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Contemporary Narratives and Counternarratives of a Myth: The Battle of Gallipoli

Abstract

This essay aims to investigate the reconstruction of national identity and collective memory in Turkey by choosing the commemoration of the battle of Gallipoli (1915–16) as a case study. It is considered that the remembering of Gallipoli is a fruitful field of investigation in order to identify the semantic and symbolic shifts in the constant re-building of collective memory in the Turkish context. The starting point of the paper is that the field of cultural production can be analysed as an extension of the commemorative practice. Thus, after a short account of the basic features of the narratives surrounding the remembering of the battle, attention will be drawn on some literary works — with few remands to cinematography — which show the different ways through which the myth of Gallipoli is popularised and incorporated in the public debate. The study will illustrate how cultural production focused on Gallipoli is marked by different ideological trends which give evidence to a widespread need to participate in its remembering by reasserting or even questioning official narratives.

Keywords

Neo-Ottomanism, Gallipoli, Cultural Production, Heritage, Memory

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Introduction

According to Esra Özyürek, one of the pioneers of memory studies in Turkey, the analysis in the Turkish context is quite intriguing not least because Turkey is often labelled as a country that experienced a forced amnesia about its imperial past following the foundation of the Republic. As she pointed out in the introduction of her 2007 volume on public memory: "As opposed to its futuristic and homogenizing character at the turn of the twentieth century, Turkish nationalism today utilises memories and generates diverse narratives for the nation as well as the minority groups" (Özyürek 2007: 2). The process of transforming the Ottoman imperial past into heritage, a resilient archive capable of constituting the foundation for the creation of new identitarian projects, plays a central role in the ongoing redefinition of Turkey's national symbolic and cultural paradigms. The clearest manifestation of this phenomenon, neo-Ottomanism, emerged initially during the neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s and then more forcefully with the strengthening of the regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's *Adalet ve Kalkınnma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party or AKP) during the 2000s.[1] Through the re-invention of a mythicised imperial past, neo-Ottomanism implies the partial recognition of an ethno-cultural *pluralism* within the imagined community, leading to a radical transformation of the paradigm of rigid ethno-linguistic homogeneity that had previously led the construction of the nation, starting with the establishment of the Republic in 1923. Furthermore, the centenary of the Great War and the commemorative celebrations it sparked highlighted how the memory of the battle of Gallipoli continues to be a crucial tassel in the mosaic of the construction of collective identity in Turkey. It is considered that the remembering of Gallipoli could be a fruitful field of investigation in order to identify the semantic and symbolic shifts in the constant re-building of national identity in the Turkish context. At the same time, approximately in the last two decades the battle of Gallipoli has become one of the most recurring subjects of popular literature, films, war diaries and memories.

This paper begins with the simple observation that artistic representations of the past, which have recently undergone an incredible proliferation globally as well as in Turkey, can be considered an extension of practices of remembering. The use of the term *remembering* here refers not just to its performative sense nor to initiatives of official commemorative propaganda, but ought instead to be interpreted in light of Jan Assman's conceptualization of "cultural memory" (Assman 1995). Expanding on Halbwachs' understanding of collective

memory as "socially determined" and materialised, Assman's use of the concept refers to "that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilise and convey that society's self-image" (Assman 1995: 132). Although the state continues to be the main choreographer and organiser of such remembering, the constitution of this corpus is nonetheless a multi-dimensional process which includes non-state actors, writers, artists, entrepreneurs, editors, and film producers, who are compelled to represent the past by a vast array of different motivations: profit, transmitting the emotions of their group, reaching political goals. In this sense, collective memory is the result of the constant negotiation between different state and non-state groupings, who enact strategies — which are not merely the result of intentions but are instead socially determined (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) — which in turn reveal different sensibilities with regard to how to remember the past (Sivan and Winter 2000: 30).

Over the past decade, a number of studies — however diverse in methodological and disciplinary terms — have begun to reflect on the official narratives surrounding the battle of Gallipoli in relation to national memory (Aktar 2016b; Aktar 2020; Arcan 2017; Güler 2012; Macleod 2015; Macleod and Tongo 2016; Okur 2016; Özcan and Arzık 2014; Şakul 2016; Uyar 2016; West 2008; Yankıdağ 2015; Yılmaz 2011; Ziino 2014).[2] Other studies have instead focused on how the battle of Gallipoli has been represented in architecture, film, literature, and children's books (Cansun 2019; Hillman 2011; Horzum 2016; İlhan, Bulut and Yumuşak 2017; Öztan 2015; Thys Şenocak 2018). In other words, we are witnessing the emergence of an academic literature which is attempting to problematise the place of this event within collective memory, without relying solely on official narratives but instead turning to the broader cultural production through which the myth of Gallipoli maintains its popular appeal, and is received and appraised. Nonetheless, despite the important points raised by this literature, it seems that the relationship between cultural production, the evolution of official narratives, and attempts to formulate counter-hegemonic narratives is still far from having been analysed in the entirety of its implications.

