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Making Sense of Senseless Times: Religious Narratives and Identity in the Memoirs of Far-right Militants in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the autobiographical narratives of the far-right Ülkücü militants in Turkey, based on memoirs written in the aftermath of the 1980 coup. The Ülkücüs, who had fought on the streets against the leftist during the 1970s in the name of the state and nation, experienced a great rupture in their lives following their torturous treatment at the hands of the junta. This article examines the ways in which narratives functioned in their attempts to make sense of their situation and in their attempt to regain coherence and meaning in terms of identity. We find that while their autobiographical narratives formulated in religious terms helped to instigate a sense of meaning, worth, and coherence in the lives of the Ülkücüs, these same narratives also ensured that they could escape any conscientious attempt to come to terms with the past. With this work, we hope to open new avenues of research, particularly focusing on the role of autobiographical narratives both in terms of the construction and negotiation of political identities and in relation to the prospects of coming to terms with the past.

Introduction

This article traces the role autobiographical narratives play in identity construction and in coming to terms with the past based on an analysis of 87 autobiographical prison narratives written by far-right Ülkücü¹ militants after the 1980 military coup in Turkey. In the late-1970s, the Ülkücü paramilitary organizations were at the vanguard of anti-communist warfare. The organizations also functioned as the unofficial youth branch of the far-right Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – MHP) where the unquestionable leader, Alparslan Türkeş,² had the ultimate authority in both bodies. After the

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¹Ülkücü is the Turkish word for ‘idealist’ which complements the self-search for a more benign name for the group after the previously popular and more aggressive denominators such as ‘the grey wolves’ or ‘the commandos. Since the political movement has no reference to philosophical idealism and since the term Ülkücü is a sui-generis label in Turkish politics, we prefer to use it without translation.

²Alparslan Türkeş (1917–1997), who was born in Cyprus, was educated at the Kuleli Military High School in Istanbul, after his family moved to Turkey in 1933. Upon graduation, he moved to Ankara and attended The Turkish Military Academy, from which he graduated in 1938 as a lieutenant. In 1944, he got arrested for his ultranationalist activities and was put behind bars for a year, after which he was acquitted by the Military Court of Cassation. Upon receiving further education in the US and in Germany, Türkeş became staff colonel in 1959. In 1960, he took part in the military coup and read the junta’s declaration on the radio. He also became the undersecretary of the Prime Minister under the junta government.

1980 military coup, the new regime abolished the Ülkücü organizations and the party while imprisoning Türkeş, party members, and the militant base together with thousands of leftists. Eight Ülkücü militants were executed by the junta, many others were detained, put on trial, and tortured.

The post-coup era left the Ülkücüs in shock and disbelief. This hostile treatment came as a huge surprise to the Ülkücüs as they had believed in the 1970s that they were protecting the state and the nation against the leftists, and the junta would congratulate them. Reverberations of the post-coup shock and disappointment were multiplied as the organizational apparatus became dysfunctional and the leader kept detached from the rest. The militants were left to their own devices to make sense of their senseless time in prison. We argue that they sought answers to their predicament through narratives of finding faith in Islam.

The article is thus concerned with how the Ülkücüs tried to make sense of their situation and with the rupture caused by the 1980 coup through narratives. We will show that narratives of finding faith in Islam served to give coherence to the Ülkücü identities along with a sense of purpose, worth and moral high ground. Utilizing the advantages of narratives such as their ambiguity³ and selectiveness, the Ülkücüs were able to regain their sense of self.

We also argue; however, these very same narratives also enabled the Ülkücüs to deflect their responsibility for the events of the 1970s. Through these narratives, they were able to present their life stories as one in which they were deceived by false, earthly ideologies only to gain consciousness through religion in the aftermath of the coup. The moral superiority and the belief that they were serving larger than life, eternal goals in the service of God, which was inbuilt in the religious narratives, also helped further justify their actions in the 1970s and beyond.

Our findings shed further light on the role that autobiographical narratives play in the construction of identity and a sense of good life. At the same time, our findings open a new path of inquiry that takes at its focal point the relationship between autobiographical narratives, collective memory, and the potential to come to terms with the past.

Narrative analysis provides an analytically useful tool because as the case at hand will indicate, there are certain characteristics of narratives that give them distinct capacities in directing worldviews and allegiances, and identities. The selective nature of narratives, the fact that they rely on emplotment rather than explanation, and their deliberate vagueness, all served the Ülkücü militant in constructing a post-1980 identity. In addition to the existing findings on narratives, this study also points out a hitherto unexplored

As a result of an internal coup, he was sent to retirement among fourteen other members of the junta. Türkeş was exiled to India as Counselor of the Turkish Embassy where he stayed for 2.5 years. Upon his return, he was detained for 4 months for plotting a coup with Talat Aydemir and was later acquitted. He joined the Republican Peasant Nation Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi* - CKMP) in 1965 and became the leader of this party in the next party convention a few months later. In 1969 congress, the party changed its name to the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* - MHP). His party joined the Nationalist Front governments in March 31, 1975 – June, 13 1977 and August, 1 – December, 31 1977. After the 1980 military coup, Türkeş was imprisoned for 4.5 years. MHP, 'Başbuğ'un Hayatı,' https://www.mhp.org.tr/htmldocs/basbug/hayati/mhp/basbugumuzun_hayati.html. For further information and a historical analysis of Türkeş's thought, see Tanıl Bora, 'Alparslan Türkeş', in Tanıl Bora and Murat Gültekinçil (eds) *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasal Düşünce – Milliyetçilik* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2002), pp. 686–695.

³Francesca Polletta, 'It Was Like A Fever ... ' Narrative and Identity in Social Protest,' *Social Problems* 45, no. 2 (1998): pp. 137–59; Francesca Polletta et al., 'The Sociology of Storytelling,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2011): pp. 109–30.

characteristic of narratives, namely their capacity to deflect responsibility and the avoidance of coming to terms with past wrongdoings.

Looking at the narratives told by the Ülkücüs does not only help us contribute to the literature on narratives, collective memory, and politics, but it also makes a substantive contribution to the study of Turkish politics in general, and the right-wing politics and the far-right in particular. The relationship between narratives and far-right politics, particularly the Ülkücüs has not been studied systematically. An exception to this is the study of the threat narratives in motivating Ülkücü violence against the leftists in Turkey during the 1970s,⁴ and the study of Ülkücü narratives in their construction of the 'other'.⁵

While there are studies that look at the intellectual history of Turkish nationalism,⁶ the intellectual and political-tactical roots of the Islamization of the movement,⁷ and the shock that the Ülkücüs felt in the wake of the coup and onwards due to their treatment at the hands of the state and due to the attitudes of the party leadership,⁸ there has been no study looking at how the Ülkücüs individually negotiated the past, the present, and the future and their identity in a systematic fashion. Existing studies mostly show us which political camps the Ülkücüs joined afterward the 1980 coup while others focus on the changes in the party trajectory due to leadership changes⁹ but these studies do not zoom into the reflections of the Ülkücü militants in the way this study attempts to do. Narratives provide an invaluable tool in this regard. They help us take a close look at the first-hand accounts of the Ülkücüs and they help us trace the reasoning and soul-searching of the militants.

In this sense, a narrative approach to the issue at hand will not only be helpful in expanding our understanding of the role of narratives, but it will also shed light on the dynamic nature of politics, enabling us to acquire a multifaceted look at the continuities and changes of far-right politics in Turkey. Narratives help us observe the transformation of political identities through a negotiation between the past and present, as will be illustrated in the case of the Ülkücüs.

Autobiographical narratives, identity, and sense-making

Narratives attribute separate, objective facts, and continuity of a subject,¹⁰ and present to us 'a formal coherency that we ourselves lack'.¹¹ As Bridger and Maines argue, narratives

⁴Meral Ugur Cinar, 'When Defense Becomes Offense: The Role of Threat Narratives in the Turkish Civil War of the 1970s', *Turkish Studies*, 15:1 (2014), pp. 1–11.

