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# 27 MAY FREEDOM AND CONSTITUTION DAY IN TURKEY: A CHRONOLOGY OF A FAILED NATIONAL HOLIDAY 1963–1980

Nadav Solomonovich

## Abstract

Despite a growing number of studies on the introduction of new holidays as part of nationalist state-building processes, few have examined the reception and contestation of these holidays by various political groups in their struggle to redefine the state. This article examines the role of national celebrations in redefining Turkish identity and statehood by focusing on a case study of a Turkish national holiday, the 27 May “Freedom and Constitution Day” (*Hürriyet ve Anayasa Bayramı*). It examines the rationale and means for its introduction after the 1960 military coup, as well as its contestation by different societal actors, until it was finally abolished in 1980. It thus highlights the constant negotiation between social and political groups and the state over the nature of Turkish nationalism.

**Keywords:** national celebrations, Turkey, Constitution Day, holidays

## 1. Introduction

On 3 April 1963, the Turkish Parliament passed a law which officially made May 27, the day on which a military coup had been conducted three years earlier, a national holiday entitled “Freedom and Constitution Day” (*Hürriyet ve Anayasa Bayramı*). The law received an overwhelming majority in Parliament and was approved by 291 votes, with only two MPs opposing and one abstaining.<sup>1</sup> In introducing the reasons for this new holiday, the attached explanation to the law stated that when the youth and the military were faced with undemocratic rule, they,

the *protectors* of Turkish independence and the Republic, felt the need to use their right *to resist*, and on 27 May 1960, the Turkish Armed Forces made a noble intervention and used the right of revolution to return to

the principles of revolutionism and *re-establish* the rule of law [...] In this respect, the date of 27 May 1961 [on which a new constitution was published] is a happy day when the Turkish Nation, gathered ‘around the national consciousness and ideals’ and ‘as an indivisible whole that shares its destiny, joy and sorrow,’ left the painful days behind it. Remembrance of today is really important for finding ourselves. By celebrating this day, the Turkish Nation will have tasted and enjoyed a victory that was *won* after great losses.<sup>2</sup>

Although this is a somewhat idyllic description of events, and although the Turkish government did not spare any efforts in promoting this holiday, in reality it was only celebrated by certain groups of the Turkish public, while being fiercely contested by others throughout its existence. In the end, it lasted less than two decades before it was finally abolished. This raises the question: why did the holiday fail? To answer this question, one must first understand the aims, functions, and mechanisms of national celebrations in general, and of Turkish national holidays in particular.

## 2. National celebrations in Turkey

State nationalism as reflected in national celebrations and holidays has been a popular topic of research over the past two decades. According to Elie Podeh, history has shown, particularly since the French Revolution, that new regimes may invent a calendar of celebrations while erasing or significantly changing the previous one. Alternatively, a new regime may keep the old calendar and add new holidays. In such cases the calendar reflects the state’s evolving national narrative. Similar to other invented traditions and symbols used for nation building, the aim of state celebrations is to tie the individual more firmly to his or her territory (“homeland”), political community (“nation”), and the incumbent regime, through the creation of a shared historical past, memory, and values. “The national calendar, in a nutshell, tells the story of the nation, passed on from one generation to the next through holidays. In many ways, the calendar provides a reliable mirror of the core belief system of the nation. Its analysis, therefore, takes us into the very inner mechanics of nation building and state formation.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in her study of nationalist reforms in the early Turkish republic, Hale Yılmaz argues that national celebrations “have been

important instrument of political socialization, legitimacy and mobilization in Turkey," and suggests studying them as "invented traditions" aimed at promoting the formation of Turkish national identity.<sup>4</sup>

According to Arzu Öztürkmen, in addition to religious holidays, there is a long list of "important days" in Turkey that can be classified into four categories. The first and most important category is that of *national holidays*: the opening of the Grand National Assembly by Atatürk in 1920 is celebrated as "National Sovereignty and Children's Day" (*Ulusal Egemenlik ve Çocuk Bayramı*) every 23 April, which also emphasizes the importance of children for the country's future (a point frequently stressed by Atatürk); Atatürk's landing at Samsun on 19 May 1919 is celebrated as "Atatürk's Commemoration and Youth and Sports Day" (*Atatürk'ü Anma, Gençlik ve Spor Bayramı*); the ending of the War of Independence on 30 August 1923 is celebrated as "Victory Day" (*Zafer Bayramı*), and on 29 October 1923 the declaration of the Republic's independence is celebrated as "Republic Day" (*Cumhuriyet Bayramı*). In addition, one must not forget Atatürk's Memorial Day, commemorated on 10 November (*10 Kasım Atatürk'ü Anma Günü*). The second category comprises *other important holidays related to the Republic's reforms* such as Red Crescent Week (*Kızılay Haftası*) and Language Day (*Dil Bayramı*); the third category includes *local holidays with "national significance,"* such as the independence day of a certain locality or a day when Atatürk paid a special visit to a particular town, for example, "the Liberation of Izmir" and "Atatürk's First Visit to Ankara"; and the fourth category is *traditionally celebrated local festivals*.<sup>5</sup>

