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Kubilay

Icon of Secularism

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Early in the morning of 23 December 2007, four municipality buses were lined in front of the town hall of Izmir to take the members of the Kemalist Thought Society to Menemen, an inland district of Izmir. However, only one bus turned out to be sufficient for the whole group composed of Kemalist activists of all ages. The Society had organized the trip in order to participate in a ceremony, which has been held every winter for the past 76 years.

The ceremony commemorates Mustafa Fehmi Kubilay, a schoolteacher and reserve officer killed in the so-called Menemen Incident, a local rebellion against the secular regime on 23 December 1930.¹ The young officer was beheaded by a self-proclaimed Mahdi and his companions who wanted to restore the Islamic law and the Caliphate. The state's reaction was a violent restoration of its authority by announcing martial law; arresting 2,200 persons; trying 600 of them; and sentencing 37 suspects to capital punishment on the charges of high treason. Among those sentenced to death were Shaykh Esad (1848-1931), a famous Naqshbandi shaykh, and his son, as well as several other shaykhs, villagers, and townspeople who had allegedly collaborated with the rebels.

The rebellion has been depicted by the state as a conspiracy of the Naqshbandi order, which had been outlawed in 1925, and *irticai hareket* (a major reactionary movement) against the secular republic. Moreover, Kubilay acquired a central position in the iconography of the Republic as "the martyr of Revolution." Since 1997, the icon of Kubilay has been revived by Kemalist associations, the army, and the mainstream media as a way to express and restore citizens' dedication to the secularist regime. The people travelling to Menemen in December 2007 had the same intent.

Memorializing Atatürk and Kubilay at the Menemen monument, Izmir

Located on a hilltop in Menemen, Izmir, the monument to Turkey's "first martyr of secularism," Kubilay, has recently become a major site for the defenders of secularism against the AKP government. Isolated from the town below and surrounded by competing sacred sites, this monument reflects the gap between national history and alternative local histories.

In front of the train station in Menemen the municipality band was dissonantly playing old nationalist marches while the people behind waived Turkish flags of all sizes. The march began when the mayor arrived and led the crowd to the ceremony area on the top of the nearby hill, which is protected by the army as a military zone. This isolation of the monument from the town is

a spatial reflection of the gap between the national history imposed from above and local memories which are often unheard or unwritten. Hence, this monument deserves a special focus as a "realm of memory,"² a space where memory is contested. The history of the monument and the commemorations show first of all how the icon of Kubilay has been used in the secularist discourse as a symbol of struggle against religious fanaticism. Secondly, the local reception of this monument reveals that the memory of Kubilay has been highly contested both on a national and a local scale.

Official memory

After the Menemen Incident, the Kemalist elite were determined to keep the memory of Kubilay alive. In 1931, the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet* initiated a campaign for the building of a Kubilay Monument in Menemen. According to the originator of this idea, Nadir Nadi, the son of the owner of *Cumhuriyet*, such a campaign would strengthen people's emotional attachment to the Revolution; and thanks to the monument Kubilay would be remembered as a legendary figure in the national history.³

The monument dedicated to the memory of Kubilay and the two village guards who were martyred during the incident was erected on a hill outside Menemen in 1934 making them the only people, besides

Atatürk himself, in whose name a monumental statue was erected. The monument depicts a castle—symbol of the Republic—protected by a figure holding a spear. Engraved on it is: "They believed, fought, and died; we are the guardians of the trust they left behind." During the official opening of the monument, emotional ceremonies were held while 20,000 people gathered in Menemen and listened to the speech made by the General Secretary of the CHP (Republican People's Party, the single-party ruling the country between 1923 and 1950).⁴

Between oblivion and remembering

However, Kubilay has not always been remembered during the course of the Republican period. A clear pattern can be observed by tracing the coverage of the "Kubilay, the Martyr Day" from the 1930s onwards, in the daily newspaper, *Cumhuriyet*, which had played a crucial role in the institutionalization of the commemorations.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, Kubilay was almost forgotten, since the press did not report about the commemorations held annually in Menemen. The revival of Kubilay, the martyr, coincided with the transformation of the secularist discourse in the 1950s when the CHP lost power and the government was no longer identified with Kemalist secularism. In the new context of multi-party politics, Islam became a useful tool of populist politics, while secularism, the founding ideology of the Republic, was transformed into a weapon of the opposition. Thus, Kubilay became an ideal icon for this secularism in opposition which has gradually developed a victim psychology.



