

## Interwar Territoriality and Soviet-Turkish Convergence across the Aras River

*Onur İşçi*

In 1893, Elizabeth Wormeley Latimer published one of the first English language books on the history of Russian-Turkish relations. Latimer was an English-American author from Baltimore who gained considerable fame in popular nonfiction. Her best-known works appeared in a series on European history, which included *Russia and Turkey in the Nineteenth Century*, receiving high acclaim from critics at the time.<sup>1</sup> Latimer begins with a rudimentary survey of two distant rivals for an American readership, but towards the end of her book, she turns to the similarities between Russian and Turkish politics of modernization in an otherwise conflict-prone narrative. Since the publication of Latimer's book, many scholars have pointed to the historiographical border between Russian and Turkish studies. Until recently, however, few had the linguistic skills and familiarity with native archives to cross that border. Hence, similar developments in the two countries' histories have rarely been recognized as such.

Over the past few years, historical scholarship on Russia and Turkey has grown, and an increasing number of publications have stressed the parallels in the developmental arc of these two countries.<sup>2</sup> Adeeb Khalid, for instance, argues that "in the quest for civilization" Soviet and Turkish state policies amounted to impressive attempts to transform and thus homogenize the respective backwards populations.<sup>3</sup> In ideological terms, Bolshevik and Kemalist regimes were a world apart, but as Khalid suggests, both originated from the same phenomenon: the collapse of the European imperial order

1 Latimer, Elizabeth Wormeley, *Russia and Turkey in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1893).

2 See for instance Hirst, Samuel J., "Anti-Westernism on the European periphery: the meaning of Soviet-Turkish convergence in the 1930s", *Slavic Review*, 72/1 (2013), 32–53; and İşçi, Onur, "Yardstick of friendship: Soviet-Turkish relations and the Montreux Convention of 1936", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 21/4 (2020), 733–62.

3 Khalid, Adeeb, "Backwardness and the quest for civilization", *Slavic Review*, 65/2 (2006), 231–51.

in the flames of World War I.<sup>4</sup> The Bolsheviks saw tsarist Russia's backwardness as a result of its participation in an exploitative imperialist order, which aligned with the *Weltanschauung* of the Kemalist leadership that looked at the Ottoman state's underdevelopment from a similar window. This comparative approach has been vital in helping us to see the Soviet Union as part of a broader process that Charles Maier has called "territorialization", in which identity markers have increasingly overlapped.<sup>5</sup>

An obvious place to look for concrete results of Turkey's convergence with the Soviet Union is the permeable eastern frontier, where the two states' imperial predecessors had waged a life and death struggle over the Caucasian borderlands. In his recent account of the struggle between the Romanovs and Ottomans, Michael Reynolds demonstrates how "fear of partition led the Ottoman state to destroy its imperial order, whereas the compulsive desire for greater security ... spurred the Russian state to press beyond its capacity and thereby precipitate its own collapse".<sup>6</sup> The absence of a Russian threat in this region and the Soviet Union's conspicuous silence during the Kurdish uprisings against the Ankara government in the 1920s and 1930s was more than a sequential step in Soviet-Turkish exchange and illustrates why it contrasted with the popular surge of antagonistic groupings elsewhere.

Through joint patrolling of the border, Turkish and Soviet governments took concrete precautions against cross-border smuggling of material goods and trafficking of arms. The Ankara government benefitted from this convergence in a different way, as the Soviet-Turkish exchange along the border drove local Kurdish tribes into isolation. Since the very onset of the republic's proclamation, Kurdish insurgency constituted the most significant concern in Turkey's eastern policy. Three main Kurdish rebellions (Şeyh Said, Ararat and Dersim) broke out during this period and Moscow's reversal of imperial Russian policy towards Kurdish notables significantly contributed to Turkey's civilizing mission and quest to consolidate central authority in its eastern provinces.

While the Russian empire incessantly pursued local and temporary alliances with Kurdish notables and tribes in order to exploit their grievances against the Ottoman state, the Soviet Union consistently remained aloof to the Kurdish question. In 1927, Soviet ambassador in Ankara, Yakov Suritz, openly told Turkish Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü (Aras) that the USSR would stick to

4 Khalid, "Backwardness and the quest for civilization", p. 234.

5 Maier, Charles S., *Once Within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

6 Reynolds, Michael A., *Shattering Empires: the Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1.

its principle of non-interference vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue, but that Turkey needed to be careful as Moscow was aware of British designs for an independent Kurdistan.<sup>7</sup> Looking at Soviet records, it would be fair to suggest that Stalin perceived Kurdish nationalism as a feudal movement open to exploitation by Western imperialism. On the rare occasions that Soviet newspapers wrote about Kurdistan, they referred to “a tribal nation, which was separated by the impassable mountainous terrains of greater Mesopotamia”.<sup>8</sup> But the question still remains: Did Ankara and Moscow work together to transform the borderlands that they shared?

