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Reconsidering Multidirectional Dynamics of German-Turkish Migration Relations: German Construction Workers in Ankara between 1924-1925

Dirk Tröndle* 

Abstract

German-Turkish migration relations are usually discussed in the context of Turkish labor migration to Germany beginning in the 1960s. This article highlights a largely forgotten counter-movement: the recruitment of 40 to 60 German construction workers and engineers by the Ankara city administration in 1924/1925 to help build Türkiye's new capital. The analysis shows that this migration was not driven by individual "push" or "pull" factors, but functioned as part of a state-controlled, symbolically charged modernization project. The case is situated within the field of tension between bureaucratic selectivity, prestige migration, and institutional continuity in German-Turkish relations. It illustrates how labor migration was intertwined with foreign policy interests, national prestige, and diplomatic crisis management. Furthermore, it adds a multidirectional perspective to historiographical migration research and demonstrates how migration could serve as an instrument of national representation just as quickly as it could be restricted. Overall, the case exemplifies the ambivalence of modern migration regimes.

Keywords : Migration History, Transnational Mobility, Modernization Regimes, Weimar Republic, German Mission, Türkiye-Germany Relations

Alman-Türk Göç İlişkilerinin Çok Yönlü Dinamiklerini Yeniden Düşünmek: 1924-1925 Yılları Arasında Ankara'daki Alman İnşaat İşçileri

Özet

Almanya-Türkiye göç ilişkileri genellikle 1960'lardan itibaren Türkiye'den Almanya'ya yönelik işgücü göçü bağlamında ele alınmaktadır. Bu makale ise büyük ölçüde unutulmuş bir karşı hareketi öne çıkarmakta ve 1924/1925 yıllarında Ankara şehir yönetimi tarafından Türkiye'nin yeni başkentinin inşası için 40 ila 60 Alman inşaat işçisi ve mühendisin işe alınmasını mercek altına almaktadır. Analiz, bu göçün bireysel itici ya da çekici faktörlerden kaynaklanmadığını, aksine devlet kontrollü ve sembolik açıdan yüklü bir modernleşme projesinin parçası olarak işlediğini ortaya koymaktadır. İncelenen vaka, Alman-Türk ilişkilerinde bürokratik seçicilik, prestij göçü ve kurumsal süreklilik arasındaki gerilim alanına yerleştirilmektedir. Bu örnek, işgücü göçünün dış politika çıkarları, ulusal prestij ve diplomatik kriz yönetimi ile nasıl iç içe geçtiğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca, göç tarihine çok yönlü bir perspektif kazandırmakta ve göçün, ulusal temsiliyetin bir aracı olarak kullanılabildiği kadar hızlı bir şekilde sınırlandırılabileceğini de göstermektedir. Böylece, modern göç rejimlerinin çelişkili doğasına ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Göç Tarihi, Ulusötesi Hareketlilik, Modernleşme Rejimleri, Weimar Cumhuriyeti, Alman Misyonu, Türkiye-Almanya İlişkileri

* Dr., Freelance Researcher, Berlin, Germany.

Introduction

The question of why people migrate is not only highly topical but has been a recurring theme throughout human history. The phenomenon of migration is not an exceptional situation, but rather a constant feature of human existence. The motives for migration are manifold, ranging from coercion, hardship, and persecution, to hope, curiosity, and strategic life planning (Massey et al., 1993, p. 432). The scientific study of migration has produced a multitude of theoretical approaches, and no single theory can fully capture the phenomenon in all its complexity, but together they offer a heuristic panorama of economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions.

This article focuses on a hitherto largely overlooked episode in German-Turkish relations: the recruitment of an estimated 40 to 60 German skilled workers and engineers by the then city planning officer Professor Max Rabe for construction projects in Ankara from 1924 to 1925 and the rapid, conflict-ridden end of their employment and return. German-Turkish migration research often focuses heavily on Turkish labor migration to Germany beginning in the 1960s, which Abadan-Unat has repeatedly criticized in various publications (Pusch, B., Split, J., 2014, pp. 9-10). This one-sided perspective sometimes obscures earlier, multidirectional mobility, as exemplified in the present case.

The hypothesis of this article is that the recruitment of German skilled workers was part of a larger, symbolically charged modernization project of the young Turkish Republic. The case exemplifies how migration is embedded in political representation logics: German engineers were regarded as bearers of technological progress, as a visible expression of Western connectivity, and thus as objects of prestige. However, this episode also highlights the ambivalence of such strategies: as soon as conflicts in everyday working life came to a head and the symbolic added value threatened to be lost, migration was abruptly restricted—an indication of selective and contradictory mechanisms of state control. This dynamic can also be interpreted as an expression of bureaucratic selectivity (Bonjour, 2011), in which migration was not a spontaneous but an actively regulated process. Nevertheless, it would be a significant overstatement to assess the city of Ankara as a gatekeeper of institutional modernization based on these minority events. Admittedly, the rapid expulsion of German skilled workers does testify to the fragility of symbolic state projects in a certain sense. Also, statements made by the mayor of Ankara to the German embassy, in which he expresses his regret at the failure of the employment and articulates his desire to continue benefiting from German construction expertise, have the potential to confirm this thesis (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [6], 1924, p. 1). However, the subsequent process of building a new capital city demonstrates precisely the opposite development.

The recruitment of skilled workers also appears to have served to symbolically elevate Ankara's status as the new capital, and technical expertise appears to have been

understood as cultural capital, the loss of which would have been seen as a loss of prestige. Here, the concept of prestige migration (Amelina & Bode, 2018) is a useful analytical category. As we will see, this resulted in a balancing act between promoting and controlling migration. This case exemplifies the precarious use of migration to represent sovereignty and modernity in nation states and demonstrates that labor migration in this context was neither random nor solely economically motivated, but part of a deliberately orchestrated and politically charged agenda.

This article shifts the perspective and aims to reconstruct this early phase of German-Turkish labor migration on a microhistorical basis and to show how the recruitment of German workers was part of the modernization project of the young Turkish Republic. Traditionally, many German-Turkish narratives focus on the antagonisms between East and West, the Orientalist concepts of Orient and Occident, or between Islam and Christianity. Instead of different worldviews and polarization, the portrayal of German-Turkish migration history has recently begun to focus more on connecting elements (Fuhrmann, 2014, p. 24). Finally, the case study points to institutional continuities in German-Turkish relations: despite the formal break after the First World War, a functioning structure remained in place on the basis of which migration and technical cooperation were organized. German labor migration was not based on existential hardship but was the result of a deliberately initiated recruitment process, and is therefore of particular interest in terms of migration history.

