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RISK OF AN EPIDEMIC DISEASE AMONG THE IMMIGRANTS DURING THE PROCESS OF POPULATION EXCHANGE AND “DESTRUCTION OF RATS”

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Abstract

The Population Exchange was a convention signed between Greece and Turkey on January 30, 1923. The convention proposed mandatory migration, a massive expulsion of 1,200,000 Greek Cypriot Orthodoxes to Greece and 500,000 Muslim Turks to Turkey. One of the major problems of large migration movements is the health problems that migrants might face. That was also the case during the exchange of Turkish and Greek populations. One of the most dreadful, crucial problems was the possibility of an outbreak of the plague. The rumors implying of that possibility were spread around at the time and that was disturbing the Turkish authorities. And for that very reason, the Turkish ships travelling to Greece to return Turkish immigrants were obliged to be disinfected beforehand. The event was nicknamed as “Waste of Rats” in the literature of the time. A regulation was issued pointing out the required immediate actions to be taken. Those were not applying the new regulation, not cleaned and pesticated throughly, or refusing exterminating rats, were not allowed to travel to Greece and bring back immigrants. Istanbul Porth Authority was in charge of checking all departing ships to Greece in that manner.

Keywords: Population Exchange, forced migration, Turkey and Greece, Waste of Rats, Istanbul Port Authority

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Mübadele’de Göçmenlerde Salgın Hastalık Riski ve “Fare İt- lafı”

Öz

Mübadele, 30 Ocak 1923 tarihinde Türkiye ile Yunanistan arasında imzalanmış bir sözleşmedir. Bu sözleşme ile 1.200.000 Ortodoks Rum Yunanistan’a, 500.000 Müslüman Türk de Türkiye’ye zorunlu olarak göç ettirildi. Büyük göç hareketlerinin en önemli sorunlarından biri göç eden kişilerin karşı karşıya kalabileceği sağlık sorunlarıdır. Mübadele’de de bu sorun yaşandı. En önemli zorluklardan biri mübadele göçmenlerinin karşılaşılabilecekleri veba salgınıydı. Bu yönde söylentiler, Türk yetkilileri çok rahatsız etti. Bu nedenle Yunanistan’a göçmenleri almak için giden Türk gemilerini dezenfekte etme zorunluluğu getirildi. Bu dönemin kaynaklarında “Fare İtlafı” olarak değerlendirildi. Buna göre bir yönetmelik çıkarıldı. Bu yönetmeliğin kurallarını uygulamayan ve geminin her yanını temizleyip ilaçlamayan ve fare temizliği yapmayan gemilerin Yunanistan’a gitmesine ve oradan göçmen alıp getirmesine izin verilmedi. Giden gemilerin bu yönde denetimini, İstanbul Liman Yönetimi yapıyordu.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Mübadele, Türkiye ve Yunanistan, Göçmen Taşıma, Fare İtlafı, İstanbul Liman Yönetimi

“How should they have given a thought to anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views. They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences...”

These words were uttered by Dr Rieux, the main character of *The Plague* written by the existentialist thinker , Albert Camus¹.

It is certain that no one is free when confronted with disasters; and especially if this disaster is a disease like plague which has had effects lasting over centuries and which has taken so many lives²

During the medieval ages, there were disasters in the western world that were considered as The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: War, famine, death and plague.

Plague was never mentioned alone; there was a being which was always

¹ Albert Camus, *Veba* , Varlık, İstanbul, 1987.

² Nihat Özyardımcı, A. Hilmi Gürses, *Yurdumuzda ve Dünyada Verem Savaşı ve Düşündürdükleri*, Bursa, 2004, p. 12; İzzettin Beştaş, “Sözlü Tarihin Tanıklığında Cumhuriyet Döneminde Buldan’da Verem Gerçeği ve Veremle Mücadele”, *Buldan Sempozyumu (23-24 November, 2006)*, Buldan, 2006, p. 200.

mentioned with it and they were like twins:

