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Turkic Historical Thought on the Eve of Repressions: The Significance of the First Turkological Congress of 1926

Abstract

The relevance of this study lies in the need to reassess the role of the First Turkological Congress of 1926 in the development of Turkic historical thought and the subsequent rupture caused by political repression. In the context of growing scholarly interest in intellectual history, collective memory, and repressed academic elites, this topic gains particular importance on the occasion of the centenary of the Congress. The research problem addressed in the article concerns the limited interpretation of the First Turkological Congress primarily as a linguistic or cultural forum, while its significance for the formation of Turkic historiography and historical consciousness has received insufficient attention. The Congress represented an important attempt to institutionalize Turkic humanities and to define common scholarly perspectives, many of which were later suppressed by ideological constraints. The aim of the study is to analyze the significance of the First Turkological Congress of 1926 for the development of Turkic historical thought on the eve of mass repression and to interpret it as one of the last relatively free stages of Turkic intellectual life in the early Soviet period. The methodological framework of the research is based on historical-analytical and historiographical approaches, allowing the Congress to be examined as an intellectual phenomenon within its broader socio-political context. Comparative analysis is also applied to assess the continuity and disruption of scholarly ideas before and after the repressive period. The main findings demonstrate that the First Turkological Congress played a crucial role in shaping the Turkic historical elite and scholarly agenda, while subsequent repression led to a significant loss of intellectual potential. The study concludes that revisiting the legacy of the Congress is essential for a deeper understanding of the historical development of the Turkic world.

Keywords: *historical thought, political repression, Turkic intelligentsia, Turkic historiography, Turkological Congress*

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Repressiyalar ərəfəsində türk tarixi düşüncəsi: 1926-cı il I Türkoloji Qurultayın əhəmiyyəti

Xülasə

Tədqiqatın aktuallığı 1926-cı il I Türkoloji Qurultayın türk tarixi düşüncəsinin formalaşmasında oynadığı rolu və bu prosesin sonradan siyasi repressiyalar nəticəsində kəsilməsini yenidən dəyərləndirmə zərurəti ilə bağlıdır. Müasir dövrdə intellektual tarixə, tarixi yaddaşa və repressiyaya

məruz qalmış elmi elitanın irsinə artan maraq fonunda bu mövzu xüsusilə əhəmiyyət kəsb edir. Məqalənin elmi problemi ondan ibarətdir ki, I Türkoloji Qurultay əsasən dilçilik və mədəniyyət aspektindən araşdırılmış, lakin onun türk tarixşünaslığının və tarixi düşüncənin inkişafına təsiri kifayət qədər işıqlandırılmamışdır. Halbuki qurultay çərçivəsində türk elmi fikrinin institusionallaşdırılmasına və ümumi elmi istiqamətlərin müəyyənləşdirilməsinə ciddi cəhd göstərilmişdir. Tədqiqatın məqsədi I Türkoloji Qurultayın repressiyalar ərəfəsində türk tarixi düşüncəsinin inkişafındakı əhəmiyyətini müəyyənləşdirmək və onu erkən sovet dövründə türk intellektual ənənəsinin nisbətən azad mərhələsi kimi təhlil etməkdir. Metodoloji yanaşma tarixi-analitik və tarixşünaslıq metodlarına əsaslanır. Qurultay elmi fenomen kimi geniş ictimai-siyasi kontekstdə araşdırılır və təqdim olunan ideyaların sonrakı tarixşünaslıq prosesləri ilə müqayisəsi aparılır. Tədqiqatın əsas nəticələri göstərir ki, I Türkoloji Qurultay türk elmi elitasının formalaşmasında mühüm rol oynamış, lakin sonrakı repressiyalar bu prosesin davamlılığını pozmuşdur. Məqalədə müasir dövrdə qurultayın irsinə yenidən qaydılmasının elmi və tarixi əhəmiyyəti vurğulanır.

Açar sözlər: *repressiyalar, tarixi düşüncə, türk tarixşünaslığı, türk ziyalıları, Türkoloji qurultay*

Introduction

The First Turkological Congress of 1926 holds a special place in the history of Turkic scholarship as an attempt to consolidate the intellectual ties of the Turkic peoples during the early Soviet modernization era. It was not only a scholarly but also a symbolic event, reflecting the Turkic intelligentsia's desire to form a unified scholarly space and develop common approaches to the study of history, culture, and language.

