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96 Photography's Imaginary: Modern Turkey in the Making

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Figure 1: Namık Görgüç on Beyazıt Tower, Istanbul, ca. 1930s. Suna and İnan Kıracı Foundation Photography Collection (SVIKV), İstanbul Research Institute (IAE), CFA_015152.

How to capture the expression of sleep in a picture of a sleeping cat? By bringing your camera up close to the cat's face, offers photographer Namık Görgüç (1895–1947), and focusing on the whiskers, just below the closed eyes. In doing so, he writes, “You will surely create a more dynamic scene than the distant and flat photograph you might take from the cushion across.”¹

This is what Görgüç calls an *ölü olmyan* (“non-dead”) moment of the photographic subject, the capture of which helps turn the photograph into a work of art.² Görgüç was one of the most prominent photographers of Turkey's early republican era. His work appeared in a wide range of publications, particularly in the leading newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, which he joined in 1924 and where he continued to work until his death. Görgüç wrote extensively on photography, offering insights into photographic techniques and everything from composition and light to photographic fixers. Few of his contemporaries approached photography with the same depth of knowledge or clarity of expression.⁴ While his columns in *Yedigün* and *Foto Magazin* from the 1930s tend to be highly technical,⁵ his avid advocacy for and understanding of photography as an art form is

palpable across his writings. In his photographs, Görgüç exhibits a profound love for both taking and posing for photographs, as figure 1 demonstrates. In his photography and his writings on the medium, he articulates a compelling sense of passion, pride, and playfulness as a photographer deeply engaged with the evolving identity of the young republic.

Görgüç is one of the two pioneering photographers, alongside Selahattin Giz (1914–1994), whose works are featured in the extensive Cumhuriyet Newspaper Photography Archive (CFA) housed in the İstanbul Research Institute.⁶ The archive comprises approximately 90,000 images, primarily composed of glass negatives and roll film. Having arrived without specific organization or categorization, a considerable portion of the collection features images by both Görgüç and Giz from the 1920s and 1930s, with a separate segment by Giz that extends into the 1970s.⁷ Focusing on early republican-era imagery, this article aims to bring visibility to this remarkable collection—central to the Institute's large photographic archive—while also exploring the possibilities it of-

fers for the study of modern Turkey and its photographic histories.

Many of the images in the collection were photographed for publication in newspapers and magazines. Indeed, some have been identified in the pages of *Cumhuriyet*. Attributing each image to its respective photographer presents a significant challenge, as the identification of specific photographs remains ambiguous despite possible stylistic indicators. Giz began his photography career in high school, joining *Cumhuriyet* in 1931 and working there for over forty years.⁸ The fact that Görgüç and Giz both produced and published work with access to the same darkroom in the 1930s poses a challenge for the cataloguing of the photographs. Further complicating matters is the fact that Görgüç mentored Giz and, as F. Gülru Tanman notes, the two likely exchanged glass negatives and roll film.⁹ While acknowledging the difficulties inherent in distinguishing between the two photographers, it is plausible that the photographs from the 1920s belong to Görgüç, particularly given the age difference between him and Giz, who was twenty years his junior. In addi-



Figure 2: A Dârülbedâyi actress, İstanbul, mid-1920s. Photographer: Namık Görgüç. SVIKV, IAE, CFA_013976.

tion, Görgüç appears to have cultivated a distinctive low-angle perspective as a signature pose (see fig. 6).

