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1920s Turkey and the Shaikh Said Revolt

By David O'Brien

Turkey underwent a massive transformation over the course of the 1920s. Ataturk's regime radically shifted the cultural narrative surrounding the then recently collapsed Ottoman Empire. This massive shift directly affected two groups, Sufi Muslims and Kurds, more than any others. By the 1930s, Sufi orders had been abolished in Turkey and those who wished to continue practicing their faith had to do so either elsewhere or in secret. This would be the first story of many where Sufi Muslims go from being ordinary citizens to being ostracized by a Middle Eastern nation that is modernizing on a mass scale. By the 1930s, the Kurds would become the primary focus of the Turkish government's fight against ethnic diversity. The 1920s would be the foundation for a century-long feud between the Turkish government and the Kurdish minority.

This essay will examine the causes, courses, and consequences of the abolition of Sufi orders in Turkey during the 1920s. This will be done by first briefly discussing Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's rise to power and his policy agenda surrounding both Turkish nationalism and the role religion had to play in modernizing Turkey. The essay will then discuss the cultural impact Sufi orders had on this new government and how Sufism was viewed by Turkish nationalists during this time period. A brief description of the Kurds, and an evaluation of the Turkish government's position on Kurds as an ethnic group will follow. The paper will then discuss how and why these two groups allied with each other to fight the Turkish government during the Shaikh Said Revolts. The reasoning surrounding government policies surrounding the abolition of Sufi orders in Turkey will be discussed. The essay will conclude with an analysis of mystic groups like

Sufism in the post-World War I world as well as a summary of how Sufi orders exist in Turkey today.

After World War I, Sultan Mehmet VI sought to preserve what was left of the Ottoman Empire. The allies sought to break the Ottoman Empire and base the new borders of each nation by ethnic groups and their own imperial interests. In response to this numerous Turkish nationalist groups arose to combat the new territorial transition. As the battle for maintaining previous territories escalated, the military officer Mustafa Kemal began to consecrate himself as the leader of the resistance movement. While the Ottoman government did attempt to squash the Turkish nationalist movement, resistance to new Ottoman policies was fierce and many citizens viewed the war between Turkish insurgents and the Ottoman government as a war for Turkish independence. In 1920, in response to the allies and Greek forces securing marginal gains, Turkish nationalists created an assembly where numerous different resistance groups ranging from former Ottoman cabinet members to insurgents from Anatolia and Thrace formed a new government with Kemal as president. The new government sought to end foreign occupation of their territory and establish Turkish sovereignty. The new government sought to undo the territorial losses of the Treaty of Sevres. Once Kemal completely took the executive party and fully controlled the army he quickly defeated the Greeks. By 1922, the war was over and the Turkish nationalists signed an agreement with the Ottoman government which would legitimately establish the Turkish republic and fully remove the Caliphate as a political position and make it purely religious. In 1924, a new constitution was established with a much more radical agenda. The new constitution established the right to vote for all men eighteen and over and a national assembly. The republic, while seemingly democratic, was a one-party state in which Mustafa Kemal Ataturk ruled with essentially dictatorial authority. Ataturk utilized his

near-total control over Turkey to modernize, nationalize, and westernize the new state. He did this through the six policies of Kemalism: etatism, laicism (secularism), nationalism, populism, reformism, and republicanism. The policies of Kemalism led to a massive political, economic, and cultural overhaul.¹

The primary focus of social reform was to establish stronger cultural cohesion through emphasizing national identity and suppressing cultural and religious divides. This was done primarily through Turkish policies surrounding secularism as well as numerous policies meant to minimize ethnic diversity throughout Turkey. Policies to minimize ethnic diversity included the suppression of languages outside of basic Turkish, the modification of the education system to base the curriculum purely on Turkish nationalism, and most importantly resettlement policies that were utilized to destroy nucleic ethnic communities.

