

Turkey, Eight Decades Later



Ismet Inonu

by Theodore Dalrymple

Two days before flying to Turkey for a few days, I found a little book published in 1944 titled *La Turquie d'Ismet Ineunu* (The Turkey of Ismet Inonu). It was published by Fernand Sorlot not long before the end of the Occupation.

Fernand Sorlot was the publisher who had been sued by Hitler in the French courts for having published a complete translation of *Mein Kampf* without Hitler's authorization. This was a breach of copyright, and Hitler won the trial. No further copies could be sold, and the stock had to be pulped.

Hitler was worried not so much by the breach of copyright, as

by the fact that a full translation revealed how much he hated the French, which it was inopportune for him at the time to reveal. A later, authorized translation was published with the anti-French sentiment removed.

Sorlot, a fascist and fervent patriot, had thought it a matter of national importance that he should alert his countrymen to the menace from across the Rhine. "Every Frenchman must read this book," Marshal Lyautey, the French soldier and colonial administrator, is quoted on the cover as having said.

But once the Occupation occurred, Sorlot continued to publish, and even went into partnership with a German publisher, whose capital he eagerly accepted. The German publisher gained nothing from the deal, and Sorlot argued that he had regarded it as his patriotic duty in effect to swindle him.

This, however, did not save him from trial as a collaborator after the war. Everything he possessed was confiscated and he was sentenced to 20 years' national degradation, meaning that he could not vote or live in Paris. He was also forbidden from publishing or writing during that period.

The author of the book on Turkey was Jean Savant, a historian specializing in the Napoleonic era, of whom it was later written that he displayed neither "an unreadable erudition nor a hasty vulgarisation," but was a true historian.

Certainly, he seemed to know firsthand the Turkey of which he wrote. As for me, I knew little of Inonu, though his name was familiar to me from collecting stamps when I was about 11 years old. Inonu, the second president of the Turkish republic after the death of Ataturk, appeared on my stamps and hence I never forgot his face. He was the first president of Turkey to allow himself to be voted out of office.

Children don't collect stamps any longer because such stamps will soon be as obsolete as horses and carts, and screens are more interesting to them. This is a great shame, I think,

because the collection of stamps necessarily opened their minds to the existence of the world outside their own country, even if it did not lead to profound knowledge. No doubt it is pointless to complain.

I read the book on the flight to Turkey. Three things stood out in it for me.

The first was a long description, as an appendix, of the model farm established by the state outside Ankara in 1925. My father, who was once a believing communist, possessed a lot of Soviet propaganda from the 1940s, with which as a child I became familiar. The account of the model farm in Turkey was exactly parallel to accounts of Soviet kolkhozes (collective farms) that I read when I was young. Nature was an enemy to be overcome, and Man triumphed over it as a wrestler overthrows his opponent. The account finishes as follows:

No educated European can ignore any longer the interest that Ataturk had in the farm. Moreover, the Turks must feel a well-deserved joy in contemplating this work which is truly the fruit of Man's struggle, even in the most pitiful conditions, against Nature; for this victory that Man wins from this high struggle constitutes a symbol of international labour, in which humanity has its joyful part.

This kind of stuff impressed people at the time.

The other passage in the book that struck me most was Savant's brief account of Ottoman finances before the abolition of the Caliphate. It might remind you of something closer to home:

The external and internal debts of the Ottoman Empire were the heaviest charge on its finances. In 1860, the regime found itself in the following situation: two hundred and forty million gold francs annual revenue against seven hundred and fourteen million gold francs of debts.... Thus, the revenues of Turkey were never sufficient to cover the

expenses of the Ottoman sovereigns. The debts never stopped growing, and the majority of the empire's revenue went directly abroad through the channel of the public debt.

It is often said that we are living through the modern equivalent of the downfall of the Roman Empire. Perhaps the downfall of the Ottoman Empire would be more apposite, though slightly less flattering to our self-esteem. No analogy is exact, of course, which is why it is an analogy rather than a repetition.

The Ottoman Empire was completely dependent on those who would lend it money. According to the book, the new regime managed to balance Turkey's budget by 1925, a feat far beyond the capacity of most Western governments.

The last thing that impressed me deeply was the fact that the population of Turkey in 1944 was about 18 million, that of Istanbul about 900,000. Eighty years later, the population of Turkey is 84 million, that is to say nearly five times as large, while that of Istanbul is 15.6 million, more than seventeen times as large.

This massive increase has not been accompanied by an increase in poverty—to the contrary. The life expectancy of Turks has doubled, from less than 40 to more than 78. Istanbul has increased in size without the production of the terrible slums of cities such as Lima, let alone Kinshasa. No doubt many people have suffered horribly and unnecessarily in the process of general improvement, but still this achievement is surely impressive.

Turkey is now on the brink of hyperinflation, which it has known before (a handsome 10,000,000 Turkish lira banknote adorns the walls of my kitchen, along with the \$50 trillion Zimbabwean banknote and others of that ilk). But somehow its progress seemed not to have stopped because of economic idiocy. I suppose this is consolation of a kind.

First published in [*Taki's magazine*](#).