Beyond Istanbul's 'Laz Underworld': Ottoman Paramilitarism and the Rise of Turkish Organised Crime, 1908–1950

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Abstract

Although the Turkish mafia is increasingly recognised as a powerful force in the ongoing trade in weapons, narcotics and people in Europe and beyond, there are few critical histories of organised crime's origins in Turkey. Rather than present some pedantic general survey of the history of organized crime in modern Turkey, this essay attempts to address two broader critical points of departure. First, how did Anatolia's journey from imperial to republican rule impact, and how was it impacted by, criminal gangs? Second, how do we situate the experience of modern gangs in Turkey in a global context? In attempting to answer these questions, this paper looks at the development of criminal syndicates among Laz migrants in the greater Istanbul area during the first half of the twentieth century. The case of the Laz shows particularly how war, migration, imperial politics, urbanisation and the rise of the international drug trade shaped the parallel development of organised crime and the nascent Turkish Republic.

Although the Turkish mafia is increasingly recognised as a powerful force in the ongoing trade in weapons, narcotics and people in Europe and beyond, there are few critical histories of the origins of organised crime in Turkey. More narrowly, despite the visible role played by organised crime in Turkish politics, its economy and its society over the last two or three decades, the fields of Ottoman and Turkish history have yet to integrate fully gangs and gangsters into the retelling of Anatolia's recent past.[1]

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[1] The one noted exception to this trend is found in the work of Hamit Bozarslan. See Hamit Borzarslan, 'Türkiye' de Devlet, Komitacılık, Cuntacılık ve Cetecilik Konusunda Birkaç Hipotez', in Fikret

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This attempted survey of the origins of organised crime in Turkey is done with an eye to the larger historiographical question of how paramilitaries contributed to the creation of the Republic of Turkey. Although this is a topic I have broached elsewhere, this paper differs in that it attempts to bridge the long evolution of paramilitary violence in Anatolia between the pre- and post-war years.[2] The time frame of this paper, while broad, speaks to a more current understanding of the periodisation of Turkish history. Rather than view the First World War and the Turkish war of independence in isolation, the years between 1914 and 1922 should instead be seen through the prism of the first half of the twentieth century, an era one could call the 'Young Turk period' of Anatolian history.[3] If one turns to the specific topic of paramilitarism during the Great War and its aftermath, I would argue that paramilitarism, as both a tactic and an institution, was critical during the region's transformation into a nation-state even after the cessation of armed conflict in 1922. The story of paramilitaries in the Turkish twentieth century is not simply about how wars or battles were won or lost; it also a story of how wartime militias in the countryside begot new generations of armed criminal syndicates.

Coming to the capital: Ottoman paramilitarism and the origins of Istanbul's Laz underworld

In the retelling of Ottoman history, the Laz tend to maintain a low profile. Despite their incorporation into the Ottoman Empire after the fall of Trabzon during the mid-fifteenth century, one does not generally read of a vibrant cohort of Laz men or women wielding notable amounts of political, economic or social influence over either the state or Ottoman society. Those roles have been reserved for others (such as Albanian soldiers, Arab scholars, Greek tradesmen, Armenian priests and the like). Instead, the history of Ottoman 'Lazistan', a region roughly incorporating the

Başkaya, ed., *Resmi Tarih Tartışmaları, Cilt I* (Ankara: Türkiye ve Ortadoğu Forumu Vakfı/Özgür Üniversite Kitaplığı, 2005), 173–90.

[2] Ryan Gingeras, 'Last Rites for a "Pure Bandit": Clandestine Service, Historiography and the Origins of the Turkish "Deep State"', *Past and Present*, 206 (February 2010), 121–44.

[3] Erik Jan Zürcher, 'The Ottoman Legacy of the Turkish Republic: An Attempt at a New Periodization', *Die Welt des Islams*, 32 (1992), 237–53.

immediate coastline between Trabzon and Batum, is rendered, largely by default, as a backwater of imperial rule. During the imperial past and in the republican present, the Laz instead appear to play the role of bit players or simply the butt of jokes.

The Laz most probably entered the mainstream of Ottoman consciousness through the steady influx of Black Sea migrants into Istanbul beginning in the early modern period. Evliya Çelebi, the famed Ottoman travel writer, mentions several Istanbul landmarks and settlements frequented by Black Sea migrants during the first half of the seventeenth century.[4] Despite their Christian roots, the Laz by and large converted to Islam after their incorporation into the Ottoman Empire. The Laz language itself derives from the Kartvelian language family (and is most closely related to the Mingrelian dialect), but to this day it has never been officially or formally codified as a written idiom. Since the Laz also tend to be speakers of Turkish or modern Georgian, the notion of a specifically bounded Laz identity remains somewhat elusive. In an empire where religion and regional bonds served as more concrete bonds of identity and belonging, official census takers never historically counted the Laz as an ethnic group. Instead, the term 'Laz' has evolved over time to signify virtually any Muslim hailing from the Black Sea coast east of Sinop. This is the sense in which the term 'Laz' is used here.

Promises of a better life initially appear to have brought Laz migrants to Istanbul. Circumstantial evidence suggests that many Laz men carved specific niches for themselves as boatmen, lightermen and dockworkers. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the nature of Laz settlement in Istanbul would radically change. After the outbreak of the Russo-Ottoman War in 1877, tens of thousands of Laz refugees fled their homes along the Black Sea. The imperial government would settle a great many in the province of İzmit, which neighboured the easternmost suburbs of Istanbul.[5] Living alongside other refugees from Georgia, Abkhazia, Circassia and the Balkans, Laz migrants came to settle densely the seaside districts of Yalova, Değirmendere, Karamürsel, Kartal and Çatalca. As poor newcomers to the politically imperilled capital, employment was scarce for these refugees from Lazistan. With the arrival of still more refugees during the First World War, the Istanbul government would ultimately try to evict vagrant Laz men from the city and have them return to their place of origin.[6] In lieu of regular or legitimate employment, some turned to crime and violence.

