

Camera, Archive, Nation: The Institutionalization of Representation in Turkish War of Independence Films*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the narrational structure and ideological representations of films about the Turkish War of Independence. The main aim is to show that these films not only visualize war but also take part in the process of nation-state building. Key themes such as heroism, patriotism and sacrifice are examined through their role in the narratives, with special attention to how the figure of the soldier is presented as an ideal citizen. Female characters, by contrast, are mostly placed in secondary roles defined by love, loyalty or devotion. This dynamic offers important insights into the reproduction of gender roles within the cinematic narrative structure. These films tend to follow the official historical narrative, combining archival footage and voice-over narration to shape collective memory. In doing so, they blur the lines between reality and representation, allowing fiction to gain documentary-like authority. The way documentaries and fiction are brought together turns cinema into more than just a form of art. It becomes a means of shaping how the past is remembered, internalized and emotionally experienced by the audience. As a result, the visual and thematic strategies used in these films function as instruments of cultural transmission. In this context, films about the War of Independence play a major role in the construction of national memory and allow the audience to engage with and reproduce a shared sense of identity that aligns with dominant historical narratives and values upheld by the state.

Keywords: The Turkish War of Independence, National Identity, Historical Memory, Ideological Representation, Militarism and Cinema

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Kamera, Arşiv, Ulus: Kurtuluş Savaşı Filmlerinde Temsilin Kurumsallaşması*

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Kurtuluş Savaşı filmlerinin anlatım yapısını ve ideolojik temsillerini incelemektedir. Araştırmanın temel amacı, bu filmlerin yalnızca savaşın görsel anlatımını sunmakla kalmayıp aynı zamanda ulus-devlet inşasında üstlendikleri işlevi ortaya koymaktır. Çalışma kapsamında film anlatılarında öne çıkan kahramanlık, vatanseverlik ve fedakârlık gibi temalar analiz edilmiş, özellikle asker figürünün ideal yurttaş modeliyle nasıl özdeşleştirildiği irdelenmiştir. Bu bağlamda asker, yalnızca savaş alanında mücadele eden bir figür değil, aynı zamanda disiplinli, özverili ve otoriteye bağlı bir birey olarak yüceltilmiştir. Kadın karakterlerin ise çoğunlukla aşk, sadakat ya da fedakârlık çerçevesinde ikincil rollerde konumlandığı görülmüştür. Bu durum, toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin sinemasal düzlemde nasıl yeniden üretildiğine dair önemli ipuçları vermektedir. Bu dönemde çekilen filmlerin anlatı yapısında resmi tarih söylemiyle paralel bir kurgunun izleri dikkat çekmekte, arşiv görüntüleri ve dış ses anlatımıyla kolektif hafızaya yön veren bir yapı kurulmaktadır. Belge ile kurmacanın iç içe geçtiği bu yapımlar, sinemayı yalnızca bir sanat formu olarak değil, aynı zamanda tarihsel hafızanın şekillendirildiği ideolojik bir araç olarak işlevselleştirmiştir. Bu sayede izleyici, yalnızca geçmişi seyretmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda nasıl hatırlanması gerektiğine dair yönlendirilmiş bir bakış açısı geliştirir. Sonuç olarak Kurtuluş Savaşı filmleri, toplumsal belleğin inşasında önemli bir rol üstlenmiş, izleyiciye ulusal kimlik algısını yeniden üretme imkânı sunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kurtuluş Savaşı, Ulusal kimlik, Tarihsel Bellek, İdeolojik Temsil, Militarizm ve Sinema

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Introduction

The arrival of cinema in Türkiye represented not only the introduction of a new form of entertainment to the public, but also the birth of one of the most effective tools of visual expression for the newly established Republic. Early Turkish cinema was not limited to the transmission of individual stories but also took on an ideological function that contributed to the shaping of national identity. The emergence of cinema as a medium of communication during this period was directly related to the new regime's efforts to present itself to the public.

Films centred on the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923) not only served as reminders of the great struggle of the past but also produced narratives that united the people around shared emotions. Thus, cinema went beyond being a mere tool for recording experiences and played a decisive role in shaping collective memory. These productions, which glorified the resistance at the front and the self-sacrifice of the people, constructed the process of a nation's rebirth through heroism, self-sacrifice, and love of country.

Towards the end of the 1940s, there was a revival of films on the theme of the War of Independence in Turkish cinema. One of the most notable examples of this period is the 1948 film *İstiklal Madalyası* (Independence Medal). This film is considered a sign that the spirit of national struggle was being brought back to the forefront in cinema, even though a long time had passed since the war (Şener, 1970a, p. 76). During the same years, adaptations of Halide Edip Adıvar's novels also frequently appeared on the silver screen. Works such as *Ateşten Gömlek* and *Vurun Kahpeye* are important not only for their literary success but also for reinforcing the ideological function of cinema (Scognamillo, 1998, p. 68; Önder & Baydemir, 2005, p. 120).

One of the striking commonalities in the film adaptations of this period is that they focus not only on the struggle at the front lines of war, but also on individual conflicts such as love, sacrifice, and moral stance. *Vurun Kahpeye* is one of the most prominent examples of this approach. The teacher's character at the center of the novel and film represents both the ideal of modernisation and the cultural aspect of national resistance. These productions have contributed to the reproduction of national identity through cinema while adapting the dramatic structure of literary works into cinematic language (Maktav, 2006, p. 7). It is evident that the War of Independence films, which are adaptations of novels, do not merely transfer a literary text to the cinema but also visually reconstruct national values through these texts. While addressing individual emotions and

human conflicts on the one hand, films become a tool that reinforces national identity on the other. Thus, the connection established between literature and cinema allows the viewer not only to watch a story but also to emotionally connect with certain historical and cultural values. The messages conveyed through film characters offer a more effective narrative by concretizing the spirit of national struggle within individual lives.

