Refugee Policies of Turkey during World War II

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Abstract
In this study, Turkey’s policy towards refugees during the World War II has been analyzed. State of Republic of Turkey did not engage with The World War II (1939-1945). However, the war came close to its borders. Turkey’s neighbor to the west, Greece went under control of Soviet Red Army, after Nazi Germany retreated from Bulgaria. Meanwhile, Iran, Turkey’s neighbor at the eastern border, was occupied by England and the Soviet Union. Iraq and Syria had already been mandated respectively by England and France. Located very closely to Anatolian coasts, 12 Islands were under Italian rule. Therefore, Turkey’s surroundings were in the hands of the combatant forces that were actually involved in the war and the country was circled by fire. Soviet Union had demands on the Straits from Turkey as of 1939. Under these circumstances, Turkey declared “armed neutrality” and strove not to be a part of the hot war by returning demands of both Germany and the Allies regarding Turkey’s participation in the war. It is commonly known that Turkey has always been a shelter for both mass and individual refugees. Within the harsh and threatening atmosphere of the World War II, Turkey took measures for the potential migration wave primarily from the Balkans. Accepted civilian and military asylums both from Europe and the Soviet Union, sheltered them in multifarious camps in Anatolia during the war. Besides, Turkey intermediated between belligerent countries in prisoners’ exchange, and involved in aid activities against famine and dearth occurred in Greece. Turkey, also opened its borders to Jews escaping from Nazi oppressions, strove to use diplomacy for rescuing Turkish cognates who escaped from Soviets or captured in German prison camps from the Red Army. In this context, it was observed that Turkey has applied this policy from humanitarian responsibilities.

Keywords: Refugee, Turkey, Turkish Policy, World War II
INTRODUCTION

Turkey, by not participating in “revisionist” movements commenced against the treaties that ended World War I, did not enter the World War II as an “anti-revisionist” state. Turkey declared active or armed neutrality in the war that came to its borders. Followed an equilibrium policy between states with the aim of protecting its territorial integrity by staying away from the war. (Özçelik, 2010: 267; Ataöv, 1965; Weisband, 2000; Deringil, 1989; Seydi, 2003; Ekincikli, 2017; Demirer, 2016; Arcayürek, 2010)

Turkey issued joint declarations on May 12, 1939 with England and on June 23, 1939 with France before the war, against the German and Italian expansionist policies in Europe. Having abstained from the consequences of German-Soviet rapprochement, Turkey signed an alliance agreement with England and France on October 19th, 1939 in Ankara, as a result of these declarations. Nevertheless, Turkey sustained its policy of “not entering the war” as the essential principle of Turkish foreign policy during the World War II. In various phases of the war, Turkey was obtruded to enter the war by both its allies and the axis powers. President İsmet İnönü, who directly determined Turkish foreign policies, ably repelled such motions, threats and oppressions. (Özçelik, 2010: 257)

In the mid-1941, situation of Turkey was worrisome. Axis powers occupied Balkans, German forces settled in Bulgarian border, Russian-German relations were rebuilt in a friendly way; in short, Turkey was virtually encompassed. This tension was overcome by the Turkish-German Non-Aggression Pact signed in June 18, 1941. Germany's attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 abolished the possibility of Poland-like invasion of Turkey by these two countries or the possibility of a German-Soviet joint pressure.

Turkey declared war on Germany and Japan on February 23, 1945 to join the San Francisco Conference, in which the United Nations organization would eventually be established at the end of the war, but did not actively participated in the war.

There are those who define Turkey’s neutrality as “progressive or distinctive impartiality” which falls between neutrality and “Nonbelligerency” (non-combatant) according to the definition of international law. The degree of bias of these distinctively neutral states, which must include Spain and Sweden as well, changed during the war. In this process, relations between “belligerents” (combatant) and “nonbelligerents” (non-combatant) were determined not by means of legal bases, but of military agenda. (Önder, 2010: 330-331)
1. War and Refugees

Since Turkey was a non-combatant country, it was considered as a country of hope for those who were escaping from war, invasion and massacre. In spite of the fact that Turkey was going through financial problems, famine and dearth, it welcomed those who escaped from the surrounding circle of fire during those years. Turkey's humanitarian missions during those years could be listed as follows:

i. Aid to refugees coming from occupied Greece and Bulgaria,
ii. Aid to Jews escaping from Nazi holocaust in Europe,
iii. Aid to asylum-seeking soldiers who passed the border through land, sea or air,
iv. Sustaining the life bonds of the captives by sending gifts packages to the prisoners in various places via the Red Cross at various times.

Since Turkey was a safe, non-combatant country, sick and wounded captives were exchanged among the combatant countries. As a matter of fact, on February 13, 1939, the Council of Ministers took precautions concerning the refugees. According to the decision dated February 13, 1939, and regulation regarding refugees, it was decided that refugees coming from Greece, Bulgaria and Aegean Islands to be considered as free immigrants, those who were soldiers or at draft age among them would be accepted and placed in locations away from the border. (Republic Archives of Prime Ministry, 030.18.01.02.88.91.10.)