Plague and rats

Plague has always been among the most feared pestilences through the course of history. Seas and harbours have been known to play an important role as the places where this disease spread. First, the ships would come alongside the docks; and then people with the plague virus that had been passed onto them by the rats on the ships would disembark. Even if there would be no plague virus on the ship, if the ship had gone into the harbour of a city where there was plague epidemic, rats carrying that virus would come onto the ship by climbing on the ropes tying the ship to the docks. If there were rats that were carrying the virus, then that ship would bring the virus to the city that it would stop at next. If the virus had invaded the shores and harbours, then rats would climb onto the ship and carry the virus onto the ship. In other words, ships and their main guests - rats - would continue carrying the plague virus to wherever they would go. Rats love damp and dingy places, and there were many places in the narrow passages on the ships where they could easily hide. They would reproduce in abundance, and if they had the plague virus, the sharp and aggressive mutation of the virus would occur in their bodies,

As it is in our modern era, marine transportation used to be the fastest and cheapest means of transporting people and cargo from one place to another in the past. When transporting people and cargo, first sailing ships, and after the Industrial Revolution, steam engine ships would also transport the plague virus. After long voyages, these ships would carry not only the plague virus but also diphtheria, variola, measles and scarlet fever viruses from one harbour to another. However, plague virus was undoubtedly the most dangerous of all the viruses these ships carried. Plague was a pestilence. Any ship taking cargo or passengers from a place that had the plague virus had the risk of transmitting this deadly virus to everywhere it went to. This virus made its appearance at different times at different places. Though it was unidentifiable at first, the virus was generally referred to as *The Curse of God* or *Black Death* in pagan cultures and millions of people had lost their lives in many places. Millions were recorded to have died in Palestine, Ethiopia, Greece and the Roman Empire during the antiquity.

Some epidemics are very ambitious and they would not come to an end. For example, the plague epidemic that started near the Caspian Sea continued for about 400 years. In such a large time span, millions of people suffered and died. This disease that made frequent appearance in the far east was almost never absent in the Middle East. This epidemic virus which could either spread from the dead rats or flea bite would cause unbearable pain in people. After this virus would make its presence in the body of a person, a black spot would appear under his/her armpits. After the formation of the black spot, there would

be bubos about the size of an egg on his neck, armpits and crotches. Deaths which would be the inevitable end during *Bubonic Plague* would cause a strange feeling of fear in anyone who would witness the death of a person from this disease. At first, the victim chosen by the virus would suffer from severe fever. Fever would be followed by shivering and sense of freezing, and a week after the virus would be transmitted to a person's body, it would destroy its victim mercilessly. The deceased person would do a departure dance as he would pass away and this dance would be interpreted in various ways by primitive cultures. The person would make strange movements as an outcome of the mental delusions he would be having, and those watching the person die would be frightened. Soon after the earthquake in 628, there was a big plague epidemic in Istanbul. During the days when the epidemic was at its peak, the number of mortalities per day would exceed a thousand, turning Istanbul into a mass tomb. It was being said that even the observation towers were filled with dead bodies upto their top. Death had descended down on the city like a dark cloud, and mental delusions would make people jump into the deep sea. There was almost no place left to bury the dead. According to rumors, dead bodies would be piled up on top of one another on boats and would be let go on the sea³. Urine, sweat and saliva of those who had suffered and died from plague would have an unbearable smell. There was also pneumonic plague which would be the condition when the virus would be in the lungs. After maintaining its presence in the body for a period of time, thick and bad smelling blood would come off from the nose of the patient and he/she would die within 24 hours. There was no way to protect oneself from the plague which spread extremely fast. The only solution was either to bury the corpse in very deep dug pits or burn them. As there was no information about how the virus would spread, no way of quarantining could be thought of. In the 14th century, this disease respread from central Asia to south and west, and from there to Europe. Black death freely lingered in Suriye and Egypt during Medieval Ages for many centuries. Of course, the effects of the virus were observed in Asia Minor. Plague was always present during the Seljuks and the Beylics period and it tyrannized the inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire during the 15th century. The Ottoman Empire had also its share from this disease⁴. This disease lasted for so long and was so effective that it even made the historian Ali of Gallipoli write verse about⁵.

