



European Journal of Turkish Studies

Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey

12 | 2011

Demographic Engineering - Part II

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejts/4538>

DOI : [10.4000/ejts.4538](https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4538)

ISSN : 1773-0546

Éditeur

EJTS

Référence électronique

Dilek Güven, « Riots against the Non-Muslims of Turkey: 6/7 September 1955 in the context of demographic engineering », *European Journal of Turkish Studies* [En ligne], 12 | 2011, mis en ligne le 12 avril 2012, consulté le 10 décembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejts/4538> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4538>

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Riots against the Non-Muslims of Turkey: 6/7 September 1955 in the context of demographic engineering

Dilek Güven

The Policy of national Homogenisation from the 1910's to the 1940's.

- 1 From 1913 to 1914, the national question entered a new era in the Ottoman Empire. The defeat in the Balkan War of 1912 had been attributed chiefly to an inchoate national consciousness, and the outbreak of the First World War was seen as an opportunity to put a new national program into effect. One of the most important steps taken in this context was revoking the system of capitulations, which was the legal ground for granting Europeans privileges such as diplomatic immunity, tax exemption, lower rates of custom duties and the right to establish their own postal services. In addition, making Turkish compulsory in economic transactions paved the way for replacing employees in the public sector who were predominantly Christian by their Muslim counterparts. Thus the conditions that would facilitate the emergence of a “national bourgeoisie” were created.
- 2 The concern for homogenising Asia Minor, which was the nucleus of the multi-ethnic empire, was also ethnically and demographically interrelated with the aforementioned issue. Demographic engineering was seen as a necessary precondition for establishing a triumphant nation-state. The settlement policy of 1912-1923 regarding the Greek-Orthodox population of Asia Minor and the deportation and killing of the Armenian population should primarily be considered outcomes of the homogenising attempts that were accomplished in the axis of nation-state.
- 3 Discrimination against non-Muslim and non-Turkish ethnic groups intensified after the formation of the Republic in 1923. Although the recently established state guaranteed the autonomy of minorities within the framework of international law, the

governments of the 1920s and 1930s explicitly pursued policies of assimilation from time to time. If the rights and obligations of all citizens before the laws seemed formally identical, in everyday life, belongingness to the dominant Turkish ethnic identity formed the basis of the state's identity policy. The intention of these practices was to accelerate the processes of nation-state formation, modernisation and westernisation.

- 4 The state's identity policy manifested primarily in the domain of national education. The significant decrease in the number of minority schools, the requirement that Turkish be the language of instruction and those schools' subjection to the Ministry of National Education's arbitrary monitoring were keystones in the Turkification process of the educational institutions belonging to non-Muslim communities.
- 5 Turkification in the educational domain was supported considerably by the economic measures by which the state attempted to create a "national bourgeoisie." To this end, the Turkish National Commercial Union, whose members were also deputies in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, was established in 1923. With the help of both the Turkish Government and the newly established commercial union, it was expected that Turkish businessmen would acquire a secure position in the country's financial and banking sectors. The union was also influential in acquiring the enterprises which used to belong to the Greek-Orthodox who left Istanbul. Moreover, under certain circumstances, Greek-Orthodox people were purposely intimidated so that they would emigrate and their property could be purchased at very low prices. However, the Turkification of the economy was not limited to the commercial sector. For example, employees in foreign firms were to be replaced by Turkish employees. Until 1923, 90 % of the administrative and office posts in foreign firms were filled by non-Muslims.¹ In a short while, the Turkish government started to pressure foreign enterprises in Istanbul to transfer all posts to Muslims. Especially the political measures that government had taken with respect to the economy reveal that the Turkish ethnic identity was thought as the basic component of demonstration for republic.
- 6 In addition to the assimilation of minorities, migration and settlement policies were other means to create ethno-cultural unity within the borders of the newly established state. For instance, between the years 1929 and 1934, the local administrations compelled Armenians who were living in the rural areas of Asia Minor to migrate into urban centres. The secret agents of the Turkish government inculcated Armenians in Anatolia, especially those in Diyarbakır and Harput, with the idea that leaving Turkey would be for "their well-being." The Armenians were assured that if they emigrated, their properties would be bought in accordance with the regulations, and that they would leave the country without any difficulty. Between the years 1928-1929, the Armenians of Sivas were prohibited to leave the provincial borders. At the same time, since the opportunities for employment were also taken away, economic problems caused the majority of the Armenians themselves to ask permission from the government to leave the country. Particularly at the level of local administrations, there was a noteworthy interest in buying the properties of the Armenian minority at very low prices to boost the wealth of the ethnically Turkish. According to the account of the officials of British Consulate, nearly the majority of well-to do Armenians in Sivas left the city, and the economic activities of the remaining ones were of quite limited by the middle of 1929.²

