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**Multiculturalism and Coexistence: from the Ottoman
Empire to Modern Turkey**

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Multiculturalism and Coexistence: From the Ottoman Empire to Modern Turkey

This paper explores the treatment of differences and the transition from the multicultural coexistence of the Ottoman Empire to the emergence of Balkan nationalisms and the homogenising nation building process of Modern Turkey. It raises issues concerning the uses of singularity and plurality in understandings of historical change, the construction of identities based on differences, the treatment of ethnic and religious differences by nation-states, communities and individuals. I seek to analyse key events and time periods that affected the neighbourhood life, coexistence, the construction of social categories of differences and “otherness” through the creation of ethnic, religious and national identities. As a non-historian, I do not claim the validity of the facts and time periods considering the fact that historical accounts are represented and interpreted from various perspectives. For space and time limits, I only document a few perspectives of different historians.

First, I analyse the ways in which differences and plurality were conceptualised and treated under the Sultan’s rule and in Ottoman daily life. Secondly, I investigate the rise of nationalisms, the creation of unity and solidarity through the emergence of Balkan nationalisms based on ethnic and religious differences and their consequences that led to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Finally, I explore the formation of modern Turkey. Anderson (2008, 2008a) only focuses on the history of Turkey. However, I situate the formation of Turkish state within the building of modern nation states in the Balkans after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and compare it with the other modern Balkan states. I focus on the international and domestic policies in Turkey that aimed to create a unified homogenous Turkish nation and the ways in which the categories of ethnicity and religion were conceptualized and acted upon by Turkish governments,

politicians and communities. I investigate the events and moments that hindered coexistence, made “minorities” feel uncomfortable and immigrate to other countries.

LOOKING BACK IN HISTORY

a) *The Ottoman Times*

According to Mazower, who is a prominent example of a revisionist and non-nationalist scholar, the Ottoman Empire made it possible for the coexistence of people of different religions, cultures and ethnicities while such coexistence was not seen anywhere else in Europe, because under the Sultan’s rule people were not identified and separated as belonging to different ethnicities (Mazower 2000: 16-17). Religion was a more salient category. The population was separated as Muslims and non-Muslims (Mazower 2000: 52). Non-Muslim communities were divided by religion (*millet* system) and their religious authorities such as kadis, bishops, rabbis were responsible for their own *millet* (Mazower 2000: 64). The Empire did not aim to convert people to Islam (Mazower 2000: 58). As long as Christians paid their taxes, they were self-governing within their communities (Mazower 2000: 58). The Ottoman Sultans married Serbian, Greek and non-Muslim princesses (Mazower 2005: 24) who changed their names and converted to Islam (Goodwin 2006). The binary between Muslims and non-Muslims existed; and religious difference was recognised. Nonetheless, people belonging to different ethnic, religious and cultural background co-existed because these differences did not cause problems in daily life. People were respected to follow their beliefs (Mazower 2000: 65). Christians, Jews and Muslims would use each other’s amulets when theirs did not work (Mazower 2000: 86). People became blood-brothers even though they belonged to different religions (Mazower 2000: 71-

72). Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians were not uncommon (Mazower 2000: 70). In a Bulgarian memoir in 1870, it was remarked that Turks and Bulgarians got on well as neighbours in the villages. Their children played together. Bulgarians spoke enough Turkish and Turks spoke enough Bulgarian to converse with each other. Even though both had their own faith, customs and clothing, they saw it as it is without putting a judgement on it (Mazower 2000: 75-76). Although Turkish was used as a court language, Ottoman Empire did not restrict the use of language. The empire was multilingual. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu remarked that in Constantinople Turkish, Greek, Hebrew, Armenian, Arabic, Persian, Russian, Slavonian, Wallachian, German, Dutch, French, English, Italian, Hungarian were spoken (Mazower 2000: 56-57).