In approaching the emergence of Laz gangs, the bulk of documentary evidence from the environs of Istanbul and elsewhere gives the impression that the problem of criminal gangs was a phenomenon confined to the countryside. To a reforming, predominately agrarian state seeking greater centralised control over its far-flung territories, the challenge posed by rural gangs (be they political in nature or not) was of grave concern. Recent studies of the Ottoman and early republican gendarmerie

[4] Doğan Yurdakul, *Abi: Kabadayıler-Mafya Derin Devlet İlişkilsi* (Istanbul: Positif Yayınları, 2007), 22.
[5] Justin McCarthy, *Ölüm ve Sürgün: Osmanlı Müslümanlarına Karşı Yürülten Ulus Olarack Temizleme İşlemi* (Istanbul: İnkılap Kitapevi, 1998), 123–4.
[6] Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA).DH.KMS 62/23, 9 June 1922.

service strongly suggest that securing the countryside was among the top priorities of the authorities during the early twentieth century.[7] Ironically, as security forces sought to combat the proliferation of gangs in such areas as Macedonia and Aydın, elements of the military and the police turned at times to local gangs or private militias as allies.

While this law enforcement tactic may seem inherently counterproductive, the alliances formed between domestic security personnel and gangs entailed certain tactical advantages that favoured the central government. At the price of permitting certain criminal groups to exist, the Ottoman government could better prosecute those groups that were seen to be acutely problematic. Significant state resources were employed alongside the services of a powerful clique of provincial private paramilitaries from the province of Balıkesir to suppress the notorious Çakırcalı gangs in the coastal region of Aydın in 1911.[8] In the case of Macedonia, Ottoman security personnel assembled ad hoc militias from Muslim villages to pursue local Christian guerrillas.[9] With the establishment of cells loyal to the revolutionary Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) after 1905, Ottoman officers themselves would not only recruit and form paramilitary gangs to suppress Christian separatists, but also would use these ostensibly criminal organisations as a clandestine paramilitary arm to further their aim of restoring the Ottoman constitution of 1876. Şükrü Hanioğlu's detailed research into this aspect of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 convincingly demonstrates that the CUP's victory in Macedonia would not have been possible without the contribution and support of gangs.[10]

As the Young Turks slowly entrenched themselves in the halls of power in both the capital and the provinces after 1908, officers, officials and fellow-travellers of the CUP formed an even more complex relationship with local gangs and criminals. A British intelligence report from 1919 describes the CUP in the years succeeding the First World War as an organisation that still utilised a clandestine cellular structure in order to administer or influence local and national affairs. An essential component of many local cells was the presence of *fedaiin* or assassins. In addition to tasks of murder and intimidation directed at political opponents and non-Muslims, *fedaiin* were also employed to oversee official Muslim labour unions (who benefited from the elimination of non-Muslim competitors). The report specifically states that the Laz of Istanbul served as a vital source of *fedaiin* recruitment.[11]

With the outbreak of the First World War, the parameters of the CUP's collusion with provincial paramilitaries expanded after the establishment of the

[7] Ferdan Ergut, 'State and Social Control: The Police in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Republican Turkey, 1839–1939', Ph.D. thesis, New School for Social Research, 1999; Nadir Özbek, 'Policing the Countryside: Gendarmes of the Late 19th Century Ottoman Empire (1876–1908)', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40 (2008), 47–67.

[8] Sabri Yetkin, *Ege'de Eşkıyalar* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfi Yurt Yayınları, 2003), 162–9.

[9] BOA.Y.MTV 242/8, 31 March 1903.

[10] Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 221–7, 254–8.

[11] The National Archives of the UK: Public Record Office: PRO/FO 371/4161/49194, 19 March 1919.

Special Organisation (Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa). Conceived by the minister of war, Enver Pasha, and the central committee of the CUP as an expansive clandestine service attached directly to the party, the Special Organisation took on a variety of extra-legal activities both domestically and abroad. Most notoriously, it is reasonably clear that chief among the Special Organisation's mandates was to assist in the liquidation of dissident non-Muslim populations throughout Anatolia. Scholars of the First World War have suggested that those Special Organisation agents tasked with deporting or executing Greek, Armenian and Syriac Christians came largely from migrant or refugee backgrounds.[12] Ottoman Interior Ministry documents again specifically suggest that the Laz communities located on the outskirts of Istanbul were a particularly valuable source of recruitment for Special Organisation units.[13]

The lord of Yalova: the rise and fall of the Yetimoğlu gang, 1914–1922

To understand more closely how the Laz diaspora of greater Istanbul fit into the convoluted story of gangs and politics at the very end of the Ottoman Empire, one could look specifically at the context of the Yalova peninsula during the period of the First World War and the Turkish War of Independence. Situated within half a day's journey from the capital, Yalova was the home of the Yetimoğlu family, leaders of one of the most powerful and well-documented gangs in greater Istanbul. The story of the rise and fall of (Akköylü) İbrahim Ağa, patriarch of the Yetimoğlus, is indicative of the broader political impact of gangs, militias and paramilitaries at this crucial stage in Anatolia's modern development. The Yetimoğlus provide a didactic case for how clandestine politics, provincial economics, rival gangs and international pressures influenced Laz gangsters and how Laz bands in turn helped to shape modern Turkey.