According to Sara-Marie Demiraz, these national holidays were created to mirror the new Turkish Republic, its values, and its new secular order. Although religious holidays were still celebrated by the public, national holidays and celebrations based on secular ideas and non-religious events were promoted by the Turkish government. Their increasing number underscores the importance Kemalists ascribed to national holidays and memorial days during the early phase of Turkish state building.<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of national holidays in Turkey were established by Atatürk's single-party regime (1923–1938), and most of them revolved around his character or the secular and western reforms he promoted. In the words of Gizem Zencirci, "these national holidays were public displays of the new Turkish nation as cleansed from religious symbols and rituals."<sup>7</sup> While a few of these holidays have received some scholarly attention, as have the new celebrations introduced (or re-introduced) in Turkey since the

1950s,<sup>8</sup> they were usually analyzed from the very limited prism of the state, asking: What did the state try to achieve by introducing these holidays? How did it try to shape or reshape Turkish nationalism, especially in the first two decades of the republic?<sup>9</sup>

While these questions are important, most studies neglect another crucial dimension: the reception of these holidays by the various Turkish publics.<sup>10</sup> Did some communities, such as religious, political, and ethnic groups, challenge certain holidays by not participating or by trying to celebrate them or commemorate the memorialized events differently? Did ethnic or political groups try to promote their own special days and if so, what was the state's reaction?<sup>11</sup> Existing studies also neglect the temporal element of these national holidays, usually focusing on the first couple of decades of the republic, but very rarely asking what happened later: How did national celebrations evolve over time to reflect changing political and social circumstances, such as the rise and fall of various political actors (for example the rise of the Democrat Party in 1950 and that of the Islamic parties since the 1970s)? Were these holidays impacted by the military coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980, and if so, in what way?

Thus, this article investigates two elements of national holidays in Turkey. First, it examines the aims of the holidays and their reception by the public at the time of their introduction, and second, it studies their evolution over time, focusing either on their re-interpretation by the state or on how they were practiced, contested, negotiated, and re-interpreted by the public. This article scrutinizes the "Freedom and Constitution Day," which was first introduced and celebrated after the 1960 coup, but was eventually abolished in 1980. Surprisingly, while there is a vast literature on various aspects of the 1960 coup, very few studies examine the national holiday that was introduced to celebrate it, aimed at unifying the nation and legitimizing the coup.<sup>12</sup> This holiday thus serves as an example of a failed national celebration. To understand why the military felt the need to intervene in civilian politics for the first time in Turkish history, it is necessary first to delve into the background of the 27 May "revolution".

### **3. Historical background to the 1960 coup**

During the late 1950s, the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti – DP*) regime showed increased authoritarianism, limiting the freedom of the press, clashing with university professors, the opposition parties, and the



military.<sup>13</sup> In addition, due to the DP's economic policies, Turkey suffered from hyper-inflation, an acute balance of payments crisis and great shortages of imported consumer goods which affected the daily lives of civil servants and state employees.<sup>14</sup>

İsmet İnönü, the former prime minister and leader of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi – CHP*) was attacked during a tour of the DP heartland in the Aegean, and in early April 1960 troops were used to stop him from holding a meeting in the city of Kayseri. When he refused to turn back, the troops were withdrawn. On 18 April, the Democrats in the assembly decided to establish a committee with wide powers to investigate the activities of the opposition. The committee, composed exclusively of hardline DP members, was to report its findings within three months and during which time all political activity outside the assembly would be banned. Even newspaper reports of assembly debates were now forbidden. The establishment of the investigatory commission was denounced as unconstitutional by law professors at Istanbul and Ankara universities. When disciplinary action was taken against the professors (for engaging in politics), student demonstrations and riots erupted. In response, the government sent the military to suppress the student riots, and as a result a student, Turan Emeksiz from Istanbul University, was shot and killed, and the universities were closed. The use of troops to suppress demonstrations in turn led to a large silent demonstration by cadets of the War Academy through Ankara on 21 May. The press, which under the censorship restrictions could not report on the riots, instead gave extensive coverage to the student demonstrations in Korea, which brought down President Syngman Rhee around this time.<sup>15</sup>

A few days after PM Menderes announced that the "investigation" into military-opposition ties would be published, the military, led by the younger officers, carried out the first coup in Turkish history.<sup>16</sup> The military explained its reasons on national radio:

Honourable fellow countrymen! Owing to the crisis into which our democracy has fallen, in view of the recent sad incidents, and in order to avert fratricide, the Turkish armed forces have taken over the administration of the country. Our armed forces have taken this initiative for the purpose of extricating the parties from the irreconcilable situation into which they have fallen, ... [and will hold] just and free elections as soon as possible under the supervision and arbitration of an above-party administration, ... [They will hand] over the administration to whichever party wins the election.

