



**Erol Köroğlu.- *Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity: Literature in Turkey during World War I* (I.B. Tauris & Company, 2007), 268p.**

Composed of a preface, six chapters, and a conclusion, Erol Köroğlu's *Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity: Literature in Turkey during World War I* emerged from a dissertation at the Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, in 2003. In an ardent manner, Köroğlu has tried to make a joint approach between Turkish historiography and modern Turkish literary history, aiming to scrutinise the fact that there is a difference between a writer depicting events

of the First World War after the end of the war and a writer portraying the same events while they are still happening during the Great War. To influence local and foreign public opinion, the use of literary and cultural traditions inherited from the past in industrialised European countries like Germany, England, and France differs from the approach followed in Turkey. The latter, for Köroğlu, could not contest England, France or Germany regarding propaganda activities during the Great War because of the absence of a suitable political supervision that could have guided Turkish public opinion to a prevalent purpose.

Chapter one discusses the relevance of propaganda mechanisms among some European countries whose writers endorsed their states' proposals to portray unreal battlefields they had constructed in their minds. To achieve a successful propaganda, the Germans produced more than one million poems, indicating that, apart from the Ottoman Empire and Russia, the pace of literacy was very high in Europe. In Turkey, for instance, the absence of literary productivity amongst Turkish writers and the presence of illiteracy surrounding the majority of Turkish soldiers remained a marker to which propaganda failure was attributed. Moreover, due to the war years' censorship, an incapable Ottoman propaganda mechanism emerged, driving anyone who failed to produce an article that did not meet the state's interests to face unexpected problems. Even the scarcity of paper in a non-industrialised country like Turkey problematised the quantity of pages, let alone the fact that there was no subject matter to take up. Furthermore, internal and external problems faced by the Turkish Triumvirate, Talat, Enver and Cemal Pashas, hindered any progress towards achieving an effective propaganda network

during the war. Resorting to hideous methods like assassinating journalists and manipulating elections engendered a remarkable disunity between governors and governed, and as the war progressed, Turkey was overwhelmed by economic problems which made the Empire reluctant to experience the war. All the attempts to solve the Turkish predicament during the course of the war failed resulting into a complete propaganda fiasco.

As for chapter two, ranging from socialism to feminism, only four ideologies, Ottomanism, Islamism, Westernism and Turkism, dominated the Empire's intellectual and political scenes. In order not to weaken the unity of the Empire, leaders enjoying Islamist, Westernist or Turkish ideologies donned the mask of Ottomanism when they reached power. The progression of these ideologies was contingent upon certain binary oppositions which formed the pillars of changing historical circumstances. Köroğlu, in this regard, affirms that although some Westernists and some Islamists were against Turkish nationalism, their inclination to solve social, political and cultural problems made part of the national movement. What made the latter progressed slowly and belatedly in Turkey was the tendency to avoid provoking any Christian, Muslim, Arab and Kurdish nationalisms due to the slightest mention of a Turkish one. It was during the Balkan War of 1912-13 that the national movement proved to be fruitful.

In chapter three, the author states that the War of Independence started in 1912, from the Balkan War through the First World War, and to the War of Independence in 1919. Because of the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan War, sympathy towards Turkish nationalism at the level of culture, politics and the state administration increased among the common people. To such humiliation, a vast collection of literary output tried to supply correct answers to question the whys and wherefores of that crushing defeat. Köroğlu observes that while Turkish and Muslim issues came to the fore, Ottomanism was abandoned by the cultural and political elite, leading to the appearance of a propaganda activity towards boycotting non-Muslim ethnic groups. The national apparatus upon which the Turkish nationalism was based was manifest in portraying Turan, the land of the ancestors, as an ideal where there was no room for non-Turkish speakers. In spite of the CUP's adoption of Turkish nationalism during the congress of 1913, becoming a party including newspapers and magazines, scientific results in the fields of sciences and humanities were doomed to failure because of the effects of the Balkan War and the European exclusion of the Ottoman state from Europe's alliances. These circumstances pushed the Empire to side with the Germans in the Great War. Köroğlu reiterates that the Ottoman Empire's eventual involvement in the war was inevitable

and that the real mistake of the CUP leadership had been the timing and the particular way in which the Empire ultimately entered the war.

