

SHAME AND PRIDE IN TURKISH COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The author takes up two events, which seem to be practically absent in the minds of a large portion of Turkish society to analyze intentional or unintentional omissions in the construction of national identity. One of the case studies the author examines to shed light on the social memory in Turks is the tragic 6-7 September 1955 events when the Greek minority in Istanbul (The Rum's) and their property was attacked. The other case study is on discourse following the disastrous sinking of a Turkish Submarine in April 1953.

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This article proposes an alternate path for thinking about forms and policies of oblivion, which seem to have a founding role in the social imagination of national identity. A necessary oblivion has been conceptualized as the indispensable constituent of the national identity and the commonly shared feelings associated to it. Intentional or unintentional omissions of the dominant historiography reveal a collective need to forget some events and to over-emphasize others. This is more or less the same for the orally transported memory of everyday life, atomized throughout the individuals' "subjectivized" minds. Apparently, such widely diffused conceptual essentials of oblivion seem to construct a well-established historical a priori, which admit that an official version of the national history, if not a nationalized form of the history, can incessantly reproduce itself. Inevitably, history is embellished with a sterilized discursive vacuum. Nevertheless, a closer look at these strata of the discourse of national identity can elucidate a much more fragmented, ambiguous and ambivalent structure that characterizes them. Not only does a well-established, highly pertinent official version of history that can be defined in a straightforward way not exist but, also, and more significantly, what is pretended to be the factual anchors of such an official history seem to function in the opposite direction of what they would inculcate into the average citizen's mind.

Several theoretical approaches emphasize the supposedly ever-existing tendency for the lack of social memory in Turkey and the fact that there exists an omnipresent official history that systematically refracts the reality. However, a more inquiring and reflexive look at such a largely shared a priori is necessary. First of all, such a global conceptualization of the official ideology, inevitably presupposes that an unchanging and monolithic official version of history exists. It also assumes the existence of a referential corpus of ideology that helps to maintain it congruous in time and space. Secondly, a widely accepted assumption on the nearly genetic characteristic of instant memory attributed to Turkish People seems to preside over most of critical studies of history. This paper challenges both assumptions, while trying to discuss two different kinds of discourse, which end up with the same process of oblivion. Indeed, some historical events, functioning as identity-constitutive, invoke mainly two kinds of feeling: shame and pride. The first one incites a social and political omission of the reality of the event, accompanied by a discourse that implicitly legitimizes the actors and causes of shame. The second one, on the contrary, is set on an over-emphasizing discourse, extremely charged with themes and clichés related to nationalistic bravery and martyrdom. The result in both cases is a nearly total evaporation of the essence of the historical event in question. We aim to expose this dual form of the social deterioration of the collective memory, through two significant historical events in the history of the Republican era in Turkey.

Shame that Erases the Collective Memory: The September 6-7 Events

At first glance the extreme vandalism of the property of the Greek Minority in Istanbul on 6 September 1955 may seem like improvised social anger, however, today we have many indices to determine that these series of uncontrolled riots were part of a finely conceived covert operation indirectly orchestrated by the government. This historical event was one of the deepest breaking points in Turks' collective imagination, and led to significant change in the modalities of social mnemonic references.

Political tension had been gradually increasing between Greece and Turkey over the status of Cyprus and had filtered into both societies. Unfortunately, minorities of both sides have been seen, through years, not as culturally varied entities of a nation, but as political hostages, which can reciprocally serve to establish diplomatic superiority over the enemy. Turks of Eastern Thrace and Rums of Istanbul were usually considered in such a perspective, since both states had been nationally sovereign units, though they have long shared common cultural and social values and practices, under the reign of the Ottoman Empire. We should underline that the Republic of Turkey has been, and still is thought of as an absolute continuation, without any conceptual rupture, of the invading empire. Reciprocally, Greece has been perceived, in the Turkish reason of state, as the first of a series of nationalist betrayals. In sum, traumatizing dichotomies marked the fluctuating history of both states, often oscillating between hate and love. The post-French Revolution intellectual climate inevitably engendered a nationalistically driven world conception. Recent antagonisms were in fact, the epitomized versions of older equilibriums of imperial cultural coexistences.

