

Turkish Foreign Policy during World War II

Mehmet Nur Altınörs¹

¹ Prof. Dr.Mehmet Nur Altınörs, Başkent University,Ankara,Turkey

Correspondence: Prof. Dr.Mehmet Nur Altınörs, Başkent University,Ankara,Turkey.

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Abstract

World War II (WW II) has been the most destructive war the mankind has ever experienced. It has started in Europe like World War I (WW I), most of fighting went on in Europe, but it has spread to North Africa and Far East. The estimated casualties are around 60 million people, 60 % of them being civilians. The devastating results of the war inevitably caused major global changes. The two opposing ideologies, capitalism and communism, practically divided the political arena into two blocks under the leadership of United States and Soviet Union. United Nations has been established with the purpose of solving problems by negotiations and maintaining world peace. The bipolar political status often referred to as “cold war” has lasted more than four decades ending with fall of Berlin wall and disintegration of Soviet Union. Turkey’s position both during WW II and postwar era has been crucial in the history of the young Republic.

Keywords: First World War, foreign policy, international diplomacy, Second World War, Turkish Republic

1. Introduction

The Ottoman Empire has gradually declined starting with the second half of the seventeenth century. The scientific and technologic gap between the Empire and developing Europe has increased. Ottomans have been ignorant to continuous progress taking place in every aspect of life. Few Sultans aware of this fact have spent efforts to reform the army, bureaucracy and political system. In 1876 and in 1909 constitutions were put into effect along with establishment of parliament. The Sultan's power was shared while different ethnic groups enjoyed changes brought by the constitution of 1909. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WW I and the invasion of Anatolia by foreign forces resulted in fall of the Empire. The nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal initiated a war of independent and the success paved the way for foundation of Turkish Republic on October 29, 1923. The priorities of the new Turkish administration was to restore territorial integrity by signing treaties with the neighbor countries and with other states in order to gain international recognition, to keep stability and promote the revolutions necessary in the transition to a modern state. The Republic's motto was “Peace at home, peace in the world” as stated by its founder. Mustafa Kemal, afterwards named Atatürk and he died on November 10, 1938.

İsmet İnönü, former four stars general, commander in chief of the western front during the independence war, the first prime minister of the Republic and above all was the closest friend and supporter of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He was elected as the second president of the Republic a day after Atatürk's death. Many Turkish historians and scholars frequently cite him as the “second man”. This was the situation in Turkey while the footsteps of the war were heard across Europe.

2. World War II

It is generally accepted that WW II began on September 1, 1939 when German troops invaded Poland. The unconditioned surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945 and of Japan on September 2, 1945 marks the end of the war.

Upon invasion of Poland by Germany, Britain and France requested Hitler to draw back in order to defend Poland and to avoid potential future threat to their own countries. The immediate response of Britain and France to Hitler's refusal was declaring war against Germany.

Japanese air and naval attacks on US naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 has been a milestone in WW II. The day after, President Roosevelt asked Congress to approve a resolution declaring war against Japan. Senate and House of Representatives naturally voted for the resolution with absolute majority. Three days later,

Germany and Italy declared war against US, and the US responded back in a similar fashion.

US dropped atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 and three days after on Nagasaki accelerating the end of WW II.

The important domestic and international events involving Turkey during and postwar era are chronologically summarized below.

2.1 1939

President İsmet İnönü addressed the American people in English from Ankara radio on February 26, 1939. He stated that all the problems of Turkey were resolved with the neighbors based on a mutual motivation and understanding. He emphasized that the existing friendship between the Turkish and American people will be stronger in the future.

In April 1939, the Republic of Turkey signed trade agreements with US. In accordance with this treaty, US was considered as one of the most privileged countries in export and import. US industry products were to receive tariff reductions at rates ranging from 12-28%.

In August 24, 1939 a non-aggression pact between Russia and Germany was signed by Ribbentrop and Molotov.

In May 12, 1939 mutual understanding treaty between Britain and Turkey was signed and this was followed by a similar treaty between Turkey and France on June 23, 1939. A triple treaty of aid was signed in Ankara on October 19, 1939 between Turkey, Britain and France.

2.2 1940

National Protection Law was discussed and adopted by the Turkish Parliament (Turkish Grand Assembly) on January 18, 1940. This law gave extraordinary new duties and powers to the government including declaration of war, total or partial mobilization of the armed forces whenever necessary. This law was in effect for long time with some modifications, and finally was abolished on June 15, 1960. On December 2, 1940 blackout in cities was initiated.