Methodologically, the article adopts a multidimensional approach. It begins with a microhistorical case study based on diplomatic sources, which makes it possible to trace migration processes at the level of specific actors and institutional practices. This is complemented by a discourse analysis of diplomatic communication, in which perceptions of expertise, migration, and national prestige are embedded. Third, the findings are situated within debates on migration and modernization theory in order to identify the structural logic of selective labor migration. The aim is to interpret this seemingly marginal episode as a crystallization point of state migration policy in the early Turkish Republic. The case enables a dual perspective: on the one hand, on the selectivity of labor policy, and on the other, on the often-overlooked multidirectional dynamics of German-Turkish migration relations. Moreover, the study contributes to the historical contextualization of current migration debates—not as a direct analogy, but as a historical example of structurally comparable control mechanisms. This reveals the fundamental ambivalence of modern mobility regimes: migration is promoted as an instrument of national representation and, at the same time, strictly restricted when there is a threat of loss of prestige. The episode examined here demonstrates how closely migration was intertwined with the assertion of state sovereignty, symbolic politics, and institutional selectivity, a logic that continues to shape contemporary migration policy discourse.

The analysis draws on a corpus of 42 diplomatic sources from the Political Archives of the Federal Foreign Office (AA) (PA-AA RAV 128-537/538) that have scarcely been evaluated to date. These include reports from the German legation in Ankara and İstanbul, transcripts of Turkish press articles, and extensive correspondence with the Federal Foreign Office, the Ankara city administration, and German companies involved. The selection of primary sources is based on a targeted and systematic review of the archives of the Federal Foreign Office for the years 1924–1937, originally focusing on the construction of the German Embassy in Ankara from 1924 and its subsequent relocation from İstanbul to Ankara. To this end, all relevant file folders were researched using a search application of the Federal Archives as an independent database, and the file folders that, based on their designations such as 1. Relocation of the Embassy to Angora, 2. Embassy Garden Angora, 3. Embassy Ankara, House Building, Gardens, 4. Embassy Ankara Construction, 5. Embassy Angora, and 6. Angora as Capital were ordered for the reading room of the Political Archives. This was followed by a review of roughly 500 documents in the 13 file folders, mainly according to their headings, and 409 documents were identified that were directly related to the construction of the embassy and the move to Ankara. Copies of these documents are available to the author in his private archive. The documents had already been organized by the Foreign Office according to thematic focus and chronological sequence, which facilitated structured navigation within the source base.¹

The 42 documents analyzed in this study on German professionals in Ankara were discovered somewhat by chance as a secondary outcome of research on the construction of the German Embassy in Ankara and its relocation from Istanbul to Ankara. Although not directly relevant to research on the construction of the embassy or the move, they appeared in broader files on diplomatic and construction matters. For the analysis, a multidimensional approach was adopted: The documents were first arranged chronologically in order to trace the sequence of recruitment, labor disputes, and expulsions. They were then grouped thematically according to content-related focal points such as political motivation, social tensions, and the symbolic significance of the skilled workers. Finally, a discursive interpretation examined the perception of German workers in diplomatic correspondence as an expression of institutional and symbolic logics.

Although the selective source material does not allow for a complete social history, it does offer a detailed insight into the political, economic, and symbolic logic of this historical migration event, from the political motivation behind the recruitment to the social tensions in everyday working life and the diplomatic handling of the failure. The

¹ A large part of these documents formed the basis for an article entitled “From Pera to Angora - Construction of the German Embassy in the Context of the Birth of a new capital,” which is to be published in a commemorative publication in 2025/2026.

historical names Constantinople and Agora² are still used in the written records; except in quotations, İstanbul and Ankara are used throughout the following text.

Conceptual Framework and Thematic Context

To conceptualize this, the analysis draws on a range of migration theories. Neoclassical theory interprets migration as a rational response to expected income differences (Hicks, 1932; Todaro, 1969). According to this logic, individuals migrate from low-income regions to more prosperous areas in order to maximize their economic benefit. The theory of the new economy of migration (Stark & Bloom, 1985) supplements this perspective with collectively made decisions within the family, whereby remittances serve as a means of income diversification and risk minimization. Both models primarily explain so-called push factors such as poverty, unemployment, or persecution.

In contrast, the dual labor market theory (Piore, 1979) emphasizes structural pull factors on the part of the receiving societies, such as the demand for cheap and flexible labor. Better living conditions, educational opportunities, and political freedoms are also relevant incentives for migration from this perspective. World-system theory (Wallerstein, 1974) and its continuation by Saskia Sassen (Sassen, 1988) situate migration in the context of global capitalist expansion, with peripheral regions becoming increasingly integrated into urban centers.

Complementing this, the theory of bureaucratic selectivity considers migration as a state-regulated process that is controlled through legal classifications (e.g., labor migrant, refugee) and institutional practices such as visas, border regimes, and documentation requirements (Bonjour, 2011). Closely related to this is the concept of prestige migration, which understands migration as symbolic capital: states recruit highly qualified migrants to demonstrate technological progress and modernity (Amelina & Bode, 2018). Finally, historical-institutional approaches (Fahrmeier, Lucassen & Gatrell, 2010) offer a further analytical perspective by highlighting the roots of modern migration control in colonial and nation-state administrative practices since the 19th century.

Against this conceptual backdrop, the question arises whether these theories can be meaningfully applied to the case of German labor migration to Ankara in the period 1924–1925 or whether doing so risks anachronism. If this hurdle is considered surmountable, the central research question is: Were the recruited German skilled workers viewed by the Ankara city administration not only as a technological resource, but also

² In correspondence, reference is usually made to the legation, namely the Constantinople Legation and the Angora Legation Department. Even though the German Empire was one of the first states to recognize Ankara as the new capital and opened an embassy in a portable wooden building in 1924, the construction of the actual embassy building took several years and the final move did not take place until 1928. The German ambassador Rudolf Nadolny only stayed in Ankara temporarily during these years and continued to reside in Istanbul with a large staff.

as symbolic representatives of Western modernity? This further prompts consideration of whether this represents an early instance of symbolic prestige migration deliberately controlled by a local government migration regime.

Chronology of Migration Phenomena between Germany and Türkiye

The shared German historical memory prominently recalls Prussian military aid in the late Ottoman era, which is documented in publications such as the 63 letters written by Helmuth Graf von Moltke (1800-1891),³ who as a military advisor at the court of Mahmud II gained insights not only into the Ottoman administrative and military apparatus but also into social developments and everyday life. The joint commemoration also refers to “the brotherhood in arms” during World War I and the German military mission, when hundreds of German officers and thousands of soldiers served in the Ottoman army and fought against the Allies at the Dardanelles-Gallipoli and in the Hejaz, among other places.⁴

The German community in İstanbul emerged in the wake of the German-speaking emigration movement that began in 1820, which primarily involved millions of Germans emigrating to South and North America. Compared to this mass exodus, the Ottoman Empire played a much smaller role; the number of German-speaking immigrants in the 1850s is estimated at around 1,000 (Pschichholz, 2014, p. 47). In particular, impoverished craftsmen who could not afford the passage to America tended to emigrate to nearby European countries and the Ottoman Empire, primarily to İstanbul. Emigration was particularly attractive and successful when skilled craftsmen or tradesmen did not face much competition in their new home, such as a Bavarian beer brewer who founded a brewery in the İstanbul suburb of Bebek in 1847 (Fuhrmann, 2015, p. 29). By 1904, the German population was estimated at 3,400 (Geser, 2016, p. 19).

