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Mehmet Arisan

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# Violence as a Means of Nation-Building: The Case of the Balkans (1890–1913)

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MEHMET ARISAN

## *Abstract*

*The paper considers the rise of the violent nationalist movements in the Ottoman Empire and questions the violent basis of these nationalisms. In the first place, the paper points out Western Europe as the source of modern nationalism and emphasizes its initial appearance as a result of a long-lasting dynamics of conflicts and reconciliations amongst social, political and economic groups in Europe. In many other parts of the world, modern nationalism appeared as part of Europeanization and modernization usually carried out by a certain west European educated elite. In most of those places, modern nationalism was quite alien to the social, political, and economic structures and practices. However, as the particular case under scrutiny here demonstrates, modern nationalism gained ground in non-western world by the widespread authoritarian and often-violent pressures applied upon the people by violent paramilitary and/or guerilla groups formed and led by the Western-oriented elite. This peculiar emergence of modern nationalism would certainly create problems in the long run in terms of constructing a well-structured nation-state and a widely shared national consensus. The paper's main focus is the insurgent nationalist movements in the Balkans and the Ottoman counter-insurgency, which developed a similar mindset in their struggle against each other, which would contribute to the problematic emergence of nation-states and the continuous unrest in the region.*

**Keywords:** *Ottoman Empire; the Balkans; nationalism; insurgency; komitadjilik; CUP; ARF; MRO*

## Introduction

The Balkans can be said to be one of the most unstable regions of the world, composed of various small nation-states which has long been either in a conflict with each other or had some internal strife in one way or another. The same can be said for most of the Middle Eastern nation-states including Turkey. Several reasons can be put forth to explain this instability. However, this paper intends to explain this from a particular point of view by focusing on the peculiar features of the emergence of nationalism in these regions especially in the Balkans. Balkans is actually the initial point where this peculiar nation-

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*Mehmet Arisan* is an Associate Professor at Istanbul University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of Political Science and International Relations. He received his PhD at the University of Essex in Ideology and Discourse Analysis and wrote a dissertation under the supervision of Prof. Ernesto Laclau on Turkish political modernization and democratic culture. He has published book chapters and articles on Turkish political transformation, modernity and emergence of national identity. His current research interests are Political Discourse Analysis, Formation of Political Subjectivities, the Collapse of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Political Modernization.

alism appears. Other nationalisms like the ones in Caucasus (specifically Armenian nationalism) and Turkish nationalism seriously influenced by it in various ways.

The basic contention of the paper is that there was no social, political, and historical basis of the nationalist uprisings in the region. Nationalism was developed as an elite conception as a result of the elite's intense attachment with the Western European idea(l)s rather than through a historical process. However, this attachment was nothing more than an eclectic and vague adoption of Western ideas such as socialism, nationalism and anarchism. As there were no historical and social bases for these ideas, the elite formed armed groups to realize their utopias. The imperial rivalry in the region helped their cause to a great deal as they were backed by the Western powers. By time they began to gain the support of the locals as well, but this is not because the people were attracted to the idea of "national identity" but rather as a result of a widespread terror and fear that these armed groups created. In that sense violence played the main role in mobilizing people for the construction of a nation-state. This violence is not limited to the insurgent nationalist movements in the Balkans. A group of Ottoman officers who dealt with these insurgency movements by counter-insurgent tactics became the rulers of their country and had the same tendency to violence, which was quite conflicting with the established governing practices of the Ottoman state as well as the political values they defended in realizing the Ottoman constitutional revolution in 1908. Moreover, they were the ones planted the seeds of modern Turkey and their legacy would be felt throughout the shaky history of modern Turkey.

At this point, it may be necessary to emphasize the fact that violence is not only a vital component of the nationalisms arose in the non-Western world. It was also the main component of the nation-building process in Western Europe. However, it appeared as a result of a particular historical context of socio-political and economic interactions that are specific to Western Europe. Those interactions involved various temporary or long-term alliances amongst the fragmentary power groups in Europe as well as various small or large wars took place amongst these groups. Until the fifteenth century, it can be claimed that the power map of Europe was very fragmentary and there was no power accumulation into a particular center in order to constitute a basis for constructing large political units such as nation-states.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the geographical discoveries and colonization paved the way for the accumulation of a large amount of wealth in European kingdoms that resulted in the formation of well-equipped and very large armies. These armies played a very important role both in the colonial rivals amongst those kingdoms and in the construction of powerful nation-states.

However, "armies" cannot be seen as the only element of the process of the nation building in Western Europe. The growing impact of the bourgeoisie in European politics cannot be missed in assessing the particular historical context of European nation building. Their shifting alliances and conflicts with the aristocracy and their final victory of establishing nation-states mostly depending on parliamentary democracy constitutes the main story of the nation-building process in Europe. The nation-building process in Europe took at least three hundred centuries which was long enough for incorporating various local, traditional, and religious symbols, meanings, and concepts into a national narrative that resulted in the construction of a widely shared national consciousness within each nation. Although violence certainly had an important role within this long process of European nation building, we can talk about the significance of national consensus within this process.<sup>2</sup>

