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To cite this article: Fatih Yazıcı & Tercan Yıldırım (2018) History teaching as a nation-building tool in the early republican period in Turkey (1923–1938), *Paedagogica Historica*, 54:4, 433-446, DOI: [10.1080/00309230.2017.1423363](https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2017.1423363)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2017.1423363>



Published online: 18 Jan 2018.



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History teaching as a nation-building tool in the early republican period in Turkey (1923–1938)

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ABSTRACT

Nation-states needed various ideological apparatuses when they wanted to eliminate traditional loyalties to the pre-modern era and establish a new superordinate identity. As frequently emphasised in conceptual discussions, two elements among these ideological apparatuses come to the fore: historiography and education. While social values that create a national identity have been constructed by historiography continuously from the past to the present, it aims at spreading such values through education. History education at the intersection of these two concepts has occupied a privileged place in the nation-building process. The most concrete examples of this phenomenon are the developments experienced in the context of history teaching in Turkey from 1923 to 1938, also known as the early republican period. The present study, using history textbooks, analyses changes in history teaching and expectations of it between 1923 and 1938, which were the most active years of the nationalisation period in Turkey. The findings of this study indicate that the historiography of the early republican period adopted an anthropology-based understanding in line with the conjuncture between the two world wars and that, in accordance with this understanding, a national identity with ethnic, religious, and political dimensions was intended to be promulgated through history teaching.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 April 2017
Accepted 31 October 2017

KEYWORDS

History education; nation-building; history textbooks; Turkey

Introduction

Living together or being part of a social group is one of the oldest and basic needs of humankind. This need has led people to gather in the form of a strong political authority, namely a state. For societies living under the umbrella of a state in the pre-modern period, dynasty/king/sultan or religious references representing that state emerge as an element that unites societies. However, loyalties based on these traditional elements that held pre-modern societies together were seriously undermined during the period reaching its peak in the French Revolution. Therefore, states appeared to need new loyalties to hold together the masses they governed. When the people, by means of democratic revolutions, especially in Europe, turned into a mass that would no longer be taken for granted, it led to a new desired form

of loyalty to the nation. However, the concept of nation around which a nation-state wants a society to unite may not encompass the entire society. In such situations where there is no homogeneity, which is a very common occurrence, the nation-state imposes its singular identity on social identity.¹ This process by which the nation attempts to homogenise various ideological apparatuses is called nation-building.

When the nation-state sought to gradually get rid of a sense of traditional group belonging in order to establish an integrated structure and, in line with this objective, it needed a new *superordinate identity*, it resulted in the emergence of the concept of national identity.² As a result of this need, the sense of belonging and connectedness was reoriented towards the nation and away from traditional/religious structures. This transformation emerges as a product of an effort to create a homogeneous society by slowly dissolving various subordinate identities and senses of belonging, redirecting affiliation towards a single national identity, and then using shared values, a common language, and shared cultural and historical backgrounds.³

Every community living together is not necessarily a nation. In other words, it does not have a national identity.⁴ Indeed, for the formation of national identity, it is necessary to overcome other various identities such as ethnic identity, religious identity, social identity, and regional identity and to ensure a unity pursuant to “common beliefs and values”⁵ Founding fathers, heroes representing a national character, common language, cultural and historical monuments, and several folkloric features that can also be considered items on an “identity checklist” come to the fore in the formation of this union.⁶ A continuous history within the frame of such collective memory builds a bridge from the origins of the nation that crosses the present and the future.⁷ Therefore, the formation of a national identity occurs through the transmission of objective items in the collective memory through history to the present.⁸

National identity, on the one hand, provides continuity over time for all who are members of the nation, as indicated above; on the other hand, it also locates belonging in a theoretical framework in space. History also emerges as a constituent element in the formation of spatial belonging. In Smith’s definition, a certain social space with and to which community members identify themselves and have a sense of belonging and a piece of land with more or less precise and restricted boundaries are among the founding elements of national identity. However, this piece of land cannot be any land; it must be a “historic” land.⁹ Therefore, what makes a homeland valuable and meaningful in terms of national identity is its historic nature rather than its geographical characteristics. Against this brief theoretical background,

¹İrfan Erdoğan, “Kimlik Sorunu: Kendini Sevmeyenin Kimliğindeki Kendi Olmayan Kendi” [Identity problem: a non-self self in a self-hatred identity], *Demokrasi Platformu* 5 (2006): 100.

²Köksal Şahin, *Küreselleşme Tartışmaları Işığında Ulus-Devlet* [Nation-state in the light of globalisation debates] (İstanbul: İlgi Kültür Sanat, 2007), 143.

³Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 9–36.

⁴Erol Göka, *İnsan Kısım Kısım: Topluluklar, Zihniyetler, Kimlikler* [Human in parts: communities, mentalities, identities] (İstanbul: Aşına Kitaplar, 2006), 298.

⁵Orhan Türkdoğan, *Niçin Milletleşme? Milli Kimliğin Yükselişi* [Why nationalisation? The rise of national identity] (İstanbul: Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı, 1995), 164.

⁶Anne-Marie Thiesse, “Ulusal Kimlikler, Ulusaşırı Bir Paradigma” [National identities, transnational paradigm], in *Milliyetçiliği Yeniden Düşünmek* [Rethinking nationalism], ed. A. Dieckhorf and C. Jaffrelot (İstanbul: İletişim, 2010), 145–62.