⁵Gökhan Şensönmez, 'Politics of Remembering the Enemy: Prisoner Narratives of the 1980 Military Coup', *Turkish Studies*, published online. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2073225>

⁶See, for example, Umut Uzer, *An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism: Between Turkish Ethnicity and Islamic Identity*, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016).

⁷Tanıl Bora and Kemal Can, *Devlet, Ocak, Dergah*, (Istanbul: İletişim, 1991); Alev Çınar and Burak Arıkan, 'The Nationalist Action Party: Representing the State, the Nation or the Nationalists?', *Turkish Studies*, 3:1 (2002), p.27. Ali Erken 'Ideological Construction of the Politics of Nationalism in Turkey: The Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP)', 1965–1980', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 200–220. 10.1080/13537113.2014.909159

⁸Bora and Can *op. cit.*

⁹Metin Heper and Başak İnce 'Devlet Bahçeli and 'far right' politics in Turkey, 1999–2002', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42:6 (2006), pp. 873–888. 10.1080/00263200600922981.

¹⁰Etienne Balibar, 'The Nation Form: History and Ideology,' *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 13:3 (1990), pp. 329–61. See also: Jens Brockmeier, 'Remembering and Forgetting: Narrative as Cultural Memory', *Culture Psychology* 8 (2002), pp. 15–43.

¹¹Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,' *Critical Inquiry* 7:1 (1980), p.4.

prove to be important interpretive and rhetorical resources that people draw upon in times of crisis and rapid change for several reasons: they provide a link between the past, present, and future and they reduce the choices of alternative meanings attributed to events by emplotting them in a certain way.¹² Moreover, the common-sense properties of their truth claims attribute reality to the events to which they refer.¹³ Thus, narratives help us comprehend separate phenomena by weaving them into a comprehensible web of relationships¹⁴ and turning ‘temporally distributed events into interpretable wholes.’¹⁵ As such, narratives are central to our understanding of who we are.

The purpose of our narrative analysis will be to discern what it is that narratives uniquely do that give them such an important role in identity formation.¹⁶ We want to understand the ways in which perceptions of the world, and their place in it ‘are mediated and transmitted through narratives’¹⁷ in the case of the Ülkücüs. We follow a thematic narrative analysis of the material in which we interpret narratives in light of thematics we develop based on ‘prior and emergent theory,’ going back and forth between primary data and existing theory and scholarship in an attempt to analyze data and provide novel theoretical insights from the data, with quotes and other illustrative examples provided for evidence as necessary.¹⁸

The link between narrative and time becomes significant as we delve into the memoirs of the Ülkücüs. When trying to make sense of their life histories and their collective history the temporal dimension plays an important role as we will show in this article. The relationship between time and narratives is addressed by Ricoeur, who argued that our sense of temporality is linked to narratives.¹⁹ Narrative plots, with their beginnings and ends, enable us to gain a sense of time that goes beyond chronology. Autobiographies and memoirs become central to the relationship between narratives, time, and identity as ‘we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives.’²⁰ Autobiographical narratives merge individual with collective identity as the protagonist aspires to present a coherent story that is both general and personal at the same time. As Brockmeier argues, autobiographical identity construction synthesizes cultural and individual orders of time as both become ways of understanding ‘one’s self in time.’²¹ The ‘individual life history and history in the broader sense’ are joined through the temporal dimension of autobiographical narratives.²²

Autobiographical narratives are not objective texts following the natural occurrences of events in one’s lifetime. They evaluate the past, both at the individual and collective

¹²Jeffrey Bridger and David Maines, ‘Narrative Structures and the Catholic Church Closings in Detroit’, *Qualitative Sociology* 21 (1998): pp. 319–40. See also, Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey, ‘Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative’, *Law & Society Review* 29: 2 (1995): pp. 197–226; James V. Wertsch, ‘Narratives as Cultural Tools in Sociocultural Analysis: Official History in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia’, *Ethos*, 28 (2000), pp. 511–533.

¹³Polletta, *op. cit.*

¹⁴Margaret R. Somers, ‘The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach’, *Theory and Society* 23:5 (1994), p. 616.

¹⁵James V. Wertsch, ‘Narratives as Cultural Tools in Sociocultural Analysis: Official History in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia’, *Ethos* 28:4 (2000), p. 515.

¹⁶Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Ideas/Matter: Conceptualising Foreign Policy Practice’, *Critical Studies on Security* 3 (2015), pp. 334–337.

¹⁷Stefan Groth, ‘Political Narratives/Narrations of the Political’, *Narrative Culture* 6 (2019), pp. 1–18.

¹⁸Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Sage, 2008).

¹⁹Paul Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Time’, *Critical Inquiry* 7:1 (1980), pp. 169–90.

²⁰Jerome Bruner, ‘Life as Narrative’, *Social Research* 54:1 (1987): p.15.

²¹Jens Brockmeier, ‘Autobiographical Time’, *Narrative Inquiry* 10:1 (2000): p. 51, 55.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 70.

level, in light of the present. Autographical narratives possess a retrospective teleology in which the 'life story starts in the here and now and reconstructs the past as if it were teleologically directed towards this specific present.'²³ The way turning points in lives are told are particularly striking in this regard as they make it explicit how we reconstruct the meaning of past experiences while remaking ourselves.²⁴ In the case of Ülkücüs, the 1980 coup serves as a turning point as the narratives in the memoirs will reveal. This turning point serves as a basis around which past experiences are re-employment from the vantage point of the present with the purpose of weaving a coherent, meaningful, and worthy narrative around the self.

Narratives have important moral implications. Through autographical narratives, we trace the trajectories of our lives and give them meaning²⁵ and communicate to others and to ourselves why our lives are worth living.²⁶ Narratives' 'temporally configurative capacity' equips them with the capacity 'to integrate past, present, and future events' and gives them an action-oriented character since 'story's chronological end is also its end in the sense of moral, purpose or telos, they project a future.'²⁷ As Ewick and Silbey argue, the temporal and structural ordering inherent in narratives ensures at the same time 'narrative closure' and 'narrative causality,' which is to say they state simultaneously how and why the recounted events occurred.²⁸ In this regard, autobiographical narratives are not just descriptive but also evaluative²⁹ and ascriptive.

In this capacity, in addition to giving cognitive order to our comprehension of time and events, narratives are also recognized as ethical tools. They give us a sense of what good life is about, and what full personhood and moral integrity mean. MacIntyre argues that narratives give clarity to one's moral vision and that it is through narratives that we make sense of our morality.³⁰ Humans understand what a good, or virtuous, life is through narratives about their lives and they pass such notions to new generations in the form of storytelling. As Taylor claims, 'in order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going' and we only reach this notion via narratives.³¹ This includes our sense of what is good, which is woven into our understanding of our lives as unfolding stories. While these arguments certainly ring true, at the same time, narratives can also serve to deflect responsibility, inhibit reflexivity and make it harder to come to terms with the past, as our analysis below will show.

In what follows, we will first provide background information regarding the Ülkücü memoirs. We will then discuss how the Ülkücüs tried to make sense of the rupture

²³Ibid., p. 60.

²⁴Elliot G. Mishler, 'Narrative and Identity: The Double Arrow of Time', in *Discourse and Identity*, ed. Anna De Fina, Deborah Schiffrin, and Michael Bamberg (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 41.

²⁵Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier, 'Narrative Integrity: Autobiographical Identity and the Meaning of the 'Good Life'', in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, ed. Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), p.79.

²⁶Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

²⁷Polletta, *op.cit.*, p.139–40.

²⁸Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey, 'Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative', *Law & Society Review* 29:2 (1995), p. 200. See also; Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (Routledge, 2010), Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge.

