



## PUBLIC RELATIONS ACTIVITIES DURING THE NATION-BUILDING PROCESS IN TURKEY <sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 by pro-modernization and westernization elites who were able to attain power during the final years of the Empire. The formation of this new state required not only the construction of a new nation, but also a 20th century identity. While modern Turkey was being constructed, numerous cultural, social, economic and legal reforms were being introduced. The founders used written, oral and visual means of communication during this strategic process. During the period following the establishment of the Republic, several public relation activities were used in the process of building a nation/community of citizens and a national identity. The public relation activities, which can be claimed to have been based upon a more systematic and programmatic approach in the 1930's, which coincides with the institutionalization and establishment of the Single-Party Rule, were carried out by means of many instruments including organizations like Halkevleri [i.e. Community Centres] and radio, as well as theatre, cinema, exhibitions, conferences, meetings and ceremonies. These institutions and instruments have up to this date been the subject of studies conducted by historians, political scientists and sociologists to shed light upon the developments during the process of establishment of a new state. The communication scientists have not yet paid sufficient attention to this topic and no detailed research on the public relation activities were carried out so far. This study focuses on these activities and the impact they had during the construction of the state and the national identity of modern Turkey. This process has gone largely unstudied in the public relations literature in Turkey. In order to do this, the author has analyzed various elements including people, events, institutions and campaigns.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Nation-Building, Nation Building and PR, Turkey.

## TÜRKİYE'DE ULUS İNŞA SÜRECİNDE HALKLA İLİŞKİLER FAALİYETLERİ

### Öz

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun devrini tamamlamasının ardından, İmparatorluk devrinde yetişen modernleşmeci ve Batıcı aydınlar tarafından, 1923 yılında cumhuriyetin ilanı ile Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Devleti kurulur. Yeni devletin inşası aynı zamanda yeni bir ulus ve ulusa ait yeni bir kimliğinin inşasını gerektirir. Kültürel, sosyal, ekonomik, hukuksal alanda pek çok değişikliğin yaşandığı modern Türkiye'nin inşası sürecinde halkın sürece dahil olabilmesi için yazılı, sözlü, görsel her türlü araçtan yararlanılır. Cumhuriyet'in ilanını izleyen dönemde ulusun/yurttaşlar topluluğunun ve ulusal kimliğin inşası sürecinde halkla ilişkiler faaliyetlerinden de yararlanılmıştır Özellikle, Tek Parti yönetiminin kurumsallaşma ve yerleşme

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sürecine denk gelen 1930'lı yıllarla birlikte sistemli ve programlı bir hal aldığı iddia edebileceğimiz halkla ilişkiler faaliyetleri; Halkevleri gibi organizasyonların yanı sıra radyo, tiyatro-sinema gösterileri, sergiler, konferanslar, ve törenler gibi çok sayıda araçtan yararlanılarak sürdürülmüştür. Bugüne kadar, sosyal bilimler alanı içinde yeni devletin kuruluş sürecindeki gelişmeleri açığa çıkarmak için tarihçiler, siyaset bilimciler, sosyologlar tarafından ele alınan bu kurum ve araçlar, henüz iletişim bilimcileri tarafından yeterince işlenmemiş ve bunlar üzerinden ayrıntılı bir halkla ilişkiler tarihi araştırması yapılmamıştır. Bu çalışmanın konusu, bugüne kadar Türkiye halkla ilişkiler literatüründe neredeyse hiç ele alınmayan Türkiye'de ulusun ve ulusal kimliğin inşa sürecinde kullanılan halkla ilişkiler faaliyetlerini çeşitli öğeler (kişiler, olaylar, kurumlar, kampanyalar) üzerinden değerlendirebilmektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Halka İlişkiler, Ulus İnşası, Ulus İnşası ve Hİ, Türkiye.

## 1. Introduction

Public relations emerged as an academic discipline and developed into a professional occupation during the 1960s. Therefore, literature that was written after 1960 is an appropriate starting point for evaluating the history of public relations in Turkey (Peltekoğlu, 1993; Asna, 1997; Kazancı, 2006). From 1970 to 2000, researchers began to study the history of public relations in Turkey. While analyzing these studies, one will find common points and patterns between the authors and their publications.

