
ARTICLE

CREATING A DISTINCTIVE "OTHER": THE PERCEPTION OF TURKS AS ASIATIC OR MONGOL IN U.S. MAINSTREAM MEDIA DURING THE COLD WAR

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Abstract

This article explores how Turks were portrayed as descendants of Asiatic or Mongolian heritage in American mainstream media during the Cold War era. It begins by discussing the broader Western view of Turks as historically Asiatic and nomadic people, then delves into how American print publications, including news outlets and magazines, contributed to this perception. Generally, in the West, Turks were often imagined as Asiatic nomads, a characterization that was also linked to notions of barbarism and violence. In the U.S., there was a tendency to depict Turks as fierce and combative, aligning with the broader trend of portraying them as violent. However, there were instances where Turks were praised, particularly in contexts such as their significant contributions during the Korean War as part of the Southern effort which saw Turkish and Western interests align. Through analysis, this study concludes that Turks in American media were often depicted as Asiatic or Mongolian along four main themes: as formidable warriors, racially Asiatic, geographically Asiatic, and as part of Eastern/Asiatic civilization (by contrasting them with Western civilization). The article concludes that the U.S. largely followed the European trend of viewing Turks as part of Asiatic civilization and descent.

Keywords

U.S. mainstream media, Asiatic/Mongolian, Cold War, Western imaginary, American perceptions

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Introduction

The Western world has been intrigued by the Turks since the 11th century when they initially encountered them in Anatolia. This encounter sparked numerous Western accounts, including chronicles, travelogues, medieval texts, and modern textbooks, all attempting to comprehend the origins and history of this unique nomadic group. What made the Turks stand out was their distinct ethnic background compared to those of Indo-European descent (Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Germans, etc.), as well as their adherence to Islam. The U.S. was not an exception. The American imagination regarding Turks/Türkiye rested upon the European construction of the Turkish image for centuries. Even as they formed their own opinions about Turks, Americans continued to hold remnants of European influence in their mindset, perceiving Turks as Asiatic, barbaric, violent, and Muslim, qualities that seemed contrary to what constitutes being “American”.

The American imagination regarding Turks/Türkiye rested upon the European construction of the Turkish image for centuries.

The Cold War added an additional dimension to America’s perception of Turks. When the Cold War began, the American perception of Turks had already been influenced by the pejorative framing previously mentioned. Turks were often viewed as cruel, barbaric, and almost outside the realm of civilization. In this regard, the U.S. followed the European trend of associating the Turkish nation with negative connotations before the Cold War era. This study aims to uncover the Asiatic traits associated with Turks in U.S. mainstream media during the Cold War. In a related manner, the following section assesses these traits by referencing various media outlets that were published during the specified period.

The connotation of Turks as Asiatic inherently combines barbaric and violent qualities, and this association is not unique to the American imaginary. Hence, this study problematizes how Americans perceived Turks as Asians/Mongolians during the Cold War and accordingly focuses on selected American mainstream media in which Turks are portrayed as Asians. However, since Americans inherited this perception, the study begins with the European imaginary before turning attention to the American one.

Turks in the European Imaginary

The European perspective was influenced by the Umayyad rule over the Iberian Peninsula as the European worldview was primarily structured around religious identities during the Middle Ages. Consequently, the Turks were not seen as

drastically distinct from the Umayyads since Europeans were already acquainted with other "foreign" Asiatic Muslim communities. Despite centuries of military campaigns, Europeans were unable to control the Iberian Peninsula fully.¹

Yet, Europe remained perplexed about the origins of the Turks despite their many encounters with them. Since their first encounter during the 11th century with Turkish raids to the Asia Minor, some believed that Turks were the descendants of Trojans, specifically the Teucry, considering them honorable heirs of the Trojan lineage. This viewpoint was supported by Pope Pius II (also known as Aeneas Piccolimini) who stated,