In addition to İstanbul, Germans also migrated to other regions of the Ottoman Empire. In 1882, the total German population in the Ottoman Empire was estimated at 3,400, rising to 5,500 by 1911, including the territories in Palestine, Beirut, and Damascus (Türk and Kaya, 2020, p. 61). From the Turkish-Ottoman perspective, other migration movements are relevant that are often overlooked or unknown from the German

³ Collected writings and memoirs of Field Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke in eight volumes. Including *Unter dem Halbmond: Zustände und Begebenheiten in der Türkei in den Jahren 1835 bis 1839* (*Under the Crescent: Conditions and Events in Turkey from 1835 to 1839*).

⁴ Above all, General Otto Liman von Sanders (1855-1913), who was commander-in-chief of the Ottoman army during the defense of the Dardanelles in 1915 and later commander-in-chief of the Yıldırım Army Group, which was tasked with defending Palestine and Syria against British troops. Liman von Sanders was honorary chairman of the German-Turkish Association (DTV), founded in 1914, for a time. He recorded his memories in: *Five Years in Turkey*. By Cavalry General Liman von Sanders.

perspective. Nazan Maksudyan's monographs (Maksudyan, 2014; Maksudyan 2019) on Ottoman orphans and Ottoman women in Germany during World War I are particularly noteworthy, as is the research by Nurçin İleri (İleri, 2025) on the fate of Turkish-Ottoman apprentices and students as well as labor migration to Germany in the shadow of World War I. The sending of students and skilled workers for training had been state policy in the Ottoman Empire since the Tanzimat period and was carried out regularly from the time of Sultan Abdülhamit II. Initially, the preferred destination was France, but during the Second Constitutional Period, the German Empire increasingly became the focus. "The brotherhood in arms" between the two countries during the First World War strengthened relations not only in the military sphere but also in cultural and economic domains (İleri, 2025, p. 30).

The migration of Ottoman workers to Germany aimed at acquiring technological knowledge and adopting technological progress. From a German perspective, the strategic plan was to curb French influence in the Ottoman Empire and align the Ottoman education system more closely with the German model (İleri, 2025, p. 31). Behind this strategy of closer ties with Germany was also the intention to further open the Ottoman market to German industrial products. The German-Turkish Association (DTV) in Berlin and its counterpart, the Turkish-German Association (TDV) in İstanbul, underscored this rapprochement, supported by both German industry and politics. Malte Fuhrmann interprets this policy as driven by semi-colonialist motives and a cultural imperialist mentality (İleri, 2025, p. 31). From the perspective of the Young Turk government, this long-term national economic policy strategy was intended to initiate contributions to the development of Ottoman industry, make it less dependent on foreign influences, adopt technological advances, and train its own experts and skilled workers. During the First World War, we know of three different groups of Ottoman apprentices, students, pupils, and engineers, who together made up a group of approximately 2,000 people (İleri, 2025, p. 32). The first Turkish pupils and trainees in Germany are often referred to as the first guest workers (Gencer, 2015, p. 329). However, the work was arduous, and the trainees were often exploited by the companies.

After the First World War, the issue of war guilt led to a break in the previously close diplomatic, military, and economic relations between the German Empire and the Ottoman Empire prompted by the victorious powers. Under the Armistice of Mudros, signed on the Greek island of Limnos on October 30, 1918, the Ottomans not only lost control of the Straits but also had to relinquish all imperial territories outside Anatolia, while İstanbul was placed under occupation. The terms of the armistice also stipulated that, in addition to German officers and soldiers serving in the Ottoman Army, much of the German-speaking community (Germans and Austrians) had to leave İstanbul and Türkiye (Mangold-Will, 2013, p. 31). The German-speaking communities in İzmir and İstanbul had existed since the first half of the 19th century, and in İstanbul, German schools,

a German hospital, and meeting places and clubs such as Teutonia and Alemania (Mangold-Will, 2013, p. 307) had developed a presence and infrastructure that was clearly visible in the cityscape. Mangold-Will estimates that those forced to leave included “(...) 10,000 soldiers present due to the war and the long-established Turkish Germans – an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 people (...)” (Mangold-Will, 2014).

A notable episode was the arrival of more than 1,000 mostly German-Jewish scientists and cultural figures who fled to Mustafa Kemal’s Türkiye to escape the Nazis and helped build the new republic. Particularly noteworthy here are German-speaking architects and urban planners such as Bruno Taut (1880-1938), Paul Bonatz (1877-1956), and Ernst Arnold Egli (1893-1974), who are immortalized in the cityscape of Ankara with countless buildings (Goethe-Institut Ankara. *Das Werden einer Hauptstadt*, 2020). The two urban planners Carl Christoph Lörcher (1884-1966) and Hermann Jansen (1869-1945) are also part of this narrative. In May 1924, Lörcher was commissioned by the new Turkish government to draft the first urban development plan, in which the contemporary concept of the garden city (Cengizkan, 2003, p. 157) played a central role. According to Lörcher, the new government district was to be built on both sides of a large boulevard modelled on *Unter den Linden*, with the parliament building and its large dome enthroned at the upper end. However, in a letter to the German legation, he expressed little hope that his plan would be implemented because: “The Turks will fragment their resources, waste them on trivialities, and, above all, fail to proceed in a systematic manner. Of course, little or nothing can be achieved in this way. It’s a shame.”⁵ (PA-AA RAV-128-537 [20], 1925, pp. 1-2). Based on Lurcher’s development plan for the *Turkish capital and residence city of Angora*, Prof. Hermann Jansen won the competition announced by the Turkish government for the redesign of Ankara in 1929.

