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The Impact of the Balkan Wars on Ottoman History Writing: Searching for a Soul

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ABSTRACT
Based on histories, accounts and articles published after the Balkan Wars, this article argues that, contrary to the commonly accepted thesis, the Balkan Wars did not mark the point at which Turkism became the dominant state ideology. There was in fact no clear-cut and definite shift toward Turkism at this point. Instead there was an increasing awareness of the need for a ‘common soul’ that would unite the population of the empire in the face of dramatic challenges such as the Balkan Wars.

KEY WORDS: Balkan Wars; Committee of Union and Progress; Ziya Gökalp; Islamism; Mehmet Fuat Köprülü; Mustafa Kemal; Ottoman Empire; Ottomanism; Ahmet Refik; Turkification; Turkism; World War I

Modern historians have tended to regard the Balkan Wars as the point at which Turkism became the dominant ideology, or, as Mustafa Aksakal put it recently, ‘the language of politics turned nationalist.’ It was now that Ottomanism ended and that, at least for Erol Ulker, ‘the nationalist project of Turkification was launched in a deliberate manner.’ This perception of the period 1912–1913 as the launching point of Turkism, or indeed any attempt to see the period in terms of clear-cut and sharply defined political ideologies, does not reflect the reality of the times and modern historians’ attempts to fit the history of the era of the Balkan Wars into such frameworks lead to confusion rather than clarity.

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such sharp distinctions or precisely constructed ideologies existed at the time. This intellectual ambiguity or amorphousness can be seen when we look at the history writing of the period.

Ottoman historians adopted a variety of approaches: traditional, appropriation of Western sources and use of translations. Some historians followed Western methods of history writing and challenged the works of European historians. The lack of sophistication among certain historians is evident in the praise of Ali Emiri for Mehmed Ata’s translation of Joseph Hammer’s history of the Ottoman Empire \(^8\) in *Tarih ve Edebiyat Mecmuası* [The journal of history and literature], a journal which continued the tradition of the Ottoman state historian and which Emiri produced. According to Ali Emiri, this work was the most all-encompassing Ottoman history to appear after Ibn-i Kemal’s history of the Ottoman sultans commissioned by Bayezid II \([r. 1481–1512]\). \(^9\)

Not all historians were so traditional, however. One leading historian of the period, a man who was regarded as using modern historical methodology and who is considered by Kemal Karpat to be ‘the father of Turkish national historiography’, \(^10\) was Köprülüzade Mehmed Fuad (later Mehmet Fuat Köprülü). For Ziya Gökalp, whose disciple he was, \(^11\) Köprülüzade ‘illuminated Turkism’ through his academic writings. \(^12\) Given Köprülüzade’s reputation as the quintessential exponent of Turkism, it is important here to examine what he said about the Balkan Wars. In 1921 Köprülüzade wrote in his school-text book, *Milli Tarih* [National History]:

> The disaster which we suffered [the Balkan Wars] was useful to us in one way: we finally understood—even if very late—that we were ‘Turks.’ We saw with our own eyes that the Christian elements whom we counted as our brothers and called ‘Ottomans’ were our most terrible enemy. \(^13\)

It would thus appear that what was important for Köprülüzade, and the lesson he took from the Balkan Wars, was the necessity of being a Turk. But what is important here is to understand when he wrote this and why, for what lay behind his analysis had less to do with the defeat in the Balkan Wars than it did with that suffered at the end of the First World War. As the empire collapsed, the conceptualisations adopted by the Ottoman elite, and in particular by Ottoman historians, were very much related to the necessities of the times, which determined how they interpreted and represented what they saw and the facts

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\(^{8}\) J. Freiherr Hammer-Purgstall’s 10-volume history of the Ottoman Empire was published between 1827 and 1835 in Pest.


\(^{10}\) K. H. Karpat (2001) *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* and B. C. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom. Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire*, in: *Eurasian Studies*, 3(1), pp. 133–136.


\(^{13}\) Mehmed Fuad Köprülüzade (1921) *Milli Tarih. Devre-i Mutavassıta- İkinci Sene* (İstanbul: Kanaat Kitabhanesi ve Matbaası, 1337 [1921]), p. 60.
they chose to present. ‘Facts,’ as E. H. Carr put it, ‘speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context.’ For Köprülüüzade, as for many historians in many different periods, history had a mission and a function. Writing in Istanbul, the capital of a once multi-ethnic empire whose future depended on the construction of a ‘nation’, Köprülüüzade wrote his history and chose his facts with the aim of proving the existence of a Turkish nation which deserved a homeland and whose ideology was Turkism.

