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Shaping Pro-American Attitudes in Turkey Through Education and Scholarships

ABSTRACT

The article examines the role of education and scholarship programs funded by American institutions in shaping pro-American attitudes among Turkey's intellectual, political, and academic elites from the late 19th century to the 1950s. The analysis begins with the emergence of American educational presence in the Ottoman Empire, focusing in particular on the activities of Robert College and the American College for Girls, which educated the first generation of men and women who would later form the modern elite of the Turkish Republic. It further explores how these programs promoted liberal values and familiarity with American culture, thereby contributing to the creation of an elite milieu receptive to cooperation with the United States.

KEYWORDS: Turkey, Ottoman Empire, United States, education

STRESZCZENIE

Kształtowanie proamerykańskich postaw w Turcji przez edukację i stypendia

Artykuł analizuje rolę edukacji i programów stypendialnych finansowanych przez instytucje amerykańskie w kształtowaniu proamerykańskich postaw wśród tureckich elit intelektualnych, politycznych i naukowych w okresie od końca XIX w. do lat 50. XX w. Punktem wyjścia analizy są początki amerykańskiej obecności edukacyjnej w Imperium Osmańskim, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem działalności Robert College i American College for Girls, które odegrały istotną rolę w kształceniu pierwszego pokolenia kobiet i mężczyzn tworzących nowoczesne elity Republiki Tureckiej. W tekście przedstawiono, jak programy te promowały wartości liberalne i znajomość kultury amerykańskiej, przyczyniając się do ukształtowania środowiska otwartego na współpracę z USA.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Turcja, Imperium Osmańskie, Stany Zjednoczone, edukacja

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Introduction

Education in the Ottoman Empire offered avenues for career advancement but was far from widespread. By the end of the 19th century, roughly 85–90 per cent of the population was illiterate. Contrary to popular belief, this situation did not improve markedly in the following decades: in 1927, the illiteracy rate still stood at approximately 89.5 per cent (Fortna, 2022). Gradual change began with the introduction of the alphabet reform, which replaced the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet, alongside efforts to “purify” the Turkish language of Persian and Arabic loanwords. This was accompanied by an intensive literacy campaign in 1928–1929. Nevertheless, the reforms proved challenging to implement, as even those literate in Ottoman Turkish had to relearn reading and writing in the new language.

Nevertheless, these efforts began to yield results: by 1940, the illiteracy rate had fallen to 78 per cent. Literacy levels, however, varied considerably by gender, with women experiencing markedly higher rates of illiteracy. Nationwide, illiteracy fell below 50 per cent only in the 1970s, reaching 31 per cent among men and 60 per cent among women (Kołodziejczyk, 2000, pp. 202–203). Reformers in both the late Ottoman and early Republican periods recognized that building a modern state required effective educational reforms aimed not only at improving the quality of education but also at broadening access across social classes. From the early 20th century onwards, proposals were made to introduce science subjects and European languages even in mosque-attached schools, alongside traditional Qur’anic instruction.

During the reform era of the Young Turks (following the 1908 Revolution) and after the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, Turkish education underwent a significant reorganization, drawing on various foreign models, particularly the French and German systems. These models were especially influential in military, technical, and vocational education. Only after World War II did Anglo-American and American models gain greater prominence. The present text seeks to address the question: To what extent did American education influence pro-Western sympathies among the Turkish elite, and through what mechanisms did this influence operate?

This article adopts a traditional historical methodology, grounded in the analysis and evaluation of primary sources alongside selected secondary materials. Its principal focus lies on archival sources – official correspondence, administrative records, and government documents – supplemented by personal memoirs. These sources were subjected to detailed formal and content analysis, taking into account their origin, historical context, reliability, and the authors’ intentions. Such source criticism not only facilitated the reconstruction of historical facts but also allowed an examination of how the phenomena under study were represented and perceived by contemporary society. This approach

enabled a multi-layered exploration of the topic, encompassing both institutional structures and the personal experiences of the individuals involved.

The best high school in the country

Educational reforms and the broader incorporation of American expertise expanded significantly only after the Second World War. Nevertheless, the first American educational institutions had already been established in the Ottoman Empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1863, Robert College was founded in Istanbul – one of the oldest American schools in continuous operation outside the United States. The college was established by philanthropist Christopher Rhinelander Robert and Protestant missionary Cyrus Hamlin, and initially admitted only male students (Petrov, 2023). In 1871, the American College for Girls (also known as Constantinople House) was established to educate female students. Initially functioning as a secondary school, its primary purpose was Protestant missionary work, and at that time, only married women were permitted to teach. This policy changed in the 1870s, when unmarried women also began to be employed. Mary Mills, Patrick, and Clara Hamlin initiated a reform of the curriculum toward a more secular model, inspired by American high schools. A significant milestone of this transformation was the graduation of the first Muslim woman, Gülistan İsmet (Tevfik),¹ in 1890 (Acun, 2015). In the same year, with support from the Women's Board of Missions, the school was elevated to college status and officially renamed the American College for Girls (Sezer, 1999).

