



## History and National Consciousness: A Critical Analysis of Kurdish Nationalist Historical Narratives

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### Abstract

This research evaluates the complex relationship between history, identity, and nationalism in the Kurdish context. It explores the challenges and motivations in the development of the nationalist narrative of Kurdish history writing. The primary objective of the research is to examine the role of these narratives in shaping national identity and their contribution to nation-building within a historical socio-political framework. While this study engages with the subject through the perspectives of constructivism, it is centered around three key tasks: analysis of the significance of history, in particular its role in defining national identity; exploring the relationship between historiography and political agendas, focusing on how historical narratives are manipulated for political incentives; and finally, a critical evaluation of Kurdish nationalist historical narratives, identifying their complexity and implications for contemporary Kurdish political conditions.

**Keywords:** Constructivism, History, Nationalism, Kurds, Kurdish History

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## Introduction

Famous historian Ibn Khaldun (2005) refers to the importance of history as:

*“History makes us acquainted with the conditions of past nations as they are reflected in their national character. It makes us acquainted with the biographies of the prophets and with the dynasties and policies of rulers. Whoever so desires may thus achieve the useful result of being able to imitate historical examples in religious and worldly matters”* (p. 11).

The important aspect of Ibn Khaldun’s definition of history is how the conditions of the past are reflected in the national character of societies. It makes it essential to know and understand a society; one should start by knowing its history, since the social, cultural, religious, linguistic, and political developments from the past are manifested in the present. In other words, a society’s historical background forms its current identity and social characteristics. Such importance is also emphasized by Ali Shariati, who argues that history is a movement flowing toward the future: the lifespan of the human species. Shariati states that just as an individual develops their personality and character throughout their life, from birth to the present, so too has the human species reached its present form throughout its lifespan, that is, within the history it inhabits. Therefore, history cannot be exaggerated; to use the language of existentialists, man is a being who acquires his essence in history. (Shariati, 2013, p. 89) Shariati’s definition sheds light on the importance of history in terms of not only the past but also the present. What forms the characteristics of a human is his experience throughout his past. Therefore, acknowledging and embracing history is crucial for societies to recognize and express their identities. It can be asserted that a society that is unaware of its past cannot fully understand its present ‘self’ or its significance within its geographical context.

Indeed, every society possesses a history, good or bad, or marked by victories or defeats. Ultimately, its significance diminishes, but what matters is how it is conveyed to the present and what influence it has. This is precisely where the issue of narrating history comes into play, which leads to history-writing, with the primary goal of integrating historical events with contemporary values. One of the most significant values is undoubtedly the construction and preservation of national consciousness. The best way to achieve this integration is by celebrating history with discourses such as the glorification of past events and personalities, their idealization, romanticization, and even involving falsification. For instance, the invasions led by

Genghis Khan and his successors throughout much of the world are widely recognized facts. However, despite this, Genghis Khan is still regarded as a national father among Mongols. Mongolian government promotes Genghis Khan as a symbol of national unity and independence. His picture is on the three highest denominations of Mongolian money. The ceremonial *ger* (yurt) located in the inner courtyard of Parliament houses a huge statue of the seated ruler; visiting dignitaries are brought here for 'photo-ups.' Right outside the legislative chamber on the first floor of Parliament, nine ceremonial 'banners' of white horsetails stand opposite a bust of Genghis Khan. (Sabloff, 2002, p. 36) Moreover, King Leopold II's reception among the Belgian people offers another example, whose legacy is filled with atrocities against the Congolese people. In June 2020, the group *Réparons l'Histoire*, Repair History, launched an online Change.org petition collecting more than 82.800 signatures, demanding that the city of Brussels remove all statues of King Leopold II. However, a counter-petition was launched, although it obtained far fewer signatures (21.250), against the removal. (Contested Histories, 2021) The case of Napoleon and Nazi Germany shows similar results. All in all, these facts give more meaning to the famous slogan in George Orwell's (1949, p. 19): "Who controls the past controls the future."

These facts are just as valid for nation-states as they are for communities striving for nation-building. Especially among the communities seeking self-determination, the significance of history can be leveraged for various purposes. In fact, asserting rights to a territory by referencing historical claims is often perceived as the only viable option. The experience of losing a territory perceived to be historically owned by a nation -likely through an event or a process that the nation and its people view as unjust and humiliating- can affect a nation's identity in a particularly powerful way. (Fang & Li, 2020, p. 345) A similar case occurs regarding the issue of self-determination. For an ethnic group, the primary goal in the process of nation-building is to establish control over a specific geographic area. And the first steps to justify this claim begin with demonstrating a historical sense of ownership.

In this case, one example of an ethnic group experiencing such processes is the Kurds, whose history has been shaped by serious events in the Middle East's socio-political context. Numerous studies have been conducted on Kurdish history by both Kurdish and non-Kurdish historians. These studies typically cover topics such as origin, homeland in historical context, cultural developments, and socio-political issues. Yet, when it comes to the interpretation of subjects such as certain events, myths, legends, and important figures, many questions remain

about how they are narrated. Given the crucial role of writing history in reinforcing national sentiment, in this case, Kurds are no exception. In Kurdish historical studies, this is particularly evident in the studies conducted by Kurdish historians. Due to factors such as oppression, denial, and state policies on culture and language, historians tend to challenge these policies by creating counter-narratives that oppose the dominant discourse.

The aim of this research is to identify the challenges associated with Kurdish history-writing, which have been influenced by socio-political factors. The primary objective of the study is to reveal the underlying motivations and ideological drives behind the development of nationalist narratives in Kurdish history writing.

The study is structured on several key tasks. Firstly, it observes history and history-writing through a *constructivist* perspective. Beginning by revisiting the theory of constructivism, the research evaluates the history-writing process through this prism. Secondly, it analyzes the importance of history in general, and particularly in a socio-political context. Within this context, it investigates the role of history in terms of national identity and nation-building.

Third, the research examines historiography in relation to political agendas. It investigates the factors and important components of historiography that are utilized for political ambitions.

Finally, the research provides a critical evaluation of the Kurdish nationalist historical narratives. It assesses these narratives in terms of their complexity of interpretations and their objectives in the contemporary Kurdish socio-political context.

The methodology of this research is based on a *literature review*. This review serves to analyze the theory of constructivism, both in general and specifically in relation to history and history-writing. Since this research is grounded on this method, the literature review covers all relevant aspects of the study, including the analysis of the concept of history and historiography, the accounts of historians who conducted studies on the Kurdish history, their interpretations and narratives that have emerged throughout various historical contexts. By examining the sources, the research identifies key subjects and debates within Kurdish historiography, as well as highlights the impact of constructivist theory on the understanding of historical events and their representations.

The study incorporates *comparative analysis* in different sections of the research. Although constructivism provides the research's general theoretical background, in debates such

as identity, ethnicity, and ethnic symbols, the comparative method is used to examine constructivism alongside the ethnicist and ethno-symbolist schools of thought.

The comparative analysis is also utilized in the evaluation of the narratives and interpretations of historical events and figures. In this regard, the accounts of Kurdish historians and academics such as Muhammed Emin Zeki Beg, Celile Celil, and Mehrdad Izady are analyzed alongside those of non-Kurdish historians such as Nikitine, Minorsky, and Bruinessen to examine how past events and figures are portrayed differently.

Lastly, the research includes *media analysis* in order to reveal how certain historical events and phenomena are reflected in the media.

### **1. Exploring History from a Constructivist perspective**

Constructivism can be simply defined as a framework in which social phenomena are products of social and cultural interactions. What it opposes is mainly the “naturalness” of the phenomena as they are influenced by cultural and social factors. In social studies, particularly in sociology, also known as social constructivism, it covers a variety of subjects such as reality, knowledge, objectives, and subjects that are related to social perception. Introduced by Berger and Luckman, constructivism argues that sociological interest in questions of “reality” and “knowledge” is thus initially justified by the fact of their social relativity” (Berger & Luckman, 1991, p. 15). Constructivism, in general, builds its arguments around the facts, or the notions that are accepted as facts, by challenging their existing understandings. The primary concern of constructivism, particularly of Berger and Luckman, is the reality of knowledge which occurs in the relationship between “knowledge” and “reality”. The authors examines these two elements in the framework of sociological interest, arguing that “in so far as all human “knowledge” is developed, transmitted, and maintained in social situation, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the process by which this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted ‘reality’ congeals for the man in the street. In other words, *we contend that the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality* (Ibid, p. 15)”. Thus, knowledge and reality, along with the reality of knowledge, differ according to social activities and their perceptions. This can be translated to the subjectivity of reality upon which knowledge is built.