⁷Montserrat Guibernau, *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

⁸Nuri Bilgin, *Kollektif Kimlik* [Collective identity] (İstanbul: Sistem Yayıncılık, 1995), 60.

⁹Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 9.

almost every element constituting the nation is in some way linked with history. This is of special importance in explaining why the founding body in the early republican period approached history and history teaching sensitively, as seen in the following pages.

The role of history teaching in identity-building

Most people identify with social groups larger than their families, and history is often used to promote identification with one group in particular – the nation.¹⁰ History tries to solve the problem of origin by seeking an answer to the question of “Who am I?” from the past to present.¹¹ While history in this respect constitutes the spirit of national identity, different “ideological apparatuses”¹² appear in the efforts made by nation-states to impose that identity on society and homogenise it. Indeed, education comes first. Accordingly, the function of education has changed in the modern period, and education has been expected to fulfil the mission of maintaining social values. As Durkheim states, education must connect individuals to the community, build up their respect and loyalty to the community, and make them feel their social functions. According to Durkheim, the community can survive when there are enough similarities between its members, and education has to build these similarities.¹³ Therefore, in addition to two major functions of socialising individuals and teaching patriotism, modern schools have other important responsibilities such as unifying communities divided by region, culture, language, and class as well as defending the state, paying taxes, working, and abiding by laws – in short, “the constant repetition of the civic national catechism”.¹⁴ Thus, while schools aim to “sustain legitimacy” in established societies, they are used to create “legitimacy” in societies that choose regime change or want to break away from their past. The aim here is to equip children of all social classes with various skills and values covered by sovereign ideology during the period from primary education to tertiary education.¹⁵

The importance of history in the emergence of national identities and the responsibility expected from education in the dissemination of such identities have led to meanings far beyond pedagogical purposes being assigned to history education at the intersection of these two concepts. In a wide range of modern societies, history has been pressed into service by politicians and scholars eager to bolster or, sometimes, to invent a national identity for the inhabitants of their states, and to foster among their populations a sense of patriotic loyalty. Such efforts to socialise citizens as patriots have naturally been concentrated in school civic education and history curricula.¹⁶ The need to create more abstract national loyalties and national identities instead of traditional ties deconstructed with the

¹⁰Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 48.

¹¹Akif Pamuk, *Kimlik ve Tarih: Kimliğin İnşasında Tarihin Kullanımı* [Identity and history: the use of history in identity-building] (İstanbul: Yeni İnsan Yayınevi, 2014), 18–19.

¹²For more information on the concept, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* 9, no. 1 (2006, first published in *La Pensée*, 1970): 86–98.

¹³Filiz Meşeci Giorgetti, *Eğitim Ritüelleri* [Education rituals] (İstanbul: Yeni İnsan Yayınevi, 2016), 29–30.

¹⁴Guibernau, *Nationalisms*.

¹⁵Türker Alkan, *Siyasal Bilinç ve Toplumsal Değişim: Siyasal Bilincin Gelişmesinde Ailenin, Okulun ve Toplumsal Sınıfların Etkisi* [Political consciousness and social change: the effect of family, school, and social classes in the development of political consciousness] (Ankara: Gündoğan, 1989); Kürşat Bumin, *Batı'da Devlet ve Çocuk* [State and child in the West] (İstanbul: Alan Yayıncılık, 1983), 96; Tercan Yıldırım, *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Kimlik Söylemi* [Identity Discourse in History Textbooks] (İstanbul: Yeni İnsan Yayınevi, 2016).

¹⁶Edward Vickers, *In Search of an Identity: The Politics of History as a School Subject in Hong Kong, 1960s–2002* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

emergence of nation-states has made history lessons an especially important means of identity-building, and in most societies history textbooks have begun to be written in a manner that mystifies national histories and leaders. In other words, history education has been functionally used to convey to individuals a sense of continuity directed towards the need for a collective memory or national consciousness and that spans from the past to the future. This understanding of history education, shaped around the idea of basing the nation-state on a homogeneous society and with a nationalist discourse in the background, is aimed at ensuring that individuals become citizens who have various rights and duties by transcending being merely a member of the society/state in which they live.¹⁷

This process of official history education aims to convey to the new generation the principles, cultural structure, historical continuity, and semantic world of the established order. Thus, the collective memory of society is strengthened; homogeneity in thought, behaviour, and attitudes is ensured; and a bond of belonging to the current time and place is established. An individual with an identity at the end of this process makes sense of the present and reproduces it by looking back to the past.¹⁸ Political power has a regulatory influence on this production. All kinds of values, positive and negative judgements, and images of others included in the collective memory are conveyed to students in a highly planned and programmed manner through textbooks with the intention of raising good citizens.¹⁹

History teaching that governments consider to be equal to social sciences teaching is aimed at citizenship education and identity transfer. Both approaches are “normative”; that is, they strive for an ideal.²⁰ In teaching the past as edited by political powers, the “desired reality” is of importance rather than the “scientific reality”. In fact, the basic objective is to protect the nation-state, i.e. the established order, and to ensure social acceptance of that order.²¹ To sum up, the aim is to “produce” the ideal citizen of the nation-state through official history education; thus, an identity that is accepted by the nation-state is constructed.²²