This initiative is not directed against any person or group. Our administration will not resort to any aggressive act against individuals, nor will it allow others to do so. All fellow-countrymen, irrespective of the parties to which they may belong, will be treated in accordance with the laws.<sup>17</sup>

To prevent abuse of power, as in the case of the Democrat Party, a new liberal constitution was approved in a referendum held on 9 July 1961 by 61% of the votes. This constitution created the Constitutional Court, able to return laws to Parliament if deemed unconstitutional, and established the National Security Council that gave room to military involvement in politics. The constitution also focused on issues such as fundamental rights and freedoms, working life, the right to form a trade union, the right to collective bargaining and strikes, and also allowed extensive freedom of the press and communication and political rights.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of the coup (which was defined by the press as a revolution), the Democrat Party was closed down and its leaders were put on trial for violating the constitution. Many members of the government were sent to prison and fifteen were sentenced to death. However, twelve of the sentences were commuted, but not those of Prime Minister Menderes and his finance and foreign ministers, and they were hanged in September 1961, leaving a legacy of bitterness which was to poison the political atmosphere for years to come. According to the historian Feroz Ahmad, Menderes became a martyr, and his memory was exploited for political ends by virtually every politician and party. The Democrat Party became a part of history, but its political base remained a much-coveted prize by all the neo-Democrat parties. Two such parties were formed in 1961 as soon as political activity was restored. The larger one, the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi* – AP), was led by a retired general with close ties to the junta. In the general election of October 1961, it won almost 35% of the votes, compared to the 36.7% who voted for the CHP, in what some commentators referred to as “a tribute to the power Adnan Menderes continued to exercise from the grave and a vote of censure against the military regime which had ousted him.”<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Commemorating and celebrating 27 May

According to Yael Zerubavel, myths and symbols are created or rediscovered in order to support the hegemonic narrative, but the relationship to them tends to change over time.<sup>20</sup> Zerubavel argued that these myths also preached and promoted the notion of self-sacrifice for the greater good of the state. In return, the state assures the remembrance of personal sacrifice through public commemoration, such as rites (national ceremonies and military funerals), fixed days (memorials), material objects (monuments) and assigned spaces (military cemeteries) that transform the private person into a national symbol.<sup>21</sup> As I will demonstrate below, “Freedom and Constitution Day” included many of these forms of commemoration. One example of the transformation of personal sacrifice to a national symbol is the state’s treatment of the abovementioned Turan Emeksiz and Nedim Özpolat, an Istanbul High School student who died in the demonstrations following 28 April. These two civilians were recognized by the state as “Martyrs of Freedom” [*Hürriyet Şehitleri*], along with a few soldiers who died in the coup, and they were buried in Anıtkabir, Atatürk’s mausoleum in Ankara.<sup>22</sup> The decision to bury the “Martyrs of Freedom” in Anıtkabir, the most sacred place for the secular followers of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was just one of the ways in which his character, ideology and image were used to try to legitimize the coup and the holiday commemorating it. Another example of this connection is evident from the fact that many of the officers who participated in the coup and the journalists and academics who supported it, described it as a “revolution” [*inkılap*, in Turkish], thus linking it to one of the six principles of Kemalism (added to the constitution in February 1937), “revolutionism” [*İnkılâpçılık*].<sup>23</sup> By using the same word, they were able to draw legitimacy from Atatürk’s legacy, arguing that they were implementing his ideology.

According to Turgay Gülpınar, Emeksiz became an important figure in the social memory of the period, and in addition to the building of a monument in his memory at Istanbul University, statues of him were erected in various parts of the country. However, Gülpınar adds, during the 1970s, Emeksiz increasingly became a symbol of the socialist opposition and the government refrained from mentioning him, and after the 1980 military coup, the government tried to erase his memory by renaming places previously named after him.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. Public celebrations

When studying national holidays, one of the basic questions is how these holidays were celebrated in public. Was there an official ceremony and if so, where was it held? Who participated in it and what did it involve? Some files in the Republican Archive, as well as many articles published by the local press at the time, allow us to get a clear view of the way the holiday was celebrated in Ankara, where the main ceremony was held at Anıtkabir, but also in other cities. A ceremony program from 1965 sheds light on the official celebrations. First, it states that the holiday will start on 26 May at noon and would be celebrated until 27 May at midnight. During that period, state offices, institutions, organizations, buildings, cinemas, stores, streets, squares, monuments, and public transportation vehicles should be decorated with flags, adorned with greenery and illuminated at night until the morning of 28 May, thus making the holiday visible in every corner of the public sphere.