Of course, the vast cultural production centred around the battle of Gallipoli is too large a field to be exhaustively covered here. I will thus focus on some textual representations — novels, popular history, and memoirs — which had a large circulation and/or provoked interest in the public debate. This will allow me to trace the different perceptions of the battle of Gallipoli with regard

to the reproduction of collective memory and identity-building politics. The diversity of the sources will show how the debate over the meaning of Gallipoli involves a plurality of agents making use of different languages, codes, and media. Therefore, rather than with a conventional instance of literary analysis, this article will proceed by isolating some textual or para-textual elements in order to attempt to provide an answer to the following questions: How do the authors or promoters of these works attempt to legitimate their narrativisation of the battle of Gallipoli with respect to their antagonists? What kind of relationship do these works have with the official narratives that have existed over the years?

In this light, I will first provide a summary reconstruction of the official narratives, semantic changes, repressions and omissions connected with remembering the event of the battle of Gallipoli. Following a brief review of the Islamist literature, and in particular Vehbi Vakkasoğlu's *Bir Destandır Çanakkale* (Gallipoli is an Epic), I will then move on to a reflection on the Kemalist bestseller *par excellence*: the historical novel Çanakkale 1915*: Diriliş* (Resurrection: Dardanelles 1915) by the novelist and playwright Turgut Özakman. Finally, I will mention Sarkis Torosiyan's memoirs, originally published in 1947 in English as *From Dardanelles to Palestine - A True Story of Five Battle Fronts of Turkey and Her Allies and a Harem Romance*, but published in Turkey only in 2012, which beyond its historical reliability or consistency led to question about the role of the minority groups within the narrative of battle. The aim of my analysis will be to isolate the most relevant aspects of these works and identify continuities with official narratives — in their conservative/Islamist and nationalist/Kemalist variants — or elements for their radical deconstruction.

Gallipoli and the Nation: A Problematic Memory

The battle of Gallipoli, one of the few and unexpected Ottoman victories during the First World War, had certainly been held in high regard already by the Ottoman ruling class during the war itself. In July 1915, during the final months of the campaign, the Ottoman government had sent a delegation of intellectuals and writers to the Gallipoli peninsula, tasked with the production of literary works that would serve as propaganda during the war (Köroğlu 2007: 83–5). Mehmet Akif Ersoy, the Islamist poet who at the time constituted a reference point for conservatives across the Empire, and the famed sociologist Ziya Gökalp, the main theoretician of Turkish ethno-linguistic nationalism,

both wrote poems celebrating the Ottomans' victory at Gallipoli.[3] At the same time, the War Minister, Enver Pasha, personally sponsored the construction of temporary monuments memorialising and celebrating the sacrifice of the Ottoman troops (Uyar 2016: 3).

However, following the proclamation of the Republic, the memory of the Great War and the Gallipoli campaign were somewhat marginalised within the narrative that would determine the characteristics of the new Turkish national identity. Although during the first decade of the Republic's existence a number of accounts of the campaign had been written by officers who had taken part in the operations on the peninsula, the myth of Gallipoli resonated little within the broader political and intellectual debate in the country. In the first official history sponsored by the Ministry of Education in 1931, only two pages were dedicated to the Gallipoli campaign (Uyar 2016: 6). According to the teleological historical narrative centred around the War of Independence and the construction of the Republic as the foundational myth of Turkish identity, the Great War and with it the Gallipoli campaign constituted a sort of *prehistory* of this narrative and were thus regarded with ambivalence. On the one hand, responsibility for the Empire's downfall was placed squarely with the unionist leadership, which had let itself be dragged into a pointless massacre by German imperialism. At the same time, however, the episode of the battle of Gallipoli was abstracted from the rest of the Great War and reinvented as the prelude of the War of Independence through the cult of the military genius of Mustafa Kemal, described as the main — if not the sole — author of that victory. While there existed other accounts by officers who hoped to give a more accurate description of the events, Gallipoli was essentially remembered as the *birth of the hero* and as a manifestation of *Turkish*, rather than Ottoman, military heroism (Grassi 2019:154–5; Uyar 2016: 6; Yankıdağ 2015: 101–3).

At the same time, the *Turkification* of the myth of Gallipoli implied the tacit but substantial omission of the role played by the German allies, as well as of the ethnic and religious diversity of the Ottoman troops that took part in the battle. In this regard, then, the memory of Gallipoli was harmonically incorporated into a representation of the nation as ethnically, linguistically, and culturally homogenous.

Nevertheless, the new regime took advantage of the desire expressed by Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand to commemorate their fallen soldiers, to consolidate the new image that republican Turkey hoped to convey internationally: a country that was by no means open to compromising its

sovereignty in any respect, but which nonetheless sought to normalise its relations with the European powers. The leaders of the Republic thus did not fail to satisfy the British's, Australians', and New Zealanders' requests to commemorate their dead, as evidenced by the famous words allegedly spoken by Atatürk himself and which have come to form an integral part of the mythology around Gallipoli in Australia and New Zealand: "Those heroes that shed their blood, and lost their lives […] You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore, rest in peace. 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 far away 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" (Macleod 2015: 166).

Of course, alongside the official narrative, there existed at least some dissonant voices. In 1934, the country's oldest legal student union, the *Milli Türk Talebe Birliği* (National Turkish Students' Union or MTTB), organised the first pilgrimage to the Gallipoli peninsula. The ultranationalist writer Nihal Atsız took part in the initiative, and seized the opportunity to criticise the government for the state of abandonment in which it had left the cemeteries dedicated to Turkish soldiers, and in general, for the indifference of the state towards the battle (Özcan and Arzık 2014: 1244).

