

**Development of the Concept of Liberalism in Post-World War II Turkey:  
An Interpretation with Reinhart Koselleck's Terms**

**Reinhart Koselleck'in Kavramları Ekseninde Türkiye'de Liberalizmin Dönüşümü  
(1946-1950)**

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## Development of the Concept of Liberalism in Post-World War II Turkey: An Interpretation with Reinhart Koselleck's Terms

Pelin Helvacı<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper aims to evaluate Turkey's transition to multi-party politics in 1946 with Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual framework of the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. Koselleck defines the space of experience as the sedimented past, comprising collective memories, institutions, and political practices, while the horizon of expectation denotes the future-oriented framework shaped by past experiences in which individuals or societies anticipate and project possible transformations. In the Turkish context, the space of experience was rooted in a single-party regime of the Republican People's Party (RPP), characterized by centralized governance, secularism, and state-led modernization. The founding of the Democrat Party (DP) in 1946 marked a pivotal moment in a pluralistic and participatory political order. This divergence between past experiences and future projections ultimately created conditions for a democratic rupture, culminating in the DP's electoral victory in 1950. This study examines the development of the concept of liberalism in Turkey in the post-World War II era by employing a qualitative and historical research method grounded in Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual framework. Through this lens, this paper illustrates how Koselleck's theory provides insight into the dynamics of political transformation in 1946-1950. With the establishment of DP, the dichotomy between past and future, experience and expectation varied depending on the proximity to RPP.

**Keywords:** Reinhart Koselleck, Turkish political history, Republican People's Party (RPP), Democrat Parti (DP), Liberalism in Turkey.

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## Reinhart Koselleck'in Kavramları Ekseninde Türkiye'de Liberalizmin Dönüşümü (1946-1950)

### Öz

Bu çalışma Türkiye'nin 1946'da çok partili hayata geçiş sürecini Alman tarih kuramcısı Reinhart Koselleck'in tarihi olayları kuramsallaştırdığı iki temel nokta üzerinden değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Koselleck'in tecrübe alanı ve beklenti alanı olarak belirlediği noktalara göre geçmiş, birinci kavramla özdeşleştirilirken; gelecek, beklentiyle ilişkilendirilmiştir. Türk siyasi hayatında Demokrat Parti (DP) geniş yoğunlukta çalışılmış olsa da liberalizm bakımından Koselleck'in kavramları ekseninde değerlendirilmemiştir. CHP, tek partili dönemde merkezi hükümet, laiklik ve devlet merkezli modernleşme unsurlarıyla tecrübe alanında ele alınabilirken, kuruluş döneminden 1950'de iktidara gelene kadar DP çok sesli ve katılımcı bir siyaset düşüncesiyle geleceği temsil ederek beklenti alanında değişiklik yaratmıştır. Bu çalışma, Reinhart Koselleck'in kavramsal çerçevesine dayanan nitel ve tarihsel bir araştırma yöntemi kullanarak, II. Dünya Savaşı sonrası dönemde Türkiye'de liberalizm kavramının gelişimini incelemektedir. Koselleck'in kavramları, 1946-1950 arasındaki değişimde DP'nin liberal anlayışının nasıl şekillendiğini gösterecektir. DP'nin kuruluşuyla birlikte, geçmiş ile gelecek, deneyim ile beklenti arasındaki ikilik, CHP'ye olan yakınlığa bağlı olarak farklılık göstermiştir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Reinhart Koselleck, Türk siyasi tarihi, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), Demokrat Parti (DP), Türkiye'de liberalizm.

### 1. Introduction

The transition from a multinational empire to a nation-state in 1923 and from one-party era to multi-party era in 1946 forms a radical transformation in Turkish political history. There is still a heated debate among scholars about whether there was continuity or rupture in the transition to democracy. Bearing in mind that the architects of the Republic belonged to the cadres of Young Turks, who experienced the transitions from empire to nation-state, from monarchy to republic, and from theocracy to a laicist/secular state, provides strong arguments in favor of rupture.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the gradual transition to democracy, culminating in the peaceful removal from power

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2 Feroz Ahmad, "Politics and Political Parties in Republican Turkey," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey: Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 226.

of the Republican People's Party (RPP), also represents a break from the past in the sense that, in contrast to the single-party era, this era marked the emergence of democratic pluralism and the growth of mass politics and participation.<sup>3</sup>

