What Happened at the Tepebaşı Theater? A Tale of the Cold War on the Periphery

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On a spring afternoon in 1956, a group of Turkish poets and writers gathered in Beyoğlu, the vibrant cultural hub of Istanbul. All in their late teens and early twenties, the young men knew each other from the city's literary circles and cafés. Their destination was the Tepebaşı Drama Theater (TDT), a popular venue for public performances.[1] The group had been discreetly preparing to stage a protest at the 'Poetry and Literature' night. The event, organized by the Turkish Writers Association, was set to feature canonical figures of modern Turkish literature. What happened on the fateful night of April 2, when the young group demonstrated their protest and its aftermath, illustrates the intersections of culture and ideology in Cold War Turkey. A public literary protest against the status quo was portrayed as a leftist rebellion, and the Cold War context is critical to understand why. This article argues that the protest, also known as the Tepebaşı Drama Theater Incident, is a critical point in Turkish cultural and intellectual history. Cultural Cold War studies predominantly deal with the European-American axis, and often reduce the Cold War's broader cultural impact on the periphery to propaganda wars. While there has been increased attention on Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, the complicated cultural Cold War experiences of non-Western countries remain largely neglected.[2] This article maintains that the Cold War's repercussions on peripheral cultures are more nuanced than the mainstream narratives. Examining the cultural and ideological dynamics in a peripheral country, such as Turkey, could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of global Cold War history. The evolution of a literary protest into an ideological witch hunt in Turkey is an illustrious example of cultural and political tensions on the periphery during the Cold War era.

Young Writers Against the Establishment

Founded in 1923, as a young republic Turkey underwent significant political and economic changes in the 1950s. After 27 years of single party rule, the Turkish republic introduced multi-party democracy by the mid-century. This transition culminated in the May 1950 elections, marking the beginning of the Democrat Party rule. The shift was part of a broader historical context, marked by the early Cold War politics and anti-communist propaganda, notably the 1951 trials.[3] The American aid from the Truman Doctrine funds ($223 million) and the Marshall Plan funds ($225 million) was followed by Turkey's involvement in the Korean War, acceptance

into NATO in 1952, and further opening itself to the influences of the Cold War. When the ruling Democrat Party sought reelection in 1954, their campaign slogan was 'Developing Turkey.' To achieve this goal, the government relied on more American aid, and the Democrat Party government consistently emphasized Turkey's strategic importance to the Western bloc as a frontline against communism. From the American perspective, the extension of the Cold War into Turkey was defined by the principle that it could be extended "everywhere where Communism could be construed as a threat."[4] Despite not being at the heart of the cultural Cold War initially, Turkey would prove to be an important front.[5]

In 1954, President Celal Bayar and Prime Minister Adnan Menderes visited the United States separately to request $300 million of additional aid. Being "small America" was the defining motivation of the Democrat Party government to secure the necessary support from the White House. For this, the Menderes administration relied on American experts not only in economic policy but also in the fields of education and culture. For example, of the forty-four education experts who worked in Turkey between 1950 and 1960, forty-one were American.[6] Turkey's transformation in the 1950s created far-reaching implications in cultural scene. In literature, new avant-garde magazines[7] emerged and challenged the dominant literary norms of the time. In music, groups like Helikon Association introduced atonal music in the country while rock 'n' roll became popular by 1956.[8] The first ever abstract art exhibition was opened by Adnan Çoker and Lütfü Günay in 1953.[9]

Although avant-garde movements like Nâzım Hikmet's early futuristic poetry or the Garip, a revolutionary poetic manifesto, predate the 1950s, the new decade ushered in new literary sensibilities. The poets and writers who started to publish their work during this time would later be called the '50s Generation (50 Kuşağı). Influenced by French existentialism, modernism, and the postwar art movements, the prominent figures of this generation rallied against the literary establishment despite disagreements among them. The young artists who participated in the TDT protest formed the core of this generation, with many being associated with the literary magazines *Mavi*[10] and *a*.[11] When some of them attempted to join the Turkish Writers Association and their request was denied, they decided to protest the association and the values it represented with a public demonstration.[12] Among the protesters on April 2, 1956 were Demirtaş Ceyhun, Ferit Edgü, Fikret Hakan, Erdal Öz, Demir Özlü, Hasan Pulur, Hilmi Yavuz, and several others. None of these young poets and writers had published a book, yet they would leave a lasting impact on Turkish culture in the coming years.

Demirtaş Ceyhun (1934-2009), who was detained after the protest (his photograph appeared in the next day's newspapers as he was taken into custody), was a young writer in 1956. He published his first book five years after the TDT protest and gained recognition as an award-winning writer with his critically acclaimed short story collections. Ceyhun's influence grew further during the 1970s when he served as the editor of the left-wing *Politika* newspaper. On the night of

the protest though, like his friends, he was an unknown young writer.

Ferit Edgü (1936-2024) had just begun publishing his work in the 1950s when he joined the protest as a part of the *Mavi* circle. His first book, a short story collection, appeared three years after the protest. Edgü soon emerged as a prominent voice in contemporary Turkish prose and became an esteemed writer.[13] Like Demirtaş Ceyhun, he was honored with the distinguished Sait Faik Award, the most prestigious award that can be given to a short story writer. Edgü's influence would go beyond literature as he published monographs on several Turkish artists.

