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The Turkish Province from an English Diplomat's Viewpoint 70 Years Ago

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Abstract

In 1947, a British diplomat conducted a visit to the places travelled rarely by local and foreign travelers, The Black Sea Coast between Samsun and Giresun in the North, the Malatya-Erzincan train line in the South, the Sivas-Erzurum train route in the West, Erzincan-Şebinkarahisar- Giresun in the East, and reported what he saw to London. In secret report, there provided military, political, ethnographic and historical information. In rapidly changing life conditions in the world, this secret report, which was written seventy years ago, set us on a historical journey. In the year, which the secret report was written, Turkey preferred being part of Western bloc in newly established bipolar international system and British diplomats were trying to understand how Britain and the Soviet Union were looked at in the regions they visited. In the secret report, there were also striking observations regarding the activities of the newly formed opposition party (Democratic Party) in Anatolia, the distance between the Turkish elites and the Anatolian villagers, and the military-civilian relationship in Anatolia.

Keywords: World War II, province, rural, English diplomats, Middle and East of Turkey

Introduction

After the Second World War, Turkey preferred being part of Western bloc in bipolar international system. In the days when Turkey made transition from single party to multiparty political system, Turkey established close relations with United States and United Kingdom. In eightieth period and second legislative year of Turkish Grand National Assembly, President İsmet İnönü's speech in which he stated United Kingdom was the most important ally of Turkey, described English people as noble nation and mentioned United States as a great democracy is the most significant official statements showing Turkey's heading in terms of international alliance. ¹

Turkey's decisive stance gained concrete visibility with the Turkey's participation to three international organizations as of 1947. In accordance with Law No. 5016 dated 25. 02. 1947, Turkish government was authorized to participate International Monetary Fund (IMF) and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) and in the same year, Turkey participated to General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which regulates international trade with the participation of 23 countries. With the participation of World Bank and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the impact of Truman Doctrine and Marshall aids, Turkey entered political and economic integration process with Western bloc. ²

While improving, and consolidating institutional relations with the West in international relations, Turkey also attempted to develop democracy in domestic politics. In the context of these international and domestic settings, we see that British diplomats and political observers in Ankara conducted a visit to Central and Eastern parts of Anatolia to get insight into political opinions of Turkish people. The secret report written as a result of the visit taking place September 4-18, 1947 was found during our research in the archives of UK Foreign Ministry. ³

We do not know how many people are involved in the trip; however, while explaining the trip route, it was emphasized that large part of Turkey, the Black Sea coast between Samsun and Giresun in the North, the Malatya-Erzincan train line in the South, the Sivas-Erzurum train route in the West and the Erzincan-Şebinkarahisar-Giresun line in the East, had been visited rarely for a hundred years.

Travel notes provide interesting information, as well as strategic and military information at the end of each traveled area. Even though World War II had already

¹ Barış Övgün, "1947: Uluslararası İç Politika", *Açıklamalı Yönetim Zamanızını 1940-1949*, Ed. Birgül Ayman Güler, Ankara 2008, p. 867. For domestic political events in Turkey in this period see: Feroz Ahmad, *Demokrasi Sürecinde Türkiye (1945-1980)*, çev. Ahmet Fethi, Hill Pub., İstanbul 1992, pp. 37-53; and also see: Meral Balcı, *Sıradışı Bir Politikacı Kasım Gülek Hayatı ve Siyasi Faaliyetleri*, Yeditepe Pub., İstanbul 2015, pp. 54-88.

² Barış Övün, p.853. Events in 1947 from a journalist's point of view, see: Cüneyt Arcayürek, *Açıkıyor -1 Demokrasinin İlk Yılları 1947-1951*, Bilgi Pub., Ankara 1983. For a research study of the term using a newspaper, see: Şerafettin Pektaş, *Milli Şef Döneminde Cumhuriyet Gazetesi (1938-1950)*, Fırat Pub., İstanbul 2003.

³ FO 371/72540/X3223

ended and with the assumption that UK would not plan a military attack on Turkey, in the report, there are significant evaluations for possible Soviet Union's attack on Turkey. We want to give examples of military evaluations by censoring geographical coordinates because they can still have a military meaning even though it has been over 70 years.

"...this region lacks of cover or room for deployment for armoured vehicles, and scarcity of areas suitable for operating air-borne troops, offers formidable obstacles to the movement of enemy forces..."

"... Erzincan plain offers excellent facilities for the landing of air-borne forces in the rear of any defensive group in the region....."

