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## **The 1934 Thrace events : continuity and change within Turkish state policies regarding non-Muslim minorities. An interview with Rifat Bali**

Rifat Bali

Born in 1948 in Istanbul. Graduated from the Saint Michel and Saint Benoit French schools. Between the years 1970-1995 he worked first as a manager then as a managing partner in a private company. In 2001 he graduated from the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes of the Sorbonne University. Since 1996 he has been researching and publishing in the field of non-Muslim minorities of Turkey, antisemitism, conspiracy theories, the social and cultural transformation of the Turkish society and Dönmes (Crypto Jews). He is a research fellow of the Alberto Benveniste Center for Sephardic Studies and Culture based in the Religious Studies Department of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Sorbonne (Paris) and a member of Ottoman-Turkish Sephardic Culture Research Center.

Interview conducted by Alexandre Toumarkine and Nikos Sigalas, Istanbul, French Institute for Anatolian Studies (I.F.E.A), 28th of April.

Alexandre Toumarkine: Thank you, Rifat Bali, for granting us this interview for our issue on demographic engineering. The first topic we want to talk to you about is your last book, 1934. *Trakya olayları* (1934. The Events of Thrace), which was published in Turkish in the spring of 2008 by Kitabevi Publishing. By taking the work you did on this event as a point of departure, we will try to establish a first link with this question of demographic engineering.

[2] Rifat Bali: I think the 1934 Thrace events (which, in summary, were an attempt to quietly move the Jews, who held many dominant positions in the economy of the various cities of Thrace) cannot only be fitted in the context of social or demographic engineering. There are many reasons behind the events that were connected to each other. The first 'problem' (as seen by locals and officials) was not that there were demographically too many Jews living in Thrace; there were not. The problem was mainly and probably a matter of economy: they were concentrated in the upper economic classes of the main cities in Thrace. This is obvious from the report of İbrahim Tali, the general inspector of Thrace (*Trakya Umumi Müfettişi*<sup>1</sup>), who, just before the events, made a grand tour in Thrace that lasted 33 days. In his report that he prepared and submitted to the Ministry of Interior, he wrote: 'We do have a Jewish problem in Thrace.'

[3] A.T.: And what was the 'Jewish problem?'

[4] R.B.: Mainly and first, from Tali's point of view, the Jews had the economic upper hand; they were seen as causing problems for the Muslims because of lending money to the locals with high interest rates and dominating the local economy; and, secondly, they had not Turkified themselves; they were still speaking Ladino<sup>2</sup>, and acting as a distinct community rather than interacting with the Muslim population. Also, the tentative conclusion I came to at the end of the book is that, along with these two reasons (for the Events) there was another one, which so far has not been dealt extensively: namely, the militarization of the Thrace region. In 1934 the Joint Staff wanted to re-militarize the Dardanelles and the whole Thrace region. This was a re-militarization that, as we all know, ended up successfully with the Montreux agreement (1936).<sup>3</sup> From their point of view, Jews

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1 General Inspector of a particular geographic zone. A sort of extraordinary governor.

2 Mother tongue of the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and settled in Ottoman lands. It is also called Judeospanish or Judezmo.

3 Montreux Agreement: Agreement signed on July 20, 1936 between Turkey and France, Great Britain, Bulgaria, Russia, Greece, Italy, Japan, Yugoslavia and which supersedes the clauses of the Straits as defined in the Lausanne Treaty. The Lausanne Treaty gave safe passage to war and commercial vessels through the Straits, demilitarized the territory and

and the Bulgarians who were still living in Thrace were potential fifth columns (as İbrahim Tali states). So, they had to be moved from this region without making too much trouble. All these reasons – economics, being seen as potential fifth agents, and finally, to a lesser degree, not being sufficiently 'Turkified' – converged. And it suited all parties to force the Jewish communities to leave. It suited the Joint Staff requirements to move these people, and it suited the local Muslim population and the Republican elites who were angry and upset at the Jews for, as they saw it, having the upper hand in economic matters. From their perspective it was the right thing to do if this 'project' could be achieved without causing too much trouble. But as we have seen, the plan went out of control and at that point the government was obliged to interfere and take charge.

