

Erol Köroğlu, *Ottoman Propaganda & Turkish Identity: Literature in Turkey During World War I*, New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007

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Erol Köroğlu's impressive debut work examines the relationship between literature, propaganda and national identity in the late Ottoman Empire leading up to and during World War I. Köroğlu rigorously contextualises selected writings from the journalism, poetry and prose of the period, and he stresses the continuities between the late Ottoman and early republican cultural scenes. He argues that the lack of effective Ottoman propaganda was partly due to historical conditions in the empire, and partly the result of literary nationalists' overriding concern to create a unifying cultural discourse of Turkish identity as the ideological cement of an imagined, national society.

The first chapter, "Material Conditions of War Propaganda and Their Want in the Ottoman Empire", deploys a cultural materialist analysis to explain the empire's failure to develop an effective propaganda mechanism during 1914-18. Köroğlu sees this as an index of the relative underdevelopment of the features of a modern nation state as understood by theorists like Ernst Gellner and Benedict Anderson, including mass literacy, industrialised cultural production and relative democratic openness. The lack of propaganda was thus partly due to the intellectual malaise created by the "exceptional ... irrationality and rigidity" (12) of the wartime censorship exercised by the CUP government, whereby exile and assassination were employed to suppress all opposition, and press freedom was drastically curtailed (12-13). He also criticises the political intrigues between supporters of Enver, Talat and Cemal Pashas, consequent on the "Triumvirate" leadership structure of the CUP – a hangover from its time as a clandestine revolutionary organisation – which made it difficult for the government to follow a coordinated cultural (or military) strategy. He then spells out the underdevelopment of the means of cultural production in the empire: the still fledgling nature of the educational infrastructure, the roughly 10% literacy rate (22), the underdevelopment of the publishing industry, and the inability to industrially produce paper. Fascinatingly, this last in particular squeezed the available column inches on which propaganda could be written as the war progressed, and also led to the paper-supplying German and Austrian embassies' partial editorial control of the Ottoman press (14).

The second chapter, "The Ideological Foundations of Ottoman War Propaganda", sketches an overview of the four dominant ideological currents in the contemporary empire. Köroğlu here stresses the debts and continuities between the dominant and residual Ottomanist, Islamist and Westernist

currents in late-Ottoman intellectual culture and the emergent ideology of Turkism (31-33). Köroğlu then maps the development of nationalist ideology over the period 1876 to post-1923 onto Miroslav Hroch's developmental model of "national movement," developed to explain primarily Balkan and Eastern European nationalisms (briefly, Phase A: "scholarly development," Phase B "patriotic agitation," and Phase C: "societal construction"), though with caveats on the exceptionality of the Ottoman experience (35-6). Köroğlu emphasises that the intellectual roots of Turkism lay in both the western-inspired Turkology beloved of Ziya Gökalp and in the practical, hard-nosed anti-Russian nationalism of Turkic immigrants from the Caucasus like Yusuf Akçura. As proof of Turkism's "scholarly development" phase, Köroğlu cites the linguistic debates in and between the *Türk Derneği* (Turkish Association) journal, advocating a "purging" of Arabic and Persianate terms, and the "simplification" approach of the *Yeni Lisan* (New Language) theorists of Gökalp's *Genç Kalemler* (Young Pens). The foundations for organised activism on the basis of a shared history and cultural symbols were also laid in this period, with the establishment of the *Türk Ocağı* (The Turkish Hearth) organisation and its associated journal, *Türk Yurdu* (The Turkish Homeland), which, together, would form a nucleus of nationalist agitation in the wake of the Balkan war. (40-45)

As its title suggests, the third chapter – "Patriotic Agitation in the Cultural Sphere: From the Balkan War to the First World War" - analyses the period from 1912-1914 as Turkish nationalism's entry into the second, more activist phase of national movement. Köroğlu analyses the socio-cultural effects of the Balkan defeat, whereby anguish over the loss of the European territories, the persecution of the remaining Turkish population and refugees, and anger at the divided loyalties of the economically strong Anatolian Greeks, made the population receptive to the "xenophobic nationalism" (49) which accompanied the "national economy" Muslim boycott of Christian businesses. However, rather than focussing on the intellectual dynamics of this activist agitation, the chapter then stages an extended discussion of Gökalp's development, between 1911 and 1914, of the concepts of *Turan*, an idealised, pan-national homeland for all Turks, and *mefkûre* (ideal), the collective thought which can become historical reality through struggle. Köroğlu argues that these entwined ideals became a kind of phantom compensation for the loss of territory in the Balkan defeat, ultimately germinating Enver's impractical war aim of uniting with the Turkic people's of the Caucasus and central Asia. A more immediately tangible social consequence was the setting up of paramilitary youth organisations such as *Türk Gücü* (Turkish Power) by military men in the CUP, to make Turkish youth strong and sturdy for the anticipated struggle to "reach Turan." (61)