The institution's missionary affiliation officially ended in 1908, when it was granted the status of a private, secular institution of higher education. Notably, although the college was relocated to a new campus in 1914, it continued its operations without interruption during the First World War, the Allied occupation of Istanbul, and the Turkish War of Independence. During the Republican era, American schools adapted to the new political and educational environment (Kaya, 2022). In 1932, the American College for Girls and Robert College were administratively merged, though the male and female divisions continued to operate separately. In 1959, both institutions lost their college status and were reclassified as high schools. It was not until 1971, exactly one hundred years after the founding of the American College for Girls, that the two schools were united into a single co-educational high school (Freely, 2009). Simultaneously, the Robert College campus in Bebek was transferred to Boğaziçi University.

1 In a significant turn of events, the introduction of surnames in Turkey began in 1934 with the adoption of the Law on Surnames. This marked a crucial shift, as prior to this law, individuals' family names were often indicated in brackets rather than formally adopted as legal surnames.

In the 19th century, the student body of American schools in the Ottoman Empire consisted predominantly of members of national minorities, including Greeks, Armenians, Romanians, and Bulgarians. However, this does not mean that Muslims were entirely absent from these institutions. Notably, in the 1893/1894 academic year, Halide Edip (Adivar)² – who would later become one of Turkey's most prominent female writers – began her education at the American College for Girls. In 1901, she became the first Muslim woman to graduate from an American college (Çalışlar, 2010, p. 39). Halide was able to access this high-quality education thanks to her father, Mehmed Edip Bey, an Anglophile who held a senior position within the palace hierarchy (Adivar, 2009, p. 82).

A demographic change in the student composition of Robert College took place in the early twentieth century, coinciding with the rise to power of the Young Turks. As efforts to modernise the state intensified, the demand for a well-educated elite grew considerably, leading to a large-scale reform of the educational system. Minister Ali Şükrü was particularly dedicated to fighting illiteracy. Ali Bey was responsible for reorganising Waqf schools for boys, while Nakiye Hanım supervised reforms in girls' schools. Halide Edip herself was appointed chief inspector and adviser in this process (Adivar, 1926, p. 351).

Halide Edip was one of many prominent figures who studied at Robert College, which operated male, female, and later coeducational sections. Another notable alumna was Hatice Safiye Ali, the second female physician in the history of the Turkish Republic and the first female lecturer in medicine (Yazgan, 2024). Mihri İffet Pektaş was among the first eighteen women elected to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in 1935, representing Malatya province (Kılınççeker & Gök, 2019). Halet Çambel, an archaeologist and the first Muslim woman to compete in the Olympic Games – participating in fencing in 1936 – was also a graduate. Other influential alumnae include Tansu Çiller, an economist and politician who served as Turkey's first female Prime Minister from 1993 to 1996. The list of distinguished alumni further includes numerous politicians, writers, and scholars. Besides Çiller, it is worth mentioning another Turkish Prime Minister, Mustafa Bülent Ecevit (in office 1978–1979 and 1999–2002), and Orhan Pamuk, Turkey's Nobel Prize-winning author, who also attended an American school. The long list of graduates features leading business figures, such as members of the Koç and Kavalas families, and Selçuk Bayraktar, the creator of the Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicle.

The influence of the school extended beyond Turkey. Among its graduates were three Bulgarian prime ministers: Konstantin Stoilov (1887, 1894–1899),

2 Halide Edip Adivar (1884–1964) – Turkish writer, co-founder of the Anadolu Ajansı news agency, first Turkish woman to reach the rank of corporal, first lecturer at Istanbul University. During the Young Turkish period, she was involved in the reform of Ottoman female education.

Todor Ivanchov (1899–1901), and Konstantin Vladov Muraviev (1944). Students of Robert College also played a significant role at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945. Graduates of the school represented the governments of three different countries: Nureddin Kahala (Syria), Hâzım Atıf Kuyucak (Turkey), and Rasasad Shafaq (Iran). Although the full list of alumni from the school's over 160-year history is much longer, these selected names alone demonstrate the exceptional calibre of individuals who studied there.

Graduates not only gained fluency in English but were also immersed in American culture, history, and literature. The notably high proportion of women among those who later played key roles in the Republic's development indicates that the education provided at Robert College enabled them to navigate and contribute to a rapidly changing society successfully. At the same time, despite some scepticism towards Western policies, graduating from an American school fostered pro-American sympathies among both students and alumni.