The Turkish people are Scythic [Scythians] and barbarian: whose origin and progress... not to be completely alien to us... [as] they have dispersed the Latins and the Christians... They are cruel and ignoble people, and being ardent in every manner of luxury, they eat those things that others would abhor... and neither would they abstain themselves from the excretions of the immature parts of the body.²

He also asserted that the Turks had migrated from eastern Scythia, conquering regions like Cappadocia, Pontus, Bithynia, and most of Asia Minor. After crossing the Hellespont, they extended their dominion over much of Greece

and expanded their influence as far as the renowned rivers Save and Danube. Pope Pius II characterized them as crude and ruthless, believing that they were seeking vengeance for their ancestors.

This claim was not unique to Pope Pius II. *De Origine Turcarum* (On the Origins of the Turks) by Theodore Gaza, written for Francesco Filelfo, delved into the anthropological study of the Turks' origins. The *Turcarum* thesis, as it became known, posited that Turks were connected to ancient barbarian tribes through a fabricated Trojan lineage.

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Similarly, Salutati proposed that Turks were descendants of the Romans, specifically tracing their lineage to an individual named Turchot, considered a Trojan figure. The link between Turks and the esteemed Romans was established

through this lineage narrative. Turchot was considered a Trojan, connecting Turks with the noble Romans.

It is astonishing how the leaders cultivate their men in the art of war; ten- or twelve- year-old boys are seized for military service. Through hunting and labors they inure and harden them, and through running, leaping and this daily training and experience they become vigorous. They eat coarse food and heavy black bread with many kinds of grains mixed into it; whatever delicate foods they eat are acquired by the sweat of hunting. They are so well trained that they live contentedly with only one set of clothing and on bread alone. Remarkably tolerant of cold and heat, they endure rain and snow without complaint.³

Similarly, Aeneas Piccolomini, a famous humanist who later became Pope Pius II, held a strong belief that the Turks were descendants of the Trojans rather than the rugged Scythians. This conviction was expressed in numerous texts, with his primary source of influence being the *Liber de familia Autumanorum id est Turchorum* (A Book about the Family of the Ottomans, That Is, the Turks) from 1456, authored by the Greek scholar Nicholas Sagundinus. Consequently, Aeneas's accounts were deemed unreliable and inconsistent as they relied solely on one source. He believed that the Scythians were the ancestors of the Huns, who shared a common heritage with the Turkic people. Aeneas described the Turkic people as "fierce and ignominious," engaging in various sexual perversions and frequenting brothels. He also mentioned their consumption of detestable foods such as mare's flesh, wolves, vultures, and even more horrifyingly, aborted human fetuses.⁴

These conflicting statements regarding the origins of Turks, whether they were believed to have descended from Scythians or Trojans, demonstrate the difficulty in pinpointing Aeneas's precise stance on the Turkish lineage.

Yet, some argued against the notion of Turks being of Trojan descent, citing the Trojans' appreciation for literature as evidence to the contrary. Conversely, certain humanists drew parallels between the invasions of the Goths and Vandals in late antiquity and the eventual fall of Constantinople. Donato Acciaiuoli expressing this perspective, stated,

Did not our ancestors often experience this devastation in Italy? The destruction of the people? The overthrow of all Europe? I have learned of the savagery of the Goths, the Vandals and other barbarian peoples who devastated Italy through the chronicles of the ancients, and I reckon a similar calamity would have befallen Italy, had not Hunyadi thwarted

it, who seems not so much to have been born to check the audacity of the Turks, as to have been given by divine favor to the Christian people.⁵

Humanists, in a way, revived the ancient contrast between European civility and Asian barbarism by imbuing it with cultural significance. Giannozzo Manetti, in his oration to Calixtus III, drew parallels between Cicero's speech "Pro lege Manilia" (On the Manilian Law) and the challenges Europe faced due to the Turkish threat. He likened Mithridates's assaults on Rome in 66 BCE to the actions of Mehmed II, using rhetoric that emphasized the menacing nature of threats originating from Asia.⁶ George of Trebizond explored the concept of Asia versus Europe in his work "Ad defendenda pro Europa Hellesponti claustra" (To Defend the Barriers of Hellespont for Europe) from 1452. He emphasized the Greek identity as fundamentally Western and positioned Greece as a stronghold of Europe against the perceived barbarian threat originating from Asia.⁷