The present chapter seeks to answer this question by looking at eastern Anatolia as a case study. First, I will look at cross-border cooperation on the Aras River along the Iğdır Valley and the construction of a joint irrigation facility – the Serdarabad Dam – that transformed the Soviet-Turkish border. I seek to explain the meaning of this cooperation and why it was at odds with an increasingly territorializing order elsewhere in Europe. I will then turn to the politics of collaboration between Ankara and Moscow during the late 1930s to demonstrate the difficulties that both sides faced while working together. My chapter is thus in keeping with recent works on Soviet-Turkish convergence during the interwar period.<sup>9</sup>

### The Turkish-Soviet Border and the Serdarabad Dam

Like a prism that scatters rays of light, eastern Anatolia reveals much about the interwar exchange between Ankara and Moscow. This territory had become a formal part of the Russian Empire after the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, and was merged into the greater Karskaia Oblast until 1921, when the Soviet Union gave it back to the Ankara government. The agreement to retrocede Kars was the product of a broader interwar exchange between nationalist Turks and internationalist Bolsheviks, who found themselves in an unusual convergence.

7 Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation [hereafter AVP RF], f. 4, op. 39, pap. 242, d. 53268, l. 219, Suritz to Rüştü, 22 April 1927.

8 While Turkish demographic studies on the size of the early to mid-twentieth century Kurdish population vary greatly, in 1937, when the Dersim rebellion broke out in Turkey, Soviet reports indicated approximately 1,500,000 Kurds residing in Turkey, “Kurdu”, *Большая Советская Энциклопедия* [The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia], 2nd ed. (Moscow: Soviet Encyclopaedia, 1953).

9 Balisteri, Alexander, “A provisional republic in the southwest Caucasus: discourses of self-determination on the Ottoman-Caucasian frontier, 1918–19”, in *The Ottoman East in the Nineteenth Century: Societies, Identities and Politics*, ed. Yaşar Tolga Cora, Dzovinar Derderian and Ali Sipahi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 62–88.

A shared resentment against the Western dictated international order permeated Soviet-Turkish relations in the 1920s and 30s. Interstate cooperation, joint-ventures and cross-border trade ultimately paved the way for engineers and workers from either side of border to work together, ultimately remaking the borderlands they shared.

The border between Turkey and the Soviet republics of the Caucasus was defined by the 1921 Treaty of Kars, which succeeded an agreement signed in Moscow earlier that year. Demarcation proved to be extremely difficult due to the ongoing war in central Anatolia and a landscape that was at times inaccessible. When groundwork was finally completed in 1926, the boundary followed an irregular course for about 367 miles across the area east of the Black Sea. From west to east it traversed three distinct terrains: (1) the rugged mountainous area along the Georgian highlands; (2) a high, and dissected plateau along the Akhurian River that divides Soviet Armenia and northeastern Anatolia, and (3) the greater valley of the Aras River.

The third section of the Soviet-Turkish border has several distinct characteristics that sharply contrast with those of the first two terrains. Just east of the confluence of the Arpaçay (Akhurian) with the Aras River, the latter drops abruptly from the Armenian plateau to the point where it is joined by Nijni Karasu. At the confluence of these streams, where the İğdır Valley ends, decreased elevation leads to climatic conditions that almost mimic the Mediterranean. The portion of the Aras flowing along the İğdır Valley is also altered by meandering streams, with low banks, a sandy bed, shifting bars and many cut-offs and large islands. This complex pattern is especially notable between the towns of Kiti (present-day Çalpala) and Serdarabad (Oktemberyan), where in 1927, the Turkish and Soviet governments completed an irrigation agreement, providing for the construction of a dam.<sup>10</sup> The project site was located northwest of Kiti about a quarter of a mile from a bridge over the Aras.

The person who exclusively orchestrated Turkey's border negotiations with the Soviet and Iranian governments throughout the 1920s was Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü (Aras).<sup>11</sup> When Aras took office, Soviet-Turkish relations had already been on a cordial footing thanks to the 1921 Treaty of Kars and the ensuing 1925 Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Friendship. But the texts of these

10 "Kars'da İmza Edilen Sular İtilafnamesile Serdarabat Barajının İnşasına Dair Müzeyyel Protokol" [Additional Protocol for Treaty on Water Resources and the Construction of the Serdarabad Dam in Kars], *Resmî Gazete*, 1168, 25 June 1927.

