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Review of Christine M. Philliou, Turkey: A Past Against History

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Christine M. Philliou,
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Christine M. Philliou

Turkey: A Past Against History

Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. 294 pp.

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Eleven years after her groundbreaking *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (2010), Christine Philliou published a second book that probes the history of a period through the eyes and experience of a historical figure. In her new book, Philliou looks at the history of modern Turkey, specifically the first half of the twentieth century, also known as the Unionist period (1908–1950), through the life story of a quintessential oppositional intellectual. Through this biography Philliou aspires to offer a genealogy of *muhalefet* – a term understood as both political opposition and dissent – and to “provide a new perspective on political authority and historical experience ... by looking at politics and culture ... through the prism of internal opposition and dissent” (2) during the first half of the century and in contradistinction to the official historical narrative. To do so, Philliou explores the life and work of a renowned *muhallif* (oppositional and dissident intellectual) writer Refik Halit Karay (1888–1965), whose life and oeuvre offer a vantage point to study continuities and ruptures, and the politics of memory between empire and republic. He was probably the last generation of Ottoman elites that experienced the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. Coming from an urban elite family, Karay studied in prestigious schools in Istanbul and, following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, he started to earn fame as a journalist, novelist, and, specifically, a master of satirical writing. He also became known for his opposition to the Unionists and the Kemalist elites that ruled the country for most of the first half of the century. It was for this reason that he was twice exiled, between 1913–1918 and 1922–1938. In this sense, his account, as well as his life and works, offers a counternarrative to the “official history” of the period, still very much hegemonic in Turkey.

The book’s seven chapters are arranged chronologically and cover Karay’s life and the history of the period from 1908 to the 1960s. The first chapter portrays his early life before he became the famous writer. The second chapter treats the period from the Young Turk Revolution until the establishment of the Unionist dictatorship and Karay’s first exile in 1913. Philliou presents the political and ideological context of the period, the confrontation between the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP or Unionists), which eventually turned

to Turkish nationalism and authoritarian politics, and the liberal opposition, but she also touches on the rift between an older, Istanbul-based Ottoman establishment and a younger radical group of state officials mostly coming from modest social backgrounds from the Balkans. Within such a confrontational political context, Karay started his career as a writer and journalist and very quickly became famous for his satirical style and loose association with the Liberals. Karay followed and commented on the confrontations between the Unionists and the liberal opposition. It was only after their fall from power in the summer of 1912 that Karay criticised the Unionists more directly and vehemently. With the establishment of the Unionist dictatorship in 1913, he was among the 800 liberal elites internally exiled.

Chapter 3 looks at the years Karay was exiled in Anatolia (1913–1918). His recollections from the period offer a rare perspective of the war years, that of an Ottoman liberal elite in internal exile, away from the war fronts but in the middle of the displacement and killing of the empire's Armenians, which he could not but have witnessed. And yet, although a proclaimed *muhalif* of the Unionist cadres and a denouncer of the violence they inflicted on their opponents, in the case of the Armenian Genocide Karay's stance was one of silent complicity. He even maintained good relations with Unionist elites responsible for the death of thousands of Armenians. In addition, he had no problem with contributing with some short stories to literary projects initiated by none other than Unionist intellectuals whose policies he had been criticising. In the case of Karay, Philliou demonstrates the contradictions of *muhalefet* and masterfully discloses the "fissures between Unionists and the Ottoman establishment as well as the lines of solidarity between them" (88).

Chapter 4 covers the life of Karay between the armistice of Mudros in 1918 and the victory of the nationalist forces in 1922. Throughout this period Karay supported the British-backed Liberal governments in Istanbul in their confrontation with the nationalist forces under Mustafa Kemal in Ankara. As a journalist he denounced the nationalist forces as a continuation of the CUP that had plunged the country into war and violence. As director of the Ottoman Post and Telegraph Administration he tried to frustrate the workings of the nationalists and specifically to obstruct Mustafa Kemal's communications, for which reason he was branded a traitor. With the nationalist victory in 1922, he had to flee the country for a second time, this time for Lebanon and then Syria. While in exile, he attempted to exonerate himself by publishing a memoir covering the period between 1918 and 1922. This memoir would have amounted to a counternarrative to the "official history" that was about to be written by no other than Mustafa Kemal himself in 1927. In chapter 5, Philliou relates Karay's case of *muhalefet* with various forms of political contestation during the early years of the republic against, but also within, the Kemalist regime, which was under formation in the 1920s. In his memoir, Karay invoked the trope of *muhalefet* and tried to legitimise his opposition by emphasising the continuities between Unionist and Kemalist

cadres. His memoir, as well as those of other exiled *muhalifs*, was banned and could only be published after the Second World War. The timing of the attempt coincided with the rift between, on the one hand, the Kemalist leadership in Ankara and, on the other, the Istanbul press and several nationalist leaders who established a political party opposing Mustafa Kemal. By 1926, the Kemalist side would emerge victorious from this contestation and, in 1927, Mustafa Kemal would produce the official narrative about the preceding period.