²⁹Brockmeier, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

³⁰Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (1981; repr., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

³¹Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

and disappointment they experienced through the 1980 coup. We will show that narratives of finding faith in Islam played a central role in the reconstruction of their identities as Ülkücüs in the post-coup era. This reconstruction selectively borrowed from the past, leaving out and distorting facts where it was deemed necessary. As we will see, the narrative form, with its conduciveness for vagueness and its reliance on emplotment rather than factual truths,³² helped Ülkücüs to instigate a sense of worth and meaning in their lives. Through these narratives, Ülkücüs were able to reformulate their lives as not ones of failure and defeat but instead as meaningful ones, given the new Islamic context and mission they situated themselves in narratives. These same narratives, on the other, served to deflect responsibility and helped Ülkücüs to get away with the past without feeling the need to reevaluate or come to terms with their deeds of the past. Religious narratives were merged with stories of victimhood and naiveté for that end as we will demonstrate below.

The Ülkücü movement and the 1980 military coup

The Ülkücü movement was the only pro-state paramilitary group during the years of ideologically motivated civil violence in Turkey. The movement recruited youth, and indoctrinated them with nationalist and anti-communist propaganda as well as militant tactics. The Ülkücü militants, thus, became street fighters who saw themselves as committed to protecting their state and nation vis-à-vis rising leftist activism. In fact, as Çınar and Arıkan argue, ‘serving the interests of the state is the most fundamental.

defining cause of the Ülkücü movement and the basic ideological tenet of the MHP. Such idealism has been the *raison-d’être* of the MHP to such an extent that MHP activists did not see any difference between the party and the state, and whoever was the enemy of the state was also deemed the enemy of the party.³³

What also made the Ülkücüs unique among the extremist organizations was that it had organic ties to a legal political party, the MHP. Under the leadership of the veteran ultranationalist former military officer Alparslan Türkeş, the party organized training camps for militias and provided them with logistical support, including funds and weapons.³⁴ The fact that this party served as a coalition partner of ‘the Nationalist Front’ governments composed of center-right and far-right parties from 1975 to 1978 and controlled several ministries, including the ministry responsible for overseeing the activities of the intelligence services³⁵ further increased the Ülkücüs belief that they were allies of the state and well-protected.

In addition, ideologically, the Ülkücüs and the MHP felt a special connection with the army. The MHP and the Ülkücüs defined Turkishness mostly in military terms, even using the phrase a ‘military nation.’ Certain sections of the party and certainly the paramilitary Ülkücüs even agitated for military intervention, trusting that the army was fiercely anti-communist and hoping that such an intervention would bring them to power.³⁶

³²Polletta, *op.cit.*

³³Çınar and Arıkan, *op.cit.*, p.34.

³⁴Sabri Sayari, ‘Political Violence and Terrorism in Turkey, 1976–80: A Retrospective Analysis’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22:2 (2010), pp. 198–215.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ümit Cizre-Sakallioğlu, ‘Labour and State in Turkey: 1960–80’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 28: 4 (1992), pp. 712–28.

In the atmosphere of violence, losing comrades, and the incessant probability of sudden death, the militants sought spiritual motivation. This motivation was found in Islam. Surely, members of the Ülkücü Movement were no strangers to religion beforehand. However, the religious rhetoric of martyrdom that was used in MHP's propaganda increased parallel to the alarming increase in the death toll during the armed conflict with the left.³⁷ Also, the party was increasingly using religion as a source of political rhetoric to preserve and expand its voter base against its rival on the far-right, the Islamist, National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi* – MSP). Still, the movement's leader, Alparslan Türkeş was inclined to maintain a balance between Turkishness and Islam.³⁸ In addition to the leadership level, lay militants also found relief and motivation in the Islamic sense of martyrdom and a holy war against the infidel communists in the wake of the imminent threat of violence and death, particularly between 1977 and 1980.³⁹ Even though the influence of Islam increased over the party, particularly in the latter half of the 1970s, it appeared to be in balance with Turkish nationalism as Turkishness preserved as the primary identity for the MHP. Islam was deployed as complementary to the nationalist ideals of the party.⁴⁰ The popular MHP slogan 'We are as Turkish as the Tengri Mountains and as Muslim as the Hira Mountain' is emblematic in this regard. As Arıkan argues, 'Rather than Turks adapting to the principles of Islam, it was Islam that was tailored to the national culture of the Turks.'⁴¹

By the year 1980, the country was pestered with political deadlocks, an economic meltdown, and an ever-increasing death toll of civil violence. In this context, the military emerged as saviors on the morning of 12 September 1980. The junta formed a supra-legislative body and declared an immediate country-wide curfew, halted all political activities and closed down the parliament. As the junta's claim of neutrality formed the basis of the military regime's legitimacy, 'defenders of the nation and the state', the Ülkücüs, became targets of the post-coup detention wave.

The military assigned a special police squad to interrogate the involvement of Ülkücü organizations and the MHP in the civil violence. For this interrogation, and later for the court procedures, the Ülkücüs were brought mainly to the Mamak Military Prison at Ankara. The prison, then, became the focal point of the Ülkücü memory, with its terrible and torturous conditions. Additionally, to showcase the junta's success in ending the ideological feud, and to ensure total domination over the inmates, Ülkücüs were forced to cohabit with their leftist enemy. Both sides were subjected to physical and mental torture, strict military discipline, as well as nationalist propaganda. On top of all this, the leader, Alparslan Türkeş who might have rallied his followers in this awful situation, was kept detached from the rest. All of these factors contributed to the shock of Ülkücüs in the wake of the coup.

³⁷Ugur Cinar, *op.cit.*

³⁸İlker Aytürk, 'Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69', *Middle Eastern Studies* 50: 5 (2014), pp. 693–719.

³⁹Bora and Can *op.cit.*, pp.202-3; Erken, *op.cit.* p.213–4.

⁴⁰M. Hakan Yavuz, 'The Politics of Fear: The Rise of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in Turkey' *Middle East Journal*, 56:2 (2002), p.211; Tamer Balci, 'The Rise and Fall of Nine Lights Ideology', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 12:2 (2011), pp. 145-160. 10.1080/21567689.2011.591979;

⁴¹E. Burak Arıkan, 'The programme of the nationalist action party: an iron hand in a velvet glove?', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34:4, (1998), p. 126. 10.1080/00263209808701246, p.126.

Narratives of shock and disbelief

The disbelief in light of what happened following the 1980 coup is very visible in the narratives told in the memoirs. The Ülkücüs portrayal by the junta as traitors and the sudden loss of status was very hard for them to accept. The examples below are illustrative and show this resentment vividly:

The state, the state struck us! Why? We were (praising) the army, they struck us with the army! Why? We were (praising) the nation, the state struck us in the name of the nation! Why?⁴²

We slept as patriots and rose from the bed as traitors.⁴³

Being put in the same category as the leftists, whom the Ülkücüs saw as their archenemies and as the enemies of the state was seen as an insult by the Ülkücüs:

The weirdest thing at Mamak was leftists and Ülkücüs sleeping together. Being detained together (...) According to the philosophy of the 1980 coup, there was no difference between those who want to destroy the state and the regime and those who resisted these actions.⁴⁴

The same Ülkücü recalls an incident in which the leftists started a death fast mentioning that this was a protest form used by the leftist from time to time. His response to this situation further demonstrates the agony felt by the Ülkücüs:

It was the Ülkücüs who should death fast there. The right to say 'I have labored for you but you crushed me, I better be dead' belonged to the Ülkücüs.⁴⁵

Müftüoğlu further notes that most of the detainees were poor and, in the winter, their families were hungry and cold.⁴⁶ He recounts a young lad saying, 'If the communist had made a revolution, I swear, I wouldn't say one word. But look at this situation. It has no explanation.'

Humiliation and lack of explanation overwhelmed the Ülkücüs who allegedly fought for the cause of the state and the nation and were now treated in the most inhumane ways possible. This can be seen as the turning point in most of the narratives of the Ülkücüs.

Here it is: the Hell of Mamak ... A place where human beings don't have the value of an animal! A terrible life. Sad but true suffering ... Look at the way the *Mehmetçik*,⁴⁷ whom I have always held dearly as my fellow people of Anatolia and my homeland and whom I have always looked after and defended with diligence, is treating me now! No! ... no ... No human being can torment like this.⁴⁸

Another memoir echoes the perceived irony:

It's as if we are soldiers of an enemy country. As if we invaded their soil and they caught us, treating us like captives. The most tragic part of this is that we were always there for the state,

⁴²Zihni Açıba, *Mamak Zulüm Kalesi* (Bilgeoğuz, 2016), p.109.