2.3 1941

Churchill sent a letter to İnönü on January 31, 1941. He offered sending British aircraft and anti-aircraft cannons to Turkey to stop the advance of the Germans. İnönü refused the proposal.

British Foreign Secretary Eden came to Ankara on February 26, 1941 and demanded from Turkey to declare war against Germany if Greece was attacked by the Germans. This was refused by the Turkish authorities.

Adolf Hitler sent a letter to president İnönü on March 1, 1941. The content of the letter emphasized that the measures taken by Germany were in no way a threat against Turkey's territorial integrity or political structure. Führer mentioned his wish for future cooperation between Turkey and Germany. Hitler expressed his belief that there is no cause that can be confronting Turkey and Germany. He added that he had already given orders to prevent any misinterpretation about the presence of German troops in Bulgaria. He also reminded that Turkish government should not take any action necessitating changes in the German attitude.

İsmet İnönü responded Hitler by sending him a letter on March 12, 1941. Hitler sent a second letter talking about friendship and he proposed a non-aggression pact between the two countries. As a result, Turkey's Foreign Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu and Ambassador von Papen signed Turkish-German friendship and non-aggression treaty on June 18, 1941. (Time Magazine. May 19, 1941)

In May 1941 all non-Muslim Turkish male citizens between 20-40 years of age were enrolled in the army, but instead of having military training they worked in the battalion operated road construction.

In May 1941 all the schools were dismissed. Additional classes were drafted to army. Civil defense measures were increased. On June 22, 1941, Germany attacked, together with Romania, to Russia. Germany's intention to reach Caspian Sea oil deposits by invading Crimean peninsula in the fall of 1941 was a comforting development for Turkey.

In December 1941, US President Roosevelt pointed out that defense of Turkey was beneficial for US defense and he promised to help Turkey by means of rental and lending system.

2.4 1942

On January 13, 1942, the bread rationing was introduced. This practice was initiated based on the decision of December 17, 1941.

İnönü spoke in Izmir on March 17, 1942. He said "We will try to stay out of the war. We have no reason for

combat. But military mobilization will not change and we will take every measure to be ready for changing situations".

Wealth Tax was accepted on November 11, 1942. This extraordinary tax was imposed by the circumstances of war. Merchants, artisans, self-employed and those working for salary were subject to this tax. There was no right of appeal. More than half of the total 315 million Turkish liras tax was paid by non-Muslim citizens. Heavy fines and even worse punishments were applied for those who did not abide by the law.

Turkish citizens of Jewish, Greek and Armenian origin were mostly affected. Some 1300 individuals who failed to pay the tax in a month's time were sent to work camps in Eastern Turkey. This tax naturally caused intense reaction; tax of 103 million Turkish liras was cancelled and the law was totally abolished as of early 1944.

2.5 1943

There were five important meetings and conferences organized throughout this year.

2.5.1 Casablanca Meeting, January 12-25

Turkey was not represented in this meeting. The main participants were President Roosevelt, with the US team and Prime Minister Churchill, with the British team. Churchill insisted upon the idea of using Turkish land as a base for military operations and establishing Turkish naval force in the Mediterranean Sea. Americans, in principle, accepted the idea of Turkey being actively involved in the war. One of the agreements reached was deploying Turkey under British and China with US responsibility. Roosevelt suggested initiation of negotiations with Germany if they had unconditionally surrendered. This proposal caused anxiety in the Turkish government since Turks believed that collapse of Germany would mean expansion of Soviets in Europe. It was decided by the Allies to start military action in Sicily Island and to open the final front when Germany is completely weakened. Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Numan Menemencioğlu shared his ideas and interpretations about Casablanca meeting with German Ambassador to Ankara, Mr. von Papen. (Weisband, 1973)

2.5.2 Adana Meeting, January 30-31

President İsmet İnönü and W. Churchill met in the Presidential Train in the small town of Yenice in Southern Turkey. Leaders were accompanied by their aides. Churchill told his counterpart that they perfectly understood Turkish position and policy. Churchill proposed military aid which included 2115 tanks and 80,000 barrels of fuel to Turkish army and concluded that it was entirely up to the Turkish government to decide about declaring war against Axis. President İnönü returned home quite satisfied with the proceedings of the meeting. Churchill spoke in the House of Commons on February 1, 1943 and stated that Turks had prevented spreading of war to Iraq and Iran thus preventing the threat to petroleum facilities in Abadan.

2.5.3 Moscow Conference October 19- November 1

The Russian daily Izvestia published an article in September. The proposed idea was that Germany benefited from Turkish neutrality. Germans took the advantage of being safe in Balkans with minimum military power and mobilized major troops to Soviet front. Stalin presumed that British and American tolerance for Turkish neutrality prevented Germans from getting weak in Balkans. Russian press insisted about the possibility that arms donated to Turkey would be used against Russia and not against Germany. The participants of the conference were Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Molotov, British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden and US counterpart Cordell Hull.