The policy-planning structure of government reform surrounding religion in Turkey would come to be known as laicism, being inspired by the French revolution. Following the path of modernization through westernization, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk sought to eliminate factors of religious revolt against the government. Ataturk sought to fulfill this doctrine by first eliminating the Caliphate, a title held by the Ottoman sultans as leaders of the Islamic community. Ataturk saw abolition as a necessity both for the Turkish government and for the modernization of the Islamic faith. In a direct address to the Turkish people, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk proclaimed, “Gentlemen, I must frankly and categorically declare that those who continue to occupy themselves with the chimera of the Caliphate and thereby mislead the Muslim world, are nothing but enemies of the Muslim world, and especially of Turkey.”² He saw the separation of church

¹William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

²Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*

and state in Turkey as a necessity for both the survival of Turkey and the preservation of Islam in a rapidly progressing world. Following the abolition of the Caliphate, Ataturk launched a campaign to stop Turks from wearing the late Ottoman fez. First, he made a massive push for the people of Turkey to wear brimmed caps, which he claimed were the hats of modernity. Soon after, he banned the fez along with other religious garments in an attempt to foster more cultural cohesion. By having his citizens wear similar clothing and lessen cultural fashions Mustafa Kemal Ataturk hoped to foster a deeper sense of Turkish culture.

Soon after, Ataturk abolished all religious convents and Sufi lodges in an attempt to reform the Islamic faith in Turkey. In banning private religious orders, Ataturk sought to build a stronger sense of Turkish nationalism rather than allow the sort of religious diversity that he believed led to the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire. He also abolished shariah and promulgated a legal code based on Swiss and Italian legal structures. He later transitioned Turkey from the Islamic calendar to the Gregorian calendar and authorized the translation of the Quran from Arabic to Turkish. Ataturk's laicist policies led to a massive overhaul of religious institutions in Turkey. While initially, these reforms were implemented for the sake of dividing church and state, they were easily the most radical anti-religious policy reforms the region had ever seen.

While all religious and ethnic groups were affected by this transition, Sufi orders and ethnic Kurds were marginalized significantly more due to their intrinsic cultural opposition to these reforms. Sufism was simply so diametrically opposed to the principles of Kemalism that it had no room to exist in a modernizing Turkey. Sufism is a form of Islam that focuses more on mystical practices rather than traditional communal worship. While the origins of Sufism have been lost over time, the root principles of Sufism are based directly on the story surrounding

Muhammad's ascension to heaven with his physical body. Sufis seek ascension to heaven through transcendental spiritual practices. Sufis believe that there are two methods of religious practices demonstrated in the Quran that allow people to live in conjunction with God. Sufis believe Islam is divided into exoteric and esoteric practices. Exoteric practices are viewed as lower practices that are followed by the majority of worshippers and are viewed as lesser methods of following God's will. Esoteric practices are viewed as higher practices that lead the individual to self-actualization and eventual merging with the divine. Traditional exoteric Islam, while not directly against Sufi beliefs, does utilize different methods for worship. While Sufis do respect the beliefs of traditional exoteric Islam, they do not follow Islamic traditions and instead worship through Sufi orders. Orders function as master-student organizations where Sufi masters initiate followers in their methods of esoteric practice. These transcendental practices vary wildly. Some focus on dancing, some on utilizing drugs, and some on strict meditation. Sufi orders often have rituals that break from societal norms. Members wear non-traditional clothing to differentiate themselves from the rest of society. Sufis also practice in their own temples and distance themselves from traditional Islam and general society due to their desire at attaining godliness through individualistic spiritual practices. Unlike other Islamic traditions, Sufi beliefs frequently worked outside the confines of society.³

Ataturk's policies were diametrically opposed to every aspect of Sufism. The individualism of Sufism was the opposite of the collectivism Kemalism sought to establish among the Turkish people. Sufis often wore vibrant and specific clothing to separate themselves from people outside of their orders, whereas Ataturk sought sartorial sameness. Sufis pursued

³ M. Brett Wilson, "The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karoasmanoğlu's Nur Baba," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (2017): 233–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020743817000034>.

spiritual transcendence through meditation, dance, and different drugs, which obviously went against the cultural values Mustafa Kemal Atatürk sought to impart on society. Atatürk attempted to modernize dancing and prayer and bridge the gap between the Turkish culture and more “modern” cultures from the west. Sufis are often taught not to take part in politics or political agendas. Kemalists viewed their political disinterest with considerable skepticism.

