

*Illustrating the Discussions on Ottoman Studies in the Early Republican Turkey through Tayyib Gökbilgin**

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Tayyib Gökbilgin (1907–1981), who ranks among the founding fathers of Ottoman studies was one of the most influential historians of the early period of the Turkish Republic. He was born in 1907 in Ordu. For four generations, the cognomen of the family was *Müderriş*, *Müderrişzâde*, or *Hocazâde*.¹ The word *bilgin/scholar* in his surname might be taken as an indication of family background who were belonged to the *ilmiyye* class², dealing mainly with law issues and education in the small towns of Anatolia. Although his primary education suspended during the period of Armistice, he was a student of *Medrese*³ and took classes such as *Sarf-ü nahiv* (grammar).⁴ Later, Hocazâde Mustafa Tayyib Efendi continued his education in *Trabzon Muallim Mektebi/Teaching School*, and right after his graduation, he was assigned to Erzurum Aşkale Village Boarding School, as a teacher in 1929. In the following seven years he taught in various village schools in Anatolia. The year 1936 was a turning point not only for him but also for the field of Ottoman studies and many other historians of the era.

“A snowy winter night in 1935”, says Afet İnan, the adopted daughter of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the decision of establishing a new faculty in the new capital of the new Republic was taken. According to İnan’s memoir-like article that night Mustafa Kemal stated that all kinds of institutions of the capital of the Republic should be established in Ankara, and this initiative must start with the education of History and Geography.⁵ The Faculty of Language, History, and Geography (*Dil, Tarih, Coğrafya, Fakültesi*) was established a year after in 1936 in Ankara as it was ordered. After the foundation of the Faculty, upon the request of Afet İnan, the graduates of teacher schools also got accepted into university besides the high school students only for that time. Thus, Tayyib Gökbilgin had also enrolled in the Faculty and begun his university life in the Hungarian Studies (Hungarology) Department. While the Faculty of Language and History was founded, Hungorology was in-

* This paper contains some parts of my forthcoming PhD dissertation “Tayyib Gökbilgin and the Historiography of Early Republican Turkey”. However, it was reformulated and formatted for this publication.

¹ Müderriş: teacher, müderrişzâde, hocazâde: the son of the teacher.

² Scholarly class in charge of organizing the religious affairs, maintaining and application of Islamic law, and educational activities in Ottoman state organization.

³ The educational institutions in Ottoman Empire where language, Islamic practices and theories were taught.

⁴ Kütükoğlu, “Prof. M. Tayyib Gökbilgin’in Ardından,” 1–3.

⁵ İnan, “Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesinin Kuruluş Hazırlıkları Üzerine,” 6.

cluded 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 in Hungary. Atatürk's main aim to include Hungarian studies to the Faculty's comprehensive training program was not merely a coincidence but was aimed to bring experts who would create connections between the two countries and the official history thesis. One of the main objectives of the department was the adaptation of the results and the methods of the long-term Hungarian-Turkish studies into the Turkish academic life so that Turkology, Turkish linguistics, and Turkish history can benefit from Hungarian expertise.⁶

As has been interpreted by many scholars, the alphabet and language reforms were determined to break the connections of the Ottoman past and revive the ancient ethnic nexus of the Turkish nation. And simultaneously with the Turkish History Thesis, this nexus was reinforced and oriented to Central Asia. This official doctrine was explicitly stating that all civilizations were the descendants of proto-Turkish civilizations or heavily influenced by them. However, the Turkish History Thesis did not have a permanent influence on the higher education institutions and publishing world nor practiced in the long term at a scholarly level as it was expected and eventually lost its extreme hypotheses.⁷

Tayyib Gökbilgin, as one of the first products of the new regime, one of the first teachers, and as an active member of the first generation of the Republic, rebuilt himself as a historian in accordance with the ideals of the new regimen, in one of the republic's first ideology-based formal educational institutions, *Dil-Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi*, at a time when such discussions were at their apex. While he was constructing himself as a new citizen and scholar, he was also reestablishing a new interpretation of the history of the Ottoman Empire; the history which was allegedly rejected politically in the new regime in line with the trends of that period.