[5] A. T.: If we look at these three rationales – economics, Turkification, and military interests – could one rank the importance of these factors?

[6] R. B.: I think the Joint Staff requirement is first; then comes (or perhaps could be ranked at the same level) the Jewish merchants' economic dominance. Turkification, I think, is the very last. It is really just a pretext, or at least, I believe so.

[7] A. T.: It seems here that the question had an important territorial dimension. Does this analysis seem fair to you?

[8] R. B.: Yes. You know Eastern Thrace means something special for the Turkish elite. It was a region that had been invaded and re-invaded by Greeks and Bulgarians, so it was seen as a very sensitive area that had to be absolutely protected against a potential 'fifth column.' I think that is one of the main reasons why they were so sensitive in Thrace.

[9] A. T.: In fact do you think of the events of Thrace – as the euphemistic appellation was imposed for these events – as an exceptional moment or as a step in the progression of a coherent policy targeting the Jewish community?

[10] R. B.: Well, the events came as a great shock to the Jewish community in Turkey. I think they also came as a shock to the Turkish intellectuals and Republican elites. I think those in charge wanted the Jews to be moved out of the region without any fuss. But it came as great shock because it was a physical attack, a physical attack on people, on their houses, on their wealth, and so on. So it

reminded them, as we all know, of 1933 and the Nazis in Germany. Seven years before, in 1927, they had had another problem, but not of this magnitude. It happened in Istanbul with the murder of a young girl named Elza Niego. This prompted a mass demonstration by the Jews against the Turks during the funeral. And the Turkish elites, in order to teach the Jews a lesson, claimed that the slogans used during the demonstration were an attack on Turkishness, so 10 Jews of Istanbul were prosecuted, but after 30 days they were all released.<sup>4</sup> That was the first shock. Then came 1934, although it cannot really be compared to this murder. First of all, it did not fit the Jewish community's conception of what the Turks, at their worst, would do to them. They were never expecting such a thing. Second, it did not fit with what we call Turkification or, whatever it is, the 'homogenization of the non-Muslims,' because you cannot Turkify people by force and by doing this kind of quasi-pogrom. I think this event has to be analyzed separately from the other ones in its own context, and explained with its own particular reasons. It cannot be compared in any way to the Varlık Vergisi events.<sup>5</sup> It is something particular to Thrace, for the various reasons I have discussed. And in addition to the reasons I have mentioned, there were the cases of two leading publicists at that time – Cevat Rifat Atilhan<sup>6</sup> and Nihal Atsız<sup>7</sup> – who had, before the events, been given free rein to make crude anti-Semitic propaganda with no interference from the state. Their journals were closed down only after the events. Then, in December 1934, five months after the events, Prime Minister İnönü made an official visit to the Thrace region and the cities where it happened, but he didn't pay a visit to the Jewish community leadership to ask them how they were and what their problems were. So we can see that the Jewish community was of almost no importance in the eyes of Ankara. The Ankara-based leadership didn't care about what happened to them. They didn't pay enough attention to the anti-Semitic publicists before the events, nor did they try to compensate the Jews after the events.

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4 Elza Niego was a young Jewish girl who was murdered by a certain Osman Bey, who fell in love with her and murdered her because his feelings were not reciprocated. The funeral was transformed into a sort of mass demonstration of the Jews against Turks and Turkey.

5 Varlık Vergisi is a Wealth Tax that was approved by the Turkish Parliament in November 11, 1942. It aimed to tax wealth accumulated under war conditions through black marketing and war profiteering. Its application was discriminatory and arbitrary. Non Muslims were taxed prohibitively compared to Muslims of equal wealth and sent to forced labor if they could not pay the taxes, whereas Muslims who could not pay were not sent.

6 Cevat Rifat Atilhan (1892-1967) was an anti-semitic writer who in 1933-2,34 published *İnkılap* (later renamed *Milli İnkılap*) and tens of books.