Transition to democracy, establishment of the liberal opposition party, Democrat Party (DP), in 1946, and the ruling era of this party in 1950-1960, have been studied by various scholars from different perspectives, depending on the ideological stance of the researchers..<sup>4</sup> RPP opponents criticize the Kemalist era for its strict measures in advocating secularism and Westernization, and see the DP era as the turning point in Turkish political history, regarding the maintenance of religious freedom, freedom of speech, and democratization. Whereas, RPP supporters view this era as the beginning of the dismantling of the Kemalist regime, imposing populist policies, financial dependence on the US, and a departure from secularist tendencies. This contested era of the DP has not been studied through the lens of conceptual history. In this study, the researcher's aim is to explore the development of the concept of liberalism in Turkey in the post-World War II era, in accordance with Reinhart Koselleck's two key terms: Space of experience and horizon of expectation. These two terms make an important contribution to understanding and interpreting the historical periods and their relation to Turkish liberalism of the 1950s.

This study employs a qualitative and historical research method to examine the development of the concept of liberalism in Turkey in the post-World War II era. These concepts are used as analytical tools to interpret how past experiences and future-oriented expectations shaped the discourse and practice of liberalism in Turkey during the 1950s. By analyzing historical sources and intellectual discussions of the period, along with Koselleck's grand theory, the study seeks to reveal the relationship between historical context and the evolving meaning of liberalism. While doing this, it

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3 Eric Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 5.

4 Some examples may be Cem Eroğul, *Demokrat Parti: Tarihi ve İdeolojisi* (İstanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2019); Feroz Ahmad, *Demokrat Parti: Bir Çağdaşlaşmanın İzdüşümü* (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2010); Feroz Ahmad, *Demokrasi Sürecinde Türkiye: 1945-1980*. Çev. Ahmet Fethi (İstanbul: Hil Yayınları, 2020); Metin Heper, *Türkiye'de Devlet Geleneği* (Ankara: Doğu Batı Yayınları, 2023); Metin Heper, İsmet İnönü: Yeni Bir Yorum Denemesi (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1999); Tanel Demirel, *Türkiye'nin Uzun On Yılı: Demokrat Parti İktidarı ve 27 Mayıs Darbesi* (İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2021); Cemil Koçak, *Demokrat Parti Karşısında CHP* (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2017); Hakkı Uyar, *Demokrat Parti İktidarında CHP (1950-1960)* (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2017); Çağdaş Görücü, *Demokrat Parti İktidarında CHP: İdeolojik ve Örgütsel Arayışlar 1950-1960* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2019).

aims to show the extent to which historical experiences and future-oriented expectations shape the discourse and meaning of liberalism in this period. This methodological approach enables a deeper understanding of liberalism not merely as a political ideology, but as a historically contingent, contested concept.

## 2. Theory and Concepts

Concepts have a dynamic and historically evolving internal structure, which shows disparity among conceptual historians. While Skinner’s rhetorical approach “turns the history of conceptual changes into a history of sudden and successive *kairos*-situations, which are captured and used by political agents,” Skinner thinks there were three major aspects of conceptual change: The changing range of *criteria* of the concept, the changing range of *reference* of the concept, and the changing range of *attitudes* toward the concept.<sup>5</sup> As a scholar who focused on the relation between past and future and experience and expectation, Reinhart Koselleck gives priority to “the slower, long and medium-term history of the *chronos* time.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the differences, according to conceptual historians, all of these relations are represented briefly as “change.” Depending on the context, concepts evolve over time, and there may be a change in the meaning.

Historically, in Turkey, the concept of liberalism began to be used in the late Ottoman era, according to the changing range of *criteria*, substituting the word individualism on a social base, rather than economic or political implications. In the political realm, Turkey has had a heritage of parliamentary elections since 1876 and multi-party democracy for short periods, in 1908-1918, 1923-25, and in 1930. In this timeline from the late Ottoman era to the Republican one, not surprisingly, liberalism has never been the aim, and it has embodied different meanings depending upon the context.

Using conceptual history tools, liberalism has primarily been categorized into three aspects: Historical, ideological, and philosophical. Freedden maintains that liberalism as history focuses on the liberation of individuals and groups from oppression and discrimination, whereas liberalism as ideology covers the configuration of specified

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5 Quentin Skinner, “Language and Political Change,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 15.

