TURKEY

Situated at one of the nerve centers of the world ideological conflict, Turkey was vitally affected by the major international political and economic developments which took place in the period from July 1955 to August 1956. In accordance with their new line, the Soviet leaders made advances to their Turkish neighbor, offering economic aid and an improvement of trade relations. Ankara rejected these proposals, as well as the invitation to send a Turkish parliamentary delegation to Moscow. The Turks regarded the new Soviet line as a change only of tactics, not of intentions. They therefore put little faith in the relaxation of world tension, and continued their policy of alignment with the Western powers.

Considerable efforts were made to extend and consolidate the Baghdad pact. But although Iran joined in October 1955, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon remained outside. There was widespread Turkish criticism of President Celal Bayar's Jerusalem speech of November 1955, in which he declared that the Arab Legion would have the full support of the Turkish Army in case it were attacked. Even the most optimistic were disillusioned by an attack on the Turkish Consulate in Amman in the same month. Nevertheless Turkey, in the apparent hope that the Arab leaders would change their minds, remained on friendly if not close terms with them.

Turkish interest continued to center on the Cyprus situation. Turkey's unyielding opposition to any grant of self-determination to the ethnically Greek majority of the island's population, and her insistence on the maintenance of the status quo there, resulted in seriously strained relations between Turkey and Greece. Cooperation between the two countries in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) became problematical. Due to this situation, and to the rapprochement between Tito and the Soviet leaders and his cultivation of Nasser and the Arab world, the Turkish leaders tended to feel that the Balkan pact had become a dead letter in the light of events. On the whole, Turkish foreign policy during 1955–56 had no spectacular successes and suffered no fundamental checks. It continued to be characterized by an attitude of vigilance and a desire to play a leading role in Middle Eastern questions.

Domestic Situation

The internal situation was less satisfactory. There was unquestionably a decline in the democratic spirit which had found expression in the 1950 electoral victory of the now-dominant Democratic Party, and which had given that party an overwhelming majority in the elections of 1954. This had had several causes. Economically, Turkey's foreign exchange resources had been drained away by its ambitious program of capital investments, comprising such items as the establishment of a modern merchant fleet, and construction of dams and hydroelectric installations, cement factories, sugar refineries, and
port facilities. The progressive rise in the standard of living of the rural population created a demand for consumer goods on an unprecedented scale. To satisfy this demand the government resorted to expedients in regard to imports which upset the balance of trade even more and stimulated the currency black market. At this point the Turkish pound fell to a quarter of its official value. Payments due for imports could be only partially met. Imported articles became rare and therefore very dear, sending up the cost of domestic production. The ceiling on the issuance of paper money was repeatedly raised, and the circulation of commercial paper reached a considerable volume; both these factors contributed substantially to the inflation. The big agricultural producers, merchants and industrialists, residing chiefly in the big cities, profited substantially from this state of things. But most of the population, and particularly the civil servants and wage-earners, suffered greatly from the high cost of living.

Discontent showed itself in a sharp criticism of government policies. Nineteen Democratic deputies, including some of the leading members of the original group which had come to power in 1950, resigned from the Party or were expelled for their dissident attitude. They formed a new Party of Liberty which, as additional dissidents joined it, became the largest opposition party in Parliament. [The others were the Republican People's Party, led by former President Ismet Inonü, and the extreme right-wing Nation Party.] Their attacks became more and more vehement. The repression was equally vigorous. Resolved to continue on the path on which he had set out, and unwilling to consider handing over the government to others, Premier Adnan Menderes adopted authoritarian methods. A new press law muzzled every tendency to criticism. Another law restricted freedom of assembly; even political parties were banned from holding meetings except in the forty-five days preceding an election. The leaders of the opposition parties were prosecuted, and journalists imprisoned.

Wishing to assure its electoral majority in the face of the growing hostility of the mass of the city voters, the government even went so far as to sacrifice several basic points of the democratic heritage. In January 1956, Premier Menderes announced at Konya that religious instruction would henceforth be compulsory in secondary schools. Kemal Ataturk had gone to great trouble abolishing the charchaj, the traditional costume of Anatolian women and a symbol of the reactionary spirit, in order to emancipate the women of Turkey. Now its wearing was legalized. These concessions were meant to win the support of the millions of peasant voters. The government also failed to impose a tax on agricultural profits, which economists regarded as essential if the Turkish budget was to be balanced.

RIOTS

It was in this atmosphere of tension with Greece and internal difficulties that the riot of the night of September 6-7, 1955, took place. An outburst of popular fury, it inflicted damage estimated at between 200,000,000 and 300,000,000 Turkish pounds (about $25,000,000 at the free market rate) on non-Moslem elements of the Istanbul population. There were various theories as to the cause of that outbreak. It has perhaps not been sufficiently emphasized
that for a long time ostentatious luxury on the part of the rich, and particularly the newly rich, had created an antagonism between the possessing classes and the rest of the population, whose standard of living was steadily deteriorating. This antagonism, which would elsewhere have expressed itself through the accepted channels of organized social conflict, found no way of expressing itself in Turkey, where the problem was still too new. To one acquainted with the Middle East, and the emotional currents conditioning the coexistence of its fundamentally different ethnic elements, the appeal to racial resentments was altogether to be expected. Inflamed by violent anti-Greek propaganda and tolerated as a defense of the Turkish position in regard to Cyprus, what began as a demonstration against Greek fellow-citizens got out of hand and became basically an attack on all non-Moslems, whether native or foreign. The authorities realized too late that the mob could extend its destructive rage. Martial law was decreed, and did not come to an end until June 6, 1956. A law was passed authorizing the government to fulfill its promise to indemnify the victims of the looting and destruction, up to the amount of 60,000,000 Turkish pounds. Order and calm were reestablished, but the malaise remained.

