

Centenary of the Republic and 90th Anniversary of the University Reform in Türkiye

Önder Ergönül^{1,2} 

¹ Department of Infectious Diseases and Clinical Microbiology, Koç University School of Medicine, Istanbul, Turkey

² Koç University İşbank Center for Infectious Diseases, İstanbul, Turkey

The Oppenheimer film reminded us once again of the situations in which scientists were forced to immigrate unwillingly from their own countries. No doubt, the most striking tragedies happened during the Nazi period in Germany. The film reflected many physicists, including Einstein, who emigrated from Europe to the USA during this period and aroused curiosity to get to know them and their stories better.

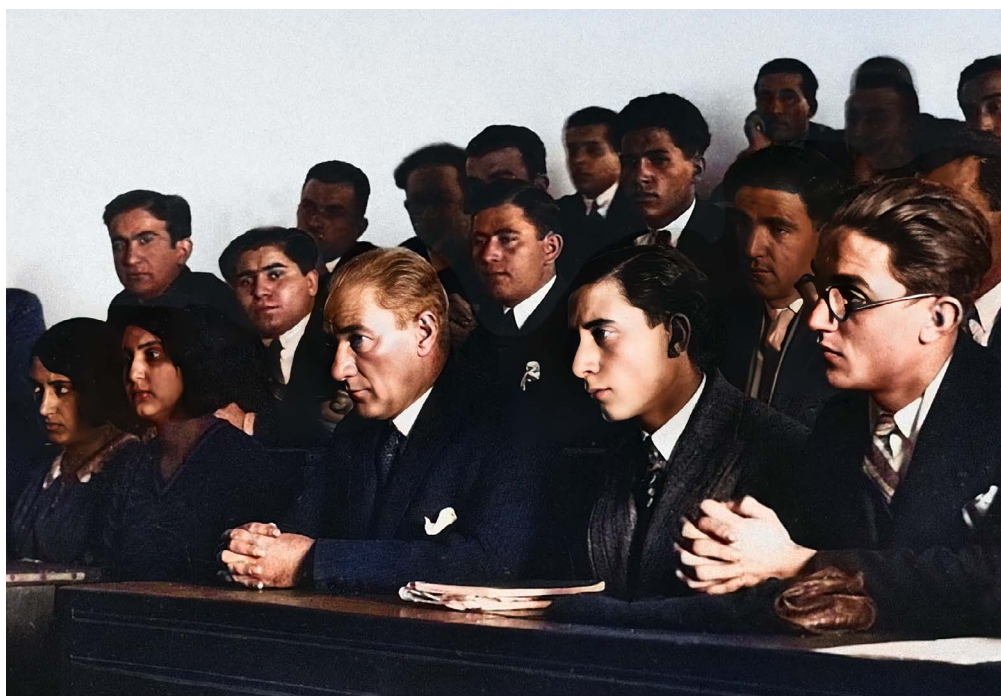


Figure 1. Atatürk with students at Istanbul University (1930).

Corresponding Author:
Önder Ergönül

E-mail:
oergonul@ku.edu.tr

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While such a tragic event was taking place on the one hand, a new country was emerging from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire and this new republic was trying to take its place in the modern world. Fundamental reforms were made in every aspect of society to catch up with the contemporary world, and in the 1930s, finally, it was time for university reform. In this short article, I will summarize the surprisingly positive impact of this tragedy on the university reform in Türkiye that happened 90 years ago.

The Exodus of Scientists from Nazi Germany

Two months after Adolf Hitler was appointed as chancellor, the law for “The Restoration of the Professional Civil Service” was adopted on April 7, 1933. This law ordered the immediate dismissal of anyone who had at least one Jewish grandparent in government positions or who was their political opponent. Thousands of teachers, judges, and academics lost their jobs. A fifth of university professors in German-speaking countries were laid off, two-thirds of whom left the country, including around 10,000 doctors (1). The Nazi regime deported leading researchers such as Albert Einstein, Hans Krebs, and even the national hero Fritz Haber, who helped develop chemical weapons during the First World War (2).

German neuropathologist and refugee Philipp Schwartz founded the *Notgemeinschaft Deutscher Wissenschaftler im Ausland* (Emergency Association of German Academics in Exile) in 1933 and prepared lists for expelled academics to find work in other countries (1). Most of the people on the expelled list were Jewish, although some had spouses or other family members who were not Jewish; some supported communism and others spoke against the government. Many of the scientists emigrated to powerhouse scientific countries such as the US and the UK. On the other hand, out of 129 displaced physicists listed on a 1936 census, six emigrated to Türkiye, making it the fourth most popular destination behind the US, the UK, and Switzerland (2).