In 1918, three years before the appearance of Milli Tarih, in the period in which the Mudros armistice talks were being conducted and when major anti-CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) feeling was rife, Köprülüüzade wrote two articles, published in the newspaper Akşam [Evening], in which he responded to Celal Nuri (İleri), whose articles in the press accused the CUP and its Turkist policies of being responsible for the disaster which had befallen the Ottoman Empire, and to articles in Hadisat [Events] newspaper claiming that ‘it is necessary, without even uttering the word Turk, to work to re-establish the Ottoman unity in the country.’ In these articles Köprülüüzade argued that Turkism was not to blame for the disaster since it was not the sole ideology of the CUP, that Turkism was not an adventurist or expansionist ideology and that in fact what had caused the end of the empire was Ottomanism, which did not work.

For Köprülüüzade, in order to claim a place in the world, a people had to have a nation without which survival was impossible. For years the Ottoman governing elite had ignored Turkishness, seeking instead to protect and foster an Ottomanism that, he wrote, had resulted in nothing: ‘Albania had gone, Rumeli had gone and now Arabia is going.’ Turks had not even been allowed a space in their own empire to the extent that the very word Turk itself was left unspoken. But despite all these efforts, ‘the Ottoman empire [now] remained only as a de-facto Turkish sultanate.’ Turks thus now had to claim their own Turkish nation and to protect their own borders, for if they did not do so, they would not survive.

These arguments must be seen in the context of the major discussions at the time about the principles, put forward by the American President Woodrow Wilson in January 1918 as the basis for a post-war peace settlement. Köprülüüzade’s passion in these articles resulted not merely from a desire to refute allegations about the Turkists, but also, and more importantly, to demonstrate that the Turkish nation was an historical reality and therefore deserved a place among the nations of the world in a period when only ‘nations’ had a right to their own states as stipulated in the Wilson principles. The faith that Köprülüüzade put in the Wilsonian principles and their importance for the survival of a Turkish nation is clear from the following passage in Milli Tarih:

We thought that the Europeans, remaining faithful to the Wilson principles, even if they took Iraq, Hijaz and Syria from us, would leave us Thrace and Anatolia, which

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15 Boyar, Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans, p. 11.
16 Mehmed Fuad Köprülüüzade (1918) Son Hadiselerin Karşısında Türkçülük- I Türk Aleyhtarlığı, Akşam, 24 Teşrin-i evvel 1334/17 Muharrem 1337 [1918].
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Mehmed Fuad Köprülüüzade (1918) Son Hadiselerin Karşısında Türkçülük- I Türk Aleyhtarlığı, and 2- Tanzimatdan Beri Osmanlılık Telakkisi, Akşam, 27 Teşrin-i evvel 1334/ 20 Muharrem 1337 [1918].
are completely Turkish, that we would be rescued from the capitulations which are contrary to justice, and that we would be successful in increasing our learning in peace and tranquillity, and in advancing our agriculture and commerce.  

Although frustrated by the reality that despite the promises made during the war, the Wilsonian principles were turning out to be ‘empty words and imaginings,’ Köprülüzade kept his faith and continued to trust in the West, and in particular in the United States. In the section in Milli Tarih on the Balkan Wars, he noted that the Carnegie report (prepared by an international commission for the Carnegie Endowment in Washington and published in 1914) had brought the attention of the West to the barbarity of the Balkan states, while in the section on the period after the First World War, the main enemy which emerged was not the Great Powers, from whom help was expected, especially Britain, but Greece. In essence, therefore, this simple school textbook reads almost as a plea to the Great Powers to grant the Turks the nation state they deserved and were entitled to under the Wilson principles.

While Köprülüzade saw Turkism, Ottomanism and the way forward in these terms, another eminent historian writing in the same period, saw things from another point of view and his take on the Balkan Wars was different. For Ahmed Refik (Ahmet Refik Altunay) there was no silver lining to the Balkan disaster. Writing in 1339 [1921], the same year as Köprülüzade, Ahmed Refik noted in his school text book for younger pupils that:

The Balkan disaster was for us a great calamity. The Ottoman nation had never seen such wretchedness. The lands which our ancestors had conquered in 150 years passed into the hands of the enemy in a couple of months. The graves of our heroic sultans slipped from our hands. The enemy put our Muslim brothers to the sword. Women and children were made wretched. Most of our soldiers were broken by cholera or starvation.

These ‘disasters’ could only be rectified by hard work, according to Ahmed Refik, who advised pupils at the end of the section on the ‘Balkan Disaster’: ‘Let us work day and night and strive to repair this disaster.’