First, there is a direct relationship between the history of public relations in Turkey and the United States of America, and to a lesser extent, Europe (Kazancı, 2006: 5). The second common aspect that can be found in previous literature is the commentary of the history of public relations in Turkey has been limited to the number of significant events that occurred after 1960, which was stated in previous portions of this article. However, in recent years there has been a significant change in the amount of commentary available regarding Turkish public relations. This shift in literature has been caused, in large part, by the call to establish narrations of the history of public relations specific to each country, with an emphasis in taking into account the social, economic and social aspects of each country (Karaaslan Şanlı, 2014). Included in this shift of literature is an increase of commentary regarding public relations used during the Ottoman Empire era, the predecessor of the Republic of Turkey (see Kazancı, 2005; Kazancı, 2006; Kazan, 2007). Public relations activities that occurred before the 1960's are now being studied (see Keloğlu İşler, 2007; Karaaslan Şanlı, 2013). In fact, for the first time in Turkish history, a book bearing the title of Public Relations is now published (see Ymanoğlu, Gençtürk Hızal & Özdemir, 2013).

Lastly, the first study that analyzed the development of public relations in Turkey through periodization of the existing literature appeared in 2013 (see Bıçakcı & Hürmeriç, 2013). The objective of this study is to make a contribution to the existing research in the field of Turkish public relations history by focusing on an area that has remained fairly unanalysed

thus far in research. This study will focus on the public relations activities that were carried out during the nation-building process of the Republic of Turkey. I will begin by examining the relationship between the construction of the Turkish national identity and public relations. Next, the idea of new modern nation and construction of national identity in Turkey will be analyzed. Lastly, the public relations activities carried out during the process of building modern Turkey will be discussed.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Construction of a National Identity and Public Relations**

Primordialists approaches, which puts forth the idea that national identities are eternal and everlasting, have been widely accepted within academic circles, but lately these approaches have lost their effectiveness. Modernist approaches, which seek to understand the emergence of nations through concepts such as construction inventions, are now occupying an increasingly prominent place within research on nationalism. Due to these shifts in research, recent discussion on national identities is no longer to be regarded as natural, eternal, or everlasting reality, but instead as historically and socially constructed and re-constructed categories (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawn, 1992; Gellner 1997). The definition of national identities, as constructed and re-constructed categories rather than natural and lasting realities, has paved the way for the emergence of research that is focused on the production of such identities as well as their embracement by the citizens. Research in various fields of social sciences including: history, sociology, political psychology, and anthropology attempt to answer these questions, with each discipline focusing on the aspect of the question that is most relevant for them. In communication sciences, interest in the construction of national identities emerged within the field of public relations. Over the past 20 years, “there has been a growing interest in the application of public relations in the nation-building process” (Taylor & Kent 2006: 342). Research reveals that public relations played a vital and complementary role within nation-building processes (Taylor, 2000; Taylor & Kent 2006, Toledano & McKie 2014; Chaka 2014). These findings have been reinforced through research on the nation-building processes in various countries in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe (such as Bulgaria, Malaysia, Israel, and other countries in North Africa).

Some theoretical studies have also been carried out on the principles of the public relations approach to nation-building. An example of such studies has been presented below:

#### **Principles of Public Relations Approach to Nation Building**

1. Nation building requires two levels of relationships: those between individuals and those between individuals and governments.

2. Individual relationships are fostered through communication. Public relations can offer a strategic approach for relationship building. Communication campaigns, a function of public relations, are one vehicle for relationship building.

3. Relationships must be negotiated between individuals and between individuals and governments. Negotiation involves compromise, trust, and respect for all parties involved. Communication campaigns need to be flexible and adapt to the needs of public.

4. Relationships are negotiated in a social context. This social context will affect the development of the relationships. Communication campaigns that foster relationships must be complemented, not contradicted, by social and political contexts.

5. Campaigns that allow individuals to control their own relationships, foster trust, and provide for closeness will be beneficial for relationship building and, ultimately, for nation building (Taylor, 2000: 207).

Studies highlighting the unique potential of the theory and practice of public relations in relation to the establishment, maintenance and preservation of the relations between governments and the public have made a particular reference to the contribution of public relations activities that are carried out during nation-building processes of an emerging modern and democratic regime.