Sources first mention the existence of the Yetimoğlu gang after the outbreak of the First World War. Rifat Yüce, a pro-CUP journalist from İzmit, described the Yetimoğlu family as originally hailing from the disputed port town of Batum on the Black Sea. As the war progressed, the Yetimoğlus menaced the wealthy seaside communities lying on both sides of the Marmara Sea. In addition to theft, groups like the Yetimoğlus also made their living through extortion and kidnapping.[14]

With the withdrawal of mounted gendarmes early on in the Great War, both sets of gangs were able to operate within increasing impunity as the conflict progressed. Surging streams of deserters from the military meanwhile filled the ranks of local gangs throughout the region, making provincial syndicates like the Yetimoğlu far larger and more powerful than ever before. With few options left at its disposal, the imperial government resorted in December 1918 to issuing a blanket amnesty to anyone involved in banditry during the course of the war. In places like Yalova, this did little but strengthen the hand of İbrahim Ağa and the Yetimoğlu family.

[12] Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Zed Books, 2004),160–163.

[13] Fuat Dündar, *İttihat ve Terakki'nin Müslümanları İskan Politikası (1913–1918)* (Istanbul: İlestişim Yayınları, 2001), 157.

[14] Rifat Yüce, *Kocaeli Tarih ve Rehberi* (İzmit: Türkyolu Matbaası, 1945), 64.

There is no evidence that suggests that İbrahim's men played any role in the Special Organisation's wartime campaign against the empire's non-Muslim population. However, once the war ended, in November 1918, this appears to have changed. In anticipation of defeat, the CUP had reorganised the Special Organisation into a resistance force tasked with arming loyal Muslims to fight the impending Allied occupation. Recruitment into this resistance, which would eventually be called the National Forces (Kuva-yı Milliye), largely fell to CUP sympathisers in the army, the provincial administration, the gendarmerie and local notables.[15] With the help of local policemen and village mayors (*muhtar*s), Laz refugees and migrants were heavily recruited into the Kuva-yı Milliye in the environs of İzmit and Istanbul. Rather than attack occupying British detachments directly, most resistance fighters directed their efforts at Greek and Armenian refugees returning from exile.[16] At war's end, Ottoman officials identified the Yetimoğlus as among the bands menacing Christian villages around Karamürsel, Yalova, Değirmendere and İzmit. Ottoman officials also implicated local *muhtar*s as co-conspirators in these attacks.[17]

In addition to Yalova, Yetimoğlu influence extended down the road to Değirmendere, a region described by one local gendarme as a countryside peppered with both Laz and Albanian villages.[18] By early summer 1919, a blood feud erupted between (Akköylü) İbrahim's retainers and local Albanians in Değirmendere. Unlike the defenceless Armenians of the region, the Albanians of Değirmendere proved more than a match. The Albanians, led by a local chieftain named Arnavud Kazım (or Kazım the Albanian), had done their share of raiding during the war, terrorising tobacco farmers and boatmen on either side of the Gulf of İzmit. Kazım's men habitually found shelter from arrest on the farm of Nurrettin Bey, a retired provincial governor and close relative of the former interior minister, Talat Pasha. Despite a formal protest submitted by sixty men of note in the Değirmendere region, Kazım would never be held accountable for his crimes.[19]

By August 1919, Laz and Albanian factions had declared a formal peace between one another. At roughly the same time, both the Yetimoğlu gang and Arnavud Kazım's men came under the direct control of the National Forces' high command in nearby Bursa.[20] As far as the Yetimoğlus were concerned, this deepening relationship with the National Forces proved an unhappy one. In autumn 1919 the Yetimoğlus, under the aegis of their Kuva-yı Milliye patrons, raided the town of İnegöl and stole property worth 140,000 lira.[21] This act drew the ire of the high command in Bursa, forcing regional command Bekir Sami Pasha to tour the region personally in order

[15] A thorough discussion of the connection between the Committee of Union and Progress and the National Movement can be found in Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor: The Role of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish Nationalist Movement, 1905–1926* (Leiden: Brill, 1984).
[16] PRO/FO 371/4157/62437, 5 April 1919.
[17] BOA.DH.İUM 19/5//1/31, 14 March 1919; BOA.DH.ŞFR 95/279, 30 January 1919.
[18] BOA.DH.KMS 56–1/14, 20 September 1919.
[19] BOA.DH.EUM.AYŞ 18/119, 8 August 1919.
[20] Yüce, *Kocaeli Tarih ve Rehberi*, 75, 82.
[21] Muhittin Ünal, *Miralay Bekir Sami Günsev'in Kurtuluş Savaşı Anıları* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 2002), 186.

to chastise wayward gangs for taking advantage of the support lent to them by the National Forces.[22] As summer turned to autumn, townspeople and villagers, as well as perhaps the Yetimoğlus themselves, chafed under the financial and military pressure put on them by the National Forces. After years of conflict, large segments of the Muslim population residing just outside Istanbul had grown sick of war and collectively blamed the National Forces (which was obviously a rebranded version of the CUP) for the troubles and hardships that had befallen the land.

