

Introduction

HOW HAPPY IS HE WHO
CALLS HIMSELF A TURK?

TURKEY HAS LONG BEEN BRANDED as a country unique in the history of the modern Middle East. This uniqueness is in large part due to the very moment of Turkey's inception. As a member of the Central Powers, the Ottoman Empire suffered defeat in World War I. But even as the state lay in ruins, supine before the victorious Entente powers, Turkish nationalists refused to accept the terms dictated to them in Europe. Acceptance of defeat would have involved the negation of a Turkish sovereign entity. Breaking from the position of the Ottoman government in occupied Istanbul, the nationalists instead demanded self-determination and independence—and successfully escaped the colonial mandate status that the victorious allies were fitting it for, a fate that would come to define much of the Arab Middle East. This remarkable achievement was sealed when Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), having led the Turkish national movement to victory, established an independent single-party republic in 1923 in Anatolia, abolishing the Ottoman Sultanate (1922) and the Caliphate (1924) in the process. He forged a path of autonomy and national self-determination that was the envy of the defeated Germans and Hungarians, not to mention Syrians, Iraqis, and others under colonial mandate and direct colonial rule, thereby earning the respect of his anti-imperialist neighbors to the north, the Soviets. Under the new republic, the Turks would be the master of their own ship—but what course would they chart?

Once the republic was established, Turkey had to confront the same challenge that so many other formally independent, presumptive democracies faced in the twentieth century: the challenge of reconciling aspirations for liberal democracy with the political exigencies of authoritarianism. In Turkey's case, what was presented to the world as a new and unique path—between democracy and authoritarianism—was also the continuation of

a longer Ottoman struggle over constitutionalism. The remnants of these conflicts survived just below the surface of the new, independent republic and shaped political authority therein in important ways.

This book is a historical exploration of the unique form of political authority that evolved between Ottoman constitutionalism and Turkish authoritarian democracy. It does not explore the singular nature of political authority in the republic by focusing directly on the looming presence of the founder and first president of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Neither does it take at face value the official history he forged of the War of Independence. Instead, it seeks to provide a new perspective on political authority and historical experience in Turkey by looking at politics and culture of the twentieth century through the prism of internal opposition and dissent: before, during, and after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, and surrounding the official telling of its history.

This book explores the meanings of the Turkish word *muhalefet*, denoting both opposition and dissent, as an analytical concept and, I argue, a cipher for understanding the nature of political authority in the late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey, as well as the politics of memory and history that are still in play today in Turkey.¹ Related to the word *hilaf*, contrary, and *ihtilaf*, or disagreement, *muhalefet*'s first meaning is opposition, as in that of an opposition party, common to the political vocabulary of many languages. But it also denotes a more subtle kind of internal defiance or disagreement—dissent—and indeed in contemporary Turkish culture, the word *muhalefet* is often associated with the dissent voiced by journalists and public intellectuals. Today the word carries a charged valence, of the principled heroism—often doomed to tragedy—of someone from a position of privilege, that is, within the Turkish elite, who speaks truth to power. It is principled because contestation, even from a position of privilege, carries an expectation of justice, as well as a cost; it is tragic because it rarely brings about change in that power. The range of meanings and connotations that the term *muhalefet* has today in Turkey has grown out of this fraught and often overlooked history—running against and alongside political power—that spans the twentieth century.

Since the concept of *muhalefet* is diffuse and is defined against power, there is no single political program that typifies it over time. In the early years covered in this study, it was often associated with a liberal agenda for a pluralist, parliamentary democracy, but later those with more radical visions could lay claim to the concept. Since it was a heterogeneous category, held together by dint of a common stance of opposition among *muhalis*, we

cannot say there was a single typical or quintessential *muhaliif* who could serve as a synecdoche for it. The socialist poet Nâzım Hikmet, the “Turkish Joan of Arc” Halide Edib, and the general who broke with Mustafa Kemal, Kâzım Karabekir, could all be termed *muhaliifs* (opponents/dissidents), yet their agendas diverged in significant ways beyond that common label. They all belonged within the category of Turk, however, and enjoyed the privileges of membership in the Ottoman-Turkish elite, broadly defined. Rather than try to treat the entirety of *muhalefet*, or all *muhaliifs* across several political eras, then, I have chosen to track closely the life and writings of one figure who, through his actions and claims, enjoyed a unique relationship to the concept in the late Ottoman and Republican periods.