⁴³Yaşar Yıldırım, *Balkondan Seyretmek* (Ankara: Kayı Yayıncılık, 1994), p. 132.

⁴⁴Rıza Müftüoğlu, *Copların Askerleri* (Ankara: Ocak Yayınları, 2000), p. 18.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁷Mehmetçik (literally: Little Mehmet) is an affectionate term used for the soldiers of the Turkish army.

⁴⁸Mehmet Öztepe, *12 Eylül'den Sonra Mamak Hatıralarım* (Ankara: Yusufiye Yayınları, 1991), p. 20.

but the ones who tormented us with unthinkable torture (techniques) were ‘the men of that state.’⁴⁹

The overlap between the military and the Ülkücü doctrines worked against the latter as the former employed nationalist practices as elements of torture and discipline. In this sense, a common narrative among the Ülkücüs is that they found it very hard to cope with the fact that they were forced to sing the national anthem.

For years, you struggle for this, and then you come here, and sing the national anthem while standing at attention in front of a neither fish nor fowl private soldier.⁵⁰

Forcing people to sing the National Anthem who sing it with pride, with all their hearts; using the National Anthem as an easy and wicked instrument for their methods was bad. I was willingly singing the National Anthem, they attempted to make me sing it by force, with gum in their mouth, strolling [i.e. in a disrespectful way] ... Yes, forcing the singing of the National Anthem was ugly. They couldn’t make us do anything by force, but this anthem is my anthem, it’s my nation’s ... So, a great contradiction was experienced. This was the greatest of all tortures.⁵¹

I told to a revolutionary friend in the prison cell: ‘If I were in your shoes, I would be very relaxed. For example, if I had felt captive in Russia, and if they had forced me to sing the International Communist Anthem, I wouldn’t have sung it. If they tortured me, I would have endured it, resisted it. I would have languished if I had to. Nobody could make me sing it. But here, I cannot accept what’s happening.’⁵²

After all, they argued, it was them who fought so hard to ensure that the Turkish national anthem ‘would never be silenced.’⁵³

Moreover, the memories of Ülkücüs are full of detailed storylines, illustrating with examples the contrast between the treatment they saw fit for themselves and the treatment they actually received from the junta. These memoirs also depict how this treatment was not only observed by them but was also visible to their enemies (the leftists), which multiplied the shame, anger, and insult they felt:

We are struggling for this country. We are saying long ‘live the state, long live the nation, we curse the separatists and the ones who want to transform our country into a communist regime. Because we are saying this, they sentence us to heavier punishments. What kind of a deal is this? we are having a very hard time comprehending this. Communists are treated like biological children, and we are treated like stepchildren.’⁵⁴

We were judged for serving this country with our hearts and blood, for stopping the invasion of Soviet Russia.⁵⁵

The Ülkücüs’ coexistence with the leftists also served as a palpable reminder of their unjust treatment by the military. They thought they were constantly being ridiculed by the leftists for the irony. For years the Ülkücüs had claimed that they fought for this state and now the state was treating them as criminals and accusing them of treason:

⁴⁹Oğuzhan Cengiz, *Kapıaltı* (İstanbul: Bilgeoğuz, 2004), p. 27.

⁵⁰Öztepe, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

⁵¹Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, *12 Eylül Günleri*, ed. Melih Perçin (Ankara: Yüzdeiki Yayınları, 2018), p. 13.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵³Ömer Girgeç in Muhammed Bahadır, ed., *12 Eylül ve Ülkücüler* (İstanbul: Cihad Yayınları, 1990), p. 192.

⁵⁴Selahattin Şenliler, *Mamak Cezaevi Günlüğü* (Ankara: Yüzdeiki Yayınları, 2019), p. 38.

⁵⁵Yusuf Ziya Arpacık, *Başşehirmediler* (İstanbul: İteriş Yayınları, 2004), p.149.

In Mamak, I would always have this feeling that the leftists were gazing at me with sarcasm. I was sensing them saying ‘at least we are here because we fought against these people. But you were used like fools.’⁵⁶

When the communists saw us handcuffed from the back in courtrooms, they mocked us saying ‘the crocodile is eating its offspring.’ This situation was heavier than the bullets we took.⁵⁷

Even though the junta had a crushing effect on the leftists, the constant argument of the Ülkücüs that they were treated worse than the leftists might be explained by the fact that they thought that the leftists deserved this treatment while the Ülkücüs definitely did not. The memoirs state that the initial detention of Ülkücüs and their treatment in the prison was the main turning point in the lives of the Ülkücüs as they were having difficulty making sense of this situation:

The Ülkücüs, who believed they were struggling for the state, started losing their loyalty every passing day. Because the state, for which they were ready to give even their lives, was torturing its ‘enemy’ with unthinkable methods.⁵⁸

One way of trying to get out of this paralysis and bringing coherence to their experiences was to organize collectively and protest against their treatment by the junta in ways that would display their nationalism and allegiance to the state. In protest of forceful practices against them and in order to highlight the irony they perceived in their treatment by the junta, the Ülkücüs decided to sing the national anthem in tandem during the opening trial of the MHP and Ülkücü case at Mamak in August 1981. This is an anecdote told by many of the Ülkücüs in their accounts:

I had sung the national anthem countless times both inside and outside the prison. But I don’t recall singing it with such enthusiasm before.⁵⁹

When Alparslan Türkeş and members of the MHP executive board entered, the detainees were all set. And at that moment, the National Anthem started to be sung in unison. Personally, I have never sung the National Anthem with such sincerity; I believe other detainees shared the same sentiment. The National Anthem was on the mouths, tears were dripping from the eyes.⁶⁰

However, over time, the ties connecting the Ülkücüs to the party establishment and the political leadership weakened. The MHP and its paramilitary branch were known for their strict hierarchical structure. But after the junta, the link between the political leadership outside the prison and the inmates broke down slowly. This situation further added to the resentment and disappointment of the Ülkücüs:

But those who pat us on the back in this struggle, when their own interests came first, they struck it rich and disposed of the ones like me. They betrayed their cause. I, and true Ülkücüs like me, had to bear the consequences. Is this idealism? Is this nationalism? Is this partisanship?⁶¹

⁵⁶Müftüoğlu, *Copların Askerleri*, p.18

⁵⁷Cengiz, *Kapıaltı*, p. 45.

⁵⁸Faik İçmeli, *Kırk Kurşun* (İstanbul: Yakın Plan Yayınları, 2015), p.109.

⁵⁹Mehmet Öztepe, *12 Eylül’den Sonra Mamak Hatıralarım* (Ankara: Yusufiye Yayınları, 1991), p. 74.

⁶⁰Yıldırım, *Balkondan Seyretmek*, pp. 130-1.

⁶¹İsa Aydın, *12 Eylül 1980 3 İdam 1 Müebbet Taylan Çocuklar* (Tarsus, 2013), p. 100.

How much respect do the ones who gave their lives for their love of their country and nation, I mean us, the Ülkücü victims of the 1980 coup, get even in their own party?⁶²

Türkeş's attitude during the trials further compounded the disillusionment and feeling of abandonment among the Ülkücüs. The fact that his prophecies regarding the trajectory of the coup and the trials were not fulfilled as well as the fact that Türkeş put emphasis on the individual responsibility of perpetrators and his attempt to exonerate himself from these crimes⁶³ shattered the trust and belief of the Ülkücüs.

Ülkücü inmates were especially resentful towards those who went ahead and continued their political life in the post-coup era, particularly in the newly founded center-right party, ANAP, which ruled the country after the first election that took place in 1983:

Some of our prominent friends who used to defend Turkish nationalism had moved to the Motherland Party [ANAP] and had become deputies and ministers. As those at the higher echelons of the party were doing this, influential Ülkücüs and nationalists in the grassroots followed them. These circles had long forgotten their friends who were suffering in prisons. The real Turkish nationalists were never content with these formations. In this respect, Yaşar Okuyan, Agah Oktay Güner, Sadi Somuncuoğlu, Taha Akyol, Namık Kemal Zeybek and similar nationalist-Ülkücüs had fallen from grace and were removed from our hearts.⁶⁴

One Ülkücü attributed the pathologies of some of the Ülkücü inmates, such as those who displayed inappropriate behaviors and disturbed the peace of others, to the fact that 'they were disowned and abandoned after the coup' (Açba, 2016: 90).