## **2.2. The Republic of Turkey and Nation-Building**

The Republic of Turkey was officially established in 1923. This meant the end of Ottoman Empire and the beginning of nation-state building process. The Republican People's Party (CHP), which was founded by modernist elites, led the building process of the new nation-state and the construction of its new national identity. The Republican People's Party (CHP) remained in power as a single party until 1946, hence the single-party era (Tunçay, 2005). The single-party era refers to the 23-year period (1923-1946) that occurred before Turkey's transition into a multi-party system of government. During this time, the scope of the modernization movement in the Ottoman Empire, which at the time was confined to military and technological renovations, was expanded to the modernization of social, political and cultural life as well. The main objective of the ideology, politics and practices being used in this era was the construction of a nation state. It was essential that this new nation-state would consist of a community of citizens that were a part of the nation-state and the construction of its new political culture. Those who were most influential in this process of re-construction

were referred to as Kemalist. They were a group of elites, consisting of military staff, bureaucrats, and intellectuals, who developed their ideas in the latter years of Ottoman Empire while witnessing its demolition (Ahmad, 1995; Karpat, 1996; Zürcher, 1998).

Following the official establishment of the modern state of Turkey in 1923, which initiated the first stage of Kemalist modernization projects that aimed to completely remove the existing political and social structure and replace it with a new order of state and society. The leaders used the Western model, while political elites embarked upon a long-lasting project of transforming the society with the goal of creating the "nation of the state". The construction of a new nation and its citizens not only meant the restructuring of the nation and the collective identities of the citizens, but it also included the reconstruction of the public sphere. Furthermore, many aspects of the private sphere were reconstructed to redirect the customs and traditions of the population, as well as daily practices of the general public. "In the new Kemalist regime; the endeavours to create a new nation, a new culture and a new citizen were integrated, and in fact, intertwined" (Keyman & İçduygu, 1998: 17). There was one common trait, which the new citizen, constructed by the Kemalist cadres was expected to have: a modern, progressive and Western-oriented (national) identity. Such an identity was needed to "reach the level of contemporary civilization," as expressed by the founding leader of the regime, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Tanör, 2002). Focusing on the socio-cultural sphere with an emphasis in social engineering was based in positivist tradition; the Kemalist movement first struggled to remove the traces of the traditional culture residue of the Ottoman Empire. With the aim of creating a type of individual and culture suitable for the objectives of the new regime, which was westernization and modernization, various reforms were implemented with the ultimate goal to nationalize the people through the implementation of reforms. The movement focused, in large part, on the institutions in the superstructure and began to discharge the socio-cultural structure and institutions of the former social structure. Sultanates and caliphates were abolished and steps were taken with the purpose of secularizing the society through laws. Some of which were aimed to lessen the impact of religion on education. This was followed by the re-organization of the judicial system, which put an end to Sharia law. The intent of these reforms was to put them into effect before the enactment of the Constitution in order to break any remaining ideological and cultural ties, which were once held in the Ottoman society. In addition to such reforms enacted in the superstructures, reforms in the social and cultural fields were also put into action. The reforms included: the adoption of the Latin script instead of Arabic alphabet, the law regarding weekend holidays (Friday, which is a sacred day in Islam was replaced by Sunday as a

holiday), the Hat Law (the requirement to wear hats instead of a fez as in the Ottoman era), the adoption of the international clock and calendar, the adoption of the international numbering system, the adoption of the international measuring system, and the Surname Law (Tanör, 2002: 183-230).

The period between the 1920s and 1930s witnessed radical changes in Turkish society.

Reforms that aimed at establishing and constructing a distinctive culture lasted until the 1930s. In the years following, the fundamental objective of the countries' new leaders was to have the public internalize these reforms. The society and individuals would each have to embrace these new values, beliefs, and behavioural patterns. The fundamental objective behind these endeavours, expressed in the words of the rulers as "the creation of the new individual, the new society," was not only to change the behavioural patterns on the people but also their mind-set, in effect, the manner in which they would make sense of the world. One of the important parts of this change was the construction of a cultural field for the new individual and society. The construction of the new individual and culture was regarded as the principal method of reproduction for the regime in the social and political sphere. The reconstructed individual and society would serve as solid foundation for the future of Turkey. For this reason, great importance has been attached to these reforms that re-organized the socio-cultural sphere of modern Turkey.

