BOOK REVIEWS

Ethnic Boundaries in Turkish Politics: The Secular Kurdish Movement and Islam, by
Zeki Sarigil, New York, NYU Press, 2018, 208 pp., $35 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1479882168.

The two cleavages that most define Turkish politics are Turkish versus Kurdish national identity,
and secularism versus Islam. Zeki Sarigil's *Ethnic Boundaries in Turkish Politics: The Secular
Kurdish Movement and Islam* addresses both. The book provides a comprehensive yet concise
account of the Kurdish movement in Turkey as it gradually took a friendlier stance toward Islam.
He traces the movement's development from the 1970s, when it was secular and hostile to religion,
into the 1990s and 2000s – the period that Sarigil identifies as the Islamic opening of the Kurdish
movement. During this period, ethnopolitical leaders navigated the social and symbolic boundaries
of the movement in response to four factors: the declining influence of Marxism, the need to expand
the movement's social base, electoral politics, and legitimacy struggles with political rivals. Sarigil
draws on several data sources to trace this process: in-depth interviews, ethnography, textual
analysis, surveys, and electoral data. Below, I describe the book's historical periodization, theoretical
approach, argument, and contribution in greater detail.

For those interested in the history of the Kurdish movement, *Ethnic Boundaries* examines
three periods that define its relationship with Islam. Starting with the 1970s, the leadership's
Marxist ideology meant that it was antagonistic to religion. Sarigil identifies this as a period of
"boundary contraction," when Kurdish nationalism decisively excluded Islam. Under the
leadership of the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, or Kurdistan Workers' Party) and its
founder, Abdullah Öcalan, religion was declared to be "a barrier to the development of
national awareness and unity among Kurds" (p. 66). In the 1990s, however, the movement's
position vis-à-vis Islam began to soften, initiating a period of "boundary expansion." In
speeches and writings, Öcalan treated Islam as a basic human need, vital for social life, and
stated that "Islam is compatible with socialism" (p. 71). Alongside a changing discourse, the
PKK also encouraged the formation of conservative religious institutions, groups, and move-
ments. By the 2000s, Islamic actors and ideas became more visible in the movement, and the
pro-Kurdish BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, or Peace and Democracy Party) began to host
religious events such as the "civilian Friday prayers" (*sivil Cuma*). At the 2014 Democratic
Islam Congress, an event called for by Öcalan and organized by the BDP, a delegation of
politicians, religious figures, journalists, and academics met to discuss a more inclusive vision
of Islam. Speakers at the Congress emphasized the Charter of Medina, an agreement from
622 CE between Muslims and non-Muslims that defined the rights and freedoms of different
ethnic and religious communities residing in Medina. Speakers described a vision of Islam that
spoke against both authoritarian secularism and radical Islam. After the congress, the coleader
of the BDP, Selahattin Demirtaş, described the Charter as a key reference for building "a
society based on equality and brotherhood" (p. 78).

Sarigil argues that the four factors introduced above – which combine international and
institutional factors with an agency-based approach – drove the decision to first exclude Islam
and later to become more inclusive of religion. The PKK, which, in the 1980s, quickly became the
most dominant organization in the Kurdish nationalist movement, was deeply influenced by
Marxist ideas. Much of the organization's early appeal was built on violent, coordinated action
against local landed elites (known as *ağas*) on behalf of peasants in Turkey's southeast (p. 61). The
collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc in the early 1990s, however, forced a
reevaluation of Marxist ideology. Sarigil uses public statements and interviews of elites to document

the PKK's abrupt shift away from Marxism. Instead, the Kurdish movement began to embrace Islam and position itself as a mass movement (p. 95). This period saw the establishment of the first legal pro-Kurdish party – the People's Labor Party – in June 1990, which further helped broaden the Kurdish movement's appeal. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Kurdish political parties gradually increased their popularity and vote share. This increasing electoral success put Kurdish parties in direct competition with conservative, pro-Islamic parties, which had also made inroads with the pious Kurdish population.

While Kurdish leaders expanded the boundaries of the movement, conservative Islamist groups – the ruling Justice and Development Party (the AKP) being the most significant – tried to delegitimize the Islamic credentials of the Kurdish movement. Current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then prime minister of Turkey, frequently declared that the Kurdish leadership was still "Marxist," "atheist," or "Zoroastrian," and that the leadership's confessions of faith were entirely instrumental (p. 106). In the theoretical terms of Sarigil's boundary approach, "AKP officials attempted to shrink or contract religious boundaries by accusing ethnonationalists of being against religion" (p. 107). Ironically, external contestation to its Islamic opening pushed Kurdish leaders to further stake out their Islamic credentials by distinguishing the movement from leftist organizations that maintained a negative stance toward religion (p. 118). Electoral politics had a moderating influence on the Kurdish movement, but it also produced new cleavages.

