


## OBITUARY

# In memory of Zafer Toprak: pioneering scholar of economic and social history of the late Ottoman and early Republican periods

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It is with heavy hearts that we mourn the passing of Zafer Toprak, a distinguished academic specializing in the economic and social history of the late Ottoman and early Republican periods in Turkey. On June 3, 2023, we bid farewell to this remarkable scholar. As his friends and colleagues, we had the privilege of presenting him with a *festschrift* entitled *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Süreklilik ve Değişim: Zafer Toprak Armağanı* (Continuity and Change from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic: Festschrift for Zafer Toprak; Alkan 2022) on his 76th birthday, April 29, 2022. This served as a symbolic gesture to express our profound gratitude for his exceptional dedication to the Economic and Social History Foundation of Turkey (Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı), Yurt Publications (the very bedrock upon which our Foundation stands), the journal *Toplumsal Tarih* (Social History), as well as his extensive scholarly contributions to the field of history, the academic community, our vibrant cultural landscape, and, above all, the indelible influence he has had on our lives.

In the foreword of this *festschrift*, I suggested that it would be fitting to describe him as a “democratic Kemalist,” given his deep veneration and unwavering commitment to the Republic of Turkey and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Upon reading this, he acknowledged that he had encountered this term for the first time; associating it with himself, he conveyed his pleasure with such an identification.

Our perspectives on the late Ottoman Empire and the founding era of the Republic diverged, prompting regular deliberations revolving around İttihat ve Terakki (the Committee of Union and Progress; CUP), the National Struggle, and the Single-Party regime. Within this framework, we approached leaders including Enver Pasha, Talat Pasha, Atatürk, and İsmet İnönü from distinct vantage points, as well as the historical events associated with them. For instance, what he referred to as “nationalism” aligned with what I perceived as “racism.” Similarly, his understanding of “establishing order” resonated with my interpretation of “authoritarianism.” Nevertheless, we gained significant insight from engaging in discussions that

showcased our divergent perspectives, as these interactions broadened our horizons. During the editorial board meetings of *Toplumsal Tarih*, we relished engaging in light-hearted banter with one another.

Zafer Toprak distinguished himself as one of the notable scholars who approached Atatürk's era from a critical standpoint while remaining committed to Kemalism. He challenged conventional historical narratives by asserting that the beginning of the Republic's historical journey could be traced back to July 23, 1908 (the Young Turk Revolution in the Empire), rather than the commonly acknowledged dates of May 19, 1919 (the Turkish War of Independence, initiated by Atatürk's landing in the city of Samsun) or April 23, 1920 (the inauguration of the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara, which served as the legislative body during the War of Independence). According to his meticulous analysis, this pivotal moment extended until 1950, illustrating the continuities between the CUP and the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*; CHP). Toprak extensively examined the intricate relationship between the Empire and the Republic, skillfully highlighting both the continuities and ruptures. In his influential work, *Atatürk: Kurucu Felsefenin Evrimi* (Atatürk: The Evolution of the Founding Philosophy; Toprak 2020), he delved into the intellectual essence of Mustafa Kemal and explored how his ideas shaped the foundational principles of the Republic, including the empowerment of women, the promotion of secularism, the pursuit of nationalization, and the spirit of revolutionary ideals.

Toprak emerges as a distinguished and proud self-taught protégé of Tarık Zafer Tunaya, a pioneering figure in the field of late Ottoman and early Republican historiography. Carrying forth the torch of his mentor, Toprak achieved remarkable breakthroughs by exploring the dynamics of political continuity and ruptures between the constitutional monarchy and the Republic within an economic framework. His seminal work, *Türkiye'de Milli İktisat 1908-1918* (National Economy in Turkey 1908-1918; Toprak 2019), first published in 1982, stands unrivalled in its comprehensive breadth and profound depth. This *magnum opus* by Toprak holds immense theoretical and methodological significance, having introduced the pivotal term "national economy." It has solidified its place as a cornerstone in the scholarly landscape of Turkish history, akin to the notable works of Tunaya's (2015) *Türkiye'de Siyasi Partiler* (Political Parties in Turkey) and Mete Tunçay's (2019) *Türkiye'de Sol Akımlar* (Left Currents in Turkey).

