

The Escape to Turkey. Ways and Methods of Illegal Border Crossings into Turkey from the perspective of SSI documents (1945-1948)

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Abstract: *The Escape to Turkey. Ways and Methods of Illegal Border Crossings into Turkey from the perspective of SSI documents (1945-1948).* Romania's first years after the communist regime took political power in Romania, concurrent with the onset of the Cold War, meant a reshuffle of the state institutions at first and later a dramatic impact on people's lives. The political and institutional purges were the first signal that soon repression and terror will follow, thus prompting numerous Romanian citizens to leave the country. Yet, due to the strict surveillance of the Secret Police Services which did not easily allow traveling to Western countries, the only way to escape was through illicit border crossings. One of the most common destinations was Turkey, with documents issued between 1945 and 1948 by the Secret police services revealing an impressive number of such cases.

Keywords: Illegal border crossings, escape, communism, Romania, Turkey.

Rezumat: *Evadarea în Turcia. Modalități și metode de trecere ilegale a frontierei în Turcia din perspectiva documentelor SSI (1945-1948).* Primii ani de după preluarea puterii politice de către regimul comunist din România, concomitent cu declanșarea Războiului Rece pe plan internațional, au vizat mai întâi întregul aparat statal, ajungând să fie resimțit apoi inclusiv la nivelul vieții cotidiene. Epurările politice și instituționale au fost semnalul că vor urma forme de represiune și teroare, ceea ce a determinat mulți cetățeni români să părăsească țara, doar că, sub atenta supraveghere a Serviciului Special de Informații care nu permitea plecarea spre Occident oricui, sigura modalitate de a fugi era în mod fraudulos, una dintre destinațiile preferate fiind Turcia iar documentele S.S.I consemnează pentru perioada 1945-1948 un număr impresionant de astfel de cazuri.

Cuvinte-cheie: Treceri frauduloase de frontieră, fugă, comunism, România, Turcia.

SUBB – Historia, Volume 65, Number 2, December 2020

doi:10.24193/subbhist.2020.2.07

Introduction

*"The number of those who run from Romania and take refuge in various parts of our territory is continuously increasing. Among these, refugees are officers of the Romanian Army but also different men and women belonging to all types of professions – they cannot stand the misery, or, better said, they cannot stand the life in the hell created by the communists"*¹. This was the headline of a high circulation Turkish daily newspaper from August 1947 regarding the increasing number of Romanian citizens who crossed the border illegally or were shipwrecked in Turkey in search of a better and free life as Turkey was perceived as a safe tie to the West.

The world at the end of World War II was portrayed in the midst of geopolitical reconfiguration and transformation, and both Romania and Turkey faced the formidable challenge of finding the best way to remain uninvolved in the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States of America. Another key thing to remember is that a political, economic, and military alliance with the United States was a feasible option for Turkey, which had already expressed its firm intention to join The North Atlantic Treaty, whereas for Romania the West was not an option given the negotiations between these and the Soviet Union behind the closed doors about the future of Eastern Europe². Romania was therefore under Moscow's sphere of influence and with the Red Army's troops on its territory plus the Soviet advisors due to the provisions of the Armistice of September 1944 and The Allied Control Commission, there were no options left³.

This article attempts to create a framework for understanding how the internal Romanian situation and the lack of democracy shaped the unbearable living conditions as soon as the war ended and it determined the inhabitants to find even illegal methods to leave the country. Secondly, the article will try to identify the main reasons why Turkey was such a suitable destination, and which were the dominant methods of crossing the border. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn to have a clear picture of their route by bringing into attention the reaction of Turkish authorities, public opinion, and refugee's faith once arrived in Turkey.

¹ *Cumhuriyet* (The Republic), August 10, 1947.

² For a broader perspective on the percentages agreement and the Moscow conference of October 1944 as well as Stalin's talks with W. Churchill see Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953*, London, Yale University Press, 2006.

³ We mention article 18: "An Allied Control Commission will be established which will undertake until the conclusion of peace the regulation of and control over the execution of the present term under the general direction and orders of the Allied (Soviet) High Command, acting on behalf of the Allied Powers", ****A decade of American Foreign Policy Basic Documents 1941-1949*, Revised Edition, Department of State, Washington, 1985, p. 490.