PHOTO BY AHMET ÇİÇEK / COURTESY OF WWW.MENEMEN.NET, 2006

The first time Kubilay appeared on the front page of the newspaper was in 1952 after the so-called Malatya Incident, an assassination attempt against Ahmet Emin Yalman (1888-1972), a famous liberal journalist. Yalman had been portrayed by conservative nationalist intellectuals as an enemy of Islam because of his alleged membership to the Freemason Society, his role in organizing beauty contests, and his defence of secularism vis-à-vis the increasing public visibility of Islamic religiosity. Invoking the memory of the Menemen Incident, *Cumhuriyet* editors warned the public and the Democratic Party government, which had replaced the CHP in the general elections of 1950, against the anti-secular reactionary forces which could “abuse democracy” by propagating anti-secularist ideas and even use brutal violence to reach their aims.

In the mid-1960s, the socialist movement appropriated Kubilay as the symbol of their struggle against conservative nationalists, seen as new reactionaries. Reaction, in the left-wing secularist discourse, gained the wider meaning of economic and cultural regression, while the Kemalist revolution was reinterpreted as the beginning of the anti-imperialist struggle and an uncompleted enlightenment movement. In the following decades, Kubilay was remembered as a martyr, especially during social and ideological tensions which resulted in violent social clashes, such as those in 1969 and 1978.

On the event of Bloody Sunday on 16 January 1969, left-wing students demonstrating against American imperialism in Taksim, Istanbul, were attacked (and two murdered) by right-wing groups who accused them of communism and infidelity. In the following days, *Cumhuriyet* columnists referred to Kubilay as the revolutionary forerunner of the murdered leftist students and as a symbol of anti-imperialism and revolution.

In 1978, however, the victim of right-wing ultra-nationalist conservative movement was the Alevis, the non-Sunni population, of the city of Kahramanmaraş. Historically, the Alevis have been demeaned by the Sunni centre as a heretic and irreligious group and recently were associated with the leftist movement. In December 1978, the quarters inhabited by Alevis in Kahramanmaraş were ruined by right-wing Sunni gangs, and 111 persons were killed while hundreds were injured. The attackers used the slogan “Muslim Turkey” and targeted also the buildings of the RPP and all left-wing institutions and organizations. The violence of the event again invoked the memory of Kubilay. Those who massacred the Alevis were depicted by *Cumhuriyet* writers as the successors of the reactionaries of the 1930s who had beheaded Kubilay.

In short, the victims of all these events have been seen as new Kubilays martyred by a timeless, abstract enemy referred to as “dark forces” or “reaction.” The theme of martyrdom was stressed especially in the 1980s and 1990s following the assassinations of the secularist professors and journalists Muammer Aksoy, Bahriye Üçok, Uğur Mumcu, and Ahmet Taner Kışlalı, who were all seen as “martyrs of secularism” like Kubilay.

The last discovery of Kubilay as a symbol of secularism, however, occurred in the 1990s when the army designated Islamism the major threat to national security. From 1997 onwards, after the Islamist political party began receiving wider popular support, the army invoked the memory of Kubilay, with the motive of protecting the secularist regime even at the expense of democracy. Since the AKP government took power in November 2002, commemoration ceremonies in Menemen became platforms for the army as well as the opposition parties and Kemalist associations to protest the government’s allegedly hidden Islamist agenda. The 2007 commemorations were the last of these.

Official memory contested

Although the crowd which gathered this year was much smaller and less agitated than in 2006, the programme of the commemoration was the same as before. Besides members of the Kemalist Thought Society, the ceremony was also attended by the city governor of Izmir, local state officials, high commanders of the army, local politicians, and students. Routine state rituals were performed in front the monument. These were followed by poems and formulaic speeches of students and soldiers chosen by their teachers or commanders for their talent in emotive oratory. The ceremony was interrupted by applause of the audience and their shouting of the slogan “Turkey is secular and will remain secular!” All speakers paid their respect to Kubilay’s memory and promised to follow his path if necessary for protecting the secular republic.

