



Re-Inventing Turks: How the United States Constructed Racial Categories for People in the Ottoman Empire (1909-1921)

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“Ignores Piasters to Rescue a Turk” was the headline at the start of page six of the *New York Times* on May 16, 1921.¹ The story detailed a black man, Henry Green, who had been contemplating employment options, when he saw a man try to take his own life in the Hudson River. As the story goes, Green yelled, “Come back here, black man, that ain’t no way to die,” before he plunged into the river after the man. This was, according to the article, an “ethnological mistake.” The man in the river was not a black man but rather, Massion Zaron, a Turkish man who worked at a dining establishment on Broadway. Zaron offered Green 100,000 piasters (a currency used in many Middle Eastern countries) to leave him to die. In response, Green sarcastically asked how he’d be able to pay him if he was dead, while trying to keep them both afloat. After the two were pulled out of the river, Zaron was sent to the hospital. Green was provided a chicken dinner at the police station, where he presumably recounted his story to the *New York Times* reporter.

The *New York Times* presented this story as light hearted and comedic. Phrases like “the Sun bronzed his ebony complexion” are simply too absurd to be unironic.² The story used exaggerated and satirical racial stereotypes as a way of making fun of something most Americans in 1921 had experienced: confusion about race. Green’s inability to correctly identify Zaron as Turkish was what made him relatable to readers. The joke is that sometimes identifying someone’s race feels like trying to tell if a man drowning in a river is black or Turkish; ridiculous, impossible, and a waste of time.

The ways in which Green was racialized are apparent; his speech patterns were preserved (likely dramatized) though spelling and grammar, and the article did not waste any opportunity to describe his skin color, even when it was already established. What is less clear is Zaron’s characterization. It is still present; the headline of the article emphasized both men’s races as their most important characteristic. Zaron’s characterization lacks the same easily identifiable traits and stereotypes present in Green’s description. Racial characterizations of black people were well established by 1921. In fact, much of American racial ideology oriented around them. Turks, on the other hand, did not seamlessly fit into pre-existing racial hierarchies.

This paper argues that when Turkish people became more visible in the United States, a new racial understanding of “Turkishness” was constructed. While these racial constructs were applied to Turks within the United States, their racialization centered the Ottoman Empire and its actions in the First World War, rather than Turkish immigrants. After the war, Turkish immigration was as present as ever, but racial narratives about them faded into obsolescence as the threat of the Ottoman Empire disappeared. The fact that Turkish racial construction was not centered around immigration makes it extremely unique for its time. Even fewer of the racial and national groups identified by US Immigration had unique narratives constructed about them; most were simply lumped into a homogenized “other.” Turkish people were briefly separated from this homogenized other category between 1909 and 1921.

In constructing a Turkish race, European anti-Ottoman bigotry was repurposed into racial ideology, then altered to adapt to the rapidly changing world during and immediately after World War I before becoming obsolete as the Ottoman Empire dissolved. This presents an extremely revealing case study into how race is constructed, how it exists to serve political purposes, how it adopts other ideologies to appear timeless, and how racial narratives can disappear as quickly as they appeared once their original function is no longer necessary.

The version of Turkishness presented in the *New York Times* article demonstrates a popular understanding of Turks in 1921. The complexity of race that the article highlighted can be found in the previous decade's immigration policy. In 1911, the US Immigration Commission published the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*. At this time, the racial status of Turkish and other Ottoman peoples was not yet the subject of popular debate and was almost exclusive to legal and academic settings. The racial dictionary was intended "for the one who wants in convenient form an approximately correct statement as to the ethnic status of immigrant races or peoples," with the implication that this audience was involved in law or policy.³ In its effort to be convenient, the book described 45 distinct racial classifications—with 36 from Europe alone—over the course of 150 pages.⁴ The authors noted that the dictionary only focused on groups immigrating to the United States in significant numbers, leaving one to imagine just how much longer it would be if it were more thorough.⁵ This dictionary was written to address a persistent issue in American law: who is allowed to enter or immigrate to the United States?