- 7 Armenian peasants living in the countryside, on the other hand, were forced to move into big cities or central or eastern districts of the country. This involuntary internal migration had many “advantages” for the Turkish government: In many cases, Armenians who were used to living in rural settings could not make a living in the cities and therefore emigrated to Syria; in addition, controlling and monitoring them became easier once they were concentrated in smaller areas. Thus the regions that were cleared of Armenians were offered to the new Turkish settlers, especially from the Balkans.
- 8 Nearly six months prior to the implementation of the Settlement Law, Anatolian Armenians were subject to a new migration wave. In early 1934, six hundred Armenians, deported from various cities and rural areas to Istanbul within a period of two months, were settled in Armenian churches and schools and in deserted houses in Yeniköy and Ortaköy.³
- 9 During the years prior to their deportation, Armenians were suppressed by local administrations so that the forced nature of their exile from Anatolia could be concealed. Turkish police initially tried to provoke local Muslims against Armenians so that it would appear that the local inhabitants had expelled the “infidels.” This attempt, however, was unsuccessful. Subsequently, the government settled the émigrés from the Balkans in Armenian settlements and warned the Armenians that their properties could be handed over to the newcomers. When instead a peaceful relationship arose in between Armenians and the Balkan émigrés, the Armenians were told to move into Istanbul immediately.⁴ In order to prevent the indictments that the state was confiscating the properties of Armenians, they were allowed to sell their possessions. Nevertheless, the prices offered for these possessions were so low that there was practically no difference between confiscation and selling. The rural Armenian groups mostly migrated to Syria as a result of not being able to adapt themselves to the urban areas they settled in.⁵
- 10 The pogrom-like attacks which were organised against Jews with the participation of state authorities in 1930s should also be considered in this context. Some of the Jews living in the cities in Thrace were intimidated through threats and economic boycotts. During the summer of 1934, shops, workplaces and residences of Jews were attacked (Aktar 2000 ; Bali 1999).
- 11 The extraordinary Wealth Tax that was approved by the National Assembly in 1942 aimed to eradicate the pioneering role that Armenians, Greek Orthodox and Jews had had in the economy. This tax was so excessive in many cases that it was impossible to pay even if they had sold all their possessions (Ökte 1987).

The narrative of the events of 6-7 September 1955.

- 12 On 6 September 1955 at 13.00, Turkish state radio announced that a bomb attack had taken place at the house in Thessalonica where Atatürk was born, and this news spread out with two different afternoon copies of the newspaper *İstanbul Ekspres*. Late in the afternoon on the same day, a public demonstration was organised in Taksim Square by various student associations, unions and the “Association of Turkish Cyprus” (KTC). Following this demonstration, groups started stoning the windows of shops and businesses that belonged to non-Muslims. In a short while, clusters of people equipped

with tools to destroy houses, shops, churches and schools rushed into neighbourhoods around Taksim such as Beyoğlu, Kurtuluş, Şişli, Nişantaşı, which were traditionally known as non-Muslim residential and business districts.⁶ In a similar manner, acts of violence took place in remoter districts of Istanbul such as Eminönü, Fatih, Eyüp, Bakırköy, Yeşilköy, Ortaköy, Arnavutköy, and Bebek, in addition to Asian quarters such as Moda, Kadıköy, Kuzguncuk, Çengelköy, and on the Prince Islands. It is estimated that approximately one hundred thousand people took part in these attacks.⁷

- 13 The assaults were carried out by organised units consisting of twenty to thirty people who can be subdivided into provocateurs, leaders, and destroyers. In many cases the provocateurs carried Turkish flags, or busts and photos of Atatürk and Celal Bayar. They also distributed KTC badges and rosettes and appealed to people to identify their homes, shops and cars with Turkish flags.
- 14 The duty of the group leaders, first of all, was to identify the objects that were to be damaged. They approached their task methodically. Some of the group leaders carried lists of the home and work addresses of non-Muslims. A week before the events took place, the headmen of the involved neighbourhoods were asked to provide home and work addresses of non-Muslim minorities. According to a report prepared by the French Consulate, the addresses of non-Muslim minorities were determined by a special unit as early as the Second World War so that in case of an encounter, their “neutralisation”⁸ would be easier. The report also revealed that the rioters were able to utilise the already registered addresses and information. Just before the uprisings, the watchmen requested some residents to indicate the door numbers of their homes and shops. Some non-Muslim homes and shops were distinguished with crosses, abbreviations like NMG (Non-Muslim Greek), or descriptions such as “non-Turkish” or “Turkish.”⁹ The third division, the destroyers, destroyed the pre-determined objects with stones, cranks, wooden boards, shovels, handsaws and welding machines. The necessary tools were kept ready at central points inside the city or at bus stops prior to the attacks.
- 15 Furthermore, the mobilisation of the perpetrators and their equipment inside the city was guaranteed by a transportation network composed of private cars, commercial taxis and trucks, ferries and even military vehicles. The rioters thus easily determined their targets and accomplished their attacks successfully throughout the city.
- 16 The vandalism followed the same procedure all over the city. In the case of shops, assailants initially destroyed the shop windows with stones, or opened the iron banisters with the help of welding machines or wire scissors. Then, goods and possessions inside the shop, or the equipments and machinery if the place was a workshop, were destroyed, either inside or just outside on the street.
- 17 The churches were also affected by the assaults. The holy images, crosses, icons and other sacred possessions inside the churches were either destroyed or burnt, or the whole church was set on fire. Greek-Orthodox cemeteries in Şişli and Balıklı were particularly damaged. The assailants not only tore down the epitaphs, but also took out the skeletons, which were either burnt or broken.¹⁰
- 18 The police officers not only confirmed their sympathy to the movement during the demonstration in Taksim, but also tended to remain passive when public order was broken and violence occurred. In some districts of Istanbul, security forces did not leave their premises even when they had witnessed violence. According to reports prepared

by German Consulate-General, the passivity of the police forces was “the result of not an official order, but an instruction which principally made room for disregarding the events.”¹¹ Another crucial point was that the fire brigades were late to attend the places set on fire, or remained passive, claiming that their equipment was inadequate.

