

Fixing the State of Art – Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Contemporary History of Turkey

Veranstalter: Berna Pekesen, Historical Institute and Institute of Turkish Studies/Turkistik; DFG Research Network „Contemporary History of Turkey“; History Department, Duisburg-Essen University
Datum, Ort: 19.11.2020–20.11.2020, digital
Bericht von: Tekin Caner, Institut für soziale Bewegungen, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The workshop was the first in a series of three events of the recently founded DFG Research Network „Contemporary History of Turkey“¹ and brought together thirteen emerging/young scholars and senior scholars to foster the rather poorly developed historical research on contemporary Turkey. It aims to coordinate and strengthen historical research in this field, to improve the discourse among the neighbouring disciplines such as Turkology, Turkish Studies, Islamic Studies, etc., to discuss theoretical and methodological questions, and finally to integrate Turkish contemporary history into historical developments in the 20th century. To this end, expert speakers from the humanities and social sciences from Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden met online in the first workshop and discussed leading currents in the field of Turkish contemporary history. In a broader sense, the experts addressed each academic discipline's specific contributions to the current state of knowledge concerning the emerging field of Turkish contemporary history. The first four sessions consisted of a lecture, a commentary, and a general discussion. In the last section, young researchers of the Network presented their current research projects.

In his keynote speech, HAMIT BOZARSLAN (Paris) gave a rich tour d'horizon on the history of conflict, violence, and insecurity throughout 20th century Turkey. As the title suggests, he employed the concepts of continuity and crisis to grasp the last hundred years of Turkish history until today. He highlighted the devastating effects of nationalism culminating in the genocide of Ottoman Armenians during the

First World War and the „Kurdish problem“ that emerged from the Ottoman Empire's dissolution, which overlapped with the Turkish nation building, and having deep repercussions on politics and society until today. Since the 1960s, alternative histories began to critically challenge the state's official version of Turkish national history and its monopoly on historical interpretation, which increased remarkably during the last three decades. What became clear of Bozarslan's presentation was the struggle of the (critical) scholarship on Turkey to come to terms with this history, while historical debates surrounding the issues of the definition, meaning and political consequences of Turkishness began to take centre-stage within the scholarship. In the ensuing discussion, Bozarslan's continuity postulate, among others, was vividly discussed and critically questioned.

In her welcoming speech, BERNA PEKESEN (Essen) delineated the current state of approaching and practising Turkey's contemporary history from the angle of the historical discipline. She addressed some thematic and temporal focuses as well as the problems of periodisation within the field while detecting two prevailing temporal lines of research on Turkey: a heavy historiographic focus earned, firstly the first half of the 20th century, and secondly the „present-day period“, beginning with the AKP's assumption of power in 2002. The „interim period“ from the 1950s to the 2000s remains largely unexplored. As a historian herself, Pekesen regarded the contribution of the historical discipline to the field as negligible. Professional historians on Turkey engage themselves rather with the earlier periods, leaving the contemporary history to political departments, whose own studies are often not historically based. Political scientists and other academics, on the other hand, would prefer to deal with present-day issues. She summarised some other consequences of these deficits, among which she highlighted the overweight of political history, the focus on „high politics“ and certain paradigms (par-

¹ DFG-Netzwerk „Zeitgeschichte der Türkei“ at the University of Duisburg-Essen: <https://www.uni-due.de/humanities/dfg-network-turkey/home.php>.

ticularly the „nation-state“, and „modernisation“ paradigms), as well as the lack of social and societal approaches in the works dealing with Turkey's recent past.

MAURUS REINKOWSKI (Basel) opened up the first session. As an expert in Islamic Studies, Reinkowski critically evaluated academic works of the last two or three decades dealing with the still highly controversial issues of religious policies and the Kemalist laicism/secularism and their legacies throughout the 20th century. Without doubt, Kemalism, understood as a core political system of republican Turkey, has played a significant role in modern Turkey's political and social life. As Reinkowski highlighted, Kemalism and its laicist policies had always been the focal point of political and intellectual analyses. Since the 2000s, however, he identified a change of paradigms in this regard. While Kemalist secularisation began to be rejected as authoritarian and deficient by some scholars, new optimism on the „emancipatory“ nature of Islamism began to take hold among some influential parts of the scholarship during the early 2000s. These blatant misconceptions and intellectual confusion were, according to Reinkowski, the result of an „inverted paternalism“ that tends to explain the present-day wrongdoings with the Kemalist practices from the 1920s and 1930s. Jan-Markus Vömel (Konstanz), network member and commentator of the section, provided further evidence for the changes in the meaning of „secular“ and „secularism“, and discussed the role of Islamist currents and movements from this angle. In the discussion that followed, some discomfort arose over the contemporary scholarship on Turkey, which often seems to follow political impulses rather than consider the purposelessness („Zweckfreiheit“) of the human sciences.