The photographs in the collection reveal an intimate relationship between the medium of photography and the figure of the photographer, a modern relationship that rapidly permeated Turkish society as amateur photography became commonplace in households in the 1930s. The collection inspires a multitude of storytelling possibilities that draw on this relationship—the stories we imagine the photographs might be telling, whether individually, in a series, or together as a collection, filtered through the gaze and psyche of the two photographers, both of whom embody the modern secular Westernized Turk that the new republic sought to produce. In their portraits, Görgüç and Giz capture the new regime as it sought to be depicted, rescaling and recalibrating this official representation with varying degrees of intimacy. Their images feature a range of sitters, including Turkish beauty queens,¹⁰ “Gürbüz Çocuk” (Robust Child) contestants,¹¹ Dârülbedâyi actors,¹² musicians, politicians, tribal leaders, sculptors, painters, teachers, students, patients, nurses, soldiers, scouts, and criminals, among others. Some of these people in the photographs are famous, some not. Some are organized in series, while others are standalone images without a clear context. Shot predominantly in Istanbul, the photographs present a wide range of bodies, poses, postures, and locations: people asleep, at home, outdoors (fig. 8), in a tea garden, having a meal, on the street, in a classroom, on the beach, on stage, at a factory, couples posing on the Bosphorus, athletes on a train, children on a Vecihi Hürkuş plane (fig. 9),¹³ a group of masked participants at a Baklahorani carnival,¹⁴ women smoking cigarettes (figs. 2 and 4). A picture of Muammer Karaca being interviewed in bed, an image from the set of a Muhsin Ertuğrul film, Neyzen Tevfik posing with a *ney*. Families, relatives, friends, and colleagues. These faces, bodies, poses, and locations collectively narrate a distinct story of a republic in the making, with representations that traverse the public and private



Figure 3: A Dârülbedâyi prompter at the Tepebaşı Dram Theater, Istanbul, early 1930s. SVIKV, IAE, CFA_003360.

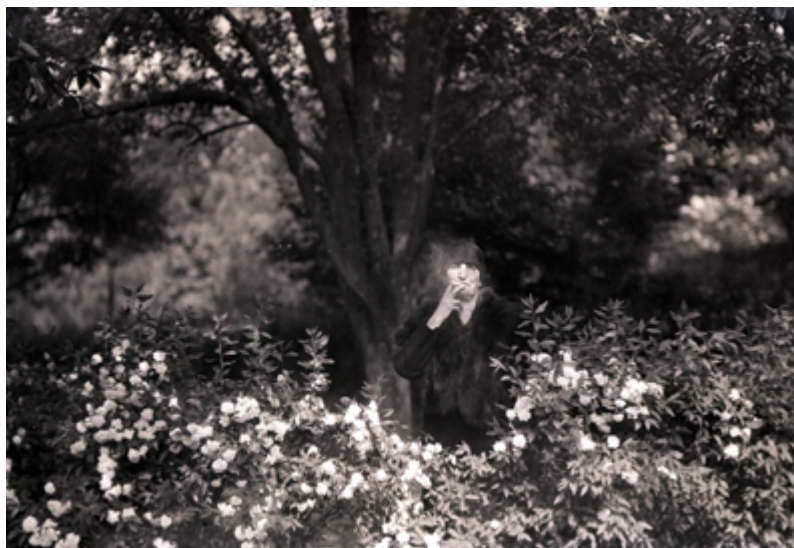


Figure 4: A woman smoking a cigarette in a public park, late 1920s. SVIKV, IAE, CFA_016330.

spheres. The collection also contains family photographs of Görgüç and Giz (fig. 4).¹⁵

These photographs’ varying scales of intimacy and the representations of modernity they contain prompt viewers to think beyond the standard categories of vernacular photography, documentary photography, photojournalism, and art photography. The multiple ways in which these photographs as archival objects (might) have been used and reused complicate how we might classify them and the photographers who produced them when cataloguing in archives today.

A portrait that gives the impression of an intimate setting or an intimate relationship between the subject and the photographer may, if later published in a newspaper, be perceived instead as belonging to the public domain, thus raising questions of intent, agency, and circulation. From a Dârülbedâyi prompter (fig. 3) to a painter at work (fig. 5), these images challenge our understanding of social life in early republican Turkey and urge us to consider how different photographic categories and practices mediated the making of this emerging social life.



Figure 5: Painting with a model at the Academy of Fine Arts, Istanbul, early 1930s. Two possibilities for the artist pictured in the photograph are Sabiha Bengütaş (1904–1992), one of the first Turkish sculptors to graduate from the academy, and the painter Hale Asaf (1905–1938). SVIKV, IAE, CFA_003597.