Consequently, it is important to note that Ottoman times were not like utopia. For example, there was tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Ottomans used violence while conquering lands in the Balkans and keeping under control the new lands (Kontogiorgi 2006: 24). Hostile behaviour of Muslims against the non-Muslims was seen in the cities (Mazower 2000: 76). However, this violence was not because of ethnic differences because the concepts of nationality, ethnicity and ethnic difference were not present at that time: the Sultan's subjects were divided by their faith but not by their nationality and ethnicity (Kontogiorgi 2006: 25). Mazower argues that Huntington's clash of civilisations did not exist in the Balkans before independent states started to emerge. Even though in law, there were differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, daily life did not reflect that much difference and discrimination.

b) The Rise of Nationalisms in the Balkans: formation of nation-states

From the 20th century onwards, modernity, Enlightenment, industrialisation, capitalism and the emergence of nationalist ideologies played catalysing role for the emergence of violence in the Balkans. Secularisation, the rise of science and emergence of printing affected the ways in which people constructed an identity of the self in difference to the other(s). With the rise of nationalism, ethnic, religious and cultural differences became intolerable and instability began in the Balkans. Between 1912 and 1922, massacres and acts of violence were common between Serbs, Turks, Albanians, Greeks and Bulgarians. “The Turks are fleeing before the Christians, the Bulgarians before the Greeks and the Turks, the Greeks and Turks before the Bulgarians and the Albanians before the Serbian (quoted by the Carnegie commission in 1914, in Mazower 2000: 118)”. One half to two-thirds of the Armenian population perished in massacres or due to deprivation and disease during their forced deportation (Keyder 2002: 36). McCarty remarks that while Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia fought for their independence, many Turks were massacred and exiled from the Balkans (McCarty 1997: 337-344).

The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire would increase the power of Russia, Britain, and the USA in the Balkans (Mazower 2000: 101). The Great Powers promised lands to newly emerging Balkan states¹ and helped them to get their independence. During the nation building process of these modern nations, ethnic and cultural identities were aimed to unite the people of the nation (Güven 2006: 103). Therefore, multi-national empires started to deteriorate, while “ethnically homogenous” nations started to appear. Montenegro, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania had their independence. As nobody was helping the Turks, they

¹ Romanians wanted Hungarian Transilvania, Serbs wanted Habsburg and Ottoman lands, Bulgarians claimed San Stefano lands, Greeks dreamed about achieving “Great Idea” of reviving the Byzantine Empire (Mazower 2000: 101-102).

decided to build their own nation themselves through creating their own nationalism (Ahmad 1993: 4).

The Young Turks aimed to reunite the Empire and appealed to have an Ottoman identity (Ottomanism) regardless of religious and ethnic differences (Mazower 2005: 275). As the empire was losing lands and becoming more homogenised, they shifted from Ottomanism to Islamism. However, religion and being Muslim was not enough for a national identity because there were Muslims who were not Turks such as Albanian, Bosnian and Bulgarian Muslims (Mazower 2005: 281). National identity among the Turks was weak before WW1 (McCarty 1997: 209). The reaction and attacks of non-Muslims against the Ottoman Empire implied that Turks were associated with the Ottoman Empire. Turkish identity emerged as a reaction against Europe and the nationalisms of different ethnicities (e.g. Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbians) (McCarty 1997: 209). Akçura, the leading figures of Turkism argued that the unity of ethnic and religious identity would guarantee the unification of the nation (Akçura 1998 quoted in Özkirimli and Sofos 2008: 33). Thus, relying on ethnic Turkishness as a nation building ideology seemed more appealing and effective (Ahmad 1993: 39).

The building of nation state for Turkey and other Balkan countries was severe and in disfavour of the minorities (Mazower 2000: 138-142, Guven 2006: 103-105). Even though Balkan states signed minority rights treaties imposed by the Great Powers which were monitored by the League of Nations (Mazower 2000: 120), minorities were still oppressed and discriminated against (Mazower 2000: 121). Jews and Turks in Greece (Mazower 2005: 299, 302, 304) Hungarians in Romania (Mazower 2000: 125), Turks in Bulgaria (Mazower 2000: 138, Eminov 1997: 4), Bosnians and Croations in Serbia (Mazower 2000: 140) and various minorities in Yugoslavia were ethnically and linguistically repressed. States aimed for

homogeneity assuming that multi-nationalism would not work.