Adaptations of Halide Edip's works also shed light on the position of female characters in the national narrative. In the film *Ateşten Gömlek* (The Shirt of Flame¹), the female character is positioned as both a romantic figure and an active resistance fighter. Although this narrative style signals a new direction in the representation of women in Turkish cinema, it is generally framed by a male-centred discourse of national heroism (Teksoy, 2007, p. 17). Film adaptations of Halide Edip's works offer important clues for understanding the place of female characters in the narratives of the War of Independence. As in the film *Ateşten Gömlek*, women are depicted not only as figures involved in emotional relationships, but also as individuals who actively participate in the struggle. Although this gives the impression of a stronger and more independent image of women in the cinema of the period, the overall structure of the narratives is still shaped by a discourse centred on male heroism. The resistance and sacrifice shown by women often serve as a backdrop that complements the story of male characters. Therefore, although female representation appears to be a strong figure, it is mostly constructed within the boundaries of a male-centred national narrative. Thus, we can say that female characters are often instrumentalised in the service of national ideology.

To make the analysis more grounded, it is important to briefly introduce the film and the character at the center of the discussion. One of the key examples is *Ateşten Gömlek* (The Shirt of Flame), adapted from Halide Edip's novel and released in 1923. Directed by Muhsin Ertuğrul, this film tells the story of Ayşe, a woman who joins the national resistance after losing her family during the war. Ayşe works as a nurse, but her role is not limited to caregiving. She also takes part in the armed struggle and shows a determined and courageous stance.

¹ This is the commonly used English translation of the Turkish novel and film *Ateşten Gömlek*. It is also occasionally referred to as *The Daughter of Smyrna* in certain academic and archival sources, reflecting the protagonist's origin and emphasizing her connection to the city of İzmir. For a historical overview of these translation titles, see Enginün (1972).

Although her character is strong and committed, her actions are often shaped in relation to the male figures around her, especially Peyami and Major İhsan. This creates a dual image. On one side, Ayşe is portrayed as a powerful figure. On the other, her story is still embedded in a male-centered narrative of heroism and sacrifice. Her strength and emotional presence contribute to the larger message of national unity, but she is rarely allowed to exist independently within the storyline.

The increase in the number of films about the War of Independence observed after the 1940s once again revealed that cinema is not only a form of entertainment but also a cultural apparatus² with the power to guide society (Althusser, 2014). The adaptation of literary works to cinema has grounded the fictional structure of cinema in a historical and cultural foundation, while also conveying the political discourse of the period to the audience through these adaptations. In this sense, post-1940 War of Independence cinema should be evaluated not only as a genre but also as a memory strategy (Odabaş, 2006, p. 208). During this period, the adaptation of literary works such as novels to cinema allowed the events being narrated to be presented not only as fictional but also within a historical context. Through these films, the political messages of the period were conveyed to the audience directly or indirectly. For this reason, post-1940 War of Independence films can be evaluated not only as a historical genre but also as a form of memory that aims to remind the audience of the past from a certain perspective.

The films that emerged during this period showed technical development and were able to process ideological discourses in a more layered manner. Cinematic narratives developed through novel adaptations ensured the continuity of the national historical narrative and offered the audience a sense of historical continuity with a familiar hero type. This structure proves once again that cinema was used both as a visual memory and an ideological tool.

The structures that played a role in the institutionalisation of cinema, the first films shot, the ideological references they carried, and their visual narrative forms will be discussed. In particular, the contributions of the institutions of the period, especially the Merkez Ordusu Sinema Dairesi (Central Army Cinema Department), the state-army cooperation in film production processes, and the common narrative patterns of the first representations will be evaluated in detail.

² This concept aligns with Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses. For a Turkish case study that critically engages with media as ideological apparatuses, see Atay (2018).

Thus, it will be revealed how the films of the War of Independence functioned not only in the history of cinema but also in terms of the visual language of the ideology of the Republic.

Studies on early Republican Turkish cinema have contributed significantly to the analysis of ideological structures and the representation of national history from various perspectives. One of the early examples in this field is Serhan Mersin's study titled *Kurtuluş Savaşı Filmleri ve Millî Hamaset* (Films on the Turkish War of Independence and National Heroism, 2011), which examines how nation-building is portrayed in Turkish War of Independence films through the lens of cultural and ethnic homogenization. However, unlike Mersin's work, this article focuses not only on national identity but also explores the ideological structure of cinematic narrative through archival footage, voice-over narration, and representations of gender.

In this context, the edited volume *Erkek Millet Asker Millet* (Man Nation, Soldier Nation, 2013) by Nurseli Yeşim Sünbuloğlu provides a multi-dimensional analysis of compulsory military service in Türkiye with respect to its historical, cultural, and gendered aspects. The book demonstrates how the representations of military service and masculinity are embedded in everyday life and shows that militarism is reproduced not only through state policies but also within the layers of social life. The chapter titled *Bir 'Aşkınlık' Anlatısı Olarak Şimal Yıldızı...* by Tebessüm Yılmaz-Wilke analyzes the 1954 film *Şimal Yıldızı* through themes of transcendence and gendered imagery within a nationalist discourse. Another chapter by Güven Gürkan Öztan, titled *Türkiye'de Milli Kimlik İnşası Sürecinde Militarist Eğilimler ve Tesirleri*, offers a comprehensive discussion on the role of militarist ideologies in the construction of national identity.

