

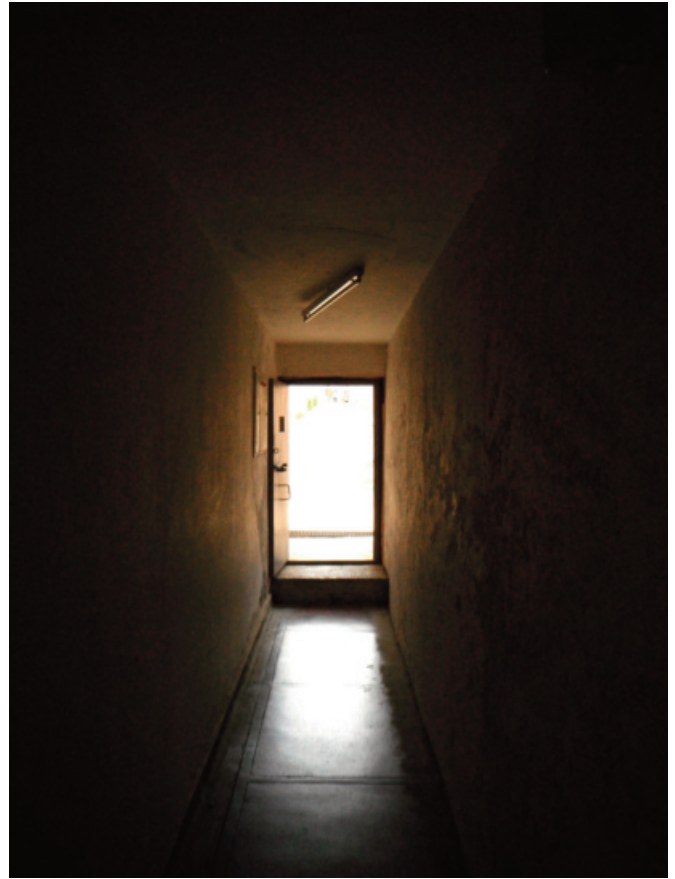
Contested histories and their musealisation at Ulucanlar Prison Museum

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*For the first time they took me out into the sun today.
And for the first time in my life I was aghast
that the sky is so far away
and so blue
and so vast*
(Nazim Hikmet – Bugün Pazar)

Ankara's Ulucanlar Prison was established in 1925 and served as a penal institution for 81 years until 2006. During this period, it housed some of Turkey's most important figures of political struggles and was deeply connected to some of its most delicate and tense historical periods. Reading through the names of those imprisoned and, in some cases, executed there is like strolling across the landscape of Turkey's political history over the past century. Among many others, these include former prime minister Bülent Ecevit and other politicians like Leyla Zana, Metin Toker, Hatip Dicle, Muehsin Yazıcıoğlu; authors and film-makers like Yaşar Kemal, Nazim Hikmet and Yılmaz Güney; political activists such as Deniz Gezmiş. Over 15 prisoners were executed there, torture was common and violent riots and state repression occurred as well. In 2011, five years after closing, Ulucanlar opened its doors to the Turkish public again, but this time in its newly restored form as a museum to commemorate the prison's history.

As a museal space dedicated to a site of political violence and suffering, the study of Ulucanlar can be placed within a global trend of such sites that has begun to emerge in the past 30 years. This development started with the trans-national commemoration process of the Holocaust. Williams (2007: 8) uses the term 'memorial museum' for those spaces which are 'dedicated to a specific event commemorating mass suffering of some kind'. Examples include the Villa Grimaldi in Chile or the Navy School of Mechanics in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In Turkey itself, these spaces are only just beginning to emerge. Historical battlefield sites such as those of Gelibolu and Sarıkamış could be seen as examples. Furthermore, one could point to the yearly 'Museum of Shame' exhibition focused on political violence and repression from the 1970s onwards which is organised by the Revolutionary 78ers Federation, a left-wing cultural association. In that sense, the Ulucanlar Cezaevi Müzesi is one of the first, if not the first, explicit 'memorial museum' connected to some of the key episodes of Turkey's republican history. It should be taken into consideration that Ulucanlar's opening comes at a time when the key historical eras that it is linked to, especially the period of the 1970s and the 1980 military coup, are gradually passing from the realm of lived memory into that of history for most people in Turkey, where the average age is 28.



The focus of this research is on Ulucanlar as a museal site of political violence and repression that deals with contested memories and how different practices of remembrance and forgetting, aestheticisation and musealisation interact in this space. If museums are institutions of memory that instantiate a dialogical link between past and present, this opens up questions surrounding the power and ability to re-present histories of political violence and interrogate the perspectives from which this reinterpretation occurs. As Kavanagh (1996: 5) states, museums are official sites where 'history is both remembered and forgotten'. In fact, remembering and forgetting tend to be intertwined aspects of all practices of commemoration and memorialisation. In this sense, it is evident that Ulucanlar attempts to fashion a meta-narrative of coming to terms not just with the prison's history but also more broadly with the historical periods it was part of. This meta-narrative attempts to invoke the wider national community by showing the ideological diversity of the prison's former inmates and thereby universalising the sense of affectiveness within a national frame. Secondly, this meta-narrative also aims to fulfil another purpose in showing that the authoritarian periods of suffering and repression which are on display are a thing of the past which can now be exhibited in the museums of a newer, more democratic age. Nevertheless, while the national community is included in

these messages that Ulucanlar communicates, it is also apparent that particular figures and episodes from its history have been discreetly airbrushed out. For instance, the historical role and voice of women at the prison is minimalised. This illustrates the political functions that museal spaces and sites of commemoration can serve in contemporary societies.

In that sense, another aspect of interest in examining Ulucanlar as a museal space is to chart the process through which the former prison became a site of commemoration and how its representation of the past is situated in ‘the politics of the present’ (Danforth, Von Boeschoten 2012: 219). The establishment of such commemorative spaces occurs within dynamic multi-actor environments ranging from national governments and international bodies to local communities and civil society groups. This is especially so when they concern contested historical periods involving multiple and competing communities of memory. As mentioned, it is also important to connect the narratives communicated at such sites to present political agendas and discourses. Narratives of the past that gain public legitimacy can constitute a valuable political resource and ‘be instruments to legitimate discourse, create loyalties, and justify political options’ (Barahona de Brito et al. 2001: 37). Thus, the museal politics and practices of remembrance within Ulucanlar’s representation of its history as well as the political background against which they emerged present an excellent means of examining how contested memories are politically dealt with and managed in contemporary Turkey.



References

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