

TURKEY'S BIPOLAR NATIONAL ANTHEM

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 29 March 2020

Photo by Wikimedia

National anthems are, by definition, bombastic, over-the-top, full of braggadocio and glittering generalities. But even in such an unrestrained musical category, Turkey's national anthem stands out as an exemplar of hyperbole, blood-and-guts vows, triumphalism, self-pity, and paranoia.

The Turkish anthem also has the rare distinction of being the only national rah-rah whose title is made up two foreign words—*İstiklal Marşı* ('independence' and 'march' in Arabic and French respectively.) As well, with forty-one lines, the Turkish anthem must be one of the longest. One can only imagine the cruel imposition on millions of Turks who are expected to remember the rambling and interminable lyrics.

Poet, politician and academic Mehmet Ersoy (1873-1936) wrote *İstiklal Marşı* in 1921. Several years later Ersoy moved to Egypt. During a trip to Lebanon he contracted typhoid and died shortly after.

Almost every line of the anthem is an invitation to disbelief and ridicule because of excesses in expression, absence of logic, or historical truth. Perhaps unsure whether his feverish lines had conveyed his ultra-nationalist bipolar message, Ersoy peppered his lyrics with eighteen exclamation marks. Ersoy also couldn't differentiate between an exclamation mark and a semi-colon. [The English translation of the anthem](#) has a number of such illogical English phrases as "take shame" and "unhand not".

"Fear not; For the crimson banner that providing ripples in this glorious dawn shall not fade," starts the anthem. It's not clear who is addressing whom. Is it the poet-politician-academic Ersoy addressing Turkey or Turkey addressing the Turks?

The third line refers to the star on the Turkish flag: "For that is the star of my people...It is mine, and solely belongs to my valiant nation." Thus Turkey appropriates a symbol that has been universally in use since at least 1,000 BCE.

Ottoman Turkey adopted the crescent-and-star in the mid-18th century, borrowing it from Christian Byzantium (it was the flag of Byzantine Constantinople). When Ersoy wrote the lines about "Turkey's star", a dozen nations—including the U.S.--had the identical five-point stars on their flags. Now there are at least fifty states—from Angola to Zimbabwe—with the same star on their flags. Tunisia's flag is almost identical to the Turkish flag.

The anthem describes the "Turkish" star as "coy". Coy means simpering, arch, flirtatious, kittenish, and skittish. A simpering star representing a nation? Addressing the star, Ersoy wrote: "Do not frown...please smile upon my heroic nation. Why that anger? Why that rage?" Putting aside the "anger/rage" tautology, "heroic nation" is a humorous description of a nation that had just lost its empire during WWI. Immediately prior to that, it had lost the Balkan Wars and for nearly two

hundred years had been given a bloody nose by Tsarist Russia.

"Freedom is the right of my nation," declares the martial song although Turkey has never experienced freedom—whether under the Ottomans, the Young Turks, Ataturk's dictatorship, or Erdogan's dictatorship lite.

In the next line, Ersoy contradicts himself: "I have been free since the beginning and forever shall be so." It's obvious Ersoy is referring to Turkey. Turkey free from the beginning?

He continues: "What madman shall put me in chains?" Was Ersoy inadvertently referring to dictator Ataturk? President Ismet Inonu? General Cemal Gursel? The various military juntas? Erdogan?

Even when excusing Ersoy/Turkey for the excessive language, one has difficulty swallowing such hyperbole as "I am like the roaring flood, trampling my banks and overcoming my body. I'll tear apart mountains, exceed the Expanses, and still gush out!"

Vividly expressing the innate Turkish hostility to the West and civilization itself, the anthem has this four-line stanza:

"The horizons of the West may be bound with walls of steel,
But my borders are guarded by the mighty bosom of a believer.
Let it bellow out, do not be afraid! And think: how can this fiery faith ever be extinguished,
By that battered, single-fanged monster you call "civilization"?"

The most outrageous stanza is reminiscent of a grotesque scene from "The Night of the Living Dead" movie. After mourning 'martyrs' buried in Turkey, the anthem promises: "Martyrs would burst forth should one simply squeeze the soil!"