### **2.3. Public Relations Activities during the Construction of the Nation**

The construction of the Turkish national identity can be dated back to the 1920s. The purpose of each of the reforms enacted between 1923 and 1930 was to create a Western-oriented, modern individual who would be idealized by the political elites. However, the people did not readily accept the reforms, which were forcefully enacted on them between 1920 and 1930. The top-down reforms drastically changed the behavioural patterns of the people. For example, the people began to wear hats instead of the fez. People began to take a day off of work on Sundays instead of Fridays. They also adopted the Western calendar, time system, and measuring systems. While the people's behavioural patterns changed, the people were far from internalizing the reforms on the level of mentality and way in which they thought. A multitude of movements emerged in opposition to the single-party system. These movements attracted an abundance of interest and enthusiasm among the people, which was representative of the populations' overall hesitancy in accepting the reforms. Seeing the growing dissatisfaction of the people, the political elites created policies that would change the mind-set of the people (Karpat, 1996; Tunçay, 2005). The leaders of the republic

understood that without the support of the people, not only would the reforms fail, but also the regime and, perhaps, the newly established country. The new policies engaged the population through socio-political and economic transformation, with an ultimate goal of each individual internalizing the reforms. From the beginning of the Republic of Turkey, the political leaders began to utilize public relations activities as part of the construction project. The projects would facilitate the construction of a nation, whose individuals were receptive of the enacted reforms and would internalize them, in effect, to ensure the "collective union of the nation in terms of affects and thoughts." One could attempt to define the public relations activities used during this era to individuals or institutions, however this is simply not possible. The evaluate each and every public relations activity used throughout this era is simply beyond the scope of this study. Many instruments were used in the public relations process including: education, cinema, political rhetoric, and festivals. The activities differed in their form and content depending on the audience, whether that was urban intellectuals or rural persons. Children, young people, and women were identified as a target group during this time. Special campaigns were used to engage these groups. Generally, activities were organized differently in order to meet the interests or needs of the target group.

### **3. Research Questions and Methodology**

This study attempts to examine how public relations activities were utilized during the nation building process of modern Turkey. Primary sources such as newspapers, posters, banners, brochures, photographs and biographies, as well as secondary sources related to the early years of the Republic have been used for the obtainment of data for this study. The study was organized in accordance to the questions posed by Jacquie L'Etang in her article entitled "Writing PR history: issues, methods and politics" (2008).

"How did public relations emerge in context X and why? What role did public relations play in a particular historical event and how? What has been the relationship between public relations and power? Why did organization X set up a public relations function? How and why did this PR practitioner achieve public notoriety or iconic status and why? When did employee magazines and communications emerge, where and why?" (2008: 323).

In order to analyse the use of public relations in Turkey during the process of nation-building, many events, institutions, people or campaigns were identified and researched. However, this study focuses only on the most fundamental and important of these examples.

## **4. Findings**

This study focuses on four public relations components and their activities that were used during the construction of a new national identity. The components include: the Anadolu Agency, the nationwide tour of the regime's leader; the literacy campaign, and the activities carried out within the scope of Halkevleri (People's Houses), which also happened to be the most widespread cultural, political and social organization of the period.

### **4.1. The Use of Announcements: Anadolu Agency**

Research dealing with the history of public relations in Turkey typically associates its beginning with the proclamation of the Republic. However, up to this point, only a single reference has usually been made regarding the establishment of the Anadolu Agency, which was founded on 6 April 1920. Further comments regarding the agency have not been made. The Anadolu Agency was established as a news agency during the War of Independence. Its purpose was to spread propaganda during the war and present information to not only the general population, but to the world. It became the voice of the state. The agency used advertisements and other methods to engaged and inform the public. In addition to the offices in Turkey, agencies were also established in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Geneva and New York. The agency not only provided news stories, but it also produced books and brochures that dealt with the war (Uzan ve Arşak Hasdemir, 2010: 88-89). In addition to reporting about war developments, the agency would promote the government's new reforms, which were quickly sweeping across Turkey. The agency's goal was to minimize the issues and crises, which were rampant, by using proper planning and communication between all parties involved. The Anadolu Agency was the first example of a prompt, well organized, and institutionalized mode of public relations activities that were used during the nation building process of what is now modern Turkey.