The Turks were seen in stark contrast to Western civilization due to their Muslim and Asiatic identity. They were viewed differently from the Umayyads, being considered fiercer and more violent, largely due to their ethnic ties to the Mongols, who were known as one of the most threatening nomadic forces in history, devastating many regions and reaching Eastern Europe. Consequently, the rising threat posed by the Turks to the Byzantines was a military concern that had the potential to endanger all of Christendom within a short period.

The Image of the Turks in the U.S. Prior to the Cold War

In the eyes of Europeans, the perceived barbarism, violence, and tyrannical characteristics of Turkish culture were believed to stem from their religious, geographical, and cultural differences. These factors contributed to the portrayal of Turks as a formidable and dangerous force, posing a significant challenge to the stability and security of European territories. Before the onset of the Cold War, the U.S. adopted this prevailing trend in framing Turks through the lens of stereotypes. This period also marked the beginning of a strong alliance between Türkiye and the U.S., albeit with fluctuations over time. Yet, mainstream media in the U.S. depicted Turks as barbaric, violent, and backward, perpetuating negative perceptions about the Turkish community.

There is a scarcity of literature documenting American perceptions of Turks and the Ottoman Empire from the early 19th century, when bilateral relations commenced, until the onset of the Cold War. However, the existing knowledge suggests that Turks were commonly referred to as the "Terrible Turks," a term carrying a pejorative connotation that portrayed them as violent and barbaric.

Early publications in the U.S. often highlighted the exotic qualities of Turks alongside their perceived viciousness.⁸

Although the establishment of a secular republic in Türkiye following World War I brought about some positive associations regarding Turkish identity, the negative attributions from earlier times persisted during the interwar period and the World War II years.⁹ These negative stereotypes continued to shape American perceptions of Turks and the Ottoman Empire, contributing to a persistent image of Turks as “Terrible Turks.”

The Turkish image in the U.S. during the 19th and early 20th centuries was largely negative, influenced by initial impressions formed during American initiatives in the Maghrib region and missionary activities within the Ottoman territory. Bilateral relations between the U.S. and the southwestern region of the Ottoman Empire began in the 18th century, shaping Americans’ perceptions of Turks through their interactions with Berber and Arab people. These groups maintained their own diplomatic relations within the divided administration of Tripoli, Tunisia, and Algeria, often without the oversight of Istanbul.¹⁰

For Americans, the term “Turk” encompassed not just an ethnicity but also served as a broader identity representing the Muslim community as a whole. Consequently, American perceptions influenced Europeans as well, particularly through the dissemination of long-standing American captivity stories that portrayed barbaric experiences of Christians at the hands of Muslims.¹¹ This contributed to a negative stereotype of Turks and Muslims in the American imagination and, to some extent, in the European perception as well.

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The missionary activities of American-based Protestant groups in the Ottoman territories also played a significant role in shaping American perceptions. One such organization, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) based in Boston, had a considerable impact on Ottoman domestic affairs through its extensive missionary endeavors.¹² These activities were successful in influencing ethnic and religious minorities within the Ottoman state, with Armenian propaganda in the 19th century being closely associated with American missionaries.¹³ Missionary activities may also have played a role in promoting anti-Turkish sentiments in the U.S. by highlighting the Armenian

question,¹⁴ and this contributing to the prevailing negative images of Turks throughout the U.S. from the late 19th century onwards.