6 Helge Jordheim, “Conceptual History Between Chronos and Kairos: The Case of ‘Empire,’” *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* (2007): 118.

political concepts such as liberty, progress, and individuality. Lastly, liberalism as a philosophy aims to draw a just and free society.<sup>7</sup> As in other concepts, Turkish liberalism has been subject to disputes over its meaning and proper application, yet it has been used in various ways to serve the objectives of political actors since the early 20th century.

Besides liberalism, the second conceptual platform that will be used in this research is regarding categories “experience” and “expectation.”<sup>8</sup> In *Futures Past*, Koselleck makes the historical claim that the very idea of history underwent a decisive shift and radical change between 1750 and 1850, a period he called the *Sattelzeit*. Examining a noteworthy period of this radical change (*Sattelzeit*), Koselleck analyzed the dynamic between experience and expectations. Although he focused on the past and space of experience, he did not undermine the importance of the future and horizon of expectations, in which he emphasized the importance of modernization. With modernization, he maintained, “historical experience descending from the past could no longer be directly extended to the future”<sup>9</sup> and this, required a new approach, which he called “new time” (*Neuzeit*).<sup>10</sup> In this “new time,” experience was related to the actual and accomplished fact, whereas expectation pertained to possible facts.<sup>11</sup> So, the expectation from the future was regarded as less related with the experience.

In the Turkish case, the space of experience in the trajectory of liberalism evolved rapidly within a short period, leading to a rupture and an inability to conclude the past for the future. This was because, for the first time, an opposition party (DP) came to power in 1950. The future was not expected to be the same, yet it was unclear what to predict from a liberal party, even though initially, the party stood for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religious practices, and limiting state intervention in economic activities. As it will be demonstrated below, the transformation occurred rapidly in just a few years, after DP entered parliament in 1950. DP rule continued until the 1960 coup, and this ten-year ruling has been scrutinized by many

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7 Michael Freeden, *Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

8 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 17.

9 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 281.

10 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 17.

11 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 44.

scholars, but not using conceptual theory tools, such as continuity and rupture and expectation-experience distinction.

In continuity and rupture line, there are some questions about the facts that brought DP to power and how liberalism was understood explicitly by the Republicans and the DP followers. DP was not the first liberal party during the Republican era of 1923-1946, but it was the first one that past and future aspects and experience and expectation need to be explored. In the rest of the article, first, the relationship between past and future will be briefly summarized, then the concept of liberalism during the Republican era will be defined, and lastly, the “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation” of this contested period will be examined.

### 3. Past and Future

Schinkel argues that the relationship between past and future can be grasped through a twofold distinction in consciousness: a backward-looking and a forward-looking orientation. The former is largely shaped by experience, even though expectations may significantly diverge from what has occurred in the past. In contrast, the forward-looking perspective does not dismiss experience; rather, it employs it to transform and reinterpret the past.<sup>12</sup>

In the Turkish case, until 1950, politics was dominated by a backward-looking perspective, where the primary aim was regime consolidation rather than a dynamic, citizen-oriented approach. Liberalism was out of the political scene in the establishment of the Republic in 1923, as the primary goal was to build a national state and create an “imagined community” of the Turkish nation. As Kadioğlu notes, liberalism and democracy were discredited in the eyes of the Republican elites during the 1930s, due to the instability of the regimes in Western Europe, and this delayed the emergence of liberalism in Turkey.<sup>13</sup> When Turkish politics entered a new phase with multi-party politics, the concepts “liberalism” and “democracy” began to be referred.

The post-war era was the right time for the emergence of liberalism, initially in for-

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12 Anders Schinkel, “Imagination as a Category of History: An Essay Concerning Koselleck’s Concepts of *Erfahrungsraum* and *Erwartungshorizont*,” *History and Theory* 44 (February 2005): 50.