Following the move to a multi-party system and the electoral victory of the Democratic Party (*Demokrat Parti* or DP) in 1950, the country's nationalist youth organizations became increasingly active in commemorating the battle of Gallipoli, setting up initiatives dedicated to celebrating the memory of the martyrs (Çapa 2015). Naturally, in the context of the Cold War and Turkey's participation in the Korean War, the memory of Gallipoli became a tool with which to exalt the heroism of the Turkish soldiers engaged in the struggle against the Communist enemy. The fortieth anniversary of the victory at Gallipoli conferred national relevance to the commemoration of the battle. In addition to the usual celebrations held on the Gallipoli peninsula itself, the event was commemorated in Ankara, Istanbul, and İzmir (Şakul 2016: 188). However, the importance the commemoration had gained turned out to be rather ephemeral, and the commemoration failed to take on any form of long-term centrality.

Following the coup of 27 May 1960, the armed forces attempted to monopolise the memory of the battle, as evidenced by the inauguration of the

Çanakkale War Memorial. However, they failed to establish a univocal and widely shared narrative (*ibid*.): in the increasingly radical and polarised political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, socialist, nationalist, and Islamist organisations found themselves competing with each other on all commemorative occasions. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the scandal around the *Kadeş*, the ship that hosted a group of students on a pilgrimage to the Gallipoli peninsula (Arzık 2012: 58–61; Özcan and Arzık 2014: 1252–53). The ship's captain circulated rumours regarding his passengers' *immoral* conduct, from alcohol consumption to fornication; these rumours were relayed by the Islamist press, such as *Sebilüreşşad*, *Milli Yol*, *İslamın İlk Emri Oku*, which pointed to the episode as demonstrating the natural outcome of the secularist cultural policies of the Republic (Arzık 2012: 58–61; Özcan and Arzık 2014: 1252–53).[4] Curiously, the MTTB, which had initially rejected all accusations, years later itself drew on the scandal as a weapon in its own battle against leftist student organisations. In fact, the actors involved in this struggle over memory effectively reinvented the remembrance of Gallipoli according to different semantic and symbolic paradigms. In the imaginary of the left, Gallipoli constituted an instance of anti-imperialist resistance, which had foiled the Entente's plans to establish a supply line to Russia, and was thus crucial in determining the fall of the Tsarist Empire and the onset of the October Revolution. For the Islamists, instead, victory had been determined by the faith of the Muslim soldiers engaged in the eternal struggle between the Ottoman Empire and the West. All in all, the press connected to the Islamist right seems to have been more active in celebrating the memory of Çanakkale, and did not shy away from using the verses composed by Mehmet Akif Ersoy to create a conceptual archive that would later re-emerge in an altogether different socio-political context.[5]

In the context of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis that rose to dominance following the coup of 12 September 1980, the leaders of the Republic undertook considerable efforts to make the memory of Gallipoli into a fundamental component of the fostering of a new national identity. As Mesut Uyar has noted, during the 1980s Gallipoli became the point of intersection of a new national narrative which aspired to harmonically meld religion and nationalism. The Turkish soldier thus became not just a patriot, but also a defender of Islam (Uyar 2016: 13–4). In fact, the erection of new memorials ahead of the battle's 75th anniversary in 1990 was aimed at stimulating the influx of Turkish pilgrims to the peninsula. The active interest of the Republic's leaders in the consolidation of a memorial tourism must thus be interpreted in light of the

neoliberal restructuring undergone by Turkey in the 1980s, and which made the memory of Gallipoli into an instrument of territorial advertising within the market of memorial tourism (Uyar 2016: 13–4).

At any rate, the most marked change in the narrative on the battle of Gallipoli took place with the rise of political Islam in the 1990s and 2000s with the consolidation of the AKP's place in government (Güler 2012: 203–5). The battle of Gallipoli became part of the new *neo-Ottoman* approach which, alongside a partial recognition of the diverse communities that comprised the Ottoman Empire and today form part of the Republic of Turkey, entailed a strong shift in emphasis towards Islam as the paramount component of the identity of the imagined community. A speech given by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during the 2013 celebrations made it clear that the reading of the battle of Gallipoli as an Islamic revanche had gained a central place in the official narrative. In other words, Gallipoli has ceased to be merely a military event of the First World War, or simply a precedent for the War of Independence; rather, with clear reference to the verses composed by Ersoy, it has been likened to Badr's stunning victory, under the guidance of the Prophet, against the polytheists of Mecca. In this perspective, Gallipoli constitutes a trans-national victory, capable of sparking celebrations across the Muslim world.[6]