I argue that it is necessary to evaluate those preliminary assumptions claiming that the studies related with the Ottoman past were not encouraged or even completely refused / neglected and brought to the conditions of despising or disclaiming the total legacy of Ottoman Empire. In the early stages of my research, I was also expecting to encounter a view that somehow would represent this general acceptance. However, no letters or documents within the vast personal archive of Gökbilgin provided me with any evidence that suggests that Ottoman studies were rejected, and/or only the studies concerning Turkism and Turkish History Thesis were supported and conducted under the influence of the Kemalist ideology. At this stage, my main focus was to understand how a young university student can conduct a research titled as "Hungarian Sources on Ottoman History" in a department which was basically established to support the Turkish History Thesis; if the Ottoman studies were, in the harshest terms, rejected, and in the simplest terms, not finding any approval in the early years of the Republic.

However, as I continued my research, I realized that the literature on historiography in the Turkish academic sphere, especially in the last decade, is full of similar statements and

⁶ Güngörmüş, "Hungarológia Törökországban," 26–28.

⁷ Toprak, "Türkiye'de ve Dünya'da Çağdaş Tarihçilik ve Eric Hobsbawm Faktörü," 40; idem, "Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türkiye'de Tarihçilik," 176–181; Gürpınar, *Ottoman/Turkish Visions of the Nation*, 40–44, Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye'nin Tarihi*, 278.

repetitive theorems.⁸ Erdem Sönmez derived a pattern from these similarities; according to this pattern, the modern Turkish historiography started with the Second Constitution era, there was a rejection or academic indifference regarding the Ottoman History in the early republican period, Fuad Köprülü was the first important representative of modern historiography in the Turkish Republic, Zeki Velidi Togan, and then later it is usually stated that Ömer Lûtfî Barkan, Osman Turan, and İbrahim Kafesoğlu were the followers of the *école* of Köprülü and made a valuable contribution to this tradition of historiography. Finally, with Halil İncalcık, it is accepted that Turkish historiography started to produce materials in international standards.⁹ In my doctoral dissertation, I am also following a similar path and not opposing the idea of putting the Second Constitution period as a milestone of the modern and organized Turkish historiography studies. Yet as I have noted before, the problematic aspect of this pattern is the argument that suggests the Ottoman studies in the early republican period were disregarded to emancipate the new citizens of the new regime from the identity formed by Ottoman past.

The scholars like Büşra Ersanlı, Günay Özdoğan, Kemal Karpat¹⁰, who actually have made significant evaluations and critiques of early republican Turkish historiography, are the source of this constantly repeating pattern that produces its own mediocre discourse over time. These works demonstrated that the reforms were not creating a very successful model for national development and criticized the elitist and top-down policies of the early republican period. The common characteristic of these critics suggests that the reconstructions, such as the change of the alphabet and the Turkish History Thesis within the scope of cultural transformation, were top-down reforms, and especially those who do not fit into the patterns of those reforms were excluded to ensure the flourishing of the Kemalist projects. Therefore, the cultural and political heritage of the Ottoman Empire was marginalized, along with the reminiscent of this heritage: the history. However, I think the interpretation that these evaluations brought to the discussions of historiography in the early republic period is not very balanced. As Sönmez states, the first valuable studies in the field of Turkish historiography, like the inevitable disadvantage of all early works in every field, tend to underestimate components that stayed beyond the prominent tendency.¹¹ Büşra Ersanlı's work, titled *Political Power and History: "Official History" Thesis in Turkey*, is one of the most cited works among the theories claiming that the Ottoman studies were neglected during this period. As a matter of fact, Ersanlı's work is one of the pioneering researches that tried to understand the dynamics, relations between the political powers, historiography and national identity. Here, Ersanlı discusses the correlation between the political power, historians and history writing within the context of the establishment of national identity by focusing on the Turkish History Thesis which was enforced in the 1930s when the nation-state process was started to be institutionalized culturally and ideologically. According to Ersanlı, the main purpose of the Turkish History Thesis, which was also one of the fundamental parts of the Kemalist cultural revolution, was to create a strong national conscious-

⁸ Sönmez, "Galat-ı Meşhuru Sorgularken", 55.; idem. "A past to be forgotten?," 2–4.

