

# **The Role of the Arts in Relations between Soviet Russia and the Republic of Turkey 1922-1944**

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**Abstract:** In the period of their modernization, the USSR (Soviet Russia) and the newly formed Republic of Turkey used cultural relations to promote good relations between their countries, which in our twenty-first century translates to the use of “soft power.” In the period of 1922 to 1944, cultural exchange translated to mutual help with shaping new cultures. An awareness of uses and necessary restrictions regarding propaganda would emerge. According to the correspondence between the wives of Soviet politician and educationalist Lev Borisovich Kamenev and Turkish president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Russian-Turkish exchange started with cinema and theater, and progressed with other forms of art, especially music. The introduction of Marxist literary theory from the Russian side would expand to a whole new aesthetic throughout continental Europe, and eventually go full circle back to the Middle East in the modern trend towards mainstream literature. Therefore, this particular correspondence documenting these first cultural exchanges is of great interest. The author of the article has worked from both Russian and Turkish records, translating for the benefit of our English readers.

**Keywords:** Soviet Russia, Republic of Turkey, good relations, performing arts, soft power, Marxist literary theory

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## **1. Introduction**

Olga Kameneva,<sup>1</sup> the wife of the prominent Soviet politician Lev Borisovich Kamenev,<sup>2</sup> who would later become the head of the VOKS organization (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) sent a letter to Mustafa Kemal Pasha's wife Latife Hanım on May 14, 1924;<sup>3</sup> he gave her information about the arts and the situation of women in the Soviet Union. The ensuing correspondence between Latife Hanım and Kameneva would be quite extensive (Kameneva, 1925:298). It starts with mention of the cultural exchange between Soviet Russia and the Republic of Turkey as including motion pictures and theatrical performances. Mention is made of Muhsin Ertuğrul's film of 1922 entitled *Foggy Media Fine Lady*. The film tells about Russians who emigrated to Turkey; Anna Mariyeviç played the part of “Media.” And also the film *Boğaziçi Esrarı*, shot in the same year (Hiçyılmaz, 1993), starring the leading Russian actresses, Sarmatova and Artinova. Two films that were approved by the Turkish Embassy in Moscow were also sent to the Turkish city of Erzurum. In the telegram, the film called *Vo Maya Boga*, said to be under severe criticism being shot but imperfectly by Muslim Clergy, was also recommended to the Erzurum Consulate to be shown when necessary (Tajibaev, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Kameneva, born in 1881, died in Orel in 1941. Trotsky's sister and Kamenev's wife. Theater and arts specialist who also held various important roles in these matters within the Soviet Union. For detailed information, see K.A. Zalesskiy, *Imperia Stalina*, Moskva, 2009: p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Lev Borisovich Kamenev was born in Moscow in 1883 and died in the same city in 1936. He was active during the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin years, until Stalin's seizure of power in the USSR, and was later liquidated by Stalin. See K.A. Zalesskiy, *Imperia Stalina*, pp. 206-208.

<sup>3</sup> Mustafa Kemal Pasha was also known as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founding father of the Republic of Turkey, serving as its first president from 1923 until his death in 1938.

## The 1920s:

The Turkish actor and director Muhsin Ertuğrul was one of the artists of the Istanbul Darülbedayi Theater, who in 1925 responded to the invitation of the Soviet Minister of Education, Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharskiy.<sup>4</sup> At that time, Lunacharskiy, a Marxist theoretician and himself an active playwright, critic, essayist and journalist was engaged in researching theater and other performing arts in Odessa and Moscow and was indeed greatly influenced by his Turkish contacts. At the time of his trip, Turkish theater was in great financial straits, and was as a result well behind Soviet theater. As a theater artist, Ertuğrul was very affected by this situation. After his trip, those immediately influenced by his observations would be among his own circle of friends (Çağatay, 2008). A Soviet-loving generation would emerge in Turkish theater and Muhsin Ertuğrul's theater eventually established in various Turkish provinces.

