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Learning about Civil War, Separatism, and Nation Building through Teaching in the Turkish Republic

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Like many college students around the world, students in Turkey are familiar with American popular culture, whether they like it or not, but have little sense of American history, particularly history before the Cold War. They may have heard anecdotes of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson, but the first president whose policies mean much to them is Harry S. Truman, whose anticommunism influenced Turkey through the Marshall Plan and the dispatch of the massive USS Missouri to Istanbul in 1946, partly as a sign of support in the early Cold War. In the words spoken to me by a Turkish colleague at Bilkent University, a secular private university in a suburb of the nation's capital, Ankara, "it seemed the first time anyone had ever stood up for us." An observer today can still find Turkish memorabilia with the name "Mizuri." Unusual outside North America and Western Europe, Bilkent's history department offers several courses in American history at the graduate level. From 2002 through 2008 I was responsible for its components in the colonial period, the early republic, and the Civil War.

While they are on foreign ground regarding the pre-1945 American past, Turkish students are all too aware of important issues with which Americans in the Civil War era grappled—the problems of unifying a republic and of recognizing the existence and rights of minorities. These are "common anxieties of rule" in postcolonial societies. At the cost of sectional destruction, the Civil War basically solved Americans' anxiety about national unification and at least partly solved the question of race and citizenship. Similar, or perhaps analogous, issues in present-day Turkey enlivened my teaching there of the American national crisis, providing "fresh perspective on what was at stake in similar American conflicts in the past."^[1]

Three developments in Turkey in particular influenced my teaching about the Civil War. First, the country has changed rapidly in the last few decades, with cable television and the Internet enabling Turks to learn more about world events and to deliberate about their country's direction. Many Turks have rethought the wisdom or at least the legacy of their country's strong support of the United States during the Cold War. A punctuating moment in this debate came in March 2003, when the Turkish parliament voted to reject the U.S. request to use Turkey as a base for intervention in Iraq. Second, the Justice and Development party, or AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), first elected in 2002, has advocated Turkey's joining the European Union, the privatization of industries, and restraint of the political power of the Turkish military. Critics of the AKP allege that the party has an Islamic agenda because it has encouraged temperance, awarded contracts to businesses professing Islamic practices, and ensured that female students may wear headscarves at universities, as a form of religious expression. Third has been the chronic conflict between the Turkish military and militants of the Kurdistan Workers' party, or PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan), whose goal since the 1980s has been to create autonomy along the Turkish borders with Iraq, Syria, and Iran, where the 12 million Kurds in Turkey are the majority. Regional separatism outside the United States is hardly a matter merely for historians. The Turkish government considers the PKK a terrorist organization. These developments complicate the legacy of the establishment by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of Turkey as a culturally Islamic yet officially secular republic in 1923. On four occasions the Turkish military has intervened in civilian government to maintain Kemalist principles, and it threatened to do so again in 2008. The AKP's ascension and the rumbling struggle among Islamic, ethnic separatist, and hypersecular military forces once prodded a Turkish colleague to mutter to me, "Perhaps we need a civil war."^[2]

At the risk of assuming too much about the influence of contemporary contexts, I adopted a strategy of teaching about the American past often through crossnational analogies. I asked Turkish students to reflect on how recent debates over foreign relations, the public role of religion, and the rights of minority groups could help them understand the Civil War, as well as offer perspective about the development of their own country.

Turkish students, like their American counterparts, come to American history in terms of their own culture.^[3] Not surprisingly, I found students interested in the transnational aspects of the conflict. Both the North and the South were part of a global cotton economy, although in different ways, a circumstance that helped generate classroom discussion about what Northerners and Southerners desired from their relations with European powers. Partly because of their ambivalence about U.S. imperialism today, students were interested in the Confederacy's attempts to ally with Britain—withstanding similarities between Britain's status in the nineteenth century and the American position today.

Students were more reluctant to consider the efforts of northern reformers to limit or abolish slavery as a moral evil. My (admittedly provocative) characterization of abolitionism as a religious crusade, not only in the United States but also in the broad Atlantic world, generated little enthusiasm in the classroom, an apathy revealing of students' skepticism about crusades, even though radical abolitionism normally was pacifist. Reflecting secular students' opposition to the alleged Islamic agenda of the AKP government, one student wrote, "Religion has always been a good tool for the people who want to lead masses. . . . [the] Catholic Church used religion, Ottomans used religion, Iran uses religion, [the] AKP uses religion, and [President George W.] Bush uses religion."

I was also struck, however, by students' lack of interest in slavery, either the internal history of the slaves themselves or the story of why white Americans would oppose or defend slavery for reasons other than purely economic ones. The Ottoman Empire practiced slavery until the late nineteenth century, when Western pressure against the international slave trade and the Ottomans' traditional practice of manumitting slaves after a period of service, somewhat similar to the Western system of indentured labor, gradually and nonviolently abolished slavery in the Ottoman Empire. The topics of Ottoman slavery and antislavery have not received the interest in Turkey that their American counterparts have received in the last generation. Only recently have African Turks formed associations and begun to create identity networks and scholarship on their hidden history. Few scholars can read Ottoman Turkish to research archives about slavery. And "race" is a complicated concept in Turkey, not often discussed in the public sphere. Thus I struggled to impress on students the centrality of racial slavery as a cause of violent national upheaval in America.^[4]

Instead, students tended to interpret the outbreak of the Civil War as a reflection of competing sectional economic interests. In an online discussion one student wrote, "There was a huge structural gap between [the] North and South. . . . New England and the Middle Atlantic states engaged in trade, banking, and industry. . . . However, [the] primary production of the South was cotton . . . sugar production in Louisiana; and tobacco in [the] Border States. . . . [the] North was like a boss, South [the] employee. This was increasing hostility." In a debate about the war's origins another student stated, "We aren't arguing about the morality of slavery, just the causes of the war." And in a history department graduate seminar, a student argued that Charles Beard's view of the war as the triumph of industrial capitalism, without any focus on race and slavery, still provided the best explanation of the Civil War.