7 Nihat Atsız (1905-1975) was a nationalist writer and owner of *Atsız* and *Orhun* journals, which promoted the idea of purity of race and blood.

[11] They really didn't care about them. If the Republican elites wanted to Turkify the Jews, to make them become Turks instead of Jews, they should at least have compensated them in December 1934 when İnönü visited Thrace. It shows for me that the Turkification process seeking to convert non-Muslims into 'real Turks' by giving them constitutional rights was something that would remain on paper. Because in the minds of the Ankara leadership, in their collective memory, the Jewish community was still considered foreign.

[12] A. T.: Is the analysis you are offering more broadly valid for analyzing the policy of the state and the Republican elites towards the three non-Muslim communities (Armenian, Jewish and Greek)?

[13] R. B.: Of course, it can be applied to all these minorities.

[14] Nikos Sigalas: I would like to ask you two other questions. Do you link the events of 1934 with the global atmosphere of these years and the broader trend towards anti-Semitism? Is this one of the causes? The second question concerns the organization or shape of the events themselves.

[15] A. T.: I too have a question that adds to this. You mentioned that there was a loss of control with regard to the initial plan. And it is not the first time that the Ankara leadership in the 1930s had to face such a loss of control. It started in the beginning of this decade with the short adventure of the Serbest Fırka party. The Kemalists seem to easily lose control of the crowds and to be afraid that the planning that they are undertaking will get out of hand. Could this be considered a particular mark of the 1930s?

[16] R. B.: In reply to the first question about the general anti-Semitic propaganda and its repercussions in Turkey, a few words on the two publicists I mentioned, Nihal Atsız and Cevat Rifat Atilhan. We know that the latter went to Germany in 1933 and that he was in touch with the editor of *Der Stürmer*.<sup>8</sup> But Cevat Rifat Atilhan didn't play a key role in the events because he was located in Istanbul, and he was publishing in Istanbul. At that time Nihat Atsız was a school teacher in Edirne<sup>9</sup>,

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<sup>8</sup> *Der Stürmer* was an anti-Semitic journal published by Julius Streicher.

<sup>9</sup> Atsız was professor of literature in Edirne for 3-4 months (September 11 – December 28, 1933).

in Thrace, and publishing the first issues of his journal *Orhun*.<sup>10</sup> His students were really fond of him, and he had a lot of admirers. So I think *Atsız* was also one factor.

[17] But I don't think the anti-Semitic propaganda was the main reason. The main reason, as mentioned before, was the Joint Staff requirement, and, secondly, the local Muslim population, which was fed up with the Jews, who were seen as dominating the economy. They were their competitors. The 'grassroots,' so to speak, was ready for some kind of provocation. 'The provocation' is now the reply to your second question: who were the perpetrators? The perpetrators were locals, ordinary people, their neighbors.

[18] The Tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Republic, celebrated in 1933, also took place in Thrace, in *Kırklareli*, one year before the events. At that time Jewish-Muslim relations had seemed all right; even two months before the events, Jewish community members were interacting with their Muslim neighbors, who after a short while became their persecutors. A particularly important subgroup of perpetrators were *Halkevleri* youth, who in 1931 took over the *Türk Ocakları*, which was closed down.<sup>11</sup> We don't know how *Ibrahim Tali*, during his visit prior to the events, addressed these people. From his report we can only assume that he really provoked them, based on the conclusion he came in his report that there was a 'Jewish problem.'

[19] As for the inability of the Kemalists to control the situations they put into motion, we have a perfect case here. Because, *Kemalist* elites never believed that the local leadership requirements were to cause a big fuss; a quasi-tragedy which by chance they escaped. We have a document, an internal inquiry from *Recep Peker*, the secretary-general of the *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası* (CHF), sent to the local party organizations (unfortunately, we don't have the reply). The *Peker* inquiry was asking how these things happened, was the leadership aware of what had happened, and, if so, why local leaders had not informed the central organization, and so on... From this we can assume that they were suspecting something occurred with the local party organization and that these things spiraled out of control.

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<sup>10</sup> Journal published by *Nihal Atsız* (November 5, 1933 – July 16, 1934) while he was in *Edirne*.

<sup>11</sup> The *Türk Ocakları* were officially established in March 25, 1912 in *Istanbul*. Its first president was *Ahmet Ferit Tek*. In 1913 *Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver* became president. They published the *Türk Yurdu* and *Yeni Mecmua* journals and had around 100 branches in Turkey. In 1931 they were closed down and replaced by *Halk Evleri* (Peoples Houses). They re-opened in 1949.

[20] A. T.: A question came to me when you described the specificity of the region in Thrace: Does the fact that it is a border region explain this double nationalist sensitivity of the state's local representatives and of the population?

[21] R. B.: Yes, it can explain why Thrace is a very sensitive area for them: it is very near the Bulgarian-Greek borders, and the Bulgarians, especially, were not so positively inclined towards Turkey. Just a few months before the events we had an incident. On 17 April 1933 the Turkish nationalists youth protested the razing of the Razgrad cemetery<sup>12</sup> in Bulgaria. So Bulgaria – especially Bulgaria and not Greece – was seen as a big threat for Turkey. And therefore, these 'alien' people – Jews of Turkish nationality, Bulgarians of Turkish or foreign nationality – were seen as potential trouble makers.

[22] A. T.: In the book, you also tried to evaluate the repercussions of the events outside Turkey as represented in the foreign press and in the diplomatic archives. What can we say about the way the events were perceived abroad? Was there a foreign reaction that could have forced the Turkish government to reconsider the events?

[23] R. B.: Of the various archives I have studied, which were, if I remember correctly, British, German, American, Italian, Israeli, Swiss, Greek, and French, I can conclude that the international press didn't pay much attention. Let's put it this way: it was minor news. But the local diplomatic community did of course pay attention. However, they did not issue any complaint to Ankara because there were no foreign nationals among the victims. In Ankara all of the foreign diplomats held the view that the main reason for the events was the Joint Staff requirement to move them. Due to rumors that were circulating at the time, they believed that there was a conspiracy about to explode in Thrace. So the events were undertaken after some kind of planning, but the question is: did events occur as planned, or did things take a different course?

[24] A. T.: So, we lack sources.

[25] R. B.: Of course we lack sources. The main source that is missing – and it is for this reason that I could not come to a firm conclusion about the events – is the report of the Minister of

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<sup>12</sup> On April 17, 1933 militants of the Bulgarian Rodna Zaštita (Defence of the fatherland) organization destroyed the Turkish cemetery of Razgrad, in Bulgaria. As a reaction the Turkish students demonstrated in Istanbul in front of the Bulgarian consulate and marched to the Bulgarian cemetery in Istanbul. 23 students were arrested.

Interior Şükrü Kaya, and his inspectors. They made a grand tour afterwards of the cities in which these events happened, but I could not find their report. The only thing I have is the official declaration of the cabinet that says that events happened, that 'we took control,' and that 'anti-Semitism is an ideology alien to Turkey.'

[26] A. T.: Have we any indications of the way Germany, which had fallen under Nazi control in 1934, perceived the event?

[27] R. B.: No. I could not find interesting things about that.

[28] N. S.: Do you find similarities in the planning or in the practices between the events of Thrace and attacks against the Rum community of Istanbul in September 1955?

[29] R. B.: I think there are some similarities. The first similarity is that both events were intended to frighten the targeted people. However, in the Thrace events the aim was that Jews would move 'voluntarily' from the region, while in the September 1955 events the aim was to show the Greek government that the Turkish grassroots was extremely emotional and sensitive on the Cyprus issue and therefore if the issue was not settled according to Turkey's desire, the Rums of Istanbul would suffer since the reaction of the grassroots could not be controlled. The September 1955 events also were somehow planned, but I think they also got out of hand to a degree that the government could not have foreseen. I believe this because I don't think the government was stupid enough to plan such a visible event at the same time an international conference was taking place in Istanbul,<sup>13</sup> and while the international community and international press were there.

