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Remembering a Very Recent Past in the Turkish Republic: The Single Party Era's Historical Remembrance of the Great War

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Abstract

This article examines how issues related to World War I were remembered and represented during the Single Party Era of the Turkish Republic (1923–1945), focusing on the political elite's narrative strategies. The study situates the persistence of a positive perception of Unionism in contemporary Turkey within the historical remembrance shaped by the early Republic's identity politics. Drawing on newspaper analyses from the 1930s and 1940s, the article reveals how narratives surrounding prominent Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) figures — such as Talat, Enver, and Cemal — evolved. Initially, the Kemalist regime distanced itself from the CUP by framing World War I (also referred to “the War” in this article) as the product of a few Unionist leaders' recklessness while celebrating the War of Independence as the foundation of a new, victorious Turkish identity. However, by the 1930s, publications began to reinterpret and partially rehabilitate the CUP leaders' reputations, emphasizing their dedication to state interests and leadership qualities.

Keywords: historical remembrance; nationalism; Committee of Union and Progress; Great War; politics of memory

Introduction

With approximately 17 million deaths, the Great War is considered the first total war in world history (Hobsbawm, 1994, 33–77). The transformative effect of the War on world politics becomes evident when considering the immense casualties and loss of life in warring nations; the widespread famine, and its far-reaching consequences; the rise of professional propaganda techniques; and the use of nationalist agitation to rally public support. Although the War seemed to have ended in 1918 with separately signed peace agreements, it took on a transformative form for states with “the civilianization of collective violence” from 1918 to 1924, in the period where the boundary between civilian and military targets had been eroded (Winter 2022). In this process, the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires were dissolved, and new states organized in the form of nation-states were established, replacing these multi-religious, multi-ethnic empires. (Kayalı 2021)

The defeated countries would have to face the consequences of the War in various ways in post-war settings. Questions such as who was responsible for declaring the War, why did a war that was expected to be short lasted so long, which mismanagement caused the emergence of war speculators and famine, who was responsible for the human rights violations committed against civilians during the War, were questions that were expected to preoccupy post-war societies. For instance, in post-

war Germany, the social democrats and left-wing socialists demanded the formation of state tribunals and prosecutions of war criminals, as well as judicial investigation of those responsible for the decision to go to war (Kramer 2006, 447). For this purpose, immediately after the Great War tribunals were formed in Istanbul and Leipzig, “The courts martial in Istanbul prosecuted 200 of those responsible in 35 trials in 1919-1920” (Kramer, 2006, 441; Dadrian and Akçam 2011) and “of the original list of 862 alleged war criminals submitted to Germany by the Allies, 45 were chosen to be tried at Leipzig as an initial test of Germany’s good will” (Kramer 2006, 448). However, the processes that both societies went through in the post-war period, namely the November Revolution in Germany and the National Struggle Movement in Anatolia, prevented these investigations from being deepened or turning into a form of social accounting.

In the Ottoman-Turkish context, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) (especially the Enver-Cemal-Talat trio, known as the triumvirate), which started to shape Ottoman politics in the second Constitutional revolution of 1908 and ruled the country in a dictatorial manner after the 1913 Raid on the Sublime Porte, were also expected to be the addressee of the above-mentioned questions for the Ottoman State (Hanioğlu 1995). However, at this critical point in history, the resistance initiated by the CUP cadres in Anatolia caused the accounting of the War to flow in a different way. The harsh provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres, signed by the Ottoman State on August 10, 1920, were not accepted by a group of Ottoman/Turkish officers who organized a resistance movement in Anatolia, and thus the so-called “National Struggle Movement” began, which would result in the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923 (Bayar 2014). This movement formed a separate parliament in Ankara, abolished the Sultanate on November 1, 1922, and announced that the regime of the newly established country would be a Republic on October 29, 1923. From this date on, the new Republic of Turkey under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal was positioned as a secular country with the abolition of the caliphate, and top-down reforms were initiated around intensive westernization and the nation-state ideal (Zürcher 2003; Bayar 2014).

This article will evaluate how issues related to World War I were remembered and represented by the political elite of this newly founded Republic during the Single Party Era (1923–1945). In 2024, when the 101st anniversary of the Republic was celebrated, the general public reproduced the myth of statesmanship shaped around the CUP, the superior interests of the state, and that these leaders were actors who protected their dignity. The persistence of positive remembrance of Unionist leaders can be observed even today. A striking example of this contemporary memory was a video recording showing Talat’s body¹ being brought from Berlin to Istanbul in 1943 and buried with a state ceremony, which was published on the YouTube channel of the popular history program called *Teketek*, and the comments made on this video are examples of the ongoing positive reputation of these names in contemporary Turkish society. Comments on this video describe Talat as a respected, great statesman.² In a similar vein, in 1996, the remains of Enver were brought back to Turkey from Central Asia and reinterred with full honors at the national Monument of Liberty in Istanbul — the same memorial where Talat had been buried in 1943.

