

Shaping Bodies Shaping Minds: Selim Sırrı Tarcan and the Origins of Modern Physical Education in Turkey

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This article discusses the role of Selim Sırrı Tarcan in the emergence of physical education in Turkey, which was an important component of the modernisation project of the Republic. Selim Sırrı Tarcan was a devoted moderniser who contributed to this process with his works and ideas in the field of physical education, a political project for the creation of strong and healthy citizens of the newly established nation-state. To analyse his contribution, we first establish the longer historical context that allows us to understand the development of modern education as a tool for shaping young generations. Second, we will focus on portions of Selim Sırrı Tarcan's biography for understanding the emergence of modern physical education and conclude by analysing his contributions to develop the archetype of healthy young citizens through modern physical education.

Keywords: physical education; youth; generation; modernisation; Selim Sırrı Tarcan

Introduction

The generation that founded the Republic of Turkey was educated in the 'modern' schools of the Ottoman Empire. These schools were based upon the Western education model, and were part of the larger modernity project of the empire. The task that lay before the graduates of these schools was nothing short of saving the Empire. Having fully internalised their mission, this generation set about accomplishing this goal by rebelling against the Sultan and attempting to institute a parliamentary regime patterned after Western models. The heterogeneous body that made up the Young Turk movement and subsequently the Unionists (the members of the Committee of Union and Progress [CUP]) were all socialised in these modern schools, as was the generation that founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923.¹ Among them was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), an important actor in the transformational political events of the late Ottoman period and the revered founding father of the Republic of Turkey.

In this article, we focus on one of the most important figures of this generation, Selim Sırrı Tarcan (1874–1956), who played a strategic role in the field of physical education starting with the Young Turk revolution in 1908 through the formative years of the

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Republican era. Thus, an analysis of this leading figure, and his ideas on physical education, affords insight into the mentality of this generation that also shaped Kemalist ideology. Physical education and the building of healthy, powerful bodies was also a political project, as Michel Foucault argues, ‘The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs’.²

By analysing the ideas and activities of Selim Sırrı Tarcan, we may discover his contribution to the modernisation process of Turkey. Portions of his biography also contribute to understanding the devotion and sacrifice about which this generation felt so deeply, as an important aspect of the modernisation project in Turkey. As Erik Zürcher argues,

[...] It should also be pointed out that the Kemalist leadership inspired many people – mostly writers, teachers, doctors and other professionals and students – with its vision of a modern, secular, independent Turkey. These people, who saw themselves as an elite, with a mission to guide their ignorant compatriots, often worked very hard and with great personal sacrifice for their ideals. This ‘noblesse oblige’ attitude of the Kemalist elite is something that modern revisionist writers of the right and the left tend to overlook.³

This paper is divided into three parts. First, we establish the longer historical context that allows us to understand the development of modern education as a tool for shaping young generations towards modernisation. Second, we will focus on portions of Selim Sırrı Tarcan’s biography for understanding the emergence of modern physical education and we will conclude by analysing his contributions to develop the archetype of healthy young citizens through modern physical education.

The Development of Modern Education and the Construction of Ideal Youth

To prevent the Empire from collapsing, the Ottoman state implemented several educational reforms to bring up a new generation.⁴ Gradually a new generation emerged as a political force within Empire and formed the backbone of the Young Turk movement. This reform-minded movement rebelled against the system, honed by the Sublime Porte, and demanded that restrictions be placed on the rights and privileges of the Sultan through the adaptation of a Western style political model, that is, a constitutional monarchy. The leaders of this movement played an important role in the making of the Young Turk revolution of 1908 that ruled the Empire until the end of the First World War. François Georgeon argues that with the emergence of this Young Turk generation, concepts such as ‘generation’ and ‘youth’ started to be used in the public sphere regularly, especially in the name of important associations and novels.⁵

As a social category, ‘youth’ is an invention of urbanisation, modernisation and industrialisation. Similarly, the concept of ‘generation’ is a social category linked with the ‘modern’ world. In traditional societies the younger generation takes elders as their role model and thereby reproduces the system, assuming the same profession, values and lifestyle, with the result that there is little difference between the older and younger generations. With modernisation, differences between generations and generational conflicts occur.