Overall, by narrating their shock and disbelief, the Ülkücü militants laid the groundwork for the emergence of a transformative narrative. In the following section, we will discuss the ways in which narratives of finding faith in Islam selectively appropriated the past and adhered meaning and coherence to the otherwise incomprehensible imprisonment of Ülkücü militants.

Making sense of the incomprehensible: narratives of finding faith in Islam

Before turning to the religious narratives through which the Ülkücüs tried to make sense of the new situation in which they found themselves, it is worth showing that the Ülkücüs were very vocal about the rupture caused to their identities in the post-coup era:

At that moment, it was time for the Ülkücüs to conduct a self-criticism of the righteous struggle that was put up yesterday. The Ülkücüs were coming to their senses as they were being beaten with the tyrant's truncheons and slaps. As if they were being slapped by God, they remembered their true ideals [...] even though they are banned. It had become imperative to turn this hell into the garden of Eden and to learn [...] the sublime Qur'an as soon as possible.⁶⁵

We took ourselves as state officials. We loved this nation so much, so we are guilty. This was our crime. That's why we will be judged [...] According to this, what are we? What should

⁶²Ali Bademci, *12 Eylül İşkenesinde Ülkücü Bir Gazetecinin Dramı* (Ötüken Neşriyat, 2016), p. 60.

⁶³Bora and Can, *op.cit.*, p.88; Özgür Bayraktar, 'Lider, Teşkilat, Doktrin'in İflası: Ülkücü Harekette 1980 Sonrası Dönüşüm, Bölünme ve İç Çatışma', *KMÜ Sosyal ve Ekonomik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 17:28 (2015), pp.36.

⁶⁴Fahrettin Masum Budak, *Giden Canlar Bizimdi* (İstanbul: Bilgeoğuz, 2013), pp. 368–9.

⁶⁵Öztepe, *op.cit.*, p. 30

we be? How should we live in the Hell of Mamak? We had to determine this [...] We were in a position in which we were tested for being ‘man of the cause.’⁶⁶

What cause? That is no trivial question when it comes to the Ülkücüs. The movement had put nationalism and pan-Turkism at the center as core values and had so far included Islam mostly as an anti-communist rhetorical mobilization device against the left. Yet under the post-coup circumstances, religious narratives started to become much more prominent among the Ülkücüs. Most of the Ülkücüs narrate the early prison experiment as an existential crisis and a significant turning point that led to a soul searching among the Ülkücüs that landed them at what they perceive as the safe heaven of Islam, as exemplified in Sünbül’s testimony below:

The fact that Ülkücüs, who took action to protect the Turkish state and were then put into the same bag with the extreme left and were subjected to torture in police centers and prisons, and were sent to gallows, caused contradictions and disappointments among the Ülkücüs. Upon this; a part of the Ülkücüs questioned the meaning of concepts such as the state, motherland, nation, and flag and turned to understand the meaning of such concepts in Islamic terms and as a result, they realized that they had been deceived and that they had been made sentinels at the front outposts of the infidel system (*küfür düzeni*).⁶⁷

Sünbül claims that he owes his turn to Islam to his imprisonment. He found a divine purpose behind their unjust incarceration while also criticizing the foundations of the movement. However, others were not as straightforward as Sünbül in criticizing the movement and publicizing their recantation. While acclaiming prisons as places of examination of faith, the others reframed the nationalist Ülkücü movement with the Islamic cause, tended to blur its foundations, and exempt themselves from their past involvement in violence. In what follows, we will delve further into the narratives of Islam in order to analyze the way in which they were deployed by the Ülkücüs to make sense of their extant situation in prison.

Prison as the place of examination: the true test of God

In the Ülkücü narratives, prisons were depicted as places of properly learning, practicing, and altogether living Islam. For example, Öztepe (1991), like many others, narrates the story of the transformation to a more religious path almost as a coming of age or rite of passage story. He starts with the time the first Quran alphabet learning guide was brought to the prison ward and recalls that everyone was willing to learn the alphabet of the Quran (which was written in its original Arabic form). He reckons this as an incomparable blessing and proceeds as follows:

This was how the first step toward turning the Hell of Mamak into the Madrasah of Joseph was taken. Of course, one alphabet guide for the Qur’an could not be sufficient for our 25 fellow detainees. Whoever had spare time for ten minutes would grab a pen and paper and would start writing down the letters, read, commit to memory, and learn the word of the God Almighty. The pain of being beaten with truncheons would disappear as we read the Qur’an.⁶⁸ (Öztepe, 1991, p.68)

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 67.

⁶⁷Mehmet Sünbül, *Milliyetçi Miyiz Müslüman Miyiz?* (1992; repr., İstanbul: Yedirenk, 2019), pp. 65–6.

⁶⁸Öztepe, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

The dungeons of Mamak became the Madrasah of Joseph, now we were thankful to be in prison. At least, we got rid of the sinful sea of the free life.⁶⁹

Every morning I was reading the alphabet guide and I was experiencing such submission to God for the first time here, together with other detainees.⁷⁰

References to the Madrasah of Joseph (*Medrese-i Yusufiye*) emulate the situation of Ülkücüs to Biblical Joseph and his unjust incarceration by the Pharaoh. The moral of the story is, despite all difficulties, Joseph spread the word of God in prison. Similarly, medrese (madrasah), which referred originally to Islamic learning centers, serves as another metaphor for the transformative character of prison to morph the Ülkücü movement into one of a religious one, away from its secular origins:

I have lived the madrasah life here. We had transformed this hell into heaven. As the tyrant hit its hammer on my head, I found myself. I caught the submission to God. What a beautiful world that is far from sin, far from filth. If you ask for suffering, there are all kinds of it here. The lonely Dervishes are here. Of course, those who brought us here imagined something else. But they were mistaken. Because they thought they would turn the Turkish-Islamic Ülkücüs into Atatürkists with their cruelty. On the contrary, many Ülkücüs became conscious of the cause they believed in. They have come to realize that what appeared to be 'evil' was in fact a good thing for them. Who is a soldier? What is Atatürkism? They understood it better. They became more loyal to their struggle. (Öztepe, 1991, p.91)

Such metaphors and allusions to Sufi Islamic terms (e.g. dervish) served to turn the movement into a struggle that was broader than a nationalist (in fact, ultranationalist) one that had to admit its defeat in the hands of the junta.

In transforming the Ülkücü movement into one that is (and as if, always has been) in the service of God, the Ülkücüs were able to reframe their imprisonment as the continuation of their struggles through other means:

The Ülkücüs had also struggled for *hak* (truth, justice) and they were punished. Some have served their sentences; the rest are still serving time. For us, these punishments are only punishments in this world. In the presence of God, I believe that they are spiritual rewards. (Yıldırım, 1991, p.53)

The fact that *hak* also simultaneously means both God and justice further reinforces the permeability between Islamic references and the retrospective presentation of Ülkücüs as warriors of justice. As Bruckmüller argues, national historical myths most of the time, tell the story of the world's origins (cosmogony) directly tied to the story of the origins of the individual group (ethnogeny).⁷¹ Similarly here, the Ülkücüs found their origins, their true nature in the world order that they tried to explain through Islam.

In the prison narratives, the earthly, mundane and finite nature of daily events was often juxtaposed to the sublime and larger-than-life nature of the newly found cause of Islam. A case in point is the depiction of the religious holiday celebration in prison:

We eat what we have, we sing folk songs, and the Eid ends within one-two hours, but the suffering of longing, the ordeal, the poverty of not finding more than seven cigarettes ...

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 69.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 71.