Not only did the Sufi way of life directly contradict the new policies of the Turkish government, but the culture of Turkey was also beginning to turn on Sufi orders due to the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media during this paradigm shift within Turkey. The general public’s shift in perspective surrounding Sufism can best be seen in the popular novel *Nur Baba*.⁴ Written in 1922 just before the abolishment of Sufi orders, *Nur Baba* depicted Sufi lodges as houses of sin. Sufi lodges were depicted as areas with widespread alcohol and drug use as well as sexual degeneracy. *Nur Baba* perfectly encapsulated the many negative stereotypes surrounding Sufi lodges and provided a perfect canvas to project the modernizers’ concerns about Sufi orders in the Kemalist period. In *Nur Baba*, Sufi lodges were shown to be cult-like organizations that lure the wealthy with promises of spiritual clarity and then break them down through constant exposure to vice. While the novel did portray the general philosophy and ideas surrounding Sufism in a positive light, it depicted the lodges as sites of sensuality rather than spirituality. *Nur Baba* had a profound effect on the Turkish people and, more importantly, a profound effect on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk even hosted the author of the novel, Karaosmanoğlu, at a private gathering. This is just one example of the rising cultural clash between Turkish nationalists and Sufism. The image of Sufis as degenerates who utilized the Islamic faith for their own selfish gains was something that had to be dealt with under Atatürk’s

⁴Wilson, *The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu’s Nur Baba*

regime. The novel's depiction of Sufis as frauds and corrupt followers of Islam perfectly encapsulated the rising sentiment modernizers had surrounding faith-based institutions in Turkey. Nationalists believed the government should crackdown on institutions. Kemalists maintained that Sufism itself had to be removed due to the cultural stereotypes surrounding it, the individualistic nature of their communities, and their inevitable connection to Kurdish revolutionaries.

In addition to Turkish policies marginalizing Sufis, numerous ethnic groups saw the new Turkish government as oppressive.⁵ As the Turkish government sought to establish a basis of nationalism based on a new culture built on borders and ethnicity, it continuously marginalized people who sought to maintain their old culture. Ataturk viewed the cultural diversity of the Ottoman Empire as one of the primary reasons for its dissolution.⁶ Ethnic groups had been granted the right to practice their own traditions and live within localized communities as long as they did not interfere with the rule of the Ottoman government. As discussed previously, over the course of the establishment of the Turkish Republic non-Turkish ethnic groups became progressively more marginalized and the government sought to change the understanding of ethnic groups within the nation. Over time the term "Turk" evolved to mean anyone residing in Turkey and following of traditional Turkish principles.⁷ Unlike Armenians, who were marginalized by Turks due to material conflict surrounding territory, Kurds would go on to face oppression due to their cultural opposition to the new Turkish nationalism.⁸

⁵ Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*

⁶ Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*

⁷ Mesut Yegen, "Prospective-Turks' or 'Pseudo-Citizens:' Kurds in Turkey," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 4 (2009): 597–615, <https://doi.org/10.3751/63.4.14>, 599.

⁸ Mesut Yegen, 'Prospective-Turks' or 'Pseudo-Citizens:' Kurds in Turkey

Under the Turkish Republic, Kurds were initially given localized autonomy and the right to continue their cultural practices. Kurds were granted the right to follow their traditions within localized communities under the Turkish constitution of 1921. Ataturk issued a proclamation supporting this claim soon after the ratification of the 1921 constitution. “In accordance with our Constitution, a kind of local autonomy is to be granted. Hence, provinces inhabited by Kurds will rule themselves autonomously. ... [The] Grand National Assembly of Turkey is composed of the deputies of both Kurds and Turks and these two peoples have unified their interests and fates.”⁹ However, as the Turkish Republic became more stable over time, Kurds lost their rights as an ethnic group. Just three years later, this policy would drastically change and put the Kurds in direct opposition to the Turkish government’s agenda. Ataturk addressed his new policy surrounding minority ethnic groups and their position in the Turkish Republic in the introduction of the 1924 constitution, “Our state is a nation-state. It is not a multi-national state. The state does not recognize any nation other than Turks. There are other peoples which come from different races [ethnic groups] and who should have equal rights within the country. Yet it is not possible to give rights to these people in accordance with their racial [ethnic] status.”¹⁰ With this transition, the Turkish state moved from a policy of tolerance to one of assimilation. While initially, Kurds were viewed as just another ethnic group living under the Ottoman Empire, within just a few years since the Turkish Republic’s founding, Kurds were viewed as either a detriment to the Turkish government or Turks who had just not fully adapted to their new environment.