⁹ Sönmez, "Galat-ı Meşhuru Sorgularken", 55.

¹⁰ Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih: Türkiye'de "Resmi Tarih" Tezinin Oluşumu (1929–1937)*; Özdoğan, "Turan" dan "Bozkurt": *Tek Parti Döneminde Türkçülük (1931–1946)*; Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: reconstructing identity, state, faith, and community in the late Ottoman state*.

¹¹ Sönmez, "Galat-ı Meşhuru Sorgularken", 56.

ness based on the pre-Islamic ethnic identity of the Turks instead of the Ottoman-Turkish identity which lost its legitimacy gradually with the impacts of the Balkan Wars. Ersanlı argues that the continuity in the historical narrative was interrupted. This is because that kind of continuity was disregarding the influence that Islam formed over the Turks in Anatolia and the identity that formulated by the political sovereignty of the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire.¹² The republic and accompanying cultural changes were quintessentially revolutionary and therefore were loaded with pessimistic and prejudiced approaches to the recent past. According to her, despite its temporary nature, the Turkish History thesis managed to paint a gloomy picture regarding the recent past and to break Turkish History from its strongest and longest past, the Ottoman reality.¹³ Because of all this discontinuity and distancing there was a general reluctance to do any kind of research on Ottoman history.¹⁴ Such statements have been repeated in different studies over time.¹⁵ However, in the same study Ersanlı mentions Köprülü's opposition to the official history thesis (although she defines Köprülü's rejections as a shy opposition since his criticism was not directly targeting the official history thesis but the research methods) and also mentions his use of documents, the variety of sources he worked on and his critical publications and evaluations. Nevertheless, she repeats that even the ones who tended to overstep the boundaries mentally and logically, chose to be dependent on this superficiality and could not contribute to the historical studies in a democratic environment.¹⁶

It is essential to emphasize at this point that I do not suggest that the Turkish History Thesis had never been applied or had no impact on education and research in the period in question. However, I exclusively object to the argument that the Ottoman studies in the early republican period were completely ignored or overlooked. The Turkish History Thesis was the official doctrine and even though it was not taken seriously by the academic community, it maintained its dominance for a short period. To argue otherwise would be false representation as well. However, as an eyewitness and as a historian, İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı gives another perspective in one of his articles published in *Belleten* in 1939, titled as 'Turkish history in writing, the Memoirs about Atatürk's interest and views'.¹⁷

The first volume of the outlines of Turkish History was published in 1930. In this volume, which was six hundred pages, the part dedicated only to Ottoman history was fifty pages and Uzunçarşılı states that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk examined the volume and was not satisfied with this work which had lots of mistakes. After this first unpleasant experience, Atatürk stated that to prepare such a work hastily and without gaining the necessary expertise and specialization would cause major mistakes, therefore such work shall be carried out only on the basis of archival documents and research. According to Uzunçarşılı's narration, Atatürk as the patron of the Turkish Historical Association had been attending the research process and meetings for long hours almost for a month. In one of such meetings when one

¹² Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih*, 239.

¹³ Ibid. 241.

¹⁴ Ibid. 221.

¹⁵ Iggers, Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, 207; Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans*, 428; Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 165; Gürpınar, "Double Discourses and Romantic Ottomanism," 39.

¹⁶ Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih*, 187.

