In recent years, on May 29, a visitor to Istanbul interested in escaping the crowds of foreign tourists at the city’s many famous monuments and museums easily might have passed the day participating in a series of commemorations occurring throughout the city. Devoted to the anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, these events include public prayers at the mausoleum of Sultan Mehmed II, the laying of wreaths at three different statues of the sultan, and an impressive ceremony outside the city walls featuring speeches, music, dance, and colorfully dressed Ottoman soldiers who stage a dramatic reenactment of the moment when the imposing city walls were finally breached following a fifty-three-day siege. The day’s celebrations are capped by an impressive musical laser and fireworks show projected over the Golden Horn, during which large crowds listen to an adulatory speech by the mayor of Istanbul and watch scenes from a film depicting the conquest of Constantinople.¹

In fact, these are the most visible among a broad range of cultural and sporting events organized on and around May 29, not only in Istanbul’s many municipalities but in public venues throughout the country.² They are commemorative activities reinforced by a multitude of other, more permanent cultural references that reflect Turkish “memories” of the event. Bookstores, for instance, sell countless tomes devoted to the conquest, including both fictional works and translations into Turkish of the various European eyewitness accounts. A number of films and magazines are available as well.³ At the same time, there are three universities in the city today with

I would like to thank six anonymous reviewers and the editorial board of the American Historical Review for thoughtful and detailed comments on earlier drafts of this essay. An early version was presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 2010. Research was made possible through financial support from the Gerda Henkel Stiftung and from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

¹ These events are covered in various Turkish newspapers. A detailed representation of 2010 celebrations is found in the May 2010 issue of Istanbul Bülteni.


³ For a brief overview of some of these trends, see Halim Kara, “The Literary Portrayal of Mehmed II in Turkish Historical Fiction,” Literature and the Nation, Special Issue, New Perspectives on Turkey 36 (Spring 2007): 71–95; Sema Uğurcan, “Fatih Sultan Mehmet’in Romanı—Fatih Konulu Romanlar Üzerine Bir İnceleme,” in Yüksek Mimar Dr. I. Aydin Yüksel’e Armağan (Istanbul, 2012), 312–327. In terms of film, along with various documentaries there is the popular animated film Fatih Sultan Mehmed (Ella Cartoon Studios, 1994). It was originally produced in Turkish, but English-dubbed versions are also available. Popular history magazines feature 1453 each May, and the city of Istanbul publishes the annual
names that reference the conquest directly, to say nothing of the Fatih Sultan Mehmed Bridge that spans the Bosphorus, connecting Europe with Asia. Perhaps of most interest is an impressive museum, aimed primarily at Turks, located just outside the old city walls at Topkapı Gate, through which Sultan Mehmed II may have passed upon his initial entry into the city. Reportedly the most popular site in the country for Turkish tourists, the 1453 Panorama Museum draws visitors into a 360-degree experience of the siege of Constantinople, complete with dramatic three-dimensional paintings, sound effects, and weapons of war lying in the foreground.

The extent of this commemorative repertoire is impressive, if only because the conquest of Constantinople took place more than five and a half centuries ago—in 1453. It marked the ascendancy of the Ottomans as the preeminent dynasty not only in the Middle East, but also throughout the Mediterranean and Europe before the consolidation of Atlantic states that would come to be associated with the Age of Empire. For centuries, armies from the great Arab caliphates and then the emerging Ottoman Empire had unsuccessfully laid siege to the “second Rome,” the seat of the once-illustrious Byzantine Empire. Finally, subsequent to the siege in April–May 1453, the city fell, and Sultan Mehmed II—henceforth “the Conqueror” (Fatih)—immediately set about establishing Constantinople, now also known as Istanbul, as his imperial capital.
The Ottoman Empire covered vast territories, incorporating a remarkable diversity of ethnic and religious identities. The new ruling elite cultivated a distinct Ottoman language and culture; importantly, it was not until much later, in the nineteenth century, that a nascent nationalist ideology began to endow the term “Turk” with any significance. Ultimately, with the surrender of the empire in World War I and its subsequent dissolution, a Turkish nationalism infused the new Republic of Turkey. Like every other successor state, from the Balkans to newly established Arab countries, Turkey explicitly rejected its Ottoman heritage to the point that the Ottoman Empire hardly figured in the new history of the nation. Yet paradoxically, today, some ninety years after the founding of Turkey, the Ottoman legacy looms large. Moreover, the evidence suggests that for many Turks, especially residents of Istanbul, shared memories of May 29, 1453, are integral to national identity.

Acts of national commemoration are fluid in both form and meaning, contingent upon time and place as a country comes to terms with and manipulates the legacy of what preceded the nation-state. The state is instrumental to commemoration of the nation, and so acts of remembrance frequently reflect the needs of the moment as a country negotiates its place in the world. In Egypt, struggles against British dominance, the demise of the monarchy and the establishment of a military regime in 1952, and wars against Israel all resulted in a succession of commemorations and re-commemorations aimed at supporting the political status quo at any given time in the twentieth century. Much more recently, in Vietnam the government declared the importance of remembering national heroes and revolutionary martyrs with the explicit purpose of buttressing current claims to territory also claimed by its neighbors. In China, National Defense Education Day concentrates on moments in the recent past when pre-Communist China was subjected to humiliation by foreign im-

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*Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995); Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2002). The leading scholar in terms of the European sources (which constitute the majority) related to the siege is Marios Philippides, whose most recent compendium is Marios Philippides and Walter K. Hanak, *The Siege and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453: Historiography, Topography, and Military Studies* (Farnham, 2011).


perial powers. Of course, this can be a very useful tool should government wish to accentuate the anti-Japanese tendencies within Chinese nationalism today.12

These celebrations were by no means automatic or spontaneous. Today Mexico, India, and Turkey each have a designated national holiday to mark the revolutionary moment that led to national independence, but political elites inaugurated these only as they consolidated control over a stabilizing society subsequent to drastic moments of political change and social modernization.13 Typical of the modern nation-state, in these countries the official appropriation of the past in the form of regular sanctioned events is limited to moments associated exclusively with the history of the modern nation. Only on occasion does the invention of tradition extend further into the past, as when the Iranian shah, Muhammad Reza (r. 1941–1979), formally celebrated in 1971 at Persepolis the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire.14 Even those countries that can claim to be direct successors to imperial states rarely if ever commemorate empire. China, a country that might usefully capitalize on its imperial heritage as it becomes a prominent power in the world today, so far has not done so in a serious manner.15

Yet commemoration of a nation cannot simply be reduced to the efforts of manipulative state and government elites, although nascent nationalist movements surely did stage events “for the people, not by the people” in many cases.16 To suc-


16 The most useful introduction to this subject is a volume of essays providing important context for understanding the relationship between commemoration and nationalism in various contexts: John R. Gillis, ed., Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity (Princeton, N.J., 1994). Studies of commemoration in particular national contexts are extensive, although a majority concentrate on Western
ceed and endure, that nation must adequately incorporate identities that ordinary people project onto it. Numbers matter, and the more people who participate in celebrating the nation, the more “real” it becomes. Thus the evident popularity in Turkey of a commemorative tradition related to May 29 reveals that a public memory built on an imperial legacy still resonates today. This shared memory is the result of negotiation over the course of modern Turkish history: it is “the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.” Ultimately, when Turks participate in the multiple opportunities to remember Constantinople’s conquest, they are contributing to and reinforcing the “continuous myth-making process” that infuses the nation with meaning. Commemorative traditions associated with such a seminal event in Ottoman history, therefore, carry significant meaning that must be understood in terms of the dynamic relationship between the shaping and expression of public memory and the process by which people come to identify with their nation and its past.

In his study of collective memory, Pierre Nora provides a framework by which to appreciate the shifting meaning attached to commemoration in very different environments and eras. In premodern societies, ordinary people lived in the present, unconcerned with tracing linear historical narratives or with evaluating the moments that constituted their memories. By contrast, elites, who simultaneously supported and depended upon a ruling dynasty, participated in remembering the past so as to legitimate the present. That these moments crystallized in text, monument, and ritual act is abundantly evident in how Ottomans commemorated the conquest of Constantinople.

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21 Originally presented as a large study of collective French memory, Nora’s most important ideas have been published in his “Between Memory and History: *Les lieux de mémoire,*” *Memory and Counter-Memory*, Special Issue, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24. This issue of *Representations*, edited by Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, provides an important starting point for the study of collective memory.
Set in their appropriate contexts, early Ottoman historical works reveal that among the elite, the production of “history” was very much a contested enterprise in the fifteenth century—around the time of Constantinople’s conquest—just as a “literate historical imagination” took root. Sultan Mehmed II’s imperial ambitions inspired numerous panegyrics, but so too did his efforts at centralization cause chroniclers to give voice to discontent and resentment. At the same time, there also emerged a consecutive account of the past so as to present the ruling dynasty in terms of an enduring myth of Ottoman origins.\(^{22}\) Infusing this historiography was a concern to legitimate the dynasty in religious terms, and so while the first Ottoman account of the capture of Constantinople was not entirely sympathetic to the rule of Mehmed II, its author, Tursun Beg, nonetheless emphasized the sultan’s piety. Thus, Tursun Beg recorded that not only did the sultan visit the great Byzantine church, the Hagia Sophia, upon first entering the city, but later he ascended to the dome, from which he gazed over this symbol of the once-mighty Roman Empire. As many other sources also relate, he had already decreed that the Hagia Sophia should be consecrated as a mosque. This was part of his plan to convert churches into mosques and to turn Constantinople into an “Islamic city,” thereafter to be known as Istanbul, or even “Islambol,” city of abundant Islam.\(^{23}\)

With time, the events of 1453 became an uncontested element in an increasingly sophisticated imperial narrative that presented them in terms of the Muslim conquest of Christian Constantinople.\(^{24}\) Later historians echoed Tursun Beg’s argument that Mehmed the Conqueror’s success set the Ottomans apart as the preeminent dynasty in Islamic history.\(^{25}\) One of the great classics of sixteenth-century Ottoman historiography, *The Crown of Histories*, reflected the recent consolidation of the Ottoman dynasty as the defender of Sunni Muslim orthodoxy under Sultan Süleyman (r. 1520–1566). Thus the siege of Constantinople was cast in terms of an obedient act of jihad, while Mehmed II’s success was understood as the ful-

\(^{22}\) The origins of Ottoman “historical consciousness” and the need to legitimate the present with reference to the past can be located in the early fifteenth century, following the near-destruction of the emergent empire by Timur in 1402. Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds*, 93–97, 108–110; Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541–1600)* (Princeton, N.J., 1986), 238.