Originally named Bumin Gaffar Çıtanak, Fikret Hakan (1934-2017), who later became a prolific film actor, was also among the TDT protesters. In the early 1950s, while working for the Ses Theatre Company, Hakan also contributed to literary magazines with his short stories. Later he devoted himself to film to become a major figure in Turkish cinema with an extensive filmography and over 170 appearances in movies.

Erdal Öz (1935-2006), who later gave insights about his involvement in the TDT protest and its impact on his worldview had started his writing career with poetry. He switched to prose like many others in his generation and became a notable short story writer (another recipient of the Sait Faik Award) and a prominent publisher. Because of his political activities, Öz was jailed after the 1971 military coup. The TDT protest was a turning point in his political education.

Another politically involved member of the group, Demir Özlü (1935-2017) was also writing poems in the mid-1950s, soon he, too, would switch to prose to be one of the emblematic writers of his generation. Influenced by French existentialists,[14] Özlü's short stories (also a recipient of the Sait Faik Award) manifest the essential literary and stylistic features of the '50s Generation. Despite his individualistic approach, Özlü participated in political activities that resulted him being a political exile.

Hasan Pulur (1932-2015), a young journalist among the protesters, was working for a newspaper in the spring of 1956 and later became a prominent name in the Turkish press. Pulur was associated with the literary group that was regularly meeting at Baylan Café, a popular gathering place for poets and writers. After publishing poems in magazines, he soon established himself as a well-known journalist in various positions for major newspapers. Pulur continued to write daily columns until he died and was one of the most widely-read columnists in Turkey thanks to his plain and straightforward writing style.[15]

Finally, Hilmi Yavuz, one of the most influential figures of modern Turkish poetry, was among the protesters that night. Born in 1936, Yavuz published his first poem in 1952. Although his first book appeared relatively late, in 1969, he became a canonical poet, largely due to the synthesis of modern and traditional poetical forms in his work. Yavuz remains a key voice of his generation who extensively discussed the TDT protest in his essays and memoir, offering insights into the incident's significance.

These young intellectuals, gathered around literary magazines in the 1950s, were passionate about changing the world and reforming literature. On the night of April 2, 1956, they believed they were exposing the hypocrisy of the literary establishment, and challenging the status quo. As ambitious young men, they were determined to make their voices heard. Little did they know that the following events would be framed differently by the authorities and the press, leading to long-term implications for them. While they eventually changed the dynamics of literature in Turkey, and the protest was just a step towards this goal, it was during the Cold War period when everything was politicized, and even on the periphery they had to pay a price.

What Happened That Night?

The essayist Salâh Birsel describes what happened at the TDT on April 2, 1956 as a world-shattering event. According to his account, the protest was well-planned, however, some individuals from the intelligence knew it in advance.[16] The poet and writer Ahmet Oktay, on the other hand, in his memoirs describes the protest as an 'almost spontaneous' reaction by the younger generation.[17] In Hilmi Yavuz's memoirs, the protest is a naive attempt to challenge the literary establishment.[18]

Birsel gives a detailed account of what happened that night based on interviews with the participants. In his narrative, a group of young writers (including Hasan Pulur, Fikret Hakan, and Demirtaş Ceyhun) planned the protest at Baylan Café a few days before the event.[19] They decided to boo Behçet Kemal Çağlar, the "national poet", to mock the mainstream literary conventions. The young writers were unhappy with the fact that Çağlar had a parliamentary salary as the national poet.[20]

When April 2 arrived, the group gathered in Beyoğlu, and as soon as darkness fell, they headed to Tepebaşı. To avoid suspicion, they split into small groups and purchased tickets from different locations.[21] On their way, they encountered the poet Attila İlhan, who would later be accused of organizing the protest, and invited him inside the building but İlhan refused to join them. As the protesters entered the building, they came across undercover cops (Hasan Pulur recognized them as he was a court reporter at *Vatan* newspaper).[22] However, as they headed towards their seats, the group did not question why so many police officers were present at a literary event. As it turned out, it was not a coincidence.

The night opened with a speech by Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889-1974), a canonical novelist and former senator, a symbolic figure of the republican Turkey. Karaosmanoğlu delivered a friendly speech to young people and received applause from the audience, including the protesters. The speaker declared his support for the new generation: "We did not like those who came before us. We looked for something new. You will not like those who came before you either. Even if you boo us, literature will benefit from it."[23] Upon hearing these words, the protesters realized that the organization committee was aware of their plans.

The second part of the event started with the critic Nurullah Ataç's (1898-1957) speech. Although he had always supported young poets and avant-garde movements, Ataç was a target of the protesters.[24] His radical stance on the Turkish Language Reform[25] made the protesters to approach him with respect and sarcasm. They opened a banner read: "*Matine dörüt erleri, essalamün aleyküm*…"[26] Their point was to show the absurdity of the language policies. After Ataç's speech, loud protests began during the poet Zeki Ömer Defne's recitation of his poems, and they increased significantly when Behçet Kemal Çağlar took the stage. While one protester, Bağırsak Süha, played his bugle, the others started booing the national poet. A few minutes later voices heard from the audience: "Silence these men!" "Call the police!"

