

PERCEPTIONS
JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

March - May 1999

Volume IV - Number 1

BOOK REVIEW

"DOCUMENTS ON THE HISTORY OF THE GREEK JEWS"

Researched and Edited by PHOTINI CONSTANTOPOULOU-THANOS VEREMIS, Athens:
Kastaniotis Editions SA, 1998, pp. 472.

M. MURAT HATİPOĞLU

Dr. M. Murat Hatipoğlu is an Associate Professor at Hacettepe University, Ankara. The study published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece and the University of Athens (namely the Department of Political Science and Public Administration) consists of four main parts. After the foreword (pp. 9-10), a prefatory note (pp. 11-12) and the Prologue (pp. 15-25), the reader can follow the four parts of the book under the titles 'Introduction' (pp. 27-38), 'Details of the Documents' (pp. 39-67), 'Documents before the 2nd World War' (pp. 70-246) and finally 'Documents during and after the 2nd World War' (pp. 249-398). At the end of the book there is an annex including a time chart of Greek history from 1908 to 1950 (pp. 403-418), some biographical notes (pp. 419-434) and some notes concerning newspapers, associations and organisations, together with a glossary (pp. 435-440). The bibliography (pp. 441-462) is followed by an index (pp. 463-472).

The work, researched and edited by Photini Constanto-poulou and Thanos Veremis and based on records from the Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece, is a useful handbook for all scholars especially those who are interested in the matter of anti-Semitism and the fate of the Jews in Greece before, during and just after the Second World War. In this work the reader can find various documents (159 in total), mainly based on reports from Greek diplomatic missions abroad, namely in London, Paris, Cairo, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Jerusalem, Bucharest, Washington, Pretoria, Istanbul, Ankara and Aleppo, between 1918 and 1957. There are also documents about the resolutions, sessions, memories and discussions on the matter of the Jews in Greece. But despite the efforts of the editors to follow an objective method, in several places of this well compiled and carefully prepared book they make either some slanderous statements against Turkey or give incorrect information about it and its politics.

Some of these intentional statements, which are predominantly based on the editors' biased claims and evaluations, turn this voluminous book into a questionable study. Here are some examples:

"The Special Research Bureau of the State Department has devoted a long report to the dealings of Nazi Germany with countries that remained neutral in the Second World War. These dealings had their starting-point with the gold taken from the victims of the occupied countries, amounting to 300 million dollars (present-day value 2.6 billion dollars). With this wealth the Nazis purchased raw materials from such 'neutral' countries as Turkey, Argentina, and Portugal, which allowed them to continue the war" (pp. 20-21.)

First, I must note that Turkey was not a 'neutral' but a 'non-belligerent' country during the period of

the Second World War until it declared war on Germany and Japan on 23 February 1945. For details of this and the following matters the book *Nazi Gold*, (Foreign and Commonwealth office, The Stationary Office: London 1998, pp. 587-654) is recommended.

The editors try to accuse Turkey on several points. About raw materials, the editors chose to use William Slany's report, 'U.S. and Allied Wartime and Post-war Relations and Negotiations with Argentina, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Turkey on Looted Gold and German External Assets and U.S. Concerns About the Fate of the Wartime Ustasha Treasury'. In this report, published on 3 June 1998, the subject of Turkey's chrome exports to Germany during the war is reflected with incomplete and incorrect information and was based solely on American documents starting from 1941 (after the United States declared war on Germany) and on some German documents, thus omitting what happened concerning chrome sales between 1939 and 1941. As a result, without resorting to the British and French archives related to Turkey's chrome sales, Slany's report interpreted historical developments with insufficient information. In fact, Turkey signed a Tripartite Alliance Agreement of Mutual Defence with Britain and France on 19 October 1939 in Ankara (the documents concerning this agreement can be examined in Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Cumhuriyet Arşivi, Bakanlar Kurulu Fonu, 19333/2/12190-89.102.11 and 19334/2/12191-89.102.12). This Agreement was concluded for a period of fifteen years and at this date—following strictly a policy of neutrality—the USA did not have any intention of joining the alliance against the Axis powers.

