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TAYYİB GÖKBİLGİN
HISTORIAN AND MEDIATOR BETWEEN THE TURKISH AND
HUNGARIAN ACADEMIES

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The Scope and Topic of the Dissertation

This dissertation investigates the life, work, and networks of Tayyib Gökbilgin (1907–1981), who was among one of the distinguished scholars of Ottoman studies. Gökbilgin was born at a time when significant transformations were constantly taking place in the late Ottoman Empire. He experienced his early stages of schooling in the educational institutions of the Empire. He read and wrote in Ottoman Turkish and learned Arabic and Persian grammar. Because of the constant conditions of war, he had to take a brief break in his education, but the same conditions made him aware of the changes and the challenges in the late Ottoman society. It is quite clear that a critical feature that distinguishes Gökbilgin from later Ottoman studies experts is that he could capture the nature of Ottoman society, literature, and culture in its last period. He completed his secondary education at the Trabzon Teachers' School and obtained a teaching diploma when the teachers' schools were recognised as institutions that trained the first teachers of the young Republic of Turkey, namely the unarmed soldiers of the nation who were to eliminate ignorance and educate the society that had just experienced the catastrophe of constant wars. In 1929, he was appointed a teacher and taught in various village schools in Anatolia for almost seven years. The year 1936 was a turning point for him; the Faculty of Language, History and Geography (*Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi*) was founded at University of Ankara. Tayyib Gökbilgin had started his university life in the Department of Hungarology. While the Faculty of Language and History was founded, Hungarology was included in the faculty's scope upon the wish of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The Faculty was established to create a scholarly institution to study Turkish language, history, and geography not only to understand the inner dynamics of the Turkish nation but also to determine the contributions of Turkish

civilisations to human history. Accordingly, the Hungarian studies department was established to investigate the common historical characteristics of the Turkish and Hungarian nations.

As a historian, Tayyib Gökbilgin was among the pioneers who shaped Ottoman studies and historiography. Gökbilgin was a committed scholar, steadfastly collecting primary resources and studying them carefully. Even a brief glimpse into his life and his career shows that he played an essential role in Ottoman studies and in developing the methods of how to explore this subject. His familiarity with several eastern and western languages, including Hungarian, enabled him to do research and produce writings in those languages. Starting from the early days of his career, he prepared articles for the Encyclopedia of Islam. During his life, he wrote six books and over three hundred articles. Soon after his graduation from the Faculty of Language, History, and Geography, he was selected as a member of the Turkish Historical Association and was also a member of other major associations, participating in international congresses at home and abroad. He established the Department of the History of Ottoman Institutions and Civilization at İstanbul University. He pioneered an academic level of studies of Ottoman history in accordance with contemporary methodologies. He worked on many archival documents that had not been previously studied, and published them with great meticulousness. He conducted a great deal of pioneering research not only in the archives in Turkey but also in the archives of Hungary and Venice. Gökbilgin trained many historians and supported them in their work. However, despite his major contributions towards establishing the field of Ottoman studies, he has not received the scholarly attention he deserves.

This study aims to provide an insight into the historiography of the period and Gökbilgin's own practices by following the path that Edward Hallett Carr suggested:

“Before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment. The historian, being an individual, is also a product of history and of society; and it is in this twofold light that the student of history must learn to regard him.”¹

The Structure of the Thesis

Within this context, I first focus on the formative years of Tayyib Gökbilgin in the first chapter and examine the transformation that started to appear in the late Ottoman Empire. I begin with the transitions that occur during the Tanzimat period. The *Tanzimat* (reorganization) Reforms were an extremely important turning point for the creation of an environment that would lead to the blossoming of revolutionary ideas that would eventually shape the intellectual background of Tayyib Gökbilgin starting from his childhood. The first steps towards modernization in the Ottoman state administration emerged during the Tanzimat period (1839-76). The reforms led to the establishment of new Western-style governing structures mainly under French and British influences. “Modernization” or “Westernization” gradually became the main goal of the reforms not only in the army and in the administrative units of the Ottoman Empire, but also in the education system and in the literature, as well as in society and daily life. The Imperial Reform Edict (*Islahat Fermani*) introduced the concept of equal citizenship.² With this edict, all Ottoman citizens would be treated according to equal rights, principles, and rules. This edict illustrated a picture of an Empire united around a sense of ambiguous common nationality, called “Ottomanism”, under the rule of a Muslim ruling class, but promising equality to non-Muslims in the fields of military, civil and education.³ The Ottoman bureaucrats projected

¹ Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?*, ed. R. W. Davies, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1987), 44.

