

What is Turkism?

Ziya Gökalp

Turkism means to exalt the Turkish nation. An understanding of the nature of Turkism, therefore, requires, first of all, a definition of the group that we call a nation. Let us examine the various existing concepts.

1 According to racist Turkists, nation is synonymous with race. However, race is a term properly used only in zoology. All animal species are classified into different types, i.e. races on the basis of their anatomical characteristics. ... And since race has no relationship to social traits, neither can it have any with nationality, which is the sum total of social characteristics. ...

2 Ethnic Turkists identify the nation with the ethnic group, which may be defined as a group of cognates descended from a common ancestor and free from any admixture of foreign blood. Ancient societies generally claimed to be such pure ethnic groups. However, even in pre-historic times, societies were not ethnically pure, ... Despite the fact that ethnic purity has never existed in any society, ancient societies did uphold the ideal of the ethnic group. The reason for this was religion, because the deity in those societies was then reputed original progenitor of the society. ... The point we wish to make is that although regard for the ideal of ethnic purity is normal for nations which are in that stage of social evolution, it is pathological for the stage that we have reached today. ... At our present stage of social development, however, social solidarity rests on cultural unity, ...

3 For the geographic Turkists, a nation is the sum total of persons who inhabit a given geographical area. Thus, for them, there is an Iranian, a Swiss, a Belgian, a British nation. In actuality, however, there are three nations – Persian, Kurdish, Turkish – in Iran and three also – German, French, Italian – in Switzerland. ... Since the languages and cultures of these various societies all differ one from the other, it is incorrect to use the term nation for such communities. ...

4 According to the Ottomanist, the nation included all subjects of the Ottoman Empire. This was a grave error, for within that amalgam were several nations possessing independent cultures.

5 According to Pan-Islamists, the nation is the totality of the Muslims. We use the word community (*ümme*) for the totality of persons who profess the same religion. Since that is so, the totality of Muslims is a community, whereas a nation, which is a group with a common language and culture only, is something quite different.

6 Individualists define a nation as any society of which a man considers himself a member. But although an individual may consider himself free to join this or that society, he does not really have such a freedom and independence, for the human spirit consists of sentiments and feelings. ...

What then is a nation? ...

The above statements make it clear that a nation is not a racial or ethnic or geographic or political or volitional group but one composed of individuals who share a common language, religion, morality and aesthetics, that is to say, who have received the same education. ...

It is a mistake, however, to ask the pedigree of humans, because race has no influence whatever on social traits. Acceptance of the contrary view would require us to sacrifice a majority of the intellectuals and fighters now living in our country. Since this is inconceivable, the only solution is to recognize as a Turk every individual who says, «I am a Turk», and to punish those, if there be any, who betray the Turkish nation.

From: Ziya Gökalp: *The Principles of Turkism* (Translated from the Turkish and annotated by Robert Devereux; Leiden [Brill], 1968). Pp. 12-16. Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924) was, as sociologist, writer and poet, the «philosopher of Turkism»; his work, deeply influenced by European positivism, had a strong impact on the formation of modern Turkey under Atatürk.