### **Violence and “Non-Western Westernization”**

In the rest of the world the modern nation states were structured in many different socio-political and historical contexts that cannot be paralleled with European historical context in any sense. Louis L. Snyder refers to Hans Kohn’s dichotomy between Western and non-Western nationalisms which emphasizes the role of contrasting (or different) socio-political environments. Such dichotomies may sometimes yield essentialist and orientalist/occidentalistic outlooks. However, it is necessary to illustrate how nationalism functioned as modern imperialism’s hegemonic tool rather than being a means of emancipation from a traditional imperial power. According to Kohn nationalism is a curse rather than blessing regardless of being Western or non-Western.<sup>3</sup> He refers to the role of Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment ideals as a source of motivation for the rise of Western nationalism amongst all the historical conditions. However, he did not glorify them as the aspects of “perfect” and “ideal” nationalism. On the contrary, he points out that the glorification or idealization of Western nationalism is the exact source of motivation for the non-Western nationalism that results in a certain inferiority complex and the rise of various forms of otherness which goes parallel with violence and hatred. Kohn firstly points out the difference between the “motivating sources” of the Western and non-Western nationalisms and outlines the different features of both nationalisms. It leads the reader discern why non-Western nationalisms are more susceptible to produce violence and hatred and why they have been manipulated by some of the most powerful Western nation-states.

There is also a contrast in historical motivation. In the Western world Renaissance and Reformation saw the creation of a new society in which the secularized bourgeoisie, gaining political power, abandoned in fact and in theory the universal, imperial concept of the medieval world. Vital changes took place in the social order. Nationalism in this area was a product of indigenous forces.<sup>4</sup>

However, as Kohn also suggested not only did nationalism emerge late in the non-Western world, but it also appeared mostly as an imposition of the Western nations upon the non-Western “communities”. It appeared as a necessity of becoming civilized and as an urgency to become liberated from their traditional imperial patrons. Thus, the motivation here was ultimately related to external dynamics rather than internal ones.

There were differences, too, between reality and ideality. Nationalism in the West stressed the political reality. Here it was a response to the challenge of building a nation in the midst of current struggles without too much regard for the past. The nation was accepted as a vital, existing, real thing. Political integration was sought around a rational goal, as well as a belief in rational political ends.

The non-Western world, in contrast, became absorbed in a search for the ideal fatherland. Nationalism here was concerned often with myths and dreams of the future, without any immediate connection with the present. The nascent nation held a wistful image of itself and its mission. It looked to the past, to non-political and history conditioned factors.

Western and non-Western nationalism had different concepts of what the nation meant. The Western idea was that nations emerged as unions of citizens, by the will of individuals expressed in contracts, covenants and plebiscites. Integration was almost always centered around a political idea, a common future achieved by common effort. Emphasis was put on universal similarities of nations.

In the non-Western view the nation was a political unit centering around the irrational, pre-civilized folk concept. Unable to find a rallying point or in the free and rational order, nationalism found it in the folk community, which was elevated to the dignity of an ideal or a mystery.

Western nationalism, reflecting the optimism of the rationalists on the possibilities of natural law, was self-assured.

Non-western nationalism, on the other hand, without roots in socio-political reality, lacked self-assurance. Often its inferiority complex was compensated by overemphasis and overconfidence.<sup>5</sup>

Such distinctions and/or dichotomies cannot be accepted as valid for all cases in the non-Western world. Nor can one talk about such perfect and seamless rational politics and universalism in the Western world. However, Snyder's arguments in reference to Kohn may shed light on why the so-called "Westernization" in the non-Western world emerged within authoritarian or sometimes violent practices. Certainly, one of the most visible indicators of Westernization appeared as "nationalization" in the non-Western world. Especially by the nineteenth century when European states became the superior powers of the world, one can talk about an *exportation* of European form of nationalism to the different parts of the world. The global rise of nationalism and the worldwide recognition of nation-state as the primary form of political organization provided the European powers useful means of controlling various different territories without actually using military power. The rise of Balkan nationalisms constitutes a perfect example for this.<sup>6</sup>

As will be explained below, most of the ethnic-nationalist uprising that struck Ottoman Empire (which mostly appeared in the Balkans) had two common points. First these nationalist movements did not rise "from below" and had little or almost no popular basis. Most of the ethnic nationalist uprisings appeared in the form of insurgency movements that were led by some western European educated middle-class elite that could hardly found popular ground. The basic reason was that the insurgency movements tried to create a new and modern sense of belonging and discredited traditional local bonds. However, violence has become the only form of social mobilization even though it provided a very fragile and short-term social consensus that would also create weak and fragile nation-states.<sup>7</sup>

The second point was related to the ethnic-nationalist uprising was the selective support of the superpowers. As already mentioned, these uprisings led by insurgency movements mostly alienated from the rest of the population. They also became the means of colonial rivalry amongst the superpowers of the time. When Balkans is considered it is not difficult to see that the region was an area of contestation between the Russian and British interests especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As a result, it can be claimed that it is not possible to evaluate the rise of ethnic nationalism without understanding the dynamics of insurgency movements and the dynamics of the insurgency movements cannot be understood without understanding the interests and manipulations of the Great Powers. In this sense, the violent process of nation building in the Balkans was a political phenomenon that is determined within international power struggles rather than being a sociological phenomenon.

### **The Rise of *Komitadjis*<sup>8</sup> in the Balkans**

In order to understand and illustrate the unique features of the nationalism generated in the Balkans at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, it becomes vital to refer to the insurgency movements and a certain culture of violence it generated. At

this point I introduce the word *Komitadji*, which was used and is still being used to define not only the insurgency and counter-insurgency movements in the Balkans in the last decades of the Empire but also any attempt to influence or interfere politics by violent means. In this respect, it is not possible to put forth any account of the emergence of nationalism in the Balkans—and emphasize its violent character—without referring the word *Komitadji*.