11 When the surname law was introduced in 1934, Atatürk personally proposed that Tevfik Rüştü take "Aras" for his services in facilitating the agreements with Moscow and Tehran on the Aras River.

initial treaties were too broad and both parties quickly realized the need for an unambiguous agreement to facilitate stronger cooperation. As early as 1924, the Soviet ambassador in Ankara, Jacob Suritz, pleaded with his government to ease cross-border trade regulations in the Caucasus. Suritz complained that Turkish merchants in Kars had to apply to Tbilisi for permission to engage in small-scale commercial activities since the Soviet Bank for Foreign Trade (Vneshtorg) was not allowed to operate in Turkey, and since the trade monopoly did not permit Turkish merchants to export consumer goods to the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

It took nearly three years before Ankara and Moscow enacted a new treaty on the equitable distribution of transboundary water resources on the Aras River.<sup>13</sup> Customs regulations and border patrol made things excruciatingly slow as Moscow and Ankara were trying to undertake joint projects. Tevfik Rüştü Aras and Jacob Suritz agreed to set up a customs-free construction zone around the Serdarabad Reservoir, which would be 1500 meters long and 100 meters wide on each side of the Aras River. But that too proved to be insufficient. Hence the 1928 Border Treaty between Turkey and the Soviet Union came into being. This set up a perimeter of ten kilometers on either side of the entire border, which facilitated commercial and cultural exchange between the inhabitants of neighboring townships. Unlike previous agreements, the 1928 Border Treaty was quite specific.<sup>14</sup>

Article 3 of the treaty laid out the circumstances under which a person could travel across the designated customs-free zone. For construction work, cross-border commerce and joint agricultural ventures workers and merchants had considerable freedom of mobility, and residents now had the ability to stay in the neighboring country for as long as six months for personal reasons. The 1928 treaty paved the way for a much broader exchange that included collaboration in times of natural disasters or transfer of medicine and doctors to fight epidemics. Special pass-cards were introduced for those who intended to remain in the neighboring country for longer periods. Article 5 of the treaty

12 AVP RF, f. 4, op. 39, pap. 238, d. 53178, Diary of Ambassador Suritz, 24 August-9 September 1924.

13 "Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ile Sosyalist Şuralar Cumhuriyeti İttihadı Hududlarını Teşkil Eyleyen Nehir, Çay ve Dere Sularından İstifadeye Dair Mukavele" [Protocol on Equitable Water Distribution from Rivers, Streams and Creeks that Constitute the Border Between Turkey and the USSR], *Resmî Gazete*, 649-650, 4 August 1927.

14 "Hudud Mıntıkası Ahalisinin Türkiye ile Soviyet Hududundan Mürurlarına Dair Türkiye Cümhuriyeti ile Sosyalist Şuralar Cumhuriyetleri İttihadı Arasında Akdolan Mukavelenamenin Tasdiki Hakkında Kanun" [Ratification of the Treaty between Turkey and the Soviet Union Regarding Border Crossing Rights of the Residents of the Soviet-Turkish Border], *Resmî Gazete*, 4136, 6 August 1928.

stipulated that both parties had the right to build as many irrigation canals as they needed so long as they did not tamper with the river's thalweg.

The Soviet-Turkish Border Treaty of 1928 was the product of a shared desire to regulate cross-border commerce, which frequently obscured territorial demarcations. The Soviet Union's trade relations with most of Turkey's eastern provinces, including Erzurum and Kars, were managed by ZakGosTorg (Transcaucasian Export-Import Office).<sup>15</sup> In terms of transfer and installation of industrial equipment to the countries of the East, the Soviet Union also had two economic organizations. The first one was Eksportstroi, which was responsible for the production in all countries of the East (except Turkey) of design works, the export and assembly of equipment and the provision of technical assistance and assistance for industrial construction. The second one was Turkstroi, which was responsible for the implementation of credits spared by the Soviet government for industrial construction in Turkey.<sup>16</sup> By the mid-1930s, although Turkstroi was investing heavily in Turkey's industrialization (prime examples of which were the two textile factories in Nazilli and Kayseri) economic cooperation between Ankara and Moscow proved to be a long-drawn out process. Particularly in eastern Anatolia, Turkstroi's operations were hampered by mismanagement and a lethargic bureaucracy on both sides. In that sense, the construction of the Serdarabad Reservoir sits well within a broader story of interwar Soviet-Turkish cooperation, but it also demonstrates the difficulties faced by both parties.

Soviet engineers completed the construction of the Serdarabad Dam in less than two years, and by 1930 it became fully operational. Turkey's leaders initially agreed to pay half of the cost, but soon they realized that they also needed a regulator and canals for irrigation. In 1937, the Ankara government balked at the figure that their Bolshevik counterparts were asking for – approximately one million rubles. Despite sweeping reforms in the nascent republic, on the eve of the Great Depression the Turkish economy had not recuperated from the Great War, constantly strained by pending Ottoman debt installments. With shortage of hard currency and bleak balance of payments prospects, Turkey was in no condition to pay their debt (indeed not until 1953) for the Serdarabad Dam let alone find additional resources to pay for a dam regulator

15 Russian State Archive of the Economy [hereafter RGAE], f. 413, op. 13, d. 164, l.1, Report of the Soviet Trade Mission in Turkey for 1931.