Similarly, Çiğdem Akgül's work *Militarizmin Cinsiyetçi Suretleri: Devlet, Ordu ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet* (2021) investigates how militarist discourse reproduces gender hierarchies and associates female identity with national ideals such as honor and virtue. Mustafa Kemal Sancar's *Popüler Türk Sinemasının İdeolojik Dönüşümü* (2023) explores how ideological shifts in popular Turkish cinema are connected to broader social transformations. Ekrem Çelikiz's 2024 study, which analyzes the film *Vice* using Louis Giannetti's ideological model, is a recent example that questions the relationship between cinema and political ideologies.

This article differs from previous research in that it specifically focuses on the Turkish War of Independence period and examines how early Republican

films institutionalized national memory through the use of archival footage and representations of gender within the cinematic narrative.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative content analysis approach. A selected group of early Republican films, such as *Ateşten Gömlek* (1923), *Ankara Postası* (1928) and, *Bir Millet Uyanıyor* (1932) were analysed based on their frequent citation in the literature and their function in shaping collective memory. These films were chosen due to their use of archival material, ideological positioning, and contribution to the visual formation of national identity.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to explore how early Republican Turkish films contribute to the formation of national memory and ideological meaning. The analysis is based on a group of films that are frequently cited in literature for their narrative structure and ideological emphasis. Specifically, *Ateşten Gömlek* (The Shirt of Flame, 1923), *Ankara Postası* (Ankara Post, 1928), and *Bir Millet Uyanıyor* (A Nation Awakens, 1932) were selected for their use of archival footage, symbolic imagery, voice-over narration, and their focus on themes such as heroism, sacrifice, and national unity. These films were not only chosen for their historical relevance, but also for the way they visually shape collective memory and reflect the ideological discourse of the early Republican period. The analysis also focuses on how characters are represented, particularly in relation to gender and militarism, through cinematic elements such as narrative structure, visual symbolism and documentary techniques.

In this context, the selected films reflect not only the ideological orientations of their period but also the cinematic modes of narration. Character representations were analysed with a focus on the construction of masculinity through the figure of the soldier and the positioning of female characters within the narrative. Specific scenes were interpreted by examining the roles assigned to characters, the values they embody, and how these representations align with the broader project of national identity formation. This analysis includes not only thematic elements, but also visual and auditory techniques used in films. In doing so, the study aims to understand how cinema reproduces ideological perspectives by narrating history and reshaping how the past is perceived.

The main characters in the selected films stand out as symbolic figures that reflect the ideological values of the period. In *Ateşten Gömlek* (The Shirt of Flame,

1923), the character Ayşe is portrayed by Bedia Muvahhit, who became one of the first female actresses in Turkish cinema history with this role. Through the characters of Peyami (Ahmet Refet) and Major İhsan (Muhsin Ertuğrul), the film reinforces a narrative of nationalist masculinity. In *Ankara Postası* (Ankara Post, 1928), the characters Kudret and Osman represent disciplined, devoted, and resilient male figures, while the betrayal of the female character Necmiye is framed within the context of loyalty to the national cause. In *Bir Millet Uyanıyor* (A Nation Awakens, 1932), instead of an individual protagonist, the emphasis is placed on collective heroism. Actors such as Nazım Zeki, Mahmut Moralı, and Feriha Tevfik embody figures symbolizing the awakening of the nation. Across these films, female characters are mostly depicted through themes of devotion, sacrifice, and national consciousness, whereas male characters are idealized through their warrior identities.

The Ideological Function of Early Turkish Cinema

In the early days of Turkish cinema, film was positioned not only as a means of entertainment or art, but also as an ideological tool serving the construction process of the newly established nation-state. During this period, film production aimed to produce narratives that were compatible with the social goals of the state rather than individual creativity. Especially in the early years of the Republic, cinema was used to strengthen the sense of national unity and solidarity, introduce the public to the values of the new regime, and guide them towards modernisation ideals (Odabaş, 2006, p. 208). The visual power of cinema was used to glorify themes such as heroism, self-sacrifice, and patriotism; the emotional world of the audience was shaped around these values through the narratives presented to them.

The close relationship established with the state during the film production process led to cinema being positioned not only as a cultural production field but also as a vehicle for official ideology. In this context, cinema served as apparatuses that enabled individuals to reproduce their national identities and also reshaped the narratives of the past according to the political needs of the present. Early films, particularly those dealing with the War of Independence, were designed to construct social memory and awaken nationalist sentiments in viewers, thus transforming the heroic stories of the past into today's sense of citizenship through cinema (Maktav, 2006, p. 7). At this point, it is necessary to focus not only on the historical reality of the past but also on which aspects of it are remembered. This is because cinema constructs the events it

chooses to remember within a narrative sequence, while consciously leaving out those it chooses to forget. As Maktav (2006) emphasises, this selective narrative practice shows that films are not merely historical documents but are part of an ideological rewriting process. Therefore, the figures, events, and themes we are accustomed to seeing in films themed around the War of Independence provide indirect answers to critical questions such as what national identity is based on and which fragments of memory are considered part of a shared past. Heroic narratives not only glorify a past struggle but also reinforce contemporary citizenship identity on an emotional level by enabling the audience to identify with that heroism.