Plague never stopped, and it never retreated from clumsiness and aggressive attitude. It joined with other contagious diseases and it gave suffering to mankind throughout history. It was during the 16th Century that there was a

³ Prokopius, *İstanbul'da İsyan ve Veba*, Çeviren: Adil Calap, Lir, İstanbul, 2002, p.237-246; Ömür Ceylan, "Ölümün Adı Veba", http://turkoloji.cu.edu.tr/_ESKI%0TURK%20%20EDEBIYATI/ceylan_veba.pdf, p. 2.

⁴ Şevket Pamuk, "Kara Ölüm Ortadoğu'da", *Tarih ve Toplum*, VII/40 (April, 1987), p. 41.

⁵ Daniel Panzac, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Veba 1700-1850*, Tarih Vakfı, İstanbul, 1997; M.W. Flinn, "Avrupa ve Akdeniz Ülkelerinde Veba", *Tarih ve Toplum*, VII/ 39, p. 28-29.

plague epidemic in Istanbul and thousands of people lost their lives. The British Ambassador Edward Barton , who had been sent to Istanbul by Queen Elizabeth with hopes of becoming allies with the Ottoman Empire against the king of Spain, was among the ones who died. Barton was burried in Heybeliada, and *The famous and honorable spokesperson of Queen Elizabeth Edward Barton went on a naval expedition with the Turks, and he passed away on the return voyage. May his soul rest in peace* were engraved on his tomb stone.

This dangerous epidemic made its appearance at different times at different places and wherever it spread, it caused the death of thousands of people and it was one of the most feared diseases during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic⁶. Risk of plague was of a major concern in the population exchange which was a mass migration involving thousands of people and it was regarded as a problem to be paid special attention to.

At that time, there were many contagious diseases that were every where and mos common of these disease were malaria, trachoma, measles and smallpox. Poor living and insufficient nutrition conditions and poverty and underdevelopment, insufficient advancements in vaccines and medicine, lack of concern for environmental hygiene , and numerous impossibilities and lack of knowledge were all responsible for not being able to fight against a simple epidemic. During wars, number of people who died owing to an epidemic disease was far more than the number of those who were killed by the enemy. The impact of epidemic diseases on the society was so severe that Turkish literature also gained literary works like that of Albert Camus⁷.

Mass migrations were the most suitable environments for epidemic diseases. Before Turkish War of Independence came to an end, Turkish Greeks had already left Turkey and arrived in Greece⁸. The exceptional over population in Greece increased the risk of an epidemic. The research done among the homeless immigrants in Greece revealed that there were 3 cases of spotted fever⁹. This disease known as spotted fever among people was actually typhus. It was an extremely dangerous virus , and if precautions were not taken, it would spread at an alarming rate and cause masses to die. Hunger, exhaustion, unhygienic conditions, disasters that occurred one after another caused proximity among people to decrease and people came into close contact with one another, and all of these conditions were ideally suited for the spread of the virus. The most effective agent that caused the the rapid spread of the virus were the fleas resulting from unhygienic conditions. A flea would bite a person who

⁶ Hikmet Özdemir, *Salgın Hastalıklardan Ölümler (1914-1918)*, TTK, Ankara, 2005

⁷ Reşat Nuri Güntekin, *Salgın ve Madalyonun Ters Tarafı*, İnkılap, İstanbul, 2005.

⁸ Kemal Arı, "Kurtuluş Savaşı'nın Bitiminde Türkiye Dışına Yönelik Göçler ve Sonuçları", *Beşinci Astkeri Tarih Semineri Bildirileri: Değişen Dünya Dengeleri İçinde Askeri ve Stratejik Açından Türkiye* (İstanbul, 23-25 Ekim 1995), I, Gnkur. ATASE, Ankara, 1995, p. 496-504

⁹ Türkiye Hilal-i Ahmer Mecmuası (*THAM*), III/ 31(15.03.1340), p. 226.