Popular anger towards the National Forces soon gave way to a mass rebellion along the southern and eastern shores of the Sea of Marmara in autumn 1919. At the forefront of this revolt were gangs drawn from throughout the region. Ironically, many of the leaders of the rebellion were paramilitaries who had previously served with the Special Organisation during the First World War. In addition to broader social pressures relating to the physical and economic hardships of the last several years of war, many leaders of the rebellion felt betrayed by the National Forces and feared that a Nationalist victory might lead to a crackdown on Muslim immigrants (whom the CUP had long identified as the key purveyors of crime and violence).[23] The rebellion also attracted the attention of the British embassy in Istanbul, which saw the insurrection as a means of weakening opposition to foreign occupation in Anatolia. British intelligence eventually contacted (Akköylü) İbrahim in the hope that he, too, would join the fray. Although it seems that the Yetimoğlus agreed to participate in the revolt, British reports suggest that the gang did very little fighting.[24]

Suppression of the revolt against the Nationalists was immediately followed by the invasion and occupation of the Marmara basin by both Greek and British troops. Like the Kuva-yı Milliye, occupation authorities were forced to contend with the power and influence of local bandits. The arrival of the British and the Greeks did little, for example, to make the road leading east out of Istanbul any safer. Through 1920 and 1921, gangs of native Greeks, Laz migrants and Albanian refugees frequently robbed and kidnapped travellers and locals alike.[25] Yet as the war between Greek and British expeditionary troops and the National Forces of Mustafa Kemal grew more intense, heavy fighting came adversely to affect the Yetimoğlus and other gangs just south and east of Istanbul. After briefly capturing the town of İzmit in summer 1920, the Greeks staged a strategic pull-out from İzmit and the Yalova peninsula after meeting heavy Nationalist resistance east of town. Retreating Greek troops, with Armenian and Greek paramilitaries in support, vigorously cleansed the region of its Muslim population as they withdrew south towards Bursa. By October 1921,

[22] *TTK Bekir Sami Dosya*, Vol. 2, p. 163, 26 October 1919; ibid., p. 185, 31 October 1919.

[23] See Ryan Gingeras, 'Notorious Subjects, Invisible Citizens: North Caucasian Resistance to the Turkish National Movement in the South Marmara, 1919–1923', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40, 1 (2008), 89–108.

[24] PRO/FO 371/5167/4510, 10 May 1920.

[25] As one reads through the scattered reports of crimes reported to the Interior Ministry during the occupation years, incidents of Laz brigandage do pop up here and there (in the case of the *vilayet* of Istanbul, see BOA.DH.AYŞ 53/65, 22 May 1921; BOA.DH.AYŞ 54/5, 12 June 1921; BOA.DH.AYŞ 54/30, 19 June 1921).

fourteen villages in the county of Yalova lay in ruin. According to statistics compiled after the war was over, the Greek offensive laid waste to 81 per cent of Yalova town.[26] Many of the region's inhabitants fled the region, most taking up residence in Istanbul as refugees. Although there is no definitive evidence (to this point), one can only assume that the Yetimoğlus may have been among the refugees or the dead at this stage in the Turkish War of Independence.

The declaration of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, which followed the conclusion of the Turkish War of Independence, is a decisive moment in the history of gangs and organised crime in the Istanbul region for several reasons. In addition to the obvious change in regime, the ascendancy of Mustafa Kemal as president and founder of the Turkish Republic marked the end of the Committee of Union and Progress. Between 1923 and 1926, CUP members and sympathisers who had opposed or disagreed with the rise of Mustafa Kemal were gradually marginalised, exiled, imprisoned or executed.[27] This purge of powerful members of the old-guard CUP also included provincial gangs in the Marmara region who were charged with acts of collaboration or sedition.[28]

The crackdown against criminal gangs in Istanbul's environs was implemented against the scarred backdrop of the region's provincial landscape. As a predominantly agricultural society, one could argue that gangs found outside the imperial capital would have lost their economic vitality regardless of Kemalist suppression. Police reports submitted at the height of the War of Independence tend to suggest that most gangs were hard-pressed to rob or hold for ransom individuals for little more than a few hundred lira. In the wake of mass physical destruction and ethnic cleansing, Istanbul's once prosperous suburbs simply could not sustain powerful criminal syndicates like the Yetimoğlus. The onset of republican rule in greater Istanbul would ultimately refocus the activities of criminal entrepreneurs almost exclusively on the city itself.

'Heroin capital of the world': Laz gangsters and the origins of the Turkish heroin trade, 1923–1950

Istanbul changed rapidly after the declaration of the republic. In 1923 it ceded its centuries-old status as an imperial capital, with the transfer of state power to Ankara. Although occupied by British and French troops for most of the War of Independence, the city itself was spared any physical damage. The destruction inflicted by the First World War and the War of Independence was instead to be found among the city's hundreds of thousands of refugees.[29] This mass of desperate, poor and displaced peoples continued to grow in the first decades of the republic, as thousands

[26] BOA.DH.KMS 60-2/20, 19 May 1921; *Lausanne Conference on Near Eastern Affairs, 1922–1923: Records of Proceedings and Draft Terms of Peace* (London: HMSO, 1923), 677; Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contacts of Civilizations* (London: Constable, 1923), 310–11.

[27] Zürcher, *Unionist Factor*, 145–54.

[28] Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores: Violence, Ethnicity and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1912–1923* (Oxford University, 2009), 139–48.