The installation of pro-Communist government on March 6, 1945, led by Dr. Petru Groza was coupled with the electoral fraud of 1946⁴, the King's forced abdication on December 1947⁵, and the institutional replacement of the monarchy with a *people's republic*⁶. These events are just some brief examples of how eager for power and control were the pro-Soviet government and the Communist Party, despite the fact that the Communist Party had a small number of adherents by 1948 and was not favored among public opinion compared to liberals or to The National Peasants' Party.

Moreover, the wave of repression, arbitrary arrests and detentions, the accession of opportunists, and poorly educated people in leading positions activated the survival mode, especially for the people working for the public system, whose activity was evaluated based on their relation with the Party and their ideology rather than on quality and professionalism. Consequently, one option was to adapt to and consent to the regime's policies, whereas the other option was to oppose the regime and face the consequences. Yet, for many Romanian citizens there was a third alternative as well - to leave the country illegally no matter what. This study aims to focus on this last alternative and to understand why Turkey was perceived as a safe destination.

The current literature on this topic concerning the chosen timeline is still consolidating as the Romanian historiography focused more on the emigration of Turks and Tatars in Turkey and some reference studies and papers belong to Metin Omer, Musfata Ali Mehmet, Adriana Cupcea, Kozák Gyula, Tasin Gemil, Marian Cojoc⁷. This study is based on the documents, reports, and official statements consulted in The National

⁴ See: Virgiliu Țărău, *Alegeri fără opțiune* (Elections without option), Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2005.

⁵ See: Andrei Muraru, Alexandru Muraru, *Regele, comuniștii și Coroana. Adevărata istorie a abdicării lui Mihai I* (The King, the communists and the Crown. The real history of King Michael I's abdication), Iasi, Editura Polirom, 2017.

⁶ The new Constitution of 1948 ensured the first legal base for the reforms and laws that soon followed and allowed the State to implement nationalization and collectivization. See the text of Constitution available: http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htm?_act_text?id=1574

⁷ On this topic see: Marian Cojoc, *Tătarii în istoria românilor*, (Tatars in Romanian History), vol. I, Constanța, Editura Muntenia, 2004; Metin Omer, "În căutarea spațiului identitar: emigrarea turcilor și tătarilor în viziunea elitelor comunității (1878-1940)" in Adriana Cupcea (ed.), *Turcii și tătarii din Dobrogea (Turks and Tatars in Dobruja)*, Editura Institutului pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, Cluj-Napoca, 2015; Musfata Ali Mehmet, "O istorie a turcilor din Dobrogea" in Adriana Cupcea, Kozák Gyula (eds.), *Istorie și identitate la turcii din Dobrogea* (The History and Identity of Turks from Dobruja), Cluj-Napoca, Institutul pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2017.

Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives and in The Ministry of National Defence Archives, most of the records referring to the surveillance and tracking files of those who crossed the border or attempted to, their family`s depositions, and the police`s inquiry into the escape.

Equally important to mention is the fact that the official Romanian reports and statements referred to the citizens who left the country as *defectors*, with many depositions of their relatives as *traitors*, whereas the Turkish authorities and the Turkish public opinion referred to them as *refugees*, *political refugees* or *immigrants*. In this respect, we will choose not to generalize any of these labels but to detail and specify each situation separately.

The main causes of escape. Why Turkey?

The presence of the Red Army soldiers in Romania, the dispatching of Soviet advisers and experts to Romanian cities, the political and shortly after 1945 economic control⁸, ideology and The Communist Party`s interference in the public life and to a considerable extent in private life as well, all urged many Romanian citizens to take into consideration the alternative of leaving the country. We shall refer to them as *citizens of Romania* without referring to ethnicity, race, system of beliefs, or cultural criteria, as the wave of those who made efforts to leave the country was a multiethnic one. For example, members of the Turkish and Tatar communities in Dobruja aimed to move with their relatives or friends in Turkey, members of the Jewish community strove to transit Turkish territory to reach Palestine.

Hence, out of the hundreds of statements of those caught trying to cross the border illegally, many of them explained in their pleas of the unbearable political environment and poor economic and living conditions. Based on their files and depositions we tried outlining a profile of those who have tried or succeeded to leave the country during 1945-1948 and the results indicated that the first category adamant to leave was actually the first one targeted in the first phase of the regime:

⁸ Illustrating this aspect, we mention the fact that the treaty signed in Moscow (May 1945) was supposed to set out methods and ventures to support the economic reconstruction and securing the payment of war damages to the Soviet Union. Based on this treaty were established the SovRoms - Romanian and Soviet joint ventures but it soon proved to be unequal as an important part of the resources were ensured by the Romanian part (oil, natural gas, wood, coal extraction, iron extraction etc.), Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe umerii lui Marx. O introducere în istoria comunismului românesc*, București, Editura Curtea Veche, 2007, pp. 67-71.

the Army, the Navy, members of the diplomatic staff⁹ of the mission who refused to return, members of various liberal professions (lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers etc.), and also civil servants.