would have the typhus virus and then the flea would also have that virus, Within 3-4 days, the virus would gain maturity in the flea, and then the flea would pass it onto another person . The flea did not need to bite a person to pass the virus to a person. Anything remaining from the flea would be passed onto another person through a small itch . Even through a small nail cut , the virus may be transmitted to another body. The main reason for the spread was not the flea bite, but it was what would be remaining from the flea. In other words, the remainder would be the source of the spread. During those times, antibiotics had not been invented. Therefore, the only remedy known was to isolate the patient and free the patient from fleas. Even so, once the virus would make its passage into one's body, it would not take long for the flea to spread like a spider web and it would reach to even the furthest tissue via the capillaries and it would reproduce either in the brain or in the nerve system and cause paralysis. Therefore, the presence of typhus among the immigrants caused serious concerns. Moreover, there was syphilis that was a common disease in Anatolia during those times.

It was during these concerns that the Turks who were going to be exchanged started their journey. Towards the end 1923, there was a scarlet fever epidemic among these people. As a result of the negotiations made with the Greek Governments, the Salihli State Doctor Mahmut Bey was stationed in Kavala so as to do research about this disease among the Turkish immigrants who were going to be transported to Turkey. The research revealed that there was scarlet fever among these immigrants. Although scarlet fever was not a fast spreading disease as typhus was, it was still a disease to be worried about. The symptoms of scarlet fever was the occurrence of red spots on a person's body. This disease would start as a round shaped virus would make its passage into a person's body and would stick on the throat and tonsils. Once a person with the virus would sneeze or cough, the virus would spread. The signs of the disease were trembling, fever, and swollen tonsils , and following these symptoms would be the red spots appearing on the body of the person. In the later stages of the disease, the virus would damage the kidneys and sometimes even result in death of the patient. The patient would definitely have to be isolated from other people and the best treatment would be to rest. However, taking these precautions was not possible among the immigrants as they were on the roads trying to arrive in Turkey, and travelling under such conditions was ideally suited for the spread of the disease. Doctor Mahmut Bey had diagnosed the disease and had informed Turkish officials about it, and Aksaray State Doctor Refet Bey was also sent to Kandiye to do research in Kandiye and the neighboring places¹⁰.

It was seen in the research that although this virus was present among the

¹⁰ *Ahenk*, 19.01.1923.

immigrants, it could be taken under control. However, plague and cholera were the most worrying diseases. There was almost no chance to take any preventive actions in case there was a plague or cholera outbreak. Immigrants would be severely affected by this epidemic, and it was feared that it would be carried to Turkey by these immigrants. Hence, immigrants who were being transported on Turkish ships were closely observed by the Red Cross institutions. Although there did not seem to be anything to be worried about at first, after the rough conditions on the ship, when the immigrants disembarked, there were several suspicious observations. Therefore, there needed to be strict cooperation between Ministry of Health and Ministry of Housing for the population exchange. Immigrants had to be vaccinated first against variola at the embarkment docks. Once an immigrant would be vaccinated, he would get his vaccination documents, and only then he would be allowed to embark. However, getting vaccinated before embarking was not satisfactory. Therefore, quarantines were established in places such as Urla, Tuzla and Mersin. In addition to quarantines, micro health stations were established in order to perform the health controls of the immigrants at every disembarkment point. 1 There were doctors and other secondary health staff on the ships to do health inspections. If there were any suspicious cases, the immigrant would be warned and precautions were taken. For example, in a letter dated February 1, 1924, addressed to Bursa provincial authorities, it was stated that there were some suspicious observations among the immigrants who were located in Bursa, and that there should be a careful investigation about whether there was a contagious disease among them or not. In those days, immigrants from Salonika and its provinces had settled in Bursa. There had been several suspicious deaths among the Greek Orthodox in and around Salonika. The causes of these deaths were not exactly known. There was a likelihood that this could be a serious outbreak risk, and this would not be anything pleasant.