It denotes a whole culture of violence, which marked not only the emergence of nationalism in the region but also marked a continuous political culture in the Balkans and the Middle East related to turmoil, uncertainty, ethnic or sectarian violence, military interventions and confrontations. Furthermore, *Komitadji* or *Komitadjilik*, which the latter can be used as a noun while the former is an adjective, is defined firstly as a state of mind or rather a certain form of being that can also be called as a form of subjectivity which depends a specific form of a series of communitarian practice.

Although the word *Komitadji* is used in a variety of context related to any violent means in political practice, the literal meaning of *Komitadji* or *Komitadjilik* here is used in exchange for both the insurgency and counter-insurgency movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ottoman Empire as a whole. Thus, it is necessary to emphasize that *Komitadjilik* does not refer to the traditional or primordial lines of belonging because it does not depend on a particular socio-political group or class, which has a certain historical continuity. Rather, it borrows various symbols and rhetoric of loyalty from those belongings to construct a meaningful abstraction that can serve to its particular and immediate cause.

The inquiry here is to understand whether this very cause serves basically to an agenda of building an efficient and institutionalized nation-state. In other words, the issue under question is that whether nationalism was the cause of those *Komitadji* movements or whether these movements initiated an ambiguous, nationalist discourse resulted in the construction of fragile nation-state structures, open to manipulation by Great Powers. *Komitadjilik* by nature, as being a state of mind, a form of subjective being and as a particular mode of socio-political practice can be both destructive and constructive both for nation-building and state-building. However, as the history of nationalist movements and nationalism—especially in the Balkans—showed that these movements mostly contributed to the nation-building and state-building processes as a destructive source rather than being constructive.

### **Between Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: MRO, CUP and ARF**

Given the specific period between the 1870s and 1920s, ethnic nationalism-based insurgency movements appeared in two basic grounds in the Ottoman world. One is in the Balkans, particularly the Macedonian insurgency movement, headed by Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (MRO), which was supported and even established by Bulgaria and by imperial Russia. The second ground is the counterinsurgency movement in the Ottoman army which was mostly composed of the members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) which was itself a clandestine organization until 1908 that was struggling against the autocracy under Sultan Abdulhamid II.

We can also add the Armenian insurgency as a third ground because it cannot be located in such an antagonistic position in the form of insurgency versus counterinsurgency at least up to 1914. The Armenian insurgency is composed of two basic Armenian insurgency organizations. The first was the Hunchakian party (also called as Social Democrat Hunchakian party) and the second was the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, which was also known as *Dashnaktsutyun*. Although both organizations were founded

nearly at the same time, the ARF became more effective both in terms of heading the armed rebellions in eastern Anatolia and in terms of diplomatic efforts to make itself recognized as the representatives of the Anatolian Armenian people. The remarkable point about the Armenian insurgency movements and particularly about ARF was that they worked closely with the CUP during the oppressive regime of Abdulhamid II. As Erik Zürcher already points out in his article “Macedonians in Anatolia”, “from 1906 onwards, the CUP (which was called CPU then) with the assistance of the Armenian Dashnakzutiun was successful in establishing cells in the East, in places like Trabzon and Erzurum, but far less so in the West”.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he claims that in the counterinsurgency movements against the MRO, the Unionists also employed some Armenians together with some Jews and Vlachs in the fight against the Macedonian insurgency.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Edward J. Erickson had made a couple of contrary claims regarding the Armenian insurgency movements. While Zürcher claims that the Armenian insurgency helped the Unionists for forming an effective insurgency and countrywide organization, Erickson points out that the Armenian Komitadji movement constituted an example for the Macedonian insurgency. Furthermore, Erickson claims that between 1892 and 1896 the Dashnaks began coordination with the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) in terms of spreading propaganda and providing armed and trained men.<sup>11</sup> Erickson also states that at the turn of the century the ARF decided to “establish cooperation with the Macedonian committees, and also with the CUP”. So, as can be discerned both by Zürcher’s and Erickson’s accounts the ARF was in cooperation with both the CUP and the Macedonian insurgency which is seemingly a controversial issue given the fact that CUP was also organized as a counterinsurgency movement fighting against the Macedonian committees. When one considers the fact that the common enemy of the time for all of these Komitadjis was Abdulhamid II, then things began to seem relatively more reasonable. Additionally, both Erickson and Anahide Ter Minassian<sup>12</sup> stressed the fact that the ARF had considerable problems with imperial or Tsarist Russia in the end of the nineteenth century, which made them closer to CUP’s anti-authoritarian and relatively liberal discourse.

