

Book Reviews

The Saga of a Friendship: Asa Kent Jennings and the American Friends of Turkey. Rifat N Bali. İstanbul: Libra Kitap, 2009. P/bk 520 pp. ISBN 978-605-89308-3-4. Price 40.00TL.

In *The Saga of a Friendship*, Bali traces the story of one man, Asa Kent Jennings (1877-1933), and his decade-long relationship with Turkey, starting just prior to the creation of the Republic in 1923. Bali's primary task is to assert the position of Jennings in a body of scholarship, that has either marginalized or forgotten entirely the role that the American philanthropist played. The book is an attempt at "straight" history insofar as it does not express an overt argument, and offers little in the way of interpretation. Approximately four-fifths of the text consists of reproduced primary sources, and Bali's labor has been to unite these sources to tell a cohesive, if selective, story. For the scholar interested in either Turkish/US relations or the early years of the Turkish Republic, *Saga* offers both a wealth of documentation and the unique perspectives of foreigners witnessing the creation of a state.

Bali begins with the history and activities of Christian missionary organizations that started working in Turkey in the late Ottoman period. The American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) were both active in Turkey prior to World War I, partaking in activities ranging from founding schools to creating clubs for meeting and recreation to proselytizing, particularly among Armenian subjects of the Empire. Taking a lesson from the ethnic and religious factionalism that had splintered the Balkans, members of the Ottoman administration looked upon these groups with great suspicion, a trend that only increased with the onset of the republic. It was the YMCA that brought Jennings to work in İzmir on a temporary assignment. He arrived in August of 1922, just before the Turkish forces defeated the Greeks, and was thus on hand to see masses of Greek and Armenian refugees flooding into the city. Working under very difficult circumstances, Jennings arranged both ships and permission for the refugees' flight to Lesbos and other islands, thereby saving the lives of an estimated 300,000-500,000 people. This work secured him both fame and the respect of important leaders, including Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and US Rear Admiral Mark Bristol, who would later become High Commissioner in İstanbul.

Jennings chose to continue working in Turkey, shifting his focus to charity work in the newly-formed nation. His initial efforts were centered in İzmir under the auspices of the YMCA, but political exigencies called for more attention to Ankara, where a joint YMCA-Türk Ocakları (Turkish Hearths) program became the focus. As with all of Jennings' subsequent work, this project entailed funds- and awareness-raising in the US, and a great deal of networking with government officials in Turkey. Jennings' goals always included a component of shared responsibility, but this joint project ultimately failed because the primary US donor, Arthur Nash, chose to give funds unconditionally, quashing any incentive for the Turkish government to work with Jennings. The ensuing difficulties were compounded by a growing distrust within Turkey for any group associated with Christianity.

Taking stock of the situation, Jennings disassociated himself from the YMCA and began a new project, which would eventually become the American Friends of Turkey (AFOT). AFOT worked in conjunction with various Turkish government organizations including the *Himaye Eftal* (Child Welfare Association), *Hayır İşlerine Yardım Cemiyeti* (Welfare Society) and the *Türk Maarif Cemiyeti* (Turkish Educational Society) on programs that ranged from setting up playgrounds to providing cattle for Mustafa Kemal's model farm, to sponsoring Turkish students in the US, and bringing educators who could collaborate in the creation of a uniquely Turkish educational system. Though the projects met with considerable success, both increasing levels of xenophobia and the economic downturn inspired by the Great Depression took their toll. After Jennings died in 1933, AFOT greatly scaled back its work. A related group, The American-Turkish Society, which included Jennings' son, Asa Will Jennings, as a director, was founded in 1949, and a different AFOT was founded in 1982.

Organized meticulously into five sections plus a lengthy set of appendices, Bali's *Saga* provides a clear narrative of the Jennings' story supported by thorough documentation from a great variety of sources. The extensive inclusion of primary material renders it ideal for the researcher

interested in Jennings, the YMCA, AFOT, US/Turkish relations, or aspects of the early Republican administration. Of particular interest are the gripping first-hand accounts of the effects of nationalism and xenophobia on the work of AFOT. One can almost see through the eyes of the foreigner at that time the burgeoning phenomenon that has since come to be known as the "Sèvres Syndrome." Drawing its name from this infamous 1920 treaty that sought to parcel the Ottoman Empire out among the victors of WWI, this "syndrome" refers to the still common conception in Turkey that the nation is under immediate threat from enemies whose primary goal is to extinguish its existence.

While Bali's account gives excellent documentation of the difficulties faced by foreigners in Turkey at the time, the history presented is clearly one-sided. We get very little information directly from the Turkish perspective, and minimal critical commentary from the author to balance the overall narrative, which basically presents Jennings as a philanthropist with pure motives, encountering repeated obstacles from the people he is trying to help. There is also no explanation of the criteria used in selecting sources, and the book lacks any critical analysis concerning the contents of or potential motives behind the primary documents, which tend to consist of letters, reports, and news items. Having a clearer sense of why documents were chosen, and what rhetorical and political contexts they served in their time would be helpful.

Bali has combined a minimalist approach to commentary with a maximalist inclusion of documents, apparently letting the sources "speak for themselves." Despite the aforementioned critiques, the endeavor is, to a large degree, successful, insofar as a compelling story is woven through the 400-plus pages of primary text and even the 100 pages of annexes, where one can read candid sketches of Turkish officials from the US perspective and find the rules of the game Vobakr (volleyball-basketball-cricket), invented and apparently quickly forgotten on the fields of a playground in Ankara. The story is a testament to an era of positivism, of both Turkish and American varieties, and it covers convincingly the early meeting and mingling of some of these ideals through the character of Asa Kent Jennings.

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