These points were highlighted in the letter; and, therefore, these immigrants needed to be closely observed. Sufficient amount of preventive vaccines and medications and especially quinine should be available. Nothing unexpected should be permitted to occur. In case of an epidemic on the ship, the doctors and other health staff should urgently inform authorities in Turkey before the ship would arrive to its final destination. After being notified, when the ship would arrive in the port, the immigrant who would be reported would be examined by the doctors as soon as he would disembark. If anything suspicious was traced or a disease was diagnosed, what was to be done was obvious. Until the disease was cured, the immigrant would not be allowed to have any contact with the local people of Bursa. Keeping the immigrant isolated and not allowing any contact between the immigrant and the locals were very vital precautions. Even a small contact would lead to a rapid spread of the disease among the people in Bursa. Therefore, the immigrant who was ill or who acted

in a suspicious way needed to be placed in a guesthouse and needed to be closely observed. During this period, whatever was required to be done medically was needed to be done¹¹.

What had caused the authorities to be very cautious were the symptoms seen in some places. Of course, this fact was causing worry, suspicion and fear. Developments that would lead to an epidemic were witnessed and they required being cautious. For example, a group of immigrants had been transported to Mudanya from Kavala. It was discovered afterwards that these immigrants had not been medically examined before embarking. As there were few epidemic instances on the ship, the immigrants were put in quarantine in Tuzla, and were taken to Mudanya after they were thoroughly examined and the necessary measures had been taken. A similar case happened in Canakkale. 1 Another example of a similar case occurred on a ship taking the immigrants to Mersin. The ship named Istanbul and the ship named Rize brought immigrants to Mersin one day after another. 867 immigrants disembarked from Istanbul, and 608 disembarked from Rize in Mersin. The immigrants had embarked in Kavala and the two ships almost left the docks at the same time. Although there was nothing extraordinary on the Istanbul ship during the journey to Mersin, on the ship named Rize, there were three casualties. The fact that both ships were carrying people from the same place and had left the docks at the same time but casualties occurring only on one ship was very suspicious. To be cautious was the only choice of action. Immigrants were not allowed to have any contact with anyone from Mersin docks until they were placed in quarantine¹².

However, another problem was discovered during this time. Some of the ships transporting immigrants from Greece to Turkey did not have any doctors or nurses, and this problem was immediately reported to Red Cross Headquarters by Mersin Health Authorities. After this notification, the headquarters immediately intervened in this matter. It was ordered that all ships transporting immigrants from Greece to Turkey should have a doctor and nurses on the ship. The headquarters were to be informed about the result as well. With the intervention of the Red Cross, this issue was inspected and it was discovered that some ships left the docks without a doctor or a nurse on board. This was a very important negligence. Based on the negotiations with Turkish Ships Association and the agreements, it was a principle for any ship carrying immigrants to have a doctor, nurse and sufficient amount of medical supplies. Such negligence was very vital especially when there was such a high epidemic risk. Istanbul Transportation Association was informed about the matter and as it was the organization that was responsible for monitoring the ships, it had to warn the ships

¹¹ BCA, 272/79-72-2-1; BCA, 272/79.72.2.2.

¹² BCA, 272/79-72-3-4.

and had to solve their equipment and staff needs¹³.

Upon learning about the matter, the ministry approached the problem with great concern and ordered that no ship could leave the docks without a doctor, a nurse and medical supplies. A special effort was going to be put for this and in case of finding anyone of these missing, extra time would be given so that the ship would comply with the requirements, otherwise it would be prohibited from starting its trip. Instead of starting the trip when one of these were missing, it was more preferable not to go on the journey. After the warning given by the ministry, the principle of not starting a trip unless with a doctor, nurse and adequate amount of medical supplies on board was strictly adhered to. All authorized institutions followed the principles strictly. If a ship would start its trip with any of the three requirements missing, it would be warned and given extra time to accommodate the procedures, and if it still did not follow the regulations, it would be halted. The ship named Rize was detained for such a reason. When it was recognized that there was no doctor or nurse on board, the ship had already left Izmir and was headed to Greece. Therefore, the ship was contacted by available communication means, and it was sanctioned in the open waters of Urla. The ship was warned about disobeying the procedures, and it sailed to Urla. By having the doctor and nurses required by the regulations on board it continued its trip.¹ Assuming that similar cases may occur frequently, mobile doctors and nurses were appointed to harbours and docks where ships with immigrants arrived from Greece or departed for Greece. The number of these mobile doctors was 11, but 5 more joined the team and the number became 16¹⁴.