On the other hand, Turkey did not prolong its Trade Agreement with Germany on 31 August 1939, which was signed on 26 July 1938 and was valid only for one year. Since Turkey stopped all its trade with Germany, it wanted to sell its total chrome production to France and Britain over a long period. After trade negotiations with these two countries, a Chrome Trade Agreement was signed upon insistence of Britain between Turkey, France and Britain on 8 January 1940 in Paris and it was valid for only two years. A year later, in September 1941, Germany applied to Turkey for a new trade deal of chrome. Ankara, after obtaining the approval of the British government, signed a chrome agreement with Germany on 9 October 1941. At this date, Germany had already invaded France and the USA was still a neutral country. Turkey stipulated a condition in this agreement that chrome deliveries to Germany would start only after January 1943, the termination of the Tripartite Chrome Agreement together with its one year prolongation. Moreover, the chrome trade with Germany did not include any gold transaction. It was carried out on the basis of barter involving war material deliveries to Turkey in exchange of chrome ore. On 21 April 1944, Turkey cut its chrome exports to Germany at the request of the Allies, although the agreement was still not terminated. I can say that the editors jump to conclusions without checking into other sources.

Another example of anti-Turkish statements is the following:

“In 1934 the large Jewish community of Edirne and the region around the western side of the Turkish straits was summarily moved and relocated within two months in Istanbul. The incident attracted considerable international attention and was criticised in diplomatic quarters but this did not prevent further anti-Jewish activities from breaking out” (p. 21.)

This is another example of jumping to conclusions. If the editors examined other sources—for instance the well-known work of Stanford J. Shaw, *Turkey and The Holocaust, Turkey's Role in Rescuing Turkish and European Jewry from Nazi Persecution, 1933-1945*, New York University Press 1993—they would recognise that the Turkish authorities suppressed all the “Nazi-inspired

anti-Semitic movements in Turkey” (Shaw, 1993, pp. 14-33).

There is further incomplete information about the Varlık Vergisi (the Capital Tax) which:

”... served a heavy blow to the Jewish and Christian communities, since their members were forced, literally, to ‘donate’ their property to the state. This law imposed a tax on the basis of an arbitrary assessment of the fortunes in question carried out by tax officials, without any means of appeal for the taxpayers. In this way, many who were not in a position to pay the huge sums demanded by them, were immediately displaced to forced labour camps” (pp. 21-22.)

Here, I have to note that the Capital Tax was a disaster for every merchant in Turkey without any exception. The Greek scholar Alexis Alexandris states in his study *The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations (1918-1974)*, (Centre for Asia Minor Studies: Athens 1983) that “Although Turkey avoided direct involvement in the war, it was unable to escape the severe economic strains felt throughout Europe during 1939-1944 On the eve of World War II, Turkey was still dependent on Europe for its basic commodities such as raw materials and spare parts At the same time heavy expenditure occasioned by mobilisation and the constant rise of the price-index resulted to a considerable increase in note circulation. Increased money circulation indicated inflation and all indices affirmed that Turkey was in the midst of a serious economic crisis” (p. 208). In fact, a number of wholesalers, brokers, exporters and importers, known as the ‘war rich’ (harp zenginleri), in the larger cities were able to dominate a flourishing black market and amass large fortunes in a short space of time. As early as 1 January 1940, the Turkish government attempted to check the situation through rationing wheat, imposing rent controls and finally by giving extensive emergency powers to the authorities by promulgating the National Emergency law. But on the whole, these measures proved ineffective and speculators were able to circumvent government controls. Finally, on 11 November 1942, the new tax measure, the Capital Tax, was promulgated in order to curb galloping inflation. It was abolished on 15 March 1944.