In some accounts the police were already waiting outside, in others they came in a few minutes after they were called.[27] The ambience in the building changed when a group of nationalist students in the audience rushed towards the protesters and attacked them. The student leading the attackers was yelling: "How dare you boo our national poet, you communists!" Protesters would later say it did not make sense, since their actions had nothing to do with communism.[28] Some, like Pulur, had understood that there was something fishy in the brawl. In fact, the nationalist students had been brought to the event as a rapid response force against the protesters. When the protesters responded to them sticks were used, chairs were thrown, and blood spilled.[29] The protesters now realized that they had fallen into a trap, but it was too late.

Later that night several protesters were detained.[30] All detainees were taken to Sansaryan Hanı (Sansaryan Inn), the notorious police station in Sirkeci district of Istanbul, to be questioned.[31] Interrogations continued until dawn. By the morning, everyone was released except Hasan Pulur and Demirtaş Ceyhun, the two scapegoats. The police officers had asked Behçet Kemal Çağlar if he was willing to file a complaint. Although Çağlar did not file one, the officials handed the two young men over to the prosecutor's office based on a provision in the penal code about disturbing the peace. Later they were fined up to fifteen liras and released. The next day, *Milliyet* newspaper reported:

> An unfortunate incident took place last night at the Drama Theater during the Turkish Writers Association's "Poetry and Music Night" event. After the event started at 9 p.m., with a predominantly female audience, a group from the crowd began continuously to chant against some of the poets. As the event neared its end, tensions escalated and the protest reached its peak when Behçet Kemal Çağlar took the stage. (…) The audience aroused and began to chant: "Where is the police? Catch those disrespectful people, long live the national poet, down with the protesters." (…) In an instant, the building was filled with uniformed and undercover police officers. Twenty protesters, the majority of

> whom were university students, were detained and taken to the Beyoğlu Police Station for legal proceedings.[32]

Other newspapers, such as the pro-government *Ekspres* described the protest as a communist plot on the front page: "Communists Cause a Stir at the Drama Theater."[33] Others like *Cumhuriyet* reported the event in a relatively neutral language: "A Brawl at the Theater."[34] *Cumhuriyet*'s report was shorter in a single-column: "Fight at the Drama Theater: People in the gallery clashed during the Poetry and Literature Night. Police arrested 33 people." *Akşam*, on the other hand, reported the incident in a two-column headline: "An Incident occurred at the Poetry Night. Some young people booed Yakup Kadri and Behçet Kemal."[35]

Milliyet's coverage continued on April 4 with more details about the protest. According to the reporting, when the national poet took the stage, and the protesters booed him, nationalist youth from the other side of the podium attacked the protesters and a brawl erupted. Although it was more or less the description of what happened inside the building, *Milliyet*'s coverage was not limited to this story. On April 4, the newspaper's notable columnist Peyami Safa joined the debate with a commentary, and claimed that the protest was a communist plot.[36] According to Safa, a prominent right-wing novelist, the protesters' attack on the national poet Behçet Kemal Çağlar was a proof that their motivation was political, not literary. Safa reminds his readers the Çiçek Palas incident of 1951, the left-wing student protest against the imprisonment of the poet Nâzım Hikmet, and warns the public that the Drama Theater protest was a similar incident. For Safa, the protest is an "infection" indicating the left's disloyalty to the country.

Safa's commentary created greater impact than any coverage of the protest, and it immediately became a matter of concern. The same day (two days after the protest) several people were called to the police station again. This time, the protester who played the bugle was summoned as well. An officer scolded Hasan Pulur: "What have you done? Ankara is furious, asking why you are asleep while the communists are causing trouble."[37]

But whose idea was the protest? Stories in the press do not mention a single organizer, however, to many people, the mastermind was Attilâ İlhan.[38] An influential and charismatic leader of the new generation, İlhan was newly returned from France at the time, mentoring young writers and poets who gathered at Baylan Café. As a poet, novelist, and essayist, İlhan had blended social realism with a romantic tone in his work. He was the ideal figure to encourage young writers to rebel against the status quo.[39] Despite not attending the protest and going to see a film that night, there were rumours that İlhan saved the film ticket in case he would need to prove that he was not among the protesters.[40] İlhan refuses being the organizer of the protest and notes that he went to Kadıköy district across the Bosphorus that night with the filmmaker Metin Erksan and learned about the incident the next day when he went back to Beyoğlu.[41] At the time a resident of Izmir, İlhan was just visiting Istanbul for a few days, and later sent a story about the protest to *Demokrat*

İzmir newspaper. The first statements about the protest from the participants such as Hasan Pulur were published in *Demokrat İzmir*.[42]

Two days after the protest, Attilâ İlhan was also among the people who were taken to the police station for questioning. In his defense, İlhan said since he was on a short visit, he would not be "such a fool to make the protest happen a day after coming to Istanbul."[43] After the interrogation, he was released.