".....All along this stretch, there is no room for deployment by armour and supply columns of any effective cover. This country- as in the case of Euphrates gorges- is essentially terrain over which only ground troops could only operate. Incidentally, while the landscape affords no facilities for movement by or cover for armoured vehicles, the deep ravines, an dozen caves, afford shelter for infantry and mounted men against air attacks..."

The Charm Of The Turkish Province

We understand that the first important center is Erzincan City in the English committee's travel.

Evaluating Erzincan City in historical process, they pointed out the following information in their report:

"The charm of Turkish provincial towns is that each has a character original to itself. Although one of the oldest settled sites in Anatolia, Erzincan has the aspect of some Alaskan township which has grown up in a few years. The old town (which had not suffered much during the war of 1914-18 since it twice changed hands without fighting- an indication of its indefensible situation) was almost entirely destroyed by the earthquake of 1939. In this catastrophe some 12. 000 people lost their lives. Numbers migrated and the pre- 1939 population of 30. 000 has been reduced to 13. 000. The old town lay to the South of the new town in the direction of the Euphrates. The area looks like some battlefield of 1918 ploughed by weeks of shell-fire and little remains of former edifices except the foundations of a strongly built hammam and mosque. Most of the present inhabitants lost all or part of their families in the disaster which still remains a principal topic of conversation. A certain pride even is taken in having experienced "the worst earthquake after San Fransisco".

After stating that the Turks were absolutely competent and courageous in building a new Erzincan and some of the state buildings in the north of the city such as train station did not collapse in the earthquake and the damaged ones were repaired and reconstructed, the report pointed to that Ismet İnönü who visited immediately

earthquake-affected zones, whose bronze sculpture was still looking down to the city on a blue scene. The report also states that wide boulevards were being organized in Erzincan and modern houses with two or four rooms have been constructed in large quantities through both public and private investment.

The secret British report notes that even though the village transport was still provided by ox carts and horsepower, the villagers on the hill had easy access to the railway line, and adding that American motorcycles and Chevrolet van trucks were found in the area, though not much. With the Marshall Aids under the framework of Truman Doctrines, American vehicles would have increased significantly. However, British diplomats reported this finding to London after observing that increasing traffic between small villages and towns in Anatolia and many municipalities made negotiations to provide buses reaching Istanbul within 3-4 days for passengers; *“Were the necessary exports from England and finance from Turkey available, there is undoubtedly a considerable market for mechanical transport and its accessories in the interior of Anatolia”*.

Daily Life In An Anatolian Town

The confidential English Report not only determines military and economical inspections, but also gives precious information about rural life in Anatolia in 1947. Here is some of the information from the report:

“An account of days passed in the Municipal Hotel (Belediye Oteli) may give some impression of the conditions of life in an Anatolian provincial town. The Belediye Oteli, a one-floor building (like all houses in Erzincan since the earthquake) is clean and decently kept. Beds- not rooms are let at TL 1. 25=2/6 per night. If a traveller wishes to keep a room to himself, he must therefore pay for three or four beds, and this is regarded as bad form if the hotel is crowded. There is a constant come-and-go of travellers- exclusively men for it is still not considered suitable for Turkish ladies to stay in provincial hotels. (When they do travel, they arrange to be accommodated by friends in the town). Travellers are a mixed bag of small officials, traders, buyers and exporters of agricultural products, students, peasants, officers. They have the usual good manners of people living in primitive conditions who have always to consider the common comfort. Next the Belediye Oteli is the cafe of the hotel, where guests and locals drink coffee or tea, listen to or ignore the wireless, and play interminable tricktrack. The majority go to bed about 10 at night. A travelling Turk, either from modesty or a desire for warmth, seldom removes his undercloths, but puts his pyjamas on over them. The crowded travellers, sleeping in twos or threes in the small rooms, prefer the windows shut but keep the doors open into the passage where those who have not been lucky enough to procure a share in a room sleep on beds ranged lengthways. There is the single washbin in the passage and the twin latrines, which invariably do service in these small hotels. Here again manners are excellent and might serve as a model to the angry queues who assail the bathrooms of English

seaside hotels. The foreigner will always meet with a grave “buyrun” as he makes for the washbasin. Probably twice a week, he will visit the hammam. On the two weekly market- days (Mondays and Tuesdays) the Turkish visitor to Erzincan will be busy on some deal. Otherwise, calls on various minor officials may occupy his time. In the afternoon the male population gathers in the Lokantas (restaurants). Here soup, mutton, kebabs, mixed grill, a sort of goulash are served. In summer food is generally served in an adjoining garden; in winter mangals (brass trays). A game of tricktrack follows a Turkish lunch, and the rattle of tricktrack is one of the most familiar sounds of a Turkish Street. All evening the radio drones mournful Turkish music, from each public place. It is interesting here to note that very few Turks in the provinces, seem to listen with any interest to the news