In the end the Capital Tax produced revenues amounting to approximately TL318m, which greatly helped the government solve its financial difficulties, but the collections were far short of the expected TL463m, and the law met with widespread criticism across the political spectrum in Turkey as well as outside the country. The inconsistent and unequal application of the law by some local councils and the bureaucracy hurt Muslims and non-Muslims alike. That the Capital Tax was not directed primarily against Jewish Turks, moreover, is shown by the fact that it was never accompanied any sort of organised, government-sponsored anti-Semitic propaganda such as that which the Nazis spread through Germany and the German occupied countries at the same time, and that most Muslim Turks themselves showed no anti-Semitic sentiments either before, during or after the Tax programme was in force (Shaw, 1993, pp. 43-44).

Another slanderous statement against Turkey is about the so-called ‘Struma affair’; a Turkish vessel which:

“... was carrying hundreds of Jewish refugees from Romania to Palestine [and] did not obtain permission to pass through the Straits; instead it was taken by the Turkish authorities out into the Black Sea and sunk. All the refugees on board lost their lives.” (p. 22.)

Here, I must note that Turkey became a true bridge to Palestine; a transit centre that enabled Jews being persecuted in their own countries to go on to the Holy Land both by land and sea making

possible the salvation of thousands who would otherwise have been exterminated (Shaw, 1993, pp. 255-257).

If the editors examined without bias the archives of the International Committee of Red Cross in Geneva they would find a wealth of information relating to the Jews rescued from Romania by various vessels that sailed from Constanza to Istanbul, such as the *Milka*, the *Bellacitta*, and Turkish ships such as the *Bülbül*, *Mefkûre*, *Kazbek*, *Özbek*, *Toros* and *Morina*. According to Jewish sources such as the Jewish Agency's Geneva Office, during the years of the Holocaust these vessels regularly carried immigrants from the Romanian port of Constanza to Palestine, via Turkey. A significant number of refugees also crossed Turkey by train on their way to Palestine. Professor Shaw estimates that a total of as many as one hundred thousand Jewish refugees passed through Turkey on their way to the 'Holy Land' between 1940 and 1945.

But on 15 December 1941, the steamship *Struma* carrying 769 Romanian Jews, refused the right to land passengers in Istanbul after the British ambassador declared that ships would not be allowed to exit the Dardanelles in order to go to Palestine, set out again into Black Sea on 23 February 1942 and sunk following an explosion on 24 February 1942 (Shaw, 1993, p. 411).

In their time chart of Greek history from 1908 to 1950, the editors make some incorrect or incomplete claims concerning the Balkan Wars and their results. The editors state that "... on October 26, 1912 the Greek Army liberates Thessaloniki ..." and "...on February 22, 1913 the Greek Army liberates Ioannina..." (p. 403). In fact, the military operation in the second half of October 1912 and the sudden presence of Greeks in Aegean Macedonia, including Salonika (Thessaloniki), was considered by the Greeks themselves to be an occupation. This is confirmed by the Decree of Occupation by the King of Hellenes Gheorgios I., dated 31 October 1913. The decree does not speak of territories that the Greek army had liberated or regained—which would have implied that Greece considered them Greek lands—but clearly speaks of "Macedonian territories occupied by the Greek army" (see John Shea, *Macedonia and Greece*, Jefferson: North Carolina and London, 1997, p. 103). A similar case occurred during the occupation of the 'Albanian Ioannina' on 22 February 1913, including the Southern Epirus and the Albanian territories such as *Préveza* further to the south (Shea, 1997, p. 102).

Finally, I would like to state that this study will serve as a useful handbook for all scholars, but in several parts there are questionable statements that should be revised after checking other sources, monographs and, especially, the Turkish archives concerning the subject. It would have been more useful if the editors had examined the Turkish sources and the studies published by the Turkish Jews, such as Avram Galante's voluminous work *Histoire de Juifs de Turquie*, Vols. I-IX, İsis Yayıncılık Ltd., İstanbul 1987 (a collection of the works of Galante published in French).