These photographs from the early republican era highlight the classed nature of the image of the modern Turkish citizen, revealing how Turkish individuals, particularly those from the newly established urban middle classes, actively engaged in shaping the aesthetics of citizenship through self-representation in portraiture.¹⁶ In the collection, we observe, too, how the citizens of modern Turkey used photography to produce, reify, and



Figure 7: İsmet Pasha (İnönü) swimming at Heybeliada, Istanbul, 1929. Possibly by Namık Görgüç. SVIKV, IAE, CFA_005423.

disseminate a predominantly Westernized, urban, middle-class, and heteronormative image.

This image of the modern Turkish citizen was reinforced through gendered and classed etiquette, exemplified in the phrase “stand nobly, look innocently” (*asilane durunuz, masumane bakınız*).¹⁷ Emblematic of its time, this phrase directs sitters to pose for photographs in a way that reflects the dignity and manners expected from the ladies (*hanımefendi*) and gentlemen (*beyefendi*) of the young republic. Yet the photographs in the collection also complicate the notions of nobility and innocence imposed by both the regime and social expectations, revealing what Elizabeth Edwards calls “points of fracture” (2001) that help challenge a rigid understanding of portrait photography at the time.¹⁸

Might we then read figure 7, in which İsmet İnönü floats in the water wearing a life vest, as a point of fracture? As a part of a series depicting İnönü’s family on the beach and in the water, this image reveals a compelling moment for reflection on the ways in which authority and vulnerability converge on a photographic surface. At the same time, in line with Mustafa



Figure 6: Portrait of a young man, possibly by Namık Görgüç, early 1930s. SVIKV, IAE, CFA_010554.

Kemal Atatürk’s iconic pictures from the 1930s, where he poses in a bathing suit on the Florya beach without any apparent security around him, this level of intimacy and vulnerability could be seen as part of İnönü’s image as a relatable and approachable leader, a pioneering role model in the process of making the modern Turkish body in public.

Magazine articles teaching photography to emerging amateur photographers, including columns by Görgüç, point to amateur photography’s rapid spread side by side with official photography in the early republic. With cheaper cameras and the increasing availability of resources for photographic processing, amateur photographers experimented with new techniques and artistic perspectives.¹⁹ In this context, the *Halkevleri* (People’s Houses) and *Köy Enstitüleri* (Village Institutes) played a crucial role in fostering a vibrant photographic culture in the 1930s and 1940s and provided platforms for both professional and amateur photographers to develop their skills and showcase their work. Görgüç himself held exhibitions at the *Halkevleri*, including a major retrospective of his work entitled *Röportaj ve Hâdisat Fotoğrafları Sergisi 1919–1943* (Reportage

and Event Photography Exhibition) with one thousand photographs in fifty sections at the Kadıköy Halkevi in 1943.²⁰

In the catalogue of his 1943 retrospective, Görgüç describes this exhibition as “nothing more than the sincere expression that it is not possible for a newspaper photographer to be present at every event or to create a valuable piece from every subject.”²¹ This sentiment offers insight into Görgüç’s perspective on his own photographic practice.²² First-hand accounts like these add additional frameworks for our readings of the photographs, contributing to layered imaginings of early republican social, cultural, and political life across a range of rapidly modernizing republican spaces. The Institute’s collection sheds light on the intricate relationships that people forge with photography, using it as a mirror for their desired selves in a multiplicity of social settings. I argue that, between the official and the personal, these images invite us to envision an emerging free space in photography, one that exists outside fixed categories, in part due to the transformed status of these photographs as archival objects today. The trusting relationship established between the sitter(s) and the photographer offers an opportunity to think through the vulnerabilities of citizenship as individuals negotiate a modern identity at a transformative historical moment. Although still shaped by the conventions of portrait and press photography at the time—as Görgüç’s teachings also affirm—the photographs in the collection allow for a critical examination of how agency, intent, and context intersect and entangle within photographic practices in a specific political landscape, prompting us to rethink the boundaries, definitions, and categories of photography itself.

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Figure 8: A young man and a child sitting by a tree, before 1925. SVIKV, IAE, CFA_007717.



Figure 9: Children on a Vecihi Hürkuş plane in Yeşilköy, Istanbul, early 1930s. SVIKV, IAE, CFA_004061.

