


Ömer Seyfettin—The Balkan Wars, World War I, and His Criticism of Ottomanism and Minority Nationalisms

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Abstract

Ömer Seyfettin (1884–1920) was one of the significant ideologues of Turkish nationalism disseminating his ideas through his activism and his literature by invoking Turkish history. In the journal *Young Pens*, published in Ottoman Salonica between 1910–1912, Seyfettin together with Ziya Gökalp laid the foundations of Turkish nationalist thought as well as national policies toward the Turkish language. While Gökalp developed a more systematic ideology of Turkism with his writings, Seyfettin appealed to the sentiments of the Turkish people with his short plays arguing that Turkish nationalism was the only viable option for the Turkish speaking people of the Balkans and Anatolia. A literary figure as well as an ideologue, Seyfettin's ideas against Ottomanism and Islamism were clearly expressed in his plays and articles focusing on Ottoman Turks, their heroism and their betrayal by the subject peoples living under the Ottoman state. Consequently, nationalism was the only natural solution to the plight of the Turks and for the prospects of their salvation against imperial encroachments and minority separatist movements. His literary production, however, had strong nationalist tones making ideological considerations to be more important than any intention to produce belles-lettres. Seyfettin's influence can be observed as his plays are still included in the curriculum of Turkish primary and secondary education as devised by the Ministry of National Education in Turkey.

Keywords: Ömer Seyfettin; World War I; minority nationalism; Ottoman Empire; the Committee of Union and Progress; literature; pan-Turkism

Introduction

Ömer Seyfettin (1884–1920), who was one of the influential propagators of Turkish nationalism, had closely collaborated with Ziya Gökalp in the articulation and advocacy of Turkish nationalism. In the journal *Young Pens* [Genç Kalemler] published in Ottoman Salonica between 1910–1912, he and Gökalp laid the foundations of Turkish nationalist thought as well as national policies toward the Turkish language. While Gökalp developed a more systematic ideology of Turkism with his writings, Seyfettin appealed to

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the sentiments of the Turkish people with his short plays. In his plays as well as in his articles and books, Ömer Seyfettin had been critical of the Ottomanist ideology and was aware of Albanian, Bulgarian and Greek nationalisms, denoting the irrelevance of the Ottomanist territorial nationalism and the dominance of ethnic nationalisms throughout the empire. As a consequence, Seyfettin argued for an ethnic form of Turkish nationalism as the only viable option for the Turkish speaking people of the Balkans and Anatolia.

In this study, in order to analyze Ömer Seyfettin's thought, primary sources will be utilized including his diary of the Balkan Wars as well as his plays, books and articles. These will provide direct access to the ideas and Weltanschauung of Ömer Seyfettin. His ideas are noteworthy for their clarity as far as the formula for the future of the Turkish people is concerned. Undoubtedly, his death at an early age prevented him from having more influence on Turkish literary life. Having said this, his thoughts still have a certain amount of impact as his short stories that continue to be read at secondary schools in Turkey, which might inculcate in the students sympathy toward Turkish nationalism, even though it would be incorrect to give too much weight to his sway over Turkish political discourse. Ömer Seyfettin's place among the ideologues of Turkish nationalists and literary figures should be analyzed within its historical context as this study purports to do.

Minority nationalisms of the Ottoman Empire included Serbian, Greek and Bulgarian nationalisms aiming to establish their own nation-states in areas where they constituted majorities. Their objective was very much commensurate with what Ernest Gellner wrote about nationalism that it was "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent".¹ Furthermore, "ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones"² which is exactly what the minorities in the Ottoman state aimed for, as they no longer wanted to live in a multinational state, which they perceived as a Turkish state, even though Turkish nationalism has never been the dominant idea in the Ottoman polity and that the effort to create an Ottoman nationality failed as a result of minority nationalisms.

All nationalisms in the Balkans were ethnic nationalisms which were historically embedded. Ethnic belonging and memory are used to provide "a firm base for the nation-to-be"³ not only in the Balkans but in most regions of the world. And the Turkish nationalism which emerged and supported by Ömer Seyfettin was similarly an ethnic-based form of national allegiance not forgetting the strong emphasis on culture, religion and language.

His Life

Ömer Seyfettin (1884–1920) was born in Western Turkey in the small town of Gönen in the contemporary province of Balıkesir. His father Ömer Şevki Bey, whose family was originally from the Caucasus with Turkish origins,⁴ had authoritarian tendencies and served as a major in the Ottoman army. His mother Fatma Hanım, on the other hand, hailed from Istanbul. Ömer moved to Istanbul at an early age and later enrolled at the Veterinary School in the Eyüp neighborhood of the city. After his graduation, Seyfettin studied at Edirne Military School graduating in 1896 and at the Royal Military Academy in Istanbul completing his studies in 1903. He was appointed to Kuşadası in the Aegean region between 1903–1906⁵ and later to Izmir in 1907 as an adjutant to the Italian general Degiorgis who was organizing the gendarmerie as well as establishing schools for that institution. Seyfettin at the time became a teacher of religious studies at the gendarmerie school. It is noteworthy that during his Izmir days, the future novelist

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