German-Turkish relations – whether through the deployment of military advisors to Turkey or the migration of students and trainees to Germany in the late Ottoman era or of scientists during the Nazi period – have been well researched. The reverse phenomenon, labor migration from Germany to Turkey, remains comparatively understudied and, in some places, a research desideratum. Only a few sources, such as the monograph by Türk and Şanda, show that since 1880 German civilian advisors have also come to the Ottoman Empire in addition to military exchanges (Türk and Şanda, 2020, p. 128). After the re-establishment of bilateral relations between the two countries, the recruitment of skilled workers from Germany resumed, as the newly founded Republic urgently needed experts to build its administrative and state system. In February 1924, the representation in Ankara reported on the visit of a delegation to prepare the German-Turkish friendship

⁵ “Die Türken werden ihre Mittel zersplittern, in lauter Nebensächlichkeiten verpuffen, und vor allem, was das Wichtigste wäre, ein planmässiges Vorgehen unterlassen. Auf solchen Wegen lässt sich natürlich nichts oder wenig erzielen. Schade drum.”

treaty, noting that the Turkish government wanted to recruit almost 100 German experts to reorganize the administration (Türk and Şanda, 2020, p. 130), including ministerial officials, civil servants in the postal and telegraph services, customs administration, and the surveying department (Türk and Şanda, 2020, p. 136). Alongside these German experts, the new government's state-controlled labor migration program recruited specialists from countries such as Austria, Hungary, England, Italy, Belgium, and even the United States.

German Specialists for the Construction of the New Capital

German-Turkish relations during the Ottoman Empire are extensively documented in both German and Turkish sources, providing broad overviews as well as accounts of specific phases and events. According to Mangold-Will, however, there is a gap in our knowledge of relations between the two countries in the period following the First World War and before the National Socialists' rise to power and the end of the Weimar Republic in 1933 (Mangold-Will, 2013, p. 11). The fact that the Weimar Republic's policy toward Türkiye is less well described may be due to the interruption of diplomatic relations after the end of the war, which was, however, only of short duration. The Young Turk triumvirate around Enver, Talat, and Cemal Pasha, as well as other leaders of the Committee of Unity and Progress, fled to Germany in a German submarine via Crimea. In exile in Berlin, they maintained ties with trusted contacts in the ministerial bureaucracy or the military, who had been central to the wartime German-Turkish alliance. "While Berlin became the well-known center for Unionist refugees, Munich developed more secretly into a gathering point for Turkish exiles and resistance against the Allied occupation in Türkiye."⁶ (Mangold-Will, 2013, p. 54).

Bilateral relations between the two countries continued secretly via the Swedish representation in İstanbul, which represented German interests in Türkiye, while Turkish policy was handled by the German embassy in Sweden (Mangold-Will, 2013, p. 200). Rudolf Nadolny (1873–1953)⁷ had also been working in Stockholm since 1921 and, following the official resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1924, served for many years as the Weimar Republic's first ambassador to İstanbul and Ankara. Nadolny was also the diplomat who, after the early recognition of the Republic of Türkiye by the Weimar Republic, supported the decision to move the German representation from İstanbul to Ankara and remained deeply committed to the construction of a

⁶ "Während Berlin zum bekannten Zentrum der geflüchteten Unionisten wurde, entwickelte sich München eher im Verborgenen zum Sammelpunkt türkischer Exilanten und des Widerstands gegen die alliierte Besatzung in der Türkei."

⁷ Nadolny served as envoy and ambassador to Iran, Sweden, Turkey, and Russia, among other countries, and headed the German delegation at the Geneva Disarmament Conference of the League of Nations 1932/1933. The well-known writer Stan Nadolny is his grandson, and his son Burkhard Nadolny was also a writer.

new embassy building there. He reportedly advocated that the new embassy be designed in the East Elbian style of landowner architecture. Whether he intended to use the Neu-deck estate of the later Reich President Paul von Hindenburg as a model, as is claimed, or “(...) to evoke memories of his home estate Camioken and the associated symbolic political statement on the loss of German territories in the East (...)”⁸ (Mangold-Will, 2013, p. 353) is not clearly documented; according to Mangold Will, it was in any case a statement and a symbolic staging of Germanness.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that the official resumption of diplomatic relations between the two states also fostered German-Turkish cooperation in many other areas. The decision to make Ankara in Anatolia the new capital in October 1923 triggered a series of events. For example, foreign companies and urban planners were to be consulted in the construction of the new city, while skilled workers were to be recruited abroad to carry out the work. In the fall of 1924, Berlin newspapers published advertisements seeking a wide variety of skilled workers and professionals in the building trades, architects, and engineers to help build the new Türkiye and its new capital. Similar advertisements also appeared in Bucharest and Vienna (Çapa, 2020, p. 91), cities where the Ankara city prefect Ali Haydar Bey (1879–1937)⁹ stayed during an extended trip to Europe and Berlin to consult construction experts about the capital project. His delegation had brought stone and soil samples from Ankara to obtain the opinions of renowned experts and geologists regarding the suitability of local resources for producing basic building materials such as bricks, cement, and tiles. In Berlin, a scientist specializing in mineral deposits judged the clay samples from the Gazi Paşa Çiftlik agricultural estate to be particularly well suited for producing bricks and masonry blocks (Çapa, 2020, p. 90f). In addition, the Turkish delegation toured factories and ordered machines and furnaces to expand domestic building-material production in Ankara.

The *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (DAZ) published an advertisement in its October 1, 1924, edition seeking skilled workers in the construction trades between the ages of 20 and 45 who were “willing to work with the Turks (...) and, if possible, had already worked in Türkiye and were willing to make a new life there”¹⁰ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537

⁸ “(...) Erinnerungen an das heimatliche Gut Camioken und die damit verbundene symbolische politische Stellungnahme zu den deutschen Gebietsverlusten im Osten (...)”

⁹ Ali Haydar (Yuluğ) Bey was a bureaucrat in the late Ottoman era who worked in many regions of the Ottoman Empire. He was appointed governor of Istanbul by the new government in 1923, where he also held the position of city prefect for a short time. On June 5, 1924, he was appointed city prefect (şehremini) of Ankara, where he remained in office until his resignation at the end of 1926. (Dere, 2023, p. 715-16). Until 1930, mayors in the Republic of Türkiye were not elected but appointed by the Ministry of the Interior, like governors, which is why the term city prefect better fits their duties and powers.

¹⁰ “(...) die gewillt sind mit den Türken zu arbeiten (...) und möglichst schon in der Türkei tätig waren und mit besten Willen sich dort eine Existenz schaffen wollen.”

[3], 1924). The advertisement referred to the simple living conditions in Ankara, guaranteed German cuisine, and clarified that the reimbursement of return travel costs before the end of the two-year employment contract was only possible upon presentation of a medical certificate or in the event of a serious illness. As departure was already planned for the following days, the selection committee led by the city prefect and the future city planning officer of Ankara, Prof. Rabe, who conducted the interviews at the Turkish embassy in Berlin, had to act quickly. No references to the course of the interviews can be found in the documents reviewed or in the diplomatic correspondence. However, it can be assumed that, due to the self-imposed urgency, decisions may have been made hastily in one or two cases and that some recruits did not have realistic expectations of the challenges in Türkiye, nor were they necessarily suited for such a demanding undertaking.

