

Revisiting cultural life in Allied-occupied Istanbul 1918–1923

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Starting with the Balkan Wars in 1912 and ending with the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the final decade of the Ottoman Empire was marked by titanic changes in the political, social and cultural life of Turkey and its people. In between came the disastrous experiences of the First World War (1914–1918), the Armenian deportations and killings of 1915, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and the occupation of Istanbul by the Allies (1918–1923). Until recently, the military victories of both the Gallipoli campaign (1915) and the War of Independence (1919–1922) have dominated the historiography of this decade, reflecting a general national amnesia regarding both the fate of non-Muslim Ottomans and the city of Istanbul. Indeed, whilst the human dimension of this history has been sacrificed to the story of a single ‘great’ man – Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – in nationalist history writing, occupied Istanbul has been overlooked by official historiography, which has focused on the establishment of the new parliament (Büyük Millet Meclisi) in Ankara (23 April 1920) and the military victories of the Nationalist forces over the Greek army in Asia Minor.

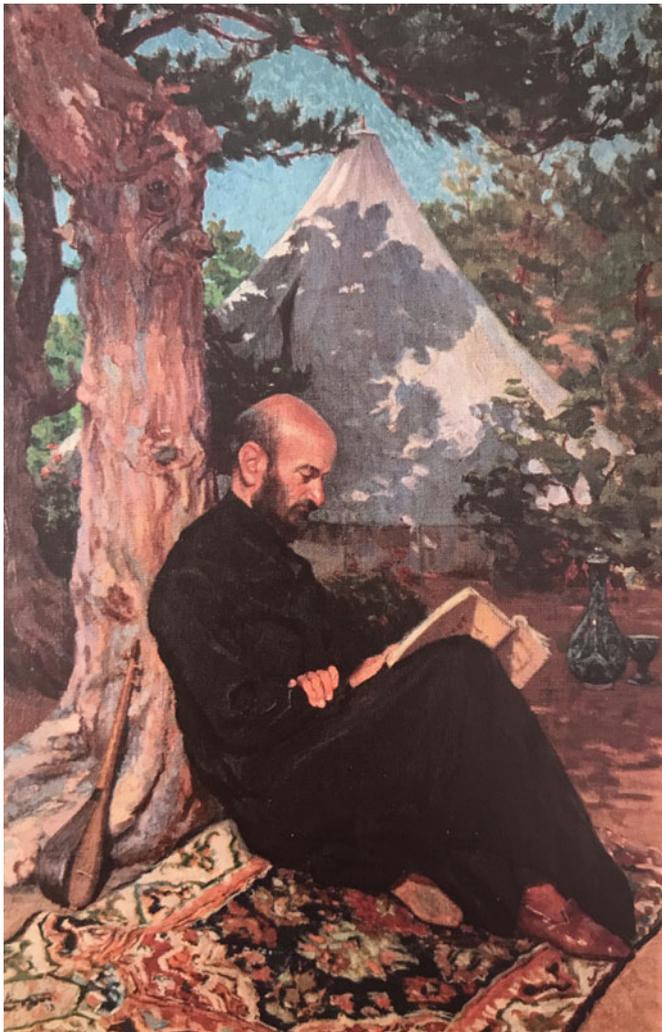
The centenary of the Ottoman Empire’s final wars has certainly encouraged many excellent revisionist studies in recent years. Yet, we still know too little about how the Ottomans perceived and configured the wars and the occupation that followed. My goal during my time as a Postdoctoral Fellow of the British Institute at Ankara was to fill this void by finalising my manuscript *War, Art and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, which explores how the Balkan Wars, the First World War and the War of Independence changed the conditions of art production, its agents and the art itself between 1913 and 1923. During my fellowship, I revised my doctoral thesis and wrote a new chapter on the Istanbul art world during the armistice period (1918–1922). Here, I complicate the nationalist narrative of Ottoman decadence and Turkish renewal and return the story of occupied Istanbul to the place it deserves in the histories of the post-First World War period in Turkey and beyond. The new materials I discovered in my second year in various libraries and archives, including the Ministry of National Defence (MSB) in Ankara, the Navy Museum in Istanbul and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon helped me to explore how Ottoman artists, intellectuals and art collectors experienced and understood the occupation, not just through the militarist and Turkish frames of the rising nationalist movement, but also through emerging pacifist and socialist sentiments, and transnational cultural encounters and possibilities.