² Carter Findley, “The Tanzimat”, in *The Cambridge History of Turkey 4*, edit. Reşat Kasaba, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18-20.

³ Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1876*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 55-56.

that a sense of common nationality would create equality and prosperity among non-Muslim communities through extensive reforms and privileges, and the Ottomanism ideology or *compatriotism* would progressively become stronger.⁴ In the next stage, I try to reflect on some observations about how the ideology of Ottomanism turned into Turkish nationalism over time, why this transformation had to happen, and why Turkish nationalism was perceived as the only logical choice for the survival of the state. Finally, by scrutinizing his own notes and articles, I explain how the modernization period in the late Ottoman Empire might have influenced Gökbilgin's formative years. In the second part of the first chapter, I look through the education system of the period and reflect on these transitions in the educational life of the late Ottoman Empire, since Tayyib Gökbilgin had his primary and secondary education within this system, and later started to work as a teacher in the very early years of the Turkish Republic. The political changes and educational developments were intertwined with one another in the late period of the Ottoman Empire. The history of education and the political history in this period cannot be evaluated separately.⁵ The transitions that took place on the political level were soon reflected in educational life as well. Therefore, repercussions of the aforementioned movements such as Ottomanism in the Tanzimat period, the Pan-Islamic policies of Abdülhamid II, and the ideology of nationalism that started to increase in the Second Constitutional period found their way into the field of education immediately. I examine the teaching and educational policies of the new state and at the same time, I try to create a reconstruction of his teaching career by using the documents in the Gökbilgin personal archive. The most remarkable educational movements of the early republican period, when Gökbilgin began his teaching career, were experienced in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, (United States of America: Princeton University Press, 2010), 102-103; Mehmet Ö. Alkan, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Modernleşme ve Eğitim" *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi* 12 (2008): 9-84.

the primary schools. As in previous periods, educational policy progressed along with cultural and social change. The new regime was determined to promote a secular, democratic national culture. The teachers chose to embrace modernity, and the mission to adapt this modernity to the nation. They contributed to the integration of individuals into the new society that was being built and they promoted the adoption of norms, values and political roles that would be required in society from the new citizens of the future.⁶ In the 1930s, the Republic began to shape its new citizens, and Gökbilgin was part of this process.

The main focus of the second chapter is the historiography of the era. Underlining that the Second Constitution was an important period that had a great impact in the field of education as well as historiography, I am talking about the establishment of the *Târîh-i Osmânî Encümeni*/ Ottoman Historical Association, its aims, and the first criticisms that were voiced about the Association. The questions of why and by whom the mission and the practices of the *Târîh-i Osmânî Encümeni* were criticized and what were the central arguments in those criticisms and how the ideology of Ottomanism became unadoptable in the field of historiography and was replaced by Turkish nationalist discourse are the main topics of the second chapter. One of the criticisms levelled against the *Târîh-i Osmânî Encümeni* was that Ottoman history was not evaluated as part of general Turkish history and was clearly not detached from the practice of court historiography. Their research and works were also criticized by some intellectuals and scholars of the era, who claimed that all the efforts of the *Târîh-i Osmânî Encümeni* were only dedicated to political and military narratives and no assessment of social or economic history was made.⁷ It was stated that Ottoman historiography could not detach itself from the tradition of

⁶ Füsun Üstel, “*Makbul Vatandaş*” in *Peşinde: II. Meşrutiyet’ten Bugüne Vatandaşlık Eğitimi*. (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008), 132.

