

# Wheat, Land, and Politics in Cold War Turkey

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My research in the Rockefeller Archive Center is part of a larger project, tentatively titled, “Land as the Object of Development in Turkey, 1945-1980,” that examines contests over land reform as a central site of statecraft, population management, and modernization, where competing visions of agricultural development, upheld by leftist intellectuals, populist politicians, and American experts, were implemented or stalled over the decades. The larger project examines how different approaches to rural development, rooted in the country’s political economy, class configurations, and nationalist project, provided both the motivation for and alternatives to “adopting” rural development models urged by American advisors.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, US military planners and agricultural experts took with them the notion that land reform would curb a revolutionary peasantry and replace it with an entrepreneurial class of landowners across the “Asian defense perimeter,” to Japan, Korea, Pakistan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and ultimately Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it was increasingly the “technical” model of land reform, rather than the redistributionist one, that prevailed in the projects of policymakers and experts. While American agencies and private organizations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, were at first tolerant observers of programs like the *ejido* system in interwar Mexico, which seized private estates and distributed them to millions of landless peasants, they increasingly pushed for an industrialized version of agricultural reform. The Ford Foundation’s community development projects in India were replaced with Green Revolution technologies, as rural programs began to concentrate on seed types, yields, mechanization, and increasing rates of agricultural productivity.<sup>3</sup> Massive projects, such as dams and TVA-style development spread across Afghanistan, Iran, Jordan, and others, while land reform in Vietnam was redefined as resettlement projects and the Strategic Hamlet Program of 1962.<sup>4</sup> The consolidation of land became the rule, as fragmentation was identified as an obstacle to efficiency.

The story of American-supported land reform played out somewhat differently in postwar Turkey, when the country became a beneficiary of Marshall Plan funds. The European Recovery Program mostly displaced a proposed Land Reform Bill of 1945, which was to eliminate landlessness among the peasantry by redistributing the properties of absentee landlords to the tenants and sharecroppers who worked on them. Instead, the Marshall Plan allocated agricultural machinery and built highways across the country, which ultimately benefited large landowners.<sup>5</sup> Still, the American model was not imposed on a blank state. Its full adoption was carried out by the Democratic Party (DP), which came to power in 1950, representing large landowners, commercial farmers, and small merchants.

After a coup displaced DP from power, the military government proposed land reform in 1961, only to see the attempt halted by another center-right party after the resumption of multiparty politics within a year. Throughout the 1960s, the Turkish Workers' Party ran a campaign that emphasized the importance of land reform, but internal debates among leftist Turkish intellectuals and political activists as to the character of Turkish agriculture was interrupted by yet another military intervention in 1971.<sup>6</sup> A similar story played out in the aftermath of this coup, when the Republican Party (CHP) undertook modest redistribution in eastern provinces before they were ousted by a center-right coalition. It should be noted that these attempts were consistent with a longstanding identification of small landownership with nationalist sentiment. The republican policymakers and intellectuals argued that appropriating land from Kurdish landlords would dissolve feudal relations of production and eradicate the economic base of Kurdish identity.<sup>7</sup> Land reform projects were also entangled with population exchange and resettlement policies and were thus emblematic of the Republican desire to limit or at least manage mobility in rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

Land reform debates among the country's ruling elite did not take place in the absence of international interlocutors. For instance, when policymakers and businessmen convened for a seminar on "Land Reform and Economic

Development” in Istanbul in 1971, presenters included representatives of the Food and Agriculture Organization and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).<sup>9</sup> USAID’s work in Turkey in the 1960s addressed the question of “rural development,” in ways that the organization hoped would avoid what they deemed to be the failures of “the ‘Marshall Plan’ approach.” One AID-commissioned report from 1964 outlined an alternative strategy that would take advantage of new opportunities, such as the establishment of a Ministry of Rural Affairs, and encourage private enterprise rather than rely on agricultural loans and counterpart funds.<sup>10</sup> The report urged the creation of a new administrative unit to oversee the marketing, supply, storage, and distribution of agricultural commodities and requisites, such as fertilizers, seeds, and pesticides. As for land reform, the rapporteurs counseled support for policies that would combine methods of fragmentation with consolidation, and limiting redistribution to state, rather than private, land holdings.

The year 1965 marked a new phase in agricultural development techniques with the import of Mexican wheat to Turkey for the first time.<sup>11</sup> This initiative had its roots in the Rockefeller Foundation’s Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP) dating back to 1943. The popularization of Norman Borlaug’s breeding techniques and the international circulation of these seeds across Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East was overseen by the International Maize and Improvement Center (CIMMYT). In 1965, the Turkish Ministry of Agriculture succeeded in obtaining 20,000 tons of Mexican seeds. While USAID refused to finance the procurement under PL 480 and encouraged the Turkish government to use its own foreign exchange sources and to negotiate an off-setting agricultural development loan later, the agency did provide extension agents for the project with assistance from Oregon State University. These agents offered training for the adoption of the new seeds, which arrived alongside new supplies of nitrogen and phosphate fertilizers, which were imported and distributed through a new agricultural supply agency.