In order to delve into the sources of this positive approach towards Unionism, it is necessary to ask the question of how issues related to the Great War were dealt with from the declaration of the Republic to the transition to multi-party life in 1945. How World War I created a historical remembrance throughout the history of the Republic, the transformations it underwent, and what role it played in the process of building the Turkish identity of the Republic during the Single Party era are the questions this article investigates. The first section discusses the memory politics of the early Republic, dealing with how Kemalist officials initially silenced World War I memories while glorifying the War of Independence. The second section examines a series of publications in the 1930s that revisited the reputations of the CUP leaders. Here, the changing narrative is analyzed, from vilifying these figures in the 1920s to partially rehabilitating them a decade later. Here, the article analyzes Republican-era narratives on the controversial issues such as the 1915 deportations, wartime economic nationalism, military catastrophes like Sarıkamış, and centralization efforts in the Ottoman periphery. The final section considers the outcomes of this remembrance shift, arguing that these official narratives ‘seeded’ the positive public perception of Unionism.

The article examines editorials, history columns in leading newspapers (such as *Cumhuriyet*, *Ulus*, *Vakit* ...), and memoirs published in the 1920s to 30s, reading them as texts where official memory was negotiated. By adopting a qualitative historical methodology, the article examines how the early Turkish Republic remembered World War I. The primary sources for this study were gathered through a systematic search of the digital newspaper archive *Gaste Arşivi* (<https://www.gastearsivi.com/>), a comprehensive repository of Turkish periodicals. Using targeted keywords such as “Committee of Union and Progress,” “Enver,” “Cemal,” and “Talat,” I identified and examined hundreds of newspaper columns, particularly from the 1930s. These columns — many of which were later compiled into published books — constitute a rich but underexamined corpus of early Republican discourse on the recent Ottoman past. By analyzing these sources, this article aims to investigate how political memory regarding the Great War was constructed, negotiated, and transformed during the Single Party era of the Turkish Republic.

This article contributes to the literature regarding how the former leading CUP members, who are held in high esteem in contemporary Turkey, were remembered during the Single Party Era and how the memory politics of the Republic changed over time, which dealt with the leading figures of the CUP and war responsibility. Overall, the article contributes to the literature on collective memory and nationalism by illustrating how a post-imperial republic constructed a usable past: The Turkish case shows a dynamic process of selective remembering and forgetting in the aftermath of a major war. The article enriches our understanding of how newly-founded states invoke history to legitimize themselves, and how official memories can shift even within a single generation. However, this study is limited to Turkish language public discourse in the single-party era and does not directly assess how, for instance, non-Turkish communities remembered the War.

It will be claimed that the memory politics of the Kemalist regime which glorified the War of Independence (1919-1923) and represented this glory as an inseparable part of Turkish identity avoided dealing with issues related to World War I and hold few individuals at the top of the CUP as the culprits who engaged the dying Empire in World War I in the early periods of the Republic. However, the series of publications that started in the 1930s maintained the reputation of these leaders established in the 1920s, criticized some of their actions, and reinterpreted their statesmanship and protection of state interests. This reinterpretation led these people to regain the reputation they had lost after the War and sowed the seeds of the positive perception of unionism that exists in contemporary Turkish society.

Creating Historical Remembrance in the Formation of the Republican Identity

The way societies confront the memory of the Great War in different ways and the memory politics determined by the ruling elite to shape the post-war societies and identities are significant in understanding how historical remembrance is formed, and this remembrance shapes the perception of “us.” According to Winter, our memories, or the “historical remembrance” that exists in society on a certain subject, are recreated or reconstructed in the process, and in this process of reconstruction, we add emotions, beliefs, and even knowledge to our experiences. “We bias our memories of the past by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event” (Winter 2006, 4). Based on this, it is possible to state that the discourse adopted by the Republican elite was significant since they were the mnemonic actors who “invoke myths and symbols of the national past to shape and delimit their societies’ identities, legitimize their power, mobilize electoral support, and exchange power resources” (Malinova 2021, 998). Thus, their interpretation of the recent past was shaped by the impact of the transition from the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Ottoman Empire to the nation-state on those figures.

The figures that wrote the accounts of the Great War would be discussed in this article were undoubtedly influenced by many factors and conveyed the evaluation of this period to their readers. The most important of these factors was certainly being able to navigate between the topics that the single-party Republican regime encouraged to cover, the topics it prohibited from being covered,

and the topics it tolerated being covered. In addition, most of these people who wrote about the War had roles they played on behalf of the Ottoman state in the War. For instance, Muhittin Birgen (1885–1959) was the chief editor of the *Tanin*, the propaganda organ of CUP. Many of them were members of the CUP, and some of them were names very close to the triumvirate who bore all the responsibility of the World War. Arif Cemil (Denker) (1888–1945) was Talat's personal secretary in Berlin, and Falih Rıfkı (Atay) (1893–1971) served five years for Cemal in Syria when he was the governor of Syria as his personal secretary. Apart from the instinct for self-censorship, these individuals undoubtedly influenced how they would function as a bridge between such a recent past and the present. As much as the past shapes the present, the present also shapes the “national” perception and understanding of the past (Eldem 2019, 76). In this context, it should not be forgotten that while these people were reading the recent past, they were reading the past as the political elites of the Republican regime.

