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Bülent Gökay

ABSTRACT

According to official Turkish and Western historiography, following the key victories against the German forces, Soviet leadership changed its position and started putting pressure on Turkey. Accordingly, the Soviet–Turkish relations changed significantly from being considered friendly until March 1945, when Molotov initiated his note denouncing the 1925 Treaty of Friendship with Turkey and demanded a base in the Straits area and the return of Kars and Ardahan to the Soviet Union. Only after such demands, Turkish government decided to move away from the Soviets and requested help from the US. I have several points of reservation about this argument: first, the Soviet–Turkish relations were never very friendly. Essentially, a common enemy incited provisional collaboration between the two. Second, for the leadership of the Turkish Republic, alliance with the Soviet Union was always counted as temporary, and their essential foreign policy aim had always been acceptance by the Western alliance. Third, the Soviet demands regarding the Turkish Straits were in no sense a surprise, a shock. For centuries, the rulers of Russia had wanted some control over the Straits, linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Finally, many accounts focus on the Soviet demands regarding the Straits and Eastern provinces in isolation. The crisis over the so-called Soviet demands and Turkish response happened at a time global interstate system was going through a major transformation: as the Second World War was coming to its end, the American administration had the ambition to impose a New World Order. Former imperial power, British Empire, no longer had the financial and military capacity to hang on to their vast territories.

During the Second World War Turkey was faced with military threats from Germany and the Soviet Union. Britain, Germany and the Soviet Union all brought strong pressure to bear on Turkey to follow a policy in keeping with their interests. The Turkish government sustained its non-belligerent status in the form of a precarious neutrality and took great care to avoid being drawn into the conflict by one side or the other. Turkey's geo-strategic location over the crossroads of three continents provided a unique position and, as a result, Turkey was able to achieve its principal aim of staying out of the devastation which surrounded the country.

At the outset of the war, there was a three-sided rivalry between the Soviet Union, Germany and the western Allies for closer alliance with Turkey. The British and French

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tolerated Turkey's receipt of military material from Germany¹. Based on this understanding, the Turkish government managed to manoeuvre itself into a position where it had a formal and explicit Treaty of Mutual Assistance with Great Britain, as well as a Friendship and Non-Aggression Pact with Germany. Not only did Turkey stay out of the conflict but it was also able to benefit as a result of its relations with both warring camps, profiting from both British and German trade and aid.² Among Turkish statesmen, there was a consensus that Turkey was a poor and tired country and an extended period of peace was necessary for Turkey to heal its wounds. The British ambassador to Turkey, Sir Percy Loraine, suggested that the Turks had wearied of war and 'in their settled policy there is no room for adventure'.³

With the clear goal of simple survival as a sovereign independent state, there was a strong sense of extreme caution and a readiness to use every opportunity to Turkey's benefit.⁴ Turkish foreign policy during the Second World War was a pragmatic synthesis of the experiences and convictions of the governing elite. Leaders such as President İnönü, his Foreign Minister Şükrü Saracoğlu⁵ and Numan Menemencioğlu, Secretary General at the Foreign Ministry, employed a distinctly pragmatic, to some extent opportunistic, approach in their decision-making. Turkish neutrality, as guided by İnönü, was essentially a policy of waiting.⁶

President İnönü relied on advisors and placed some importance on putting on a show of democratic principles and openness, but he effectively held a monopoly of real power when it came to the decision-making process. Numan Menemencioğlu had a close relationship with İnönü and managed to influence the president's decision-making to some extent. He was considered widely as a brilliant intellect and a top-class diplomat.⁷ Menemencioğlu summarized the Turkish position by saying that 'we are egoists and fight exclusively for ourselves'.⁸

Menemencioğlu's, and İnönü's, first aim was to keep Turkey out of the war at all expense. To accomplish this he was prepared to employ the most pragmatic means if necessary. It was this pragmatism that led to his identification as pro-German in certain British circles. He saw nothing inherently wrong with keeping his options open by moving into closer relationships with various warring parties. This was necessary, to him, for maintaining what he called 'Turkey's active neutrality'.⁹ This policy was designed to safeguard Turkey's territorial integrity by having close relations with Germany and the Soviet Union, while, at the same time, keeping either powers at arms' length and away from Turkish lands.