One of the main discussions of constructivism evolves around two fundamental questions: objective and subjective. This school of thought suggests that objective and subjective are

primarily predicates of judgement. We often speak of judgements as being subjective when we mean that their truth or falsity cannot be settled objectively, because the truth or falsity is not a simple matter of fact but depends on certain attitudes, feelings, and points of view of the makers and the hearers of the judgement (Searle, 1995, p. 8). In Jackson and Sorensen's (2006, pp. 166-167) view, constructivists generally agree that they need to employ interpretive understanding in order to analyze social actions. But they are not in agreement about the extent to which it is possible to emulate the scientific ideas of the natural sciences and produce scientific explanations based on hypotheses, data collection, and generalization. On the one hand, constructivists reject the notion of the objective truth. Social scientist cannot discover a 'final truth' about the world which is true across time and space. On the other hand, constructivists do make truth claims about the subjects they have investigated, while admitting that their claims are always contingent and partial interpretations of a complex world.

When observing history, the constructivist school of thought brings the similar arguments into the discussion. The evolution of the constructivist view on history, as Leira and Carvalho (2016, p. 102) describes, to early constructivist, the central point of engaging history was to make the case for structural change. Accordingly, the first generation focused on macro-historical developments, using history as leverage to challenge the seemingly ahistorical truths of established scholarship. While the early constructivists were not necessarily united by identical approaches and understanding of the past, they shared an ontological commitment and a pluralist methodology. Ontologically, their focus was on showcasing the historical contingency of state and state-system, demonstrating how important the emergence of modernity was for our current predicament. Methodologically, the commitment was to showing how different sources and different ways of approaching sources lead to different results, accepting the multi-vocal character of history and thus the problem of looking to history for the 'facts', 'truth', or 'validity'.

One of the salient arguments of constructivism regarding history, is the question between fiction and facts and their role in history-writing which creates a complex structure in which interpretation is involved. Given the fact that the evidence of the past is essential for history, crafting a narrative around them becomes inevitable. As Williams (2012) puts it, "*Historical research is a process of discovery and construction. The historian investigates what happened in the past by researching the available evidence in order to establish the facts and the chronology*

of events. This evidence may include written records, archives, manuscript, maps, and documents, but also unwritten evidence- photographs, paintings, coins, records, tapes, videos, computer hard drives, and so on. The garbage of the past is everywhere. But from the very beginning, the historian must select and distinguish what is important and significant from what is unimportant and ephemeral. We discover evidence, but we construct a history” (p. 11). To simply put it, once an event takes place, the description and elaboration of the event becomes the duty of the narrator, in this case, historian. But one thing should be distinguished: constructivism, at least apart from the field of metaphysics, does not claim the falsity of history; it rather challenges the arguments built around the historical facts and the interpretations of the evidence and the meanings attributed to them. As Williams (2012) suggests, “*History seeks to understand and explain past events by interpreting their meaning. The historian seeks to discover order and structure in the chaos and messiness of the past. The historian also constructs order and structure by creating a narrative or an argument, based on verifiable evidence*” (p. 12).

Since historians live in a different time than the time when the event took place, their view on the historical evidence ultimately falls into their personal interpretation. In fact, interpretation is as important as the discovery for historian. The evidence should be described, explained, narrated; thus they form the general interpretation of the historian which ultimately leads to a constructed reality about the past. Nevertheless, as White (1973, p. 281) argues, the historian has to interpret his material in order to construct the moving pattern of images in which the form of the historical process is to be mirrored. And this is because the historical record is both too full and too sparse. On the one hand, there are always more facts in the record than the historian can possibly include in his narrative presentation of a given segment of historical process. And so the historian must “interpret” his data excluding certain facts from his account as irrelevant to his narrative purpose. On the other hand, in his efforts to reconstruct “what happened” in any given period of history, a historian inevitable must include in his narrative an account of some event or complex of events for which the fact that would permit a plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking. And this means that the historian must “interpret” his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds. While White emphasizes the importance of interpretation, he also demonstrates its involvement in the history-writing process in three ways:

- Aesthetically: in the choice of narrative strategy;

- Epistemologically: in the choice of an explanatory paradigm;
- Ethically: in the choice of a strategy by which the ideological implications of a given representation can be drawn for the comprehension of current social problems (1973, p. 307).

The result of the involvement of interpretation in three steps once again raises the question of objective and subjective. Indeed, the created style of history-writing by the historian, taking into account all the three ways of interpretation, one might be certainly sceptical about the objectivity of the narratives. Such style, once again in White's view (2014, p. 60), represents a particular combination of modes of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication.

Taking history and history-writing beyond the border of academic discipline, the efforts should serve a specific purpose. One of them indeed is to help shape public opinion about the past. What shapes this opinion the most is how the past is interpreted rather than simply how the past event occurred. The problem is that we access the past through frames of interpretation, and these frames have their own history. The assumptions, questions, silences, politics, and much else that have shaped history writing over time become evident. This does not mean that histories do not contain facts, only that they have certain facts, not others, and that they assign certain significance to those facts and not to others (Goddard et al. 2025, p. 281). Therefore, as in Nietzsche's (1957) view, *"To think objectively, in this sense, of history is the work of the dramatist: to think one thing with another, and weave the element into a single whole, with the presumption that the unity of plan must be put into the objects if it is not already there. So man veils and subdues the past, and expresses his impulse to art- but not his impulse to truth or justice. Objectivity and justice has nothing to do with each other. There could be a kind of historical writing that has no drop of common fact in it and yet could claim to be called in the highest degree objective"* (pp. 37-38).

From this point of view, constructivism cast doubt on the privileged nature of certain transforming rules, although they recognize the use of various transforming rules by means of which the creation of different ideas or pictures of the past are justified. The possibility of using various transforming rules leads historians to different meanings of facts or events, so that various depictions of reality arise. The plurality of historical pictures makes unclear the idea of one firm and "obvious" structure of the past. By making problematic the possibility of "uncovering" the

content or meaning of historical pictures of the past, the constructivist view of history emphasizes the problem of the relativity of historical knowledge (Such, 2017, p. 801).

## 2. Why history matters?

John Tosh (2015) begins this debate with the notion of collective memory. He argues that all societies have a collective memory, a storehouse of experience that is drawn for a sense of identity, and a sense of direction. Professional historians commonly deplore the superficiality of popular historical knowledge, but some knowledge of the past is almost universal; without it one is effectively excluded from social and political debate, just as loss of memory disqualifies one from much everyday human interaction. Our political judgments are permeated by a sense of the past, whether we are deciding between the competing claims of political parties or assessing the feasibility of particular policies. To understand our social arrangements, we need to have some notions of where they have come from. In that sense, all societies possess ‘memory’ (pp. 4-5). This can be translated as historical self-awareness. Alternatively, this self-awareness can also be interpreted as a historical existence. The reason behind that is that the most important characteristic that the memories of societies bestow upon them is their past which makes them who they are. With such characteristics, history no longer remains in the shadow of the past; it becomes a part of the present. In other words, history becomes the definition of today. One of the crucial roles of history in fostering self-awareness and self-recognition is its function as evidence. It raises questions about how an identity without a past can be perceived in the present. Therefore, every society that seeks to establish its “self” in the present first attempts to present a past.

As evident as it is, in the context of self-awareness with its relations to history, what emerges is the matter of identity as the primary question. Looking at debates on identity, particularly national identity, historical roots and values are among the main arguments that create a basic ground for the term. What forms a national identity, through *ethnicist* theories, elements such as a common language and culture, a shared historical territory, kinship, and bloodline are of primary importance to observe. In this context, Smith (1991) proposes five criteria to define a national identity:

- A named human population sharing a historic territory,
- Common myths and historical memories,

- A mass,
- Public culture,
- A common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members (p.14).

