

ACIE/ACTR Final Report

14 December 2011

Program: Title VIII Research Scholar

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Location and Dates: Moscow, Russia; 16 July-16 November 2011

Project: “Allied against the West: Anti-Imperialism and Anti-Capitalism in Russia and Turkey, 1917 – 1937”

Overview

A generous grant from ACIE/ACTR allowed me to spend the last four months in Moscow, where I completed valuable research for my dissertation, “Eurasia’s Discontent: Anti-Westernism in the Soviet Union and Turkey in the Interwar Period.” The following report describes the subject of my research, the progress that I made in Moscow, and, finally, the significance of my work for a broader audience. The central theme of my research – anti-Westernism – holds, I believe, a very real and immediate relevance for policy-makers, business people, and academics in the United States. I trace the development of anti-Western ideas on the very edge of Europe, in Russia and Turkey, and show how these strains of thought were defined narrowly, geographically constrained, and a product of a very particular political conjuncture. I also show how they became part of diplomatic and cultural relations between the Soviet Union and Turkey.

Anti-Westernism in the Soviet Union and Turkey

On 14 February 1919, the London *Times* published a special correspondent's warning about the spread of "Bolshevism" in İstanbul. The journalist's words were more observation than analysis; he or she put aside "the vexed question" of whether the Russian and Turkish revolutionary movements were created by the same "mainly capitalist" forces.¹ At that moment, the correspondent could not have known that just a year later Russian and Turkish revolutionaries would share not only homologous characteristics, but also concrete connections. By the summer of 1920, guns, grains, and gold flowed back and forth through the Caucasus and across the Black Sea. And, in a 1922 letter to Vladimir Lenin, Mustafa Kemal indicated that frustration with European Capitalism was indeed a factor in this Eurasian convergence: "what constitutes now, and what shall constitute, the basis of Turkish-Russian rapprochement is the struggle we are waging against Western imperialism and the capitalist system upon which it is founded."² Mustafa Kemal's missive – written in French and addressed to a Russian audience – is by no means a definitive answer to the correspondent's vexed question, but it does offer a point of departure.

In repeated conversations during the interwar period, Russian and Turkish revolutionaries expressed a shared understanding of imagined geography and geopolitical circumstance when they spoke of joint opposition to the European economic and political system. At times, as during the Russian Civil War and the Turkish Independence War, conflict with the Western interstate order was immediate and visceral. At others, as when Mustafa Kemal met with Russian linguist Nikolai Marr in 1933, irritation with European academics' condescension was subdued

¹ "Enver's Stage Army," *The Times*, 14 February 1919.

² Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'noi i politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 5, op. 1, d. 1520, l. 2 (Mustafa Kemal to Lenin, 4 January 1922).

and measured. Throughout, Russians and Turks found common cause in a vexation that was consistent, if not constant.

Union born of Eurasia's discontent was perhaps most striking in May 1932 when, in a private apartment just outside the Kremlin on Granovskii Street, Joseph Stalin offered İsmet Pasha economic support equivalent to eight million U.S. dollars.³ The General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party presented a twenty-year loan with no interest, "as a brother," in the name of Turkish industrialization.⁴ The Turkish Prime Minister, after his acceptance of the tender, wrote to Ankara that the "prominent and effusive concern and honor" shown for Turkey in Moscow had caused him "real pleasure."⁵ Both sides expressed satisfaction with an agreement that involved real economic and political commitment.

The intimacy and results of this meeting jar with common understandings of the interwar period. By this point the Soviet pursuit of international revolution had already been shaken by the massacre of Chinese Communists in Shanghai in 1927, and the Bolsheviks had turned inward and were desperate for hard currency to finance their own development of "Socialism in One Country." The Turkish government was avowedly anti-Communist, and persecution of local radicals hardly seemed likely to win Bolshevik sympathy.⁶ Indeed, the rationale for the Soviet commitment to Turkey was not readily evident to many observers at the time. The British embassy in Moscow reported to London with surprise that it should be in Turkey that "the Soviet

³ Granovskii Street is now, as it was before the revolution, Romanov Street. House number 3 was home to many of the Soviet Union's military leaders, including Mikhail Frunze, Kliment Voroshilov, and others. It was in the apartment of Voroshilov that the May meeting between Stalin and İsmet took place. In their conversation, Stalin and İsmet denominated amounts in dollars. To give an idea of the scale of 8 million dollars: Soviet exports in 1932 were roughly 220 million dollars, and the Turkish government's entire budget for 1932-1933 was roughly 85 million dollars. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 388, ll. 5-8 ("Record of a conversation at Voroshilov's," 6 May 1932). Walter Duranty, "Soviet Trade off Heavily in 4 Years," *New York Times*, 18 June 1933; J. W. Kernick, "Turkey Strives to Please Powers," *The New York Times*, 1 January 1933.