The implications of such a *new* politics of memory emerged forcefully during the magnificent celebrations for the battle's centenary. The speech given by then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in the city of Çanakkale on 18 March 2015 was extremely significant in terms of showcasing the close interweaving of the re-invention of the past and the creation of the present: "Çanakkale left an indelible mark in our memory. We promise that their [the martyrs] legacy will be preserved forever. The heirs of that great nation will march together at Diyarbakir, Izmir, Hakkari, Edirne and Muğla. No one will be allowed to bring discord to this legacy. Whether they are Turks, Kurds, Alevis or Sunnis, the citizens of Turkey will march together towards the future! Those who died as martyrs were not all from Anatolia. [...] Just like Syrians, Palestinians, Balkan peoples, Azeris, fought shoulder to shoulder to save our great capital Istanbul, we, as the Turkish Republic, share a common destiny with the nephews of those martyrs. The fate of the Syrians, of the Iraqis, of the Balkan peoples rests now in the merciful hands of Turkish Republic. We will preserve them in tribute to those martyrs".[7] It is clear how the battle of Gallipoli has become a symbol for the harmony between the different (Muslim) components of the Empire, and at the same time a symbol capable of celebrating Turkey's new

role in the Middle East especially in the Syrian scenario. It is not by chance that among the 16 Presidents who took part in the celebration in Turkey, Turkish press reported the presence of Khaled Khoja, who had been (for a short time) the Head of the Syrian National Coalition between 2015 and 2016. The link between the remembering of Gallipoli and the Syrians has been even more forcefully reiterated by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the context of the celebrations of 18 March 2018, during which he announced the success of the so-called *Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı* (Operation Olive Branch) against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, with the Turkish armed forces and the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army taking control of the city of Afrin.[8]

The celebrations for the battle's centenary, however, are also significant with regard to international relations. The decision to select 24 April as the date for the celebration — a crucial date for the deportation of the Armenian population — situated it in *de facto* opposition with the commemoration of the centenary of the genocide held in Yerevan on the same day. Already in 2011, referring to the preparations for the centenary, Davutoğlu had declared that "[W]e will show to the whole world what 2015 is all about. We will present it as the anniversary of a nation's glorious defence, its resistance at Çanakkale, not as the anniversary of genocide as some have suggested through nothing but empty allegations and slander" (cited in Yankıdağ 2015: 111).

However, the commemoration of the battle's centenary also saw a number of initiatives that contrasted with the official policy of remembrance. Civil society organizations such as the Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği or İHD), and the *DurDe* platform (Say Stop to Racism and Nationalism) organised a commemoration of the Armenian genocide that included thousands of people, academics, intellectuals, activists, and diaspora Armenians (Macleod and Tongo 2016: 29). In fact, the nationalist/Kemalist narrative and the conservative/Islamist narrative share the effort to disentangle the victory at Gallipoli from the deportation of the Armenian population. Disregard for the Armenians, both for those who fought in the Dardanelles and those who fell victim to the *tehcir*, showcases the selective approach that undergirds the act of *remembrance*. Following Allan and Thompson (1999: 42), it is possible to argue that "what is selected to be remembered is partially determined by what is chosen to be forgotten, that which is to be dismissed as being 'inappropriate'". In this sense, how Gallipoli is remembered (and forgotten) offers an extremely interesting case study of the constant re-invention of the past with the aim of affirming the continuity and immortality of the nation (Özkırımlı 2005: 186).

Popularising the Myth: Between Propaganda and Counter-Memory

As already mentioned in the previous section, alongside the depiction of Gallipoli compressed around the cult of Mustafa Kemal's strategic genius and of the Turkish nation's military prowess, Mehmet Akif Ersoy's poem constituted the foundation for the construction, over the years, of the conservative/Islamist narrative of the battle. Starting approximately in the 1990s, popular history acted as the main channel for the diffusion of an Islamist retelling of the battle. While each individual work has its own specific characteristics, a common element across this current is comprised by the intermingling of religion and popular myth, which acts as the central node of the event. In other words, Gallipoli is transformed into an anti-materialistic epic, in which the role of supernatural intervention is as important as the faith and fighting spirit of the peninsula's defenders. Examples of this Islamist literature include exponents of different genres such as Mehmet İhsan Gençcan's book *Çanakkale Savaşlarından Menkıbeler* (Legends from the Battles of the Dardanelles, 1990), or Mehmet Niyazi Özdemir's novel *Çanakkale Mahşeri* (The Armageddon of the Dardanelles, 1997).

However, one of the most interesting examples in this regard is *Bir Destandır Çanakkale* by author and teacher Vehbi Vakkasoğlu, first published in 2001. Prolific writer and journalist, starting from the 1960s Vakkasoğlu collaborated with Islamist-nationalist periodicals as *Büyük Doğu* (Grand Orient) and in the 1990s wrote pieces for *Zafer* (Victory) and *Sur* (Bulwark). In this sense Vakkasoğlu can be considered among the intellectuals who actively contributed to shape this trend.

In the foreword, the author clearly displays the identity implications of remembering the battle of Çanakkale as a victory of the faith: "Gallipoli distinguishes itself from our other military successes in that the battle was won at the end of the Ottoman era, or rather, during its downfall. This victory showed the world one last time what the Ottoman man was made of, right when he was said to broken, done for, dead, and what the Islamic faith, which upheld him and elevated him to a superior level, could achieve. From then on, our faith has been our enemies' principal target […]. The cause of the distress in which our country finds itself today lies in our estrangement from what makes us who we are, from the values that shape our identity. […] The most painful aspect of this whole ordeal, is that we have strayed away from the Islamic faith to which

we owe our spiritual and material existence, and our very ethic" (Vakkasoğlu 2001: 12–14).