16 In 1936 the Politburo decided to join the two trusts together under Eksportstroi, in order to create a more rational administration. They were merged under Eksportstroi in 1937. RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38., d. 309, Molotov to Ordjonokidze, 25 December 1936.

and irrigation canals.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, irrigation began on the Soviet side as soon as the reservoir was linked to the Armenian banks of the Aras River. In other words, villagers on the Turkish side of the river were not able to utilize the Serdarabad Reservoir.

In 1935, five years after the construction of the reservoir, the Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü embarked on his famous eastern tour (*Şark Seyahati*), when he ruefully admitted that residents of the İğdır Valley urgently needed water and that the regulator and irrigation canals became much more than a necessity. “This is not simply a matter of economic development but our political responsibility to the people” proclaimed the Turkish prime minister and proceeded to visit the canals on the Armenian banks of the Aras.<sup>18</sup> The Armenian prime minister and agricultural minister, who accompanied İsmet İnönü during the tour, provided round estimates of their total cost – 80,000 Turkish lira for the regulator, which made the total cost 200,000 lira including the canals. The real problem was finding the right engineers and technical expertise. Once again, Turkey relied on the Soviet government to provide concrete and technical equipment. Even though the Turks had not yet paid the money they owed for the dam and its reservoir, the Soviets agreed to take a step further in 1936 and undertook the building of the dam’s regulator and irrigation canals for the Turkish banks of the Aras.<sup>19</sup> The project was delayed as both parties haggled over the price, over whether the cost of the labor to be provided by the Turkish government was included in the estimate.<sup>20</sup>

Roughly a year later, in January 1937, hoping to avoid further delays in the construction of the Serdarabad reservoir’s tunnel and the dam regulator, the Turkish ambassador in Moscow, Zekai Apaydın, sent a letter to Turkstroï’s director. Apaydın communicated his government’s response to an earlier conversation he had had with Soviet engineers about the channel construction on the Turkish banks of the Aras River. Looking at Turkstroï’s proposals, drawn up in two versions, the Turkish ministry of public works made the following observations: (1) Since the tunnel and canal construction projects were estimated at a total value of approximately 350,000 Turkish liras, both of the exploration projects proposed by Turkstroï which cost respectively 106,000 and 173,000 liras seemed to be overly exaggerated; (2) the Turkish ministry of public works,

17 *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Tutanak Dergisi*, 8. Dönem, 26. Birleşim, 1. Oturum, p. 52, 6 January 1950.

18 İnönü, İsmet, *Şark Seyahati Raporu* [The Report of the Eastern Tour] (Istanbul: Başvekalet Matbaası, 1935).

19 Turkish Diplomatic Archives [hereafter TDA], TSİD 9106721, Ambassador Zekai Apaydın in Moscow to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara, 18 August 1936.

20 RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38., d. 309, l. 47, Apaydın to Zolotarev, 23 January 1937.

upon receipt of an acceptable Soviet proposal and a revised number regarding Turkey's share in the total cost of the Serdarabad Dam Project, would transfer the necessary funds to the Directorate of Turkstroi, hoping that the organization would then materialize the project by their own means.<sup>21</sup>

In response to Apaydın's letter (dated 9 January 1937) on the construction of irrigation facilities in the Iğdır Valley, Turkstroi director A. Zolotarev suggested that during their preliminary talks in April 1936, they had agreed to exchange technical expertise, whereby Soviet engineers would travel to Turkey to become acquainted with Turkish equipment and engineers on the site. Zolotarev was first deputy head of the chief administration for the engineering industry and a long-established senior industrial official. As a first step to launch the project, Zolotarev commissioned a chief Soviet engineer, Tatarintsev, in May 1936 to go to Erivan, where a meeting with Turkish engineers was to take place. Tatarintsev stayed there until late June 1936, waiting for the arrival of Turkish engineers. When the Turkish delegation finally arrived on 29–30 June 1936, the two teams explored the construction zone and results of their survey were reported to the General Inspector of Eastern Anatolia in Iğdır – Tahsin Uzer.

Tatarintsev also wrote a memorandum to the governor of Kars, expressing his opinion that it was necessary to devise the project's blueprints completely, demarcating the main canal route as well as the irrigation network *before* the construction began. The governor of Kars replied that he would transmit this message to the Ankara government but Tatarintsev had not received an answer for days when he decided to leave the site and departed for Moscow on 9 July 1936. Nearly three months later, in late September, Turkstroi finally provided the Turkish embassy with a detailed program and estimates for research and design work, in the context of a memorandum drafted by Tatarintsev. The Soviet officials and Turkstroi were notified of Turkey's response, which had been drafted by the ministry of public works. Much to the Soviets' dismay, however, Ambassador Apaydın abruptly informed Zolotarev that the Ankara government found the recent Soviet proposals unacceptable.