In another definition of national identity, Smith (2002) draws a similar picture which demonstrates the significance of history:

*“A named community possessing a historical territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture, and common laws and customs.”* (p. 15)

Both definitions emphasize the essential role of history in defining an ethnic group or nation. On the other hand, its relationship with historiography becomes clearer in both general and nationalist narratives when it is viewed as a political process, as represented by the *modernist* approach, which suggests that the factors of nation and nationalism are taken as an ideological or political position in history. Yet once again, Smith emphasizes the importance of historical roots by describing the element of *durability* in the construction of identity while explaining the historical origins of nations as perpetuating their identity, if not all of the nationalists. Thus, the people thought that nations had existed since the beginning of time and that even if nature was not itself, it was ingrained in the existence of man. As for nationalism, Smith (2009) argues that although nationalism is recent and new, nations are seen as extended forms of kinship, and therefore as old as the universal and family conception. And so, it emphasizes that the nation is both a category and a community structure, with its history and culture (p. 20).

After the French Revolution, along with the concepts of freedom and equality, the concept of national identity came to the fore, which in modernists view, is a new phenomenon. As a result, this event caused France and other European states to enter the process of “nationalization” after their monarchs, and it also affected all the world societies in the post-nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century (Şimşek, 2014, p. 2). No doubt, the doctrine of history was not invented in the 19th century, although it was re-developed in parallel with the acquisition of modern scientific disciplines. In this regard, it has become essential to highlight the specific characteristics of society and to emphasize the exact differences between “us” and “them” in order to build and to reinforce a national identity by employing certain events and phenomena from history, thus creating historiography. Such factors also lead us to view “us” and “them” with regard to national identity through a constructive perspective. Unlike the ethnicist view, which is keen on identity as an independent phenomena, constructivism brings identity into

the debate of nationalism. In this case, these concepts are constructed both socially and politically. Overlapping with modernist approach, what creates the center of this debate is the concept of nationalism; and national identity is perceived as a product of socio-political developments. That is why, as Anderson (1991) defines, it is an “imagined community” (p. 6). Kedourie (1994), on the other hand, views nationalism as a doctrine that was created in Europe in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (p. 9). Another argument is presented by Gellner (1964), who believes that nationalism is not the awakening of nation to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist (p. 169).

Looking at these definitions, one might suggest that they mainly refer to societies which found their place in a nation-state where the construction involves state policies. This indeed excludes societies which strive for self-determination and build their nation states. While in the case of nation-state, national identity is the subject of the state’s guarantee, in the case of the latter, it becomes the duty of the leaders. Yet for the leaders to create their arguments, what is needed the most is a narrative that would confirm their identity and justify the actions to win a status for the identity. This necessitates efforts to provide evidence from the past for the present claims. Such efforts, as, highlighted by Ibn Khaldun (2005), together with the necessity of considerable and much knowledge and right speculative mind, suggesting certain aspects such as, the principles resulting from customs, the fundamental facts of politics, the nature of civilization, and the conditions governing human organizations (p. 11). What is evident at this point is the true purpose of the presentation of a history and to what objectives it is deployed. Once again, in Shariati’s (2013) argument, “History is not the knowledge of the past. History is not the sum of events that occurred before. History is not the study of independent cultures, independent civilizations, independent societies, or specific tribes, nations, and races in a particular era. Indeed, history is not even the knowledge of the various changes and transformations of realities that emerged throughout different times and eras. History, for example, literary history, is not poetry or art that a writer, poet, or artist has given a certain form, direction, and meaning in the name of a historian, according to their own taste, beliefs, and ideals. History is not a mirror of lessons learned. History is not about talking about something that has already happened. History is a past that has shaped the present” (p. 89).

Another view which confirms the “constructed” nature of history can be observed in Engel’s (1977) statement which suggests that history starts with man, people make their own

history in person and with consciousness. He claims that people come close to making their history to the extent that they distance themselves from animals. The effect of unexpected factors and unchecked forces on this history is also reduced in the measure of human detachment from animals (p. 52). Under these circumstances, making a history depends on the human community's struggle to transform and use it to its advantage in the face of circumstances other than its own, the effects directed at it, the incalculable obstacles faced in the process of moving towards the intended purpose (Topakkaya, 2008, p. 387). In the struggle of national movements, it is possible to see all the advanced features of the process of making its own history of any human society and thus confirm Engels' theses of historical materialism. Moreover, from a Marxist perspective, 'human' is the main actor in the endeavor of history. History is immobile; all the conflicts within history are done by humans. Therefore, he says, real and living man, undoubtedly, is not history, using man to fulfill his goals - as if he were a person in his own right; history is nothing but the activity of man who runs after his own goals. (Jorge, 1998, p. 41). To narrow it down to the subject matter, the act of "writing history", which can be considered as part of the act of making history in particular, begins to acquire its general and distinctive national characteristics in this process. In Duara's (1995) words: "*Nations emerge as the subjects of History just as History emerges as the ground, the mode of being, of the nation*" (p. 27).

Another important matter is that, in addition to self-recognition and identity-building, societies also begin to differentiate themselves from others. A powerful tool in this process is the presentation of a history that is distinct from that of other societies developed through certain processes. Aysevener (2009) points out that the way for any society to 'separate' by organizing around the national-consciousness and by explicitly identifying the characteristics that distinguish itself from other national communities is through the intensifying expression of these processes, which can be considered "natural" and spontaneous. While these historical conditions are necessary and sufficient for the completion of the process of nationalization, the imperative condition for a nation to make its own existence "for itself" is that a national liberation ideology and policy become a material force. To this point, 'national history' is a meta- or master narrative of historical writing, i.e. the underlying script of 'historical culture' at a given time in a given country (p. 10). Such a narrative might retrace a remote past of foreign domination to a period when the nation allegedly struggled against such oppression and independence. Ultimately, this

fight was supposed to end in the creation of an independent state with a modernizing society (Simon, 2019, p. 183).

Despite the fact that postmodernism has introduced various interpretations of identity in contemporary society, as well as its relativity through constructivist view, many collectivist cultures still identify individuals primarily through their ancestry, meaning that a person's background is the essence for their status and dignity within the community; that is, the important role of individual history in defining who they are. On a broader scale, a nation's history influences its standing in both regional and international contexts. The historical narratives of societies, whether they pertain to ethnic groups or nations, reveal their identities to the world. History serves as both a collective 'memory' and a source of 'awareness,' enabling them to reflect on past experiences, understand their evolution, and comprehend the reasons behind their current circumstances. It encompasses a deep understanding as well as popular historical knowledge.

### **3. Writing history, making history**

Edward Hallett Carr (1987) defines history as a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past. (p. 30). Carr's definition not only represents a simple definition of history but also demonstrates the role of historians in making history. Indeed, such a role begs questions whether what presented are truly facts or merely fabrications of historical phenomena or their exaggerations. This presentation takes us back to White's (2014) constructivist thoughts who presented three modes of combination: *emplotment*, *argument*, and *ideological implications* (p. 60). When history is invoked by societies, it is up to contemporary thinkers, starting from historians, decision makers, and policy makers to evaluate its alignment with their goals. These evaluations can influence the support of historical works. Yet the true justification for historical narratives lies in their ability to promote and elevate national values. Lerner (1997) claims that such aspects lead to misuse of history. She argues that we construct symbolic communities, based on ethnicity, religion, race, or any other kind of distinguishing mark, setting ourselves apart from those different from us, in order to find and enhance our own identity. We look to a past community, our "folk" of whatever definition, and our stories weave a collective myth into our own narrative. These widespread collective myths can serve as a creative, harmonizing function, in stressing shared values, ideas,

and experiences. They offer us heroes in the past, role models for emulation, and provide us with a coherent narrative which gives shape and order to our experience (p. 201).

History is the transformation and development of a society over time. Therefore, social memory is built upon the constructed narratives of historical events, which serve as a foundation for building a national identity. Societies have a fundamental need for a historical narrative, driven by their desire to answer questions about the past, present, and future. The presence of history lessons in the curricula of countries worldwide reflects the importance of shared knowledge about key events and elements in the formation of national identity. Ultimately, national identity is rooted in a collective understanding of the past, and behind this understanding lies history. In the search for social and political recognition, societies turn to their past to validate their presence in the modern world. In that case, historical references, such as myths, legends, events, figures, and elements alike, become significant tools in this process. Consequently, a relationship develops between the past and present identity, which can be described as a 'historical-modern-self.' This relationship illustrates how today's identity is built on history, while history is interpreted through the lens of today's identity. Walter Pohl (2019) describes this relationship as "histories and other narratives of identity do not merely reflect past and present identities; they help to create, reaffirm, modify, and legitimize them, and to project them into the future" (p. 12). Yet looking at these essential aspects, *create*, *reaffirm*, *modify*, and *legitimize*, it is possible to state that all of them are parts of a certain construction. The fact that history does not exist without historians, their duty becomes fundamental to create a path from the past to the present to reach these goals, and eventually to *project them in the future*.

