



THE OTTOMAN “OTHER”: (RE)FRAMING THE PAST OF THE MODERN TURKISH NATION

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*“[n. In Turchia] la schizofrenia culturale conviva
una forte eredità laicista che la differenza da tutto
il resto del mondo islamico”¹*

Abstract

The paper examines the process of the Turkish nation building process starting from the premises that whether we talk about culture, religion, ethnicity, language, traditions or other elements nations identify with and take pride in, continuity in time is an essential requirement to legitimize the bases of national identity in the nationalist discourse.

Keywords: *The Ottomans; Turkish nation; identity; the Kemalists; the nation building process*

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¹ Feride Çiçekoğlu, „Mediterraneo?”, Feride Çiçekoğlu, Edhem Eldem, *Rappresentare il Mediterraneo: lo sguardo turco*, Mesogea, Messina, 2001, p. 13.

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What we call/used to call historical experience often turns out to be memory of an experience or part of it, and not necessarily a definite or complete historical truth. This remembered and, at times, imagined history can generate “more heat than light” among historians. Memory has a profound influence on the public sphere and becomes subjective and distorted in nationalist discourses. As LaCapra remarks:

memory as part of the experience of the group is bound up with the way that group relates to its past as it bears on its present and future².

Nationalists resort to people’s emotions and will³ to create a bond that many times is non-existent or very fragile. The link generated is national history, a history that is “felt”, “desired” and aims to unify people. Whether we talk about culture, religion, ethnicity, language, traditions or other elements nations identify with and take pride in, continuity in time is an essential requirement to legitimize the bases of national identity in the nationalist discourse. In the words of Hobsbawm:

Nations without a past are contradictions in terms. What makes a nation is the past, what justifies one nation against others is the past, and historians are the people who produce it⁴.

In the Turkish nation-building process, the pre-Ottoman past and Ottoman alterity represented rich sources of inspiration for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. History was used, on the one hand, to identify in the pre-Ottoman history elements of national pride and legitimacy, and, on the other hand, to delegitimize the Ottomans by distinguishing between modern

² Dominick LaCapra, “Experience and Identity” Ed. Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Satya P. Mohanty, Paul M. L. Moya, *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, p. 225.

³ Federico Chabod, *L’idea di nazione*, Roma, Editori Laterza, 2004, p. 72.

⁴ Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today”, *Anthropology Today*, 1992, vol. 8, no. 1., at <http://www.rationalites-contemporaines.paris-sorbonne.fr/IMG/pdf/Hobsbawm.pdf>.

progressive reforms the newly founded republic would adopt and retrograde Ottoman measures showcased as mistakes to avoid.

Ottomanism and Islamic dogmatism were considered the main causes of the Ottoman Empire's dissolution by Kemalists. Thus, they rejected the heterogeneity and cultural diversity inherited from the late empire, in order to prevent future separatist movements of ethnic and religious minorities, and encouraged citizens to adopt Turkish identity, regardless of their ethnic background or mother tongue⁵.

The Kemalist modernization project was inspired by *Orientalism*, respectively by the Western-fabricated image of the Muslim world⁶, a process in which the Ottoman becomes the "Other". According to Kadioğlu the Turkish national question poses itself theoretically as an insoluble problem, indicating a distinction between the thematic and problematic levels of nationalist thought. Thematic Orientalism is „codified in linguistic conventions”, a thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident. Orientalism, at the problematic level, on the other hand, separates the Orient as a passive and non-participant object of study, legitimizing the domination of the Occident over the Orient. However, in the nationalist narrative, while the Orient still retains its essentialist character, the object is empowered, thus, is no longer passive, and defined by Orientalism. This phenomenon is specific for ex-colonies. Even if Turkey was not a colony, a similar paradox emerges through the adoption of the Westernization project and the affirmation of a distinctive cultural character of the Turks. Thus, the paradox of Turkish nationalism has generated both hostility and admiration towards the West⁷.

⁵ Nora Fisher Onar, *Neo Ottomanism, Historical Legacies and Turkish Foreign Policy*, EDAM Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, Discussion Paper Series, October 2009/03 <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/neo-ottomanism-historical-legacies-and-turkish-foreign-policy>.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Timișoara, Editura Amarcord, 2001.

⁷ Ayşe Kadioğlu, *The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity*, "Middle Eastern Studies", 1996, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 184-185.