It was expressed in the report that Turks were not interested in news and developments in Ankara. It was more than indifference, but, may be related to people's expectation of democratic transformation. Therefore, Muhiddin Birgen wrote in his essay, under the headline of “Do not build high hopes” in Cumhuriyet newspaper in 12th September, 1947, that everything wouldn't change with the establishment of a new government. It was also noted that in order to establish democracy and independence, there had to be some radical changes and these changes would not be realized by the members of the same party. ¹ However, in the cabinet change in Ankara, in fact, was only the change of government inside the People's Republican Party, which had been governing the country alone. We think that far bigger changes and developments were expected in Anatolia, but it was not understood.

A Turkish Country Train

Geographical descriptions also have an extensive coverage in the report of the trip to make an observation about Anatolia. This trip informs us about life conditions and development level of Anatolia, therefore it supplies useful data regarded near social history of Anatolia:

“A slow freight train took us in 8 hours over 179 kms of track between Erzincan and Divriği. The route, with its numerous tunnels making observation difficult, follows the ravine of the Euphrates. On the South side the mountains rise steeply to the heights of Munzur. Some of these rocky peaks exceed 10. 000 feet and are still virgin ground for alpinists. To the North range from east to west Kara or Karlı (Black or Snowy Mount), Diş Taş (Tooth Stone) and Deli and Bey (Mad and Lord Mounts), each with peaks between eight and nine thousand feet. The freight train carried one third close coach packed with peasants, but bench had been reserved for officials. It was interesting to observe the racial underworld of Anatolia. Our companion was an elderly gendarmerie Colonel entering his fourth decade of service. His grey-close cropped

¹ Barış Övün, p. 855.

head, cleanout features and blue eyes are characteristic of the Circasian type common enough in the Turkish service. A young cavalry officer opposite had the florid good looks and “sheep’s head” of a Georgian, and may well have been the son of some Georgian Moslem emigrant- another type not seldom to be found in Anatolia. Peasants who joined the train at wayside stations had often the big noses and flat heads described by anthropologists as “Armenoidé, but which belongs to perhaps to a pre-Armenian stratum dating back to Hittites or Assyrian times. Others had the regular features and (particularly among the women) the dark beauty of the Kurds- so notable among the Moslem peasantry of Muş and Bitlis”.

The Gendarmerie, The Peasants and The Intellectuals

It was emphasized in the report that, the gendarmerie colonel got off the train before Kemaliye, he was going to inspect gendarmerie posts in the mountains and had ten days riding in front of him, and added that his relations with peasants was easy and like a father and others were respectful and friendly in return. The English diplomat continued to tell his observations like that:

“Our observation of gendarmes during all this trip makes it difficult to believe that the present campaign conducted by Istanbul journalists against this hard-working corps can have much basis in fact. Among a population of 16 million virile and independent peasants, many of them men of strong passions addicted to hard drinking, it would be difficult to believe that there are never incidents nor that a gendarme is never in the wrong. But the gendarmes are of peasants stock themselves, living with their families in isolated posts and travelling singly or in pairs over the wild countryside. They would hardly survive were they body of opinion in the villages against them. Journalistic critics’ knowledge of the country gendarmerie is, of course, limited to their observation of peasant life from the Windows of the Istanbul-Ankara wagon lits. The Istanbul intellectual’s ignorance of and dislike for the Anatolian countryside is phenomenal. He knows neither gendarmes nor peasants nor can he distinguish a potato from a turnip”.

Hospitability

One of the most famous national features of Turks is their hospitality. We examined the report only to find out if it is just self-praise or does it take place in Turkey in 1947. We can say that there are some findings in the report. For example, these statements of the diplomat explains his ideas about it; “On arrival at Divriği at 02. 30 hours in the morning, we were received by the elderly Mayor and other officials- an example of the extraordinary courtesy which provincial Turks accord to travelling foreigners. A chevrolet lorry (the municipal transport in a mountain town where there are no cars nor gharries but only horses for hire) carried us to the local hotel where a small but cleanroom had been made ready”.