\(^{25}\) Inalcik and Murphey, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror by Tursun Beg*, 24. For a useful overview of this tendency in Ottoman historiography, see Carole Hillenbrand, *Turkish Myth and Muslim Symbol: The Battle of Manzikert* (Edinburgh, 2007), 172–177.
fillment of a popular prophetic tradition, or hadith, that ostensibly foretold the capture of the city and the glory that would bring upon its conqueror.\textsuperscript{26} In the next century, a much more embellished account of the siege by the traveler scholar Evliya Çelebi revealed that this tradition of presenting Mehmed II as a pious and divinely blessed sultan remained vibrant in elite Ottoman society.\textsuperscript{27}

Ottoman elite culture in Istanbul also commemorated 1453 in more visible ways. Mehmed the Conqueror himself ensured this through the order to construct two permanent monuments that bore testimony to his achievements: a mosque complex (the “Fatih” Mosque) and the Topkapı Palace. These complemented the mosque that the sultan had commissioned outside the city walls at the site of the tomb of the revered companion of the Prophet Muhammad, Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, who had died at the siege of the city between 674 and 678; it quickly became a site of popular pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{28} The Fatih Mosque itself—beside which Mehmed II’s mausoleum is to be found—has inscribed at its entrance the Arabic text of the Prophet’s hadith: “Constantinople will be conquered. Blessed is the commander who will conquer it, and blessed are his troops.” The Topkapı Palace bears its own Arabic inscription, bestowing on Mehmed II titles that include “the Sultan of the Two Continents and the Two Seas, the Shadow of God in this World and the Next . . . the Conqueror of Constantinople, the Father of Conquest, Sultan Mehmed Khan.”\textsuperscript{29}

Beginning in the early seventeenth century, these monuments came to be incorporated into a commemorative tradition associated with a sultan’s accession to the throne. It was already customary for a new sultan to visit the tomb of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari in the district of Eyüp. Now he participated in the “girding of the sword” at the same site. A leading religious figure would bestow a sword—attributed variously to the Prophet or an early Ottoman sultan—on the young sultan, who would then process through the walls into the city, pausing en route to pay tribute at the mausoleum and mosque of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. Similarly, the tradition of the sultan holding a Friday reception following his accession to the throne imitated Mehmed II’s practice of doing so at the Hagia Sophia following the conquest of the city in 1453.\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{27} Evliya Çelebi, \textit{Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa in the Seventeenth Century}, trans. the Ritter Joseph von Hammer (London, 1834), 5–49.


\textsuperscript{30} Colin Imber, \textit{The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The Structure of Power} (New York, 2002), 116–118.
In the nineteenth century, this commemorative practice increasingly incorpo-
rated not only the elite but also large public crowds: it was a development closely
associated with the emergence of nationalism. In France and the United States,
nationalist narratives reflected a determination to break with history, but Ottoman
nationalism resembled that in Britain, where the emphasis was upon continuity with
the past.\textsuperscript{31} The Young Ottomans were the most prominent advocates of an “Ottoman
nation” that, liberally defined, might incorporate the wide range of ethnic—and for
some, even religious—diversity characteristic of the empire. At the same time, vari-
ous ethnic nationalisms also took root among segments of the population. One of
these was a cultural Turkish nationalism, and ethnic Turkish roots became a new
source of pride among some members of the Ottoman elite. Neither locus of identity,
it should be stressed, envisioned the nation as separate from Islamic tradition. More-
over, the tendency for these currents to employ the terms “Ottoman” and “Turk”
interchangeably—and hence the failure to articulate a distinct terminology—indi-
cated a desire to remain rooted in the legacy of empire itself.\textsuperscript{32}

Central to this legacy was Ottoman control of Constantinople, and a new liter-
ature devoted to remembering its conquest coincided with the gradual articulation
of Ottoman nationalism. According to Nora, this is entirely in keeping with the in-
timate relationship between nationalism and commemoration: the need to articulate
a sacred narrative of the history of the “holy nation” naturally resulted in the quint-
essential \textit{milieu de mémoire}, with an emphasis on public recognition of specific but
connected moments from the past.\textsuperscript{33} Previous Ottoman tradition had been to in-
corporate the event into dynastic or universal histories. However, it was a modern-
izing sultan, Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839), who commissioned two accounts devoted
exclusively to the quest to capture Constantinople. One, an Arabic work, specifically
chronicled the many martyrs who had died while laying siege to the city over the
centuries. The other, an Ottoman treatise by Imamazade Es’ad Efendi (d. 1851), was
devoted to the significance of Mehmed II’s success at fulfilling the hadith of the
Prophet Muhammad, and to justifying later Ottoman claims to the caliphate. Written
for the sultan rather than for the public, this work was very much a product of elite
culture, but it is best understood in terms of Mahmud II’s own concern to present
himself as a pious leader in the midst of an era of reform that would change the very
nature of the Ottoman state’s relationship to the sultan’s subjects.\textsuperscript{34}

Namık Kemal (r. 1840–1888), the prominent Young Ottoman who actively con-


\textsuperscript{32} On the Young Ottomans, see Şerif Mardin, \textit{The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in
the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas} (Princeton, N.J., 1962); Erol Ülker, “Contextualizing ‘Turki-
fication’: Nation-Building in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1908–18,” \textit{Nations and Nationalism} 11, no. 4

\textsuperscript{33} Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 11.

\textsuperscript{34} This treatise was not published until 1869, after the author’s death. At the time the Ottoman solar
(or Rumi) calendar was in use for official matters and for publishing, Dates for Ottoman publications
here are provided according to both the Rumi and Gregorian calendars. Es’ad Imamzade, \textit{Feth-i Ko-
stantiniyye} (Istanbul, 1285); Imamzade Necdet Yılmaz, ed., \textit{Mehmed Es’ad Efendi: Değeri ve Tesiri
Açısından Feth Hadisi “Feth-i Kostantiniyye”} (Istanbul, 2002); Carter Vaughn Findley, \textit{Turkey, Islam,
tributed to the new print media that were transforming Ottoman society after the reign of Mahmud II, wrote extensively about 1453. At first, inspired by the actual anniversary in 1862 of Constantinople’s conquest, Kemal produced a brief panegyric. It was written in an ornate Ottoman language hardly accessible to the public, but within a few years he was using a very different, much simpler style to serialize vignettes of Ottoman history in the newspaper Tasvir-i Efkar, with the goal of inculcating pride in the Ottoman nation. This included exalting Mehmed the Conqueror’s heroic and enlightened character, which Kemal would elaborate on further in an entirely separate short biography published in 1872 (1289). At a time when the integrity of the empire was under tremendous strain as a result of internal strife and conflict with foreign powers, Kemal was devoted to nourishing a Muslim Ottoman identity based on seminal moments and figures that included Ottoman sultans and other heroic figures, most notably the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin (r. 1174–1193), famous for his recapture of Jerusalem during the Crusades in 1187. Representing these distant figures to an emergent Ottoman public, Kemal “endowed heroes with political and social intentions inconceivable before the time at which he was writing.” Thus he credited Sultan Mehmed II with transforming the Ottoman state into a “civilized society” that Kemal readily identified as a nation (millet).