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The Kemalists assumed the role of Western colonizers in carrying out a civilizing mission in a seemingly backward, traditional and conservative Anatolian society⁸. In other words, the Kemalists adopted an Orientalist view of the East and, by trying to demonstrate Turkey’s belonging to Western civilization, denied the Ottoman past, regarded as Oriental, and turned it into the “Other” of the Kemalist project.

The Western idea according to which Islam is a dogmatic religion, opposed to progress, was adopted by the ruling elite of the new state. By “borrowing” European thought patterns, the founders of the Turkish republic divided the world between secular European nation-states and non-European colonies, trying to secure Turkey’s place in the first. To this aim, the elite implemented a comprehensive program of secularization. The caliphate, Sufi orders and other religious movements were abolished. The cultural revolution, however, was not embraced by the entire society, generating resistance especially in rural Anatolia. Later, in the second half of the 20th century, the processes of modernization, industrialization and urbanization brought the rural periphery closer to the urban center and led to a “cultural struggle” (Kulturkampf)⁹.

Society was divided between the secular, Westernized, ruling elite and the rest of the population. The Kemalists assumed the role of civilizing the “backward” Turkish masses, by imitating the West. The motto of the 1930s was “for the people, despite the people” (*Halk için, halka rağmen*), drawing from the colonial mindset according to which “natives” cannot speak for themselves, thus, they must be governed and “represented”. The elite aimed to create a Turkish nation from the social structures inherited from the Ottoman Empire, which was regarded as the “Other” by the Kemalist project. Everything defined as Ottoman had to be transformed to ensure a smooth transition from the Empire to the nation-state. In this regard, the primacy of Islamic religious authority was replaced by nationalism, or the so-called “Atatürk cult”. The elite adopted a

⁸ Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, “The White Turkish Man’s Burden»: Orientalism, Kemalism and the Kurds in Turkey”, *Kurdipedia*, p. 4.

⁹ Nora Fisher Onar, *op. cit.*

paternalistic Orientalist approach in which Islamic, ethnic, tribal and rural alterities had to be reeducated¹⁰.

Atatürk was presented as a model to be followed by Turkish people. Photography depicting the leader and circulated by the press were not simple snapshots of his daily life, but they were meant to showcase the “ideal” Turk to the population. However, there was a great distance between the “father of the Turks” and many of “his people”. Atatürk was blond, Westernized, army general, intellectual, director, modern farmer, hero of the homeland, ideal son and husband, civilized, gentleman with a developed aesthetic sense, while the ordinary Anatolian Turk was brunette, Oriental, mostly illiterate, traditional farmer, father and son of the patriarchal system, uneducated, lacking aesthetic sense¹¹.

Consequently, Turkish citizens had to go through a transformation process to resemble the founding leader of the republic; they had to become Western, and for that, to forget their Oriental origins, respectively the Ottoman past. For this purpose, Atatürk promoted pan-Turkist nationalism, but rejected the central theme of ideology: the unification of the Turkic states under the crescent and the star. Instead, the Kemalists adopted the cultural form of Ziya Gökalp's Pan-Turkism, emphasizing the cultural heritage, history, language and traditions of the Turkic people as basic elements of nationalism¹². Cultural pan-Turkism was propagated especially through the following institutions: the Turkish Historical Society (Türk Tarih Kurumu) and the Turkish Linguistic Society (Türk Dil Kurumu).

The Turkish Historical Society had the role to (re)write national history¹³, and therefore, to identify or create the historical foundations of Turkish identity, in a way which follows the traces of Western civilization and ties the new culture

¹⁰ Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-6.

¹¹ Deniz Derman, “The Close/Blow Up of the Picture: The Turkish Family with Two Sons” in Deniz Derman, Karen Ross, Nevena Daković, *Mediated Identities*, Istanbul Bilgi University Press, Istanbul, 2001, p. 98.

¹² Athena S. Leoussi, Anthony D. Smith, *The Call of the Homeland: Diaspora Nationalisms, Past and Present*, Brill Academic Publishers, 2010, p. 221.