Chapter four is about the Ottoman war propaganda and culture from 1914 to 1918. During the first year of World War One, the Turanist and Pan-Islamist propaganda was very simplistic and full of quixotic aims that were produced by Ottoman elites, ignoring lower level propaganda that targeted the common people and speaking of the war as if it had already been won. Still, this unfounded propaganda reached only the ears of those who sympathised with the CUP's cause. Apart from the common people, who were mostly illiterate, the intellectuals were put down to a lower grade and were forced to uncritically accept anything done by the government. Interestingly, like written propaganda, visual propaganda was also overwhelmed by a striking backwardness; while cinema was not yet born in the Empire, fields like painting and photography were relatively new to the Turkish people. According to the author, the most important attempt at official propaganda was the Gallipoli Trip, a campaign that aimed at encouraging a group of writers, painters and musicians to work on the topic of the war. For the benefit of public opinion, the participants described their impressions in various ways. However, the resulting output arrived late with a small quantity due to the lack of a mechanism that would have ensured the continuity of propaganda and that would have encouraged the participants to write. Generally, the lack of a modern mechanism combined with exaggerated censorship and political repression kept the cultural sector far from propaganda. Indeed, the economic deficits and difficulties of the war not only made the revitalisation and enrichment of the cultural world impossible, but they impoverished it in terms of the quality and the quantity of cultural output as well.

Köroğlu starts chapter five with a stern critique to the literary work during the war years, describing its output as a backward cultural production. The evolution of poetry during that period reflected the process of national identity building. This chapter also puts under scrutiny the cultural output of Ziyae Gökalp, who was one of the most famous Turkish poets in the period under study. Because of his pragmatic approach to poetry, most of his poems were seen valuable only from an ideological or literary historiographic perspective. While some researchers belittle his poems, neglecting the relations between his individual psychology and his work, others see that Gökalp developed a philosophy of hope that gave procedure to sentiments and intuitions over external realities. His poems oscillate between providing a purpose of reviving nationalism within a Pan-Turkist context and reflecting the reality a transformational period. Additionally, the poet who best satisfied the state's

needs for cultural propaganda during the war years was Mehmet Emin whose interest in German Orientalism pushed him to switch from a populist, limited Turkish nationalist to Pan-Turanist nationalist. His exaggeratedly exuberant wartime poems supported a propaganda effort closely related to state ideology. Unsurprisingly, since these poems do not discuss the common people's problems, his literary output failed. However, his trip to Berlin in 1914 made his propaganda efforts reach even Muslims in south-east Asia, leading significant Muslim crowds to desert from enemy lines and to seek refuge among the Germans.

In chapter six, Köroğlu explains that wartime novels and short stories proved to be unproductive. The author analyses the works of Süleyman Nazif and Şenap Shehabettin, who were non-fiction writers and outside the national literature movement. They worked on modifying works which had been already published in periodicals so as to use them in accordance with government policies for the sake of portraying the war in a more favourable way. Other intellectuals were totally convinced that propaganda activities failed because the war had not been conducted within the borders of the Empire. This chapter also pinpoints some of Ömer Seyfettin's activities in the wartime period, which tended to entice every citizen to unite under the ideals of Turkishness and Islam and under the leadership of the CUP. Nevertheless, when propaganda efforts weakened a short while entry into the war, he stopped writing partisan pamphlets, and in the period from 1917 to the end of 1919, his stories were characterised by a negative nationalism defined in opposition to the 'other,' evolving towards a realistic style which led him to form a repertoire of historical heroism that answered the needs of those years' youth. Due to the complex environment that Seyfettin was trying to reflect in his stories, the Great War entered into his works not mainly for propaganda reasons but within the context of the effort to build a national identity. When censorship was fully abolished, Refik Halit started writing about the war profiteers and poverty which deepened the miserable situation of many people. After the Armistice, Halit could talk about the faults of the CUP.

Köroğlu has concluded that unlike the situation in Europe, the Ottoman Empire was still developing and for specific historical conditions had not yet completed its process of becoming a national state; consequently, the literature produced could not satisfy the propaganda requirements of the state. The tangible evidence of this failure emanated from the strict censorship regime employed by the government that considered the intelligentsia as one of the many untrustworthy elements of society to be kept under control,

rather than a partner in the mission to convince and guide the masses. Moreover, the conflicts created by the CUP's factionalism were among the most important reasons for the incapacity to form a coordinated propaganda mechanism which was also due to the unfavourable infrastructure conditions of the Ottoman Empire. In spite of this, the Turkish nationalist section tried to produce as much propagandist literature as it could during the Great War. Still, once it became clear that these were unsuccessful, the nationalists began to use the war as a means of completing the national identity construction process. Kōroḡlu incites the readers to correctly evaluate the past, from their stances, as it was interpreted by the writers who produced wartime cultural output. To do this, the author suggests that we, the readers, have to know the history leading up to 1908. Interestingly, concerning the comparative study of Ottomanism, Islamism, Westernism and Turkism, Kōroḡlu advocates an important theoretical framework: Hroch's 'national building process' approach. Generally, the propaganda efforts ranging from politicians and cultural agents' failure, to fully grasp the new situation created by the war, to the weak efforts employed in the fields of cinematography and visual arts, one can touch an ultimate failure faced during the First World War. Without infringing the disciplinary conventions and methodologies of cultural and literary historiographies, *Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity* allows us to get acquainted to the output of a work that looks for the possibilities of an effective and enriching interaction between the two fields.

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