13 Ayşe Kadioğlu, “The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 1996): 180.



foreign politics, when Turkey faced expansionist threats from the Soviet Union, which demanded military bases on the northeast border and sought to change the straits administration. These threats entitled Turkey to align itself with the West and turn toward the United States (US), a protective state and the pioneer of the “New World Order.” In this context, with US protection and internal and external pressures, Turkey was ultimately compelled to transition to a multi-party era after 23 years of single-party rule. However, this transition did not embrace the international connotation of liberalism in political, economic, and cultural terms; rather, it found a unique path compatible with the post-war context. UN membership in 1945 was followed by the economic policy of the Truman Doctrine of 1947 and the Marshall Plan, which was enunciated to guarantee the security of Turkey, along with military and economic aid.

#### 4. Development of the Concept of Liberalism in Republican Era

Historically, the concept of liberalism (and the term “liberal”) began to be used during the late Ottoman era, substituting the word individualism within a social framework, rather than embracing economic or political implications. In the political sphere, Turkey inherited a tradition of parliamentary elections since 1876 and multi-party democracy for short periods, between 1908 and 1913, 1923 and 1925, and in 1930.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this timeline, from the late Ottoman era to the Republican one, not surprisingly, liberalism has never been the aim, rather the means, where it embodied different meanings depending upon the context. As in other concepts, there were disputes over its meaning and proper application; nevertheless, it was utilized in limited yet various ways to serve the purposes of political actors.

The leaders of the new Republic concentrated on consolidating their power and modernizing the newly established nation-state in a Western model. Taking apart the two short-lived attempts to establish a liberal opposition party, this era was dominated by the Republican People’s Party (RPP). Republicans conceived liberalism as an individualist philosophical system that was a set of timeless claims about human nature and basic qualities. As Kadioğlu maintains, alienation, isolation, and selfishness were the themes that the republicans associated with liberalism<sup>15</sup>

One of the prominent intellectuals and pioneers of Turkish liberalism, with an attempt

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14 Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 218.

15 Kadioğlu, “The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism,” 181.



to establish the liberal Free Party in 1930, was Ahmet Ağaoğlu. He maintained in his book *The State and the Individual* that “the intervention of the state has occurred in national life at every time and place... The problem, however, is to set the limits to this intervention.” “In Turkey,” he believed, “involvement of the state in economic affairs, particularly through suppressing the individual and promoting state entrepreneurship, is very dangerous.” He went on to claim that the primary goal of the Kemalist regime should be to protect the individual from destructive forces.<sup>16</sup>

Another significant figure in the intellectual arena regarding the interpretation of liberalism was Tekin Alp. He had a similar view of Ağaoğlu, and he indicated in his book published in 1936 that, “In the Kemalist regime, Nation and State form a single, indivisible and inseparable whole. The spirit of the entire Nation, workers especially the elite surrounding the leader, constituted a guarantee against any possible deviation or degeneration of statism.” “The Kemalist state,” he continued, “cannot tolerate the emergence of constant struggles between the two elements of national production, the employers and the.”<sup>17</sup>

Çağlar Keyder points out the denial of the class conflicts and emphasis on national unity and solidarity in Kemalist *etatism* and says, “The policy consisted of heavy oppression of the working class, and an attempt centrally to coordinate investment decisions through increasing the surplus available to an industrial bourgeoisie that was nurtured by protectionism. This was achieved with the aid of an ideology of nationalism and a rhetoric of mobilization.”<sup>18</sup> Hale agrees with the essential debates and disagreements within intellectual and political circles and states that they were centered on the definition and purpose of *etatism*, rather than of the other five ‘arrows’ of Kemalist ideology: Nationalism, Republicanism, Secularism, Populism, and Reformism. They were adopted by the ruling Republican People’s Party at its 1931 Congress and enshrined in the Turkish Constitution in 1937.<sup>19</sup>

*Etatism*, as the opposite of liberalism, was interpreted as a new form of socialism,

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16 William Hale, “Ideology and Economic Development in Turkey 1930–1945,” *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)* 7, no. 2 (1980): 107.

17 Hale, “Ideology and Economic Development,” 105.

18 Çağlar Keyder, “The Political Economy of Turkish Democracy,” *New Left Review*, no. 115 (May–June 1979): 14.

19 Hale, “Ideology and Economic Development,” 100.

fascism, or a combination of both. In practice, it amounted to the assumption that the key to Turkey's economic development lay in the establishment of new import-substitution industries, and that the state had the major responsibility for founding and managing them.<sup>20</sup> In this *etatism* scheme, the interests of the bourgeoisie were the main component, which had cleavages with the state apparatus. Thus, it can be said that while the Republicans and the elite praised classical theory of rights, like freedom of thought and consciousness, and private property, they never accepted them as absolute categories.<sup>21</sup> These categories were of secondary importance compared to the *etatism*, which represented the economic implication of the word "liberalism."