Ultimately, it is in Namık Kemal’s posthumously published history of the early Ottoman Empire that we note the identification of 1453 as a seminal moment in the Ottoman historical narrative that prevailed at the turn of the twentieth century. Grounding an extensive account of Constantinople’s conquest in both non-Ottoman sources and the works of Western historians, he emphasized Turks rather than Ottomans. Equally significant was his departure from tradition as he cast the event not as an act of jihad best understood in terms of a clash of civilizations, but rather as a pivotal event in world history. Without equal, Mehmed II embodied the virtues of justice, tolerance, and humanity; his victory marked the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of a new, modern era. Whereas European authors had long interpreted 1453 as a catastrophe, Kemal now asserted that it had been of great benefit to all of human civilization.
At a time, therefore, when nationalist ideologies came to infuse Ottoman politics and when elites sought to preserve the empire in a rapidly changing world, Ottomans not only identified 1453 as an important moment in their own historical narrative, but used it to demonstrate the value of their imperial nation to world history. In 1900, the Istanbul newspapers Servet and Malumat published articles echoing Namık Kemal’s sentiments, stressing that the new age ushered in had been characterized by freedom of conscience and religion. Moreover, an encyclopedic account of the siege published in the same year called upon Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) to formally commemorate the 450th anniversary in 1903. Yet it was only following the distinct break in Ottoman political history represented by the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 that Ottomans actually came together to formally commemorate Constantinople’s conquest. In the charged atmosphere of those days, public celebration of the past was an ideal means to legitimate the present, and in 1910 residents of Istanbul were enthusiastic participants in what was the first formal commemoration. Only four years later, however, the start of World War I and then the emergence of the new Turkish Republic, infused by an elite Turkish nationalism that treated the Ottoman past with contempt, guaranteed that future national recognition


Written by Ahmet Muhtar Paşa, this was likely the first comprehensive Ottoman study of 1453, drawing on both Ottoman and European sources. Reflecting the fluidity of terminology at the time, it emphasizes the Ottoman rather than Turkish identity of the victorious forces. It was first published in 1900 (1316), with a second printing in 1904 (1320). Feth-i Celi-i Kostantiniyye (Istanbul, 1316). A transliterated text is Ahmed Muhtar Paşa, Feth-i Celi-i Kostantiniyye (Istanbul, 1994). The more recent edition was published with the purpose of gaining public support for restoring the Hagia Sophia to its status as a mosque. This edition contains transliterated versions of the articles that appeared in Servet and Malumat on pp. 431–432.

of this moment from the imperial past would not become an established tradition until its quincentenary in 1953.

Nothing captures better the common association between the Republic of Turkey and the Ottoman legacy than the attitude of its founding president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (r. 1923–1938), toward Sultan Mehmed II and the city that he conquered. Atatürk was both a modernizer and an iconoclast. He understood that in the new world of nations, the “Turks” had a difficult future: ridiculed as the “sick man of Europe” before 1914, now they were reviled as responsible for the near-total eradication of the Christian population of Anatolia during World War I.\(^{44}\) It is little surprise, therefore, that he set out to transform Turkey into a modern nation severed from its Ottoman Islamic roots. In a manner reminiscent of France in the late eighteenth century, Kemalism—as Atatürk’s nationalist ideology came to be known—broke with the immediate past. Consequently, it was necessary to create a new Turkish \textit{milieu de mémoire} that would imbue the nation with a sacred history linked to a more ancient past—a narrative that would constitute the basis for a new collective memory to be inculcated in the citizens of modern Turkey.

As the imperial seat of a line of sultans who had eventually capitulated in 1918 and the site of a humiliating Allied occupation during the War of Independence, the city of Constantinople symbolized all that was antithetical to the modern Turkish nation.\(^{45}\) Consequently, Atatürk designated Ankara the new capital, while he himself refused to even visit Istanbul following the conclusion of the war.\(^{46}\) In October 1922, he had appointed his ally Refet Bele military governor over Eastern Thrace. At that point the nationalist government had not yet publicly rejected the Ottoman dynasty, so Bele’s arrival in Istanbul was notable for the fact that he paid tribute to a long-standing Ottoman tradition: his first act was to visit the mausoleum of Sultan Mehmed II. Later, Bele took the symbolism one step further and preached a rousing sermon to a large crowd gathered at the Hagia Sophia for Friday prayers.\(^{47}\) Within a few weeks, however, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey had dissolved the

\(^{44}\) And subsequently, in September 1922, at the end of the War of Independence, for the campaign that drove the Greek army and remaining Greek population out of Anatolia. In the late nineteenth century, European intellectuals had placed “Turks” at the bottom of their racial hierarchies. See M. Şükrü Hanoğlu, \textit{The Young Turks in Opposition} (Oxford, 1995), 209.

\(^{45}\) In the early years of the republic, the city came to be officially referred to as Istanbul, perhaps both to remove any association with its imperial past and to counter Greek nationalist claims to the city. Ottomans, as had Europeans, had continued to use the name Constantinople. Following the Ottoman surrender on October 29, 1918, Allied forces established a military administration in Istanbul on December 8. On February 8, 1919, the French general Franchet d’Espéry reportedly rode into the city atop a white horse provided by the Greek population. The symbolism here would have been unmistakable. Allied troops finally vacated Istanbul on October 2, 1923. Bernard Lewis, \textit{The Emergence of Modern Turkey}, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968), 240.


\(^{47}\) This was on the eve of the Lausanne Conference and the decision by the Grand National Assembly to abolish the sultanate at the start of November 1922. Revealingly, the new caliph, Abdülmecid, asked the government’s permission to be allowed to appear in public in the same robes and turban that Sultan
sultanate, and the Turkish government turned its back on both the Ottoman Empire and Constantinople. When Mustafa Kemal finally deigned to visit Istanbul in July 1927, he made no pretense of honoring the Ottoman dynasty. He did not visit Mehmed II’s mausoleum, but arrived at Dolmabahçe Palace on the Bosphorus, where he immediately received an audience. Alluding to a common title used by Ottoman sultans, he unhesitatingly declared, “The palace belongs no longer to the Shadows of Allah on Earth, but to the nation, which is a fact and not a shadow, and I am happy to be here as an individual member of the nation, as a guest.”

As Atatürk’s words implied, in what was a cult of new beginnings, the Ottoman Empire had become the much-derided, even illegitimate, ancien régime as soon as the sultanate was abolished at the end of October 1922. Atatürk himself criticized Mehmed II as one of the sultans who had sought to expand Ottoman territory for their own personal benefit. While “Turks” had sacrificed themselves on his behalf, other peoples—or nations—had worked the land and secured their own wealth and well-being. Ultimately, Ottoman sultans had pursued personal power and riches, to the point that the “Turkish nation” had scarcely survived.

In accordance with this reading of the past, Kemalist politics rejected the Ottoman legacy. Thus in 1925, Atatürk ordered that the mausoleums of Ottoman sultans be closed to the public: they were no longer allowed to be places of pilgrimage. Later, in 1934, he personally signed an order declaring that the Hagia Sophia would no longer function as a mosque but rather would become a museum testifying to a bygone era. Replacing these sites of Ottoman-oriented commemoration was a new narrative centered on the person of Atatürk himself. Imposing statues of “the father of the Turks” were erected throughout the country, and each year a series of anniversaries kindled public memory of Atatürk’s central role in the miraculous rescue and rebirth of the nation. They included his arrival to lead the resistance in Anatolia on May 19, 1919; the opening of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara on April 23, 1920; the final victory in the War of Independence on August 29, 1922; and the declaration of the republic—with Atatürk as president—on October 29, 1923.

Mehmed II would have worn. This request was denied. Mango, Atatürk, 361–366; Lord Kinross, Atatürk: A Biography of Mustafa Kemal, Father of Modern Turkey (New York, 1964), 387–397.

At the İzmir Economic Conference held on February 17, 1923. Atatürk’s speech is in Atatürk’un Söylev ve Demeçleri, 3 vols. (Ankara, 1997), 2: 103–116. Atatürk was quite capable of presenting a different perspective under different circumstances. In 1919, at the start of the War of Independence, at a time when he felt it necessary to refute European assertions that Turks had a history of despotism and oppression, Atatürk referred to Sultan Mehmed very positively, citing his generous policies toward Christian minorities in 1453. Ibid., 4–15.

The mausoleums of Ottoman sultans were closed to the public by Law #677, November 30, 1925. This law is better known for the fact that it also attempted to legislate an end to sufi tariyats, or brotherhoods, in Turkey. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk personally signed a directive issued by the cabinet on November 24, 1934, to convert the Hagia Sophia into a museum. Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivleri [the Prime Minister’s Republican Archive, hereafter BCA] 30.13.01.013.49.79.6 (November 24, 1934). For more on the Hagia Sophia—and Western interest in it—see Erik Goldstein, “Holy Wisdom and British Foreign Policy, 1918–1922: The St. Sophia Redemption Agitation,” Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 15, no. 1 (1991): 36–65; Robert S. Nelson, Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950: Holy Wisdom, Modern Monument (Chicago, 2004).

“The father of the Turks” is the meaning of the word “Atatürk.” Initially popular, these anniversaries were vigorously promoted by schools, local officials, and the
Ultimately, in 1935 the government declared October 29 to be Republic Day, a national holiday set apart from all others. Also known as “the holiday of reforms,” this date reminded Turks that their nation was founded upon an explicit repudiation of the Ottoman Empire and all that it represented. Already in 1933 the young republic had celebrated its tenth anniversary on this date, when the government employed a commemorative ceremony reinforced by popular publications to convey the idea that life in the Ottoman Empire had been corrupt and decadent as compared to the progress and civilization already achieved by the Turkish Republic.

For all that Kemalist ideology derided the Ottoman past, however, in practice there was much more ambiguity between republic and empire than the political history of reform has allowed for. Lived memories of the once and glorious empire did not simply evaporate, and in a country defined by Ottoman architecture and cultural practices, the imperial legacy could not be erased. Newspapers across the country may have toed the official line and ignored Ottoman history, but popular literature in the form of novels and poetry continued to feature it. More to the point, government-authorized school history textbooks contained the formula by which the new nationalist narrative could in fact be reconciled with and incorporate the Ottoman Empire.

