

## “Atatürk is mentioned only once”. The Last Letter from the Gallipoli Campaign 1915

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### News:

On March 18, 2015 the Turkish film *Son Mektup* (The Last letter) had its premiere. The film about a love affair between a war pilot and a nurse during the Gallipoli War created a political controversy on Turkish history.

### Summary:

The article analyzes the controversy created by the film *Son Mektup* (The Last letter) between moderate Islamists and secularists about how to explain the victory at the Battle of Canakkale in 1915, as Turks call the Gallipoli Campaign, and the role of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the war. Since the director of the film in several interviews has stated that he supports the current AKP government, his fictional version of the war was taken to be an Islamist statement of on the war. The fact that Atatürk is mentioned only once in the film and that the focus of the narrative is on a war pilot, a nurse and an orphan angered the secularist nationalists. The article argues that the controversy about the film is yet another manifestation of the deep-rooted split between the pious periphery and the secular nationalist center in Turkish politics and cultural life.

### Key words:

The Battle of Canakkale, Gallipoli Campaign, Atatürk, *Son Mektup* (The Last Letter)

### Analysis:

Shortly after its release on March 18th, the feature film *Son Mektup* (The Last Letter), became a subject of heated dispute in Turkey. At first glance, the film looks innocently uncontroversial, since it is a typical "love during wartime story" about an unfulfilled love affair between a nurse and a military pilot during the Battle of Canakkale in 1915. However, the adherents of the "personality cult" (Morris 2005: 32) around Mustafa Kemal Atatürk Turkish did not miss the opportunity to display once again that any work of art, which has to do or which might have to do with the founder of the republic, is on dangerous ground. The Last Letter creating an occasion for the nation to celebrate itself was expected to unite the whole nation around the memory of Canakkale, which for many Turks symbolizes "sacrificing oneself for the motherland". But instead it became a sort of a mirror put in front of the nation, which showed that it is still at war with itself even hundred years after the Canakkale Battle.

The former Chief of the General Staff Ilker Basbug accused the director of the film, whom he described as "ill-advised", of distorting historical facts. The reason for his angry attack was that Atatürk figures only once in the film, and not even in person but mentioned in a letter, which is used to frame the narrative. As a reaction to the director's previous explanation, that the narrative's setting is not the war on the land, but on the sea and in the air, and that the land war is summarized in the film by only one sentence, in which Atatürk is praised, were swept aside by ex-general Basbug. He said bluntly, "He is lying (about the role of Atatürk in the battle of Canakkale-mün)" (Dogan News Agency 2015) and made it clear: "Atatürk can be seen in every instant of the Canakkale Battle". Mentioning Atatürk only once in a Turkish film about the Battle of Canakkale! That was too provocative for the pensioned general and many other like-minded people in the press and social media.

Released on March 18, the date of the beginning of the annual commemorations, *The Last Letter*, was in fact planned to be an important element in the centenary commemorations of the Turkish victory at the battle of Canakkale, which has been traditionally called the Gallipoli Campaign in English speaking countries. An armada of allied battleships and thousands of troops attacked the Ottoman forces on the Gallipoli peninsula during most of the year 1915, but had to pull back in January 1916 leaving thousands of casualties on both sides. Turks celebrate the victory, the first after the many defeats in the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s, as a defining moment in their history. It was during the battles against the invading forces that Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) rose

to fame due to his reputation for being an audacious and intelligent military commander. Turks consider the defense of Canakkale as the beginning of their Independence War, which started five years later and was led by Mustafa Kemal.

Turks celebrated the occasion with pomp and circumstance. Among other things, the attendance of international dignitaries at a "Peace Summit" in Istanbul was arranged alongside an exceptionally well-organized commemoration on the Gallipoli Peninsula Historical National Park with thousands of participants.

### **An element in the Turkish political debate**

Careful observers of the relations between Turkish politics and the Turkish film industry could probably foresee the storm ahead. The film in question is directed by Özhan Eren, who besides having directed the popular nationalistic war film 120, which has been viewed by over a million people (Kocabaylioglu 2015), has also made AKP's election campaign film in 2011, *Biz Birlikte Türkiye* (We Are All Together Turkey). Moreover, the film was supported by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey as part of the ministry's cinema funding.

As expected the film became part and parcel of the Turkish political quarrels. A film critic at the left-leaning secular daily *Radikal* wrote "The Last Letter could not sail through the Dardanelles either" and foresaw the coming conflict: "The fact that Atatürk is mentioned only in one sentence in the film seems to create a stormy controversy". (For other similar critical remarks see Koca 2015 and Yalcin 2015).

What is remarkable about this debate is the lack of a matter-of-fact approach to the question of Atatürk's role in the Gallipoli Campaign and of the limits of taking artistic liberties in works of art on historical events. The discussion became rapidly part of Turkish identity politics: Secularist nationalists versus moderate Islamists. The passionate tone of the debate is yet another illustration of the observation often put forward that, when a topic becomes an issue of identity politics, i.e. "our culture, religion, history and heroes against yours", the debate takes on an emotional tone. The conflicting sides seem to say to each other: If you give Atatürk an important role in a film about Canakkale, then you are nationalist, patriotic, secular, modern, Europeanized etc. However, if you decide not to, then you are an Islamist, not only a reactionary dreaming about going back to Islam, the Ottoman times and a sharia rule, but also a part of the

AKP government's propaganda machine, which allegedly is allegedly trying to erase the memory of Atatürk.