Although two attempts to establish a liberal party resulted in an unpromising end, they occupy an important place in understanding the development of liberalism in Turkish politics. The first party, Progressive Republican Party (PRP), implying a progress in the Republic, even in the name, was the first one to put itself in the Western European liberal shape. Like RPP, the party stood for secular and nationalist policies, but clearly opposed its radical, centralist, and authoritarian tendencies. Instead, it advocated decentralization, separation of powers, and evolutionary rather than revolutionary change, as well as more liberal economic policy by accepting foreign loans as necessary.<sup>22</sup> Despite these distinctions, the party was established by a small group of dissidents in RPP, mostly due to the personal grievances against Mustafa Kemal or his close circle, rather than a genuine commitment to liberal principles. The founding members of the new party did not differ significantly from those of RPP, as both groups had bureaucratic and military backgrounds. Within a few months, PRP established branches in major cities and towns and created significant grass-roots capacity. This was not due to the enhancement of liberalism but rather reflected a widespread desire for an alternative to the RPP, regardless of ideological orientation. The party was closed because of trials because of its affinity and support for the Kurdish rebellion in southeast Turkey. This marked the end of the first experiment, and political opposition was not allowed for some time, not only in politics, but also in the press.

The second attempt at establishing a liberal party was more of a tutelary democracy, which was offered by Mustafa Kemal to find a "loyal" opposition party, to channel the social discontent and complaints towards the RPP. The party promised to remain

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20 Hale, "Ideology and Economic Development," 101.

21 Kadioğlu, "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism," 181.

22 Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 218.

faithful to the ideals of Republicanism and Secularism, it would advocate a liberal economic policy and encourage foreign investment, as well as freedom of speech and direct elections, instead of two-tier elections. The party would be allowed to operate, and Mustafa Kemal, as the President, would remain impartial to both parties. Within these mutual promises, the Free Republican Party (FRP) was founded in 1930, and it was greeted with widespread public support. As in previous experience, the support stemmed primarily from discontent with the one-party regime, favoritism, the absence of civil liberties, and reform policies of the government, which were further exacerbated by the world economic crisis. Nevertheless, the party was closed after four months because of fierce struggle in the political atmosphere. As Angrist observes, despite these two experiences in the multi-party era, between 1925 and 1950, the Turkish party system became less polarized and more symmetrical.<sup>23</sup>

It took until the end of World War II and the middle of the 1940s to transform into a multi-party era, when dissenting elites and politicians had strong incentives to launch new parties. By then, liberalism or liberals were no longer regarded with suspicion for different reasons. First, the Cold War enabled new meanings of liberalism; second, the discontent from the ruling party, RPP, allowed new horizons in political space. With the Cold War, the content of the word “liberalism” began to change, with a greater reference to “freedom.” A Turkish liberal would be the one who stood for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom from bureaucratic measures, and democratization. It is hard to mention that they were supporters of the classical liberal tradition in economic means, and an anti-communist stance was one of the main pillars in politics.

Sakallıoğlu notes the importance of anti-communist ideology in shaping liberal thought and says, “to the extent that the Cold War anti-communist ideology of the state reinforced political and social conservatism (...), the rising Turkish bourgeoisie was in demand of ‘relative freedom’ from the strait jacket of bureaucratic controls.”<sup>24</sup> Angrist agrees on the domination of the elites and points out that for a century and a half, Turkish politics have been dominated by mainly bureaucratic elites, who had aligned with mutual interests, struggling against local provincial actors from com-

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23 Michele Penner Angrist, “Party Systems and Regime Formation in the Modern Middle East: Explaining Turkish Exceptionalism,” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (January 2004): 239.

24 Ümit Cizre Sakallıoğlu, “Liberalism, Democracy and the Turkish Centre-Right: The Identity Crisis of the True Path Party,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 1996): 146.

mercial, agricultural, and religious backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the shift in social structure reflected the preferences and activism of a rising private commercial and industrial middle class. While they did not initially label themselves as liberals, they were unsatisfied with RPP's interventionist economic policies and arbitrary governance.