Kemalist ideologues posited an exaggerated scheme of world history in which the ancient Turkish nation was cast as the original source of all human civilization.
Turkish migrants from Central Asia had been responsible for the spread of civilization to all corners of the earth, and by implication, even modern Western civilization was itself Turkish in origin. World history, therefore, was an account of the many instances in which the Turkish nation had played the pivotal role. It was a narrative in which the Ottoman Empire, for all its six hundred years, was accorded only a minor, and generally negative, role: thus the decadence and decline that started in the sixteenth century and threatened the very existence of the nation were explicitly blamed on the actions of “the Ottomans.” Nevertheless, Ottoman history did have some moments worth exploiting, and these were suitably attributed not to Ottomans but to “Turks.” Foremost among them were the events of 1453, and one of the earliest republican texts actually dated the beginning of “Turkish history” to the conquest of Constantinople. Similarly, a 1931 text that offered a scathing interpretation of Ottoman history in general nonetheless echoed the earlier assertion made by Namık Kemal that it was in 1453 that the Turks had brought about the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era. The sacred history of the nation had been modified to allow for such a seminal event. In this particular case, the Ottomans had become Turks.

It was only after the death of Atatürk in 1938, however, that commemorative practice in Turkey came to reflect this Kemalist appropriation of the imperial past to the national present. Indeed, the year 1953 marked the moment when commemoration came to reflect not only elite ideals but the emergence of a public memory. By this point, Turks were becoming active participants in a vital public culture that accompanied the introduction of multi-party politics in the wake of World War II. Authoritarian Kemalist nationalism proved to be at odds with more popular conceptions of identity, and the process of working out a Turkish democratic tradition necessitated the generation of a truly national narrative to which a majority of Turks could subscribe. Kemalism retained its dominant status, but a nascent commemorative tradition related to Constantinople’s conquest facilitated the fusion of the Ottoman past to the prevailing nationalist milieu de mémoire. The result was, for the first time, the crystallization of a popular national identity infused by a new public memory.

In 1953, Turks broke with the young Kemalist tradition and formally marked an anniversary that acknowledged the importance of Ottoman history—the quincentenary of the capture of Constantinople. Multi-party politics and an expanding com-


58 The scheme was originally laid out in Türk Tarih Anahatları, published in 1930.


60 Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti, Tarih III: Yeni ve Yakın Zamanlar (Istanbul, 1931), chap. 2.

petitive print culture had given voice to widespread popular interest in the Ottoman past. Increasingly, not only historical novels, but also daily newspapers and weekly periodicals—produced in both Istanbul and the provinces—as well as films featured the stories of Ottoman personalities, society, culture, and politics. The prevailing tone indicated a respect for and a curiosity about the Ottoman past—a recognition that all six centuries constituted an integral part of the nation’s history of which Turks were justifiably proud. School history texts echoed this sentiment, as the terms “Ottoman” and “Turk” came to be used interchangeably, each endowed with respect and pride.

It was in this context, almost immediately upon Atatürk’s death, that officials in Istanbul had begun to explore the possibility of establishing a commission to restore one of the most potent symbols of the Ottoman past: the mosque, school, and mausoleum that bore Sultan Mehmed II’s name. Scarcely three years later, the Ministry of Education and the Turkish Historical Association were among a number of state institutions to enter into discussions concerning how best to commemorate the looming quincentenary of the Ottoman capture of Constantinople. The result was a proposal that at least seventeen government ministries and institutions should become involved, and that a budget of some 17.3 million lira should be allotted for the event. Concurrently, in 1946 the Istanbul daily Yeni Sabah drew attention to the anniversary on May 29, while in 1948 the religious journal Selamet and the nationalist publication Çınaraltı both devoted commemorative issues to the 495th anniversary. In these they reminded the government and readers that a unique and much more important anniversary loomed only five years hence. Ultimately, in Feb-

62 As a result of changes to laws regulating the press in 1946 and then 1950. Brockett, How Happy to Call Oneself a Turk, chap. 3.

63 Increasingly after 1945, major Istanbul newspapers—as well as those in provincial centers—began to feature serialized novels that portrayed the Ottoman past in exotic and exciting terms. Particularly prominent were the novels of Feridun Tülbentçi. A reader might find the front page of a newspaper featuring a dramatic picture of a sword-wielding, turbaned sultan as part of an advertisement for a story. Newspapers also carried cartoons dealing with Ottoman history. For example, Türkün Sesi (Zonguldak), May 3, 1952; Demokrat Hanle (Eskişehir), October 16, 1952; Hakimiyet (Kayseri), December 2, 1952; Porsuk (Eskişehir), August 7, 1953.

64 This new interest in and acceptance of the Ottoman past was mirrored in the content of high school history textbooks dealing with the Middle Ages and with the Ottoman Empire specifically. However, accounts of the conquest of Constantinople remained limited. Zuhuri Danışman, Yeni Tarih Dersleri: Orta Okul III (Istanbul, 1950), chap. 2. Emin Oktay, Tarih III: Yeni ve Yakın Çağılar (Istanbul, 1952), chap. 15.

65 The earliest account of activities aimed at celebrating the quincentenary is Recep Ferdi, “İstanbul Fethi Dernegi,” Fatih ve İstanbul 1, no. 1 (May 29, 1953): 139–141. This journal itself began publication with the anniversary. A more detailed account of developments based on an intimate understanding of the workings of the Istanbul Conquest Association is Kazım Yetiş, “İstanbul’un Fethi Kutlamaları Yeni Bir Dönemi Başlatıyor,” in Yetiş, Türk Edebiyatında İstanbul’un Fethi ve Fatih, 3–65; Cumhuriyet (İstanbul), June 3, 1953.

66 A majority of those involved at this stage in the planning were academics, some of whom began to actively publish books related to Istanbul’s history. A first report commissioned and issued in 1944–1945 called for the publication of a wide variety of Turkish and foreign works (in translation), repairs to public areas in Istanbul, a statue of Mehmed II, and celebratory events in 1953. Nothing came about as a result of this report. A second report was issued in December 1949, stemming from the efforts of the Turkish Historical Association and the Ministry of Education. Ulus (Ankara), December 16, 1949.

67 Yeni Sabah (İstanbul), May 29, 1946; Selamet (İstanbul), May 28, 1948; Çınaraltı (İstanbul), May 26, 1948. See also Millet (İstanbul), September 2, 1948; Ulus (İstanbul), December 16, 1949; Cumhuriyet (İstanbul), August 6, 1950, November 14, 1950, and May 29, 1951; Hürriyet (İstanbul), May 29 and June 30, 1949, and May 29, 1950.
ruary 1950, discussions led to the establishment of an association dedicated to organizing not only the 500th anniversary of the conquest but also subsequent anniversaries.68

Press coverage from the period reveals that both the Istanbul Conquest Association and the government struggled to meet public expectations for celebrations associated with the quincentenary of a signal moment in the nation’s past. The Istanbul press reported on the restoration of Sultan Mehmed II’s mausoleum and mosque, but when it came to the graves of many of the martyrs of the conquest spread across the city, it complained that much of the work remained unfinished.69 A statue of Mehmed the Conqueror had not materialized despite a public competition to solicit designs, while the graves of some important figures had been completely forgotten, and many remained quite literally mired in mud. On not a few occasions, Istanbul periodicals published cartoons ridiculing those in charge of the commemoration—the mayor in particular—no doubt capturing the frustration felt by many in Istanbul.70

For all that the quincentenary provided fodder for critics of government, print media also reveal that the celebrations were popular and successful. Unlike the tenth-anniversary celebrations of the republic in 1933, the first formal celebration of Constantinople’s conquest in Turkey was not simply choreographed by the country’s political elite. It offered multiple opportunities for the people to actively contribute to the process by which the nation remembered its past. In the weeks leading up to May 29, newspapers across the country informed readers about what they might expect. They published editorials, serialized stories, cartoons, and pictures that fueled public excitement. When the day itself arrived, these same publications formed part of an impressive print culture that included dozens of books, collections of poetry, comic books, brochures, and magazines issued especially for the anniver-

68 Its official name was the Association for the Celebration of the 500th and Subsequent Anniversaries of Istanbul’s Conquest (İstanbul’un Beşyüzüncü ve Müteakip Fetih Yıllarını Kutlama Derneği). It adopted the short name Istanbul Conquest Association (İstanbul Fethi Derneği). This organization was to have a more modest budget of 4 million lira. The committee was initially established on February 20, 1950, and issued a formal statement to Prime Minister Şemseddin Günaltay at the beginning of March listing its founding members. This was accompanied by the organization’s “constitution” or Ana Niçamnamesi. Subsequent to the general elections of May 14, 1950, however, the new Democratic Party government decided to start over again and reestablish the organization. Developments associated with the association can be traced partially through documents at the Prime Minister’s Republican Archive. BCA 030.01.123.782.6 (March 1, 1950); BCA 490.1.0.0.600.76.7 (April 14, 1950); BCA 030.18.1.2.123.61.13 (July 28, 1950); BCA 030.01.17.98.42 (August 14, 1950).

69 The government allocated 500,000 lira for repairs to the complex surrounding the Fatih Mosque. TBMM Tutanak Dergisi 9.13.50 S. Sayısı 51 (February 28, 1952); Cumhuriyet (İstanbul), May 14, 16, and 27, 1953; Hürriyet (İstanbul), May 28, 1953; Vatan (İstanbul), January 2 and May 28, 1953.