The moderator of the meeting, Molotov put forward three demands. Accordingly, a) the second front should be opened latest as of spring of 1944, b) Turkey should join the war immediately and c) Swedish air space should be used. British Eden followed the middle way and he mentioned the obstacles in the course of Turkey joining the war and he pointed out that decision belongs to the Turkish state. British and Soviet foreign ministers signed a secret protocol on November 1, 1943.

The protocol aimed Turkey to participate in the war before the end of 1943 and the use of Turkish air bases and other facilities by the allies. Molotov tried hard to convince US about joining the protocol. On November 4, 1943, Roosevelt addressed Secretary of State Hull about US government's decision to share the idea of Turkey getting involved in the war and use of Turkish airspace. Naturally Molotov was pleased with this development.

2.5.4 Tehran Conference November 28- December 1

Tehran Conference was conducted from 1 November to 28 December. Turkey was not represented at this conference. Safety concerns still existed because only a few months ago Tehran was taken back from Nazi supporters.

Roosevelt attended this conference with the hope of winning Stalin's trust and he wanted to convey that he wished opening of the second front as much as Stalin did. Stalin and Roosevelt made private bilateral discussions at this meeting. Parties concluded that Turkey's participation in the war was in their interests. Russians stood close to US rather than the British opinion in this conference. Russians gave up the idea of Turkey's participation in the war. US military officials were also of the same opinion that they will not benefit by Turkey's entry into the war. General Marshall said that Turkey's participation in the war would require mobilization of manpower and military equipment to Aegean region and opposed the British claim that Turkey would defend the straits against Germans with her own power. Admiral King stated that Turkey's entry into the war would cause US involvement in Rhodes Island and other twelve Aegean islands.

2.5.5 Cairo Conference 4-7 December

İnönü, Churchill and Roosevelt met in Cairo on December 4-7, 1943. At the beginning of the meeting, Turkish side believed that Russians and the British had made a secret agreement and that Russian demands were conveyed to Turkey by Eden. Turkey did not want to engage in war with the Germans. The Russians wanted Turkey to use her power and resources in a war against Germany thus weakened Turkey would easily accept Russian demands.

Turkish side tried to persuade the Allies about the potential risks of getting into war unprepared. Such an attempt would serve only to Russian interests, and both Turkey and Allies would be harmed. Turks thought to increase the national military power against the Germans.

Mr. Menemencioğlu, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, put forward three conditions to enter the war. These were a) creation of a common strategy with the allied forces so that military power could be shifted to the Balkans from Italy, b) strengthening of anti-aircraft systems to protect the large cities of Turkey and c) a period of one or two months in order to persuade the Turkish public about war and to negotiate with the governments who did not participate in the Cairo conference.

İnönü asked for a definite description of the function and role of Turkey and refrained from being actively involved in the war unless such a specification was made.

İnönü realized that postwar aid from the British and Americans for Turkey's security seems unlikely unless Turkey provides any support for the Allies.

Turkey's main concern in the early years of the WW II has been to protect Turkey from military threats by the Russians and the Nazis. Turkey's policy showed some shift with the Cairo conference. The main issues of importance were diminishing Russian influence in Eastern Europe and the postwar political conflicts.

2.6 1944

The sudden departure of the British military mission from Ankara on February 3, 1944 marks the beginning of the deterioration of Turkish-Anglo-American relations.

Wealth Tax was abolished on March 15, 1944. Wealth Tax was discriminatory and repressive in terms of equality as mentioned above. Only three of the 300 people sent to labor camps in town of Aşkale bore Turkish names. The rest were of Jewish, Armenian and Greek origin. After the war the Turkish government's decision to abolish the Wealth Tax was interpreted as a precaution against allegations about Pan-Turanism, which is gathering of all Turkish origin people under one flag thus establishing a greater Turkish state.

Turkey made important decisions in foreign politics upon feeling lonely and isolated in the international arena in the first months of 1944.

The chain of decisions in the course of diverting policy included stopping export of chrome to Germany, closing the straits to Axis powers, hardening of economic and diplomatic relations with Germany and resignation of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Menemencioğlu who was known as pro-German. Russian newspaper Pravda evaluated Turkey's policies as opportunistic.

Churchill told Stalin on October 9, 1944 that he has no relations with the Turks except the treaty of Montreux.

