

BOOK REVIEWS

Stefan Ihrig, *Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination* (Cambridge, Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2014), 320 pages.

Reviewed by Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, Senior Research Fellow,
Institute of Oriental Studies, National Academy of Sciences of Republic
of Armenia, Assistant Professor, American University of Armenia

This book is undoubtedly an important, enlightening and original contribution to our understanding of the post-WWI transformations in Germany as well as in Turkey. It brings into a picture hitherto unknown facts, perceptions and assertions about admirations that the German right wing political parties, especially Nazis, and key politicians had for Turkey. It is an eye-opening account, which deserves further contextualization within the history of both countries of Turkey and Germany of the inter-war period. Although the book “*is a history of perceptions and discourses about Turkey*” (p. 7), it does bring interesting insights about the reasons for the Nazi engagement with the Kemalist Turkey. Although the book is about Germany and its post WWI transformations, it also provides important hints about many developments in Turkey especially in the 1930s. It also implies that the book is an important contribution in studying the German dimensions and perspectives in examining the history of Turkey also.

The author cautions about two important assumptions at the beginning of the book hoping that his clarifications will clear out any ambiguity that the book may trigger. The author arguably claims that he does not intend to discuss “*whether the Nazis were right that the Kemalists displayed fascist tendencies*” and secondly, he “*cannot delve too deeply into the difficult topic*” of the Armenian Genocide. Although he immediately refers to the period under discussion (1919-1923 and 1933-1938) as a reason for not including it, his next argument comes a little off the context of the book. By citing key studies in the field of the Armenian Genocide, he implicitly questions them as he claims that the Armenian Genocide “*still needs to be studied extensively before we can make more definite statements about it*” (p. 7). Although later in the book he dedicated an entire subsection to the Armenian Genocide, the caveat of his raises some questions for the reader. As for his first claim, that he leaves the discussion of the existence of the fascist tendencies of the Kemalists to others (p. 7), he admittedly points at one of the major gaps of the book. The Nazi’s admiration of the Turkish transformation is presented as a one-way process, underestimating the German experience of feeding pro-German sentiments in Turkey since the late 19th century, and overestimating the Turkish model of transformation.

The book mainly examines the German nationalist excitement and obsession with Turkey through analysis of a range of conservative to far-right newspapers, oftentimes turning to broader media trends. He mainly concentrated on the following newspapers: *Neue Preussische Zeitung* (also called *Kreuzzeitung*), *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Vossische Zeitung*, *Heimatland*, *Völkischer Beobachter* (VB), *Der Reichwart* etc. The author claims “*the*

whole spectrum of newspapers, from the nationalist center to the fringe far-right, developed an almost monolithic discourse on Turkey". (p. 15) The German newspapers recognized Turkey as a role model for the Germans urging "*certain Turkish strategies to replicate in Germany in some way*". (p. 15) The process of "role modeling" became more accentuated with the rise into prominence of Mustafa Kemal in 1919. In the following years, the German press covered extensively the major achievements and steps of Mustafa Kemal. The image around Mustafa Kemal was consistently built in a way as to construct a nationalist backbone and martial spirit that might appeal many readers (p. 49). The German Press not only "*became champions of and spokespeople of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk*" but also "*something akin to a large European Kemalist PR agency*" (pp. 23, 150-151). The German press even reprinted Kemalist demands during the Lausanne negotiations as lists on page 1, (p. 43), thereby expressing their apparent support to the Kemalist cause. With the advent of Mustafa Kemal and the attention given to him in the German press, the author argues that "*there has never been another period with a huge number of articles in the German press devoted to Turkey, not even during the high points of the recent EU-Turkey debate*". (p. 23)

The main feature of the right wing German press of the Weimer Republic was to seek commonalities and parallelism (anti-Western, anti-Entente, anti-Greek etc.) between Turkey and Germany and potential lessons that Germany could draw from the Turkish tactics. (p. 49) In addition, the nationalist German press was full of overexcitement, fascination, admiration and praise for the Turkish success, "Turkish methods", "Turkish solutions", for Mustafa Kemal and, even for Ismet İnönü. Interestingly, the history textbooks of the late Weimer years mentioned the Turkish War of Independence as a "*marvelous example of national devotion*" (p. 113). The main conclusion that German nationalist circles drew from the Turkish experience and tried to disseminate through the press was the following belief: "*national unity, a strong leader, a preemptive and total military action were advanced as crucial policy prerequisites and political means*". (p. 66)

The second chapter starts with a rather strong claim, which challenges established views in the historiography. Ihrig argues that Hitler's attempted seizure of power in 1923 "*was inspired much more by Mustafa Kemal and the events in Anatolia than by the example of Mussolini's 'March of Rome'*". (p. 68) He further argues that the "Nazis 'grew up' with Turkey as it was the case for the 'völkisch' press to which continually proposed to learn from Turkey. (p. 70) He approached this case through the official Nazi papers, *Völkischer Beobachter* (VB), and a weekly, *Heimatland*.