Hence, in an irritated tone, Zolotarev told Apaydın that they had lost no less than six months in construction and "by no means through the fault of Turkstroi". Essentially, what Turkey proposed to Turkstroi was to limit the cost of labor for the canal's construction, to which Turkstroi replied positively and said that they were ready to negotiate the Turkish proposal.<sup>22</sup> For more than ten long months, the Ankara government continued bargaining, ultimately conceding that 350–400 people a day at the height of construction would be

21 RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38., d. 309, l. 38, Apaydın to Zolotarev, 9 January 1937.

22 RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38., d. 309, l. 39–40, Zolotarev to Apaydın, 21 January 1937.

included in the estimate.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Apaydın and Zolotarev were able to resume negotiations, when the Turkish government came back with a much lower figure. Zolotarev told Apaydın that he would need some time since the Soviet team of engineers had been dispatched to different cities due to the long break in negotiations. The ambassador asked if Turkstroï had any other priorities in Turkey at the moment, to which Zolotarev replied “yes, in Ankara, İzmit, and İzmir”.<sup>24</sup>

Mindful of an impending war in Europe, the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the USSR repeatedly urged the transportation ministry to intensify their work in Turkey’s eastern provinces and to promote Soviet machinery and technical exports. Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov sent Turkstroï’s director Zolotarev a number of astringent notes, reminding him of the vital political importance of this region, which was located in the immediate vicinity of Soviet Transcaucasia. What was particularly disturbing for Litvinov was the recent increase in the activity of foreigners, “in particular the Germans operating in Eastern Anatolia”. German firms were receiving requests from local authorities for the construction of small industrial enterprises, such as electric stations, wagons, dams and canals. While the Soviets recognized that they could not match the capacity and breadth of these foreign firms, which were providing the Turks with long-term credit lines, they still hoped to expand Soviet operations on normal commercial terms, “if, of course, Soviet organizations showed enough initiative and flexibility”. But, some in Moscow thought that local authorities might not be fully representative of the official Turkish position. Deputy Commissar of Foreign Affairs Boris Stomoniakov, for example, told Zolotarev that a small but typical example was the water pipeline project in Kars. According to the information received from the consul in Kars, the local governor accepted the conditions of German technical experts but his decision was overruled by the Ankara government, which found the German quote for pipes too expensive.<sup>25</sup>

Stomoniakov was right. On 21 June 1937, Zolotarev received a telephone call from the Turkish ambassador, who wished to see him for a discussion on the 1932 Soviet-Turkish credit agreement for eight million US dollars. With the knowledge and consent of Litvinov, Zolotarev visited the Turkish ambassador on 23 June, accompanied by his deputy, A.S. Trabun, who was the author of a recently published Russian-Turkish Textile Dictionary. In his conversation with Zolotarev, the Turkish ambassador drew attention to the Soviet-Turkish

23 TDA, TSID 910684, Apaydın to Aras, 31 January 1937.

24 TDA, TSID 912998, Litvinov to Apaydın, 5 October 1937.

25 RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38., d. 309, l. 57, Stomoniakov to Zolotarev, 13 March 1937.

agreement's payment schedule, which limited the right to use the loan by a certain period of time (within four years from the date of signing the agreement). Until the expiry of the four-year term, it was suggested in the agreement that if the Turkish side omitted this deadline, then the question of using the loan after the expiration of the agreement would be negotiated on the basis of mutual consent. Zolotarev responded by arguing that after Turkstroï's recent operations in December 1936, the loan agreement had expired. The ambassador asked him to raise the issue of another loan, so that the Turkish side could receive an additional loan for 770,000 US dollars. Zolotarev gave an evasive answer to this and advised the ambassador officially on this issue to address the demarche through the Soviet foreign ministry.<sup>26</sup>

After another protracted round of internal discussions, the Soviet leadership decided that a speedy construction of the canal and tunnel for connecting the Serdarabad Reservoir with the Iğdır Valley was beneficial in terms of (1) freeing the Soviet side from their obligation to supervise equitable distribution of water on the Iğdır Valley and (2) providing the Turkish government with the overall amount of their outstanding debt for the entire project – including half of the cost of the dam construction from seven years earlier. Moscow stated that the Turkish government owed altogether 1,041,163 rubles for the whole thing, including the loss of value over the past seven years and other amortization charges from the day the USSR opened the dam in 1930.<sup>27</sup> Despite difficulties in launching the long-delayed construction in Iğdır, the scope of Turkstroï's projects in Turkey on the eve of World War II demonstrates the political significance Moscow attributed to their continued cooperation with Ankara.

