

Introduction

Toward an Infrahistory of Republican Turkey

Taş olsam yandım idi If I was stone I was burned
 Toprak oldum da dayandım I endured by becoming soil

Thus wrote Aşık Veysel, the greatest folk poet of the Turkish republic, eighty years ago. These verses powerfully suggest the subtlety with which the Anatolian people endured the challenges and shocking upheavals of the twentieth century. Indeed, this period – experienced in much of the world as an age of extremes – was by all measures an extraordinary one for Turkey’s inhabitants too. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire through devastating wars created upheaval throughout the Anatolian peninsula. Modern Turkey arose from the ashes of the empire, but the fighting did not end with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. The first two decades of the republic that elapsed after the wars were crucial in the making of modern Turkey. The citizens of the new state were exposed to yet another battle, this one for “progress.” This battle poured salt into the wounds of war by creating social, political and cultural turbulence.

In 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, leader of the Independence War and founder of republican Turkey, established a modernizing dictatorship dominated by his Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) (RPP). He assumed the presidency of both the Republic of Turkey and the RPP. Under his presidency from 1923 to 1938, the young republic witnessed spectacular schemes intended to catapult Turkey into modernity. The creation of a Turkish nation modeled on Western secular nations, a state-building process under an authoritarian system, the commercialization and commodification of the economy and state-led industrialization gained momentum. The world’s most ruinous economic crisis, which depleted the country’s resources and energy further, coincided with this period and helped consolidate authoritarianism. The costs of political and economic modernization

loomed in social problems. The rulers of the new Turkey, particularly Atatürk, sincerely desired to promote welfare by changing their society profoundly. However, this process created its own problems such as new hierarchies, privileges, burdens, grievances and conflicts, which reshaped the republican modernization in turn.

Despite the radical modernization schemes to achieve nation-state building, economic development and social and cultural renewal, many features of Turkish society changed little. The durability of the peasantry was so visible by the 1980s that it led famous historian Eric Hobsbawm to write about Turkey in his magnum opus *Age of Extremes*: “Only one peasant stronghold remained in or around the neighborhood of Europe and the Middle East – Turkey, where the peasantry declined but in the mid-1980s, still remained an absolute majority.”¹ Not only the peasantry but also its culture would continue to live and even permeate urban areas. Secular reforms did not extinguish the people’s religious and traditional way of life except for a tiny coterie of the ruling elite and educated urbanite middle class.

On one level, this persistence points to the early republican state’s failure to transform the Turkish society from a rural, traditional one to an urban, modern one – that is, to the structural limits of Turkish modernization. However, as this book reveals, another important but unacknowledged reason is the everyday politics of ordinary people: the people’s coping strategies, which Aşık Veysel expresses succinctly in his verse above. This politics revealed itself through everyday, mostly informal forms of resistance, which found its best expression in James C. Scott’s notion of “weapons of the weak.”² Anatolian people generally coped with the hardships they encountered through these weapons.

The proclamation of the republic and the abolition of the caliphate culminated in the formation of the first opposition political party, the Progressive Republican Party (Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası) (PRP), in 1924 and the Sheikh Sait Rebellion with Kurdish and Islamist overtones in 1925. However, these two events, followed by an assassination plot hatched in 1926, provided Atatürk the opportunity to hold extraordinary powers. The Maintenance of Order Law (Takrirî Sükun Kanunu) in 1925 and the new Criminal Law, adopted from Fascist Italy in 1926, wiped out the opposition. A few well-known rebellions were suppressed instantly. Nevertheless, the people coped daily with dizzying secular reforms, burdensome economic policies and abject poverty intensified by the Great Depression in mostly informal

ways, which counterbalanced the high pressure of authoritarian power.

This book probes the everyday politics of ordinary people – specifically, the rural and urban poor and low-income individuals – in a period when formal politics was closed to them. By “everyday and informal politics” I mean the varied dissenting opinions ordinary people expressed about the regime, as well as their daily coping strategies that evoked wider reverberations by affecting politics directly or indirectly. In other words, my main object is to illuminate how the rural and urban masses resisted unfavorable changes and obligations, social injustice, loss of livelihood, monopolies, taxes, low wages and lack of social rights. I then evaluate the impact of their resistance to policy. By underlining the interplay between the top and bottom rungs of society, this book exposes the underpinnings of the official politics – that is, the role of the grass roots in Turkey’s social and political change.

I argue that ordinary people, using all means available to them, struggled to weather the crises they confronted and contested their oppressors and exploiters. People’s individualistic, daily and spur-of-the-moment but widespread actions to get rid of hardships generated wider, macro consequences. Through informal and indirect mechanisms of negotiation occurring in daily life, those who were excluded from high politics prompted the government to soften its policies, thereby shaping political life and the modernization process. People’s covert criticisms and struggles, intentionally or not, generated concessions from the government, notwithstanding the lack of any radical change in the short term.