One of the first attempts to answer this question was a law in 1790 that made any "free white person" who had resided in the United States for two years or more eligible for naturalization.⁶ Most interpreted this law to simply refer to anyone who was not black or Native American, which is probably the clearest definition "white" has ever had. From the mid-1800s onward, anti-immigrant sentiments grew. Soon, the Irish, Chinese, Slavs, Mexicans, and many others were under both social and legal scrutiny.⁷ Who is and is not white was at the center of this discourse, a question that required a meaningful definition of whiteness.

Complicating all of this even more, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 made Chinese a legally distinct racial group. It was the first law of its kind to completely restrict a group of immigrants based on their race.⁸ This law not only made one's status as Chinese—which was not clearly defined—legally consequential, it opened the floodgates for more legislation seeking to restrict immigrants based on their race.⁹ Proximity to Asia was one of the main arguments in favor of restricting immigration, whether that proximity be geographic or cultural. At its most extreme, anti-Asian rhetoric extended to include Slavic people and Southern Europeans.¹⁰

The line between acceptable and unacceptable immigrants loosely followed the line dividing Europe and Asia. In between these two sat the Ottoman Empire, where attempts to draw a line between white and Asian became the most complicated. The Immigration Commission did not identify where this boundary was, at least not in this report. Most of the groups on this boundary were spoken about in vague, often contradicting terms. Despite this, it is apparent that

some groups had more potential to become white than others. Distinctly non-white races were described quite clearly. Turks, for example, were described as part of the “Mongolian division of mankind,” making them unambiguously not white.¹¹

Other groups living in the same region as Turks were described with significantly more ambiguity, leaving more potential for them to be considered white. Arabs were described as “one of the three great groups of the Semitic branch of the Caucasian race,” which is likely as close to white as one could be outside of North-Western Europe.¹² Similarly Syrians “belong to the Semitic branch of the Caucasian race, thus widely differing from their rulers, the Turks, who are in origin Mongolian.”¹³ Both of these groups, but Syrians especially, were described almost exclusively by comparing them to other surrounding groups, implying that one way to achieve whiteness was to be seen as more white than surrounding groups.

Syrians and Armenians were both considered Caucasian, which the dictionary described as including “all races, which, although dark in color or aberrant in other directions, are, when considered from all points of view, felt to be more like the white race than like any of the four other races just mentioned.”¹⁴ People of the Northern Caucasus were described in somewhat conflicting terms, painting them as simultaneously backwards and as prime examples of whiteness.¹⁵ While the details of classification varied wildly between different people, in practice, they were all classified as “other” when they arrived at Ellis Island. This reflects that these classifications, no matter how detailed, did not clear up confusion about where the line between white and Asian should be drawn.

In 1906, the Department of Commerce and Labor was created.¹⁶ Alongside this, the law also sought to prevent abuses of the naturalization process by preventing naturalization hearings within 30 days of a general election. It was after this bureaucratic reform that the racial status of people classed as “other” began to be challenged in federal court. A Syrian named Costa Najour challenged a lower court ruling that stated he was not eligible for naturalization.¹⁷ The case went to the Fifth Circuit Court, where Judge William T. Newman ruled that Syrians were white and therefore eligible for naturalization. This was the first case where an applicant for citizenship successfully litigated their status as a white person.¹⁸

Syrians were some of the most successful at arguing for naturalization. They made up just under one third of those represented in cases where race was the determining factor in one’s eligibility for citizenship.¹⁹ They were able to successfully argue that, as Christians with strong connections to the Holy Land, they were not Asian but actually Semitic.²⁰ Few other racial minorities were able to make this argument successfully, but groups with historical ties to Christianity (not including Catholics) tended to be regarded as racially superior to others that shared the same geography. In fact, these historical connections were considered by some to be more important than other racialized features, like skin color. This is demonstrated in an article from the *New York Times* published in 1909,