This position was noticeably highlighted in the work of the Turkish cartoonist Ramiz Gökçe, which illustrated Turkey as 'The Comrade of Germany; The Sweetheart of America; The Ally of Britain; The Neighbour of Russia; The Protector of Peace; The Friend of the World'.¹⁰ In many cases, as when the British accused him of being pro-German, it was simply a case of him not being pro-British enough to satisfy their war-time requirements. For the British, Turkey was a tool to be used to achieve their goal of shortening the war.¹¹ Numan Menemencioğlu succeeded in keeping the Germans guessing as well as the British suspecting. Indeed, from the outset and even before the actual outbreak of the war, he was against a dominant German influence in Turkey. However, he also considered the game of international power balances as the most reasonable path and an opportunity for keeping Turkey out of harm's way.¹²

For a time, Turkey managed to carry close relations with both the British and Soviets simultaneously. Turkey gradually drifted away from the Soviet Union after the Nazi–Soviet Pact of August 1939, which can be seen as the real starting point of the Second World War.¹³ The British appreciated the value of Turkey as a possible connecting link with the Soviets, but the news of the Nazi–Soviet Pact created surprise and apprehension. The Pact certainly disturbed and surprised Turkish policymakers, and Turkish foreign policy entered a new phase with Turkey looking further isolated.¹⁴ Both Germany and Great Britain tried to use Turkish wariness of the Soviet Union for their own ends: Germany used the Soviets to frighten the Turks away from a more active cooperation with the Allies, and the British sought to convince Turkey that close relations with Britain were its only hope of avoiding any Soviet intimidation.¹⁵

As the Soviet forces took the offensive against Germany, a growing apprehension of Turkey's big and powerful neighbour began to colour its whole position with respect to the war, and Turkish leaders desired more than ever to keep out of it. There were several journals and magazines in Turkey funded and controlled by Germany, including *Beyoğlu Dergisi*, *İstanbul Dergisi* and *Türkische Post*. In Nazi Germany, radio was an important propaganda tool. Several radio programmes were broadcasted within Turkey, referring to historic ties and friendship between two countries, praising even Atatürk himself. In Atatürk, the Nazis saw a powerful leader governing through a one-party system, which for them was the only viable alternative to what they perceived as decadent Western democracy. In Nazi Germany, radio was an important propaganda tool. For the duration of the war, several German radio stations had each day seven times 15-minute long programmes in Turkish. Four of these stations were based in Berlin, one in Bucharest, and in Tirana and the other one in Sofia.¹⁶ The Nazis presented themselves as the only alternative to the Russian communists, whom Germany would fight against, should their expansion continue, in order to protect Turkey, as well as by a selective appropriation and reception of the traditions of Islam in ways that suggested their compatibility with the ideology of National Socialism.¹⁷ Operation Barbarossa was initially quite popular among certain circles in Turkey, both because Russia was a traditional enemy and because of its long-standing hate of communism. German influence was quite visible in the political, economic, military and cultural fields.

Pro-Soviet propaganda in Turkey

During the war years, the pro-Soviet Communist Party of Turkey (TKP) carried out open propaganda activities against the war and fascism. In particular, the formation of a new government in 1943 led by Saracoğlu was a turning point for the Turkish communists. They described Saracoğlu as a trustworthy friend of the Nazis and was one of those who considered German victory as a *fait accompli*. Indeed, the Saracoğlu government took certain steps such as wide-ranging anti-Soviet and anti-communist propaganda in the media, which strengthened this belief. Until that point, anti-Sovietism was kept under control or even prohibited by the unofficial government censor. For many influential Turkish nationalists, fascism was considered as a better option, and welcomed as a means of resisting the menace of Russian communism. Anti-communist and chauvinist agitation coupled with an anti-minority campaign reached its peak in this period. A special capital levy law, introduced a year earlier in 1942, was enacted and applied to the

minorities for the purpose of dispossessing them of their means of livelihood, and many non-Muslims who could not pay the levy were sent to concentration camps set up in eastern Anatolia.