Violence was not peculiar to the Balkans and did not arise from the fact that these regions were ethnically diverse (Mazower 2000: 144, Toynbee 1922: 17-18, Kontogiorgi 2006: 24-25). The massacres were influenced by the European rooted concept of nationalism as well as the intervention of their armies and governments (Mazower 2000: 144). The Holocaust and ethnic cleansing were also present in Europe especially during the WW2 (Mazower 2000: 144, Bauman 1989 and Beilartz 2000). Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey had similar ways of building the modern nation and treating the minorities. This othering process affected the ways in which the public started to demonise the minorities. National identity was constructed against internal and external others. Modern nation states tried to build their nation through language restriction, population movements, violence and killing, restriction of economic rights and creating unsafe environments for the minorities. In the end, coexistence was hindered, which made minorities leave.

Critical events and domestic policies during the formation of Modern Turkey

From the 20th century onwards, just before and after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Balkan states aimed to build their nations. Ethnic and religious differences were relied on to create homogenous national identities against internal and external others. Ozkirimli and Sofos argue that modern Greeks constructed their cultural superiority and national identity through rediscovering their Hellenic and Byzantine history, values and philosophy. Modern Greeks created an artificial meaningful link with NeoHellenic Enlightenment and against the Ottoman Empire that has been the “Other” (Ozkirimli and Sofos 2008: 23, 55). In a similar way, Turkey

appealed to Turkism which was the third fallback of the Young Turks² after having tried Ottomanism and Pan-Islamism. Turkish identity was founded on the ideologies of a secular, Western, modern and monolithic country regardless of ethnic, religious and class differences or any divisionist aims. Turkism tried to get rid of the pejorative connotation of the “Turk” as the “backward” and the “barbar” to create the sense of pride, but Turkism became the dominant ideology enforcing cultural hegemony over the minorities (Ozkirimli and Sofos 2008: 31, 69, 72). The next section explores the key events and the ways in which Turkey built a homogenous modern nation-state through international and domestic policies and tried to construct Turkish national unity and identity.

*** Population exchange (1923):** The wars between Greek and Turkish forces during the First World War led both countries to agree on the compulsory exchange of populations to bring a cessation of hostility and prevent further potential conflicts that might arise due to the coexistence of so called “unmixing people” (Hirshon 2002: 4). Oran states that Ismet Pasa wanted to have a complete population exchange because, the Great Powers were intervening in Turkish foreign policies in terms of dealing with the minority issues and this would bring a more homogenous population (Oran 2002: 99). However, the *Rums* of Bozcaada, Gökçeada and Istanbul and the Muslims of Western Thrace in Greece were excluded from the compulsory population of exchange because 100,000 *Rums* in Istanbul and 10,000 from Bozcaada and Gökçeada (Akgönül 2004: 36) would be too many to settle them in, affirm Oran, Mazower, Akgonul and Hirschon (Oran 2002: 98-99, Mazower 2000: 120, Hirschon 2002: 8). Moreover, Venizelos did not want

² What is really interesting is that the founding members of CUP members who continued the Young Turk movement were actually not ethnically Turk: Ibrahim Temo, an Albanian from Ohrid, Mehmed Resit, a Circassian from the Caucasus, Abdullah Cevdet & Ishak Sukuti were Kurdish from Arabkir and Diyarbakir (Ozkirimli and Sofos 2008: 36). Turkism was used as a supranational identity (quoted from

Greeks to leave “Constantinople” as a remainder of *Megali Idea* and otherwise the *Rum* Patriarch had to be removed from Istanbul to Greece (Oran 2002: 99). Consequently, the Pact of Lausanne signed in 30 January 1923³ implied that Muslims of Greece would be sent to Turkey and Orthodox of Turkey to Greece. In Crete and Macedonia all the Muslims were considered to be “Turk” regardless their different ethnicities, and all the *Rums* (Greek-Orthodox Christian) were sent to Greece (Güven 2006: 107). Around 356,000 Turks left Greece and 190,000 Rums (355,635 Turks left Greece and 189,916 Rums) emigrated from Turkey⁴ (quoted from McCartney 1934: 446 in Oran 2002: 100).