The congress's centennial in 2026 highlights the need to rethink it beyond traditional linguistic or cultural analysis. Contemporary humanities scholarship increasingly addresses intellectual history, the fate of scholarly communities, and the problem of disrupted scientific continuity, making a revisit to the congress's legacy particularly timely.

The topic is given added relevance by the fact that the congress took place on the eve of large-scale political repression, which led to the extermination of a significant portion of the Turkic academic elite. As a result, many ideas formulated in 1926 were not developed further, and the tradition of Turkic historical thought was interrupted. In today's context, drawing on this experience allows for a deeper understanding of the processes of formation of the historical self-awareness of the Turkic peoples and their significance for modern scholarship.

Research

The research's methodological framework focuses on a comprehensive analysis of the First Turkological Congress of 1926 as a phenomenon in the intellectual history of the Turkic peoples. The study utilizes historical-analytical and historiographical approaches, allowing one to view the congress as a stage in the development of Turkic historical thought in the early Soviet period.

A historical-analytical method is used to reconstruct the socio-political and scientific context of the 1920s and identify the connections between the congress's scientific initiatives and subsequent political processes. Historiographical analysis is used to assess the extent to which the congress has been reflected in scholarly literature and to identify key trends and gaps in its interpretation.

Additionally, a comparative historical approach is employed, allowing us to compare the ideas formulated at the congress with the subsequent development of Turkic historiography under conditions of ideological pressure and repressive policies. This methodology provides a holistic understanding of the significance of the First Turkological Congress for the historical experience of the Turkic peoples.

The 1920s marked a period of profound social, political, and intellectual transformation for the Turkic peoples. The formation of new state and administrative structures within the Soviet Union was accompanied by an active search for forms of national self-determination, including in the fields of science, education, and historical knowledge. Under these conditions, the Turkic peoples'

humanitarian thought developed in close connection with modernization processes and attempts to rethink their own past within new ideological realities (Martin, 2001, pp. 15–18).

The development of Turkic scientific and historical thought during this period drew on the established traditions of pre-revolutionary Oriental studies and the Jadid movement, but simultaneously sought to transcend the confines of colonial scientific discourse. History was viewed not only as a field of academic knowledge but also as a tool for shaping collective self-awareness, which imbued historical research with particular social significance (Khalid, 1998, pp. 42–45).

It was in this context that the First Turkological Congress of 1926 occupied a special place in the history of Turkology. It became the first large-scale attempt at an institutional unification of Turkic scholars, focused on developing common scientific approaches to the study of the language, culture, and history of the Turkic peoples. The significance of the congress extends beyond a single scientific event, as it reflected the desire of the Turkic intelligentsia to create a coherent scientific paradigm based on the principles of historical continuity and scientific autonomy (Bartold, 1962, pp. 5–7).

The 1st Turkological Congress of 1926 as an intellectual phenomenon

The 1st Turkological Congress was conceived as a scientific platform for discussing key issues related to the development of Turkic languages, cultures, and historical knowledge. Its primary goals were to coordinate scientific research, develop a unified methodological approach, and strengthen ties between representatives of the Turkic intellectual elite located in various regions of the Soviet Union and beyond (Golden, 1992, pp. 21–24).

The congress's participants reflected a high level of scholarly concentration and a diversity of research fields. Among them were historians, linguists, ethnographers, and public figures whose work largely shaped the development of Turkic humanities in the first third of the 20th century. The discussions that unfolded during the congress were interdisciplinary in nature and touched upon both theoretical and practical aspects of scholarly work, including issues of terminology, historical periodization, and source interpretation (Akiner, 1995, pp. 63–66).

The historical ideas presented at the congress were particularly significant. They reflected a desire to rethink the history of the Turkic peoples beyond the narrow confines of imperial and colonial narratives and emphasized the internal logic of historical development. However, many of these ideas remained unrealized due to subsequent political repression, turning the First Turkological Congress into a unique boundary between the relatively free stage of development of Turkic historical thought and the period of its severe ideological restrictions (Conquest, 1990, pp. 54–57; Yaroshevski, 1995, pp. 88–90).