Ultimately, Soviet support for Turkish industrialization in 1937 had mixed results. The Serdarabad Dam regulator and irrigation canals were part of a larger Soviet commitment that had helped Ankara launch its first Five-Year Plan (1932–37). Turkey had already been receiving substantial support for years, but 1937 seemed a showcase year for collaboration. In that year alone, Turkey completed three factories, all equipped to varying degrees with Soviet-sponsored machinery: a cotton-mill factory in Nazilli; a merino factory in Bursa; and an artificial silk factory in Gemlik. The Nazilli plant was Turkey's fourth and largest textile mill, with a production capacity of 20 million meters (1,800,000 kilograms) of coarse cotton fabrics for peasants as well as fine fabrics for urban consumers. Much of the construction work for Turkey's textile

26 RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38., d. 309, l. 139, Apaydın to Zolotarev, 23 June 1937.

27 TDA, TSID 990123, Protocol on the construction of the Iğdır Valley Tunnel connecting the Serdarabad Dam, 4 November 1937.

industry was financed by Eksportstroi's Turkish counterpart, Sümer Bank, and this development brought new life into remote towns, triggering an influx of people looking for much-needed jobs, housing, schools for their children, and a cultural environment.

But there were many setbacks, stemming from Eksportstroi and Sümer Bank's failure to fully harmonize their efforts, with consequent interruptions in work.<sup>28</sup> After its opening, it took another eight months for the Nazilli plant to reach full capacity, delaying the eight million rubles' worth of textile products that were to be exported to the Soviet Union. Equally, however, collaboration suffered from the two sides' ambition. Moscow and Ankara were frequently overzealous, commencing ventures with no specific deadline, cost, or technical specifications. The planned construction of a short-wave national radio station in Ankara, for example, was ultimately aborted, along with several other local stations in the Aegean. For Soviet Ambassador Lev Karakhan and others concerned about German propaganda, it was a particularly frustrating failure, since this was a project in which the Soviet economic and cultural challenge to German influence in Turkey had been particularly entwined.<sup>29</sup>

In 1937, Soviet-Turkish interaction was also hampered by the appalling transformation in Moscow's political and diplomatic leadership. The Great Terror saw almost all of Moscow's notable Turkey experts purged, imprisoned, or executed. In less than four months, the host of men with whom Ankara had been intimately acquainted but were now disgraced included Lev Karakhan, recalled from his position as ambassador in Ankara, and Andrei Bubnov, who had accompanied Voroshilov in the famous Soviet grand delegation to Ankara in 1933. Turkey's ailing leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was deeply resentful of the treatment of people to whom he had shown personal favor in Ankara's corps diplomatique for nearly two decades. When he received the new Soviet ambassador M.A. Karskii's request for *agrément*, only weeks after Lev Karakhan's execution in September 1937, Atatürk told Litvinov that one after another, the Soviet officials who were recommended to him as persons deserving of Turkey's confidence and esteem had been either disgraced or executed as persons inimical to the very government that entrusted them with their missions. "Who, therefore, can I trust?" he asked Litvinov tersely.<sup>30</sup>

In October 1937, Turkstroi director Zolotarev and his deputy Trabun became the next victims of the Great Purge. Zolotarev's position had been central to

28 TDA, TSID 888234, Report on Eksportsroi and Sümer Bank, 3 June 1937.

29 RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38., d. 309, l. 90, Stomonyakov to НКТП, 22 March 1937.

30 TDA, TSID 4999348, Turkish request for extension of Karakhan's diplomatic mission in Ankara, 27 April 1937.

the Soviet-Turkish joint ventures in eastern Anatolia, but as early as June 1937, he had been reprimanded for unproductive spending of public funds and for conducting work from the Turkstroi budget without approved estimates.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the two trusts Turkstroi and Ekportsroi had been merged into one unified trust under Ekportstroi in early 1937 and the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry had never conducted an all-round survey of the organization's work in Turkey, which included many other operations in Nazilli and Kayseri. On 29 October 1937, Zolotarev and Trabun were arrested.<sup>32</sup> They were found guilty of "allowing overpayments for machinery (30 percent to 80 percent higher than existing prices)", "exaggerating per diem expenses of Turkish workers and trainees", and "economic waste of public funds of the USSR".<sup>33</sup>

As World War II approached, it became increasingly hard to maintain the relationship of the interwar period. The dismissal and subsequent arrests of Zolotarev and Trabun came as a major blow to Turkstroi's operations in eastern Anatolia. Just when Soviet engineers and workers were making progress in Iğdır after countless rounds of negotiations and seven years of bargaining, the Serdarabad project was postponed indefinitely. The much-needed regulator and canals would not be finished until 1953, when the Ankara government paid off its remaining debt to the Soviets. What was more, in 1938 Stalin decided to close Soviet consulates in Kars and İzmir, leaving only the Istanbul consulate open. Responding to the Turkish ambassador's protests, Stomoniakov told him that the Soviet Union was closing most consulates in other countries, including Afghanistan and Iran.<sup>34</sup> In a subsequent meeting at the Turkish embassy in Moscow, Ambassador Apaydın told Stomoniakov that the Turks were disturbed by the Soviet desire to close consulates, but would agree to the Soviet proposal provided that all (including Istanbul) Soviet consulates were closed.<sup>35</sup> With the outbreak of war in 1939, Soviet-Turkish cooperation ultimately came to a spectacular end.

