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The Effect of National History Courses in Turkey and Other Countries on the Formation Process of National States

Dr. Mahmut Bolat*, Assoc. Prof. Bengül Salman Bolat**

* Ahi Evran University / Department of Atatürk's Principles and Revolution History, Kırşehir / Turkey

** Ahi Evran University Education Faculty Department of Social Sciences Teaching, Kırşehir / Turkey

Abstract

Many European states tried to establish their own nation-states by making the people internalize the new values and new state understanding emerging in this formation process of nation states at the 19th century, in particular. These states which attached a great importance to the process of placing these new values and state understanding in the minds of the people and conveying them to the future generations used many different methods to fulfill their goals. Without doubt, the most important means used by the states to this end has become the national history courses. With the Turkish Revolution led by Atatürk, similar developments were also observed in Turkey and it was aimed at creating awareness in Turkish community in this respect through the national history courses and developing a national identity for the Turkish people and establishing the targeted national state.

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1. Introduction

The nation-state understanding has been based on the nationalism which started to spread as of the 19th century. This movement led to the collapse of kingdoms and establishment of separate states for each nation in Europe. This new order was defined as modernization and it started to spread to the whole world from Europe (Çelik, 2009: 145).

It can be expressed that the most important characteristics of nation states which came out depending on the developments in Europe and is still the most common state model are "Being a centralized and constitutional state",

Corresponding Author: Mahmut Bolat -Bengül Salman Bolat Tel: +23 444747839

Email: Mahmut Bolat -Bengül Salman Bolat @gmail.com

“Administration with an Assembly through a parliamentary functioning”, “Being based on a national community” and “Following a secular policy” (Köken, 2002: 64).

When Europe was heavily hit by nationalist uprisings at the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire which was seen as the dominant power of the Islam World considered these events as internal affairs of Europe and did not follow these developments closely (Çelik, 2009: 146).

2.Nation State- National History

Following the nationalist movements which started to spread after the Enlightenment and French Revolution triggered by a series of events including Geographical Discoveries, Renaissance and Reform in Europe, a cultural change has taken place as in all other fields. During the formation of nation states, Western communities displayed their cultural differences and started to discuss their national histories intensely (Köken, 2002: 31).

The concept of nation state refers to a community which actually started with the establishment of national monarchies at the end of the Middle Age and has been organized and integrated in accordance with the nationalizations principle in its modern sense. Although it appeared at the end of the Middle Age, it can be said that this state model has been shaped completely as a new phenomenon at the 19th century with industrializations and capitalizations following the collapse of feudalism in Western Europe (Köken, 2002: 66).

National state needs a cultural integrity which will give prominence to the integrity sense of a socially and politically integrated community to survive. Thus, national states had to lean over the history in order to reveal the roots of national culture and to find out a legitimacy basis appropriate for the nation desired to be formed. Therefore, national history gained more importance at the 19th century during which nationalism and democracy ideas spread rapidly, empires dissolved and nation-states were established. As a result, resorting to the national history has become a common method for each country aiming at enhancing national integrity and spiritual power as well as taking new steps. One of the most important factors integrating a community is the common history consciousness. Besides, the fact that the Italians, the Germans and the Slavic people wrote their national histories even before establishing their political, national integrities shows that history is one of the most important factors to develop a national identity (Köken, 2002: 78–79).

3. National History Understanding in Turkey and Other Countries

The most fundamental characteristic of French history writing at the 19th century has been the intense impact of French Revolution. This impact has affected the nationalist viewpoint, in particular. Contemporary history writing also started in line with nationalist approaches of the 19th century in the Ottoman Empire. The modern Turkey can not be kept out of this generalisation. In Modern Turkey, the establishment of nation-state and re-writing of the history are also concurrent (Behar, 1996: 19).

Throughout the world, it has been a common method to resort to history as a means of benefiting from history to deepen the nation-state understanding or revealing the legitimacy of the revolution. For instance, many countries ranging from America to Asia formed books out of speeches and statements of leaders and published them to create such an impact. The first one of these books included speeches and statements of Washington, the first president of the U.S. and was published in 1837 (<http://www.archives.gov/nhprc>). Another example is France where the date of French Revolution, the 14th of July, was proclaimed a fete and a revolution history chair was established in Sorbonne University several years later. Besides, in Russia, museums were opened to introduce the Bolshevik Revolution dated 1917 to the community (Oral, 2001: 323). In Turkey, it is also seen that Revolution Institutes were established in 1933 and 1942 with the similar purposes.

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