The missionary endeavors contributed to miscommunication, which, in turn, fostered hostility towards the Turkish out-group, which continued into the Cold War period. An example of this is the story recounted by Stavros and published in 1982 in *Time magazine*. "During World War I, Stavros [the protagonist] has magnificent visions of a Greater Greece, when the wicked Turks will be laid low as the profits in rugs soar skyward."¹⁵

The negative portrayal of Turks was also perpetuated by the stories circulating in the U.S. about the events of 1915.¹⁶ Related to this, Turks were often depicted as despotic, imposters, and heathens, and believing in an antithesis of the true religion, i.e., Christianity.¹⁷ The reports by American missionaries reflected these negative perceptions, with the general overview of bilateral relations influencing the tone of their reports. When cooperation between the U.S. and Türkiye increased, the missionaries' reports tended to portray a more positive image, while periods of tension led to more negative depictions.¹⁸

The Turkish-American population living in the U.S. also played a role in shaping the American image of Turks. As Turks migrated to the U.S., their presence contributed to a gradual shift towards a more positive perception among the American public.

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The interaction and integration of Turkish immigrants into American society provided Americans with a more nuanced understanding of Turkish culture, traditions, and values. This firsthand experience of Turks as neighbors, colleagues, and friends

helped dispel some of the negative stereotypes and misconceptions that had previously prevailed.¹⁹

Additionally, the contributions of Turkish-Americans to various aspects of American life, such as business, academia, arts, and sports, further enhanced the positive image of Turks in the eyes of the American public. Over time, the Turkish image in America evolved from a negative or neutral one to a more positive and multifaceted one, reflecting the diverse and vibrant Turkish-American community.

Two instances during the Great War exemplify this improvement. The first instance is related to the Turkish leatherworkers in Peabody, Massachusetts,

who, at first, were affected by the negative notions associated with Turks at that time. Despite this, they actively engaged with the American community, which helped to alleviate prejudice and improve mutual understanding.²⁰ Similarly, the activities of the Turkish community in the Chicago area also played a role in enhancing the representation of Türkiye in the minds of Americans.²¹ Through their involvement in various cultural, social, and economic activities, Turkish immigrants contributed positively to their local communities. This engagement helped to counter negative stereotypes and promote a more favorable perception of Türkiye and its people among Americans.

However, negative connotations were challenging to overcome, especially given Türkiye's neutral stance during World War II. Türkiye's refusal to side with either the Allies or the Axis powers added to the existing distrust among the former, notably the British. This was significant as the U.S. had taken a leading role in the offensive against Nazi Germany after the attack on Pearl Harbor 1941. Türkiye's neutrality was viewed with suspicion by some Allies, leading to a sense of unease and lack of full trust, particularly from those who were actively engaged in combat against the Axis powers.²²

Turks as Asiatic/Mongolian in the U.S. Mainstream Media during the Cold War

Throughout the centuries, Americans have similarly portrayed Turks based on their Asiatic origins. When discussing uncivilized Eastern invasions into Europe, Turks are often mentioned in the same breath as the Mongols, the Moors, and other Eastern "invaders" seen as threats to Western civilization.

As previously mentioned, Americans' initial interaction with Turks can be traced back to the 19th century when the U.S. aimed to enhance its economic presence in the Levant region. After then, Americans formed a specific perception of Turks, primarily influenced by various cultural elements. Being predominantly Muslim, having migrated from the Asian steppes, and often thought to be descendants of Mongols who traversed Asia and Europe from the 13th century onward, Turks were viewed as a warlike nation originating from a distinct cultural background, positioned in contrast to Western civilization and its foundational values.

It was believed that Turks' imperial history was marked by a series of terrible events and barbaric massacres committed to ethnic minorities within the empire's territory. The British policy that allowed the Ottoman Empire to get away with the so-called Bulgarian massacres was mocked by Lawrence Housman from *The Atlantic*,

[The] Turkish policy of Lord Beaconsfield [then prime minister] was being violently denounced...and the Bulgarian massacres charged against the Turkish bashibazouks, had become a bone of contention between the Liberal and Tony parties. The question was: If you were a bird, what bird would you be, what would you do and where would you locate yourself?... And this is how Alfred Housman [an English poet and scholar] tackled the problem...:

'Oh, what should I be but a turkey?

