WRITING IN RED
(BOOK REVIEW)

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INTRODUCTION

One could hardly accuse the author of the book's author of lacking erudition. She assembled a huge amount of material, indicated by an extensive bibliography in English, Russian and Turkish. She also demonstrated erudition and good knowledge of world culture. The subject of the monograph is also engaging. Her book focuses on an interesting subject: how Turkish intellectuals, mostly on the radical/left side of the political spectrum, approached the Soviet regime and its culture.

Some parts of the narrative are sound, if not completely original, at least from the reviewer's point of view. The most interesting, or at least potentially interesting, is the part of the narrative dealing with Turkish intellectuals and their interaction with Soviet cultural reality. Here, however, the problem emerges.

The study of the subject implied elaboration on the social and political context and, therefore, on the nature of the Soviet regime. There is an enormous amount of works published in the West on

the subject and main trend changes as time passed. Still, two major views on the regime have dominated for much of history. In an oversimplified fashion, it could be defined as follows:

For the left, the USSR was a great historical experiment; it boasted full employment, free medical service, and education. The Soviet State ensured that numerous ethnicities lived in peace.

For the right, the regime was a product of an unworkable utopian paradigm. To them, the millions killed and starved was the only result of an experiment doomed from the start. For Professor Nergis Ertürk, history and, in particular, the USSR and her native Turkish history, is distinctly a conflict of genders or, to be more precise, reproductive organs. Indeed, the word "phallocracy" emerged as an explanatory model which defined the nature of the regime and provided the framework for historical evolution. The male reproductive organ emerged in her narrative as the major symbol of social, political, and cultural oppression. She implicitly engaged the male reproductive organ in mortal conflict with the female reproductive organ. It was this conflict that defined the evolution of any regime, and, implicitly, world history in general.

Definitely, the word "phallocracy" refers to the phallus, the male sexual organ. The author does not explicitly address what opposes a phallocracy, and therefore the phallus. Still, even those with the most rudimentary knowledge of human anatomy know that the female sexual organ is the "vagina". In the author's view, assuming you take Ertürk's definition literally, history is nothing but a mortal conflict between "vagina" and "phallus". Through this lens, Ertürk defines the evolution of any regime or country, whether it be the USSR or her native Turkey. In this narrative, whereas "phallus" and the related "phallocracy" represent everything negative and repressive, "vagina" and "female" represent liberation and freedom. According to Ertürk, "The feminine structure marks the establishment of a fundamentally different relationship to the master signifier" (146). While female sexuality is true and wholesome, the story is different for male sexuality. Indeed, Ertürk asserts that "phallic jouissance is masturbatory, finite, and

dissatisfying" (146). How could one detect the malicious "phallocracy"? While detecting specifics of male sexuality might not be easy, due to the private nature of the act, Professor Ertürk indicated that it can be easily done. The author provides a clear answer: Phallocracy manifested in the traditional family. It dominated pre-revolutionary Russia and, implicitly, underscored the oppressive nature of the regime. In the author's view, the beginning of the Bolshevik regime provided the hope of liberation. It was manifested, for example, in discarding the notion of the nuclear family, the major stronghold of "phallocracy" and implicitly all forms of oppression or one of the major manifestations of oppression. And it was Alexandra Kollontai, the female Bolshevik, who advocated for "free love" and implicitly the end of "phallocracy" manifested in traditional families. Still, the era of liberty was short-lived, and Soviet society lapsed into its "Thermidor" – a term taken from the history of the French Revolution and quite popular among Trotskyites and Mensheviks. Stalin restored the nuclear family and the dreaded "phallocracy". Indeed, "sexual Thermidor" was marked by the "ascendance of the heterosexual reproductive family and end of the Bolshevik dream of sexual revolution" (179). This return to the traditional family model was apparently the major crime of the regime, and it truly horrified progressive Turkish observers: "Dĕrviş refuses to model a communist collective on the heteronormative, phallocentric family" (141).

Terror and starvation of countless numbers of "phalluses" and "vaginas" alike are basically ignored. The party's ideological revolution, for example, the rise of "National-Bolshevism", the regime's functional ideology since the 1930s, was also ignored. At least, there was no attempt to connect it to Soviet cultural expression and its influences on the Turkish intellectual elite. There was not much discussion of anything beyond the Stalinist era. One could assume that Nikita Khrushchev's actions — the end of the terror and liberation of political prisoners — were not important for the "phallocracy" to remain intact. Not just

Russian-Soviet history, but the history of Ertürk's native Turkey is seen in the context of the battle between "phallus" and "vagina". And, as is the case with Russia and the USSR, reactionary "phalli" and progressive "vaginas". The Ottoman Empire was based on "imperial phallocentrism" (95) and, apparently, a dominant group of Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals "support the preservation of the phallocentric order" (105). The end of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic did not bring about much change. Instead, the 1926 Turkish Civil War "granted women new rights pertaining to divorce and child custody – an emancipation unaccompanied by the anything resembling a sexual revolution, because women were simply reimagined as mothers of a new nation" (89). How could one validate Professor Ertürk's work? One of course could explore any subject and profess any views. Still, interpretation shall be lodged in reality and not be totally constructed. Some novelty of interpretation and avoiding worn-out clichés are also expected. Still, it is not the case with the reviewed work. Let's look at some examples.

Professor Ertürk noted the emergence of Turkish literature with explicitly sexual themes, such as, for example, sadomasochism. She implied that this was done because of the influence of radical Russian writers and had a sort of emancipatory aspect. It is not always the case; the explosion of sexually explicit, or often semi-pornographic literature in the late Soviet era – such as the works of Eduard Limonov — was hardly a harbinger of female liberation at a time when the Soviet regime was about to collapse. As such, "phallocracy" emerged in its most ugly form, and women were mercilessly sexually mistreated and exploited, especially by the rich and powerful. Kollontai, as a radical Marxist, wanted to liberate women from household chores and taking care of children to help them be active participants in Soviet society. Her enemy was not the abstract "phallus"/male but the capitalist socio-economic system. The nuclear family's way of rearing children was not Kollontai's enemy. She herself was married. The

author's juxtaposition of "vagina" and the brutish and oppressive "phallus" is also hardly based upon fact.

The Bolshevik Revolution, as well as the French Revolution and, needless to say, the Nazi regime, knew quite a few brutal females – some truly sadistic. The major problem with the author's ideological framework is not that it has too often warped interpretation unrelated to fact or extravagance of interpretation — the evaluation of the views is, of course, subjective and the reviewer is aware of this — but in the other aspects. The roots of Professor Ertürk's radical feminism are clear: it is French postmodernism, particularly Jacques Lacan and other neo-Freudians. These radical and challenging ideas were a novelty in the 1960s, more than 60 years ago. They were imported from France and were eagerly consumed by American academia. Though Professor Ertürk's narratives could well please a visible segment of Western academics, it hardly helps the humanities' popularity among taxpayers, particularly in the US. And this hardly helps the humanities overall.