On 7 December, the Comintern periodical *Communist International* wrote:

... The Turkish people is unable to understand why Turkish Government circles, instead of strengthening the friendship with the USSR, should have preferred to make a pact with the old enemies of Turkey's independence ... Britain and France wished to extend the war to the Balkans, to create there a military front against Germany. They wished to convert Turkey into a strategic base for the execution of their plans ... Everyone knows that the present Turkish regime has little to do with a true democracy. Owing to the rapprochement between the ruling Turkish classes and the Anglo-French imperialists, Turkey's independence ... is now seriously threatened.¹⁸

The Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Turkey introduced a new policy line with their 1943 Platform, called as the 'Struggle Front Against Fascism and Profiteering'. According to this new line, the party claimed that the regime in Turkey had now become the principal representative of the interests of the most parasitic and reactionary forces in the country. During the night of 18–19 May 1944, some members of the communist party hung a huge banner between two minarets of the Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul. The writing on the banner was SARACOĞLU IS A FASCIST, and the signature was 'the Coalition Against Fascism and War-profiteering'. Following this incident, the police started mass arrests of the communists and other left-wing activists and organized a violent raid on the central office and the printing house of the progressive daily, *Tan* (Dawn). A large number of university students were arrested in Istanbul, all accused of being members of the *İleri Gençler Birliği* (Union of Progressive Youth), a TKP initiated youth organization active among university students. Also, a number of lecturers were accused of being pro-Soviet Union and dismissed from their posts.

Stalin, the 'new' Tsar, decides to take the Straits

According to official Turkish and Western history, and many standard accounts agreed with this, following the key victories against the Nazi German forces, the Soviet leadership suddenly changed its position and started putting pressure on Turkey. One key element in this historical interpretation was the Treaty of Friendship with Turkey.¹⁹ The following steps are cited by almost all accounts to justify this interpretation:

In March 1945, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov gave notice of Moscow's intention to denounce the 1925 Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression with Turkey.

Molotov told Selim Sarper, the Turkish ambassador in Moscow, that in return for renewing the treaty, the USSR would demand a new straits convention, negotiated solely between Turkey and the Soviet Union. This would provide for the free passage of Soviet warships through the straits and their closure to non-Black Sea states, the establishment of Soviet bases at the straits, and the retrocession to Russia of the eastern provinces of Kars and Ardahan that had been returned to Turkey in 1921. Of these proposals, the Soviet plan for the establishment of Soviet bases seemed easily the most dangerous since it threatened the establishment of a Soviet military presence, which could have been used to secure Russian political control over the country as a whole.²⁰

This suspicion was strengthened when Molotov indicated that the kind of treaty the Soviet Union favoured with Turkey would be similar to those it was drafting with Poland and other Eastern European socialist states.

One of the most important aims of Soviet diplomacy during this period was of course to prevent the conclusion of an agreement between Turkey and the Western powers, and various proposals introduced by Moscow were aiming to achieve exactly this. Ironically, however, they achieved just the opposite. Ankara rejected the first two demands, and indicated that any amendment to the Montreux Convention would require approval from other parties to that convention.²¹ This triggered a vociferous anti-Turkish campaign in Soviet media.²² Alarmed by the situation, Turkish authorities approached London and Washington in search of diplomatic support to counter Moscow. The Turkish government urgently sought to bring the US position on the Straits into harmony with Turkish views and to involve the US in the defence of Turkey against the Soviet threats.²³