Early Turkish cinema was shaped within an ideological framework, with its historical narratives, character typologies, and symbolic elements, leading to its evaluation as a field that developed in tandem with the state. This situation can be clearly observed through the film production conditions of the period, producer-state collaborations, and institutional support networks (Şener, 1970a, p. 76). Based on Şener's observation, cinema is not merely an artistic activity but a direct carrier of a state-supported narrative regime. Films not only visualised the legitimacy of the regime but also took on a visual pedagogical function, suggesting to the audience which ideals to pursue. The representation of the state's founding values on the cinematic plane has been reinforced by historical tales of heroism, army-centric figurations, typologies representing the resistance of the people, and dramatic presentations of victories over the enemy. These narratives are mostly structured around the national resistance that developed in Anatolia against the occupation of Istanbul, and the emotional involvement of the audience is ensured through elements frequently used in films, such as flags, marches, and voiceovers. As Şener points out, this structure reveals that the production of ideological content was organised in a state-guided manner, beyond the technical capabilities of cinema. This shows that early Turkish cinema was not only a cultural field but also an important medium through which the state re-established its symbolic order.

The Place of the War of Independence in Social Memory

The War of Independence has established itself in the collective memory of Turkish society not only as a historical turning point, but also as one of the cornerstones of national identity. This war is not merely remembered as a military victory, but as a symbol of resistance and rebirth shaped by the will of the people. Therefore, the way the war is remembered goes beyond individual

memories and is intertwined with a cultural and ideological framework that builds a sense of shared history.

As defined by scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs (1992), social memory refers to the collective processes through which societies remember, reinterpret, and transmit the past in ways that serve current cultural or political needs. Social memory is not merely the recollection of the past as it was, but the re-enactment of memory in certain forms. The place of the War of Independence in memory is, in this context, not merely a reflection of what was experienced, but a practice of remembrance shaped by official historical discourse. As Benedict Anderson (2006) argues, nations are imagined communities in which individuals perceive themselves as part of a larger collective not because of direct personal interactions, but through shared symbols, narratives and rituals. In this sense, the War of Independence becomes one of the foundational myths around which this imagined unity is constructed. Its commemoration in various cultural forms, including cinema, functions as a medium through which national belonging is both remembered and reproduced. Especially in the early years of the Republic, narratives about this war were reproduced in various fields, from education to literature, from museology to cinema, and embedded in the collective memory of the masses (Özgüç, 1998, p. 8). In this process, the commemoration of the past was not limited to producing emotional attachment or nostalgia but also involved systematic guidance on which past to remember and how to remember it. Certain aspects of the war were highlighted in the education curriculum, themes such as heroism and sacrifice were centralised, and a common national narrative was shaped instead of the diversity of individual experiences. This narrative has made itself felt not only in history books but also in many areas of daily life. Commemorative ceremonies, national holidays, marches, and state-sponsored cultural events have served to continuously reproduce this memory. The institutionalisation of memory in this way shows how not only the past but also the present is constructed. The position of the War of Independence in memory does not merely represent a period of time. It functions as a foundation that ensures the continuity of national unity. This historical experience, reinforced by narratives, is transmitted not only as historical knowledge but also as part of a social identity. Thus, war becomes not merely an event that took place in the past but an effective tool in shaping today's sense of citizenship.

The widespread use of mass media such as cinema has enabled the official narrative to reach a wider audience. The historical scenes recreated on cinema screens have deepened the emotional and intellectual connection between

viewers and the war. Shaped by the impact of visual narration, this memory has left a more lasting impression than the narratives in written texts; thus, the audience has not only gained knowledge but also identified with a feeling. At this point, memory has become not just a transfer of information but also a transfer of identity established through emotion. The themes of heroism, sacrifice and unity, which are often emphasised in the narratives of the War of Independence, are not merely recollections of the past, but also values that nourish today's sense of citizenship. Thanks to these narratives, even though war is not a living experience for the new generations, it has become an emotionally shared past. Society has been directed to remember not the historical traumas but the victory, resistance, and national honour through these narratives; thus, in collective memory, the War of Independence has become a unifying and pride-inspiring common ground.

Visual materials have had a significant impact on the construction of this memory. Photographs, documents and, in particular, film footage and newspapers from the war period have visualised the past beyond oral narratives and written sources. In addition to visual materials such as photographs and film footage, the local press also played a significant role in shaping public memory during the War of Independence. Newspapers of the time, which Atatürk famously referred to as “islands of virtue,” contributed to documenting the resistance and emotionally engaging the public.³ This visual heritage has created an emotional connection without detaching itself from historical reality; it has served to convey the spirit of the war more powerfully to the viewer or reader. In particular, the images used in the cinema archives of the period have been one of the main factors determining how the war would be remembered (Evren, 1995, p. 74-75). According to Evren's assessment, the use of archive images not only to document the War of Independence but also as tools to shape memory reveals the historical and ideological function of cinema. These images, shot immediately after the war, went beyond directly conveying the spirit of the era and also set the framework for how a war memory would be constructed for future generations. In particular, images recorded through official institutions visually highlighted carefully selected events such as popular resistance, military victories, or rally scenes, thus establishing a narrative that guided the viewer's emotional response. This situation shows that cinema functions not only as an aesthetic field but also as an effective memory technology in shaping social

³ See Atay, T. (2020). *Asi'deki Fazilet Adaları: Hatay yerel basını*. İstanbul: Ezgi Matbaacılık.

memory. The reuse of the same images in fictional films made in subsequent years reveals that war was not merely a period of reality but a constantly reproduced field of meaning. In this sense, archival materials were evaluated not only as historical records but also as strategic tools for determining how the past would be remembered, establishing not only a visual connection but also a powerful emotional connection between the audience and history. Thus, the War of Independence has become not merely a narrated history but a shared past that is felt and embraced.

