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Building a “Modern” and “Western” image: Miss Turkey beauty contests from 1929 to 1933

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the beauty contests organised by the *Cumhuriyet* (Republic) newspaper in late 1920s and early 1930s in Turkey with the aim of publicizing the young Turkish Republic. The research employs those issues of *Cumhuriyet* newspaper published between 1929 and 1933 in order to demonstrate the newspaper's motivation for the international publicity. This study argues that the beauty contests have served for representing Turkey as a modern Western country while distancing it from the Ottoman past and benefited from the woman body as a canvas upon which the prospect of the Turkish Republic is drawn.

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1. Introduction

Even though the image of the Ottoman Empire, as viewed by others, changed during its 600 years of history, one thing can be asserted: its image was always a negative one. In the beginning the Ottoman Empire was seen as the “terror of the world”, and towards the end it turned into the “sick man of Europe” (Çirakman, 2002). And so when, in the 1920s, the Republic of Turkey was founded, it preferred to be known as a new independent state rather than as the successor to the Ottomans. The new nationalist elite felt that they needed to distance themselves from the “dissolute and degenerate past” of their predecessors, the Ottoman ruling elite (Deringil, 1998, p. 217).

One of the priorities of the new Republic was to reject the negative Ottoman image and instead build a new one. According to this image, Turkey was a country eager to join the modern, secular Western world. So while the Ottomans represented the East, Turkey now faced towards the West; and whereas the Ottomans embodied many different ethnicities, the new Turkey was Turkish (Howard, 2001; Pope & Pope, 2011; Macfie, 1994). The new Republic decided to show the West that it no longer had any connections with the Ottomans and that it was a new state, independent from them. At this point, publicizing this new image abroad became an important issue. This paper focuses on how the beauty contests organized by the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* (Republic), starting in 1929 when the first contest was staged until 1932 when Miss Turkey was selected as Miss World, were used as a public relations tool to publicize the new Turkey.

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2. Method

Newspapers have always recorded the first draft of history and they help us to gain an insight into places, people and periods. As a result, newspapers have long been relied upon by historians as a source of historical data. This article, based on a study of the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, sets out to analyze the first beauty contests in Turkey in the context of public relations. For the purpose of the analysis *Cumhuriyet* has been chosen not only because it organized the early beauty contests, but also because it is considered to be a newspaper that reflected the program of the young Turkish Republic during the 1920s and 1930s. To research the issues of *Cumhuriyet* during this period, online digital archives were used and each issue published between 1929 and 1933 was checked to locate any mention of these beauty contests. Rather than using a keywords search; the researcher looked through each issue of *Cumhuriyet* which was published daily; and to examine the views about the beauty contest columns that were current during this period; opinion leaders on the subject were also included.

3. The establishment of the Republic of Turkey

The First World War ended for the Ottoman Empire in the armistice of Mudros on 31 October 1918, followed on 10 August 1920 by the government of Sultan Mehmed VI signing the Treaty of Sevres. As a result, the Ottoman Empire had to renounce its claims to all non-Turkish lands and was reduced to a minor territory in northwestern Asia Minor with the city of Istanbul as its capital. However the nationalists were not willing to accept the treaty (Howard, 2001, p. 86–87) and upon the urging of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), the lower house of the last Ottoman Parliament (*Heyeti Mebusan*), which had previously assembled in Istanbul, convened in Ankara (Koçak, 2005) and the Grand National Assembly was established there on 23 April 1920. This new parliament formed its own government and is known as the Ankara Government. During the War of Independence (1919–1923) the Ankara Government commanded the army, National Forces (*Kuva-yi Milliye*), fighting against Greece, Armenia, France, Great Britain and Italy, and the army's success in several battles paved the way for the Conference of Lausanne (1922–1923), the purpose of which was the negotiation of a treaty to replace that of Sevres which was no longer recognized by the Turkish government. The Lausanne Treaty was concluded in July 1923, affirming the Turkish nationalists' victory, and the regaining of eastern Thrace and all of Anatolia.

A republic was proclaimed on October 29 1923 Atatürk's westernist views came clearly to the fore, his own power was consolidated and the fate of Turkey assured. Atatürk was indeed a visionary statesman whose ultimate goal was to unite the nation and create a modern western state (Pope & Pope, 2011, p. 51) in which economic, social and cultural developments were inseparable to his vision (Mango, 2008, p. 163). The great task of modernization was to change the Turkish people's outlook and behavior from something inward looking, passive and shaped by collective religious and institutional values, to something active, outward looking and more in tune with the economic and materialistic values of the modern world (Okyar, 1984, p. 50). Women were given a special emphasis in Atatürk's revolution and, as a result, Turkish women won legal equality long before many in the West (Pope & Pope, 2011 p. 63).

2. Beauty contests as a national publicity tool

2.1. Public relations in Turkey in the 1920s

Although in Turkey the concept of public relations only started to be used in the 1960s (Aktas Yamanoglu, Gençtür Hızal, & Ozdemir, 2013), the 1920s made a special contribution to the development of Turkish public relations when they were key in gaining support for the War of Independence. The Guidance Committee (*Irşad Encümeni*), formed as a propaganda organization, was founded in 1920 with the aim of persuading people in Anatolia to join and support the War of Independence, although its target audience also included soldiers who needed information about what was happening on the other war fronts (Aslan, 2004).

From the start of the War of Independence publicizing the struggle abroad was also highly valued. The Anadolu Agency (*Anadolu Ajansı*), which was established on 6 April 1920, was a press agency that announced the success of the resistance movement and the failures of its enemies, and in particular combed the foreign press for encouraging reports (Mango, 1999, p. 275). Soon after, on 7 June 1920, the General Directorate of the Press (*Matbuat ve İstihbarat Müdüriyeti Umumiyesi*) was founded with the aim of producing publications to defend the national cause and to constantly scrutinize the foreign press in order to understand the flow of ideas. At the same time, it also produced publications for national consumption to unite ideas and uphold spirits.

These institutions, which focused on propaganda and publicity, had an important role in winning the War of Independence, but even after the establishment of the Republic, the young state continued with its publicity efforts. But now the main emphasis of publicity was mostly on the modernization process that the new-formed country was undergoing. Also during the 1920s and 1930s, Turkey had started to attend international exhibitions to display its modernity, such as the exhibitions in Milan (1932), Brussels (1935), and Königsberg (1936), and it was also during these years that beauty contests were used as a tool to promote Turkey.

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