- 1 "Fotoğrafa Yeni Başlayanlar Dikkat Ediniz," *Foto Magazin* 4 (August 1, 1938): 70.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Hüseyin Coğun, "Atatürk'ün Fotoğrafçıları," *Atatürk Ansiklopedisi, Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu - Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Başkanlığı*, February 4, 2021, <https://ataturkansiklopedisi.gov.tr/bilgi/ataturkun-fotografcalari/>. Namık Görgüç is also referred to as Foto Namık at times, particularly in some articles related to his exhibitions. See, for example, "Foto Namığın Sergisi." *Cumhuriyet*, October 26, 1941; "Foto Namık Sergisi," *Cumhuriyet*, May 4, 1943.
- 4 Other well-known writers who wrote on photography at the time include Nurullah Ataç and Peyami Safa.
- 5 The monthly *Foto Magazin* (1938–1941) was published by the prominent photographer Süleyman Süreyya Bükey, who also founded the studio Foto Süreyya, which became extremely popular in the 1930s.
- 6 Online conversation with F. Gülrü Tanman, Ekin Can Göksoy, Mustafa Ergül, and F. Elif Özsoy, July 22, 2024. I am indebted to K. Mehmet Kentel, F. Gülrü Tanman, Ekin Can Göksoy, Mustafa Ergül, and F. Elif Özsoy for their guidance regarding the collection, and for offering me access to the photographs and the written materials pertinent to the photographers therein. My special thanks to F. Gülrü Tanman, the head of the Istanbul Research Institute, for her valuable insights into the individual photographs in the archive. Additional thanks to Alper Tekin, Shekoufeh Behbehani, and Ruggero Calich for their insightful notes on this research.
- 7 Suna and İnan Kıracı donated the archive to the Suna and İnan Kıracı Foundation in 2011. It took several years to conserve, preserve, and digitize the photographs. Currently, 9,360 images are accessible to the public via the Institute's online library catalogue, and research is ongoing to label the rest of the collection. You can access the archive via this link: [https://katalog.iae.org.tr/yordam/?p=1&dil=3&tip=gelisimsgorunum=&tk=&alan=&q=kunyeKoleksiyonKN_txt:\(26\)](https://katalog.iae.org.tr/yordam/?p=1&dil=3&tip=gelisimsgorunum=&tk=&alan=&q=kunyeKoleksiyonKN_txt:(26)).
- 8 Coğun, "Atatürk'ün Fotoğrafçıları."
- 9 Online conversation with F. Gülrü Tanman, Ekin Can Göksoy, Mustafa Ergül, and F. Elif Özsoy, July 22, 2024.
- 10 Between 1929 and 1933, Turkey hosted an annual beauty contest organized by *Cumhuriyet* as part of the country's modernization efforts under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's reforms. These contests gained international significance when Keriman Halis won Miss Universe in 1932, symbolizing Turkey's cultural alignment with the West and the success of its reforms in reshaping women's roles.

