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The Development of Turkish Identity in the Late Ottoman Empire (1904-1917)

After the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, it was clear that the Ottoman Empire had to make drastic changes to fend off encroachment by European powers. What initially took the form of military improvement and minor institutional modernizations transformed into a new set of ideologies based on identification with the Empire (Ottomanism) and with Islam (Pan-Islam). While both ideologies had their supporters and were integrated into government policy during their respective periods, neither succeeded in forming a strong enough identity among the Empire’s peoples.

This source analysis will take off from this period and focus on the other major ideological trend that became common among many intellectuals in the Empire, Turkish identity. The documents, Yusuf Akçura’s *Three Kinds of Politics* (1904), Ahmet Ağaoğlu’s *The Turkish World* (1912-13), and German news correspondent Harry Sturemer’s account of Istanbul during WWI (1917), will be used to present the chronological and thematic development of Turkish identity between 1904-1917. This analysis will follow the development of this new ideology in the late Ottoman Period and in doing so will provide a visible ideological transition from the Ottoman Empire to the modern Turkish Republic. This ideology will be considered because of both its retention of the past, in the case of Islam, in addition to its integration of modern concepts of identification and organization along national and ethnic categories. In these documents and the ideology they present, it is hoped that one will be able to see both a break

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1 Citations for the sources will be provided as they are introduced in the analysis.
with the past as well as a struggle in maintaining previous institutions and modes of thinking that had dominated the Empire for centuries. In analyzing these documents, one will also be able to see the foundations, in part, of the modern Turkish state as it moved away from its Ottoman past towards a new identity based on the criteria that these documents will lay out.

The sources that will be used in this analysis fall between 1904 and 1917. This was a crucial period for the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East overall. It was in this period that the Empire faced continued trouble in the Balkans which forced the Ottomans to give up the last parts of their European empire. The Empire also faced rapid change at home with the rise of the C.U.P., the overthrow of Abdulhamid II, and the eventual coup d’etat of the C.U.P. in 1913. And of course, World War I would be a crucial event in Ottoman history- marking the end of the empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic. It is with these events and crises in mind that the documents should be read and interpreted.

The first document is a series of excerpts from Yusuf Akçura entitled Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset (Three Kinds of Politics). Published in 1904, Akçura lays out the essential question that the Tanizmat, Ottomanism, and other ideologies attempted to resolve- how can the Ottoman state resist European imperial encroachment and become a world power again. As such, it is a good point from which to start a discussion about the new ideologies of the time and why they had arisen in the first place.

Yusuf Akçura was not an Ottoman Turk. Rather, he was born in Russia and moved to Istanbul when he was young. Educated in the latest sociological and theoretical trends of Europe

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in France and drawing from the Franco-Prussian War and German Unification, Akçura brought new concepts of racial identity to his writings and the problems he addressed.

The central message of Akçura was that the previous ideological foundations of Ottoman self-strengthening were not sufficient and effective. He argued that the first “kind of politics”, Ottomanism, was unable to unite the Empire because of both internal and external problems; Muslims did not want to give up their elevated status; non-Muslims did not want to give up their special autonomy given to their communities; Russia would work against the formation of a strong Ottoman state that could resist her imperial goals; and European public opinion was also turned against Ottomanism and a large Ottoman state.³ He also stated that the policies of Abdulhamid had made reconciliation among the various groups in the Empire even less likely. Akçura then went on to argue that the second style of politics, Pan-Islam or Islamism, which Abdulhamid tried to harness during his reign, was equally problematic. While he admitted that “Islamic civilization continues with its original unity”, the external obstacles to unification under Islam were too great because European powers with Muslim subjects would be directly threatened by an Ottoman state causing insubordination among foreign Muslims.⁴ Thus, Pan-Islam would be defeated by the forces it hoped to resist. The final style of politics that Akçura brought up greatly diverges from the previous two, in that it did not have widespread support in the Empire and it has not been implemented. “Unification of the Turks”, as Akçura described it, would bring together all Turkish peoples from across Asia, not just those in Anatolia, and could even incorporate non-Turkish peoples who would become “Turkified”.⁵

³ Ibid, 323-324.
⁴ Ibid, 327.
⁵ This suggestion of “Turkification” would be important for the foundation of the Turkish Republic and the desire of many to rid Turkey of non-Turkish peoples like Armenians, who could not be incorporated into Turkish society and culture.
Akçura’s writings here are important for a study of the various ideologies of the late Ottoman period because the author explicitly laid out the various ideologies that had been implemented, why they had failed, and presented a new potential ideology to address the same problem of Ottoman self-strengthening. Through Akçura, one can see the changes that were occurring within Ottoman intellectual circles as they move away from the Ottomanism of the Tanzimat and Young Turk era and the Pan-Islam of Abdulhamid’s autocracy towards a more ethnic and racial conception of their identity. This new concept was theoretically more exclusionary, but Akçura perceived Turkishness as an ethnic, racial, and even religious construct that could maintain and even expand the size of the Ottoman state. Akçura recognized that his new ideology of Pan-Turkism lacked the foundation of the previous two, but it had greater potential because it lacked significant resistance and it fit into the new ideological trends of the era.6

