

## MYTHS AND REPRESENTATIONS:

## ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN ITALY AND TURKEY IN THE 1950s

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The protracted and controversial relationship between Turkey and Europe has long been the topic of several studies and research. Toward understanding these relations, a historical-political approach or an analysis in the framework of international relations is generally favored.<sup>29</sup> In my paper, I would like to underline how, by examining some aspects of the socio-cultural history that links Turkey and Europe, it is possible to promote an innovative approach to the study of their relationship. In particular, I focus on the relations of cultural exchange between Turkey and Italy in the period after World War II.

In this period, relations between Turkey and Europe were intense and continuous. During the Cold War years, Turkey, as the far eastern border of Western Europe behind the Iron Curtain, adopted a strategic position on geopolitical issues. Together with Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, Turkey was considered part of the South European countries in official sources. For instance, official documents about migration movements in post-WWII Europe, especially those concerning the recruitment of the Turkish labor force for German industries until 1984, neither stress Turkey's lack of belonging to

the EU nor its peculiarity as a Muslim country.<sup>30</sup> Later, because of the following developments in the European Community and the writing of a European historiography strongly affected by the building of the EU, the definition of Turkey as a country belonging to the South European group of countries has been dismissed if not forgotten. This is not only a geographical definition but a political one, testifying to the position of Turkey vis-à-vis Europe and vice-versa.

Since 1945, Turkey has belonged to the Western European and U.S. military security zone. As Zürcher explains, "The post-war era was a period of intensified incorporation of Turkey into the world capitalist system, not only in the economic field, but also in the realms of foreign policy and defense."<sup>31</sup> Having abandoned the Kemalist foreign policy doctrine of cautious neutralism, Turkey became a solid part of the political and military structures that the United States and its allies built up to safeguard the continued existence of democracy and free enterprise. Within the context of the Cold War, Turkey's entry into various international organizations (OEEC, Council of Europe, NATO, as well as the European Broadcasting Union) seemed to confirm the notion that the country had finally gained full status among Western nations. The intensification of relations between Turkey and Western countries was yet not only a matter of

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<sup>29</sup> This happens because, for what concerns the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the core of the analysis are the relations between Turkey and the European Union: for instance, Birol Yeşilada, *EU-Turkey Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Routledge, 2012); Senem Aydın-Düzgüt and Nathalie Tocci, *Turkey and the European Union* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> I have extensively discussed this issue in Lea Nocera, *Manikürlü Eller Almanya'da elektrik bobini saracak* (Istanbul: Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993).

military and international affairs but reflected also in socio-cultural relations, in the many opportunities for contact and exchange between the societies and in daily life. In seemingly frivolous events such as beauty pageants, Turkey was indeed a European country, which helped shape its social imagery. For instance, in 1952, Günseli Başar, a twenty-year-old girl from Istanbul, great-niece of the Grand Vizier Halil Rifat Pasha, represented her country at the Miss Europe beauty contest held in Naples, Italy, and became Turkey's first ever Miss Europe winner on August 20, 1952. Her nomination confirmed both in Turkey and Europe that the Turkish republic deserved to be considered as a European country, and this had a political meaning. This mirrored a similar event in 1932, when Miss Turkey Keriman Halis was selected as Miss Universe.<sup>32</sup>

Europe has always been an inspiration for Turkey, even before its foundation, since the Ottoman times, and European culture as well has been a landmark in the education of Turkish elites since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1950s, in the beginning years of mass culture, while remaining a reference point for the upper bourgeoisie, which still sent its children to study in France, Germany, Austria, or going on a cruise around the European ports, Europe became also a reference to dreams of modernity within the emerging Turkish urban middle class. In spite of the so-called Americanization of Turkish society, which was probably much more an idea than a fact, Europe shaped cultural models inside Turkey, at this time not only for the elite but also for a larger

<sup>32</sup> The achievement of Keriman Halis as Miss Universe precisely "was celebrated as a national victory for the young Kemalist Republic": Amit Bein, "There She is, Miss Universe: Keriman Halis goes to Egypt, 1933," in *Middle Eastern and North African Societies in the Interwar Period*, ed. Kate Fleet and Ebru Boyar, 144–163 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018). On beauty pageants in Turkey, see also: Ada Holland Shissler, "Beauty Is Nothing to Be Ashamed Of: Beauty Contests As Tools of Women's Liberation in Early Republican Turkey," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 1 (2004): 107–122.

