

HARD TIMES IN TURKEY

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After a wide-ranging debate about the role of the state in enhancing the status and the developmental prospects of the newly decolonized countries in the 1960s, the topic experienced a revival of sorts in the 1980s when the economic transformation and growth in East Asia became a popular subject of research and writing.¹ Regardless of the authors' political preferences, in both the earlier and the later incarnations of this literature, there was a consensus that an active state was desirable if not inescapable if a country was to break free from the vestiges of its colonial, semi-colonial, or dependent past. In the absence of other qualified agents such as the middle class or the "national" bourgeoisie, the state becomes the agent that controls economic resources and assumes a leading role in setting the direction and priorities of economic development. That such a heavy-handed intervention by the state in the economy and society would inevitably entail restrictions in political freedoms and democratic procedures was considered to be a minor inconvenience—one that was justified by the desirability of the ends it served.

Turkey has long been considered one of the best examples of a country that put into practice these theories of modernization and economic development after it acquired its status as an independent republic in the 1920s. As such, it has long been treated as some kind of a laboratory where the success of these theories could be tested and their applicability could be assessed.² The decade of the 1930s plays a particularly privileged role in the narrative of Turkey's industrialization and modernization: After the initial years of the republic—when the

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1 See Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Peter Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

2 See Çağlar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey* (London: Verso, 1985); John Waterbury, *Exposed to Innumerable Delusions: Public Enterprise and State Power in Egypt, India, Mexico, and Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David Waldner, *State Building and Late Development* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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new state did not have the freedom to set its own economic policies and was required to follow the liberal agenda agreed upon in international treaties—the country became fully independent in the 1930s. Yet it was precisely in these years that the world economy descended into a crisis that left Turkey in a precarious position. The social and economic life that had never recovered fully from the adverse effects of World War I were made even worse by the collapse in international prices and the deterioration of Turkey's external terms of trade. But these seemingly impossible conditions in the 1930s also offered opportunity to Turkey's economic and political elite, who could now install tariff barriers and enact other measures designed to protect and promote specific and selective industries. What followed was a new phase in Turkey's economic transformation that is identified as the period of import-substituting industrialization.³ The policy shift toward a state-centered system of industrialization was integral to both the construction of a national economy in Turkey and the cultivation of a national bourgeoisie who would take the place of the departed non-Muslim middle classes of the empire.

This version of the story, which has been standard for some time now, leaves out several important issues, and the essays in this collection seek to address some of these issues. The first such question concerns the link with the Ottoman past. Whether (and to what extent) the 1930s involved the kind of radical rupture assumed by the generally accepted renderings of this story constitutes a question that needs to be considered very seriously. There are various levels on which the continuity between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey can be identified and studied. All the essays in this collection take this continuity as providing the context in which the state's aggressive approach to economy and politics took shape. Işık Özel, Frederic Shorter, and Kathryn Libal are particularly clear about this point. Özel examines the various aspects of the economic growth that occurred in the 1930s and finds that rather than starting on a clear slate and following a rupture, the Turkish economy succeeded in recovering the growth rates of the late Ottoman era, based on the resources that had been accumulated in those years. Shorter shows that the pro-natalist population policies of the new state were designed in the 1920s

3 The classic account is in Korkut Boratav, *Türkiye'de Devletçilik* (Ankara: Gerçek, 1981).

and 1930s as a direct response to the severely compromised demographic conditions that the republic inherited from the empire. Libal's essay complements Shorter's by focusing on a central but much neglected topic of children in the early republic. The very large number of children orphaned during the long wars of the early twentieth century presented a very difficult and urgent problem for the new state. The care of these children—feeding them, housing them, and educating them—was entirely left on the shoulders of the government. By the 1930s, this had become a particularly daunting task, because the religious institutions that had traditionally played important roles in providing relief were largely eliminated from the public sphere in the country. Libal discusses the establishment and the function of *Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu*, a quasi-public institution established to fill in this gap and provide these services.

The second area about which the standard accounts of Turkey in the 1930s are somewhat silent is the implementation of the measures designed to enhance the state's position as the central and primary actor in the country's economic and social transformation. Two essays by Akçetin and Watts focus on this as their primary concern. Akçetin points to a number of different ways in which the peasants were much more than passive adjuncts of an economy that had concentrated its resources on industrialization. Various coping strategies that peasant households utilized provide part of the explanation for why the agricultural sector did not completely collapse, even though the state's policies were obviously discriminatory against it. A careful examination of these strategies also shows that they went far beyond being simple acts of resistance; they involved peasants' taking advantage of the specific conditions of the period—advancing their status and even bringing about some growth in this sector. Watts's essay directs our attention to the most important fault line of Turkish society during the early years of the new republic. The policies of ethnic homogenization that rid the country of its Greek and Armenian citizens in the early years of the twentieth century had left Kurds as the only remaining non-Turkish ethnic group of significant size and hence a potential threat to the Turkish state. Indeed, as soon as the new republic was established, Kurds were involved in several large-scale uprisings that consumed a large amount of the state's resources in the 1920s and 1930s. Watts discusses the Dersim uprisings, a relatively little-studied Kurdish revolt that involved the killing and relocation of thousands of Kurds

and the razing of hundreds of villages and hamlets in parts of Eastern Anatolia in the 1930s. Rather than seeing it as yet another example of an unchanging ethnic conflict between the Turkish and Kurdish communities, Watts presents Dersim as a response to an increasingly intrusive state that, in the process of asserting its authority, was undermining the existing power structure in eastern Turkey. Finally, Emrence's essay reevaluates the short-lived existence of the Free Republican Party, which, in the 1930s, created the impression of a new democratic opening in Turkish politics. Classical accounts of this experiment see it strictly as a manifestation of intra-elite competition. Emrence, however, examines the founding, and especially the unexpectedly broad appeal of the party, and concludes that far from being an elite matter, the Free Republican Party was the product of real forces that originated from within the Ottoman society.

When considered together, the essays in this collection argue for a contingent explanation of the policies and measures that gave the 1930s their unique characteristics. When we examine this crucial interval, we are not dealing with an overtly planned and systematically imposed coherent body of policies that aimed to create a new, powerful, and centralized state. What we have, instead, is a state in the making, a state that was dealing with a set of difficult conditions that it had inherited from its predecessor—conditions that were exacerbated by the international conjuncture of the interwar years. The Turkish state tried to deal with these hard times by using policies that were not always coherent or consistent. To argue otherwise and present this history in a rigidly formulaic manner does an injustice to the rich complexity of the period.