

INTRODUCTION

AMBIVALENCES AND ANXIETIES

The Turkish History Exhibition was inaugurated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey, on October 20, 1937, at the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul.¹ His larger-than-life green marble bust greeted visitors at the entrance, positioned in an alcove as the centerpiece of the exhibition's introductory tableau. Below him, on the ground, lay a giant map of Eurasia, with a series of concentric circles emanating from Central Asia. According to the newly minted Turkish History Thesis, this was where the Turkish people had originated and spread out in successive waves to the rest of the world, bringing civilization to the new lands wherein they eventually settled. Atatürk's words, pronounced when he first embarked on the ambitious project of producing a "national history" in 1931, framed this map: "*writing* history is just as important as *making* history: if the writers are not faithful to the makers, then the immutable truth will be altered in ways that can confound mankind."² Using maps, photographs, drawings, and artifacts from archaeological excavations throughout the country, the exhibition was intended to serve as a material embodiment of the History Thesis, which placed the "Turkish race" at the forefront of world historical development through the ages.³ Held in conjunction with the much lauded Turkish History Congress, it was ephemeral—lasting only a few days—and had relatively few visitors, but the exhibition's central themes directly fed into educational curricula, civic rituals, and public policy, which vastly augmented its effect.⁴ As such, it was part of a much larger discursive project to generate and disseminate a foundation myth, instilling a proud sense of shared history and common destiny as a uni-

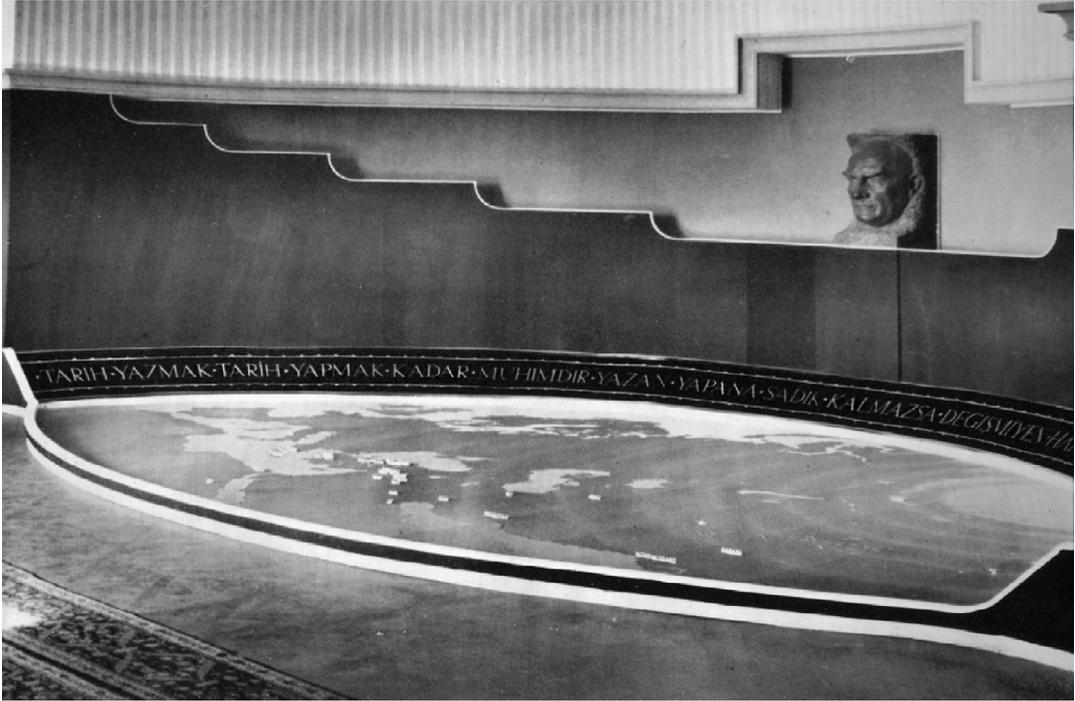


FIGURE 1.1. THE ENTRANCE OF THE EXHIBITION, ORGANIZED IN TANDEM WITH THE CONFERENCE, FEATURING AN ATATÜRK BUST ATOP THE MAP OF EURASIA WITH THE CONCENTRIC WAVES REPRESENTING THE WESTBOUND SPREAD OF TURKIC PEOPLES. COURTESY OF THE TURKISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY.

fied nation in a population that had been so profoundly traumatized and displaced by endless years of war.