⁷¹Ernst Bruckmüller, *The Austrian Nation. Cultural Consciousness and Socio-Political Processes* (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2003).

the deprivation of medicine ... the lack of money will not end. Let it not end, in the face of all these, there was the perfect order of life. Everyone was in the struggle to be a servant of God. It was like this yesterday, and it goes on like this today.⁷²

The examples below further illustrate how the Ülkücüs placed their earthly experiences into a religious storyline, thereby giving them new meaning:

As always, we took refuge in God, we asked God for help. We did not get crushed or shrunk against the *Taghut*.⁷³ We lost nine younglings to the gallows, left thousands to study in dungeons. Today, we see the necessity to write about the Madrasah of Joseph and our present and our past.⁷⁴

If I have to give this place a name, I would like to call this place a madrasah, where I made up for my shortcomings, increased my knowledge within the limits of the circumstances, and more importantly, a place where I put my soul to test.⁷⁵

I believe that all of these occurrences were an opportunity given by the God Almighty to understand our cause better and raise ourselves (...) Our bodies were captivated, but our minds were free.⁷⁶

If you want it, prisons become *Yusufiyes*⁷⁷, *Taş Medreses*.⁷⁸ Despite the modern tyranny overseen by psychologists⁷⁹, Mamak is turned into a Yusufiye by its members. There, an impeccable, complete, perfect religious community life is lived.⁸⁰

In addition to *Yusufiye* and *Taş Medrese*, there are frequent references to certain eras and communities such as the *Asr-ı Saadet*⁸¹ to which the Ülkücüs in Mamak prison are likened merged with detailed depictions of all the religious practices and rituals they follow in prison collectively.⁸²

Given the discrepancy between the pre-coup Ülkücü movement and the one shaped in the wake of the coup, in prison, the narratives told by the Ülkücüs in their memoirs became important in understanding how the Ülkücüs rewrite their own history and their identity to regain a coherent identity and a moral high ground. It is to these narratives that we now turn.

Reframing the Ülkücü movement as a struggle to make Islam prevail

As discussed in the introduction, turning points can become important focal points of narratives around which storylines are shaped retrospectively. As we will see below, Ülkücü narratives are full of such negotiations between the past and present in order to bring the story to a sense-making equilibrium. Bahadır's (1990) edited volume is

⁷²Yıldırım, *Balkondan Seyretmek*, p. 164.

⁷³Those who are in subordination of Allah.

⁷⁴Mehmet Öztepe, *12 Eylül Adaleti ve C-5*, (Ankara: Özen Matbaacılık, 1989), p. 71.

⁷⁵Zihni Açıba in *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁶Mahmut Gül in *ibid.*, p.143-4.

⁷⁷Prisons of Prophet Joseph.

⁷⁸Stone Madrasah: Referring to the prison as religious learning centers.

⁷⁹Refers to the cooperation between certain psychologists and the perpetrators of the coup in determining the treatment of the inmates.

⁸⁰Yaşar Yıldırım in Mehmet Kürşat, ed., *12 Eylül Zindanlarında Ülkücü Olmak* (İstanbul: Hoşgörü Yayınları, 2012), p. 91.

⁸¹Al-Asr al-Saadah (the Era of Bliss) refers to the period when the Prophet Muhammed was leading the Muslims himself, before the caliphs.

⁸²See for example, *ibid.*, p.92.

very illustrative in this regard. The pieces in this book start with *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*⁸³ and by reading the book, the reader is left under the impression that the sole aim of the Ülkücü movement has always been to make Islam prevail in Turkey. Even the name of the publishing house is called *Cihad*, which means jihad, the holy war in the name of Islam. When talking about their forced cohabitation with the leftist inmates in the prison wards, Açıba states, as a result of this practice, 'I once again believed in the righteousness of the struggle for our faith.'⁸⁴ Açıba elaborates on his views regarding the political system with reference to Islam:

A different understanding of justice could not be expected from the unjust system of the 1980 coup, which ensured the continuation of the system of falsehood. For this reason, since both decreeing on the falsity of an unjust system and complaining about being subjected to the injustice of one of the institutions of the same unjust system is meaningless, it is meaningless for us Ülkücüs to complain about the justice of the 1980 coup.⁸⁵

According to this storyline, it was because the Ülkücüs attempted to stop the system from operating that the 'owners of the state' took measures against the Ülkücüs. Hence, the story goes, there was nothing to be astonished at. In Açıba's words, 'What is important for us is not the measures taken, but what *we* can do. [...] The Ülkücü movement has become the sole hope of the people who gave their hearts to make God's order prevail.'⁸⁶ İşler, too, tells the story of the Ülkücüs as a struggle for Islam. He argues, 'the secular order came to the conclusion that the Ülkücü movement is an Islamic potential that needs to be blocked and exterminated.'⁸⁷

Yet another one, Karakuş, argues that the Ülkücüs are continuing their past struggle, which he defines as one that is undertaken for God's sake.⁸⁸ Similar to İşler, Karakuş sees their struggle as one between good and evil, and presents it in religious terms:

Our divine struggle which we stamped with golden letters onto the history of an era is against all ideologies and all powers. Those whose minds became a slave to this material world will do every evil they can to prevent us from reaching our absolute goal, which grows stronger every day.⁸⁹

Erdoğan, like İşler and Karakuş, tells the story of the Ülkücüs as one of a divinely ordained struggle:

Our cause was to spread the word of God and to bring God's order to the world. We ended up in prison while we were struggling for this. Therefore, we needed to educate ourselves by reading works in this direction.⁹⁰

According to Akabe, the goal of the coup was 'to destroy a community whose sole aim was to protect the nation's national and sacred values and to raise the Muslim Turks to the place they deserve.'⁹¹ He argues that the practice of forced cohabitation aimed to serve this purpose but it would never be successful since 'the just and the unjust

⁸³In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate'

⁸⁴Açıba in Bahadır, *12 Eylül ve Ülkücüler*, p. 31.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 34.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 35.

⁸⁷İşler in Bahadır, *op.cit.*, p. 150.

⁸⁸Karakuş in Bahadır, *op.cit.*, p. 189.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 192.

⁹⁰Erdoğan in Bahadır, *12 Eylül ve Ülkücüler*, p. 255.

⁹¹Rıdvan Akabe, ed., *Cezaevi Taşmedrese Yusufiye* (İstanbul: Buhara Yayıncılık, 1991), p. 7.

could not coexist.⁹² Akabe's narrative line connects the past of the Ülkücüs to the future almost seamlessly. First, he asks 'What were they able to do to the Ülkücü youth? What were they able to do to this army in the service of faith who were ready to sacrifice their heads in the way of God?'⁹³ Based on this, he prescribes, and even foretells the future for the Ülkücüs:

Even if they do not want it, the Ülkücü Movement will confidently march to its goals, with God's permission, the Ülkücüs will ensure the dominance of God's order.⁹⁴

He furthers his argument, raising the stakes even further:

Even if our blood is shed, victory will belong to Islam!⁹⁵

In a similar vein, Gündoğdu argues that their cause began as the necessity of the struggle for their faith arose and claims that their most important purpose is to fulfill the imperative 'Fight until God's religion is the only one.'⁹⁶

Ülkücüs use concepts such as 'Islam's infatuate lovers'⁹⁷ or Türk-İslam Ülkücüleri (Turkish-Islamist idealists)⁹⁸ to define the Ülkücüs in the memoirs. The 'other' is depicted in religious terms as well. Öztepe, who frequently writes in his memoir about the Ülkücü cause as one of making God's world order (*Nizam-ı Alem davası*) dominant and who calls Ülkücüs Turkish-Islamist Ülkücüs (*Türk-İslam Ülkücüleri*), had the following to say about the communists:

We were living on the same soil as a nation but our ideas are different. Does the communists share the same culture, same customs with me? Does the communist recognize God, the Holy Book, the Prophet? What kind of patriotism can we talk about in their case? How can I hug and make peace with those who openly yell in courtrooms 'I am a communist?'⁹⁹

'Similar to when we were outside, in the ward, there were people of two world views. There were leftists divided into different fractions. Some could not get along with each other: Maoists, Leninists, Enverists, etc. The ideal of the Ülkücüs, on the other hand, was to labor for the salvation of both this world and the afterlife.'¹⁰⁰

The Ülkücüs argued that due to Islam, they were not only morally superior but also mentally and physically more resilient, fit, and put together than the leftists, as exemplified by Yazıcıoğlu's account below, which is echoed in many other memoirs:

We were more protected than the others due to our faith. For example, I was telling the president of Dev-Genç¹⁰¹ who was in the same cell as me: 'Your ordeal is bigger than mine. When you get out of prison, you will be past fifty, what will be your status, are you going to get married, will you have children, you are thinking all about these.' He would stay up awake till the morning many times. I would wake up, lay my prayer rug. When I stood for namaz, I would travel to another realm, I would not be there anymore. I had

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid., p. 7.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 60.

