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The Impact of Zeki Velidi Togan (1890-1970) on Turkish Politics

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Introduction

First of all some short but very authentic and original information about the life of Zeki Velidi Togan should be cited here in order to understand his position on the policy of Türkism, which were obtained from stories and memories of his relatives which cannot be found in his personal memoirs published several times over and in several languages. My grandfather-in-law, Tatar Sabri Artam (1920-2008), was his nephew. In other words, Zeki Velidi was the husband of my grandfather-in-law (Sabri Artam)'s maternal aunt, Nazmiye Hanim. In addition, Tatar Sabri Artam was the sponsor of several of Zeki Velidi Togan's books, such as his memoirs (*Hatıralar*) or "Umumi Türk Tarihi'ne Giriş [Introduction of General Turkish History]" (1946). He also became the supporter of Togan's family while he was in jail and in necessity. We know that there has been more than one period where the Togans were reduced to living in quite difficult conditions by the İnönü Government in 1943-1948.¹

Crucial Aspects of His Life

Zeki Velidi [Togan] was born on 10 December 1891 and passed away on 26 July 1970. At the age of 18, Zeki Velidi had already a command of Bashkort, Chaghatay, Persian, Arabic and Russian languages. He accompanied his father on his travels, and became familiar with a wide geographic region. This was to prove beneficial after 1916, when he became the Chairman of the Bashkort Autonomous Region. He worked as an historian at several universities

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¹ Friedrich Bergdolt, "Wortlaut des Interviews mit Frau Nazmiye Togan am 13. August 1979 in Ankara", *Der geistige Hintergrund des türkischen Historikers Ahmed Zeki Velidi Togan*, Berlin 1981, p. 118.

(Istanbul, Vienna, and Bonn among others). He was also a statesman in several countries such as Turkistan, Bashkortostan. He was a Muslim reformer and leader of various liberation movements and revolutions which occurred in Central Asia. There is no doubt that Zeki Velidi had also a great influence on the movement of pan-Turkism in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. He stayed in Turkey from 20 May 1925 to 8 July 1932, and again from 1939 until his death in 1970 in Istanbul. He was the founder of the General Turkish History Chair at Istanbul University in 1939. However, very soon afterwards, he was condemned by İsmet [İnönü] Pasha (1884-1973), second President of Turkish Republic (1938-1950), to ten years imprisonment towards the end of the Second WW in 15 May 1944, with the accusation of racism, Turanism and activities against the Soviet Union. Togan was jailed for 17 months and 10 days. He was finally acquitted and returned to his position at the University of Istanbul in 1948 where he taught until his death in 1970. He chaired the 21st International Congress of Orientalists which gathered in Istanbul in 1951. This organisation increased his scientific reputation greatly in the entire orientalist world.

Two cases of his impact on Turkish politics

Below are two untouched examples of his several impacts on Turkish politics in Republican Turkey which will be discussed. The first one is his impact on secularism in state policy, and the second one is his opinion about English language as an instruction and teaching language at Turkish schools and universities.

On secularism:

Zeki Velidi Bey, with encouragement of sociologist Prof. Xvostov and sociologist Prof. Kareyev, wrote an article on Ibn Haldun's sociology about state organization to submit as a paper to Association of History and Archaeology of Kazan State University in 1914. In the meantime, **Yosif Aqçura** (1876-1935), famous Tatar writer, was publishing "Türk Yurdu", a very Türkist review published in Istanbul. **Yosif Aqçora** had several times asked for articles from Zeki Velidi Bey to publish in his journal Türk Yurdu. At the end, Zeki Velidi Bey accepted his invitation and re-edited his article for Turkish readers "*Ibn Haldun'un nazarında İslam hükümetlerinin istikbali*/The future of Islamic governments according to Ibn Haldoun".² **Yosif Aqçora** published it in 1914 (nr. 7, pp. 733-43) not in Türk Yurdu but in another review "Bilgi" directed by Tevfik Rüştü [Aras] (1883-1972), later Foreign Minister of Turkish Republic in

² For his another article on Islam see "İslâm âleminde tedenni sebepleri ve Mercâni" (Mercani and the reasons for the decline of the Islamic world), *Yulduz* (Kazan), 117, 1914.