Both papers closely followed the major development in Turkey. The VB explicitly called to resort to "Turkish methods" (p. 71), the Heimatland in turn was quite encouraged by the Kemalist experience of countering the Entente. That paper also looks at the case of Turkey with a sense of inspiration: "*the governing in Anatolia has managed, after the downfall of their Fatherland, to get a lot of trumps into their hands by intelligently waiting, the iron nerves and skillful maneuvering*". (p. 74) By relying the claims of the Nazi papers, the author argues that, inspired by the Turkish model of counterpoising Constantinople with Ankara, the Nazis tried to follow suit and change the center of gravity from Berlin to Munich. Thus, what was happening in Turkey had captivated the imagination of the Nazis in a very detailed way. They sought models and inspirations not only from general trends which

were unveiling in Turkey, but also in certain steps and tactics that Mustafa Kemal and his "Ankara government" took to cope with the Entente and the power-holders in Constantinople. (p. 91) References to Turkey, Mustafa Kemal and Ankara government popped up regularly in testimonies and during the trial of the organizers of the failed Munich coup d'état in November 1923. Ihrig also argues that many names, which played an important role during Hitler's time in power, had a previous experience both in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. They were also either actively involved in the Armenian Genocide or served in the Ottoman Empire as German officials carrying out different missions (military, diplomatic), which made them to build and develop significant connections with Turkey and its key politicians. Holistically referred as "German Ottomans", the author brings the following names - Losow, Hans von Seeckt, Hans Humann, Franz von Papen, Konstantin von Neurath (Foreign Minister) and General Bronsart von Schellendorf, Otto von Feldman (a leading politician in the DNVP and the All-deutscher Verband), Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richter (Hitler's political advisor, who was the German vice-chancellor in Eastern Regions of Turkey and witnessed the Armenian Genocide, he is believed to be the main person that Hitler learnt about the Armenian Genocide), Rudolf Hoess (future commander of Auschwitz), (p. 104), Josef Thorak, a Nazi sculptor, who had erected many monuments of central importance in Turkey (p. 130).

Ihrig clearly displays that Hitler knew very well about Turkish domestic politics (minority questions, domestic reforms etc.) and major turning points in the foreign policy of the past 20 decades at least. Hitler's admiration with Turkey and particularly with Mustafa Kemal did not fade away even when he came to power. In 1933, he Turkish *Milliyet* interviewed him, which later on was reprinted and summarized in a variety of German papers. In that interview, Hitler spared no words to share his excitement and admiration of Turkey and its leader. He famously pointed at that Turkey and Germany were united not only by mere good relations, but also by "something more" sympathy and understanding based on the shared pursuit of similar goals". He named Turkey "a shining star for him" and called Mustafa Kemal "the greatest man of the century". (p. 115) The same logic of words were later used by Hitler when he was sending congratulatory telegrams to Mustafa Kemal. Hitler famously admitted "... Atatürk was a teacher, Mussolini was his first and I his second student." (p. 116) Ihrig quotes Heinrich Hoffman, Hitler's personal photographer and a close friend, who reported in his memoirs that Hitler's admired Atatürk so much that one of the many busts of Atatürk by the famous Nazi sculptor Josef Thorak, became Hitler's cherished possession. (p. 129) The Nazi press also presented Atatürk and his deeds to ascertain the righteousness of "Men make history" claim. The latter was widely circulated to affirm that only great men, the Führer, can regenerate the nation and to refute the anticipations both from the masses and democracy. (p. 149)

Hitler also repeatedly mentioned that Turkey had been a role model for him (p. 116), which was used along with a famous metaphor when referring to Turkey "*star in the darkness*" (pp. 114-117). Later, in the midst of the war against Poland, he told Turkish ambassador that he "*was coping Atatürk*." (p. 116)

Particularly interesting were the statements made on the occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the Turkish Republic in 1933. In one of those statements, Kemalism, Nazism and

Fascism were seen as emanations of the same thing that emerged from the same source of great ideological breakthrough. The three were also seen “as the first great eruptions, which will cover the antiquated intellectual crust with a new, smoldering and fiery layer, with a new ideology and [a new] cultural layer.” (p. 119)

Already in power, Hitler and the Nazi press continued to share their admiration with Turkey and Mustafa Kemal. Between 1933 and 1938, *Völkischer Beobachter*, the flagship of the Nazi Press, kept publishing hundreds of articles about Turkey. (pp. 134-136) Atatürk featured prominently in books on contemporary Führers and the new world order. In those depictions, Atatürk was put on equal footing with Hitler himself as well as with Mussolini. Moreover, Ihrig claims that, nowhere in the world, except Turkey, were as many books on Atatürk and the New Turkey published as in interwar Germany. (p. 151) In its glorified descriptions of Atatürk and his achievements the Nazi press created an aura which “elevated him to messianistic levels”, he was presented as “the imminent savior” or as “a transcendental savior”, and oftentimes “savior and Führer” in some texts. (p. 155) Understandably, Atatürk was highlighted along those lines in order to strengthen his image among Germans and boost the confidence towards the German Führer. The Nazi press also presented “actual, coincidental and manufactured parallels” between Atatürk and Hitler (both came from periphery, had humble backgrounds and were soldiers). (p. 157)