Writing about public memory in Turkey, Özyürek stated that in the first years of the Republic, there was a process based on forgetting rather than remembering. This “administered forgetting” focused on loosening the ties with the Ottoman past and created a new identity with the representation of a past in which this past is tried to be ignored or rearranged (Özyürek 2007). However, Gürpınar underlined that there were no completely consistent discourses on history, and that one can be proud of the Ottoman heritage, as well as despise the Ottoman *ancien régime* (Gürpınar 2011, 63). In addition, while Danforth emphasized that history was a battleground between pro-Ottoman Islamists and anti-Ottoman Kemalists, he stated that Republican historiography focused on the “Turkishness” in Ottoman achievements and did not completely ignore the Ottoman past (Danforth 2014, 657). Similarly, Sönmez wrote that Kemalist nation-builders adopted a “double discourse” towards the Ottoman past. According to this:

Through this discourse, the Kemalists could on the one hand praise the political and military achievements of the Ottomans by explaining them with reference to the so called Turkish ingenuity in state-building and administration, and on the other hand characterize and discredit the Ottoman Empire as an *ancien régime* whose socio political diseases would be cured by the revolutions of the young republic. (Sönmez 2021, 765)

Moving from this discussion on how Ottoman history was evaluated in the young Turkish Republic, it is interesting to observe that the series of articles this article analyses did not deny the past; on the contrary, they directly dealt with this recent past and wanted to give an account of it to their readers. However, while doing this, which issues were strongly underlined and which issues were glossed over were determined by the boundaries set by the Republic between the past and the present. Therefore, observing this narrative will also help us understand the relationship that the Republican elites constructed between historical remembrance and Republican identity. There is a very strong connection between the representation of the past in various fields and identity construction. (Özyürek 2007, 3) Both the historical remembrance of World War I and the War of Independence in Republican Turkey were elements that made significant contributions to Turkish nationalism in its formation phase. According to Eldem;

Turkey offers a rare example of a defeated actor who ends up being treated as a victor and this situation of being both victorious and defeated contributed to the utilization of both pride and victimization elements of the identity promoted by the newly established Republic comfortably and ambiguously. (Eldem 2019, 78)

For this reason, since the relationship established with the CUP represented the oscillation between World War defeat and War of Independence victory for the Republican elite, questioning this relationship requires considering this factor in the construction of Turkish national identity. After the signature of the Armistice of Mudros on October 30, 1918, an immediate amnesia started about

war-related issues, particularly about the role played by mainstream intellectuals in the declaration of war. According to this post-war amnesia, the War was declared as the result of the adventurous initiatives of a few individuals at the top of the Young-Turk regime (namely, Cemal, Talat, and Enver) but not supported by many Ottoman intellectuals. In the first years of the Armistice Period, anti-unionism had gained ground. Being called a Unionist began to be used as a serious insult (Aslanmirza 2021, 1482). As a result of this tendency, the aforementioned trials in Istanbul had started. While the national struggle was being organized, at the beginning of the Sivas Congress, all delegates were required to swear that they would not work for the resurrection of the CUP. During this period, there was an effort to prove that both the movement and the actors themselves were not extensions of the CUP. Although the escaped Unionists wrote and published their self-defense, this was not enough to change the anti-Unionist attitude in the early 1920s (Cemal 2024; Talat 2021). It was believed that a new government that would not be associated with wartime politics would be better able to negotiate the terms of the agreement.

After the founding of the Republic, a narrative was constructed targeting the former CUP members. This narrative was reckoning with the past without considering that the ruling political elite of the Republic were also significant actors and decision makers during the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1918). (Zürcher 2010, 108). Thus, this narrative created an old versus new dualism, labeling the defeat in World War I as the responsibility of the Ottoman cadres and celebrating the War of Independence as the work of the new cadres represented by Ankara. In this way, certain pride was provided for Turkish nationalism in its formation period. As an extension of this, according to Turan, World War I has been a more under-researched subject in Turkish historiography compared to the War of Independence. (Turan 2014)

Although there was an opposition against Mustafa Kemal organized by former Unionists such as Kara Kemal, Cavid Bey, and Rauf Orbay, they were eliminated from the political scene as a result of their names being mentioned in the assassination attempt against Mustafa Kemal in Izmir in 1926. With the Maintenance of Law and Order Law declared after the Sheikh Said rebellion, the Progressive Republican Party, which was generally associated with the Unionists, was also closed. All forms of political opposition were suppressed until 1927, when Mustafa Kemal delivered the Speech (Zürcher 2010, 12). And the Speech emerged as the only legitimate historical accounting of the War of Independence during the Single Party Period. Efforts to create an alternative historical remembrance of World War I and the War of Independence were censored. For example, the publishing process of Kazım Karabekir's *İstiklal Harbimiz* (Our War of Independence) is quite interesting (Karabekir 2024). Karabekir, being one of the leading commanders who initiated the War of Independence, prepared a 1,230-page manuscript between 1927 and 1933. It was to be published in 1933, but in the same year, the printing was halted, and the proofs of the book were collected and burned (Zürcher 2010, 20; Göcek 2015, 57). It was only after the Democrat Party's election victory in 1950 that this book was published in 1951. Constructing a distance between the CUP and the Republican elite, which remained valid throughout the 1920s, changed when the Unionists and their memories ceased to be an immediate threat to the Kemalist establishment. Especially after various liquidation processes, which are listed above, like the closing of the Progressive Republican Party, took place, the self-confidence of the single-party regime was achieved. In Gürpınar's words, "they (the Unionists) could be upheld as the abortive precursors of the Kemalists and selfless patriots, albeit utopian and childlike" (Gürpınar 2011, 55). Thus, the self-confidence the Single party gained paved the way for publications examining the roles of CUP leaders during the War in the 1930s. With these publications, CUP leaders were given back their lost reputation. This effort to regain reputation lays the foundations of the process that causes issues such as war responsibility to be overshadowed by the concept of state interest in Turkish society in the long run.