Relations with Israel

Subject to the limits imposed by Turkey's desire to avoid actively antagonizing the Arabs, relations between Turkey and Israel continued to develop on a cordial basis. Israel was anxious to preserve one of the principal markets for its young industries; among the products Turkey bought from Israel were cement, glassware, tires, and chemicals. Turkey paid for these through a clearing account by exporting agricultural products such as grain, oilcakes, dried fruits, and sheepskins. During 1955–56 trade between the two countries reached a total of about $30,000,000, as against $19,000,000 in 1953. A relaxation of Middle East tensions would unquestionably permit a substantial increase in these figures. Israel participated, along with fifteen other foreign countries, in the annual International Fair at Izmir.

With the approval of the Turkish authorities, a group of young Turkish Jewish singers of both sexes participated in the Tel Aviv Zimriya and scored a notable success, particularly with some Turkish folk songs.

Jewish Community

Although the September 1955 riots were not directed against the Jewish community either officially or in principle, they were profoundly disturbing to it. After the deportations of 1941 and the capital levy of 1942, whose arbitrary and discriminatory application to the ethnic and religious minorities appeared to be directed at their economic annihilation, the Jews of Turkey returned to work. The remarkable success of the reorganization of the community and its cultural activities was due to the feeling of solidarity and brotherhood in misfortune which grew up in the dark hours of 1941–42. Since that time, the commercial and industrial boom of the last years of World War II and the prosperity which followed it enabled a large part of the Jewish population, located chiefly in Istanbul, to prosper along with other
sections of the population. Jewish philanthropic activities profited accordingly. After the wave of emigration to Israel, the majority of Turkey's remaining 50,000 Jews had no apprehension that there would be a recurrence of discrimination. They considerably expanded their activities, making large investments in industry and real estate.

The awakening on the morrow of September 6, 1955, was all the more brutal. The restrictive economic controls which the authorities subsequently decreed, in a spirit of centralization and to meet the economic crisis, profoundly affected the prosperity of all citizens. People began asking themselves whether the patiently constructed edifice of communal achievements was not again threatened.

Of the community's progress there could be no doubt. Long one of the strongest groups of European Jewry, the Jews of Istanbul had carried out the task of organizing along modern lines. Formerly Turkish Jews had been divided into a considerable number of autonomous congregations in the various districts of Istanbul and the rest of Turkey. But in recent years they had formed well-organized communities in Istanbul and Izmir, as well as two central organizations of uncontested authority. Matters of general interest to all Turkish Jews were handled by the Grand Rabbinate of Turkey, assisted by a lay council. The council sought to assure the financial stability of the Grand Rabbinate, permitting the introduction of improvements and reforms. Contributors were asked to pay annual fixed assessments. Among other things, this made possible the reorganization of the Beth Din (Jewish court of law) and the provision of kashrut, with a well-organized and adequately staffed central organization of Turkish Jewry.

A surplus of revenues enabled the council to take under its wing to some extent all the cultural and social services of the community. A hospital with eighty-six beds cared for about 1,000 patients during 1955–56, and some 11,000 out-patients were treated in its dispensary. There was also a home for the aged. An orphanage cared for forty children, and there were also three centers for the feeding and clothing of needy students. A preventorium had thirty-five beds for pre-tuberculous children, and a vacation camp was attended during the past year by 185 undernourished children. Finally, the community conducted a lycée with 450 students and four elementary schools with a total of 1,500. These schools of course followed the Turkish curriculum, but with the addition of three to five hours of instruction in Hebrew and two to three hours in French weekly. Hebrew instruction was compulsory.

All these institutions submitted their budgets to the council which, after approving them, met their deficits. The total revenues sufficed not only to strengthen all these activities, but also to meet needs previously neglected. These included furnishng a residence for the grand rabbi and supplying him with all that was necessary for the fulfillment of his representative functions; repair of the building of the central administration; creation of a library and a division of archives; and purchase of an adequate building for the preventorium. Finally, a rabbinical seminary was set up, to meet the situation created by the successive disappearance of the various yeshivot which had been in times past one of the prides of the Jews of Turkey. The
seminary was established with the legal status of a lycée with eight grades, whose diploma was the equivalent of the official baccalaureate and gave its possessors the right to perform their military service as officer-candidates. During 1955–56 the seminary had five teachers, one of them a specialist brought from Israel, and thirty-five students divided among the first three grades. The students were fed and clothed at the expense of the community. It was planned to make the seminary into a boarding school.

In addition to the activity of the council, the Grand Aghgaha (congregation) administered the affairs of the 30,000 to 35,000 Jews living in the heart of Istanbul. With about two-thirds of the Jewish population of Turkey under its jurisdiction, the Aghgaha administered the synagogues, religious services, cemeteries, and various other spiritual and temporal activities. New methods of taxation and budgeting permitted the repair of several synagogues and the construction of others, where this was judged necessary because of a revival of religious activity. This revival was shown in increased attendance at services and religious classes. Fundamentally traditionalist and attached to its past, Turkish Judaism had never known either the Reform religion or assimilation. As had happened almost everywhere else, the differences between the Sephardic majority and the few thousand Ashkenazim gradually tended to disappear, and constituted no problem. The one ideological conflict in the community was between those who placed a primary emphasis on purely religious activity and that large part of the contributors who thought that the always insufficient resources of the community could be best employed for welfare work.