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Faik Okte, The tragedy of the Turkish capital tax, translates by G. Cox

James R. Russell

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Faik Ökte, *The Tragedy of the Turkish Capital Tax*, translated by G. Cox, London: Croom Hel, 1987, 95 pp.

On the face of it this would seem to be an essay on a tedious subject, despite the amusingly alliterative title; but it illuminates a frightening incident on the periphery of the Second World War. Faik Ökte, a high official in the wartime Finance Ministry of the Turkish Republic, has written a forthright and meticulously documented confession of the role he and other hardworking bureaucrats played in the execution of the *Varlık Vergisi*, an iniquitously punitive tax levied against the property of Armenian, Jewish, and Greek citizens of Turkey. Most lived in Istanbul, where the author worked.

The idea of the tax was İsmet İnönü's and Prime Minister Saracoğlu pursued its implementation with fanatical vigor. There were two motives. First, Turkey was in desperate need of revenue to finance the five-fold increase in Government expenditure, mostly on defense, caused by the outbreak of war in Europe. Second, in late 1942 Hitler seemed to be winning the war, and the Turkish Government felt free to adopt the Nazi methods it admired to cripple the minorities. European-style racism was in evidence; for DÖNMEs – Jewish converts to Islam – were not spared. The tax structure in force had not tapped adequately the expanded wartime profits of the non-Turks, who virtually dominated commerce, the Turks having reserved for themselves the unproductive military and government administration.

Although the capital tax applied to all Turkish citizens, non-Muslims had to pay five to ten times more than their Muslim compatriots. Most were unable to do this; for many, the tax far exceeded the wealth they in fact possessed. The assessments were often determined in an arbitrary manner: Ökte recalls how one official thought a Jew owed 500,000 Turkish liras and another determined he owed a million. They settled on a figure of 750,000. There was no system for legal appeal of the tax: this aspect of the order incensed Ökte's old economics professor, who telephoned him to ask what madness had afflicted the government. Ökte records scattered examples of Turkish officials intervening to save non-

Muslim business partners and friends; but aside from these rare personal gestures, the machinery of extortion worked efficiently.

The property of those unable to pay the full assessment was confiscated and auctioned off at low prices by the authorities; few were able to liquidate their assets fast enough to meet the deadlines for payment determined, and adult men whose payments fell short were deported to Ashkale, near Erzurum (a primitive and inhospitable region) to work out what they owed at hard labor. Of the 2,057 people interned at Ashkale, 21 died there; and their families back in Istanbul and other Western Turkish cities were reduced to destitution. In March 1944, when it became apparent the Allies were winning the war, the *Varlik Vergisi* was revoked, and the deportees were allowed to return home. Many had a hard time obtaining loans from Turkish banks to rebuild their ruined livelihoods; and for all his flowery expressions of contrition, Ökte does not even contemplate the idea that reparations might have been paid.

Faik Ökte the Ottoman gentleman resembles in some ways the Nazi bureaucrat. He is often proud of his efficiency in carrying out, despite difficult working conditions, orders he knew from the start to be wholly iniquitous. He admits to a certain pleasure in sending tiresome petitioners off to Ashkale. Some of his most strenuous criticisms of the government of the day have nothing to do with the injustices visited upon the minorities: he fears that the attempt to extend the *Varlik Vergisi* to foreign nationals, a measure which aroused the intervention of their embassies, might force Turkey into a position of weakness. He recalls how the Ottoman Empire had been constrained to grant capitulations to foreign countries: this meant that subjects of Britain, France, or Russia, say, of Greek, Armenian, or Jewish extraction most often, and born in Turkey, were immune from prosecution under Turkish law. America, Britain, and the USSR did make Turkey back down, and citizens of these countries, mostly Turkish-born, did not suffer as their co-religionists of Turkish nationality did. The Allied powers had other concerns on their minds, and did not take advantage of the equation with Ottoman conditions to force permanent capitulations upon Turkey once again. Ökte suggests that European banks were reluctant because of the incidents of the capital tax to deal with Turkey after the war.

Ökte's essay bristles with statistics; and numbers can have a treacherously calming effect, persuading their manipulator that he has controlled and delineated events by quantifying them. The *Varlik Vergisi* was a problem going far beyond taxation, though: it was not just a deplorable lapse of fiscal sense, nor was Turkey outside the immediate circumstan-

ces of the policy of a normal or civilized society; and it is not now. In his foreword David Brown sees this where his Turkish Speer has not, and draws our attention to conditions before and after the war. In 1934, Brown notes, Jews were forced from their ancestral homes in Edirne and throughout Thrace, as a non-Turkish element. He points out that most of the minorities of Turkey have fled the country. By focussing on conditions in Istanbul, he neglects to mention one minority treated with consistent barbarity since the birth of the Turkish Republic: the Kurds.

While businessmen from Istanbul were being deported into Anatolia, whose native Armenian populations had been exterminated or expelled less than twenty years earlier, the same Turkish government responsible for the Capital Tax was (and still is) busy killing or imprisoning people for the crime of calling themselves Kurds and speaking their native Kurdish language. In the closing pages of his book, Ökte writes, «Modern nationalism is not dictated solely by religious and linguistic unity. There are nations composed of people who do not have the same religion and do not speak the same language... Contemporary nations are formed by people who, because of economic necessity and historical circumstances, feel the need to live together».

These are wise words, worth heeding on the Western side of the Turkish border. For while Istanbul Jews were suffering extortion of their businesses and homes in 1942-3, the Jews of Salonica a few miles away were being rounded up, with the active and passive complicity of very many of their Greek fellow citizens, and sent to the extermination camp at Auschwitz. When this writer visited Salonica (his ancestral town) in 1975 to see what remained of the martyred community, he was told by a resident American teacher that the Nazi *Gauleiter* of the place still vacationed there, with the approval of local officials. These same officials had, in an act of blasphemous and deliberate desecration, paved over the Jewish cemetery. A Greek-American told me his Jewish wife, not being Greek Orthodox, had been refused citizenship when he had decided to resettle in Greece with her.

Though the difference between Greece and Turkey is that of day and night – nothing in Greek history compares to the Armenian Holocaust or the present persecution of the Kurds – Faik Ökte's essay on the Turkish Capital Tax is grossly misused if it becomes merely a weapon in a Greek or Armenian or Kurdish arsenal of anti-Turkish literature. The poison he describes is Greek, too. And it is American: The U.S. Congress has just determined to pay reparations to Japanese Americans expropriated and imprisoned during World War II. Ökte's book, taken together with the

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other events of the grim years of the war, must awaken in the enlightened reader a general vigilance in the defense of democracy and a resolution to oppose racism everywhere, irrespective of the national costume in which it may conceal itself.

Department of Middle East Languages and Cultures,
Columbia University.

JAMES R. RUSSELL