When Atatürk passed away on November 10, 1938, the Nazi leadership and the entire propaganda machine did their best to convey to Turkey “German’s people’s painful sympathy”. Hitler also made sure to underline that point in his condolences telegram. (pp. 138-143). For the next days and weeks Atatürk’s death turn into a major Nazi media event as both national and provincial papers carried announcements and essays on Atatürk, his life, deeds, his successor İsmet İnönü and the New Turkey that he created. (p. 138)

The fifth chapter of the book stands out for a number of reasons. Most prominently, one of its sections discusses the Armenian Genocide, albeit briefly, through the eyes of the Nazi Germany¹. At the outset, he argues that in the eyes of Nazis “the murder of the Ottoman Armenians was one of the main foundations” of the new national (*völkisch*) state. (p. 175) Ihrig questions Hitler’s alleged exclamation “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians” and his reference to the “extermination of the Armenians”. Ihrig does not seem to trust the reliability of the sources which discuss those quotes. (p. 176) Without providing his own explanations why the sources are not reliable, Ihrig argues that there is no need in “either of them to show that the Nazis were influenced by the Armenian Genocide”. He goes on to argue: “Because as much as the Nazis grew up with Turkey and the Turkish War of independence, they also grew up with the Armenian Genocide” (p. 175). Ihrig takes the argument even further by claiming that in the process of constructing anti-Armenianism Germans borrowed heavily from the late 19-th century anti-Semitism. He once again shares the widely known fact that in the German anti-Armenian discourse the Armenians were presented as the “Jews of the Orient” (p. 177). Ihrig claims that in the Nazi Press Armenians were presented as “parasites”, a “plague” and as early as in the beginning of the 1920s, it

1. He apparently promises to cover it in detail in his forthcoming book “Justifying Genocide: Germany, the Armenian Genocide, the long road to Auschwitz”, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

was replete with warnings that “*what happened to the Armenians might very well happen to the Jews in a future Germany*” (p. 179). Ihrig also argues that Hitler was very well informed about the intricacies of the Armenian Genocide. One of the possible sources of him being informed was that the former German vice-consul in Eastern Turkey during WWI, Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richter, was Hitler’s close friend. Thus, Ihrig believes that the former vice-consul would not have failed to discuss Turkey and the Armenians with Hitler. (p. 179) During the 1920s, Hitler sought the opportunity to present the Armenians as an example of a “lesser race” on par with the Jews. (p. 181) The Third Reich continued its previously built foundation of anti-Armenianism. Its key ideologues came to believe that “the destruction of the Armenians” as a “compelling necessity”. (p. 182) The Third Reich press kept using different negative stereotypes about Armenians as well as Greeks. (pp. 183-184) Based on the discourse of the time, the concluding parts of that chapter carries three central arguments: a) the Armenian Genocide was nothing distant to interwar Germany, b) furthermore, the Armenian Genocide served as a tempting precedent as it helped the New Turkey with its national rebirth and a blissful *völkisch* existence, c) the process of constructing the “pure Turkish nation” through the extermination of the Armenians did not entail any “negative” repercussions for the Turks, such as a Great Power intervention to punish them for the committed crime. (pp. 206-207) This part of the book is certainly interesting and it would tremendously interesting to examine Ihrig’s forthcoming book, the title of which is quite telling and promising.

Overall the book leaves only positive impressions, however, from time to time, it takes some efforts to grasp the chronology jumps and thematic discussions. The other minor issue is that many topics and assertions in the book surface repeatedly in different chapter. Quite logically, the book also raises some questions. For instance, while dealing with Turkey why the question of “race”, an important part of the Nazi discourse, was not discussed deeper enough in the Nazi press of the 1920s and 1930s (the book discusses it albeit very briefly)? Why Hitler continued to use the image of Atatürk and his New Turkey even after coming to power?

Even though the author mentions a few times that certain sentiments of right wing press were shared by other papers, it would have been helpful if the author could discuss a few left wing papers in order to see whether there was any discussion at all about New Turkey in the German press, which could have been slightly different than that of the far right press. That would also be helpful to put some of the claims and perceptions in the book into a larger perspective.

It would also be helpful to understand how big the audience was and an approximate number of subscriptions of the Nazi press in the 1920s and during the later decades. That would undoubtedly help us enormously to understand the size of readers and the potential impact that the Nazi press was having on the German society.

The Sixth chapter on Turkish-German relations during WWII ends with questions rather than definite arguments, which is done to signify that Turkish-German relations during WWII remain understudied. That chapter, the shortest in the book, does not even have a conclusion. However, that chapter reiterates a set of questions that a reader would think about while reading the book – Why did Hitler care about German-Turkish friendship

after WWI? In order to answer to that and many other questions Ihrig rightly proposes to analyze the other side of the coin – the image of National Socialism in 1930s Turkey. He conditions that option with the claim that it would not be possible to have a complete answer to that until “the Turkish Foreign Office archives are opened” (p. 221).