Nation-building in the early republican period

The process of creating the Turkish nation is no different from those discussed in the introduction to the present study. Despite a set of differences, a similar path was followed, and the western process of building the nation-state was imitated from top to bottom for purposes of modernisation. As a result, between 1918 and 1939 in Turkey, a change of identity was undertaken to transform the Turkish subjects of a cosmopolitan empire of various ethnicities into republican citizens who affirmed their Turkish identity. Certainly, this transformation was a result of a long historical process starting in the nineteenth century. The French Revolution, on the one hand, based on the equality of citizens and national sovereignty and German Idealism, on the other, viewing the nation as an organic entity having a common culture and history consciousness, greatly affected the Turkish nationalisation process. Expanding to the Ottoman geography through Young Ottomans, this effect caused

¹⁷İsmet Parlak, *Kemalist İdeolojide Eğitim* [Education in Kemalist ideology] (Ankara: Turhan Kitabevi, 2005), 6–7.

¹⁸M. Naci Bostancı, “Kimlik Tartışması Hayatın Telaffuzu Üzerinden Yürümelii” [Identity debate should be based on the utterance of life], *Türkiye Günü* 83 (2005): 52–6.

¹⁹Yıldırım, *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Kimlik Söylemi* [Identity discourse in history textbooks], 18.

²⁰Pamuk, *Kimlik ve Tarih* [Identity and history], 18.

²¹Kemal İnal, *Eğitim ve İktidar: Türkiye’de Ders Kitaplarında Demokratik ve Milliyetçi Değerler* [Education and power: democratic and nationalist values in textbooks in Turkey] (Ankara: Ütopya Yayınevi, 2004), 94–101.

²²Tercan Yıldırım, “Meşrutiyet’ten Günümüze Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Türk Kimliğinin İnşası” [Construction of Turkish Identity in History Textbooks from the Constitutional Era to the Present] (PhD diss., The University of Marmara, 2014), 53.

the issue of national identity to reflect firstly on politics, literature, and education, then on historiography. Emphasising the pre-Islamic period of the Turks and the importance of them in history, these studies were carried out under the leadership of Ziya Gökalp, Yusuf Akçura, Ahmed Ağaoğlu, Fuad Köprülü, Necip Asım, and Mehmed Emin.²³

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I paved the way for the weakening of Ottoman political authority in the ensuing period.²⁴ This process was followed by the termination of the political existence of the Ottoman state in 1922 and the declaration of the new republican regime in 1923. Thus, the nation-building process, which had begun in the Second Constitutional Era (1908–1918), gained considerable momentum. The developments experienced after 1923 can be placed into two categories. The first is the period between 1923 and 1930, when the new regime was politically institutionalised and westernisation was dominant; the second is the period between 1930 and 1938, when the efforts of social engineering as well as nationalism were predominant. Accordingly, it seems plausible to look at the revolutions of the Republic through two opposing concepts: westernisation and nationalism.

The reforms carried out between 1923 and 1930 were directed toward the establishment of a new regime resting on explicitly secular foundations.²⁵ Indeed, the main objective of the republican elites was to raise a secular, republican, and contemporary community of citizens. Atatürk introduced various reforms to break the potential political power of religion over society in order to reach the level of “contemporary civilization.”²⁶ This intellectual process lay behind such reforms as the proclamation of the republic, the abolition of the sultanate and the caliphate, the Law on Unification of Education (1924), the closure of religious convents and dervish lodges, the adoption of the Latin alphabet and the Turkish Civil Code, and changes in dress and women’s social status.²⁷ The aim of realising a radical change of mind and ensuring the national unity and coexistence of the newly established state underlay language and cultural policies in particular. For instance, the alphabet reform meant more than practical concerns such as increasing the literacy rate in the country and making it easier to learn to read and write. This reform was also a product of the effort to achieve cultural integration with the West and bring about an absolute change of mind, particularly in the new generation.²⁸ Thus, cultural ties with the Ottoman past were being considerably weakened.

The effects of westernisation are evident in all the change in Turkey that continued until the 1930s. The infrastructure of social transformation was being shaped especially by changes in the political structure and institutions of the country. When it came to social revolutions, westernisation began to be replaced by nationalism. The Great Depression in 1929, which was seen to discredit the political and economic liberalism of the West, played

²³Büşra Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih Türkiye’de “Resmi Tarih” Tezinin Oluşumu (1929–1937)* [Power and history: the formation of the “Official History Thesis” in Turkey, 1929–1937] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2006), 71–5.

²⁴Eray Alaca, “Ortaöğretim Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Unutulmuş Bir Zafer: 100. Yılında Kütü’l Amare” [A victory long lost in secondary education history textbooks: the Siege of Kut in its 100th year], *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 19 (2016): 49–62.

²⁵Soner Çağaptay, *Türkiye’de İslam, Laiklik ve Milliyetçilik* [Islam, secularism and nationalism in modern Turkey] (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2009), 71.

²⁶Eray Alaca, *Orta Asya’dan Günümüze Türk Tarihi ve Kültürü* [Turkish history and culture from Central Asia until today] (İstanbul: Pegem Yayınları, 2016).

²⁷Yılmaz Çolak, “Türk Devrimi, Devlet ve Kültür” [Turkish revolution, state, and culture], *Muhafazakâr Düşünce* 12 (2007): 18; H. Emre Bağcı, “Türkiye’de Ulusal Modernleşme: Diyalektik Bir Bakış” [National modernization in Turkey: a dialectical view] *Belgelerle Türk Tarihi Dergisi* 62 (2002): 96–101.