[29] Nur Bilge Criss, *Istanbul under Allied Occupation, 1918–1923* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 29–32.

of peasants from Anatolia's interior arrived in the city looking for work and a better life.[30] Crime in Istanbul worsened as the city expanded. Between 1938 and 1947, court cases in the former Ottoman capital had jumped from 9,636 in a year to over 300,000.[31]

Gangs and criminal syndicates naturally plagued urban Istanbul during the reign of the Ottoman sultans. Murat Çulcu has painstakingly detailed the criminal exploits of rebellious Janissaries, smugglers and clandestine societies from the early modern period to the nineteenth century (such as the case of disgruntled Laz recruits during the creation of Sultan Mahmud II's modern military force, the Nizam-ı Cedid).[32] Yücel Yeşilgöz has argued that the modern concept of *kabadayı*, or neighbourhood boss, lies in the power and influence of Istanbul's competing local fire brigades (*tulumbacı*).[33] While rebel soldiers, smugglers and firemen certainly may have taken part in criminal or political intrigues in the Ottoman capital, Istanbul's passage into the republican era appears to have changed the dynamics of the old criminal underworld. Just as the city was evolving into a modern, burgeoning metropolis, the new culture and industry of drugs trafficking was taking root.

Anatolia's role in the contemporary global narcotics trade dates back to the early nineteenth century. After the end of the First Opium War, large amounts of opium produced in central Anatolia increasingly found its way to Asia. By the end of the century, more than two-thirds of opium imported into the United States came from the Ottoman Empire.[34] Yet, with the turn of the century, popular dissent in the United States, Britain and other major powers brought about a new reckoning regarding opium and other narcotics. The signing of the International Opium Convention in The Hague in 1912 would signal a new political and economic order, whereby opium-producing countries were obliged to end the unregulated transnational sale of the drug. The Ottoman Empire, despite being one of the largest producers of opium, did not sign the treaty.[35]

The empire's collapse and its reconstitution as the Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk did not change this state of non-compliance. International pressure on Turkey, again with the United States in the lead, continued unabated into the early 1930s. Meanwhile, European and Japanese syndicates operated a series of morphine and heroin factories in Istanbul in blatant violation of the global prohibition and

[30] John Kolars, 'The Integration of the Villager into the National Life of Turkey', in Kemal Karpat et al., eds., *Social Change and Politics in Turkey: A Structural–Historical Analysis* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 191; David Shankland, 'Integrating the Rural: Gellner and the Study of Anatolia', *Middle East Studies*, 35, 2 (1999), 132–49. In 1927 there was a total of five cities with populations of more than 50,000. By 1950, there were eleven and in 1960 there were twenty-seven.

[31] 'Turkey Troubled by Crime Increase', *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 1947.

[32] Murat Çulcu, *Kan Defteri (Türkiye'de MAFİA'laşmanın Kökenleri IV)* (Istanbul: E Yayınları, 2005), 572–80.

[33] Frank Bovenkerk and Yücel Yeşilgöz, *The Turkish Mafia: A History of the Heroin Godfathers* (Preston: Milo Books, 2007), 77–8.

[34] Üner Turgay, 'The Nineteenth Century Golden Triangle: Chinese Consumption, Ottoman Production, and the American Connection, II', *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, 3, 1 (1984–5), 93.

[35] F. Cengiz Erdinç, *Overdose Türkiye: Türkiye'de Eroin Kaçakçılığı, Bağımlılığı ve Politikalar* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2004), 30–4.

Western admonitions.[36] A powerful, but small, multinational clique of traffickers was at the forefront of the shipment of opiates out of Turkey during the inter-war period. Smuggling the drugs abroad fell to men such as the Eliopoulos brothers, two Greek nationals who possessed contacts and customers in Turkey, China, Greece, Cuba, France and the United States.[37] By the post-war era, most shipments of Turkish drugs passed across the country's southern border, through Syria and on to Beirut. By the 1950s Beirut served as a key node in the infamous French Connection, a route connecting Marseille to Havana, New York, Mexico City and Montreal.

Pressure from Washington, London and the League of Nations finally forced Ankara to reconsider its lax policies towards the opium trade in 1931.[38] With the closing of the foreign-owned factories in Istanbul and the creation of an officially regulated opium administration in Turkey, a new underground narcotics industry was born. As French, Japanese and German manufacturers left, locals who had learned the trade assumed their place. By 1950, small cohorts of Laz gangsters emerged as being among the principal architects of Turkey's role in the modern global heroin trade.

If one were to draw a comparison between Istanbul's Laz gangs before 1923 and after, the Yetimoğlu gang's counterpart in the post-Kemalist era can best be found in İhsan Sekban. Sekban, or Laz İhsan, supposedly arrived in Istanbul from his native town of Rize with no money or property to his name. He ultimately found employment as a petty dope dealer and gradually learned the manufacturing and smuggling side of the trade. By 1950, İhsan was counted among the wealthiest individuals in the city. He eventually came to own several town houses on the Bosphorus and even a multi-million-dollar apartment building in one of the most fashionable sections of Istanbul. Whether behind the wheel of his pricey American-made car or strolling arm in arm with his girlfriend, a well-known Armenian nightclub singer, İhsan exhibited all the flash of a high roller and man about town.[39]

İhsan's wealth and status was a testament to the political influence and brutality of the gang he led. Sources claimed that İhsan bought raw opium from peasants in the region of Afyon and processed it into either morphine base or heroin in any of the thirty to forty clandestine laboratories he ran in Istanbul and in neighbouring suburbs and towns.[40] Eight men from Rize comprised the core of his gang, but one informant familiar with his activities estimated that the gang employed fifty to sixty people. Virtually all the men in his entourage were Laz.[41]

[36] Ibid., 53–69.