The effects and gaps of the „intellectual labour division“ mentioned by Pekesen in her introduction became explicit in the following sessions dealing with the contributions of sociology/social anthropology) and political science to Turkish contemporary studies. Obviously, the preoccupation with people and society in Turkey was primarily undertaken by sociology, which has been superseded for some time by social and cultural anthropol-

ogy. JENNY B. WHITE (Stockholm) gave a rich overview of the shifting approaches and paradigms of sociology, which in a sense had its inauguration in the 1950s, while village, town and gecekondü (squatter areas) studies being its hallmark. Since the 1980s and especially since the 1990s, sociology has been more or less superseded by social anthropological approaches, and the research itself became richer and diversified. In his comment Network member Alp Yenen (Leiden) reiterated the strong focus of the scholarship on the so-called „founding ideology“ (particularly the Committee for Union and Progress and historical Kemalism). Yenen expressed regret that the rich approaches of sociology or social anthropology were not reflected in works dealing with the recent past but rather dominated by disputable paradigms such as the „centre-periphery“ approach.

CENGİZ GÜNAY (Vienna), in turn, confirmed the idiosyncrasies of the research on Turkey that seem to defy disciplinary distinctions. His presentation made clear once again that Turkish history has traditionally been the domain of political scientists. Günay criticised above all the reduction of complexity in the prevailing studies and the uncritical adoption of Western concepts. He contextualised his argument with his references to the political science literature about state's conception and practices, where many authors take the Western norms as a template for Turkish history. In her commentary, Funda Hülagu (Marburg) emphasised the widespread normative modernisation approach for Turkey, which rarely contributes to the understanding of current political phenomena, as demonstrated by many recent studies on the authoritarian turn in Turkish politics.

In the fourth session, SAMİM AKGÖNÜL (Strasbourg) explained the origins and research focus of Turkology at Strasbourg University. He emphasised the origins of the discipline lying within Orientalism: the „Western“ way to view and categorise the non-Western hemisphere. He then explained the enormous contribution of the early Turkology studies to the genesis of Turkish nationalism. A lively debate on the very nature and self-understanding of the discipline and the current division and the intersection of Turkol-

ogy and Turkish Studies followed. Some discussants praised the latter as an impressively interdisciplinary subject, which brings contextual variation into the field. Others criticised the merging of the former into the latter and questioned the originality of the discipline. The critics argued that Turkish Studies, if characterised only by its objects of research (Turkey and everything imaginable Turkish), would be in danger to fray and become an auxiliary science for systematic disciplines.

In the last section, doctoral students of the Network presented their current research projects, all of which seem to fill a sensitive gap in the field of contemporary historical research. BÜSRA ARI (Bochum), in her ongoing dissertation, examines the problem of poverty from a social history perspective and analyses economic and social planning in the period from the 1950s to the 1980s. LÉA DELMAIRE's (Paris) dissertation examines the fight against tuberculosis in Turkey in the second half of the 20th century. Her research project aims to shed light not only on an endemic disease in Turkey, but also on the question, how the state and society fought against a socioeconomic problem in the context of a developing and modernising Turkey. ZEYNEP BURSA (Nanterre) presented the results of her recently completed dissertation on the „Intellectuals' Hearth“, a right-wing intellectual organisation that became active after the 1980 military coup. In her prosopographical study, she analysed the individual careers and biographies of the leading intellectuals, their networks and relations with the state and society.

The workshop provided an original venue for scholars working on contemporary Turkish history to engage in scholarly dialogue and reflect on the gaps, possibilities, and limitations of their research fields. It is this stimulating exchange that gives reason to look forward to further events of the Network scheduled for 2021 and 2022.

Conference overview:

Keynote lecture

Hamit Bozarslan (Paris): History Writing and Historiography from Kemalism to Erdoganism – Continuities and Ruptures in Contemporary History

Berna Pekesen (Essen): Welcoming and introduction

Session 1: Studies on religion and secularism

Lecture: Maurus Reinkowski (Basel)

Comment: Jan-Markus Vömel (Konstanz)

Session 2: The contribution of cultural anthropology to the understanding of contemporary history of Turkey

Lecture: Jenny B. White (Stockholm)

Comment: Alp Yenen (Leiden)

Session 3: The contribution of Political Sciences to the understanding of contemporary history of Turkey

Lecture: Cengiz Günay (Vienna)

Comment: Funda Hülal (Marburg)

Session 4: Turkish Studies as Contemporary History?

Lecture: Samim Akgönül (Strasbourg)

Comment: Hüseyin Çiçek (Nürnberg-Erlangen)

Session: 5: Presentations of ongoing research projects of Network members

Büşra Arı (Bochum): The Politics of Poverty in Turkey. Managing Poverty through Economic and Social Planning (1950-1980)

Léa Delmaire (Paris): Rise and Fall of a Public Issue. Anti-tuberculosis Fight in Turkey (mid-1940s to mid-1970s)

Zeynep Bursa (Nanterre): Aydınlar Ocağı (Intellectuals' Hearth). A Socio-history of a Right-wing Club

Tagungsbericht *Fixing the State of Art – Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Contemporary History of Turkey*. 19.11.2020–20.11.2020, digital, in: H-Soz-Kult 18.02.2021.