Muslims were not allowed to sell their houses while leaving Greece to immigrate to Turkey because the new comers from Turkey would need houses. Mosques were abolished in order to make the city Greek (Mazower 2005: 351, 352). The immigrants of both countries had to leave everything behind (e.g. properties, friends, jobs). The immigrants were not welcomed in their new country. The new comers to Greece spoke Turkish and they were not considered as “fully Greek” by the Greeks (Hirschon 1998). They had “Turkish seeds” (Mazower 2005: 360). Oran argues that the outcomes of the population exchange were worse than expected (Oran 2002: 101). Güven says that the population exchange reinforced the concept of otherness against the non-muslims in Turkey (Güven 2006: 108) because the “other” had been needed to be sent away

Hanioglu 2002: 94-95 in Ozkirimli and Sofos 2008: 38).

³ Bozcaada (Tenedos) and Gökçeada (Imbros), which were occupied by the Greeks until the treaty of Lausanne (24 July 1923), were given to Turkey, but the rights of the non-Muslim populations including the ones in Istanbul would be guaranteed (article 14 quoted in Babül 2004: 4). Article 14: “The islands of Imbros and Tenedos, remaining under Turkish sovereignty, shall enjoy a special administrative organisation composed of local elements and furnishing every guarantee for the native non-Moslem population in so far as concerns local administration and the protection of person and property. The maintenance of order will be assured therein by a police force recruited from amongst the local population by the local administration above provided for and placed under its orders. The agreements, which have been, or may be concluded between Greece and Turkey relating to the exchange of the Greek and Turkish populations will not be applied to the inhabitants of the Islands of Imbros and Tenedos” (Babül 2004: 4).

⁴ When the Greek army was defeated in Izmir 1.2 million Rums had already fled from Turkey to Greece before the population exchange. In total, around two million Greeks were deported to Greece and 380,000 Muslims to Turkey, by 1923.

(Hirschon 2002: 10).

* **Turkification of the economy** (Güven 2006: 108): the Turkish government tried to Turkify the bureaucratic system and the economy by following a nationalist approach during industrialisation⁵ (Güven 2006: 109). Güven states that between November 1922 until March 1923, 110 *Rum* and 21 Armenian enterprises were closed (Güven 2006: 109). People were also encouraged to consume “Turkish products” (Güven 2006: 112). Enterprises started to replace non-Muslim employees with Muslim ones⁶ (Kuyucu 2005:110, 370). Thus, Jews, Greeks and other non-muslims started to immigrate from 1934 onwards.

* **Turkification of the language and education**: Atatürk and Kemalists took on board Gökalp’s “one nation, one education” theory and in 1924 the education system was unified under one code of practice (Kaplan 2006: 41). The Latin alphabet started to be used; Persian and Arabic words were taken out of the language and new Turkish words were created through referring to Turkic roots. Campaigns were thrown such as “Speak Turkish!”. Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Arabs were not allowed to speak their language in public places such as in restaurants and theatres (Güven 2006: 114, Bali 2000 quoted in Kuyucu 2005: 370). Minority schools did not receive enough financial aid and the number of its students lessened day by day (Güven 2006: 116, 117).

* **Wealth Tax/Capital Tax (Varlık Vergisi)**: In 1942, the government informed that *varlık vergisi* (wealth tax) aimed to redistribute the capital that was unequally and unfairly distributed

⁵ National Turkish Commerce Union founded in 1923 and funded by the government, aimed for Turkish business men and bankers to secure their place in the industry (Güven 2006: 109).