The nineteenth century wiped out community-based social expression, ceding its place to a rigid nationalist redefinition of peoples. As a result, a series of traumatic events paved the path of inseparable destiny of Greeks and Turks after the proclamation of the Republic in Turkey in 1923, following the "Asia Minor disaster" or the War of Independence. The Cold War atmosphere, especially in the 1950's, pushed the states of the world to adopt a more or less defensive posture. Turkey, as most of his allies, seemed, in the 1950's, to enclosure itself in a politically reinforced ideological cocoon. Meanwhile, some national causes were acquiring the status of international juridical and political problems; Cyprus was one of them. Mutually degrading perceptions of both sides were provoked with the Enosis policy of the Greeks, which aimed to clean the island of Turks¹

¹ Vamık Volkan, Norman Itzkowitz, *Türkler ve Yunanlılar, Çatışan Komşular [Turks and Greeks, Conflicting Neighbors]*, İstanbul, Bağlam Yayınları, 2002, p 160.

In 1955, the political atmosphere, based on a general lack of confidence, was so electrified that a simple provocation could trigger a total conflict between two states. Such a spark came with some highly manipulated news, publicly announced in entire national press, that Atatürk's House in Thessalonica (which is included in the campus of the Turkish Consulate) had been bombed. This not yet confirmed news led to an explosion of the antagonism against Greece, but projected onto non-Muslim minorities, especially the Rums of Istanbul. During the night of September 6 groups of protestors went to Rum occupied districts of the city. They destroyed shops, houses, churches and cemeteries with a surrealistic ravage that caused massive devastation of commercial goods and personal belongings. Despite the high level of material damage, protestors were generally behaving as if they have been ordered not to cause corporal offense. Nevertheless, the human toll of the events counted 15 recorded deaths, 300 to 600 injured including aggressors, and 60 raped women. The latter was only the number of women who were treated in hospitals, thus other untold cases most probably occurred. As in every fury of pillage, an uncountable number of robberies took place, accompanied by several profanations and destructions in cemeteries. Jews and other minorities were also targeted by the acts of vandalism, though they were not the real objects of the hate. Three kinds of actors are seen to have provoked the events: (1) Some extremist nationalist association (e.g. the famous "Cyprus is Turkish" association); (2) secondary actors (young workers and young unemployed people); and (3) a variety of pillagers.² A series of absurd investigations and trials were conducted against leftist intellectuals, who were blamed by the government as the sole perpetrators of these events, aiming thus to create a chaotic milieu which could discredit the political powerholders, and legitimize communism. No real offender was penalized at the end of the trials, and all the intellectuals accused were acquitted. Years after, a high-ranking secret service official declared that the events of September 6-7 were one of the most brilliant operations of the counter-guerilla, a nearly explicit Cold War formation for unregulated conflict in NATO countries.

Besides the political aspect of the event, sociologically, it signaled a clear rupture with the imperial heterogeneous cultural heritage. The republican conception of the state, even that of the 1908 Revolution of the Union and Progress Party, was pillared by a homogeneous conception of the nation. In fact, the Republican principle was simple: Atatürk formulated the definition of being Turk as "the one who feels him/herself as Turk" as just a citizen, without any ethnic connotations. But, the general ideological climate of the anxious era between the

² Mehmet Arif Demirel, *6 Eylül 1955 Yassıada 6/7 Eylül Davası [6 September 1955, The Yassıada 6/7 September Lawsuit]*, İstanbul, Bağlam Yayınları, 1995, pp 90-91.

two World Wars, quickly degenerated this concept. Consequently, a latent tendency to homogenize the Turkish population became dominant among the republican elite.³ Moreover, the politics of the creation of a national bourgeoisie coalesced with the authoritarian tendencies of the period. Inevitably, the definition of the Turkish identity acquired an ethnic connotation. But the real problem appeared at the level of fixing the conceptual elements of the term, because historically it was defined as racial purity. Instead, Turkish nationalists desperately and instinctively oriented themselves to the definition of what is not Turkish. The most and maybe the only relevant criteria was religion. The non-majority entities represented by non-Muslim and foreign capital, became, in the politically manipulated public discourse, hate-objects of a slowly emerging Turkish commercial enterprise.