[30] Secondly, there is some sort of a similarity with local criticisms of what was perceived of as an ostentatious way of showing wealth. In Thrace, also, in the local press of that time, we see such criticism as: 'These Jews, they are wealthy, they are going to the local balls and eating well, when we, poor Turks, are suffering ...'

[31] In the September 1955 events, we don't see this, but we do see there is a wild kind of vandalism in Beyoğlu because all the big shops were owned by the non-Muslims. Not only Greeks but also the Jews and Armenians were mainly in Beyoğlu and at that time the non-Muslims had still a

more 'ostentatious' way of living while the people who did the vandalism didn't have a penny. So there is somehow a similarity there.

[32] The third similarity, if we may say so, is how the people who were attacked became hostage to international developments that they could not control. In September 1955, the local Rum were hostage or pawn in a great chess game between Turkey and Greece. It is my opinion that Turkey used them as leverage on the negotiation table against Greece in the Cyprus issue. In Thrace, we do not have such case, but we do have an antagonism between Turkey and Bulgaria together with the militarization of the Thrace region, which contributed to the idea that this 'alien element' should be removed.

[33] A. T.: Earlier you underlined the gap between the local representatives of the state and those at the national level, and you saw a very real difference of perception, as you discussed when you were talking about the reaction of Recep Peker. Do you think that there is also a difference in the way that the various institutions within the state are involved in the events of 1934? And more generally in their stance regarding the three non-Muslim communities?

[34] R. B.: Well, it is very difficult for me to answer because I lack primary documents. In order to answer this I would have, for example, to see how the Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü (General Police Directorate) or the Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (National Intelligence Organization) was evaluating the three minorities, or to see what the Ministry of Interior thought. I haven't seen any of these documents because they are not open to researchers. So therefore it is very difficult to answer you.

[35] A. T.: Well, perhaps not particular to the event itself but looking more generally at the period from the 1920s to the 1960s, can we distinguish how different state institutions saw and treated these minorities?

[36] R. B.: I can see different things, not according to the institution but according to the minority. What was the state perspective concerning each minority? I think they were more or less categorizing the Greeks and Armenians together – although in the 1930s the Greeks were still okay – in the long run they were putting them in the same basket as having a track record of betraying the fatherland during the Independence War. And therefore, they were seen, in general, as people who had to be 'watched carefully' and 'not be trusted too much'. That was also the case in the 1940s. In 1941 when all the non-Muslims were conscripted to labor battalions, what we call Yirmi Kura Nafia

Askerleri.<sup>14</sup> Even after the 1950s, we see this problem. There was different treatment of the three minorities. The Jews were set apart because they did not have a track record of 'betrayal of the Fatherland' and were, at least in some cases, more inclined to be Turkified – we have the example of Tekin Alp<sup>15</sup> and other communal leaders in the single-party period who 'wished' to be Turkified. Tekin Alp was seen as a model case of Turkification and so the Jews became some kind of symbol for all the other non-Muslim minorities as a good example of citizen, a good example of how non-Muslim citizens should act and behave. We still see it today in the 2000s, with the Armenian question. The Jews have been used rhetorically for 30 years, portrayed as the minority welcomed by first the Ottoman Empire and then by the Turkish Republic. Therefore the Turkish Jews have become a benchmark to show the outside world that 'We Turks will not commit a crime against humanity towards a non-Muslim minority as evidenced by the fact that we have a track record of tolerance of the Jews.' It is a rhetoric used by both the Jewish community and the Turkish state.

[37] Moreover, it is important to clarify that from 1946 onwards, in the multi-party period, what we call Turkification is not so much in the agenda. There is no Turkification requirement after 1946 because the world changed; Turkey changed; Turkey became part of the western world, signed the United Nations Charter and so forth.