The Ulu Cami In Divriği: Culture In The Turkish Provinces

In this confidential English report, information about Divriği, which is a province of Sivas City today, has been given. After giving the information about Divriği Ulu Cami, which was among the finest surviving monuments of Selcuk architecture in Anatolia, and built in the middle of the 13th century; in fact, when Selcuklu kingdoms in Anatolia were being shattered by the Mongol Invasions, the followings are said: "The peculiar florid art of this mosque illustrates rich currents of culture which mingled in the Anatolian middle ages. Together with the Selcuk monuments at Erzurum, Tokat and Sivas, the Ulu Cami of Divriği shows a distant reflection of Indian Art. At the same time the interlaced design, so common in the Caucasus, and the charming sculptured birds recall the Georgian influences which were introduced into Selcuk art by numerous princesses of the Bagratid line. Another curious feature is the stylised solar disc which exactly resembles similar designs found in English Gothic churches of the same period. A common concept propagated through the Crusades may explain this phenomenon".

Another crucial finding of this report written in 1947 is that about the point of view Europe neglected or ignored in Anatolia. The report has said that: "The originality and the character of the Moslem provincial cultures in Anatolia is a page of history which has been completely ignored by European travellers, and historians have hitherto written under the hypnosis of Byzantine and Armenian studies".

A "Han" In Resadiye

Life conditions and styles in Anatolia has not changed so quickly, even Turkey started to be modernized years ago. Roads, routes and accommodation habits started to change thanks to road attack and using motor vehicles widespread started in 1950's. For this reason, it is understood that this was a travel which the traditional roads and travelling habits were witnessed. The diplomat who had written this report also realized the fact and wrote the followings: "As it was already 19. 00 hrs, we stopped for the night in Resadiye; and found accommodation in the Han. The place was clean but conditions were primitive. The Han is simply a halt for peasants going to market in Niksar. We thus had an opportunity of observing the ways of rustic travel which can have changed little through the centuries. Travellers ready to pay a lira may have a bed in a small room to themselves, but few of the thrifty peasants would waste Money on such useless comfort. The ground floor of the Han was divided into a courtyard where timber and carts were stored; a stables for the "hayvan" (horses, mules, donkeys) and a large kitchen where the travellers might cook their own food, and roll up later in a blanket to sleep on the broad wooden bank. The mayor entertained us to coffee and before resting for the night we had an excellent meal of mutton cutlets. Our Erzincanlı driver was enjoying a bottle of raki and sent us over a dish of watermelon with his compliments".

Niksar-Tokat-Amasya Triangle

The English diplomat who says “As we emerged from the narrow valley of the Kelkit into the fertile bahçelik (vale as in “vale of Evesham in English) of Niksar” said that this region has been prestigious with its cities since the classical times and added that Niksar, Tokat, Amasya are the most important cities in Pontus. Then he pointed out that Sinop, Amasya and Samsun are the other important cities, moreover, by mentioning rich history of Amasya, he reminded the most famous Roman commanders Sezar, Pompei and Lucullus had very serious wars in Kelkit valley and Yeşilirmak.

The English diplomat said that the geography of Amasya has changed very little since Strabo has described fondly as “the city which I was born in”. He also mentioned that Turkish people who have been living in this province still talk about the Pontic Kings with pride.

According to the English diplomat’s report, conjuncture indicates as a whole steady progress in Niksar–Tokat–Amasya triangle. Enhanced conditions, like better communications, improved public health and education. It was also pointed out that: “the application of modern methods of agricultural production, processing and marketing give scope to the natural industry and to be proverbial fertility of the Turkish peasant”.

Tudor Market-Like City Tokat

Tokat, which is a historic city in Central Anatolia, is said like this in the report: “At the fork of roads running to Amasya and Sivas, Tokat lies about a mile to the South of the Yeşilirmak. Still suffering from the aftermath of the earthquake of 1939, it is a lively place with a substantial modern suburb to the North of the older quarters. With something of the air of a Tudor market town in England. The mud-and-timber houses with overhanging caves are built round interior courtyards and are roomy and comfortable. Mostly in good repair they compare well with either the dilapidated mansions of old-or gerrybuilt villas of new Ankara”.