2.7 1945

On February 23, 1945 lend and lease agreement was signed between US and Turkey. The Soviet Union and the Republic of Turkey had signed neutrality and non-aggression pact in Paris, on December 17, 1925. Soviet Union announced that the treaty did not fulfill the requirements of the day and at the same time the consequences of WW II. The treaty was not prolonged unilaterally by the Soviets and naturally the agreement ended.

Izvestia newspaper published an article on March 21, 1945. The article commented about Turkish-Soviet

relations and postulated that this relation could be better at some critical moments. The article claimed that continuation of a treaty signed under very different circumstances will not be in the interest of both countries. Four days after, Pravda newspaper wrote that Soviets had developed successful relations with other forces during the war while the relation with Turkey depended on an outdated treaty.

3. Discussion

Turkey's foreign policy during World War II has been active neutrality. During this period Turkey had close relationship with the Allies, especially with Britain whom persistently wanted Turkey to take an active part in the war and promised to provide military supplies to that end. Through the negotiations with Britain as well as a chain of multiparty conferences with other members of the Alliance, Turkey has managed to avoid fulfilling the British desire. Turkey had also good relations with the Axis, particularly with Germany. Turkey continued exporting chromium to Germany, which was vital for its war industry. In addition, Turkey signed a non-aggression agreement with Germany to maintain the integrity of its northwestern border.

Turkey's main concern was the Soviet threat and the risk of its expansion in the postwar era. This concern stems from history. Ottoman Empire and Czarist Russia fought 13 wars with each other.

President İnönü has strongly resisted against Churchill's pressure to involve Turkey in the war. He corresponded with Hitler thus emphasizing that Turkey would not disturb German troops in Bulgaria, in turn hoping the safety of Northwestern border of Turkey. He also deliberately avoided the risk of Soviets' invading Turkish lands with the purpose of defending Turkey against Germany. Turkey's foreign policy during the World War II has often been criticized as being unethical and unprincipled.

The new Turkish Republic's basic policy was to maintain peace and foster national development. During the Turkish Independence War, the good relation between the young Republic of Turkey and the new Soviet regime was established.

A series of agreements, namely Leninakan Treaty of December 3, 1920, Treaty of Friendship on March 16, 1921 and finally Neutrality and Non-Aggression Treaty on December 17, 1925 were signed. Despite all these developments, the Turkish rulers did not overlook the Soviet's desire of maintaining the traditional targets of Czarist Russia.

Turkish administration feared of Soviet armed forces entering the country with the mission of protecting against Germany which subsequently would convert Turkish land into a complete battlefield. Postwar Soviet expansion was another point of concern.

It was obvious that entering the war would cause enormous destruction for Turkey. Soviets is a good example for this. Although they were one of the winners, the country has undergone a tremendous devastation and no compensation was paid by the loser countries.

İsmet İnönü's first priority has been foreign policy. His most important feature was his prudent manner and careful evaluation in reaching decisions. He was fully aware of the fact that an error would be highly dangerous and would bring serious trouble. He believed that if Turkey eventually entered the war timing should be determined by Turkey.

He said that a tough response will be given by Turkey in case of an attack by Germany and/or Italy. In Cairo conference he asked for an explanation about the specifics of Turkey's function and role in the war. İnönü believed that Russia's alliance with the West was associated with pragmatic reasons and he warned about intense competition in the postwar era.

İsmet İnönü, during an interview on October 19, 1939, mentioned that Soviets wanted to join the triple alliance made between Turkey, Britain and France. But at the last moment they changed their minds and refrained from joining the rest.

In the same interview, İnönü refused the allegation of Turkey's reluctance to take part in the war. Turkey repeated on many occasions the need for military aid and declared that she would join the Allies in the most favorable time.

Turkey may have requested the protection of the great states, but the idea of being fully protected by UK and US was not tempted. Also protection should not be at the expense of national security. Stay neutral while being involved in the event seemed to be the only formula to realize this goal. Turkey signed an agreement of friendship and non-aggression with Germany because the position of the Allies was not clear at that time and Turkey wanted to feel secure.

The perspective of great powers about Turkey's entry into the war is briefly as follows: Prime Minister Churchill

was the strongest supporter of Turkey's entry into the war by linking it to fine policies and conditions from time to time, other times he expressed with a more open and menacing approach. His main motive was Turkey's possible postwar role in the international political arena. The failure of British to capture Rhodes marked the changing of Churchill's position about Turkey.

The US initially did not favor Turkey's participation in the war, subsequently they appeared inclined to Churchill's suggestions. The US officials thought that Turkey did not want Soviet help; instead she requested British and US protection against Soviets.

