

Property tax: The poor porter is changing the country

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The brief history of Turkey is chock-full of tragic events. In other words, we have managed to give much pain to the citizens and children of this country. One of the most tragic of these events was the imposition of the property tax 68 years ago.

On Nov. 11, 2010, the [Young Civilians](#) organized an event to mark the anniversary of this tragic practice from the past, and I was invited to the event held in front of the Kadıköy Public Education Center, which had been chosen as the gathering spot for 1,869 non-Muslim citizens who would be sent to Aşkale. Many members of my family had been victims of the property tax as the few possessions that they could salvage from previous calamities were lost to this tax. Yet, some people were more unfortunate than us. One of them was the Apoyevmatini daily's editor-in-chief, Mihail Vasiliadis, who, like me, attended the commemoration ceremony. Before moving on to his story, I would like to provide some historical background on the property tax.

The property tax had been imposed by the ruling Republican People's Party (CHP) with the advertised intention of giving some relief to the state during the difficult conditions of World War II and penalizing the groups who were said to have obtained their wealth from black marketeering during the war. Indeed, in the speech he delivered to Parliament on Nov. 1, 1942, then-President İsmet İnönü was manufacturing the justification for the mischief they were planning to implement. He said: "The fraudulent farm lords who consider unstable times a golden opportunity and the rapacious profiteering traders who would even attempt to sell us the very air we breathe are arrogantly poisoning this great nation as a whole. Of course, there are ways to offset the damages this handful of people do to the homeland... We should not give any person or group the right to rob the nation using commercial and economic freedoms as their excuse."

A hidden intent

Apparently, this statement served to camouflage a hidden and despicable intent. The real intent, as could be understood from the continuity and results of the practice in question, was to "Turkify" and "Islamize" the economic assets of the non-Muslim community that still survived despite adverse conditions. At this point, I should note that by saying "Turkify" and "Islamize" I am not referring to "black" Turks — who were mentioned in the headline a newspaper, acting as the watchdog of the official ideology, had run in the days when the property tax was in put place that read, "As the public flocked to the beaches, the citizens could not swim." And as Nevzat Tandoğan, the governor of Ankara during the single-party Jacobin dictatorial regime, referred to Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti, who was arrested in 1944, saying: "You idiot from Anatolia, who are you to advocate nationalism or communism? It is us who will do it if need be. It is us who will introduce communism to the country, if this is supposed to be done. You have two duties: first, to cultivate crops and do farming, second, to join the army when we summon you." I am specifically talking about the elites esteemed by the minority of Jacobin Kemalist white Turks when I say "Turkify."

As a matter of fact, the practice signaled by İnönü on Nov. 1 must have been previously decided and planned as a bill was passed by Parliament on Nov. 11, 1942, i.e., just 10 days later. The practice introduced by this bill targeted not only a handful of black profiteers as İnönü had suggested, but also the entire public, and, more specifically, non-Muslims. In his memoirs, Faik Ökte, the then-head of the İstanbul financial department says: "I was just appointed to the office. In a letter sent by the [finance] ministry, it was said that the extraordinary income obtained via profiteering during the war would be

taxed, and the wealth of the minorities should be specifically examined.”

Yes, it is true that non-Muslims are demonized in this country, but this letter clearly imparts the intention to blacklist all “gavurs,” or unbelievers, from an economic standpoint rather than a prejudice that all gavurs are also black market profiteers. As a matter of fact, this is the real intention that emerged during the secret session held in Parliament. In the speech he delivered at the meeting of his party’s parliamentary group, CHP member and former Prime Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu said: “This bill is, at the same time, a revolution law. We are faced with an opportunity that will give us economic independence. By eliminating the foreigners who dominate our market with this law, we will give the Turkish market to Turks.” His words clearly reveal the real purpose of the property tax.

Ökte prepared a report in which he listed his concerns about the methods by which this tax would be collected in İstanbul, but his report was not taken into consideration. So he went to Ankara in order to talk to then Finance Minister Fuat Ağralı, then chief of the Cabinet Şevket Adalan and former Prime Minister Saraçoğlu. He narrates the interview as follows:

“Mümtaz Tarhan, who was being sent to İzmir as the head of the financial department there like me, and I met with Saraçoğlu. Saraçoğlu asked whether I liked the bill. ‘I have some objections,’ I said. ‘Like what?’ he asked.

