Introduction

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The aim of this special issue is to offer studies on the multiple readings of Ottoman history by different ideological and political forces in modern Turkey, readings which contributed to the formulation of a specific present with the goal of creating a specific future. The articles herein cover the different readings of Ottoman history by Turkish political forces both during the period of Kemalist domination and after the emergence of political Islam and its rise to power. By studying and analysing these different readings of Ottoman history, this issue attempts to understand the importance of the ideological use of history in different political environments and, more importantly, the current ideological directions in Turkey and their historical background(s).

The special issue uses the term ‘multiple readings of Ottoman history’ because different political forces in twentieth and twenty-first century Turkey have created frameworks for different readings of Ottoman history based on their divergent ideological and political standpoints and goals. Thus, Kemalism and the political and social forces that represent it appear to have their own reading of Ottoman history and important historical facts, a reading which permitted the moulding of the Turkish nation as it was defined by the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk. Interestingly, the reading of Ottoman history by the Kemalists in the first decades of Republican Turkey appears to be different from the one made especially from the 1970s onwards and even more so after the formulation of the framework of the ‘Turkish-Islamic synthesis’. A different present created the need for a different reading of Ottoman history, one which would permit the materialization of new goals, but would maintain the links to the goals for the present and future set by early Republican Kemalism.

The developments of the past few decades, specifically the rise of political Islam in Turkey and its hold on power for the last twenty years, have in
turn created another reading of Ottoman history in an effort to recompose the fundamental elements of the Turkish nation. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Ottoman history seems to be present everywhere and most importantly, it seems that it is read differently by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). This new reading of history reshapes—along with other factors—the Turkish nation as it is envisioned by the new Turkish administration, while also it shapes a new future for modern Turkey.

This issue begins with a paper written by Edhem Eldem, who discusses the changes regarding the reading of Ottoman history in modern Turkey. He notes that history in Turkey has always been the prey of political and ideological pressures emanating from diverse levels of state and government. For decades, most of this political ‘monitoring’ was dominated by the Kemalist view of history, which often bypassed or marginalized the Ottoman past. However, as he argues, and as this special issue tries to underline, the past three decades or so have witnessed a gradual but radical shift, in tune with the political changes in Turkey: Ottoman history has made a comeback, to the point of warranting the use of the term ‘neo-Ottomanist’ to describe governmental policies under the AKP. This qualitative change has been enhanced by a quantitative one, concerning an unprecedented echoing of the new government- and state-sponsored grand narrative by the media and popular culture, leading to a serious and threatening siege of the discipline of history from non-academic circles. Eldem supports the idea that the time has come for the discipline to reflect on this phenomenon and evaluate the potential damage it has caused and is likely to cause in the future.

Michalis Michael’s article endeavours to show how the ruling party in Turkey today and especially Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are trying to construct a new Turkish nation and a new Turkey on an ideological level through a different reading of Ottoman history. In this process, Ottoman history, and most importantly a special reading of this history, comes to the fore after the Kemalist state tried to undermine its importance for the Turkish nation. The article studies the importance of the ideological use of Ottoman history and the instrumentalization of the events of the Ottoman past by the governing party in Turkey and in particular by Erdoğan, who often sheds his own light on Ottoman history. The author analyses this effort as an attempt to prove the historical continuity of the Turkish nation, which includes the long history of the Ottoman state and dynasty that the Kemalist secular state challenged. In this process, the author argues, Erdoğan is in essence nationalizing and religionizing the Ottoman Empire as a Turkish and Islamic empire and Ottomanizing the contemporary Turkish nation as one which should rely on the religious
aspect of its identity, an aspect which according to the new narrative, comes from the Ottoman—and Turkish—past.

Erdem Sönmez’s article aims to examine the transformation in Ottoman historical writing and establish a general framework for nineteenth-century Ottoman historiography. The author tries to trace the evolution of late Ottoman historical writing and explores the ways in which Ottoman historiographical practices changed over the century. His article initially focuses on the process of what can be called historiographical expansion in the late Ottoman Empire, which took place with the emergence of a new understanding of history among the Ottomans as a result of the efforts to construct a modern centralized state and the formulation of an imperial state ideology towards the mid nineteenth century. After examining this process, which was mostly experienced in such forms as the construction of history-related infrastructure, the publication of numerous historical works and the introduction of history courses into the newly established school curricula, he explores how these practices evolved and were affected by the changes in late Ottoman politics. The author seeks to trace how Ottoman historical writing received a relatively Islamized and nationalized content in the final decades of the nineteenth century due to the Islamic and autocratic shift in the political context. He concludes his article with a brief epilogue on the course of Ottoman historiography after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, which altered significantly the political landscape in the country and the politico-scholarly perceptions of historical writing, leading it to the path of professionalization and institutionalization.