During the armistice period, Istanbul was indeed a sophisticated and vibrant cultural centre. It hosted concerts, films, theatres and art exhibitions that were organised and attended by a highly cosmopolitan and international Istanbul society, including Ottoman Muslims, Greeks, Armenians, Levantines, Russians and Allied soldiers. The rich diversity of art exhibitions during this period is a case in point. The Organisation of Russian Painters, founded in Istanbul in the spring of 1921, for instance, organised more than ten exhibitions in a single year. Moreover, the ‘Galatasaraylılar Yurdu’ art exhibitions, first organised in 1916 and 1917, continued to draw crowds after 1919 under their new name ‘Exposition des artistes turcs’, and the newly founded Armenian Society of the Fine Arts Union (Ermeni Sanayi-i Nefise İttihadı Cemiyeti) hosted displays which brought together many established and emerging Armenian painters.

For instance, Panos Terlemejian, the well-known portrait and landscape painter, was among the Ottoman Armenian artists and intellectuals who returned to the imperial capital during its occupation to attempt to renew Armenian cultural and literary life. Having received his art training first in St Petersburg and later in Paris and having survived the Armenian deportations and killings of 1915, Terlemejian held an art exhibition at the Armenian Association in Pera in 1920. He displayed around 90 works, including landscapes and portraits, ranging from images of the Bosphorus and Lake Sevan to a portrait of his close friend Gomidas (Soghomon Soghomonian), a respected ethnomusicologist and composer.

During my time as a BIAA Postdoctoral Fellow, the Institute has provided me with a wonderfully supportive research and working environment. I also feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal, who arrived at the Institute as the Assistant Director during the second year of my fellowship. His expertise on the history of Istanbul during the armistice period has supported me through various stages of my research and the writing of my monograph.

During the second year of my fellowship, I also had the chance to give two talks (at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul) and work on four articles. My paper ‘An ambivalent patriot: Namık İsmail, the First World War and the politics of remembrance in Turkey’, which discusses the war and its commemoration by tracing the shifting cultural appropriations of a single Ottoman war painting, *Take Another* (1917, today in the collection of the Ankara Museum of Painting and Sculpture), was recently published



Panos Terlemezian's portrait of the musicologist Gomidas exhibited in Istanbul in 1920 (1913, oil on canvas, 80 × 53cm; © National Gallery of Armenia).

in an edited volume entitled *Portraits of Remembrance: Painting, Memory and the First World War*. I have also published a more popular piece for Pera Museum (co-authored with Irvin Cemil Schick) on the history of *turquerie* (literally ‘Turkish stuff’) and its artistic and cultural context in the eighteenth century. I have two other papers scheduled to be published by the beginning of next year: a review essay for a peer-reviewed journal, where I explore the commemoration of the centenaries of the Ottoman Empire’s final wars, and a paper for an edited volume, where I focus on the development of state and civil-society patronage in the mobilisation of the art world between 1914 and 1918.

With cancelled conferences, restricted travel and closed libraries and archives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, research and academic production have indeed gained a ‘new’ form, and I am doing my best to research, produce and stay connected. The workshop I had planned to organize for this summer at the Institute, ‘Cultural Life in Allied-

Occupied Istanbul 1918–1923’, was unfortunately cancelled. My aim was to bring together cultural, social and art historians from various institutions (including Europe, the UK and the US) in order to foster closer connections and exchanges of ideas. Though coming together physically seems unlikely to happen any time soon, I am planning to keep the group connected by producing a special issue with the same working title. While only a few months remain until the end of my current BIAA fellowship in March 2021, I am delighted to continue to support research related to Turkey during the armistice period (1918–1923) with Daniel-Joseph, and am helping to organise a forthcoming conference on ‘Occupied Istanbul: Urban Politics, Culture and Society, 1918–1923’ at Boğaziçi University as well as working on a comprehensive bibliography of the period. Meanwhile, I am also conducting new research on the first Ottoman historical film, *Binnaz*, which was produced and aired in occupied Istanbul between 1919 and 1920.

Finally, there is something very uncanny about revisiting the history of the final decade of the Ottoman Empire as a global pandemic ravages the world’s population, as also happened a hundred years ago during the influenza pandemic. Known as the ‘Spanish flu’, the 1918 virus broke down the infrastructure of daily life, pushed some countries to civil war and killed more people in two years than died throughout the First World War itself. Whilst there is no exact figure of pandemic-related deaths in the Ottoman Empire during the armistice period, it is clear that populations across the remaining territories would have had their physical and social resilience to disease severely weakened by the growing struggle between the occupying forces and nationalists in Anatolia, following so soon upon experiences of massive displacement and demographic engineering by the wartime administration of the Committee of Union and Progress.

Today, in the midst of global pandemic and continuing wars, whilst climate change threatens our earth and racism our humanity, I cannot help but recall the words of Walter Benjamin as he looked at Paul Klee’s monoprint *Angelus Novus* and warned us about what we call ‘progress’ and what we expect from it (‘Theses on the philosophy of history’, *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, New York 1969: 249):

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.