

In the Shadow of War and Empire

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In the Shadow of War and Empire

*Industrialisation, Nation-Building, and
Working-Class Politics in Turkey*

By

Görkem Akgöz



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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

*To Neriman, the tobacco worker
Sabiha, the neighbourhood tailor
and Behçet, the soul mechanic
for the light they shed on the child inside me*



Contents

Foreword	XI
Acknowledgements	XIII
List of Maps, Figures and Table	XV
Abbreviations	XVII

Introduction

Postimperial Synchrony: Industrialisation and Nation-Building as Entwined Processes 1

1	The Story: From Economic Colonialism to Economic Nationalism	5
2	The Argument: Controlling Labour on and beyond the Shop Floor	9
3	The Historiography: Industrial Workplace in Global Labour History	17
4	The Book: Sources, Themes, and Organisation	26

PART 1

1 The “Turkish Manchester”

Factories in Nineteenth-Century Istanbul 33

1	The Ottoman Military-Industrial Complex	37
2	Ottoman Industrialisation in the 1840s	45
3	The Dadian Family	46
4	The Agro-Industrial Complex	50
5	The Construction of the Basmahane	52
6	Labour in State Factories	56
7	The Demise and Memory of Tanzimat Industrialisation	59
8	The Bakırköy Factory in the Twentieth Century	63

2 A “Home-Grown Plant”

State-Led Industrialisation between Ideology and Empiricism 69

1	From National Economy to Economic Nationalism	71
2	Industrial Structure in the 1920s	75
3	The Search for a Post-depression Economic Policy	78
4	Etatism and the Politics of Foreign Expertise	83
5	The First Five-Year Industrial Plan	87
6	“A Classless, Fused Mass”: Populism and Industrial Labour	91
7	The Labour Code: Fifteen Years in the Making	95

- 8 The 1936 Labour Code: A Regime Law 100
- 9 Conclusion 104
- 3 Smokestacks of “Atatürk’s Minarets”**
- Industrialisation and the Politics of National Space* 106
- 1 Space, Ideology, and Industrial Site Selection 108
- 2 Industrialising Anatolia 114
- 3 Consuming Industrial Modernity: State Factories and the Rural-Urban Connection 120
- 4 National Planning versus Local Labour Markets 126
- 5 “But Where Are the Heroic Turkish Women?” 136
- 6 Local Industrial Labour Market in Istanbul 145
- 7 Conclusion 149

PART 2

- 4 The View from the Factory**
- State-Led Industrialisation as Myth and Ceremony* 155
- 1 “It Looks Like One of Those Famous American Factories!” 157
- 2 Organisational Structure and Managerial Personnel 167
- 3 Recruiting and Promoting 173
- 4 Wages: Policy, Payment Systems, and Valorisation 180
- 5 Wages and the Working Day during the War 187
- 6 Labour Discipline 191
- 7 Technical Relations and Workers’ Skills 195
- 8 Unweaving Leaving 198
- 9 How Long Does the Harvest Season Last? 202
- 10 The Reasons Behind Discontinuity 204
- 11 Industrial Welfare Policy 207
- 12 Industrial Welfare Provision during the War 211
- 13 Working-Class Housing in Early Republican Istanbul 216
- 14 The Move to *Gecekondus* 220
- 15 Conclusion 223
- 5 Voices from the Shop Floor**
- Politics, Law, and Workplace Industrial Relations* 226
- 1 The War at the Workplace 229
- 2 Postwar Changes in the External Regulation of Labour 236
- 3 Questions of Distribution: Mümin versus Management 242

4	The Investigation	245
5	Questions of Dignity: Mustafa versus Management	249
6	A Reverse Order: from <i>İşçi</i> to <i>Amele</i>	256
7	From the Logic of Escape to the Logic of Control	258
8	Conclusion	262
6	Textures of Struggle	
	<i>Worker Politicisation from the Shop Floor to the Trade Union</i>	264
1	A Formative Experience: The First Work Stoppage	266
2	The Return of the Repressed	270
3	Weakening the Trade Unions, One Step at a Time	286
4	Union Structure: Fragmentation, Finances, and Leadership	287
5	Parties and Politics in the Trade Union Movement	290
6	What Are Trade Unions For?	300
7	The Arrest	312
8	Conclusion	315
	Conclusion	
	<i>Shattering Silence, Deafening Nostalgia: The Legacy of State-Led Industrialisation</i>	318
	Bibliography	327
	Index	365

Foreword

Görkem Akgöz has written an important and original book. Not only is the subject new, so is the methodology used. She explores new paths and she does so convincingly.