The Mnemonic Actors Forming the Historical Remembrance of Unionism

After the foundation of the Republic, the actors who created the dominant discourse about the CUP and the War responsibility formed this narrative through a series of articles published in the leading newspapers of the period. Some of these newspapers were *Akşam*, *Son Posta*, *Sabah*, *Milliyet*, *Yeni Asır*. During this period, newspapers were the medium through which the literate elite expressed themselves and attempted to shape politics. In the early Republican history, authors generally expressed their ideas through newspaper series they published, which could later be published as books. (Bilgiç, 2017) In this respect, it is meaningful to scan the newspapers to examine how and by whom the accounting of the Great War was made during the Single Party Period.

These figures who published series on the Great War and CUP took a direct role in the Committee and participated in the War effort of the Ottoman State. For instance, Arif Cemil (Denker) served as Talat Pasha's private secretary during the Berlin period, and was an important actor in the promotion of the German-Ottoman alliance during World War I (Özçalık 2018, 102, 103). In 1933, he wrote the article series *İttihat ve Terakkinin Son Günleri* (The last days of Committee of Union and Progress) for *Akşam*, and between 1933 and 1934 he wrote *Umumi Harpte Teşkilatı Mahsusa* (Special Organization during the Great War) for *Vakit*. One of the other most significant of these actors was Muhittin Birgen, the chief writer of *Tanin* newspaper, the mouthpiece publication of the CUP during the Second Constitutional Era. The series of articles he wrote titled *İttihat ve Terakki'de On Sene* (Ten Years in Committee of Union and Progress), which appeared in the *Son Posta* newspaper between 1936–1939, was crucial in the formation of the narrative about Unionism during the Single Party Era. Ziya Şakir (Soku) (1883–1959) was another publisher of the Second Constitutional Era who wrote on the Great War and the CUP. Hüseyin Cahid Yalçın (1875–1957) was also an influential figure, publisher, and politician who was exiled to Malta by the British authorities during the Armistice Period due to his involvement in World War I. He also wrote intensively about Talat after his funeral in Istanbul in 1943. Falih Rıfkı Atay, in addition to his publishing activities during the War, served as Cemal's private secretary in Syria during the War. Rauf Ahmet (Hotinli) (1875–1952) was a Ministry of Foreign Affairs employee and served in the commission to examine peace issues until the end of the War. In summary, these names who write about recent history in daily newspapers were the people who witnessed these days alongside the ruling elite, and even took part in the propaganda on war-related issues. These names have become important mnemonic actors in creating historical remembrance, not only with their activities during the War but also with the roles they played after the proclamation of the Republic. Figures such as Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın, Ziya Şakir, and Rauf Ahmet (Hotinli) continued their publishing activities on various platforms. And names such as Muhittin Birgen and Falih Rıfkı Atay took an active role in politics as deputies in the Grand National Assembly, in addition to their publishing activities.

In all of the works to be discussed, without exception, the authors explained their motivation for writing about this period and underlined that it was their responsibility to convey the past “correctly.” Falih Rıfkı Atay, who served Cemal Pasha in Syria for 4 years, in his book *Zeytindağı* (Mount of Olives), published in 1932, stated that he did not write anything about Syria during the Great War because he had to write only the things he approved of, and during the Armistice period (1918–1923) he had to write only the things he did not like, so he wrote about Syria in 1932 when it became possible to express his own ideas objectively. (Atay 2023, 7) In 1930, Rauf Ahmed published a series of articles titled *Büyük Harbe Nasıl Girdik?* (How did we enter the Great War?), and invited everyone who witnessed the period to write their memories in order to “do their duty to the country” (Rauf Ahmed 2015, 189). Ziya Şakir, however, stated that the issue of entering the War has remained in the dark for 20 years and that people involved in the subject have distorted the truth, sometimes partially or completely, in order to save themselves from responsibility (Ziya Şakir 2018a, 127). Muhittin Birgen, the former chief editor of *Tanin*, stated that there was a collective effort to slander the CUP immediately after the War and that the witnesses of the period were

obliged to write what they knew (Birgen 2017, 761). In summary, after more than a decade had passed since the end of the War in the 1930s, it was time for an accounting for these state elites who held various positions during the War. The single-party regime now felt strong enough to initiate such an inquiry.

What was the Committee of Union and Progress?

The majority of these names who write about the relationship between the World War and the CUP focused on the structure of the CUP, the role it played in Ottoman politics, and the questions of whether it was a political party or an organization that adopted *komitacı* methods.

Komitacılık refers to the culture of rebel bands that developed in the Balkans during the 19th century, in particular. And, as such, it has been considered as part of the paramilitary political culture of the Committee for Union and Progress that relied on underground networks (Ipek 2018, 161).