In other words, the memory of the battle of Gallipoli becomes an instrument through which to convey a vision of collective identity. In Vakkasoğlu's work, there is no place for the acritical cult of Mustafa Kemal's military genius, even though the father of the Republic is mentioned in the book; rather, the book highlights the fighting spirit of the Ottoman soldiers, from the Balkans to Medina, who fought on in the name of the faith. In this instance too, the author seizes on the opportunity to insert religious anecdotes, such as the one reported by an *ʿālim* named Cemal Öğüt who travelled to the holy cities in 1928. During his pilgrimage, he met an old guardian of the Prophet's tomb in Medina, who told him how he regretted the fall of Ottoman rule. Surprised, Cemal asked the old guardian why love for the Ottomans should be so closely linked to Islam. The guardian then told him that in 1915 an ʿālim from India had travelled to the tomb; after arriving in the city of the Prophet, the ʿālim had fallen ill from a sort of spiritual malaise, saying that although he was at the centre of the Islamic world, he could not feel the Prophet's presence. These words had made a great impression upon the guardian, and that night he had dreamt of the Prophet and thought back to the Indian pilgrim's words, though he had not dared to ask the Prophet the same question. Nonetheless, the Prophet had decided to satisfy his curiosity, and had told him that: "what you have heard is true. For at this time, I am not in Medina, but in Gallipoli […] I could not find it in my heart to abandon my sons who fight on amidst adversity. Now I am there to bring them help" (Vakkasoğlu 2001: 86).

While Vakkasoğlu's (2001: 131–6) work is mainly devoted to a Turkish audience attempts to depict not just a Turkish but a victory of the entire *umma*. In this line, the author devotes attention to the symbolic participation of Jewish/Zionist soldiers in the British army establishing a parallelism between the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the oppression of the Palestinians and while emphasising the tortures suffered by Ottoman soldiers fallen in in the hands of the British takes the opportunity to deny the Armenian genocide which is labelled as "unfounded" (*asılsız*). Significantly non-Muslim soldiers serving in the Ottoman army are not mentioned in the book.

While it is difficult to give a conclusive account of the reception of this Islamist cultural production, with its insistence on the spiritual dimension of the victory and its use of tales and legends that can be traced back to Turkish-Islamic folklore, existing research nonetheless allows us to gauge the popularity

of some of its recurring themes.[9] Furthermore, this kind of literature, together with the widespread practice of unofficial Gallipoli tour-guides of re-telling supernatural episodes, has fuelled a fable-like memorialisation of the battle.

There have of course been some reactions against this production within the wider Turkish cultural and artistic scene. Tolga Örnek, director of the 2005 documentary *Gallipoli: The Frontline Experience*, which attempted to piece together a transnational narrative of the battle of Gallipoli by giving space to testimonies from both the French-British and Ottoman sides, constituted one of the voices that were critical of this process. The film director in fact argued that exponents of the Islamist political front were attempting to make the Gallipoli peninsula into a focal point for the country's memory as an alternative to Anıtkabir, Atatürk's mausoleum.[10]

In attempting to gain an understanding of the reactions of the Kemalist intelligentsia towards the Islamisation of the battle of Gallipoli, one cannot forget novelist and playwright Turgut Özakman's novel *Diriliş Çanakkale 1915* (Resurrection: Dardanelles 1915). Published in 2008, the novel is conceived as part of a trilogy, the other two volumes of which aim to provide an account of the War of Independence, with *Şu Çılgın Türkler* (Those Crazy Turks), and of the formation of the Republic, with *Cumhuriyet: Türk Mucizesi* (Republic: The Turkish Miracle). In 2013, film director Yeşim Sezgin used the novel as the base for her film *Çanakkale 1915* (Dardanelles 1915). *Diriliş Çanakkale 1915* is interesting also because, aside from being a widely circulated book with over 130 reprints, it allows us to isolate some of the most controversial issues in the debate surrounding the memory of Gallipoli. In his introduction to the novel, Özakman rails against Islamist literature, citing authors such as Mehmet İhsan Gençcan or Vehbi Vakkasoğlu, whose writings, he argues, are responsible for the degeneration of the way the battle is remembered and memorialised. In Özakman's (2008: 4) own words, according to such literature, "Çanakkale is not a military victory but a miracles exhibition". While the novelist admits that folktales and legends are precious for any writer, he also argues that presenting clearly fictional elements as the background (*arka plan*) for official history is nothing more than the reproduction of the medieval mentality that led to the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Against what he sees as a manipulation of memory, Özakman responds with a book in which para-textual elements are as important as the text proper, if not more. This leads to an almost obsessive attention to citing sources, which include works of military history and archival documents, to support the narrativisation of the historical events