¹⁷ Uzunçarşılı, "Türk Tarihi Yazılırken," 349–353.

of the colleagues of Uzunçarşılı mentioned his research where he questioned whether Osman Gazi, the founder of the Ottoman dynasty and the state, existed or not. As a response they all laughed together at this superficial study and Atatürk immediately ordered this article to be rewritten again. Uzunçarşılı concludes his memoirs by stating that it was understood clearly that Ottoman history which existed for six and a half centuries and produced a large number of documents cannot be rewritten from a school textbook which was only published half a century ago. Moreover, a consensus was reached on the necessity of dividing the research into sections such as political history, economic history, and social history and examining each topic by different specialized experts. Within the same article, Uzunçarşılı gives a couple of examples regarding Atatürk's interest in Ottoman history.¹⁸ However, what is important here is, as Uzunçarşılı remarks, that we see the steps in the field of academic specialization had been taken in this period.

It is also possible to trace back, through the journal of the Turkish Historical Association *Belleten*, that contrary to popular assumptions, Ottoman studies found its place in the early republican era. Even though like the Turkish Historical Association itself, this journal was established to support the official history thesis and promote the archaeological studies to prove that high civilization had emerged from the Anatolian lands, various studies related to Ottoman past such as the Delegacy of Âmedî Galib Efendi and His Encrypted Letters from Paris (İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı volume 1/no:2, 1937), About the Captivity and Suicide of Yıldırım Bayezid (Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, volume 1/no:2, 1937), Seven Island Republic According to Archival Documents (İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı volume 1/no:3-4, 1937) were also published in the first volumes.

Certainly, the protagonist of this article, Tayyib Gökbilgin, and the studies he conducted early in his career can be presented as an example in this context. He recognized the importance of the Hungarian sources for the Ottoman History, translated the works of eminent archivist and historian Lajos Fekete while he was still a student.¹⁹

In his first article published in *Belleten* dated to 1939, he presented examples of the content and the organizational structure of the Hungarian State Archives as to offer suggestions for the organization of the Turkish archives.²⁰ He submitted his graduation thesis, *Hungarian Sources on Ottoman History*, in 1940; it was the outcome of the research that he concluded in Hungarian archives. From one letter dated 1940 in the personal archive of Gökbilgin, we can understand that he wanted to conduct a doctoral study about Imre Thököly and exchanged some ideas on that matter with Lajos Fekete. However, Fekete told him that it might be more valuable to conduct research onto the registers (*defter*) since the *defters* were the key point in the study of the Ottoman social history.²¹ He followed this path and conducted his doctoral dissertation in accordance with the recommendations given by Fekete. In 1941, again in *Belleten* he published another study related to the Ottoman-Hungarian common history/past, *II. Rákóczi Ferenc ve Tevaabine Dair Yeni Vesikalar/ New documents related to II. Rákóczi Ferenc and his entourage*. During this period, he was

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Fekete, "A török levéltárügy/Arşiv Meseleleri", translated by Tayyib Gökbilgin.

²⁰ Gökbilgin, "Macar Devlet Arşivi ve Tarihçesi".

²¹ Papp, "Tayyib Gökbilgin'in İlmi Faaliyetleri ve Macar Tarihçiliği", 52.; From Lajos Fekete to Tayyib Gökbilgin, 19.10.1940. Personal Archives of Gökbilgin Family.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1U6NdX5OU506CfqWRcKAyWFB9ieW9PUNn/view?usp=sharing>

also writing articles about Ottoman governors and viziers for the Encyclopedia of Islam. Gökbilgin began to work as an associate professor in 1943 in the Modern and Contemporary History Department at İstanbul University. Again in 1943, he was also elected as a member of the Turkish Historical Association. In his dissertation work, which was published later, *Rumeli'de Yörükler ve Tatarlar/Yürüks and Tatars in Rumelia* he states that the aim of the historians “is to illuminate the dark parts of our past which have been left untouched in many respects by relying on completely original documents in historical investigations, and by doing so, revealing the superior and sound foundations of the true features of this great empire”.²² As it might be seen, the early works of Tayyib Gökbilgin demolish the perception that studies on Ottoman History were not performed during the single-party regime. At the end of the 1950s, he started to work on establishing a separate department of history of Ottoman Civilization and Institutions. Gökbilgin achieved his aims in 1961 and became the head of this department. During the same period, he was appointed as the director of the Institute for Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Literature as the successor of renowned turkologist/historian Zeki Velidi Togan. Evidently, this is all to say that the argument that the studies of the Ottoman history were completely excluded in early republican Turkey and that the researchers engaged in the Ottoman history were marginalized, does not completely reflect the fact, as it is observable from the examples. I believe this argument requires a more balanced perspective and monographic studies on the early republican era historians in Turkey.