According to the view held by the race experts of the Smithsonian Institution, the Syrians, a large portion of the Armenians, the Arabs, Semitics, and dwellers of Northern Africa, such as the Egyptians, notwithstanding the fact that the hot sun in that climate has tanned their skins, are as much a part of the white race as any blonde white man can be.
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While many of these groups were considered white prior to the court rulings in 1909 (by the standard set in 1790) their naturalization often hinged on whether or not Turks were white. In one court case, a Syrian was denied naturalization because as a citizen of the Ottoman Empire, they possessed a Turkish passport.²² Of all of the people under the Ottoman Empire, Turks were usually the least successful at arguing for their whiteness. Turkic origins in Asia were undisputed. Rather, the argument hinged on whether or not their Turkishness had been diluted while living with Syrians, Armenians, and Arabs. At best, they could be considered mixed, even by supporters of Turkish naturalization.²³ In a court case in the same year as *Costa Najour's*, the President of Robert College, George Washburn, testified in favor of Turkish whiteness:

They are a cruel and massacring people, and they have lost none of their ancient proclivities. But they are also Europeans, as much “white” people as the Huns, Finns, and Cossacks. A trace of negro blood, if only enough to stain the fingers about the nails, will bar a person from white society.²⁴

There is little evidence of widespread anxieties about the threat of Turkish immigration in the United States. The US Immigration Dictionary stated that Tatars (which includes Turks), “may be an important factor in the future but few of them are known to come of yet.”²⁵ Debates surrounding Turkish whiteness had more to do with the implications for other, more demonized, immigrant groups. One letter to the *New York Times* argued, “If Turks may not be naturalized because they are Asiatics it would be only consistent to exclude Hebrews and also Huns and Slavs, who are not only of Asiatic but Mongolian extraction.”²⁶ Turkish naturalization eligibility was rarely invoked without mentioning Slavs, Magyars, Hebrews, or other groups considered a threat to white American job security.

In 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, conversation around the racial nature of Turks left the realm of purely academic and legal discourse and entered popular consciousness through war-focused media. Centuries-old European depictions of Turkish people translated easily into American racial ideology. Between the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire outside Vienna in 1683, Turks were depicted in Europe as bloodthirsty beasts. Martin Luther claimed Turks were sent by God to punish Christians, similar to when he sent plagues, wars, and earthquakes.²⁷ Fear of Turks started to dissipate after 1683. As described by Ingmar Karlson, “The Turks were generally ridiculed and the noble European character emphasized. This did not change the image of the brutal Turk but fear of this barbarian lessened and a feeling of superiority emerged that has lasted to the present day.”²⁸

The Turkish barbarian image was one of two conflicting impressions of Turks in early 20th century America. The other, more recent, is the Sick Man of Europe, which was also adopted from Europe. Captured perfectly by Dutch artist Louis Raemakers in the picture *Order of Merit* in 1915, the Ottoman Empire was old, harmless, and undoubtedly European.²⁹ The real threat in this depiction was Germany, which was blamed for dragging the Ottoman Empire into the war.

American versions of these two narratives of the Ottoman Empire were combined into one, explaining the contradictions with the heavily racialized analyses that were produced in the early stages of World War I. Harvard Professor Albert Bushnell Hart confidently predicted the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1914. Hart attributed the previous success of the Ottoman Empire to the Turks being “born destroyers” and “the Germans of their time,” who had dominated their subjects so completely that “in all the Balkans and Hungary hardly a Christian church survived.”³⁰ What caused the Ottoman Empire to fall from its previous might, according to Hart, was its racial diversity,

We in the United States know what it is to entertain a multitude of race elements... but we have avoided the mistake of the Turks who allowed such races to remain as units, to keep their own languages, religion, schools, village life, to be little nations inside of a great nation.³¹

Hart’s analysis is not dissimilar to Sociologist Edward Ross in *The Causes of Race Superiority*, published in 1901, which attributed civilizational success to ethnic homogeneity.³² Ross would be unlikely to agree that the Ottoman Turks would be more successful by “Turkifying” their population, given that they were not a civilized enough race, but it is clear Hart was applying dominant racial theories to explain something not yet explained.

Another idea of Hart’s that was similar to Ross’s is the idea that each racial group intends to dominate every other.³³ When taking Ross and Hart’s ideas to their logical conclusion, the Armenian Genocide carried out by the Ottoman government during the First World War seems inevitable. Both Hart and Ross presented racial and ethnic violence as a method of solving problems, rather than being a problem itself. Others, like American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire Henry Morgenthau, relied on a similar race war narrative to try to present a solution to violence and discrimination.