The Historical Background of Films about the War of Independence

When examining the historical development of cinema in Türkiye, it is evident that the technological transfer process signified not only a change in tools but also the beginning of a cultural transformation. Cinema first arrived in the Ottoman Empire in 1894 through Edison's invention, the Kinetoscope, which allowed a single person to watch films, marking society's first encounter with cinema. Shortly thereafter, with the introduction of the cinematograph device, collective viewing became possible, and in 1896, the first public screening was held in Istanbul, organised by the French Embassy (Özuyar, 2004, p. 14-19). This historical threshold paved the way for cinema to emerge not only as a technical innovation but also as a representational space intertwined with the ideology of modernisation.

The state's institutional intervention in the field of cinema became evident with the establishment of the Central Army Cinema Department in 1915, thus transforming cinema from a mere form of entertainment into a propaganda tool organised by the army and serving ideological functions. This structure, established as a result of War Minister Enver Pasha's influence from cinema units affiliated with the army during his trip to Germany, played a pioneering role in the institutionalisation of cinema in Türkiye (Onaran, 1999, p. 14). This institutional transformation, as highlighted by Onaran, demonstrates that cinema in Türkiye began to be systematically directed by a central authority for the first time. The establishment of the Central Army Cinema Department led to cinema being used not only as a technical activity but also as a direct ideological tool. This structure was not limited to simply making films but also developed a strategic framework for which images would be recorded, how they would be edited, and which messages would be conveyed to the audience. One of the main objectives behind the establishment of the department was to promote the idea

that war was not merely a military struggle, but also a propaganda process aimed at gaining the support of the people. In this context, cinema became an important tool for communicating successes on the front lines to the public, raising morale and strengthening national consciousness. Enver Pasha's attempt to adapt the army-cinema integration he observed in Germany to Türkiye was not merely a technical imitation but also an ideological decision to integrate cinema into the political climate of the time. This development was an early indication that cinema would be established as a state-supported field in Türkiye and that activities in this field would be shaped within the framework of national discourse for a long time to come.

In addition to the Central Army Cinema Department, civil organisations such as the National Defence Society and the Disabled Veterans Society, which appeared to be civilian but worked closely with the state, were also active in the field of cinema. They carried out work aimed at strengthening the sense of national unity in society, particularly during wartime, through the documentary and news films they produced. The cinema activities initiated by the National Defence Society during the Balkan Wars took on a documentary role, especially during the War of Independence, and these visuals were used as source footage in later films. The Disabled Veterans Association, on the other hand, pioneered the first private production initiatives by utilising the technical equipment left over after the war, thus ensuring the institutional development of film production (Scognamillo, 1987, p. 68). This historical development, as emphasised by Scognamillo, is significant in that it shows that film production was organised not only by the state but also through semi-civil structures closely related to it. The Disabled Veterans Association's efforts to continue production despite technical limitations indicate that the cinema activities of the period were intended to be sustainable not only aesthetically but also ideologically and economically. Thanks to these institutions, the visual representation of the war gained continuity, and film production became an effective tool for bringing official history to the public.

The cinema activities carried out by institutions such as the Central Army Cinema Department, the National Defence Association, and the Disabled Veterans Association were not limited to technical production but also produced narratives that determined how the audience approached historical events. Film production and distribution during this period were carried out under the direct supervision of state institutions, and a close collaboration developed between military authorities and civilian filmmakers, particularly in war-themed

productions. This situation was decisive in shaping the relationship between producers and the state in Turkish cinema, making the use of cinema as an ideological and historical tool permanent. The fact that the first examples of films on the War of Independence mostly progressed with structures close to documentaries and that these visuals later formed the basis for fictional films shows that cinema functioned not only as an aesthetic form but also as a state-supported space for memory production (Evren, 1995; Özuyar, 2004). This demonstrates that early Republican cinema did not merely reflect historical consciousness but actively participated in its formation by aligning cinematic narratives with official memory politics.

The historical background of the War of Independence films reveals not only a technical and institutional process, but also how the political ideology of the period was circulated through cinema. The decisive role of military and semi-civilian institutions in film production paved the way for cinema to be conceived not only as a documentary tool, but also as a guiding one. This orientation continued to exert its influence in fictional productions made in subsequent years. We can say that the representation of historical events was reconstructed within a militaristic framework and with specific narrative codes. Therefore, early War of Independence films are notable not only for their technical capabilities but also for their narrative structures, which were shaped by ideological preferences. These structures explicitly carry the aesthetic and content-level codes of militaristic discourse (Uçakan, 1977; Mersin, 2011). This reveals that early cinematic portrayals of the War of Independence were not simply artistic interpretations of the past, but intentional narratives shaped by ideological concerns. These films did more than tell a story; they instructed viewers on how to remember history and what values to embrace. Through recurring themes such as heroism, unity, and sacrifice, the cinematic language helped define the image of the ideal citizen in the eyes of the new Republic. Rather than offering a neutral perspective, the films functioned as tools that guided the emotional and political imagination of the audience.