Undoubtedly, individuals’ views and actions could be contradictory and heterogeneous. A person who espoused one policy or reform of the regime might oppose others. There were subordinate individuals who colluded with the authorities. Indeed, a considerable number were true believers in the new rulers. The people’s affirmative responses are already well known. Rather, my aim is to elucidate the hitherto unnoticed dissonant views and actions that distorted, rejected or provided an alternative to government discourse and policies.

I mean by ordinary people several segments of subordinate groups in general rather than a single, specific social category. Indeed, opinions and attitudes are not easy to attribute to precisely defined groups. Despite their differences in many respects, segments of the ordinary

people like poor peasants and low-income wage earners including workers, artisans and low-paid white-collar workers often spoke a similar language and acted in similar ways to confront the daily challenges of living under an authoritarian regime.

In this book, I approach the most extraordinary years of modern Turkey from the angle of ordinary people and their ordinary life. In the first place, I hope to show that the republic's citizens were not without options for a way out in the face of new challenges. Everyday life was rich with possibilities for action. The bulk of such actions was informal, temporary, pragmatic and spur of the moment – the timeless routines of daily life – while some solutions were devised according to the circumstances. Thus the people's repertory of everyday and informal action has tended to seem irrelevant or trivial to scholars, who have been generally interested in large-scale or well-known events, organizations and individuals. This rich palette of dissonant opinion and action of ordinary people is also hard to detect with the standard radar of historians. Perhaps the most apparent blind spot of this radar is the narrow conception of politics. The politics in this sense prioritizes and therefore traces only legal or organizational activities performed by bureaucrats, institutions or organized movements, thereby obscuring the people's voice and the wide array of struggles poeticized by Veysel.

The common trait of the historical literature on Turkish modernization is its scant attention to ordinary people and their everyday experiences. The people have been considered ignorant and hapless victims, cynical opponents or brainwashed masses due to the lack of their own political organizations and movements. This book draws a different and more complicated picture by revealing the people's critical voices and coping strategies. In this picture, the political actors are not only the state, the elite and the organized opposition but also individuals, families, communities, peasants, laborers, white-collar workers, retirees, widows and orphans – women and men, old and young. It offers an extraordinary history of ordinary people in which the conflicts and interplays are not simply those between continuity and change, rich and poor, or state and society but also encompass a variety of social, economic, cultural, geographical, psychological and gender-related factors. Understanding the rich experiences of people in those times can also shed light on their resourcefulness under authoritarian regimes in the past and even today, whether in

Turkey or elsewhere in the Middle East, in dealing with challenges by devising solutions on their own terms.

Writing the history of ordinary people entails the use of novel sources and source-reading methods. It is possible to draw new evidence from untapped sources such as police and gendarmerie records, politicians' reports on election districts or inspection regions, petitions and letters, the "wish lists" of provincial party congresses and contemporary newspapers and memoirs. Though many of the written sources and the memoirs imbibed the republican modernization rhetoric, even these may give hints about the people's experiences. Finding traces of people's lives and voices who are mostly illiterate also requires new methods of analysis. Among these strategies is Carlo Ginzburg's advice to "read between the lines" and "cross check the sources" as he did in *The Cheese and the Worms*, which illustrates social conflict in sixteenth-century Italy by recounting the life and thought of a miller, Menocchio, via his trial records. Likewise, Subaltern Studies' method "to read official documents against the grain" for biases and omissions facilitates unearthing the people's experiences and views buried within the texts.³

Existing History: Focusing on State and High Politics, Overlooking Ordinary People and Everyday Life

Since the Turkish single-party regime occupied a place on the continuum of authoritarian regimes of the interwar period, studies on early republican history have shared similarities with the classical histories of these regimes. Until the advent of new social history, scholars were more or less united in their appraisal of the authoritarian regimes of the interwar period. Historians of colonial and postcolonial India, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Stalin's Soviet Union and Reza Shah's Iran overemphasized the coercive and transformative features of the state. The concept of totalitarianism was amply used to define these regimes. Society was regarded as being atomized under the absolute suppression of the state.⁴ Despite recent studies, for the most part historiography on early republican Turkey has taken place within this genre.