The Rockefeller Foundation and Turkish science

The Americans recognized the significance of education, language proficiency, influence over national elites, and scholarship programs in shaping their international image and gaining real influence abroad. As U.S. Ambassador to Ankara, Edwin C. Wilson emphasized in a letter to the U.S. Department of State, graduates of American schools and scholarship programs were becoming “enthusiastic ambassadors of the American liberal tradition” (FRUS, 1949, p. 1663). This proactive approach was reflected in a meeting between Recep Peker and Harold Dwight Lasswell, head of the Information and Culture Division at the U.S. Department of State, which took place on September 3, 1946. The conversation concerned an American proposal to establish an institution in Turkey dedicated to promoting American culture. Lasswell, who had previously visited several European countries, envisioned this institution as a hub for the dissemination of American culture and for facilitating both student and academic exchanges (Başbakanlık, 30-1-0-0/11-65-5). The tangible outcomes of these efforts soon followed: the import tax on American films was reduced from 75 per cent to 50 per cent, a move intended to increase their presence in Turkish cinemas and further popularize American culture.

The exchange of academic staff between Turkish and American universities, along with the circulation of books between the libraries of major Turkish institutions and the Library of Congress, represented a significant cultural and scholarly initiative. In 1950, thirteen American professors were appointed to positions at Istanbul University, reflecting the deepening academic cooperation

between the two countries. On 13 March 1950, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey ratified a Turkish-American cultural agreement, under which materials donated to Turkey during the Second World War – valued at approximately 10 million USD – were formally recognised as contributions to cultural services. American educational institutions increasingly served as models for Turkish educational reform. İhsan Doğramacı, a prominent Turkish educator and physician, graduated from the American University of Beirut in 1934, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. He later founded two of Ankara's leading universities, both inspired by the American educational model: Bilkent University, where instruction is conducted in English, and Hacettepe University (Yurdakök, 2023). Among the graduates of Bilkent University are two recent foreign ministers of Turkey, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Hakan Fidan, underscoring the institution's continued role in shaping Turkey's political and diplomatic elite.

However, the scope and effectiveness of American initiatives were contingent upon substantial financial investment. In this context, the Rockefeller Foundation played a pivotal role. Its engagement in Turkey began in the 1920s, particularly in the field of medical science. In 1925, the foundation dispatched its first representatives to Turkey to assess the country's public health needs. The challenges identified were considerable: high infant mortality rates, widespread infectious diseases, and limited access to healthcare infrastructure. İsmet İnönü and Refik Saydam sought the foundation's assistance in establishing a Hygiene Institute in Ankara and in funding scholarships for medical professionals, including doctors and nurses. Officials representing the foundation in Turkey perceived the country's development potential as significant, especially given the Turkish government's cooperative attitude (Erken, 2018, p. 33).

As a result, in 1928, a grant of \$280,000 was allocated to support the establishment of the Central Institute of Hygiene in Ankara. The institute comprised four departments central to the public health priorities of the young Republic: epidemiology and statistics, sanitary engineering, parasitology, and social hygiene. The Rockefeller Foundation's commitment to advancing Turkish medical science continued in subsequent years; between 1948 and 1951, the foundation provided funding for several nursing scholarships (Başar & Öztürk, 2025).

Expanding professional staffing was a critical issue for the development of the Turkish Republic; however, contrary to expectations, many proposed projects were rejected by the United States. Following the Second World War, only two nursing schools operated in Turkey. The Turkish government intended to establish a third institution at the Amerikan Hastanesi (American Hospital) in Istanbul, but the Rockefeller Foundation declined to provide financial support. This did not, however, signify a cessation of aid – rather, it marked its limitation. In 1956, the foundation allocated a grant of \$100,000 for equipment

and the recruitment of initial specialists for the newly established Institute of Child Health at Hacettepe University in Ankara. Nevertheless, the Turkish government could not reasonably expect American funds to support all of the country's critical development projects. Turkey, lagging behind in terms of infrastructure and social development, and simultaneously required to maintain a large standing army in the postwar period, faced considerable financial needs.

The Rockefeller Foundation operated across multiple domains, extending its influence beyond the field of medicine. It invested in the development of academic disciplines designed to train regional specialists who would ultimately serve American strategic interests. In 1939, with the foundation's financial support, Princeton University inaugurated a program in Turkish language and history. Additional funding was directed toward translating Turkish literary works into European languages. One of the prominent Turkish authors to receive a Rockefeller grant was Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, who used the opportunity to study 19th-century European literature in the United States. Drawing on this experience, he authored *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (History of 19th-Century Turkish Literature) in 1949. Likewise, thanks to the foundation's support, *Maske ve Rub* [*Mask and Soul*], a play by Halide Edip Adivar, was translated into English (Erken, 2018, p. 133). The play – considered the first written in Turkey by a woman – captured the cultural tensions of the early republic, depicting the struggle between tradition and modernity, and between Turkish and European identities. Such works served as valuable cultural artifacts that could foster greater mutual understanding between Americans, Europeans, and contemporary Turkey. It is worth noting that Halide Edip Adivar taught English language and literature at the Faculty of Literature of Istanbul University, where she became the first Turkish woman to hold a professorship (Göze, 2013, p. 5).