For example, Ziya Şakir stated that although the CUP had been working as a political party for years during the War, the old spirit of *komitacılık* had not lost its strength. (Ziya Şakir 2018c, 441) In a similar vein, Muhittin Birgen started his article series with the question of whether the CUP was a Komita or an Association. According to him, this question was important because “The first of these are organizations that represent a will that wants to dominate from top to bottom, and the second is an expression of the desires expressed by the masses from bottom to top” (Birgen 2017, 81). Birgen stated that the CUP oscillated between these two. It was basically a political party, but when the conditions of the country do not allow it, it takes on a structure that was forced to maintain its *komitacı* nature. According to Birgen, this was an understandable situation. In his words:

In a country that is not prepared to use the institutions of freedom and democracy, as in Europe, it would not be fair to condemn the CUP for attaching importance to managing its affairs from behind the scenes, as it is not possible to leave the people completely unattended. (Birgen 2017, 85)

The authors’ identification of the Unionist movement with the rise of Turkishness in the Ottoman State legitimized these *komitacı* tendencies in the eyes of the authors. According to Birgen, the CUP is “an idealistic move that emerged from the spirit of the Turkish nation” (Birgen 2017, 64). According to him, although the movement initially emerged with the Ottomanist ideal, the developments after its establishment led it towards Turkishness, and it was understood that “only the Turkish presence would provide the cement of the Ottoman community” (Birgen 2017, 109). According to Birgen, whether it is successful or not, whether it uses dirty methods or not, “it is the collective work of a generation of Turks working for the rise of a Turk who acts as a Turk” (Birgen 2017, 758). As a natural consequence of this line of logic, the CUP should be supported because it ultimately serves Turkishness. Hüseyin Cahid Yalçın also stated that the CUP had no choice but to rely on the Turkish element and expressed that the Committee was “a self-defense move born from the spirit of the Turks in difficult times” (Yalçın 2024, 26). According to Yalçın, with the CUP, Turks began to be able to say that they were Turks. This narrative, adopted in the 1930s, seems to be an extension of lineal Turkish historiography, which considered Turkism as a last resort after the exhaustion of Ottomanism and Islamism policies (Akçura 1976). According to this narrative, the CUP was a political party that could not stand the disadvantaged situation of the Turks within the Empire and adopted Turkism as a last resort, thus regaining the position Turks deserved as the essential element that the state should rest on, and while doing this, it did not hesitate to sometimes use *komitacı* methods.

The Ottoman State's entry into the War, together with Germany, was seen as a necessity by all of the authors discussed. However, the manner in which the Ottomans entered the War was a matter of criticism for these writers. All writers, without exception, believed that this declaration of war was a *fait accompli* prepared by the German General Souchon. The German General attacked the Russian fleet in the Black Sea with an Ottoman ship, dragging the Ottoman Empire into a war for which it was not sufficiently prepared. There were various disagreements about whether the triumvirate was informed about this *fait accompli* beforehand. Many stated that Enver was aware of this maneuver. But they especially emphasized that Talat had no knowledge of this issue and that he had no choice but to tolerate it after this move (Birgen 2017, 201). Rauf Ahmet, who published a 38-part article series about the Ottoman Empire's entry into the War in 1930, stated that the leaders all agreed that they would not be able to benefit from the alliance with Germany if they hesitated about declaring war (Rauf Ahmed 2015). The Alliance and Germany's forcing the Ottoman Empire into war had been the subject of criticism by all writers. In the words of Rauf Ahmet, "The Germans wanted to use the Ottoman Empire like a lemon whose peel was discarded after squeezing it, and they signed the Alliance agreement only after declaring war on Russia" (Rauf Ahmed 2015, 95).

Although they adopt a critical attitude towards the Ottoman Empire's entry into the War, the authors did not see any obstacle in adopting the motto that there was no conflict while there was war. According to Birgen, the parliament also adopted this *Burgfrieden* attitude with "patriotic obedience" and accepted the result (Birgen 2017, 235). Birgen, who was Tanin's chief correspondent during the declaration of war, did not engage in self-criticism regarding the propaganda articles he wrote and stated that "journalists sometimes have to lie" (Birgen 2017, 201).

Corruption and Misuse of Power During the Great War

Examples of abuse of power, wrong military decisions, and strategic mistakes during the Great War were the most prevalent topics in these articles. Although the Unionists were seen as patriots who had to take the necessary precautionary measures for the advancement of Turkishness, the authors discussed could not help but mention the examples of mismanagement during the War in their accounts of the 1930s. Although they were criticizing these acts, there was definitely a factor that would excuse the bad management of the Unionists on these issues. These mismanagements were often legitimized with an argument embellished with war conditions and the patriotic nationalist attitudes of the Unionists.

The first of these issues, and the one most sensitively addressed by the authors, was the 1915 deportation law and its implementation. Muhittin Birgen dealt with this issue in only nine pages under the title of *Ermenilerin İsyanı* (The Revolt of the Armenians) in his published article series, which constitutes a total of 761 pages (Birgen 2017, 243–251). He defined this issue as a "delicate issue" and stated that he would approach the issue as a human being, not as a Turk (Birgen 2017, 243). Birgen claimed that it was necessary to issue a law of deportation because of the rebellious acts of Armenian gangs in eastern Anatolia. According to Birgen, the rebellion erupted at a time when the memory of the Armenians' situation during the Balkan Wars was still fresh, which led to bloodshed during its suppression; however, he also acknowledged that the government did not resort to its utmost force to prevent it (Birgen 2017, 248). Thereupon, Birgen took up Talat's defense and stated that the deportation decision should be seen as the Turks' right to defend themselves and added, "this good-hearted defender of history (Talat Pasha) added the following: Everyone in this world has the right to live, and not the Turk?" (Birgen 2017, 249).