An advertisement in the *Berliner Morgenpost* on September 26, 1924, indicated that preference was given to “(...) possibly single skilled workers (...)”¹¹ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [2], 1924). Based on the sources reviewed, it is not easy to determine the number of skilled workers who left for Ankara with Rabe. References in some embassy reports on the Rabe mission suggest that the group comprised roughly 40–60 men from various construction trades, most of whom came from Berlin and the surrounding area. On November 2, 1924, the pro-government newspaper *Hâkimiyet-i Milliye* (National Sovereignty) reported on the return of the city prefect, listing the equipment, machinery, and building materials and factory units ordered from German companies. Prof. Rabe is also mentioned in a half-sentence, along with other experts in the fields of water, green spaces, and electrification who were still to arrive, as well as 43 construction workers (*amele*) of various professions who had come with him to Ankara (Karataş, 2019, p. 25). It remains unclear whether these advertisements also appeared in other German cities and whether comparable selection and recruitment measures were carried out outside Berlin.

German City Planning Officer in Ankara

The available documents do not reveal how City Prefect Ali Haydar Bey first contacted his new city planning officer. The contact was likely established during his first trip to Europe in Berlin, and Prof. Dr. Max Rabe from Homburg v. d. Höhe was appointed by Ali Haydar Bey as “(...) technical advisor with the title of city planning officer for the reconstruction of Angora (...)”¹² (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [1], 1924, p. 1) for a two-year term starting on October 1, 1924. He was thus responsible for overseeing all trades involved in Ankara’s reconstruction. Prof. Rabe had a significant say in appointments and was guaranteed a monthly tax-free salary of 200 US dollars, as well as official accommodation and

¹¹ “(...) mögl. ledige Facharbeiter (...)”.

¹² “(...) technischer Beirat mit dem Titel Stadtbaurat für den Neuaufbau von Angora (...)”.

appropriate office space. He ranked directly below the city prefect (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [1], 1924 p. 2).

However, Rabe's tenure was short-lived, ending abruptly after only a few weeks. On December 6 of the same year, Embassy Counselor von Moltke (1884–1943)¹³ reported from the legation in İstanbul about intrigues within the German staff, Rabes' significant loss of authority, and other ominous and unfriendly events which had led to his immediate dismissal by the city prefect of Ankara (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [5], 1924, p. 1). In a newspaper interview on November 18, 1924, Ali Haydar Bey claimed there had been no disagreements between the city and Rabe, but that the problems existed between Rabe and the German workers he had brought with him. On the other hand, contrary statements can be found in which the city prefect described Prof. Rabe as a very angry and nervous contemporary who had submitted his resignation of his own accord (Çapa, 2020, p. 9).

A detailed report at the end of November 1924 from Embassy Counselor Walter Holstein (1881–unknown)¹⁴ in Ankara to Ambassador Nadolny clarified the circumstances of Rabe's dismissal. According to Holstein, Rabe's poor decisions, personal faults, and lack of leadership qualities had turned parts of the workforce against him. They not only refused to follow him but also instigated countless intrigues. Holstein reports on controversial disputes and turf wars, including a confrontation between Rabe and the construction manager Leube, which occurred in front of the workforce, regarding the structural calculations for a car garage and its support beams. The garage almost collapsed three days later if Rabe had not had an additional support beam inserted. "This led to a serious conflict of competence between Rabe, Leube, and Hikmet Bey, with lively participation on all sides (even the interpreters expressed their expert opinions) and finally a complaint to the city prefect by Rabe about Leube's complete incompetence; the result: a serious rift between Rabe and Leube"¹⁵ (PA-AA-RAV-128-538 [1], 1925, p. 2).

The same report describes another dispute that took place a few days later between Rabe and Schwab, the construction manager responsible for the electrical work, in the city prefecture building. During an inspection, Rabe criticized Schwab for a missing

¹³ Hans-Adolf Helmuth Erdmann Ludwig Waldemar von Moltke was embassy counselor in İstanbul between 1924 and 1928 and later envoy and ambassador in Warsaw. He is related to Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke through his grandfather Adolf von Moltke.

¹⁴ Walter Holstein was born in İstanbul and served as a soldier in the Prussian military mission in Mosul, among other places, in the staff of the Turkish army (Mangold-Will, 2013, p. 189). He was accredited to the Swedish Embassy in İstanbul in 1921 and held various posts in İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Ankara, and Trabzon for more than 20 years (Mangold-Will, 2013, p. 118).

¹⁵ "Darauf schwerer Kompetenzkonflikt zwischen Rabe, Leube und Hikmet Bey, unter lebhafter allseitiger Beteiligung (selbst die Dolmetscher äußerten sich sachverständig) und schließlich Beschwerde beim Stadtpräsidenten seitens Rabes über die gänzliche Unfähigkeit Leubes; Folge: schweres Zerwürfnis zwischen Rabe und Leube."

plug connection. Holstein reports a “violent altercation between Rabe and Schwab, an exchange of words, shouting, various people standing around in the corridors rushing over, and finally Hikmet Bey, who threw the entire group out of the room! As a result, Schwab is also portrayed to the prefect as a completely incompetent man”¹⁶ (PA-AA-RAV-128-538 [1], 1924, p. 3).

Because Rabe publicly humiliated his employees and for other reasons, intrigues developed against him, and within a very short time a large number of workers revolted. After further incidents, the prefect assigned Rabe the new task of drawing up a master plan for the construction of Ankara and relieved him of his previous duties. After a few days, 38 of the German skilled workers nevertheless assured Rabe of their full confidence in a written statement, because they did not want to be subordinate to the new city planning officer. Rabe had this letter translated into Turkish and sent it to the city prefect along with a message stating that he needed other German workers for his new task who might need to be recruited from Germany. Holstein’s report notes succinctly: “These two ‘démarches’ by Rabe finally broke the camel’s back: Rabe received written notice of his dismissal from the prefect on the same day (...); at the same time, the prefect informed Rabe verbally that he did not wish to have any further dealings with him and did not want to see him again”¹⁷ (PA-AA-RAV-128-538 [1], 1924, p. 4). Rabe approached the German embassy and asked them to represent his claim of \$1,000 against the Ankara city administration. He also announced further claims, such as the costs of a spa treatment, which, according to his own statements, he had to undergo due to an illness he had contracted while working for the city of Ankara (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [5], 1924, p. 1).

Rabe wanted to remain in Ankara until the prefecture had paid him the money. Holstein was apparently able to convince Rabe that he would be better off pursuing his claims with the Foreign Office in Berlin, whereupon he returned to Germany (PA-AA-RAV-128-538 [1], 1924, p. 6). Although only seven other skilled workers had left the country with Rabe, and the rest of the nearly 40 experts, wished to remain in Ankara, in the weeks and months that followed, the vast majority of German construction workers and engineers who had come to the city with him and the city prefect at the beginning of October 1924 were dismissed or resigned for personal reasons. In both cases, they were unable to claim reimbursement of their return travel expenses, an issue that occupied the legation and the Foreign Office for a long time.