At the beginning of 1946, as a result of increasing concern about Soviet actions in Iran and demands from Turkey, President Truman formulated a much tougher line towards the Soviet Union. On 3 January 1946, Truman was writing that

There is not a doubt in my mind that Russia intends an invasion of Turkey and the seizure of the Black Sea Straits to the Mediterranean. Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language, another war is in the making. Only one language do they understand—'How many divisions have you?' I do not think we should play compromise any longer.²⁴

This was followed, in April, by a symbolic gesture: the body of Turkish Ambassador Münir Ertegun, who had died in Washington, was returned to Turkey aboard the US battleship *Missouri*. 'The decision to send the body of Turkish Ambassador Mehmet Münir Ertegün home to Turkey in honour aboard the battleship Missouri in 1946 arose not only from a wish to warn the Soviet Union away from Turkey but also from a conscious recognition of the positive impact that the humanitarian gesture would have on the Turkish people'.²⁵ The reaction in Turkey was so ecstatic that Ismet Inonu, the President of Turkey, hailed the naval visit as 'a new and brilliant manifestation of Turkish-American friendship', and he applauded 'the strengthening of mutual friendship and confidence between our two countries'.²⁶ In August, Washington sent an official note firmly backing the Turkish stand with respect to the Soviet demands, stressing the need for Turkey to maintain sole control over the Straits and rejecting the idea of a regime administered exclusively by Black Sea powers. Thus, the American leaders were sending a signal to the Soviet Union of their new tougher stance, as well as to Turkey of their growing interest in the Near East. We also know today from the documents that the US administration had even envisaged annihilating the Soviet Union with a coordinated nuclear attack directed against major urban areas. The document outlining this diabolical military agenda was dated 15 September 1945. The Kremlin was aware of the 1945 plan to bomb 66 Soviet cities. Some evidence suggests that Stalin may have realized just how close they were to the brink. Even though publicly he dismissed the American atomic monopoly with his usual bravado, he called the campaign regarding Turkish Straits and northern Iran off. After that, Soviet pressure on Turkey eased considerably, and in the autumn of the same year, Moscow unofficially informed London that it deemed it premature to call a conference on the Straits. This

entire episode contributed strongly and directly to Turkey's commitment to the Western security alliance, which was being shaped under strong US lead, and thereby became a major setback for Soviet designs in the region.²⁷ This was even considered 'a key factor in the development of the Truman doctrine (1947)'.²⁸ To sum up, as a result of 'the extreme nature of the Soviet demands', Soviet-Turkish relations changed significantly almost overnight from being considered friendly until March 1945, when Molotov initiated his note denouncing the 1925 Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression with Turkey and demanded a base in the Straits area and the return of Kars and Ardahan to the Soviet Union.²⁹ Only after such hostile demands did the Turkish government decide to move away from the Soviets and request help from the US.³⁰

I have several points of reservation about this line of argument: first, the Soviet-Turkish relations were never totally friendly. Essentially, it was a common enemy that fomented provisional collaboration between the two. The relationship was never entirely unproblematic as I have already provided evidence and analysis of this in earlier work.³¹ Second, for the leadership of the young Turkish Republic alliance with the Soviet Union was always considered temporary, and their essential foreign policy aim had always been to be accepted by the Western system of alliance. The founders of the Turkish Republic introduced their main goal as how to achieve western standards of political and economic management or, in other words, 'how to make Turkey European'. Even at the moment of opposition to the plans of the European powers over Turkish lands, during the Turco-Greek war, the self-Orientalized Turkish élite deployed Euro-Orientalist perceptions in the formulation of Turkish national-self and legitimacy. The Turkish delegation at Lausanne, led by İnönü, sought to convince the British, French and Italian delegates that 'new Turkey' had nothing in common with the old Eastern empire and to 'prove' the Turkish race and culture were part of the white European civilizations.³² Since then, the self-perceptions of individual members of the Turkish élite, until the end of the 20th century, have remained closely rooted in the identity-formation processes of those early days: Hence, the change of alliance after 1945 was not such a sudden change of course, but it was in line with what the leaders of the Turkish Republic had always wanted.³³