⁹⁶Gündoğdu in *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹⁷Yayla in *ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹⁸Gündoğdu in *ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁹Öztepe, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Leftist youth organization called 'Federation of the Revolutionary Youth of Turkey'

such an advantage to cure myself. This gave us the opportunity to cure our spirits. Consequently, I think that I have kept my physical and mental health despite all the heavy trauma.¹⁰²

Political Islamists and their youth branches called *Akıncılar* (the Raiders) were also the targets of the Ülkücü Islamist narratives. *Akıncılar* were shown contempt on the ground that they did not fight hard enough for Islam, compared to the Ülkücüs. Budak's story below is similar to many others present in the memoirs:

'As we were fighting toe to toe with the communists outside, chanting 'Allah, Allah,' they (the *Akıncıs*) were looking for holes to hide in.'¹⁰³

According to the Ülkücü memoirs, religion was in fact always essential to the Ülkücü movement almost intuitively and innately. Yet it was in prison where the Ülkücüs could afford to further their knowledge of Islam and become more observant in terms of religious practices. The quote below is illustrative in that regard:

'We had learned how to read the Qur'an at this Madrasah of Joseph, we needed to continue our future at this direction. We needed to delve deep into the gist of our cause. We were looking to improve ourselves religion-wise. The (prison) administrators had allowed some religious books to pass through. So, we were ordering Islam-themed books through our families. Catechisms, books on Islamic law, Islamic history, Ottoman history, etc. We used to share Qur'an fragments (*cüz*) with friends, and finished reading (a fragment of) Qur'an once a week. We were doing this in every ward. On Thursdays, we were doing 'hatim'¹⁰⁴ prayers.'¹⁰⁵

The street fights of the precoup era were retrospectively depicted as some form of holy war against the infidel. In the postcoup prison era, it was thus time for the Ülkücüs to complete their religious immersion:

The Ülkücüs had defended Islam with the blood of martyrdom. After seeing what we were lacking in our life, we tried to supplement them in prison. We firmly gripped the rope of God.¹⁰⁶

Some of the Ülkücüs acknowledged the transformation from nationalism to Islamism through prison. Yet, essentially, according to this storyline, the Ülkücüs were always close to Islam, found refuge in Islam, and believed that they were fighting for Islam. Yet, they were not that observant before but it was with the prison time that they started to truly engage with Islam and follow its orders, such as praying five times a day:¹⁰⁷

September¹⁰⁸ was the moment that we understood that real captivity was to live under the repression and tyranny of a political organization that rejects the sovereignty of God.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰²Yazıcıoğlu, *12 Eylül Günleri*, p. 105.

¹⁰³Budak, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

¹⁰⁴The completion of the recitation of the entire Quran.

¹⁰⁵Öztepe, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁰⁷See for example, Haluk Kırcı, *Donmuş Zaman Manzaranları* (1999; repr., İstanbul: Bilgeoğuz, 2012), pp.131-2.

¹⁰⁸Again, referring to the September 12, 1980 coup.

¹⁰⁹Kalaycı in Akabe, *Cezaevi Taşmedrese Yusufiye*, p. 39.

The reason they attribute to the lack of Islamic practices is not that the Ülkücüs were indifferent to Islam but rather that they were so busy fighting on the streets that they never got to read and reflect about Islam or to fulfill its orders:

Those of us who could not find the time to read and contemplate outside because of all the fighting and protecting their space during the wars of position, started to question the foundations of our nationalism when we found the abundant opportunity to both read and contemplate in prison. It did not take long for this internal questioning to externalize [...] There was great unrest. I observed that some of my friends felt conflicted. We needed to persuade those who perceive nationalism and Islam as opposing concepts.¹¹⁰

The most prominent youth leader of the Ülkücüs at that time, Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, who was also the head of the Ülkücü Hearts organization, told a similar story:

As a matter of fact, the essential value judgments of these young people (the Ülkücüs) were in accordance with Islam. They are part of a movement that adopts Islam's principles as the order of life. The younglings who were already following a fully Islamic life even before prison gained the opportunity to live in accordance with Islam in a more intense way. On the other hand, there were those who, despite being willing to live in accordance with Islam, never got the opportunity to do so before September 12 due to being in a combat atmosphere. When put in prison, these people found the opportunity to learn what the essence of their cause was and what it meant to live unequivocally in accordance with the requirements of Islam.¹¹¹

In terms of the role that narratives play in the reinstating of a sense of identity and coherence for the Ülkücüs, the blurring of the foundations of the Ülkücü Struggle through narratives becomes essential. Narratives owe much of their powers to the fact that they rely on emplotment rather than explanation and to the fact that they tend to be vaguer, leaving room for personal interpretation and actually requiring our interpretative participation to 'fill the gaps and resolve the ambiguities'.¹¹² As Polletta et. al. argue, storytelling can be an especially effective way to communicate ambiguous meanings because 'people expect stories to be allusive.'¹¹³ In the case of Ülkücüs, we see a similar utilization of narratives that ensure the blurring between the essentially religious character of the Ülkücü struggle and their transformation through prison.

To illustrate, recalling that when the leftists were on death fast, they were beaten badly in prison, Öztepe wrote:

'We pitied those people now who, in their free life, shot bullets at Ülkücüs, at nationalists, at innocent people who wanted to live according to their religion ...'¹¹⁴

Here, the use of the words Ülkücü, nationalist and religious person in an interchangeable manner is really striking and hints at the power of narratives in building bridges and tying different concepts together through emplotment.

As one can notice in the example below, again, the stories of Ülkücüs as nationalist and as Muslims are merged together, this time with a hyphen and without any further explanation:

¹¹⁰Cengiz, *Kapıaltı*, pp.63–4.

¹¹¹Yazıcıoğlu, *12 Eylül Günleri*, pp. 32–3.

¹¹²Polletta, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

¹¹³Polletta et. al., *op.cit.*, p. 122.

¹¹⁴Öztepe, *op.cit.*, p. 137.

The pre-coup era constituted only a small part of the struggle. It was an inevitable episode in the ever-existing struggle between *Hak* and *Batil*.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, the true mission of the struggle the Ülkücüs aspired for was to make the Muslim-Turk, who had been the target of attempts to bury it into the darkness of history for three hundred years, a soldier of the cause of Nizam-ı Alem¹¹⁶ with the historical mission to make history again. Are the only barriers against this ideal the phony anarchists with their invaded brains! So, why then should this struggle come to an end once the junta administration captures one or two of those?¹¹⁷

The ambivalence of the Ülkücü narratives does not only serve to convince the reader but it also helps the Ülkücüs themselves to weave a meaningful narrative around their personal and collective existence.

