

An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism: Between Turkish Ethnicity and Islamic Identity

Umut UZER

Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 2016, 276 pages. ISBN: 9781607814658

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The scholarship on Turkish nationalism has traditionally focused on the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic, often examining how the imperial ruling elites gradually came to terms with the transition from imperial attachments to narrower ethnic belongings. Since the early 2000s, however, as political Islam has begun to gain a more prominent position in Turkish political life, the studies on Turkish nationalism have also shifted gear. While scholars never really ditched aside the broader emphasis on the Ottoman origins, a range of new studies such as the ones by Soner Çağaptay, Gavin D. Brockett, Behlül Özkan, and Jenny White began to tackle the rise of what one may call the conservative and Islamist strands of Turkish nationalism since the Second World War.¹

Umut Uzer's *An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism* is a welcome contribution to this burgeoning literature, with a scope that covers the emergence of Turkish nationalism from the late Ottoman times until its recent transformation in the 2000s. Self-professed as the intellectual history of Turkish nationalism, Uzer illustrates a commitment to the factual treatment of the phenomenon, and eagerly emphasizes the diversity of positions Turkish nationalism came to embody in its century-long history. In doing so, he often provides much needed biographic data of important nationalist figures, which are often not readily available in English. He also locates where each nationalist thinker falls within his useful typology of Kemalist, ethnic, and conservative variants of Turkish nationalism. In tracing these shifting trajectories, Uzer makes use of a range of primary sources, and successfully incorporates the findings of relevant secondary literature into his analysis.

Uzer situates the emergence of Turkish nationalism within the late Ottoman context where three overlapping processes contributed to its making. First is the growing number of studies done by European orientalist on Turkish history and philology which gradually began to shed light into

1 Soner Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: who is a Turk?*, London, Routledge, 2006; Gavin D. Brockett, *How Happy to Call Oneself a Turk: Provincial Newspapers and the Negotiation of a Muslim National Identity*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2011; Behlül Özkan, *From the Abode of Islam to the Turkish Vatan: The Making of a National Homeland in Turkey*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012; Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012.

the pre-Ottoman origins of the Turks. Second is the growing influx of Tatar and Turkic emigres from the Tsarist Russia into the Ottoman Empire where they began to propagate Turkish nationalism and pan-Turkism through a range of publications and associational activities. The political situation in the Ottoman Empire provided the third complementary context whereby the territorial erosion of the empire made Turkism as the strongest alternative to the currents of Ottomanism and Islamism. The first and second chapters survey these contexts through a prosopographic approach that includes not only the discussions of major figures such as Gökalp, Akçura, Seyfettin, Gaspiralı, or Ağaoğlu but also those of lesser-known figures in English-speaking academia such as Kırimer, Aarsal, or Togan.

After tracing the intellectual origins of Turkish nationalism, Uzer sets out to examine the development of the official nationalist ideology under the new Kemalist arrangements from 1923 onwards. He accordingly surveys a range of policies adopted by the Republican regime in pursuit of its top-down nation-building project, followed by generic discussions of the (in)famous Turkish Historical Thesis and Sun Language Theory. Uzer also provides brief biographies of key Kemalist ideologues, and discusses how Kemalist nationalism was redefined and appropriated by the later generation of politicians from the 1950s onwards. Of particular interest here is the well-crafted treatment of ethnic and racist nationalists in Turkey such as Rıza Nur, Atsız, Sançar, and Türkkan, all of whom Uzer locates in the fringes of Turkish nationalism. He then examines the conservative variant of Turkish nationalism by analyzing the vibrant associational life since the 1950s, a time of growing anticommunist sentiments, emerging imperial nostalgia, and budding anti-Kemalist positions. Uzer then traces the gradual development of Turkish-Islamic synthesis through the prism of conservative nationalists such as Bayatlı, Kısakürek, Güngör, Kafesoğlu, Arvasi, Serdengeçti, and Topçu, and concludes with Turkish nationalism's final transformation under the rule of Justice and Development Party.

What makes this book strong is also where one could locate its weaknesses. The study's descriptive focus and textual approach at times runs the risk of decontextualization where period-specific nuances get lost in favor of teleological certainties. For example, the section on the Ottoman context suffers from presentist tendencies, as it readily seeks to uncover the "turning points" towards Turkish nationalism in an otherwise imperial context. Also, this study could have been better, if it had followed a stricter chronology. For instance, we first read about European Orientalists or Ömer Seyfettin, well before we are introduced to the world of Young Ottomans and Young Turks. Similarly, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek is introduced last, long after detailed discussions of a range of figures influenced by him. Finally, while I found the typology of Kemalist, ethnic, and conservative nationalism useful to understand the historical transformation and overlapping trajectories of Turkish nationalism, Uzer's study could have been more analytical, and engaging with the field. As it stands, the bibliography does not feature major theoretical works by Anderson, Gellner, or Breuilly, nor those by Zürcher or Feroz Ahmad.

Despite these weaknesses, the book offers a rich and layered intellectual background of how Turkish nationalism emerged and evolved over time. Uzer's broad coverage includes the discussions of some of the lesser-known figures in the history of Turkish nationalism who are mostly absent in English-speaking academia. Devoid of jargon and competitively priced, the book is highly recommended for those who are interested in the history of Turkish nationalism.