Her greatest merit is probably that she connects two spheres that usually remain separate: on the one hand, the “public” sphere of economic development, industrial politics, and business management—what Marx called the “noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone”—and on the other hand, “the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice ‘No admittance except on business.’” Akgöz places the developments in one textile company in Istanbul, the Bakırköy Cloth Factory, in a broad economic and political context from the 1840s onward. She situates the fortunes of the enterprise and its workforce during the downturn and collapse of the Ottoman Empire and in the subsequent state-led industrialization in Republican Turkey until the 1950s. Creatively exploiting hitherto unused sources, she then leads the reader in the second part into the everyday world of the women, men and children within the company walls, their lives, problems, ambitions and actions. She has an eye for contradictions and differences. The workers about whom she has been able to find biographical data—often only after persistent sleuthing—are described as individuals with their individual idiosyncrasies, some very courageous, others less so. Always Akgöz guards against stereotypes and simplifications.

By tracing the lines of development from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Akgöz mines new ground, for as she herself rightly writes, the story of Turkish industrial relations in the 1930s and ‘40s is “a largely neglected history.” In recent decades, Turkish labour history has undergone tremendous development. After earlier historians had already explored institutional aspects, others have expanded the field to broader questions, concerning labour relations and workers’ struggles. But this initially focused on the Ottoman period and the first years of the Republic. Akgöz follows subsequent developments, during the world economic crisis and etatist attempts at import substitution. In doing so, she simultaneously lays the groundwork for a more in-depth analysis of Turkish society after World War II.

By paying attention both to wider social relations and to the feelings and actions of concrete workers, Akgöz makes the age-old opposition between structure and agency manageable. Historians are constantly faced with a dilemma: the more they focus on real individuals the more social processes and structures on a larger scale move to the background. And the more intensely

they focus on structures and large-scale processes the more individual actors with their personal histories are erased. Each approach has its price. Akgöz does not choose either approach, but combines them fruitfully.

In doing so, she adopts a feminist perspective. She recognizes that the working class is extremely heterogeneous and complex at all levels. She leaves the “single-axis framework” of the “white, male industrial worker” behind and sketches a multi-dimensional picture of interacting factors that, in combination, keep people in subordinate social positions in different ways. Akgöz exposes intersections between class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and age, among others. The analysis of such intersections is difficult. It has even been argued, that it is almost impossible to simultaneously keep more than two concepts such as gender and class in play. Akgöz’s study nevertheless succeeds in unifying the importance of aspects heuristically.

With her creative and complex approach, Akgöz demonstrates that while a single narrative can never tell the whole story, a so-called Grand Narrative remains possible. Like spotlights, each separate perspective generates a great deal of light, but also leave something in the shade and may even blind the observer. In combination however they can create an unprecedentedly rich picture.

In the Shadow of War and Empire is undoubtedly a landmark in the social historiography of the Global South.

Marcel van der Linden

International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

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This book has been a long time in the making. From the beginning, it emanated from concerns that were at once political and personal. These concerns only grew over time, and the writing was shaped and buffeted by a huge amount of contemporary change. I began contemplating this book more than ten years ago in Amsterdam. Back then, I had a job waiting for me in Turkey, my home country, and I naively thought that I would spend the early years of my academic career learning to teach and writing my book. Little did I know that these years would be spent mostly on political activism. In the end, I could only begin writing after I had to flee my home country in 2017, and found myself settled in Berlin. Since then, its progress has fluctuated with the ups and downs in the political situation in Turkey, and it was finally finished under circumstances dramatically different to those in which I began writing it.