Except for a few teachers, students, local politicians, and local Kemalist activists, hardly anybody from Menemen attended the commemoration ceremony. It was understandable: Since 1930, the Menemen population has found itself in an awkward situation as their town has become notorious as the embodiment of religious reaction. The official memory about the Menemen Incident has resulted in the stigmatization of the townspeople as religious fanatics. Every male person in Menemen recalls the moment during his military service when his commander shouted at him and accused him of being “the murderer of Kubilay.” Townspeople have been extremely disturbed by this stigmatization and as a backlash, they have boycotted commemoration ceremonies at the monument site. Many express their sorrow for being blemished by such commemorations; some even express the need to demolish the monument in order to erase this unjust association of the town with religious fanaticism.

To resist such associations, townspeople feel also obliged to assert themselves as true secularists. They blame a neighbour town (Manisa) for the incident, because the group of rebels had in fact come to Menemen from there. The monument and the annual ceremonies, according to locals, reinforce a shameful episode of history of which they were not responsible and which they want to forget. They all sadly know about Atatürk’s unrealized wish to depopulate the town as a punishment for their alleged collaboration with the rebels. Similarly, they remember not only Kubilay’s martyrdom, but also the horrifying scenes of 28 persons who were hanged at gallows set in the streets of Menemen in February 1931. In other words, if the local people’s memory does not consciously challenge the national memory embodied by the monument, it certainly resists it by attempting to insert their own realities.

This is also shown by the existence of different but more popular holy *ziyaret* (visit) centres at the foot of the hill. One of them is a mosque, which hides in its basement the tombs of Shaykh Esad and his son, the alleged leaders of the rebellion of 1930. This mosque is today a pilgrimage place for the Naqshbandi successors of Shaykh Esad. Here, instead of Kubilay, this Shaykh is accepted as the real victim of the Menemen Incident, while the latter is seen as a fake event staged by the Kemalist state.⁵ Further up between this mosque and the monument is another tomb which is said to be hosting *Hızır*, a pre-Islamic cult of spring and new life. This tomb is the favourite sacred site for those desiring special boons such as getting married or giving birth to a child, etc. Thousands of people visit here every year in spring, pray and then wait for their wish to be realized. In other words, the sacred space of secularism is circumscribed by other and more popular sacred sites.

The Monument of Kubilay in Menemen was erected by the political elite of the 1930s on top of a hill dominating the town. However, to be placed at a high location does not mean that its presence affects the everyday life of the people below. People resist the domination of the national memory in several ways: nationally, Naqshbandis defy the official history by stressing the martyrdom of their Shaykh instead of Kubilay, while the locals want to forget the event, ignore the commemorations and attempt to revise the official account by playing down their involvement in the rebellion by naming it as “Kubilay Incident” instead of “Menemen Incident.” In short, the national memory represented by the monument is far away from being hegemonic. Like the monument on the hill, it keeps its dominance, but not without the challenge of alternative and local memories.

Notes

1. For this incident, see Hamit Bozarslan, “Le Mahdisme en Turquie: L’Incident de Menemen en 1930,” *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 91-94 (2000): 297-320; Umut Azak, “A Reaction to Authoritarian Modernization in Turkey: The Menemen Incident and the Creation and Contestation of a Myth, 1930-31,” in *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 143-158.
2. See Nora’s pioneering study of French realms of memory (*lieux de mémoires*), Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Vol I, II, III (Paris: Gallimard, 1984, 1986, 1992).
3. *Cumhuriyet*, 25 December 1931; Kemal Üstün, *Devrim Şehidi Öğretmen Kubilay: 60.yıl (1930-1990)*, 4th ed. (İstanbul: Çağdaş, 1990), 116-117.
4. *Cumhuriyet*, 26-27 December 1934.
5. This conspiracy theory was first raised by Rıza Nur (1879-1942), a former member of the National Assembly and an anti-Kemalist exile in Paris, who claimed the government incited the rebellion in order to create terror and eliminate the opposition. Rıza Nur, *Hayat ve Hatıratım, Rıza Nur Atatürk Kavgası* (İstanbul: İşaret, 1992), 479-482. The first portrayal of Shaykh Esad as the real victim of the Menemen Incident was made by Necip Fazıl Kısakürek in his *Son Devrin Din Mazlumlari*, 18th ed. (İstanbul: Büyük Doğu, 1997, 1st ed. 1969).

Umut Azak has recently defended her thesis, “Myths and Memories of Secularism in Turkey (1946-1966),” at Leiden University.
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