### Cultural "Cold War"

What has taken place can be described as a "cold war" within the Turkish political class. Seven days after Basbug's diatribe, the Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu participated in the film's gala and warmly congratulated the director in front of an array of television cameras and journalists. The Internet is full of recordings from Davutoglu's meeting with the film crew, in which he is seen chatting jovially with them and praising their performances. A month later, it was President Erdogan's turn to show his support to the film. He went to a movie theater together with his wife and a cabinet minister with the media in his heels to see "that film", as hostile newspapers described *The Last Letter*. Erdogan had no public comments though.

To understand this partly open partly more or less disguised contradiction about the film, three levels of conflict, which constitute the background of the present debate, have to be taken into account. Starting from the abstract level of analysis and approaching step by step the object of the current debate, *The Last Letter*, the three levels are: 1) The general conflict between center and periphery in Turkey, 2) the conflict on the historiography of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic between these two entities in question and 3) the conflict about the interpretation of the victory at the Battle of Canakkale.

Many observers of the Turkish society have posited the thesis that the key to understanding Turkish politics, is to analyze the relations of center and periphery. The Turkish sociologist Serif Mardin (1973: 170) put forward long ago, that "the confrontation between center and periphery (is) the most important social cleavage underlying Turkish politics and one that seems to have survived more than a century of modernization" is still valid. More than 40 years after Mardin's seminal article, a number of analysts of Turkish politics (see for example Polat 2013; Park 2012: 26) will nod assent, and claim that the same confrontation still goes on, though under different circumstances.

To put it succinctly, this cleavage is between the Europeanized military and civil bureaucracy, which in the last 150 years, especially after the establishment of the Republic in 1923, has, mostly in an autocratic fashion tried to modernize, civilize and secularize its people on the one side, and the pious Muslims, who in different ways resisted this top-down modernization and "assertive secularization" (Kuru 2006) on the other side. The discourses of West-

ernization and modernization were conceptualized synonymously, and the center aimed at cleansing the society of public displays of Islam.

The second conflict concerns historiography of the country and mainly the question of how to explain the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Since 1800's the main topic of debate among the Ottoman and Turkish elite was the factors behind the economic and military might of the West and the reasons behind the backwardness of the Ottoman Empire. The center explained this unfortunate situation in terms of the hindrances to economic and cultural progress created by Islam, and thus Islam became the *bête noir* of Kemalist historiography in the 1920s and the 1930s. This meant that any thinkable positive role, which Islam may have played in the Ottoman history, was suppressed and denied. This necessitated a radical break with Islam and its deep-rooted influence on the way people lived, behaved and felt. On the other hand, different currents in what one can call Islamism tried to explain the military defeats the Ottomans suffered and the ensuing collapse of the Empire by claiming that the Ottomans and other Muslims abandoned Islam and got influenced by Western ideas, life style and morals. There were, of course, middle positions as in every controversy, and intellectuals subscribing to them, offered ideas which came down to the proposal that the country had to modernize without losing its Islamic identity.

However, this radical break with Islam created a problem when it came to explain, for example, what motivated the soldiers, when they sacrificed themselves during the Canakkale War. This is the third level of the conflict between center and the periphery, which has to be taken into account to understand the emotional debate on *The Last Letter*. While the official narrative has focused on the person Atatürk, his courage, intelligence as a commander and capacity to instigate his soldiers to fight and sacrifice themselves, the intellectuals and historians of the periphery, have stressed the role of the religious belief of the soldiers as the main factor of the victory in the war and constructed the war as a fight between Islamic belief and Western technology. In this context, it has to be stressed that Atatürk himself never denied that the soldiers' main motivation was their religious belief, and he described vividly how in the trenches "(t)hose who could read were getting ready to enter paradise (by dying as a martyr – *mün*) with the Koran in their hands. Those who could not, walked (toward certain death – *mün*) reciting the shahada (The Muslim profession of faith – *mün*)<sup>1</sup>." (Rusen Esref 1930: 48). However, Atatürks own observations were apparently "forgotten", and they did not have a great impact on the official narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation

### Whom to forget in the name of the nation?

If we now take a look at the narrative of the film itself: Who are the characters, which the film puts forward? The main protagonists are a nurse and a military pilot, who develop a romance, and a young orphan boy, whom the romantic couple and their military unit adopt as their child. Moreover, the film focuses on the courage and sacrifice of the soldiers. Shortly, this is not a film on well-known historical figures and high level officers, but a film on the "Unknown Soldier".

What we see in the film is that the periphery "talks back" and demands its well-deserved and long-neglected place in the history of the nation. In a way, the film can be seen as an artistic production of "the periphery as the center of a counter-official culture" (Mardin 1973). In the Turkish context, it is a rather defiant way of constructing the Canakkale War.

Scholars of nationalism have stressed many times that distorting consciously one's history is an essential factor in the construction of a nation. It seems as if both sides in the debate, the Kemalist center and the Islamist periphery, have both tried to construct a national identity, the first by "forgetting" Islam's role in the identity of the nation and the second by "forgetting" Atatürk. The people of Turkey had to suffer a historic amnesia for around a century due to the cultural engineering project of the state, and it seems as if they will nowadays be the object of another cultural engineering by the Islamists, who have to a certain degree moved into the offices of power. It may take some time for the Turkish Islamists to recognize that Atatürk is for better or worse an important part of the Turkish history, and that his ideas still have a great impact on the way Turks, who subscribe to different political visions, think, feel and behave. Scientific and artistic productions, which try to dig out and remember, what "really" happened in the history of the nation, will help to build the nation on more inclusive and democratic fundamentals.

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