According to [Karl] Mannheim, persons raised in the same historical period are marked in ways which makes it possible for them to develop a generational consciousness if their cohort comes to experience transformative historical events. In such a case, an age-cohort is transformed into a generation with a distinct identity. Even when subunits of a generation have conflicting views, they share the same moral universe, associated with the historical period in which they come of age.⁶

Leyla Neyzi argues,

the concept of generation is particularly useful in the study of societies characterized by rapid social change, a powerful intelligentsia, the centrality of collective identity in the construction of subjectivity, and the maintenance of historical notions of age during the process of adoption of modernist constructions of youth.⁷

Turkey is a good example of this phenomenon.

Prior to the modernisation of education in the Empire, Ottoman schools were organised around mosques and pious foundations, and students began their primary education from the lowest level in *mekteps* to the highest in *medreses*, the Ottoman equivalent of a university. Beyond this, the Palace School (*Enderun Mektebi*) also recruited students among unmarried, non-Muslim subjects of the Empire. The students of the *Enderun* were the brightest of their community and upon graduation were expected to hold the highest positions in the civil, military and religious offices of the Empire. This was indeed a Platonic model, in which ‘the artisans’ were educated in religious, traditional *mekteps*, ‘the guardians’ were recruited and trained as janissaries, and ‘the rulers’ were given a philosophical formation in the schools of the palace. Within this Platonic model, students were given physical education in classical martial arts such as wrestling, artillery, jeered, horse riding and iron mace, thereby physically preparing them for professional life in the guilds, army or state bureaucracy.⁸ The classical educational model worked smoothly and effectively during the classical age of the Empire, producing the required personnel for the imperial bureaucracy.

However, this system began to decline by the end of the eighteenth century. After the Treaty of *Küçük Kaynarca* (1774), Ottoman statesmen became aware of this alarming trend, and introduced various reforms. Modernisation of educational institutions, especially those related to defence, was high on the reformers’ agenda. In this context, the *Mühendishane-i Bahri Hümayun* (1776) and the *Mühendishane-i Berri Hümayun* (1795) – the military schools of engineering for the navy and land forces – were established to train engineers for the army.⁹ Subsequently, the School of Medicine (*Tıbbiye*), the School of War (*Harbiye*) and the School of Public Administration (*Mülkiye*) were founded in 1827, 1834 and 1859, respectively, all of which adopted Western principles of education and curricula.¹⁰ It was through these newly established modern schools, especially through the military schools, that physical education and modern sports entered the Ottoman Empire in the first half of the 1860s.¹¹

These schools first recruited students from the graduates of *mekteps* or *medreses*. However, these students hardly had the educational background required for modern military schools. To fill this gap, modern military schools known as the *askeri rüştiyes* and the *askeri idadis* were opened at the secondary and tertiary levels.¹² Furthermore, non-Muslim communities of the Empire also opened their own modern schools at these levels to address the growing need for educated people to serve as intermediaries of international business in the age of rising capitalism.¹³ Reformers began to recognise modern education as a remedy for the decline of the Empire and began to establish modern civil schools in the major urban centres of Bursa, Edirne, Konya and Salonika/Selanik.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, physical education was included in the curricula of these modern civil and military high schools. As an illustration of the significance assigned to physical education in the new educational model, the Ottoman government passed a regulation in 1869 for public education (*Maarif-i Umumiye Nizamnamesi*), which made gymnastics and physical education (*riyazat-ı bedeniye*) a compulsory element of modern high school curricula.¹⁵

However, the Ottoman reformers failed to transform the traditional Islamic schools whose curricula had limited space not only for modern science but also for physical education. Moreover, the modern schools appealed to only a small group of people.

An unintended consequence of the advent of the modern schools was the emergence of new Ottoman elite that adhered to Western values and advocated the adoption of Western political institutions. This new elite class soon became influential in the trade, the media and the bureaucracy and eventually became indispensable in the policy-making of the Empire. In fact, the reform edicts of 1839 and 1856, collectively known as the *Tanzimat*, along with the promulgation of the constitution in 1876 and its restoration in 1908, can all be listed among the developments that took place under the influence of the new educated elite. Despite these advances in politics, the new intelligentsia remained alienated from Ottoman society because the masses were suffering from economic hardship, which resulted from the elite's reforms that integrated the Ottoman Empire into the capitalist world economy. The Muslim masses reacted by turning to Islamic ideology and vigorously opposing the reform movements. The result was a social cleavage between the religious-traditional masses and the secular-modern elite, and the struggle between the modern and traditional schools further widened this 'cultural bifurcation.'¹⁶