The official ceremony was to be held in Anıtkabir and include a visit to the graves of the “Martyrs of Freedom.” The ceremony started at 9 a.m. and was led by the Turkish President, with the participation of the Prime Minister, ministers, the leaders of the various political parties, the head of the Constitutional Court, the Chief of the General Staff, and high-ranking officials and military personnel, university rectors and deans, students and teachers, heads of local and national federations, and other associations.<sup>25</sup> One group is very much absent from the plan, the general public, since it seems that participation in the ceremony was limited to the abovementioned groups, which, as one might guess, did not help the holiday’s popularity. Unfortunately, the program does not describe the ceremony itself in detail, except for the fact that representatives of the abovementioned groups laid wreaths on the graves of Atatürk and the “Martyrs of Freedom.”

After the ceremony, members of the military walked, together with youth groups, to the Hippodrome, where another ceremony took place. This ceremony started at 11 a.m., with a band playing the national anthem while a young officer raised the Turkish flag accompanied by a young girl on his right, and a young male student on his left, thus trying to strengthen the link between the youth and university students to the revolution and the holiday.<sup>26</sup> After the raising of the flag, the ceremony continued with two minutes of silence for the “Martyrs of Freedom,” followed by speeches given by one representative of each of the following

groups: the government, the military, and Turkish youth. The speeches were then followed by the singing of the *Youth March* and the *27 May March* and after that a joint parade was held.<sup>27</sup> According to press reports of the ceremony in previous and subsequent years, this was the general structure or model for ceremonies across the country.<sup>28</sup>

As we will see below, ceremonies in other cities were also held at the same time, thus trying to instill the holiday and the events it commemorated as part of the Turkish national identity, since according to Ben-Amos and Bet-El, “[t]he simultaneous observance of ceremonies also coincided with the modern concept of national time, based on the imaginary unity of the community synchronically commemorating the same historical event in like form.”<sup>29</sup> The singing of the national anthem was also an important aspect since, according to Podeh, the anthem is a formal symbol transferred by music and performance, which also conveys a message of sacredness. It thus helps to give form to an event by marking its opening and closing.<sup>30</sup> Referring to the Jewish commemorative prayer, *Yizkor*, in memorials in Israel, Ben-Amos and Bet-El argue that the ceremonies cannot be considered completely secular affairs and “the very act of employing prayer in the ceremonies bears witness to their religious nature and links them to the historical narrative in which the Jewish people metamorphose from a religious community to a modern national one.”<sup>31</sup> While during the Korean War in the early 1950s memorials included recitation of a prayer for the dead Turkish soldiers (*al-Fatiha*), during the official celebrations of Freedom and Constitution Day, no prayer took place, which highlights the secular nature of the holiday and its planners, as opposed to the DP era which was viewed as having been more positive toward religion.<sup>32</sup>

One of the central questions is how the holiday was celebrated in the public sphere, beside the official ceremony in Ankara. While sources for this are not always available (especially regarding the periphery), a program of the celebrations in Izmir in 1963, planned jointly by the municipality and the local Ege [Aegean] University, might shed light on the question. The plan was very similar to that of the main ceremony in Ankara, e.g., the starting date of the holiday, the decoration of various buildings in the public sphere, and the illumination of public places at night. The ceremony in Izmir started at 9 a.m. as well and included a gathering of soldiers, university students, and youth organizations in the central “Republic Square.” The ceremony itself included greetings by the governor and the garrison commander, the flag was raised during the singing of the national anthem, a wreath was laid on Atatürk’s Monument by representatives of

the province, garrison, municipality, institutions, political parties, and other establishments. The crowd observed a two-minute silence for the “Martyrs of Freedom” and Atatürk, and speeches were given on “the meaning and value of 27 May” by young university students, and representatives of the military garrison, and of the “Hearths of the Revolution” [*Devrim Ocağı*] (an organization founded in 1952, for the protection of the revolution and principles of Mustafa Kemal). The ceremony ended with a parade with the participation of the Scouts, university students, and students at the military schools.<sup>33</sup> But ceremonies alone were not enough to legitimize the new holiday, therefore the state also promoted the holiday through the education system. The next section examines the representation the holiday and the 27 May revolution in school textbooks and journals approved by the Ministry of National Education.

## 6. The holiday in school textbooks and journals

It is generally agreed that school textbooks play a prominent role in children’s cultural upbringing. In their formative years, children’s minds are particularly elastic and vulnerable. School textbooks have the capacity to influence their value system and this change may well remain with them for the rest of their lives. This renders the school system and textbooks in particular key tools with which states can inculcate their citizens with a shared collective identity. Textbooks are therefore often employed to promote a certain belief system and legitimize an established political and social order.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that school textbooks, booklets and journals for school children were used in order to introduce and explain the “27 May Revolution” to young children. Since the writing of new textbooks (or the updating of old ones) takes time and since the original textbooks were prepared one year in advance and did not include any references to the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, the Turkish Ministry of National Education sent the schools booklets on the topic, written and published by the Ministry itself. It also approved other booklets published by various publishing houses. According to Çağhan Sarı, the 27 May especially affected elementary school curricula in various subjects including history and civics, but also literature (with a play titled “May 27 School Play”) and music (with a booklet titled “May 27 Marches”).<sup>35</sup>