⁶ In December 1934, the new commercial law entitled as “*Türk vatandaşlarına tahsis Edilen Sanat ve Hizmetler Hakkında Kanun*” implied that non-muslims will not be able to do menial jobs such as being

during the WW2 period (quoted from Okte in Guven 2006: 135, Kuyucu 2005: 370). As non-Muslims were well ahead in status, wealth and business; this tax aimed to exacerbate their situation and make Muslims gain wealth. *Donme* (non-Muslim, mostly Jewish, who converted to Islam) were supposed to pay double and non-Muslims had to pay 10 times more (Guven 2006: 139, 141). If they were late to pay *Varlik vergisi*, the interest was high and if they could not pay they had to go to work camps (Guven 2006: 143, Kuyucu 2005: 371). From 1943 onwards, non-Muslims started to sell their property and enterprises. In 1948-1949, 30000 Jews immigrated to Israel (quoted by Bali, in Guven 2006: 146). When the Democratic Party came to power (Guven 2006: 149), they got rid of *Varlik vergisi* in 1949.

*** 6-7 September 1955 Pogrom:** I refer to the findings of Guven who explores the pogrom through archival research and oral history, to Coker who created an archive of photos and documents of the pogrom while he was the chief justice and Kuyucu who analyses it from a sociological perspective. Guven highlights the subjectivity and diversity of people's memories and states that the validity of information given should be evaluated within the epistemology of collecting oral history (Guven 2006: 19-24).

According to Guven, in early 1950s Turkey, Greece and NATO maintained good relations with each other. However, due to the Cyprus issues in mid 1950s, their relations exacerbated and this affected in great impact the situations of minorities in each country (Guven 2006: 162-163). In 1954, Greek Cypriots wanted British rule to end and Greek-Cypriot national activism began. Greek Cypriots and Greece had been supporting ENOSIS, the movement that aimed to include Cyprus to Greece (Guven 2006, Kuyucu 2005). When the nationalist organisation EOKA started

butcher, grocer or baker (Guven 2006: 111).

attacking British officials and massacred Turks in Cyprus, Britain⁷ invited Turkish and Greek governments to the London conference on the 29th August 1955 to solve the problems (Güven 2006: 196). Before the London Conference, Menderes and the media were spreading the word about a potential massacre against the Turks in Cyprus, thus creating more tension in Turkey, provoking anxiety and hatred. The *Rums* were associated to be on the Greek side (Kuyucu 2005: 376).

On the 6th of September 1955, the newspaper entitled, *Istanbul Ekspres*, released the news that Atatürk's house and the Turkish embassy in Thessalonica were bombed (Kuyucu 2005: 361). This news triggered the pogrom against non-Muslims in Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara. According to the Istanbul Consulate reports, Güven and Kuyucu, the pogrom was initiated by organised groups of people (Istanbul Consulate reports 1955 quoted in Güven 2006: 26, 28, Kuyucu 2005: 362). The rumours of the pogrom started to spread before the 6th of September. The non-Muslims were warned by their Muslim neighbours not to go in the town in Istanbul on the 6th of September (Güven 2006: 96). While the attacks were being done, the police men were quite passive because they were told not to stop the attacks unless people were in danger of dying (paraphrased from the Yassiada court and Istanbul Consulate reports quoted in Güven 2006: 33-35, Kuyucu 2005: 362). The combined effects of the bombings in Thessalonica and the organised groups in Istanbul during the London Conference where the issue of Cyprus was being discussed mobilised the Muslims to exert violence on non-Muslims in Istanbul. Muslims attacked the stores of non-Muslims, broke and destroyed anything they found and stole (Güven 2006: 29). The number of dead people was unsure between 11-15 (Güven 2006: 55).

