

Stefan Ihrig, *Ataturk in the Nazi Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014). 312 pages. Illustrated.

Reviewed by Dan Georgakas

Ataturk in the Nazi Imagination is an accurate title for this remarkable book. Nonetheless, this study offers much more than the title indicates. It examines in great detail the wider German conception of Greek, Turkish and Armenian culture. Finally, there is a strong summary of Turkey's role as a pro-German "neutral" during World War II.

Stefan Ihrig, who is Polonsky Fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, bases his analysis on primary data rather than abstract theorizing. He draws heavily on *Heimatland* and *Volkische Beobachter*, the two most widely read Nazi papers to which even Hitler contributed. He also cites Weimer newspapers such as the *Neue Preussische (Kreuz-) Zeitung* and draws on a collection of articles from *Reichslandbund* and other materials found in the Political Archives of the German Office and the Bundesarchiv. In addition, Ihrig cites dairies and the correspondence of Hitler, Goebbels, and other Nazi leaders. This is classic historical research based on thousands of newspaper articles augmented by citations from private papers, party documents, diaries, Nazi novelists, and correspondence. This results in an impressive sense of the evolving thinking of the Nazi movement regarding national identity. Ihrig's view of Turkey is quite different than standard Western perspectives.

In his discussion of sources and historiography, the author laments that there is no body of literature on this particular topic. Perhaps that proved an advantage as the author proceeded without preconceptions other than that the topic was crucial. Another positive aspect of the book is its crisp, readable style. The work is further enriched by Ihrig illustrating how Germans felt

about the political dynamics of that era by with full-page reproductions of bold graphics originally appearing in newspapers such as *Kladderadatsch*.

Central to the appeal of Ataturk to the Nazis was the general sense in Germany that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) were extremely harsh and unjustified. Strong financial burdens had been imposed on Germany and the treaty had stripped Germany of borderland areas and overseas colonies. The purpose of the treaty seemed to set conditions that would permanently render Germany a second-tier European power.

The Ottoman Empire had been treated even more harshly than Germany, first by the Treaty of Versailles and then by the Treaty of Sevres (1920). Large sections of the former Ottoman Empire in the Middle East were placed under British and French, mandates. There were also Italian and French “zones of influence” in the Turkish heartland. Greece had a zone of occupation centered on Smyrna in the west and Armenia took possession of some Ottoman lands in the east. Constantinople was kept under international control. This left ethnic Turks largely clustered in an underdeveloped region in Anatolia.

The Nazis were impressed by Kemal Ataturk’s refusal to accept the terms of the treaties and his ability to undo most of their provisions regarding Turkey. Ataturk’s new Turkish republic would eventually wipe out the foreign mandates, regain parts of Thrace, eventually achieve control of Constantinople, expel the Greeks, and enlarge the Turkish borders in the east and the south. German nationalists thought these actions could serve as models for what they felt needed to be done in Germany. The Nazis were particularly approving of the personality of Ataturk as so many of his methods and goals paralleled Nazi beliefs and ambitions.

The Nazi’s admiration of Ataturk’s goal of creating a “Turkey for the Turks” is covered extensively by Ihrig with citations from original texts.¹ Nazis wrote continuously in support of what they termed the compelling necessity for Turkey to rid itself of inassimilable foreign bodies in order to purify the nation and achieve what German writers termed “harmonization” and “standardization.” Any option for a multi-ethnic nation was considered a nightmare. Greeks and Armenians were dismissed as “bloodsuckers,” “swine,” “foreign bodies,” and “parasites” that had to be eradicated or otherwise rendered harmless. In addition, they were charged with being

“fifth columnists” always willing to stab Turkey in the back. Adding to the danger they represented was that they supposedly “multiplied” more rapidly than the more civilized Turks.

Greeks and Armenians were contemptuously described as being the “Jews of the Orient.” Hans Trobst, the only German mercenary in the Kemalist forces, stated openly in 1924 that what had happened to the Armenians might very well happen to the Jews in a future Germany.² At a general party meeting in Munich in the summer of 1927, Hitler stated:

It is impossible that a non-Jew would be able in the long run to compete with Jews in the Jewish area of business. At least for the Aryan it is impossible. There are peoples who are able to do so, the Greeks and the Armenians. These people are able to economically defeat even the Jew. However, by doing this, they have become Jews themselves. They have these specific disgraceful characteristics we condemn in the Jews.³

When the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923, Nazis congratulated Turkey for forcing foreign nationals to resettle in their ancestral homelands and for returning Turks to Anatolia. The Nazis endorsed the expulsion of the Greeks from Turkey as an act of national liberation and supported the Turkish claim that the Greeks were terrorists. The Nazis conveniently forgot that the Greeks had founded Byzantium in the 7th century BCE and the Armenians had arrived in the 8th century BCE. Moreover, many of the returning “Turks” were converts to Islam with no connection to their new “native land.”

The Nazis viewed the Turks as a European people who understood discipline and were marching to a modernizing beat exemplified in a dynamic Fuhrer who knew how to use an iron fist when needed. The Nazis applauded Atatürk’s curbing the power of religion, a policy they wanted to apply in Germany when they took power. The Greeks were thought to have been great once, but the modern Greek and Greek culture had been fatally contaminated by the multi-ethnic nature of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. The Armenians were viewed as Orientals who had done nothing exceptional for millennia. Assyrians were never written about at any length and Kurds were “mountain Turks” or any other characterization favored by Atatürk, but certainly not a distinct “nation.”