Muhammed Ceyhan surveys how the Republic of Turkey, built on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, has carried out, as in many other areas, a wide-ranging and radical revolution in the field of law; yet, he remarks that this revolution was founded on the Ottoman Empire’s legacy of innovation and continued the Tanzimat era reform efforts. As he points out, how this reality has been evaluated and perceived after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey is a matter of debate. Ceyhan treats the legal changes in the period from 1839, when the reforms began, to the end of the 1930s, when they were completed, as a whole in terms of ‘continuity’. In this sense, especially the issue of how the Ottoman state has been perceived during the period of the Republic of Turkey is evaluated with a specific interest in reform in the field of law.

Christos Teazis argues that the dominant mentality among state leadership in Turkey in 1923 was to impose the values of the Enlightenment on society through the army. This mentality was expressed by the First Group and its political wing, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), in the first Grand National Assembly of 1920–23—the continuation of the last parliament of the Ottoman era. On the other hand, the Second Group in that Assembly and its political
ideas were the ideological founding fathers of what is today the AKP, which has also implemented the values of the Enlightenment, but through a grassroots approach giving importance to the social and economic sectors. The author argues that during the AKP era, Islam blended with the Protestant values of capitalism and was transformed into Protestant Islam. According to the author, both the CHP and the AKP share a common ground, which is the Protestant values of the Enlightenment.

Umut Azak focuses on the symbolism of the Hagia Sophia for the conservative nationalist movement and examines the emergence of Ottomanism as an attempt to challenge the Kemalist reading of Ottoman history. The Hagia Sophia, the former imperial church of the Byzantine Empire that was converted into a mosque by Sultan Mehmed II in 1453 and served as the imperial mosque of the Ottomans, lost its religious function and was opened as a museum in 1934 by government decision. The author points out that this ‘secularization’ of the building could be opposed only after the transition to multi-party democracy in the late 1940s. Demands for reconverting the museum into a mosque were gradually transformed into public campaigns led by the protagonists of the conservative nationalist movement. Azak analyses these campaigns as reflected in the printed press from the 1950s onwards and explores how the Hagia Sophia has since been instrumentalized for the reproduction of a xenophobic and anti-Western Islamic nationalism.

Emrah Konuralp notes in his article that although the establishment of the Republic of Turkey was marked by a revolutionary break with the sultanate and the caliphate, its political structure has been built on what remained of the Ottoman Empire, not on its ruins. For this reason, it is unlikely to expect that political polarization in Turkey has been immune to rival attitudes towards the Ottoman past. On the one hand, following the War of Independence, the Kemalist revolutionaries carefully detached themselves and the new state from the Ottoman legacy. On the other hand, their more conservative allies, the opposition group in the first Grand National Assembly, and religious power centres within society were discontent with the new regime’s nature and orientation. Therefore, the positive and sometimes nostalgic approach to Ottoman history has been an important reference point for counter-revolutionary dissidents and the conservatives who are more distant from Kemalism. This distinction persisted during the single-party rule of the CHP and after the transition to multi-party democracy. Konuralp’s article discusses the position of Bülent Ecevit, the third chair of the CHP and the pioneer of Turkey’s Social Democratic movement, in the antagonism between Kemalist and conservative readings of Ottoman history.
Ioannis Grigoriadis remarks in his article that narratives and representations of the past in the present sometimes tell us more about the present than the past. He notes that views of Ottoman history have varied in Republican Turkey, according to political and ideological circumstances. Grigoriadis underlines that the era of Sultan Abdülhamid II has remained one of the most contested. While classic Republican Turkish historiography has identified the Hamidian era with Oriental despotism and blamed it for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, but exonerated it for the killings of Armenians, recent historical interest in the era has been characterized by revisionist approaches. The author believes that some of these approaches aim to contribute to a more balanced evaluation of the Hamidian period, while other approaches move to the opposite extreme, aggrandizing Abdülhamid II and his era and also pointing to alleged Young Turk treason. These approaches have coincided with a re-evaluation, if not outright critique, of the ideological foundations of Republican Turkey and the re-emergence of a strong cult of personality in mainstream Turkish politics. Ultimately, they reveal much about Turkey’s contemporary ideological and political developments.