In the last two chapters, Philliou recounts Karay's life from 1928, when he took the decision to accept the Kemalist regime, eventually returning to Turkey until his death in 1965. Starting in 1928, the exiled Karay stopped writing about overtly political themes and started, in his writings, to support the reforms undertaken in Turkey by the Kemalist regime. This turn, as well as his support for Turkey's foreign policy in Syria that led to the annexation of the province of Alexandretta, won him a pardon and he eventually returned to Turkey in 1938. Once in Turkey he started publishing several of his previous works. In the process though, he had to reinvent himself through several acts of self-censorship. Apart from not publishing his past oppositional writings, Karay deleted most of his previous references to politics, several favourable mentions to Armenians and other non-Muslims, accusations against Unionists and Kemalists – essentially his own past as a *muhalif*.

It was only after the establishment of multiparty politics in 1946 that he could publish, for the first time, the memoir he had unsuccessfully tried to publish in 1924. Here Philliou could have given more information about this important text, as it would be interesting to see how his memoir challenged the official Kemalist version, how it was received, but also how it related to the memoirs of other oppositional figures that were also only allowed to publish after the post-Second World War political liberalisation in Turkey. In any case, Karay had made his peace with his previous opponents and, until his death in 1965, he rarely engaged in overt political activity, especially under his previous persona of the dissident intellectual. Instead he produced several works of fiction. It is perhaps for his prolific writing of fiction that today in Turkey Karay is essentially known as a writer, and not as an oppositional figure who had once been condemned a traitor.

In this work Philliou engages in a fascinating and challenging reading both of literary and nonliterary sources. In Karay's case, she attentively reads literature and politics together, as political critique took the form of fiction and satire. Her inspired analysis of the ways the Armenian Genocide was hinted at and later censored in his texts by Karay himself is a case in point, illustrative of the shifts in memory and narration of key events in the transition from empire to republic. To be able to convey her subtle reading of fiction and nonfiction, Philliou translates extensive extracts from several of Karay's works, allowing the reader to get a thorough taste of Karay's style and mastery of allusion and wit, but also the interplay of politics, satire and fiction in the working of Ottoman and Turkish *muhaletet*. This is not an easy task and it is to Philliou's credit that only in two places does her reading of Karay's fiction in direct relation to wider issues of contemporary politics seem somewhat strained (34–38 and 74–75).

A major contribution of Philliou's book is her exploration of the conflicts within the Ottoman/Turkish political establishment at the end of the empire, and specifically from the perspective of Istanbul and the Ottoman liberal elites, whose voice was nearly completely suppressed following the victory of Ankara and the formation of a Kemalist official narrative by the 1920s. The deep continuity between the Unionist and Kemalist cadres is, of course, well known at least since the 1980s through the work of Erik-Jan Zürcher. Yet, what Philliou offers is a fascinating study of the transition between empire and republic through the perspective of the (continuity of the) opposition to the Unionist and Kemalist regimes. With her well-documented research, Philliou opens up a discussion of how to rethink the issue of continuity/rupture. In criticising the rupture thesis, she uses the case of Karay, his life and work, to highlight the silences and (self)imposed amnesia regarding the deep continuities throughout the period from 1908 to 1950.

Karay's case is significant because it offers a vantage point to study these continuities, that is, that of the liberal opposition to the Unionist and later Kemalist modernising elites and their authoritarian politics. This vantage point is also significant because Karay and the liberal opposition were never outsiders to the Ottoman/Turkish elite establishment. Thus, her book not only provides us a counternarrative about the transitional period from empire to republic but also a perspective that, however censored until the 1950s, was still coming from within the Ottoman/Turkish elite establishment. Although Philliou writes "a genealogy – not necessarily the genealogy – of *muhalefet*" (17), relating Karay's position as *muhalif* with other cases of oppositional or dissenting intellectuals would have been interesting, but also would a discussion of his counternarrative reading against the "official history" and in contrast to other oppositional narratives. Of course, this is too much to expect of any book, not least a work of such rare scholarship.