Yes, the skeletons of Bloody Sultan Abdul Hamid, genocidiars Talaat, Enver, Jemal, and Ataturk would crack the sod and pop from underground in a scene Stephen King might have imagined. Pity Turkish kindergarten children who have to sing the morbid words **every morning** per government law.

Addressing Allah, Ersoy says:

"Oh glorious God, the sole wish of my pain-stricken heart is that
No infidel's hand should ever touch the bosom of my sacred Temples!"

However, it's fine that 2,434 Armenian churches and 450 monasteries in Turkey lie in ruins or are used as bars, for storage, or as dumps.

There's no let-up as Ersoy limns, "Let noble sound prevail thunderously across my eternal homeland... my fatigued tombstone...prostrate a thousand times in ecstasy...my lifeless body shall burst forth from the earth like an eternal spirit...our every last drop of blood may finally be

blessed...noble sound prevail thunderously across my eternal homeland."

The drivel continues:

"For freedom is the absolute right of my ever-free flag.

For independence is the absolute right of my God-worshipping nation!"

Was dictator Ataturk **who squelched freedom** aware of this factoid? Does Erdogan who jails journalists and judges, shuts newspapers and blocks social media?

Despite his excesses, Ersoy is circumspect about referring to national origin which is essential for most national anthems. According to Turks, a Grey Wolf was the "mother-creator" of Turks: she was a lactating wolf in Central Asia who nursed the first Turks. Perhaps Ersoy knew the wolf exalted by Turks as their matriarch is scientifically known as the Iberian Wolf--from Spain. Turks are already in denial about their origins. That they got their matriarch's identity and its habitat wrong would shatter their shaky sense of Turkish selfhood.

Comments



Bedros – 2020-12-13 07:26:06

To Umut, You say the anthem's lyrics are excessive because they were written when Turkey was fighting for its independence against the western powers. Most anthems are written under such circumstances and not in peacetime. As well, by 1921, the First World War had been long over and Turkey was occupied in killing its remaining minorities (Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks) and were sharpening their swords to eliminate the Kurds. In light of recent Erdogan statements that Turkey is part of Europe and should have been admitted into the EU, it's interesting to note one of the anthem's stanzas: "The horizons of the West may be bound with walls of steel, But my borders are guarded by the mighty bosom of the believer. Let it bellow out, do not be afraid! And think how can this fiery faith ever be extinguished, By the battered, single-fanged monster you call "civilization"? If Angela Merkle, Emmanuel Macron, Boris Johnson, etc. heard the above anti-Europe lyrics, I am sure they would embrace Erdogan and all 60 million Turks.



Vahan – 2020-12-12 22:51:58

Umut, ---The Turkish national anthem remained unchanged long after what you call "independence war." If there was an independence war it was that of the people whose homelands had been occupied by the racist, authoritarian, theocratic, and lawless Ottoman Sultanate for hundreds of years. ---The translation is the official one. Google. ---The article's only agenda was to reveal where the hearts and minds of Turks were. --- Since you claim all national anthems can be made fun of, It would be helpful if you provided a funny national anthem.



Umut – 2020-12-12 19:33:27

This anthem was written when Turkey was fighting an independence war against western powers and supposed to lift the fighting spirits of people. Your translation is terrible and this article obviously has different agendas. You could make fun of any national anthem if you tried hard like this.



Hayorti - 2020-08-02 20:34:24

When it comes to Turkish genocidiers, wonders never cease. Here we have 139-year-old Enver Pasha--who kicked the bucket 98 years ago courtesy of an Armenian soldier, has not only come back to life but has written in English. Perhaps after rotting underground for 98 years the "Bungler of Sarikamish" can't see well unless the letters are in caps. Maybe I should apologize to the murderous cadaver for writing in lower case. Enver, who knew some broken German, must have picked English when he was 8 ft. under. It should return to the worms to learn how to punctuate: his inane comment is free of punctuation, even of a period in the end.



ENVER PASHA - 2020-08-02 06:04:50

HAHA ARMENIAN SORE LOSER TRYING TO MAKE FUN OF A COUNTRY'S NATIONAL ANTHEM BY IGNORING ALL THE LITERATURE USED IN THE MARCH AND TRANSLATING EVERYTHING WRONG LOL HAD MY BEST LAUGH EVER