Nikos Moudouros’s article analyses the ideological background on which the AKP’s policy rested for the adoption of the presidential system in Turkey. The author examines the presidential system as an AKP claim aiming at the resolution of Turkey’s ‘basic historical contradiction’ of being a Muslim nation on which Western civilization has been imposed, but also as an effort to restore the Ottoman imperial legacy. Additionally, he analyses the interconnection of the presidential system with the concept of imperial ‘restoration’ as an aspect of Turkish conservative political thought in the country, but also as a transformative dynamic for a new national identity. In the same context, his analysis extends to the ideological content of ‘New Turkey’, which focuses on the adoption of a ‘Turkish-type’ presidential system. At this level, the importance of the identification of a powerful state with the centralization of executive power is emphasized as a natural result of the restoration of the Ottoman imperial legacy. Finally, Moudouros presents specific problematic aspects arising from the social and ideological polarization accompanying the transition of Turkey to the presidential system.

Michalis Theodorou points out in his article that, since the AKP became the dominant party in Turkey, it has developed a political narrative and a public discourse that have many attributes of modern populism. He underlines the fact that in line with its attempt to consolidate its power, the AKP’s populist public discourse is distinctive and multifaceted. One of its most important manifestations is the mobilization of nostalgia, in a context of politicization of emotion in order to associate with the broader masses. The author argues that
the AKP’s nostalgic rhetoric is embodied mainly in a neo-Ottoman discourse that informs and governs political action, reconstructs collective memory and identity and reveals a political attempt to construct a tradition based on specific aspects of the Ottoman historical culture. At the same time, in today’s Turkey nostalgia is triggered not only by the political elites, but also by the media and the pro-AKP public intellectuals who reproduce the AKP’s populist discourse in the public sphere.

Georgios Michalakopoulos argues that language constitutes a powerful tool for the transmission of information and of ideology and power alike and should this succeed then groups of people acquire an ‘identity’ and feel different from ‘others’. Thus, the author studies how Erdoğan uses poetry as a means to connect the past with the present and tomorrow and also to promote his personal and the AKP’s world views. Although Erdoğan’s method has been criticized, the author notes that it seems to serve him well in terms of communicational needs. However, Michalakopoulos believes that it is premature to evaluate the potential outcome of the new mixture between Turkishness and Islam that both the AKP and Erdoğan himself promote.

Ahmet Yıkık describes in his article how, from the nineteenth century to the present day, a considerable number of Turkish novels have been published which either incorporate facts from Ottoman history directly into their plots or rely on that history to form the background of the action. A number of these novels belong to the category of popular (or ‘low’) literature, which tends to be romantic or didactic in tone and to portray the Turkish-Islamic synthesis in an almost exclusively positive light. On the opposite end of the spectrum are novels which approach Ottoman history more critically, often openly displaying their authors’ favour towards Republican Turkey. Yıkık argues that, regardless of the category to which they belong—and whether they remain faithful to the historical events they incorporate or the facts have been altered to suit the work’s ideological position, novels such as these play a significant role in the formation of Turkish national consciousness. In this context, he analyses the historical novels İtiraf and Her Yerde Kan Var, which were written during the reign of the AKP. He places both books in the context of the sociology of literature and examines their depiction of the Ottoman Empire, or their ‘Ottoman image’.

Okcan Yıldırımtürk’s article discusses how the Turkish historical narratives of Cyprus evolved in mutually antagonistic and constitutive ways from the 1920s to the 1970s. The author questions how and why Islamist authors approached the island’s history and in what ways they reproduced and/or challenged the official historiography and ruling ideology of the Turkish Republic. In doing so, he attempts to contextualize the development and transformation
of modern Turkish historiography, standing at the juncture of possible pasts, presents and futures, along with identity formations, ideologies and political upheavals.

Finally, Olivier Bouquet discusses the cases of Celal Bükey and his son Erol Bükey as administrators (mütevelli) of the waqf of their illustrious ancestor Halil Hamid Pasha, Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire from 1782 to 1785. Celal and Erol Bükey administered the waqf from 1973 to 1981 and from 1992 to 2002 respectively, and Bouquet analyses how they handled the various symbolic materials they had inherited from their predecessors in order to transform an ancien régime lineage into a republican dynasty organized through new family memorial references. Thus, he argues that the re-Ottomanization of Turkish society, far from only reflecting the political agenda of the AKP governments since 2002, is also the product of activities and references nurtured by elites usually depicted as ‘white Turks’. At the same time, the article reassesses the line usually drawn by scholars between private papers and public archives.

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