Religious narratives and the exemption from guilt

Religious narratives not only helped the Ülkücüs regain purpose and worth, but they also aided them in deflecting responsibility and agency for their actions in the pre-coup era. Apologetic narratives of victimhood and false consciousness were merged with religious narratives to further exempt the Ülkücüs from guilt. The declaration made by a group of Ülkücüs who turned to Islam in prison presents the overarching storyline quite well:

We had been turned into slaves of ideologies that were fabricated by Godless (*taguti*) people as a result of a years-long effort. We had been intentionally drawn away from God's orders. We had become buttresses to those who wanted to sustain the system and fulfill their expectations. We invite all of you to defy these gimmicks and to unite against the plots performed on the community of Islam.¹¹⁸

Another quote illustrates the same storyline:

I examined the Ülkücüs here: First of all, they were all unsullied children of Anatolia and came from poor families. They did not understand many details but they were all patriots to the degree of giving their lives for the country. There were no cheaters among them. They were very ignorant, there were very few among them who could define Turkish nationalism and Ülkücülük as an intellectual would. Usually, they would also say 'we are followers of Türkiye, and we are Muslims, this is our cause.' Of course, along with this, slogan-like concepts such as 'Flag, Religion, God' were thought to be the essence of the cause. There was almost nobody who had read a book among them. They would put forward their reactions to the burning and shooting of houses in their neighborhoods, waylayings, bombings, etc. as the causes of their actions inside the movement.¹¹⁹

Now, what should we do; who is responsible for all this? Of course, it is the September 12 mentality. Why? Because they have removed the ability to think due to the labels of right and left (...). Because they have created today's racist separatism, too. Ok, what will we do? What we will do is to take refuge in God and keep our hopes alive.¹²⁰

The religious narratives also enabled the Ülkücüs to further dismiss agency by hiding behind concepts such as 'fate':

¹¹⁵Hak, which simultaneously means righteousness, truthfulness, justness, and God is an Islamic reference, just like batıl, which can be translated as falsehood, unjustness, and profanity.

¹¹⁶Ottoman Turkish: Bringing God's order to the World.

¹¹⁷İçmeli, *Kırk Kurşun*, p. 106.

¹¹⁸Kırcı, *Donmuş Zaman Manzaraları*, p. 50.

¹¹⁹Bademci, *12 Eylül İşkencesinde*, p. 62.

¹²⁰*ibid.*, p. 83.

Fate made this prominent friend of us the murder suspect of late Metin Yüksel. Metin Yüksel was a leading active member of the *Akıncı* Foundation before the 1980 coup. He was adored, respected, appreciated by the *Akıncı* youth. These two men of faith faced each other in a moment of heedless anger, Ali Bilir being the more agile one, drew his gun and killed Metin Yüksel.¹²¹

As one can see from these accounts, instead of facing their violent actions in the pre-coup era, Ülkücüs framed these past occurrences in their religion narratives. According to this storyline, the wrongdoings of the past were an outcome of false consciousness and naivete since the Ülkücüs were not yet aware of the true principles of Islam. As a result, the Ülkücüs were used for other political ends by those who pushed worldly ideologies on them.

Conclusion

The MHP stands as a unique case in Turkish politics as an actor who posits itself as a mainstream political player, yet it is the only political party that can directly be associated with the worst period of political violence in Turkish political history. The way its members, in the past and today, revisit that chapter of Turkish history has, and will continue to have important implications for the future trajectory of Turkish politics.

In the aftermath of the coup, the issue of religion became a central point of contention among those who came from the Ülkücü background. While some Ülkücüs continued to identify with the MHP,¹²² those who reshaped their identity around religion, which became their primary identity and source of allegiance, split into a new party called Great Unity Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi* – BBP), in 1993 under the leadership of Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu.¹²³ As Cengiz argues, ‘While the senior leaders of the MHP called for the absorption of Islam into Turkish nationalism, the BBP aimed at the sovereignty of Islam.’¹²⁴ In the MHP itself, a nuanced version of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis entitled Turkish-Islamic Ideal was dominant.¹²⁵ This idea, also supported by the military regime as an antidote to the Left, meant the inclusion of religion as a sentiment and as personal piety but still kept religion under the check of the state and treated religion as complimentary to the allegiance to the nation and to the state,¹²⁶ which was not sufficient for most of the Ülkücü-turned-Islamists. With the rise of identity politics, and the PKK terror, the MHP increasingly situated itself as a bulwark against Kurdish separatism and securitized the Kurdish issue in the 1990s.¹²⁷

This study has found that religious narratives helped Ülkücüs find meaning in a time of rupture, resentment, disbelief, and unbearable pain. Through the narrative form, they were able to tell a selective account of the past, move around the timing and sequencing

¹²¹Budak, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

¹²²Bora and Can, *op.cit.*, p.215.

¹²³Sultan Tepe, ‘A Kemalist-Islamist Movement? The Nationalist Action Party’, *Turkish Studies*, 1:2 (2000), p. 63, 10.1080/14683840008721234; Ali Erken, *The Construction of Nationalist Politics in Turkey: The MHP, 1965-1980*, University Of Oxford-St. Antony’s, Ph.D dissertation, (2013), p.240.

¹²⁴Fatih Çağatay Cengiz, ‘Resistance to change: the ideological immoderation of the Nationalist Action Party in Turkey’, *Turkish Studies*, 22:3 (2021), pp. 462-480, 10.1080/14683849.2020.1850283, p.469.

¹²⁵See Ömer Aslan, ‘A Turkish Muslim Between Islamism and Turkish Nationalism: Seyyid Ahmet Arvasi [1932–88]’, *Turkish Studies* 15: 3 (2014), pp. 519–35.

¹²⁶Bora and Can, *op.cit.*, p.124, 200.

¹²⁷Yavuz, *op. cit.*; Cengiz, *op. cit.*, p.473.

of events and occurrences to construct a meaningful identity for themselves. Thanks to narratives, they put Islam, instead of nationalism, at the center of their stories, which enabled them to find meaning in the hard times. Again, through narratives they were also able to keep the ambivalence in their accounts with regard to the origins and true cause of their movement.

In addition to providing much needed sense of coherence, worth and identity, the narratives, at the same time, helped Ülkücüs deflect personal or collective responsibility for their actions during the 1970s, including the murder of their political opponents. As they were now formulating their struggle as one between good and evil in religious terms, the ends justified means even more so than in the case of nationalism. Along with supporting narratives of victimhood and structural reasons that went beyond personal agency, these stories never led to a proper coming to terms with the past and accountability. As evident in such narratives, which were told either in passive voice or with terms such as ‘someone, one, one’s, some groups’ the narrators were able to keep themselves clear of responsibility and blame. This study has thus shown that in addition to the central role narrative plays in personal integrity, morality, and other normative purposes as established in the literature, narratives can also prevent individuals and collectivities from working through past mistakes and going through heart-searching.

Further studies can investigate stories among other participants of civil wars and perpetrators of personal or collective crimes to compare narrative patterns. Another fruitful future line of work can also investigate stories on the left and see if other, secular, stories serve similar purposes as the religious narratives examined in this study.

The analytical lens provided in this article can also help shed light on understanding the political trajectories of the Ülkücüs in the post-1980 era, who joined diverse political movements ranging from those who ended up becoming pro-Iranian agents (e.g. the *Selam-Tevhid* line) and those who came to support leftist causes and Kurdish politics (e.g. *Yeryüzü Magazine*).¹²⁸ A narrative analysis of the members of these groups both through public statements and through memoirs and interviews, were possible, can help researchers shed light on the motivations of such political actors as well as helping us understand how they negotiate their past identities with present. This would include understanding their motivations, and the lessons they derive from the past as well as seeing if there are exceptions to the pattern of deflecting responsibility and to what effect.

As of today, the MHP is in a political alliance with the governing Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*- AKP). It would be interesting to listen to members of the party leadership and the current day MHP members in order to see how and to what extent the porous relationship between the AKP and the MHP is understood in terms of religion and how this relatively new development of Turkish politics has affected the view of the current Ülkücüs about the past and their role in the violence of the 1970s.

As there is still a lot to be explored with regard to the link between lessons derived from the past and their political implications,¹²⁹ narratives can help us make a lot of headway in this regard.

¹²⁸We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer of the article who has brought these movements to our attention.

¹²⁹Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies’, *History and Theory* 41: 2 (2002), pp. 179–97; James V. Wertsch and Henry L. Roediger, ‘Collective Memory: Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Approaches’, *Memory*, 16:3 (2008), pp. 318–26.

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