which constitute not so much the frame of the novel as its primary subject. Consequently, the narrative plot is strongly subordinated to the documentary intent. All in all, what emerges from the novel is a contemporary version of the nationalist-Kemalist narrative of the event. Thus, the novel aims at restoring the centrality of Mustafa Kemal as the main protagonist of the victory at Gallipoli, once more using paratextuality to insert polemics against both Islamist and leftist writers, guilty of having undermined the role of Mustafa Kemal or of having doubted the very interpretation of the Gallipoli campaign as a victory worth celebrating.[11] On the contrary, in Özakman's perspective, the Gallipoli campaign is seen as one of the crucial tassels in the composition of the identity of the nation, constituting, as the novel's title suggests, the *resurrection* of the until then muted Turkish national consciousness. Particularly salient in this regard is a passage in the novel in which Orhan, one of a handful of invented characters in the book, comes across an ageing coachman in Istanbul, where he has been transferred due to an injury: "[...] The old coachman asked with curiosity: 'From the Dardanelles?'. 'Yes'. The coachman saluted like an experienced soldier: '[Not so long ago], Arabs, Albanians, Egyptians, Tunisians, Persians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews or Bulgarians, anyone, could say 'I am Arab, Albanian, Egyptian, Tunisian, Persian, Greek, Armenian, Jew or Bulgarian', but we were not allowed to say 'We are Turkish'. For some reason we were forbidden from being a nation. And now thanks to you, […] we can say it out loud! Thank you'" (*Özakman 2008*: 294).

It is interesting that the author does not have a Turkist intellectual voice these words, but instead an ordinary coachman, who, regardless of his military past as it transpires from the text, appears to be surprisingly in tune with the identity conundrums faced by the late Ottoman intellectual elites. Criticism of the Empire's cosmopolitanism and — implicitly — of contemporary neo-Ottomanism is, however, voiced by the military doctor Fikret: "[w]ith the exception of the official formulations, the word 'Ottoman' is becoming increasingly rare in newspapers. Instead, they mention Turks, the Turkish language, Turkey. There has been a realization that there is no such thing as an Ottoman nation. Ottomanism, after all, had already been rejected by Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Bulgarians, Kurds, Albanians, and especially by the Arabs. We were the only ones to accept it. We forgot, we were made to forget, our own race, our own history […]. The Ottoman gentlemen, lords, pashas, have destroyed, dishonoured, sold the state […]. And yet today they celebrate Turkishness, and hide behind it, because in order to save the state they need the life and blood of

Turks. When the danger will have passed […] they will again try to snuff out Turkishness. It is imperative that we cure this chronic disease" (*ibid*.: 181).

Of course, the interpretation of Gallipoli as an early manifestation of national consciousness, alongside the critique towards Ottomanism, and the overestimation of Turkism, elsewhere as a reaction to "Balkan and Arab racialism" (*ibid*.: 11), as a central element in the education received by Ottoman soldiers, are all signs of the strongly teleological nature of the novel (*ibid*.: 304n). Thus, obviously, from the novel emerges a strongly negative image of the Arab soldiers (even those who fought against the ANZAC troops in 25–26 April under the command of Mustafa Kemal) who are often labelled as incompetent and above all "coward". At the same time, the author, starting from the Arab habit to call their children "Muhammad" which astonished Turks who allegedly preferred the name "Mehmet" as a sign of respect for the Prophet, does not miss the chance to describe the negative impact of the "Arabesque culture" in Turkey: "[T]he Arabesque trend is harming this kind of fineness of ours. Nowadays some families without caring about this secular caution and fineness call their sons Muhammad as the Arabs. […] Arabic lifestyle quietly spreads not just in the way of dressing but also in the mentality. Pan-islamist (*ümmetçi*) Ottomans incensed the Arabs as a 'noble people' but did not experienced Arabisation. [Today's] Unconscious Ottomanist, religious and Islamist trend is destroying national culture, is turning once again the nation in a state of poorness […]. Politicians do not realise the price of this direction […]" (*ibid*.: 333n).

In this respect, Özakman's is a *reactive* book, whose aim is the restoration of the "right" narrative of the victory as a first step towards the creation of modern Turkey.[12]

After this discussion of the examples of Vakkasoğlu and Özakman I would like to briefly mention Sarkis Torosyan's (2012) work *From Dardanelles to Palestine - A True Story of Five Battle Fronts of Turkey and Her Allies and a Harem Romance*. Albeit indirectly, this controversial work contributed to the creation of a "pluralistic" counternarrative of the battle of Gallipoli that cannot be assimilated either with the conservative-Islamist approach nor with the nationalist-Kemalist. In this sense this publication can be seen as an attempt to promote a pluralistic and inclusive memory of Gallipoli, highlighting the contribution of communities left out of the official narratives (Şakul 2016: 202) and investigating the relationship of the campaign with the 1915 deportation and genocide of Ottoman Armenians. In this regard, the Turkish publication of the memoirs of Sarkis Torosyan (or Torossian) in 2012 constituted a turning point

in gathering public attention on the Armenian matter — albeit with contradictory outcomes. This book, first published in the United States in 1947, appeared in Turkey over half a century later, with a lengthy introduction by sociologist Ayhan Aktar, who edited the publication. Torosyan claims to have been an Armenian artillery officer in the Ottoman army, and to have been decorated for his role in the naval attack of 18 March 1915. Later on, however, Torosyan, despite holding a writ of safe-conduct signed by the war minister Enver Paşa, lost his family during the deportation of the Empire's Armenian population; he then decided to support Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī's anti-Ottoman Arab revolt as a double-agent, before emigrating to the USA. Leaving aside the reactions of the Armenian genocide's negationists, it is important to note that reception of the book in Turkey was ambivalent. Aytekin Özen, director of the Istanbul-based amateur theatre company *Nar Taneleri*, wrote a theatre adaptation of Torosyan's memoirs which was first performed on 29 March 2014, sparking an enthusiastic reaction by the Armenian community in Istanbul (Şakul 2016: 203). Moreover, during the diplomatic dispute relating the centenary celebrations of Gallipoli and Armenian genocide in 2015, President Sargsyan mentioned Torosyan as a soldier "dedicated to the defence and security of the Empire" whose family suffered an unjust fate.[13] This episode shows how the Turkish translation of the book had a bearing even in the diplomatic field.

