

**MONSIGNOR RONCALLI, LATER POPE JOHN
XXII, AND TURKISH NEUTRALITY IN THE
FIRST PERIOD OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR
(SEPTEMBER 1939-JUNE 1941).**

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The Fourth volume of Vatican's documents on the Second World War has, as the first of the same series, a diplomatic content, while the Second and the Third ones, on the relations between the Pope and the German Bishops and on the religious situation in Poland and in the Baltic States, have a more ecclesiastical interest. Following the editors, this volume¹ collects documents on a period marked by some uncertainty and diplomatic immobility of the Vatican, facing the growing restrictions imposed to his action by the widening conflict. There was to be added the continuous care not to appear involved with one belligerent party or the other, eluding their efforts for gaining the Holy See's influence to their cause. In accordance with such premises, the volume is largely descriptive of the European wartime situation, but its interest lies more in this aspect than in the record of the few and narrow diplomatic actions that the Vatican could carry in the period between Italy's entry in the war and the German aggression against Soviet Union.

From this volume we wish here to relate about some documents of a descriptive character, namely the reports on neutral Turkey's policy and the Straits issue, transmitted to the Vatican State Secretary, Cardinal Maglione, by Monsignor Roncalli, at that time Apostolic Delegate in Istanbul. Such a choice of reports is justified by more than one reason: the political importance of

¹ *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale. Le Saint Siège et la guerre en Europe; Juin 1940-juin 1941.* Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1967, pp. XXIV-622.

Roncalli's observation field, Balkans and Turkey, from where will rise the war between the Soviet Union and Germany; their author's personality, who also in these reports shows his gifts of humanity and sharpness, and, finally, the personality of one among his most important interlocutors, the German Ambassador von Papen, whose cautious diplomatic action helped Turkey to save her neutrality.

When the Second World War broke out, the importance of Turkey's position is clearly pointed to by the Straits regime in wartime according to the Montreux Convention of July 20th, 1936. As long as Turkey stayed neutral, the transit in the Straits was free only to merchant ships but forbidden to belligerents' warships, subject to the special obligations deriving from the League of Nations Covenant; and from Turkey's mutual assistance pacts if Turkey became belligerent, only neutral merchant ships not assisting the enemy, were allowed to transit, while the passage of warships rested entirely on the Turkish Government's discretion. A special regime was foreseen, were Turkey to fear a threat of war, allowing her to impose some limitations to the movements and the course of merchant ships, and, as to the warships, to exercise the same powers as in the belligerent condition.

The abolition of the Straits International Commission, set up by the Lausanne Treaty, and the transfer of its functions to the Turkish Government ended the international regime of the Straits: their militarization completed the full restoration of the Turkish sovereignty. However, the major benefits of such settlement were on the Soviet Union side; the good neighbourhood relations between the two Powers, already established during the Atatürk times, were further improved by the Soviet support to the Turkish claims for a revision of the Lausanne Treaty and by the identical interest for the Black Sea security and the Balkans equilibrium. The strain in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea caused by the Ethiopian war and the failure of London Naval Conference favoured such developments, undermining the faith in the values of the League system, and led Soviet Union to look for concrete security guarantees in the Black Sea, at the same time restoring Turkish control on the Straits.

In the Turkish security system, friendship with the Soviet Union was completed by good relations with the Western De-

mocracies, as a guarantee against Italian expansionism in the Eastern Mediterranean, that often worried Turkey, and by the Turkish membership to the Balkan Entente, to secure the regional equilibrium and status quo. This system, valid as long as -in accordance with the collective security principles- Soviet Union, France and Great Britain were united against the German danger, underwent a crisis after the German-Soviet Pact of August 23rd, 1939. The balance, on which rested the Turkish security, was suddenly broken and more than one worry rose, not only about changes in the Balkans and the Mediterranean, but on real threats to Turkish sovereignty on the Straits. These new possibilities were immediately felt by Turkish statesmen, as well as by all interested Powers: Italy, owing to her Mediterranean plans, Russia to her security, Great Britain in order to open a new front in the Balkans, thus relieving Poland through the Black Sea and Rumanian territory, or to strike the German oil supplies in Russia. As for Germany, notwithstanding that nothing was told about the Straits in the secret Protocols, enclosed to the August 23rd Pact, dealing with the respective influence zones, at the moment she certainly was less interested to hamper Soviet expansion into the Balkans, or towards Istanbul and the Straits, than after her victory on the western front and the swift Soviet annexations at Poland's, Rumania's and Baltic countries' expenses.