1925, and Celal Sahir [Erozan] (1883-1935), later member of Turkish parliament in 1928, and a member of Turkish Language Association.

In his article Zeki Velidi Bey argued that theocracy was an annoyance and the source of troubles for Turks. In addition, theocracy was not a principal feature of Islam. According to Zeki Velidi the Turks have always separated caliphate (spiritual authority) in other words, separated Sharia and sultanate (temporal authority) which is better known as *Yasa* or *Qanun* in their history. Even the Ottomans found a need to separate them. Just so, after the fall of the Abbasids in 1258, a practice known to the Turks and Mongols transformed itself into *Qanun* (in other words *Yasağ-i Osmani* or *Yasa* of Genghis Khan in Mongols), which gave power to caliphs, and/or sultans alike to “*make their own regulations for activities sometimes not addressed by the Sharia or sometimes in contrast to Sharia.*” *Qanun* comes, etymologically, from the Greek word *canon*.

He additionally pointed out that by joining European civilisation even Islam had to adapt to European lifestyle and listen to European intellectuals as well as their own. In addition Qur’anic laws must be modified by secular laws. He wrote thus because the Muslim nations became slaves of Russia -according to him- after leaving *Yasa* of Genghis and recognized the Sharia. With the Sharia, he saw no chance for development within the Muslim countries. Opposition to Togan’s ideas brought the reactions among the Turkish intellectuals immediately to scene. Leading the reactionaries, appeared the very famous teacher Muallim Cevdet (1883-1935), later member of Turkish Historical Society in 1933, and Prof. Şemseddin Günaltay (1883-1961), later prime minister of Turkish Republic (1949-1950), and later president of Turkish Historical Society between 1941 and 1961. They wrote several articles (in *Tedrisat-ı İbtidaiyye Mecmuası*) in order to criticize and to refute Zeki Velidi’s ideas.

In truth, Zeki Velidi was neither an atheist nor without religion. On the contrary, he could be considered a Muslim. But he said that he saw himself very near to Shamanism.³ In addition, his mother belonged to the *Yesevi tariqa*, and his father belonged to the *Naksibendi tariqa*. However, Zeki Velidi didn’t like Islamic Sufism. He said in 1907 that he did not like anything connected to mysticism. He despised sheikhs and considered them as hypocrites. Although Zeki Velidi did not always perform the ritual prayers of Islam, in his father’s house prayer was an obligation and his father and mother never left their prayers like most of the Bashkirs including some imams who used to perform

³ Zeki Velidi Togan, *Hatıralar*, Ankara 1999: 68-70, 72.

the ritual prayer even they were in a drunken condition.⁴ Except honey wine, he and his family did not consume alcohol. When he was 21, he started consuming "Russian alcohol" like vodka, and declared that he was a very liberal Muslim. Even well into his 60's, his ideas did not change.⁵ According to him, God laid down rules and laws, and everything works according to these rules and laws. But it is not God who is occupied with the problems of "Ahmed or Mehmed" nor is it He who takes care of the "quarrel or battle among ants". This is not business of God, but the business of the natural laws put down by God.

However, at the end, the ideas of Zeki Velidi have been in great demand in Turkey since 1923, thanks to Mustafa Kemal's, first president of Turkish Republic (1923-1938), maintain (*İslam Tedkikleri Enstitüsü Dergisi*, I: 512). Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938) showed his support of Zeki Velidi's ideas by inviting him to Çankaya (Ankara), presidential resident, to dinner on 1 February 1930. In this meeting, beside Mustafa Kemal and Zeki Velidi, Tevfik Rüştü [Aras], later Foreign Minister of Turkish Republic in 1925 as mentioned before, Celal [Bayar] (1883-1986), later president of Turkish Republic (1950-1960), Yusuf Aqçora and Afet Hanım [İnan] (1908-1985) were also present. Mustafa Kemal read Zeki Velidi's aforementioned article about secularism during the dinner and complimented him when everybody was present. In these times, it was not only Mustafa Kemal who supported his idea but also a good number of Turkish intellectuals and professors also agreed with Zeki Velidi in this matter. For example; sociologist Prof. Ziyaeddin Fahri (1902-1974) wrote a follower article and book (Ziyaeddin Fahri, *İbn-i Haldun*, Ankara 1940: 172) about his idea.⁶ As a result of these support, Zeki Velidi was appointed first professor of the Turkish History Chair in Istanbul in 1927, and later director of the Institute for Islamic Researches in 1953 where he remained until his death.