²⁸Hüseyin Sadoğlu, *Türkiye’de Ulusçuluk ve Dil Politikaları* [Nationalism and language policies in Turkey] (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2010), 200–1.

a major role in this replacement. In addition to such external factors, the discomfort of the society with radical reforms as well as internal revolts gave rise to the belief that the reforms introduced up to that point were shallow and not deeply rooted, and thus could not be automatically internalised at the level of the broader society.²⁹

It was agreed that there was a need for a programme or an ideology that would serve to replace religion with respect to social life with a sense of patriotism, and that would disseminate more rapidly the reforms aimed at modernising the public.³⁰ This need resulted in the incorporation of such principles as republicanism, nationalism, populism, secularism, statism, and reformism, first into the People's Party programme and later into the Constitution (1937). Thus, more authoritarian political structures such as those of Germany and Italy were taken as examples, one-party rule was strengthened, and secular-nationalist reforms were further deepened.³¹ When nationalism and authoritarianism became the determining factors in the nation-building process after the 1930s, it led to the mobilisation of almost every element with the potential to affect society for the sake of nation-building.³² History and history education were undoubtedly primary elements of this process which were in a sense instrumentalised.

History education from the Ottoman legacy to the early republic

Textbooks, unlike other historical texts, are not read to understand, evaluate, compare, or criticise in education systems where history teaching is based on rote learning. Instead, historical information in textbooks is regarded as the *absolute* truth, since it is memorised to be recalled when needed, and textbooks thus become sacred texts. As a result, all that the vast majority of people see and learn as "history" throughout their lifetime is just composed of what they are told in primary and secondary school history textbooks.³³ This effectiveness of history textbooks has not escaped the attention of political authorities since the Second Constitutional Era. In this regard, the instrumentalisation of history textbooks on behalf of national identity construction can be traced back to the Second Constitutional Era.

The understanding of history in the Second Constitutional Era was based on an enlightened positivism arising from the concerns of the constitutional intellectuals to follow in the footsteps of the French Third Republic. As such, the perception of 1908 as a revolution in the Ottoman territories was based upon the French Revolution.³⁴ The French influence in the history textbooks of this period is so clear that it gives the impression that they were prepared for the French education system, not for the Ottomans. There were even times when history textbooks were prepared through line-by-line translation of history books of the French Third Republic into Turkish. For this reason, textbooks tended to include developments in France rather than in Turkey. For example, the number of pages devoted to Turkish history was 56 in a 310-page history textbook for high school seniors prepared

²⁹Kemal Karpat, *Türk Demokrasi Tarihi* [History of the Turkish democracy] (İstanbul: İmge, 2008), 167; Çolak, "Türk Devrimi" [Turkish revolution], 18.

³⁰Feroz Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 75–94.

³¹Karpat, *Türk Demokrasi Tarihi* [History of the Turkish democracy], 167.

³²Zafer Toprak, *Darwin'den Dersim'e Cumhuriyet ve Antropoloji* [Republic and anthropology from Darwin to Dersim] (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2012).

³³Mete Tunçay, "Tarih Öğretiminin İyileştirilmesine Yönelik Düşünceler" [Thoughts on improving history teaching], in *Tarih Öğretimi ve Ders Kitapları* [History teaching and textbooks], ed. Salih Özbaran (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1995), 53.

³⁴Toprak, *Darwin'den Dersim'e* [From Darwin to Dersim], 354.

by Ali Reşad. In other words, 82% of the book was devoted to European and partly world history, while only 18% was about Turkey.³⁵

Another consequence of the French influence in textbooks was the realisation of the close relationship between history education and nationalism and their importance in influencing mass psychology. Therefore, history began to be used for pragmatic educational purposes during the Second Constitutional Era.³⁶ Citizenship education, upon which the intellectuals of the Second Constitutional Era laid great emphasis within the framework of the “new human-new society” project, constituted an important dimension of the nation-building project of Turkey’s founding leaders in the period following the declaration of the republic.³⁷ However, the French history-oriented content of history textbooks did not uphold the nation-state that was now steering towards nationalism, while the legacy of the Second Constitutional Era was maintained at the point of the instrumentalisation of history education. In terms of this instrumentalisation, it was a very clear requirement to write compact and methodical textbooks. It was foreseen that this task would be done in a unique way by the Turks, and Turkish historians were asked to write history books with “scientific and contemporary rules”.³⁸ There was only one group of historians upon whom the republican ideologues could rely to fulfil such a vital task: themselves.³⁹

As there were not many history experts at that time and history writing was seen as a political task, nationalist leaders and active politicians also fulfilled the mission of historiography.⁴⁰ This direct relationship between history and politics led to the fact that almost all of the members of the Society for the Study of Turkish History,⁴¹ which was the only effective institution for determining the understanding of history writing and teaching in that period, were deputies or party members, and this institution functioned like a parliamentary or party commission.