### **4.2. The Nationwide Tour of Atatürk, the Regime's Founding Leader**

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Turkey's founding leader, worked relentlessly to promote and advertise the reforms in order to help the public internalize them. He utilized nationwide tours, press releases and public announcements in order to engage the population. Atatürk served as a role model for the population by internalizing the reforms himself and demonstrating to the public, a modern and Western way of life. The primary public relations activity that Atatürk employed was in the form of persuasive speeches. He gave them in a variety of contexts including: parliament, at balls, formal dinners, mosques, or in general meetings. He tried to convey a single message to the general public when we embarked on his

nationwide tours. In a fifteen-year period, between 1923 and 1938, the year when he passed away, Mustafa Kemal visited a total of 52 provinces. Some of these areas were visited more than once. Kemal took with him bureaucrats and specialists who had specific knowledge regarding the provinces to be visited (Gül, 2006: 54). During these nationwide tours, Atatürk would have face-to-face conversations with a variety of people from all socioeconomic backgrounds and upbringings. For example, he would converse with young people at their schools, with factory workers, peasants, and prominent intellectuals. He encouraged people to ask questions and would hold meetings with influential leaders. These tours were used as a means to promote, advertise, and spread the message of the reforms and the changes that they would bring. The influential leader used the tours and interactions with the people to gauge the level in which the public had internalized the reforms. The use of public relations in governmental activities was exemplified by the nationwide tours of Atatürk (Keloğlu İşler, 2010: 171). Additionally, another interpretation of these nationwide tours was that they aimed to create a "domestic public opinion" (Gül, 2006: 52). Each of the nationwide tours exemplified how public relations were used during the construction of the new national identity. The impact of nationwide tours in relation to the Hat Reform<sup>2</sup> will be analysed in this section. For the construction of a modern state, reform was needed in the dress code. This was considered to be a fundamental element of modern life. The objective of this reform was to help the people break away from traditional clothing that was associated with their daily habits and religious beliefs. Instead, the goal was for the population to embrace the dress code trends of Western societies. Atatürk carried out face-to-face conversations and meetings with influential leaders so that they could inform and persuade their communities to accept the dress code reforms. In fact, prior to the tour, there were news stories that communicated the upcoming reform. Furthermore, in order to create a positive public opinion regarding the hat law reform and before the law was enacted, Atatürk expressed his ideas about wearing hats on his nationwide tours. In 1925, Atatürk embarked on a tour with his hat in hand for the first time. Additionally, in order to facilitate the public's internalization of the influential reform, Atatürk wore a hat in every meeting in which he participated.

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<sup>2</sup> Hat was the political symbol of the Republic during the process of modernization/Westernization. The hat was seen as the symbol of breaking away with the Eastern values and a way of integrating with the West. This was also supported by a law. According to Article 1 of the Law passed on 25 November 1925 at the National Assembly "The members of the Parliament, civil servants and employees in the general, special and local administrations and all other agencies shall wear the hat worn by the Turkish Public. Hat shall be the general cap of Turkish society, violation of which is prohibited by the Government." Turkish Grand National Assembly, Official Reports Diary, 25 November 1341 (1925), V. XIX, Book II, p. 231.