Although both authors approached the Balkan Wars from the perspective of mistakes, failures and the destruction of the innocent masses, the conceptual clarity so favoured by modern historians was absent. This is hardly to be wondered at, given the fluidity of thought, the rapid changes of realities and the challenge of swiftly shifting political conjunctions, evidenced, for example, in Ziya Gökalp’s move from ardent support of

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20 Mehmed Fuad Köprülüzade (1919) Milli Tarih (1337/1919), pp. 61, 62.
21 Ibid, p. 62.
23 Ibid, p. 62.
24 The content of the text strongly suggests that the publication date on the text is Hicri. If the date on the text was Rumi dating, then the publication date of the book would be 1923.
26 Ibid.
Ottomanism in 1911 to total negation of it in the post-World War I period. The lack of clarity in conceptualization is particularly clear in translations made from European languages into Turkish. After the lifting of Abdülhamidian censorship in the wake of the 1908 Revolution, translations flourished. The aim of these translations was to give the readers the most comprehensive information in the shortest possible time and because of this, concepts and terms lost their importance. In 1331 [1915], just two years after the Balkan Wars, Ahmed Salah Aldin, a lecturer at Darülfünun, published *Makedonya Meselesi ve Balkan Harb-i Ahiri* [The Macedonian question and the last Balkan war].

This book was a patchwork of various French works translated by Ahmed Salah Aldin in which terms such as Rumeli, Balkans, Ottoman government, Turkish government, Ottoman people and Turkish people are used interchangeably without any concern for ideological or conceptual rigour. For Ahmed Salah Aldin, the most important question was not to promote Turkism or any other clearly defined ideology or to solve any problem of identity. His concern was to present the reasons behind the recent disaster which had befallen the state and its people. Like his nineteenth-century predecessors, his priority was ‘not that of developing concrete political theories, but of describing events.’ The fact that the book was published so soon after the Balkan Wars, in a period in which sufficient documentation was not available, was a problem acknowledged by the author, for whom, however, the important point was to produce an analysis of events for Ottoman readers as soon after the event as possible.

While the Balkan Wars did not thus represent a turning point in Turkism, or any other ideological or conceptual break, it did represent one thing, common to all those who wrote about it in this period. It was a psychological trauma which led to a series of questionings, accusations and searching for an answer to the question of ‘why we lost’ and for those responsible. That it was not a simple loss of territory is apparent from the lines of Mehmed Akif who mourned: ‘The land my grandfather ploughed and into which he poured his soul/ Has gone and never will come back!’ a land whose soil held Muslim/Ottoman/Turkish bones and was the repository of their soul. Such a loss was also an unexpected and devastating humiliation both for the Ottoman state and for its army. The loss of the Balkan lands was thus a far greater blow than merely the loss of territory.

Such a catastrophe was not envisaged on the eve of the war when the atmosphere was upbeat and self-confidence high, especially among the civilian Ottoman elite. In an article

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27 Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and The Balkans*, p. 54.
28 Ahmed Salah Aldin (1915) *Makedonya Meselesi ve Balkan Harb-i Ahiri* (Dersaadet, Kanaat Matbaası, 1331 [1915]). Another example was Fuad Münir’s translation of C. Vellay’s, *Balkan Harbinden Sonra Bahri Sefid Meselesi ve Asya-i Osmaniye-i Tehdid Eden Tehlikeler* (İstanbul: Resimli Kitab Matbaası, 1331 [1915]).
29 It is very difficult to establish in history books written in the period what exactly is translation, what is original and how faithful the author had been to the work translated. For example, one of the most prolific and important historians, Ali Reşad, is known to have made extensive use of French works without acknowledgement. When he did translate, he altered and inserted his own views into the text as if this was part of the original work. See for example, E. Boyar (2004) Engelhardt from censorship to icon: the use of a European diplomat’s history in Ottoman and Turkish historiography on the Tanzimat, *Eurasian Studies*, 3(1), pp. 81–88.
30 Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans*, p. 50.
32 Boyar *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans*, p. 1.
entitled ‘Eğer Tarih Tekerrürden İbaret ise . . . ’ [If history repeats itself . . . ], published in Sebiliürreşad [True Path] in 1328 [1912], the author argued that ‘if history repeats itself’, then the Ottoman victories over the Balkan allies in the past, referring to those of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, would ensure that ‘with God’s will’ the Ottomans would win this coming war and the Balkan nations would be subjected to ‘a bloody rout.’ For him: ‘These marmots, these field moles, these rabbits put their minds—no, let us not say minds, as if they had such a thing—to fighting the Ottomans, like mice gathering together to put a bell on a cat.’34 Contrary to the author’s expectation, history did not repeat itself. Not only did the mice manage to put a bell on the cat’s neck, but they also succeeded in burying it, at least this was how a Bulgarian postcard published after the fall of Edirne joyfully depicted it.35