⁴ Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (BCA), 30..10.0.0/248.677..8 ("Report from our embassy in Moscow," signed by İsmet and sent by Huseyin Ragip, 8 May 1932).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ In some contexts I have chosen to capitalize the word "Capitalist" to emphasize both Turkish and Soviet reference to a specific system and ideology that was at odds with a Communist counterpart.

government appear [*sic*] for the first time in the world market on any considerable scale as a supplier of machinery.”⁷

In contrast with foreigners’ bewilderment, however, neither Soviet nor Turkish leaders expressed discomfort at the coalition formed. For the first time in the history of the Soviet Union, a public social function was staged in the St. George Hall, and the welcome that İsmet’s delegation received in Moscow struck a reporter for the *The New York Times* as worthy of “the celebration of the return of a victorious Roman General.”⁸ The next year, when Turkey welcomed a reciprocal Bolshevik visit, the guests were received with enthusiasm that shocked even the long-serving Soviet ambassador.⁹ The bravado of Moscow’s and Ankara’s politicians was more than pageantry; it resonated in each country’s broader political culture. The Soviet visit to Ankara in 1933 was captured on film by the established Soviet director Sergei Iutkevich and set to music by Zeki (Üngör), head of the Turkish National Conservatory. Reviewers in each country picked up on the anti-Western elements that had been intentionally worked into the film.¹⁰ Writing for Ankara’s central newspaper, Burhan Asaf (Belge) contrasted the explicitly Turkish subject and imagery of the film with domestic productions set in Turkey but made in imitation of European models.¹¹ The meeting on Granovskii Street was thus part of a diverse set of Soviet-Turkish exchanges that ranged from economics to film and which were, as their participants insisted, rich with ideological meaning.

⁷ Foreign Office (FO) 424/276 E 2383/449/44 (Ovey to Simon, 9 May 1932).

⁸ “Soviet Welcomes Turks with Pomp,” *The New York Times*, 29 April 1932. For the British embassy’s surprise reaction to the use of the St. George Hall, see FO 424/278 E 2381/449/44 (Strang to Simon, 3 May 1932). The St. George Hall was in fact occasionally used, with that name, for the awarding of military orders; but foreign observers were shocked by its use for a diplomatic event. For earlier use, see “Vypusk voennykh akademii,” *Pravda*, 4 May 1930.

⁹ *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 16, 592 (Surits to NKID, 28 October 1933).

¹⁰ On the film as an explicit contrast to European “exoticism,” see Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i isskustva (RGALI), f. 3070, op. 1, d. 1327, l. 56.

¹¹ Burhan Asaf, “Türkiye’nin kalbi – Ankara,” *Ulus*, 25 March 1934.

The Soviet-Turkish relationship between 1920 and 1937 is the subject of my dissertation and of the research that I undertook in Moscow while supported by ACIE/ACTR. The dominant theme of the period, despite numerous factors that pulled the two states in opposite directions, is cooperation. Internationalist Bolsheviks and nationalist Turks joined in an anti-Western union that trumped the ideological divide which ran between Capitalist and Communist societies. What is more, in both Turkey and the Soviet Union, this seemingly awkward alliance was worked into a meaningful political narrative. In their shared discontent, Bolsheviks and Turks recognized and developed ideas that shape the politics of this European periphery. To appreciate the resentment towards the West that drew Bolsheviks and Turks together is to better understand the politics of Eurasia in the interwar period; it is also to see part of what continues to drive anti-Westernism even after the Communism in which it was so often voiced during the twentieth century has largely been discredited.

Research in Moscow

I spent the majority of my time in Moscow engaged in archival research. Access to sources in Moscow was surprisingly good, especially for the chronological first half of my project. To follow the course of government interactions between the Soviet Union and Turkey, I found the former Party Archive (RGASPI) and the Foreign Ministry Archive (AVP RF) by far the most useful. At RGASPI I was able to look at catalogs, select documents according to my desire, and order as I pleased. At AVP RF the system was much less transparent and neither I, nor any other researcher that I saw, was able to look at catalogs. Documents were chosen by archivists and brought for us to see. While my freedom to select material at AVP RF was thus limited, the documents that were brought to me were frequently useful, and there was even some

advantage to having someone familiar with the archive selecting documents from a wide variety of sections. In documents from both archives I was able to see transcripts of conversations between Soviet and Turkish diplomats, as well as internal Soviet correspondence about international relations in general and relations with Turkey more particularly. Reports from the Soviet embassy in Ankara proved particularly revealing.