In September 1926, a group of Turkish artists, including Nirenur Hanım, attended a tour in Moscow to study Soviet Theater. At that time, the participation of a female actress on a trip like this reverberated in the Turkish press (Cumhuriyet Newspaper, 1926). She stayed in Moscow for three months with Münire Eyyub Hanım and conducted various researches on Soviet Theater.

In late April and early May 1926, Soviet Violinist Naoum Blinder gave various concerts in Ankara and Istanbul. Blinder's concerts attracted considerable attention and large audiences in both cities (Izvestiya, 1926). In April 26, 1926 the film *Abori*, a parody on Soviet medical qualifications, was approved by the Turkey Embassy in Moscow (Tajibaev, 2004). This comedy brought about a Cabinet decision undertaken on July 28, 1926 regarding Turkish propaganda and its nature in relation to importation of Soviet films and films released in cooperation (Prime Ministry Republic Archive of Turkey).

In 1928, the Republic Monument was erected in Taksim Square in Istanbul to commemorate the formation of the Turkish Republic, replacing the statue of the departing Soviet Ambassador Semyon Ivanovich Aralov. Aralov's presence in the Republic Monument by order of the Turkish Republic's founding father and president Atatürk symbolized the history of the years of the Liberation War and subsequent good relations. Soviet embassies had delivered aid to Turkey and the monument was intended to be a standing sign of Soviet-Turkish friendship (Bugay, 2000). Also in 1928, Muhsin Ertuğrul started publishing the theater magazine *Darülbedai* with its occasional article introducing Soviet theater and art (Ertuğrul, 1934). The *Darülbedai* magazine became one of the important signposts of Turkish-Soviet cultural relations to the extent that on occasion Ertuğrul faced accusations of making propaganda on behalf of Communism. The Darülbedai Theater itself was revived after Muhsin Ertuğrul's return from the USSR in 1927; it staged Russian plays such as *The Great Van*, *The Power of Darkness*, *The Blind*, *The Well*, *Kirazlı Bahçe*, and *The Bear* (Tajibaev, R.: 183). In 1928, a tour of Darülbedai Theater of Anatolia was well received in the USSR (Cumhuriyet Newspaper, 1928). The tour served as a sign of recognition that Soviet culture was recognized in Anatolia (Tevetoglu, 1967).

Another activity resulting from the role of culture in Turkish-Soviet relations is that on September 28, 1929, November 2, 1929 and December 14, 1929, Soviet artists gave concerts in Moscow, where they performed samples of the traditional Turkish and Kurdish songs that had become conceived of as "Turkish folk music" at home in Turkey and then among the Turkish-speaking folk of the Soviets (Çağatay, 2008).

## The 1930s:

In the spring of 1931, Istanbul hosted the Soviet Minister of Education, Lunaçarskiy, who along with other officials visited the Turkish Language Institution (Tajibaev, 2004). On 8 November 1931, the students of the private ballet school of Lydia Krassa Arzumanova,<sup>5</sup> a Russian immigrant, gave their first performance at the Casa d'Italia Hall in Turkey, and became the touchstone for discussing the history of Turkish ballet. This show was followed by a presentation in the Union Française on April 1, 1933 (Deleon, 1990).

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<sup>4</sup> See *Anatoly Lunacharsky On Literature and Art, From the compiler*. Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lunachar/1965/compiler.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Arzumanov (b. 1897 in St. Petersburg) was educated in ballet and migrated to Turkey in 1921. Researchers working on the ballet training begun with Arzumanov in Turkey, established a ballet school. In 1929, Atatürk called Arzumanova to Ankara to ask about their vision for the ballet.

On October 26, 1933, Kliment Voroshilov, Marshall of the Soviet Union, arrived in Turkey together with a large Soviet delegation, and Altai Sovietica experts prepared a series of documentations (Dokumenti Vnesney Politiki Sssr, 776).

Another landmark in Turkish-Soviet cultural relations was the Turkish Music concert given by the Turkish composers Ulvi Cemal, Cemal Reşit and Ekrem Zeki on 19 February 1934 in the hall of the State Conservatory in Moscow. It had been agreed that the concert should be broadcast live on the radio in Turkey (Çağatay, 2008). Another event followed in April of 1934 when the Ankara Conservatory director Zeki Bey and violinist Ekrem Zeki Bey went to Moscow and gave three concerts. They were received with great honor at the Turkish Embassy in Moscow where the Embassy foreign staff expressed their interest. The Soviet art community also enjoyed meeting the Turkish musicians, so that apart from giving the three concerts, these artists visited various venues in Moscow and made professional contacts (Dokumenti Vnesney Politiki SSSR: 246).

A joint film project starting in September 1933 and ending in April 1934 marked another development in Turkish-Soviet cultural relations. Soviet writer Zahri N. went to Turkey in September 1933 to meet with Atatürk who had had preliminary surveys carried out to find suitable locations to shoot the film, and made other preparations in Anatolia. Yakup Kadri and Aka Gündüz accompanied Zahri N. on his working tour. After the work on the script was complete, the Soviet Soyuzkino trust applied for government approval to back the film as a joint production, and from the Turkish side a commission was established to follow up on this issue. Ultimately the project was terminated after the shooting had already begun, at the request of the Turkish side. The failure of this first attempt nonetheless increased determination to produce joint Turkish-Russian films. The result was the release of the Soviet documentary film *Ankara - serdtse Turtsii* (Ankara – Heart of Turkey) directed by Sergei Yutkevich. The film celebrated the 10th anniversary of the new Turkish Republic in the year 1934. The cast included Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, İsmet İnönü, Fevzi Çakmak, and Kazım Özalp.<sup>6</sup> When it was delivered to Turkey, there was a delivery ceremony held in the presence of Atatürk. The film was shown in the Soviet Union in Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, and Gorky, and throughout urban Turkey (RGASPI, f.74.1.1. d.112.y.31).

Muhsin Ertuğrul and others from Turkey were invited to participate in the International Theater Festival held in Moscow from 1 to 10 September 1934 (Tajibaev, 2004). At that time, Ertuğrul met the Russian stage director Natalia Sats who ran children's theaters. He exchanged ideas with her on children's theater. After returning to Turkey, Ertuğrul broadened his activities to include children's theater. He staged Natalia Sats' *Negro children and a Monkey* and organized children's games (Çağatay, 2008). Another Turkish-Soviet cultural exchange took place that autumn of 1934 when Esfir Shub visited Turkey. Shub was especially orientated towards ideological productions, both theatrical films and documentaries. She went to Ankara with her team at the invitation of Atatürk where she made contacts (Tajibaev, 2004). An event organized during Shub's Ankara visit was conceived of as being a Soviet film night. Accordingly, part of the event consisted of the showing of the Soviet films *Komsomol-sef Elektrofikatsii*, *Zlotai Gori*, and *Okrayna and Vstreçniy* before Atatürk and civilian officials (Çağatay, 2008). Shub and her crew also contributed a first Center in Turkey for avant-garde workshops in the performing arts. In the same period, Abidin Dino, an outstanding Turkish artist as a guest of the USSR contributed to the artwork of a film called *Miners* (Tajibaev, 2004).

In the following year, the Soviet Ambassador Karahan, who met with Mustafa Kemal Pasha on 14 March, 1935, informed the Center that Mustafa Kemal wanted two musicians from the Soviet Union to come to his country to assist with the development of Turkish Music (Dokumenti Vnesney Politiki SSSR, V.18/177). Ankara expected Professor Daniel, orchestral conductor to be sent by 30 April, 1935. However, for personal reasons, the professor could not undertake this assignment. The Turkish Embassy in Moscow reported the disappointing news to the Turkish authorities (Prime Ministry Republic Archives, f.030.10., Y.248.680.10). May 1935 saw the last of the Soviet Artists of the 37-day tour that had included the composer Dmitri Shostakovich, singers Randy Barsov, Maksakov, Pirogov, Nartsov, ballet dancers Messere and Duginske, pianist Obora, violinist David Oistrakh, the conductor Akib Steinberg, and Maestro Sakharov. These Soviet artists, put on a total of twenty-three concerts, fifteen in Ankara, five in Istanbul, and three in Izmir; their audiences came from all segments of the public (Dokumenti Vnesney Politiki SSSR: V.18/632).<sup>7</sup> On 3 May, 1935, another Soviet delegation that included the artists Arkanoff, Makaskova, Barsova, Daniskaya, Makaroff, Nostroff, Yadanin Cheslakolovich, Oberine, Oystraki, Pirogoff, Messere, and Akib Steinberg visited Izmir to give concerts and participate in various events.