Third, the Soviet demands regarding the Turkish Straits were in no sense a surprise, a shock, to anyone. For centuries, the rulers of Russia had wanted some kind of control over the Straits, linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. In 1915, at the peak of the Great War, Great Britain even promised to support Russia's aspirations to claim the Straits and the littoral zone of Turkey as its sphere of influence. During the Soviet-German talks in Berlin in November 1940, Molotov insisted that Bulgaria, the Turkish Straits and the Black Sea area should be a Soviet sphere of influence.³⁴ During his meetings with Churchill and Roosevelt in Tehran in 1943, Stalin repeated the Soviet demand of revising the Montreux Convention of 1936 and making sure that the Soviet navy had access to the Mediterranean at any time. Churchill and Roosevelt agreed in principle that some revisions should be made to the Montreux Convention to satisfy the Soviet demands. Later, in Moscow in 1944, Churchill seemed to have agreed to most of the Soviet demands. Even at Potsdam, in July-August 1945, both the British and the Americans confirmed their agreement to make some changes to the Convention to reassure the Soviets. Churchill, in particular, expressed his opinion to Stalin that he wanted to welcome Russia as a Great Power on the sea.³⁵

A final point is that many existing accounts focus on the Soviet demands regarding the Straits and Eastern Anatolian provinces in isolation.³⁶ The crisis over the so-called Soviet demands and the Turkish response happened at a time the global interstate system was going through one of its major transformations. As the Second World War was coming to its end, the American administration had the ambition of imposing a New World Order which would first and foremost meet the interests of the US. The American perspective was implemented during the Bretton Woods Conference of July 1944 where the representatives of 44 states approved of an American project, rejecting the British proposals, to organize the postwar monetary system. The former imperial powers no longer had the financial and military capacity to hang on to their vast territories. Nor did their people want to pay the price of empire whether in money or blood. The British empire was fast approaching its end, which would soon begin with the withdrawal from India in 1947.³⁷ In February, the same year, when the British cabled Washington that they no longer had the money or troops to defend Greece or Turkey as the Soviet Union threatened to extend its influence in the near east, Dean Acheson, soon to be Harry Truman's secretary of state, was said to have remarked: 'Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role. The attempt to play a separate power role—that is, a role apart from Europe, a role based on a "special relationship" with the United States, a role based on being head of a "commonwealth" which has no political structure, or unity, or strength—this role is about played out. Great Britain, attempting to be a broker between the United States and Russia, has seemed to conduct policy as weak as its military power'.³⁸ Britain was no longer a world power. The Soviet Union emerged as the most powerful force in Europe at the end of the Second World War. It had effectively extended its dominance across Europe and occupied half of Berlin. So, when all those demands were being introduced and discussed between Turkey and the Soviet Union regarding the Straits, the US, the new strongman and hegemonic power of the Western world, was putting the last stones in place in building a new world order and displacing the former imperial power, the United Kingdom, as the main stabilizing power in the world. It was part of the US strategic policy priorities to replace the UK along the Northern Tier of the Middle and Near East, in Greece, Turkey and Iran.³⁹ In relation to extending assistance to Turkey, President Roosevelt had already openly declared this policy of playing a major role in the Near and Middle East as early as 3 December 1941, by announcing that he had found the defence of Turkey vital to the defence of the United States and had directed the Lend Lease Administrator to see that the defence needs of the Government of Turkey were filled as fast as possible. This was known to all parties involved, including the Turks, almost 4 years before Molotov's infamous notice to Selim Harper.⁴⁰

Notes

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3. Given in Deringil, op.cit., p. 3.
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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