Mr. Menemencioglu, an important name who was influential in shaping Turkish foreign policies during WW II believed that small countries have to monitor the balance of power between the great powers. Turkey's alliance with Britain and friendship with Germany at the same time was not a drawback according to Mr. Menemencioglu. He rejected the idea of being extremely dependent on any major power. Menemencioglu spent efforts to develop good relations with Russia. He was of the opinion that Turkey would gain practically nothing, but would lose much by entering into the war.

Criticisms about the policy followed by the Republic of Turkey during WW II by different circles can be collected at several points.

- a) The treaty of friendship signed with Germany on June 18, 1941 was considered contradictory to the triple alliance between Turkey, France and Britain. Turks had always feared that eventually Germany would attack Turkey when the conditions were convenient for them. The presence of German troops in Bulgaria had been a potential threat for Turkey although this has not been outspoken. Article 2 of the triple alliance required Turkey's help to Britain and to France in case of war in the Mediterranean Sea with Axis forces. France and Britain asked Turkey to act according to article 2 the day after Italy entered war. President İnönü refused this demand because he thought this meant war against Russia. Churchill was dissatisfied with this reaction.
- b) Turkey's declaration of symbolic war against Germany and Japan when the final outcome of the war was evident has been another point of criticism. Turkey did so only to fulfill the requirement for being a founder member of United Nations (UN) because only those states who have declared war against Axis were accepted as founding members of UN. A Turkish official in order to defend the government's decision on this issue stated that the country did not want to be the menu at the table, but preferred to be an invited guest. (Lewis, 1995)
- c) The main topic in Adana meeting and the following ones has been the modernization of Turkish army. It is argued that the military requests of Turkey has been so exaggerated that it was beyond Britain's capacity to provide these needs. Some claim that Turkey has used insufficiency of her army as an excuse of her reluctance to enter the war.
- d) The prohibition of naval aid to Russia through Turkish straits has been another point of criticism against Turkey. The answer to this mentions that German forces have controlled the Mediterranean Sea and air space to all kind of transportation and communication.
- e) National Protection Law, Wealth Tax, bread rationing and night blackouts received heavy domestic and international criticism.

Even in developed countries similar measures and practices were observed during the war years. Bread, food, clothing and footwear rationing was applied in England during WW II. Basic necessities were restricted in Sweden, France and Germany. US also practiced oil rationing.

The Ottoman Empire tried to overcome the difficulties of WW I by comparable measures. The prices of bread, flour and milk increased tremendously but fell to regular values after the end of WW I. (<https://tibbiyelihikmet.wordpress.com/2015/02/26/tek-parti-doneminde-ekmek-neden-karneyle-dagitilyordu/> (what was the reason of bread rationing during monparty rule?))

f) Much of Turkish foreign policy during WW II was criticized as being not moral, not ethical and unprincipled. (Selim Deringil, 1989) Some circles accused Turkey playing the "balance game". These arguments open the concepts of belligerency and neutrality to discussion. In Anglo-Saxon literature belligerency means the status of being at war or in conflict. In this sense Turkey is defined as a non-belligerent nation since she did not military got involved in the war. One point of view regards nonbelligerency same as neutrality. On the other hand, the treaties signed by Turkey and her policies are contradictory to traditional international law which prohibits any kind of military engagement and preparation by a neutral state.

4. Conclusion

The end of WW II paved the way for inevitable important changes. A new era started in human history. The political arena was composed of two opposing blocks led by winners of the war, the US and Soviet Union. Bipolar system lasted over four decades ending with fall of Berlin wall and disintegration of Soviet Union. Turkey stayed close to Allies during the war and she completely entered the western block by being a member of many western political and military organizations. The pros and cons of this situation is another matter of discussion but I personally believe that staying neutral in WW II was the right decision for Turkey's interests. Poor economy, technologically insufficient army, shortage of manpower, destructive effect of recent wars, perceived Soviet threat during and after the war and general public's opinion have been the factors playing role in the Turkish foreign policy during the World War II.

This success is mostly associated with President İnönü's firm and determined state of mind and very careful attitude of avoiding fatal mistakes. President İnönü and his team should be appreciated for their achievement in avoiding the nation from the destructive effects of WW II which for sure would have delayed economic, political and social progress of the country.

An important postwar imitative of President İnönü was to create the favorable environment for establishment of political parties which eventually meant transition to democracy. In the election of 1950, President İnönü's party which has been ruling the country for 27 years lost the elections, and the main opposition party had an election victory thus forming the new government. Multiparty, fair and open election resulting in change of government was possible in only a few countries particularly in early 1950's. (VanderLippe, 2005)

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