The fact that the Kemalist cadre worked as both politicians and historians resulted in the construction of an official history discourse conceptualised as the *Turkish History Thesis*, which aimed to erase the negativities created in the collective memory by the military and political failures of the Ottoman Empire over the last century and rebuild national pride. The *Turkish History Thesis*, which was derived from an exaggerated nationalist discourse for the reappearance of national pride, had a very ambitious notion of basing the origins of all civilisations on Central Asia and the Turks.⁴²

The development of a nationalist historiography like the *Turkish History Thesis* during a nation-building process is a common phenomenon across the world. Indeed, it was in the interwar period that the Nazis argued that the Hittites were of Germanic origin, Hungarian

³⁵Ibid., 240.

³⁶Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih* [Power and history].

³⁷Füsun Üstel, “Makbul Vatandaş” in *Peşinde: II. Meşrutiyet’ten Bugüne Vatandaşlık Eğitimi* [Striving for the “acceptable citizen”: citizenship education from the second constitutional monarchy until today] (İstanbul: İletişim, 2004), 127.

³⁸Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih* [Power and history], 115.

³⁹Fatih Yazıcı, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Tarihyazımı” [Historiography in History Textbooks in Republican Period] in *Türkiye’de tarihyazımı*, Ed. Vahdettin Engin and Ahmet Şimşek (İstanbul: Yeditepe, 2011), 200.

⁴⁰Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih* [Power and history], 108.

⁴¹Based on the directives given by Mustafa Kemal to Afet İnan and some other convention members in the 6th Convention of Turkish Society in 1930, “The Committee for the Study of Turkish History” affiliated to Turkish Hearths was founded. The 16 members of this committee were selected by Mustafa Kemal himself. Mustafa Kemal participated in the meetings of the committee with his presidency private secretary. After the abolition of Turkish Hearths, Mustafa Kemal advised the committee to carry on its activities as a “sovereign association”. Thus, on 15 April 1931, the Society for the Study of Turkish History was founded; this council changed its name to the Turkish Historical Society on 3 October 1935, which was given by Mustafa Kemal. Hasan Akbayrak, *Milletin Tarihinden Ulusun Tarihine* (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2009), 206.

⁴²Yazıcı, “Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Tarihyazımı” [Historiography in history textbooks], 200.

scientists sought to link their own nations with Sumerians, and the Soviets tried to change the name of the Lavoisier Law to the Lomonosov Law.⁴³ History textbooks became an area where an understanding of historiography based on the instrumentalisation of history for the creation of nationalist sentiments was implemented and developed in Turkey. Accordingly, the first attempt was the book entitled *History Lessons for Turkish Children*, co-authored by Afet Inan and Atatürk to contradict the phrase in a French textbook, “Turks are barbarian tribes who cannot create a civilization”, and was first tested by Afet Inan in the Music School. This book also served as a source for Atatürk’s history thesis and his later work.⁴⁴

Atatürk ensured the establishment of a Turkish History Investigation Society consisting of 16 members under the Turkish Hearths to write a national history book taught in schools in order to provide a national historical consciousness to the new generation. Thus, the first work titled *The Outline of Turkish History* appeared.⁴⁵ It was intended to print only 100 copies of the book and to send them to relevant persons for evaluation and review.⁴⁶ However, intense criticism prevented the book from being published. Instead, the book was summarised and printed in 30,000 copies under the title *The Outline of Turkish History: Introduction* and put up for sale in schools.⁴⁷ This work was important for containing the main structure of the *Turkish History Thesis* as well as forming the backbone of *History Textbooks I, II, III, and IV*, all to be written later.⁴⁸

It was in high school history textbooks that the *Turkish History Thesis* was fully shaped and became systematic. The four-volume set of high school history textbooks⁴⁹ prepared by the Turkish History Investigation Society in 1931 were shaped as a reflection of the effort of the *Turkish History Thesis* in accordance with its intention to find a place for the Turkish nation in world civilisation and to instil a national consciousness in the Turkish people.⁵⁰ The main idea in the textbooks reflecting this sense of official history, shaped as an antithesis to European historians’ thesis that the Turks belonged to the yellow races like the Mongols and had not create any civilisation, was the claim that Central Asia is the cradle of civilisation; the first signs of civilisation were created by the Turks living there, and the Turks carried this civilisation to different parts of the world as a result of their

⁴³Halil Berktaş, “Tarih Çalışmaları” [History studies], in *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkiye Ansiklopedisi 9* [Encyclopaedia of Turkey in the period of the republic], ed. Murat Belge (İstanbul: İletişim, 1983), 2456–78.

⁴⁴Mustafa Oral, *Türk Ulusunun İnşası: Ortak Tarih Söylemi* [Construction of the Turkish nation: common history discourse] (İstanbul: Yeni İnsan Yayınları, 2015), 38.

⁴⁵As the name suggests, the book was greatly influenced by the English author H.G. Wells’ *The Outline of History*. The most important reason for this is the fact that although Atatürk read predominantly French history books, he was mostly influenced by H.G. Wells. See, Toprak, *Darwin’den Dersim’e* [From Darwin to Dersim], 360–2.

⁴⁶Ahmet Şimşek, “Türk Tarih Tezi Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme” [An overview of Turkish History Thesis], *Türkiye Günlüğü* 111 (2012): 88.

⁴⁷Afet İnan, Mehmet Tevfik, Samih Rifat, Akçura Yusuf, Reşit Galip, Hasan Cemil, Sadri Maksudi, and Şemsettin (Günaltay). See Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Türk Tarihinin Ana Hatları Methal Kısmı* [The outline of Turkish history: introduction] (İstanbul: Maarif Vekâleti, 1931).