REFIK HALID KARAY

I employ the biography and oeuvre of the writer and self-proclaimed *muhaliif* Refik Halid Karay (1888–1965) as a case study in *muhalefet*. He lived and wrote across the divide between the Ottoman constitutional era and the Republic of Turkey, providing us with a line of continuity from which to trace the many orders of change between the two state formations and historical eras. His relationship to the term *muhalefet* was certainly complicated; in his words and actions he embodied so many of the conflicting meanings and shifting paradoxes of the concept over time. He proclaimed himself a *muhaliif* at key points, suppressed his dissent at others, and even invested the concept with a historical and literary narrative at still others, elevating it almost to an ideology before eschewing it altogether and finally embracing it anew at the end of his life. Of equal importance is that he straddled the worlds of literature and politics. Because he combined politics and literature and continually cast and recast the recent past before, during, and after the forging of official history, his work allows us to see the ways that *muhalefet* was both a product of an imaginary and a feature of politics. Viewing his posthumous legacy as an iconic *muhaliif*, furthermore, allows us to connect the genealogy of *muhalefet* across the twentieth century with the current associations that the term carries in Turkey today.

Refik Halid Karay is invoked today as an iconic *muhaliif* by those on both the right and the left, and by Islamists and secularists—he is still very much part of the arena of the contested politics of memory and history in Turkey. His works and his image—as “the Porcupine” (*Kirpi*), his most famous nom

de plume—are embedded in the current culture of *muhalefet*. Despite the claims he often made in his writings, Refik was anything but a stalwart and principled opponent in his actions, as these pages make painfully clear. That contradiction, I contend, was built into the paradoxical concept of *muhalefet* itself. He was a typical child of privilege, born to a family in the Ottoman bureaucratic establishment during the reign of Sultan Abülhamid II, a period during which the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 was suspended. He wrote prolifically, beginning shortly after the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution of 1908 (which restored the 1876 Constitution) and continuing until his death in 1965, through two stints of exile and several regime changes—a lifespan that brings us well into the Turkish Republic’s post–World War II multiparty era.

Karay’s changing fortunes—as an outsider and yet one who, at the end of the day, always retained his elite privilege—reflect in turn the distinct incarnations that the concept of *muhalefet* underwent, as the Ottoman regime went through a larger metamorphosis. It began the period as a constitutional monarchy that came to be driven by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP or Unionists), a secret society-turned-organization-turned-political party. The empire itself was reduced after World War I to a defeated country under Allied occupation. Out of the ashes of that empire, a Turkish national movement established a new basis of sovereignty and a new base of power—shifting from Istanbul to Ankara—becoming a single-party republic under Mustafa Kemal in the process. Finally, from the late 1940s, that single-party system was expanded to accommodate a sustained opposition party, leading to a multiparty system by the 1950s.

But Refik Halid had a more personal connection to the official history of the republic. At a crucial point in the formation of the Turkish national resistance-cum-independence movement—the summer of 1919—he directly opposed Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in his bid to proclaim and organize that national resistance movement against the foreign occupation of the Ottoman Empire. In what became known as the Telegraph Episode, Refik Halid, from his post in the General Directorate of Post, Telegraph, and Telephone, forbade the telegrams sent by Mustafa Kemal in Samsun from being circulated and helped call for the latter’s recall and arrest as a renegade, refusing to recognize the legitimacy of Mustafa Kemal or the national resistance movement. In the context of Mustafa Kemal’s official history, Refik Halid was a traitor and collaborator with the British occupation forces, working against the Turkish nation that was attempting to assert its independence.² I deal

with this episode in greater depth in chapter 4, but for now what matters is that this was a specific point of convergence—and conflict—between the narrative of official history in the Turkish Republic and Refik’s alternative, dissident account of history. And in this book it is also a turning point in the larger history of *muhalefet*, as the moment when the internal conflict of the Ottoman establishment shifted into a conflict over the legitimacy of a new, presumptive national political authority.