Hitler referred to Atatürk as his “shining star.” He complimented Atatürk far more lavishly than he did Benito Mussolini. Ihrig suggests that the traditional view that Hitler was imitating Mussolini with his beer-hall putsch in Munich is wrong. Mussolini had marched on

Rome with his black shirts. Hitler had not taken that course. Rather than marching on Berlin, Hitler had attempted to imitate the Ataturk model of seizing a center in the conservative interior, from which he could build a base for national power.

The Nazis fully endorsed the Turkish denial of an Armenian genocide. An example of this support is seen in the Nazi support of Turkey's successful attempt to thwart Warner Brothers from making a film version of Franz Werfel's novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* written by Franz Werfel. The novel, which exposed the realities of the Armenian Genocide in no uncertain terms, was an international bestseller. Germany informed Warner Brothers that it would not only ban that film if it were made but would ban all Warner Films from being screened in Germany and would use its considerable influence on France to do likewise if the film was made.⁴

An aspect of the Nazi-Turkish relationship that is rarely written about with candor is Turkey's role in World War II. Turkey had signed a mutual military assistance pact with the English in 1939, but Turkey took no action when the war with Germany began. The treaty with England, in fact, was obviated by the signing of the *Turkisch-Deutscher Freundschaftsvertrag* in 1941, an agreement sometimes cited as a non-aggression pact and other times as a friendship treaty. Ihrig believes that Turkey feared to offend the Nazis as the Nazis might order Bulgaria to bomb Istanbul, a city highly vulnerable to uncontrollable fires as it mainly consisted of wooden buildings. Whether that fear was genuine or not, an important factor in the alliance was that trade between Turkey and Nazi Germany was vigorous. A little over 50% of all Turkish exports went to Germany and 50% of all Turkish imports originated in Germany. Of critical military significance was Turkish production of chromite, an essential element in producing stainless steel. Turkey provided 51% of the chromite needed by Germany for its civilian and military production.

During the war, Turkey revived internal discussion of a Greater Turkey by funding clubs that spoke of a multitude of Turkish states in the Caucuses and Central Asia that would be led by Turkey. Nazi interrogators cooperated in this campaign by promoting the idea of a Greater Turkey to captured Soviet soldiers of Turkic ethnicity, such as Tartars, Azeris, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs. Turkey's territorial wish list included northern Syria, Mosul, Aleppo, and the Dodecanese Islands. For a time in 1941, Turkish Prime Minister Saracoglu gave permission for the transit of German troops through Turkey for fighting in Iraq.

The link of the Turkish military and the German military was long standing, and continuous, beginning with the Ottomans in pre-World War I. This interaction did not cease during World War II. Turkish military officers and diplomats in tandem with Nazis visited Germany and Occupied Europe on several occasions. This relationship only waned when the Soviets stopped the Nazi advance and began its own offensives. Nonetheless, it took threat of an allied boycott for Turkey to cease sending chromite to Germany. Trade officially ended on April 21, 1944, but the evening before Turkey shipped 218 wagons of chromite to Nazi Germany which met the original goal set for all of 1944. Turkey did not declare war on Germany until Feb. 23, 1945, and Turkish troops never went into battle.

Turkish motivations and behavior throughout World War II were complex. Turkey indeed served as a haven for anti-Nazi Germans, especially Jews who it helped proceed to Palestine. Turkey tried to serve as a peacemaker between the warring parties on several occasions and offered other services to the Allies. What is obvious, however, is that Turkey would have been quite happy with a Nazi victory that had overthrown the Soviet Union and was open to Turkey's territorial expansion.

That the Nazis and Ataturk's Turkey had much in common does not mean that Ataturk is equivalent to Hitler or that Turkey was fascist in nature. What it does indicate is that the belief held by many Americans, including leading politicians and think tank pundits, that Turkey has been a long-term American ally is invalid. That it is a "model" for the Middle East and a secular state are also in question, especially with Turkey's increasing support of Islamic activists in Syria and Iraq, its attacks on Kurds in the border area, its increasing autocratic leadership, and the religiously-based nature of Turkey's governing party.

Turkey has taken no action to stem the flow of migrants into Greece, and even though it is formally allied with Greece in NATO, Turkey continues to regularly violate Greek air space. Turkey remains adamant that there was no Armenian genocide and that the Greek expulsions were a matter of defending Turkish civilians. It uses the same justification for keeping 30,000 troops in Cyprus.

Stefan Ihrig's *Ataturk in the Nazi Imagination* establishes that the Nazis were more accurate in speculating on the nature of modern Turkey than European and American

governments. It also provides a detailed template to understanding how present Turkish positions flow naturally from policies formed at Turkey's inception as a modern state.

¹These topics are discussed in detail in Ihrig, pp. 68-108 and 172-209.

²Trost was a frequent contributor to Nazis papers such as *Heimatland* and *Volkischer Kurier*. This particular statement is cited by Ihrig on p.178.

³Cited by Ihrig, p. 180.

⁴For a full account of the campaign against the film mounted by Turkey, see David Welky, "Global Battle Versus National Pride: The Battle to Film *the Forty Days of Musa Dagh*," *Film Quarterly* V. 59, N. 3 (Spring, 2006).