⁴⁸Şimşek, “Türk Tarih Tezi” [Turkish History Thesis].

⁴⁹The history textbooks published in 1931 became the foundation of history teaching during the early republican period and were kept on to be used with small changes until the death of Mustafa Kemal in 1938. The same textbooks were simplified and used in middle schools. Therefore, textbooks of 1931 were selected as the study field for this research.

⁵⁰Üçel Kabapınar, “Başlangıcından Günümüze Türk Tarih Tezi ve Lise Tarih Kitaplarına Etkisi” [Turkish History Thesis from its beginning to the present and its effect on high school history books], *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (1992): 151.

migration from the region due to climate changes.⁵¹ The close relation of the government to history since the early years of the republic caused history education to remain on the axis of official history writing. Since its first emergence, the *Turkish History Thesis* has been frequently criticised both for being an imposed construct of history and for the accuracy of the historical information it revealed.⁵²

The reflection of nation-building on history textbooks

History textbooks were primarily aimed at developing an antithesis of the anthropological thesis of the then-Europe that classified a very large population of people, including Turks, as “lower races”. It is striking that this antithesis is also based on anthropology:

it is not right to divide mankind into races on the basis of colors (white-yellow-black-red). Racial truths are based on physical differences between skeletons belonging to human groups. These differences arise from: 1) The shape of the skull and 2) Height. The distinguishing characteristic is the shape of the skull and the ratio between its length and width.⁵³

This process here was an effort to prove that the Turks were included in the civilisation-creating group, members of the brachycephalic Aryan race maintaining the purity and continuity of its race and origin, and the autochthonous people of the Anatolian lands. As can be seen in the following excerpt, a defensive sense of history was built up in order to disprove all these assertions and prove their opposite. This negative attitude as a reflection of the Orientalist sense of history obviously had a deep influence on the Kemalist elites:⁵⁴

They are now outdated nasty allegations and aspersions that the Turks live only by war and with the aim and effort to seize other countries ... It is worth deploring the fact that nasty assertions against the Turks arising from Christian fanaticism for ages are also integrated into the spirit of knowledge that always needs to remain pure and objective ... It is considered, to put it mildly, a matter of self-respect for Christianity and Europeanness to accept that the Turks have been the founders of the most ancient and highest.⁵⁵

It should be noted the new history discourse developed against the Eurocentric understanding of history was based on the reference point that the anthropological background of Europe was a priori. To put it another way, there was a contradiction in these efforts in that they did not completely reject such negatively encoded comments, instead trying to prove that they expressed the truth, but the Turks were not involved in this group.⁵⁶

⁵¹The book *Civic Information for the Citizen*, authored by Atatürk in the same period as the history textbooks, calls such communities as the Sumerians and Elamites “Turkish tribes”, and says that before the known history, the Turks spread and settled across an area from the Mesopotamian and Egyptian valleys to Central Asia, Russia, the Caucasus, Anatolia, past and present Greece, Crete, Central Italy before the Romans – in short, all the Mediterranean coasts. See Afet İnan, *Medeni Bilgiler ve M. Kemal Atatürk’ün El Yazıları* [Civic information and manuscripts of M. Kemal Atatürk] (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırmaları Merkezi, 2000), 29, 41.

⁵²The primary criticisms were raised by the then historians Fuat Köprülü and especially Zeki Velidi Togan, who argued that the thesis did not comply with scientific rules or methodology. Another criticism was raised by Nihal Atsız from a different point of view. According to Atsız, the thesis aimed at extolling a sense of nationality, on the contrary, debases the sense of nationality on the grounds that “if everybody is Turkish, then Turkishness is no more a privilege”. As quoted in Şimşek, “Türk Tarih Tezi” [Turkish History Thesis].

⁵³Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Tarih I: Tarihten evvelki zamanlar ve eski zamanlar* [History I: prehistoric times and older times] (İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1931a), 15–6.

⁵⁴As quoted in Yıldırım, “Meşrutiyetten Günümüze” [From the constitutional era to the present], 98.

⁵⁵Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Türk Tarihinin Ana Hatları Methal Kısmı* [The outline of Turkish history: introduction] (İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1930), 69–70.

⁵⁶Yıldırım, “Meşrutiyetten Günümüze” [From the constitutional era to the present], 98.

After the racial traits of the Turks were explained based on anthropological theories, an attempt was made to explain how this race created a civilisation spreading from Central Asia across the world. *History I*, the first volume of the textbooks, has a special significance since it is about ancient history and bases the claims of the *Turkish History Thesis* about Central Asia on anthropological grounds. According to the book, while people in other parts of the world were still living in the darkest savagery in rock and tree caves, the first seeds of civilisation were sown by the Turks in Central Asia who started tending livestock and farming, considered as signs of civilisation.⁵⁷ However, with the change in climate conditions, the doors to the west of Central Asia were opened to the back. Afterward, Central Asia became a great sea that gushed waves across China, India, Asia Minor, North Africa, and Europe over thousands of years.⁵⁸ While the Turks were carrying civilisation all over the world as result of this migration that took place in the ancient ages of history, climate changes in Central Asia also influenced the social lives of the Turks who were actually civilised and established, but were forced to live a nomadic life.