[38] A. T.: You just underlined how much the events of 1934 have to be considered in a global frame, and, in particular, in light of relations between the young Turkish Republic and Bulgaria. You made as such a comparison with the events of September 6-7th, 1955. It brings me to the following question: did the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 change the nature of Turkey's policies towards the Jewish community?

[39] R. B.: I don't think so, because politics are made by taking into consideration local sensibilities. However, it is the case that Jewish community leaders began to try to play this game. Because after 1949, when Turkey recognized the State of Israel, Israel was always pro-Turkish. It needed a country like Turkey – a country that was Muslim, democratic, and so on – as a potential

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<sup>14</sup> In April 1941 non-Muslim men were conscripted into the Turkish Army, but instead of serving as regular soldiers they were conscripted into labor battalions and sent to work in road construction. They were released in July 1942. The main reason was that the government was afraid of fifth column infiltration if the Nazis invaded Turkey. They were very suspicious, especially of the Armenians, although not the Greeks, who were openly anti-Axis. Rifat Bali has published recently a book on this subject entitled *Yirmi Kur'a Nafia Askerleri*, Kitabevi, İstanbul, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Tekin Alp or Moise Cohen (1883-1961). A Turkish Jewish intellectual who was a partisan of the Turkification of minorities and a fervent Kemalist. He is the author of *Türkleşirme* (1928), *Le Kémalisme* (1938) and *Türk Ruhü* (1944).

ally. Israel always supported Turkey in all kinds of international situations and institutions; for instance, its leaders supported Turkey's membership in the United Nations in 1949. And this policy is still going on. So until July 1974 and the Turkish Armed Forces' intervention into Cyprus, the local Jewish community leadership was not a factor in this bilateral relation between Turkey and Israel. In 1974, when Turkey intervened, two big problems emerged: first, the U.S. arms embargo, and second, the American-Armenian organizations lobbying the U.S. Congress to have a bill passed to recognize the genocide. At that point Turkey needed somebody local to use as a card – in this case, the local Jewish community vis-à-vis the American Jewish community and maybe vis-à-vis Israel – to enforce their strategy of lobbying. But until 1974, this was not the case because there was no need for it; things were moving along with no problem from the Turkish side. When Turkey had a problem in 1974, then this required the local community to intervene on Turkey's behalf, and this made many people in the local Jewish community, which until 1974 had practically no leverage vis-à-vis Ankara, extremely happy. I mean *le malheur des uns fait le bonheur des autres* (one person's misery is another's happiness). They were extremely happy that they had the occasion to at least show that they were 'real' citizens. This is what Professor Riva Kastoryano calls 'integration coming from abroad.'<sup>16</sup>

[40] A. T.: I would like, if it is possible, to return to a subject we have already mentioned when we spoke about your last book. Turkification seems to be for a number of authors to be a continuous concern of the state throughout the Turkish Republic, and as a concern that determines the policy of the state towards minorities. It is today a privileged paradigm. What would you say about it?

[41] R. B.: I think two things have to be considered. First of all, Turkification has an extremely negative connotation today in the Turkish intellectual arena because Turkification, from the intellectuals' perspective, is assimilation. Moreover, it is seen not only as assimilation but as the demographic attempt for the reduction of non-Muslims. So first of all I think we should define what Turkification meant in the context of the 1920s and 1930s. In theory, Turkification until 1945 was to convert non-Muslims into Turks of Christian or Jewish faith. It was a social contract. It could even be seen, from the non-Muslim perspective, as an upgrading of their social status, from the dhimmi status they held until 1923, to a citizenship status that they might obtain after the foundation of the Republic,

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<sup>16</sup> Riva Kastoryano, 'L'intégration politique par l'extérieur. La communauté Juive de Turquie', *Revue Française de Science Politique*, Vol. 42, no. 5 (October 1992), pp. 786-801.