The September 6-7 havoc was a highly aggressive movement of tabula rasa, in a market, in which the actors have been established long ago. Henceforth, new actors, feeling themselves more deserving than suspicious minorities, were preparing the ground for legitimacy for the reconfiguration of the market. Indeed, after the events, a large portion of Rums and other non-Muslim minorities left the country, or at least became much more timid, while their force of enterprise dramatically decreased in the national market. The game was reset for new actors and new rules. The degree of violence used in these events is also an indication of the hidden symbolic dimension of the conflict; only with such a profoundly traumatizing blow that new property relations could be reestablished. Indeed, in the aftermath of September 6-7, a variety of individuals in an upward mobility, bought for ridiculous prices or confiscated the properties (houses, shops, buildings, terrains, etc.) of the escaping Rums. Thus, in a very short amount of time, a new economic division had come about.⁴ This is the main reason for the erasing of the events of September 6-7, from the collective memory of the Turkish people. Of course, the official historical discourse also systematically evaporated the signs of this incident. Not only have schoolbooks on near history never written the events of September 6-7, but most of independent researches have not entered this thorny domain either. More importantly, individuals who were victims of the crisis tended not to speak out and instead to forget, though the deeply cut stigmata remained sealed in their minds.

Nevertheless, recent research has shed light on many forgotten, untold, unquestioned, unknown aspects of September 6-7, with the help of witnesses. The 6-7

³ Dilek Güven, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Azınlık Politikaları ve Stratejileri Bağlamında 6-7 Eylül Olayları [The 6/7 September Events in the Context of Minority Strategies and Policies in the Republican Era]*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2005, p 106.

⁴ Dosdoğru, M. Hulusi, *6/7 Eylül Olayları [The 6/7 September Events]*, İstanbul, Bağlam Yayınları, 1993, p 58.

September 1955 attack was one of the shames buried in the deepest layers of the Turkish collective memory, not because it was an inhuman wave of violence, but because it brought a new social mobility, a new redistribution of resources. Many of the conservatives enriched by these events have built their ethos on this dark story; too much people, now respectful, have profited from this reshuffling. The shame was so collective that the only solution to overcome such a deep traumatism was collective oblivion. Nevertheless, we also know that the conscience of the present time is forged around the stylized images of the past, especially including forgotten social experiences. Moreover, the acknowledgement accomplishes the crucial function of adjusting the reappearing to appearing through disappearing.⁵ An historical event of shame needed to be omitted until being rediscovered by recent efforts to analyze the events in a critical framework.

The events of September 6-7 were also the real liquidation of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, though the passage to a new regime with the proclamation of the republic in 1923 seems to be a radical rupture from the imperial past, the cultural facts did not change as fast as the political world itself. The Ottoman Empire was one of those ancient militaro-agricultural imperial political unions that embodied the coexistence of a multi-ethnic social texture, implying some more or less autonomous lebenswelts. Although ethnic communities kept a cautious distance from each other, a general state of mutual complementarity dominated the Ottoman territory. Many political elites as well as in the wide popular classes in Turkey emphasize, with confused nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire, that a culture of tolerance marked the Empire. However, the system consisted of the virtue of keeping the optimal distance with others, which meant steering away from interpenetrated relations. The coming of the nineteenth century stimulated nationalist feelings among subjects of the Empire and the emergence of nation states from dismantling of imperial structures. With the nineteenth century, the Ottoman cultural entity progressively degraded, ceding its place to a general atmosphere of mutual hostilities, particularly apparent in the Balkan Wars and the First World War.