Sarigil's framework also allows him to map a middle road between instrumentalist, constructivist, and primordialist approaches to analyzing identity. Popular opinion data shows that the Kurdish population tends to be more religious than the general population in Turkey (p. 130). Therefore, Kurdish leaders had a limited set of preexisting options as they maneuvered to cultivate the movement's legitimacy and expand its social base. At the same time, because of the leadership's strategic decisions, the definition of Kurdish nationalism changed. Religion and nationalism became co-constitutive, not unlike some nationalist movements in Europe and the United States. The contraction and expansion of the boundaries of the Kurdish movement provide evidence of a dynamic interplay between structure and agency. The sticky cultural qualities of the Kurdish population constrained the agency of the movement's leaders. Kurdish ethnic identity, however, was not static.

Ethnic Boundaries provides important evidence of Islam's flexibility and democratic potential in nationalist movements. The conclusions of the book also draw attention to, but do not answer, some important questions about the Kurdish movement. The PKK is unique as one of the longest-lasting and most influential Marxist organizations in the Middle East. The historical condition of the Kurdish population as a large but stateless minority is also unique. These two unusual country-level conditions certainly shape the Kurdish movement's fusion of Islam and pluralist principles in a nationalist movement. If not for its leftist roots and a highly heterogenous constituency, would the current Kurdish party – the HDP – be concerned with institutionalizing equal gender representation and an inclusive national identity? It is also likely that the size of the Kurdish population in Turkey – as a large but invariably marginalized minority – reinforces Kurdish leaders' commitment to elections and constitutional democracy. In this direction, Sarigil's work provides important steps toward better understanding the conditions that undergird how religious identity is expressed. But as we see in Europe, the United States, and even in Turkey with the AKP, religious nationalism can have a dramatically different political valence under alternative circumstances. An expanded theoretical framework that includes structural factors such as the size of social cleavages and the salience of class identity would help account for the democratic and authoritarian tendencies of religious nationalist movements, whether in Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey, or Europe. Such cross-country comparative studies would combine powerfully with the boundary approach, which Sarigil shows is very effective at mapping the symbolic contours of a movement over time. The book points toward these potential avenues of research while at the same time succeeding in its

primary aim: providing a comprehensive account of Islam's place in the history of the Kurdish movement in Turkey.

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From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe, by John Connelly, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020, 966 pp., $35 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0691167121.

This is a massive and masterfully written account of the political history of Eastern Europe from the early modern period to the present. Connelly begins the book with bold pushback against much of the current scholarly skepticism of nationalism. The leading trifecta (Ernst Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson) has yielded a generation of historical works to justify such skepticism. The most influential research in this field tells us that national identity is a modern construction, a late 19th-century deception of elite radicals to force people into strict ethnic groups. Tara Zahra even introduced the idea of "national indifference" to strike down the consensus that nationalism was always popular and dominant in history. Connelly responds that although this perspective is not technically wrong, it describes something peripheral and does not apply to the heartlands in Poland, Serbia, or Romania, for example. Although Zahra and many others tried to write about nationalism without adopting nationalist frameworks, Connelly claims that we cannot escape the embrace of nationalism. Rather than avert our gaze, we must stare into the abyss to understand "an ideology of unrivalled force" (787) that answers many whys in Eastern European history.

The sections of *Peoples into Nations* that cover the pre-1919 period are a teleological exploration of the origins of national movements. The author tends to jump through time for comparisons and points of reference. Connelly cleverly threads the needle to say that the historical roots of nations – often beginning with medieval kingdoms – are both a manipulation and a fact that we cannot deny. The existence of Serbian or Bohemian nobles – the *natio* – became the basis for Serbian and Czech nationalism in the 19th century. Political movements and print capitalism, according to Connelly, only served to "spread national ideas and identities that already existed" (798).

As a complement to history, whether legendary or factual, language was the other determinant that led to the rise of nationalism. Connelly highlights Joseph II's centralizing state program to build a unified German-speaking administration in the Austrian Empire that created a situation in which nationalists began to defend themselves from certain extinction or assimilation into Germandom. As peoples of each language and culture faced down their own threats, the fear of disappearance propelled Eastern European nationalist projects out of obscurity.

The Paris Peace Treaties of 1919 constitute Connelly's "big bang" (799), which is when the principle of nationality became the basis upon which states could be formed, and democratic self-government among ethnic units became the rule rather than the exception. This principle had first gained prominence in international politics with the Treaty of Berlin (1878), which effectively granted independence to Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro. The apparent victory of democratization, however, proved to be fleeting in the interwar period as each constitutional regime in the region (with the exception of Czechoslovakia) succumbed to some form of authoritarian government. Rather than succeed at their mission of forming "national" states, several countries became untenable "miniature Habsburg empires" (364), and irredentism and national discontent led to the outbreak of war.