- 19 Depending on the source that is taken as a chief reference, one can reach different conclusions about the harm caused by the uprisings. According to an official Turkish source, 4,214 houses, 1,004 workplaces, 73 churches, 1 synagogue, 2 monasteries, 26 schools, and 5,317 other establishments such as factories, hotels, pubs, etc., were attacked.¹²
- 20 According to an American source, 59 % of the attacked workplaces, and 80 % of damaged houses, belonged to Greek-Orthodox. Seventeen % of all assaulted workplaces and 9 % of all damaged houses belonged to Armenians. In addition to these, 3 out of 33 Armenian churches and 4 out of 22 Armenian schools were attacked. 12 % of all attacked workplaces and 3 % of all destroyed houses belonged to Jewish residents according to this source.¹³
- 21 It is probable that the mob leaders had been instructed to not engage in theft, since there were crucially few cases of theft during the first wave of rioting. The sentries located at important crossroads checked whether pedestrians were carrying any stolen items.
- 22 The number of reported injuries fluctuates between 300 and 600, but those numbers include not only victims, but also injured perpetrators.¹⁴ It can also be argued, given the small number of injuries and deaths compared to the destruction caused by the attacks, that an instruction prohibiting corporeal injury was given. During the attacks, some perpetrators informed the inhabitants in a calming manner that they would only cause material damage, and they were given orders only to destroy.
- 23 In household attacks, Greek-Orthodox women in particular were raped. The Chief Physician of Balıklı Hospital reported that 60 Greek-Orthodox women were treated accordingly.¹⁵ If we assume that many rape victims concealed what had happened and avoided medical care, it can be claimed that the actual number of rape victims was higher.
- 24 The number of deaths is uncertain; in the Turkish press it was reported that between 11 and 15 people died.¹⁶ According to records of the German Consulate General, economic losses amounted to approximately 150 million Turkish Liras (TL), an amount equal to the value of 54 million US Dollars in that period. 28 million TL of this financial damage belonged to Greek citizens, 68 million TL to Greek-Orthodox citizens of the Turkish Republic, 35 million TL to churches, and 18 million TL to foreigners and other minorities (Armenians and Jews) respectively.¹⁷
- 25 After the violence was suppressed, on 9 September 1955 the Ministry of Finance announced the provisions to be taken for the victims of the attacks: tax relief, providing cheap construction materials, importing glass products, moderating interest rates on bank loans, easing the process of applying for bank loans and accelerating the process of determining and compensating the material losses. At first, however, the expectations that Parliament would materialise funds were not met. Instead, the issue of compensation became a matter of charity and turned into a donation campaign. At the end of 1957, 3,247 individuals and corporate bodies had donated a total of 6.533.856 TL to the campaign (Kocabaşoğlu 2000).

- 26 On 28 February 1956, the indemnity law, which aimed to reimburse the losses caused by the events of 6 September 1955, was passed in the National Assembly. However, the amount assigned for compensation was only 60 million TL, and consequently the losses were only partially compensated.¹⁸
- 27 Despite the promise made by Prime Minister Menderes that “he would do his best to compensate the losses in any means,”¹⁹ foreign observers characterized the indemnities as “insufficient, bureaucratic and late.”²⁰ The quick recovery of the businesses that suffered damage was chiefly attributed to the industriousness and adaptability of the minorities. The victims themselves regarded the payments not as real compensation, but as a gesture to please the international public opinion.

The first step of the judicial process: a meagre indemnity, the usual scapegoat

- 28 Stating its deep concern about the events, the government initially blamed “communists” and “treacherous provocateurs” as responsible for the uprisings. Foreign observers found these explanations doubtful, since undesirable political activities were often labelled as “surreptitious communism” by the government even though the actual number of communists in Turkey was quite limited at the time. Besides, it was obvious that activities of communist and leftist groups were being closely monitored by the secret police; therefore, it seemed quite unlikely that they could have organised the attacks. Nevertheless, on 7 September 1955, 48 persons considered communists by the Police Department were arrested and brought in to Harbiye.²¹
- 29 The special tribunals which were established in order to ensure rapid investigation of the attacks had already made their first interrogations on 10 September 1955. Immediately after the uprisings, Beyoğlu Special Tribunal announced that the total amount of people under arrest was 5,104, which they classified according to the locations and categories of their crimes. The indictments prepared by the prosecutors of the special tribunals accused 1,886 persons of destruction, 1,622 persons for theft, 595 persons for plunder, 333 persons for provocation, 21 persons for arson, and 3 persons for attacking religious premises.²² Other charges included demonstrations against foreign countries, damaging national interests, communist propaganda, manslaughter, sabotage, raiding, rape, insulting the government and the army, and resisting state authority.
- 30 However, the judges rejected some of the charges because the police forces who performed the arrests were unable to provide the necessary evidence. In addition to this, in a report submitted to the Commandership of Beyoğlu Administrative District, magistrates complained that a considerable number of the arrested was absolutely not involved in the events.²³
- 31 In the weeks following the events, the Turkish government began persistently defending the claim that communists were responsible for the attacks. Finally, in the end of December 1955 the suspected “communists” were released without any explanation along with many other detainees. The court cases against the suspected communists and other detainees continued, but they eventually resulted in favour of the defendants (Dosdoğru 1993).