In a memoir published in 1918, Morgenthau attempted the daunting task of explaining the root cause of the Armenian Genocide. While Morgenthau’s analysis was explicitly racialized, he differed from Hart and Ross in that he saw genocide as a new phenomenon, rather than the default state of human interaction. Turkish people, according to Morgenthau, were uniquely predisposed to race war. “We must realize that the basic fact underlying the Turkish mentality is its utter contempt for all other races. A fairly insane pride is the element that largely explains this strange human species.”³⁴

Morgenthau's analysis was strangely optimistic, as it implied that those who commit genocide can be determined from birth and can be rendered harmless through European colonialism. He argued that the reason the genocide was able to happen was that Europe took its foot off of Turkey's neck. "New Turkey, freed from European tutelage, celebrated its national rebirth by murdering not far from a million of its own subjects."³⁵ Morgenthau seemed to get his wish. In 1921, he was appointed as President Woodrow Wilson's personal representative in mediating tension between Armenia and Turkey and enforcing the Treaty of Sèvres, which split apart the Ottoman Empire.³⁶

Unfortunately for Morgenthau, America's position as Turkey's handler did not last long. Shortly after he was given his new position, Turkish nationalists took control of most of Anatolia, creating the independent Republic of Turkey. Meanwhile, the state of Armenia was already under the control of a Bolshevik friendly government by January of 1921 and was incorporated into the Soviet Union shortly after in 1922.³⁷ To Americans, the Soviet Union was a greater threat than Turkey could ever be. Even at the height of the Armenian Genocide, the Turkish threat remained in Anatolia. Even from Morgenthau's perspective, the Sick Old Man of Europe could never be a threat to the superior might of the United States or Western Europe.

The version of the Armenian Genocide presented to the American public by the press assumed very little knowledge of the different ethnic groups in Anatolia. Articles like "Turks are Evicting Native Christians" define Armenians and Greeks as "the two native Christian races of Turkey."³⁸ The same article claimed that the genocide was not committed by Turks alone, but points to migrants from Macedonia and Kurds as equally guilty parties.³⁹ This depiction was still racial, but by paying more attention to the religious nature of the conflict, a disinterested reader could easily come to the understanding that religious differences were the driving force of the genocide, not race. Something that was much less of an overt threat from the secular Republic of Turkey.

The *New York Times* article about Green and Zaron in the Hudson River was published in 1921, after Turkey and Armenia were no longer relevant to the American public. The article described Turkey, not as a barbaric empire, but as the "land of the collapsible, pocket-fitting fez."⁴⁰ There is an argument to be made that because the article is light-hearted, such language might not have been included. However, given that the article is about a suicide attempt, the simpler explanation is that the fez was a more recognizable symbol of Turkishness to the average *New York Times* reader. Interestingly, this more closely resembles pre-racial European stereotypes than it does war-time racial ideology. There are no signs that the journalist saw Zaron as malicious, untrustworthy, or anything other than a man who was misidentified by a stranger.

Wartime understandings of Turkishness became obscure in less time than it took to construct those narratives. All of this demonstrates just how flexible racial ideology is; its ability to rewrite itself into history, invent new categories quicker than the average person can keep up with, and switch focus rapidly between different perceived threats. It is also a rare example of a

racial caricature that was based exclusively on the actions of an empire on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, rather than focusing on immigrants in the United States. A potential explanation for this is the theme of racial competition that has been ever-present in this ideology. Race war rhetoric appeared in its most obvious forms during the Armenian Genocide and World War I, but a more subtle version can be observed in earlier racial categorizations where groups with an ambiguous claim to whiteness were considered in relation to Turks. Turkish immigrants did not exist in the United States in large enough numbers to be a competitive force, restricting their racial classification to the discourses of academics and pedants. This indicates that competition is not just an element of popular racial ideology, but a requirement.

The construction of whiteness and its boundaries during World War I is not only relevant to immigration history, but also set the foundation for how the United States would later interact with the rest of the world. In the years following September 11, 2001, new racialized narratives about Muslims and people from the Middle East were constructed as rapidly as narratives about Turkish people during the First World War. Creating temporary racial categories is a feature of racial ideology that may help explain why it has persisted as a social system for as long as it has.