Toprak's books, *Milli İktisat-Milli Burjuvazi* (National Economy and National Bourgeoisie; Toprak 1995b) and *İttihat-Terakki ve Devletçilik* (The Committee of Union and Progress and Statism; Toprak 1995a), offer significant contributions to our scholarly understanding of the development of bourgeois ideology during the Second Constitutional Era, as well as the emergence of modern capitalist financial institutions, commercialization, and monetary policies in the Empire. These works, along with Toprak's comprehensive study, *İttihat-Terakki ve Cihan Harbi* (The Committee of Union and Progress and the World War; Toprak 2016), which explores the implementation of this prevailing bourgeois ideology, particularly under challenging wartime conditions, collectively illuminate the origins of the capitalist-statist-development project pursued during the Republican era.

The discussions regarding the national economy, the creation of a national bourgeoisie, and the capitalist-statist-development project provide invaluable insights into the institutional and social transformations that shaped the experience

of the Republic, rooted within the institutional legacy of the Tanzimat period. Recognizing the paramount importance of the national economy debate is imperative for scholars engaged in political economy, social history, or economic history, investigating the Second Constitutional Era or the early Republican period. This notion provides the essential groundwork for conducting thorough research in these areas, facilitating a nuanced comprehension of the socio-economic dynamics and historical advancements during these critical epochs.

The discipline of history has emerged as a specialized field dedicated to the study and understanding of the past, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. It serves as both an endeavor and a methodology to provide context for ongoing political and social debates, enabling a clearer understanding and positioning within these discourses. Zafer Toprak's extensive body of work covers a wide range of topics, spanning from the working class in the Empire to discussions on anthropology and racism during the early Republican period, as well as populism in both the late Empire and the Republic. Notably, these studies exemplify the valuable contributions that a scholar can make to public discourse within their respective fields.

Taking a closer look at Toprak's work reveals a notable emphasis on the significance of modernization and the Enlightenment tradition. Furthermore, his studies transcend the ambiguous dichotomies often present in the social sciences, such as Ottoman–Republican, continuity–interruption, agriculture–industry, secularism–religion, and modernization–tradition. Instead, he adopts a more holistic approach, incorporating macro–micro, disciplinary–interdisciplinary, and synchronic–diachronic dimensions.

While Tunaya aptly described the Second Constitutional Monarchy as a political laboratory, Toprak skillfully employed it as an economic and social laboratory. However, Toprak's scholarly pursuits were not limited to a singular focus. Alongside his notable contributions to the field of economic history, he also produced valuable works in the realms of social and political history. His innovative approach revolutionized social history studies, establishing a new dimension within the field. Remarkably, he published pioneering research, particularly in the context of social history, which served as a catalyst for numerous subsequent books, theses, and articles. It is virtually impossible to delve into the final period of the Empire and the early years of the Republic without acknowledging the significant body of work by Zafer Toprak. His notable contributions in this field include “Osmanlı'nın Son Döneminde İstanbul Sokaklarında Marjinaler: Hırsızlar, Dolandırıcılar, Yankesiciler” (*Marginals in the Streets of İstanbul in the Last Decades of The Ottoman Empire: Thieves, Swindlers, Pickpockets*; Toprak 2008), “Meşrutiyet'ten Cumhuriyet'e Müstehcen Avam Edebiyatı” (*Obscene Plebeian Literature from the Constitutional Era to the Republic*; Toprak 1987b), and “İstanbul'da Fuhuş ve Zührevi Hastalıklar 1914–1933” (*Prostitution and Venereal Diseases in İstanbul 1914–1933*; Toprak 1987a), alongside “Osmanlı'da Alafranga Evlenme İlanları” (*European-style Matrimonial Advertisements in the Ottoman Empire*; Toprak 1988c). Furthermore, his works such as “Osmanlı Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyeti, Kadın Askerler ve Milli Aile” (*Ottoman Women's Employment Society, Women Soldiers and the National Family*; Toprak 1988b) and “Halk Fırkası'ndan Önce Kurulan Parti: Kadınlar Halk Fırkası” (*Party Established Before the People's Party: Women's People's Party*; Toprak 1988a), stand as pioneering contributions in the study of women in the Empire. Moreover, his