Behind the scenes: the organisation of the riots

- 32 The events of 6/7 September were planned by the Democratic Party (DP) government of the period, and were accomplished with the participation of the Secret Service, the DP's local administrations and organisations guided by the state such as student unions, youth associations, syndicates and the "Association of Turkish Cyprus" (*Kıbrıs Türktür Cemiyeti* - KTC).
- 33 The KTC was relatively a new organization. According to official explanations, it was established as a national committee in August 1954 to defend the Turkish minority in Cyprus against the United Nations and other organisations, and staged protests all over the country with the encouragement of the National Union of Turkish Students (*Milli Türk Talebe Birliği* - MTTB) and the Turkish National Federation of Students (*Türkiye Milli Talebe Federasyonu* - TMTF), in addition to the press and the Organisation of Turkish National Youth (*Türkiye Milli Gençlik Teşkilatı* - TMGT). Not only the majority of the executive board, but also ordinary members in this newly established organisation cooperated with members of the government, as well as with organisations guided by state or with other state institutions. The activities of the KTC, which were particularly expected to reflect the Turkish public opinion on the Cyprus issue, were supported financially by the government.²⁴ Hikmet Bil, the president of the KTC, and Sedat Simavi, the owner of the newspaper *Hürriyet*, contributed a great deal to making the Cyprus issue a "national matter" through the articles they penned.
- 34 Kâmil Önal, a journalist and one of the members of executive board, was simultaneously a member of the National Security Service (MAH).²⁵ He was assigned to set up the Anatolian, London and Cyprus branches of the KTC by the executive board. By the end of 1954, local branches had been established in Konya, Tarsus, Mersin, İskenderun, Antakya, Gaziantep, İzmir, Balıkesir, Mudanya and Adana, in addition to district branches in Fatih and Karagümrük in Istanbul.²⁶
- 35 The KTC had a close collaborative relationship with student and youth associations. Since the initiative for constituting the association belonged to student organisations, the majority of the founding members was comprised of TMGT and TMTF members.
- 36 The KTC acted together with the trade unions that were clearly in the "nationalistic line;" this collaboration reached a point where there was substantial overlap between the executive staffs of both institutions. For instance, Bahir Ersoy, who was the top executive of the Union of Textile and Weaving Industry Workers, was also enlisted as an executive member of the TMGT, and had previously participated in the initiative that resulted in the foundation of the KTC.²⁷
- 37 From August 1955 until the time the events broke out, the activities of KTC increased remarkably.
- 38 While the number of local branches in İstanbul was only three until mid-August, at least ten branches were set up in different regions of İstanbul until the attacks started on 6 September 1955. Crucially, the İstanbul and Anatolian branches were founded by members of the DP's local organisations and trade-union executives. For example, Serafim Sağlamel, who was the head of the DP's Zühtüpaşa district division, was also the head of the Kadıköy branch of the KTC. The executive committee members of DP's Zühtüpaşa district division were also the top executives of the KTC's Kadıköy branch. The members of the Büyükçekmece, Küçükçekmece, Paşabahçe ve Beykoz

branches of the KTC were also DP members. Seyfi Lobut, who was the head of the DP's Beykoz district division, was also an executive member of the KTC's Beykoz branch along with other executives of the local DP division (Dosdoğru 1993).