In response to Ataturk’s continuous policies against institutional religion, opposition was bound to emerge over time. By 1924, the first opposition party in Turkey emerged, the

⁹Mesut Yegen, 'Prospective-Turks' or 'Pseudo-Citizens:' Kurds in Turkey

¹⁰ Mesut Yegen, 'Prospective-Turks' or 'Pseudo-Citizens:' Kurds in Turkey, 599

Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası (TCF). The primary goal of this party was to protect the interests of religion under the Turkish republic. The formation of the TCF led to the collectivism of ethnic minorities, traditionalists, and religious Turks. This provided Shaikh Said the base he needed to engineer a rebellion against the Turkish government. Along with the religious backlash against the Turkish government, the Kurds had become increasingly frustrated with Ankara's policies, including restrictions of the Kurdish language, mass deportation of ethnic Kurds, and the economic exploitation of the Kurds. Due to these grievances, Kurds and those who opposed the secularization of Turkey created an alliance to launch a resistance movement against Ataturk's regime.

Throughout 1924, numerous splinter groups emerged and were dealt with by the Turkish government, but the continuous small-scale rebellions enabled the rising opposition to mobilize widespread discontent with Ataturk's regime. The Kurdish Sufi Shaikh Said sent numerous demands to the Turkish government anonymously and after not seeing results time and time again, he decided to initiate the first major revolt in the history of modern Turkey. After a failed attempt by the Turkish government to arrest numerous Kurdish nationalists, Shaikh Said declared that the Turkish government must be destroyed due to their consistent failure to meet the demands of the prophet. Shaikh Said was elected to lead the resistance in February 1925.¹¹

On February 20, 1925, the Kurdish rebellion was fully underway and the rebel forces managed to capture their first city. Over the course of the next month, numerous cities were captured by the insurgents and numerous battles were fought between the rebellion and the

¹¹ Ahmet Yükleyen, "Sufism and Islamic Groups in Contemporary Turkey," *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, 2008, 381–87, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cho19780521620963.015>.
Ahmet, Sufism and Islamic Groups in Contemporary Turkey

Turkish army. By March, the Turkish government had dealt with the majority of its opposition. By April, Shaikh Said had been captured and the revolt was officially defeated.¹²

Shaikh Said himself was both a Sufi mystic and a Kurd. While his revolution had clear ethnic roots, he attempted to expand his rebellion by providing a religious foundation and recruit those who opposed new Turkey's religious policies. In doing so, he merged both Kurdish and Sufi interests alongside his revolt. After its failure, Ataturk sought to remove all opposition to his regime. Kurds and Sufis were viewed as the two primary groups that led to this rebellion.

Following the Shaikh Said revolt, the Turkish government immediately cracked down on the Kurds. Ataturk placed over seven thousand people under arrest as co-conspirators and executed six hundred people. Kurds became and still remain one of the most marginalized ethnic groups in Turkey. The Shaikh Said revolt would be the first of many Kurdish rebellions against the Turkish government. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the Kurds have continuously attempted to re-establish their own ethnic identity and resist the government through guerrilla warfare.

