RE-READING BERNHARD LEWIS: “THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN TURKEY”

Camilla Dawletschin-Linder

BERNARD LEWIS: “THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN TURKEY” YENİDEN OKUMAK.

Abstract

The article looks at a standard work on the history of the late Ottoman Empire and the first decades of the Turkish Republic and asks whether and how it can be used today in the light of new historiographical evidence.

Keywords: Turkey - Modern History - Historiography.

Öz

Metin geç Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun ve Türkiye Cumhuriyeti’nin ilk zamanın tarihi hakkında olan standart bir esere bakıyor ve acaba bugünümüzde yeni tarihsel ispatları göze alırsak kullanılabileceğini ve nasıl kullanılabileceğini inceliyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye Cumhuriyet Tarihi.

Few studies on Modern Turkey have influenced my generation of historians of the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic more than this book. Originally published in 1961 and several times reprinted in the 60ies, it saw a second edition (almost unrevised except for a few printing errors according to the author) in 1968.

This is quite some time ago and would not necessarily merit a review especially since the study ends with the transition from the single-party period to a multi-party “experiment in democracy” (to cite Feroz Ahmad’s book of 1977). However, as Lewis himself authorized a third edition in 2002 which, he claims, is a revised version of the earlier book, and which edition has been translated into Turkish, one can assume that

* Hamburg (Almanya), e-posta: Dawletschin.Linder@t-online.de
the book is still on the reading lists of University students world-wide and therefore an influential transmitter of concepts and ideas about the history of the late Ottoman Empire and especially the early Turkish Republic. A critical re-reading of “The Emergence of Modern Turkey” could therefore add to our understanding of current historiographical trends and present perceptions of Turkey.

In the preface to the third edition which he writes in lieu of a revised conclusion, Lewis mentions his own academic development as a student of first medieval Islam, then of the Ottoman Empire moving on to recent Turkish history. He emphasizes that – unlike most Western scholars - he first came to Turkey from the East, via the Arab countries in the late 1940s. He himself assumes that this made him “more keenly aware of the immensity of the tasks that the Turks were undertaking, the difficulties that they confronted, and, in consequence, more able to appreciate the quality and magnitude of their achievements.” (Emergence ix) He goes on to explain how he and his generation were formed by the defeat of fascism in Europe, the ensuing Cold War and Third World post-colonialism. “Even now, more than fifty years later, despite all the ensuing setbacks and frustrations – and there have been many – no one who was there at the time can ever forget the excitement, the exhilaration, of Turkey’s first giant step towards a free and open society” (Emergence x).

And indeed, this critical and frank introspection – besides probably other personal factors not mentioned – might be the explanation for the underlying tone throughout the book of admiration for the early Turkish reform period. It might explain the fact that Lewis never went beyond the year 1950 in his historical representation, not even in the third revised edition. For unfortunately for the present-day student, the study ends with the year 1950. Due to the times it was written in and the impression the events in Turkey of the late 40ies made on the author, the book ends on a highly optimistic and almost enthusiastic note for the future of Turkey. Lewis claims that he did not continue his documentation in later years because he always saw the book as one of history and not of current affairs. Here he seems to overlook the fact that in 2002, at the time of the third edition, the 50ies as well as the decades up to the 80ies at least were already history and by no means “current affairs” any more.

Lewis goes on to say that he made small changes and incorporated “new evidence, of new thinking, […] and of the insights afforded by

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1 All quotes refer to the third edition except where otherwise indicated.
subsequent events” (Emergence viii) but left presentation and interpretation as it were.

Subsequently, in the Preface, he gives a brief overview of how things developed in Turkey after the point in time where he stopped his analysis. It would be unfair to take him up too critically on these few pages that can only give a rudimentary account of very complex developments and problems in Turkey’s internal as well as external affairs over more than 50 years. Nobody would be able to briefly sketch such a long period of history without extreme simplification. Nevertheless, those pages reveal that Lewis is still very much under the spell of certain ideas and ideologies pertaining to the 20th rather than the 21st century, to the time when Westernization was considered an end in itself, when modernization was the creed to adhere to, when leftism was the enemy number one and the nation state a propagated ideal.

Before giving just a few examples that question the wisdom of republishing an analysis as it was 50 years ago, let us first look at Lewis himself debating the way historiography is an expression of changing times and its judgments.

In chapter three of his book “History. Remembered, Recovered, Invented”, published in 1975 by Princeton University Press, Lewis gives some enlightening examples of how historiography can be used and was used in different periods of time.