### **4.3. The Promotion Latin Script, Literacy Campaign and National Schools**

The adoption of the Latin script, which replaced the Ottoman era Arabic alphabet, on 1 November 1928, was perhaps the most significant of all the reforms. The reforms in their entirety were referred to as the Atatürk Reforms (Tunçay, 2005). This particular reform was especially noteworthy because it rendered the whole public illiterate. Atatürk acted as the pioneer of the adoption of the Latin script, which required a completely different technique of reading and writing. The Script Reform was initiated in a public relations campaign. On 8 August 1928, a concert was organized in Istanbul, during which the announcement of the Script Reform was made. Next, the new alphabet was distributed to intellectuals and bureaucrats (Jevakhoff, 1998: 285). These leaders promoted the Script Reform by displaying posters, brochures, and banners that were written using the Latin script. Such displays were placed all over the cities including: the streets, post offices, bazaars, and train stations (Williams, 1929). Much like the previously mentioned Hat reform, Atatürk used his nationwide tours to promote the use of the Latin script. Most notably was his Kayseri tour, during which the Script Reform was first promoted. Atatürk introduced the new alphabet to the people of Kayseri nearly one and a half months before the reform was enacted. Here, he once again used face-to-face conversations with the general public in order to draw attention to upcoming reforms. Beginning on 1 November 1928, an extensive literacy campaign was initiated for the teaching of the new script. The campaign was established to take place within the government schools. The National Schools objective was introduced on 1 January 1929. Its goal was to teach the general population, ages 16-45, who were not enrolled in formal education, to read and write using the Latin script. The schools were organized as "fixed, special and mobile" classrooms with the goal to teach all persons how to read and write "in front of their doors and while they are at work." The literacy campaign facilitated the creation of new public spheres that would take place in locations such as new school buildings, coffee houses, mosques and village chambers. The press was also used to garner support for the literacy campaign. They released news stories and wrote columns that supported the campaign and even placed special reading columns in their newspapers. Due to the literacy campaign, a staggering number of more than two and a half million citizens learned how to read and write.

### **4.4. Public Relations Activities through Institutions: Halkevleri (People's Houses)**

Community centres called *Halkevleri*, literally meaning People's Houses, were established by the state on 19 February 1932. In 19 years, 4,800 Halkevleri were opened (Çeçen, 1990). The objective and function of these houses varied, while their activities focused on engaging the young people and adults within their communities. The first

objective was to reconcile the general public with the new regime. Secondly, there was a concerted effort to establish a dialogue between the elites and general population. Lastly, the homes were used to facilitate the adaptation of people to a westernized lifestyle.

"People's Houses was established for establishing political communication under the specific circumstances of the era... People's Houses was also used to mobilize the people with a view to remove the disconnection (or polarization) between the state and society" (Şimşek, 2002).

The activities that took place within these homes were carried out in nine bureaus or branches. These branches were as follows: language and literature, fine arts, performance, sports, social relief, people's lessons, library and publishing, rural education, and history and museum (for detailed information see Karpaz, 1963). In an attempt to connect with the people, the houses utilized a variety of means which included: conferences, concerts, rural fests, rural tours, formal balls, open-air cinemas, puppet shows, *Karagöz* shadow play, and literature nights. Furthermore, theatre performances, tea parties, exhibitions, and language courses (English, French, German, Italian) were provided. An assortment of sports tournaments were created including: football, volleyball, basketball, and ping-pong. Furthermore, the homes mobilized relief efforts for the poor that would provide medical relief, provision of clothes, and food etc. Additionally, the homes published magazines, brochures and newspapers for their communities. They instituted tracking bureaus with the objective to help rural persons be successful with their businesses inside the city (*Cumhuriyet* Newspaper, compiled from the news stories on Halkevleri between 1932 and 1951). Due to these public relations activities, the general public was not only able to connect with their leaders, but they also saw themselves adapting quite successfully into a modern lifestyle.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The term "campaign," which is often used to refer to the relationship between nation-building and public relations, can literally be translated into Turkish as *seferberlik* (mobilization). This concept is intrinsically political. Mobilization is used to refer to a process that is organized by a top-down framework in which people are essential and thus must be included. This concept, in effect, refers to the unidirectional nature of the public relation activities that were used during the process of nation-building in modern Turkey. In an effort to construct a secular nation-state and new national identity the new Republic of Turkey utilized public relations activities with the ultimate goal of constructing a modern public. This study has focused on the process of nation-building and the use of public relations in the early

years of the Turkish Republic. This period of time had been limited to just a few significant public relations activities, which included the aforementioned Anadolu Agency, the activities of the founder of the republic, literacy campaign, and Halkevleri (People's houses). Public relations activities were carried out through political speeches, ceremonies, celebrations, exhibitions, festivals and many other manners that are unique to Turkish society. Each of these activities played a significant role in creating modern Turkey and its western-minded citizens. Future studies will confirm that this era witnessed many examples of public relations activities and each of them had a major impact on the Republic of Turkey.

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