The Chinese civilisation the whole world admires today actually owes its existence to these Turkish migrations. It is necessary to trace the Turks' first appearance in Northern China back to at least 7000 years BC. The civilisation improved for ages by the Turks, who settled in China with their civic knowledge, high and noble morals, and pure and simple creeds, maintained its status as one of the world's most important civilisations until the last centuries.⁵⁹

According to the book, another Asian civilisation owed its existence to the "other wave of migration" from Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent:

In India, just as in China, Indians did not have civilisation ... In previous times, India was settled by tribes of dark-skinned humans resembling a troop of monkeys ... Archaeological discoveries revealed that the Turks raised the civilisation in India to a higher level.⁶⁰

As the book relates, the Turks who migrated from Central Asia to the West established the Sumerian civilisation in Mesopotamia. Anatolia, contrary to what was believed, had not been settled since the Battle of Manzikert (1071) but instead had been "settled as a sacred homeland by the Turks for at least seven thousand years". Therefore, it does not seem a surprise to us that Anatolian-Hittite civilisations dating back to the fourth millennium BC are also attributed to the Turks.⁶¹

After all these civilisations are listed, another major prehistoric civilisation, Egypt, is addressed in the book. The book also includes an important observation in this regard: "It is accepted by most scholars dealing with Egypt's ancient history that the founders of the first Egyptian civilisation came from Asia".⁶² According to the history textbook, it is not hard to guess that this community from Asia is that of the Turks.

The Mediterranean civilisation that dates back to 4000 BC with its places and stages called Troy, Crete, Lydia and Ionia has become the most precious crown of human skills and talents that is decorated with the most precious pearls.

After the book defines the Mediterranean civilisation with such literary expression, it asks the origin of this civilisation: "Who created this Mediterranean civilisation with a fine

⁵⁷Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Tarih I* [History I], 26.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 29.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 30.

⁶²*Ibid.*

majesty?”⁶³ The answer, again, is unsurprisingly the Turks. It would not be surprising to read that the origin of the Roman civilisation was also somehow based on that of the Turks.

It is undoubtedly a result of a nationalist sense of history that ancient history is depicted in such way in the history textbooks of 1931, which are the products of the *Turkish History Thesis*. This conception of ancient history sought to create two types of national loyalties. The first is nationalism based on the claim that the Turkish nation is a great nation that has built civilisation throughout history and brought this civilisation to all corners of the world. The second is patriotism, based on the claim that Anatolia has been a Turkish homeland since ancient times.⁶⁴ Thus, various claims of Greek and Armenian⁶⁵ nationalism supported by Europe were answered through the evidence of ancestors from the ages of Anatolia.

The fact that the *Turkish History Thesis* is based on the Turks' past in Central Asia cannot be explained only by geographical conditions. This period also corresponds to the Turks' pre-Islamic past, which is important for creating a secular Turkish identity stripped of the Ottoman Islamic past. In fact, the connection with the Seljuk and Ottoman past was largely broken by alphabet reform. The understanding of secular history to be conveyed through history textbooks was complementary to this process.⁶⁶

For the construction of a secular national identity, it is first necessary to break religious influence on society. At this point, positivist (more specifically, the Darwinist) theory was utilised. The first parts of the *History I* textbook, telling how life began on Earth, serve as an example:

In any case, we must accept that life is a natural, essential chemistry and physics movement on earth without any intervention of any external agent ... All of these are based on the primitive cell which is the first form of life ... during the embryonic and fetal periods, human first appears like a fish, then takes a number of forms reminiscent of animals crawling on the ground, replicates the body of simple mammals, and has even a tail for a while ... in summary, humans take their present appearance through a very slow evolution from a being dabbling into water.⁶⁷

Such expressions were aimed at “scientifically” refuting the idea of creation and breaking religious ties. The ancient history sections of previous history textbooks contained information about the birth of mankind that was divided into subheadings such as “Creation” and “Flood”⁶⁸ It seems that the replacement of such religious references and explanations with Darwinist discourse was aimed at bringing about the deconstruction of and separation from traditional identity.

Following the discussion of how the idea of God appeared and of “superstitions” in Islam, the history textbooks addressed whether Islam is revelatory or developed as a product of human intelligence:

There is a lot of made-up information about the childhood and youth of Muhammad; his life after he invited his citizens to the religion was much more certain ... When Muhammad

⁶³Ibid., 31.

⁶⁴Yazıcı, “Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Tarihyazımı” [Historiography in history textbooks], 205.

⁶⁵At the same time, the Greek and Armenian minorities in the newly founded republic were built as “others” to the identity desired to be created in textbooks. Being ignored and not accepted as a part of the society, these minorities were commonly mentioned in order to explain the disagreements during the World War I or their “betrayals” according to textbooks. See Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Tarih IV: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti* [History IV: Republic of Turkey] (İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1931d).

⁶⁶Toprak, *Darwin'den Dersime* [From Darwin to Dersim], 147.

⁶⁷Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Tarih II: Ortazamanlar* [History II: Middle Ages] (İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1931b), 5.

⁶⁸Toprak, *Darwin'den Dersime* [From Darwin to Dersim], 354.

reached the age of 40, he began to invite his citizens to a religion which he himself invented and believed to be right.⁶⁹

The statements “he himself invented” and “believed to be right” imply that “the case is in fact not true; it is just assumed to be”. In a similar vein, the use of the word “made-up” in this excerpt suggests that the origin of religious thought was not “God” but “man”.

