

## **The Circassians of Turkey: War, Violence and Nationalism from the Ottomans to Atatürk by Caner Yelbaşı**

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In his book *The Circassians of Turkey: War, Violence and Nationalism from the Ottomans to Atatürk*, Caner Yelbaşı discusses Circassians' paramilitary and political activities from the late Ottoman Empire period to the end of the First World War. After their exile in 1864, some of the Circassians became integrated into the Ottoman military and bureaucracy, held privileged positions, and became one of the "loyal groups" (p. 175) of the empire. With the transformation to a nation-state, Circassians were the subjects of major changes. The book has a specific period to the incidents in Central and Western Anatolia, between 1918 and 1938, to elaborate the breakpoints of this transformation for Circassian people.

Yelbaşı starts his arguments by distinguishing the ordinary Circassian people and the elites regarding the loyalty discussion. He states that while ordinary Circassian people supported the Ottoman state (and also have the opportunity to identify themselves as Circassians, since the Ottoman identity is multinational), Circassian elites were on the nationalists' side. He argues that the majority of Circassians support the Ottoman government, not the nationalists and *Kuva-yi Milliye*. Apart from the ordinary people, Yelbaşı categorizes Circassian elite into three groups: first group as the ones who had a significant role in the resistance against the Alliance and Greek occupation in Anatolia, such as Rauf Orbay and Bekir Sami (Kunduh); second group as the ones who were influential on the national struggle, suppressed

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resistances but then excluded from the cause, such as Çerkes Ethem, Çerkes Reşid and Kuşçubaşı Eşref; and the third group as the ones who were members of the Ottoman army and were against the nationalists, such as Ahmed Anzavur, Sefer Berzeg and Maan Şirin. People in the last group are the ones who organized anti-nationalist movements in the South Marmara and Adapazarı-Düzce regions.

After the introductory chapter, the second chapter examines Circassians' paramilitary activities during the Turkish-Greek War of 1919-20. The conflict between Anzavur Ahmed and Çerkes Ethem is given as an example of the civil war between Ottoman state loyalists (Istanbul) and nationalists (Ankara). The third chapter focuses on the Adapazarı-Düzce and Yozgat incidents and Çerkes Ethem's role in suppressing these uprisings. This chapter argues that by the invitations from Ankara to restore order for these incidents, Ethem increased his military and political power. The fourth chapter evaluates the replacement of the bandits and irregular forces with the regular army and the exclusion of Ethem from the nationalist movement. Chapter five examines the anti-nationalist activities of Circassians regarding Circassian Congress, Çule İbrahim Hakkı's activities, and Gönen-Manyas deportations. The sixth chapter details the 150'ers (the ones who were against the nationalist movement from the beginning and those excluded by Ankara after their anti-nationalist activities) and Circassians' relations with the Turkish state between 1924-38. This chapter questions the motivation behind the preparation of the list of these people and discusses the Kemalist nation-state building policies and projects on the Circassians.

The book argues that due to the lack of state authority during the First World War, bandits were widespread in the South Marmara region that involves many Circassians. During the national struggle, along with the resistance groups called Defense of Right Societies (*Müdafa-i Hukuk Cemiyetleri*), bandits were a part of these resistance movements against Greek forces. Meanwhile, there was also an anti-nationalist movement in South Marmara, especially with Anzavur Ahmed's impact in the region. During the Greek occupation, he organized people against

nationalists, emphasizing Islamic references, with the Ottoman government's support (the Damad Ferit cabinet). Circassian villages in Gönen and Manyas region "either willingly or forcibly participated in Anzavur's anti-nationalist movement" (p.34). It is argued that he became a more significant threat to the *Kuva-yi Milliye* than the Greek occupation. His impact expanded through Adapazarı-Düzce region, where Circassian-populated villages were numerically quite a few. However, the book argues that ordinary Circassian people supported the Ottoman state contrary to the Circassian elite; the latter were former members of CUP and then were on nationalists' side. Çerkes Ethem was the name who had chosen for suppressing this resistance and defeated Anzavur Ahmed. Regarding this confrontation, Yelbaşı remarks a significant point: "The conflict between the loyalists and nationalists then became an intra-community struggle between Çerkes Ethem and Anzavur Ahmed" (p.39).