- 11 The Gürbüz Çocuk competitions were health-focused events organized in Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s as part of the republican government's efforts to promote physical fitness and public health. These competitions encouraged parents to raise healthy, strong children who represented the vitality of the new Turkish nation. See Makbule Sarıkaya, "Gürbüz Çocuk Yarışmaları," *Atatürk Dergisi* 1, no. 1 (March 2016): 201–224.
- 12 The Dârülbeyâti ("House of Fine Arts") was established in Istanbul in 1914 as an Ottoman imperial theater. Its history was closely linked to that of its director, the actor Muhsin Ertuğrul, and by the 1930s it had evolved into the Istanbul City Theaters, which offered a range of performances at different venues in the city. Didem Ardalı Büyükarman, "Theatre in Istanbul in the Republican Era," History of Istanbul, Türkiye Diyanet Foundation Center for Islamic Studies (İSAM) and İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality Kültür ve Sanat Ürünleri A.Ş., 2019, <https://istanbultarihi.ist/648-theatre-in-istanbul-in-the-republican-era>.
- 13 Vecihi Hürkuş (1896–1969) was a pioneering Turkish aviator, engineer, and aircraft designer, often considered one of the most important figures in Turkish aviation history. During the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923), he flew various missions for the Turkish army. Hürkuş built Turkey's first domestically produced aircraft, the Vecihi K-VI, in 1925. He founded Turkey's first private aircraft factory (Vecihi Fıham Hava ve Deniz Fenni İnşaat Fabrikası) in the 1930s and continued to design aircraft. For more about Hürkuş, see "TRT Radyo 1 - Gecenin İçinden - Vecihi Hürkuş Röportajı," Tayyareci Vecihi Hürkuş Müzesi Derneği, July 19, 2021, <https://tayyarecivecihi.com/trt-radyo-1-gecenin-icinden-vecihi-hurkus-roportaji/>.
- 14 Baklahorani was a traditional carnival celebrated by Istanbul's Greek Orthodox community on Clean Monday, the last Monday before Lent, particularly in the Kurtuluş (formerly Tatavla) neighborhood. Baklahorani was one of Istanbul's most famous Christian festivals until its last celebration in 1941. A law banning people from wearing masks ended the carnival in 1943. See Sada Payır, "Umumda Mahremiyet: Geç Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Tatavla Karnavalı" [Privacy in public: The carnival of Tatavla in late Ottoman Istanbul], *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 321 (September 2020): 32–38.
- 15 F. Gülrü Tanman (2024) explains that the photographs in the collection belonging to Giz and his friends and family appear to be from an earlier period that may not be a part of another collection of his work held by Yapı Kredi. Bought in 1996, Yapı Kredi's Selahattin Giz Photography Collection includes around 35,000 images. It is unclear how, when, and why the photographs acquired by the Institute became separated from Giz's archive. "Selahattin Giz Fotoğrafları," Yapı Kredi, accessed

- October 1, 2024, <https://www.yapikredi.com.tr/yapi-kredi-hakkinda/kurumsal-sosyal-sorumluluk/kurumsal-sosyal-sorumluluk-projeleri/yapi-kredi-koleksiyonlari/selahattin-giz-fotografcalari>.
- 16 See Özge Baykan Calafato, *Making the Modern Turkish Citizen: Vernacular Photography in the Early Republican Era* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022).
- 17 I am grateful to F. Gülrü Tanman for bringing this phrase, brought up by M. Baha Tanman at an earlier date, to my attention. Tanman explains that Semavi Eyice used this phrase in reference to a specific pose (where the sitter rests an arm on a stand) which became popular in studio photography in the late nineteenth century. It is likely that both the pose and the phrase gained popularity simultaneously and continued to be used in the early years of the Turkish Republic.
- 18 Elizabeth Edwards, "Photography and the Performance of History," in "Visual History," ed. Patricia Hayes and Andrew Bank, special issue, *Kronos*, no. 27 (November 2001): 15–29.
- 19 The 1930s also witnessed a flourishing culture of *alaminüt* or itinerant photography, which used a wooden box camera that also served as a dark room. In cities and the countryside, *alaminüt* photography played an important role in reimagining modern Turkey as a republican home for its newly minted citizens across different classes. Though photography in this period is regarded as having been a predominantly male profession, the Institute's collection brings to light an exceptional set of photographs of a woman *alaminüt* photographer, "Foto Fatma" (FKA_003979, CFA_000135, FKA_004058), posing in front of her small shop next to a wooden box camera. This series, shot by Giz in the 1930s, helps us revisit historiographies of photography in the early republican era.
- 20 However, the flourishing scene and networks of creative expression established thanks to the Halkevleri and Köy Enstitüleri faced a significant rupture when the new right-wing Demokrat Parti government shut down these institutions after coming to power in 1950.
- 21 Namık Görgüç, *Röportaj ve Hâdisat Fotoğrafları Sergisi, 1919–1943* (Istanbul: Cumhuriyet Matbaası, 1943): "Bu da bir gazete fotoğrafçısının her hadiseye yetişmesi veyahud her mevzudan nisbeten olsun kıymetli bir eser yaratabilmesi mümkün olamayacağına samimi bir ifadesinden başka birşey değildir."
- 22 Considering the overall lack of such first-hand accounts, photographers' memoirs offer a deeper understanding about the conditions in which photographers worked at the time. See, for instance, Günvar Otmanbölük, *Babali'nin Yarım Asırlıkları* (Istanbul: Gazeteciler Cemiyeti Yayınları, 1986) for the accounts of Giz on the life of photojournalists in the early republican era.