Literary Quarrel Between Generations

Every generation challenges the previous one, and this is how literature evolves. Generational conflict has a long history in modern Turkish literature, going back to the early Westernization period in the Tanzimat (Reorganization) Era during the second half of the nineteenth century. While the Tanzimat writers challenged the older writers to modernize Turkish literature, their successors would rebel against them. These were a group of writers who gathered around *Servet-i Fünûn* magazine and called themselves Edebiyat-i Cedide[44] (New Literature) movement, criticized Tanzimat literature.[45] It is worth noting that generational tensions in the late Ottoman period have always been a part of the larger Westernization debate.

In the republican period after 1923, the most significant challenge against the literary establishment and the older generations was the 'Destroying the Idols' (Putları Yıkıyoruz) campaign. It was led by the communist poet Nâzım Hikmet who was influenced by Russian futurists. Nâzım Hikmet was in Moscow when the Bolshevik Revolution changed Russia substantially, and heavily influenced by Russian futurists, constructivists, and later social realists. While the struggle between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern was manifesting itself in almost every layer of society during the first decades of the Turkish Republic, it was inevitable for such a change to also have an impact on literature. In this context, Nâzım initiated the "Destroying the Idols" campaign in 1929 through the most popular social magazine of the era, *Resimli Ay*. Although short-lived, the campaign would have a long-term impact. Targeting the canonical poets like Abdülhak Hâmid Tarhan, nationalists like Mehmet Emin Yurdakul, and well-established novelists like Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (who was on the stage during the TDT protest), the 'Destroying the Idols' campaign encouraged a challenge against the conventional literary standards. However, the response to the campaign was more politically motivated than literary, largely because of Nâzım Hikmet's ideology and public image. The writer Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver, the president of the nationalist organization Turkish Hearths, responded to the campaign by blaming the supporters of being "the certified slaves of the Bolsheviks."[46]

Nâzım Hikmet's bold campaign against the literary establishment would inspire the TDT protesters in the 1950s. When the young writers decided to stage a public protest, Nâzım's campaign was on their mind from the beginning. Attilâ İlhan encouraged them for a similar action to Nâzım Hikmet's campaign.[47] Recently, Yavuz noted that what they wanted to do with the TDT protest was another 'De-

stroying the Idols' campaign.[48]

There are similarities between the two campaigns. When the first article of Nâzım Hikmet's campaign was published, a group of young nationalists gathered in front of the *Resimli Ay* offices with undercover police officers in the crowd to attack the writers. They chose a Sunday to ensure there would be no witnesses around.[49] The publisher of the magazine, Zekeriya Sertel, managed to calm the crowd down, and later Nâzım Hikmet talked to the demonstrators as well to reduce the tension. A brawl was averted.[50] On the other hand, the TDT protest was different in several ways. First, it was a physical demonstration, not limited to magazine pages. Secondly, while "Destroying the Idols" campaign was largely an idea of single figure, the TDT protest was a collaboration. And, finally, the Cold War context played a significant role in the public perception of the TDT protest.

For the participants, the TDT protest's aim was pure literary. Depicting the incident as a clash between two generations, Attilâ İlhan argues that the new magazines in the 1950s made the generational tension in Turkish literature relevant again, and the TDT protest was a culmination of this rhetoric.[51] The reason several literary magazines emerged in the first place during the 1950s was the new generation's discontent with the previous one. While the main idea behind the protest was to criticize the honoring of Behçet Kemal Çağlar, a mediocre poet, Çağlar was only a symbol.[52] On the other hand, for this very reason, any protest against him was considered as a reaction to the regime. Noting that they were first and foremost against the earlier generations and the protest had literary intentions, Pulur speaks on behalf of the TDT group: "They belong to the old generation, their writings have become outdated. Behçet Kemal Çağlar has given himself the title of 'national poet.' We used to discuss among ourselves, 'How can one become a national poet? Are we non-national poets?' We were critical of their style and literary understanding. They used to say, 'Art is for art's sake,' but we would say, 'No, art is for society!'"[53]

It is important to note that during the 1950s young writers had debates among themselves on social responsibility and individual expression, social realism and existentialism. Those debates would cause divisions among them in the future. Despite disagreements, what defined their generation was a rebellion against the status quo. The TDT protest was a culmination of that common goal, however, their bold statement against the literary establishment would be portrayed as leftist propaganda. In Cold War Turkey, the public saw the protest as an attempt to manipulate their opinion. "It may sound comical to today's reader," Oktay writes years later, "Once upon a time in Turkey, even the most ordinary things were understood in a political context. Everyone used to perceive communism as a deadly disease."[54] After all, these were the times when the famous Russian salad became the "American" salad in Turkey because people were too afraid to say 'Russian' in public.[55]

"A Hairpin Curve on the Road of History"