The risk of an epidemic was not only concerning the ships transporting immigrants from Greece to Turkey. The same risk was also present for the ships carrying Orthodox immigrants from Turkey to Greece. It was reported that there had been two cholera incidents on the Greek ship- Anloni- that had Orthodox immigrants on board. Epidemic would not discriminate against, whether Greek or Turkish would not make any difference. As a result, if these people were carrying that virus, then there was a high probability that the virus would exist in the environments where these people were present. Whether the ship that had the immigrants with the cholera virus had stopped in Istanbul or not was investigated. When it was learned that the ship had no immigrants with the cholera virus, everyone was relieved¹⁵.

Ships were continuously transporting passengers. All efforts were made to clear the ship away from any viruses if there were any. The most common epidemic diseases were, measles and variola. Among the immigrants who got

¹³ BCA, 272/14-76-29-8.

¹⁴ THAM, 111/33 (15.05.1924), p. 291; BCA, 272, 14-76-31-20

¹⁵ BCA, 272/14-76-32-11.

on board from Kavala and Salonika, there were 5000 measles diagnosed. In addition to measles, variola virus was also traced among these immigrants. There were vaccinations, yet the virus was travelling on the ships with the immigrants who were carrying it. In order to prevent the spread of the disease among the local people, immigrants with illnesses were kept in quarantine as a precaution and their treatment was completed under observation. February of 1924 was the most difficult month in terms of epidemic disease. 188 immigrants were reported to have passed away while they were waiting for the arrival of a ship in Kavala and Salonika. The reason for these casualties was that they had been mobile for quite a long time and they had been in misery and squalor. The number of casualties was 188 in February. Bodies that could hardly resist the tiresome journeys would collapse as the virus was transmitted to them¹⁶.

Leprosy was observed among some of the immigrants who came from Crete. They were taken in quarantine in Crete before they embarked for their journey to Turkey. There were three of these immigrants, and they were Muslims and they were going to come to Turkey. The director of Turkish Deputy Association, Tevfik Rustu Bey wrote a letter to the Ministry of Exchange and he asked about where these immigrants with leprosy should be sent and whether they should be isolated in their destination or not. In his response, Tevfik Rustu Bey declared that transportation of immigrants from Crete would soon come to an end, and he also clarified that it was necessary to come to a decision about the immigrants who were in quarantine.

The ministry sent a circular to all the Health Departments and emphasized that these immigrants should be transported in quarantine and all measures should be taken to prevent their contact with anyone and they should be taken to Istanbul Emraz-i Sariye Hospital¹⁷.

During this period, vaccinations were in effect. It was observed that immigrants who were being vaccinated against typhoid fever at their departure port were having difficulty during their journeys. When unpleasant weather conditions were combined with the difficulties of travelling and the effects of vaccination, it would be quite difficult for the immigrants to continue the journey. Therefore, it was decided that typhoid fever vaccinations should be sent to the port of destination from the port of departure. All those involved in this matter were ordered to obey as dictated by the decision and report back the results.¹⁸

And the plague...

Horseman of death, the feared disease, and rats which were identified

¹⁶ BCA, 272/79-72-2-2

¹⁷ BCA, 272/19-72-2-6; 272/79-72-2-29

¹⁸ BCA, 272/79-72-3-4.

with this disease...

In *The Plague*, Albert Camus describes the rats : “*There were even times when people would step on the soft carcas of a rat that would still be warm . It was as if the earth on which our homes had been built was trying clear itself and get rid of what it had been keeping on its bosom. It was releasing the suppuration of the carbuncles that had been been for so many years.*”¹⁹

Plague had always scared the humankind. During the journey, of course , the most frightening kind of epidemic among the immigrants was plague. Ships and rats had always played the major role in the spread of the disease as rats were never absent on ships. Especially the coastal cities of the Mediterreanean had frequently been invaded by the microbes that the old wooden ships carried. During times of an epidemic, it was impossible for a ship to maintain the number of passangers who had embarked the same as the number when they were disembarking. Ships that were suspected of having passangers with the plague virus were not permitted to approach any shore because of the measurements taken at those ports. There were even times when crew members would suffer under the paw of plague, and ships not allowed to approach any port would float on the open waters and not even the pirate ships would get near these ships²⁰.