- 39 On 16 August 1955, Hikmet Bil, acting on a letter from the Turkish Cypriot leader Fazıl Küçük warning that Greek Cypriots were preparing a massacre of the island's Turkish minority, sent a letter to all branches of the KTC stating the necessity of a "manly reaction" from the Turkish motherland in order to intimidate London and Athens.²⁸ On 4 September 1955, Hikmet Bil ordered Kâmil Önal to have students burn some Greek newspapers on Taksim Square in support of the demonstration organised by the KTC's London branch. Indeed, the university students Gündüz Gölönü and Hurşit şahsuvar incinerated Greek newspapers in front of many members of the press.²⁹
- 40 In the last week of August, Önal gave an urgent order to a printing house to prepare 20,000 placards bearing the expression "Cyprus is Turkish," and commanded a group of university students, including Aydın Konuralp, Hurşit şahsuvar, Erol Çetindağ and Ekrem Yangın, to distribute the placards to main streets and department stores two days before the attacks. One day before the attacks, on 5 September 1955, Prime Minister Adnan Menderes had dinner with Hikmet Bil, and told him that he had received a ciphered telegram from the Minister of Foreign Affairs Fatin Rüştü Zorlu, who had been visiting London for the Cyprus Conference. The Foreign Minister reported that he had faced difficulties during the negotiations, that the terms of negotiation were hard and that during negotiations, he would like to utter Turkish public opinion to be formed³⁰. In other words, the Minister was demanding more action from the mainland.
- 41 Bil reported this information to the executive board of the KTC, which was convened for an urgent meeting on the same day. In the afternoon of 6 September, after news reached Istanbul of the bomb attack to Atatürk's home, Önal made the following statement to the evening copy of *İstanbul Ekspres*: "Eventually, we can obviously confess that we will call to account those who dared lay hands on our sacred values."³¹ While Önal was handing out posters and copies of the *İstanbul Ekspres* to a crowd in front of the TMTF premises, Orhan Birgit, a member of executive board, wrote a declaration on behalf of the KTC condemning the attack on Atatürk's home and asking the people to act in solidarity and to devote themselves to the national oath "Cyprus is Turkish, and will stay Turkish."³²
- 42 On 7 September 1955, police arrested 87 members of the administrative committees of the KTC Istanbul branches along with individuals who had cooperated closely with them, including Kâmil Önal, Hikmet Bil, Hüsamettin Canöztürk, Nedim Üsdiken, Orhan Birgit, Hurşit şahsuvar, Aydın Konuralp and Öztürk Canöztürk. The unification of KTC branches was banned, and the local branches' possessions and estates were confiscated. The alleged reason for these precautions was that the KTC's activities led to the attacks, and that the association had veered from its founding principle. Indeed, the number of KTC members among the more than 3,000 arrested was relatively high. During their period of detention, some of the leaders of the KTC and the MTTF mentioned that they were given instructions by state and official authorities to plan and participate into the attacks. A spy hidden by the Chief Inspectorship of Security among the arrested KTC members reported that Bil had explicitly mentioned during his detention that "Adnan Menderes himself had given instructions and financial help for the organisation of the attacks."³³

- 43 Towards the end of December 1955, the 87 executive members of the KTC were released, and a charge was filed against 17 individuals on 12 February 1956.
- 44 Though the police reports, which included the testimony of KTC and student union members stating that they had participated in the attacks in accordance with instructions given by the members of government, were submitted to the court, the testimonies were not incorporated into the indictments. The court did not take into consideration the participation of administrators and ordinary members of the DP's local headquarters while preparing the indictments, nor did it take into account the fact that Kâmil Önal had been working for MAH.
- 45 In January 1955 the court received a memorandum prepared by the First Division of Police conveying the fact that the MAH had cooperated with Önal in organising the attacks, and that DP members also partook in the attacks. However, Kemal Aygün, the General Director of Police, rejected this memorandum because it did not take into consideration the Kominform's activities regarding the Cyprus issue, and ordered Şevki Mutlugil, another member of the MAH, to prepare a new memorandum. The second memorandum described the circumstances for the emergence of Kominform and the methods it used, and quoted political brochures of the organisations confirming the collaboration with Communist Party of Turkey (TKP).³⁴ The investigation had apparently disclosed that the methods utilised in the events of 6 September 1955 were those of the Komintern.
- 46 As evidence for the Komintern's involvement in the attacks, the memorandum included two letters written by Nazım Hikmet, who had previously fled to Soviet Union, encouraging Turkish workers in Cyprus to collaborate with Greek workers to fight imperialist dictators on the island. Only the second memorandum constituted the formal basis for the indictment.
- 47 Another indication that communists had been involved was that Kâmil Önal, the main defendant, had collaborated with Komintern while he was in Lebanon working for the MAH. Önal was said to have made contacts with communists and persons who held "leftist views" and utilised these contacts during the attacks.³⁵ Although witness testimonies revealed that Önal's collaboration with the MAH continued during his membership in the KTC, the court disregarded this point. It was taken for granted that Önal's mission in MAH had ended before he was involved with KTC, and consequently the evidence that was burnt by students on Önal's order could not be related to the MAH. On this assumption, the court excluded the possibility that the MAH had participated in the organisation of the attacks.
- 48 After martial law came to an end, the trial of the 17 defendants, which had been initiated by the military court on 12 February 1956, proceeded in a civilian court closed to the public.³⁶ Like the military court, the civilian court did not take into consideration the evidence of the MAH's participation. In fact, MAH employees participated both in the bombing attack in Thessalonica and in announcing it in the *İstanbulEkspres* 6 September 1955.
- 49 The night before, a bomb exploded in the garden of Turkish Consulate in Thessalonica. According to an account given confidentially to a US Embassy staff member by a high-ranking Turkish bureaucrat, the bombing was realised to justify the attacks in İstanbul by an "agent-provocateur."³⁷ According to police investigations, the bomb, which resulted only in some broken windows, was not actually thrown into the garden, but

must have been placed by someone among the Consulate staff. The so-called “agent provocateur” was in fact a student named Oktay Engin. Engin was living in Thessalonica as part of Turkish minority in Greece, and his education at the Faculty of Law was covered by a scholarship from the Turkish government. Also a MAH member, Oktay Engin was assured that he would be given money and a position in return for his help. With the assistance of the Turkish Consulate in Komotini (Gümölcine), Engin was brought to Turkey on 22 September 1956.³⁸ Through the personal orders of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and the governor of İstanbul Fahrettin Kerim Gökay, Engin was given a position in the Municipality towards the end of 1956. After performing some additional tasks for the MAH, he became first a provincial governor, then a governor in Nevşehir.³⁹

50 On the surface, the events of 6 September were caused by the news of a bomb attack on the house where Atatürk was born, a story that surfaced only in the boulevard newspaper *İstanbul Ekspres*, which was printed in extraordinary numbers that day. The editor of this newspaper, Mithat Perin, who was also known to have close connections with the DP, was arrested after the uprisings but released two hours later on the order given by Prime Minister Menderes personally. The fact that Perin had collaborated with the MAH became obvious when he addressed a letter to the organisation in 1960 (Yalçın 2002). In his letter, Perin listed the missions he had performed for the MAH, and requested financial support for his newspaper *İstanbul Ekspres*.

