



BOOK REVIEW

Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination (Kindle edition), By. Stefan Ihrig, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014, 320 p.

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In this groundbreaking work, Stefan Ihrig explores what has been a previously unexplored aspect of studies on Nazi Germany. Through examination of German press and statements from Nazi figures, Ihrig contributes greatly to a field where there is little literature. Originally released in 2014, this work warrants a reconsideration, in light of recent developments in global politics – the rise of right wing populism, populist leadership and tensions toward immigrant and minority groups. Turkey has not escaped these trends either. The title of the book is obviously provocative, even more so, in light of recent developments.

Ihrig's research find these recurring themes through studies of German right wing press of the time and the statements of Nazi officials, from the start of the Turkish nationalist struggle, to the second world war. The research focuses on German right wing press, usually outside of the era's mainstream, where he finds largely positive depictions of Turkey and of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Ihrig's central thesis is that early German Nationalists and the later Adolf Hitler Nazi regime saw Turkey's independence struggle and nation building efforts as critically influential to how they would build their reich. Second is Atatürk's leadership and character was seen as a model "führer" upon which Hitler could base his own rule. In short, the Nazis saw Atatürk's Turkey the example of national struggle, elimination of national enemies and gaining international recognition which they would aspire to follow.

The idea that Germany use Atatürk's Turkey as an example is prevalent in the press that Ihrig studies. Chapter one describes how the German press took a keen interest in the Turkish independence struggle, Ihrig goes as far to describe their fascination with the struggle as a form of "*hypernationalist pornography*." This corresponds with Germany's position at the end of the first world war, which was similar to Turkey's; having been defeated by the allies and forced into accepting humiliating treaties (Sevres and Versailles). Turkey was able to resist the demands of Sevres treaty and establish an independent nation through armed, nationalist struggle.

In chapter four, Ihrig states that German interpretation of specific nation building efforts could also be a model for the Nazi German state. These referred to Atatürk's regime's abolishment of the Ottoman imperial rule, which the Nazis saw as antithetical to Turkey's nationalist principles. Turkey's efforts during and after the war to handle foreign sympathiser elements of society, specifically Greek and Armenian populations, as essential to purify the nation. These interpretations had some influence into how Germany would later deal with its

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own “internal enemies. That Turkey was able to attain victory against the hated allies through an organic nationalist movement and an independent state on their own terms sent the German right wing press into rapture. They saw the struggle as an example of what Germany must do.

Ihrig establishes that the German press was enthusiastically in support of using Turkey as an example. In chapter 2, Ihrig finds that the specifically pro-National socialist press suggested going further, in their demands “*give us an Ankara government!*” Here, Ihrig suggests that it was Atatürk’s nationalist struggle, and not Benito Mussolini’s march on Rome which was the primary inspiration for the failed “beer hall putsch” of 1923. Evidence he cites is of Hitler mentioning Atatürk before he did Mussolini in the post attempt trial. By the time the Nazis had attained power in 1933, their and German media’s fascination with Turkey had not subsided. Only now, the German state was seen to be on the right track which Atatürk’s Turkey had set out a decade earlier

The second major theme of the book is the way in which the German press and Nazi figures depicted Atatürk himself. Central to these depictions was how Atatürk could be a model leader for the Nazi state. Hitler, in an interview with Turkish Newspaper Milliyet, had described Atatürk as “*his shining star,*” a significant statement which was repeated throughout Hitler’s career. In his trial for leading the Munich beer hall putsch, Hitler had cited Atatürk’s nationalist struggle in his defence. Ihrig argues the significance of this, as Hitler had placed it above Mussolini’s march on Rome. Ihrig argues that Atatürk had a greater influence, relative to Mussolini than the existing literature suggests. Most tellingly in citing Hitler’s statement “*in this respect, Atatürk was a teacher; Mussolini was his first, and I his second student.*” Atatürk, as Hitler’s “*shining star*” would have a crucial influence on the type of leadership Hitler wanted to convey.

German literature, echoed Hitler’s sentiments. In Atatürk, the German media and publications had found their ideal leader and example. Ihrig cites the proliferation of Atatürk biographies in Germany being greater in number than anywhere else in the world outside of Turkey. In chapter 4, Ihrig describes how Atatürk was elevated to a level of near saint. Atatürk was, a warrior, a saviour and a man who embodied the Turkish nation itself. The Turkish state at the time was only possible through Atatürk’s will. German publications of the time place Atatürk on an equal footing with Hitler and Mussolini. The purpose of these publications was to draw parallels between Atatürk and Hitler. In doing so, Ihrig argues, this could legitimise the cult around Hitler and his rule.

Through reading these publications and statements, Ihrig comes to the conclusion that Atatürk and the Turkish republic of the time had a great influence on Nazi ideology, actions and leadership. As a result, critics could easily use this to support arguments of Atatürk as a dictator or war criminal. However, Ihrig takes great pains to argue that most of the Nazi view of Atatürk and Turkey was largely constructed to serve their own agenda. Publications carefully selected and interpreted the Turkish narrative, while ignoring many realities. Therefore, such comparisons cannot be used to slander Atatürk, or draw parallels between Nazi atrocities and the Turkish struggle. Ihrig argues that national socialism and



fascism as practiced by the Nazi regime has some roots in Atatürk and Turkey, however he makes a strong statement in conclusion that

“we must always be wary of alleged traditions and continuities. More often than not, they are constructed and imagined, rather than real.”

This study has made a significant contribution to studies on fascism through exploring a previously little studied aspect of history and through the examination of sources outside of the mainstream. In an age where fascist sentiments are becoming ever prevalent, works such as Ihrig’s study have become more necessary.