While school textbooks have received some scholarly attention, journals aimed at elementary schools approved by the Ministry of

Education have been somewhat neglected. One such journal for the third grade dedicated to the new holiday was published in May 1966. It includes some guiding questions on its first page such as: When is Freedom and Constitution Day celebrated? What is the difference between this holiday and other holidays? What does freedom mean? What would happen if it did not exist? The journal also included questions about the coup (using, of course, the term revolution), asking why it was conducted, when did it take place, and so on. The holiday itself was described by the journal as follows: "The youth, who were entrusted with the protection of the Republic, carried out a revolution with the support of the Turkish Armed Forces. A new government was formed. The constitution was renewed. This is why the date of 27 May 1960 gained importance. Long live the Turkish youth! Long live our heroic military!"<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, another journal for the third grade, published in May 1972, introduced the holiday as follows:

Before 1960, our nation's government administration had made some restrictions on Atatürk's Revolution, in democracy and freedom issues. This behavior was against the principles of the constitution and democracy. For this reason, disagreements arose between the enlightened Turkish youth and the government administrators. The youth's rightful demands for the benefit of our nation were not met. There was a tense atmosphere in our country. In order to avoid bad results, the Turkish Armed Forces took over the administration on 27 May 1960. The government took those responsible to court. Penalties were given to those who were guilty according to the law.

The Constitution was re-formed, and a new Constitution was adopted on 27 May 1961. This day, which brought wider rights and freedom to the Turkish nation, was accepted as Freedom and Constitution Day.<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, both journals included a picture of cooperation between a uniformed soldier (or soldiers) and civilians, including both men and women, thus sending a message of unity, that the "revolution" and the subsequent holiday represent everyone.

Similar journals for the fourth and fifth grade put more emphasis on the importance of the constitution. The journal for the fourth grade dedicated an article to the importance of a constitution, starting with the Ottoman constitution of 1876, and the first Turkish constitution of 1924. While the DP's authoritarian tendencies were not mentioned by the journal, the need for the new constitution was presented to the children as an attempt to prevent the future abuse of state mechanisms, or as stated by the journal

“such a constitution had to be made so that whoever or whatever comes to power would not rule the country according to their own views.”<sup>38</sup>

The journal for the fifth grade explained that the revolution was conducted in order to “ensure national unity and prevent fraternal quarrels,” and that the ministers and deputies of the Democrat Party were arrested. It then introduced the process of drafting the new constitution including the recruitment of university law professors, the construction of the Constituent Assembly [*Kurucu Meclis*], and the referendum conducted on 9 July 1961 and the approval of the constitution.<sup>39</sup>

## **7. Sacred spaces or contested spaces? The Bayonet Monument in Taksim**

One of the most important means of commemoration available to the state is building monuments. According to Maoz Azaryahu, monuments “embod[y] the link between history and geography, community and terrain, society and environment, culture and nature in the process of forging an identity between past and present.” The size and topographical location of monuments determines the amount of public exposure they receive and the attention they attract to themselves and to the story they wish to tell. Azaryahu added that there are two main types of monuments: remote monuments which sometimes become tourist attractions, and monuments situated in the center of cities which are constantly encountered by passers-by. The main difference between the two is that “remote monuments may be less frequented, but the encounter with them is characterized by intense awareness of their significance. City monuments, by contrast, are woven into the urban texture so that a maximal number of random encounters is guaranteed, although each encounter carries a low charge of symbolic potential.” The monument’s location also affects their symbolic significance. Monuments built at the place they were designed to commemorate attain an “aura of sacredness”, while monuments located in city centers “endow their location with sacredness.”<sup>40</sup>

One of the most controversial symbols of the 27 May revolution was a monument built in Taksim Square in Istanbul, one of the most important and symbolic places in Istanbul. The monument, seven meters tall, shaped like a bayonet placed on stones surrounded by a laurel branch (the symbol of 27 May revolution), was built in front of the Republic



Monument (*Cumhuriyet Anıtı*), the most iconic monument of early republican Turkey, commemorating the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 on one side, and with the Atatürk Cultural Center on the other. The new monument was located in a central and visible location, and therefore redefined the experience of the square. While I was unable to find the exact date on which it was built, according to an article published on 27 August 1962 in the journal *Akis*, the Justice Party was critical of the monument and “launched a campaign against it, saying it should be removed from there.”<sup>41</sup>

From an article published in *Milliyet* on 29 June 1966, we learn that although the initial attempt to remove the Bayonet monument from Taksim failed, some groups did not despair and tried to find a new way to get rid of it. According to the article, there was a new attempt to remove the monument using the local municipality:

The removal of the ‘bayonet,’ which reminds us of 27 May and its reasons every time it is seen, has been put forward by some people for a year now, arguing that it should be removed because there was no [official] decision to build it. However, this reason was not considered sufficient to remove the bayonet. Those who followed the idea of removing the bayonet found a new way to do it fifteen days ago and proposed to the City Council to build a pool instead of the park in Taksim, where the bayonet is located. At the meeting of the Municipal Council last week, it was decided to allocate 250 thousand TL from the budget of the Directorate of Science Affairs for the construction of the pool. After a while, the park in front of the Opera will be turned into a circular pool and the 27 May bayonet will be removed.<sup>42</sup>

While the details are not entirely clear, this attempt failed as well, and the monument remained in Taksim until the 1980 military coup. However, it serves as an example of the way some groups tried to contest the holiday and its representations in the public sphere by targeting the monument.

## **8. 27 May postage stamps and commemorative coins**

Monuments were not the only means in which the state represented the “revolution” and holiday in the public sphere. Various objects relating to the holiday were introduced by the state, including stamps and commemorative coins. According to Donald M. Reid, stamps are excellent primary sources for the symbolic messages which governments

seek to convey to their citizens and to the world. “Stamps resemble government buildings, monuments, coins, paper money, flags, national anthems, nationalized newspapers, and ambassadors as conveyors of official viewpoints.”<sup>43</sup> The state organized a nationwide competition to design commemorative stamps via the Turkish post service (*Posta Telgraf Telefon – PTT*) celebrating the “revolution.” According to *Milliyet*, the winner of the competition was a young artist named Erdoğan Değer, who got to design the first stamp in a series of four. According to the article, his design, which was inspired by a poem named “White Horse Rising,” depicted a white horse on a red background, breaking his chains, hinting at the DP’s oppression broken by the revolution.<sup>44</sup> The rest of the series, which was published on 1 December 1960, included a stamp depicting the friends of Turan Emeksiz carrying his body while in the background, one can see the Atatürk and Youth Monument at Istanbul University, in which a young woman holds the torch of freedom, a young man holds the Turkish flag, and Atatürk stands in the middle with his hand raised up high. A caption at the bottom of the stamp quotes from the revised version of the Plevne March, rewritten shortly before the coup as an anti-DP march: “What is the world coming to? A brother shooting his brother?” Another stamp included the face of Atatürk, linking him again to the revolution, and a torch (symbolizing freedom), while in the background one can see soldiers on the one side and youth on the other. The last stamp depicted a soldier who has broken his chains and is helping a wounded young man. There were at least three versions of the first day envelopes published together with the stamps. The first two included a larger version of the white horse stamp (although the horse itself appeared on one in gold and on the other in red), while the third one included a map of Turkey with the caption “27 May” in the middle of the country, a bayonet symbolizing the military on its right side, a pen symbolizing the academia and intelligentsia on the left, and the torch of freedom in the center.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to stamps, in November 1960 the state also decided to mint commemorative 10 Lira coins. These coins bore Atatürk’s picture on the obverse, and the emblem of the “27 May Revolution” consisting of a torch (symbolizing freedom), scales (symbolizing justice), the Turkish flag, a bayonet (symbolizing the military), an eagle and an anchor, on the reverse. Above the emblem appeared the Crescent and the Star along with Atatürk’s famous saying, “Sovereignty Belongs to the Nation.” Below the emblem appeared the date of the “revolution,” 27 May 1960, and underneath it, a laurel branch symbolizing peace.<sup>46</sup> The state’s difficult

economic situation led many couples to donate their wedding rings to the state in a show of support. These couples received instead a cheaper alternative wedding ring inscribed with “27 May 1960.”<sup>47</sup>

Most of the commemorative or celebratory aspects of the holiday examined thus far have focused on the state’s attempt to promote the holiday. But this is of course only one side of the holiday, which can tell us nothing about its reception. How did people react to it? Did they participate in the ceremonies or ignore them? Did certain groups criticize the holiday, and if so, why?

## **9. Talking about a revolution – the reception and contestation of the holiday**

During the early 1960s the “27 May Revolution” and the holiday celebrating it were praised by many national newspapers who objected to what they described as the DP’s authoritarianism. Writing in 1961, just a few days before the first anniversary of the coup, Nadir Nadi, a well-known journalist and a previous supporter of the DP, wrote the following in *Cumhuriyet*: “In two days, we will celebrate the first anniversary of May 27th... The Revolution, with its youth, the army and its Atatürkist staff, stands immaculately as the success of the whole nation.”<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, in 1964 the journalist Burhan Felek praised the revolution in general and the holiday specifically, pointing to the freedom of the press as one of the main changes from the policy of the DP and its extensive censorship over the press. According to him, “May 27 was made an official holiday by law... in fact, if this law had not existed, after 10–15 years, the people would celebrate it spontaneously. Because as a nation, we have gained a lot from this revolution. For once we got freedom; so much freedom that we can personally criticize 27 May. Can there be a better proof in favor of the revolution?”<sup>49</sup>