¹³ Dietrich Jung, Wolfango Piccoli, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

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to its pre-historic past¹⁴. The Society was established on June 4, 1930, under the guidance of Atatürk and was given the tasks to research the origins of Turkish people and to define a historical thesis that could explain and support Turkish nationalism. These tasks were given to a research group, each scholar being assigned a segment of world history that was considered important for Turkish history. The collective efforts resulted in a manuscript, entitled *Türk Tarihinin Ana Hatları* (Fundamental Principles of Turkish History) completed in 1930. The book included sections on the history of China, India, Mesopotamia (Sumerians, Elamites and Assyrians), Anatolia (Hittites, Phrygians, Lydians and Seljuks), Aegean (Greeks), Italy (Etruscans), Iran (Achaemenids, Parthians, Sassanians), Turkish states of Central Asia and the Ottoman Empire. The cultural diversity of the histories studied uncovers the goal of Turkish nationalists: to find a common cultural link between the inhabitants of the territory of the new nation-state and to proclaim the superiority of Turks¹⁵.

Türk Tarihinin Ana Hatları, the related brochure, *Methal Kısmı*, the four volumes of history for high school students and the textbooks for secondary school contained the following “truths”:

1. Turks do not belong to the Mongoloid race. There is no connection between Turks and Mongols. Turks are of Aryan descent.

2. Turks living in Turkey came from Central Asia. Migration was caused by adverse climate conditions.

3. The origin of Turkish people dates back to 9.000, 12.000 BC, or even 20.000 BC.

4. The language of the Turks left its mark on other major languages of the world.

¹⁴ Yılmaz Çolak, “Ottomanism vs. Kemalism: Collective Memory and Cultural Pluralism in 1990s Turkey”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4, p. 590.

¹⁵ Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir, “Archaeology as a Source of National Pride in the Early Years of the Turkish Republic”, *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 2006, vol. 31, no. 4, p. 382.

5. The history of the Turks does not begin with the history of the Ottoman Empire. The Turks founded 18 states before the Ottoman era and before converting Islam.

6. The Ottoman Empire did much damage to the Turkish people. Turkish identity is not based on Ottoman heritage¹⁶.

Thus, the Turkish history thesis sought to show that the Turks migrated from Central Asia because of harsh weather conditions, led by a wolf. On their way to Asia Minor they were engaged in endeavors of “civilizing” the people encountered. In addition, according to Kemalist nationalist historians, Turks even laid the foundations of Western civilization, by developing and passing on their knowledge of ceramic arts, agriculture and domestication of animals to Europeans. Kemalist history did not hesitate to call Turks the founders of ancient Anatolian civilizations like the Hittites and the Sumerians¹⁷. By claiming that Turks were of Aryan descent, just like Europeans, furthermore, that they set up the bases of Western civilization, Kemalists redefined their Westernization project, which was interpreted as a process of returning to indigenous roots instead of imitation. The whole process of Westernization was seen as a rediscovery of the forgotten Turkish identity¹⁸.

The history thesis aimed to legitimize not only the place of Turkey in Europe but also the establishment of a Turkish Republic in Anatolia, seeking to create a strong link between Turkish citizens and the new state’s territory. The goal was to awaken feelings of patriotism and pride in Turkish history and

¹⁶ Büşra Ersanlı, “Bir Aidiyet Fermanı: “Türk Tarih Tezi”, in Tanıl Bora, Murat Gültekinil, *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasal Düşünce, İslamcılık*, İletişim, İstanbul, 2005, pp. 805-806.

¹⁷ Ergün Yildirim, Hüsamettin Inaç, Ahmet Uysal, “Symbolic Construction of the Turkish National Identity as a Factor of International Management”, *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 2009, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 250-251, at http://businessperspectives.org/journals_free/ppm/2009/PPM_EN_2009_01c_Yildirim.pdf.

¹⁸ Çigdem Atakuman, “Cradle or crucible: Anatolia and archaeology in the early years of the Turkish Republic (1923-1938)”, *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 2008, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 219.

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culture among citizens¹⁹. Knowledge of national history was regarded as vital to the nation's very survival and treated accordingly. Selahattin Kandemir drew attention to the importance of national roots in the introduction of his book, *Etiler* (The Hittites):

[a] tree that doesn't have its roots deep in the soil cannot grow. The root of national power is national identity. What creates national identity is national history²⁰.