These narratives lead to one of the main questions, that is historiography. Cambridge Dictionary defines historiography simply as "the study of history and how it is written." Dursun Dilek (2001) categorizes the aim of historiography as:

1. Interdisciplinary goals of history, academic,
2. Educational goals of history, non-disciplinary (p. 29).

Dilek's categorization of the aims of historiography suggests that the primary purpose of the first category is to teach history in a general educational purpose; and the undisciplined aim of history is to create a national identity. However, the aims of historiography cannot be limited to only two aspects. Historiography can be defined as "the history of history" (Mandavili, 2015, p. 2). In this regard, historiography expands to encompass a wider range of histories. On the other

hand, the objectives of historiography can vary by nation, and the way individuals interpret historical events influences how they perceive and how they represent themselves. Consequently, the use of history as a tool in establishing nationalist ideologies has led to the birth of a category called nationalist historiography (Tekeli, 1998, p. 103).

It is evident that the role of history does not only simply define societies, but its relationship with politics and its services for political agendas is ratified. History is, in fact, one of the essential tools for political ambitions, especially when one group attempts to assert itself against another. That is how it becomes an instrument of propaganda in the hands of politicians. But it is important to highlight the role that historians play, as their narratives of historical facts are crucial in creating the understanding of the past. In Jan Marinus Wiersma's arguments (2009), "the objective interpretation of the facts is not possible. Facts as such mean nothing. Historians select them and create the framework within which they get meaning. They look at the past from their own perspective, different from that of their predecessors and successors" (p. 15). Wiersma also claims that "historians are not neutral and are influenced by their contemporary societies, as he goes on by stating that what applies to historians also applies to politicians. Nevertheless, historians use scientific tools to study the past, and they try to be as impartial as possible. History is neither a purely subjective undertaking where every narrative of the past is equally good; nor, however, is objectivity to be found in uncritically accepting embellished images of the past" (2009, p. 15).

As examined earlier, objectivity and subjectivity are the main question in the constructivist school of thought. Even though in terms of objective and subjective Wiersma present his critical point of view towards historians, not as harsh as Nietzsche does, he still praises their role for using scientific tools to study the past. While Nietzsche, as mentioned earlier, believes that history is the work of dramatists, Wiersma keeps a balance between purely objective and purely subjective. On the other hand, when looking at the example of the study of Turkish history, it is possible to give credit to Nietzsche's argument, which in the case of Prof. Afet Inan (1930), who presented the *Turkish History Thesis* in 1930 claiming as:

*"The highest and first civilized tribe of humanity are the Turks, whose homeland is Altai and Central Asia. It is the Turks, who are given names of Sumer, Akad, Alan, who founded the first civilization of humanity at least 7000 years before Mesopotamia and Iran and opened the first historical period for humanity. The autochthonous inhabitants of the delta in Egypt and the*

*founders of Egyptian civilization are Turks. Sami Hammurabi, who found fame in Mesopotamia in 2300 BC, Assyrians who took place in history are histories in history. The autochthonous people of Anatolia, the first and true owners of the Doryens, who took the Greek name, are the Turks whose ancestors were at the head of the Hittites” (p. 243).*

It is important to note that the crucial point is the way that nations recognize and narrate their history, how they value it, how they use it on the masses, how they benefit from it, and above all, how they utilize it as a propaganda tool against their rivals. Hence, through the relationship between history and identity, it is evident that history as an ideological tool that concerns societies the most, namely, expecting that what people know and regard their national history influence their nationalism and patriotism significantly. In particular, those who overestimate the achievements of their countries’ civilization should have a stronger sense of national identity than others. Conversely, underestimation of national historical achievements may reduce an individual's national identity (Haifeng & Xinsheng, 2018, p. 2). Whether the narratives of historical events reflect the truth or not, again depends on the self-image of the nations. As demonstrated in Prof. Inan’s speech, in which all the mentioned civilizations are originally associated with the Turkish origin, including Mesopotamian, Muhammed Emin Zeki Beg (2014) attributes the origin of the Kurds to the Medes who were one of the ancient peoples of Mesopotamia (p. 82). Similarly, in the example of the story of *Kawa the Blacksmith* and *Zahhak*, even though lacking historical evidence, true or not, it is the narratives that play the important role on where to place a nation. As Bernard Lewis (2014) states, history that is not true is better than no history. People can live with delusions and myths (p. 158). Therefore, the historical narratives become one of the most prominent subjects in the sense that serves both the perception of identity and the nation/nationalism since every nationalist believes that there is a special relationship between the nation and the piece of land whose ancestors first emerged and flourished as a separate group (Gelvin, 2016, p. 247).

This leads to the question of how political trajectories influence the writing of history. History is often presented in a way that emphasizes the greatness of the nation and the wickedness of its enemies, thereby fostering a sense of national pride. Once it is placed in the public’s memory, victories from the past are credited to the nation’s greatness, while defeats are attributed to the blame of the "enemies." For instance, according to the Levada Center (2020), most Russians have consistently regretted the dissolution of the USSR. In 2020, 60 percent of

respondents expressed regret and 63 percent believed that the dissolution could have been avoided; 49 percent of those polled named “destruction of the USSR” among the twentieth-century events that evoked in them feelings of shame and sadness; and 76 percent have a positive opinion about the Soviet era in terms of stability, good life, availability and quality of goods and service, free education and medicine (p. 5). Whereas, in the view of the Ukrainian population, Soviet history is known as the history of famine, subjugation, and nuclear fallout (Justice & Lassin, 2022, para. 1).

To understand this duality, it will be useful to examine the concept of *ego history*, presented by Braganca and Louwagie, (2018) who quoted from Pierre Nora:

*“An experiment (...), an exercise which involves clarifying one’s own history as one would write the history of another, to try to apply to oneself, with one’s own style and cherished methods, the cold, globalizing, explanatory gaze that has so often scrutinized others. To ease out, as a historian, the link between the history that you have produced and the history of which you are a product”* (p. 6).

What ego-history tends to identify is that, the narrative of a nation’s history does not remain only in the historical description of the *self* but also of *others*. Such narratives create a multidimensional framework in which historical events are observed and interpreted. What becomes the result is the clash of narratives in an environment in which counterarguments collide. For instance, the Ottoman Empire is considered as the symbol of power and the representative of Islam among Muslim communities. But in the European views, for over six hundred years, they were the enemy on the border of Europe, the heathen at the gates of Christendom, the scourge of God sent to punish the sinner and test the faith of the righteous. Myth and symbol, enemy and outsider, both heathen in religion and barbaric in nature, the Ottomans were characterized as the traditional enemy for the nations of Europe (Vossler, 2010, p. 1).

Similar examples of ego-history can be observed in colonial rhetoric. For instance, concerning French colonization in Algeria in French textbooks, in 1989, senator Paul Alduy confronted the ministry of education for what he thought is the misinterpretation of this episode with the lack of recognition for the suffering of the *pieds noirs* (French colons that inhabited Algeria) and the humanitarian drive of the French when conquering Algeria. It is because of such a statement that the law of February 2, 2005, with article 4 asking for the recognition of the

positive impact of French colonization, became visible in the French political agenda. Article 4 was an attempt to rehabilitate the French colonial ideology of the mission *civilisatrice* (Chauveau, 2013, p. 5).

All in all, with the construction of modern nation-states, alongside their economic, military, and diplomatic needs, the development of national identity and the cultivation of a nation's moral foundation is an important process. In that case, the first goal to reach is the creation of a national consciousness. The main step to be taken to achieve this goal begins with referencing the past. That is why history and history writing have become essential for every nation. This results in the formation of a national history that represents the collective experiences of the nation. In this process, the focus shifts from individual, family, tribe, or clan affiliations to a strong connection with the nation itself. It would not be wrong to assert that every society's history exhibits a constructive method.