The Orientalist and secular approach to studying the history of Islam was deemed necessary for the creation of a secular national identity. Thus, the transition from a religion-oriented community to the nation-state was desired to be accelerated. However, the history of Islam was not addressed merely to be neutralised by Darwinist theories; it was also intended to make connections between the history of Islam to the new form of government: the republic. In this regard, the revolutionary and progressive character of the republic was associated with Islam and its prophet:

Muhammad, when it comes to making a reform both in religious affairs and in social matters, did not see himself connected to anything. He always walked in the direction of evolution. Death suddenly interrupted this evolution. The cause of recession and decline in the Islamic world after Muhammad does not result from Muhammad and should be sought in the fact that his successors did not grasp the spirit of Muhammad’s profession but his text. This great truth was properly realised and accepted in the period of the Republic of Turkey.⁷⁰

As might be expected, the association of the values of the new regime with the past was not limited to the history of Islam alone. References are made to the basic values of the republic without paying attention to whether they are compatible with the content of the textbooks. For example, the *History I* textbook, which deals with ancient times, also includes information on the fact that the Republic of Turkey is founded on “nationalist, popular and secular principles”.⁷¹ In more recent periods, the association between the past and the values of the new regime has shifted to a different dimension. For example, *History IV*, titled “the Republic of Turkey”, is about the last 23-year period from 1931 when the history textbooks were written, although a historical evaluation of this period can be considered controversial.⁷² While 60% of the 335-page book was about the historical/political events that occurred between the end of World War I and the time the book was written, 40% was devoted to the introduction of the new state system and its reforms. In this regard, the fourth volume of the high school history textbooks is more a book of citizenship education than a history textbook.⁷³

The coexistence of history and civic education in the history textbooks of the time was denied in the related textbooks but defined as two complementary concepts:

History, above all, is a guide that introduces a nation itself along with its all virtues and virtues, and mistakes and defects, and that leads the way and the goal for tomorrow. Civics teaches the duties of each and every citizen and the way to walk toward that destination.⁷⁴

The secular influence and nationalist discourse that appear in high school history textbooks are the most important characteristics of the citizen typology that the founders of

⁶⁹Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Tarih III: Yeni ve Yakın Zamanlarda Osmanlı-Türk Tarihi* [History III: Ottoman-Turkish history in new and modern ages] (İstanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1931c), 86.

⁷⁰Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Tarih II* [History II], 118.

⁷¹Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Tarih I* [History I], 41.

⁷²Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti [The Society for the Study of Turkish History], *Tarih IV* [History IV].

⁷³Yazıcı, “Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Tarihyazımı” [Historiography in history textbooks], 207.

⁷⁴Ibid., 258.

the republic tried to create. It was inevitable that citizenship education would prominently stand out in high school history textbooks, taking into consideration the concern for the legitimisation of the new political system.

Conclusion

When a person desires a new future, he or she seeks a new past, a “discovered” history.⁷⁵ Through history writing and teaching, the founders of the new state tried to build up a new society and, by extension, a new future, which is precisely the product of an effort to build a new past. This vital role of history in the nation-building process has led history writing and teaching to be treated as a state policy since the early years of the republic.⁷⁶

As is clear in the textbooks of the period, the national identity desired to be formed through history and to be spread by history education was fed by three different types of collective identity: firstly, the *ethnic identity* based on the *Turkish History Thesis* and emphasising the Asian characteristics of the Turks (at the same time reflecting the nationalistic nature of the republican reforms); secondly, the secular *religious identity* that represented the contemporary and westernised nature of the republican reforms; and thirdly, the *political identity* that reflected the ideological characteristics of the new regime.

The responsibility attributed to history writing and teaching in the early republican era was obviously very weighty. However, this responsibility had to be fulfilled in a very short time due to practical necessities. The new understanding of history needed to encompass adults, children, and young people as well as experts and ordinary people. Thus, the objective was to stereotype new generations and adults, elites and peoples altogether with the same understanding. History and its education had to be based on a scientific basis, to declare the character of Turkish nationalism to the whole world, and to constitute the essence of civic education at the same time. In short, it had to have an urgent revolutionary and pedagogical value; however, it was very difficult to have all of them together. Therefore, hastiness and pragmatism prevailed,⁷⁷ which has led to an anachronistic and ahistorical construction of history in textbooks.⁷⁸ When the alleged past was not supported by scientific evidence, the construct of history as reflected in history textbooks began to lose credibility. After the death of Atatürk, one of the greatest supporters of this construct, its influence in the textbooks slowly disappeared.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

⁷⁵Etienne Copeaux, *Tarih Ders Kitaplarında (1931–1993): Türk Tarih Tezinden Türk-İslam Sentezine* [In history textbooks (1931–1993): from the Turkish History Thesis to the Turkish–Islamic synthesis] (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1998), 22.

⁷⁶Yazıcı, “Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Tarihyazımı” [Historiography in history textbooks], 199.

⁷⁷Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih* [Power and history], 137.

⁷⁸Suavi Aydın, “Cumhuriyet’in İdeolojik Şekillenmesinde Antropolojinin Rolü: İrkçı Paradigmanın Yükselişi” [The role of anthropology in the ideological construction of the republic: the rise of the racist paradigm], in *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce: Kemalizm* [Political thought in Modern Turkey: Kemalism], ed. Ahmet İnsel (İstanbul: İletişim, 2006), 349.

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