

The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Pan-Turkism*

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Six years ago, a book of mine on *Pan-Turkism in Turkey* was published in London. Since then, I have busied myself with other studies, but have returned, occasionally, to give some thought to the nature of Pan-Turkism's limited success and what appears to be its ultimate failure.

I believe that one may indeed determine that Pan-Turkism has failed. After all, even if the idea is kept alive by a handful of adherents, its current political impact is hardly noticeable. The overall situation may be divided into three geographical categories, as summarized briefly below:

1. In the Soviet Union and other Communist states, Pan-Turkism, which is evidently frowned upon, has practically disappeared as an organized phenomenon and is rarely mentioned at all. One exception to this consideration occurred as recently as mid-December 1986, however, in Kazakhstan, following the dismissal of Dinmuhammed Kunayev from his post as Secretary-General of the Communist Party in this Republic and his replacement by an ethnic Russian from Ulyanovsk, outside Kazakhstan. The ensuing riots in Alma Ata, in which about 3000 demonstrators participated, causing physical damage to the city, resulted in two dead and 200 injured. They shouted slogans such as "Kazakhstan for the Kazakhs" — a manifestation of nationalism according to the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan himself, Nursultan Nazarbayev. However, according to the world press, several slogans had clear Pan-Turk content.

2. Pan-Turk ideas are more frequently expressed in non-Communist states with relatively sizeable minorities of Turkic stock, such as Cyprus, particularly before the 1974 military intervention. Another example is Persian Azerbaijan, where a large minority with

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Turkish/Turkic traditions has been struggling for its cultural identity — first against the Iranization politics of the Shah's Government and then against Khomeyni's; indeed, much of the support given to the independent stand of Ayatollah Şeriatmedari within Persian Azarbayjan was due to and expressed via Pan-Turk sentiments. Again, however, these instances do not appear to have been followed up.

3. In Turkey itself, over the past few years, more pronounced Pan-Turk activities appear to have lost even the limited political impact which they had had before the September 1980 military intervention. Such activities have now reverted to the promulgation of written propaganda, focusing on such topical issues as the persecution of Turks in Bulgaria.

All considered, the failure of Pan-Turkism to achieve its aims is of some interest because of its century-long importance as an ideology and a movement. Moreover, it is equally interesting to note that most Pan-movements have failed as yet to achieve their ambitions; however, others, such as Pan-Italianism in the 19th century and Pan-Romanianism before and during the First World War, have enjoyed success, while still others, such as Pan-Europeanism or Pan-Islam, have been making some visible headway in more recent years.

We commence with several definitions: There are two principal types of Pan-ideologies and Pan-movements — cultural and political (or a combination thereof). Here, we consider only political Pan-Turkism, comparing it with other political Pan-ideologies and Pan-movements (primarily the latter), as it is nearly impossible to evaluate the success of a cultural Pan-movement, particularly cultural Pan-Turkism, over an entire century and such vast territory. The vicissitudes of political Pan-Turkism, on the other hand, while not always self-evident, appear less difficult to identify and appraise.

Political Pan-Turkism derives its character from its irredentist approach — common to other political Pan-movements as well. Cultural Pan-Turkism in the late 19th century and during certain subsequent phases clearly lacked the irredentist claims which have accorded political Pan-Turkism its special appeal.

Obviously, the entire course of Pan-Turkism's history cannot be presented in detail in a brief paper. It suffices to say that this movement had two opportunities, very different from one another, to achieve its irredentist dream and render Pan-Turkism an important element in national and international politics. A small, elitist movement, nurturing great and possibly disproportionate ambitions, would have only a modest chance for success, at best, since the cards are stacked against it internationally. Most of the time all Great Powers are interested in preserving the status quo or at least in maintaining control of decision-making concerning their own respective

moves, without letting other states force their hand. Hence the only viable opportunity for political Pan-Turkism to achieve its irredentist aims was a world war — the only major event fostering the cataclysmic changes from which Pan-Turkism could profit. This, of course, was also true of other political Pan-movements in the 20th century. It was no accident that the Nazi Third Reich preached Pan-Germanism immediately before and during the Second World War and that Stalin revived the ideology of Pan-Slavism soon after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union.

During the wars waged by the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, political Pan-Turkism was considered by a core of Turkish intellectuals as the only viable alternative to an Empire doomed to fragmentation by the centripetal activities of separatist nationalist movements among the non-Turkish groups. The scenario envisioned was another Empire, still comprising as much of the Ottoman territories as was possible, but strengthened by the annexation of lands inhabited by groups of Turkic origins and culture from across the political frontiers of the time. Several of the Ottoman Empire's political leaders subscribed to this irredentist approach, of whom the most notable was Minister of War Enver Pasha, explaining — at least in part — the Empire's entry into the First World War. Indeed, the declaration of war mentions specifically the oppressed Turks in Tsarist Russia. Apparently, several military decisions taken by the Ottoman leadership during this war are to be understood solely in the context of Pan-Turk commitment. It is hardly coincidental that the end of the war finds an Ottoman Empire defeated militarily in most battles but scoring an impressive success on its Russian front. Considering this pattern, one may also better understand Enver's having fought and died for the cause in Central Asia in 1922.