The Rockefeller Foundation also allocated substantial funding to social science and field research. These initiatives aimed to familiarize other societies with the “norms of Western social science” (Erken, 2018, p. 89). Prior to 1950, the foundation's social science activities in Turkey were limited to a small number of research grants. The first recipient was Kasım Gülek, a professor of economics at Istanbul University and minister in the CHP government. As an advisor to the foundation, he advocated for the expansion of its scholarship program to include sociology. Gülek is a noteworthy example of an individual who held influential governmental positions – serving as Minister of Public Works (10 September 1947–10 June 1948) and Minister of Transport (10 June 1948–16 January 1949) – while also using his American education to promote U.S.-Turkish cooperation in major development projects. One of his main objectives was to enhance bilateral collaboration in the areas of water management and road infrastructure (Erken, 2018, p. 60).

In 1951, Professor Hilmi Ziya Ülken, a leading sociologist, received a grant to study migration. His research focused on Bulgarian refugees and the historical context of migration within the Ottoman Empire, aiming to inform more effective strategies for the future settlement of migrants. A separate grant for research on the social and economic history of the Ottoman Empire was awarded to French historian Fernand Braudel, who sought to illustrate the parallels between European and Ottoman experiences. The grant enabled him to conduct extensive archival research in Ottoman repositories, as well as in the Balkans and Western Europe (Erken, 2018, p. 102). Through such initiatives, the Rockefeller Foundation helped Turkish scholars enhance the quality and scope of their academic work. At the same time, it cultivated pro-American attitudes among researchers – sentiments that have left a lasting imprint on Turkish academic culture and remain evident in numerous contemporary scholarly publications.

Nevertheless, academic professionals were not the only ones afforded opportunities for training in the United States. For the American side, military collaboration was a key priority; for the Turkish side, the development of public infrastructure was paramount. With the support of American loans and assistance from the Marshall Plan, opportunities arose for Turkish specialists to travel to the United States and for American experts to visit Turkey. In 1945, Vecdi Diker, an engineer at the Turkish Ministry of Public Works, visited the United States to study highway systems and the operations of the Federal Bureau of Public Roads. Upon his return, he recommended that Turkey adopt similar models. In 1948, Harold Hiltz, Deputy Commissioner of the U.S. Public Roads Administration, traveled to Ankara to assess the state of Turkey's highways and prepare a report containing policy recommendations. His conclusions echoed those of Diker, particularly the need to establish an independent agency and to send Turkish engineers to the United States for specialized training (Olszowska, 2023, p. 431).

Turkey's turn toward the United States cannot be attributed solely to the activities of American educational and philanthropic institutions. To a significant extent, it was driven by the growing threat posed by the Soviet Union and the uncertain geopolitical situation following the end of World War II. Soviet pressure – manifested, among other things, in demands to revise the Montreux Convention and to establish joint control over the Straits – forced Turkish decision-makers to take a clear stance in favour of the West. In this context, cooperation with the United States and the adoption of Western models, including in the fields of science and education, was not merely a pragmatic choice for modernisation. Seeking security and stability, Turkey actively pursued NATO membership, which was reflected both in the intensification of diplomatic relations with Washington and in the increasing influence of American institutions on Turkish intellectual and academic life.

Conclusion

Based on the analyzed material, it can be concluded that American educational and scholarship programs played a significant role in fostering pro-American attitudes among Turkey's intellectual, political, and academic elites. Beginning in the late nineteenth century – with the activities of institutions such as Robert College and the American College for Girls – and continuing through the involvement of the Rockefeller Foundation during the Republican era, the American educational model and liberal values were gradually integrated into the Turkish education system. These institutions not only offered high-quality education and access to the English language but also familiarized students with American culture, literature, and intellectual traditions. Particularly significant were scholarship programs and academic exchanges, by enabling Turkish scholars and professionals to acquire knowledge and build networks in the United States. Consequently, an elite milieu emerged among the graduates of these institutions which, although at times critical of the West, was generally sympathetic toward the United States and receptive to transatlantic cooperation. In the context of the growing Soviet threat after the Second World War, these pro-American sympathies gained strategic importance, facilitating Turkey's turn toward the West and the strengthening Turkish-American relations, particularly in connection with Turkey's bid for NATO membership.

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