

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 18, No 1 (2021)

Historical Review / La Revue Historique

The *H*istorical Review
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XVIII (2021)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

Christine M. Philliou, Turkey: A Past against History

Efi Kanner

Copyright © 2022



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Kanner, E. (2022). Christine M. Philliou, Turkey: A Past against History. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 18(1), 275–278. Retrieved from <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historicalReview/article/view/31382>

Christine M. Philliou,
TURKEY: A PAST AGAINST HISTORY,
Oakland: University of California Press, 2021, 278 pages.

In this book Christine Philliou explores, as she declares in the introduction, “the meaning of the Turkish word *muhalefet*, denoting both political opposition and dissent, as an analytical concept and ... 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” (2). She uses for this purpose the life and oeuvre of the writer and journalist Refik Halid Karay (1885–1965), an emblematic intellectual, as a case study in *muhalefet* in the late Ottoman and Republican periods. She chose this person because right- and left-wing circles in Turkey, Islamist and secularists, consider him as an exemplary *muhaliif* (dissident). His life course and place in Turkish political imagery permits her to construct a genealogy of the term *muhalefet* across the twentieth century. Such a genealogy is linked to three issues: the relationship between Ottoman liberalism and Young Turk constitutionalism, continuities and discontinuities between the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic and the place of the Ottoman Empire in Turkish political imagery (5). Philliou examines these topics through literary rather than conventional political texts, satirical writing occupying a major place

among them. This choice enables her to explore the relationship between politics and imagination and define *muhalefet* as a marker of political failure. It also opens the way to view the notion of *muhalefet* as a joke, since all dissidents (including Refik Halid) were parts of the elite; thus the history of *muhalefet* until the 1950s could be regarded as a series of back and forths from denouncements of the privileged establishment to acceptance back in it. In this context ideology appears in the early Turkish Republic as a vehicle to express “contestation and pre-existing fissures regarding the understandings of constitutionalism and democracy” (10), until the 1950s, when the multiparty system created new political agendas.

The book comprises seven chapters articulated in chronological order. The first one (19–43) describes Refik Halid’s childhood and early youth as that of an offspring of a mid-level family that was part of the Istanbul bureaucratic establishment. Despite the mid-level status of his family, its belonging to the Tanzimat-era bureaucracy permitted Refik Halid to construct an aristocratic pedigree and thus to be included in the Turkish Muslim elite. Refik Halid grew up as an Ottoman gentleman: he received French education (mixed with Islamic elements) in the Galatasaray Lyceum,

afterwards attending law school and being appointed as a secretary in the central offices of the Finance Ministry. A feeling of non-belonging to these places produced a rebellious spirit in him, a first personal elaboration of the notion *muhalefet*. These elaborations are depicted in his involvement in the literary journal *Servet-i Fünûn* (Wealth of knowledge), a conveyor of new European (mainly French) cultural and literary forms and in *Fecr-i Ati* (Light of Dawn), a literary circle which emphasised the personal and non-ideological character of the art. In 1909 he created a short lived newspaper entitled *Son Havadis: Müstakil ve Meşrutiyetperver Akşam Gazetesi* (Latest news: An independent and constitutionally minded evening newspaper). His first literary attempts expressed both his discontent with political authority at the time and the tragic futility of opposing power. This life path and disillusionment of the “European dream” he felt during his European tour (October 1909–January 1910) distinguish Refik Halid from his Unionist contemporaries,¹ despite their common constitutional aspirations.

The second chapter (44–68) tracks the crystallisation of the notion of *muhalefet* in a time span from the constitutional revolution of July 1908 to the Sublime Porte coup d’état in January 1913. Philliou makes clear that its meaning evolved as the Committee

of Union and Progress (CUP) slid into authoritarianism and its opponents turned out to be unable to provide a viable political alternative. By 1911 Unionists and liberals started referring to *muhalefet* as something expressly directed at the CUP, whereas the latter labelled dissidents as reactionary, anti-constitutional elements. It is at this time that Refik Halid entered the satirical press, targeting more and more specifically the CUP. Though the CUP was not his only target from the beginning of his career in social and political satire, his association with the liberals resulted in his arrest and deportation to Sinop in June 1913.

Refik Halid’s exile experiences between 1913 and 1918 are described in the third chapter (69–89). In spite of being exiled in Sinop, Ankara and finally Bilecik, our protagonist led there a more or less comfortable life – he was in regular receipt of his salary as a civil servant as well as additional financial assistance from his father (73). This situation is indicative of his privileged status in the Ottoman establishment. His position as part and parcel of the latter is also signalled by the selective *muhalefet* he displayed: while outraged at the CUP’s corruption, he wove relations of friendship with some of its most prominent members, particularly Dr Mehmet Reşid – one of the major perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide – and, later on, Ziya Gökalp in the context of the Milli Edebiyat (National literature) movement. This meant an ambivalent stance vis-à-vis the non-Muslim populations and mainly his silence about the Armenian Genocide that was taking place around him. On the other hand it is thanks to these networks that he managed to return to Istanbul in January 1918.

¹ The term “Unionist” refers to the followers of the Committee of Union and Progress, a major power of constitutional opposition to Abdul Hamid’s absolutism. Committee of Union and Progress played a significant role in the Young Turk Revolution of 1908.