A second opportunity beckoned to the Pan-Turkists during the Second World War. By now, they were not merely remote from positions of power, as the Kemalists had the entire system of decision-making in their hands, but also driven to oblivion in the periphery of political life. Moreover, the Republic of Turkey was neutral in the Second World War. Nevertheless, some Pan-Turkists intensified their activity in Turkey after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, establishing contacts with the Nazi leadership, repeating its racist slogans and calling loudly for Turkey's intervention in the war, with the declared intent of destroying the Soviet Union, liberating the Turks and creating a far-flung new Turkish state with a vast population. Although the two brothers Hüseyin Nihal Atsız and Nejdet Sançar were the main spokesmen in this revival of political Pan-Turkism, whose best-known achievements were a few street demonstrations in 1944, the main figure — as we now realize in retrospect — was none

other than Alparslan Türkeş.

In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, Türkeş moved Pan-Turkism from the political desert back into the mainstream of Turkish politics. He drew Pan-Turkists into his Nationalist Action Party. While Türkeş did not allocate any central positions to Pan-Turkist leaders, he was careful to incorporate their demands into the Party's platform and into his own speeches and interviews, especially when the Party was in the Opposition (Türkeş displayed more reticence while in the Cabinet). During his pre-Cabinet days, i.e. before 1975, Türkeş vociferously pleaded the cause of the *Diş Türkler*, not excluding their liberation by war. Presumably, he referred to a Third World War, although he did not say so explicitly. Other Pan-Turkists, however, are more explicit regarding this issue.

We now return to our basic question: Why did success elude political Pan-Turkism? The answer seems to lie in both external and internal causes.

To put it bluntly, external forces were too strong for the Pan-Turkists to achieve any part of their dreams. In the First World War, after all, the Ottoman Empire was on the losing side; in the Second, it was neutral, joining the Allies for only a few brief months before the end of hostilities. Since then, the states with the largest Turkic minorities are superpowers — the Soviet Union and China — while several of the others are protégés of these two. Needless to say, all these countries frown on political activity smacking of Pan-Turkism. Pan-Turkists still nourish hopes of “liberating” (which, in their phraseology, may well mean “annexing”) areas inhabited by Turks in Iraq, Iran and elsewhere. However, virtually no such activity has taken place so far.

Internal factors were probably even more crucial in the failure of Pan-Turkism in Turkey. In the First World War, Pan-Turkists had a share in decision-making, yet failed to carry out their designs. Since then, they have been remote from decision-making foci, except for a brief period during the 1970s, when Türkeş's Nationalist Action Party shared in the Cabinet Coalition. At this time, however, as indicated above, Türkeş was very cautious about Pan-Turkism when he served as a Cabinet Minister. The Republic of Turkey has officially and constantly stressed its commitment to international peace and rejected Pan-Turkism — which, after all, might have shattered this commitment easily. The only two political acts carried out in the Republic of Turkey, which had a definite Pan-Turkist flavor, occurred at times when Pan-Turkists were *not* involved in the Government, namely the annexation of Hatay in the late 1930s, and the military intervention in Cyprus in 1974.

However, there was more to the failure of political Pan-Turkism.

Pan-Turkists were always few in number and had little success in propagating their message among the masses. In Tsarist Russia, Islam had a better chance than Pan-Turkism to be accepted by those masses, as indicated recently in an admirable paper by Alexandre Bennigsen.¹ In the Republic of Turkey itself, many people, it appears, were not all that interested in politics; those who were, had a choice among a variety of ideologies besides Pan-Turkism: Kemalism, with its message of modernization; Marxism, preaching equality for the masses; and a revivalist Islam, promising happiness in the hereafter.

All three ideologies presented a serious challenge to Pan-Turkism. Its spokesmen realized well the potency of the message of Islam and, in recent years, were careful not to antagonize its proponents. They were equally aware of the appeal of Marxism and fought it openly. Kemalism, however, was most probably a direct factor in their lack of success. Kemalism was the state ideology with the father figure of the Founder of the Republic on its banner. Furthermore, it stole much of Pan-Turkism's thunder by advocating pride in Turkish culture and civilization in all their manifestations throughout history. The only element which Pan-Turkism could add to this was political advocacy of liberation of the *Dış Türkler*; this, however, was an appeal imbued with dangerous irredentism, bearing an effective message in isolated cases only. Moreover, although Pan-Turkism undoubtedly included a romantic, emotional element, the somewhat pedantic intellectual terms in which it frequently expressed itself could not compete successfully with other ideologies, especially among the masses, whose support was a *sine-qua-non* for transforming Pan-Turkism into a significant political movement.

NOTES

1. See Alexandre Bennigsen, "Panturkism and Panislamism in History and Today," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. III (1985), No. 3, pp. 39-49.