Contrary to the dominant idea that the Republican era constitutes a severe cut from the Ottoman Empire, such an assumption can only be valid for political matters. Although the new regime and policies were established after 1923, the multi-ethnic and culturally amalgamated structure of Istanbul prevailed, to some extent, until the beginning of a relatively rapid process of urbanization, just after the Second World War. Such a large-scale movement, with all its internal contradictions and dynamism, introduced new economic and then political ac-

⁵ Ricoeur, Paul, *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli* [*Memory, history, oblivion*], Paris, Les Éditions du Seuil, 2000, p. 556.

tors into the nationalizing market economy. Thus, besides the partaking of the goods of production, newly emerging social strata began to penetrate into the metropolitan areas, especially Istanbul and Izmir. As the distribution of the property had taken place in the last century of the imperial period, according to the economic ability and capacity of commercial enterprise in the financial regime of a globalizing economy, the non-Muslim ethnic groups, who traditionally had much more aptitude to commercial activity and foreign languages, were, naturally placed in some key-points. But, when the actors and equilibrium of the socio-economic context changed rapidly, newcomers, and with some remarkable political will and manipulation, adopted a highly aggressive and ambitious attitude towards the older economic actors, who were losing territory in a national homogeneity. The 6-7 September 1955 riots were the result of this growing social tension. Therefore, it led to the demise of the multi-ethnic perception of the social life and led to a brutal remaking of the market economy with new growing actors; this is why the main target was the Rums, and why the events occurred particularly in Istanbul and partially Izmir. The events had a latent symbolic value as well, which connoted a radical negation of the Roman Empire (Ottoman past as an extended Roman Empire). Consequently, 1955 can be conceptualized as the real end of, not only the Ottoman Empire and its cultural world of meaning, but also the absolute liquidation of the Roman cultural sphere.

It is relatively more comprehensible to diagnose an apparent deterioration of the collective memory, because of a shameful event. But, what makes this social amnesia so proliferated is not the existence of a dominant official discourse, capable to reshape history, but the very rhetorical coverage of the historiography itself, which makes the historical event an object of semantic degradation. This is why we preferred to contrast the events of September 6-7, with an apparently opposite character of historical event: an event of pride, traumatized with a national-scale tragedy.

A Conditional Pride: The Rhetorical Encircling of the Dumlupınar Submarine Disaster

On the night of April 3 going on to April 4 1953, the Turkish submarine Dumlupınar, ex-USS Blower, crashed into the Swedish freighter Naboland, in the middle of the Dardanelles strait. In just a minute, the vessel sunk, bringing down with her eighty-one sailors, while only five managed to escape. This was a great national tragedy in the history of the Turkish Republic. What made this event even more tragic was that 22 men had actually survived after the ship sunk, at the aft torpedo section of the ship, which they could separate from the sunken parts. Squeezed in a little metal coffin, these sailors launched the communicati-

on buoy to the surface, early in the morning. A navy team succeeded in communicating with them. Despite the efforts, because of the location of the ship and the very complex system of the currents, it was not possible to save them and they perished with the last words, according to those who narrated the story “Long live the motherland!” These words remained the unique signifier of the Dumlupınar disaster.

A few days after the accident, much social interest was geared at the event. The sinking and particularly the loss of the surviving sailors had already stimulated a general state of national grief that left deep traces in peoples’ minds. Moreover, the accident also had later echoes, due to the law cases succeeding the event. At the first trial, the captain of Naboland had been sentenced to six months, while the commander of the submarine had been acquitted. In such national-scale tragic events, we also observe a more or less accentuated need to exteriorize the feeling of guiltiness by demonizing others (in this example the publicly constructed image of the captain Lorentzon). Indeed, the fragile feeling of pride referring to nationhood seems to be fed, not only by the discourse of bravery, but also by the creation of an “other.” Moreover, the transfer of ethical responsibility to an “other” procures a generalized feeling of comfort, if not total salvation for those who associate themselves with the constitutive force of national pride. Therefore, the historical responsibility towards those who lost their lives in dramatic conditions for the nation, are socially greeted, together with an intrinsic search for revenge. But later, the reevaluation of the case at the Court of Cassation modified the verdict, while condemning also the commander to 20 months of prison. This process stimulated national consciousness. Consequently, the Dumlupınar submarine disaster was covered with a thick layer of a discourse on bravery and martyrdom, reinforced by second-rate literature.

This over-emphasizing rhetoric functions is in fact an inverted eraser to the factual essence of the historical event. The most interesting and paradoxical aspect of such a rhetorical encircling resides in the very vociferous nature of the discourse, with which the history is embellished and presented: it annuls, ironically, the referential field to the reality of the historical event, while degrading its own credibility and persuasiveness. The most relevant examples of that kind of historical stylization can be detected in the narratives on the Battles of the Dardanelles, the War of Independence and some constitutive events in the history of the Republican era.