Turhal

The following information is written about Turhal which is Tokat’s borough: “The excellent metalled road from Tokat to Amasya follows for some twenty miles to northern bank of the Yeşilirmak. The valley (Tokat ovası), broadens gradually to the Kazova (Goose Plain) where it is some six miles in breadth- and then narrows on the approaches to Turhal. Along the railway immediately to the West of this rather miserable town, the sugar Monopoly have established an extensive plant (visited by the Commercial Counsellor, Mr. Lomax, in 1945). Managerial villas, workers dwellings and welfare institutions form a self-contained community. The sugar plant is a striking consummation of one of the most ambitious of the plans for the

modernization of the Turkish countryside, and the steady market for beet has brought prosperity to many peasants of the Amasya and Tokat vilayets”.

Amasya

The English diplomat who found the people of Amasya alert and lively said that in Amasya there is something of the atmosphere of cheap living in a dry sunny climate to be found before the war in Italian towns. By pointing out that people of Amasya are proud of becoming a part of Ottoman history and recently Kemalist Revolution, The diplomat also said the followings: “Life is thoroughly democratic in the old country sense rather than in the self-conscious fashion of modern city communities. It centres round the political clubs, in the bathes. The leading cafe in the centre of the town is crowded with the come-and-go of peasants and the multifarious deals and quick gossip of a thriving rural World”.

Attitude to Britain

In the last part of the English diplomat’s report is about the Turkish attitude towards Britain. Even today, various measurements are held on the perception of the countries over another country. However, it must have been a little harder to measure this in Anatolia seventy years ago. It is understood that, diplomats tried to solve this problem by using face to face method. The repor says that: “Following the excellent reception of the British Commonwealth and Empire Exhibition in Erzincan, we were welcomed everywhere with the utmost friendliness. Everywhere was to be noted antogonism to the Soviet expansion, which was based on a sturdy dislike of Communism and the thread of Soviet expansion than on fear. It would appear that British are preferred to Americans- but this impression may derive from the natural politeness of the Turks. There is a pathetic desire to learn English, and rare facilities are provided by Turkish teachers who hardly know English themselves. The departure of the British Council representative from Samsun was generally regretted in Merzifon, where he had some contacts. Were the goods and the necessary exchange facilities available, there is a good market for British exports in the Turkish provinces- agricultural machinery and accessories, chemical manures, insecticides, and various article of household consumption. American (Chevrolet) trucks were much in evidence, and farmers are taking to the use of motorbikes”.

The British Propaganda

In the report, the British propaganda has also been mentioned. It is pointed out that the propaganda reaches the region through the many items supplied by the British Information Office to the Anatolian Agency Radio Ankara; indirectly through the material originating from the British Information Office which appears in the form of

feature articles in the metropolitan and local press. ¹ It is also emphasized in the report that it is clear that occasional direct contact is better than much wireless and paper propaganda. It is proposed to send the Commonwealth Exhibition to Samsun, Merzifon and Amasya during the winter, and it is hoped that other opportunities will arise for British individuals to visit the region.

Conclusion

It is noted that even though it was hard to make any significant conclusions from a journey that takes only two weeks, the observations made about the village life and information is gathered from the interviews with the civil servants and the villagers were fruitful.

Following are the main conclusions from the report:

1. Except for poor places such as Refahiye and Reşadiye, the conditions are more successful than Opposition spokesmen and the newspapers claimed and difference of opinion is less.
2. It is true that in the regions visited, the Democratic Party has hardly been active at all so far, although it has a strong presence in Amasya and Merzifon. These two towns are also reachable to Samsun which have lively Democratic center.
3. All segments of the population showed only a haphazard interest regarding the shift in government, which was announced while we were in Erzincan. If there was a strong feeling shown, it was for M. Peker; especially in Amasya, where there was prevailing belief that the new government would be weaker than its predecessor.
4. It is difficult to escape from the impression that the so-called "extremists" of the CHP were strongly represented in the central and eastern provinces. The Amasya governor, a clever man in his thirties, had confirmed that the influence of aged villagers who carefully and skeptically approach to change and political opinion (political idea sales) was strong among peasants. The elderly men in this place were still ruling their houses, and their sons have been waiting their fathers to die for years to challenge their fathers' authority. (The report's forecast did not come true)
5. New effects, such as easier access and local industrialization as seen in Turhal, can lead to perspective change but the process would be slow.

¹It may be an example of the the news about the mentioned collaboration: According to the news sent by the British News Agency Britanova; American weapons worth 23 million Pounds will be sent to Turkey and some 2 million Pounds will be allocated to Turkish Army. (Cumhuriyet newspaper, 12 August 1947) written by Barış Övün, p. 865.

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