Before my trip to Moscow I had already worked with a number of primary sources and had developed a tentative framework for my work on Soviet-Turkish interactions. I had been to the Presidential Archive in Turkey, studied newspapers from the period, and found a number of documents that had been published in collections put together by other historians. These materials had convinced me that a form of political understanding informed and contributed to relations between the two countries, and that Soviet-Turkish cooperation in the interwar period was not – as it is often described – a pragmatic alliance between the Communist Soviet Union and anti-Communist Republic of Turkey that cut against the grain of the dominant political narrative in each country. From a public historical record I could see that Soviet-Turkish cooperation was not an awkward fact for either government, but something that was celebrated in front of domestic and international audiences. The documents that I had seen before I arrived in Moscow led me to think of the language that Soviets and Turks shared in terms of opposition to an international system that they thought of as imperialist and capitalist.

In Moscow I had access to a much more extensive historical record and the material that I found not only enriched the model that I arrived with, it also changed that model. Russian archival documents showed me that Soviet-Turkish conversations were more far-reaching than I had originally imagined. Russian-Turkish cooperation emerged from similar conflicts with the West and – although much discontent was voiced in the form of very particular complaints about

economic and political inequalities – it coalesced into a specific, but recognizable form of anti-Westernism. Russian and Turkish politicians were not only aware that the antagonism towards the West that spurred their diplomatic cooperation spread to fields such as film, literature, and music, they also recognized the concerns developed in other fields as substantive contributions to, rather than merely reflections of, their own dialogues. The widespread nature of frustration with the West and its incorporation into diplomatic exchanges persuaded me to revise my original framework for understanding this phenomenon from “anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism” – the terms that I used in my initial ACTR/ACIE proposal – to the “anti-Westernism” that is now a part of my dissertation title.

My trip to Moscow, and the research that I carried out with support from ACTR/ACIE, was thus crucial to the development of my dissertation. I am now working to process the material that I collected in Moscow and flesh out a new perspective. On a shorter timeline, I have submitted a manuscript to *Slavic Review* that includes results from my visit and hope for publication in the near future. In presentations at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies and at the Middle East Studies Association in November and December of this year I shared some of the results of my research. As I finish my dissertation and move on to the next stage of my career, I will continue to draw upon the experience that I gained during these four months in Moscow.

Relevance and Implications of Research

For a brief moment after the collapse of the Soviet Union, observers in the United States and Western Europe hoped for the beginning of a newer, more peaceful era. For Francis Fukuyama, the victory in the Cold War of states associated with liberal democracy promised the onset of a universal

modernity.¹² Even if warnings of a clash of civilizations have since tempered predictions of the end of History, Anglophone historians continue to take the ideological clash between Capitalism and Communism to be the central axis of conflict in any grand narrative of Europe's twentieth century.¹³ Yet as the years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union pass, the hegemony of the Western political system is anything but complete. The challenge of fundamentalist Islam aside, all is not quiet on Europe's eastern periphery. After an initial bid for European Union membership, the Turkish political elite have begun to seek political alternatives in other regions. The post-Soviet Russian government has offered little indication of a desire to join the European order. And some members of the Russian and Turkish political elites have even begun to speak together about a Eurasian alternative to Europe.¹⁴ To understand the limits of the appeal of Western liberal democracy, the place to look is the point of first resistance as one moves east – Eurasia.

My research shows that current Eurasianist sentiment in Russia and Turkey is only in part related to a wider post-Cold War frustration with the West. Soviet-Turkish cooperation against the West began in the immediate aftermath of the First World War and many elements of that discontent remain today. I show that immediate economic concerns – prominently the fear of becoming an agricultural colony of the industrialized West – were a large part of Soviet-Turkish anti-Westernism in the interwar period. These concerns, however, were frequently interconnected with less concrete objections to European “Orientalism” and condescension. My research, I believe, demonstrates the value of searching thoroughly – and far back – for the roots of anti-Westernism and the necessity – if such anti-Westernism is to be engaged constructively – of addressing deeper, systemic issues.

¹² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), xi.

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁴ Emel Akçalı and Mehmet Perinçek, “Kemalist Eurasianism: An emerging Geopolitical discourse in Turkey,” *Geopolitics*, 14, 3 (Autumn, 2009): 550-569.