Finally, the existence of political interests in the past and present, centered around the narratives created by past events, cannot be ignored. On the other hand, in the process of history-writing that will serve a nation and its morale, elements must be carefully selected and molded. That is because the created reality is essentially a created memory. And the important aspect of this memory is the careful selection of facts, events, and individuals. Therefore, every part of the present must fully align with an understanding of the past and future. The experiences of creating nation-states and the ongoing struggle to maintain stable and legitimate sovereignty within a defined territory have occurred at various times across different regions of the world. However, almost all national narratives feature competing and contrasting interpretations of the past. These historical accounts are shaped by each nation's unique sense of generational time and consciousness, as well as their own processes of solidifying history. In light of these arguments, in Hobsbawm's (1997) words: "*History is not invoked but constructed; it is not presented but re-presented and used to give meaning to the present. If the present is unsatisfactory, the past can be looked to as a way of reconstructing the present*" (p. 34).

#### **4. Nationalist narratives of Kurdish history; a critical overview**

In nationalist discourses, the use of historical narratives to justify disagreements rooted in identities is a fundamental aspect. As previously mentioned, the way history is presented serves to build a contemporary identity. In the context of nationalist ambitions, these narratives are often

constructed through selective interpretations that would serve to link a “glorified” past with the justification of the actions taken in this regard. If nationalist sentiment is to be fostered within a society, it is essential to create a strong foundational framework. If this foundation is not based on factual evidence, it can be fabricated, crafted, and narrated. Such nationalist historical narration, according to Hakansson, based on four principles (2025):

1. *Subscribing to the cult of the glories dead*: historical heroes are worshiped for their death-defying actions and are used to instill the same willingness to sacrifice in the nation’s citizens today, in a manner strongly reminiscent of exemplary history writing.
2. *Relating to history cultures*: deciding what kind of history can be used, for which purposes, and when. At the same time, their account must abide by nationalist grammar.
3. *Proof of national sentiment as a historical driving force*: the historical narration illustrates that a national sentiment as a guiding principle for the people previously has saved the nation.
4. *Reverberating ideas*: providing a historical basis for an existing idea or ideology (pp. 130-132).

In light of these principles, as with any society, Kurdish nationalist discourse demonstrates a similar pattern. In Abbas Vali’s (2005) arguments, Kurdish nationalist discourse, while aware of the fragmentation stemming from the division of Kurdistan, continues to hold onto the concepts of a unified community and identity, viewing this as an expression of shared origin (p. 83). The question of origin, however, is one of the critical issues in such discourse. Hassanpour (2005), when describing the term, makes a distinction between how other nations perceive their origin and the discourses constructed in Kurdish historical narratives:

*“The question of origin is applicable to many national movements that find their raison d’être (reasons for existence) largely in the differences and conflicts between themselves and other nations. For the Kurds, however, “origin” is the realm of state violence and the (re)production of differences within the regime”* (p. 135).

In Kurdish history-writing, this origin is primarily characterized as an “ancient civilization.” Such characterization aims to express the aspiration to be the rightful inhabitants of the territory they occupy. For instance, historians such as Muhammed Emin Zeki Beg (in his work “History of the Kurds and Kurdistan”; Zeki Beg wrote his work in 1931. Nubihar Press published its Turkish version in 2010. This research uses the eight edition of the book, published

in 2014), Botan Amedi (“Kürtler ve Kürdistan Tarihi” or “History of the Kurds and Kurdistan,” 1991), and Kazım Yeşilgöz (“Kürtler; Kökeni ve Tarihi” or “The Kurds: History and Origin,” 2004) emphasize forms of power—like civilization, empire, or kingdom—that once ruled the region and possess ancient roots. These historical roots are presented as significant expressions of power. For instance, in Zeki Beg’s work (2014), the origin of the Kurds is traced back to the Medes Empire (p. 85). Additionally, citing Xenophon's “*The Return of the Ten Thousand*”, he mentions *Kardu* people who lived between 400-4001 BC, with their lands extending as far as the Botan region (Zeki Beg, 2014, p. 59).

In Kurdish historical studies, there is almost a complete agreement on the question of origin, especially in the works prepared by Kurdish historians. It can be said that having an origin linked to an ancient and a strong civilization forms the general content of these works. Mehrdad Izady’s (2009) attribution of this origin to the Hurrians (p. 35), Tori's (1998) confirmation of the same claim (p. 13), Kazım Yeşilgöz’s (2003) arguments that the word “Kurd” was first encountered in Assyrian inscriptions around 2000 BC (p. 16), and Celadet Ali Bedirxan’s (2009) citation of Xenophon as a source (p. 25) are only a few examples of how a narrative is constructed on origin. Similarly, non-Kurdish historians such as Nikitin (1943, p. 2) and Minorsky (2004, p. 42), who have conducted studies on Kurdish history, also seem to agree with the same discourse.

It is worth noting that the key issue is neither confirming nor refuting the claims of the Kurdish historians who trace their origins to ancient civilizations. The central debate focuses on understanding how these narratives are constructed and how they fit within nationalist discourse. The point that determines its importance regarding the subject, as Vali states (2005), conceptual and political differences that define Kurdish nationalist discourse and practices (p. 84). These differences demonstrate the existence of different conceptions of origin within nationalist discourse, and how these conceptions create different and conflicting notions of Kurdish history, society, and identity. Additionally, Hassanpour’s (2005) argument presents a clear political dimension to this debate:

*“In academia, another arena of conflict; another debate is being waged over the question of "origins." Although the struggle has epistemological, theoretical, and methodological aspects, its main focus is politics”* (p. 136).

The notion of having ancient origins linked to a powerful empire signifies a driving force of nationalism. This belief not only fosters a sense of pride and unity among citizens but also is an indication to legitimize contemporary political movements. By emphasizing historical achievements and cultural heritage, nations often seek to draw parallels between their glorious past and their current struggles, offering alternative narratives that reframe the challenges they face today. These historical connections can provide a sense of purpose and collective identity, influencing how societies understand their present circumstances and envision their future. Bozarslan (2005) suggests that technically, past victories and defeats are powerful means as they are understood equally with feelings of pride and tragedies; on the other hand, as a cultural, ideological, and political discourse, it is an inexhaustible source to legitimate the claims of Kurdish nationalism (p. 32). Bozarslan's also brings four characteristics that describe the Kurdish nationalist historiography, particularly the frame of Kurdish nationalism:

- a) historiography's invention of myths and legends, folklore, tradition, facts and behavior patterns;
- b) carrying a meaning only when it becomes a part of a political process;
- c) despite its continuity, its functions still to be dependent on what the political actors take from it and how to position it;
- d) taking into account what it represents rather than what it says (Bozarslan, 2005, pp. 33-36).

One significant result is that history fundamentally challenges ethnicist theories that define identity through a primordialist lens, which posits that ethnic identities are innate and unchanging. Ethnicist theories, as studied before, typically rely on shared historical roots as a primary source for building national identity, asserting that a common past is the strongest factor. However, taking into account what Bozarslan claims, history also holds immense significance for constructivist theories of identity. In this context, history is not merely a repository of facts used to introduce a group of people; rather, it serves as a potent political instrument that is strategically employed to influence and shape current political realities. By leveraging history, political actors can promote a sense of national consciousness and construct a cohesive national identity, often highlighting selective historical events or narratives that resonate with contemporary aspirations and values. This dynamic illustrates how history can be manipulated to support specific political

agendas, demonstrating its dual role as both a foundation for identity and a tool for political mobilization.

When looking at the objectives of Kurdish historiography, documenting their history is primarily tied to a political agenda that emphasizes their quest for self-determination. Unlike nation-states that often have the luxury of a consolidated historical narrative, the Kurds face the challenge of presenting their history in a way that legitimizes their claims for autonomy and a recognition on the global stage. Such need is particularly pressing given their rich cultural heritage, which dates back thousands of years, and their contributions to ancient civilizations, including their ties to the Medes. Thus, if the Kurds do not actively articulate and promote their history, the importance of their ancient roots and vibrant past risks becoming overshadowed or dismissed entirely in the broader discourse surrounding national identity and statehood. The best example of it, as McDowall (2004) argues, is that history, as well as myths, plays an important part in nation building, and it is no accident that history has been a major preoccupation of Kurdish nationalists. From the 1930s onwards, a number of historical works appeared, written by Kurds who were clearly nationalists in their thinking. The most solid of these was Mohammad Amin Zaki's *Khulasat tarikh al Kurd and wa'l Kurdistan* (History of the Kurds and Kurdistan), first published in Kurdish in 1936 and clearly intended to awaken the literate class to their national history (pp. 5-6).