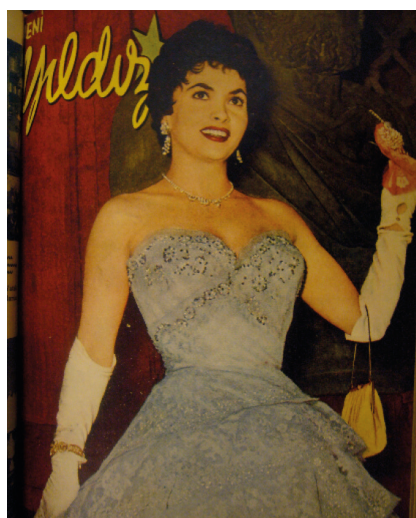
part of the society, through cultural commodities belonging to the realm of popular culture.<sup>33</sup>

### Italy as a Myth

Popular music and cinema, therefore, were the main vehicles for a modern, up-to-date lifestyle inspiring the new urban middle class. Being aware of the fact that European education and culture had always been a sign of social and class distinction, the emerging urban bourgeoisie longed to access European cultural life, and Italian popular culture satisfied it. By the late 1940s and through the 1950s and 1960s, Italian cultural commodities were strongly promoted and diffused in Turkey. If the upper class could have the Piccola Orchestra at a gala dinner in the Hilton Hotel in Istanbul, the middle class could at the same time listen to Mina's or Milva's records. The presence and the relevance of culture coming from Italy is in fact still vivid in the popular memories of the period and has contributed undoubtedly to shape a shared imaginary about modernity, and also European modernity, in Turkey. Italian movies, popular songs, comics, and photo stories were quickly imported, translated, and distributed all over Turkey and seduced a large public ready to follow the Italian stars (actors, actresses, and singers) on their Turkish tours. Italian singers

<sup>33</sup> Cultural production in Turkey and the outset of the Turkish cultural industry have very often focused on the question of imitation and/or emulation of Western cultural models, whether European or American. Particularly, the "Americanization" of Turkish society from the 1950s seems to be an undisputed fact. Even if it is evident that in political discourse the United States became the so-called "New West" (Yeni garp), and that U.S. pioneered mass consumption became a central symbol, it is not clear to what extent it effectively affected Turkish society, practices, and aspirations. As Kaelble argues, for Europe, the Americanization of European consumption is debated and is a "still misleading simplification." H. Kaelble, *A Social History of Europe 1945-2000 – Recovery and Transformation After Two World Wars* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Book, 2013). For Turkey, it seems necessary to investigate how European patterns of consumption, with their own styles, variety, and traditional links to the Turkish social elite, persisted to be seductive and incisive for an emerging urban bourgeoisie. The success and the mass consumption of Italian cultural commodities seem to push in this direction.

often gave concerts in Istanbul, and the new weekly cultural magazines (e.g., *Ses*, *Yıldız*, *Diskotek*) followed them closely, describing the details of their concerts and providing information for fans.



Gina Lollobrigida, *Yeni Yıldız*, July 1, 1955



Simona Silva, Cover of *Yeni Yıldız*, July 8, 1955

Italy was an attractive destination, where change and the future appeared possible and closer. It mirrored a Southern European society, a Mediterranean country, which in some ways was perceived as a model of progress and development due to its “economic miracle” and its successful cultural products (like movies). As the Turkish cultural magazines of the period show, Turkish girls dreamt of having the chance to go to Italy and become actresses or pop singers, not different from their peers in Southern Italy dreaming to go in Rome and change their lives. In the eyes of the younger generation in Turkey, in the 1950s, Italy was a true myth.

#### The Italian Representation of Turkey

On the other side of the Mediterranean, however, despite all the political and social changes in Italy, representations of Turkey were not changing quickly or radically. Italy after WWII was also deeply changing and actively engaged in international relations. During the Italian economic miracle, Italy set up solid relations with many countries, even behind Europe and the United States. Enrico Mattei, public administrator and founder of Italian energy company Eni in 1953, who negotiated important oil concessions in the Middle East and broke the power of international oligopolies, was one of those brilliant figures who fostered stronger connections outside European borders. In the same direction, Italy established the first Italian cultural institute in Turkey, in Istanbul, in 1951 and two years later another in Ankara.