Indeed, the last few decades of the Ottoman Empire were a period of accelerated unraveling under mounting pressures from various internal and external factors. Growing integration with the networks of imperial capitalism had transformed the empire's geography and its social and economic structures.⁵ Having expanded by conquest and the accommodative incorporation of diverse peoples and their customs and laws, the empire historically comprised an inherently pluralistic society, though with in-built asymmetries in its social structures, that historically had favored its Muslim populations.⁶ Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, whereas many entrepreneurial non-Muslims who engaged in commerce and new professions saw their financial fortunes rise, Muslims, despite their privileged status, saw theirs ebb. Although the actual fluctuations in wealth and status were more complicated and varied by region, these shifts reinforced mutually held negative stereotypes, contributing to rising tensions between the empire's constituent millets (ethnoreligious com-

munities). Increased contact, through conflict or collaboration, with the West also facilitated the influx of Enlightenment ideas. Nascent notions of individual rights, citizenship, and national identity were taken up by the empire's diverse populations and reinterpreted as needed to legitimize new kinds of political activities and demands.⁷ Such demands—including secession—were aided and abetted by nineteenth-century imperial powers all of which had designs on Ottoman territories and assets: Great Britain, France, and Russia sought to partition and control certain strategic regions through client states, while Germany was after retaining the empire largely intact but bringing it under its sphere of influence.⁸ The confluence of these demands and designs made for a very volatile environment, with wars on several fronts and insurrections in many regions (especially where the central authority's reach was weak), leading to great loss of life, assets, and territory in the waning years of the nineteenth century.

Of all successive wars, defeat in the Balkan War (1912–1913) proved to be a watershed moment because it unequivocally spelled the end of Ottoman presence in Europe, truncating a particular geographic imagination, long cultivated in the minds of the empire's ruling class, of an imperial domain straddling across Anatolia and Rumelia with Istanbul ensconced in its middle.⁹ As the first Ottoman foothold in Europe, conquered between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Balkan Peninsula had been as integral to the empire as its Anatolian half, with which it shared identical governmental, institutional, and social structures. The peninsula was home to the empire's oldest and most prosperous provinces, from which a substantial portion of its military and bureaucratic elite was recruited. The Ottomans had been losing ground in the region since the early nineteenth century, but the Balkans had continued to have a large Muslim population that had remained loyal to Istanbul. Following the Balkan defeat, the ongoing flow of Muslim (both Turcophone and non-Turcophone) refugees escaping ethnoreligious violence mainly from pro-Slavic and Christian forces in regions surrounding the Ottoman Empire peaked.¹⁰ A massive influx of uprooted and dejected people into major Anatolian cities stretched to the breaking point the ability of local authorities to cope.¹¹ Realizing how real and close to home the threat of disintegration was, Ottoman politicians and intellectuals began to seek explanations—as well as scapegoats—for the empire's misfortunes. It was at this juncture that a particularly zealous faction within the newly formed Congress of Union and Progress (CUP) staged a coup to take over the government and effectively established a dictatorship.¹² Shocked by the loss of their homelands, CUP leaders had become ideologically radicalized. They espoused a highly polarized version of nationalism with strong anti-non-Muslim tendencies,

which now they fully expected to translate into policy.¹³ The CUP takeover foreclosed all possibilities for Ottomanism, a more liberal ideology calling for a reformed and equalized pluralistic society. Since the CUP's steering cadres had, from their earlier education onward, cultivated close ties to Germany (both military and educational cooperation schemes), the coup also brought the empire into closer alliance with the Axis powers (Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire) that were then just in the making.

