly turned into a centralized structure. His declarations and the support he received from other military commanders in Anatolia were ratified in local (Erzurum) and national (Sivas) congresses. The Sivas Congress declared that the “people of Turkey will fight for their independence and use their right of self-determination.” This Congress is considered

a most important milestone in the Turkish War of Independence.

One problem Mustafa Kemal faced was lack of sufficient weapons and ammunition for the Turkish revolutionary forces. The Karakol organization successfully smuggled weapons and ammunition into Anatolia. According to Mehmet Arif Bey,<sup>16</sup> one of the military commanders who was in Anatolia with Mustafa Kemal:

“Head of War Department at Ministry of War, Staff Colonel Omer Lutfi and Director of Arms Department, Staff Major Naim Cevad were both

members of Karakol and they have successfully smuggled 56,000 bolts, 320 machinery rifle[s], 1,500 rifles, 2,000 chests of ammunition and 10,000 military uniforms to Anatolia.”<sup>17</sup>

Karakol also gathered intelligence. Its members recognized that acting like an enemy of the Unionists and Mustafa Kemal was the best method for gathering intelligence from the occupying powers and the collaborating Istanbul government. Some Karakol members were private clerks of Ottoman decision-makers, members of pro-British associations, interpreters for occupying powers’ commanders, and even worked as intelligence officers for them. They noted decisions and plans and sent these to Anatolia in encrypted form for security. Also, if anyone wanted to travel to Anatolia, they had to know the passwords and codes and have a travel document sealed by Karakol. As occupying powers and the Istanbul government were not suspicious of religious figures, Karakol members used religious dress and long beards to travel safely from Istanbul.

Propaganda was used by Karakol to promote the idea of national struggle among Turks living in occupied Istanbul. Karakol members contacted intellectuals in Istanbul and organized private and public meetings,

12. Taylan Sorgun, *Halil Paşa: Bitmeyen Savaş*, Yaylacik Printing, Istanbul, 1972, p. 259

13. Special Organization was an Ottoman imperial government special forces unit under the War Department and was allegedly used to suppress Arab separatism and Western imperialism in the Ottoman Empire. Most of its members were active in *Karakol*.

14. This term refers to the irregular Turkish militia forces in the early period of the Turkish War of Independence. *Kuva-yi Milliye* was integrated to the regular army of the Grand National Assembly after 1921.

15. They were regional resistance organizations established in the Ottoman Empire between the years 1918–1919.

16. “Bey” is a Turkish title for a chieftain and also an honorific. Today, it is still used and has a similar meaning to “Sir” or “Mister” in English.

17. Bulent Demirbas, *Miralay Mehmet Arif Bey: Anadolu İnkılabı*, Arba Publications, 1987, pp. 70-71.

talks, and seminars where important figures such as Halide Edip (Adivar, a female author and intellectual) talked about the legitimacy of national struggle, the right of self-determination, and the atrocities of Greek forces in Anatolia. Karakol members also used religion as an important propaganda tool with Muslim soldiers in the ranks of British and French forces occupying Istanbul. A good example of this was the case of “Raid of Rami Barracks.” Algerian troops, a part of French occupying forces, were accommodated in Rami Barracks. The Algerian soldiers visited the Eyup Sultan Mosque for Friday prayers. Preacher Kemal, an active member of Karakol, spoke during and after prayers about the loyalty of Muslims to one another. A French-speaking Karakol member, who was a military official, was always present during these prayers to translate. On June 28, 1919, there was a suspicious fire in the arsenal of Rami Barracks, explosions happened and some of the arms and ammunition were carried away by Karakol members. None of the Algerian soldiers were injured or suffered any consequences since they were not present during the fire.<sup>18</sup>

Mustafa Kemal and the national resistance movement in Anatolia needed military officers, staff, and others to help the resistance in Anatolia. Karakol organized a safe travel route from Istanbul. One of the locations Karakol used was a religious lodge, called Ozbekler Tekkesi (Ozbekler Lodge). The sheikh in charge was a member of Karakol. When someone was going to travel to Anatolia from Istanbul, they arrived at Ozbekler Lodge using the secret words: “İsa (Jesus) sent me.” (Ozbekler Lodge not only smuggled individuals but also rifles and ammunition to Anatolia.) One method of providing military officers to the resistance was to “discharge” them from the Ottoman army. Karakol members, who were high-rank officers in the Ottoman military, prepared legitimate “certificates of discharge” for those needed in Anatolia, and they used such certificates to travel, telling the occupying forces that they were returning to their hometowns as civilians after discharge.

Although Karakol and its structure were disciplined, some members were talkative. In addition, a member of Karakol was arrested before his attempted assassination of Grand Vizier Damat Ferit Pasha. During his interrogation, he gave the names of some of the Karakol members to the interrogators. As a result, the Istanbul government successfully infiltrated Karakol and learned the names of Executive Committee members. On March 16, 1920, Britain decided to deploy a stronger military force in Istanbul because of the weak control by the Istanbul government over Turkish nationalists in the city. Some members of Karakol were arrested and some had to flee to Anatolia. Karakol disbanded as a secret organization, but the structure and network it established were used by other secret organizations established afterward, such as the Hamza-Mucahit-Muharip-Felah group. These secret organizations learned the lessons from Karakol’s experience and transformed themselves into more strict underground establishments after March 1920. They sent a known member of their organization to Ankara and received direct orders from their contact person in Ankara via telegraph. Also, their correspondence was only with their representative in Ankara through the use of multiple codes and code names. In that sense, and with a better organized structure in Ankara, the secret organizations established after Karakol were more effective. If they had suspicions of being infiltrated, they disbanded themselves, changed their names, and replaced prior members with new ones.