The fourth chapter, "Ottoman War Propaganda and Culture, 1914-1918," is perhaps the central historical essay in the book, and concentrates on

the changing cultural priorities of the various currents within Turkism. It starts with a fascinating insight into the “short-term and irrational” propaganda that accompanied the Ottoman entry into the war, including Turanist dream interpretation and adulation of Enver-the-conqueror staged in CUP clubs and encouraged at the highest level. At the same time, the Anatolianist group around Halide Edip and Yahya Kemal found their more practically minded vision of Turkist nationalism both strengthened by the defeats at Sarıkamış and Suez in the first two years of the war, and increasingly sidelined by Unionist insiders suspicious of any criticism. Official war propaganda continued with initiatives such as the Galatasaray painting exhibitions, the *Harp Mecmuası* (War Journal), a multimedia illustrated containing lists of the killed and patriotic poems and short stories, and the Gallipoli trip of the intellectuals in June 1915, though Köroğlu regrets the dearth and late arrival of the propagandist fruits of this last exercise (83). Next, he analyzes the propaganda priorities of the CUP, mentioning the operations of its secret service, the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, active in what might today be called “PsyOps” (85-7). He also analyses the governments’ post-1916 policy of commissioning works from prominent authors for wholesale distribution to the army – a retroactive attempt at ideological control of the soldiery and home front – though, Köroğlu suggests, by this point, most writers could only be induced to participate by the payment of “incredible fees” (90). Köroğlu then details Ziya Gökalp’s post-1916 move away from CUP factionalism and attempt, with the foundation of the *Yeni Mecmua* (New Journal), to offer patronage and protection from state persecution for all writers talented enough to lend a hand in the construction of a “national literature” (95). At this time, Gökalp underwent a theoretical shift away from dreams of Turan (increasingly unlikely given the military situation) towards a “national sociology” that could develop Turkish society within the existing borders (96). In their search for symbols around which Turkist populism could cohere into the solidarism they advocated, Gökalp and his followers found the blood sacrifice at Gallipoli just the spur to the “national imagination” they needed, and they dedicated an “extraordinary” issue of *Yeni Mecmua* to it (97-99). The chapter finishes with an extended analysis of the post-1918 modulations of the concepts of Turan and national culture in Gökalp’s writings in response to the Anatolianist challenge of Halide Edip and the later “Turkeyist” (as opposed to “Turanist” or “Turkist”) priorities of the nationalist movement under Mustafa Kemal (102-8), noting their influence on post-1923 currents of pan-Turkist thought.

The division of the last two chapters, “The War and Poetry” and “The War and Prose,” follows the (far from strict) contemporary distinction between *şair*, or poet, and *nâsir*, or prose writer (xxiii), and both chapters develop a progression from naïve propaganda early in the war to more literary, multifaceted and, the author suggests, fully “national” works at its end. In the poetry chapter, we return to Gökalp, and, Köroğlu seeks to rehabilitate

Gökalp's poetry into a historical understanding of the development of his thought (113-8) with a contrastive analysis of two of Gökalp's poetry collections: *Kızılelma* (Red-apple), written between 1911 and 1914 and full of emotive pan-Turanist agitation, and *Yeni Hayat* (The New Life), reflecting Gökalp's later aim of building a national consciousness around a solidarist ethics (118-28). Studied next is the "national poet" and "one man propaganda army", Mehmet Emin Yurdakul, a disciple of Cemaleddin Efgani's populist revivalism, and, for Köroğlu, a literary opportunist whose slew of feverishly Turanist poetry collections during the war years benefited from both CUP sponsored print runs in the tens of thousands and even (self-garnered) Western critical interest (128-37). The final poet in the chapter is Mehmet Akif Ersoy, a member of the Islamist wing of the CUP, popular for his ambivalent satires of Turanist pieties and for the realism and technical competence of his verse. Köroğlu provides a close reading of "Berlin Hatıraları" (Memories of Berlin) and "Asım", which contains the famously stirring "Boğaz Harbi" poem about the Gallipoli battle, yet which frames it in a dialogue which expresses the war fatigue and disillusionment with the CUP commanders of 1916-17: "As you see, the easiest operations are/Conquering the Caucasus barefoot, taking the Sinai bareheaded!" (145)