70 Nothing more than a small bust of Mehmed II materialized, this outside Istanbul University. Cumhuriyet (İstanbul), March 3, 1951, and June 26, 1953; Akbaba (İstanbul), May 26, 1953; Hürriyet (İstanbul), May 14 and June 4, 1953; Vatan (İstanbul), May 6, 9, and 30, 1953. For discussion in the Grand National Assembly about the matter of a commemorative statue, see TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 9.18.12.67–68 (December 3, 1952). The campaign to erect a statue of Mehmed II was resurrected at a later date, and eventually, on the 1982 anniversary, a statue was unveiled. Milliyet (İstanbul), May 29, 1982. Today there are apparently three statues of the sultan in Istanbul. The popular magazine İnci published an interview with İsmail Hami Danışmand, one of the chairs of the Istanbul Conquest Association, in a special issue devoted to the quincentenary, 500 Fetih Yılı (no. 40), published on May 28, 1953.
Major newspapers such as *Cumhuriyet* and *Yeni Sabah* produced separate supplements with colorful and dramatic pictures on the cover. *Turkish Istanbul*, pub-

Various series of books were published by the Turkish Ministry of Education, the municipality of Istanbul, the Istanbul Conquest Association, and Istanbul University. Three bibliographies of this material exist. M. D. Mercanlıgil and S. N. Özerdim, “Fethin 500 Yıldönümü Dolayısıyla Çıkan Eserler,” *Belleten* 17 (1953): 413–428; Müjgan Cunbur, “İstanbul’un 500 üncü Fetih Yıldönümü Dolayısıyla Ter-

**Figure 1**: “500th Anniversary of the Conquest.” From *Yeni Inci*, May 28, 1953.
lished by *Cumhuriyet*, would be distributed across the country. So too the popular magazines *Yeni Inci* and *Resimli Tarih Mecmuası* produced special issues, the latter of which was 148 pages long, with articles covering almost every conceivable aspect of the conquest.72

Significantly, May 29, 1953, was a national day of celebration, in that it was not limited to Istanbul alone. Provincial representatives and groups of schoolchildren were invited to travel to Istanbul to take part in the festivities. Some of them participated in the folk dances representing local culture and customs that took place in public venues during the week following the anniversary. At the official ceremony on May 29, they would contribute to the symbolism by sprinkling dirt brought from the provinces at the mausoleum of Mehmed the Conqueror. For the majority who remained in the provinces, there were at least two ways to participate in the commemoration. First, May 29 was a Friday, and so when Turks attended weekly prayers at the local mosque—as they did in large numbers—they listened to a sermon issued by the Presidency of Religious Affairs and dedicated to 1453. Secondly, many provincial cities also hosted their own public ceremonies. Newspapers reported well-attended events in local schools or sports arenas in cities such as Balıkesir, Bursa, Erzurum, and Zonguldak. In the Central Anatolian city of Kayseri, for example, schools at all levels held special events at which teachers and local officials delivered speeches.73 As so often occurred on the occasion of national holidays, children and their parents were encouraged to participate by reciting poetry that they had written to recall this glorious time. Everywhere, of course, what had originally been a distinct moment in Ottoman history was now cast as a foundational event in Turkish national history; it was an interpretation encouraged by the playing of the Turkish national anthem and the flying of the Turkish flag at each and every commemoration.

In Istanbul itself, May 29 was the first of ten days of organized events. On that day official ceremony gave way to carefully scripted reenactments at which large numbers of people were spectators. Events began outside the old city walls, at a pavilion resembling that of Sultan Mehmed II, erected between the Topkapı and Edirne Gates. Here a distinguished group of dignitaries gathered. Among the invited guests were a group of ten Grand National Assembly deputies, foreign consuls to Istanbul, and delegates from provincial cities as close as Edirne and as far away as Kars.74 Of considerable significance was the fact that the party included official mem-

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73 This included the middle school (*orta okul*), high school (*lise*), business school (*ticaret okulu*), and fine arts institute (*sanat enstitüsü*). *İstiğlal* (Kayseri), May 30, 1953; *Şarkın Sesi* (Erzurum), May 30, 1953; *İş Yolu* (Zonguldak), June 5, 1953; *Demokrat Zonguldak* (Zonguldak), May 29, 1953; *Cumhuriyet* (İstanbul), May 9, 26, and 30, 1953; *Vatan* (İstanbul), May 30, 1953. The program of events was published—subject to later changes—one week prior to the actual anniversary. *Hürriyet* (İstanbul), May 21, 1953; *Vatan* (İstanbul), May 22, 1953.

74 As will be noted later, neither the president, the prime minister, nor the foreign minister (the noted historian Mehmed Fuad Köprülü) participated.
bers from Istanbul’s Greek, Armenian, and Jewish communities—representing the very people who had lived in Constantinople before its conquest and then been incorporated within the Ottoman Empire. Addressed by Istanbul’s mayor, Professor Fahreddin Kerim Gökay, they were reminded that Sultan Mehmed II had been a humble, magnanimous ruler who was greeted when he entered the conquered city.

not by residents fearing punishment and death, but ostensibly by Byzantine women and children bearing bouquets of flowers.\textsuperscript{75}

Symbols and images throughout the celebrations reflected a rich blend of both the imperial and the national. Modern Turkish soldiers participated in parades, and

\textsuperscript{75} Cumhuriyet (Istanbul), May 30, 1953.
a military band played Turkey’s national anthem; however, the dignitaries were accompanied on their journey into the city by a corps of Ottoman Janissaries decked out in full regalia and bearing Sultan Mehmed II’s own banner. The procession proceeded through the Topkapı Gate, following the route by which Mehmed II himself had first entered Constantinople. It paused at the point where tradition said that Ulubathlı Hasan, the first “Turk” to successfully surmount the fortifications, allegedly planted a flag and then died a martyr’s death. Here a brief ceremony commemorated all those (Turkish) martyrs who died in the final battle on May 29. The procession then moved along to the great Mosque of the Conqueror, where the dignitaries were joined by academics and representatives of the Turkish military, as well as large crowds. Following Friday prayers in the mosque, they then paid their respects to Mehmed the Conqueror by visiting his mausoleum and witnessing a parade of Turkish military units accompanied by their bands, and of children from Istanbul’s schools.

Concurrently, another procession consisting of Turkish sailors pulling a model of an Ottoman galleon made its way up from the Golden Horn; this was an unmistakable allusion to Mehmed II’s remarkable feat of transporting the Ottoman fleet overland from the Bosphorus to the Golden Horn. Pictures from the day suggest that these processions into the city were cheered on by huge crowds who lined the streets, having arrived early to ensure themselves a good view. Newspapers estimated the size of the crowds at between 100,000 and 500,000. With bands playing, Turkish flags (as well as a few Ottoman banners) waving, cannons firing, the call to prayer ringing from mosque minarets, and the Turkish air force flying overhead, the celebrations were both loud and colorful. Later in the afternoon, the focus shifted to Istanbul University, where a ceremony commemorated the so-called founding of this institution—in other words, a religious school or medrese—five hundred years earlier.

May 29 concluded with a fireworks display, but in fact it was only the first of ten full days of celebration that invited people to actively participate in their own remembering of the nation’s history. Activities appealed to a variety of interests. At Istanbul University as well as at other venues, Turkish academics gave presentations on various aspects of Ottoman and Byzantine history; a few foreign Orientalists evidently participated, although no large academic conference was held in Istanbul.

Interestingly, although the very presence of a corps of Janissaries and other Ottoman soldiers was highly symbolic, no attempt appears to have been made to imitate Mehmed II himself: there was no “sultan” riding a white horse, as occurred in more recent commemorative ceremonies up to and including that in 2011.

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The anniversary attracted some international attention as well. One event that did not take place was a meeting of an international Muslim congress. A Turkish delegate to a similar meeting in Pakistan in 1952, Nuri Demirağ, proposed a meeting in Istanbul of
At public schools across the city, special events also marked the conquest: these included displays of art, historic costumes, and of course numerous speeches. Various athletic events such as football (soccer), gymnastics, wrestling, and equestrian competitions took place in the city’s stadiums. Folk dances took place on Friday, June 5, while throughout the ten days, residents of Istanbul could attend special concerts; the State Opera and Theater Company performed various pieces, including a new play, *The Conqueror (Fatih)*. Accompanying these celebrations was a less public but no less significant gesture on the part of the government, as it issued an extensive set of new stamps that captured those aspects of the conquest of Constantinople that Turks preferred to recall: included were images of Rumeli Hisarı, the great fortress on the Bosphorus; the cannon used to batter Constantinople’s defenses; the ships hauled over Pera and to the Golden Horn; Mehmed II granting authority over the Greek Orthodox Church to the new Greek patriarch; the mausoleum of Mehmed II; and of course images of the Conqueror himself.

**The Success of Commemorations** in 1953, combined with the evident importance of Constantinople’s conquest in Turkish public memory now sixty years later, stands in distinct contrast to the fact that for other nations the imperial heritage has posed a significant problem: its commemoration no longer remains integral to public identification with the nation. In fact, commemoration of events associated with now-vanished empires is not common. For the modern nation-state, post-imperial memory constitutes a very real challenge: the legacy of empire rarely provides reason to celebrate. Dozens of countries from Latin America to East Asia that attained independence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries explicitly frame national identity in distinct opposition to the imperial domination that they experienced for decades, even centuries. In these cases, imperial history, in which they had no choice but to participate, constitutes a foil against which is set a narrative of struggle that ultimately leads to national liberation. Naturally this narrative includes seminal moments that the new nation-state identifies as worthy of celebration, and national holidays commemorate not the imperial legacy, but only those events connected to the nation’s newfound independence. In this case, imperial history is accorded little if any positive place in the new public memory.

Muslims from around the world to coincide with the quincentenary. The Turkish government refused to permit such an event. *Vatan* (Istanbul), April 29, 1953. Small conferences marking the date took place at McGill University in Canada and at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies. Runciman, Lewis, et al., *The Fall of Constantinople*; Cunbur, “İstanbul’un 500üncü Yıldönümü Dolayısıyla Tertiplenen Sergilere, Yapılan Kültür, San’at ve Neşriyat Hareketlerine Dair,” 270. Turkish newspapers also took some pleasure in noting how the anniversary was recognized in Arab countries. *Cumhuriyet* (Istanbul), June 1, 1953; *Yeni Sabah* (Istanbul), May 30 and June 2, 1953.