If we return back to the basic grounds of ethnic nationalist insurgency activities, the Armenian case constitutes a unique and relatively controversial as well as a complicated case to locate it in such an antagonistic ground as insurgency and counterinsurgency. However, this condition was only viable until 1913 or until the traumatic Ottoman defeat in the Balkan Wars. By 1908 after the CUP’s victory of reestablishing a constitutional monarchy after decades of Hamidian authoritarian regime, the ARF and CUP seemed to be brother organizations, which seemingly tried to establish an egalitarian polity depending on equal citizenship under constitutional rule. However, both the internal political strife and the deteriorating situation in Tripoli and the Balkans made the CUP more restless and highly cautious which turned out to be defensively aggressive after the Balkan defeat. On the other hand, the ARF had long been suspicious about its alliance with CUP, as it did not carry out the reforms that it previously promised about the Armenian rights in the Eastern provinces. This led the ARF to develop closer relations with Russia that would determine the ARF insurgency activities during World War One. According to Minassian the ARF fell short of constructing a unified Armenian national movement let alone founding a basis for an institutional nation-state. She points out to the fact that the ARF has lost in revolutionary teaching, armed resistance, adoration to violence and ideological oversimplification.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, every political actor on the stage at that time knew the fact that the deterioration in Tripoli and the Balkans was not a result of the ongoing insurgency activi-

ties in the Balkans, but as a result of the meeting between the Russian and British monarchs at Reval in June 1908 during which reference was made to the passage of new reforms in Macedonia that were, in fact, directed at detaching that region from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Balkan Wars can be said to be the breaking point for some complicated and controversial alliances and the Ottoman Empire was left all alone. After this point onwards, one can no longer talk about a third or fourth ground of insurgent activities, as the CUP became not only a counter-insurgency movement but also the sole administrator of the Ottoman Empire. By the Balkan Wars until the end of World War I, there was only the antagonistic relationship of the CUP and the anti-Ottoman insurgency—including the ARF—in every corner of the Ottoman Empire.

### **The Ambivalent Motivating Basis of the Ethnic Nationalist Terror: What Differs Insurgency and Counterinsurgency**

According to Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony, the only thing that made the two antagonistic political beings exist is their very antagonistic positioning against each other. Once the antagonistic positioning ceases, then all the conditions of existence for each position vanishes and they would no longer exist.<sup>15</sup> This is, however, only partially true for the cases under scrutiny here.

From a Foucaultian genealogical point of view, the conditions of formation of all the insurgency movements, the MRO, ARF and the CUP can be set on the same genealogical level that is the hegemonic dissemination of western modernity to the non-Western or ex-Western elite in various forms. In this sense the Komitadji movements are different from the primordial or traditional rebellions but certainly using violence is one of the *sine-qua-non* of these movements. The primordial and traditional rebellions usually depended upon local concerns and therefore generally issue oriented. These movements were mostly led by a local leader rather than a leading committee and the organizational strength of the rebellion was usually determined by the charisma of its leader. As Erickson noted, it is for this reason the Ottoman authorities did not have too much difficulty to "localize and isolate those responsible for the problem" up to the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

When we analyze the initiation of the nationalist insurgency movements what we see is rather an elite-led movement rather than a massive national uprising or a class-based one. In most of the accounts on the origins of Komitadji organizations, these were organized primarily by some intellectuals who were educated in Russia, France, or to a lesser extent Britain and mostly under the influence of such Western European notions of freedom, equality and nationalism.<sup>17</sup> They were also influenced by other ideologies like socialism, anarchism, and nihilism that were popular in Russia and Europe at the time.<sup>18</sup> However, given the socio-economic conditions of the Balkans and Anatolia at the time when these intellectuals tried to form certain groups to "change" the particular world they have inhabited, what we observe is a huge disparity between their intellectual inclinations and the people living on these land generally as peasants.

### **The Insurgency**

#### *Background*

This situation was also valid for the initial appearance of the Armenian insurgency in the Eastern frontiers of the Ottoman Empire. However, by time they utilized the growing unrest of the Armenian peasants due to the various land disputes that began by the settle-

ment of hundreds of thousands of refugees came from Russia after the subsequent defeats in the war with it. Thus, although the Armenian insurgency had always serious problems in mobilizing the peasantry, the attitudes of the Hamidian regime and its settlement policies helped the Armenian Komitadjis to gain ground.

For the Balkan insurgency movements, the picture was the same in terms of the disruption between the great portions of the population and the so-called “revolutionary” Komitadjis. For centuries the non-Muslim population of the region had been peaceful to a great extent and had no serious strife with the Ottoman state. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, there were no significant shift in the relationship between the Ottoman administration and the non-Muslim populations of the region like in the Eastern frontier of the empire. Naturally, there had always been some disputes and unrest between the Ottoman administration and local communities regarding taxes and some minor issues but these issues hardly turned into large-scale rebellions or serious confrontations with the imperial center.

Most important of all until the mid-nineteenth century, all the Orthodox communities of the Balkans were connected to a single church and no significant nationalist sentiment could be observed on a large scale. The nationalist separation of the churches was followed by the appearance of the insurgency movements in the region in a couple of decades.<sup>19</sup> Even though certain nation-states had already been created in some portions of the Balkans, it was still difficult to talk about a wide-ranging Bulgarian or Macedonian national sentiment. Additionally, it was doubtful to what extent those newly created nation-states would be independent and well-institutionalized sovereign states, because at that time the region was still an area of contestation between imperial powers such as Britain and Russia. Thus, it is this very ground that the Komitadji movements came to appear.

So, if the local inhabitants of the region were that indifferent to the “national causes” of the insurgency, how could they be successful for mobilizing an important amount of people to fight with the Ottoman state? It may be useful to mention the work of Keith Brown, “Royal unto Death” which constitutes a great assessment whether the Komitadji movements, particularly of MRO could be approached by nationalism paradigm. As being primarily a study of historiography of the advent of MRO and the Ilinden uprising of 1903, he holds the view that the nationalism paradigm cannot explain the Komitadji activities in the Balkans as a whole.<sup>20</sup> Brown’s analysis in fact holds some light on the question that why there was no formation of strong independent and sovereign nation-states in the region that is still a question of our day. His basic concern was multiple levels of loyalties and belongings, which were wrongly attributed into a single mode of national belonging. In reference to Edward Shils, he both stresses the importance of primordial, personal, sacred and civil ties as well as the class concerns. While some of them were aiding for the construction of a national identity some were totally estrange the population from it and all these were depending on the context that the population came to interact with these multiple bonds. He basically points out the economic developments in Europe, like the advent of industrialism and capitalism that drastically affected the Balkans and caused a serious amount of labor migration. As a result, this created a substantial anomie amongst the Balkan communities.