Immediately after the Balkan Wars, many works were produced by a variety of authors with different political leanings, both soldiers and civilians, who sought to understand and analyze the reasons for the Balkan disaster, to teach the lessons to be learned from the failure, to point to the culprits and to set a common goal that would unite the people of the Ottoman state in a drive to take back the lands they had lost and to clear their names. This was a defeat which, as Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] wrote on November 6, 1914, when he was military attaché in Sofia, had left ‘a stain on the honour’ of the Ottoman army,36 a stain which many, like Hafız Hakkı, a major of the general staff, wished to see removed. Writing on October 28, 1913 about the failures in this war, Hafız Hakkı declared: ‘Now the only desire and single aim of my life is to remove the black stain smeared on the honour of the army and, one day, to go to the help of my groaning enslaved brothers.’37

Many soldiers who had taken part in the Balkan Wars wrote accounts in its immediate aftermath analyzing the reasons for this crushing military failure. In Balkan Harbinde Garb Ordusu [The Western army in the Balkan War]38 and Balkan Harbinde Srıb Ordusu [The Serbian army in the Balkan War],39 published in 1329 [1913] and based on his own experiences during the war, Captain Selanikli Bahri pointed to various factors in the defeat, such as ignorance, lack of preparedness, lack of foresight and lack of discipline among the Ottoman army. However, he argued, the main reason was a lack of morale, an argument supported by the author of Balkan Harbinde Askeri Mağlubiyetlerimizin Esbabı [Reasons for our military defeats in the Balkan War],40 published with the author’s name given only as an initial but whose author was in fact Ali İhsan Paşa (Sabis).41 In this book

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34 Tahir ul-Mevlevi (1912) Eğer Tarih Tekerrürden İbaret ise . . . , Sebiliürreşad, 9–2, 29 Şevval 1330 and 27 Eylül 1328 [1912], p. 105.
37 Hafız Hakkı Paşa, Bozgun (İstanbul: Tercüman Yayınları, n.d.), p. 31.
38 Selanikli Bahri (1913) Balkan Harbinde Garb Ordusu (İstanbul: Çifçi Kitabhanesi, 1329 [1913]).
39 Yüzbaşı Selanikli Bahri (1913) Balkan Harbinde Srıb Ordusu (İstanbul: Tanin Matbaası, 1329 [1913]).
40 Elif (1913) Balkan Harbinde Askeri Mağlubiyetlerimizin Esbabı (İstanbul: Kitabhan-i İslam ve Askeri (Tüccarzade İbrahim Hilmi), 1329 [1913]).
41 The anonymous author of the book later was identified as Ali İhsan Paşa (Sabis) who took part in the Balkan Wars, served as a general in the First World War, and was imprisoned on Malta because of his anti-British activities as the head of the Sixth Army from November 1918 to March 1919; after his release from Malta, he served in the national army.
Ali İhsan Paşa gave a very detailed account of the war and a critical analysis of the military mistakes made before and during it. For Ali İhsan Paşa ‘the great danger which threatened the country was not properly understood.’ At the end of the book in a section called ‘Absence of army morale,’ he wrote that ‘the morale of the nation and of the army, which was its heroic symbol’ was of major importance in the winning of a war. Ottoman society, however, was made up of individuals who thought only of their own interests and were bereft of feelings of self-sacrifice and heroism.

While authors like Selanikli Bahri and Ali İhsan Paşa wrote critical accounts of the war, it was Fevzi Paşa (Çakmak) who clearly and systematically brought all these criticisms together. In the lectures he gave after the National Liberation War at the Military Academy, which were later published as a book for army personnel only, Fevzi Paşa listed the reasons for the loss of the Balkan Wars, including the deficiencies in military planning and application, lack of foresight and incompetence. In addition, there was also a lack of discipline due to the breakdown of the command structure caused by political factionalism within the army. But the most important factor was, again, the lack of morale. According to Fevzi Paşa, ‘there is a spiritual aspect to the army. The material strength of an army is of no importance if that army does not have a strong morale. The vitality of nations is dependent on morale.’ This lack of morale arose from the absence of a common ideal in the nation of which the army was part. In order to remedy this, according to Hafız Hakki Paşa, what was necessary was a ‘belief, knowingly and with understanding, in the sacredness of the goal and a belief in a common and holy ideal for the entire nation. No discord, and not even the devil, can come among souls who are united in this blessed belief.’