MUHALEFET AS CIPHER

Beyond its potential significance against the backdrop of contemporary Turkish politics and culture, the following history—of Refik Halid Karay’s life, works, and changing relationship to the concept of *muhalefet*—unlocks three major problems in scholarship on the late Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey: first, the relationship between Ottoman liberalism and the constitutionalism of the Young Turk movement and particularly the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP); second, the problem of continuity and rupture in the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey; and third, the politics of memory regarding the Ottoman past, particularly the late Ottoman past, in the Turkish Republic. As the story of *muhalefet* and of Refik Halid Karay takes us through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it engages with these three problems in turn.

The first problem is the relationship between Ottoman liberalism and the unfolding of Ottoman constitutionalism.³ Ottoman liberalism was articulated by the Young Ottomans in the 1860s and 1870s, leading to the promulgation of the Ottoman Constitution in 1876. Young Ottomans went to great lengths to envision a liberal order for the empire, debating the role of consensus, consultation, and opposition and dissent. When its beloved constitution was abrogated by Sultan Abdülhamid II soon after its institution, liberalism and its interlocutors went underground. The Young Turk movement took up the mantle of constitutionalism a generation later, in exile and in hidden recesses of the Ottoman military itself. That movement was made up of countless factions and tendencies, but it would ultimately be driven by the Committee of Union and Progress, which formed in 1889 and rose to power in and after the Constitutional Revolution of 1908.

The precise relationship between the two movements—Young Ottomans and Young Turks—is often passed over, or explained away by generational

differences. And it is easy to see how the two could be elided, because both movements claimed the banner of constitutionalism and liberal democracy. The Young Turks' major demand, after all, was the restoration of the 1876 Ottoman Constitution, a document that had been designed and authored by Midhat Paşa and his fellow Young Ottomans. It would be natural to assume that adherents of both movements would have shared the same political vision. And yet there were serious social and political fissures between the two movements, and thus fissures within the broader Ottoman establishment. Since there were plenty of Ottoman liberals in subsequent generations after the original Young Ottomans, the rift between Ottoman liberals and the emergent CUP faction of the Young Turk movement persisted into the Second Constitutional Era of 1908 and evolved long after. And this, I argue, was the birth of *muhalefet* in the twentieth century.

Young Ottomans, as well as later generations of Ottoman liberals, were often elite-born Francophiles and members of the Istanbul Ottoman bureaucracy. Many who spearheaded the CUP, in contrast, were of more modest origins, either Balkan born or immigrants from Russia, often educated in the Ottoman military academies under German training in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ *Muhalefet*, I argue, would shift in meaning as the Young Turk constitutionalist coalition fragmented into Unionists (CUP) and their internal opposition. The concept of *muhalefet* went from being a theoretical ideal in a hypothetical constitutional order, to being the term associated with Ottoman liberals and other groups, including religious figures and other traditional elements, against the emergent CUP after 1908.

Chapter 1 takes a close-up look at this prehistory of *muhalefet* through a consideration of Refik Halid's origins, upbringing, and early sensibilities as a child of the Ottoman bureaucracy. In his values and prejudices he represented a continuation of Young Ottoman sensibilities two generations after the fact, in a Young Turk world. This rift, I argue, was emblematic of the emergent conflict within the Ottoman establishment that led to a new set of meanings for *muhalefet*. Chapter 2 explores the unfolding of Ottoman constitutionalism between 1908 and 1913, when many and diverse understandings, and many parties and factions of constitutionalism, underwent a polarization into "Unionists" and "liberals," with the liberals taking on the identity of *muhalefet*, or opposition. I show how the social and institutional differences between Young Ottomans and Young Turks then evolved into partisan political rifts, highlighting Refik's early satirical writings as Kirpi, or the Porcupine.