“I am supposed to collect 300 million. Under the law, this money must be collected in 15 days or at most, in one month. I am afraid that tax payers will not be able to find funds to pay the tax in such a short time,’ I said. The prime minister’s face was a mess. ‘There is some price policy involved, young man,’ he said. ‘I will pour out the goods in the market. Your concerns are justified. I have taken them into consideration. After our price goals are fulfilled, I will give you extra time for tax collection,’ he said.”

Not a normal initiative

Saraçoğlu’s remarks can be rendered into plain English as follows: This is not a normal tax collection initiative. As non-Muslims will not be able to pay the taxes — which may amount to five times their current wealth — in such a short period, i.e., 15 days, they will be forced to sell their property on the market, which will boost the supply. But since the people do not have money to buy them at their normal prices, the prices of their property will decline steeply. In this way, the state will collect a great sum in taxes and at the same time, the white Turks — i.e., the former pro-Community of Union and Progress groups or the new privileged Kemalist groups — as the only group who have the financial capacity to buy these goods will become the new owners of non-Muslims’ property.

Saraçoğlu called this policy a “price policy” and openly stated their intention by saying, “After our price goals are fulfilled, I will give you extra time for tax collection.”

The (black)list of people who would pay the property tax would be prepared frantically, and these lists would be approved by then-İstanbul Governor Lütfi Kırdar, and sent to the police department. Ökte would meet with Deputy Governor Muzaffer Akalın to ensure that those who refused to pay the tax were identified. Gad Franko, Şekip Adu, Faracci, etc., were among the rich non-Muslims who strongly reacted to the tax, and you can be assured that they were duly punished.

Yet, the victims of the tax were not non-Muslims only. It was ruthlessly imposed on converts as well. In his memoirs, Ökte sums up the decision concerning the converts as follows: “In a word, our nerves were caught up in hysterical shivers of Hitler. All of us lost our self-possession as the distinguishing characteristic of a finance officer. This mood haunted everyone even during the first tax collection.”

The large black books containing the lists of taxpayers at the financial departments contained letters next to each taxpayer in what seemed to be an inspiration derived from Nazi Germany. Thus, non-Muslims, Muslims and converts would be denoted with letters respectively G (gavur), M (müslüman), and D (dönme). This was intended to ensure so-called “justice” among the already disproportionate tax rates. It

was intended to protect “innocent” people from punishment.

The following brief story is sufficient to indicate the injustice of the tax. The rate of the tax for Muslims was one-eighth of their wealth, while it started at half of their wealth for non-Muslims. In practice, this bias increased against non-Muslims until it was completely out of control.

This policy was closely monitored and criticized by international parties. In a report he sent to Washington, then-US Ambassador to Turkey Laurence Steinhardt described the property tax as follows, “The tax inspired by Hitler is persecuting the minorities in the country who are forced to pay sums that are far beyond their capabilities.” In the articles that appeared in the international media, the property tax was depicted as a new example of Turkish barbarism and Turkey was accused of implementing a racist policy. Dependant on the course of World War II — as the Germans lost power and the British-American and Russian alliance became successful — the property tax was repealed 16 months later.

Now, it is time to tell the tragic story my dear friend Vasiliadis had told me. After the property tax was imposed, a sequestration officer and a porter arrived on Tarlabası Street. His father, who was a dentist, was bedridden. The house where his family lived was also the office his father would use when he was healthy. Mihail was only 6 years old. The sequestration officer made the porter stack all the objects in the house and his father’s dentistry equipment in a room. The porter even took his father from the bed and put him on the ground in order to take the bed to the same room. As the room was about to be locked down and sealed the little Mihail said his rocking horse was in that room. The porter quickly climbed on top of the stacked objects and found the rocking horse and gave it to Mihail. But at that moment, the stentorian voice of the sequestration officer was heard. He grabbed the wooden horse from Mihail’s hands and threw it to the room and sealed it with rage, shouting: “It is the property of the state!”

What is happening currently in Turkey is similar to the conscientious porter inheriting power from that ruthless sequestration officer. If this great injustice can be condemned only after 68 years, the people who were once scorned as “porters” had a great share in this change.

Sources

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