#### *“Loyalty unto Death”*

However, the issue at stake was how this anomie was manifested. In reference to Eric Hobsbawm, Brown claims that the reaction was conservative. This is like a recourse to

traditional symbols rather than a tendency toward a western-European sense of nation-state.<sup>21</sup> Yet, even though they borrowed some symbols from traditional and primordial bonds, the ethnic nationalist insurgency in the Balkans were depending on the rejection of the former social bonds and were offering a certain departure to a new future.

In this sense Brown offers a controversial means of attachment that bound the ignorant masses to the elite-led insurgency movements. He calls it loyalty that was a “loyalty unto death”, which was developed by the practice of secrecy, violence and the personal effect of being a member of a clandestine organization. Brown indicates that the significant role that these practices play in people’s lives and their senses were far greater than an elusive discourse of nationalism would do.<sup>22</sup> In reference to E. P. Thompson’s arguments on the priority of practice,<sup>23</sup> Brown points out the importance of the mechanisms of recruitment, retention, cohesion and control, which includes a system of punitive internal justice for those who did not obey or conform. He contends that

none of those could be taken for granted if an organization was to survive; each step demanded its own symbolic and practical apparatus in order to contend with the range of rival demands that other longer established, or more powerful institutions placed on members. Kin obligations, religious sanctions, economic rewards, or state reprisals all threatened their existence.<sup>24</sup>

Brown also emphasized the role of “oathing” and “oathing ceremonies” that was very influential in terms of social mobilization that served the goals of the insurgency. First of all, it provided secrecy, obedience and loyalty.

The Ilinden dossier presents a diverse array of descriptions of oath taking and oath giving by participants in the revolutionary movement, in which metaphors of cursing outnumber those of christening, field commanders administer more oaths than do priests, private homes host more ceremonies than do churches, and women become members alongside men. The imagery and practices of oathing serve to distinguish the organization from its church-based rivals for the royalty and commitment of Macedonia’s inhabitants.<sup>25</sup>

### *Tactics and Strategies*

Drawing parallels with more fully documented cases of subversive oathing in Christian contexts—as practiced by the Carbonari secret societies, whiteboys, ribbon-men and the IRA in anti-imperialist Ireland, and Mau Mau in colonial Kenya—Brown’s work identifies MRO oathing as a key vector of the insurgent imagination along which new configurations of power and solidarity were created.<sup>26</sup> He also analyzes MRO’s “practices of writing and record keeping, arguing that the organization undertook to make its personnel and practices legible both to bring into being its own institutional structure and also as part of its agenda of self-legitimation”. He focuses on the

command and communication circuits created by written death sentences issued against spies and traitors. These decrees were generated by the organization’s leadership and secretaries, conveyed by couriers, implemented by terrorists and often left on the target’s body where others could read them.<sup>27</sup>

By referring to such incidents Brown claims that the Macedonia’s so-called revolutionaries developed a new terminology and new practices of the organization, which would later be inscribed onto the practices of new nation state.

Brown also emphasized how the insurgents utilized some traditional patterns of rebellion for creating a new pattern of meaning. There was a

complex relationship between the organization and prior traditions of locally rooted anti-governmental dissent in which these same terms had different meanings. The MRO simultaneously grew out of, drew upon and defined itself in opposition to prior practices of “prerevolutionary” or “primitive” rebellion.<sup>28</sup>

There was a radical transformation of the ideologies of honor and fundamental shift in flows of resources created by the work of the organization (MRO) in the course of preparation for the Ilinden Uprising of 1903. Brown suggests that even the obtaining of rifles had symbolic and practical effects on the patterns of intercommunal violence in Macedonia. As he puts it;

It focuses in particular on descriptions of purchasing rifles and ammunition from a purportedly threatening other, Albanians, to argue that the organization’s emphasis on acquiring arms, even when undertaking in a spirit of self-defense, had important and far-reaching cultural consequences in reordering patterns of deadly retribution and escalation between different communities.<sup>29</sup>

Even though the insurgent activities created a certain social practice of solidarity, formed new social and political borders and demarcated new forms of otherness, it should be underlined that the basis of all these “transformation” was violence and fear generated by the insurgent activities and spread throughout the region. There are several actual cases recorded elsewhere at that times and referred in many of the studies on the insurgent activities in Ottoman Macedonia in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The killings of the spies and “traitors” were especially spectacular and terrorizing, (and disgusting and irritating at the same time) which the brutality and cruelty of these murders had become the “message” itself. The murdered—and often beheaded or mutilated—bodies generally left to a place where many locals could see it. Furthermore, in such incidents, the family of the alleged traitor or spy also killed including elderly people, women and children. The reports include various cases of rape and torture that accompanied in these murders. The insurgent violence was not only directed to the spies and traitors. The people who traded with the Muslim villages or the Ottoman authorities were also targeted and killed in the same spectacular and terrorizing way in order to become deterrent and to make the “indifferent” people become involved in the insurgency.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Spread of Insurgency to the Ottoman Empire*

The rise of violence was not one-directional. On the contrary it is proper to define the situation as a spiral of violence or simply an escalation of violence, which would also influence the Muslim populations and the Ottoman state. The civil Muslim populations of the Macedonian villages were also the targets of the insurgent violence. In fact, the Muslim population of the region would become the victim of that “nationalist terror” on a massive scale by the Balkan Wars in 1912; just before the “nationalist fervor” of the Christian communities of the Balkans hit against each other by the second Balkan war in 1913.