While commenting on this issue, Ziya Şakir mentioned that innocent people were also harmed because there was no distinction between guilty and innocent during the deportation (Ziya Şakir 2018b, 268). However, he accused those who blamed Talat of misusing his powers. Şakir claimed that those who were blaming Talat for misuse of power were serving circles that produce propaganda about the Ottoman Empire. For him, blaming Talat "meant coming under the influence of Morgan Tav (Morgenthau)³ and his peers" (Ziya Şakir 2018c, 420). Therefore, while

Ziya Şakir stated that there was abuse of power during the deportation, he equated pointing out those responsible with spreading propaganda against the Ottoman State.

Apart from those who reproduced the state's argument about the 1915 deportation law, there were also people who went beyond this argument during the single-party era. The historian Ahmet Refik Altınay was one of these names. "Describing the CUP government as the 'tyranny of the riffraff', he recounted in detail the stories of the Armenians who were killed during the 'deportation disaster', that is, the "cruel act of Talat (Pasha), in the two books he published in 1919, entitled *Two Committees, Two Massacres and On the Roads of the Caucasus*" (Sönmez 2021, 764; Ahmet Refik 2016). Altınay's capacity to create a historical remembrance or shape the already existing historical remembrance about Unionism remained limited due to the disapproving view of the single-party regime towards Altınay. As a matter of fact, Altınay's post at the Istanbul University was terminated with the liquidation of 1933.

Talat was killed by an Armenian, a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, in Germany in 1921. Talat's murder by the Armenian conspirator, Tehlieian, in Berlin and his trial in Germany were another topic of Armenian annihilation in the Ottoman State that the authors addressed. According to Yenen, this event and the way it was handled in the Armenian and Turkish societies represented a situation in which the processes of heroization and villainization can be concretely observed for both societies (Yenen 2022). In parallel with this, in the writings evaluated in this article, this murder created aggrievement for Talat. Arif Cemil (Denker) discussed that during the two-day trial of Tehlirian, the issue was evaluated through the Armenian point of view, and the testimony of biased people was consulted (Denker 1992, 157). Talat's body was brought to İstanbul with a state ceremony in February 1943. He was buried in the *Abide-i Hürriyet* (Monument of Liberties) in Istanbul, with a funeral ceremony accompanied by leading politicians (Şükrü Saraçoğlu), journalists (Ahmed Emin Yalman), and with a wide public participation (Olson 1986, 48). This state ceremony caused a lively debate about Talat to arise again, and attempts were made to restore Talat's dignity, which was thought to have been lost when he escaped to Germany in 1918. The articles published immediately after this ceremony on Talat constituted a clear example of the process of restoring the lost reputation of the Unionists. For example, Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın wrote in his article on the day when Talat's body was brought to Istanbul:

Talat went to Germany. He found death in this allied country, where he had the right to expect loyalty and fidelity. The court of the allied country released his murderer with applause. Talat did not feel this pain. But we still do. (Yalçın 2024, 98)

The book he published with the title *Talat Pasha* after the funeral was Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın's effort to restore Talat's reputation. In Yalçın's words, "Talat was the dome stone, cement and foundation of the CUP and thanks to his usefulness, he became the Talat of all of us, the Talat of the country, the Talat of the homeland" (Yalçın 2024, 77), and Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın's initiative made Talat a national value again. Apart from the issue of the 1915 deportation law and its misuse, the triumvirate's personal and arbitrary decisions have been a subject of much criticism in these articles. Among these decisions, the Sarıkamış Disaster was considered by many writers to be the product of Enver's personal ambitions. Ziya Şakir wrote that thousands of Turkish children were left to rot under those terrible snowdrifts just because of stubbornness and selfishness (Ziya Şakir 2018b, 200). The so-called Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa (Special Organization) and its activities were another topic the authors covered when writing about the Great War. The Special Organisation was both a precursor of an intelligence agency for the Ottoman State and a semi-official, autonomous security structure aiming to protect the state from internal and external threats (Yiğit 2014, 158). Apart from having the mission to prepare the local Muslim population for guerrilla fighting and raise Muslim political consciousness, the Organization was used by the Triumvirate, especially by Enver, to eliminate domestic political opposition and consolidate dictatorial power. Arif Cemil Denker was also a name that brought the issue to the agenda in the 1930s with his 163-part article series titled

Umumi Harpte Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa (Special Organization during the Great War), published in Vakit between November 1933 and April 1934. While Arif Cemil stated providing the Islamic union and the gathering the Turks outside Turkey as the highest aim of this organization (Arif Cemil 2023, 3), he also referred that it at the same time became a militia force that Enver benefited from in order to get upper hand in the internal conflict of the CUP. Enver's use of *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (special organization) as a tool to control civilians throughout the War is shown by Ziya Şakir as another abuse of power (Ziya Şakir 2018c, 235).