Codes of Militaristic Discourse in Early Films

The first films made during the early Republican period were not limited to merely visualising historical events but were also shaped by militaristic rhetoric that made the ideological orientation of the new regime visible. These films were imbued with representations that exalted values such as heroism, sacrifice, discipline and national unity, in keeping with the political atmosphere of the

time. In particular, productions such as *Ateşten Gömlek* (1923), *Ankara Postası* (1928) and *Bir Millet Uyanıyor* (1932) relied on similar narrative patterns, influenced by both technical capabilities and political direction. The characters that come to the fore in these productions are generally male figures who are identified with the army, who fight for their country and who, when necessary, give up their individual desires. This narrative of masculinity serves to create not only a heroic individual but also a character type that represents the nation. War is presented not only as a physical conflict but also as a social laboratory where the ideal male citizen is tested and matured (Önder & Baydemir, 2005, pp. 120–121). Önder and Baydemir's assessment is extremely important in that it shows that the cinema works produced in the early Republican period were not limited to serving as historical documents but also conveyed the dominant ideological codes of the period to society through cinematic forms. The male figures in these films are not only defined by their personal traits but also by the symbolic weight they carry. As characters who fight for their country, suppress personal desires, and embody discipline and obedience, they reflect the idealised citizen model promoted by the early Republican regime. In this sense, cinema does not merely offer entertainment or an aesthetic experience; it also functions as a pedagogical tool that determines which behavioural patterns will be identified with civic identity. This model is clearly repeated in films such as *Ateşten Gömlek*, *Ankara Postası* and *Bir Millet Uyanıyor*. In the stories, individual desires are often suppressed, even romantic relationships are shaped under the shadow of national duty, and the value of a character is measured not by their love but by their choice to prioritise the nation. This situation reveals that masculinity is redefined not through physical strength or emotional intensity but through self-sacrifice and loyalty to duty.

Another prominent feature of early cinema is that characters are almost without exception presented with a military identity. This reinforces the idea that the male citizen model can only be tested and matured in a war environment. Thus, war takes on meaning not only as a context for national defence, but also as a space of transformation where the individual character achieves ideological maturity. This perspective provides a framework for explaining how early Turkish cinema constructed its vision of citizenship.

Masculinity is not a fixed identity but rather a phenomenon that is reshaped according to the context in which it is found and manifested in practice (Whitehead & Barret, 2004, p. 18). Whitehead and Barret's definition of masculinity as a structure that is acted out contextually rather than as a fixed and

universal identity is extremely important in terms of gender theory. This approach reveals that masculinity cannot be considered as something innate or biological, but rather as something that is constantly reproduced according to social, cultural and historical conditions. Masculinity is not a characteristic that individuals carry with them in the same way in every environment, but rather a form of behaviour that is displayed and approved of according to certain norms within social relations. Therefore, when masculinity is identified with a certain form of authority, power or dominance, this reflects not only the individual's identity but also the social structure in which they are embedded.

The representation of masculinity in films about the War of Independence takes the form of a hero defending the homeland, a warrior attacking the enemy, or a figure experiencing dissolution amid losses and sacrifices. In this context, masculinity is not only an individual identity but also a social role and representation that circulates through national ideologies, official historical narratives, and militaristic discourses. Another striking feature of these films is the intertwining of official history and the fictional plane of cinema. The flow of the stories is based on historical chronology, and the narration of events is structured in parallel with official historical discourse, emphasising the absoluteness of victory and the clarity of the enemy. This narrative form has served to guide the public's perception of history; cinema has become an emotional and visual counterpart to history books.

The voice-over used in the narrative structure of films has sometimes produced documentary-like objectivity, and at other times a nationalistic rhetoric. As seen in the film *Bir Millet Uyanyor* (A Nation Awakens), the narrative of the War of Independence is based not only on fictional elements, but also on a sense of reality supported by archival footage (Mersin, 2011, p. 41). The structure emphasised by Mersin reveals that cinema is not merely a narrative medium that dramatises historical events but also positions itself as a visual carrier of official historical discourse. The use of archival footage in productions such as *A Nation Awakens* blurs the boundaries between fiction and documentary, presenting the viewer with a powerful sense of reality. This method makes the historical accuracy of the events being narrated unquestionable, reinforcing the viewer's emotional connection to the film. The commentary delivered through voice-over may sometimes appear to be that of a neutral narrator, but in most cases, it centres on a nationalist perspective, suggesting to the viewer what is important, what is true, and what should be glorified. Thus, cinema becomes not merely a narrative that lists events, but a strategy of remembrance that decides which

historical memories should be highlighted. In this sense, the film constitutes not only a representation of history, but also a powerful tool for shaping memory, determining how history should be remembered. Mersin's observation clearly demonstrates that cinema's relationship with historical reality is not a simple imitation, but rather an ideologically directed, selective form of narration.

As Wood (2013, p. 21) puts it, gender roles are not fixed and universal structures, but rather patterns of behaviour that are shaped by the cultural context and historical conditions to which they belong and can change over time. Wood's approach to gender roles provides an explanatory framework for understanding the representations of women and men in films about the War of Independence. In these films, male characters are mostly idealised as figures who fight, protect, or make sacrifices, while female characters are mostly limited to roles of love, loyalty, and support. However, if we consider that gender is not fixed but shaped by context, we can see that these representations are constructed according to historical and ideological preferences. Thus, films about the War of Independence reproduce a gender understanding that equates masculinity with heroism and relegates femininity to the background, in line with the dominant discourse of a particular period. This shows that the films not only convey historical events but also select and re-construct the social roles associated with those events.