[37] Douglas Valentine, *The Strength of the Wolf: The Secret History of America's War on Drugs* (London: Verso, 2004), 10.

[38] Erdinç, *Overdose Türkiye*, 87–101.

[39] Subject Files of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, 1916–1970, Records of the Drug Enforcement Administration, Record Group 170, National Archives Building II, Silver Spring, MD, Charles Siragusa to Mr H. J. Anslinger, 25 July 1950, Turkey, 1950; ibid., Frank Sojat to Mr H. J. Anslinger, 1 October 1951, Turkey, 1951–1952; ibid., Frank Sojat to Mr. H. J. Anslinger, 5 November 1951, Turkey, 1951–1952.

[40] Ibid., Charles Siragusa to Mr H. J. Anslinger, 25 July 1950, Turkey, 1950.

[41] Interestingly, one man among his group is specifically referenced as being of Albanian descent. Ibid., Frank Sojat to Mr H. J. Anslinger, 5 November 1951, Turkey, 1951–1952.

İhsan was clearly a hard man with friends in high places. In 1934 he was arrested and convicted of murder, but served only a year and ten months in prison. He was again arrested, for heroin trafficking, on 26 July 1950. A court found him guilty of the charge but he was released shortly afterwards on appeal.[42] Police in Istanbul and İzmir protected İhsan and in some cases allegedly killed informants on his orders. This close relationship with law enforcement was based only in part on sizable bribes to patrolmen and their superiors. Laz İhsan also served as an opportunist informant for the police, informing on rivals who threatened to cut into his gang's operations.[43] Despite repeated US demands for his prosecution, İhsan remained a core member of the Istanbul underworld well into the 1970s.

What remains to be seen is the degree to which İhsan Sekban played a direct role in the party politics and administration of the state during the early 1950s. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), for example, knew of his existence and operations in 1948 (just one year after the CIA's establishment). After 1950, however, the Agency refused to have any part in his prosecution.[44] Intelligence later passed on to the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN, grandfather to the modern Drug Enforcement Administration) suggests that İhsan held certain communist sympathies and had ties to the arms trade (the source of which was most likely Bulgaria).[45] Although his ties to communists in Turkey and Bulgaria may have been an attempt to besmirch İhsan's reputation or exaggerate his political significance, such connections between members of organised crime and political parties would later prove to be a common feature of the Turkish underworld. Subsequent organised crime figures did open relations with young members of various dissident and pro-state factions during the 1960s and 1970s. The coupling of the illegal arms trade and drugs trafficking also became a crucial feature of organised crime's involvement in local and international affairs (as seen in the case of Mehmet Ali Ağca, the would-be assassin of Pope John Paul II).[46] If we accept US claims regarding İhsan's communist sympathies, it may be safe to say that the era of the 'political *baba*s' in Turkey may have been born during this period.

One cannot begin to assess the historical significance of İhsan Sekban without first probing the role played by the United States in this story. As the Second World War gave way to the Cold War, US strategic and political interest in Asia Minor peaked.

[42] Ibid., Frank Sojat to Mr. H. J. Anslinger, 1 October 1951; Turkey, 1951–1952; Subject Files of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, 1916–1970; Records of the Drug Enforcement Administration, Record Group 170; National Archives Building II, Silver Spring, MD.

[43] Ibid., Charles Siragusa to Mr H. J. Anslinger, 25 July 1950, Turkey, 1950.

[44] Ibid., Charles Siragusa to Mr H. J. Anslinger, 24 July 1950, Turkey, 1950.

[45] Henry Kamm, 'Turkish Ban on Poppy: Delayed Impact Seen', *New York Times*, 10 Oct. 1972; Uğur Mumcu, *Silah Kaçakçılığı ve Terör* (Ankara: Tekin Yayınevi, 1981).

[46] Enis Berberoğlu, *Kod Adı Yüksekova: Susurluk, Ankara, Bodrum, Yüksekova Fay Hattı* (Istanbul: AD Kitapçılık, 1998); Hamit Bozarlsan, *Violence in the Middle East: From Political Struggle to Self-Sacrifice* (Princeton: Markus Weiner, 2004), 76–7; Edward Herman and Frank Brodhead, *The Rise and Fall of the Bulgarian Connection* (New York: Sheridan Square Publications, 1986); Gültekin Ural, *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa'dan MİT'e: Abdullah Çatlı ve Susurluk Olayı* (Istanbul: Kamer Yayınları, 1997); Soner Yalçın and Doğan Yudakul, *Reis: Gladio'nun Türk Tetikçisi* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitapcılık, 2007).

Close relations between Turkey and the United States were first consummated with the arrival of tens of millions of dollars under the Marshall Plan, which was followed by Ankara's admission into NATO. US influence quickly permeated the domestic sphere as well. The United States' 'advisory' role in Turkish politics and society extended into a multiplicity of spheres. Among the development programmes propagated in Turkey was the development of a robust anti-narcotics regime, an effort spearheaded by the FBN. Naturally an altruistic plan to better Turkey did not lead US 'experts' in narcotics trafficking to venture abroad. Rather, it is clear that programmes to advise on and improve local law enforcement were part of a larger strategy to tie Turkey ever closer to the United States and deepen the latter's strategic presence in the greater Middle East.[47]