From this document one gains an understanding of the previous ideological trends between 1839-1904 from a man who lived through their impact and became dissatisfied with them. With an introduction to the preceding modes of thinking about self-strengthening and a short glimpse of the new kind of ideology that hoped to strengthen the Ottoman state, the following documents will expand this new ideology and give it more practical illustration and explication.

The second document, excerpts from Ahmet Ağaoğlu’s The Turkish World from 1912-1913, provides a continuation and extension of the Turkish ideology set forth in the previous document.7 Published in a journal entitled Türk Yurdu, the Ağaoğlu and his excerpts were a

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6 Ibid, 328-329.
product of the burgeoning Turkish Hearth movement of which Yusuf Akçura was a leading member. Understanding the Turkish Hearth movement is essential to understanding the significance of this document and Ağaoğlu himself. Founded in 1911 to “promote Turkish culture and Turkish nationalist sentiment”, the movement represented the popular development of ideas first promoted and developed by Akçura earlier in the analysis. The fact that The Turkish World was a popular series of articles with circulation in both the Ottoman and Russian empires only 7-8 years after Akçura first wrote about Turkism illustrated the legitimacy of Pan-Turkism and Turkish nationalism, the widespread reach of this new ideology, and the speed with which it gained popularity.

In the document, Ağaoğlu began by discussing the question that he would address, which was what one should do if nationalist or racial feelings of solidarity conflicted with religious sentiments, specifically Islam. He went on to give a definition of nationalism from Ernest Renan, which defined nationalism as composed of language, religion, customs, and a common history and fatherland. The author did this to illustrate that religion is not in opposition to nationalism, but rather that it is an integral component. Ağaoğlu stated that “For the Turks, Islam has acquired a national, racial character in the fullest sense”. The Turks and Ottomans had been the defenders of Islam and had preserved it against destruction by Europeans. Perhaps the most important and directly nationalistic excerpt of the document is this:

A nation that has made an idea, a principle, [or] a religion its polestar for so long, would have earned amply the right to label that idea, that principle, [or] that

8 Ibid, 345.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid, 346.
11 Ibid, 347.
12 The author points to the example of Spain after the Reconquista, juxtaposing it to Islam in the Balkans and Africa and Asia under Ottoman protection
religion with its own national name: this is not only a right, it is at the same time an obligation. For the Turks, Islam is not merely a religion: it is, at the same time, a national, racial religion.\textsuperscript{13}

Ağaoğlu concluded by stating that nationalism cannot remain in the abstract; it must be implemented and it must have practical results. This practical implementation would necessarily draw on all the components mentioned previously: language, history, religion, customs, and politics.

While in some parts of the document Ağaoğlu discussed issues like religion and nationalism in the abstract and as general ideals, it is indisputable that, in this Turkish Hearth journal, these questions were discussed with the Turkish peoples and a Turkish state in mind. That is an important point to keep in mind when thinking about the significance of this document, since the belief in a Turkish state would be a central goal of the former Ottoman leadership after WWI.

Ağaoğlu and his writings here are significant in and of themselves because they show that there was a growing Turkish identity in the late Ottoman period. While this ideology still did not exert influence over Ottoman policy and the Ottoman masses, it had blossomed into a full-fledged intellectual movement with supporters. Even more importantly, this identity had the emotional and social ties of nationalism, which prior to then had been fairly absent from any discussions on Ottoman identity. The concept of Turkish identity separate from Ottoman identity, as seen in the previous document, was a new concept in the late Ottoman era. Ağaoğlu and his Hearth movement were integral in giving the ideology greater organization and forming the necessary support for a Turkish identity.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 348.
It is also important to think about how Islam functioned for Ağaoğlu and Turkish nationalists. Islam, for them, was no longer just a religion they shared with Arabs, Berbers, Persians, and Indians. Rather, they appropriated Islam and made it a Turkish religion. In doing so, they exalted the position of the Turkish nation and Turkish people above the status of Islam. In light of the changing relationship between the Ottoman state and Islam since the beginning of the Tanzimat and Ottoman reforms, Ağaoğlu’s position was radical. More than just a simple change in the relation between church and state, the Turkish nation nationalized Islam and made it a tool and function of the Turkish people and their culture, to the exclusion of all other peoples and nations. While the explicit writings about Islam in this document did not fit with the future secularism of the Turkish Republic, the primacy given to the Turkish people and Turkishness over Islam would be an important principle that would be utilized by Ataturk and the founders of the Turkish Republic in creating a unique Turkish identity, to the exclusion of other non-Turkish groups.