The influence of this violence on the Ottoman state was slightly complicated. The rising ethnic-nationalist violence did not only result in the harsh measures that the Ottoman authorities took. Most of the Ottoman soldiers who were fighting against the

insurgents in the region by counter-insurgent methods were also against the autocracy of Sultan Abdulhamid II and were secretly planning to overthrow the Sultan and to reenact the constitution. It can be claimed that in the process of their struggle with the insurgency, they learned a lot from them in terms of secrecy, organization and social mobilization including the effective use of violence. The Ottoman “counter-insurgents” used it both to gain popular support against the Hamidian regime and for constituting a military dominance against the ones who were loyal to the Sultan in the region. It was a process resulted in the 1908 Ottoman constitutional revolution. So ironically the ethno-nationalist insurgency in the Balkans helped the Ottoman revolution.

Although it seems as an irony, there were various similarities between the leaders of the insurgency and the commanders of the counter-insurgency who would become the fore-runners of the constitutional revolution. In the first place both had a Western-oriented education and/or influenced by the Western European based ideologies. Secondly, they both had a vague and baseless understanding of a “fatherland” which can neither be referred to the past traditions nor compatible with the Western European notion of “nation”. Any collective territorial or identity based belonging they held was far from having a widespread acceptance within the people they associated with and devoted their struggle. Thirdly, both embraced violence in their struggle against each other, which seriously shaped their approach to various social and political problems they would confront. In this sense it is not surprising why both the Balkan insurgents and the counter-insurgents who fought against them can be called as *Komitadji*. As it is obvious that it denotes a certain way of perceiving the world and a certain mindset.

Brown indicates that there was a very rich insurgent life in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ottoman Macedonia and the circuits of trust and terror through which the insurgent organizations expanded its reach came to constitute a state within a state.<sup>31</sup> So, any nation-state structure, which came out of such a *Komitadji* heritage, should expect various internal unrests and bloody strife. Because, it is not difficult to conclude that such a socio-political practice of nation-building could not help consolidating a well-institutionalized civic practice but rather ongoing polarizations depending on never-ending power struggles within the state.

### **The Counter-Insurgency: The Committee of Union and Progress**

The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was largely composed of the counter-insurgents who fought with the insurgency movements in the Balkans for years and rebelled against the Hamidian regime. Therefore, and as emphasized above, the CUP's pre-1908 social and political practices of organization and functioning was not much different from the mechanisms of recruitment, retention, cohesion and control that Brown defined in analyzing the Balkan insurgencies.<sup>32</sup> In fact, as Erick Zürcher already pointed out in reference to Tarik Zafer Tunaya, the CUP was born in this struggle with the Macedonian insurgency movements.<sup>33</sup> Even though most of the top members of it were military officers, they organized exactly like their enemies and constituted a very effective counterinsurgency movement against the Balkan insurgency. Actually, it was the Ottoman Freedom Committee (OFC), which was primarily carried out the counter-insurgency activities and it was founded by the top members of the CUP to deal with the Macedonian issue.

For the young officers who joined the OFC in Manastir contra-guerilla warfare against Bulgarian, Serb and Greek bands was the dominant everyday reality of

their lives in 1904–8. Enver, who would become the leader of the CUP as well as the prime minister, had a particularly strong reputation as a counterinsurgency expert fought no fewer than 54 engagements with guerilla bands in the years before the constitutional revolution.<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned above, the CUP's basic concern was to put an end to the authoritarian regime of Abdulhamid II and to reinstate the constitution. It should be emphasized however that the CUP had no intention to overthrow the monarchical regime at all but they offered constitutional monarchy and a sort of Ottomanism depending on egalitarian citizenship which their predecessors, Young Ottomans unsuccessfully tried three or four decades ago. As it was both stated in Zürcher and in many accounts on the CUP, their egalitarian and constitutional tendencies were in fact pragmatic concerns because their primary focus was to save the Empire from collapse.

Michael Reynolds is undoubtedly right when he says that “a desire to preserve the state, not to destroy it, motivated the revolutionaries”. Whether that makes them conservatives, as Şükrü Hanioglu states, is a matter of discussion. They were in favor of constitutional rule, because they saw it as a means to an end—a means to modernize and strengthen the state. Because of this “Ottomanism” of the OFC (and of the reconstituted CUP) was always fundamentally ambivalent as the events and proclamations in the run-up to the constitutional revolution of 23 July 1908 clearly demonstrate. Their policies vis-à-vis the different nationalist movements were also essentially opportunistic and fluid.<sup>35</sup>

The reason of this ambivalence and fluidity was in fact depending upon the CUP's complication to fix a certain “mode of belonging” to construct a multi-national and multi-religious state other than the traditional imperial means of cohesion that could compete with the evolving powerful nation-based polities of Europe. On the other hand, they were well aware that “constitutionalism” would not solve the problems arose by the nationalist inclinations of the non-Muslim communities but they were still determined to introduce “constitutionalism” at least to reduce the nationalist fervor of the Christian communities.