The case of İhsan Sekban demonstrates, however, that US interest in drug trafficking did not resonate with the priorities of local Turkish officials. Laz İhsan clearly posed a greater (albeit perceived) threat to the domestic security and tranquillity of the United States than to Istanbul's population and administration. For many city officials, policemen and party officials, the fallout from his potential prosecution went beyond the loss of potential bribe money and gifts. İhsan's business and land interests made him more than some criminal to be tossed in prison. He possessed capital and political clout beyond the wildest dreams of the Yetimoğlu family or any other provincial gangster of a generation or two earlier. As a willing informer who aided police in maintaining the façade of Turkey's commitment to cracking down on drug smuggling, one could also say that his utility, power and worth even stretched into the sphere of law enforcement. İhsan Sekban's significance as a real and representative figure in Turkish politics and society grows if one also considers the broader economic implications of his existence. İhsan's shipments of illegally refined opium represented an important stage in one of the largest sectors of Turkey's otherwise legitimate national economy. Tens of thousands of people living in the Anatolian hinterland depended on the harvesting of opium. To crack down on illicit traffickers like Laz İhsan would mean the elimination of an entire apparatus of smugglers and suppliers who tended to pay more than double what the Turkish national monopoly would have paid for opium.[48]

In short, İhsan Sekban's significance in history resides in the fact that gangsters were no longer, at best, provincial thugs who, as either challengers or subordinates, were largely at the receiving end of the evolving political order. Men like İhsan, through their financial largesse and social status derived from the drug trade, became incrementally more integrated into the upper rungs of both the provincial and the national power structure. Washington's crusade against drugs greatly enabled this rise to prominence. In addition to establishing the parameters of an embargo that assured

[47] For greater discussion on the Americanisation of law enforcement practices worldwide, see Ethan Avram Nadelmann, *Cops across Borders: The Internationalization of US Law Enforcement* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

[48] Felix Belair, 'US Loan to Turkey Dismays Narcotics Officials', *New York Times*, 14 June 1970; Alfried Friendly, 'Turkish Program Curbing Opium Poppy', *New York Times*, 11 June 1970; 'Turkey Rebuffs US on Opium Ban', *New York Times*, 11 Sept. 1970.

higher profits for illicit traffickers in heroin, the United States' nascent 'war on drugs' forced US and Turkish officials specifically to identify and then contend with figures like Laz İhsan as political and economic actors. Negotiations over the repercussions of prosecuting traffickers like İhsan Sekban consequently would open up much larger, but subtle, questions regarding the nature of Turkish sovereignty and governance in the face of US pressure and influence. In other words, İhsan was more than just an individual; he constituted a phenomenon helping to define Turkey's place in the world.

From *babas* to *banditos*: thinking comparatively about the history of gangs in modern Turkey

One cannot deny that there is little direct connection between (Akköylü) İbrahim Ağa and İhsan Sekban. The latter did not succeed the former in any immediate way. The political environment and the physical world inhabited by the two men and their retainers were also quite different from one another. It should also be added that gangsters of Laz origin do not hold exclusive rights to the history of organised crime in Istanbul or Turkey at large. A very similar story could be told with immigrant Albanian or Bosnian, or even native Turkish or Kurdish, gangsters in the place of the Laz chieftains fleshed out above.

What I have instead striven to do here is to add some texture and clarity to a historical process that is often overlooked by historians of modern Anatolia. The physical hardship brought on by war and imperial crisis helped to produce a culture of rural gangs and paramilitaries in significant portions of the Ottoman Empire (particularly in areas with large numbers of refugees). Late Ottoman administrators, in an effort both to secure the countryside and to promote a centralising agenda, employed policies that aimed to suppress criminal syndicates *and* incorporate them into a new imperial order. The Turkish War of Independence represents the high-water mark for many rural gangs. As a period when many erstwhile Young Turks sought out the assistance of rural outfits to further a statewide 'national resistance' movement, the war allowed many gangs to exercise an unprecedented amount of local authority. Yet the power of groups like the Yetimoğlus would suddenly, at its height, be extinguished by either the physical devastation of the countryside or the political reordering that followed the establishment of the republic.

A new era in the history of gangs opened after 1923 as the centre of criminal life shifted to the city, which increasingly served as the main destination for migrating peasants and refugees. For those poor migrants and refugees, like the Laz, who would turn to crime as means of survival and upward mobility, the birth of the drug trade offered unrivalled possibilities. The imposition of a prohibitionist regime on opiates and the departure of foreign narcotics producers from Turkey opened the door for locals to assume the means of production of an increasingly lucrative trade. The case of İhsan Sekban demonstrates the degree to which heroin enabled a new generation of gangs to attain previously unachievable wealth and political status. While an individual like (Akköylü) İbrahim may have possessed, at the height of his power,

an ample amount of local prestige and influence, he was still largely subordinate to the political order of the day. İhsan Sekban's case offers an early glimpse into the kind of political and economic autonomy and weight that the drug trade afforded to successful post-war gangsters. Laz İhsan's historical significance lies not only in his ability to influence policy and administration in Istanbul, but also in association with much grander issues related to Turkey's relationship with the United States and the contemporary world order.