51 Gökşin Sipahioğlu, the editor of the *İstanbul Ekspres* at that time, explained in an interview that the events of 6 September 1955 were organised by the MAH. Sipahioğlu’s account was confirmed by a brigadier general in an interview conducted in 1991 regarding the structure and working principles of Special Operations:

“The attacks of 6/7 September were certainly planned by the Special Operations Unit. It was an extremely premeditated operation and it accomplished its objective. Let me ask you; wasn’t it an extraordinarily successful action?”⁴⁰

52 In a hearing on 24 January 1957, the judges of Criminal Court No. 1 decided to release the defendants. The prosecutor demanded the release on the grounds that Cyprus is historically a Turkish island and is only a few of sea miles from the motherland, and that the provocative actions against Turks in Greece and Cyprus caused the events to break out. The prosecutor’s demand of acquittal was approved by the court on the grounds that it was impossible for the court to produce a fair verdict based on the evidence provided by police investigations, the trials at the Court of Martial Law and the Civilian Court or through the witness testimonies. Moreover, the defendants did not have criminal intentions. The judges then acquitted the accused of all charges by unanimous vote.⁴¹

53 According to reports prepared by German and British Consulates-General in İstanbul, from the government’s side at least President Celal Bayar, Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, Minister of Interior Namık Gedik, Minister of Foreign Affairs Fatin Rüştü Zorlu and governor of İstanbul Fahrettin Kerim Gökay partook in the preparation of the attacks; their aim was, first of all, to create a pressure over London Conference, and secondly to direct attention away from the domestic political problems.⁴² However, the foreign observers also agreed that the government was surprised by the extent of the damage caused by the events.

54 After the *coup d’état* in May 1960, President Bayar, Prime Minister Menderes, Minister of Foreign Affairs Zorlu and Minister Köprülü were tried at the military tribunal on

Yassıada Island, and among other charges were the events of 6 September 1955. The defendants were accused of violating the constitutionally guaranteed citizenship rights of the Greek-Orthodox minority and of provoking Turkish citizens into demonstration and violence.⁴³ The courts at both İstanbul and Yassıada were given evidence that the attacks had been initiated by the government with the collaboration of the secret service and the DP administration, and that various state-sponsored associations such as student and youth organisations, trade unions and the KTC had mobilised the participants, but this partnership was not taken into consideration during the preparation of the verdicts. During the hearings in İstanbul between 1956 and 1957, the role of DP members, the leaders of government, and the MAH was overlooked in order to conceal the fact that the Turkish state was responsible for the attacks. Though the KTC was charged, its executive boards were acquitted from all accusations, probably because they threatened to reveal the responsibility of the members of government if sentenced. The hearings at the military tribunal on Yassıada, on the other hand, attempted to prove that only government members were responsible for the acts of violence, thus legitimising the military invention in 1960. The intermingling of the KTC, MAH, trade unions and student associations was ignored. The innocence of KTC members was accepted as “verified” by the Court of Martial Law in 1957. The MAH was still part of the military structure in 1960; thus, pressing charges against MAH staff might also have brought accusations against the officers of the military regime. Probably for this reason, the court openly rejected a number of requests by attorneys to arrange hearings for MAH administrators or executives, on the grounds that “the MAH’s responsibility was already clarified with the memorandum prepared in 1956.”⁴⁴ In this way, members of the Democratic Party were presented as exclusively responsible for organising and operating the attacks. As a result, the İstanbul and Yassıada hearings actually served to legitimise the political regimes of 1955 and 1960 instead of clarifying the Events of 6/7 September.

- 55 The Events of 6/7 September 1955 caused extensive disappointment with the Turkish Republic among non-Muslims. When the of Democratic Party was established in 1945 and the single party regime of Republican People’s Party (CHP) came to an end with the transition to a multi-party regime, it was expected that the policies towards minorities would be liberalised in parallel with the democratisation of country. Indeed, certain discriminatory treatments against minorities were abolished in this new political era. Another important reason was the struggle that the CHP, now in opposition, waged to acquire votes. With the transition to a multi-party regime, it became critical to secure the votes of non-Muslim minorities, who constituted nearly a third of all voters in İstanbul.
- 56 As a consequence of Democratic Party’s election victory in spring 1950, the non-Muslim minorities hoped that the liberal policies of the new government would also usher in a democratic approach towards minorities of the country. Some of the steps taken by DP did in fact reveal a considerably more tolerant approach to minority groups. However, the happy atmosphere between minorities and the government quickly soured when it turned out that the DP’s view of minorities was not all that different from the CHP’s. Non-Muslim minorities began to be treated as secondary citizens, as had been the case in the Ottoman past. The DP’s liberal minority policy since 1950 proved to be an impression created by the party’s foreign policy tactics. Finally, the intensification of

disputes over Cyprus in 1954 brought a complete end to the DP government's goodwill toward non-Muslim minorities.