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80 Already in 1951, Aydın Arakon had produced the film *Istanbul’un Fethi*, which was in theaters again in 1953.

81 *Cumhuriyet* (Istanbul), May 9, 1953. Copies of these were included in a special 500th-anniversary issue of *Resimli Hayat*.

82 A rejection of empire is not the only theme that infuses national celebrations, but it is present in almost every case, whether implicitly or explicitly. Scholarly analysis of national commemorations is informed by the rich theoretical foundation of studies of nationalism as an imagined or invented tradition—a foundation laid by such prominent scholars as Benedict Anderson, Prasenjit Duara, Eric
Modern states that themselves were once imperial powers also cultivate public memory that is hardly any more likely to incorporate the imperial past into the national historical narrative. Painfully embarrassing atrocities and episodes of oppression overshadow what were once glorious imperial narratives. These nations must now wrestle with such truths in light of the bitter critiques that emerged in the context of decolonization and subsequent postcolonial analyses. To be sure, many people in these countries still cling to sanitized versions of history, while governments have not entirely given up on trying to preserve a degree of imperial dignity that justifies exerting influence over territories they once controlled: the British Commonwealth and the Organisation international de la Francophonie are but the most obvious examples of this.

So too former metropoles such as London, Paris, and Berlin are home to museums that pay tribute to their earlier economic and military power: they commemorate men who died upholding empire, and they proudly display archaeological artifacts that former subjects now seek to repatriate to their rightful homes. Nevertheless, the pomp and circumstance that once accompanied this im-


84 They too have their own days of celebration: Commonwealth Day (the second Monday in March) and Journée internationale de la Francophonie (March 20).

perial dominance are gone, and these countries, too, now celebrate only national holidays. Empire Day, a prominent event in early-twentieth-century Britain, is no more than a faint memory of the past.86

That major milestones such as quincentenaries are no more conducive to celebration was abundantly evident in 1992, when colonizers and colonized alike had the rare opportunity to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s voyages across the Atlantic and so-called discovery of, or encounter with, the Americas. So widespread was the impact of the events of 1492 that five centuries later, their commemoration involved many countries on both sides of the Atlantic. As is their wont, governments sought to use history for the purpose of current agendas, even as debates raged about not only how but whether 1492 should be celebrated.87 Commemorative events unfolded variously, according to specific issues current in each country: in the United States and Mexico, organizing committees struggled with public controversy to the point that their efforts were largely eclipsed, while more successful celebrations in Spain and the Dominican Republic were followed by widespread criticism that they hardly justified the vast expenditures of money incurred by government.88

Quite apart from the efforts of government, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic seized on the anniversary to thoroughly revise historical interpretations of Columbus and European expansion into the Americas—this in distinct contrast to the hagi-

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87 The U.S. government was not very engaged in the anniversary once it established a committee to oversee events. An interesting point of comparison and example of the complex ways governments try to manipulate the past for present purposes is the centenary celebrations in Mexico in 1911. Michael J. Gonzales, “Imagining Mexico in 1910: Visions of the Patria in the Centennial Celebration in Mexico City,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 39, no. 3 (August 2007): 495–533. By contrast, Jamaica’s 300th anniversary of British rule in 1955 became caught up with the government’s own immediate agenda related to tourism, and debates over national identity and independence. Rather ironically, it opened the door for a neocolonial relationship between Jamaica and the United States. Howard Johnson, “The ‘Jamaica 300’ Celebrations of 1955: Commemoration in a Colonial Polity,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26, no. 2 (May 1998): 120–137.

graphic tone that had characterized commemorations in 1892.\textsuperscript{89} Much had changed over a century, and in 1992 there was a pervasive critique of Columbus’s personality.

and of the impact of European empire upon the indigenous populations of the Americas. In Latin America, intellectuals who had long challenged the benefits of colonialism saw little reason to commemorate the anniversary. By the 1990s, many scholars in North America and Europe had also adopted this perspective. All in all, those who identified 1992 as worthy of commemoration “set out to celebrate an imperial past but found themselves confronting difficult questions about the rise of colonialism, the destruction of Native American societies, and the disruption of biological habitats throughout the globe.” In light of the controversy that surrounded this one signal event, it is little wonder that European empire, increasingly the object of scholarly scrutiny, is rarely the subject of public celebration today.

Commemoration of Constantinople’s conquest is the exception that proves the rule. The quincentenary of 1453 turned out not to be an isolated event. Rather, a commemorative tradition was established—one that in recent decades has become more elaborate and more popular. Moreover, it has been integrated into Turkey’s political pageantry. In 1953, critics faulted the government for failing to capitalize on the importance of a unique anniversary; the prime minister and president even declined to participate. Two decades later, in 1975, a religious nationalist movement, National Outlook (Milli Görüş), launched its own separate commemorations, implicitly finding fault with the annual celebrations sponsored by the Istanbul Conquest Association since 1953. Its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, later became head of the religiously oriented Welfare Party, which made much of its “reconquest” of...
Istanbul in municipal elections in 1994. In the context of intense debate about the place of Islam in Turkey, the secular establishment was alarmed when two years later the Welfare Party became the leading partner in a national coalition government.\textsuperscript{95} Within a year, Erdal had been forced to resign as prime minister, but not before he had defied his critics by choosing to commemorate May 29, 1997, with a dramatic descent into Istanbul’s İnönü Stadium in a helicopter.\textsuperscript{96} According to one observer, Erdal, who was dressed in white and demanded that the Hagia Sophia be turned into a mosque once again, reminded his audience of none other than Mehmed the Conqueror himself.\textsuperscript{97}

Thus, the May 29 celebrations that year became a point of contention in the ongoing struggle between the secular military and Islamist politicians.\textsuperscript{98} At a ceremony outside the city walls, Erdal’s protégé, Mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, used the opportunity to publicly challenge the military’s role in Turkey’s politics. He told those gathered that he prayed for divine restoration of the same religious freedoms established by Mehmed II; while in response, Yavuz Kadir Dağ, the ranking officer, spoke of the importance of the military to protecting Atatürk’s secular, democratic state. The next year, in 1998, the governor of Istanbul refused to give permission to the youth association associated with Erdal (Milli Gençlik Vakfı) to commemorate the anniversary: thus celebrations were moved to a stadium in the northwestern Anatolian city of Sakarya.\textsuperscript{99}

These events were characteristic of the decades of political turmoil finally brought to an end by the electoral victory of the new Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma) in November 2002. As its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan vaulted from mayor of Istanbul to prime minister, beginning a lengthy tenure during which he has succeeded in minimizing the influence of the secular elite and the military in the affairs of government.\textsuperscript{100} More than that, as he has consolidated his


\textsuperscript{96} On February 28, 1997, the Turkish military intervened in Turkish politics through the National Security Council to force Erdal’s resignation later that year in June. In the years before his death in February 2011, Erdal continued to use May 29 as an opportunity to practice Islamist politics even though he had lost most of his influence. Appearing in stadiums at ceremonies organized by the Anatolian Youth Association (Anadolu Gençlik Vakfı), he played to the crowd, even calling for new “conquests.” Vatan (Istanbul), May 31, 2009; El-Aziz (Istanbul), May 31, 2010; Milli Gazete (Istanbul), June 6, 2010. For a description of 2011 celebrations in which Erdal’s legacy was emphasized, see Milli Gazete (Istanbul), May 30, 2011.

\textsuperscript{97} Milliyet (Istanbul), May 30, 1997. The demand concerning the Hagia Sophia had been made previously by the Association of the Nationalists of Turkey (Türkiye Milliyetçiler Derneği) prior to the quincentenary. Vîcdan Sesi (Samsun), October 29, 1952; Köroğlu (Istanbul), July 16, 1952. On this occasion, with Erdal as prime minister, the Ministry of Culture also allowed celebrations to take place at Rumeli Hisarı, the fortress originally built in 1452. In previous years, requests to hold events here had been denied.


\textsuperscript{100} Erdoğan was the mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998 before being banned from politics by the National Security Court. After its electoral victory, the Justice and Development Party used its majority to alter the law, thus enabling Erdoğan to enter the Grand National Assembly and assume the role of prime minister. On Erdoğan’s early political career, see Jenny B. White, Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics (Seattle, 2002), 137–148.
power, he himself has begun to manipulate public memory of the conquest of Constantinople while facing criticism for interfering with official commemorations of republican anniversaries associated with Atatürk. It was his government that initiated the 1453 Panorama Museum. In 2012, Erdoğan curiously decided that May 29 celebrations would not occur in the traditional location outside the city wall: instead, a series of events, including a “victory walk” to the Hagia Sophia, would take place in the heart of the Sultanahmet tourist district. Meanwhile, not coincidentally, on that same day he delivered a speech at the opening of Mehmed the Conqueror’s newly refurbished mosque, later announcing plans to construct yet another massive mosque. Situated on the opposite side of the city above Istanbul’s Asian shore and visible from all parts of the city, this mosque will rival both the Hagia Sophia and the city’s majestic Ottoman architecture. In 2013, the prime minister again seized on the anniversary, this time to officially announce the construction of a third bridge across the Bosphorus. It is to be named after Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–1520), whose reign, although brief, was notable for Ottoman ascendancy over a rival empire in Iran and subsequent Ottoman expansion into the Arab world.