From the islands at Aegean Sea, it is understood that asylums to Turkey began in March 1941. Government of Turkey rules on acceptance of asylums unconditionally and be treated as refugees. Turkey would receive most refugees from Aegean Islands during the war. Turkey founds internment camps in Edirne, Uzunköprü, Aydın, Nazilli and Denizli. In the progress of time, as needed, more refugee camps would be opened in Niğde, Yozgat, Sivas, Bergama, Kastamonu and Gölçük. There were 1,849 Greek refugees in Bergama Camp in June, 1941. 17 of them were commissioned officers, 470 were privates and non-commissioned officers. There were 1,631 asylees in the camp in Niğde. 13 of them were commissioned officers, 1,495 private, 2 women and 4 were children. Their expenses were covered by Turkey. (Keser, 2005: 193, 197; Keser, 2009: 185-208)

In response to the increasing refugee movement, on May 24, 1942, Turkey rules on to change the definition of refugee and decides to place the incoming soldiers to camps and the civilians to the civilian authorities. Guilt free ones among escapes from non-combatant armies could be freed. Escaping refugees who had been war prisoners will be released with the condition of leaving the country as per the 1907 Hague Convention. When an army is outmaneuvered by the opposing forces during battle, the refuging army...
members and the war equipment they bring are taken into custody. Those who take refuge in the harbors from war ships and auxiliary ships will be considered refugees and confiscated if they do not leave the territorial waters within 24 hours. Compulsory landing air passengers are subject to unconditional mandatory settling together with their aircraft. The Turkish authorities will decide whether or not a member of the army of a state which is under occupation and influence of another state and which is not in a state of war shall be considered refugee. (Keser, 2005: 205, 207; Tekeli and İlíkin, 2014: 604–606)

The German occupation in Greece and the Aegean islands had a terrible negative effect on the social and economic life. Famine began in Greece as a major part of the country’s agricultural crop was allocated to the German army. Both the pressure of the German army of occupation and the concerns of starvation and poverty prompts Greeks to take refuge in Turkey. From May 1941 to March 1943, 22,909 Greek refugees arrived in the Aegean coast. 10,128 of them returned, 1,925 stayed in the vicinity of Izmir and 10,472 were sent to Cyprus and Syria voluntarily. (Keser, 2005: 126)

During the war, there were asylum seekers in Turkey from other countries as well. There were Jewish groups escaping from Romania. They were allowed to proceed to Aegean Islands, Cyprus and Palestine after their temporary stay in Turkey. 3,759 Naqsbandi members, who revolted at the French in Syria, entered Turkey from Gaziantep border. After negotiating with the French authorities and guaranteeing to be welcomed if they go back, some of them returned to Syria. 1,206 people who did not want to return stayed in various cities in Turkey. (Keser, 2005: 170)

2. Shelter for the Jews

Turkey has been a country where Jews have lived most comfortably for centuries and have been sheltered at times of distress. When they were expelled from Spain in 1492, Ottoman Sultan ascetic Bayezid II invited them to Turkey. When they were expelled from Russia in 19th century, Jews of Russia were accepted by Ottoman Empire without hesitation. Turkey invited Jewish scientists ostracized by Germany as of 1933 and employed them in universities. During World War II, Jews were trying to escape from the countries where Nazis arrived. Those Jewish groups were trying to reach Palestine via Turkey. Turkey has always been willing to act as a bridge for those people. However, since Palestine was under British rule, they were required to obtain visas to go there. England did not issue entrance visas to Palestine between 1939 and 1942. They were arresting ships carrying Jewish immigrants to Palestine. As a matter of fact, the British arrested the Greek-flagged ship Hilda and asked Turkish government to arrest the Turkish-flagged vessels named Sakarya, Vatan and Trabzon. On February 15, 1940,
the ship Sakarya was arrested after exiting from Dardanelles Strait and interned in Haifa port. (Tekeli- İlkin, 2014: 636)

Stanford J. Shaw wrote that Nazis demanded Turkey to stop hosting Jews in Eastern Europe, and to return Jews to Germany to be eliminated; however, Turkey rejected all these demands. Jewish American Professor Shaw woefully stated that Turkey’s aids to European Jews since 1930s and rescuing thousands of Jews from holocaust despite German threats and pressures has been disregarded by the relevant literature and Jewish communities. (Shaw, 2004: 16-17; Shaw, 1991)

During all these years of battle, there have been troublesome events, as well. On December 16, 1941, the ship Struma travels from Romania to Istanbul with 769 Romanian Jewish passengers. However, upon the declaration of British Embassy regarding the ship’s rejection of clearance from Çanakkale to Palestine, passengers are not allowed to get out of the ship interned in Istanbul for two and a half months on the alleged grounds that there was an epidemic disease on the ship. The ship that put to Black Sea again on February 23rd was sunk by a torpedo of a Russian submarine on February 24, 1942, and only one survived. (Shaw, 2004: 485-487)

On February 28, 1943, 4 days after Hitler's declaration in his keynote regarding European Jews to be eliminated, general elections took part in Turkey on February 28, 1943, and a Jewish, Avram Galante was elected to the parliament.