If the first problem in scholarship had to do with the relationship between Ottoman liberalism and the Young Turk/Unionist movement at the turn of the twentieth century, the second one has to do with the historical and political relationship between the Ottoman Empire, occupied in defeat in 1919 and abolished in 1922, and the Republic of Turkey, established in 1923.⁵ This problem—of continuity and/or rupture—grows out of the claims of total rupture from the Ottoman past and total unity of the Turkish nation in its struggle for independence as laid out in the official history of the Turkish Republic. Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) set the parameters of this official history in his epic four-day “Great Speech” (Nutuk) in 1927, marking the consolidation of his authority within the single-party state, serving as both head of the party and first president of the Turkish Republic. In this version of events, Mustafa Kemal’s personal story is conflated with that of the Turkish nation, and the singular nature of his political authority made it virtually impossible to discuss any other version of events until the 1950s.⁶ This claim of absolute rupture sidesteps the many and complicated relationships between the modern republic and the late Ottoman past, and its force was so strong that one anthropologist claimed that even as late as the 1980s there was a forced “amnesia” and “prohibition” surrounding the period of transition, meaning the Turkish War of Independence.⁷

The middle chapters examine the transitional period through the lens of *muhalefet*, as well as Refik’s life and works, offering an alternative narrative to that espoused in official history. Through it we gain a vista on the political conflict within the Ottoman/Turkish establishment that led to the abolishment of the Sultanate and Caliphate and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, from the point of view of Ottoman liberals in Istanbul. Having originally opposed the Unionists during their time in power, the liberals persisted by opposing the nationalist resistance movement in Anatolia. From Refik’s perspective and that of other members of the *muhalefet*, the core problem throughout the World War (1914–1918) and the Armistice/War of Independence (1918–1922) eras was the Committee of Union and Progress—both the CUP’s actions and policies and the Unionist legacy in postwar and national politics. And indeed, while there was a rupture in the formal structure of the state between the Ottoman and Republican eras, the continuity between the two eras was reflected in the personnel, social networks, and political culture of Unionism. Erik Zürcher and others have long since pointed out this continuity; the middle chapters expose a different dimension of it by looking at the continuing meaning of *muhalefet* through the transformation of Unionism

from an Ottoman into a Republican framework. Unionists were renouncing their ties to the CUP after the empire's defeat and remaking themselves into a Turkish nationalist resistance to fight foreign occupation, and then into a national independence movement. Those who identified as *muhalis* against the CUP remained in opposition to the nationalist movement. The basis for their opposition was the contention that the nationalist movement was none other than the CUP in a new guise. The revelation that came in historical scholarship in the 1980s, then, of continuity of Unionism between the Ottoman and Republican states, was known, and objected to, by those in this internal opposition as the transition was taking place.

The third problem that this history of *muhalefet* addresses also grows out of the republic's official history, mentioned previously. Namely, because of the conflicted relationship to the Ottoman past in the Turkish Republic—the continuities were both known and deliberately suppressed in order to match the official history of rupture and national unity—the politics of memory and history were themselves a highly contested arena in the republic. The overwhelming hegemony of Kemalist official history suppressed alternative narratives and experiences for decades, and that hegemony has still not been entirely overturned. When we look closely through Refik's experience and writings, we see three distinct phases in these politics of memory and history: the early republic (1923–1927; see chapter 5); the single-party Kemalist period (1927–1945; see chapter 6); and the multiparty period (1945–1965 and beyond; see chapter 7 and the epilogue). In chapter 5 we see Refik continuing to enact *muhalefet* from exile, challenging a still-shaky Kemalist hegemony by attempting to publish his memoir of the recent Armistice/War of Independence period. Chapter 6 discusses how he had a “change of convictions,” deciding from his Syrian exile that he would leave *muhalefet* behind and prove his loyalty and patriotism to the new republic. This change of convictions had a palpable effect on his writings, as he redacted his old *muhalefet* writings, and recast his role in the past in line with his new image as a Kemalist. And in chapter 7 he witnessed the reinvention of Turkey as a multiparty democracy in the new global context of the Cold War, after 1945. This final change ushered in a new relevance for *muhalefet* and for the past history of *muhalefet* dating back to 1908, leading to a new profusion of literary writings regarding the Ottoman past. The politics of memory and history shifted along with the shift to a single-party republic, and again to a multiparty democracy, and Refik's writings and their reception are a vivid illustration of these changes.