In this transition from 1946 to 1950, liberals and RPP opponents found common confrontation in a single-party rule. Recognizing that post-war transformations were inevitable, RPP understood that democratic reforms were necessary if the party wanted to remain in power. RPP intended to appropriate and redefine the word "liberalism" and take some liberal measures at the party congress. While RPP aimed to transform Turkey by implementing land reform and the creation of a prosperous landowning peasantry on the face of a feudal landlord class, the bourgeoisie favored a free-market economy, protection of private property, and integration into the West. In terms of politics, they responded to RPP policies of land reform by supporting the opposition within the party, which would pave the way for the foundation of a new party.

DP was established in 1946, by a group of the well-respected younger members of the ruling RPP, including some RPP members who had been more prominent under Ataturk than under Inonu; businessmen unhappy with the RPP's policy of etatism; lawyers, and some civil servants who had not been active in the RPP.<sup>26</sup>

In this preliminary era of 1946-1950, RPP felt the obligation to conform more closely to the political and economic ideals, namely democracy and free enterprise, especially following Turkey's participation in the San Francisco Conference, and its role as a founding member of the United Nations, where it signed the UN Charter that declared commitment to democratic ideals. It can be maintained that one of the main influences for changing the single-party regime was this external pressure. Also, one should consider the role of President İnönü, who had a landmark opening speech in the parliament, where he formally invited the opposition within the party to form a party, so that Turkey would align with the democratic world.

Angrist rightly points out that the beginning of Turkish pluralism in politics is typically explained in two frameworks: An externalist argument that international influences at the beginning of the Cold War and an internalist perspective that highlights the

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25 Angrist, "Party Systems and Regime Formation," 241.

26 Arnold Leder, "Party Competition in Rural Turkey: Agent of Change or Defender of Traditional Rule?," *Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 1979): 84.

pluralist tendencies of Turkey's middle class.<sup>27</sup> Whether responding to external or internal causes, this era marked the turning point for both the ruling RPP and the newly established DP. Although DP was conceived as a controlled or even as a puppet-party, rapidly, even in the first phases of its establishment, it met with an enthusiastic response nationwide and maintained a wide range of support from the discontented groups. In response, RPP found no other way than taking some small liberalization steps to satisfy this internal pressure. Abolishing the "permanent leadership" position of İsmet İnönü, giving more voice to the grassroots within the party, liberalizing press law, taking some measures in loosening religious practice, and signaling to ease statist economic policies were among these liberal attempts. However, these reforms failed to shield RPP from criticism over the RPP rule, due to the organic connection with the government and the stagnant nature of the economy.

The first multi-party elections of 1946 took place in this conflicting context with the highest level of election campaign. While DP followed the same line of RPP and subscribed to the basic Kemalist principles of Nationalism and Secularism, it distinguished itself by emphasizing economic liberalization, including privatization and limiting state intervention. Angrist takes the issue from center-periphery relations and states that "center-periphery conflict, reflected in RPP-DP conflict, turned in large part on divergent preferences about taxation, the amount of power to concentrate in the central state, the role the center would play in society and the economy, and the role of religion in politics."<sup>28</sup> Sakallıoğlu, on the other hand, argues the ambiguity in ideological distinctions between the two parties, noting there is no doubt that the positivist and Western elements of Secularism were well received by the political base of the DP. However, DP was basically supported by a free-market economy and its power base consisted of large numbers of landowners and peasants in the more developed regions of Turkey who had been hard-hit by the extensive power of the RPP government during World War II.<sup>29</sup>

Despite economic or political differences, the 1946 elections resulted in the DP's entrance into the parliament as an opposition party. Although the election results brought along many questions with it, DP announced the elections to be far from

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27 Angrist, "Party Systems and Regime Formation," 229.