If we assume a more global perspective, the early history of Istanbul's 'Laz underworld' adds to a growing body of literature on the ways in which gangs, bandits, paramilitaries and other violent criminal syndicates contributed to the making of modern states. To cite just one example, the emerging revisionist narrative concerning the establishment of modern Mexico provides a number of valid points of comparison. Rural banditry was an endemic challenge confronting post-independence Mexico during the nineteenth century. Yet, as in the case of the late Ottoman Empire, sincere efforts to combat banditry and secure the countryside under centralised government control was hindered (and, ironically, complemented) by the fact that many of the most powerful figures of the nineteenth century possessed a great deal of influence among rural gangs.[49] The making of a national police force in Mexico was similarly defined by the inclusion of bandits and former gangsters in rural law enforcement groups.[50]

The revolution of 1910 marks something of a high-water mark for rural gangs in Mexico as powerful thugs and paramilitaries, such as Pancho Villa and many others, took part in the struggle to define a new revolutionary order.[51] The devastation of the Mexican Revolution (which was accompanied by a comparable pattern of mass migration from the countryside to major cities) and the onset of prohibition in the United States had an analogous effect on criminal syndicates in Mexico. A particularly apt case can be found in the history of Tijuana in the state of Baja California Norté, a region that was taken over by a rebellious military officer and paramilitary by the name of Esteban Cantú Jiménez. As the de facto governor of the state between 1915 and 1920, Cantú transformed Tijuana into a haven for opium trafficking and illicit liquor production.[52] One could say that Cantú set a seminal precedent in terms of the centrality of the drug trade and the evolving (and continuous) relationship between narcotics traffickers and elements of the post-revolutionary Mexican state.[53]

[49] Chris Fraser, *Bandit Nation: A History of Outlaws and Cultural Struggle in Mexico, 1810–1920* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 20–57; Paul Vanderwood*: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1992), 5–13.

[50] Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress*, 53–60.

[51] Ana Maria Alonso, *Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution, and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

[52] Luis Astorga, 'Organized Crime and the Organization of Crime', John Bailey and Roy Godson, eds., *Organized Crime and Democratic Governability: Mexico and the US–Mexico Borderlands* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 58–82; James A. Sandos, 'Northern Separatism during the Mexican Revolution: An Inquiry into the Role of Drug Trafficking, 1910–1920', *Americas*, 41, 2 (1984), 191–214.

[53] Luis Astorga, *Drogas Sin Fronteras* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2003), 283–94.

If we include examples from other fields of study, the years encompassing the First World War are of extreme importance in looking at the role played by gangs in the building of modern states. Few would disagree that the period between the 1910s and 1920s produced a seismic shift in the development of the contemporary nation-state. As revolution and war weakened the authority of central governments, concomitant surges in poverty, migration and political disorder served to strengthen the political authority of rural gangs and paramilitaries in Russia and China.[54] One could say that many gangs during this period do conform to the sort of revolutionary and conservative forms of 'social banditry' described by such scholars as Eric Hobsbawm and Anton Blok.[55]

At precisely this point in world history a global prohibition on a specific and expanding array of narcotics also began to take shape. Bans on heroin, marijuana and cocaine gradually produced a new transnational economy that grew in size and strength as the inter-war period progressed. The masters of this new economy were at first marginal characters and groups in close proximity to the main nodes of the new narcotics trade. One cannot minimise the degree to which drug trafficking redefined the nature of gang life (which again progressively became an almost exclusive urban phenomenon). Increasing profits from these illicit dealings would transform previously marginal and transient groups into more economically and political robust actors on both the local and the national stage. We see this in the case of Shanghai, where previously clandestine brotherhoods of provincial migrants reinvented themselves, with the aid of opium, as the Green Gang. Under one of its leaders, Du Yueshang, the Green Gang became instrumental in promoting relative peace in Shanghai and in bolstering the fortunes of Chiang Kai Shek's Kuomindong.[56] A similar set of circumstances can be found in the making of the so-called Marseille mob during the inter-war period. Born of the Corsican diaspora of the city, the Marseille mafia's founders, Paul Carbone and Francois Spirito, helped to lay the foundations of the infamous 'French Connection' heroin pipeline across the Atlantic Ocean. Carbone's Corsican gang, like Du's Green Gang, also had a hand in the unravelling of the political order of the day as anti-communist strike-breakers and Nazi collaborators.[57]

[54] Phil Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China* (Stanford University Press, 1988); Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War: Politics, Society and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917–1922* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

[55] Anton Blok, 'The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14 (1972): 494–503; Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Abacus, 2007).

[56] Brian Martin, 'The Green Gang and the Guomindang State: Du Yuesheng and the Politics of Shanghai', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 54, 1 (1995), 64–92.

[57] Pierre Galante and Louis Sapin, *The Marseilles Mafia: The Truth Behind the World of Drug Trafficking* (London: W. H. Allen, 1979); Eduardo Saenz Rover and Russ Davidson, *The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking, Smuggling and Gambling in Cuba from the 1920s to the Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 105; Stephen Wilson, *Feuding, Conflict and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

In taking a longer view of the history of gangs (that is, to look specifically at the years falling on both sides of the pre- and post-drug trade turn), historians have the opportunity to take up where Eric Hobsbawm leaves off in his study of bandits as a global phenomenon. Our collective reassessment of the twentieth century tends gradually to leave banditry by the wayside in recognition of a world that has progressively become more industrial and urban.[58] Yet despite the near extinction of rural banditry in the industrialised world, urban gangs and syndicates (particularly those that profit from the drug trade) have taken their place and have become a pandemic of equally global proportions. If we are to understand this new turn, we must endeavour to further conjoin our studies of bandits, paramilitaries and gangs of the rural type to the still unfolding histories of urban criminal syndicates. In doing so, we can perhaps open a new chapter on, and reveal new insights into, the evolution of the nation-state.

[58] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 183–99. Hobsbawm readily acknowledges that 'banditry as a social phenomenon diminishes when better ways of agrarian struggle become available' (184). Yet in discussing the modern manifestation of 'banditry' in the contemporary world, he appears consciously to avoid any discussion of contemporary cartels, gangs and other urban criminal groups.