The CUP's decision to enter the First World War on the side of the Axis powers—with the not-so-hidden agenda of recovering lost lands—turned out to be an unmitigated disaster and precipitated the empire's collapse. Unlike previous conflicts, the Ottomans had to fight this war on several distant fronts at once.¹⁴ Considerably weakened by defeats in preceding wars, the Ottoman army suffered very heavy casualties and experienced mass desertions that not only undermined the morale but also wreaked havoc in the countryside as runaway soldiers turned into bandits and terrorized local populations. Moreover, because the army recruited mainly from the Anatolian peasantry, the absence of this large workforce from the fields severely affected food supplies. Moving armies also helped to spread epidemics—especially cholera and typhus in the summer—thus further contributing to mass civilian deaths. Most important, the First World War gave the CUP leaders an opening to implement some of their most radical ideas regarding population policy. Already before the war, claiming security concerns, they had purged thousands of Orthodox Greeks residing in the Aegean region of Greece.¹⁵ In 1915, using the war and the activities of Armenian nationalists as a pretext, the CUP government ordered the mass deportation of Anatolian Armenians.¹⁶ With the exception of those in Istanbul, all Armenians were exiled to the desert areas of what is modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq in a process that decimated at least 40 percent of their population who died at the hands of CUP officials and marauding bandits as well as from exposure, disease, and starvation.¹⁷ In sum, the Ottoman population endured a 2.5 percent net decrease, something no other First World War participant experienced.¹⁸

Following the 1918 Armistice, the Ottoman Empire came under extensive occupation by the Allies and effectively lost its sovereignty. In this state of post-occupation confusion, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the emergent leader of the nationalist liberation movement (*Kuva-i Milliye*) managed to pull together a coalition of diverse constituencies, which, despite profound differences of opinion and allegiance, were unified in their opposition to the foreign takeover of Anatolia. Meanwhile, although its leadership was unceremoniously deposed, the CUP's rank and file had remained in place and several of them—including secret operatives from *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*

who had been instrumental in executing some of the most ruthless policies during the First World War—also joined Mustafa Kemal’s forces.¹⁹ It was this coalition—comprising, in addition to the military-bureaucratic cadre close to Mustafa Kemal at the helm, local notables whose organizations had a more limited geographic outlook, religious leaders whose primary allegiance was to Islam the Sultan-Caliph, and former CUP operatives—that rallied people to fight one last war against post-First World War occupation. The best-known battles of the Turkish War of Independence were fought on the Western front against the Greek army—which, notably, was pursuing its own nationalist vision of unifying the Aegean under a Hellenic flag—but there were also violent guerilla-style wars in eastern and southeastern Turkey to liberate these regions from French occupation. In the end, taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of the Greek army, the war weariness of the Allies, and the postrevolutionary about-face in Russia, the nationalists prevailed, reclaiming the territory that became modern Turkey.

Thereafter, Mustafa Kemal and the military-bureaucratic cadre around him decided that in order to thrive in the post-First World War context, it was imperative to reinvent Turkey as a modern nation-state, rather than returning to Istanbul and restoring the old imperial order. In 1923 they relocated the capital to Ankara, which had been their wartime base of operations, and proclaimed a republic. The challenges of such a comprehensive reinvention were multifarious. On the home front, this was a profound change, which meant not only the wholesale importation of a new form of government with its laws and institutions but also the rejection of the Ottoman legacy that had shaped this land and its people for more than six centuries.²⁰ It entailed categorically repudiating—rather than repairing—the already damaged tapestry of ethnic and religious communitarian structures that had historically constituted the empire’s social fabric. A pluralistic society that accommodated differences in linguistic, ethnic, and religious affiliation and even a range of legal statuses for residency and citizenship was anathema to the nationalist vision of a modern state with a homogeneous population, which identified as Turkish to the exclusion of all other ethnoreligious identities, and was subject to uniform laws.²¹ On the international front, it required reestablishing the new state as a recognized peer among other nation-states at a time when such recognition was accorded begrudgingly by the Great Powers (especially the winners of the First World War) that dominated the diplomatic arena.²² In the eyes of modern Turkey’s founding fathers, this also necessitated stitching Turkey more firmly to modern Western traditions, albeit at the expense of their own. Having internalized Orientalist criticisms of the Ottoman state and