article titled “Tarihçiliğin Alanı: Jestlerin Tarihi” (The Field of History: The History of Gestures; Toprak 1992) and his contributions to *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Encyclopaedia of İstanbul: from Past to Present), covering topics such as banking, bar associations, the fez boycott, bakeries, brothels, elections, *şehreminis* (municipal administrators), and secretaries, continue to retain their scholarly significance.

Toprak’s significant contributions to the academic and research institutions that he established and served deserve recognition. His instrumental role in training numerous historians within these institutions cannot be overstated. One of his remarkable achievements was his pioneering role in the establishment of the History Department at Boğaziçi University. Under his guidance, Atatürk İlke ve İnkılapları Enstitüsü (Atatürk’s Principles and Revolutions Institute; ATA), also at Boğaziçi, transformed into a reputable institution committed to scientific research rather than mere indoctrination. The collaborative work “*İnkılap Tarihi*” *Dersleri Nasıl Okutulmalı* (How to Teach History of Revolution; Toprak et al. 1997), authored by Toprak, Bülent Tanör, and Halil Berktaş, exemplifies his dedication to scholarly pursuits. The ATA witnessed the production of numerous valuable theses by graduate and doctoral students, a testament to Toprak’s unwavering encouragement of young researchers, academics, and students in their quest for knowledge. His approach was characterized by support, guidance, and facilitation, which fostered an environment conducive to intellectual growth. With an influence that extends beyond the boundaries of academia, Toprak also actively participated in symposiums, conferences, and public speaking engagements, thus broadening intellectual horizons. He possessed an extensive collection comprising a diverse range of resources, which he skillfully utilized in all his presentations. This collection included engravings, photographs, books, and documents, enabling him to enhance the depth and enrich the quality of his academic interactions.

Toprak played a pivotal role as one of the founding members of the History Foundation, demonstrating his unwavering dedication to advancing historical scholarship. Notably, he played a significant part in sustaining Turkey’s longest-running history journal, *Toplumsal Tarih*. His steadfast support for the journal was evident through his active participation in meetings, as well as his valuable contributions in the form of articles and special issue suggestions. Furthermore, he made noteworthy contributions to the publication of other journals and publications such as *Toplum ve Bilim* (Society and Science), *Tarih ve Toplum* (History and Society), *Yurt Ansiklopedisi* (Encyclopaedia of Homeland), *Tanzimat’tan Cumhuriyet’e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi* (Encyclopaedia of Turkey from Tanzimat to the Republic), and *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Encyclopaedia of İstanbul – from Past to Present). These publications have left an indelible mark on Turkey’s cultural landscape, owing in part to Toprak’s invaluable contributions.

Upon examining his bibliography, it becomes evident that Toprak stands as one of the most prolific authors in the field of history, with an impressive repertoire of nearly forty books and close to 400 articles. His contributions span a wide range of subjects, pioneering the exploration of various fields such as economic history, social security history, women’s history, elections, political parties, ideologies, non-governmental institutions, and social history. Toprak’s extensive body of work signifies his exceptional scholarly achievements and his dedication to expanding the boundaries of historical research.