It was plain that the German-Soviet alliance would have brought as a consequence the changing of Turkey's international position; already on August 25th, Hitler stated in a personal letter to Mussolini² that Turkey was to be compelled to revise her alliances. Turkish neutrality was of the greatest importance to Germany at that moment, as well as in the future, although for partially different reasons; to such a goal was acting the German Ambassador in Ankara, von Papen, a man certainly fit for that task, who, since his arrival in Turkey in April 1939, advised Hitler to reassure the Turkish statesmen against Italian ambitions, then more worrying owing to the occupation of Albania. But Germany was trying to obtain from Turkey something more than neutrality; as she was fearing an allied action in the Balkans, Germany wished the closure of the Straits to the fleets

² *Italian Diplomatic Documents*, VIIIth Series, Vol. XIII, Doc. No. 245, p. 161.

of France and Great Britain, who would conclude with Turkey a mutual assistance pact. The German Government, well aware that Turkey was careful to keep good relations with the Soviet Union, entrusted to the Soviet diplomatic action the attainment of this goal.

Molotov, willing also in the Soviet's own interest to do such a favour to the ally, tried, during the negotiations that detained the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Şükrü Saracoğlu, in Moscow from September 25th till October 17th 1939, to obtain from Turkey the closure of the Straits to the ships of the Powers having no coasts on the Black Sea. The Soviet insistence on this matter and their veto to Turkey, in order to obtain Soviet alliance, to conclude with the Western Powers the mutual assistance pact foreseen in the Turkish preliminary agreements with Great Britain of May 12th and with France of June 23rd doomed the negotiations to a failure. Looking for a mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union too, the Turkish statesmen intended to build on new foundations the balance between the Soviet and the Anglo-French alliances, that previously was the basis of Turkish foreign policy and, at the same time, to sound the Soviet availability to maintain the status quo in the Balkans; but, of course, such a meaning in the proposed agreement with the Soviet Union, that, in the Turkish draft, could not be applied against France and Great Britain, did not suit the German interests, nor those of Soviet Union, equally wishing to avert every western influence from the Balkans and Black Sea.

The Turkish Government hence tried to get the same end by an inverse settlement and concluded on October 19th, only two days after Saracoğlu's departure from Moscow, the final mutual assistance pact with France and Great Britain, formally excluding a Turkish intervention against Soviet Union or every action capable to rise a conflict with this Power. Hence, Turkey wished to avoid to be involved with one of the majors Powers acting in the area, who by then were divided by opposing interests, by keeping a balance of her engagements and not qualifying her neutrality by some infringement of the Montreux Convention in favour of one party. Such a settlement, though not completely satisfactory, could at least be acceptable for British, French and perhaps Soviet interests, but meant a diplomatic failure by Germany, a

position for which von Papen, who took no part in the negotiations, could not be blamed.

The understanding between Germany and the Soviet Union meant indeed a continuous danger for Turkey; an evidence of that is given by the report³ of the Italian Ambassador in Moscow, Rosso, on November 29th, 1939, which did not exclude that, in particular circumstances, the Soviet Union could develop, as a consequence of the German alliance, a military action against Turkey in order to acquire concrete guarantees on the Straits.

A series of circumstances averted the imminence of such a danger: in the first place, the Soviet military engagements of Winter 1939-1940, secondly the German ones in Spring 1940; but Italy's entry in the war, the Russian ultimatum to Rumania and the Bessarabian occupation, both of which events passed in June 1940 and were capable to induce some changes in the Balkans situation, showed again to Turkey the difficulties of her position, that was made more dangerous by the British pressures, accentuated by the presence of a military mission, in order to obtain the Turkish intervention in favour of the Western Allies, who were suffering a complete defeat on the French front. Among the consequences of the French surrender, a minor episode, the capture of a number of quai d'Orsay secret documents, made the Turkish position even worse, by revealing a project exposed by the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Saracoğlu to the French Ambassador in Ankara, Massigli, of bombing the Soviet Baku oil fields.

But the rise of reciprocal suspicions between Moscow and Berlin, as the allies undertook unilateral actions in the Balkans (Soviet occupation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, second Vienna Arbitration, German guarantee of Rumania's territorial integrity, Vienna agreement on the new Danube's regime) and the failure of the German-Soviet agreement for the regional settlement, gave Turkey some respite. At the beginning of October, moreover, the exchange of new Ambassadors, to replace those retired after the French diplomatic documents were published on the sixth German white Book, the Turkish-Soviet relations improved and a *détente* was due to the uncertainties of the Soviet-German intercourse, already present in the ambiguous Pact of

³ *Italian Diplomatic Documents*, IXth Series, Vol. II, Doc. No. 207, p. 160.