The fourth chapter of the book (90–124) is centred on the Armistice period (1918–1922), the period between the Armistice of Mudros (October 1918) and the victory of the nationalist movement (1922), and particularly on Refik Halid's life and action in Istanbul that was under Allied occupation at the time. It offers thus a counternarrative to the history of national resistance in Anatolia, the official Turkish history of the period (92). This counternarrative focus on *muhalefet* – opposition to the nationalist movement which was considered to be an evolution of the Unionist one that *muhalis* blamed for the country's humiliating defeat and the war atrocities. For the Ottoman liberals, Allied occupation was the lesser evil compared to the Unionists-nationalists. Their main aim was then to eradicate the latter from the Ottoman state with the help of the occupying forces. Under these circumstances, Refik Halid, having held the position of the head of the General Directorate of the Post, Telegraph and Telephone Service, blocked Mustafa Kemal's telegrams and tried to prevent the Erzurum and Sivas congresses in 1919. At the same time he denounced the nationalist movement through his publication activity on the grounds of its ties with the CUP and – unlike the previous period – the Armenian Genocide. For that reason the nationalists treated him, along with other *muhalis*, as a traitor to the Turkish nation. Refik Halid's action challenges obviously the official Turkish narrative of the united national struggle against European forces and the total breach with the Ottoman past. It also costed him 15 more years of exile in Syria and Lebanon as the triumphant nationalist forces

entered Istanbul, abolished the sultanate in late 1922 and consolidated their power in the following years.

The five-year period from 1922 to 1927 was crucial for the consolidation of power of the nationalists and the leadership of Mustafa Kemal. Their reinforcement entailed banishing their opponents from the new Turkish state as traitors to the nation, silencing the oppositional press and establishing their own narrative about the recent past (the Armistice Period and War of Independence) as the only official and orthodox one, which would overshadow all other accounts. Under these conditions Refik Halid continued his *muhalefet* activity from abroad, publishing in 1924 a memoir which constituted his own version of the crucial period between the Armistice and the Independence War; it was actually an attempt to refute the nationalists' counterpart and his (as well as most *muhalis*'s) labelling as a traitor to the nation. For that reason it generated a strong controversy in Turkey that contributed (among other factors) to the promulgation of the Law on the Maintenance of Order (Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu, 1925) and the reopening of the Independence Tribunals (1925–27), which silenced all political opposition. In 1927, *Nutuk*, the great speech Mustafa Kemal delivered to the second congress of the Republican People's Party, set down the official history of the Turkish War of Independence. It thus sealed the consolidation of his hegemony and the hegemony of his party over the country. This procedure is described in the fifth chapter (125–56).

In the sixth chapter (157–85) we track our protagonist's endeavours to construct a new image of himself, that

of a loyal Turkish patriot/Kemalist in the aim to be accepted back home. Refik Halid attempted after 1927 to forge an alliance with the Kemalist regime. He did so by ceasing his opposition to it and siding with Turkey in its irredentist claims for the Hatay/Alexandretta region – by “proving” in his publications the cultural Turkishness of the latter. In this way he succeeded in gaining a pardon and a permit to return home in 1938. Just after his return he attempted to reinvent himself and his literary work, purifying his image as a *muhaliif* and deleting from his re-edited texts any reference to politics (especially to the Armenian issue). This procedure coincided with the elevation of Atatürk to the position of the symbol of the principles of the Turkish Republic. This is not to say that Refik Halid totally buried his past: he found instead subtle ways to indicate the Unionist roots of the Kemalist regime.

In the seventh and last chapter of the book (186–203) we follow Refik Halid’s life and work in the period of the transition of Turkey towards a multiparty system, after the end of the Second World War. It was a period when the meaning of *muhalefet* changed, since the opponents of the Kemalist Republican People’s Party that was regarded as a continuity of Unionism were in power after the victory of Democratic Party in the 1950 elections. In this context Refik Halid could once more openly declare himself as a *muhaliif* and enjoy social recognition in political and literary circles. However his uncritical stance towards the Democratic Party, as well as the national chauvinism he displayed in his writings, were indicative of the limits of elite *muhalefet*, political opposition that remained within the state

establishment. Finally the military coup of 27 May 1960 ushered in a period in which the Turkish army became the guardian of Atatürk’s principles, the opposition to which “was not *muhalefet* but outright treason” (202).

It is obvious that the book’s title refers to a past that challenges constructive narratives of Turkish history: the account of the complete rupture between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, as well as the image of *muhalefet*, as a story of a desperate fight against a corrupted state. These narratives constitute not only integral parts of the official ideologies in Turkey but also the lens through which many analysts (including academics) interpret reality in this country. Hence the importance of this study: it reconstitutes through the life story of Refik Halid Karay, an emblematic *muhaliif*, the history of Turkish political opposition in the twentieth century as a part of the dominant power block that offers no alternatives to cultural and political nationalism. It is a history that helps us to comparatively understand political authority and opposition in today’s Turkey.

The importance of the book also lies at another level. It is a microhistorical study that sheds light on the potential of microhistory as a tool to renew political history itself: to rewrite it using literary texts, correspondence or journals, which means inserting the study of subjectivity and irony that were hitherto considered incompatible with it. It shows how a fascinating life story can be an alternative political history of a twentieth-century state formation.

Efi Kanner
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens