

TURKEY'S DECLARATION OF WAR ON GERMANY AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II*

SINA AKŞİN

That the nature of Turkey's relations with Germany should be very different compared to relations with Japan is self-evident. The gigantic distances separating Japan and Turkey obviously affect relations, so that economic and cultural relations play a much more prominent part than military and political relations. On the other hand, the transformation of Japan into a modern society in relatively very short time, and the modalities of this transformation has always excited great curiosity in Turkey. (For the sake of brevity, I am including the Ottoman Empire under the rubric of "Turkey".) There is, however, a similarity in that Turkey, in spite of its many bloody encounters with Austria, never fought against Germany as such on any major scale. Most probably, the fact that Germany and the Ottoman Empire were not contiguous and that the German Navy did not exercise much dominance in the Mediterranean, explains the peacefulness of these

*This paper was presented to the 6th National Congress of the Social Sciences, organised by the Turkish Social Sciences Association, Ankara, 1999.

relations. Obviously, the Baghdad Railway scheme was an imperialistic enterprise, but because territorial aims were not much in evidence, it ought to be considered a neo-imperialistic project. During the Sultanate of Abdülhamit II (1876-1909), Germany's refusal to join the other powers in boycotting the Ottoman Empire because of the Armenian issue, and the memorable official visit of Wilhelm II in 1898 was very welcome support for the Empire. Later, with the coming to power of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), a close affinity with the Empire soon became evident, especially because of the great allergy that the other powers developed towards the nationalistic policies of that party. This affinity certainly must have played a part in the decision of the CUP government to throw in its lot with the German-Austro-Hungarian alliance in 1914. That alliance continued until the very end of World War I. Whether the memory of German-Ottoman alliance played any part in Hitler's mind in his disinclination to attack Turkey during WW-II is, as far as I know, a matter of conjecture.

Despite the German-Ottoman alliance in WW-I, in the interwar period Turkey and Germany were, in a sense, in opposite camps. Turkey, thanks to its national struggle, was able to avoid the partition and emasculation that had been ordained at Sèvres. The peace treaty of Lausanne (1923) that replaced it, had, to a large extent, satisfied Turkey's demands. As a result, she was in the "Pro-status quo" camp. Germany, however, had had to accept the Versailles Treaty, which had reduced her territory, deprived her of her colonies, burdened her with a huge indemnity and other restrictions. Therefore, she was in the revisionist camp. Nevertheless, Germany in the 1930's made it a matter of policy to buy most of Turkey's exports at good prices. The result was that most of Turkey's imports came from Germany. This exchange was effected through clearing agreements. The Turkish government was uncomfortable about the dominance of Germany in her foreign trade and was seeking to diversify her trade partners. It is interesting to note that in spite of this German dominance, Turkey was able to welcome and employ 142 German academics who had been purged by the Nazi regime. In other words, the Turkish government's freedom of action seems not to have been greatly affected by the said relationship.

During the War of Independence and after, the cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy was friendship with Soviet Russia. The gradual increase of cordiality with Britain and France did not affect this principle. France's decision to grant independence to Syria in 1936 became a turning point. The province of Hatay had been in Ottoman hands at the time of the signature of the Moudros, Armistice on October 30, 1918. At the Erzurum and Sivas Congresses, held in the following year, the Armistice borders were declared to be Ottoman territory. The last Ottoman Parliament which convened at the beginning of 1920, proclaimed by its National Pact its reaffirmation of this doctrine. But by the Ankara agreement of October 20, 1921, the French did not give back Hatay. However, they conceded its 'Turkishness' and agreed to give the province a special status. The French decision to grant independence to Syria was considered by Ankara as a new situation, so that she began to press her claim on Hatay. Turkey got what she wanted, but in the process, her 'intimacy' with Britain and France increased. On May 12, 1939, Turkey and Britain issued a joint declaration to the effect that if there should be a war in the Mediterranean, the two countries would cooperate. The same declaration was made with France following France's cession of Hatay on June 23, 1939.

Everything seemed to be going well when the whole world was thunderstruck by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939). Negotiations between France and Britain on the one hand, and the Soviet government on the other, had been progressing when it seems that Stalin suddenly concluded that the Western powers were wlaying a game, that they did not intend to build an alliance with the Soviets, and that their real aim was to bring about a German-Soviet war. Thereupon, the Soviets made a deal with the Germans in order to stave off their first onslaught and thus gain time. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact put Turkey in a predicament, because the Soviet Union thus had suddenly joined the revisionist camp. Indeed, Foreign Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu's visit to Moscow on September 25, 1939 was a failure. The Soviets were demanding the "joint defense" of the Dardanelles, and a revision of the Montreux regime (1936). This led to the Turkish-French-British alliance on September 19, 1939. If Turkey were to be attacked, the other two powers would come to the aid of Turkey. If there should be war in the Mediterranean, or if France and Britain should be involved in war to defend Greece and Romania, Turkey

would come to the aid of its allies. No provision of the Treaty would be construed to force Turkey into an armed conflict with the Soviet Union. Thus, so long as the Soviet-German Pact stood, Turkey maintained its neutrality. Because Bulgaria was a German ally and because Greece was invaded by Germany, Turkey became Germany's neighbour. When Germany asked for a non-aggression pact, Turkey concurred and on June 18, 1941, this pact was signed. This was four days before Germany's declaration of war on the Soviet Union.