¹⁶ “Heftiges Aneinandergeraten zwischen Rabe und diesem, Wortwechsel, Geschrei, Herbeilaufen verschiedener auf den Gängen Herumstehender, schließlich Hikmet Beys, der die ganze Gesellschaft aus dem Saal raussetzte! Folge: Auch Schwab wird dem Präfecten als ein ganz unfähiger Mann dargestellt.”

¹⁷ “Diese beiden „Démarches“ Rabes schlugen dem Fass endlich den Boden aus: Rabe erhielt noch am gleichen Tage vom Präfecten schriftlich die Kündigung, (...); gleichzeitig ließ der Präfect Rabe mündlich mitteilen, er wünsche keine Auseinandersetzung mehr mit ihm, wolle ihn überhaupt nicht mehr sehen.”

Diplomacy between Complaint Management and Foreign Trade

During those years, the German legation in İstanbul and the representation in Ankara performed a wide range of delicate complaint-management tasks and obviously exercised great moderation in order to mediate between the various demands of the German workers and the Ankara city administration. Since Ali Haydar Bey and Prof. Rabe had recruited the construction workers in Germany on their own initiative, without involving the Foreign Office, the latter did not initially see itself as the primary point of contact for the misconduct of some Germans or for their contractual claims. The German diplomats were keen to smooth over any unease on the Turkish side and to avert any negative effects of these isolated incidents as well as potential damage to the strengthened bilateral relations between the two countries. The documents in this collection reinforce the impression that there was particular concern about foreign trade relations and contracts for German companies exporting goods, building materials, and machinery to Türkiye.

Admittedly, there was also a willingness to listen to the concerns of the German skilled workers and their individual fates, as evidenced by the extensive correspondence in the fall of 1924 and winter of 1924/1925 between Ankara and İstanbul, as well as to and from Berlin, regarding various complaints, demands, and requests from relatives in Germany. However, when assessing most of the skilled workers who had lodged complaints, a very clear stance and critical opinion quickly emerged internally. In a lengthy concluding summary on the Rabe case and his expedition, Embassy Counselor Holstein reported: "(...) 90% of the Rabe people can only be described as adventurers and rabble who (...) hoped to establish a 'comfortable' existence here as a kind of master race among Negroes"¹⁸ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [11], 1925, p. 2). This assessment of Embassy Counselor Holstein reveals a clearly racist and colonial mindset that was widespread in parts of European foreign policy during the interwar period. This phrase testifies to a colonialist superiority complex and reflects a deeply rooted hierarchy of people based on racial categories and shows a sweeping devaluation of the Rabe participants, while at the same time conveying an Orientalist view of the African population. Such discourse often served to legitimize colonial intervention and delegitimized local or migrant actors across the board. Only about half of the construction workers who had traveled to Ankara with Rabe resigned shortly after Rabe's departure or were dismissed, and many of them sought new employment. At the end of March 1925, the embassy reported that a total of 21 Germans were still in the service of the Ankara city administration. Nevertheless, Ali Haydar Bey made it unmistakably clear in a conversation with Holstein that he could not tolerate construction workers who had come to Ankara at the expense of

¹⁸ "(...) 90% der Rabe-Leute kann man nicht anders als Abenteurer und Gesindel bezeichnen, die (...) hoffen, sich hier eine "gemütliche" Existenz als so eine Art Herrenmenschen unter Negeren gründen zu können."

the city administration now taking up employment with other companies in Ankara or the surrounding area. He had to “(...) solely out of consideration for his own prestige, insist that these people be expelled from Türkiye as troublesome foreigners (...) May I respectfully request the ambassador (...) to provide financial assistance to the Rabe people who are loitering here without jobs so that they can return to their homeland”¹⁹ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [11], 1925, pp. 2–3).

The city prefect’s position must have reached all other German companies and construction sites in Ankara and Anatolia, as almost none of the affected workers were able to find other employment. Furthermore, the conflict in Ankara alarmed the embassy and prompted Holstein to argue that the *German Reich* should bear the costs, as otherwise negative effects on German-Turkish relations were to be feared. In the same letter, Holstein put it quite clearly: “If a few dozen unemployed Germans are lying on the streets begging in the large international port city of Constantinople, this is hardly damaging to our prestige; but here it is different; here it could cause us serious and lasting damage”²⁰ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [11], 1925, p. 3). Ambassador Nadolny agreed with Holstein’s request and telegraphed Holstein’s assessment word for word to Berlin, adding that deportation should be prevented by immediate removal at the expense of the Reich “(...) since the people in Romania and Bulgaria would probably not find work there either and would have to be transported back to their homeland at the expense of the Reich”²¹ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [12], 1925, p. 2).

The failed Rabe case was therefore regarded by German diplomats not only as an embarrassment, but also as a growing threat to the reputation of the German Reich and the foreign economic relations of both countries. Diplomatic correspondence between the Foreign Office and the embassy contains many critical references to the arbitrary actions of the city prefect, who hired these skilled workers and Rabe without consulting the German authorities. After some initial hesitation, however, there was a fundamental change of heart, especially after the city prefect’s request for help, as “(...) everything will be done to ensure that the German company as a whole does not fail”²² (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [5], 1924, p. 2). The embassy and the Foreign Office developed ideas on how best to

¹⁹ “(...) allein aus Rücksicht auf sein eigenes Prestige darauf dringen, dass diese Leute als lästige Ausländer aus der Türkei ausgewiesen würden. (...) Darf ich Herrn Botschafter gehorsamst bitten, (...) die hier stellungslos herumlungenden Rabe-Leute mit Geldmitteln zwecks Rückkehr in die Heimat unterstützen zu dürfen.”

²⁰ “Wenn in der grossen internationalen Hafenstadt Konstantinopel einige Dutzend stellungs- und arbeitslose Deutsche bettelnd auf den Strassen liegen, ist es unserem Prestige wohl kaum schädlich; anders hier; hier kann uns daraus ein schwerer, nachhaltiger Schaden entstehen.”

²¹ “(...), da die Leute in Rumänien bzw. Bulgarien voraussichtlich auch keine Arbeitsmöglichkeit finden würden und von dort aus ebenfalls auf Reichskosten in die Heimat zurücktransportiert werden müssten.”