The first significant studies in the field of Turkish historiography that I mentioned above, which brought stimulating criticisms between the historiography and the power, influenced a new academic generation greatly and became widespread in political circles as well. However in the course of a short time the initial cautious theoretical criticisms gradually disappeared and were replaced by a total accusation.²³ According to Sönmez, the reason for the extraordinary spread of this narrative during the past ten years is that, in terms of its nationalist-conservative actors any kind of narrative of exclusion that they may deduce from the single party regime would be functional for historize and reproduce their own victimization process. This is one of the most prominent reasons for the unquestioning acceptance of the criticisms about Ottoman historiography in the early republican period.²⁴ In conclusion, I can state that there were certain trends and works highlighting the Turkish History Thesis during this period. However, these tendencies lasted only for a brief period of time, and after the 1930s, when the archives became open to researchers, the Ottoman studies gained a great momentum. As Zafer Toprak states, the discussions of historiography that emerged with the Second Constitution offers us relatively pluralistic, more complex approaches despite the fact that the regime was gradually becoming more simplex.²⁵ In other words, contrary to what post-Kemalist views advocate, the Kemalist ideology or the short-lived Turkish History Thesis did not hinder the development of Ottoman studies as a field. The life and works of Tayyib Gökbilgin, indeed, are the proof that it was possible to

²² Gökbilgin, *Rumeli'de Yörükler, Tatarlar, ve Evlâd-ı Fâtiyhân.*, ix.

²³ For an important assessment of the underlying reasons why these accusations are so widespread, see, Aytürk, “Post-post Kemalizm,” 34–48.

²⁴ Sönmez, “Galat-ı Meşhuru Sorgularken”, 70.

²⁵ Toprak, “Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türkiye’de Tarihçilik”, 176–181.

produce critical works on Ottoman history in the early republican and single party period and the Ottoman past remained on the agenda of significant researchers and academicians.

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Illustrating the Discussions on Ottoman Studies in the Early Republican Turkey through Tayyib Gökbilgin

Tayyib Gökbilgin, who ranks among the founding fathers of Ottoman studies was one of the most influential historians of the early period of the Turkish Republic. He was also one of the prominent historians who conducted numerous researches on Ottoman–Hungarian historical relations. Gökbilgin was the first student of Faculty of Language, History, and Geography (*Dil, Tarih, Coğrafya, Fakültesi*) in the new capital of the new state, namely in Ankara where he began studying Hungarology/Hungarian Studies as a student of László Rásonyi.

The modern practice of history and the advancement of the nation-state progressed side by side and Tayyib Gökbilgin had maintained his modernist Turkish nationalist identity and emphasized that one of the fundamental aims of history was to feel proud with the historical past of the Turks. One can coincide with this statement in almost all historians of the period since it was the clearest example of efforts to legitimize Ottoman history as a part of World history. Tayyib Gökbilgin, like the way his contemporaries, followed the mission of his professor Fuad Köprülü and tried to reveal the truth of the matters that the western world conceptualized incorrectly with incomplete materials, with the capability provided by the authority given by the utilization of the original sources. He, like many of his colleagues, had also a particular interest, an intellectual purpose of breaking down the prejudices against the Ottomans and thus the Turks. It would not be wrong to state that his historiography emerged from this core. However, it also does not mean that he creates an Ottoman admiration or exaltation adorned with unnecessary heroic stories at the opposite end while trying to realize his purpose.

What I plan to proceed in this presentation is to evaluate Tayyib Gökbilgin's contribution to writing Ottoman History and efforts to legitimize Ottoman History as a part of World History while maintaining his modernist Turkish nationalist identity that was formed by the developments within nation-building process in the late Ottoman and early Republican era.