While Population Exchange was in progress, fear of an epidemic was not only in Turkey but also in Greece . Any news either overheard or on the newspapers was creating serious worries in Turkey. What was said and what was on official documents was that there were indications and news that contagious diseases were widespread in Greece and plague was the primary disease among them. Ships that would sail to Greece to transport immigrants from Greece to Turkey were made to wait in Greek ports for days and days , and it was a big risk for these ships to carry back the plague virus to Turkey. In case of such an occurance, inexorable disasters may come to the threshold, and mass destructions would be inevitable. Before the winter of 1924 ended, it became obvious that what was thought to be rumour was the reality. Everyone became very scared. This fear and excitement were caused by a letter send by Health and Domestic Affairs Ministry to Ministry of Population Exchange Housing and Settlement on March 4 of 1924. It was indicated in the letter that there were incidents of plague in Istanbul²¹. Quarantine precautions were implemented urgently. It was reported to the Ministry that towards the end of summer, there were incidents of plague and typhus in Salonika again. Plague had prevailed in Salonika before. However, it was observed that, this time, it was more serious.

¹⁹ Albert Camus, *ibid*, p. 19-20.

²⁰ Ömür Ceylan, *ibid*, p. 2.

²¹ BCA, 272/14-76-29-11.

That plague had been prevailing in Greece for quite a long time was being written and spoken about. A fact that had been known to have been existing for some time was in official written and spoken discourse. Transportation of immigrants from Salonika to Turkey came to a halt for some time for fear that plague would cause massive destruction if it were to be transmitted to Turkey. Doctors were sent to Salonika to help the First Aid Team and vaccinate the immigrants against plague²². As transportation of immigrants from Greece to Turkey was paused for a while, the borders were closed for a period of time²³. The related organizations where the immigrants were planned to be housed were warned so as to take the necessary precautions. The plague epidemic was recognized as the disease was perceived by the teams working in Greece. Plague was seen among the immigrants when they disembarked in Mersin ports. Circulating only in Istanbul, the İleri newspaper gave an account of this news piece by quoting from a local newspaper:

*“Plague among the immigrants sent to Mersin: Last Monday, 2993 immigrants were transported by the Istanbul ship and 866 immigrants were transported by the Rize ship to Mersin; and 614 were transported to Tasucu-Mersin. The vast majority of these immigrants were from Kozana, and they came to Mersin. The journey on the ship from Urla to Mersin was in terrible conditions. Four pregnant women and eight people passed away due to various diseases. According to what was reported in the New Adana, only one of the babies born during the journey remained alive, and the immigrants were complaining about the ignorance of the officials in Urla. Immigrants who disembarked in Mersin will soon be transported to Kayseri and Nigde regions.”*²⁴

Under such conditions, it was urgent that necessary measurements be taken. Ministry of Population Exchange notified the Health Ministry about this fact²⁵.

Plague and death... Albert Camus wrote:

*“Rambling words were issuing from the gaping mouth, thickly coated now with sordes. He kept on repeating: ‘Them rats. Them damned rats’. His face had gone livid. a grayish green, his lips were bloodless, his breath came in sudden gasps. His limbs spread out by the ganglia, embedded in the berth as if he were trying to burry himself in it or a voice from the depths of the earth were summoning him below, the unhappy man seemed to be stifling under some unseen pressure. His wife was sobbing: ‘Isn’t there any hope left, Doctor?’ ‘He is dead’ said Reix”*²⁶

It had long been known that rats had an important role in the spread of plague as they were the most important carriers of the plague virus. Of course,

²² THAM, III/ 36 (15 Ağustos 1924), p. 407.

²³ Ahenk, 18.07.1924

²⁴ İleri, 14.06.1924.