- 57 The widespread assumption in the scholarly literature that the events of 6/7 September were exclusively related to Cyprus issue is misleading. The crisis on Cyprus was more of a “constructed” development that contributed to the deportation process of minorities since 1920s. Like the Thracian Jews in 1934, non-Muslim minorities were forced to leave the country as a result of the destruction of their movable and immovable possessions. The CHP's policy of cleansing Anatolian towns of Christians and Jews and amassing minorities in the few metropolises of the country –primarily in İstanbul– was accomplished before the 1950s. Following this, as is mentioned in a report prepared in 1946, the process that would purge İstanbul of Jews and Christians was to be completed.⁴⁵ If it is kept in mind that only slightly more than half of all ruined businesses belonged to Greek-Orthodox, it is difficult to explain the acts of violence as retaliation towards Cyprus policy of Greece.
- 58 The attacks in 1955 should be considered in the context of the political and financial difficulties that the Menderes government was experiencing at the time. In order to prevent negative reactions from the opposition and the press, the government adopted a hostile stance, in turn alienating the educated segments of society. The events of 6/7 September became an excuse for the government to limit the freedom of the press, the opposition and student movement, and for keeping domestic political developments under control. Immediately after the attacks, on 7 September 1955, martial law was promulgated in İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir for six months, and the National Assembly was temporarily closed down. However, according to report prepared by German Consulate General, the government decided as early as 24 August 1955, that is, 15 days prior to the outbreak of attacks, to initiate martial law for a year with the purpose of restraining the activities of the opposition.⁴⁶ On 7 June 1956, two distinct drafts prepared by the government in order to silence criticism from the Ankara and İstanbul press were passed by the Grand National Assembly. The DP justified the bills by claiming that exaggerated representations of news such as the bomb attack on Atatürk's home “could depress the country and promote crime.”⁴⁷

The interaction between the 6-7 September Riots and the Cyprus Issue

- 59 Undoubtedly, one of the surprising findings of this study is the contribution of the British government to the preparation of the events of 6/7 September. After the Greek-Orthodox majority in Cyprus proclaimed the goal of *enosis*, that is, of annexing Cyprus to the Greek mainland, the British imperial administration decided to organise a three-party conference in London from 29 August to 7 September 1955. The British government's rationale was to prevent Greece from bringing the Cyprus issue to the United Nations, to ease the increasing tension between ethnic groups on the island and to strengthen Turkey's position in order to preclude criticism of Britain's colonialism (Holland 1998). Above all, London endeavoured to convince Greeks that Turkey also had a rightful claim to Cyprus. The British knew that their position at the conference, and later during the probable negotiations in United Nations, would be reinforced “as long as Turks were awakened from their own passivity” (Nicolet 2001: 59).

- 60 Subsequently, Macmillan informed the Turkish Foreign Ministry that he would like meet with them prior to the conference, and stated that “if Turks put their claims as sharply as they can at the beginning of negotiations, that would be beneficial both for them and us.” (Holland 1998: 69). Thus encouraged, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Fatin Rüştü Zorlu presented his government’s view in an unusually firm manner. The Greek delegation did not disguise their bewilderment about the “Turkish element” in the Cyprus issue, and they held the British government accountable for Zorlu’s severe approach.⁴⁸ The only development that prevented the delegates from leaving London was the suggestion made by Macmillan that the conference should be carried on bilaterally.
- 61 The conference in London collapsed because of the attacks in İstanbul, İzmir and Ankara on 6 September 1955. Not aware of the conspiracy plotted by the Turks, the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs apologised for the bomb attack in Thessalonica; however, Zorlu blamed the Greeks, arguing that their provocative Cyprus policy caused to the attacks. The Turkish delegation was called back by Menderes, and left London on 8 September 1955. The British responses to the attacks were diverse. While the British Consulate General Mihalis Stewart called the attacks the “apex of barbarism,”⁴⁹ other members of the British Foreign Ministry were pleased with the Turkish approach of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”⁵⁰ Yet another group among the British was pleased with the burning of a Greek-Orthodox church because it eliminated “an unpleasant view.”⁵¹ The most remarkable response was that of the British Minister of Foreign Affairs Macmillan; although his colleagues and the British Ambassador in Ankara recommended that he issue a stern warning to Ankara, he preferred a milder protest.⁵²
- 62 The charges by Greeks that the British had participated in preparing the attacks in İstanbul should also be considered in this context. Immediately after the attacks, the Greek press held the British government accountable for the events of 6 September 1955.
- 63 Even official Greek authorities considered the bomb attack in Thessalonica the doing of British intelligence agents. Though the Greek accusations seem figments of imagination, there are indications that British were involved in the events. For instance, the British Ambassador in Athens had already in August 1954 foreseen the possibility that an event at Atatürk’s parental home would lead to deterioration in Turco-Greek relations:
- “I think Turks started to be concerned about the situation. When I saw my Turkish colleague, who is also a close friend of mine, he explained that he was worried about the way things are going. As I mentioned in my message, the relations are not favourable and it is obvious that seemingly friendly Turco-Greek relations are indeed fragile, even a slightest shock can be enough. It would be sufficient to incite a turmoil through an unimportant event such as inscribing a slogan with a piece chalk on the wall of the house where Atatürk was born.”⁵³
- 64 In his memoirs published later, Prime Minister Anthony Eden confessed that the only crucial matter for British government during London Conference was to make known the disagreement between Turkey and Greece that they had already acknowledged in the international arena. Moreover, a functionary of the British Foreign Ministry stated that “If some revolts take place in Ankara that will suit our interest” (Holland 1993).
- 65 Shortly after the attacks in Turkey, the British Foreign Ministry ordered the News Office to avoid emphasising news related the destruction of British commodities and