culture, they sought to introduce Westernizing reforms that would affect the day-to-day lives of the citizenry on an unprecedented scale. Finally, for the long term, to ensure the new order's durability, it called for creating and maintaining a standard legal, institutional, and physical infrastructure regulating relations among citizens and between citizens and the state, thereby sustaining the reproduction of society as a nation.²³

Inaugurated just a year before the end of Mustafa Kemal's fifteen-year-long rule as the founding president of the republic (as if a bookend to an intense period of transformations), the History Exhibition summarized the official interpretation of these events, the lessons to be drawn from them, and repositioned Turkey historically vis-à-vis the larger world around it. Exhibitions such as this were a favored medium for Turkey's leaders to communicate how they saw themselves and wanted to be seen by others. Borrowing from the well-worn late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century repertoire of modernizing states, Early Republican exhibitions sought to use the persuasiveness of physical objects and images to educate a broader citizenry and entice them to participate willingly in advancing that state's agenda.²⁴ At the same time, however, contextualized and examined as material artifacts, they also revealed, at their seams, the tensions inherent in formulating and disseminating the official foundation narrative and the difficulty of keeping at bay alternative narratives and factual challenges that could disrupt it. Seen in that light, the exhibition encapsulated Turkey's leaders' most consuming anxieties outlined above: achieving and preserving national integration, territorial sovereignty, and recognition as a peer within the then exclusive international system of states.

The exhibition displayed two distinctive yet interrelated strategies to frame the modern nation-state building project as inevitable and to preemptively discredit challenges that could undermine this narrative. First, the republican section of the exhibition, which, despite spanning barely fourteen years, took up the largest amount of space at the center, was presented as a comparison that sharply contrasted the failures of the Ottoman Empire with the accomplishments and vision of the Kemalist regime. Large posters and glass cases flanking the two sides of the U-shaped alcove proudly displayed the various areas of state intervention successfully pursued by the republican government including justice, economy, customs and tariffs, agriculture, industry, health, arts, education, architecture, and urbanism. Some of these exhibits were designed as two-part displays in a manner akin to "before and after" comparisons commonly seen in advertising. Others, replete with graphs and pictures, proudly displayed the country's growing industrial production, improved educational fa-