Muhalefet as an analytical concept does much to address the three major problems in historiography. But the word also did important work for political and historical actors going through these shifts in political authority. Those familiar with existing scholarship will recognize that this study focuses on what Erik Zürcher has dubbed the “Unionist period” between the Constitutional Revolution of 1908 and the establishment of the multiparty regime by 1950. And the ongoing relevance of *muhalefet* in this Unionist period had to do with the problem of Unionism in the past as much as the Unionist legacy in the present, as we will see. Between these years, institutionalized opposition in the form of an opposition party—first to the Unionists, and then to Mustafa Kemal’s Republican People’s Party, which carried important vestiges of the Unionist project forward—was an elusive dream, experiencing a series of episodic failures (in 1909–12, 1920, 1924–25, and 1930). In this period it was the *imaginary* of *muhalefet* that held the greatest significance. That imaginary was invoked at crucial junctures, since the *reality* of a viable partisan opposition party was not attainable. It was also during this period that the word *muhalefet* shifted from its earlier meanings and became synonymous with opposition to the Unionists. As the Unionist regime collapsed after World War I, *muhalefet* then became tied to the question of continuity from the Unionist to the national, Republican regime. This is why Karay as both a literary and political figure has much to teach us about power and *muhalefet*, for it was during those times that the idea and history of *muhalefet* were invoked as a symbol for what was missing in a system that was to be a pluralist democracy. *Muhalefet* as a word and an idea was a surrogate, a placeholder, and a marker of absence and failure. It was also invoked as a vehicle to condemn the failures and shortcomings of those in authority, who were often Unionists and former Unionists. Examining the genealogy of *muhalefet*, then, helps us understand some of the core contradictions of power in twentieth-century Turkey.

Exploration into the history and nature of political authority is the central project of this book. It may seem counterintuitive that I elaborate many of my arguments in the following chapters with literary texts rather than conventional political or government sources. I do not spend much time situating Refik within the history of Turkish literature either; those familiar with Turkish literature will be able to see the ways he was typical of his day as well as the ways in which his writing was extraordinary. Rather, I use his writings as an instrument to explore the relationship between politics and imagination; I thus interpret Refik’s literary texts as a historian more than

as a literature scholar.⁸ Refik voiced his opposition and dissent in several genres: polemical essays, short stories, serialized novels, and even plays. And it is not a coincidence that many of Refik Halid Karay's best-known and most popular writings were works of satire. In that, he was not unique; satire has been and remains a uniquely important form of political dissent and social critique, both in the late Ottoman Empire and in Turkish society to this day.⁹ As a genre it is an important link between politics and imagination, and we might even call it the genre with the most unique relationship to the culture of *muhalefet*.

But in a different sense, satire is also significant to this story because the notion of *muhalefet* as principled opposition, when held up to historical scrutiny, is a joke. It is a joke because the principled *muhalis* are ultimately, by definition, already part of the privileged establishment; the lines they cross appear to be dangerous but almost always involve eventual acceptance back into the fold of elite society and privilege. When they truly cross a red line, and there are some instances of that in this story, they cease to be *muhalis* and become traitors to the nation (*vatan haini*), which means banishment or even death. The joke of *muhalefet*, or opposition from within, sheds light on the unique stakes of privilege, power, and dissent, not to mention on the meaning of belonging—to an Ottoman, and then Turkish, elite.

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Readers may be taken aback by the relative absence of discussion regarding Islam, and even of the question of secularism, a principle that was at the heart of the single-party republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.¹⁰ This is particularly surprising, one might think, given that the political appropriation of Islam is a defining characteristic of the party that was elected in 2003 and currently remains in power in Turkey—the Justice and Development Party (AKP, for Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi). This absence reflects what I found when I followed the sources—literary and political—by and about Refik Halid Karay and his relationship to the concept of *muhalefet*. It also reflects the contours of the argument I put forth here: that it was not ideology (Islam, as deployed in the twentieth century, acts as an ideology, as does secularism) that was driving the conflict within the Ottoman, and then Turkish, establishment. Instead, ideology emerged as the language through which to express contestation and preexisting fissures regarding the understanding of constitutionalism and democracy.¹¹ Islam as a belief system embedded in the