He reminds us of Ranke’s verdict, that a historian should tell it “as it actually was” and elaborates on the difficulty and the self-deception of this allegedly simple principle: The narrative of history is guided by what is recalled, what is recovered and what finally falls to the temptation of writing history as it should have been – invented history.

Lewis then cites examples for all three kinds of historiography from the wide range of history of the Muslim world.

Invented history is the subject here that interests us most. Lewis remarks: “Probably the outstanding example in our time of the inventive and purposive use of historiography is the writing of colonial, post-colonial, and finally pre-colonial history.” (History 87). He goes on to look at how history was de-colonized in Russia and then taken in by the Soviet regime to be revised completely and changed from bottom to top. “In the former British, French, and Dutch colonies there was no such reversal, and the process of decolonizing the past went on unabated. The present was saved – their efforts had accomplished that; the future was assured – their
ideologies promised them that. There remained the task of rescuing the past from imperialist control. The history that served the imperialist rulers and their native helpers would not do, was not fitting for the people of independent and sovereign states. To meet the new need a new historiography was devised and teams of historians, or at any rate of teachers and writers of history, were deployed to conquer and liberate the past.” (History 96) And he goes on to say: “It is exceedingly difficult for even the most conscientious historians to be fair to former and fallen masters” (History 97).

It is evident that Lewis was painfully aware of the pitfalls of writing the history of those states that emerged after the end of imperialism or the breakup of former Empires. In his own work about Turkey, he would be confronted with the fact that what is recalled of the events of the Ottoman Empire and the process of its break-up and emergence of a republican, democratic state, was not necessarily what “had actually happened”. He was well aware of the scarcity of available sources due to war destruction, the low literacy level in Turkey, and the scarcity of knowledge about the availability of sources due to the fact that many sources had not or not yet been identified.

Let me cite one example. In “The Emergence of Modern Turkey” Lewis writes about the famous speech that Atatürk gave at the congress of the CHP in 1927 and that is widely known as Nutuk (The speech): “The received version of the War of Independence and the subsequent struggles is that given by Kemal himself in his famous six-day speech (…) Kemals’s speech, though a remarkable achievement, inevitably reflects the powerful personality of its author and the struggles in which he was engaged. Some other Turkish sources are available, which, presenting independent testimony, make it possible to amplify and occasionally rectify the received version.” (Emergence 242, Fn 5). He goes on to state that a “full critical study of the mass of Turkish and foreign documentation now available on the national struggle and the early years of the Turkish Republic is a task still to be undertaken” (Emergencee 243, same footnote) This is quite critical by the standards of Turkish historiography up until quite recent years but it does not wholly reflect the extent to which Nutuk was a political propaganda instrument by Atatürk to make people accept his version of the events and to thereby cement his claim to power. And it does not prevent the same author from amply using Nutuk as a primary source for his own writing.

The establishment of the Republic on October 29th 1923 is another example of how the official version of an event can blur the historians’
sight. Lewis describes that decisive moment: “At 8.30 in the evening, after hours of debate, the resolution was carried by 158 votes, with many abstentions but no dissentients. Fifteen minutes later, at 8.45, the deputies elected Mustafa Kemal as the first President of the Republic.” (Emergence 261-262). At that time, the Turkish Parliament comprised 334 deputies. In the last days of October 1923, all the prominent opponents of Mustafa Kemal were absent from Ankara – a fact that the Kemalists used for the timing of the vote. The extremely high number of abstentions and especially of absentees is explained by the fact that oppositional and dissenting deputies were too afraid to openly vote against Mustafa Kemal. Remains the fact that Mustafa Kemal as well as the establishment of the republic was confirmed by less than half of the members of Parliament at the time!

Many similar examples could be cited as proof that Lewis’ admiration for Kemal Atatürk blurs his critical vision. This may have been understandable at the time - but it is definitively outdated today.

Another critical point is Lewis’ adherence to the official Turkish version of historiography with reference to the touchy subject of the minorities in Turkey, be they religious or ethnic. In his Preface to the third edition, i.e. in the revised version, Lewis writes about minority problems which were not new to the Turkish state and that religious minorities “…had enjoyed their own communal organizations, with special communal rights and privileges. These were revised and limited in the Turkish Republic, but by no means abolished, and the minorities were seen as having a definite place as such in society.” (Emergence xvi)

Apart from the fact that the much-lauded special communal rights of the religious minorities meant their distinct discrimination vis-à-vis the majority of Sunni Muslims, in the light of recent research and especially in the light of a more distinct emphasis on human rights, the wording of this statement is debatable. In the body of the book, however, Lewis is much more sophisticated in his expressions when he admits “that certain forms of discrimination continued”, that non-Muslims, “despite successive improvements in their status, remained separate and distinct, extruded from the body of the nation.” (Emergence 357) He mentions in this context the discriminatory measure of the Varlık Vergisi in 1942/43.