### From Serdarabad to Arpaçay

Through the fog and filthy air of World War II, Ankara and Moscow gradually drifted apart and the snowcapped towns along the banks of Aras became

31 RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38, d. 309, l. 143, Zolotarev to NKTP, 17 June 1937.

32 TDA, TSID 873245, Apaydın's report on Zolotarev's arrest, 29 October 1937.

33 RGAE, f. 7297, op. 38, d. 309, l. 146, Sovnarkom to NKTP, 9 June 1937.

34 AVP RF, f. 5, op. 18, pap. 148, d. 144, l.2, Diary of Stomonyakov, 8 January 1938.

35 AVP RF, f. 5, op. 18, pap. 148, d. 144, l. 5, Diary of Stomonyakov, 8 January 1938.

dilapidated frontier garrisons. The (re)territorialization of the Soviet-Turkish frontier led to a steep population decline in the greater Kars region. To illustrate, Kars's population, which plunged to a meager 200,000 in 1927 from 385,000 in 1914, was around 400,000 by the mid-1930s mainly due to the Soviet-Turkish joint ventures and a sustainable peace on the Russian border.<sup>36</sup> With the advent of war from 1939 through the mid-1940s, and the ensuing conflict with the Soviet Union in the 1950s, population growth fell behind Turkey's overall growth rate, which was about 14 percent per annum.

In fact, there was nothing unusual about the fate of eastern Anatolia in a volatile political climate. The Second World War and its immediate aftermath was characterized by similar population movements, sweeping designs for displaced peoples and complex patterns of repatriation across the whole world. From war prisoners to Holocaust survivors and civilians who lost their homes during the war, millions of people journeyed between countries and continents, hoping to find a way back to their motherlands, or reach new destinations and promised lands. Yet problems of post-war displacement and repatriation turned out to be a much more difficult enterprise than the leaders of the new world order had imagined at the Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco conferences. One underlying reason was the extension of Stalin's control over and beyond Soviet borderlands, which meant that population resettlement and state reconstruction would be a deeply politicized issue and a source of conflict. This was particularly the case for places wrecked by war, such as Crimea or Eastern Europe. But in the case of eastern Anatolia, contours of human mobility took on a different form. After the war, rumors of Stalin's designs over eastern Anatolia and schemes of creating a greater Armenia led to further demographic decline on the Turkish side and, unsurprisingly, cross-border human mobility ceased for nearly two decades.

The question of territoriality in eastern Anatolia throughout the twentieth century relates closely to the twists and turns of Russian-Turkish diplomatic relations. The Serdarabad Dam was originally built with diversion gates on each side of the Aras River so that it would benefit both countries. As bilateral affairs turned sour in the 1940s, the Soviets, who controlled the dam, refused to allow any water to go to Turkey until they were paid one million rubles. By 1950, when Turkey was on its way to becoming a NATO member, there was some apprehension in Ankara that even if they paid their debt, the Soviet government would create difficulties. Speaking before the Turkish Grand National

36 Ural, Selçuk and İlyas Topçu, "İkinci Dünya Savaşı Yıllarında Kars'ın Nüfusu" [The Population of Kars during World War II], *Iğdır Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 12 (2017), 385–416.

Assembly in January 1950, Minister of Foreign Affairs Necmettin Sadak declared that they would fulfill their financial obligations to Moscow regardless of diplomatic problems and that if the other side created difficulties “they would not refrain from any measure”.<sup>37</sup> Yet, the Turkish government was acutely aware that some type of cooperation with the USSR was necessary if Turkey was to develop any irrigation works in the wide İğdır plain, which some Turks referred to as “Turkey’s Egypt”.<sup>38</sup> Two decades after the Soviet government arrested the Turkstroi representative Zolotarev and shelved the construction of the Serdarabad regulator, there were still no irrigation canals on the Aras. Turkish farmers tried to build small diversion dams on the Turkish side of the river, but by the 1950s, changes in the water level either washed out the dams or left them dry. Some members of the Turkish parliament were convinced that the Soviets have deliberately caused the water level to fluctuate.