August 1939 but, at the moment, worsened by the German ill disposition, after the victory on France, to divide South-East Europe into zones of influence. Germany was offering Russia, instead, to expand into Central Asia at the expense of the British Empire. This would mean to strike British Empire a deadly blow and to involve the Soviet definitely in the conflict on the German side, without portioning German pre-eminence in Europe.

However, Germany was disposed to offer the Soviet Union substantial compensations on the Straits for the withdrawal from the Balkan affairs. In the course of the talks between Hitler, von Ribbentrop and Molotov in Berlin, on November 12th and 13th 1940, German proposals to overcome Soviet Minister's perplexities went to a revision of the Montreux Convention, closing the Straits to the non-riparian countries navies and thus securing Soviet supremacy in the Black Sea; Turkey would have received a Four-Powers territorial guarantee. Germany wished, by this way, to avoid the Soviets taking military possession of the Straits as a basis for future operations in the Balkans. But, apart from the Baltic and the Balkan issues, where the Soviets certainly did not wish to be turned out, the Soviet plans on the Straits went beyond German offers, seeking for more effective profits. A draft agreement was proposed, on November 25th, from Molotov to the German Ambassador in Moscow, von Schulenburg: it specified those Soviet plans, asking for a military and naval base on the Straits to be lent by Turkey, who at these conditions would obtain territorial guarantees; if there were no other way, the undertaking of a common military action was also foreseen.

Berlin did not answer those demands on the contrary, the plan of attacking the Soviet Union matured in the Nazi rulers, and the initial arrangements for it were made on December 18. Once more, Turkey's safety was due to the failing of the German-Soviet understanding. As indicated in von Papen's *Memoirs*, the German proposals on the Straits issue were kept in a restricted scope thanks to the advice that Papen personally gave to Hitler and to Ribbentrop on November 10th: Von Papen then maintained that to retain her sovereignty on the Straits was so vitally important for Turkey that she would have entered into war in order to defend it. In his opinion, it was impossible to turn

Turkey out of Europe, leaving the northern Turkish coast to Soviet discretion. But only a revision of the Montreux Convention with Turkish agreement was acceptable. This was very convenient for the Soviet Union too. Von Papen seems to have understood, better than many others, the real goals of Turkish policy, aimed to keep the country out of the war but not at the price of its territorial integrity.

Guided by this intuition, von Papen could suggest to the German Government an appropriate behaviour in order to tranquillize the Turkish statesmen, notwithstanding the carrying out of the plans for the German conquest of the Balkans. On January 28th, 1941, von Papen advised Hitler, in case military movements would be executed along the Turkish border, to send to the Turkish President İnönü a personal letter, assuring him of the action's limited aims and guaranteeing Turkish territorial integrity. Such a proposal was certainly well timed, as on January 31st, foreseeing Bulgaria's fall under German influence, Churchill offered Turkey large naval and air reliefs. The soundness of von Papen's line was showed by the signing, on February 17th, of the Non-aggression Pact between Turkey and Bulgaria. The latter was able, therefore, to adhere to the Tripartite Pact without obstacles. Few days after Bulgaria's adhesion, von Papen sent İnönü Hitler's letter, making Turkey able to justify her neutrality and frustrate British hopes for a Greek-Turkish-Yugoslav mutual defence pact. After German assurances, Turkey abandoned the defence of the Balkan status quo, avoiding to be involved in the war that later overwhelmed Yugoslavia and Greece. At the same time, by this policy, Turkey succeeded in averting Soviet threats towards the Straits: on February 6th, 1941, von Ribbentrop advised the Italian Government not to support the Soviet demands on the Straits issue, as Italy seemed inclined to do during the lengthy negotiations to reach a political agreement with the Soviet Union. The uncertain attitude then adopted by Italy's Ambassador in Moscow, Rosso in a talk with Molotov, passed on February 24th 1941, on the Straits issue, put an end to these negotiations and was among the causes of their failure⁴.

The German diplomatic successes in case of Turkey were certainly due to von Papen's shrewdness; furthermore, he firmly

⁴ See Toscano, *Una mancata intesa italo-sovietica nel 1940-41*, Firenze, 1953.

opposed von Ribbentrop's plan to obtain from Turkey the passage of German troops in relief of the revolt in Irak. Such a prudent conduct showed her advantages when the Soviet campaigning forces Germany to make sure of her flanks; von Papen's action was aimed to this end, seeking for a development of German-Turkish relations from non-belligerency to friendly neutrality. The German Ambassador understood that the Turkish statesmen's cares for equidistance imposed, against von Ribbentrop's opinion, the insertion in the friendship agreement of a clause excluding any contrast with Turkey's previous engagements.