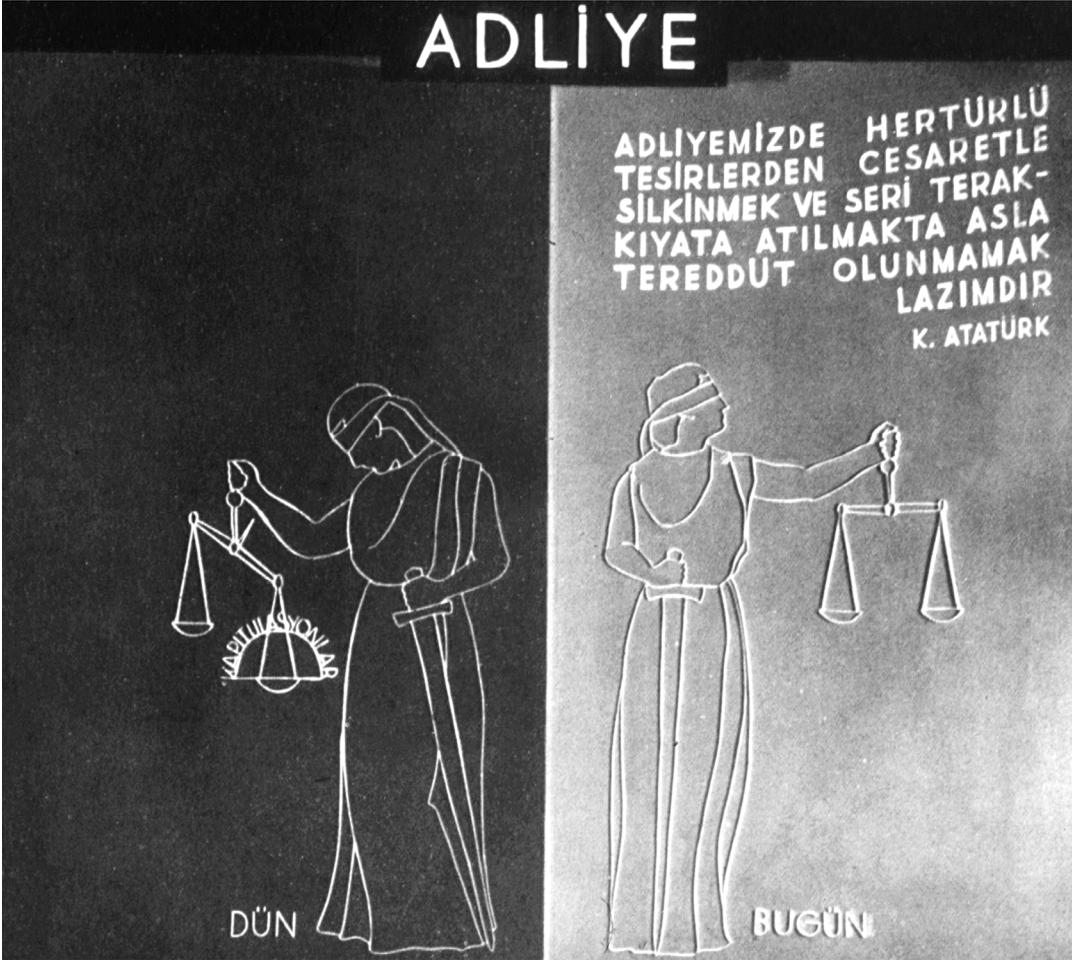


FIGURE 1.2. A COMPARATIVE IMAGE OF BEFORE AND AFTER FROM THE REPUBLICAN SECTION OF THE EXHIBITION FEATURING THE IMPROVEMENTS IN THE JUDICIARY. IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE REPUBLIC, THIS VISUAL TROPE OF PITTING THE OTTOMAN AGAINST THE REPUBLICAN TO POSIT THE SUPERIORITY OF THE LATTER PROLIFERATED IN ALL TYPES OF MEDIA CONTROLLED BY THE STATE. COURTESY OF THE TURKISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY.

cilities, expanding rail network, and better health care, all of which were the work of the new regime. Ironically this binary framing, which had been borrowed from Orientalist discourses and internalized and reinstrumentalized by the Kemalists, had now become a ubiquitous narrative device to validate their visions and policies as unprecedented, yet necessary, measures to move Turkey forward and away from past mistakes that had gotten in the way of its progress.²⁵ Moreover, it conveniently glossed over more than a century of Ottoman reforms that had effectively laid the



FIGURE 1.3. A SCENE FROM THE CONFERENCE, HASAN CEMİL ÇAMBEL DELIVERS HIS REMARKS. BEHIND HIM IS AN EARLY USE OF THE HITTITE SUN AS A LOGO, A PRACTICE THAT CONTINUES TO BE VERY COMMON AMONG VARIOUS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS. COURTESY OF THE TURKISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY.

ground work for many of the changes implemented under the republic, thus attributing to the republican leadership all the credit for the country's accelerated modernization.