The viscous discourse on an abstracted perception of the event, with an objective to inculcate into the next generations’ minds the importance and centrality of that event, converts it, in fact, into a grotesque remembrance of a suspended scene of an uprooted history, even a caricature of it, which annihilates the percep-

tual possibilities of its own veracity. Furthermore, in today's media-centered public discourse, the historical event becomes once more stylized and rhetorically encircled. Indeed, the year 2003 has witnessed a series of such a discursive reformatting of the Dumlupınar disaster. The 50 anniversary of the accident occasioned different media-supported programs of commemoration, which transformed them into extremely sentimental spectacles, emphasizing the aspects of bravery and martyrdom, instead of the factuality of the event. But, the conditional pride associated to the event remained constant. It even became more grotesque in the media-supported discourse; it has been remembered in a lamenting form, because of the perishing survivors who devoted their lives to the country. Inevitably, tragedies have such an identity-generating effect.⁶

It seems that, in today's media-centered public discourse, the tragic event becomes only a "promising input" for the perpetuation of an exclusively rhetoric-based politics of reality. A very similar example justifies this argument: no publicly known commemoration has been done for another submarine disaster which occurred on 14 July 1942: The *Atlay* which mysteriously sunk with her 67 sailors off the Dardanelles straits in the Aegean Sea. The lack of a dramatic scene avoided the translation of the factuality into a discursive abstraction. Moreover, the lack of any other who could be accused publicly devalued not only the sentimentality but also its historical factuality. The media economy necessitates a systematic absorbing of the historical event into the over-charged present, while the latter "desires to be seen as already historical, as if it was past."⁷

Especially after the coup d'état of 12 September 1980, the teaching and the re-interpretation of the history has been highly politically biased, desiring to establish a well-constructed national consciousness, based on a rhetorically over-emphasized, and thus, inevitably ridiculed conception of history. Therefore, a massive hate of history has flourished, very ironically, from this will to inculcate a motif of historical attachment.

In sum, neither the intended and unintended micro and macro-policies of collective erasing of a commonly shared shame, nor the over-emphasized rhetorically encircled national pride can shape the formation of a historical consciousness. In such circumstances, the absolute omitting and the excessive stylization of the historical event, generate nearly the same kind of dramatic evaporation of the collective memory, because the over-stimulation of the collective memory se-

⁶ Candau, Joël, *Mémoire et Identité [Memory and Identity]*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, p 148.

⁷ Hartog, François, *Régimes d'historicité, Présentisme et expériences du temps [Regimes of Historicity, Presentism and Experiences of Time]*, Paris, Les Éditions du Seuil, 2003, p 127.

ems to be distorted in the same direction with that of an omission by repulsing. Additionally, such interconnectedness of shame and pride implies that the fragility of the latter is often counter-balanced by the solidness of the invisible former.

Conclusion

Today both events seem to be practically absent in the minds of a large portion of Turkish society. Furthermore, today's perception of history as well as the other identity-constitutive narratives, inevitably coalesce with an omnipresent media discourse, which, in turn, magnifies all discursive strategies charged on it, equalizing absence to over-emphasizing, as the perceptual indicators unifying the opposite forms of oblivion in a same kind of hyper-reality. Even the artificially set up discourse on bravery and martyrdom, which vulgarly exploits an extreme sentimentality, loses its capacity to maintain itself in the collective memory. On the contrary, it contributes to over-all effacement, for in favor of an absolute instantaneity, even worse, for a stylized nostalgia that the links to reality is completely broken-off. Dialectically, the loss of memory in the historical event (past), engenders a reshaping of a politics of memory as a component of an emerging identity (present). In such a case, the past acquires significance only if it has a spatio-temporal function in the minds of the present time. But, if the rhetorical encircling of the historical event is too suffocating by its internal exaggerations, not only the historical event is submitted to a discursive effacement, but it also generates an illusory image of itself that creates the very impression of reality.