Turkic Historical Thought on the Eve of Repression

By the mid-1920s, the Turkic intelligentsia had established the foundations for the emergence of its own historical school, focused on the scientific understanding of the past of the Turkic peoples outside of the colonial and narrowly imperial narrative. History was viewed as an independent field of knowledge, closely linked to the tasks of cultural self-determination and the formation of historical consciousness, which imbued historical research with particular social significance (Khalid, 1998, pp. 37–40).

The Turkic intelligentsia, united not only by shared scholarly interests but also by strong intellectual and professional ties, played a key role in this process. Scholarly networks formed between historians, philologists, and public figures facilitated the exchange of ideas, the development of common methodological guidelines, and the elaboration of a collective vision of the historical development of the Turkic world (Khalid, 2015, pp. 64–67).

However, the development of Turkic historical thought occurred amidst a growing contradiction between scholarly inquiry and the ideological tenets of the Soviet regime. The desire for an autonomous understanding of history gradually came into conflict with demands for political loyalty and the normative framework of official ideology. This contradiction became one of the key factors predetermining the vulnerability of the Turkic school of thought on the eve of the repressive campaigns of the late 1920s and 1930s (Martin, 2001, pp. 102–105).

Repression and the rupture of historical continuity

The political repressions that unfolded in the late 1920s and especially in the 1930s had a devastating impact on Turkic humanities. A significant number of participants in the First Turkological Congress were persecuted, arrested, and physically killed, resulting in the loss of an entire generation of researchers who had pioneered the formation of the Turkic historical school (Conquest, 1990, pp. 71–74).

The consequences of the repressions manifested themselves not only in personnel losses but also in a profound change in the very logic of scientific development. Historical scholarship came under strict ideological control, and many topics and interpretations were declared undesirable or dangerous. This led to a rupture in scientific continuity and a distortion of previously formulated concepts, which were either suppressed or reinterpreted in accordance with official doctrine (Fitzpatrick, 1999, pp. 118–121).

The loss of the intellectual heritage of Turkic historical thought also manifested itself in limited access to the works of repressed scholars and the marginalization of their scientific ideas. As a result, subsequent generations of researchers were deprived of the opportunity to draw on their own tradition, which long hindered the development of Turkic historiography as an independent scholarly field (Yaroshevski, 1995, pp. 93–96).

The significance of the 1st Turkological Congress for modern times

In the context of the contemporary rethinking of the history of the Turkic peoples, the First Turkological Congress is once again gaining importance as a key reference point for humanities research. Growing interest in intellectual history and the fates of repressed scholars is encouraging a return to the scientific ideas formulated in 1926 but never fully developed (Bartold, 1962, pp. 11–14).

The recovery of this repressed intellectual heritage allows for a fresh look at the formation of Turkic historical thought and the restoration of lost elements of scholarly continuity. Contemporary research increasingly turns to the legacy of the early Soviet period as a source of alternative interpretations and methodological approaches capable of enriching contemporary Turkology (Golden, 1992, pp. 29–31).

The experience of the First Turkological Congress contains important lessons for contemporary Turkic historical scholarship. It demonstrates the importance of scholarly autonomy, interdisciplinary dialogue, and institutional collaboration for the sustainable development of humanities. Understanding this experience not only allows us to restore historical justice but also to form a more holistic understanding of the development of Turkic historical thought, past and present.

Conclusion

The 1st Turkological Congress of 1926 became not only a significant academic event but also a symbol of the unfinished intellectual project of Turkic historical thought. It marked the moment when Turkic humanities came close to forming their own historical paradigm, based on the principles of scientific autonomy, interdisciplinary dialogue, and a conscious approach to historical heritage.

The subsequent political repressions led to the destruction of this intellectual environment and a rupture in scholarly continuity, the consequences of which were felt for decades. The loss of the scholarly elite and the distortion of research traditions not only slowed the development of Turkic historiography but also limited the possibilities for a full understanding of the historical experience of the Turkic peoples.

A contemporary revisit of the legacy of the First Turkological Congress offers opportunities to restore lost connections and reassess the role of the early Soviet period in the history of Turkic scholarship. Understanding this experience not only allows us to rediscover forgotten names and ideas but also to develop more sustainable guidelines for the further development of Turkic historical thought in the 21st century.

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