The most famous consequence of the book's publication however was the so called "Torossian debate" (Aktar 2016a; Eldem 2016a; 2016b) between, on the hand, Ayhan Aktar and Taner Akçam, and on the other, Halil Berktay, Hakan Erdem, and Edhem Eldem; the latter three, not themselves connected to any negationist historiographical current, nonetheless doubted the authenticity of the documents reproduced in the novel, and argued that the book was essentially fictional. While the "anti-Torosyan" front certainly produced some solid arguments, it is not my intention to question or affirm the book's validity as a historical source.[14] However, some of the issues touched upon during the debate can be useful in isolating the essential elements of this counter-narrative. My very brief observations, then, will not touch on the book's contents, but rather on its paratextual elements, and in particular on Aktar's hefty introduction. The book was in fact translated and published after over sixty years with the aim of countering the official narratives around the Great War and, of course, the battle of Gallipoli. In the introduction, Aktar highlights these narratives' amnesia with regard to the non-Muslim components of the Ottoman army. In sum, the sociologist carries out an effective deconstruction of the Kemalist

and Islamist narratives, both of which share the repression of the memory of non-Muslims because of its dissonance, respectively, with the process of Turkification and Islamisation of the battle (Aktar 2012; 2016b). From this perspective, the publication of Torosyan's memoirs appears oriented towards the construction of a narrative *from below*, based on the explosive effect of bringing up *forgotten voices* in the reproduction of collective memory. However, the uncritical acceptance of the documents included in the memoirs, and the insistence on representing Torosyan as a soldier loyal to the Empire, as Edhem Eldem (2016a: 295) has noted, "dangerously flirts with the idea that this evidence is necessary to prove the innocence and victimization of the empire's Armenian population", and even though it aims to break out of nationalist and conservative narratives, it nonetheless implies "a nationalist understanding of guilt versus innocence based on expressions and acts of loyalty". The need to highlight the contribution of non-Muslims to the Ottoman war effort thus appears to be an instrument for the promotion of a pluralism inclusive of the social and cultural communities removed from dominant narratives of the past. From this point of view, with regard to the case of the battle of Gallipoli, the efficacy of this cultural operation is debatable. It is true, however, that the resonance of the debate in Turkey and abroad paved the way for the publication of less problematic material (Cebeciyan 2015; Sürmenyan 2015).

Concluding Remarks

The aim of this contribution has been to shed some light on the role of cultural production, broadly speaking, in the reproduction of the collective memory of the battle of Gallipoli by reflecting on its implications in the ongoing redefinition of national identity in Turkey. This article thus attempted to reconstruct how an almost minor commemoration, which for a long time was ancillary to the nationalist cult of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and of Turkish military heroism, became progressively permeated with an Islamic and neo-Ottomanist charge which, while recognising an ethno-cultural *pluralism* within the Turkish imagined community, nonetheless also contains a form of exclusivism. The works reviewed in the article provide us with a more precise appreciation for the symbols, recurring themes, and contradictions which participate in the transformation of the collective imaginary connected to the understanding of the battle of Gallipoli. Consequently, *consumer products* such as the bestsellers and popular history books discussed here, regardless of their literary or scientific worth, constituted fruitful objects of analysis through which to identify and

understand the terms framing the contemporary public debate on the memory of Gallipoli. The aim of this analysis has been to highlight how artistic representations of the past play a role in popularizing national mythologies as much as the official narratives formulated by the elites. Furthermore, we have clearly seen how the field of cultural production constitutes a battleground between different and at times conflicting hegemonic projects. From this perspective, the heterogeneity found in the field of cultural production signals a generalised need to *participate* in the memory of Gallipoli, felt by socio-cultural communities that act on the basis of very different aims and identity projects. Future research will be able to highlight further elements for evaluating the memory politics underlying this event, situated between the fall of the Empire and the rise of the Republic, which at times seems to have been interpreted as a potential alternative founding myth.

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Notes

1 - Of course, the current quest for a new national identity throughout the reinterpretation — or reinvention — of the Ottoman past has much deeper roots which can be identified in the crisis of the Kemalist identity paradigm experienced in the decade following the 12 September 1980 military coup. While each had its own distinctive features, the political approaches to the issue of identity of Turgut Özal's *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party or ANAP), Necmettin Erbakan's *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party or RP), and of the AKP, were all characterised by different forms of neo-Ottomanism. Unlike 19th-century Ottomanism, contemporary neo-Ottomanism stresses the Islamic roots of the Turkish nation but recognises a sort of "pluralism" of the different (Muslim) cultural and ethnic groups that form the imagined community. Instead of giving an exhaustive bibliography I shall limit myself in listing Carney (2014), Carney et al. (2014), Çolak (2006), Ergin and Karakaya (2017), Erken (2013), Girard (2014), Karanfil and Eğilmez (2017), Taglia (2016), Volfová (2016), Wastnidge (2019), Yavuz (2016).