One main reason for this profile is that the newly installed proCommunist government began to purge the local and national public institutions of the former systems' exponents, political opponents, intellectuals or vocal non-communists who publicly reacted against Petru Groza's government or against the Soviet Union and the Red Army. As a case point, one report about the military's attitude towards the government in 1946 and registered at the Then Ministry of National Defence showed that a high number of the officers and soldiers were against it. Moreover, the institution's internal stability was disturbed by some anonymous manifestos impelled to disobey and to condemn the new government:

“This Government is a lack of initiative and works as a Moscow puppet. The laws are framed in Moscow. Following the Soviet order, the best officers in the Army were purged, the same fate had also the most experienced magistrates, the most trustworthy public servants [...]”¹⁰.

Why Turkey? The answer to this question entails some level of analysis. First of all, we have to take into consideration the geographic factor which shows that the Black Sea was a link to Turkey, but the decisive factor was a rather a geopolitical one. Amongst all its neighbors and countries in its proximity, Turkey was the only one unaffected by the Soviet presence or influence and had close ties with the United States and Western countries. Additionally, Turkey accepted the American program providing aid to Western European countries known as Marshall Plan (*The European Recovery Program*)¹¹ and later expressed its intention to join The North Atlantic Treaty¹².

Therefore, as we have mentioned, Turkey's geopolitical option at the beginning of the Cold War was to adhere to Western initiatives, a decisive step not only for the Turkish foreign policy agenda but also for

⁹ For a broader perspective on this particular topic see: Stejărel Olaru, *Agentul nostru Victor*, [Our agent Victor], Iași, Editura Polirom, 2018.

¹⁰ Arhivele Ministerului Apărării Naționale, (The Ministry of National Defence Archives - hereafter, A. M. Ap. N), General Staff Section II, file 1586, c. 45.

¹¹ See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997.

¹² In 1952 Turkey became member of The North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

the public opinion. For instance, the official newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, wrote a generous article entitled: *“The negotiations for the Atlantic Pact begun. Russia or any other state will not be allowed to infringe the Western frontiers”*¹³. Two days later, the same newspaper stated that *“Russia is trying to undermine the Atlantic Pact. It is rumored that the Soviets will take military measures against Finland to threaten Norway and Sweden”*¹⁴. Moreover, the Turkish public opinion criticized not only the Soviet Union but also the Eastern countries under its influence, therefore all those who opposed in one way or another the Soviets or communists were praised and welcomed to Turkey.

Lastly, Turkey was a suitable option also due to logistic aspects. Since Turkey had numerous cities close to the shores of the Black Sea, the escaping by using boats, merchant ships, or any other small vessel was easier and more affordable. There were also reported several cases of members of the Romanian Army or the Defense Ministry hijacking passenger planes or military aircraft and being offered temporary asylum in Turkey.

Consequently, due to this enormous Turkish geopolitical asset as it was quietly perceived by the Romanian public opinion during Cold War, many considered Turkey as we dare say, *“a temporary dream land”* before reaching democratic Western countries.

Ways and Methods of escape

Western emigration under legal conditions at the beginning of Cold War when communists took power in Romania, was almost impossible for ordinary citizens, thus many of them risked their lives using clandestine methods to leave the country. This topic raises several issues: a) the vulnerability of borders; b) the regime’s lack of capacity to deal with internal issues; c) clandestine businesses in the public sector.

The war had a significant impact on the economy, but also on the military which was left ill-equipped and with soldiers in poor condition. Several notes addressed to General Staff showed that soldiers of the garrison near West border deserted, some committed suicide, and many were reported to be seen begging for food from local civilians¹⁵. The Port of Constanta (Constantza) and the Romanian Black Sea coastal area were a dynamic one as many commercial vessels docked frequently in the port city of

¹³ *Cumhuriyet* (The Republic), December 12, 1948, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Cumhuriyet* (The Republic), December 14, 1948, p. 1.