This lack of unity was not something to be observed only at the front. Selahattin Yurtoğlu, Yüzbaşı (Captain) Selahattin, felt deep pain when he witnessed the apathy of people of Istanbul, poor and rich alike, to the war just 80 kilometres outside the city while celebrating the spring festival of Hıdırellez. ‘A people’ he wrote ‘who have lost all their land on the European continent and have left in the hands of the enemy a mass of three million Turks, are enjoying themselves under the sounds of cannon fire. The crowd was so great that it was not even possible to approach sellers to buy something.’

The element that linked all intellectuals in this period, regardless of their political leanings, was the need for unity and for some feeling or belief which would hold the empire together, a psychological glue to attach people to each other. Mehmed Akif, who is considered one of the most important Islamist thinkers, composed ‘Hakkın Sesi’ [True voice] as a response to the Albanian revolt and the secession of Albania from the Ottoman Empire. In this poem, which defended Ottoman unity and warned the different Muslim segments of Ottoman society not to act independently, he wrote: ‘Now, oh dead millet [nation], it is morning wake up!/... Open your eyes, neither Arabness nor Turkishness

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42 Elif, Balkan Harbinde Askeri Mağlubiyetlerimizin Esbabı, p. 24.
43 Ibid, pp. 85–86.
45 Hafız Hakki Paşa, Boğazın, pp. 82–83.
46 I. Selçuk (ed.) (2005) Yüzbaşı Selahattin’in Romanı (1) (İstanbul: Cumhuriyet Kitapları), p. 82.
will survive/... Come together, otherwise it will end in manifest frustration/ No government will survive there, nor by God will religion." The sentiment expressed here by Mehmed Akif is echoed by the response of Ziya Gökalp, who is counted as the father of Turkism, to the accusation levelled against him by Ali Kemal of being a Kurd, not a Turk: ‘Even if I were a Kurd, Arab or a Circassian/ my first desire would be Turkish nationality!/ Because if the Turk becomes strong, without doubt/ he will save every Muslim nation.’

What both writers sought was a common ‘soul,’ something referred to by Ziya Gökalp in a letter which he wrote to his daughter on his way back from prison in Malta in April 1921. Citing the successes of the Kemalist army in Anatolia, he wrote: ‘The Turkish peasant begged God with sincere faith: I have no soul, give me strength, allow me to rescue my nation, he said.’ For Ziya Gökalp, this was a plea that God granted. Just like Mehmed Akif and Ziya Gökalp, Ahmed Refik too emphasized the necessity of unity. Although he did not define what exactly ‘vatan’ (patrie, fatherland) meant, he urged his readers to ‘love the vatan,’ and, not forgetting the ‘Libyan disaster, the Balkan Wars and the calamity of the Great War,’ to ‘be brothers to your co-religionists living in your vatan, to love them and to work with them. The vatan is protected by strength. Strength comes from unity.’

This searching for a soul or a unifying ideology was one thing but to produce concrete results was another. For Ziya Gökalp ‘to think and to pronounce about [Turkism] is easy. But to materialise it and especially to bring it successfully to a reality is difficult.’ This reality was achieved, according to him, by Mustafa Kemal. Turkism in fact only could serve as an effective unifying factor with the creation of the Turkish nation-state. This change is strikingly demonstrated in the 1924 edition of Köprülüzade’s *Milli Tarih*, which, despite there being only a three-year gap between this and the previous edition, displays a fundamental shift in the author’s presentation of the recent past. Köprülüzade now removed the reference to the Carnegie report, for what the Westerners thought or wrote was now of no importance. The British became the number one enemy and Sultan Vahdeddin and the Ottoman dynasty, as well as the *Huğriyet ve İtilaf Fırkası* (Freedom and Harmony Party) were declared to be traitors of the state and puppets of the British. Perhaps most significantly of all, there was now a national leader, Mustafa Kemal who embodied the Turkish nation.

In conclusion, although historians have often regarded the Balkan Wars as the point at which Turkism emerged as the dominant ideology in the Ottoman Empire, it is clear that this was not in fact the case. The Balkan Wars undoubtedly prompted much intellectual self-examination and re-assessment of the world around them on the part of Ottoman elite, this did not result in the construction of a dominant ideology but rather a cacophony of

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different strands of intellectual responses. It was not until the emergence of a Turkish nation-state after a successful war of independence that Turkism became a dominant ideology. Indeed, it was only at this point that, logically, Turkism could come into its own, for without a Turkish national state it remained only one of many competing ideological strands of thought. Even with the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkism did not form a fixed, clearly defined intellectual ideal but remained elastic and fluid.

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