Second, although it appeared to be all-encompassing, the exhibition was, in fact, quite selective about the cultures and connections it featured and how it ordered them. The displays included several ancient civilizations of the broader region—such as Sumeria, Egypt, and classical Greece, co-opting some cultures with which links were at best dubious, as part of modern Turkey's heritage. But it excluded other local contemporary cultures—such as Anatolian Greeks, Armenians, Arabs, and Kurds—who made up the empire's Anatolian population. In order to bolster Turkey's claims to an undeniable place within the genealogy of modern European history, the exhibition dated the presence of the “Turkish race” in Anatolia to the Neolithic period and portrayed it as being related to the region's ancient civilizations to which European nations also traced their cultural ancestry—albeit through similarly fictive processes of cultural appropriation.²⁶ For instance, the use of the newly excavated Hittite Sun statue as

the logo for the Second History Congress, which the exhibition accompanied, was especially telling. The logo presented as a foregone conclusion the shared and uninterrupted lineage between Hittites, an Anatolian civilization from more than three millennia ago, and contemporary Turks. It implied that by virtue of thus antedating other local ethnic groups, whose long-standing presence was known to all but was carefully edited out of the narrative, the exclusivity of Turkish claims to this indivisible territory was justified beyond a doubt.

Despite its careful scripting, the exhibition also lay bare the ambivalences of the new regime and its leaders and their inability to seal the past hermetically. As most ironically epitomized by the venue chosen for the exhibition, Dolmabahçe Palace, rather than, say, a modern republican structure in Ankara, the Kemalist narrative was far from consistent in its historiographic selectivity and the polarization it promoted. Far more dazzling than anything on display, the palace's profusely decorated Ceremonial Hall, with its 36-meter (118-foot)-high domed ceiling and 4.5-ton crystal chandelier—a gift from Queen Victoria—hovering right at the center of the section dedicated to the republic, threatened to undercut any assertions about the purported superiority of Kemalist achievements over Ottoman failures. Such a choice would not have been so noteworthy had the Kemalists not maligned Istanbul and repudiated the legacy of the Ottoman Empire so categorically. But as the last seat of the Sultans, designed and built in the mid-nineteenth century by Garabet and Nigogos Balyan of the long-serving Armenian family of imperial architects, Dolmabahçe was a quintessential part of Turkey's Ottoman past. And it was, by the same token, an embodiment of the foreign affectation, pluralistic constitution, and profligacy for which Kemalists condemned their Ottoman predecessors.

The anxieties and ambivalences embedded in the materiality of the 1937 exhibition also lie at the heart of this book. In retrospect, even when taken on its own terms, the exhibition may be read as symptomatic of the growing cognitive dissonance between the promise of the republic and what it delivered. The centerpiece of the republican section, featuring a large photograph of the inaugural meeting of the Grand National Assembly in April 1920, expressly celebrated democratic self-governance as the culmination, in Atatürk's words, of the "nation's centuries-long quest for self-governance and a living symbol of it"²⁷ Presented as achieved, this was a goal that eluded the Turkish citizenry. The 1920s and 1930s were characterized by a fierce rivalry among members of the leadership cadre jockeying for power, occasional outbursts of violence and the dissolution of wartime alliances with tribal and religious leaders, who now resented the



FIGURE 1.4. THE TWO-PAGE SPREAD FROM *LA TURQUIE KAMALISTE*, THE GOVERNMENT'S MULTILINGUAL PROPAGANDA PUBLICATION, DEPICTING THE EXHIBITION'S CENTRAL SECTION AT THE CEREMONIAL HALL OF DOLMABAÇE PALACE. NOTE THE LARGE CHANDELIER, A GIFT FROM QUEEN VICTORIA, AND THE ELABORATE DETAILING OF THE MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY OTTOMAN INTERIOR, A BACKGROUND AGAINST WHICH THE EXHIBITION PALES. COURTESY OF THE TURKISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY.

elimination of their power base by the expanding central authority, and growing resentment and alienation among the population at large whose voices almost never trickled up. The increasingly authoritarian regime that emerged out of this process brooked no dissent, neither in politics nor in historiography, and was ruthless in squashing both. In tandem with the narrowing political horizon, starting from the late 1920s, when attempts to produce a standardized version of Turkish history—especially for use in textbooks—gained momentum, scholars who called for a more critical evidence-based historiography found themselves increasingly silenced by their more ideologically driven counterparts who ultimately put their stamp on the Turkish History Thesis.²⁸ By the time of this exhibition, what



had once been a fluid debate about the shape of the past and the arc of the future was fixed, preemptively foreclosing alternate paths and the possibility of discussing them in an open scholarly environment—or, for that matter, in a political forum.