The representation of women in films of this period was also shaped within the boundaries of militaristic discourse. Female characters were generally included in the narrative either as objects of love or as self-sacrificing figures. In the film *Ateşten Gömlek*, adapted from Halide Edip Adıvar's novel of the same name, the female character's participation in the resistance and her role in a love story may portray her as an active subject, but the narrative still centres on the male hero's story. The female character has become an element that reinforces the male hero's emotional motivation. These narratives also present a sharp distinction between good women, who represent the innocent and combative nature of Anatolia, and bad women, who reflect the corrupt face of Istanbul under occupation. This dual opposition creates an ideological structure that offers not only a spatial distinction but also a moral and national choice (Teksoy, 2007, p. 17). Teksoy's observation reveals that representations of women in early Turkish cinema are not only defined by individual character traits but also by the ideological roles they assume within the national discourse. The fact that the female figure in *Ateşten Gömlek* appears to take on an active role does not mean that she is at the centre of the narrative. On the contrary, even if this figure

participates in the resistance, she cannot attain the position of the main subject that determines the direction of the narrative and is generally positioned in a way that makes the male hero's sacrifice appear more noble. This situation leads to the woman's existence gaining value not in its own right, but in the context of the male character's development and idealisation. The distinction between good women and bad women is presented not only through individuals but also in direct connection with place.

In films, Anatolian women are generally self-sacrificing, pure, and committed to national values. In contrast, Istanbul women are corrupted by the occupation, emotionally shallow, and morally questionable. This striking dichotomy not only offers the viewer a choice of characters but also sends a powerful message about which geography is acceptable in terms of national identity. Thus, the representation of women becomes a narrative tool that draws the moral map of the homeland beyond individual identity. This structure is the product of an ideological understanding of cinema that prefers to symbolise women rather than subjectify them.

Scholars such as Yuval-Davis (1997) argue that women are often symbolically positioned as bearers of national culture and morality. Enloe (2000) further asserts that militarism reproduces gender hierarchies by placing women either as supporters of the nation or as markers of its purity. Gledhill and Swanson (1996), similarly, point out that national narratives frequently instrumentalise femininity within male-dominated heroic frameworks. These perspectives deepen our understanding of how gender is constructed in nationalist cinematic discourse and support the claim that early Republican cinema marginalises female agency by framing women primarily as ideological symbols rather than active historical subjects.

Another striking feature of the narrative structure of early War of Independence films is the collective mobilisation of social emotions. These films prefer to highlight the story of the nation rather than the individual. The personal inner worlds or psychological conflicts of the characters are mostly suppressed, and instead collective values such as national unity, common goals and love of the homeland are placed at the centre. Thus, the figure with whom the audience identifies gains meaning not through their individual characteristics, but through their role as the bearer of a national ideal. This narrative orientation constructs a model of citizenship that aligns with the educational policies of the period; because cinema is positioned not merely as a tool for recounting the past, but as

a powerful ideological tool that visually constructs the vision of what kind of society is imagined. In this sense, early War of Independence films do not merely depict historical events; they also offer a national behavioral repertoire for future generations.

Within the militaristic cinema aesthetic of the period, symbols such as flags, marches, uniforms and voiceovers are frequently used. These elements are designed not only to create visual richness but also to instill a sense of national belonging in the audience. In the dramatic climaxes of films, the raising of the Turkish flag, heroes charging forward to the sound of marches, or messages of patriotism added to the narrative through voice-overs aim to engage the audience not only in a story but also in the national sentiment that the story represents. Such codes demonstrate that early Turkish cinema was shaped not only thematically but also narratively within an ideological framework. Thus, militarist discourse has become an integral part of the narrative structure, permeating not only the content but also the rhythm, visuals, and sound design of cinema.

The Cinematic Use of Archival Footage

Some thoughts expressed on the history of cinema have pointed out that this field is often unclear, full of uncertainties, and open to various interpretations (Card, 1950, p. 279). While this approach questions cinema's relationship with historical narratives, the picture is different when it comes to films about the War of Independence. Such productions rely not only on individual memory or fictional elements but also on archival documents, documentary-style images from the period, and the institutional structures that shape national memory. Therefore, ideological preferences that serve the institutionalisation of representation, rather than speculation, are decisive in the production processes of these films. In this respect, War of Independence films rely on a structured and directed narrative rather than the uncertainty that stands out in cinema history.

In early Republican cinema, archival footage served as a narrative practice that deliberately blurred the boundaries between documentary and fiction. The limited availability of existing records of the War of Independence led filmmakers to make use of both real footage and reenactments, thus reconstructing historical events within cinematic narratives. This situation led to films being positioned not only as tools for documenting the past, but also as tools for determining how that past would be remembered. As Şener points out, documentary films shot by institutions such as the Müdafaa-ı Milliye Cemiyeti

(National Defence Society) and the Malul Gaziler Cemiyeti (Disabled Veterans Society) were among the most valuable visual sources recorded during the heat of the war (Şener, 1970b, p. 15–16). Şener's observation shows that archival footage in early Turkish cinema did not merely serve a documentary function but also became a narrative element that supported the ideological direction of cinematic storytelling. The footage shot during the war years by institutions such as the National Defence Society and the Disabled Veterans Society went beyond visually recording the historical reality of the period and played a decisive role in shaping the national memory through the narratives constructed from these recordings. The archival footage used in these films not only carried the physical traces of the war but also became the visual carrier of a historical consciousness that was reconstructed through cinema. For this reason, these images were reinterpreted without departing from reality and were interwoven with fictional scenes in fictional films shot in different periods, enabling the audience to establish an emotional connection with the past. In particular, the repeated use of scenes that have become embedded in collective memory, such as war rallies, funerals, and military parades, has become a strategy that reinforces both a sense of familiarity and national unity.

