

MYTH BUSTED:
TURKEY'S JEWISH POLICY DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

An extraordinary series of conferences on “Memory Policies” that concentrates on wounded memories of various countries have been held since 2014 under the directorship of Nora Şeni, a professor from the University of Paris 8, in collaboration with the French Institute, Mémorial de la Shoah (Paris), University of Paris 8, and Anadolu Kültür.¹ The 8th conference of the series was held on March 24, 2015 under the title “Turkey’s Jewish Policy during the Second World War,” which directly questions the long-standing myth presuming that Turkey rescued thousands of Jews either as a place of refuge or a safe passageway for those running away from the Holocaust.

Professor Şeni, the moderator of the conference, began her keynote speech by making an analytical distinction between “memory studies” and “studies of history.” Şeni emphasized that the formers concentrate on the analysis of the construction of collective or public memories, while the latter look for *the* “truth” via “mounting evidences.” Thus, instead of daring to present “exact” replicas of historical events via official documents and the like, memory studies concentrate on the very process of “memory construction” via individual narratives and memoirs through which the formerly singular, complete, and clear truth turns out to be multifaceted, incomplete, and blurred; hence, the path breaking promise of memory studies for social sciences.

Regarding the construction of “the European memory” in the 20th Century, *the memory age* par excellence, along with the “memory policies” in Europe, Şeni presented a vital historical periodization: (i) After the end of the Second World War, memories were being constructed antagonistically on the national level through the classical dichotomy of “triumphant” vs. “defeated” countries. Thus, the reconstruction of public memory in the first period was characterized by heroism, courage, and sacrifice for the nation. (ii) In the second period, which was initiated by the fall of the Berlin Wall and thus by Germany’s reintegration into the European identity, individual national memories have begun to be Europeanized and even internationalized. Therefore, while the former dichotomy of national antagonism was being dissolved, the history of “national heroes” was replaced by that of “the

oppressed” or “the victim;” hence, the initiation of “the age of testimony.” (iii) In the ongoing final period, defined by Şeni as the period of “memory boom,” states have begun to face their own massacres while official messages of regret and peace (usually accompanied with the motto “Never Again!”) are being given via the recently established tradition of “state’s apology” not only for interstate but also for intrastate peace.

Being a part of Europe long before the establishment of the Republic, Turkey has never been out of the aforementioned process. Turkey is an observer member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and needs to comply with two criteria, i.e., inserting the Holocaust into its curriculum and opening up the state archives from the Second World War, in order to become a full member. Yet, even taking such crucial steps would only be preliminary as Turkey tries to reach out the European identity, and thus to be articulated to the common European memory not only amidst a rising Islamophobia in Europe but also with (at least) the Armenian and Kurdish “hunches” on its back.² For such an articulation, an analysis of Turkey’s Jewish policy in the face of the Holocaust during the Second World War turns out to be a key theme for critically assessing Turkey’s memory construction.

Corry Guttstadt, whose doctorate thesis is entitled as *Turkey, Jews and Holocaust* (2009), underlined that historical narratives, whether official or not, become integral parts of public memory, as was the case for the long-standing myth that maintains Turkey’s saving of thousands of Jews during the Holocaust.³ Such a quasi-official myth becomes all the more whimsical, as the Turkish ruling elite not only sympathized with the Italian Fascism and the German Nazism long before the Second World War, but also the 1930s constitute the acme of Turkish ethnic nationalism, which had begun with miscellaneous economic policies of Turkification and the Resettlement Law of 1934, continued with the Thrace pogroms and the Dersim massacre, and eventually culminated in a literal replication of the German and Italian concentration camps by the Wealth Tax of 1942. Within such a historical context, the aforementioned myth turns out to be nothing but fallacious. Guttstadt demonstrated that the Turkish Government only rarely accepted Jewish refugees until the prohibition of Jews from going out of Germany in 1941 and the accepted Jews hardly aggregated 150 people (600 people with their families). In fact, the Turkish

Government, according to Guttstadt, took various measures to prevent the coming of Jewish refugees, who were already defined in 1937 as an “unwanted element” in the state documents, such as Turkey’s official demand from Germany in 1938 for putting a secret sign (“J”) on the passports of Jews. As a rule, Turkey rejected Jewish refugees until the beginning of the Holocaust through secret enactments, while exceptions could have only been realized by the approval of each and every minister in the Government. In other words, Turkey’s mythical rescue of Jews between Nazis’ coming to power (1933) and the Holocaust (1941) could have not exceeded 0,15% of the total Jewish refugees coming from Germany and Austria. During the Holocaust, when Turkey had become a vital passageway for the Jews seeking refuge in Palestine, Guttstadt noted that only 4,600 Jews were admitted after an arduous process of negotiation. Indeed, unlike the other neutral countries, Turkey did not open refugee camps, and, as the Struma incident demonstrated without leaving any doubt behind, rejected to serve even as a temporary refuge for the Jews escaping from the massive massacre in Romania until 1944 when the Nazis’ defeat became definite.

İzzet Bahar, the author of *Turkey and the Rescue of European Jews* (2015), concentrated on the Jews of Turkish origin living in France during the Second World War.⁴ Bahar’s findings validate those of Guttstadt, as the Turkish Government delayed in general the coming of Jews of Turkish origin to Turkey after Germany’s invasion of France in 1940 despite repeated Nazi ultimatums. Until 1943 when Germany prohibited Jews from going abroad, only a small number of Jews (according to Bahar, around 600 people) could have come to Turkey. In this respect, the popular historical narrative of Necdet Kent, the Turkish diplomat of the period, which seems to contribute highly to the construction of the aforementioned myth, falls within the category of fallacious testimony. Still, despite all these findings, the myth of Turkey’s legendary “rescue of helpless Jewish people” seems to be irrefutable, since myths are about neither truth nor falsehood, nor past or future, as Georges Sorel wrote, “they are not description of things but expressions of a will to act” over the present.⁵ Here, the myth seems to reflect Turkey’s will of assuming the role of savior in the European memory of the Holocaust.

¹ See: Nora Şeni, *Oryantalizm ve Hayırseverliğin İttifakı (The Alliance of Orientalism and Charity)*, İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2009.

² See: Baskın Oran, “A Proactive Policy with Many Hunches on the Back,” in Kerem Öktem, Ayşe Kadioğlu, and Mehmet Karlı (eds.), *Another Empire: A Decade of Turkey’s Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party*, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Press, 2012, pp. xv–xxiii.

³ See: Corry Guttsadt, *Türkiye, Yahudiler ve Holokost (Turkey, Jews and Holocaust)*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012.

⁴ See: İzzet Bahar, *Turkey and the Rescue of European Jews*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

⁵ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, Jeremy Jennings (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 4th Edition, 2004, p. 28.