The chapter on wartime prose contains a brief introduction to the major currents in the period's prose, including writers like Süleyman Nazif and Cenap Şehabettin who produced much propagandist work, though in the flowery Ottoman style of the previous literary generation (147-8), and Falih Rıfki, who write sympathetic journalism on the soldiers' lives on the Syrian front and CUP mismanagement of the campaign. Of the wartime novels, all but two (by Halide Edip and Refik Halit Karay) are dismissed as "poorly written works ... not known in our times" (150), and most of the unpatriotic short fiction of the period is similarly dismissed as dilettante. There follows a rather brief treatment of the wartime works of Halide Edip (only one short story is rather cursorily analysed). Köroğlu rather dismisses Edip's intellectual production as conceptually "sentimental" and "romantic," though he is nonetheless admiring of her "tenacious" political spirit and her inclusive educational activism (152-3). He then moves on to examine the two most important figures in short fiction during the war: Ömer Seyfettin and Refik Halit Karay. Seyfettin was a Balkan war veteran, pro-CUP pamphleteer, passionate pan-Turanist poet and, from 1917 until his early death in 1920 at 36, a prolific writer of patriotic and soldierly short stories in a realist mode, celebrating the virtues of Turkish heroes, old and new (158-65). With defeat in 1918, a new ambivalence about Ottoman society and the profiteering of the war years crept into his stories (167), and there is a substantial analysis of "Zeytin Ekmek," (Bread and Olives) about a young woman's virtuous choice of starvation over prostitution (169-70). Finally, Köroğlu turns to Refik Halit Karay, who was initially exiled as an oppositional journalist and satirist of the

regime, but was brought under Gökalp's protection at *Yeni Mecmua* towards the end of the war. Refik Halit empathised with the economic hardships of the people, and he wrote many columns lamenting the lack of food, a serialised satirical novel on the new class of Muslim war profiteers, and, after the armistice, immensely popular rants against the absconding "effendis" (182) of the triumvirate. Ironically, Köroğlu actually praises Refik Halit for having refrained from all but listless attempts at "superficial propaganda" during the war years. For Köroğlu, it is Refik Halit's "simple and agreeable language, realism and closeness to the common people," as well as his populist oppositional stance, that make him a truly *milli edip* (national writer), as well as the ultimate exemplar of the literary construction of national identity.

These last two chapters in particular highlight the contradictions of the author's under-theorised conflation of wartime literature with propaganda *per se*. As Köroğlu himself states, "The first World War was a period when Turkish poetry was at its most polyphonic," (113) yet his literary analysis is sometimes (though not always) reduced to telling us whether or not the writers or works under study really constitute properly "patriotic" or "national" literature; perhaps an effect the preponderance of analysis of Ziya Gökalp's ideas about national culture in the book. Köroğlu does occasionally allude to works not dealing directly with patriotic themes, but dismisses these as reflecting merely the "subjective" choice of writers facing improperly "responsive" literary audience (150). Finally, while Köroğlu's patriotic lens includes appreciative analysis of the works of Islamist-leaning anti-unionists from the period, what the empire's nascent socialist and feminist discourses may have contributed to late-Ottoman *anti-war* propaganda is generally bracketed out of view by the study's structural identification with the cultural aims of first the Ottoman state and then the nationalist movement. In this context, the relative critical neglect of an equally imposing figure like Halide Edip, particularly her early patriotic novels and her explicit criticisms of the Armenian deportations policy, is particularly frustrating.

That said, the book represents a much needed addition of late-Ottoman perspectives to comparative literary studies of World War I, and brings a neglected period of Turkish literary history back under seriously contextual study. Köroğlu's eye for historical anecdote and sensitive treatment of his literary subject matter will mean that students of the late Ottoman Empire or the First World War will find this book an invaluable resource, as well as an enjoyable journey back to a moment of the Ottoman literary past when "Turkishness" was a work in progress.

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