Despite such Turkish rumors, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, when the Aras became a firm divisional marker between the two states, Moscow carried out extensive economic programs in both the Armenian SSR and in southwest Georgia. In stark contrast with eastern Anatolia, the Soviet side of the Aras River had many industrial facilities, including clothing factories, fruit and vegetable canneries, rubber plants, textile mills and sugar beet refineries. The Soviet Union had hydroelectric stations even on tributaries, such as the one on the Razdan River, which falls from Lake Servan to the Aras. eastern Anatolia’s relative underdevelopment was visible from the Soviet side of the border.

Almost half a century after the Serdarabad Dam’s construction, Turkey and the Soviet Union agreed to build a second dam in eastern Anatolia in 1973 – this time on the Arpaçay (Akhurian) River, which is about a hundred miles north of the Serdarabad Dam.<sup>39</sup> The Arpaçay flows along the border between eastern Turkey and western Armenia. Regulating the currents of four transboundary rivers in the Caucasus, the Arpaçay Reservoir has a capacity of over 500 million cubic meters and is the main water supply for several towns on either side of the Turkish-Armenian frontier. Construction work for the Arpaçay Reservoir was commenced in 1975 and for the next five years, Soviet-Turkish relations were

37 *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Tutanak Dergisi*, 8. Dönem, 26. Birleşim, 1. Oturum, p. 52, 6 January 1950.

38 *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Tutanak Dergisi*, 9. Dönem, 94. Birleşim, 1. Oturum, p. 138, 10 June 1953.

39 Armenian water managers had first proposed the reservoir in the mid-1940s, but the geopolitical situation had kept it on the drawing board. The two sides signed their first protocol for the project in April 1963 but due to problems similar to those that had hampered the Serdarabad Dam (protracted negotiations, arguments over funding, difficulties traversing the border, etc.), the Arpaçay Dam took over two decades to finish.

once again marked by a striking convergence across the river's basin.<sup>40</sup> As engineers and workers from two opposing Cold War states crossed a customs-free zone around the project site, there was even a thin ray of hope for rejuvenation in this otherwise dilapidated area. Interstate cooperation between the Soviets and the NATO allied-Turkey might have boded well within the détente milieu, when Cold War tensions were mostly eased. Indeed, a rapprochement between the two states had already been in place since the mid-1960s and the enactment of the Arpaçay project, which came only months after the US embargo against Turkey over the Cyprus dispute, surprised hardly anyone. In that sense, the nature of Soviet-Turkish collaboration was mostly pragmatic and did not aim at "unmixing" of borderlands between the two countries.

In its preamble, the Arpaçay agreement of 1973 made references to its precursor – the Serdarabad agreement of 1927 – which stipulated cooperation, labor mobility and equitable distribution of the eastern Anatolia's water resources in almost identical terms.<sup>41</sup> Because Serdarabad was directly linked to the projected Arpaçay Reservoir through the Aras River, the treaty also suggested that the existing (Serdarabad) dam controller might be reconstructed to ensure necessary water withdrawal amounts and the new regulator would be equipped with stream gauges.<sup>42</sup> Bringing to mind Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü's observations about eastern Anatolia in his eastern tour of 1935, Russian scholars contended that each year the agriculture of this region suffered significant losses due to droughts and accompanying decreases in crop yields because of insufficient irrigation. Hence taming the Aras River through Soviet developmental aid once again became a necessity to (1) prevent flooding caused by thawing of the snow cover and rainfall and (2) make use of the river flow, which was not used and discharged in the Aras River.

Beyond their proximity and topographical parallels, the Arpaçay and Serdarabad Reservoirs are also very similar in terms of their historical contexts. To be sure, the Arpaçay Reservoir could be seen as a Cold War development story with an unusual interwar prelude in Serdarabad. Much like the Soviet

40 *Resmî Gazete*, 15288, 7 July 1975.

41 As before, negotiations for joint-construction got delayed in 1974 with Ankara and Moscow bargaining over the price of construction (16,6 million rubles). When the project was finally ratified in 1975, both parties agreed to share the burden evenly, but the Soviets pledged to compensate for Turkey's losses (4.4 million rubles) due to projected delays in the Turkish side of the border. In other words, Moscow's lump sum rose to 12.7 million rubles as opposed to Turkey's 3.9 million.

42 Shnyrov, E.P., "Construction of the Arpachai reservoir", *Hydrotechnical Construction*, 12 (1978), 1101–4.

sponsored Aswan High Dam in Egypt or the American sponsored Akosombo Dam in Ghana, the Arpaçay Dam was the product of a Cold War superpower rivalry over developmental aid to the Third World. But both the Serdarabad and Arpaçay reservoirs, which were built on a shared river basin between two ideologically different states, demonstrate a consistent framework for Moscow's and Ankara's joint projects across the past century – the quest for development in the sense of the pursuit of parity with the West.<sup>43</sup>

43 Hirst, Samuel J. and Onur İşçi, "Smokestacks and pipelines: Russian-Turkish relations and the persistence of economic development", *Diplomatic History*, 44/5 (2020), 834–59.