A détente policy was observed in England’s stance after Struma disaster. Jews traveling from Romania through Turkey were able to safely arrive at Palestine until the end of 1944. This passage would be stopped after Nazi Army retreated from Balkans. (Şimşir, 2010: 435) As a matter of fact, on May 30, 1944, the Palestinian Jewish Minority thanked the Turkish government for treating well the refugees coming from Europe to Turkey. (BCA, 30-10-0-0/266-793-45)

3. Incoming Refugee Flow from Dodecanes

In September 1943, Britain launched an operation to seize Rhodes and Dodecanese (The Twelve Islands) without sufficient preparation. Upon the counter-attack of Germans, British were forced to retreat. Between September and November of the year 1943, numerous Italian and British soldiers, officers and civilians took refuge in Turkey. At the end of November 1943, total number of refugees was 19.735. 186 of the Greek were soldiers. Biggest group was the Greek with 7676 people. Second biggest group was Italians with 5676 people. 519 of Italians were civilians, the rest soldiers. Among the refugees were 739 British and American soldiers, 140 German
soldiers. Nationalities of 4260 civilians were not indicated. (Danacıoğlu, 2006: 50-55; Tekeli- İlkin, 2014: 638)

Refuges from Aegean islands continued in 1944. Between February and July of 1944, 503 Greek-citizen Turks, 3,426 Greek, 183 British, 10 Americans, 1 Jew, 8 British soldiers, 87 Italian soldiers and 2 German soldiers took refuge in Turkey. On September 7th, 1944, a German naval aircraft takes off from Athens, lands in Izmir port, and its personnel demands asylum. (Tekeli- İlkin, 2014: 638-639)

Under the conditions of war, the Turkish Red Crescent Society strove to provide relief by offering all possible means for immigrants, refugees and soldiers. In the letters written by administrators of refugee camps to the Red Crescent Headquarters, it is understood that they were trying to help people with very modest budgets. These devoted works of the Red Crescent Society were also corresponded. Another appreciation came from the French War Prisoners’ Union. In the convention held in Paris in February 23-24, 1946, they were showing gratitude for the help they received from Turkey during their desertions. (BCA, 30.10.0-0/245-656-15)

4. Exchange of War Prisoners

Apart from sheltering refugees during war, Turkey was also a safe port for exchanging war prisoners. In accordance with article 68 of the Geneva Convention, as a result of the agreement reached between the governments of Italy, Germany and England, the exchange of prisoners of war was carried out in various cities and ports of Turkey. According to the information in the Turkish archives, the list of these exchanges is as follows:

i. On April 7, 1942, 919 Italian - 129 British, in Izmir Port,
ii. On November 10, 1942, 162 Palestinian - 305 German and Italian, in Istanbul,
iii. On March 21, 1943, 853 German and Italian - 863 British, in Mersin Port,
iv. On April 18, 1943, 1205 Italian - 150 British, in Izmir Port,
v. On May 8, 1943, 1200 Italian - 200 British, in Izmir Port,

It was reported that, on June 2nd, 1943, 2269 Italian prisoners comprised of privates and commissioned officers, five of which were generals, and 455 British privates and commissioned officers were exchanged in Izmir Port and there were no incidents during this exchange. (BCA, 030.10.179.236.2)
CONCLUSION

Turkey’s help to captives and refugees during the World War II is a subject that still has not been studied and emphasized adequately. The Republic Archive and Turkish Red Crescent Archive which are newly opened to the researchers contain important and valuable data and documents of the period.

From these archive documents, we learn that in 1940s, Turkey helped Greece which, wanted to capture Turkey between 1919 and 1922, for the sake of good will of a neighboring country. Turkish support to Greece during the World War II has been known by neither Greek historians nor Greek public. It is understood that Turkey’s humanitarian help was not organized and limited to not only the Greeks who sheltered to Turkey, but also people who stayed in Dodecanes.

In the World War II, Turkey’s help to the Jewish people escaping from Nazi Germany and other countries which support anti-Semitic policies has not been studied thoroughly.

All through the war, Turkey accepted not only the civilians but also the soldiers who passed the borders in some way and reached Turkey. It is also understood that Turkey provided soldier refugees with different camps apart from the civilians.

In conclusion, Turkey tried to help refugees consistently throughout the war and did not avoid sharing its limited sources.

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Appendix

The map showing the distribution of soldier refugees interned in Turkey on July 1942, and the locations of camps they were settled.