

# Book Reviews

## Sons of the Conquerors: The Rise of the Turkic World

By *Hugh Pope*

New York, Woodstock and London, Overlook Duckworth, 2005, 416 pp., ISBN: 8781585678044.

“One spring day towards the end of the cold war, a time of surprises, my teleprinter shuddered into action. A colleague in Beijing was sending a message: members of an ethnic group called the Uygurs, of whom I had never heard, were demonstrating in the streets of Urumqi, capital of the north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang. The protesters were denouncing the communist leadership in Beijing and chanting the name of an exiled leader said to be living in Turkey, a man named ‘Isa’. My colleague had a simple and urgent question: Could I trace Isa down?”

In tracking down Isa Alptekin, the exiled leader of the ethnic group called Uighurs who died in 1995 in Turkey, Hugh Pope, the *Wall Street Journal’s* correspondent in Turkey and a long-time resident of Istanbul, got excited about and interested in the fact that the Turkic people had been overlooked for so long. Together they constitute more than 140 million people spread through more than 20 states, starting from the Great Wall of China to Europe and even a small community in the United States, and now they are on the edge of a revival. This runs all through his book, *Sons of the Conquerors: The Rise of the Turkic World*, selected as a Book of the Year (one of 45 chosen) for 2005 by the London-based weekly the *Economist*.

This book is the fruit of more than a decade of travel through the lands of the Turkic-speaking peoples and with the journal-

ist’s eye and ear for details (and very often anecdotes), Pope explores the legacy of the Turkic world, which has been bloody as well as glorious. For centuries Muslim lands were ruled by Turkic dynasties like the Moguls, the Safavids and the Ottomans, of which the later encompassed Turkey, the Balkans and the Middle East. Pope is observing and listening and the approach is foremost anthropological and cultural. Without any doubts the reader is provided with a fascinating and penetrating reportage as well as a thorough insight into the Turkic world. There are chapters entitled “The Army’s Grip on Turkey”, “Kemal Atatürk – Icon of the Secular Turkish Republic”, “Islam Allaturca”, and “The Turkic Problem with Human Rights” to mention a few. The book reaches its peak when the author invites the reader to human meetings, like the one with an Iranian Azeri engineering student on a plane to London from Istanbul. Pope was not able to persuade him of the progress of Turkey, even though he had a Turkish girlfriend, had spent 10 days being amazed in Istanbul and kept talking on the backwardness of Iran:

“The Turks are just copying the West, he insisted. Yes just like Japan and China used to [...], I replied. Really, he said [...] He looked down back at his feet. No, sorry, I can’t help it. Iran can’t learn anything from Turkey, he went on. Only America can save us.” (Pope 2005: 250)

However, as a reader one gets some difficulties thinking of the consequences of the

missing political perspective or what could be interpreted as a romantic plea for a unified Turkic identity. In 1992 the Turkish president of that time, Turgut Özal claimed:

We are from the same root, we are a large family. If we make no mistakes, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be ours. (Pope 2005: 369)

“He who lives will see,” could be a humble comment on this statement. According to Samuel P. Huntington in his highly controversial and often debated book *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 1997), Turkey, having rejected Mecca and being rejected by Brussels, seized the opportunity in the early nineties to turn toward Tashkent. Turkish leaders including Turgut Özal held out a vision of a community of Turkic peoples and particular attention was directed to Azerbaijan and the four Turkic speaking Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Even with regard to Turkey’s ambition to develop its links with the Turkic former Soviet Republics, and by doing so putting the Kemalist secular identity under challenge, Huntington’s own conclusion was that Turkey did not meet all the minimum requirements for a thorn country to shift its civilizational identity.<sup>1</sup>

Of course this could be viewed as a qualified truth, as well as the often outspoken doubts from some European political figures that Turkey does not belong to Europe. However, in the foreseeable future the modern Republic of Turkey with its strong Kemalist mindset is a political reality like the ongoing negotiations, even though slow, between Turkey and the EU on a Turkish membership. It should be a rather unquestionable assumption that the EU negotiations have been and still are the real engine of the political reform process in Turkey.

During the political and constitutional crisis in Turkey in 2007-2008 we have maybe been witnessing the first real challenge to the secular establishment in terms of a promising step in consolidating Turkey’s fragile and guided democracy. Bearing this in mind, a unified Turkic political identity and configuration among Turkic speaking people seems neither realistic, nor urgent.

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### Endnotes

1. See the discussions on Turkey in Huntington 2002 in chapter 6 on *The Cultural Reconfiguration of Global Politics* (The Free Press 2002, as an imprint of Simon & Schuster UK Ltd 1997).

## **Kemalism in Turkish Politics: The Republican People’s Party, Secularism and Nationalism**

By *Sinan Ciddi*

London and New York: Routledge, 2009, 196 pp., ISBN 9780415475044.

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The title of this book is a misnomer: the title should have been “The Republican Peo-

ple Party and Kemalism” for the book aims to unravel why this leftist political party in