¹⁵ See: A. M. Ap. N, General Staff Section II, file 1586.

Constanta. Moreover, the Coast guard had insufficient and ill-equipped personnel and some of its members were easily bribed.

The most common way to leave the country by sea was on small vessels, luggers, or merchant ships, either purchased, rented, or even stolen. To purchase any of these types and to save up for the road, many had to sell their properties or borrow from friends or family with the promise of paying back as soon as they found a safe country and a job. These types of border crossings were usually arranged after sunset or before dawn when the coast guard was less vigilant, but there were several other methods as well. For instance, some people embarked on Turkish commercial vessels disguised as American soldiers, because many American commercial vessels anchored in Turkish harbors and, from Turkey they could continue their cruise to the United States.

In addition, it is important to mention that the Romanian political situation and the desperate need of many people to leave the country appeared to be a potential business for Turkish sailors. Some of them were selling fake sailor authorization so, for an amount of money and an ID photo one could hide aboard the ship. Next, there were three scenarios: after the vessel left the Romanian port, the person could be dropped off in a port-of-call; the second scenario was to buy a boat and the officer in charge of the ship could declare that they saved the person from a shipwreck; or, the last possibility was to allow people to stay on the vessel until it anchored to a major commercial harbor or to the home port.

A statement of an arrested person from the records of the Secret Police Services illustrates this business and what the Turkish sailors offered:

“[...] the first option (the cheapest one, just 2-3000 pounds) involves the following: you just embark on the vessel and you will be dropped off somewhere on its way, the name of the port is unknown; the second option costs 5-6000 pounds and it implies buying a boat that will be carried on the vessel and the sailors will declare they saved the person from a shipwreck and could not abandon him and the third one costs 1000 pounds and the captain took the responsibility to disembark in a port in Italy”¹⁶.

¹⁶ Arhiva Consiliului Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității (The National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives – hereafter, A.C.N.S.A.S), Documentar Fund, File 9511, vol. 6., f. 205.

By way of illustration, we mention that only in July and August 1947 the authorities from Constanta put under investigation for illegal border crossing 100 suspects¹⁷.

As previously stated, the emigration topic developed into a clandestine business in the public sector. For example, we identified a case within The Ministry of Industry where one of the employees was able to facilitate clandestine departures abroad:

“Carol Gagel, an industrialist, declared that one day he met Ritsch Miroslav, a public servant for The Ministry of Industry who offered him the possibility to leave the country clandestine, arguing that he were able to provide some possibilities to facilitate his departure.

Among other aspects, Ritsch affirmed that he cannot reveal too many details, just the fact that the transport will be by Turkish commercial vessels that bring to Constanta harbor colonial goods and, on their way back transport cement. He also mentioned that so far 5-6 people have already left the country”¹⁸.

Although the most accessible, the Black Sea was not the only way to reach Turkey, there was another way, especially by people from military and aviation sectors. Some reports of the Secret Police Services and of The Ministry of National Defence registered a few cases of hijacked passenger planes or military aircrafts by pilots who diverted flights to Turkey. For instance, a report of the Secret Police in Timisoara was informing the authorities in Bucharest that on August 1948 they detected a group of approx. 18 people who were planning to fly from Bucharest to Ankara with the flight booked for some Soviet officers in Galati prepared to return to Bucharest¹⁹.

These types of illegal border crossings via internal flights increased in 1948. In fact, a report issued by the Foreign Ministry showed that Turkish authorities sent in February several lists of Romanian planes that landed in Turkey without permission and asked the Romanian authorities to provide explanations for these situations, while also refusing to repatriate the people²⁰.

¹⁷ A.C.N.S.A.S, Documentar Fund, File 9511, vol. 1., f. 49.

¹⁸ A.C.N.S.A.S, Documentar Fund, File 9511, vol. 3, f. 146.

¹⁹ A.C.N.S.A.S, Documentar Fund, File 9511, vol. 3, ff. 81-82.

²⁰ A.C.N.S.A.S, Documentar Fund, File 9511, vol. 2, f. 17.