Building Modern Turkey portrays Turkey's transition from a pluralistic (multiethnic, multireligious) empire to a modern unitary nation-state as a fitful twofold process that simultaneously unleashed creative and destructive forces. It juxtaposes the drive to put in place the physical infrastructure and sociospatial practices of a new cultural and political order with the urge to dismantle the vestiges of its predecessor and also reveals the inextricable—if hitherto overlooked—interdependence between the two. The Turkish experience also provides a good case study for exploring the spatiality of nation-state building processes, which unfold at different and interdependent scales from that of the individual self to that of larger geopolitical configurations. The fine-grained analysis of specific sites and spatial practices provided here illuminates the concrete and performative dimensions of shoring up a particular political regime, instilling in the

population a sense of membership in and allegiance to the nation above all competing loyalties, and ensuring the longevity of a particular social and political order.

This book consists of three main sections that correspond to the concerns outlined above. The first of these, “Forging a New Identity,” examines how the formative processes of the new state played out spatially. The first chapter, “Political Capital,” focuses on the making of Ankara, which was, by the nationalists’ own admission, the crucible in which they sought to forge a new political identity and a modern way of life. But by the same token, contentions over the form, use, accessibility, and ownership of the new capital’s physical spaces became symptomatic of broader frictions resulting in the emergence of an authoritarian politics and the formation of an exclusive political and cultural elite that characterized modern Turkey for decades to come. “Theaters of Diplomacy,” the second chapter, examines the challenges Turkey faced in gaining recognition as a peer within the international system of states. Moving between scales from Ankara’s embassy row to the broader eastern Mediterranean region, it traces hitherto overlooked links between the formation of regional spheres of influence in the unstable geopolitical climate of the interwar years and Turkey’s preference for German and (to a lesser extent) Russian models of modernization.

The second section, “Erasures in the Land,” explores how the republican leadership sought to take apart the physical and figurative scaffolding that sustained the Ottoman society’s historically pluralistic constitution so as to realign people’s collective allegiances around a unitary Turkish nation. Despite their great reliance on Islam’s existing networks to mobilize the population for the War of Independence, Turkey’s leaders regarded religion as a rival to nationalism. Hence “Dismantling the Landscapes of Islam,” the book’s third chapter, examines the outlawing of the public expression of religious identities, the closure and demolition of various religious enclaves, and the appropriation of assets pertaining to religious organizations, while funneling their revenues to the preferred projects of the cash-strapped republic. The following chapter, “Of Forgotten People and Forgotten Places,” investigates how, as if to nationalize Turkey’s history and geography, the country’s dwindling non-Muslim citizens were marginalized in the public sphere, their properties appropriated, and the vestiges of their existence deliberately eradicated.

While they jettisoned the constitutive institutions of the Ottoman society, Turkey’s leaders also sought to replace them with modern ones to ensure the longevity of the state they were building. The third and final section, “An Imaginable Community,” discusses how indispensable the

creation of a tangible network of sites and services designed to sustain the social reproduction of a homogeneous polity was to forging an “imagined” national community. The fifth chapter, “Nationalizing Space,” is dedicated to the efforts to create a material culture closely identified with the new state through the expansion of infrastructural projects designed to shape the daily lives of the citizenry. Through a study of some of the most representative republican institutions, “Manufacturing Turkish Citizens,” the book’s last chapter, examines how Turkey’s leaders deployed a range of prescriptive sociospatial practices to inculcate the masses with a sense of territorial attachment, a shared notion of spatial order, and the habits of body and mind to sustain and transmit these to future generations.