Thus, the deeper one nation's roots are, the brighter and longer its future. According to Kemalists nations must literally unearth their roots, by conducting archaeological excavations and engaging modern methods. Nationalists were skeptical about the Western version of history, regarding it as a “myth”, which undermined the achievements of Turks and denied any of their contribution to the history of civilization, and labelling them as barbarians²¹. Consequently, they promoted archaeological research to support the national historiographical objectives.

On the other hand, the Turkish Historical Society was also in charge of writing recent history. The recount of late Ottoman history, and depiction of state and government institutions were strongly historicized, while, in the meantime Mustafa Kemal's biography was narrated by using personal memory as a legitimate source. It is noteworthy that more than half of the recent past's historians were also holding a political office, indicating the politicization of history through an overlap between the political and the historiographical discourse²².

The Turkish Linguistic Society also played a critical role in building a distinctive Turkish nation-state out of the ashes of

¹⁹ Ayşegül Aydıngün, İsmail Aydıngün, “The Role of Language in the Formation of Turkish National Identity and Turkishness”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 2004, no. 10, p. 421.

²⁰ Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² Veronika Hager, “A Past, So Distant, and Yet So Very Near. Belleten and the Creation of a Historiographical Rupture”, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 2017, no. 24, at <https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/5506#tocto1n1>.

the late Ottoman Empire, by rejecting and reforming the linguistic heritage. The Society developed and promoted a unified Turkish language, by “cleansing” it of Arabic and Persian elements²³. This task was achieved through radical initiatives such as the Linguistic Purification Movement (*öz-Türkçecilik*) and the Sun Language Theory (*Güneş Dil Teorisi*)²⁴. Turkish linguistic theory asserts that Turkish is one of the oldest and simplest languages in the world, almost all languages spoken today being derived from Turkish language:

the ancient form of Turkish that these conquering emigrants spoke was also carried with them and contributed the most important concepts necessary for abstract thought to every primitive language as loanwords²⁵.

The Sun Language Theory was presented to international scientific community at the Third Congress of the Turkish Linguistic Society in 1936, a year before the Second Congress on Turkish History. However, the ideas of Turkish researchers did not find support among international participants²⁶, the theory being widely criticized. As a result, it was abandoned soon after²⁷. The theory lost its popularity in the early years of the Republic, Atatürk himself stopped encouraging it. Although the process of purification impoverished the language and the Sun Language Theory was considered a total failure, both represented powerful tools to frame and promote nationalism and national identity²⁸. Language was considered an important element of Turkish culture and the main link to Turkish pre-history, the means by which Turks preserved their identity. According to Atatürk, the most important requirement of belonging to the Turkish nation was to speak Turkish language²⁹.

²³ Sabirzyan Badretdin, “Pan-turkism: Past, Present and Future”, *The Tatar Gazette*, 18 April 2000, no. 3-4, at http://tatar.yuldash.com/eng_099.html.

²⁴ Ayşegül Aydıngün, İsmail Aydıngün, *op. cit.*, p. 421.

²⁵ Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

²⁶ Çigdem Atakuman, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

²⁷ Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

²⁸ Ayşegül Aydıngün, İsmail Aydıngün, *op. cit.*, p. 421.

²⁹ Çigdem Atakuman, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

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The language theory just like the Turkish history thesis tried to demonstrate that the Turkish nation was equal or even superior to the European nations, by indicating common racial and linguistic origins. To assert the Europeanness of Turkish people meant to reject their Oriental or Ottoman character, since the Ottoman Empire was perceived as genuinely Oriental. Consequently, if Ottomans were religious, Kemalists had to be secular. But this transformation was not smooth and enough on its own, the alleged difference had to be confirmed by historical evidence. Consequently, the Kemalists turned to pre-Ottoman history, as means of showing that Turkish history is not limited to the history of Islam. Moreover, to legitimize the Turkish presence in Anatolia against the territorial claims of ethnic groups, such as the Kurds, Armenians or Greeks, it was necessary to prove the continuity of Turkish people in the Anatolian space³⁰.

Even though both theories failed the test of science, they show the degree to which history can be invented and distorted for political purposes. The history thesis as well as the Turkish language theory reveals how people’s own past and identity can be rejected, denied, discredited, and turned into a despised “Other”. However, these endeavors to rewrite history are not unique to Turkish people or to the Kemalists regime, but they can be observed in (almost) all nationalist narratives as well as in times of ideological change.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 220.