The authors also discussed the food scarcity and how the leading CUP members dealt with this problem in a detailed manner. The argument that people starved during the Great War became another issue that the CUP was accused of right after the war. However, articles written on the subject in the 1930s emphasized that wartime food management also served another ideal: to achieve Turkification in trade. In order to turn the issue of war wealth and speculation to the benefit of the Turkish population, the CUP administration created the Ministry of Subsistence and appointed Kara Kemal as its head. However, Kara Kemal's non-transparent practices, especially in the Istanbul bread market, have been a subject that has been criticized at length. In his series of articles published in 181 chapters in 1937, Mustafa Ragıp Esatlı deals with the corruption that Kara Kemal was involved in, using the policy of Turkification of the economy in the Istanbul subsistence sector, and how this caused divisions under the umbrella of the CUP (Esatlı 2007). While these criticisms were being made, it was also stated that the claim that the Ministry of Subsistence was starving the people was propaganda (Birgen 2017, 316). According to Birgen, this Ministry, founded in the last year of the War, was not enough to solve Istanbul's food problem (Birgen 2017, 235). It was also noted that there was no progress in terms of Turkification. According to Birgen, 90 percent of the War speculators were still Jewish, Greek, and Armenian merchants (Birgen 2017, 331).

The policy carried out by the Ottoman Empire in Syria and Arabia throughout the War, and its consequences leading to the Arab revolt, is another subject examined by the writers of this period. Although there were different opinions about the necessity of the climate of fear created by Cemal in the region, a general critical discourse prevails on this subject, but there was an unclear tone in this criticism. Falih Rıfki Atay complained about the lack of guarantee of personal freedom and property ownership and the arbitrary declaration of laws in Syria, which was ruled by Cemal throughout the War. According to Atay, who served as Cemal's private secretary during his duration in Syria, Cemal, by taking advantage of the law for Armenian deportation, chose to exile people and families he deemed harmful until the end of the War, and carried out arbitrary practices that victimized many civilians. He also clashed with the soldiers who questioned these decisions and liquidated them (Atay 2023, 91). Falih Rıfki Atay stated that Cemal executed about 40 Arab nationalists without a consensus among the CUP leadership, and that he used execution and exile arbitrarily, leaving an open-ended question as to whether this policy of terror was really necessary (Atay 2023, 49). While examining this issue, Ziya Şakir uses an ambiguous language regarding Cemal's Syrian policy, "We do not answer whether it was necessary for the execution and exile of the most important people carried out by Cemal Pasha, we just continue to follow the course of events" (Ziya Şakir 2018c, 318). It is possible to see a similar ambiguous attitude in Birgen. Birgen stated that Arabs have been applying to Great Powers for autonomy since the Balkan Wars and added, "I do not think that the reasons that would justify violence would be ambiguous" (Birgen 2017, 263). Although the necessity of a more intelligently planned Arabian policy is a common point of all writers, they do not completely oppose the policy of violence implemented by Cemal. In the words of Ziya Şakir, "Cemal was not entirely wrong in Syria, but choosing the heads to be severed better could have brought great benefits to the country" (Ziya Şakir 2018c, 653).

The dispatch of soldiers from Anatolia for the defense of this region has been a subject criticized by all writers without exception. Falih Rıfki Atay's main problematization of the issue was the flow of Anatolian resources to the region: "This energy that went into the air to plant the flag of a country that had not been built in Cairo was never used to make empty Anatolia a rich and prosperous homeland" (Atay 2023, 128). He stated that Jerusalem was never truly Ottoman, and that the

Ottomans could neither colonize nor nationalize the region (Atay 2023, 42). According to Falih Rıfki, the martyrs here are considered lost in the gamble the Ottomans played in this region. (Atay, 2023, 110) Birgen also opposed the use of “tired children of Anatolia” to defend this place and argued that the region’s own people should be used in defense (Birgen 2017, 262).

The question of whether a decentralization initiative in the region could prevent the process leading to the Arab revolt has also occupied the writers. Birgen thought that such a decentralized administration could improve things (Birgen 2017, 262). However, according to Yalçın although it was imaginable for a strong central government with its prestige never damaged, in the Turkish case it was impossible because in his words “even the Turkish element was trying to tear each other apart. It will mean nothing other than tearing it apart with our own hands” (Yalçın 2024, 61). Therefore, even if the autonomy that could be given to Arabia was the key to a possible solution for the authors evaluated in this article, the Ottoman state was not able to hold the state together while providing this autonomy.

The nuanced accounts of these writers highlight the tension between moral judgement and political loyalty in interpreting historical events. Although certain authors criticized Unionist policies like the Sarıkamış disaster, the activities of the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Special Organization), and the suppression of dissent in Syria and Arabia, they often tempered their critiques with justifications rooted in the challenges of war. According to these writings in the 1930s, although the CUP had wrong practices during the War, the CUP’s intentions of trying to give Turkishness its rightful place and the CUP leadership’s reflexes of trying to protect the interests of the state should be enough to ignore these wrong practices.

The End of Union and Progress and the Escape of the Triumvirate

The Triumvirate, Enver, Cemal, and Talat, who ruled the Ottoman State in a dictatorial manner during the Second Constitutional Era, fled to Germany on a German ship after the end of the War. The details of this escape had been a subject widely examined in the articles discussed. The concept of ‘escape’ was an action that did not suit the leaders who represented the state and looked after its interests, despite their mistakes. In short, the secret departure of these leaders was a subject that the writers evaluated in this article could hardly digest. According to Birgen, the fact that people directed their anger towards these leaders at the end of the War and that the leaders were seen as scapegoats was a factor that legitimized their escape (Birgen 2017, 537). Both the difficulty of being the recipient of this anger and the burden of being accountable to the occupying forces legitimized escape in Birgen’s eyes. In his words:

If it became necessary to give [an] account to the country, staying was undoubtedly the best course of action. However, when it became necessary to give the account to the enemy or to be disgraced in the hands of the enemy’s disgraceful servants and perhaps be roped in by their hands, perhaps it would be more appropriate to flee. (Birgen 2017, 522)