so long as they became 'Turks.' This would mean not only that they spoke Turkish fluently but that they would become 'Turks' in their heart, ideals, and minds, that they would get rid of their particularism – whether it be Hellenism or Zionism or Armenian nationalism – and embrace Turkish nationalism. In return, what they were promised was equality in all public domains. But this did not happen; this was left on paper as constitutional rights but never implemented. And the only explanation I see for this is that the social memory of the Turkish Republic, which is the inheritance of 700 years of an empire run by sharia, was still strong after 1923, that the Republican elites and the intellectual elites still considered the non-Muslims as dhimmis.<sup>17</sup>

[42] To be more precise, I think (even if I can't prove it) there were two factions: one faction (we don't know if it was dominant at the beginning or not) was an idealistic faction that believed this would be the way to create a new citizen status in Turkey, and then another faction, that in the end became dominant, which still considered them dhimmis, not to be trusted too much, with all the repercussions we have seen in the single-party period. How do I come to this conclusion? The only document I found, which is an American Intelligence report prepared in 1946, is quite interesting. It is a report by the American Intelligence, OSS people, in Istanbul referring to what a Jewish leader of the period, whose name is not given, has to say about the 1930s. According to him the Turkish Jewish leadership understood that there was no other option but to be Turkified. So, he continues, 'how can we Turkify the Jewish future generation, the young people? The only way is to turn our schools into Maarif Vekaleti's schools<sup>18</sup> or to close them down. To turn them into such schools with all the conversion expenses supported by the Jewish leadership.' So they went to Ankara to propose this but were refused. And the only explanation given by the anonymous Jewish leader about why Ankara refused is that according to him the Turks wanted the Jews to remain Jews and not assimilate into Turkishness so that they could be identified. The idea was, 'We don't need them to be Turkified, we need to be able to identify them so that, eventually, we can squeeze them financially.'

[43] A. T.: So the goal was not to mix these populations?

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<sup>17</sup> This term defines the social status of non Muslims living in a Muslim country ruled by Sharia. Under such a regime non Muslims are under the protection of Muslims and do not enjoy the same rights as them.

<sup>18</sup> Schools administrated by the Ministry of Education (Maarif Vekaleti), in distinction to private schools, of which minority schools were a part, put under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

[44] R. B.: Yes. That may explain the discrepancy between the theory of the Turkification and the discriminatory practices of the 22 years of the single-party period.

[45] So, the second thing is what today's intelligentsia in Turkey sees as Turkification. They do see it as a linear program, a requirement of the Turkish State, or the 'Deep State' (Derin Devlet) which started in 1915 with the Armenian deportation and continued until 1964<sup>19</sup> with all these events (or steps) in between: the 1934 Thrace events, the 1941 conscription of non-Muslims into labour battalions, in 1942 the Varlık Vergisi, in 1955 the September anti-Rum pogrom and finally the expelling of the foreign Greek nationals...

[46] N. S.:... and maybe until the displacement of Kurdish villages for some people today...

[47] R. B.: Yes. But the people who use this concept do so in the context of talking about non-Muslims. I do not agree with this because all these events happened in different circumstances. Some events happened in the single-party period in which Turkey was in a different context; and some happened after 1946 where Turkey was part of the Western world. So you cannot explain these events through one single reason: that is, the will of the state to Turkify all these people. It is not so simple. Each event has to be evaluated in its own context. After 1946, the 1955 events for me indicate something that is still valid today: that the non-Muslims in the multi-party period became hostages to a situation they could not control and in which they are not the dominant actors. This situation involves Turkey's international development and relations with other states concerning its borders, and the non-Muslims are used as a pawn on the master chess game, the Jews included.

[48] A. T.: To continue this analysis and build on the critique you make of the idea of Turkification, it seems that in the relationship between physical displacement and aggression against the community, the events of 1934 are very unusual. If we tried to relate these events to the waves of emigration outside Turkey during these years, can we find a correlation between the policy towards the Jewish community and emigration?

[49] R. B.: When you say waves of emigration, are you speaking only of the Jews or in general?

[50] A. T.: Let's begin with the Jews...

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<sup>19</sup> In March 1964 Turkey denounced the 1930 bilateral agreement with Greece on disputes arising from the 1923 exchange of population, which expelled the Rums of Greek nationality.