⁷ Doğan Gürpınar, *Ottoman/Turkish Visions of the Nation, 1860-1950*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 18; Abdülkadir Özcan, “*Târîh-i Osmânî Encümeni*”, *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* 40, (İstanbul: TDV İslâm Araştırmaları

the court chroniclers. After addressing these criticisms, I examine the establishment of the Turkish Historical Association and then Turkish History Thesis that was presented at the first and second Turkish History Congresses, as well as the reflections of the thesis on the definition of historiography of the era and the establishment of a new faculty in the capital of the new Republic. As we mentioned before, Tayyib Gökbilgin began his training in the Hungarian studies department. When the Faculty of Language and History was founded, Hungarian studies was included in the scope of the faculty upon the wish of Atatürk. The intellectuals of the era were aware that there was a deep-rooted tradition of Turkish language and Turkish history studies in Hungary which gained momentum in early nineteenth century.⁸ In general, the primary subjects of Hungarian studies consisted of themes such as the ancient history of the Hungarians, the common ancestors, ethnogenesis, and kinship of the early Hungarians and Turks. Atatürk's main aim to include Hungarian Studies in the Faculty's comprehensive training program was not merely a coincidence but was aimed at attracting experts who would create connections between the two countries. In addition to convey one hundred years of Hungarian expertise in Turkology, and the findings of such proficiency to the young Turkish generation, there was also a motivation to benefit from the scientific methods of a nation that started to research its origins long before the Turks did. I discuss how Gökbilgin might have been influenced by the developments within this process, his higher education in the department of Hungarian studies in the Faculty of Language, History, and Geography, and the criticism of the Turkish History Thesis and the possible influences of the various trends and schools on Tayyib Gökbilgin's writings on history.

Merkezi, 2011), 83-86, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tarih-i-osmani-encumeni> , (accessed June 8, 2021); Halil Berktaş, *Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi ve Fuat Köprülü*, (İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1983), 39.

⁸ Gábor Ágoston, "Siyaset ve Historyografi: Macaristan'da Türk ve Balkan Çalışmalarının Gelişimi ve İstanbul'daki Macar Araştırma Enstitüsü," in *Türkler*, eds. Hasan Celal Güzel, Kemal Çiçek, and Selim Koca (haz.), (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2002), 92-94.

I trace Gökbilgin's thoughts on national history back and present his evaluations about the process of nationalization on historiography by using his own documents and articles. His graduation from the university, his future plans and his aim to establish a separate department devoted to Ottoman institutions and civilization and excerpts from his career are the topics I also deal with in the conclusion section of the chapter.

On the third chapter, I examine Tayyib Gökbilgin's writings on history by tracing the intellectual trends and methodological approaches that possibly influenced Gökbilgin's history making and narration. I discuss positivism as the most influential theory that Turkish historiography was based upon, and try to analyze what kinds of notions and tools positivism proposed for the intellectuals of the era. I consider positivism as the most influential theory on which Turkish historiography is based, and I try to analyze the concepts and tools positivism offered to the intellectuals of the time. Positivism was seen as the only and solid foundation of social organization that could end the crisis that civilized societies had been in for years, for social integration, the main goal and the only means for the progress of humanity.⁹ Then I reconstruct the arguments that criticized the concept of positivism and the developments in line with these discussions, and finally the impact of the socio-historical trends in the Turkish and Hungarian intellectual environment. The intellectuals of this period criticized the positivist tendency in Ottoman historiography which granted space to great men such as the sultan, pasha, bey or military successes without providing an analytical framework. An opinion that argues that it is not possible to develop the logic of historical research in such way and that it is useless to try to create an understanding of history without dealing with the social and economic sides of

⁹ Auguste Comte, "Pozitif Felsefe Dersleri.", trans. Ümit Meriç, *İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi* 2.19-20 (1964): 233.

societies emerged during this period. In this section of the dissertation, I point out that Gökbilgin was influenced both by the developments and debates in Turkey during the early republican period but also by the social-historical discussions – *szellemtörténet* and *népiségtörténet* – schools in Hungary. Gökbilgin became acquainted with these trends of historiography in Hungary through his correspondence with Lajos Fekete and, thanks to Fekete's guidance, determined the topic of his doctoral thesis. I continue this chapter by examining Gökbilgin's methodology through his works. His assessments of the understanding of history and his notion of historiography are also included in this section. Finally, to conclude the chapter, I try to analyze why the historians of the era, including Tayyib Gökbilgin were on a mission to legitimize Ottoman history as a part of world history and also had a particular interest, an intellectual purpose for breaking down the prejudices against the Ottomans, and thus the Turks.