In the last decade or two, historians and political scientists of Turkey have taken special notice of the problems of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state. It is only recently that they have regarded Turkish nationalism as it developed after the end of the Ottoman Empire as a
willful construction (if not to say invention) of a political elite that needed an ideology to instill a common identity in order to be able to keep the country together and put it on the way of a prescribed “modernization”.

Turkish citizenship in the new Republic as a concept – not de jure - was tied to a person being Muslim; a non-Muslim was regarded as second-class citizen and state-sponsored campaigns at various times such as “Speak Turkish” or the Turkification of the economy, the population exchange in the 1920s, the “Turkification” of the Kurdish provinces, not least by forced re-settlements, the above-mentioned Varlık Vergisi as well as several incidences in which the collusion of state officials can be proven during the Republican years— to cite just the events that fall within the period that Lewis covered in his book – eventually up to the events of 6/7 September 1955, had a distinctly anti-Christian and anti-Jewish direction of impact (see e.g. Ince). In this light it is all the more astonishing that Lewis did not revise his conclusion on “The Kemalist Republic” in which he states: “His (Kemal Atatürk’s) nationalism was healthy and reasonable” (Emergence 292).

There are some particularly touchy subjects in recent Turkish history where it has not been easy for historians of Turkey to apply the necessary critical view without putting their own future research possibilities at risk. For instance, scholars of Modern Turkey for a long time have tried to avoid to be too outspoken on the Armenian massacres of 1915 and on so-called the Kurdish question. This is understandable in the light of the harsh reaction by the Turkish official side as well as by parts of the public when they felt that the Turkish standpoint was not duly respected. The acceptance of a more critical view on these subjects by the Turkish side is growing only slowly. Recent research on the Armenian massacres also by scholars of Turkish origin, the publication of literary works such as the memoirs of her Armenian-born grandmother by Fethiye Çetin, the writings of Hrant Dink and others are slowly leading the way to a historiography that is truer to facts rather than fiction.

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2 Lewis’ commentary on the population exchange is articulate as well as cautious: “What took place was not an exchange of Greeks and Turks, but rather an exchange of Greek Orthodox Christians and Ottoman Muslims. A Western observer, accustomed to a different system of social and national classification, might even conclude that this was no repatriation at all, but two deportations into exile – of Christian Turks to Greece, and of Muslim Greeks to Turkey.” (Emergence 355).
In his book, Lewis sees the Armenian nationalist movement of the late 19th century as the “deadliest of all threats” for the Turks (Emergence 356). This is very much in line with the apologetic Turkish historiography at the time and in parts still today. In this context, it is remarkable that Lewis in his third edition, in one of the very few passages where he actually changed the text of the first edition, replaced the sentence: “…a struggle between two nations for the possession a single homeland, that ended with the terrible holocaust of 1915, when a million and a half Armenians perished.” (Emergence 2nd ed. 356) with the following: “… a struggle between two nations for the possession of a single homeland, that ended with the terrible slaughter of 1915, when, according to estimates, more than a million Armenians perished, as well as an unknown number of Turks.” (Emergence 3rd ed. 356). This reads suspiciously like a reverence to official Turkish historiography.

Lewis is an avowed Kemalist. Impressed by his early experiences and by - in his eyes - the negative development of the Arab countries of the Middle East, at the time of the fifties and sixties, this bias may have been understandable. But as a scholar, one would expect a more analytical and therefore critical view of him and certainly an intellectual development that has not become petrified in earlier experiences and out-of-time ideologies. From that point of view, the fact that Lewis supported another practically unrevised edition of “The Emergence of Modern Turkey”, that he did not update his study is lamentable. The book adheres to concepts that are clearly outdated nowadays. It can only be understood when we take into account the circumstances of the time it was written in: the Cold War, the author’s aversion to everything that smacks leftist, his admiration of a leader and an ideology that although originating in a so-called third world country clearly distinguished itself from Third-Worldism. By being trapped in this way his book is not able to provide a sufficient basis for understanding more recent developments and events in Turkey.

“The Emergence of Modern Turkey” is still enlightening for the study of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the development of Turkey as a national state but it should not be used uncritically as a text-book for students of present-day Turkey.

Works Cited