Von Papen still succeeded in winning Berlin's reserves, and the friendship agreement was signed on June 18th, four days before the attack against the Soviet Union. The treaty provided mutual respect of the respective territorial integrities, prevented every hostile action and engaged the parties to consult in a friendly attitude on every affair of common interest. Even if von Papen ignored, as he maintains in his *Memoirs*, the imminence of the German attack, the timely conclusion of the friendship agreement certainly gave Germany, who was entering in the decisive period of the war, great advantages. As for Turkey, made formally sure on the German side, she saw in the German-Soviet conflict the disappearance of the major threats to her territorial integrity.

It does not seem that Roncalli's published reports add new elements to the historical knowledge of these events: Anyhow, it is noticeable that the Apostolic Delegate's opinion on Turkey's impossibility to yield on the Straits issue, expressed in the report dated July 25th, 1940, coincide with von Papen's appraisal. The German ambassador, however, as results from Roncalli's report on August 13th, esteemed necessary a revision of the Montreux Convention, in order to neutralize again the Straits, as a consequence of Soviet-German understanding that, on the contrary, will not last. Von Papen's disposition towards a pacific revision of the Montreux Convention appears from his record of his talks with Hitler and von Ribbentrop immediately before Molotov's visit in Berlin: On the contrary, von Papen's *Memoirs* on his talks with Hitler on July 19th and August the 1st, show the fallacy of the expectations he revealed to Roncalli, reported by him on August 13th. And let us doubt of the good faith that inspired the German Ambassador's disclosures.

As for von Papen's informations, reported by Roncalli on November 26th, they appear to be entirely untrue, even if von Papen ignored the full extent of the German-Soviet disagreement. A precise appraisal of the German Ambassador's diplomatic action and of its aims is contained in Roncalli's report dated February 7th, 1941, by which he gives also alarming news on the worsening of the Balkan crisis. The Turkish attitude towards such developments is well described in the April 17th report. Finally, the success of von Papen's efforts is precisely and synthetically accounted in the report dated June 19th, 1941.

RONCALLI'S REPORTS

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL TEXT BY G. CONETTI

Report dated July 25th, 1940:

The prevailing impression in these days, here, in Istanbul, is that Turkey could not preserve intact her actual position. The publishing by the Germans of the famous documents found in the waggon at La Charité, has deeply worsened her relations with Russia. The Turkish Government has frankly given publicity to those documents, whose real meaning, that rather mitigates some expressions, was clarified in order to prove his loyalty. But the diplomatic intrigue, skilfully weaved by the French Ambassador by appropriate nuances and bashful allusions, has offered, once clarified, a pretext for too many dangerous suspicions about the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister as well as about the French Ambassador, who are supposed to leave both their places in a short period.

The Council's President Mr. Refik Saydam, in his last speech to the Parliament, explained the correctness of Russian-Turkish relations and protested against the rumours on possible sacrifices of Government members; but it seems that such a sacrifice must be done in future under the joint pressure of Russia and Germany. Great Britain and France can no more exert pretences, that once seemed justified, on the allied Turkey. Towards the middle of June, when the French and the British diplomatic representatives tried a last persuasive effort to decide Turkey to go down into the abyss, under the pretext of the lot of money payed to Turkey and of the gift of the Hatay Republic President İnönü drily replied: "As for the money, you have only to tell us whithin how many days you wish us to give it back". The conclusion of the commercial treaty with Germany, a patient work by von Papen, who stubbornly followed it up through many months, clearly has averted any suspicion of an Axis attack against Turkish territory.

Nevertheless the military movements of these weeks towards the Bulgarian border are impressing... Someone says that Russia is making Turkey understand that she could not defend alone the Straits, offering to act as a warrantor by occupying the Black Sea's entry. The rumours that Russia and the Axis Powers have de-

cided to take off Turkey the Straits' guardianship is more persistent... But in the confusion of odd rumours, a fact imposes itself as significant: the Turkish deployment of troops on Thrace fields, about Edirne. The Turkish Government will never yield on the Straits and Istanbul issue, but after the bravest war of defence...