In the 1950s, one impact of new literary magazines was providing a platform to left-wing ideas. As a result, debates on the left expressed mostly through literary works.[56] One needs to consider the growing pressure on the left to contextualize the significance of literary magazines for left-wing intellectuals in the 1950s. It was a time when the Democrat Party relied on a close relationship with the United States and becoming more oppressive against potentially pro-communist movements and parties. President Harry Truman's argument from March 1947 was now Democrat Party government's motto in international relations: Turkey must be aided before 'confusion and disorder' spread in. It is important to note that persecution against the left did not begin in the 1950s; it goes back to the early republican years under the Republican People's Party. Even before the Turkish Republic was founded, the founder of Communist Party of Turkey, Mustafa Suphi, was assassinated with fourteen leading communists.[57] The most prominent communist poet of the country, Nâzım Hikmet, was in prison from 1938 to 1950. His poems remained banned in Turkey until 1965. The young generation in the 1950s read Nâzım Hikmet's poems secretly.[58] Another prominent left-wing artist, Sabahattin Ali, a pioneering short story writer and novelist, was murdered by the Turkish intelligence while fleeing the country in 1948. Although anti-communism has a long history in Turkey, it became more dominant in the Cold War framework. In this new context, culture was a critical weapon as psychological contest and 'peaceful' methods were very important.[59]

After the shift to multi-party democracy, especially the new generation was hopeful that things were changing, and the 'communist witch hunt' would end but it did not take long for them to realize that they were wrong.[60] After winning the 1950 election, the Democrat Party administration, to align with the United States with hopes for additional aid, became more oppressive against the left. Oppressing and eventually silencing left-wing intellectuals and writers, purging progressive academics in line with the McCarthyist paranoia defined the early 1950s in Turkey, notably the 1951 trials. One needs to consider the TDT protest in this context. Not surprisingly, when the protest was presented by the mainstream press as a revolt by the communists, it has been interpreted as an ideological insurgence. Giving an account of that night's events in his memoir, Oktay (despite not participating in the protest he was from the *Mavi* circle) describes the media's approach to the incident as Cold War propaganda.[61]

Politicization of intellectual debate was not alien to the early Cold War world. A good example is a quarrel that took place in the United States a few years earlier. When a peace conference held in Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City on March 25, 1949, the American press covered the event in a similar fashion and labeled the event as a Bolshevik propaganda attempt.[62] Although the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, or the Waldorf Affair, unlike the TDT protest, was a conference and not a public protest, it is sobering to see the parallels

in public reception in New York City and Istanbul. One significance of the TDT protest is that it shows how dynamics of the cultural Cold War reached from centre to periphery. In other words, the TDT incident mimicked what happened during and after the peace conference at Waldorf Hotel. Arthur Miller, a participant at the conference, describes the Waldorf Affair "a hairpin curve on the road of history."[63] In the context of Turkish cultural history, the TDT protest had a similar function and significance.

It is likely that the radical nature of the demonstration at the Tepebaşı Drama Theater made it easier for the public to associate the protest with communism.[64] However, the protesters were not a homogenous group. For example, Bağırsak Süha, who caused chaos with his bugle[65] did not identify with any ideology. The young people wanted a fair world for sure, and above all, they wanted to change literature but they were also young men looking for adventure and fun. But the authorities would take their adventure seriously. The interrogation process indicates how the protest was seen by the pro-American government. In his memoir, Yavuz notes that when his statement was taken at Sansaryan Hanı, the first question he was asked was "When and through whom did you become a communist?"[66] The deputy commissioner told him that booing the national poet was incompatible with patriotism. When Yavuz was released a few hours later it was clear that the whole questioning was motivated by finding the 'communists.'

Several writers and poets from the '50s Generation later stated that they were introduced to politics through literature.[67] Most of them adopted left-wing views not by reading theoretical works by Marx, Engels or Lenin, but by reading novels by Tolstoy or Steinbeck.[68] Sentiments they discovered in literature such as humanism or fury against injustice and inequality made the '50s Generation writers feel closer to left-wing politics. Eventually, their literary tastes changed and styles became varied, some of them would shift from individualistic literature to social realism. Instead of describing abstract notions about humanity they focused on real examples of oppressed and exploited individuals.[69] They believed transforming the world could be possible through telling the stories of oppressed individuals, and the working class. In Yavuz's words, they were being transformed from morality to theory, from emotion to consciousness in the mid-1950s.[70] The TDT protest took place precisely at that turning point, indeed. On the one hand, the protest was an expression of this transformation. On the other hand, the aftermath of the protest would spoil that transformation. The outcome of the protest would create mixed effects on the political education of the '50s Generation.

According to Yavuz, the protest's aftermath 'crippled' their political awakening.[71] Years later, in a letter to Oktay Akbal from London in 1965, talking about the Marxist critic György Lukács's book *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* and how much he liked it, Yavuz states that despite his desire of translating a chapter from the book he would refrain from it due to legal troubles of a translator who had translated Lukács's work a few years earlier.[72] It is hard not see the shadow of

the Sansaryan Hanı experience in Yavuz's abstention.

While remembering the TDT protest, Pulur describes the reason of this pressure on them as the state's desire to wipe the left out.[73] After the vilification by the press and police interrogations, it was no surprise that many young writers would become more cautious in the future. On the other hand, the protest made some of them more politically aware, such as Erdal Öz. For Öz, the TDT incident meant encountering the police for the first time, the first detention, the first interrogation, and the first police beating. The portrayal of the protest as a communist rebellion in the newspapers had a significant impact on him. It sparked an interest in Öz about the oppressed people, a reaction against poverty and exploitation, a strong hatred towards injustice, and a sense of solidarity. It eventually led him to join the Workers' Party of Turkey, the first socialist party in the country to win representation in the parliament. This political awakening left a lasting mark on his life.[74]

The impact of the Cold War politicization on the TDT protest can be traced through the later literary and political careers of the participants. While showing the protest's long-term effects, it sheds light onto the intersections of culture and politics. That is why, the TDT incident is critical to understand both the cultural and intellectual history, and the history of the left in Turkey.

Conclusion

On March 22, 1964, during the performance of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* at the Tepebaşı Drama Theater, a premeditated nationalist protest erupted. The Turkish National Executive Committee of the International Theater Institute issued a statement after the protest: "While Bertolt Brecht's play '*The Good Person of Szechwan*,' which he wrote in America in 1939 after he could not tolerate the Nazi regime, was successfully performed at the Tepebaşı Theater of Istanbul, it was seen as truly ugly and disgraceful act by the National Centre's Executive Committee that some backward-minded individuals, lacking even the most basic sense of civilization, interfered with the play, shouting and attacking the actors."[75] A decade after the TDT protest, this time during a play, another demonstration was taking place at the same stage. Similarly, a nationalist group played an important role in the protest. Apparently, the state policy of using nationalists against the leftists in the Cold War environment had not changed.[76]

The TDT protest by a group of young writers against the literary establishment was arguably the most significant public literary protest in Turkey. Unlike earlier generations who challenged their predecessors in magazine pages, the '50s Generation showed their disdain for the conventional norms on a public stage. Although this makes the protest unique, this could also be a reason that it was the last public literary protest on such scale. Some protesters became more politically reserved after the protest, some were imprisoned later because of political activities, some spent years in exile. The cultural framework of Cold War changed the intended outcome of an otherwise creative public protest by young writers. In another

time and context, could it have paved the way for a different direction in Turkish literature? This question remains relevant and justifies examining the TDT protest as a turning point in Turkish cultural history.

NOTES

[1] Built in the late nineteenth century, the Tepebaşı Theater had been home to prestigious productions for decades. It was designed by the architect Hovsep Aznavur, and became distinguished with its Italian style. When Jean Cocteau visited Istanbul in 1954, for example, he became fascinated with the building. See Eser Tutel, "Güzelim Tepebaşı Tiyatrosu: Yıllara Nasıl Dayandı, Sonunda Nasıl da Yandı?" *Bütün Dünya* no. 8 (2003): 62-63. Birsel gives 1892 as the theater's building date. See Salâh Birsel, *Ah Beyoğlu Vah Beyoğlu* (Istanbul: Sel Yayıncılık, 2009), 47. According to And, the theater was built in 1889. See Metin And, *Başlangıcından 1983'e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014), 132. Later, Tepebaşı Theater's drama section was separated from the comedy and operetta sections. See Vasfi Rıza Zobu, *O Günden Bu Güne: Anılar* (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1977), 458. The nearby Comedy Theater disappeared during the demolitions due to expansion policies of the 1950s, while the Drama Theater continued its activities for a while. After two fires in 1970 and 1971, the theater suffered damage and closed down. Over the course of nearly eight decades, it hosted more than 13,000 performances. The last play performed at the Tepebaşı Drama Theater was Daphne du Maurier's *September Tide* in 1969.

[2] For a discussion of Turkey's cultural Cold War in the larger body of cultural Cold War studies, see Cangül Örnek and Çağdaş Üngör, "Introduction: Turkey's Cold War: Global Influences, Local Manifestations" in *Turkey in Cold War*, ed. Cangül Örnek and Çağdaş Üngör (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 1-18.

[3] Notably, series of arrests and operations against the members of the Turkish Communist Party in 1951-1952. 187 party members were arrested. Detainees were held and tortured at Sansaryan Inn. This purge is known as 51 Tevkifatı (the 51 Detentions).

[4] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 38.

[5] George Kennan, for example, one of the architects of the American Cold War policy was unhappy with the idea of pairing Greece with Turkey in Truman Doctrine in the beginning, because there was no real communist threat or underground activity in Turkey. See John Lukacs, *George Kennan* (Yale University Press, 2007), 80-81.

[6] Reem Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 180.

[7] The avant-garde literary magazines published in the 1950s were: *Yaprak* (1949-1950), *Yeditepe* (1950-1984), *Nokta* (1951-1951), *Yenilik* (1952-1957), *Mavi* (1952-1956), *Pazar Postası* (1951-1959), *Yelken* (1958-1977), *Yeni Ufuklar* (1952/53-1976), *Seçilmiş Hikâyeler* (1947-1957), *Dost* (1957-1973), *Yeryüzü* (1951-1952), a (1956-1960), and *Şairler Yaprağı* (1954-1957).