Because both the first and second documents deal with Turkish identity as a unifying force, it is important to compare them. Despite both documents coming from similar ideological wellsprings, they do have several important differences. On a basic level, Akcura’s writings were the initial conception of any kind of Turkish identity, while Ağaoğlu revealed a more developed and popular conception of Turkish identity that drew on nationalism and contemporary ideological trends. Akçura also proposed a wider Turkism that encompassed all Asian Turkish peoples, whereas Ağaoğlu makes the ideology more localized to Ottoman Turks by sentimentalizing Ottoman history and highlighting the importance of the Empire in Turkish history. This change reflected the practical considerations of developing a cohesive Turkish identity, since it would be much more difficult to unite all Turkish peoples across Asia who are
of a variety of languages and states, compared to Ottoman Turks who live primarily in Anatolia and share a similar history, language, and state. Both documents discussed the relation between Turkish identity and Islam. Ağaoğlu linked Turkish nationalism with Islam more strongly than Akçura did, though they both highlighted religion as an important factor of identity. In addition, Akçura wrote about Pan-Turkism in a purely speculative way and considered it only a possibility for uniting the Ottoman Empire against Europe, whereas Ağaoğlu actually perceived the existence of a Turkish identity as real and evoked images of Turkish and more specifically Ottoman history to illustrate the greatness of the Turkish people throughout the past centuries.

Coming back to the thesis of this analysis, these two documents, while different in scope and minor details, both moved away from broader ideologies like Ottomanism and Pan-Islam towards a more ethnic and racial nationalism that subordinated Islam to the Turkish people and the Turkish nation. Combined, they demonstrated the rise of a new ideology that fit more easily with “modern” conceptions of state and society which were based on ethnicity, race, and a common culture found in the nation. This new ideology became popular rapidly in the late Ottoman era, in part because of the failure of previous ideologies, and had have an important impact on the transition to the Turkish Republic.

The last document represents the final, logical stage of the Turkish identity that had been forming and gaining support in the previous two documents. This account is unique in that it was written by a German correspondent in 1917, at the height of the Ottoman war effort in WWI. Coming from a non-Turkish source, the document will have a different perspective on the events witnessed. A European steeped in experiences regarding nationalism, nation-states, and ethnic

identities will approach the events in the source differently because of his background and his awareness of these forces and issues.

The first part of the correspondent’s account focused primarily on the hardships faced by the citizens of the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul during WWI. The devaluation of Ottoman money and the exchange of paper money for specie were central financial problems faced by the Ottoman economy. The author reported that “no idea of patriotism prevented them [citizens] from collecting everything metal they could lay their hands on and…paying the highest price in paper money for every gold piece they could get”.15 It would seem that the situation had dissolved into pure self-interest in maintaining one’s life in Istanbul and in doing so rejecting Ottoman law and rejecting support for the Ottoman state. But the author notes that Talat Bey, one of the Three Pashas who led the Empire into WWI, was fanning a “smoldering nationalism”.16 He did so through the Turkification of all signs in the city, including Pera, the traditionally European section of the city.17 While English and French were the initial targets, German was added soon after, much to the dismay of the author. A second language rule was implemented, forcing all trade and business to be conducted in Turkish, which forced many European businesses to hire Turkish speakers.

The events that Stuermer observed above were a result of both the accelerated tensions of WWI and the growing strength of Turkish identity. World War I, triggered by ethnic tensions in the Balkans, had an equally important impact on the multinational Ottoman Empire. In the destruction of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, the Empire was stripped of its Arab and Balkan provinces down to its Anatolian, Turkish center. As a result, Turkish nationalism became a more politically acceptable and enticing ideology to follow, both among the ruling Ottomans

15 Ibid, 442.
16 Ibid.
17 The author notes that “of the thousand inhabitants of Pera, not ten can read Turkish”
and among the Ottoman people. In the document, the people lost respect for the law and order of the Ottoman state, and in order to counter that loss of respect, Ottoman leaders like Talat Bey attempted to harness the power of Turkish nationalism to bring the people closer to the Ottoman state. Many Ottoman leaders recognized that a transition from an Ottoman identity to a Turkish national identity would be the most successful and safe for their own power. In doing so, the Ottoman state was transformed into the Turkish state, at least culturally. The expansion of the Turkish language in Istanbul was a logical nationalist strategy to engender pride in one’s language and to rid Istanbul of its foreign influences. By removing French and English from signs and businesses, the Turkish leadership attempted to erase a form of European cultural influence and also give speakers of Turkish greater economic opportunities. Not even German, a language and nation that had a close relationship with the Ottoman ruling class, was spared from being eliminated from the streets. The attempt and intent to create a “Turkey for Turks” is seen clearly in the Stuermer’s account.