Çerkes Ethem was the one who also suppressed the Adapazarı-Düzce and Yozgat incidents in 1920, which were significant uprising according to Ankara. In fact, "the incidents broke out in a region that was situated very close to the headquarters of the national movement, thus forcing the Ankara government to prepare for relocating parliament to the town of Sivas" (p.43). Before Ethem's arrival, Kuşçubasi Esref Bey was the name who had been appointed to the position of commander of the *Kuva-yi Milliye* forces in the region. However, his family's rank in the Circassian cultural hierarchy was high enough for locals, and he failed to gain support for nationalists. As time progressed, no *Kuva-yi Milliye* sympathizers remained in the region; in fact, "by May 1920, the region had already become a centre of the anti-nationalist movement" (p.49). At this point, it is essential to state that Yelbaşı provides an alternative perspective to the recent historiography of Turkey, where Circassians had been perceived as the loyalist people among non-Turkish groups, according to the literature. In that sense, the book fulfills a significant gap in modern Turkey literature.

After the suppression of the Anzavur Ahmed incident in the South Marmara region, by İsmet İnönü's appointment, Ethem

restored order for the Adapazarı-Düzce incidents without distinguishing people in terms of their religious or ethnic identities and did not eliminate Circassians from his brutal measures. It is stated that Ethem was not “an apolitical fighter” and after he suppressed three incidents (Anzavur, Adapazarı-Düzce, and Yozgat), he increased his military and political power in Anatolia and Ankara. In Yozgat, Ethem suppressed Çapanoğlu family’s movement and started to criticize Ankara government for not being able to suppress an incident that occurred next to them. Upon this incident, the divergence between Ethem and Mustafa Kemal increased in the nationalist movement. The exclusion of him contains several reasons according to the book, including the preparation for the regular army (with the Bolshevik military and financial support), the absence of important threats from Anatolia, his relationship with Enver Paşa (and Mustafa Kemal’s conflict with Enver Paşa), the disagreements regarding the suppression of Simav and Gediz battles, and Ethem’s influence on the assembly with his increased political and military power. Ethem also joined the Green Army, founded as a secret and unofficial organization for offering a mix of Bolshevik ideology and Islam, transformed into a significant centre of anti-Mustafa Kemal activity, and joined the Greeks “when he was left with no option” (p.96). In the early republican period, he and his friends were on the list of the 150’ers (*Yüzellilikler*), on modern Turkey historiography’s list of the “traitors” (p.131).

The anti-nationalist Circassian activities remained after Ethem’s exclusion from the national movement and transformed into an association with the declaration of independence from Istanbul and Ankara governments. Çule İbrahim Hakkı was one of the notable names of this Circassian nationalist movement, which has its basis on Islam and Circassian identity. Discussed as a “collective punishment” (p.100) in the book, although the majority of Circassians did not support the Circassian nationalist movement or the Congress, they were deported from their villages in Gönen-Manyas after the anti-nationalist movements and the declaration of independence. The anti-nationalist oppositions remained until 1938, and the early republican period policies to Circassians were

a part of the Turkification process by restricting their identity. The regime's repressive policies during the transformation from an empire to a nation-state are examined with attention to the restriction of Circassian language usage in the public space and Keriman Halis example.

One might remark the book's narrative structure and some connections between topics and chapters as ambiguous. I believe this point might be related to the book's structure, since, to my knowledge, it is reproduced from the author's Ph.D. thesis. Nevertheless, by discussing the issues with primary and secondary sources such as Ottoman and Republican archives and memoirs, Yelbaşı proposes a new perspective to the existing modern Turkey historiography.