The arrival of the new material also led to the signing of a mutual cooperation agreement between the Government of Turkey and the Rockefeller Foundation on April 28, 1969, resulting in the establishment of a wheat research and training project centered in Ankara in 1970. According to official RF publications, the timing of the Turkish government's interest in wheat research was serendipitous, since the Foundation's plans to establish a regional program based in Lebanon had just been cancelled due to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.<sup>12</sup> As Mexican wheat rapidly spread across coastal Turkey, Bill Wright, an RF agronomist was appointed as the co-director of the Ankara project along with Ahmet Demirlicakmak, a local wheat scientist. In 1971, Wright was joined by plant pathologist Michael Prescott, plant breeder Arthur Klatt, Oregon State University agronomist Floyd Bolton and finally, by economist Charles Mann, who also taught at the economics department at Middle East Technical University. It is their correspondences and reports that I examined during my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center.

The writings of the members of the Wheat Training and Research Project chronicle both the successes (very high yield in both 1975 and 1976, likely aided by good weather) and the failures encountered on the field.<sup>13</sup> An outcome of the program that was deemed to be particularly successful was the training of wheat scientists abroad, with joint funding from RF, USAID, and the FAO. Twenty-two scientists received graduate degrees in American universities (especially Oregon State University) and another twenty-eight received training at CIMMYT's nine-month in-service course in Mexico. By the end of 1975, the Wheat Training and Research Project operated at twelve different locations across Turkey, working on creating high-yield, disease-resistant types of wheats.<sup>14</sup>

Among the difficulties that the project encountered in Turkey were farmers' resistance to adopting the new seeds and technologies, as well as the fact that the Mexican varieties were not strongly resistant to Turkish strains of two fungus diseases, septoria leaf blotch and stripe rust. The 1970s were also a time of turmoil and instability both in Turkish domestic politics and in Turkish-American

relations. In one example, Bill Wright, the co-director of the project, complained that he dealt with eight ministers of agriculture in the five years he spent in the country. He wrote: “it seems that just as you get one educated to the point where he can be useful, off he goes and in comes a new one who doesn’t know wheat from bananas.”<sup>15</sup>

Still, various Turkish governments offered cooperation through regulations that eased the efforts of the wheat research and training project. In 1975, for instance, teams of RF researchers and extensions agents set up farmer demonstration plots in Ankara provinces. The demonstrations displayed the “package” of “best” practices for tillage implements, herbicides, fertilizers, and seeding dates, based on complex experiments which were conducted at the research laboratory in Ankara. Among their recommendations were improved tillage to conserve soil moisture through the fallow season and the use of fertilizer-responsive and disease-resistant varieties of seeds. When Charles Mann, the economist, compared the costs and returns of traditional methods and those on display at the demonstrations, he concluded that “the recommended practices cost only 25 percent more than usual farmer’s practices, but output increased so much that the ratio of increased benefits to increased costs averaged over 5 to 1.”<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, Mann and other RF researchers contemplated the relationship between farm size and the beneficiaries of “improved technology.”<sup>17</sup> The evaluation of new production practices in relation to “alternative enterprises in farming systems of the country” had in fact been an early rationale for the wheat research and training program.<sup>18</sup> In 1973, Resat Aktan, an Ankara University agricultural economist, conducted a field survey of 1250 farmers for CIMMYT. The study posed questions about the adoption of improved technologies, such as seeding, harvesting, fertilizing and irrigation along with questions about land tenure status, size and fragmentation of farms.<sup>19</sup> Aktan’s brief stint as Minister of Agriculture in 1974, followed by his subsequent return to Ankara University and his other writings on land reform, are a further testament to the imbrications of Turkish intellectuals,

policymakers, and American agencies, such as the Rockefeller Foundation during this period.<sup>20</sup> “Land as the Object of Development” will examine these intellectual and political entanglements in further detail in order to show that American advisors’ visions for agricultural development were not imposed on blank slates, but were rather in dynamic conversation with local material and political realities.