Kuyucu concludes that who initiated and organised the pogrom is still uncertain (Kuyucu

⁷ For Britain not to be considered as a colonising power, Turkey needed to take a more dominant status (Güven 2006: 196). The pogrom worked towards Britain's advantage in the fact that Turkey and Greece were

2005: 363) Menderes (Turkish prime minister at that time) claimed that these attacks were spontaneous (Güven 2006: 14). Later on, he contradicted himself and said that it was planned by the communists (Güven 2006: 14). Dosdoğru, Toprak and *Tarih ve Toplum* institution blamed the government of organising the pogrom (Kuyucu 2005: 363). During the Yassıada trial, Menderes and his government were persecuted as being guilty of the pogrom⁸ (Kuyucu 2005: 362). Güven states that DP government, MIT (Milli İstihbarat Servisi, National Intelligence Organisation), Cyprus is Turkish Organisation (Kıbrıs Türktür Cemiyeti) and the student union organisations were responsible in taking part in the organisation of the pogrom (Güven 2005: xi). Kuyucu argues that rather than the split between the state and the public and blaming the government of causing this pogrom the economic, social and political context that motivated people at that particular time should be explored to understand why such violence happened (Kuyucu 2005: 363). Todorova also argues that people are not gullible, passive and open to manipulation of the government, “why do people *hear* the message at a particular time (Todorova 2004: 4)” should be analysed. The pogrom was a consequence of the othering process of the minorities during the creation of the nation-state of Turkey (Kuyucu 2005: 363).

According to the life stories that Güven collected, people’s reactions were quite complex. For example, while these attacks had been executed, some Muslims protected their non-Muslim neighbours (Güven 2006: 36). In Heybeliada, one non-Muslim woman said that a Muslim driver stood up at the beginning of the street and said that the attackers had to kill him first before they attack the non-Muslims (Güven 2006: 37). All the people on Burgazada resisted against the

being bad towards the minorities thus Cyprus should be independent (Güven 2006: 196-199).

⁸ Rather than dealing with the issues of the pogrom, the pogrom was just used to justify the 1960s coup in order to find Menderes’s government guilty (Güven 2006: 100-101). Finally, at the end of the trial, 3 members of DP including Menderes were executed (Kuyucu 2005: 362).

pogrom and did not let anybody get to the island and attack (Hazar 2004). Muslims also hosted their non-Muslim neighbours in their house for the night of the pogrom (Güven 2006: 37, Hazar 2004). On the other hand, there were some Muslims who reported their non-Muslims neighbours to the attackers (Güven 2006: 38). One of Güven's Rum informant said that the Muslim concierge protected the non-Muslim women of the building by lying to the attackers that there were not any non-Muslims living in the apartment. But then, he joined the attackers to attack other non-Muslims stores. Was it because he knew the non-Muslims personally that he protected them? Or was it because he was against the non-Muslims who were the "others" that he attacked the non-Muslims store? Or was he protecting his pretext as a good Muslim?

In the end, the pogrom was one of the reasons that made many minorities leave Turkey (Güven 2006: 173). By 1960, 10,000 Jewish people left for Israel (Güven 2006: 178). By 1964, 30.000 Rums emigrated from Turkey (Güven 2006: 183).

CONCLUSION:

This paper discussed the situation of the minorities in the Balkans and the ways in which ethnic and religious differences were perceived and treated by governments, communities and individuals. Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey had similar ways of building the modern nation and treating the minorities. Language restriction, population movements, violence and killing, restriction of economic rights and creating unsafe environments led minorities to leave the country. Identification of the nation was constructed against internal and external others. In the end, minorities were the ones who suffered economically and psychologically and had to move to other places.

I also highlighted that the government is not a monolithic power that normalises people and manipulates the public in any way it wants. The “othering” is a complex and long process of economic, political and social phenomena. During this otherising process there is a moment when the public “hears the message” and reacts with diverse and complex responses. I concluded that to explore historical change, the relationship between unified and homogenous aims and assumptions of governments should be analysed in relation to multiple and diverse ways of individual reactions.

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