Report dated August 13th, 1940:

Yesterday I had a long talk with the German Ambassador in Turkey, von Papen, that I wish to report to Your Eminence by its principal passages... Von Papen had a long talk with Hitler a few days ago, and he was pleased to have found him calmer and more thoughtful after the victory that before; Hitler repeated once more that he never intended to destroy England but to make her more reasonable towards Germany and disposed to consider again her positions, inconsistent with current developments of the international life. At present, Hitler is deeply grieved by the necessity of launching the extreme attack, but he will be very happy if, after the first blows, England would decide to negotiate an agreement that will preserve her from a tremendous downfall...

The Axis Powers' relations are always loyal and firm and so are relations between the Axis and Russia, although in a different way and on different issues. As for the Danubian countries, Berlin persuaded Rumania to cede a vast part of the territories that unjustly were assigned to her after the Great War and assured Bulgaria that her claims, as they were reasonable, would be satisfied.

Italy after the war would replace entirely France in the Near East, performing a noble task in the interest of Catholicism too, as her relations with the Holy See are at present so good; Germany has no territorial claims in the East but for what concerns a commercial role to play there.

Turkey is at present in a precarious and worrying situation; in spite of all, she stays connected with England and seems not to realize the inexorable dangers that are pending on her. After the invitation that Russia made last winter to Turkey to close the Straits to every ship which would enter the Black Sea against the Russian interests the İnönü Government stayed intransigent, maintaining that to yield on the Straits issue meant to impair radically Turkey's independence and sovereignty.

The equilibrist's attitude of the Foreign Affairs Minister Saracoğlu in Moscow did not succeed to dispel the mistrust and the discontent of the Soviet Government, who is able to wait but doesn't renounce to his plans. Moscow at present is waiting the outcome of the German attack on England and shall not undertake anything before this match has ended. But whatever be the outcome, Russia suddenly will renew her attacks and in any case Turkey's position will be seriously compromised; at least there would be a Straits neutralization and some changes in the Istanbul condition...

Report dated November 26th, 1940:

I think it would be interesting to inform You that von Papen, as he was hurrying in his way from Berlin to Ankara, sent to me a confidant to give me the following informations:... The agreement between the Axis Powers and Russia is full and complete. The Tripartite Pact is growing stronger and bases itself on the conviction

that the European new order is already carried out and that England shall at least yield. Some nations have already adhered to the Pact, some others are about to do it; the way is open to every nation who wish to adhere, Turkey included. In the final settlement there would be a place for Turkey according to her behaviour. At present, neither Germany, nor Italy, nor Bulgaria wish to give troubles to Turkey. A war in this region is not possible unless England will push Turkey to attack Bulgaria or Syria. Berlin esteems that the Greek issue is settled in Italy's favour; Germany gave a free hand to her ally; the first set-backs of these days are not viewed as hampering the final success of the undertaking.

The German Ambassador shall inform the Turkish government of that all.

From von Papen's confidant's informations I formed the opinion that the Axis and Russia, after England's defeat, don't attach much importance to Turkey, whose independence may be preserved in the settlements of the new European Great Powers' interests...

Report dated February 7th, 1941:

Last night I had a long talk with Baron Lessner, just back from Ankara... It's well known that a huge concentration of German troops is going on in Rumania; they will form a left and a right flank towards two fronts, the Greek and the Turkish one... The left flank is waiting for the Turkish attitude. Germany does not wish nor has interest in moving war to Turkey. Von Papen is decided to prevent it as long as he stays as Ambassador; but no one knows what Britain might impose on Turkey and what complications might rise...

Report dated April 17th, 1941:

Turkey is following the swirling course of the events in the conterminous countries with her eyes open. But she is not disposed to be dragged into the war, in spite of the British pressures. The German Embassy's diplomatic action is going on very actively with evident results. The expectation of no advantages if Turkey decides to fight by Britain side, of great damages if she would be defeated as Greece and Yugoslavia, the fear of Russia make feelings disinclined to enter the war, even if it is not certain that Turkey will not fight. The press,... Following the instructions, is going on saying that war will be waged only if Turkish territory would be violated... Some rumours let us deem that a new fact is developing to help Turkey to secure her future in the case of an Axis victory...

Report dated June 19th, 1941:

As the diplomatic messenger is leaving, the newspapers announce the non-aggression treaty between Turkey and Germany. By my former report I let You understand that such happenings were possible. The last one crowns von Papen's persevering and succeeding work. At present we must be pleased that the peace in the East is more secured. The aim pursued by this treaty and by the previous acts is quite clear: to hold open a way for Germany's provisionment. The goods here are all very dear as they are sent to Germany. That is, anyway, a contribution to peace, that asked Turkey a courageous attitude as to her engagements with Great Britain.