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Atul Kohli, *State-Directed Development: Political Power and Industrialization in the Global Periphery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> On the earlier community development programs, see Nicole Sackley, “Village Models: Etawah, India, and the Making and Remaking of Development in the Early Cold War” *Diplomatic History* 2013; Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Benjamin Siegel, “Modernizing Peasants and ‘Master Farmers’: All-India Crop Competitions and the Politics of Progressive Agriculture in Early Independent India” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37 (1), 2017: 64-85.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Citino, “The Ghosts of Development: The United States and Jordan’s East Ghor Canal” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16 (4), Fall 2014: 159-88; Nick Cullather, “Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State” *The Journal of American History* 89 (9), 2002: 512-37; Cyrus Schayegh, “Iran’s Karaj Dam Affair: Emerging Mass Consumerism, the Politics of Promise, and the Cold War in the Third World” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (3), 2012: 612-43; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Land Reform and Social Change in Iran* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Begüm Adalet, *Hotels and Highways: The Construction of Modernization Theory in Cold War Turkey* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> David Seddon and Ronnie Marguiles, “The Politics of the Agrarian Question in Turkey: Review of a Debate” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 11 (3), 1984: 28-59.

<sup>7</sup> Asım Karaömerlioğlu, “Elite Perceptions of Land Reform in Early Republican Turkey.” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 27, no. 3 (2000): 115–41.

<sup>8</sup> Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); İlhan Tekeli, “Involuntary Displacement and the Problem of Resettlement in Turkey from the Ottoman Empire to the Present.” *Center for Migration Studies* 11, no. 4 (2012): 202–26; Adalet, *Hotels and Highways*.

<sup>9</sup> Program for Land Reform and Economic Development, October 18-21, 1971, enclosed in Sadun Katipoglu to unnamed, October 4, 1971, Folder 148, Box 12, Series 2, RG 6.19, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>10</sup> John D. Montgomery, “Comments on American Aid to Agricultural Development in Turkey,” March 24-April 5, 1964, enclosed in Raymond H. Davis (consultant) to Ralph Gleason (Food and Agriculture Officer, US AID to Turkey), April 23, 1964, RG 1.9-1.15, Series: 105, Box 2002C. Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

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- <sup>11</sup> L.M. Humphrey, *Mexican Wheat Comes to Turkey* (Food and Agriculture Division USAID/Turkey, 1969). RG 1.9-1.15, Series: 105, Box 2002C. Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>12</sup> Bill Wright, "A Brief Review of the Turkish Wheat Research and Training Project," April 1977. Folder: wheat improvement organization and planning, February-August 1977, Box: R 2003, Series 105: CIMMYT; Subseries 804: CIMMYT Turkish Wheat Project, RG 1.9-RG 1.15 (A83-A89), Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>13</sup> *CIMMYT Today*, enclosed in John Knowles to Theodore Kesburgh, June 21, 1977. Folder: wheat improvement administration (1976-77), Box: R 2003, Series 105: CIMMYT; Subseries 804: CIMMYT Turkish Wheat Project, RG 1.9-RG 1.15 (A83-A89), Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>14</sup> Bill Wright, Agricultural Project Leader to John Pino, Director of Agricultural Sciences at Rockefeller Foundation, December 9, 1975. Folder: wheat improvement organization and planning 1975, Box: R 2003, Series 105: CIMMYT; Subseries 804: CIMMYT Turkish Wheat Project, RG 1.9-RG 1.15 (A83-A89), Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>15</sup> Bill Wright to John Pino, November 14, 1975. Folder: wheat improvement organization and planning 1975. Box: R 2003, Series 105: CIMMYT; Subseries 804: CIMMYT Turkish Wheat Project, RG 1.9-RG 1.15 (A83-A89), Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Charles Mann, "The effects of government policy on income distribution: a case study of wheat production in Turkey since World War II," March 1978. Folder: wheat improvement organization and planning 1978, Box: R 2003, Series 105: CIMMYT; Subseries 804: CIMMYT Turkish Wheat Project, RG 1.9-RG 1.15 (A83-A89), Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>18</sup> Ralph W. Cummings, H.A. Rodenhiser, J.W. Gibler, "The Cooperative Wheat Research Program in Turkey: A Report to the Ministry of Agriculture and to the Rockefeller Foundation, August 1968. Folder 1, Box 1, Series 19, RG 6, Field Offices, Ankara, Turkey, FA 116, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.
- <sup>19</sup> Charles Mann to Ralph Davidson, May 21, 1975. Folder 37: Resat Aktan, Box 3 Series 19, RG 6, Field Offices, Ankara, Turkey, FA 116, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center. Also see Nazmi Demir, *The Adoption of New Bread Wheat Technology in Selected Regions of Turkey* (Mexico: CIMMYT, 1976).
- <sup>20</sup> For instance, see Resat Aktan, "Problems of Land Reform in Turkey," *Middle East Journal* 20 (3), 1966: 317-334; "Zirai Teknolojide İlerlemeler ve Arazi Reformu" *Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 1956.