#### *Nationalism, Religion, and Saving the State*

It should be underlined that this situation did not constitute a clear-cut basis for Turkish nationalism. Even after the Balkan defeat—when most of the Ottoman lands that the Christian minorities inhabited were lost—the ambivalence was continuing in terms of fixing a binding identity to prevent the collapse of the Empire and mostly it appeared as the Muslim identity. Certainly, there were various nationalistic thought currents appeared amongst the intelligentsia of the Ottoman Empire promoting Turkish nationalism but they did not play a role in mobilizing large masses for war and the CUP never embraced Turkish nationalism as an official policy of mobilization. Thus, as Zürcher notes, the usage and connotation of the word Turk itself ambiguous enough to form a prospective political agenda based on Turkish nationalism. In defining one of the most famous figures of Ottoman counter-insurgency “Resneli Niyazi” he talked about his confusion about his self-identity.

Niyazi clearly positions himself as a fellow Albanian talking about “those Turks” while rejecting Albanian nationalism. On the other hand, the same Niyazi also appealed to Ottomanism. He addressed his ethnic Albanian followers on the

first day of his rebellion saying, “Friends are you ready to set an example that befits the great character of the Ottomans?” Clearly he understood himself to be both—Albanian and Ottoman. Identities were fluid and multifaceted. Albanians could see themselves as Ottomans, but also Turks. Kazim Karabekir tells us how he introduced the singing of a rousing march composed to the text of Mehmed Emin Yurdakul’s famous 1897 poem *Cenge Giderken* (Going into Battle) as part of the daily routine. The Albanian soldiers enthusiastically joined in the singing of the line “Ben bir Türküm, dinim cinsim uludur” (“I am a Turk, my religion and race are great”) as they understood “Türk” to mean Muslim.<sup>36</sup>

Zürcher also shows how religion was utilized as a mobilizing source in countering the insurgency movements in the Balkans again by referring to Niyazi. “As Niyazi says, the aim was ‘first to unite all Muslims’ and then to take in the minorities. Niyazi even had his band recite the Muslim creed out loud as they entered the villages. They appealed to the fears of the Muslim population that a foreign occupation of Macedonia was imminent and that would mark the end of the ‘Muslim majority’”.<sup>37</sup> However, it may be necessary to point out to the fact that, just like the utilization of constitutionalism, Islam was also utilized instrumentally to mobilize the masses. The CUP had neither a clear or concealed agenda of constructing a state on Turkish nationalism nor on Islamic identity. The only agenda it clearly had to stop the drastic losses of territory let alone retrieving the imperial strength of half a century ago. Moreover, it could be claimed that they more likely had a retrospective agenda to stop territorial loss rather than any prospective agenda of state building at all costs.

Such urgency certainly led the CUP to give a short shrift to such crucial issues like constitutionalism, parliamentarism and legitimacy. In fact, the developments after the 1908 revolution, particularly the 1912 elections and the 1913 *coup d’état* of the CUP against the opposition proved the fact that the Young Turks including the CUP and its opponents in the parliament had little concern over establishing a constitutional regime but engaged in harsh and bloody power struggles on the issue of the urgency of saving the Empire from collapse. However, the Empire was really on the brink of a collapse and preventing territorial loss seemed to be much important than regime concerns.

### *The Komitadji Legacy*

It can be claimed that the Komitadji practices of the Young Turks, particularly of the CUP proved to be very useful given some specific victories like reclamation of Edirne and the unexpected resistance that the Ottoman army demonstrated during the First World War despite the lack of resources and despite a largely exhausted army after nearly a hundred years of continuing wars. Finally, the reflection of the Komitadji legacy cannot be denied in the independence war fought between 1919 and 1922 mainly against the Greeks.<sup>38</sup>

However, there is certainly another face of the coin. Even though the Komitadji legacy helped the CUP and later the Kemalists who founded Turkish Republic out of the remains of the collapsed Empire, it also contaminated the endeavors to establish a well-institutionalized constitutional state based on a civic consensus on the sovereignty and legitimacy of the regime. On the other hand, the official introduction of Turkish nationalism after the establishment of Turkish republic, which was reinforced by some attempts of homogenization during the 1930s and 40s did not contribute any wide-

range consolidation of a common identity in modern Turkey. The ambiguities lying at the root of the nationalist discourse resurfaced in the last three or four decades of the Republic just like the case of post-communist Balkans. The internal political strife and mutual coup attempts in the ten years of political practice of the second constitutional period (1908-1918) appeared to be a sign of an emerging modern Turkish political culture that is as hasty, interventionist and aggressive as the Komitadjis of the Balkans which would mark at least the first 80 years of the Turkish Republic.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has three important implications. One of them is that the emergence of nationalism in the non-Western world has some very important differences compared to the emergence of nationalism in Western Europe. Even though some nationalist movements emerged as a reaction against Western colonialism, the West reproduced its hegemony on those territories by inciting and manipulating ethnic based nationalist sentiments. So, even though Balkan nationalisms may seem as a reaction against the Ottoman imperial dominance, it may well be claimed that these nationalisms were a consequence of the British and Russian imperial rivalry in the region, which was formulated as the “Eastern Question”. Thus, the formulation of “Eastern Question” itself was an indication of the weakness of the Ottoman Empire, which had long ceased to be an imperial power.

