

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role Of The United States And The Marshall Plan In Turkey's Socio-Economic Development

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Abstract

This article examines the penetration of West German monopolies into the Middle East, the Near East, and Turkey in the aftermath of the Second World War, and analyzes the economic agreements concluded between the two countries.

KEY WORDS

Turkey, Western countries, USA, Germany, Turkish Straits, Black Sea, Trans-Turkish Railway, Krupp.

INTRODUCTION

The outcomes of the Second World War compelled Turkey to choose a new political and economic path. The intensification of the Cold War, the deterioration of the security environment, and the urgent need for economic recovery pushed the country to seek external assistance. In this context, Turkey's cooperation with the West—particularly its economic and military alliance with the United States and its participation in the Marshall Plan—played a decisive role in shaping its model of modernization.

The Marshall Plan was not merely a program of economic reconstruction; it also became a crucial factor in redefining the country's political orientation, economic structure, and socio-cultural transformation. The liberalization of the economy, the restructuring of the state sector, the mechanization of agriculture, and the expansion of transport and energy infrastructure in Turkey largely coincided with this period.

Furthermore, the Menderes government transformed economic modernization into one of the principal sources of political legitimization during this era. This process was directly and intrinsically linked to the state's foreign policy orientation, while economic assistance emerged as a key instrument for

Turkey's integration into the Western political bloc.

The relationship between the Turkish economy and the Marshall Plan has been extensively examined in international historiography, with scholars offering diverse interpretations of this process.

Western scholarship notes that Marshall aid introduced economic modernization, infrastructure development, and agrarian transformation to Turkey. For instance, F. Ahmad characterizes Marshall assistance as a process of "adapting the Turkish economy to market mechanisms and integrating it into the external financial system." W. Hale and B. Kuniholm, by contrast, interpret this assistance within the framework of Cold War geostrategy, viewing it as a strategy aimed at transforming Turkey into an integral component of Western defense policy.

Among Turkish scholars, M. H. Özer and Z. Öniş assess the Marshall Plan as a catalyst for economic modernization, emphasizing its tangible outcomes in agricultural mechanization as well as in the development of road infrastructure and the energy sector.

However, some Turkish scholars—most notably A. Okay and

K. Keyder—argue that this assistance resulted in an “uneven distribution of capital, the strengthening of the influence of large landowners, and a widening rural–urban divide” in Turkey.

In Soviet and CIS historiography, the issue has been addressed in a predominantly critical manner. Y. Borisov emphasizes that the Marshall Plan in Turkey led to the strengthening of Western political influence and to constraints on the country’s economic independence.

In contemporary European and Turkish scholarship, the approach is more balanced, with two key characteristics of the Marshall Plan being highlighted:

- its role as a catalyst for economic modernization;
- the intensification of elements of external political dependence.

Thus, the academic literature assesses this process not merely as “donor assistance,” but as a complex and dual-faceted historical phenomenon that played a decisive role in the formation of Turkey’s new geopolitical and economic model.

The new international order that emerged after the Second World War determined Turkey’s foreign policy choices. War-weary Europe was experiencing economic decline, while the USSR was attempting to expand its sphere of geopolitical influence. In particular, Stalin repeatedly demanded joint control over the Dardanelles Straits and raised territorial claims regarding Turkey’s eastern regions. These demands compelled Ankara to turn decisively toward the West.

The United States, seeking to protect the Middle East from Soviet expansion, viewed Turkey as an “eastern bulwark.” As B. Kuniholm has noted, Turkey remained a central link in the “intercontinental geostrategic architecture of the United States.”

European scholars—most notably Paul Kennedy, a historian at Yale University—note that the strategic objective of the Marshall Plan was to contain Soviet influence in Europe and adjacent regions while simultaneously promoting the market economy model. Within this framework, Turkey became an experimental ground for this model in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey’s participation in the Marshall Plan was driven not only by external factors but also by the following internal conditions:

- the economic crisis of the wartime years;
- the deterioration of infrastructure;
- the weakness of the state budget;
- the need to modernize the armed forces;
- growing societal demand for liberal economic reforms.

The Turkish economist Ziya Öniş describes this as a “compulsory convergence of modernization and external security.”

It should be emphasized that Turkey’s accession to the Marshall Plan was neither simple nor straightforward, but rather a decision made under complex circumstances and difficult choices. Government minutes and diplomatic correspondence from 1948–1949 preserved in the Prime Ministry Republican Archives of Turkey (BCA) indicate that Ankara initially approached the issue of joining the Marshall Plan with caution. The discussions framed the matter not solely in terms of economic benefits, but as a strategic decision determining the country’s future geopolitical orientation.

One archival report contains the following assessment:

“The issue of joining Marshall assistance is not limited to economic necessities. This decision determines the character of our future national policy and our international position. Our choice is not merely a matter of whether to receive financial aid or not, but a strategic decision aimed at defining a new framework for Turkey’s sovereignty and its foreign policy concept.”

The Arab scholar Mahmoud al-Hut characterizes Turkey’s position not as an ideologically driven stance, but as a choice grounded in state interests—a “realpolitik calculation.”

Soviet historiography interpreted this process as a consequence of “U.S. imperialism.” However, contemporary Russian scholars adopt a more neutral position, emphasizing that:

- Turkey made a realistic choice in the face of security challenges;
- it utilized U.S. assistance to pursue economic modernization;
- yet this process also intensified elements of external geopolitical dependence.

According to Professor A. Fursov, “Turkey aligned with the

West in exchange for certain political constraints, but this alignment also created historical opportunities for the country.”

According to OECD archives, Turkey was the only Muslim-majority state to receive assistance together with Europe between 1948 and 1952, a factor that contributed to shaping the subsequent geopolitical structure of the Middle East.

In UN ESCWA assessments, the Turkish model is described as a “successful synthesis between modernization and external alliance.”

As a result, Turkey’s participation in the Marshall Plan entailed the following outcomes:

- Geopolitically, Turkey aligned itself with the Western security bloc;
- Economically, processes of modernization and infrastructure development were set in motion;
- Socially, urbanization accelerated alongside agrarian transformation and the formation of a middle class;
- Politically, liberal-democratic discourse gained strength, while external influence also increased.

This process should be regarded as a pivotal turning point in understanding Turkey’s mid-twentieth-century history.

After the Second World War, the Marshall Plan played a significant role in Turkey’s economic recovery. Within the framework of U.S. and European reconstruction programs, Turkey received economic, technical, and financial assistance between 1948 and 1952. Although the reported volume of this aid varies across sources, most scholars estimate its total value at approximately 184–225 million U.S. dollars.

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