Turkish authorities` reaction and Turkish public opinion

The previous sections aimed to briefly define the internal Romanian context at the beginning of the Cold War and to reveal the most common methods used by Romanian citizens to leave the country determined by harsh living and politics conditions. The last part of this article aims to bring into attention the Turkish public opinion and the Turkish official reaction towards the increasing wave of people arriving illicitly on its territory. While maintaining economic relations with Romania, Turkey's approach to the pro-Soviet government in Bucharest was rather reserved and discrete. Few Turkish officials expressed themselves in official statements against the new Romanian government but subtly protected the newly arrived in Turkey. There were various situations when Turkish authorities refused to disclose the identity of those arrived, declined Romanian authorities' request to repatriate them, and instead offered them temporary asylum in special centers. Moreover, local authorities tried to integrate them into the labor market, but the language was the main barrier.

On the opposite, Turkish press and public opinion was vocal and aggressive, denouncing the regime from Bucharest. Interviewing people that left Romania was used as a strong argument to support their discourse. Many times, the Turkish newspapers revealed the interviewed persons` identities and each interview was published along with a dramatic headline about the Red Army troops in Romania, the communist rule, the uncertain situation of King Michael, and the social context:

“Russians own everything. The actual Romanian government cannot do anything except for obeying the Russians and accomplishing their behests. [...] None`s life in Romania is safe”²¹.

Another example is from *Hürriyet* newspaper from May 1948, where a wide article was dedicated to Romanian internal affairs and an interview with some refugees:

“Seven Romanian political refugees who recently escaped from their country by a small boat declared to our correspondent who interviewed them about their odyssey and about the living conditions in Romania:

²¹ *Vakit* [Time], August 3, 1947 in *Ibidem*, f. 39.

`- We left Romania in a small boat on May 7. On May 10, we reached Çilingoz shore, 17km south of Midiya. We are seven people. Among us are a captain, a gunner lieutenant, an officer of the Navy, a lawyer, three technicians, and one sailor. [...] The Turkish authorities welcomed us. First, they sent us to Kırklareli and then to Istanbul. Now we are totally free and independent. `

The meaning of freedom is for persons who live under communists' pressure completely different than the one we use. Freedom no longer exists in Romania. [...]"²².

This excerpt is just one example of the many published by the Turkish press that overwhelmed the Romanian authorities as the communist regime was blackened and blamed for the poor living conditions and lack of democracy. Even the ads in the local newspapers dedicated to integrating Romanian refugees into the labor market contained protests against Bucharest's regime: *"Each patriot's duty is to help the enemies of communism. Escaped from the red hell, these enemies of communism are in search for a job. Those who can help are required to contact our administration"*²³.

As a counter reaction, the Romanian Secret police arrested family members, relatives, or close friends of those who escaped and forced them to testify that the missing persons were national traitors, delinquents, mischievous, vicious persons, and that they were not aware about their escape plans. Afraid for their lives or blackmailed, witnesses were constrained to provide false depositions and even to praise the regime²⁴.

Final remarks

As a last note, we mention that it was hard to track to the end the fate of those who crossed the border illegally and where they established themselves after departing from Turkey. At the same time, the life of those left at home was complex and perilous as they were constantly under close surveillance, arrested, sanctioned, or fired, with years to follow showing a crueller facet of the regime. Focused more on taking power and consolidating its position, the communist regime was unprepared at first to handle a wave of emigration, and the files and notes issued by the local authorities and by the secret police services perfectly illustrate this

²² *Hürriyet* [Liberty], 05th May 1948, p. 5.

²³ A.C.N.S.A.S, Documentar Fund, File 9511, vol. 2, f. 489.

²⁴ See: A.C.N.S.A.S, Documentar Fund, File 9511, vol. 5.

situation. The police and military points near borders signaled the fact that the staff is ill-equipped and faces food shortage; many urgent reports were registered or solved with delay due to insufficient personnel or, in some cases, due to a lack of experience or education.

This situation portrays a chaotic administration of an unconsolidated regime, yet this situation was also a breach that allowed many to leave the country. If escaping was not possible under legal conditions, many people found alternative methods to cross the border illegally.

To conclude, this study focused strictly upon the case of illegal border crossings into Turkey as it is less known that many of the Romanian citizens who left the country and asked for political asylum in Western countries first went to Turkey. Some of them just transited Turkey, others spent a few months there until finding ways to reach Western destinations. Turkey was an option not only due to common shores on Black Sea but also due to its close ties with the West and the United States and the shared rivalry against the Soviet Union. The dawn of Cold War caught Romania and Turkey on different sides of the Iron Curtain yet the diplomatic and economic relations were not interrupted, and, surprisingly, the fact that many Romanian citizens escaped to Turkey through illegal methods did not bring tensions between Bucharest and Ankara.

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