The second impact of Zeki Velidi on the Turkish politics: Foreign language.

As earlier mentioned, he was a defender of the idea that English had to be an instruction and teaching language at Turkish schools and universities. When he was invited to work in Turkey, he accepted and arrived in Turkey towards the end of May 1925 from Berlin. He was shortly afterwards appointed as a member

⁴ Zeki Velidi Togan, *Hatıralar*, Ankara 1999: 17, 30, 35.

⁵ For more details about his belief see Zeki Velidi Togan, "Kritische Geschichtsauffassung in der islamischen Welt des Mittelalters", *Proceedings of the twenty second congress of orientalist held in Istanbul*, 15.09.1951, ed. Z. V. Togan, Istanbul 1953, I: 76-85.

⁶ Zeki Velidi Togan, *Hatıralar*, Ankara 1999: 103-105.

of the Council of Publication and Translation (*Telif ve Tercüme Encümeni*) in the Ministry of Education of Turkish Republic on 3 June 1925. In the meantime, Zeki Velidi met with above-mentioned Muallim Cevdet and Iranist Prof. Ferid Kam (1864-1944), professor at the Istanbul University in order to discuss some of the intellectual problems. During the discussion, Zeki Velidi argued that English had to be accepted and be used as an academic language, both at Turkish universities and at the universities in Central Asia. In order to achieve this task, English should be obligatory starting at secondary school level. He said by doing that and by adopting Western civilisation, both Indian Muslims and Hindus were able to be creative elements of global culture. However, Muallim Cevdet and even open-minded and liberal Ferid Kam didn't share and didn't approve of his idea. They put forward that India might have to adapt to this system because they were an English colony, but Turkey was an independent state and country. By following the Indian system, Turkey would have become at least culturally an English colony as well.⁷ Although there were such reactions, Zeki Velidi was chosen as a member of *Türk Ocağı* by Samih Rifat (1874-1983), Yosif Aqçora, Fuad Köprülüzade (1890-1966), Veled Çelebi [İzbudak] (1867-1953) etc. on 4 June 1925. Two days later in addition, Zeki Velidi presented some regulations of Academy of Sciences, Association of Turkish Archaeology, Association of Turkish Geography, Institute of Turkish History, and Institute of Turkish Language to Hamdullah Subhi [Tanrıöver] (1885-1966), Minister of Education of Turkish Republic in 1925. Actually, it was the Ministry which demanded them from Zeki Velidi. On 27 January 1927 he was appointed this time as a professor of the Turkish History Chair with his own consent. Later, he resigned and went to the University of Vienna (August 1932) after a disagreement he had on historiography with medical doctor Reşid Galib in the First Turkish History Congress (02-11 July 1932). Afterwards, on 1 September 1939, he was re-invited from Germany to establish the General Turkish History Chair in Istanbul University.

As a result, since 1990, the ideas of Zeki Velidi are being applied in the Turkish educational system in most of the secondary schools and at most of the universities, where all instruction, teaching, learning, and academic researches are done in English. However, there are still many Turkish scholars, instructors, intellectuals and education experts who oppose his ideas. They continue to

⁷ For his another articles on cultural crisis among the Turks see Zeki Velidi Togan, "Türklerde hars buhram", *Türk Yurdu* (Istanbul), 24, 1927: 495-509; "Türk dünyasında elifbe meselesi" (The question of the alphabet in the Turkish world), *Yeni Türkistan*, 12, 1928: 1-18.

argue that learning, teaching, and giving academic work must be in the country's mother tongue, both in secondary schools and in universities.

Conclusion

Although Zeki Velidi was an immigrant, his ideas on secularism and English as an instructor language at the schools and universities became very influential on Turkish Republican policies in the past, and are currently applied in Turkey. Moreover, the results of the educational system in English language and secularism will be seen very soon.

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