My focus in the fourth chapter is the matter of personal archives and ego-documents. What is a personal archive? What makes personal papers different from other forms of archival material? What could the function of ego-documents be? In their simplest definition, personal archives are documents that are not collected under the control and/or the catalogues of any public institution. They are highly individual and the motivation for preserving the materials varies from case to case. Personal archives require a different critical approach than administrative or government records. They are not only related to people's jobs and official activities, but are also the most explanatory sources in terms of the subjects' daily lives and relationships. The questions of how to gain access to them, approach them and evaluate them varies according to almost every personal archive to be researched. This is because each personal archive is created in line with unique human experiences and reflects these experiences from the individual's own perspective. Tayyib Gökbilgin was passionate about archives since they brought

adventure and the thrill of discovery to his life as an accomplished researcher. Some of the documents in his personal archives are related to the real estate of the family, some of them contain lecture notes, and some of them are official documents showing his activities at the university and at the Turkish Historical Association. However, correspondences constitute the vast majority of the collection. Therefore, in this chapter I proceed with the most comprehensive section of Gökbilgin's personal archive, the correspondences. Gökbilgin's broad personal archive provides us an interesting perspective, especially on the networks he established with Hungarian academics. Although there is the problem that it does not contain a large number of letters that Gökbilgin himself wrote, there is a significant collection of the letters he received. These letters not only provide insights about Gökbilgin's personal and professional relationships, but also explain his underlying purpose for preserving the letters. The legacy that he chose to preserve was a part of his identity, his position in his field, and his connections with important historians, intellectuals and dignitaries of state, all in all his place in the world. This archive provides us the opportunity to ask and answer questions such as how these networks and friendships developed, how they expanded, which themes were at the forefront of the correspondence, and what kind of perspectives do these themes offer us? It is possible to identify the first of the topics in these letters as Gökbilgin's education. Under this theme, there are recommendations regarding Gökbilgin's education and future studies. We can position Ottoman studies as the second theme. In this way, it will be possible to produce a continuous and connected data with the first theme. This is also because letters containing topics on education and Ottoman studies have intersection points from time to time. The third theme, political turmoil, is planned as a subheading that attempts to show the reflections of the political situation and relations between Turkey and Hungary of the time.

Publication List:

Kutse ALTIN, “The Reconstruction of the Motives and Activities of the Last Campaign of Kanuni Sultan Süleyman” In: Zimonyi, István (eds.) *Altaic and Chagatay Lectures : Studies in Honour of Éva Kincses-Nagy Szeged, Hungary : University of Szeged, Department of Altaic Studies*, pp. 21-42, (2021).

Kutse ALTIN, “Kanuni Sultan Süleyman’ın Son Seferi Üzerine Bir Macar Kroniği: Bánffy György, “Második János ... török császárhoz menetele / II. János’un Türk İmparatoru’nu ziyareti” *Güney Doğu Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi / Journal Of South-Eastern European Studies* 34, pp. 27-44. (2021).

Kutse ALTIN, “Illustrating the Discussions on Ottoman Studies in the Early Republican Turkey through Tayyib Gökbilgin”, *Études Sur La Région Méditerranéenne – Méditerranéenne* Tanulmányok 30, pp. 9-16, (2020).

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Kutse ALTIN, “Yayın Kritiği: Kanuni Devrinde İmparatorluk ve İktidar: Celalzade Mustafa ve 16. Yüzyıl Osmanlı Dünyası Kaya ŞAHİN Çev. Ahmet Tunç Şen, İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2017, 315 sayfa”, *Tarihyazımı Dergisi/ Journal of Historiography* 1 : 1 pp. 123-127. Paper: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/tarihyazimi/issue/43330/531508> , (2019).