The processing of archival footage in conjunction with the understanding of national identity means not only the evaluation of existing images but also the reproduction of specific historical narratives. Thus, cinema has become not merely a tool for collecting documents, but a dynamic medium of memory that transforms and presents historical events in line with the political and social needs of the present. These images have formed the aesthetic and narrative foundation of fictional films produced in subsequent years, becoming a vehicle that ensures the continuity of visual memory.

The reuse of archival footage in cinema is often integrated into a non-diegetic narrative structure, with the historical context conveyed to the audience primarily through voice-overs. These voices are usually used by narrators with an authoritative tone, coming from outside the time in which the events took place, thus presenting the audience with a narrative that not only makes them watch but also implies what they should think. Although this approach has an effect that undermines the neutrality of the image, it has guided memory in certain directions in line with the official ideology of the period. According to Erksan's assessment, the integration of wartime footage into dramatic films later on not only created an aesthetic effect on the audience but also served the ideological persuasion process through a sense of visual authenticity (Erksan,

1983, p. 11-12). Erksan's assessment clearly shows that we are talking not only about an aesthetic choice regarding the use of archival footage in cinema, but also about a conscious ideological steering strategy. The placement of real images from the war period within a dramatic structure ensured that the scenes were coded in the viewer's perception not as fiction, but as lived and therefore indisputable reality. This situation not only enhances the credibility of cinema but also distances the audience from critical thinking, directing them to emotionally attach themselves to a specific historical interpretation. The use of voice-over in this context is not merely a part of the narrative but also functions as a guiding authority. This voice, which speaks from outside the events rather than from within, not only explains what is happening but also gives the audience strong clues as to what is meaningful, what is heroic, and what is treacherous. Thus, the ideological balance established between image and sound transforms cinema from merely a form of representation into a space for the transmission of values.

Archival images function as tools that visualise not only traces of the past but also the political and cultural expectations of the present. These images become instrumental because they are used in a specific context. Thus, it becomes clear how cinema plays an active role in shaping historical memory. Therefore, every archival piece used in cinema is not merely a reminder but also a powerful directive on what should be remembered. Based on all these thoughts, we can say that archival images have become part of creating an emotionally compelling and politically functional cinematic language, rather than merely historical documents.

Conclusion

This study on the early period of Turkish cinema reveals how films themed around the War of Independence were positioned not only as aesthetic structures but also as political and ideological tools. The production processes of these films played a decisive role not only in terms of cinema art but also in terms of shaping the official memory constructed by the nation-state. The historical narrative established through cinema by many institutions, from the Central Army Cinema Department to the National Defence Society, from the Disabled Veterans Society to the Army Film Acquisition Department, reproduced the meaning of the war in the collective consciousness of the audience and created a visual discourse in line with the political orientations of the period.

The soldier figure that appears in the vast majority of productions on the War of Independence is not merely a character, but a visual representation of the idealised model of citizenship. These male characters are presented as individuals who fight for their country, suppress their emotions when necessary, and glorify self-sacrifice. For these figures, war is not merely a struggle on the battlefield but also a test of identity and a transformative process that reinforces national belonging. In this sense, the narrative of masculinity in cinema is not merely a gender-based representation, but also a model that embodies the cultural codes of the type of citizen desired by the state. This figure is not merely a hero of the past, but also an ideological symbol that ensures the continuity of the political imagination of that era.

Representations of women, on the other hand, generally lean towards two extremes. On one side are women who represent the moral purity and self-sacrifice of Anatolia, while on the other are women who reflect the corrupt face of Istanbul under occupation. In these representations, presented through love stories, the social role of female characters has often been shaped as a tool to strengthen the emotional motivation of the male hero. Thus, even women's participation in resistance has been presented within a framework that serves to glorify the heroism of men, suppressing the potential of women as independent subjects to shape the narrative. This situation is noteworthy in terms of understanding the reflections of the gender norms of that period in cinema. The official historical discourse used in film narratives is presented in a narrative form that does not disrupt the chronological order of events, defines the enemy with clear lines, and absolutises national victory. This narrative not only blurred the line between historical reality and fictional narrative but also reshaped the audience's perception of the past. The use of voice-over, particularly in productions such as *A Nation Awakens*, removed the audience from the position of mere spectators and created a narrative style that suggested how events should be interpreted. This has once again demonstrated that cinema is not only a tool for reviving the past, but also for interpreting and directing it.

The use of archive footage in these films is also noteworthy. The integration of real war footage or documentary-style scenes into dramatic narratives has not only given the films a sense of reality but has also placed this sense within an ideological context. The authoritative voiceover used during the presentation of these visuals has reinforced their impact, ensuring that the audience does not merely watch the past but also experiences it within a specific

emotional framework. This approach concretely demonstrates cinema's power to shape memory.

The use of literary works as an important source in the production of films about the War of Independence is another defining feature of this cinema history. Adaptations of Halide Edip Adivar's works have provided both content and emotional grounding for cinema, facilitating the establishment of a connection between the audience and the narrative. These adaptations have served as an important tool for transferring the ideological and aesthetic values of literary texts to cinema, while also strengthening the relationship between cinema and literature.

All these assessments show that films on the theme of the War of Independence are not merely productions that convey historical events but works that function as cultural instruments of nation building. Through these films, not only was a period narrated, but it was also determined how a form of remembrance of this period would be made permanent. The functional relationship established between the state and cinema should be evaluated not only as ideological guidance but also as a process of cultural heritage production. Therefore, each of these films should be considered not only as aesthetic or artistic works but also as tools that shape memory, contribute to identity construction, and transform social memory.

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