The 1933 University Reform in Türkiye

Before the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, scientific studies were extremely weak and far behind the times. Atatürk and the Minister of

National Education, Dr. Reşit Galip, were eager to transform the existing higher education institution, known as the *Dârülfünûn* (House of Sciences) of the old regime, into the contemporary İstanbul University. *Dârülfünûn*, the country’s only higher education institution during the Ottoman period and the first decade of the Republic, had a conservative character in the society where the social revolutions took place. Politicians and scientists who were in power at that time believed that *Dârülfünûn* was raising people who did not think, question, or criticize enough, and that this institution was completely insensitive to the problems of the country. As one of the urgent tasks of the time, the current situation of higher education should have been described, and the needs should have been determined objectively. Similar to today’s overseers’ tasks that happen in some institutions, Atatürk invited Swiss Pedagogy Professor Albert Malche to prepare a comprehensive situation report in 1932. According to the report of Albert Malche, there was no research in *Dârülfünûn*, the professors did not know foreign languages to communicate with the world, and there was no scientific output. By this report, Atatürk decided to reform higher education based on the European management and education model. One of the conclusions was inviting professors from developed countries, mainly from Europe, and sending students abroad.

The need for university reform in the 10-year-old young Republic of Türkiye coincidentally met the seeking of German academics for a home who fled from Nazi Germany. The Republic of Türkiye, under the leadership of Atatürk, invited German scientists from all fields. Philipp Schwartz came to Ankara with modest expectations in the summer of 1933 after receiving Atatürk’s invitation. Schwartz met with Turkish Minister of National Education Dr. Reşit Galip to secure three job offers. After seven hours of meeting, Schwartz received approval for the arrival of 30 professors (1), much more than expected.

By the end of 1933, 42 German academics had started working at İstanbul University. They received salaries almost equivalent to those in Germany on five-year contracts. Some refugee professors liked to express that İstanbul had become “the best university in Germany,” citing the influx of talent from Tür-

kiye and the fact that many schools in Germany no longer had enough staff to teach all classes. Even Albert Einstein considered the offer to work in Türkiye before applying to the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) in the USA (2). In the following years, dozens more German academics would find employment in İstanbul and other Turkish institutions.

Refugee Scientists with Numbers

To provide a clearer perspective on this migration, I've sourced data from several primary references (5, 6, 7, 8), and the biographies of each scientist that could be reached via online sources. Arnold Reisman listed 189 academics in his book (8), but detailed information was available for 117 scientists. Among 117 incoming academics, the median age on their arrival was 44 (min 25, max 75), and 93% of them were male. The median duration of their stay in Türkiye was 8 years (min 1, max 45); 75% stayed in İstanbul, mainly İstanbul University, and 25% stayed in Ankara. The ones in İstanbul University were directly involved in the university reform led by Atatürk.

The highest proportion of the professors was in the health sciences (37%) who came to the medical school of İstanbul University and the public health institute in Ankara. According to Reisman, 26% of them were professors of health sciences. The second highest proportion of the professors came to the faculty of sciences.

After the Second World War, many of them moved to the USA (39%), 30% moved to Germany, some stayed until retirement, and 18% of them died in Türkiye.

Remarkable Implications of Incoming Professors for the Future

The unanticipated influx of intellectual capital following Germany's dark period had ramifications not just for Germany, but for host countries as well. Using Nobel Prizes as a metric of scientific contributions, it becomes evident that the epicenter of infectious diseases research transitioned from Germany to the USA post-World War II (3). In this backdrop, Turkey, with visionary leadership, capitalized immensely on the expertise of these migrating professors. Emigrant economist Fritz Neumark,

who later wrote her memoirs, would observe that although German-speaking refugees in the United States outnumbered those in Türkiye, nowhere else did their work have such a lasting impact as in Türkiye (4). This period would later be described by many Turkish academics as the "golden age" of universities in Türkiye.

The most important contribution of refugee professors was training thousands of professionals, such as engineers, doctors, and teachers. As Neumark said, they could not establish a real research university that could compete with the best of Western Universities, but they trained many professionals (4).

They trained the teachers of our teachers in the universities. The founder of the Turkish Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (KLİMİK), Prof Enver Tali Çetin, was a student of Hugo Braun, who was a refugee microbiology professor at İstanbul University (9). Another legendary refugee professor of internal medicine, Erich Frank, initiated the Journal "İstanbul Contribution to Clinical Science", which then turned to be Turkish Journal of Hematology (10). There are many other examples of their impact that extend to the present day.

None of them achieved the Nobel Prize or such impressive scientific achievement while in Türkiye, but it paved the way for many scientists to advance scientifically in many fields. For example, who can say that Aziz Sançar, who received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2016, was not influenced by immigrant professors while he was a student at İstanbul University Faculty of Medicine?

Contrary to the German-born scientists who came 90 years ago, today, many Turkish physicians are migrating in the opposite direction. According to the Turkish Medical Association, about 10,000 physicians left the country within the last five years and migrated mainly to Germany (11). On the other hand, 90 years after the university reform and 100 years after the establishment of the Republic, the University reform in Türkiye is still urgently needed. The rise of İstanbul University in the 1930s today motivates us to move forward. These heavy tasks could be managed in the footsteps of Atatürk, who said "The truest guide in life is science."

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