injuries caused to British nationals, especially in the press.⁵⁴ The existence of such an instruction strengthens the view that the British government provoked Turks into preparing the attacks.

- 66 The demand to reimburse the losses suffered by British nationals was withdrawn because of political decisions made by the British Foreign Ministry. As a result, the movement against minorities in İstanbul reinforced the position of Britain.
- 67 As consequence of the events, Turkey was clearly incorporated into the Cyprus conflict as a third power. Therefore, the continuity of the status quo, that is, the permanence of British domination over the island, became more probable. Another advantage that the events of 6/7 September provided for Britain was that the USA changed its Cyprus policy in the aftermath of the attacks.
- 68 When Greece announced that it would bring the Cyprus conflict to the United Nations again in the spring of 1955, the US government tended to support Greek claims. The US Ambassador to the United Nations Henry C. Lodge's anti-colonial opinions were well known by British government. Prior to the London Conference, the United States moderated its position on the Cyprus issue. A week before three-party-conference, Americans were still anticipating that an agreement among the three powers would prevent the Greeks from bringing the issue to the United Nations. If the United States refused the Greeks recourse to the United Nations, it would be giving up one of its political principles, which in turn would amount to rejecting an ally's wish to negotiate its claim in the United Nations.
- 69 On 23 September 1955, the United States voted in the UN General Assembly against including the Cyprus issue on the UN agenda. The United States based its rejection on the comparative significance of threats to the liberal world order and of maintaining unity within NATO. Thus the British government eventually achieved its goal of preventing the Cyprus issue from being debated in the United Nations. The functionaries of the British Foreign Ministry were aware that the "ambitious approach of Greece in the UN" could be handled easily with "the active support of USA" and they received that support as a result of the attacks.⁵⁵
- 70 In conclusion, let us examine whether the events of 1955 were a case of demographic engineering. The answer is affirmative for two reasons. The first is the fact that the riots both directly and indirectly provoked the non-Muslim population of İstanbul (Greek-Orthodox, Armenians and Jews) to migrate from the country. Although the Greek patriarchate and the Greek consulate in İstanbul tried to prevent migration, we know that in one year after the riots 5,000 young men migrated to Greece. The number of Greek-speaking residents was reduced from 79,691 in 1955 to 65,139 in 1960. Between 1955 and 1960, 10,000 Jews left İstanbul for Israel. The British consulate reported a sudden increase of visa applications from non-Muslim minorities after the riots.
- 71 The second reason for considering the events of 1955 a case of demographic engineering lies in the definition of the concept as "any deliberate state program or policy originating from religious/ethnic discrimination or initiated for political reasons which aim to increase the political and economic power of one ethnic group over others by manipulating population through various methods." This was obviously the case in 1955: a deliberately planned manipulation caused the riots, which subsequently escaped the control of the organizers. For a majority of the non-Muslim residents, the events of 6/7 September was evidence that they were not recognized as Turkish citizens. The belief that they would be subject to discrimination in the future regardless

of the political party in power strengthened their motive to emigrate. The developments after 1955 thus also signal the end of religious pluralism in Istanbul.

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RÉSUMÉS

A proper analysis of the Events of 6/7 September requires taking into account the ethnic and religious homogenization practices of the Kemalist elite, the exceptional of democratic and financial circumstances of the 1950s and the Cyprus conflict. Furthermore, the events should be seen in connection to the concept of demographic engineering, defined as any deliberate state program or policy originating from religious/ethnic discrimination or initiated for political

reasons which aim to increase the political and economic power of one ethnic group over others by manipulating population through various methods. Under the circumstances, could the events of 1955 be defined as a such case of demographic engineering?

In order to answer to this question, this paper analyses the political circumstances in Turkey in the 1950s as a continuation of the 1930s and 1940s, and evaluates the “Events of 6/7 September” in 1955 in the context of the nationalization and homogenization of the economic sphere. It then focuses on the following judicial process, and finally on the planning of the riots, emphasizing the roles of different actors in organising the riots.

INDEX

Mots-clés : Chypre, émeutes, ingénierie démographique, Kıbrıs Türktür Cemiyeti – KTC, minorités non-musulmanes

Keywords : Cyprus, Demographic engineering, Kıbrıs Türktür Cemiyeti – KTC, Non-Muslim minorities, riots