¹ “Ignores Piasters to Rescue a Turk,” *New York Times*, May 16, 1921, <https://www.nytimes.com/1921/05/16/archives/ignores-piasters-to-rescue-a-turk-negro-plunges-into-river-and.html>.

² “Ignores Piasters to Rescue a Turk.”

³ William Dillingham, et al. *Reports of the Immigration Commission: Dictionary of Races or Peoples* (Government Printing Office, December 1911,) 3, https://www.academia.edu/44947699/DICTIONARY_OF_RACES_OR_PEOPLES_Reports_of_the_Immigration_Commission_1911_FULL_PDF?email_work_card=interaction-paper.

⁴ Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 2.

⁵ Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 2.

⁶ David Roediger, *How Race survived U.S. History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Eclipse of Post-Racialism* (Verso, 2019), 142.

⁷ Erika Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882-1924” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 3 (2002): 43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27502847?seq=1>.

⁸ Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example,” 36.

⁹ Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example,” 37.

¹⁰ Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example,” 48.

¹¹ Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 144.

¹² Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 16.

¹³ Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 139.

¹⁴ Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 30.

¹⁵ Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 16, 33, 34.

¹⁶ Sarah Gualtieri, “Becoming ‘White’: Race, Religion and the Foundations of Syrian/Lebanese Ethnicity in the United States.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20, no. 4 (2001): 33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27502745>.

¹⁷ Gualtieri, “Becoming ‘White,’” 33.

¹⁸ Gualtieri, “Becoming ‘White,’” 31-32.

¹⁹ Gualtieri, “Becoming ‘White,’” 31.

²⁰ Gualtieri, “Becoming ‘White,’” 41-42.

²¹ “Is the Turk Yellow?” *New York Times*, November 4, 1909, <https://www.nytimes.com/1909/11/04/archives/is-the-turk-yellow-court-must-decide-question-for-the-state.html?searchResultPosition=31>.

²² S. A. Mokalzel, “Turkish Subjects,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1909, <https://www.nytimes.com/1909/10/03/archives/turkish-subjects-declares-that-prejudice-exists-against-their.html?searchResultPosition=14>.

²³ Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 144.

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- ²⁴ “Is the Turk a White Man?” *New York Times*, September 30, 1909, <https://www.nytimes.com/1909/09/30/archives/is-the-turk-a-white-man.html>.
- ²⁵ Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, 142.
- ²⁶ Q. E. A. “Use of Columbus Day,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1909, <https://www.nytimes.com/1909/10/10/archives/use-of-columbus-day-as-to-Excluding-asiatic-aliens.html>.
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- ²⁸ Karlsson, “The Turk as a Threat and Europe’s Other,” 8.
- ²⁹ Louis Raemakers, *Order of Merit*, 1915, drawing in color, 35.5 x 25 cm, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/157015/the-order-of-merit>.
- ³⁰ Albert Bushnell Hart, “The Sick Man of Europe is Dying at Last,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1914, <https://www.nytimes.com/1914/11/08/archives/the-sick-man-of-europe-is-dying-at-last-noted-harvard-authority-on.html?searchResultPosition=50>.
- ³¹ Hart, “The Sick Man of Europe is Dying at Last.”
- ³² Edward A. Ross, “The Causes of Race Superiority,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 18 (1901): 85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1009883>.
- ³³ Ross, “The Causes of Race Superiority,” 87-88.
- ³⁴ Henry Morgenthau, “The Turks Return to an Ancestral Type,” in *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story* (Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919), <https://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/comment/morgenthau/MorgenTC.htm>.
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- ³⁷ “Expanding Russia,” *New York Times*, Jan 17, 1921, <https://nytimes.com/1921.01/17/archives/expanding-russia.html>;
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- ³⁸ “Turks are Evicting Native Christians,” *New York Times*, July 12, 1915, <https://www.nytimes.com/1915/07/12/archives/turks-are-evicting-native-christians-greeks-and-armenians-driven.html>.
- ³⁹ “Turks are Evicting Native Christians.”
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