Now, with Germany and the Soviets on opposite sides, pressure began to be exerted on Turkey to enter the war. Turkey, however, made it a point not to comply. The story of Turkey's steadfast neutrality is ably portrayed in Selim Deringil's study.¹ A lot has been said about Turkey's default in respect to its Tripartite Treaty, especially from the Soviet side. They, with an active agitation based on this legal point, tried to push through territorial claims and attempted to establish hegemony over Turkey by controlling the Straits. The legal aspects have been and will be argued at length. I will not go into that.

What I do want to underline are the motives for Turkey's neutrality. The first motive was Turkey's unpreparedness for mechanized warfare. When the Republic was founded in 1923, Turkey was in every respect a very poor country, burdened with a sizable share of the Ottoman Debt. Over the years, Turkey, with no exterior aid and a minimal amount of debt, tried to build a material and educational-cultural infrastructure, while at the same time nationalizing foreign investments and paying the Ottoman Debt. It is hardly surprising that very little was left for military investment. In 1943, at the Adana (January 30-31) and Cairo (December 4-7) Conferences, President İnönü put forth this excuse to counter Churchill's and Roosevelt's demands for Turkey's entry into war. The Allies thereupon provided some military hardware, but this was hardly sufficient and necessitated a length of time for the training of personnel.

The second motive may have been the unsavory prospect of Allied troops coming to Turkey to support its war effort. This might have entailed a certain amount of intervention in Turkey's internal

¹S. Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War: An Active Neutrality*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1989.

affairs. If we consider that Soviet troops might also have been among them, Turkey's repugnance becomes easier to understand, as the Soviets had evinced territorial claims regarding Turkey. It is to be remembered that the Germans, even in their retreat, seemed to lack neither the means nor the determination to fight.

As the final German defeat became imminent, Turkey made certain moves in support of the Allies. June 6, 1944 was the date of the Normandy landing. On May 26, Turkey had decided to end strategic chrome exports to Germany. On June 15, 1944, Numan Menemencioğlu, the Foreign Minister who was known for his pro-German sympathies, resigned.² Again in June, German merchant ships passing through the Straits, which probably often carried military material or personnel, began to be searched.³ On August 2, 1944, diplomatic relations with Germany were ended. No doubt the active encouragement of the Allies played a certain part in these moves.

At the beginning of February 1945, the Big Three, represented by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, met in Yalta. It was decided that to be considered an Associate Nation in planned United Nations organization, and thus to be able to participate in the San Francisco Conference, should be conditional on a declaration of war on Germany and Japan before March 1945. On February 20, Peterson, the British Ambassador in Ankara, communicated this decision to the Turkish Government.

On February 23, 1945 the Turkish Grand National Assembly decided by a unanimous vote of 401 members to declare war on Germany and Japan (54 members were absent).⁴ During the debate, Foreign Minister Hasan Saka said that the British Ambassador's advice ("telkin") had been thoroughly examined by the government and that it had been decided to accept it as being in keeping both with the alliance and with the "high interests" of the state which had all along inspired the government's policy. Prime Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu, on his part, declared that the Turkish Republic had from the very first

²Very probably, this was a 'role', a part of İnönü's 'balancing act'.

³Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, p. 238, reports the searching of the Kassel.

⁴The sources for the following paragraphs are *Ayin Tarihi*, 1-28 February 1945, No. 135; *Cumhuriyet*, February 24, 1945.

minutes of danger placed its word, arms and heart on the side of "democratic nations" and had all along pursued that policy. Now, one more step was being taken to officially join the ranks of the Allies where Turkey had already been in practice. MP Mümtaz Ökmen pointed out that all of the neighbours of the Soviet Union ("this great friend") except Turkey had joined the opposite side or given right of way to the armies invading that country. The Soviets' heroic stand at Stalingrad had been facilitated by the fact that the Straits and the Caucasian frontier were in friendly hands. Had it not been for Turkey, the result at El-Alamein might also have been dubious. He also asserted Turkey's basic policy as being Turkish-Soviet friendship.

Ökmen's point about Turkey's military contribution to the Allied cause was also taken up by Independent Group⁵ leader Ali Nihat Tarlan and Şemsettin Günaltay. Rasih Kaplan went even further, asserting that by keeping her armies ready for war, Turkey could be considered to have been at war.

In the newspaper *Akşam*, Necmettin Sadak (February 24) pointed out that the proposition to declare war on Germany had not been made to the main neutral countries, and that therefore, it was a kind of privilege. Nadir in *Cumhuriyet*, the same day, said that they were sincerely together with the freedom-loving nations. Retired General H. Emir Erkilet, who wrote a column in the same paper and who had displayed pro-German sympathies during the war (at one point, he had visited the German front in Russia) was now writing about "Soviet Russia's Military Might". In the unsigned column, titled "Political Report" (İcmal), it was asserted that the Turkish nation would have nothing to do with a Germany, which claimed racial superiority and *lebensraum* and thereby refused other nations' rights, invaded their territory and turned the world into a prison. The same was true of Japan, which, claiming to establish an area of prosperity, enslaved nations and strangled the ideals of freedom and independence. The Turkish nation was democratic and stood by the democratic front. According to the report of the *Anatolian News Agency*, *The Times*, on February 25, welcomed in its leading article Turkey's decision,

⁵The Independent Group composed of 21 MPs had been created by the 5th General Congress of the Republican People's Party in 1939 to 'democratise' the single-party system.

emphasizing Turkey's consistently friendly attitude throughout the war and pointing out that Turkey's key position in the area fully entitled her to participate in the discussions concerning the future of the Balkans and the Aegean.

This, in short outline, is the story of Turkey's declaration of war on Germany.