Italian society was changing rapidly—as neorealist cinema attentively showed—and was curious about other cultures and countries. Nevertheless, in those years the image of Turkey or of Turkish people did not differ that much from a still vivid Orientalist stereotype. It was not only because of the legacy of the older Italian culture—though, for instance, *The Turk in Italy*, the opera (buffa) by Gioacchino Rossini first performed in 1814, gained a renewed fortune during the 1950s.

A couple of examples reveal to what extent the representation of Turks was not substantially affected by the changes in society or in foreign relations. The first one is a comedy film, *Un turco napoletano* (Neapolitan Turk), directed by Mario Mattoli, produced in 1953, and starring Totò, the most popular Italian comedian of all time. “Neapolitan Turk” is set in Naples and Sorrento in the second half of the 1800s. It is based on a series of funny situations and misunderstanding that arise from the figure of a Turk, a eunuch who, as the spectators know, proves to be a great womanizer and gains the sympathy of all the girls in the town. The fake eunuch is played by Totò, who gives the film portentous comic vein. The film is a classic



Poster for *Un turco napoletano* (Neapolitan Turk), film directed by Mario Mattoli, 1953

example of cinematic Italian comedy in the 1950s, based on the indissoluble presence of two elements: comedy and sex. But still more, here, along the entire story, it gathers all the typical clichés about the Turkish and Middle Eastern world: the harem, belly dancers, fez, and the Arabian melody from Franz Hüntten’s “Fantaisie arabe, op. 136” (1845), a classical, stereotypical theme of Middle Eastern music and culture. Classical elements of the Oriental world, where Turks are often confused with Arabs, continue to appear. This not only reflects a representation of Turkey completely disconnected to all the changes that occurred at those times in both countries, Turkey and Italy, but also in relations between the two.



A scene from the film “Neapolitan Turk”

Another example of this Italian perception concerns a real Turk in Italy, in this case a woman: Ayşe Nana, a Turkish actress, dancer, and stripper of Armenian origin whose story inspired the late Italian director Federico Fellini to make his classic film *La Dolce Vita*. Ayşe Nana, who began her career in 1954 at the age of fourteen before moving to France then Italy to become a belly dancer, shot to fame when she performed a striptease at a restaurant in Rome in 1958. Police raided the Rugantino restaurant while the party was still in progress and closed it for offending public morality, but a photographer who shot the entire sequence managed to get out with a roll of pictures of Nana stripping to her underwear (figure).



*Lo Specchio*, October 9, 1960



One of the scandalous pictures shot at the Rugantino by Tazio Secchiaroli in 1958, published also in the weekly magazine *L'Espresso*, August 6, 1958

The photos created a scandal when they were published several days later, but Fellini seized on the episode as an inspiration for a film he had been wanting to make about the idle, wealthy cafe society in Rome. Nana then married an Italian film director and went on to play small parts in several Italian films. She was one of the last major protagonists of Rome's Dolce Vita years. Her image, sharply contrasting the elegant and discrete Miss Europe, perfectly corresponded to the Oriental lust associated with women and the Middle East.



Miss Europe Günseli Başar – *Cumhuriyet*, August 21, 1952



Ayşe Nana, [https://retrorambling.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/6645\\_nana\\_01.jpg](https://retrorambling.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/6645_nana_01.jpg)

### Conclusions

While in Turkey Italy represented a symbol of European culture and provided narrations of modernity and progress through its cultural products—which were much closer to Turkish society and to the emerging urban bourgeoisie, as well as their imagery, than North American or North European models—Italian representations of Turkey were still strongly influenced by rooted stereotypes and affected the definition of the most common image of Turkey and Turkish people. These images were reproduced despite the continuous and stable cultural and commercial relations between the two countries.

It is important and useful to investigate these relations and the diffusion of Italian cultural production in the decades following WWII. Focusing on the distribution and the influence of Italian (and European) culture in Turkey shows intense cultural relations between those countries, which were up to now mostly disregarded. As aforementioned, these relations (namely South-South relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) have not been sufficiently explored because of a European historiography strongly influenced by the EU process. A study of transnational connections in the cultural field can reveal undiscovered socio-historical aspects of the Turkey-Italy relationship and open up new perspectives in the historiography of Europe, as well as in the formulation of European identity and Europeanization, and can also contribute to coping with ongoing clichés and stereotypes.