What would be the fate of a movement whose leaders fled? The CUP dissolved itself at its last congress on November 5, 1918, and two parties were established that claimed to be the heirs of the CUP: the Renewal Party (Teceddüt Fırkası) and the Ottoman Liberal People’s Party (Osmanlı Hürriyetperver Avam Fırkası) (Zürcher 2010, 198). The Renewal Party, which was the heir of CUP in terms of inheriting the CUP’s assets, organizational networks, and real estate, was determining the direction of the national struggle to be formed in Anatolia with its 175-article party program (Zürcher 2010, 200). Although they denied their ties with the CUP, these parties were closed in May 1919 by the order of the Istanbul government on the grounds that they were the direct successors of the CUP. (Altınkaş 2022, 149) Although the CUP seemed to have ended with the closure of these parties, as the authors mentioned, the unionist spirit formed the basis of the national struggle movement. According to Birgen, the unionist spirit continued in the national struggle but in a new

form. Unionism was dissolving and taking on a new shape by entering a new mold (Birgen 2017, 663). Ziya Şakir also agreed that Unionism should live in other forms. In his words;

Now let's kill this name in the face of history. Let's bury it in the grave of history. But let us cast the spirit of the Unionist movement into another mold. Let's continue the main purpose of the Committee under a different name, like a secret history. (Ziya Şakir 2018c, 642)

Moving from this, Unionism should continue as another form in the national struggle movement. This new form should have assumed the old missions of the CUP. These missions, as Birgen described them, were the CUP's greatest gifts to history: "To teach everyone the love of homeland and nationality and to make people taste the taste of sacrifice" (Birgen 2017, 678).

Conclusion

In the exploration of historical remembrance surrounding World War I and the CUP during Turkey's Single Party Era, a nuanced understanding emerges of how narratives are crafted, contested, and reconstructed over time. The narrative depicting the leading Unionists as irresponsible leaders who dragged the country into war and preferred to keep a distance from former leading CUP members underwent a transformation as the single-party regime gained self-confidence after liquidating the opponents. Initially, after the foundation of the Republic in 1923, the newly founded Republic grappled with its past; the memory politics of the Kemalist regime glorified the War of Independence while sidestepping the complexities of the Great War and attributing blame to a select few CUP leaders. However, beginning from the early 1930s, a new recalculation of the past took place. In this respect, historical remembrance was undergoing a transformation, and former Unionists, current mnemonic actors of the Republic, had started to question the recent past again through newspaper columns. Central to this remembrance was the portrayal of the CUP as guardians of Turkish identity, despite criticisms of their methods and decisions during the War. Through a series of articles in leading newspapers of the period, key figures sought to reclaim the reputation of the CUP, framing their actions as necessary for the defense of the nation.

Yet, within this narrative lie layers of complexity and contradiction. Writers grappled with the moral implications of decisions such as the deportation law of 1915, the manipulation of the economy for Turkification, and the abuse of political power by CUP leaders. While in some parts of their writings, the authors evaluated in this article attempted to voice concern about the erosion of personal freedoms and the heavy toll on civilian populations in general, they tended to justify these actions within the context of wartime necessity. Based on this, the duties these actors undertook during the War were presented as necessities during the War. Thus, the wrong decisions of the CUP leaders could be justified by their intentions, that is, their sensitivity to the importance of the survival of the state and their efforts to bring the Turkish nation to the position they deserved. This discourse adopted during the single-party period led the leading CUP leaders to regain the reputation they had lost and to be remembered as respected statesmen even in contemporary Turkey.

The memory of the Great War and the CUP's role therein is not static but evolves alongside shifting political agendas and societal values. In the early years of the Republic, political agendas necessitated a sharp rupture with the Ottoman past and the vilification of the Unionist leadership, aligning memory with the goal of legitimizing the new secular nation-state. As the single-party regime consolidated power and internal threats to the Kemalist order diminished, a recalibration of memory occurred, the narrative softened toward the former Unionist figures, reinterpreting them as precursors to Republican ideas rather than as liabilities. Similarly, societal values evolved; the emphasis on Turkish national pride increasingly demanded a genealogy that could incorporate elements of the late Ottoman era rather than reject them outright. In later decades, nostalgia for strong leadership, national unity, and anti-imperialist struggle further rehabilitated the image of the

CUP in public memory. Thus, remembrance served not merely as a reflection of historical fact but as a tool continually adapted to the prevailing needs of national identity construction. As we reflect on this intricate tapestry of remembrance, we are reminded that history is not a fixed narrative but a living dialogue, shaped by the voices of the past and present alike.

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Notes

- 1 Talat, who was the Grand Vizier during World War I, fled from the Ottoman State to Germany after the War was lost and supported the National Struggle Movement from Germany. He was killed in Berlin in 1921 by Soghomon Tehlirian, a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, and his body was buried in Berlin. In 1943, upon the request of the then Prime Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu, with the initiative of the German ambassador to Ankara, Franz von Papen, his body was brought to Istanbul, and a state funeral was held. In the following sections, the repercussions of this funeral on the Turkish public will be discussed.
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvC0RhSD740&t=112s> (23.09.2024)
- 3 Henry Morgenthau was the United States Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire; he was writing intensively about the annihilation of the Armenians in 1915.

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