Many people and institutions have contributed to the completion of this study, and it is a pleasure to be able to acknowledge this. The dissertation that lies behind this book was supervised by Marcel van der Linden, who, among other things, taught this converted social scientist to think like a historian. His support continues to this day. The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam provided me with office space, library facilities, and, most important of all, supportive and intellectually stimulating colleagues. Among those, *sevgili hocam* Touraj Atabaki has a special place in my heart.

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Maps, Figures and Table

Maps

- 1 Nineteenth-century Istanbul 34
- 2 Industrial buildings and enterprises in Istanbul, 1800–1850 49
- 3 Industrial buildings and enterprises in Istanbul, 1850–1900 50
- 4 Railroad network, factories, and planned cities in Turkey in 1940 115

Figures

- 1 The weavery of the Bakırköy factory, c. 1920s 63
- 2 Hidayet Usta at the factory celebration, 1950 67
- 3 Poster in the special new year issue of Vatan, 1933 108
- 4 Preparations for the opening ceremony of the Nazilli Factory, 1937 117
- 5 Poster for Sümerbank stores, c. 1940s 123
- 6 Machinery at the Kayseri factory, c. 1936 132
- 7 Comparison of women's industrial work under the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, 1949 140
- 8 Women and men at the Feshane factory spinnery, c. 1930–1940s 144
- 9 Workers at the Bakırköy spinnery, 1950 144
- 10 Cover of the official publication *La Turquie Kemaliste*, late 1930s 159
- 11 The old factory building at the back and the construction site at the front, 1934 160
- 12 Construction of the main production building, 1934 160
- 13 Construction site, 1934 161
- 14 Bakırköy neighbourhood, 1934 161
- 15 The front of the factory overlooking the train tracks, 1940s 163
- 16 The back of the factory, 1949 163
- 17 The construction of the new production building, 1934 164
- 18 Workers bringing in new machinery to the new production building, 1934 165
- 19 Factory Director explaining the new machinery to Prime Minister, 1933 165
- 20 Women at the spindlers at the Bakırköy Factory, 1950s 178
- 21 A street with rundown houses in Bakırköy, 1930s 217
- 22 Ground-breaking ceremony for the new social buildings of the Bakırköy Factory, c. 1948 240
- 23 Head foremen with technicians and engineers in the factory garden, c. 1950 248

- 24 Senior engineers at the factory clubhouse, 1950 253
- 25 An engineer and head foreman in conversation, c. 1950s 260
- 26 Enver Tenşi with his father, 1936 295
- 27 Enver Tenşi with Nuri Demirağ, c. 1950 297
- 28 Ahmet (second from the right in the front row) in front of the Bakırköy Textile Workers Trade Union, c. 1949 301
- 29 "We are the enemy of communism," Aydın branch of the Textile, Knitting, and Clothing Industry Workers' Union (Türkiye Tekstil, Örne, Giyim ve Deri Sanayi İşçileri Sendikası, TEKSİF), c. 1955 310
- 30 İhsan Aydın leaving for the United States with a big send-off from his family and factory personnel, c. 1951 312
- 31 Ahmet Cansızoğlu in prison with Hikmet Kıvılcımlı and other Homeland Party members, c. 1957 313
- 32 Enver Tenşi in front of the prison, c. 1960 314

Table

- 1 The share of the Sümerbank in the volume of industrial output, 1939 91

Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party (<i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i>)
CHP	Republican People's Party (<i>Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi</i>)
DIP	Democrat Labour Party (<i>Demokrat İşçi Partisi</i>)
DISK	Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (<i>Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu</i>)
DP	Democrat Party (<i>Demokrat Parti</i>)
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ILO	International Labour Organization
MKP	National Development Party (<i>Milli Kalkınma Partisi</i>)
TKP	Communist Party of Turkey (<i>Türkiye Komünist Partisi</i>)
TSEKP	Socialist Party of the Workers and Peasants of Turkey (<i>Türkiye Sosyalist Emekçi ve Köylü Partisi</i>)
TSP	Socialist Party of Turkey (<i>Türkiye Sosyalist Partisi</i>)
Türk-İş	Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (<i>Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu</i>)
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions

