Imperial Lives Turned National: Biographical Reflections On the Post-Ottoman Transformation

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“There is properly no history; only biography.”
–Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays (1841)

The relationship between history and biography is both long and hotly contested. Numerous literary and scholarly figures have weighed in on the issue, presenting their sometimes diametrically opposing views. Some, as represented by Emerson in the quotation above, have espoused the idea that biography is indispensable to the writing of history while others, from very different points of view, considered it futile (thus William Makepeace Thackeray) or even impossible (Mark Twain) or illusory (Pierre Bourdieu). While the contributors to this special volume entitled “Imperial Lives Turned National” have not set out to engage explicitly with this protracted debate, their contributions collectively make a strong case for the importance of biographically informed scholarship in both elucidating and complicating the passage of history between empire and nation state.

Taking the transition from the late Ottoman Empire to its many successor states as their setting, the scholars gathered here address the varied contexts of the equally variegated lives they explore, collectively demonstrating both the many methodological challenges involved in such research and the rewards that following biographical trajectories hold for explicating the messy transit from the imperial to the national age. Explicating—and here lies perhaps the greatest advantage of the biographical approach—also complicating the historiography that despite considerable critique remains remarkably beholden to facile nationalist modes of conceiving of the passage between the imperial and the post-imperial in which the national states emerge from their putative imperial predecessors not only inevitably but also triumphantly. Whether individually or collectively, the lives examined in this volume force us to reconsider the putative certainties of the prevailing historiography of the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its successor states and thus present it with a welcome set of challenges.

In the lives explored and contextualized in the following pages, we find a variety of human experience that complicates and enriches the usual narrative...
of national emergence. Recognizing the diversity of experience is crucial to understanding the multiplicity of the lives on display here, but, more prosaically, it also ensures that there can be no simple way of introducing the volume. The approach I have chosen for this enjoyable task is to identify several rubrics which encompass many but far from all the themes evinced in the chapters that follow.

But even the three broad rubrics that I have chosen, namely, Complications, Ruptures, and Continuities, are inevitably insufficient, given the wide range of historical and historiographical issues that the contributors grapple with here. This underscores the wider point that I would like to make about the diversity of experience in the relatively small set of explorations selected for this volume. Considering a few exceptions that our authors hold up to the expected ways individuals experienced the trajectory between empire and post-empire is perhaps a fitting way to start. Matthew Ghazarian raises an important question about sources, both extant and absent, in the aftermath of the contentious history of the Armenian Genocide and the related anxieties of the Turkish Republic. Is it even morally acceptable, he asks, to try to draw on the history of someone such as Narduhi Magarian, the Armenian woman at the center of his study, who absented herself from communal and national pictures? Narduhi’s story disrupts our expectations of what is to be gained from the archival record, especially when that record is dispersed due to the violence of the period in question. Another kind of challenge to our expectations is made readily apparent in Metin Yüksel’s treatment of the Ottoman-Kurdish intellectual Tawfiq Wahbi. Instead of moving along the anticipated path from imperial to national existence, Tawfiq Wahbi’s life, like so many others, becomes transnational after the empire falls away. Somewhat similar, as Yakoob Ahmed shows us, is the life of Muhammad Husayn Na’ini and many like him among the Shi’i mujtahids who moved back and forth between Iran and the shrine cities of Southern Iraq. Such men were both part of and apart from the “national” history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran. And yet he was buried, as he wished, in the Iraqi shrine city of Najaf, a poignant detail at the end of a binational life. Abdülhamit Kırmızı’s sensitive treatment of the Muslim Ottoman-Albanian Süreyya Vlora likewise teases out the many interwoven strands of identity with which this enigmatic character was engaged. Shorn of his family’s accustomed status by the changes of the early twentieth century, Süreyya’s entanglements with Austria, Switzerland, Germany, and Italy failed to propel him into the central role in Albanian independence that he so coveted and expected. The other Albanians considered here, namely Isa Blumi’s network Southern Albanian Orthodox Christians also defy easy classification in the empire-to-post-empire progression. Trans-continental, trans-Mediterranean, and even transatlantic,
this diasporic group of entrepreneurs and influence-seekers pursued their individual and collective interests in defiance of both the Great Powers’ plans for post-Ottoman Albania and the expectations of historiography. The usual reading on late-Ottoman lives turned national does not anticipate engagements with places like Uppsala, Sweden or Buffalo, New York.

COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION

In other words, this volume points to considerable complexity in the lives of those whose imperial lives turned national—and the many whose lives did not follow the national path. Together they insist that there is often no clear pattern that encompasses the many paths taken in this period. Instead, their lives frequently turn up considerable complexity and contradiction. Webs of relationships and affinities emerge as an important focus of identification that frequently defy national classification. Whether linking Albanian Orthodox Christian diaspora, Süreyya Vlora’s contacts, or Wahbi’s literary and linguistic interlocutors, these nexuses cross and re-cross political boundaries and, in many cases, draw their power from their ability to traverse national borders.

As we should expect, these lives are characterized by both success and failures on the personal and collective level. Whether, to choose only a few examples, we think of Süreyya Vlora’s embitterment over being outmaneuvered and supplanted by his cousin Ismail Kemal, the conflicts between and among factions of the Shi’i mujtahids in Iraq, Tawfiq Wahbi’s struggles to achieve his vision for Kurdish culture and language in post-Ottoman Iraq, the rivalries that could rear up to split the Albanian Orthodox Christian networks, or the fatal “rebellion” of Ahmed Anzavur, to say nothing of Narduhi Magarian’s disappearance from the historical record, we have to acknowledge that these lives were affected by formidable rivalries and contain considerable personal pathos.

RUPTURES

Not surprisingly, therefore, one of the most emphatic contributions of this volume is to underscore the degree to which the history of the transit from empire to post-empire is one of rupture. The historiographical breaks inscribed in these stories are both expected and surprising. For example, we might well anticipate that the narrative of the Anzavur movement, presented here so effectively by Caner Yelbaşı would emphasize the fracture within the Circassian community effected by the Turkish national movement, or that the place of
Armenians in post-independence Turkey would be characterized by fissure and disappearance from the public record. But we might not necessarily expect an almost similar fate to befall someone like Ahmed Cevdet Pasha’s lesser-known daughter Emine Semiye. As Ebru Akcasu informs us, she was a committed modernist and feminist and thus in many respects naturally suited to prosper amid the changes in store for her and for the late Ottoman Empire and Turkey. The way the women’s rights movement was derailed in the Turkish Republic runs in parallel with Emine Semiye’s own story, which was one of eclipse and near amnesia that is discernible in her later writings.

The nation states created out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire were keen to effect ruptures with the ancien régime, and the Turkish Republic was particularly keen on emphasizing its breaks with the Ottoman past. The fate of Narduhi Magarian and many others of Armenian community whose records were dispersed as Istanbul changed hands in the aftermath of World War I, first with the occupation of the Allied Powers and then with the arrival of the forces of the Ankara government, is evidence of the less celebrated aspect of those ruptures, such “national unity,” majority rule, and the anti-minority policies that followed in the wake of the Treaty of Lausanne. Even previously loyal Muslim groups such as the Circassians would find themselves under suspicion and in cases such as that of Ahmet Anzavur, turned into a “traitor to the nation” for remaining loyal to the Ottoman state. As Yelbaşı shows us, Anzavur’s case casts an inherently critical light on the official version of the Turkish Republican history-telling which through its forceful version of victor’s history spectacularly managed to invert the roles of loyalist and traitor in the telling of the tale of the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the Republic. The double history of national silencing, first of the people involved and then of their stories, is a poignant reminder of both the power of official historical narrative and the ability of life stories to complicate and contradict that supposedly sacrosanct version of events.

CONTINUITIES

Given the prevalence of complexity and contradiction in these lives explored in this volume, it is perhaps unsurprising to find considerable evidence of continuity alongside the ruptures. Such is the human instinct to adapt and persevere that even a person such as Emine Semiye would refer back across the ostensible chronological barrier between empire and republic to treat her life as an unbroken line. For example, what Akcasu refers to as the “seemingly mundane incident of Emine Semiye’s pension” (which remained intact despite the change
of government) or the fact that she appears not to have resisted the Turkish alphabet change when she easily might have, speaks volumes about the day-to-day continuities that persist in the face of macro-level and supposedly decisive historical change.

More strikingly, İclal Vanvesenbeeck guides us through the world of Turkish music to reveal a remarkable emphasis on synthesis between the Ottoman and Turkish Republican cultural realms in Halide Edip’s vision for a “national” opera. Halide Edip’s solution not only refused to reject the Ottoman past, but rather incorporated it musically into a national form that, unexpectedly, given the Republic’s nationalistic emphasis on the new, drew heavily on the past. Vanvesenbeeck shows us that whereas both Ziya Gökalp, arguably the key ideologue of Turkish nationalism, and Mustafa Kemal himself were personally invested in the idea of a Turkish national opera and Turkish national music more broadly, another iconic individual like Halide Edip and a woman to boot managed to blur the relationship between empire and nation.

Furthermore, in Blumi’s exploration of the connected lives of Southern Albanian Orthodox Christians, in effect a kind of biography not of an individual but rather a group of similarly minded individuals, we see the ways that these men and the far-flung networks that linked their native Çamëria (Çamlık) with Egypt, numerous European capitals, and the United States, managed to leave their historical mark. Blumi’s account indicates how a prosopographic approach can help to destabilize the existing scholarship focused on national identity. It seems clear that these men and their web of connections linking kinship, influence, connections, and capital would have played a role no matter the particular type of state or states in which—and across which—they were operating.

LANGUAGE

A common thread to many of these studies is the question of language. Nationalisms tend to treat language as the badge of the nation and posit a one-to-one correlation between nation and language. Several of these contributions suggest, however, that the relationship between languages and nation, like that of the people who spoke to them, was much more complicated. Language frequently appears as a point of tension or disagreement in these studies. For example, the rising tensions in Albania at the turn of the century induced Süreyya Vlora (who, like many individuals encountered in this volume, was comfortable in seven languages) to seek Austrian support for his views on language and alphabet issues that put him at odds with the Ottoman government, a sign
among others that he needed to leave his homeland. Later, during the period of Young Turk rule he again contested Ottoman policy on three counts, two of which were related to language, namely his support for the teaching of Albanian in schools and adopting the Latin script. Freedom of language and the question of which script to convey it were also major issues for Tawfiq Wahbi. Advancing the cause of Kurdish was Wahbi’s life work. But even in Iraq which of all the countries with a significant Kurdish population was the most open to Kurdish, it faced a difficult trajectory for recognition and dissemination as a language of literature, let alone government. Wahbi’s attempts at reforming the Kurdish script were opposed by Sati al-Husri, the prominent ideologue of Arab nationalism, Wahbi later worked with Western scholars to on script reform for Kurdish. As noted above, Emine Semiye seems to have acquiesced to the Turkish Republic’s campaign to Latinize Turkish when she might easily not have done so.

Indeed, the issue of script—and the dual use of the term—might serve as an appropriate metaphor for the interplay between biography and history in this passage of history. Many of the fascinating cases so carefully explored in the current volume refused to follow the national script for the way they were expected to conduct their lives after the empire ceased to exist. Flipping the script was only natural for many of these and others who had good reason to reject the national turn. Indeed, many former Ottoman subjects “voted with their feet” and left the nation states in which they were expected to live, never to return. Others stayed where they were but found ways to cope, to synthesize, and sometimes to resist. As noted, opera became a field for exploring—and contesting—the language of the new nation. In particular, as Vanvesenbeeck demonstrates, opera in the Turkish Republic reveals the diverging impulses of some very key players, even those such as Mustafa Kemal and Halide Edip who were in other respects allied on questions of the proper direction for the new nation state. While Mustafa Kemal saw opera as a forum for demonstrating rupture with the Ottoman and Islamic past, Halide Edip was seeking an operatic expression that drew on the Republic cultural antecedents and drew on a cultural repertoire of synthesis. She literally wrote her own libretto that was in important respects a divergent turn from the dominant national script.

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