

Research proposal

Religious Institutions, Secular Muslims: A Comparative Analysis of Turkey and Yugoslavia, 1953–1991

My research interests are in the comparative study of state-sponsored secularism in two post-Ottoman successor states that are generally not studied together: Turkey and Yugoslavia. While taking different paths after the end of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Cold War era, these two states were both committed to secular politics that sought to forge new national identities in lieu of old religious ones. How did Muslims in these polities conceptualize, practice, and re-imagine their identity? How were their views shaped by “socialism/communism”? What types of similarities and divergences do we see in these two nations during the Cold War era? Through this line of inquiry my objective is to study the relationship between religious and legal/national identities, and to flesh out what it meant to be a secular Muslim. Specifically, I hope to study how Cold War politics and competing US and Soviet foreign policy shaped the field of political action for Muslims, and to map out critical junctures that influenced the development of secular and socialist Muslim identities.

I am particularly interested in studying the role of religious ideology in Southeastern Europe and Turkey among “ordinary people,” asking questions about how Turks, Albanians, and Slavic-speaking Muslims identified themselves in relation to their co-religionists and to their fellow citizens. At the same time, my work will explore the role of institutions within communities, as well as the role that national institutions could play beyond their borders. One example is the evolving influence of the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which was an active but understudied extraterritorial actor in the religious sphere in Yugoslavia. By conducting research in the Yugoslav Archives in Belgrade and in Istanbul, I will investigate the impetus for the Diyanet’s activities in Yugoslavia. My hypothesis is that in the “laicist” Turkish Republic, there was an active movement to export or promote a particular form of Sunni Islam, which was in the Turkish context self-consciously seen as different from “Arab” Islam. Yet at the same time, these types of Turkish initiatives, I contend, suggest that there was greater divergence among Muslims in Turkey and the Balkans than scholars have generally assumed. By undertaking research in both countries and framing my questions in an interdisciplinary manner, influenced by anthropological and political approaches to the question of secularism, I hope to produce the basis for a broader dissertation study of Turkey and the Balkans in the twentieth century.

I strongly believe that CEU’s faculty and historical strengths would be the ideal place to pursue this project. In particular, I would be honored to study with professors such as Aziz al-Azmeh, Matthias Riedl, Constantin Iordachi, Tolga Esmer, Tijana Krstic, and Vladimir Petrovic. As a student at CEU I hope to write a master’s thesis, which will sharpen my research focus and prepare me for continued graduate study in a Ph.D. program and a career in research that crosses area studies divides.