[51] R. B.: Emigration is an indication that something really serious was happening in Turkey... After the events we see that in 1934, 521 Turkish Jews, and in 1935 1445 Turkish Jews, mainly from Thrace, left for Palestine. Then in 1942, during the Varlık Vergisi, we do see a small wave. But the big wave came at the end of 1948, which was the accumulation of all these negative feelings in the social memory of the Jews: 1934, 1941, the conscription of non-Muslims, and 1942, during which they suffered economically the most. So they came to the conclusion that they had no future here and they left en masse after 1948. During 1955, we do see a few thousand people who left for Israel because some Jews had their shops damaged; they lost money and, besides, there was a great loss of confidence in the Turkish state. Then we do see migration in the opposite direction, after the Six Days War in 1967, which gave some kind of Zionist pride to the youngsters in Turkey. So the emigration of Jews is closely linked either to particular moments or violence and oppression or, like in the 1970s, social and economic turmoil in Turkey. In the 1970s there was a continuous wave of emigration from Turkey, which stopped in the 1980s.

[52] A. T.: Can we make the same analysis for the other non-Muslim communities?

[53] R. B.: I haven't seen demographic data. But for the Armenians – and this is a subjective evaluation – we do have it of course after the Varlık Vergisi. Recently someone told me that most moved to South America. For the period after 1955, I don't know the numbers, but in the 1970s they left as well, because – as we all may remember – 1973 was the first murder of a Turkish diplomat by an American Armenian in San Francisco, and, if I remember correctly, after that came ASALA. So the Armenians themselves were hostages of a situation that they did not control, and they were under too much pressure, so they left.

[54] A. T.: Let us return now to what constitutes the essential object of your study, a topic you get at not only in this book about the events of 1934 but also in many of the works you published before. The question is related to the one I asked you about the possible link between the status of the community and emigration. What is your feeling on the general problem of this notion of demographic engineering, and on its relevance in the case of the history of the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic? Have there been any major changes in the mentality of the state on these questions since the development of its policies after World War I?

[55] R. B.: Yes, there was some kind of social engineering attempt that included demographic engineering during the last decade of Ottoman Empire. In the Republican period, I really don't know, but I can say that the main reasons why there was a form of demographic engineering was, first, not trusting the non-Muslims, at least in part because they were seen as activists – nationalist activists and so on – and, secondly, because of their economic dominance. Apart from the Thrace events and, in 1934, and some Armenians moving from middle Anatolia to Istanbul – and I am speaking exclusively of non-Muslims, not about other ethnic minorities – I am not very comfortable saying that the social engineering project also continued during the Republican period. This is either because I did not really find any document testifying to this, or because I did not focus on this aspect. But at least we can say that the general feeling, the attitude of people towards non-Muslims – and this constitutes the [underlying] reason why these events occurred – I think is the same in both periods. And in the actual context of today, in 2008, when demographically non-Muslims are practically nil, in Turkey if you ask the man in the street in İstiklal Avenue<sup>20</sup> 'What do you think of a non-Muslim?', he will of course say that a non-Muslim is not a Turk; he is a 'giavur' <sup>21</sup> or a 'gayrı müslim'<sup>22</sup>. And, secondly, if you ask 'Can we trust them?' there is a greater than 50 percent chance that he will say, 'Why should we trust them?' Probably in his lifetime he never met any non-Muslim, but he thinks so from what he is reading in the popular press or, if he ever went to school, from what he read in his textbooks. So the perception of the non-Muslims is still the same during all these decades.

[56] A. T.: We want to thank you for the long interview you granted us.

[57] R. B.: Thanks to you.

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20 Previously called Grande Rue de Pera. The name was changed into İstiklal (Independence) Avenue after the Republic was proclaimed. This used to be, and still is, one of the main streets of the city.

21 Derogatory term, approximately meaning 'infidel', to define non Muslims in general and particularly Christians.

22 Non-Muslim.

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