

Berin Golonu on Mike Mandel and Chantal Zakari, *The State of Ata: The Contested Imagery of Power in Turkey*, (Boston: Eighteen Publications, 2009), 272 pages, hardbound in English, with Turkish translation.



Over twelve years, photographers Mike Mandel and Chantal Zakari made repeated visits to Turkey to photograph images and sculptures of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish republic. Their documents of Atatürk’s ubiquitous image are combined with their own writings and public interventions, interviews with Turkish citizens, and clips and stills from Turkish print and television media in *The State of Ata: The Contested Imagery of Power in Turkey*. The book’s varied content reads as an ethnographic study of the Turkish state and its people, exploring how state ideology has been internalized into the private lives of citizens. As an art project, it also engages in a self-reflexive critique of such ethnographic studies and the possibilities for social change that their definitive accounts may foreclose.

Mandel and Zakari bring “insider” and “outsider” perspectives together in a productive tension. Mandel, who is American, lends an outsider’s point of view to the book, a reminder that the cult of Ata appears odd—even quaintly absurd—to someone not raised on Turkish state propaganda. Zakari assumes the position of the insider photographer who grew up in Turkey, acculturated in still-prevalent daily rituals intended to nurture a love for Ata and the Turkish state. The process of conditioning the subject of the state through photographic print media starts at a very young age, and the same twenty or so photographs that narrate the life and story of Ata form the visual guideposts through which to construct notions of the Turkish republic, as well as fostering the Turkish citizen’s sense of belonging within this republic. Zakari’s words are accompanied by several page spreads including scans from her own history books: “Our classroom had an ‘Atatürk’ corner where our teacher pinned up photographs from his life. These were also the same photographs in our schoolbooks and the same photographs that I would later see in my history books throughout middle and high school. [...] This became part of our shared Turkish identity” (57).

Anthropologist Esra Özyürek has noted that in the wake of 1990s identity politics, as expressions of Islamic religious belief became more public in Turkey, the secular segment of Turkey’s population clung increasingly and fervently to Atatürk’s image.[1] A renewed, nostalgic love of Atatürk resulted in a proliferation of his already ubiquitous presence in both public and private spheres. *The State of Ata* examines how these newly internalized secular ideologies are put on public display today, often in response to Islamist ideologies. There are those individuals, such as Turkish historian and columnist Sevan Nisanyan, interviewed in the book, who blame the Kemalist regime for hijacking Atatürk’s image as symbol, putting it in the service of a totalitarian, statist ideology that

in fact inhibits freedom rather than ensuring it (86-87).

Yet *The State of Ata* is also a self-reflexive examination of Zakari's own fondness for Atatürk. Zakari begins the project as an "Atatürkcü" or supporter of Atatürk, a term meant to connote secularist affiliation. Over the course of the book's loosely structured narrative, the authors become embroiled in an ideological warfare between secularism and Islamism that makes Zakari question her own affiliations. The couple's travels take them to Ankara, where they encounter an Islamist protest march demanding educational rights. Zakari grabs a framed photograph of Atatürk and holds it up as the crowd marches by—a defiant gesture recorded by a group of reporters on the scene. Overnight, she is turned into a "symbol of secularism and modernism," the "daughter of the republic." Having become a pawn in a polarizing ideological warfare that leaves little room for more moderate views—whether religious or secular—is incentive enough for Zakari to dispense with the Atatürk mythology that she was raised on, and re-evaluate her own political stance.

Mandel and Zakari use their book as a platform to both reveal and poke fun at the misunderstandings that can accompany consecrated images. *The State of Ata* examines Law 5816, which threatens to imprison anyone who publicly insults or curses the memory of Atatürk, and profiles a few particularly absurd censorship cases in which Atatürk's image was deemed to be misused. In one, a silhouette of Atatürk's portrait stitched onto a tie made for a national holiday is likened to resemble an image of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish terrorist organization, the PKK (219). The maker of the tie, as well as the principal of the school in which the tie was sold, are imprisoned and made to face trial. Which state official has undertaken this visual interpretation and which criteria does he use to analyze this visual symbology? How can the state claim that certain images of Atatürk are appropriate, and others not? As the case of the Atatürk/Öcalan tie illustrates, the process of controlling and manipulating Ata's image often proves to be an absurdly impossible task. If, as a maker of images, Zakari herself cannot play with the image of her beloved Ata in her work, of what use is he to her? This leads her to further question her own stance as an "Atatürkcü," realizing that this word has also accrued multiple meanings in Turkey's current struggle for political power. Taking a cue from Roland Barthes, *The State of Ata* questions the use of photography as a clear document of communication and treats photographic representation in a "poetic" manner. [2] As such, the publication reveals the photograph's role as a mythical signifier and attempts to dismantle myth in order to expunge the voice of oppressive political authority in Turkey.

The State of Ata concludes by asking if the iconic image of Ata, put at the service of totalitarian agendas, needs to be replaced by newer, more inclusive symbols expressing statehood and identity. Mandel and Zakari visit a portrait studio that specializes in portraits of young Turkish men in uniform made during their required military service. Using slick digital enhancement and collaging techniques, the portraits of the men in uniform combine the colors and symbols of the Turkish flag, family photographs showing many female relatives wearing headscarves, stock images of tropical paradise scenes, perfect beach sunsets, military fighter jets, rose petals, eagles in flight, and views

of Islamic architecture in chaotic, kitschy, candy-colored mash-ups. By collaging together symbols of religious affiliation with symbols of allegiance to secular statehood, these portraits dismantle divisive binaries and embrace newly emergent ideas of nationhood that promise to meet the task and challenge of holding the secular and the religious in a delicate equilibrium.

Mandel and Zakari interrogate the conventional book format as a selection of images assembled to result in a composed whole and imparting a cohesive argument. The fragmented nature of *The State of Ata*, similar to the fragmented nature of the soldiers' studio portraits described above, weaves together contrasting opinions, sources and interpretations of imagery in order to jeopardize the possibility of arriving at a totalizing ethnographic study of the contemporary Turkish population. Placing the photographic spread of Zakari holding her childhood history book within the format of her photography book, a product of her collaboration with her life partner, reveals the self-reflexive nature of a project that at once presents a large selection of photographs of an "educational" nature, while simultaneously questioning both the content and form of the documentary value of such photographs. Ultimately, *The State of Ata* poses the narratives of the Kemalist propaganda machine in contrast to those of the Islamist propaganda machine, and sets up a dialectic between the two in an attempt to dismantle the totalizing claims made by any state ideology.

notes

[1] Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[2] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies* (New York: Noon Day Press, 1957), 109-159.

Berin Golonu is a doctoral student in the Visual and Cultural Studies Program at the University of Rochester where she is investigating the confluence of art and politics in the work of contemporary artists from the Middle East.