Toprak's writings not only broke new ground in his field but also offered striking perspectives and introduced novel dimensions to the subjects he explored. For instance, writing under the pseudonym Ahmet Seren, he authored notable works such as "Türkiye İşçi Sınıfı ve Tarihte 1 Mayıslar 1906–1925" (The Working Class of Turkey and May Days in History 1906–1925; Toprak 1977b), "İkinci Meşrutiyet'te Solidarist Düşünce: Halkçılık" (Solidarist Thought in the Second Constitutional Monarchy: Populism; Toprak 1977a), "İttihat ve Terakki'nin Paramiliter Gençlik Örgütleri" (Paramilitary Youth Organizations of the Committee of Union and Progress; Toprak 1979), "Türkiye'de Korporatizmin Doğuşu" (The Birth of Corporatism in Turkey; Toprak 1980), and "Osmanlı Narodnikleri: 'Halka Doğru Gidenler'" (Ottoman Narodniks: "Those Who Moved towards the People;" Toprak 1984).

In addition to his extensive body of work, Toprak also delved into the historical analysis of various institutions, shedding light on the economic and financial history of Turkey. His notable contributions in this area include *Sanayileşmede Tarihsel Perspektif: Ulusal Cam Sanayi ve Teknoloji Transferi* (Historical Perspective in Industrialization: National Glass Industry and Technology Transfer; Toprak 1985), *Sümerbank Holding A.Ş.* (Toprak 1990), *Bir Geleceğin Geçmişi - 1948'den 1998'e Akbank Tarihi* (A Future's Past - Akbank History from 1948 to 1998; Toprak 1998), *Ulusaldan Küresele Millî Reasürans T.A.Ş. ve Türkiye'de Reasüransın Evrimi* (From National to Global: Milli Reasürans T.A.Ş. and The Evolution of Reinsurance in Turkey; Toprak 2009), and *Geçmişten Geleceğe Anadolu Sigorta. Türkiye'nin Sigortası* (Anadolu Sigorta: Turkey's Insurance from Past to Future; Toprak 2010). Toprak also made significant contributions to the establishment of several museums, notably *Cumhuriyet'e Doğru 1919-1923: Özgürlük ve Bağımsızlık Yolu* (Towards the Republic 1919-1923: Road to Freedom and Independence; Toprak 2006) and *Cumhuriyet'in İlk Bankası'nın Müzesi* (Museum of the First Bank of the Republic; Toprak 2007).

The examination of modernity's development within the Empire and Republican Turkey serves as a central theme in Zafer Toprak's scholarly pursuits. Within this context, his diverse works explore the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, the formation of modern social classes within this sphere, and the unfolding of various political and social projects. Toprak's publications, such as *Nutuk - Egemenliğe Giden Yol* (Speech - The Road to Sovereignty; Toprak 2021b), *Cumhuriyet ve Antropoloji* (Republic and Anthropology; Toprak 2021a), *Atatürk - Kurucu Felsefenin Evrimi* (Atatürk - Evolution of Founding Philosophy; Toprak 2020), *Türkiye'de Kadın Özgürlüğü ve Feminizm (1908-1935)* (Women's Freedom and Feminism in Turkey [1908-1935]; Toprak 2015), and *Lozan'dan Cumhuriyet'e İsmet İnönü* (İsmet İnönü from Lausanne to the Republic; Toprak 2012), concentrate primarily on the early years of the Republic's establishment. Drawing inspiration from Fahrettin Altay's (2022) book, *On Yıl Savaş ve Sonrası (1912-1922)* (Ten Years of War and After [1912-1922]), Toprak interprets the National Struggle as a decade-long conflict commencing with the 1912 Balkan Wars. His profound respect and unwavering dedication to the Republic and Atatürk position him aptly as a democratic Kemalist.

As a self-taught protégé of Zafer Toprak, the current president of the History Foundation, which we jointly established, and his friend for thirty-five years, I humbly pay homage to his memory. His absence will be deeply felt, and I will greatly miss him . . .

Translated by Özge Çelik

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