Writing in 1968, Nadi acknowledged that not everything was rosy, but according to him, the problems faced by the republic and the way they were managed, served as an indication that it became a “real democracy”. Unfortunately, he added, not everyone was happy about this development:

After 27 May, much has changed in our country. Social and economic problems, which we know as an indispensable element of real democracies, are handled in an atmosphere of freedom that has never

been seen before in our history, and the solutions are explained to the public. Horrified by the situation, the conservatives are confused about what to do in their desperation, they try to intimidate the public or to empty the dirt in their hearts by cursing 27 May. But their efforts are in vain. The Republic of Turkey will surely find the way to reach the level of contemporary civilization in the footsteps of Atatürk. Those who are unwilling to implement it fully, because they are anxious to prune our Constitution, the keeper of our freedoms, in a way that suits their own interests, have not dared to touch it until today.<sup>50</sup>

The Turkish left was extremely supportive of the new constitution which allowed it to operate out in the open and supported workers' rights, the formation of new political parties and so on. As a result, they also supported the new holiday. One example of this support can be seen in a short booklet published by the cultural office of the Turkish Worker's Party [*Türkiye İşçi Partisi – TİP*] in İzmir in 1964, titled "Freedom and Constitution Day." After elaborating on some of the articles in the new constitution, the booklet expressed its appreciation for the new constitution, but also its fear that the leaders of the existing political parties who "work for the benefit of the ruling classes" would try to deceive the public by resisting the constitution. It thus congratulated all citizens on the Freedom and Constitution Day and called upon its supporters "to unite around the Turkish Workers' Party, which is fighting to ensure the full implementation of the constitution."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the leftist journal *Yön* expressed its appreciation of the constitution and holiday by stating: "Today, aside from all the ceremonies, it [i.e., the constitution] should be read in every school, in every cafe, in every meeting. It should be reconsidered whether all daily events are in conformity with the Constitution. This political and legal text, which is our only advanced document, should be interpreted and explained over and over again."<sup>52</sup>

But not everyone supported this so-called revolution and the holiday dedicated to it. Unlike *Cumhuriyet*, *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet* newspapers, very little place was given to the news of the holiday in opposition newspapers. For example, the *Son Havadis* newspaper, which supports the Democrat Party and its successor, the Justice Party, began to criticize the 27 May, "Constitution Day", and the CHP in 1965, when the Justice Party came to power. In an article published in May 1967, Orhan Seyfi Orhon wrote: "We are against all kinds of revolutions, including the 27th of May, we will not allow any socialist revolution, communist revolution, fascist revolution, or military revolution."<sup>53</sup>

Two years later, in 1969, Orhon continued to criticize the holiday: “May 27 is not a national holiday, it is a political holiday. While the hearts of the unhappy people weep blood on political holidays, the happy ones celebrate the holiday. These kinds of holidays are the ones that an authority imposes on the nation... For this reason, it cannot continue, neither as a national holiday, nor as a political holiday.” He especially criticized the coup against the Democrat Party and underlined that this holiday cannot be permanent like other national holidays.<sup>54</sup>

Towards the end of the 1960s, violence and instability plagued Turkey. An economic recession late in that decade sparked a wave of social unrest marked by street demonstrations, labor strikes and political assassinations. Violent clashes erupted between left-wing workers and students’ movements on one side, and Islamist and militant Turkish nationalist groups on the other. From the end of 1968, and increasingly during 1969 and 1970, left-wing violence was matched and surpassed by far-right violence, notably from the Grey Wolves. On the political front, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel’s Justice Party government, re-elected in 1969, also experienced trouble. Various factions within his party defected to form splinter groups of their own, gradually reducing his parliamentary majority and bringing the legislative process to a halt. By January 1971, Turkey appeared to be in a state of chaos which led to another military coup, this time through an ultimatum.<sup>55</sup> The new regime’s first priority, to restore law and order in the country, was equated with the repression of any group viewed as leftist, thus leading to the closure of the Turkish Workers’ Party, as well as leftist youth organizations such as the Revolutionary Youth Federation of Turkey [*Dev-Genç*].<sup>56</sup> In addition, the main leftist journal, *Ant* (which succeeded *Yön*), was closed in May 1971.<sup>57</sup> The new regime also made several amendments to the constitution in September 1971, stating that fundamental rights and freedoms could be restricted for the protection of national security and public order, and that newspapers and magazines could be confiscated by the authorities.<sup>58</sup>