And what should I have but a wattle—

...

A wattle to change like an opal?

My looks should be gloomy and murky;

My tail should be lively and perky:

And my home should be Constantinople.

An Ottoman ('cos I am called so)

My throne and my footstool should be;

...

I would laugh at the onsets of Russia,

My protectors would certainly crush her.²³

While highlighting instances of Turkish violence targeting Bulgarians within the empire, Housman also criticized the European powers, especially Britain's policy towards the Ottomans under Lord Beaconsfield's government, for overlooking the so-called Turkish atrocities and supporting the empire against the Russians as needed. Additionally, these incidents also involved instances of cruelty towards their own people. Lesley Blanch from *Vogue* argued,

Nowhere are extremes more striking than in the life once lived with the Sultan's palace, Topkapi Sarai, the Vieux Serail or Seraglio, as it is generally known...From murder to tulip festival, all had been foreseen... Sultan Ibrahim [once] drowned his entire harem, three hundred strong, in order to have the refreshing experience of forming a new one, overnight... by the 1850's there were few such drownings, though decapitations were still sometimes practiced in the grand harems.²⁴

Within this context, it can be argued that in American popular discourse, a Turk was often perceived as significantly different from an American. There was a persistent feeling of belonging to a specific culture among Americans, who reverted back to a sense of normality when considering themselves as opposed to a Mexican or a Turk.²⁵ Such discourse highlights the shared cultural domain

that Americans experienced in their daily lives, which they didn't necessarily share with Turks on a daily basis. For example, music is deeply embedded in cultural frameworks as a form of communication. Thus, the interest of Türkiye's Ambassador to the U.S. Mehmet Munir Erteğün's son, Ahmet Erteğün, in jazz is seen as a "crisis in diplomacy" as jazz and blues are viewed as "un-Turkish" and resonate with Americanness during the early phase of the Cold War.²⁶

Even when texts declared the similarity of Turkish and American aspirations in terms of science and progress, this similarity was emphasized within the context of the differences between the two societies. In a letter to the editorial of *Time*, for example, an American citizen writing from Istanbul explained the Turkish reaction to the *Apollo 11* mission, emphasizing a shared sense of humanity's unity and progress, and emphasizing the fact that "what were our thoughts American and Turkish alike? Simply, might all mankind be united at last [despite differences]."²⁷ In other words, Turkish aspirations were thought to align with the trait of progressive liberal capitalism, which is characteristic of the protagonist American society.²⁸

However, despite these shared aspirations, there were still differences that defined Turks in various aspects. Turks' Asian quality was just one example that signaled a diverse identity within the Turkish out-group. Accordingly, the portrayal of Turks' Asiatic characteristics by the American mainstream media during the Cold War can be divided into four main categories: Turks depicted as fierce warriors; Turks identified with their geographical Asiatic origins; Turks associated with their ethnic Asiatic heritage; and Turks positioned in opposition to Western civilization.

Turks as Fierce Warriors

Turks were recognized for their skill as fighters, with their strength believed by Americans to stem from their Asiatic roots. Originating as fierce and aggressive nomads from Central Asia, they naturally excelled as warriors, giving them a military advantage.

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Particularly during the Korean War, when Türkiye deployed its brigades to support the South against the Communist North, the effectiveness of Turkish fighters on the battlefield was highlighted in the opinion pieces about the war.