Another important point in this situation is the reactive nature of history that needs to be written. This suggests that the individuals involved cannot truly identify themselves or their rightful place in society by relying on the narratives constructed by others. This underscores the need for them to articulate their own history, both as a response and a deliberate act of self-definition. By doing so, they are obliged to create a narrative that reflects their unique past, values, culture, thereby ensuring their stories are recognized as meaningful as worthy in the broader context of history. Following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, certain works endorsed by the Turkish History Foundation began to promote the idea that a Turkish civilization existed thousands of years prior to the rise of the Babylonians and Assyrians in Mesopotamia. Particularly in "*Türk Tarihinin Ana Hatları* (The Main Outlines of Turkish History)" conducted by several researchers in 1930, it is contended that the Turks played a crucial role in laying the foundations of diverse ancient civilizations, including those of Egypt,

China, the Aegean region, as well as the Latin and Anatolian cultures, thereby suggesting a significant and overarching influence from the East to the West (Inan et al. 1930, pp. 200-243).

The Turkish National Assembly, aligning with these historical narratives, formally accepted these theses. These works primarily focused on the Turkish origins of ancient civilizations, a perspective that was part of the nation-building process of the young Republic. Within this framework, other ethnic groups in Anatolia, including Kurds, were not separately addressed. There are also assertions in some sources that the Kurds may have Turkish origins, with some proponents linking their name to the term "Kart-Kurt" (KKK, 1980, p. 43), which references their mountainous habitat. This discourse reflects the broader effort to construct a national history centered on Turkish identity during the early Republican period.

Therefore, importance of creating a counter-narrative becomes evident when confronted with dominant narratives. This necessity is powerfully articulated by M. Emin Zeki Beg, who emphasizes the crucial role of conducting historical research. By challenging prevailing narratives and offering alternative interpretations, Zeki Beg (2014) underscores the fundamental need to present his work as:

*“From the moment the term Ottoman was completely eliminated in Turkey and replaced with "Turk " and" Turan ", I, as every Ottoman citizen who is not Turkish, naturally came to the knowledge of the identity of a nation separate from the Turks. This consciousness led to an emotional and sensitive nationalism and a tendency to bring national qualities to the front (p. 23).*

For this reason, as for Zeki Beg, the collapse of Ottoman universalism and the rise of Turkish nationalism immediately after that, provided space for the formation of modern Kurdish history. The fundamental change in the way that the restrictive principles (Islamic) *ethos* of the national system is replaced by a wave of ethnic self-consciousness has pushed Zeki Beg to seek his own Kurdish identity. From this point of view, writing the *History of the Kurds and Kurdistan* is an attempt at self-consciousness, as well as an attempt to create a genealogy of Kurdish nationalism (Vali, 2005, p. 101).

In conclusion, the nationalist narrative of Kurdish history seems to serve as a necessary framework rather than simply an accessible historical account. This reactionary approach goes beyond merely showcasing origins and past experiences; it becomes a matter of self-awareness.

In other words, writing history transforms into a process of identity construction, illustrating who they were and are, as well as who they were not and are not. There is no doubt that Kurdish national identity has deep historical roots that predate this period of time. But the formulation of a modern Kurdish national identity showcases a particular appearance in strategically using historical narratives as a political instrument. Such evolution is a reflection of the shifting political environment and various circumstances faced by the Kurdish people. Examining the narratives of historical events and how they are mobilized to shape political incentives, they can offer a comprehensive approach towards the formation of Kurdish national identity in response to contemporary issues. As Beruly (1993) suggests, there is the re-enactment of a moment in national history. History provides identity within the *historicist* frame of reference (p. 66).

#### **4.1 Myths, legends, and figures; clash of narratives in ethno-symbolic references**

Smith defines ethno-symbolism as it considers the cultural elements of symbol, myth, memory, value, ritual, and tradition to be crucial to an analysis of ethnicity, nations, and nationalism (Smith, 2009, p. 25). Smith justifies his claim by showing three reasons:

- a) various combinations of these elements have played, and continue to play, a vital role in shaping social structures and cultures, defining and legitimating the relations of different sectors, groups and institutions within a community;
- b) these cultural elements each community with a distinctive symbolic repertoire in terms of language, religion, customs and traditions, which helps to differentiate it from other analogous communities in the eyes of both its members and outsiders, and they have raised the profile of the community and sharpened its social boundary and its opposition to outsiders, as much as the boundary has continued to define the community and divide ‘us’ from ‘them’;
- c) finally, shared values, memories, rituals and traditions have helped to ensure a sense of continuity with past generations of the community - a sentiment greatly enhanced by the widespread acceptance of collective symbols such as flag, anthem or national holiday whose meaning may change over time but whose forms remain relatively fixed (Smith, 2009, p. 25).

The primary symbolic elements that shape a national identity revolve around language, religion, customs and tradition, as well as territory. This theory shows that these elements constitute the foundation of a national identity, independently from any ideology which includes

nationalism. Both nation-states and nationalist movements utilize their symbols, even though their employment showcases different purposes, either to preserve or to revive their identity. Smith (2009) also reaffirms that “*nations for both modernist and ethno-symbolists are conceived of as historical communities, embedded in specific historical and geo-cultural contexts. As a result, their origins, character, and trajectories are amenable to causal historical analysis. This is not to claim that nations have ‘essence’ or to reify nations and nationalism, but to see them as forms of community and movement, located in specific contexts of space and time, with their members viewing as resources and vehicles for their own interests and visions, and as intimate social bonds and cultural solidarities*” (p. 14).

Looking at Smith’s definition, the first thing that comes to minds is the clear distinction between the theories. As previously analyzed, the ethnicist and constructivist views have been differentiated in the argument of nation and nationalism on the aspects of “existing” and “produced”. Ethno-symbolism, however, seems to be an attempt to create a common ground for both theories, as both the primordial and constructed elements can be found in this theory. What attracts the attentions in Smith’s arguments is certain symbolic elements such language, religion, customs and traditions as cultural elements, and shared values, memories, rituals, and so on. But what also distracts us is the objectives of these elements, that is, *shaping social structures and cultures, defining and legitimating the relations of different sectors, groups and institutions within a community, sharpening social boundary which divides “us” from “them”, and finally a sentiment*. Looking at these objectives, the symbolic elements can serve a society only if they represent certain meanings. The question is that how these certain meanings are given to these elements if they are not carefully constructed. Through the establishment of connection with history and other elements such as culture, the use of symbols contributes to the consolidation if the idea that there is an overarching shared national identity among citizens. Symbols serve as a common point of reference for many subgroups that exist within a nation, which helps them function as unifying aspects (Johnson, 2022, p. 27). In this case, symbols in the constructivist tradition is something that we can generally understand in the world. They ontologize human being through certain states of consciousness, including through such a construct of cultural identity as an ethnic group. A symbol becomes an economical way of coding state of consciousness, and myth becomes its real “economical” design (Pudov et al., 2020, p. 4).

Constructivism does not deny the existence of the ethnic symbols, nor it can be asserted that it creates them. But the meanings and the representations of these symbols certainly fall into the critique of the constructivism. In the case of Kurdish nationalist historical narratives, the way that the ethnic symbols are demonstrated is mainly driven by the meanings that historians attribute to them, rather than their factual definitions. Such meanings, or in other words: their constructed attributions, make them become part of national representation. The idea behind this is undoubtedly to evoke emotional response and a sense of pride among the Kurds as a reinforcement to the sense of identity and belonging. In contemporary nationalist rhetoric, such symbols are presented not only as national values but also as sources of inspiration that would serve collective action. A key example of this lies in the historical significance of Newroz, which stands as a major symbol for the Kurds. More importantly, it has been transformed into a powerful source of political inspiration in contemporary nationalist narrative. The United Nations (2025, para.1) celebrates Newroz as “*far more than just the start of a new year—it is an ancient celebration of life, rebirth, and the triumph of light over darkness. With roots extending back over 3,000 years to the era of Zoroastrianism, Nowruz heralds the arrival of spring and is celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox, usually March 20 or 21. Today, it unites diverse cultures across Iran, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and beyond, offering a rich tapestry of customs, traditions, and shared values*”. It is considered the only holiday celebrated by different ethnicities and groups across the globe. It is an official holiday in many countries, including Iran, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and a number of other countries. For hundreds of years, it has been seen as a religious or cultural holiday for most of those who celebrate it. However, the Kurdish belief of Newroz is that it dates to the emergence of the Median Empire around 700 BC. According to the Kurdish myth, Kawa the Blacksmith killed Dahhak the tyrant. To spread the word about his success, he lit a bonfire on a mountain, and it was a new day for the Kurds and all the other Aryan ethnic groups. After that, Diocese was chosen by seven Kurdish tribes to build the Median Empire. Thus, it has become a political and cultural festival (Khalid, 2020, p. 116).