Fortunately, recent works on other countries have revealed social resistance under such regimes. Inspired by the history from below of the British Marxist historians, the Subaltern Studies school has challenged the elitist narratives of Indian history, be they

colonialist, Marxist or nationalist by demonstrating how mostly downtrodden rural masses of colonial and postcolonial India displayed everyday and informal actions and thus played a crucial role in shaping modern India. *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday life history) scholars of the Third Reich have criticized the concept of totalitarianism, underlining the fragmentations inherent to the Nazis and the role of the people's dissent and nonconformity, which resulted in the Nazis' failure to establish the *Volks gemeinschaft*.⁵ Social history studies on the Soviet Union have disparaged the totalitarianism model by showing the contestation of communist projects by peasants and workers. Likewise, new accounts of Iran have revealed the masses' resistance to Reza Shah's authoritarian modernizing programs.⁶

Despite the great progress in the history of the ordinary people in other geographies, unfortunately the state and elite prevail as main focal points with a few recent exceptions.⁷ Both modernist-nationalist narratives and critical Marxian or Islamist accounts are mesmerized by the republican Kemalist reforms. Their focus exclusively revolves around the state, elites and ideologies. The modernists eulogize the republic as a decisive revolution against religious backlash (*irtica*), whereas the latter questions it by overemphasizing its coercive and transformative features.⁸

Turkish politics of the early republican era is equated with high politics, in which any overt or organized political contests were absent. Bereft of organizations and rights, the crowds receive scant attention and are portrayed as silent masses or cynical opponents. The micro negotiation processes between state and society or between rich and poor that occur in everyday life and that bear little resemblance to the usual political action go unnoticed. Social resistance to the state is reduced to collective protests and rebellions, which are seen as flashes in the pan the state never condoned.

Admittedly, this literature has contributed to our understanding of domination and injustice. Indeed, the early republican state encroached upon people's daily lives by impinging on liberties and rights while economic inequalities deepened. Yet this was only one side of the coin. On the other side were rampant social discontent and struggle. The objective of this book is to flip the coin, illuminating this other side hitherto left in the dark.

Missing Peasantry

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| Orada bir köy var uzakta | There is a village, far away |
| O köy bizim köyümüzdür | That village is our village |
| Gitmesek de, görmesek de | Even if we don't go, even if we don't see |
| O köy bizim köyümüzdür | That village is our village |

These verses of Ahmet Kutsi Tecer, a famous republican bureaucrat and poet, became a popular motto during the 1930s. These words, I think, are applicable to the scholarship. Though peasants comprised more than 80 percent of the population in these years, scholars' interest has barely extended beyond economic policies and agricultural structures. Almost no deep research has been carried out regarding the peasants' everyday life, their struggles for the barest survival and rights and the interaction between the peasants and the government except for a few contemporary village monographs and short papers.⁹

Due to the lack of peasant movements akin to the Bulgarian agrarian movement or to rebellions like those in Russia, Eastern Europe and northern China, even critical accounts portray the Anatolian peasantry as a submissive mass.¹⁰ The fixation on high politics and economic structures has obscured the social conflicts that occurred in everyday life. Scholars generally overrate the abolition of the tithe and the republic's populist-peasantist discourse, believed to have eased the peasants' conditions. Considering smallholding as a static land tenure system is another tendency that has led to underestimation of intra-village conflicts over land and scarce resources.¹¹

Except for Kurdish uprisings, the rampant crime and violence plaguing the countryside – including assault, theft, robbery, arson and banditry – is dismissed as *vakayı adiyeye*, common events of no importance and undeserving of scholarly attention. Banditry has been seen as peculiar to tribalism or to Kurdish provinces. Both Turkish and Kurdish nationalist narratives, covertly but not deliberately, supported each other by focusing on the role of Kurdish tribes and political organizations, portrayed as uncivilized criminals or separatists in Turkish nationalist accounts and as the national forces in Kurdish awakening narratives. Turkish scholars attribute banditry to tribalism, Kurdish separatism or foreign agitation. Critical accounts similarly neglect banditry and rural crimes in Kurdish villages unless connected to the Kurdish cause.¹²

These narratives also tend to overemphasize the power of vertical ties linking poor peasants to tribal leadership through patronage and other hierarchies.¹³ Although such ties were indeed important, treating the tribal and village communities as homogenous and free from inner differentiation omits the class conflicts within them. Despite shared culture linking the different classes as emphasized by Clifford Geertz, the peasantry was not a homogenous entity, nor did peasants act as a class in the way Marxian accounts such as Theodor Shanin's defined class for the peasantry.¹⁴ In this regard, the resulting conflicts within the rural communities constitute the main components of peasant politics and warrant the closer examination this book seeks to undertake.