The first Turks swept across Asia to become a military aristocracy and then found the Seljuk dynasty. They were a horde of lean, hawk-faced men, with black slit eyes, ferocious warriors. And today, those who have fought beside the magnificent Turkish brigade in Korea know the breed has remained uncorrupted.²⁹

Similarly, Turks' traditions were scrutinized based on civilizational and so-called ethnic traits in order to comprehend this distinct group of people, viewed as fundamentally different from American culture. An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* characterized Turks as follows: "The nation [Turks], which is Asiatic, has received its traditions from three main sources: self-reliant, bellicose, horse-riding tribal ancestors, Moslem religion and half a millennium of imperial power."³⁰

This specific trait was correlated with Turks' geographical origins, religious beliefs, and their historical imperial legacy, all articulated as characteristics stemming from cultural affiliations. Thus, Americans continued to perceive Turks as nomadic people and this perception affected how Americans understood the Turkish approach to urbanization. Accordingly, "It has been said that the Turk remains a nomad at heart and that his cities are but the dwelling of a night."³¹

From the assigned characteristics, it becomes clear that Turks were seen as naturally contentious as a nation. This trait was believed to originate from both their geographical and ethnic origins, purportedly as descendants of Mongols. An article in the *L.A. Times* concluded, "Asker means soldier and is pronounced exactly like Oscar. He is a peasant lad of old Anatolian stock, often with slightly Mongolian features that testify of nomadic ancestors from Central Asia."³²

Turks as Geographically Asiatic

Within the context of the Cold War, Türkiye's firm alliance with the West and particularly with the U.S. presented a contrast: it was a nation that stood as a Western ally, while possessing cultural characteristics associated with Eastern or Asiatic origins stemming from geographic position. Their ferocious quality resulted from the harsh Central Asian environment, which was often reminded through their social practices. As Lesley Blanch stated, "...these *mangals* [charcoal brazier] and the *semovers* [samovars] ... remind us that here are many Asiatic roots, the Asia of the steppes, of the Mongols; contrast again."³³ Indeed, Türkiye's geographical location between Europe and Asia further reinforced such assumptions: "Part of Istanbul may be in Europe, but anywhere in Türkiye one is in Asia, among Asiatics."³⁴

Historically also Turks were positioned in the Eastern Mediterranean region as part of the Asian continent. Based on this perception, Western governments, including American policymakers, positioned Türkiye as part of the southeastern flank of the containment policy towards the Soviet Union. In a 1955 article in the *L.A. Times*, the geopolitical proximity of Cyprus to Türkiye, seen as an Asiatic nation, was articulated as follows: “Cyprus is a British crown colony which lies just south of Asiatic Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean.”³⁵

Within the same framework, during the Cold War, American foreign policy viewed Türkiye as a stronghold in the Near East region that needed to be reinforced in response to the Soviet threat from the north. This perspective led to Türkiye’s inclusion in the Marshall Plan under the Truman administration. Tom Twitty from the *New York Herald Tribune* summarized this stance with the following sentence: “The immediate problems which Mr. Truman will discuss in detail are those of preventing the collapse of Greece and of strengthening Türkiye, both Near Eastern outposts of Western civilization facing a wall of Communism.”³⁶

Furthermore, the positioning of Turks as Asiatic inherently attributed to them characteristics contrary to Western culture and civilization. Turks’ nomadic and Asiatic traits were perceived as diametrically opposed to the thousands of years of Western civilization founded on urban settlements, architectural marvels, and the birth of primitive forms of democracy. Therefore, since the earliest encounters between Turks and the West in the 11th century, Turks were viewed as a significant threat, first, to Christendom and, later, to Western civilization. This entrenched understanding was also evident in the American mainstream media. In an article in the *Atlantic Daily*, N.R. Danielian wrote,

The Roman Empire in the Mediterranean basin, and Byzantium of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, had stood guard at the gates of Europe protecting the established values of Western civilization, its legal codes, its Christian and humanistic values inherited from the ancient world, against the attacks of the Persians, the Tatars, the Turks, the Mongols and the Moors.³⁷

Likewise, areas where the West encountered Turks were often portrayed as crossroads of diverse civilizations, with Turks symbolizing the entirety of the East, juxtaposed against the seemingly radically different West. Thus, Mediterranean ports were presented as melting pots of two distinct axiologies, East and West: “This is a spot [Venice] where the Orient of the Turks and Mongols blends extensively with Europe.”³⁸