Even less likely to receive sympathetic understanding among Bilkent students were the Civil War topics of "states' rights" and Southern secession, sentiments that transparently revealed students' sensitivity to contemporary political events. Fighting between PKK insurgents and Turkish military forces has killed more than 40,000 people. The pro-Kurdish Democratic Society party, or DTP (Demokratik Toplum Partisi) has been banned from Parliament, and it is illegal to display a flag that Kurdish separatists deem their national flag. (I do not believe that the Confederate flag, occasionally visible among protest groups in Europe, is present in southeastern Turkey, the area of most violence in this ongoing conflict.) However, mainstream Turks regularly unfurl large Turkish flags. After a particularly violent month in the spring of 2008, Bilkent students, normally apolitical compared to students at Turkish state universities, were moved to perform this action at an on-campus antiterrorism rally.^[5]

Students' conflicted attitudes about central governments' use of force to compel national security complicated their understanding of the Union's military invasion of the Confederacy to prevent Southern independence. Opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq as well as the Israeli militarization of Palestinian territory emerged in discussions about President Lincoln's determination to reunify the country. But students sympathized with a chief executive committed to preventing people in one part of the country from acting on their claim of

irreconcilable difference from the majority.

Lincoln's apparent reluctance to punish the South at the time of his death, moreover, resonated with students and legitimized his use of force. On this point, comparisons between him and Atatürk proved useful. At Gettysburg, Lincoln offered a bipartisan eulogy for "the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here," and his famous words in his second inaugural address called for blind charity to create a "just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Atatürk's speech in 1934 commemorating the World War I Çanakkale Savaşları between Turks and Anzacs, known in the West as the battle of Gallipoli, echoed Lincoln: "Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives. You are now living in the soil of a friendly country. . . . There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side, here in this country of ours. You, the mothers, who sent their sons from faraway countries, wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well." Lincoln and Atatürk wielded dictatorial authority during national wars of survival, but both encouraged reconciliation to secure unity at home and peace abroad.^[6]

Students' civic familiarity with the Turkish hero helps them understand the challenges and achievements of his American counterpart, and study of Lincoln's disconcerting racial and religious attitudes as well as his measured use of force encourages a more analytical understanding of Atatürk. Such resort to comparative "great man" history helped me connect with students unaccustomed to looking critically at the past and unfamiliar with slavery and its legacies, but more knowledgeable than many American students about the unromantic problems of building a pluralistic democracy.

^[1]Tim Roberts is an assistant professor of history at Western Illinois University. The author thanks Ufuk Özdağ for her comments on this essay and Paul Quigley for organizing the panel at the American Historical Association's 2009 meeting at which it was first presented.

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^[2]Metin Heper, *The State Tradition in Turkey* (Walkington, 1985); Ayşe Kadioğlu, "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32 (April 1996), 177–93; M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (New York, 2003).

^[3]See Timothy Roberts, "Teaching by Analogy: Comparing American and Turkish History," *Common-place*, 8 (Oct. 2007), <http://www.common-place.org/vol-08/no-01/school/>.

^[4]On abolitionism in the Ottoman Empire, see Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800–1909* (New York, 1996); and Ehud Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle, 2000). For an example of the rise of African-Turk consciousness, see Turkish Historical Foundation, *Sessiz bir Geçmişten Sesler: Afrika Kökenli "Türk" Olmanın Dünü ve Bugünü* (Voices from a voiceless past: Being a "Turk" of African origin yesterday and today), <http://www.afroturk.org>.

^[5]Chris Springer, "Troubled Resurgence of the Confederate Flag," *History Today*, 43 (June 1993), 7–9; John Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 292–307.

^[6]For the Gettysburg Address, see "Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address," Gettysburg Foundation, <http://www.gettysburgfoundation.org/lincoln-address.htm>. For Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, see "President Abraham Lincoln's Inaugural Address (1865)," Our Documents, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=old&doc=38>. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk quoted in Kevin Fewster, Vecihi Başarın, and Hatice Hürmüz Başarın, *Gallipoli: The Turkish Story* (Crows Nest, 2003), 2. Comparisons of Lincoln and Atatürk appear in Michael Ledeen, *Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli's Iron Rules Are as Timely and Important Today as Five Centuries Ago* (New York, 1999), 183–84; and Steven Davis, *Leadership in Conflict: The Lessons of History* (New York, 1996), 15–20, 71–75, 124–69. Both leaders are subjects of study in the Profiles in Power series published by Longman. See A. L. Macfie, *Atatürk* (London, 1994); and Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln* (Harlow, 2003).

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