Stuermer, a European, clearly saw and interpreted the events preceding before him within a specific vocabulary. Coming from a theoretical background based on nationalism, the correspondent understood that what was occurring in Istanbul was the full expression of Turkish nationalism. And the events in the document were not being led and instigated by Talat Bey and other Ottoman officials. Rather, the events were the result of a genuine mass movement among Turkish people in Istanbul. The Turkish people were pursuing this change and were swept up in a nationalist spirit that made the Turkification of language in Istanbul a practical possibility to enforce and enact.

This document provides the last depiction of the development of Turkish identity and nationalism. The events described within the account are the culmination of the previous two
documents in which Turkism was a broad and unfounded ideology that slowly gained an intellectual following. This intellectual following, however, came to influence the Turkish peoples in the Ottoman Empire to such an extent that it translated into government policy and eventually an entirely new nation and government. One sees in the final document the beginnings of the Turkish people’s struggle for a nation, founded on the Turkish language and the sovereignty of the Turkish people.

It is necessary now to bring the three documents together to make the narrative of Turkish identity cohesive and clear. The ideology which would eventually become Turkish nationalism was originally formulated by Akçura in the first document as Pan-Turkism, in which all Turkish peoples across Asia would unite. This broad ideology with no social foundation became more narrow and concise in the writings of Ağaoğlu and the Turkish Hearth Movement. Ağaoğlu’s focus on Ottoman history, his readership, and his focus on nationalism necessarily narrowed the focus of Pan-Turkism to the Turks of the Ottoman Empire. Ağaoğlu also added key components of nationalism to the discourse on Turkish identity - language, religion, history, fatherland - which added substance to the concept of being a Turk from which strong identity could grow. An exaltation of Turkish history, Ağaoğlu fleshed out the concept of Turkish identity by providing a vibrant intellectual community and by defining core components of the Turkish people. The final document, then, is the popularization of Turkish national identity among both Ottoman officials and the people of Istanbul and the beginning of the struggle to establish the Turkish nation out of the destruction of the Empire in WWI.

From these three documents, a narrative develops through which the path of Turkish nationalism and identity is charted. The rapid growth of this ideology in the span of about a decade is a testament to the appeal of the ideology among Turkish peoples. While ideologies like
Ottomanism and Pan-Islam were pushed for several decades, respectively, they did not gather the strength that Turkish identity and Turkish nationalism did. This could be due in part to the general appeal of nationalist movements and their ideological strength compared to Empire-wide or religious identity movements. The Ottoman Empire, which for nearly a century had been struggling to combat national movements that threatened the empire from within, finally succumbed to its own nationalist movement in the form of Turkism, which transformed the core of the Empire into the Turkish Republic. The rise of Turkish nationalism, then, should be considered within the common phenomenon of nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

What were some potential causes for this rapid development of Turkish nationalism? There is little doubt that the continued loss of non-Turkish provinces within the Ottoman Empire made Turkish nationalism a continually more appealing force, to the point that there was no reason not to harness it after World War I destroyed Ottoman control of its Arab provinces and left it with only its Anatolian hearth. Also, the basic concept of nationalism and thinking along ethnic and racial lines spread from Europe and Russia, as the educational background of Akçura and Ağaoğlu makes clear. World War I provided the opportunity for Turkish nationalism to gain the upper hand as the Ottoman Empire was destroyed and Ottoman domination of the Arab Islamic world came to an end, thus eliminating Ottomanism and Pan-Islam as potential ideological tools. From that point forward, Turkish nationalism would be harnessed by the founders of the Turkish Republic to resist foreign control in the aftermath of WWI and to build a stronger and more cohesive state.

18 Akcura was educated in the Ecole des Sciences Politiques and the Sorbonne in Paris, where he studied under Durkheim, Sorel, and other major intellectual figures. Agaoğlu attended Russian middle and secondary schools, and later studied at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris.
In this analysis, three documents have been used to form a narrative on the growth and success of Turkish identity and nationalism in the late Ottoman Empire. Starting with the initial formulation of Pan-Turkism and moving towards a more nationalistic ideology, these primary excerpts show how Turkish identity came to replace other competing identities among Ottomans leading up to World War I. This ideological shift represented both a recognition of the failure of other ideologies and a realization of the strength of a potential new one- Turkish nationalism- as a tool for strengthening the Empire. For cultural, ethnic, and political reasons, Turkish nationalism became the dominant ideology of the Turkish people during and after World War I and provided a clear ideological connection between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic.
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