In fact, except for Ferdowsi’s *Shahname*, there is no historical evidence to establish the factuality and its origin. Ferdowsi mentioned Kawa in four stories in the *Shahname*: *Zahak*, *Faridun*, *Minuchir*, and *Naudar* (Ferdowsi, 1905, pp. 155-361). Yet, in none of these accounts, Ferdowsi explicitly makes any references regarding the ethnic origin of Kawa. But in the

*Sharafnama* of Idris-i Bitlisi, written in the 16th century, the story of Dahhak is associated with the origin of the Kurds. According to Bitlisi (1971):

*“The Kurds are descended from people who, fleeing from being killed, slaughtered, and beheaded so that their brains could be taken and smeared on a cancerous sore that appeared on Dahhak's shoulder, scattered into the mountains and vast lands.”* (p. 19)

Regarding the association of Kawa and his assistance of Fereydoun in defeating Dahhak with Newroz celebration, A. G. Warner and E. Warner (1905), who translated *Shahname*, make a compelling argument:

*“The reader will notice that Zakhak is not slain by Faridun but imprisoned - a point indicative of his supernatural character; and also that the legend of Kawa the smith is, as one would naturally expect, a West Iranian tradition, as shown by its association with the city of Ispahan. The historical flag of the Persian Empire, known as the flag of Kawa, the traditional origin fell into the hands of the Mohammadans at the battle of Kadisiyya, A.D. 637. The natives of the town of Damawand, situated on the south side of the mountain of that name, still celebrate a feast, called “Id-i Kurdi” or the Kurds’ Holiday, to commemorate the death of Zakhak, while a cyclopean terrace in the neighborhood is pointed out as the place where, in accord to Eastern usage, his drums were beaten at dawn”* (p. 143).

Nonetheless, the myths of Kawa and Newroz are embraced by the Kurds as symbols of resistance and freedom. Unlike other ethnic groups, the Kurds adopt and interpret these myths in unique ways. This distinct understanding and purpose behind the celebration of Newroz are reflected in the messages conveyed through nationalist discourses. For example, in the discourse of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Newroz and Kawa represent symbols of resistance, unity, and freedom. This stems from the party's effort to claim Newroz as its own, drawing parallels with its own struggle and transforming Newroz into a contemporary myth of resistance. The party established a connection with the mythological content of Newroz by referring to Mazlum Dogan, a prisoner who died in Diyarbakır Prison on March 21, 1982, as the 'contemporary Kawa,' and by associating several fellow inmates with the 'spirit' and 'fire' of Newroz (Rudi, 2018, p. 99).

The content of these symbols aims to encourage solidarity and strengthen the sense of belonging by emphasizing the community's shared struggle. As John A. Armstrong notes, from the perspective of myth-symbol theory, 'common fate' refers to the extent to which an episode—

whether historical or 'purely mythical'—arouses intense effect by stressing individuals' solidarity against an alien force, that is, by enhancing the salience of boundary perceptions (Armstrong, 1982, p. 9). The instrumentalization of historical symbols within the contemporary political context can be illustrated through narratives found in various sources (KCK-INFO, 2024, 2025; ANF, 2022; Medya News, 2022). These narratives include discourses in which Mazlum Dogan is described as the 'modern Kawa' and associated with the fire of Newroz, indicating the politicization of historical symbols within the contemporary context. The role and significance of myths and symbols perhaps can be best summarized in Smith's (1999) words:

*“Within given ethnic communities since the French Revolution (or slightly earlier), both kinds of national myth-making emerge and persist in an often-contrapuntal relationship. They thus both divide and, and unite, the communities whose identity and consciousness they underpin. They divide them, because different modes of myth making are embraced by opposing strata; and they unite them because, out of this tension of opposites, there emerges a great sense of dynamic activism, and an enhanced communal self-consciousness. Beyond that, myths of ethnic descent are vital both for territorial claims and for national solidarity; these have not merely been underwritten, but have actually inspired such claims and solidarities, acting as ‘title-deeds’ and as ideal guiding action”* (p. 58).

Another notable aspect of Kurdish nationalist historical discourse is the polemics surrounding historical figures. A prime example is Saladin, who has been the subject of numerous studies, including books, articles, and biographical works. This interest is likely to continue growing, and in many of these studies, apart from the structure of his dynasty, Saladin's Kurdish identity is prominently emphasized. In addition to his Kurdish identity, depicting him as a just, courageous, respectful, and peaceful ruler creates a romanticized image of him. In the center of such depiction is his commitment to justice, his respect to non-Muslims, a leader who is not only the champion of his people but also the champion of the whole Islamic *ummah*. With such attributes, his status is elevated with an ideal image of a ruler who values compassion and justice. Ultimately, Saladin becomes a historic, cultural, and religious pride.

Similar polemics can also be observed in modern history. A notable example is the debate surrounding the nationalist aspects of Mir Bedirxan's revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Mir Bedirxan, one of the most respected figures in Kurdish history, has ruled the vast territory of Botan, from the borders of Urumiyeh until Mosul from 1820 until 1847 (Bruinessen, 2003, p.

273). McDowall (2005) describes him as “*brave, charming, pious, and ambitious, but reckless, too. He is important partly because he was the last paramount chief to present a serious challenge to the Ottoman reformers. However, his real significance lies in the way local magnate, state, and Great Power interests began to crystallize around the growing religious dimension of Kurdistan*” (p. 45). Bedirxan ruled the entire emirate with an iron fist. His severe punishment for even the smallest attack had made Botan a highly secure area. In a land once occupied by robbers and bandits, life and property were now respected; everyone’s condition had improved (Bruinessen, 2003, p. 274). His revolt in 1847 against the centralization policy imposed to distribute his ruling territory between Diyarbakir and Mosul provinces was suppressed, and Mir was put in exile in Greece until his last days (Özoğlu, 2005, p. 80).

In addition to its socio-political significance in Kurdish history, the conflicting aspect of his rebellion stems from historians' and researchers' accounts, which lead to a clash of narratives. For instance, Chris Kutschera (2001) addresses Bedirxan as, “*unlike the other Kurdish rulers, he goes beyond being a simply Kurd; he succeeds in transcending the limited horizon and framework of this tribe, creating the first Kurdish state and nation in modern times*” (p. 24). In Kutschera’s account, Bedirxan is an unquestionable hero of Kurdish nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He had an indisputable advantage over those who came after him. Although his kingdom did not last long, he was the only Kurdish leader who had, for the first time in all Kurdistan, accepted his authority from Iran to Euphrates since legendary time (Kutschera, 2001, p. 27). However, Barbara Henning (2018), refuting Kutschera’s account, states that “*while preparing his book, Kutschera interviewed Kamuran Bedirxan, a descendant of Mir Bedirxan. In consequence, elements of Kamuran’s own narrative of the history of the Bedirxanis in the larger context of Kurdish history made it into the book*” (p. 80). Hennings argues that of Kutschera’s writing, 1979, there was no comprehensive scholarly account of the history of the early Kurdish nationalist movements yet. Therefore, Kutschera worked from scratch and found himself confronted with fragments, gaps, and contradictory information (Henning, 2018, p. 81).

In the accounts of non-Kurdish authors such as Minorsky, Nikitine, McDowall, Bedirxan is shown with a high regard on the list of Kurdish revolts, emphasizing his religious personality. Nikitine (1956) defines him as “*a spiritual leader of regions liberated from Turkish domination*” (p. 193). Yet in these accounts, there are two main arguments that are common in the context of his rebellion; first is the rebellion against the Ottoman’s centralization policy, and the second is

the massacre of Nestorians. Wadie Jwaideh (2009), who dedicated considerable space in his work to Bedirxan's era and his rebellion, also draws attention to these two points (pp. 130-151). Apart from these two, none of the accounts explicitly indicates that Bedirxan aimed to establish an independent Kurdish state as his ultimate objective. Bruinessen (2003) states that "*according to the interpretation of later Kurdish nationalists, particularly the grandchildren of the Mir, Sureyya Bedirxan, he had started to make plans to establish an independent Kurdistan after seeing weakness of the Ottoman in the 1830s. However, there is no source to confirm such claims*" (p. 275).