28 Angrist, "Party Systems and Regime Formation," 241.

29 Ümit Cizre Sakallıoğlu, "Parameters and Strategies of Islam-State Interaction in Republican Turkey," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 2 (May 1996): 237.

free and fair, due to the government's control of the election apparatus. RPP was the ruling party again, but as Ahmad observes, in the four years that spanned before the next election, the RPP tried desperately to reaffirm its popularity in the Republic, but voters were unconvinced that the party could implement any real change after twenty-seven years in power.<sup>30</sup>

## 5. “Space of Experience” and Liberal Experience

The concept that ordered these new experiences was “change.” Even though RPP attempted to take some measures to liberalize the regime, because of the foundational base of the party, mainly composed of bureaucrats and elite, the attempts of RPP in a top-down model were not embraced by the masses. In contrast, DP, at the local level, was mobilized by landowners who were alarmed by the 1945 Land Reform Bill. Newly emerging small merchants who were excluded from the economic privileges and who did not enjoy the commercial benefits, against the older and established merchants with close ties to the RPP, formed the backbone of the opposition. Also, less well-known families who had achieved some wealth and prominence, but who were denied access to political power by local notables with ties to RPP and the peasants, who often experienced “oppression of the gendarme and harsh and exacting state measures,” formed the pillars of DP.<sup>31</sup>

Breaking away from RPP and emergence of DP was one of the prominent experiences in Turkish political history. Experience and history begin with events, which raise two fundamental historical questions: What happened? and How did it come to that end?<sup>32</sup> The patterns of recurrence and repetition generate what Koselleck emphasizes “space of experience,” which was to be ruptured by unpredictable developments with a shift to a “new time.”<sup>33</sup> Even though, a new era was opened up with the entrance of a new party into the parliament, the points DP differed from RPP were in political and economic liberalization. Democrats asserted that they were completing what Atatürk had started: He had brought national independence and reformed Turkish society,

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30 Feroz Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy, 1950–1975* (London: C. Hurst Company, 1977), 89.

31 Leder, “Party Competition in Rural Turkey,” 84.

32 J. Zammito, “Koselleck’s Philosophy of Historical Time(s) and the Practice of History,” *History and Theory* 43 (February 2004): 129.

33 Zammito, “Koselleck’s Philosophy,” 126.



they would, now, complete his reforms by introducing “democracy.”<sup>34</sup>

The appearance of terms such as “democracy” and “liberal” brings light to another term of Koselleck: “Contested concept.” It emphasizes the continuities, transformations, and innovations in the meaning of political language. The basic idea of conceptual history is that all key social, political, and cultural concepts are both historical and, even when not always contested, at least potentially contestable.<sup>35</sup> The end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War are contested based on political ideologies. There was relative tolerance for the left, where a socialist party, the Turkish Socialist Workers and Peasants Party, and class-based trade unions were founded. On the extreme side of this, pan-Turkist and far-nationalist groups, which were supported during the war, existed for a while but closed with martial law.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, DP received support from previously repressed leftist groups. This was due to the evolving definition of liberalism and liberal during the Cold War. Liberalism came to be associated not with rigid ideological commitments, but with demands for freedom of expression and democratization.

As Koselleck notes, “Once new experiences, supposedly never had by anyone until then, were registered in one’s own history, it was also possible to conceive of the past in its fundamental otherness.”<sup>37</sup> So, in this new era, dominated by DP, the regime of RPP, particularly under İsmet İnönü, was to be remembered in the form of “the otherness.” Rather than viewing history as static, Democrats emphasized a dynamic historical narrative, favoring the possibilities of the unknown future over the limitations of the past. The Republican era was estranged in a radical way and was always referred to by negative connotations.

On the other hand, it must be mentioned that republicanism had never become the counter-concept of liberalism. Main themes and tone of Turkish liberals shifted variably, but they never challenged the Kemalist principles, other than *statism*. Responding to DP’s stance embracing liberalism, as Ahmad states, over the years, RPP took

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34 Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 223.

35 Matti Hyvärinen, “Towards a Conceptual History of Narrative,” accessed January 21, 2025, <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstreams/abc28f99-59e6-416e-8725-133ced75923a/download>

36 Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 223.