²² “(...) alles daran setzen wird, damit das deutsche Unternehmen als ganzes nicht scheitert.”

respond to the request for assistance from Ali Haydar Bey, who was looking for a successor for Rabe as well as additional skilled workers. Holstein suggested to Ambassador Nadolny that, given the low salaries paid by the Ankara city administration, it might be possible to recruit civil servants in Germany and grant them leave of absence, who would then receive “sufficient remuneration” from the city administration. “It is unlikely that we will be able to attract skilled workers here on the salary offered by Haidar Bey alone. And now, if anything, we must send only the very best people (...)”²³ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [11], 1925, p. 1).

Regarding the question of the costs for the repatriation of the Rabe people, Nadolny again instructed Holstein to seek talks with Ali Haydar Bey and find a middle ground for sharing the costs. The German diplomats had not failed to notice that Ali Haydar Bey’s trips to Europe and the failed recruitment of German skilled workers were now being viewed critically by the Turkish press, and that the city prefect was facing strong criticism from his opponents (PA-AA-RAV-128-538 [1], 1924, p. 7). However, as there was little hope of this happening, the ambassador recommended that the total costs be covered so that those who had fallen out of favor could be brought out of the country and back to Germany as soon as possible. For future ventures of this kind and further recruitment of German skilled workers to Türkiye, Nadolny also proposed that the Reich Ministry of Labor be involved in such a way that only contracts for employment abroad that contractually regulated the costs of the return journey would be permitted (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [12], 1925, p. 3). The Foreign Office responded quickly, and Berlin decided to advance the costs of the Rabe people’s return journey as an exception, with those affected having to commit in writing to repay the expenses (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [14], 1925). The documents available do not reveal how many of the Rabe people ultimately returned to Germany at their own expense or took advantage of the embassy’s offer. By the end of March 1925, the problem in Ankara seemed to have resolved itself, at least to a greater or lesser extent. Holstein reported: “(...) None of the Rabe people are currently unemployed or wandering around”²⁴ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [15], 1925).

Complaints and Other Tragic Individual Cases

The German diplomats in Türkiye and Berlin were clearly trying to smoothe things over and had to act against the alleged malicious intentions and unfair motives of some people in Rabe’s expedition. The Foreign Office reported on the engineer Bever, who had been recruited by Ali Haydar Bey as Rabe’s deputy and had terminated his contract at the same

²³ “ (...) gezahlten Romuneration über durchaus hinreichende Bezüge verfügen würden. Für das von Haidar Bey ausgeworfene Gehalt allein dürfte man wohl kaum Corifeen hierher locken können. Und wir müssen jetzt, wenn überhaupt, nur die ausgesucht besten Leute hersenden, (...)”

²⁴ “ (...) Stellungs- und arbeitslos treibt sich von den Rabe-Leuten zur Zeit niemand mehr herum. “

time as Rabe after only a short period. Bever had returned to Germany and frequently appeared at the Foreign Office in his capacity as representative of his own consulting firm. It was feared that he was posing as a negotiator for the city of Ankara vis-à-vis several companies in Jena, Dresden, and Dessau, which is why it was decided to warn the companies concerned in advance and thus avert further trouble and damage to bilateral relations (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [5], 1924, p. 2). Bever had already promoted the idea of establishing an information center for German skilled workers in Türkiye within the German community in İstanbul and immediately recommended himself as the representative responsible for such a contact point. He obviously found support for this idea from, among others, the president of the German Teutonia Association in İstanbul and representatives of the legation in İstanbul. The campaigning for this project must have been so vehement that the Foreign Office felt compelled to instruct the legation to warn the relevant persons in İstanbul about Bever. "Bever gives the impression of a mentally unstable person who overestimates his abilities and likes to play the busy pompous person. The legation is kindly requested to inform Mr. Ruff of this in an appropriate manner"²⁵ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [10], 1925, p. 2).

At the end of 1924, the Ankara city administration had complained to the embassy in a letter from Ali Haydar Bey regarding delays in deliveries of materials and machinery or the failure of some German companies to comply with agreements, and requested that the embassy mediate (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [6], 1924, p. 1). Ali Haydar Bey's opening statement emphasized the great importance of cooperation between the two countries, the Turkish side's strong trust in Germany, and the desire to benefit from the knowledge and experience of the German people in the construction of the new capital. The city prefect then listed a number of orders he had personally placed with German companies during his visit to Germany. Although he had made cash payments on site and immediately instructed the Ottoman Bank to issue the necessary letters of credit for the remaining amounts upon his return, Ali Haydar Bey believed that some of the companies had only partially or inadequately fulfilled their contractual obligations. For example, some machines and manufacturing parts that were strategically important for producing the necessary building materials had not been delivered as contractually agreed, according to the accusation, leading to fears of considerable delays in the further construction of the city.

Specifically, the city prefect complained about delays in the delivery of a wood factory and a wood-cutting machine that he had ordered from the *Allgemeine Werkzeug-Maschinen-Gesellschaft* in Berlin, and in the shipment of the brick factory and the kiln from the

²⁵ "Bever macht den Eindruck eines geistig nicht ganz normalen Menschen, der seine Fähigkeiten überschätzt und gern den geschäftigen Wichtigtuier spielt. Die Gesandtschaft wird ergebenst gebeten, Herrn Ruff davon in geeigneter Weise mündlich zu verständigen."

Nienburger Maschinenfabrik in Nienburg a. d. Saale (Niemag) for the construction of a strategically important brick factory in Ankara. In both cases, he had paid 15 percent of the purchase price in cash (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [6], 1924, p. 2), and both parties had different interpretations of the installment amount. In its reply to the AA, Niemag, as an export-oriented company, made it clear that customer satisfaction was its highest priority and that it would not engage in any behavior that could damage the reputation of German industry. This was particularly important, as this first major order in Türkiye was intended to test the market for further follow-up orders (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [7], 1925, p. 1). Niemag was able to demonstrate, through the enclosed purchase agreement, that there had been a misinterpretation on the part of the city prefect. The written agreement regulated the sale of materials, fittings, and plans for the construction of a kiln for a brick factory, but not a complete kiln, as claimed by the city prefect. In addition, there had been delays in the contractually agreed opening of the letter of credit at the Ottoman Bank, which had led to a series of rejections and further delays in the letters of credit deposited and the payment of the installments due.

However, in another case of delay, there was particular urgency for reasons of public health. The city prefect had paid 80 percent of the purchase price in cash for several “(...) Etuve machines (...) which are related to public health in the country (...)”²⁶ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [6], 1924, p. 1). The correspondence available does not reveal the purpose for which these drying ovens were purchased. Since such machines were used for disinfection and sterilization for medical purposes, it can be assumed that they were intended for use in the health sector. With one exception, all disputes with German companies including Niemag had been resolved by March 1925, and Ali Haydar Bey thanked the ambassador for his intervention (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [13], 1925).