In conclusion, the secret organization Karakol that conducted the intelligence collection and smuggling in Istanbul played a very important role in the history of the Turkish War of Independence. The bureaucratic-military connections and networks of the ousted CUP were used by Karakol to organize the national resistance, smuggle arms, and gather information against the occupying forces and its collaborators. This was crucial for the success of Mustafa Kemal and the national resistance movement and the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic afterward (see the historical timeline of the Turkish War of Independence).

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18. Nur Bilge Criss, *İşgal Altında İstanbul*, İletişim Yayınları, 2008, pp. 157-158.

TIMELINE: THE TURKISH WAR OF INDEPENDENCE	
1914-1918	The Ottoman Empire is a member of the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria) in the First World War.
October 30, 1918	<b>Armistice of Mudros</b> was signed. Some measures included the demobilization of Turkish troops and giving the Allies “the right to occupy any strategic points in the event of any situation arising which threatens the security of the Allies.”
October 31, 1918	<i>Karakol</i> established.
November 1918	British troops occupied Iskenderun and both sides of the Dardanelles. A fleet consisting of Allied ships embarked troops in Istanbul
December 1918	The first <b>Association for Defense of National Rights</b> is founded in Izmir and followed by similar associations for other provinces in the following days.
May 15, 1919	Greek troops occupy Izmir and launch operation to occupy Western Anatolia.
May 19, 1919	<b>Mustafa Kemal</b> sets foot in Samsun, Anatolia.
June 21, 1919	<b>Amasya Circular</b> , issued by army commanders in Anatolia under Kemal’s leadership, calls for a national movement against the occupying powers.
July 21, 1919	<b>Erzurum Congress</b> unites representatives from Eastern Anatolia under the chairmanship of Kemal.
September 4, 1919	<b>Sivas Congress</b> unites the representatives from all over Turkey and calls for national unity.
December 27, 1919	Kemal arrives in Ankara.
January 28, 1920	The Ottoman Parliament in Istanbul publishes a <b>National Oath</b> document, which constitutes principles for establishing Turkey’s borders.
March 16, 1920	Istanbul officially occupied by the Allied Forces.
April 19, 1920	<b>San Remo Conference</b> started to discuss League of Nations mandates for former Ottoman territories (Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia).
April 23, 1920	The opposition <b>Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA)</b> opened in Ankara. Kemal was elected as the president.
August 10, 1920	<b>Treaty of Sèvres</b> signed between the Istanbul Government and the Allies. The treaty ceded large parts of Ottoman territory to France, the United Kingdom, Greece and Italy and created large occupation zones within the Ottoman Empire. TGNA did not recognize this treaty.
<div> <p><b>Treaty of Sèvres (1920)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><span style="border: 1px solid red; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> Ottoman Empire in 1914</li> <li><span style="background-color: orange; border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> Armenia, without Azerbaijani and Georgian territorial claims</li> <li><span style="border: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> Modern borders of Turkey</li> <li><span style="border-top: 1px dashed black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> Theoretical zones of influence</li> <li><span style="border-top: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px;"></span> Effective zones of occupation (as of signing date/August 10)</li> </ul> </div>	
December 2, 1920	<b>Treaty of Alexandropol (Gymri)</b> between Turkey (represented by TGNA) and Armenia, ended the battles in Eastern front.
January 9, 1921	<b>First Battle of Inonu</b> between Turkish and Greek forces. Victory by Turks.
February 21, 1921	<b>London Conference</b> opens with the aim of revising the Treaty of Sèvres.
March 16, 1921	<b>Treaty of Moscow</b> signed as a friendship agreement between the TGNA and the Soviet Union.

TIMELINE: THE TURKISH WAR OF INDEPENDENCE	
March 26, 1921	<b>Second Battle of Inonu</b> between Turkish and Greek forces. Victory by Turks.
August 23, 1921	<b>Battle of Sakarya</b> (ended September 13) between Turkish and Greek forces. Victory by Turks.
October 13, 1921	<b>Treaty of Kars</b> between Republics of Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia) and Turkey (represented by TGNA).
October 20, 1921	<b>Accord of Ankara</b> between France and Turkey (represented by TGNA). Evacuation of French troops from southern Anatolia.
August 26-30, 1922	<b>Battle of Dumlupınar</b> between Turkish and Greek forces. Victory by Turks. This led to the rapid retreat and evacuation of Greek army from Anatolia.
September 9, 1922	Izmir on the Aegean coast recaptured by Turkish <b>forces</b> .
October 11, 1922	Signing of the <b>Armistice of Mudanya</b> between the TGNA, Italy, France, and Britain. Greece later acceded to its terms.
November 1, 1922	<b>Abolition of Ottoman Sultanate.</b>
July 24, 1923	Signing of <b>Treaty of Lausanne</b> . Replaced the Treaty of Sèvres. The Allies recognized Turkish sovereignty, and Turkey gave up its empire.
October 6, 1923	Turkish troops entered Istanbul.
October 29, 1923	Proclamation of the <b>Republic of Turkey</b> .

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