Turks as Racially Asiatic

Turks were viewed not just as Asiatic in a geographical sense but also in an anthropological sense. Their descent from the feared Mongols, who had a significant impact on the world during the High Middle Ages, set them apart ethnically from Americans and other Western nations. In an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, Percy Wood made a comparison between the Greek and Turkish nations on the basis of their anthropological origins in order to indicate a significant difference in Cyprus as "Turks being Moslems and Greeks are Greek Orthodox"³⁹

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and hence "... Greeks are Aryan, Turks purely Asiatic."⁴⁰ Similarly Ron Grossman from the same newspaper noted an enmity on the island, highlighting the Turks' distinctiveness due to their different racial background by quoting from a Chinese translator, John Kuo, who helped him interview famous Macedonian bagpipe virtuoso Ljupco Milenkovski. Kuo said to him that because of his Asiatic features and having knowledge of Macedonian language "they [local people] decided I must be a Turk, because, so many of their songs commemorate the centuries

when that Asian people occupied their land."⁴¹ Turks' ethnic background was linked to certain nations on the European continent as well: "The Turks, who originated in Central Asia, are related ethnically to the Finns, Estonians, and Hungarians Magyars."⁴²

Still, however, Americans insisted that "Türkiye remains in truth Asian with its principal population and area on that continent."⁴³ Originating from the steppes of Central Asia, even their successful efforts to establish settlements in the West did not automatically categorize Turks as European. Rather, their origins continued to be emphasized, as Edmund Fuller from the *Wall Street Journal* noted, "The people we know as Turks, who have complicated ethnic links to Huns, Mongols, Finns, and modern Hungarians, were initially a part of successive waves through several centuries, of Asiatic nomadic peoples who pressed relentlessly from the edge of China across Turkestan and the Eurasian Steppes into the Middle East and the marches of Europe."⁴⁴ It was, thus, strongly believed that the Turks came from Central Asia, and were related closely to the Mongols and Manchus of

North China, and to the Finns and Hungarians of Europe.⁴⁵ Regardless of any similarities they might have shared with nations on the European continent, Turks historically were and would continue to be seen as Asiatic or Eastern. “The original Turks,” the Chicago Tribune claimed were Mongol people.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Throughout the centuries, the Americans have portrayed Turks based on their Asiatic origin in alignment with the prevalent image of the Turk in the Western imagination. Texts exemplifying this perspective share a common theme of identifying Turks with their Asiatic roots in an anthropological sense. While Turks were sometimes seen as part of Western civilization, particularly when referring to uncivilized Eastern attacks on Europe, they were often associated in the same context with other Eastern “invaders” such as the Mongols and Moors, who were perceived as threats to Western civilization. Authors frequently emphasized Turks’ Asiatic origin, considering both their geographical origins and physical characteristics, and highlighted Türkiye’s connections to its Asiatic roots despite its geographic proximity to Europe.

American media sources are not alone in portraying Turks in this way: they largely inherited this perspective from Europe. Previous accounts of Turks, their origins, and manners had been making their way into European literature for centuries when Americans first encountered Turks in the Levant. The Americans were naturally heavily influenced by these narratives and continued to build upon them: they saw these established “characteristics” of the Turks as useful in the context of the Cold War, a war against a violent, Eastern rival, namely the Soviet Union.

American authors portrayed Turks as nomadic people from the steppes, contrasting them with settled urban populations. Mainstream media in the U.S. often used Turks and Mongols interchangeably, reinforcing the negative association of Turks with their Asiatic/Mongol heritage. This portrayal contributed to shaping the aspect of American collective values whereby Turks, negatively identified as Asiatic/Mongol, were juxtaposed against Americans, positively associated with Anglo-Saxon qualities. Being identified as Asiatic/Mongol became one of the key identifiers of Turkish identity in American media during the Cold War era.

Endnotes

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