However, in the accounts provided by Kurdish historians, Bedirxan is portrayed through a distinctly nationalist lens, emphasizing his role as a pivotal figure in the Kurdish struggle for self-determination. Kalman (1994) states that the federation formed by Bedirxan and joined by the *begs* of Hakkari, Muş, Kars, and Erdelan from Iranian Kurdistan evidently showed that the borders drawn for them were not recognized anymore (p. 114). Dr. Chirguh's (Süreyya Bedirxan) (2009) claim is that the main goal of this alliance was to establish an independent state (p. 129). Celîlê Celîl (1992) quotes from Alaaddin Sajjadi, a prominent Kurdish historian, "*Bedirxan declared his independence. He minted his own coin, and preached sermon on his behalf on Friday prayers*" (p. 135). Rahman Dağ also confirms that minting coins in his name and having his name read in Friday prayers are explicit indicators of his independence (Dağ, 2014, p 63). Ahmet Kahraman (2004), who explicitly stated that the rebellion was entirely nationalist in nature and aimed at an independent Kurdistan, recounts the events as follows:

*"The independence of Kurdistan disturbed not only the Sultanate, but also France and England, who had gained new economic and political advantages by exploiting the weakness of the Ottoman Empire (...) In the spring of 1847, Ottoman armies, under the command of Osman Pasha, advanced into Kurdistan on several fronts, attacking Bedirhan Bey and the other two important leaders of the idea of independent Kurdistan, Nurullah Bey and Han Mahmud"* (pp. 40-41).

The importance of such events and the actions of notable figures in history-writing may not necessarily be based on their factuality. What matters is the meaning and the message they carry, or the message which the narrator would like to convey to the next generations. Looking at the socio-political conditions experienced by the Kurds, generating such narratives are also the products of these conditions. In the example of Saladin, for instance, of whose Kurdish identity is

deniable, certain key words such as “fairness”, “courage”, “respect”, “peace” are associated with the “Kurdishness” which is a clear indication of characterization of the Kurdish ancestry. In the discourses of politicians, such narratives represent a meaning which is used in the context of “us” against “them”. For instance, in a speech reported by Kurdistan 24 (2023), the Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtaş invoked his lineage to Saladin, stating that he was named after the '*great Kurdish commander*.' This invocation serves as an example of how historical figures like Saladin are mobilized in contemporary political discourse to establish legitimacy and draw parallels between past and present struggles. In the case of Mir Bedirxan, even though there are no specific records regarding the true objective of his revolt, namely an independent Kurdish state, him being both Kurdish and a ruler of a Kurdish territory would be sufficient enough to place him in the nationalist discourses. Another important aspect that helps praise his personality among the nationalists is the role of his descendants who have had valuable services both politically and culturally, such as Celadet Bedirxan, Abdulrazaq Bedirxan, Sureya Bedirxan, which makes the Bedirxanis as one of the most important families among the Kurdish population. Yet in Henning's (2018) opinion, the history of the Bedirxani family as it is reconstructed by historians today and has been briefly laid out above differs to no small extent from accounts given by family member themselves at different points in time and to various audience (p. 118). Henning also claims that the Bedirxani brothers, Celadet and Kamuran, living in the French mandate territories in Syria and Lebanon in the 1930s, tell a story tailored to the newly emerging narrative of Kurdish nationalist history. They stress the fact that their family suffered greatly from displacement, being exiled from their Kurdish homeland under atrocious conditions in the mid-19th century. Their narratives evoke parallels to Kemalist policies of forced resettlement of Kurdish communities in the western part of Turkish Republic they witnessed at the time of their writing. The audience that Celadet and Kamuran Bedirxan were hoping to win over with their narrative, the Kurdish community in exile, was familiar with the sufferings of displacement. By stressing similar experiences in the history of their own family, the Bedirxanis could hope to increase their credibility and the legitimacy of their claims to a leadership role (Henning, 2018, p. 121).

In sum, the significance of polemics surrounding key figures in the formation of Kurdish national identity is rooted in the way that historical figures are depicted as “heroes” based on the values regarded as essential for the nation. Such narratives involve not only evaluations of their

contribution but also reflect the broader aspirations of the Kurdish people in the ongoing quest for recognition which serves as a means of legitimization of contemporary struggle. These narratives also serve the Kurds to seek reinforcement of their collective identity, which honors the past while striving for the future. As a result, one can observe both exaggerations and/or completely altered representations of historical figures in the various debates and narratives that surround them. Therefore, the depiction of such figures can show significant differences depending on the perspective of historians and researchers, which leads to a complex landscape of interpretation that may or may not accurately reflect the true historical context. Similarly, the historical narratives of epics and myths produce the same results. In fact, in this case, since it is even more difficult to provide historical references for myths and epics, they are both more open to interpretation, and the narratives developed around them become more exaggerated.

### **Conclusions**

All societies around the world place an unquestionable value to their history, as it helps build their identity and reinforce their cultural narratives. The critical step in showing such respect is the process of writing their history. However, this act goes beyond simply record-keeping; it serves as a reflection of their values, ideologies, and social and political priorities. The real importance of writing history lies in its strength to affect today's world. As such, history goes beyond the boundaries of a simple timeline; it transforms into a vital social phenomenon and influences various aspects of life. The political aspect of this phenomenon is particularly important. Societies tend to reinforce their sense of national sentiment; thus, fostering their national identity grounded in collective memories becomes vital with the narratives around historical events. While such historical consciousness is crucial for nurturing national identity; it also provides a framework for dealing with present issues. First, it generates people's perspectives on their status in the world's stage not only in the past but in the present. Secondly, it strengthens a sense of unity within a society against a present challenge with historical reinforcement. Ultimately, writing history does not only preserve the past but also directs societies to active participation in shaping the future and recognizing their role on the global stage.

Yet the question remains about the objective and subjective aspects of history-writing process. In this case, the theoretical background of the research, constructivism, helped comprehend this dilemma by engaging with interpretation of the historical facts. While the

general framework of constructivism is based on the challenging “knowledge” and “reality”, its critique to this process is specifically described. The study established that both the socio-political conditions of the present time and the personal ideological point of view of historians strongly influence the narratives on historical events. However, this research does not explicitly decide on the subjective aspect; it rather questions the reasons behind such narratives.

In this regard, the Kurdish history-writing process also falls into this discussion. While it plays an essential role in cultivating Kurdish national sentiment and cultural preservation, it is also closely related to the Kurds' ongoing political and cultural struggles for recognition. But the efforts within this process does not only remain in the borders of interpretation of historical events and figures through a cultural lens to highlight the richness of heritage; these elements are contextualized within a broader socio-political framework. By examining how these narratives concur with contemporary issues, the research established that Kurdish nationalist history writing aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the past to create a background for present challenges. The example of the origin, that is linked to an ancient and a strong past, demonstrated the Kurdish history writing as a reactive attempt against denials, which can be translated as counter-narrative. In other words, the Kurdish nationalist narrative of history is used as a showcase for the existence of an ancient heritage or a powerful civilization from which they are descended, in contrast to the narratives constructed by opposing parties that deny their historical significance. The connection to an ancient past provides leverage for claiming rights to specific territories.

But in the case of historical symbols and motifs, the problem of interpretation becomes more evident. Instead of focusing solely on historical context, historians often create a politicized framework that intertwines ideology and history. This complexity is demonstrated in the examples of Newroz and the legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, in the context of which they are co-opted for political objectives. This mixture of ideology and historical narrative can lead to altering the original significance of these symbols, which leads to reflecting contemporary agendas rather than their true historical roots. That is why these symbols are elaborated in an exaggerated way which indicates ideological implications. On the other hand, once they are placed in the political sphere, the true purpose of these narratives comes forth. The political discourses that stem from these narratives often serve both to manipulate public opinion and shape their perception.

From a constructivist point of view, while the history-writing process carried out with this aim that are essential for gaining a deeper understanding of events in Kurdish history and appreciating their broader significance, they simultaneously raise critical methodological questions. One major concern is, once again, the reflection of the ideological viewpoints of historians, that shape these narratives, leading to a compromise of objectivity in the interpretation of historical accounts. Therefore, it is concluded that the ideological bias often manifests as the use of exaggerated or emotive language, which can color the portrayal of historical events, key figures, myths, symbols, and legends.

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