37 Reinhart Koselleck, “The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 167.



on so much of its rival's coloring that it was difficult to distinguish between the two parties. The party programs hardly differed, especially in foreign relations. Both endorsed an anti-Soviet, pro-Western foreign policy during the Cold War. Yet, Democrats exploited popular antagonism towards old governance, reminding its arbitrary and oppressive character, and promised to end the hated rule of the gendarmerie and the bureaucracy. In Ahmad's words, "They became the party of the masses by constantly attacking 'the tyranny of the state.'"<sup>38</sup>

## 6. "Horizon of Expectations" and Liberal Experience

Past experiences constituted the essential field in this section of the space of experience. For the future, expectations will be the main component under the horizon of expectations, which involves envisioning a society yet to come. Koselleck develops Gadamer's notion of horizons by introducing the horizon of expectations, linking expectation with experience.<sup>39</sup> He maintains that the horizon of expectations is subject to historical transformation, and it is the tension between experience and expectation that continuously generates new outcomes through shifting patterns.<sup>40</sup>

The idea that the future would not only change society at an increasing rate, but also foster improvement was characteristic of the horizon of expectation.<sup>41</sup> Koselleck formulated this as "the lesser the experience, the greater the expectation." This was a formula for the temporal structure of modernity to the degree that it is rendered a concept by "progress."<sup>42</sup> As the modernity yielded new kinds of experience, changing rhythms in understanding time and creating new spaces in future imagining." As modernity yielded new kinds of experience, changing rhythms in understanding time and creating new spaces in future imagining." In this framework, in 1950, Turkish politics entered a new phase in an imaginary future. The mechanization of agriculture, road construction in major cities, investment attempts, and American credits had a great impact upon all layers of society and brought all the individuals and social groups

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38 Ahmad, "Politics and Political Parties in Republican Turkey," 234.

39 Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theories: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 118.

40 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 262.

41 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 270.

42 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 274.

face to face with the blessings of modern life.<sup>43</sup> DP naively believed the economic development would lead to liberalization and that adjusting Atatürk's policies would expand their support base. However, the party underestimated the resistance from bureaucratic, judicial, and military institutions, which had a strong tradition coming from the past.

The support to DP started to diminish in the late 1950s because of three reasons: An increasing economic crisis, growing dissatisfaction among intellectuals and the military, and the so-called "Pasha factor," implying the influence of former president and RPP leader, İsmet İnönü, over these elite groups.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, as Karpat emphasizes, DP was the first party that met the demands of people with its formation, function, and essence, and it always carried out its functions by taking the demands and reactions of people into consideration.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to DP, although not having a unique and unified solution, the aim of the military that held power until 1961 was to go back to the "Golden Ages of Kemalism," which intended to emulate a national welfare state, rather than liberalism.

## 7. Conclusion

Since the establishment of the Republic, the state and the first political party (RPP) were closely intertwined. RPP was committed to implementing sustained and radical reforms. Not only did it abolish the dynastic and Islamic foundations of the Ottoman Empire and establish a secular Turkish Republic, but it also sought to strengthen and centralize the state and expand its role in both economic and social spheres. One significant consequence of this fusion between state and party was that the party failed to cultivate an independent ideological or organizational "personality" and became heavily bureaucratized.<sup>46</sup> It did not leave any space for any opposition within the party until the Cold War and distanced itself from the broader public. With the establishment of DP, the dichotomy between past and future, experience and expectation varied depending on the proximity to RPP.

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43 Kemal Karpat, *Turkey's Politics: The Transition to a Multi-party System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 337-338.

44 Cihat Göktepe, "The Menderes Period (1950-1960)," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*. Accessed January 30, 2025. <http://www.turkishweekly.net/article/60/the-menderes-period-1950-1960-.html>

45 Karpat, *Turkey's Politics*, 339.

46 Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 185.

The appeal of both RPP and DP ‘was not ideological but rooted in the social structure of Turkey.’<sup>47</sup> Political and economic liberalism had only limited relevance for the core constituency of small peasants and rising urban commercial groups. As parties of the rural periphery, their existence depended on the most significant cleavage within the existing power balance between the central bureaucratic elite and the rural periphery.<sup>48</sup>

DP’s electoral victory in 1950, accepted without contest by the ruling RPP, marked a peaceful transition of power. It would be correct to say that with a liberal party, the centre of political life shifted from the cities to the provinces that were largely untouched by Kemalist reforms or modern secular culture.

What distinguished the DP as a political phenomenon in Turkish history was not its program—which remained largely aligned with Kemalist, secularist, and nationalist principles—but its origin within a schism in the ruling “Young Turk” coalition. It was the first party with a genuine mass following, capable of expressing that support through free and competitive elections.

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47 Ümit Cizre, “Ideology, Context and Interest: The Turkish Military,” in *The Cambridge History of Turkey: Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 315.

48 Cizre, “Ideology, Context and Interest,” 315.

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