The Turkish government immediately instituted policies that would go on to eradicate Sufi orders. After the revolt, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk banned the practices of Sufism, abolished all religious orders including Sufi lodges, and banned the Sufi practice of visiting Ottoman tombs. Sufis went from religious orders that could enjoy their religious practices free of inhibition to common criminals. While some historians and scholars blame the Shaikh Said Revolt for the ban on Sufism, the evidence suggests it is a small part in a much larger pattern that has been shown time and time again in Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's Turkey.¹³

¹² Ahmet, *Sufism and Islamic Groups in Contemporary Turkey*

¹³ Wilson, *The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karoasmanoğlu's Nur Baba*

Ataturk's treatment of Kurds has served as the foundation for the Turkish government's policy planning surrounding them. Almost a century after the Shaikh Said revolt, the Kurds continue to suffer from extreme oppression from the Turkish government. While there have been periods of modern Turkish history where Kurdish rights have expanded, Kurds continue to be an oppressed minority group to this day. Despite making up 18% of the population of Turkey, Kurds are not allowed representation in the Turkish government. Today, using the Kurdish language in public is an arrestable offense. Since the 1920s there have been dozens of other Kurdish revolts. Some have been peaceful, but those that shape public opinion and make up the of the cultural mind are the violent conflicts between domestic terrorists and the Turkish army.

Throughout the 21st century, Turkey has continued its old practices of mass exiling Kurds. The Turkish government has placed food embargoes on Kurdish villages and continues to harm innocent civilians due to the continuous conflicts between Kurdish nationalist groups and the Turkish government. Turkey has continuously been condemned by the west for its continuous violations of human rights when it comes to Kurds.

While there have been ceasefires between Kurdish separatists and the Turkish government, the individualistic nature of the separatist groups and the Turkish government's collective view of Kurds have made it incredibly difficult for the Kurdish minority to live in peace. Political, economic, and cultural equality continues to elude the Kurdish people. While in 2015, President Erdoğan attempted to negotiate a cease-fire and attain a viable solution to the continuous conflict between the Kurds and Turks, this plan has broken down.¹⁴ Erdoğan has arrested over 50,000 Kurds due to his fear of Kurdish terrorism. His regime has also expanded air bombings against Kurdish militants in Syria.¹⁵

¹⁴Lynn Riggsbee, "The Kurdish Tragedy," *Domes* 5, no. 2 (1996): 69.

¹⁵Rigbee, *The Kurdish Tragedy*

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and the Turkish republic's sweeping plan to engineer a new culture in post-World War I Turkey can be argued to be one of the biggest cultural transitions in Modern Middle Eastern history. The systemic removal of Sufi practices can and should be viewed as a fundamental aspect of Ataturk's attempt to remove insulated and individualistic groups throughout the 1920s. The Turkish government's association of Sufis with Kurds, while seemingly only because of Shaikh Said's rebellion stemming from the two groups, makes up a larger pattern of the systemic removal of groups that ideologically opposed the Turkish nationalist agenda. Kurds were assimilated into the new Turkish culture and those who attempted to continue their traditions were viewed as pariahs, criminals, and undesirables.

In 1950, after the ousting of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's party from the Turkish parliament, stringent religious laws became significantly more relaxed. Ottoman tombs were reopened within the year, while initially they were closed to prohibit Sufis and other religious orders from enacting rituals at the site of their past mentors, theologians, and other major figures in their religious orders. Over time, interest in Sufism has reemerged throughout modern Turkey. Today, Sufi dances can be witnessed in numerous museums throughout Turkey. While interest in Sufism is continuously expanding in Turkey and numerous major political parties have openly admitted that they are willing to repeal the 1925 law that abolished them in the first place, practicing Sufism and operating a Sufi lodge is still technically illegal.¹⁶ Throughout the post-World War I world mystical orders have continuously become less and less common. Gnostic Christians congregate online rather than in their own churches. Kabbalist Jews are respected more so as academics rather than true followers of Judaism. Sufi Muslims continue to be marginalized by the Islamic community. While there is a growing interest in mystic traditions, political and larger

¹⁶Ahmet, Sufism and Islamic Groups in Contemporary Turkey

religious institutions are likely to continue marginalizing these groups for the sake of not only combating opposition but also maintaining the cultural dominance over those who seek to operate outside of their culture. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and the policies of the Turkish Republic is one of the many stories of the marginalization of mystical schools throughout the modern world. Today, these orders are only allowed to emerge as long as they work in lockstep for the interests of the state they reside in. This can easily be seen in the allowance of Sufi dances for the sake of tourism rather than the actual preservation of a Ottoman cultural tradition that goes back to the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans.

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