The second implication is that the emergences of nationalism amongst the Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire were mostly an elite imposition that blocked a certain connection with the socio-political and historical practice. This deprives the people of certain long-lasting values, thought patterns and symbols based on hundreds of years of practice and cannot be substituted instantly in a short time. In that sense, the only means to lead people toward a certain “national cause” immediately was to create an atmosphere of violence. This was realized by terrorizing both the “enemy” and the “indifferent masses” to attain loyalty. The enemy differs according to different situations. Sometimes it may be other Balkan states, sometimes “internal traitors” and mostly the “evil Ottoman imperial regime”.

The third and last implication is that the violence, which was grounded on the mutually exclusive categories of “otherness” results in a deployment of nationalist violence to all the parties effected by this violence. In the case of a struggle with nationalist insurgency—in the form of counter-insurgency—the tactics as well as modes of thought began to become similar within a certain period of time. Thus, the CUP’s lack of concern with parliamentarism and constitutionalism and their violent tendencies which became obvious by the Balkan Wars of 1912 had certainly something to do with their counter-insurgency background.

As a result, not only the nation-states in the Balkans but also the modern Turkish republic have similar weaknesses and vulnerabilities in terms of developing a well-structured, institutionalized and democratic nation-states as well as providing a widely shared national consensus. What can be suggested as a conclusion is a reevaluation of “nationalist histories” that goes beyond the ethnic boundaries built by ethnic hatred and violence and contemplate the possibilities of mutual—and peaceful—coexistence which had long been a reality for centuries until the rise of European superiority in nineteenth century. As Yosmaoğlu rightly points out, “it is *not* a static ideology based on an immutable ethnic core that drives people to kill their neighbors but the instrumentality of violence in the service of politics that turns the illusion of hard ethnic boundaries into reality”.<sup>39</sup>

## NOTES

1. For a detailed account of how the modern state evolved in Western Europe see, Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of Modern State*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1978, esp. pp. 1–85; G. Poggi, *The State, Its Nature, Development and Prospects*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991, pp. 1–65; and Reinhard Bendix, *Kings or People, Power and the Mandate to Rule*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980, pp. 21–60, 128–175, 219–243, 321–430.
2. D. Norbu, *Culture and the Politics of Third World Nationalism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 88–91.
3. Louis L. Snyder, *The New Nationalism*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003, p. 57, (Originally published in 1968 by Cornell University Press).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.
6. See İpek Yosmaoğlu, *Blood Ties: Religious, Violence and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878–1908*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014, especially Chapter One, pp.19–47.
7. Norbu, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–102.
8. *Komitadji* (written as *Komitacı* in Turkish) has no direct translation to English. It is a word firstly appeared to define the nationalist gangs fighting against the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans in the end of the nineteenth and in the beginning of the twentieth century. By time it began to be used for the groups who formed any clandestine organization and use violence against the state or aiming regime change.
9. E. Jan Zürcher, “Macedonians in Anatolia: The Importance of the Macedonian Roots of the Unionists for Their Policies in Anatolia after 1914”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 50, No.6, 2014, p. 962.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 963, 967.
11. E. J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, p. 17.
12. A. Ter Minnassian, (trans. Mete Tunçay) *Ermeni Devrimci Hareketinde Milliyetçilik ve Sosyalizm 1887–1912 [Nationalism and Socialism in the Armenian Revolutionary Movement]*, İstanbul: İletişim, 2012.
13. Minassian, *op.cit.*, pp. 37–38.
14. See, “The Reval Meeting”, *Trove*, June 9, 1908, p. 7 at: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/5148826> (accessed on 5 April 2018) and William Langer, “The 1908 Prelude to the First World War”, *Foreign Affairs*, July, 1929 at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68997/william-l-langer/the-1908-prelude-to-the-world-war> (accessed on 5 April 2018).
15. See, E. Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London and New York: Verso, 1985, pp. 93–148.
16. Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
17. See Nizamettin Nazif Tepedelenlioğlu, *Sultan Abdülhamit ve Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Komitacılar [Sultan Abdulhamid and the Komitadjis in the Ottoman Empire]*, Ankara: Toker Yayınları, 1992.
18. Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
19. Dimitrios Stamatopoulos, “From Millets to Minorities in the 19th century Ottoman Empire: An Ambiguous Modernization”, in *Citizenship in Historical Perspective*, ed. S. G. Ellis, G. Halfdanarson, A. K. Isaacs. CLIOHRES Network, 2006, p. 257.
20. Keith Brown, *Loyal Unto Death, Trust and Terror in Revolutionary Macedonia*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
23. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of The English Working Class*, New York: Vintage Books, 1966.
24. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–97
27. *Ibid.*, p.11
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12
29. *Ibid.* p. 12.
30. Yosmaoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 209–287.
31. Brown, *op. cit.*, p.10
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–28
33. Erik Jan Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 962.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 964.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, p. 967.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 965.

38. See Turgut Gürer (ed.), *Komitacı: BJK'nin Kurucusu Fuat Balkan'ın Anıları* [*The Komitadji: The Memoirs of the Founder of BJK, Fuat Balkan*], İstanbul: Gürer Yayıncılık, 2008 and Burhanettin Bilmez, *Galip Hoca, Komitacı Celal Bayar* [*Galip Hodja, the Komitadji Celal Bayar*], Ankara: Art & Saypa Basın Yayın, 2008.

39. Yosmaoğlu, *op. cit.*, p. 293.