For all that political parties began to manipulate the Ottoman legacy in accordance with their own ideologies after 1953, the formal political rehabilitation of the Ottoman Empire that has allowed Prime Minister Erdoğan to capitalize on public memory associated with the conquest of Constantinople did not occur until after a military coup in 1980. Initially “neo-Ottomanism” reflected official recognition that Kemalism alone could not resolve decades of intense social tension and public strife in Turkey. Since 1980, it has taken many forms. At the popular level,

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101 Erdoğan was faulted for restricting ceremonies on May 19 and October 29, 2012. He was reportedly the first prime minister not to attend commemorative ceremonies marking Atatürk’s death on November 10 of the same year. Milliyet (Istanbul), May 19, 2012; Hürriyet Daily News (Istanbul), November 10, 2012; Cumhuriyet (Istanbul), October 30, 2012.

102 The large-scale celebrations at night on the Golden Horn also took place. The same applied in May 2013. Radikal (Istanbul), May 29, 2012; Hurriyet Daily News (Istanbul), May 31, 2012.

103 Rarely have Turkish prime ministers or presidents formally participated in May 29 commemorations. Typically they have issued statements to the press emphasizing the importance of Constantinople’s conquest to world history. An exception to this rule was May 1958, when both Prime Minister Menderes and President Bayar attended the opening of Rumeli Hisarı on the occasion of the anniversary. Sultan Selim I’s army defeated that of the Safavid Shah Ismail at the Battle of Chaldiran in August 1514, before proceeding to conquer much of the Arab Middle East—including the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt—beginning in 1516. In Turkey, Selim I is also known for his suppression of heterodox Muslim groups in eastern Anatolia, and the decision to name the new bridge after him contributed to widespread opposition and protests against the government in May–June 2013.


Istanbul’s “MiniaTurk” heritage park has been enthusiastically welcomed, while a television series, *The Magnificent Century* (*Muhteşem Yüzyıl*), became the talk of the country in 2011.107 In Istanbul, neo-Ottomanism embodies popular and scholarly discourses of multiculturalism and tolerance that have accompanied its development as a truly global city.108 In the realm of foreign affairs, it speaks to a policy of positive engagement with Turkey’s immediate neighbors, although some argue that this constitutes an irredentist permutation of Turkish nationalism, a poorly disguised effort to reassert the influence of the former “Turkish” Ottoman Empire.109 Finally, in terms of Turkey’s politics, neo-Ottomanism is indelibly associated with the rise of political Islam in the 1990s, and more recently with the dominance of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party.110

While the evident importance accorded May 29 in public memory in recent years no doubt can be understood as a product of this neo-Ottoman turn in Turkish politics, the quincentenary celebrations of 1953 demonstrate that commemorations since 1980 are not merely the result of the intersection of globalization, resurgent religious politics, and refashioned nationalism.111 On the contrary, such an emphasis upon the present obscures the reality that commemoration of Constantinople’s conquest has a genealogy reaching further back. Remembering 1453 is not a recent phenomenon, and the themes associated with it are not novel. Nevertheless, the act of commemoration itself now carries a very different significance than it did sixty years ago.

The year 1953 proved particularly important to the reification of the Kemalist narrative even as the quincentenary validated the significance of the imperial legacy to a popular national identity. Five months after the celebrations, Turks participated in another unique commemoration with the dedication of Atatürk’s mammoth mausoleum (the Anıtkabir) in Ankara. Multi-party politics after World War II had raised the possibility that Turks might reject Kemalism, but in 1951 the Grand National


107 A study sensitive to popular engagement of the imperial past is Michael E. Meeker,*A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif., 2002).


109 A form of Turkish nationalism, it should be noted, that was rejected by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

110 The literature on Islamism in Turkey is extensive. Among particularly useful recent works are Kemal H. Karpat,*The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (Oxford, 2001); White,*Islamist Mobilization in Turkey*; M. Hakan Yavuz,*Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford, 2003); Zeyno Baran,*Torn Country: Turkey between Secularism and Islamism* (Stanford, Calif., 2010); Banu Elığür,*The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge, 2010).

Assembly captured widespread popular sentiment when it passed a law making it illegal to publicly criticize the nation’s “eternal leader.” So it was that Atatürk remained enshrined in public memory even as Mehmed the Conqueror was declared his equal. Commemoration of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in fact contributed to the nationalist milieu de mémoire, thus enabling it to survive in the midst of future decades characterized by intense political turmoil. Quincentenary celebrations, therefore, consolidated the place of 1453 in an emerging public memory of the Turkish nation’s history that originally had been fashioned in response to the birth of the new republic.

By contrast, the commemorative tradition born in 1953 has assumed new meaning and even greater relevance in the post–Cold War years. The 1980 coup ushered in a new era characterized by increasing challenges to Kemalist certainties. These included the unprecedented prominence of political Islam, an assertive and often violent Kurdish nationalism, and the embarrassing failure of successive governments to attain Turkish inclusion within the European Union and its predecessors. The very idea of a singular Turkish identity was called into question as public discourse began to acknowledge the reality of multiple religious and ethnic identities among the people. Most dramatically of all, there even emerged a debate among historians concerning the deeply controversial question of whether the near-decimation of the Christian population during World War I constituted genocide. In short, the long-accepted Turkish historical narrative became a site of contest as memories of the trauma associated with nation-building began to be explored. As a result, Kemalist nationalism is no longer sacrosanct, and Turkey has entered into what remains an unresolved “identity crisis.”

As Pierre Nora has explained, sooner or later modern nations experience a crisis in which the underlying linear historical narrative is called into question. Especially in a country of singular memory—as contrasted with the plural memories and diverse traditions underlying a country such as the United States—this study of history “cannot be an innocent operation.” The development of a critical historical tradition


113 After much delay and controversy, a conference on this subject was held at Istanbul’s Bilgi University in September 2005. See İmparatorluk Çöküş Döneminde Osmanlı Ermenileri (Istanbul, 2011).

becomes inherently subversive, and hence threatening. As if in response, however, public memory is remarkably resilient, and societies respond to the iconoclasm and irreverence of the new history by elevating particular sites or lieux de mémoire to unprecedented levels of importance. In the case of Turkey, the popularity of the commemorative culture surrounding Constantinople’s conquest illustrates this transformation. The nationalist milieu de mémoire is on the verge of dissolution, but the intensity of public identification with May 29 in Turkey has only increased. The result is that a coherent serial narrative has been replaced by a nostalgic devotion to museums, monuments, and festivals dedicated to a moment onto which Turks can project the ideals they associate with their nation.

To be sure, not all Turks accept the mythology that surrounds the conquest of Constantinople, but public criticism has been limited largely to excesses and exaggerations. Thus, as a post-nationalist historiography has begun to probe the past and reject the creed of national homogeneity, the legacy of Ottoman inclusive cultural pluralism in particular has assumed tremendous popular appeal. Despite the sad irony that quincentenary celebrations were followed in 1955 by intense anti-Greek riots in Istanbul, and the fact that expressions of nationalism in Turkey have often been resolutely intolerant of minorities, official statements associated with May 29 commemorations have consistently stressed the rich multicultural nature of the history of the Turkish nation. In this case, commemoration serves not only to put to rest the uncertainties of modernity, but to “sanitize” further the messy history that is part of the nation-state.

When Prime Minister Erbakan addressed the crowds in İnönü Stadium on May 29, 1997, he stressed that Turks had an obligation to follow Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror’s example and struggle for a “new world” in which not only Islam but also peace and justice would prevail. In so doing, he echoed a theme that had a significant genealogy: rooted in the nineteenth century, the idea that the conquest of Constantinople had been part of the Turkish nation’s contribution to world history had been front and center at official public celebrations in 1953, when Turks embarked on their ten days of celebration associated with that moment’s 500th anniversary.

The quincentenary, therefore, established a commemorative tradition that continues to resonate six decades later. Even as commemoration has served different purposes, certain themes have endured at the center of a public memory that infuses

115 The same applies to the development of critical historiography in France. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 10.
116 For example, the criticisms of Mustafa Armağan, Murat Belge, and Baki Tezcan: Tarıf (Istanbul), March 29, 2009; Zaman (Istanbul), February 19, 2012; biamag, March 3, 2012, http://bianet.org/biamag/sanat/156647-feth-2012. It must also be said that among Turkish historians there is a concern to examine the history of 1453 in a more critical manner. Feridun Emecn, İstanbul’un Fethi Olayı ve Meseleri (Istanbul, 2003); Emecn, Feth ve Kıyamet, 1453 (Istanbul, 2012); Erdoğan Aydın, Fatih ve Fetih: Mitler-Gerçekler (Istanbul, 1997).
117 Fatma Müge Göçek, “Defining the Parameters of a Post-Nationalist Turkish Historiography through the Case of the Anatolian Armenians,” in Kieser, Turkey beyond Nationalism, 85–103.
118 Frank Tachau, “The Face of Turkish Nationalism as Reflected in the Cyprus Dispute,” Middle East Journal 13, no. 3 (Summer 1959): 262–272. For example, statements by President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Zaman (Istanbul), May 29, 2010. Prime Minister Erdoğan also officiated at the opening of the 1453 Panorama Museum on January 31, 2009.
The first theme is the personification of the nation, the embodiment of national ideals in men central to the narrative of 1453. Two stand out: Ulubatlı Hasan, remembered as the man who died flag in hand as he led troops over the city walls; and Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. The former became immortalized in popular lore as a giant, fearless man who sacrificed himself for the sake of the nation. He was someone with whom the common Turk might identify, although ironically, as a Janissary he was almost certainly one of the many Ottoman soldiers who were not of Turkish origin. The latter was remembered as a brilliant, determined leader who had ingeniously solved the problems facing Turkish forces laying siege to the city: he designed the fortress known as Rumeli Hisarı on the Bosporus, he carried out the ballistic calculations necessary for the huge cannons used to breach the walls, and he himself devised the scheme to haul ships from the Bosporus into the Golden Horn. It was on account of these achievements that Mehmed II was able to do what no other commander laying siege to the city had been able to do before: lead the Turkish nation to launch an assault from all sides, and ultimately to conquer Constantinople.