2 - Aktar A., *Rewriting the History of Gallipoli: a Turkish Perspective*, in "Honest History", 25 July 2017, honesthistory.net.au/wp/rewriting-the-history-of-gallipoli-a-turkish-perspective/ (last accessed 7 April 2025).

3 - I am referring to the poems *Çanakkale Şehitlerine* (To the Martyrs of the Dardanelles) and *Çanakkale* (The Dardanelles) respectively.

4 - See Polat (1962); Sebilürreşad (1962a); Sebilürreşad (1962b).

5 - See Dündar (1964) and Yeniden Milli Mücadele (1970).

6 - Quoted in Aktar A., *Rewriting the History of Gallipoli: a Turkish Perspective*, in

"Honest History", 25 July 2017, honesthistory.net.au/wp/rewriting-the-history-of-gallipoli-a-turkish-perspective/ (last accessed 7 April 2025). In this light the insistence on the Islamic character of the victory showcases a relevant change compared to Erdoğan's rhetoric during the celebrations of 2010, see *Erdoğan'ın, Çanakkale Zaferi'nin yıldönümü konuşması* [Discourse of the anniversary of the victory of the Dardanelles by Erdoğan]', "Cumhuriyet", 18 March 2010, www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/erdoganin-canakkale-zaferinin-yildonumu-konusmasi-128186 (last accessed 8 April 2025).

7 - Yıldırım, Taylan and Gezen, Burak, 2015, "Davutoğlu: Selam olsun ölüme giden kahramanlara [Davutoğlu: Greetings to the heroes gone toward death]", *Hürriyet*, 18 March 2015, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/davutoglu-selam-olsun-olume-giden-kahramanlara-28486195 (last accessed 28 April 2025).

8 - See *Afrin'de artık terör örgütünün paçavraları değil, huzur ve güvenin sembolü Türk bayrağı dalgalanıyor*, 18 March 2018, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/91807/afrinde-artik-teror-orgutunun-pacavralari-degil-huzur-ve-guvenin-sembolu-turk-bayragi-dalgalaniyor.html (last accessed 28 April 2025).

9 - According to a research conducted in 2010 by the university of Çanakkale and quoted by Kahraman Şakul, 80 per cent of the students surveyed declared that they believed in the supernatural events regarding the martyrs, and more than half affirmed that only the Muslim soldiers who had died deserved the title of şehit (martyr), while 66 per cent believed that the martyrs had influenced the outcome of the battle (Şakul 2016: 195; Sezen 2010).

10 - On this, see also the interview with Örnek in Philips R., *An Interview with Tolga Örnek, Director of Gallipoli: The Front Line Experience*, "World Socialist Web Site", 20 December 2005, www.wsws.org/en/articles/2005/12/tolg-d20.html (last accessed 10 April 2025). See also Gezen B. and Uçar H., *Gelibolu'da Hurafeli Turizm* [Superstitious Tourism at Gallipoli], "Hürriyet", 8 July 2004, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/gelibolu-da-hurafeli-turizm-38633526 (last accessed 28 April 2025); Hillman (2011); Yıldırım T. and Gezen B., *Davutoğlu: Selam olsun ölüme giden kahramanlara* [Davutoğlu: Greetings to the heroes gone toward death]', "Hürriyet", 18 March 2015, www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/davutoglu-selam-olsun-olume-giden-kahramanlara-28486195 (last accessed 10 April 2025); Aktar (2020: 220–2).

11 - In this regard, the author cites his earlier book, where he criticises several journalists, writers, and television presenters including Çetin Altan, Yalçın Küçük and Vehbi Vakkasoğlu. See Özakman (1997: 94–174).

12 - The didactic value of the novel was evaluated by 2011 research which provided a number of students at the Faculty of Education of the University of Amasya with a multiple- and open-answer questionnaire. The questionnaire investigated found that most of the students who had been given the novel to read demonstrated greater knowledge of the different phases of the battle of Gallipoli and often declared that they had reached a deeper understanding of the crucial role played by Mustafa Kemal as military commander (Altunay and İskender Kılıç 2011: 134–5).

13 - See Çolak Ö.O., *'Kendi Toprağında Tutsak…*, "Cumhuriyet", 10 April 2014. www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/kendi-topraginda-tutsak-59217 (last accessed 10 April 2025); *Sargsyan responds to 'Gallipoli' invitation: Before organizing a commemorative event,*

Turkey has obligation to recognize and condemn Armenian Genocide, "Agos", 17 January 2015, www.agos.com.tr/en/article/10275/sargsyan-responds-to-gallipoli-invitation-before-organizing-a-commemorative-event-turkey-has-obligation-to-recognize-and-condemn-armenian-genocide (last accessed 10 April 2025).

14 - In my view, Christoph K. Neumann's (2016) literary analysis is more useful in this respect, as the book is compared to other examples of writing about the self.

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