The 1971 coup and the subsequent changes in the constitution led to a further decrease in the latter’s legitimacy, as well as that of “Constitution Day,” among an increasing number of groups. As time passed, there were those who had originally supported the holiday, but became increasingly disillusioned with it. Oktay Akbal, a journalist and an author, was one of them. In an article published in *Cumhuriyet* on 27 May 1973, he referred to his expectations of the constitution: “Now we need to laugh at our dreams of that day! We wrote a lot of articles, praising what 27 May brought and

what it will bring! I come across those articles. In a drawer, in a closet, between the pages of an old book... Sometimes a reader will remind me, 'What was your enthusiasm in those days, your endless hopes and dreams?' ... 27 May is a meaningless holiday. We call it Constitution Day, but that Constitution, which was considered an event to be celebrated, is no longer in existence. Where is the 1961 Constitution, where is it now?"<sup>59</sup>

*Son Havadis* continued to criticize the holiday also in the 1970s. Yalçın Uraz wondered about the nature of the holiday and the reason for its existence in an article published in May 1975: "If freedom is the use of the free will of citizens, then the Freedom Day should be 14 May 1950. Why Constitution Day? Was this the first time a constitution was made in Turkey? If a constitutional holiday is going to be celebrated... shouldn't it be the first constitution made during the Ottoman Empire?"<sup>60</sup> By referring to 14 May, the day in which the Democrat Party first came to power, Uraz clearly criticized the coup of 27 May, and "Constitution Day" as illegitimate, since they were carried out against the will of the people.

Some political leaders also started to voice their objection to the holiday. In a speech given in the city of Kayseri on 27 May 1977, Süleyman Demirel, the head of the Justice Party, criticized the constitution and called for its amendment – thus also delegitimizing the holiday dedicated to it. According to him, "today is constitution day. But this constitution needs to be changed." He added that "today, the Constitutional Court and the Council of State are above the state. The will of the people must be acted upon fully. I ask you, who will rule the country?"<sup>61</sup>

Maybe the best example of the fact that the holiday lost its legitimacy and importance among the public in general was the fact that no political leader participated in the annual ceremony in Ankara in 1978. Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit of the Republican People's Party was abroad; Demirel of the Justice Party and Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Islamist National Salvation Party (*Millî Selâmet Partisi*), remained in Istanbul; and Alparslan Türkeş, one of the leaders of the 27 May coup who later established and headed the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*), was in Erzurum.<sup>62</sup>

In May 1979, Süleyman Demirel explicitly called for the abolishing of the holiday, arguing that the constitution and the holiday were rejected by millions in Turkey. According to him, "the 27 May holiday should be abolished... If you want peace in Turkey, the wounds inflicted by the 27 May revolution must be healed... the 27 May holiday should be abolished because it is the day of the revolution which was not

approved by the majority of the nation, as millions of our citizens say no to this constitution.”<sup>63</sup> Demirel soon got his wish, but not in the way he expected. On 12 September 1980, the military conducted another coup and remained in power for three years, during which it also introduced a new constitution and abolished the old holiday.<sup>64</sup>

## 10. Conclusion

Although the decision to fix 27 May as a national holiday enjoyed a large majority in Parliament in 1963, it failed to create unity and promote a shared historical past, memory, and values; in fact, it did exactly the opposite. The holiday suffered from a lack of legitimacy, since among large segments of the population it was viewed as a holiday that celebrated the expulsion of their elected representatives, and thus silencing their voice and oppressing them. Moreover, the legitimacy of the holiday also decreased as time passed, since it was evident that the liberal constitution was at least somewhat responsible for the rising tension and violence in the streets.

According to Berna Pekesen, the short-term democratization that was ironically provided by the constitution introduced after the military coup in 1960, was thwarted by the ups and downs of political repression after the military coup in 1971, which turned out to be a decisive blow against the polarized but vibrant civil society. These processes led to extreme frictions. Turkey in the 1960s, and particularly in the 1970s, was torn between violent activism and instable politics, exacerbated by the ideological fault lines of the Cold War. The dramatic rise of political violence, exercised between right-wing and left-wing activists, and then again between the former and the security forces, had reached the scale of a civil war by the end of the 1970s, resulting in a death toll reaching well into several thousands of civilians, thus paving the way to another military coup and a new, more conservative, and less liberal constitution.<sup>65</sup>

As a result, even those who first approved of the holiday, such as the Turkish left, who hoped the constitution would promote social justice, were oppressed by the state. The amendments of the constitution in 1971 which made it less liberal also diminished its legitimacy among those who supported it in the first place precisely for that reason.

On 17 March 1981 the holiday was officially abolished by the new regime due to the fact that it had lost its legitimacy among the people. The

attached explanation stated that the holiday failed in gaining the public legitimacy it needed to survive and that developments which had occurred since its introduction made it obsolete: "Since 1963, 27 May has been celebrated as Freedom and Constitution Day. This day is the day when the 1961[sic] Revolution and therefore the 1961 Constitution are celebrated. However, as a result of the developments that took place especially since the 1970s, the suitability of the 1961 Constitution became debatable for our society and it lost its attractiveness among the people as a holiday."<sup>66</sup>



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