A second theme emphasizes that this success belonged to a Muslim Turkish nation. Prior to 1953, there had been intense debate about the place of Islam in Turkish society, and the appropriate nature of the secular state. Consequently, the elevation of the sultan to the status of national hero alongside Atatürk addressed the palpable tension in Turkey concerning the legacy of secularism. Mehmed II has been remembered as the very paragon of Muslim virtue, following the advice of spiritual advisers confident that he would be the one to lead his nation to fulfill the Prophet’s hadith concerning the ultimate conquest of Constantinople. His first act upon entering the city was to visit the great Hagia Sophia, to pray, and to announce that the church would be a mosque from that point forward. The popular narrative of Constantinople’s conquest presents Turkish soldiers laying siege to Constantinople as pious men, fighting as holy warriors or gazi, and dying the deaths of martyrs. The word used to describe this monumental moment in Islamic history is fetih—a term of Arabic origin, pregnant with meaning. Thus the victory was the result of a triumphant Muslim Turkish spirit, in distinct contrast to the fate that befell the Christian defenders of the city. Prior to the final assault, the Christian population had beseeched God, calling out for mercy. Then in the final hours they had taken refuge in the Hagia Sophia, believing in a legend that predicted that help would come in the form of an

120 Namık Kemal and Ahmed Muhtar Paşa appear to have been the first Ottoman historians to introduce the person of Ulubatlı Hasan, presumably inspired by references to the account provided by the Austrian Orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall in his Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches: Von der Gründung des osmanischen Reiches bis zur Eroberung Constantinopels, 1300–1453 (Pest, 1827). Today at the Istanbul Panorama Museum, visitors are greeted by an imposing actor dressed up as Ulubatlı Hasan. More recently scholars have begun to question his place in the narrative. Resmi Tarih Mecmuası 51 (May 1953): 2260–2262; M. Çağatay Uluçay, Ulubatlı Hasan (Istanbul, 1959); Erol Abasız, Istanbul’un Fethi ve Ulubatlı Hasan (Istanbul, 2004); Feridun M. Emecen, “Menkıbe-Tarih İlişkisinin Çarpıcı bir Örneği İstanbul’un Fethinde Surlara İlk Çikanın Kimliği Meselesi,” in Yüksek Mimar Dr. I. Aydın Yüksel’e Armağan, 251–260.


122 The Turkish fetih derives from the Arabic fataha, which denotes both victory and “opening.” Thus the very first sura in the Qur’an is titled al-fātiha, “the beginning.”
angel and drive the Turks out of the city. Such a miracle did not occur, and no sooner had Mehmed the Conqueror occupied Constantinople than he set about establishing it as Istanbul, soon to be synonymous with the richness and greatness of Islamic civilization.

123 Cahid Okurer, Büyük Fetih (Istanbul, 1953); Tübentçi, İstanbul’un Kapılarında.
More than this, however, the third theme in the narrative stakes a claim to 1453 as the pivotal event in world history. It explicitly refutes the longstanding European notion that the fall of Constantinople spelled disaster for the civilized European world. On the contrary, Turkish public memory imagines that prior to 1453, the history of Christian Europe had been characterized by violence and bloodshed, fanatical reaction and bigotry, as well as by the mutual interference of government and religious institutions in each other’s affairs.124 Understood in this context, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in fact had paved the way for Europe to escape these problems and to progress along the path to religious reform, enlightenment, and ultimately the emergence of individual nations. The Turkish nation, from its inception a beacon of tolerance, had pursued rational knowledge alongside religious faith, and its triumph in 1453 initiated a process of cultural interchange that was essential to the future success of Western civilization. In short, the conquest of Constantinople was not so much a military triumph as a victory for all of humankind, resulting in the spread of freedom and equality throughout Europe.125

Again, it is the person of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror who embodies these ideals. Compared to the devastation that had accompanied the Fourth Christian Crusader conquest of the city in 1204, his victory represented the very model of civility and humanity.126 He had offered the Byzantine emperor Constantine XI the opportunity to surrender and avoid bloodshed prior to the final battle, and contrary to the expectations of the residents of the city, he demonstrated admirable concern that they be treated humanely immediately after their defeat.127 The sultan was magnanimous toward the thousands of Byzantine subjects who took refuge in the Hagia Sophia, and thereafter he appointed a new patriarch over the Greek Orthodox community. Declaring his commitment to religious freedom, Mehmed the Conqueror thus established the foundation for what would eventually become the millet system, by which minority religious rights were protected within the Ottoman Empire.128 Consequently, public memory in Turkey recalls that not only did the city’s Greek

124 Cumhuriyet (Istanbul), May 10, 26, 29, and 30, 1953; Halkın Sesi (Zonguldak), May 28, 1953; Vatan (Istanbul), May 30 and 31, 1953.
125 Hıtal (Tarsus), May 15, 22, and 29, 1953; Yeni Sabah (Istanbul), May 29, 1953.
127 Whether the looting and pillaging in fact lasted the three days allowed by Islamic law is the subject of debate. Most Ottoman sources, concerned no doubt to present Mehmed II as a pious sultan, emphasize that it did. Scholars, however, suggest otherwise. Runciman, The Fall of Constantinople, 1453, 145–159; Halil Inalcik, “The Policy of Mehmed II toward the Greek Population of Istanbul and the Byzantine Buildings of the City”; Babinger, Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time, 92–98; Aydin, Fatih ve Fethi, 167–183.
128 Cumhuriyet (Istanbul), May 8 and 23, 1953; Çinaraltı (Istanbul), May 26, 1948; Vatan (Istanbul), May 29, 1953; Gündüz (Giresun), May 29, 1953; Yeni Sabah (Istanbul), May 26, 1953. This idealized version of the origins of the Millet System (which was not formalized until much later) is captured well in a publication produced not only in Turkish but also in English and French at the time of the quincentenary: Ismail Hami Danisman, The Importance of the Conquest of Istanbul for Mankind and Civilization (Istanbul, 1953); Feridun Dirimtekin, Istanbul after the Conquest According to Foreign Travellers (Istanbul, 1953); Babinger, Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time, 104–105, 436–437. Historians are increasingly focusing on the varying experiences of minorities in the Ottoman Empire, and the literature is growing rapidly. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society, 2 vols. (London, 1982); Dean Sakel, “Three Tales for a Sultan? Three Tales on Mehmed the Conqueror and Patriarch Gennadius,” British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 35, no. 2 (August 2008): 227–238.
population reject a last-minute union between the Byzantine and Roman churches in return for assistance, but the monk Gennadius—soon to become the Greek patriarch—even announced that he would rather submit to the Turks than to the pope. It thus fell to the Turks to deliver a Greek population trapped in the Middle Ages and longing for freedom and enlightenment.

Public commemoration of Constantinople’s conquest since 1953 suggests the enduring appeal of these themes to the modern Turkish nation. The appropriation of the imperial past to the national present is one means by which Turks have navigated the uncertainties accompanying the negotiation of their nation for more than half a century. It is hardly surprising that 2012 witnessed the screening of the most expensive and most popular film in Turkish history. The title was Conquest 1453 (Fetih 1453), and its content is faithful to the themes that emerged in the nineteenth century before being clearly articulated in 1953. These enabled both Ottoman elites and Turkish citizens to locate their imperial nation in world history. Then, as political and social change has called into question the Turkish national narrative in recent years, Turks have reiterated the underlying public memory through a culture of commemoration. At the time of the quincentenary, the world historian Arnold Toynbee and the American publication Freedom & Union called on the world to rejoice that the Turk—personified in both Atatürk and Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror—now stood guard over Istanbul ready to contribute to the ideal of human unity. It is a sentiment with which few Turks would disagree today.

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129 Not surprisingly, the lead character is Ulubatlı Hasan.

130 This was the publication associated with Clarence K. Streit, who promoted international cooperation and even political union among democracies for the purpose of ensuring peace. According to Streit, the “terrible Turk” of 1923 had become the “terrific Turk” by 1953: “his story is already a most inspiring one for all who believe in the vast possibilities of human freedom, or struggle against great odds. They can rejoice that he stands guard [over] Istanbul.” Streit, “Turkey’s 500 Years at Constantinople,” Freedom & Union 8, no. 5 (May 1953): 26–27. Arnold Toynbee, who shared much in common with Streit, was also a contributor to Freedom & Union. Having been a fierce critic of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, Toynbee went on to become a great proponent of Atatürk and the Turkish Republic, as was evident in comments in his BBC Reith Lectures delivered between November 16 and December 21, 1952. His comments on Turkey came in his second lecture, on November 23, Toynbee, Civilization on Trial and The World and the West (New York, 1957), 253. Needless to say, Greeks took a rather different approach to the quincentenary, something that the Turkish government followed with interest: BCA 030.01.103.644.7 (May 30, 1953).