Conventional Labor History: Prioritizing Industrial Labor and Organized Movements

Turkey's social and economic transformation from an agricultural society to a more capitalistic and industrial one accelerated under the republic. State-led industrialization undeniably brought working people certain benefits in the long term, yet in the short term it created enormous burdens. The labor history of the era focuses primarily on these burdens, examining working conditions and the state's economic and social policies. The weakness of organized action is treated as a deviation from idealized labor movements. The first (conditions) and final (organized struggles) stages of working-class formation were overemphasized at the expense of the intermediate stages, such as workers' perception of their conditions and their everyday struggles, which are prerequisites for the formation of class consciousness and organizational movements.¹⁵

Perceiving organized movements as a unique form of labor politics, the conventional accounts have seen the early and mid-1920s as an active period. This period has been assumed to have come to a halt in the 1930s with the elimination of the left and the organized labor movement with the shutting down of unions and prolabor newspapers.¹⁶ This assumption has led scholars to interpret the social policy measures taken in these years and the labor legislation of 1936 as a product of corporatist ideology, the requirements of International Labor Organization membership or the desire to create a stable and productive labor force rather than working people's struggles. The

peasant origin of the vast number of working people and the peasant workers' resistance to being forced into permanent wage labor have been viewed as a deviation from the linear model of development of industrial labor and working-class politics. Therefore these laborers have been seen as a passive industrial reserve army.¹⁷

Another common argument is that the government pacified laborers by creating a labor aristocracy consisting of well-paid, privileged groups and better-off state officials furnished with social security. Also widely emphasized is the government's attempt to control laboring groups by organizing them on an occupational basis according to the corporatist model. All of these arguments hinder analysis of these people's experiences, perceptions and class conflict within professional associations as well as struggles between rival associations of employees and employers.¹⁸

Scholars have also tended to feature industrial and organized workers, often those with a leftist consciousness, at the expense of others. Labor history studies on the interwar period have neglected small-scale artisans, who were the backbone of the working class in Turkey at that time. Their response to industrialization has yet to be investigated because they are seen as the declining remnants of the preindustrial society or lumpen proletariat.¹⁹

Secular Reforms: Partnership of the Modernist and Conservative Accounts

The republic's secular reform, as one of the most comprehensive in world history, is the most intriguing aspect of Turkish history and politics. The new state abandoned the organized institutions of Islam such as the sultanate, the caliphate, *medreses*, sharia courts, *tariqas*, shrines, the fez, the face veil, sexual segregation, the Islamic calendar and the Arabic alphabet while adopting a new Civil Code, Latin script, the Western calendar, Western dress styles and women's political rights. Almost all studies on Turkish secularism concentrate on Atatürk's intentions, legal regulations or political opposition to secular reforms.²⁰ Although their points of departure and evaluations differ, nationalist-modernization narratives and critical accounts both view the secular reforms in light of elite motivation. The former regards secularism as a progressive step against religiosity whereas the latter mostly emphasizes the authoritarian agenda of the elite. In this last

group, particularly Islamists see the secular reforms as the alienation of the irreligious elite from Muslim society and as a blind imitation of the West.²¹

All of these rival narratives consider the people as passive or without options, overlooking their everyday and more complex interactions with the reforms. And when they consider opposition to the secular reforms, the focus is always upon religious dissidents and riots. Modernists label such contending with secularism as backward reactions of hidebound traditionalists whereas Islamists attribute such reactions to the Muslims' attachment to their values.²² Both groups ignore the diversity of responses in daily life ranging from selective adaptation to subtle resistance. Moreover, both modernist and Islamist accounts share a preoccupation with the old vs. new dichotomy, failing to notice hybridity – that is, the persistence of more traditional and religious ways of life alongside and intermingled with modern forms.²³ Finally, they have overly relied on cultural explanations and ignored more complex social, psychological and gender-related factors and economic dislocation exacerbated by the economic policies of the government, which shaped people's perception of the secular reforms.

Toward an Infrahistory of Modern Turkey

Fortunately, the new sources and approaches enable us to see this extraordinary era from the ordinary people's viewpoint. Writing a people's history entails not only recalling the awful and dark scenes of their lives but also their active, hopeful and resistant moments. Going beyond the monotone depictions of traditional narratives requires unfolding the divergent opinions and avenues of action available to them. As E. P. Thompson suggested long ago, avoiding the portrayal of ordinary people as passive victims, this book rehabilitates their agency, particularly their struggles for survival and for the recognition of their rights in the context of early republican Turkey, as an infrapolitics of Turkey's politics.²⁴ I offer an *infrahistory* of what is known as history, or perhaps we can call it a superhistory in the sense of a history of the state and its elites. Instead of concentrating on the superstructure of history in the sense of the well-known history of high politics, this book introduces the ordinary, everyday politics of Atatürk's citizens in extraordinary times; the constellation of opinions,