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. <https://letterboxd.com/film/ankara-heart-of-turkey/>

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see Sverçevskaya, A., age., s.23: 48.

İzmir governor, Kazım Dirik received instructions from the Ministry of Internal Affairs regarding their arrival and welcomed of the delegation with a lengthy telegram.<sup>8</sup> A separate delegation also giving concerts and attending

various events traveled to İzmir, and also Buca, Bergama, and Kemalpaşa, departed from İzmir on 6 May 1935. They made a good impression on Istanbul (Prime Ministry Republic Archives of Turkey, f.030.10., y.248.680.11: 3-6). On the instruction of Atatürk, thirteen gold cigarette trays were gifted to the delegation of artists hosted at Pera Palace Hotel in Istanbul, and on the instruction of İsmet İnönü, silver frames were gifted to the three female artists in the delegation. The artists asked the Deputy Governor of Istanbul, who personally presented the gifts to convey their gratitude to the Turkish authorities (Prime Ministry Republic Archives of Turkey, f.030.10., Y.248.680.11).

Münir Hayri Egeli, a sculptor who combined theater and sculpture on his stage and whom Atatürk promoted to study film-making also visited the city of Leningrad within the framework of a Theater Festival that took place in the summer of 1935.<sup>9</sup> Münir Hayri donated the Karagöz puppet set to the Bahrusin Theater Museum (Tajibaev, 2004).

### **The Final Moments of Olga Kameneva and Latife Hanım's Correspondence:**

In the summer of 1936, the Turkish Composers Cemal Reşit Rey, Ahmet Adnan Saygın and Ulmi Cemal Erkin Beyler, the pianist Ferhunde Erkin Hanım and the Ankara Community Center Choir Director Halil Bedi Bey visited the USSR as guests at the music festival held in Moscow (Çağatay, 2008). From 8 to 9 August 1936, Turkey's tiny ballerinas, trained by Lydia Arzumanova, attended the Eminonu Benefit for History in Turkey. The Red Crescent Society organized a demonstration in solidarity (Deleon, 1990). From this it is obvious that Arzumanova's students who were of Russian origin, not only enabled the development of Turkish ballet, but also helped the advancement of Turkish-Russian cultural relations.

The stage play *Between the Legs*, written by Maksim Gorki and adapted into Turkish by Muhsin Ertuğrul, opened its first curtain on November 3, 1936. It was greatly liked by the Istanbul audience and enjoyed twenty-one performances before the last curtain call. As can be seen, the Turkish-Soviet cultural relations were ever progressing (Ertugrul, 1941). At the end of 1941, Lydia Arzumanova established the Bedii Raks School in the Eminönü Community Center and started giving lectures to participants (Tasvir-i Efkâr, 1942). The first demonstration at the Eminönü Community Center was held in 1942, with fifty-nine girls and one boy student participating (Deleon, 1990). On 6-7 May 1944, Arzumanova staged her work entitled *Orman Masalı* at the Eminönü Community Center, with the Bedii Raks School, Bedii Raks, and Adnan Saygun choreographer. The audience responded enthusiastically (Deleon, 1990).

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<sup>8</sup> The İzmir governor, Kazım Dirik sent a lengthy telegram commencing: "Russian artists were eagerly welcomed. Ege Palas [a business hotel] was host. All were conducted to separate and shining clean rooms. The hotel was closed to all but them; they enjoyed the food and the comfort. Today, the Municipality gave a banquet, the Mayor and the Chairman of the Board gave cordial speeches. They basked in Turkish-Soviet friendship. . . ."

<sup>9</sup> Atatürk was greatly interested in constructing public monuments. See e.g. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1468-2281.12000>.

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