[8] See Derya Bengi, *50'li Yıllarda Türkiye: Sazlı Cazlı Sözlük* (Istanbul: YKY, 2017).

[9] Erhan Altan, *Sanatımızda Bir Dönemeç: 50'li Yıllar, Ankara* (Istanbul: Edebi Şeyler, 2014), 78. Bülent Ecevit, the future left-wing politican and prime minister, wrote the first review on this exhibition in *Ulus* newspaper.

[10] *Mavi* was launched in November 1952 as a monthly magazine in Ankara. Ahmet Oktay, one of the founders, notes that the magazine did not have a specific literary approach, and they did not care about political and artistic differences, therefore *Mavi* looked like a haphazard compilation of literary works. After publishing controversial articles by Attilâ İlhan on social realism, *Mavi* became more polemical and visible. See Ahmet Oktay, "Mavi Bir Dergi Olarak Beklentileri Karşılamamış, Sadece Haber Vermiştir". *Milliyet Sanat* no. 61 (1982): 3.

[11] In January 1956, *a* magazine was launched by young writers, mostly university students. The first letter of the alphabet was chosen by the young writer Adnan Özyalçıner, who also later became an acclaimed figure, as the magazine's name to highlight a brand new beginning. It was published for 29 issues until the military coup on May 27th 1960. In the final issue of the magazine, it was announced that the publication was being discontinued because the "freedom" atmosphere emerged, therefore the magazine fulfilled its purpose. Ferit Öngören, Kemal Özer, Hilmi Yavuz, Onat Kutlar, Adnan Özyalçıner, Konur Ertop, Demir Özlü, Erdal Öz, Doğan Hızlan, Ercüment Uçarı, and Ergin Ertem formed the core team. The magazine served as a catalyst for the emerging of poets, writers, and critics who would go on to leave their mark on Turkish literature.

[12] Ayşe Sarısayın, *Erdal Öz: Unutulmaz Bir Ath* (Istanbul: Can Yayınları, 2009), 67.

[13] While an acclaimed writer in Turkey, Edgü's work has been relatively unknown to Western readers. This may potentially change as NYRB Classics has recently published a selection from his stories. See Ferit Edgü, *The Wounded Age and Eastern Tales*. Translated by Aron Aji. (New York: NYRB Classics, 2023).

[14] Özlü's first book has same title with Sartre's *La Nausée* (Bunaltı). See Demir Özlü, *Bunaltı* (Istanbul: Ahmet Halit Kitabevi, 1958).

[15] For the compilations from his columns, see, for example, Hasan Pulur, *Olaylar ve İnsanlar-1* (Istanbul: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1993).

[16] It is important to note that Birsel's (1919-1999) account focuses more on his generation and the Baylan group. He does not mention the younger protesters from the *a* magazine circle. One possible explanation for this negligence is Erdal Öz's harsh critique of Birsel's *Günlük* (Diary) in the first issue of *a* magazine.

[17] Ahmet Oktay, *Gizli Çekmece* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2004), 203.

[18] Hilmi Yavuz, *Ceviz Sandıktaki Anılar* (Istanbul: Can Yayınları, 2001), 73.

[19] Salâh Birsel, *Ah Beyoğlu Vah Beyoğlu* (Istanbul: Sel Yayıncılık, 2009), 218-224.

[20] Oktay, 203.

[21] Yavuz, 72.

[22] Pulur, in his account, says they already knew that the intelligence had an information about the protest and they sent undercover police officers. See Hasan Pulur,

"Behçet Kemal'e Her Zaman Başım Eğikti" *Milliyet*, October 27, 1969. In Birsel's account, Pulur says they had no idea about what police knew until arriving the building. See Birsel, 220.

[23] Birsel, 220.

[24] Notably, Ataç does not mention the protest in his 1956 diary. See Nurullah. Ataç, *Günce 1956-1957* (Istanbul: YKY, 2013).

[25] For Ataç's impact on Turkish Language Reform, see Geoffrey Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[26] Literary means: "Matinee art soldiers, selamün aleykum [God's peace be upon you]." There is a word play here. "Dörüt" is a word that Ataç invented to replace the Arabic-origin "sanat" (art) and the protesters wanted to show the absurdity of the coexistence of the new and old words together on the banner by using the Arabic greeting.

[27] See Birsel, 222; Yavuz, 73.

[28] Birsel, 222.

[29] Sarısayın, 67.

[30] It is difficult identify the number of the detainees. *Milliyet* newspaper reported 20 while *Cumhuriyet* reported 33 people were detained after the protest. The literary critic Tahir Alangu gives the number of detainess as 23. See Birsel, 222.

[31] Sansaryan Hanı got its name from the philanthropist Mkrtich Agha Sanasaryan who had it built in 1881. The building was later confiscated by the Turkish government and converted into police headquarters. It had been used predominantly as an interrogation and torture centre. As of 2023, the court process is still ongoing to return the building to the Armenian Sanasaryan Foundation. One of the protesters, Demirtaş Ceyhun published a short story collection with the title *Sansaryan Hanı* in 1967.

[32] "Edebiyat Matinesinde Kavga Çıktı," *Milliyet*, April 3, 1956, 1.

[33] "Komünistler Dram Tiyatrosunda Hadise Çıkardılar," *Ekspres*, April 3, 1956, 1.

[34] "Dram Tiyatrosu'nde Kavga: Şiir ve Edebiyat Gecesi'nde galeride oturanlar birbirine girdi," *Cumhuriyet*, April 3, 1956, 1.

[35] "Şiir Gecesinde Hâdiseler Oldu: Bazı gençler Yakup Kadri ve Behçet Kemal'i yuhaladılar," *Akşam*, April 3, 1956, 1.

[36] Peyami Safa, "İkinci Çiçek Palas," *Milliyet*, April 4 1956.

[37] Birsel, 224.

[38] Emin Karaca, *Bay Ataç Gocunmasın Hiç: Türk Edebiyatında Unutulmayan Kavgalar* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2019), 140.

[39] In his Paris days, İlhan had learned agitprop, an agitation and propaganda method, from the communist politician Waldeck Rochet. Yavuz, *Ceviz Sandıktaki Anılar*, 71.

[40] Yavuz, 72.

[41] Selim İleri, *Nâm-ı Diğer Kaptan: Attilâ İlhan'ı Dinledim* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2005), 164.

[42] İleri, 165.
[43] İleri, 166.
[44] Today, the term "Edebiyât-ı Cedîde" refers to the group of authors specifically published poetry, novels, and stories between 1896 and 1901.
[45] Tanzimat writers in response, accused the new generation of being "decadent." For this debate see Fazıl Gökçek, *Dekadanlar: Bir Tartışmanın Hikâyesi* (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları 2014).
[46] Zafer Toprak, "Nâzım Hikmet'in 'Putları Kırıyoruz' Kampanyası ve Yeni Edebiyat." *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 261 (2015): 39.
[47] Yavuz, 71.
[48] Hilmi Yavuz "'Varlık' ve Ben." *Varlık*, July 2023, 5.
[49] Toprak, 40.
[50] More than a decade later, in 1945, Sertel's left-wing daily newspaper *Tan* would be raided and looted by nationalists.
[51] İleri, 164.
[52] The Turkish literati agreed that Çağlar was at best a mediocre poet. Many not only denied his status as a "national poet" but also refused to acknowledge him as a "poet" altogether. See Tuncay Birkan, *Dünya ile Devlet Arasında Türk Muharriri* (Istanbul: Metis, 2019), 491.
[53] Sefa Kaplan, *Olaylar ve İnsanların Peşinde Bir Ömür: Hasan Pulur Kitabı* (Istanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2006), 37-38.
[54] Oktay, 202.
[55] Hasan Pulur, "Behçet Kemal'e Her Zaman Başım Eğikti" *Milliyet*, October 27, 1969, 3.
[56] Tanıl Bora and Kerem Ünüvar, "Ellili Yıllarda Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce Hayatı" in *Türkiye'nin 1950'li Yılları*, ed. Mete Kaan Kaynar (Istanbul: İletişim, 2019), 172.
[57] Hilmi Yavuz, later published a poetry collection on Mustafa Suphi in 1980. See Hilmi Yavuz, *Büyü'sün, Yaz!* (Istanbul: YKY, 2005).
[58] Attilâ İlhan was arrested and expelled from school at the age of 16 because he was caught secretly exchanging Nâzım Hikmet's poems with his girlfriend. İlhan served two months in prison. See İleri, 43.
[59] Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold war: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 17.
[60] This disappointment is a pattern visible in the memoirs of left-wing intellectuals from the 1950s. See, among others, Mina Urgan, *Bir Dinozorun Anıları* (Istanbul: YKY, 2000).
[61] Oktay misremembers the date of the raid as May 2. See Oktay, 200.
[62] "Red Visitors Cause Rumpus," *Life*, April 4, 1949, 39-43.
[63] Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 234.
[64] In his memoir, Miller mentions the Turkish left's dilemma between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, based on his Turkey visit and a con-

versation with the prominent writer Aziz Nesin. Miller notes that the Turkish left was in "between the two giants," and for the left-wing Turkish writers, the most important topic was Turkish independence. It is eye-opening in understanding the TDT protest's context. See Miller, 261.

[65] According to Oktay, it was a bicycle horn. See Oktay, 201.

[66] Hilmi Yavuz, *Ceviz Sandıktaki Anılar* (Istanbul: Can Yayınları, 2001), 74.

[67] See, for example, Yavuz (2001) and Oktay (2004).

[68] Yavuz, 69.

[69] Sarısayın, 67.

[70] Yavuz, 70.

[71] Yavuz, 70.

[72] Oktay Akbal and Hilmi Yavuz, *Sanki Her Şey Daha Dün Gibi* (Istanbul: Everest, 2021), 22.

[73] Kaplan, 42.

[74] For Öz's memoir in the militant left movement and prison, see Erdal Öz, *Gülünün Solduğu Akşam* (Istanbul: Can Yayınları, 1989).

[75] Metin And, *Başlangıcından 1983'e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014), 333.

[76] İlker Aytürk, "Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69." *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 5 (2014): 697.