The embassy was also informed of many individual cases, some of which were very specific and unique. For example, a rumor was spread that the construction worker Rudolf Prien, who had been dismissed for refusing to work and who, unlike most others, had been able to find employment on the construction of the railway line between Ankara and Sivas, had been detained against his will and raped (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [8], 1925, p. 1). However, Prien personally rejected these outrageous allegations as untrue and mere rumors in a written statement; he had neither been detained nor raped. Further individual cases were pursued by relatives in Germany who contacted the Foreign Office in Berlin. One such case was that of the mother of 22-year-old Eugen von Niessen, who was concerned about her son's health because he suffered from a lung condition and had been recruited by Rabe despite being certified unfit for tropical service by a doctor. The mother expressed her fears that “(...) her son would not be able to tolerate the climate

²⁶ “(...) Etuve-Maschinen, (...) die in Verbindung mit der Volksgesundheit im Lande stehen(...)”.

and would perish”²⁷ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [9], 1925) and asked the Foreign Office to arrange for his early release from the two-year contract and reimbursement of his return travel expenses. Niessen returned to Germany early and unharmed. This case may be further evidence that the recruitment campaign in Berlin did not have the desired response and was not as successful as had been hoped or imagined, and that the Turkish authorities had not examined the suitability of the men with the desired depth and seriousness. In another case, that of 19-year-old bricklayer Bruno Köpke, whose father also approached the Foreign Office in Berlin, the embassy or legation councilor Holstein was able to act as a mediator. Köpke was referred by Holstein to another German company, Firma Heusler from İstanbul, which was building the new post office in Ankara. But his employment there was also short-lived, until he found a job with Philipp Holzmann in Diyarbakır on the construction site for the railway line (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [16], 1925, p. 2).

Although the embassy had been able to prevent vagrant Germans from straining bilateral relations by advancing their travel expenses, there were still a number of cases in which those affected asserted claims against the AA after their return to Germany. For example, civil engineer Wilhelm Panzenhagen claimed wages withheld by the AA and also complained in Berlin to Counselor Holstein, who, despite Panzenhagen’s request, did not want to intervene with the city prefect without instructions from Berlin (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [17], 1925). The Panzenhagen case was delicate for another reason, because he threatened to go to the German press if necessary and seemed prepared to cause negative headlines. This was taken very seriously by the German Embassy and the AA. “In my opinion, this man’s flight to the German press must be prevented at all costs and by all means in the interests of our work here,”²⁸ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [19], 1925, p. 2) according to Holstein in Ankara.

Finally, there were also accidents that strained bilateral relations on more than one occasion. For example, two workers were injured in an accident while building a silo under the supervision of the mechanic Börnicke; one Hungarian worker died and a Turkish worker was seriously injured. Börnicke was temporarily taken into police custody and Envoy Holstein held talks with the city administration for his release. However, the person concerned had already attracted negative attention on several occasions due to drunkenness in public and had “(...) caused a completely scandalous incident one evening in a state of total intoxication at the Fresco restaurant (...), which (...) gave rise to a temporary surge of anti-German sentiment here”²⁹ (PA-AA-RAV-128-537 [18], 1925, p. 2).

²⁷ “ (...), daß ihr Sohn das Klima nicht vertragen wird und zugrunde geht.”

²⁸ “Eine Flucht dieses Mannes in die Öffentlichkeit der deutschen Presse müsste meines Erachtens im Interesse unserer hiesigen Arbeit unter allen Umständen und mit jedem Mittel verhindert werden.”

²⁹ “ (...) in total betrunkenem Zustande im Lokal Fresco eines Abends einen ganz skandalösen Auftritt verursacht (...), der (...) Anlaß zu einer vorübergehenden stärkeren antideutschen Hetze hieselbst geboten hat.”

Conclusion

The episode surrounding the recruitment and subsequent expulsion of German skilled workers in the context of the construction of the new capital, Ankara, points to fundamental dynamics of modern migration regimes. It shows that migration in the early 20th century was not only motivated by economic factors or individual motives, but was also deeply embedded in state modernization projects, national representation interests, and diplomatic constellations. Migration was selectively controlled, symbolically charged, and politically instrumentalized, and it could be quickly reversed or terminated if expectations were not met. The case exemplifies the ambivalence of selective migration: while foreign skilled workers were initially welcomed as bearers of know-how and civilizational progress, within a few months they became “annoying foreigners,” whose mere presence was perceived as a threat to national prestige. This episode not only underscores the fragility of early Republican labor migration projects but also points to a deeper tension between technocratic modernization and cultural sovereignty that continues to shape many states to this day.

In the case studied, the recruitment of German engineers and skilled workers was part of a symbolically charged prestige concept: the presence of these experts was intended to demonstrate the young Republic of Türkiye’s ability to connect with “Western modernity” and to showcase the new capital as a place of technological progress and international recognition. At the same time, the episode highlights the ambivalence of such strategies: as soon as conflicts in everyday working life came to a head, and the symbolic added value threatened to be lost, migration was abruptly restricted. This selective control shows that migration must be understood here not as a spontaneous flow but as an actively regulated process, whose decisions were closely linked to the protection of prestige and political sovereignty. The city of Ankara acted not only as a recipient of technical expertise but also as the guardian of a fragile symbolic order, in which the loss of the hoped-for prestige was perceived as a crisis-ridden disappointment.

Furthermore, the article adds an important perspective to the history of Turkish-German migration: it shows that the direction of migration is historically contingent and did not only run from the global South to the global North but also in the opposite direction, in specific political and institutional constellations. German-Turkish relations in the interwar period thus appear less as a linear precursor to later labor migration from Türkiye and more as a complex space of exchange in which migration was a central instrument of diplomatic, economic, and symbolic-political interests. In addition, the individual fates of German workers in Anatolia in 1924–1925, briefly described here, are a historical footnote, which is presented from the very narrow narrative perspective of diplomatic reporting. However, this account breaks down the great symbolism of Ankara’s rise to capital-city status from the meta-level to an everyday cultural dimension, making

the ideological spaces of the new Türkiye tangible and experienceable. This footnote also represents an expansion of German-Turkish migration history to include a lesser-known migration route from Germany to Türkiye.

This historical episode reminds us that migration is not a one-dimensional or timelessly stable process but is always caught between political interests, institutional orders, and symbolic attributions. The failure of the Rabe mission, in particular, shows that migration is not only shaped by economic needs or individual mobility but is also strongly regulated by state selection mechanisms, diplomatic considerations, and social notions of belonging. The history of German construction workers in Ankara therefore raises further questions: under what conditions is migration constructed as desirable? When does it tip over into state-legitimized exclusion? And how do national modernization efforts relate to global migration dynamics? This episode not only adds a historically neglected dimension to the conventional narrative of Turkish-German migration history, but also illustrates how closely labor migration, state formation, and international relations have been intertwined throughout history—and continue to be so today.

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