²⁵ BCA, 272/79.72.4.2

²⁶ Albert Camus, *ibid.*, p. 27.

they loved the wooden structures of the ships. They would travel from one port to another on the ship, and would easily carry the virus that they had. Since plague was present in Greece, it was of vital importance to have the ships that transported immigrants from Greece to Turkey rat-free so as to prevent the arrival of the virus into Turkey as that would lead to a disaster. The only way to eliminate rats as the carrier of the virus was to prevent the transportation of rats on the ships that went from Turkey to Greece to transport the immigrants. So long as there were rats on the ship, immigrants were under great threat. The virus would easily spread all over Turkey either by people who had the virus or by the rats through the Turkish ports. Rats were perfect for the development of the virus in their bodies, and they could easily spread the virus. Therefore, it was inevitable to discard rats as the carrier of the virus. When this would be done, risk would be minimized. Hanging upside down metal cones on the ropes that tied the ship to the buoy could not prevent rats from getting onto the ships. What was important was to make ships uninhabitable environments for rats. Immigrants had to wait on the docks for days and days for the ships to come and get them; and their disorganized bundles of mattresses, blankets and other belongings piled up on top of each other were an ideal environment for the rats to be housed in. Something had to be done to prevent rats carrying the plague virus from being transported to Turkey. Wooden construction and hidden corners on the ships were perfect for the rats to hide. The only solution was to free ships from rats by cleaning and using pesticide treatment to kill them. Rats carrying the virus were being transported on the ships. Therefore, vaccination of the immigrants against plague was not an adequate precaution. In addition to vaccination, ships needed to be cleaned, and disinfected so as to be free from the virus. Only by “destroying/killing” rats, could the rapid spread of a deadly virus be avoided.

During those times, pesticides used in treatments to destroy rats were not so advanced as they are now. Because there were many wooden spaces on ships, they were ideal homes for the rats to reproduce and multiply in number. In light of all these, it was decided that the ships which would be transporting the immigrants be cleared from the plague virus and rats and that they meet the health requirements. With the suggestion of Ministry of Health, Ministry of Population Exchange made the “destruction of rats” a mandatory practice on ships which would be used in the transportation of immigrants. In accordance with this decision, a letter was sent to the Head Office of Maritime Management on March 12 1924. Moreover, all other companies involved in the transportation of immigrants were notified about this decision. Istanbul Port Management was also informed as it was the only authorized department to plan the departures and arrivals of these ships. Monitoring whether requirements were met or not

and issuing the certificate of compliance were the responsibilities of this management. The rules set were to be implemented immediately²⁷.

Obedience of these rules was made mandatory. Before setting sail to Greece, the ships would stop at quarantine locations and they would be treated with pesticides including their warehouses and all wooden parts. After being given pesticide treatments, the ship would be free of rats - the destruction of the rats would be accomplished, and the ship would get a document from quarantine showing that it was rat-free. If the document was missing, even if the ship had been given pesticide treatment, it would have to go through the same process of rat destruction to get the document. Ships could leave Turkey only after obtaining this document of rat destruction and start their journey to Greece. In order for the immigrants to embark, ships were obliged to show their documents to the authorities in Greece as well. Most of the ships sailing to Greece would sail pass from Istanbul. Prior to leaving the Istanbul Port, or while passing near Istanbul, ships would be inspected to check their having done rats cleansing²⁸.

The journey on the sea would take a few days. Immigrants were feeling desperate and under depression, and after so many days on the ship poverty, hunger, filth, lice, fleas and rats were inevitable and they were posing as serious risks for epidemic diseases. However, destruction of rats was an important application against plague-black death- which had been a big enemy of humanity through out history²⁹. Rats were destroyed, and spread of plague, like the Fourth Horseman of Apocalypse, to Turkey was prevented...

Albert Camus ends his masterpiece with these lines describing the emotional state of his main character Rieux: "*Rieux... knew that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.*"³⁰

²⁷ BCA, 272/14-76-29-11

²⁸ BCA, 272/14-76-29-1

²⁹ BCA, 272/12-4-46-3.

³⁰ Albert Camus, *ibid*, p. 357.

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