The dichotomy between the elite and the masses, that was shaped by the parallel education systems continued until the last days of the Empire. The Ministry of Religion and Pious Foundations (*Şeriye ve Evkaf Vekaleti*) supported education based on faith and religion, whereas the Ministry of National Education provided secular education in the modern schools. These parallel education systems competed with each other into the early Republican period. Not until March 3, 1924, when the Kemalist government passed the law on the Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*), did the duality in Turkish education end. This decision established the conditions for a truly Western, secular system that would transform the Anatolian people into citizens of the Republic. The Kemalist educational policy was, therefore, a grand project to transform society as a whole by introducing new values, new ideologies and new ways of looking at things.

The imperial modern schools simply aimed at saving the Empire by catching up with the West and reversing the process of decline. But the modern schools of the Republic were designed to play a significant role in the construction of a nation and a nation-state. The new model of education became the most important foundation of national transformation in Turkey. Ernest Gellner, philosopher and anthropologist, has illustrated the relationship between nationalism and education in the creation of a nation-state. In his analysis, the nation-state depends on the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society with mutually substitutable individuals. These individuals are held together by a shared culture imposed by national education in place of a previous complex structure of local groups and cultures.¹⁷ This was what the Kemalist nationalists sought to achieve. Rather than saving an ailing Empire, the modern schools of the Republic aimed to create the culturally homogeneous society necessary for the consolidation of the new regime.

In this context, the Kemalist nationalists readily adopted physical education as an ideological apparatus of the state to transform the masses into strong, equal and substitutable citizens of the Republic. In the Ottoman educational system, physical education was limited with modern educational institutions, which only aimed at educating the imperial elite, whereas the Republican model physical education was integral to the structures and institutions of public education, which included virtually all segments of society.

In conclusion, one of the fundamental elements of modern education both within 'imperial modernization' and 'the nationalist modernity' projects was the inception of physical education received from the Western educational model. While introducing physical education into the Turkish context, a group of reformers/intellectuals had played a very significant role in the *long durée* from the declaration of the second constitutional period to the Republic. This group included Rıza Tevfik and İsmail Hakkı along with

Selim Sırrı. Niyazi Berkes, a sociologist and historian who has written extensively on the period, noted the following about these reformers:

A new type of reformer arose immediately following the Revolution to criticize the traditional institutions and their educational effects. We may call these men mass educators. They are worthy of description because they arose in a manner unheard of in other countries and shook the Turkish mores sorely. One of their common characteristics was that they made their influence felt, not by writing or discussion, but rather by demonstrating their views, creating a mass psychology, and converting it into small social movements and a number of fashionable myths. These mass educators emerged from among the previously obscure army officers, doctors, poets, teachers, and civil servants. Each was the popularizer of one or two novel ideas. All skyrocketed to fame and were as popular as the top politicians. Most of them were colorful personalities and a type of public figure never before known in Turkey. Under normal conditions, all of them would have been called eccentrics, if not lunatics. But at no other time in Turkish history has the educator been so popular, possessing such magical powers over the crowds.¹⁸

Among these intellectuals, we shall focus on Selim Sırrı Tarcan, who played a particularly vital role in the development of modern physical education in Turkey.

Selim Sırrı Tarcan and the Emergence of Modern Physical Education

Selim Sırrı Tarcan was born on March 25, 1874 in Yenişehir (now Larissa in Greece). He was two years old when his father, Yusuf Bey, a colonel in the army, died during the mission to retake Bileki in Montenegro in 1876. Selim Sırrı had only the last letter his father wrote to his mother as a souvenir.¹⁹ Therefore, his mother was forced to bring up the children, Selim Sırrı and his two older sisters, Hürmüz and İsmet. His mother, Zeynep Hanım, was the daughter of Kesriyeli Selim Efendi, one of the most important officials (*katip*) of his time. Selim Efendi gave importance to the education of his daughter as well as his son, Rıfat Bey, a major in the General Staff (*erkan-ı harp binbaşı*) and a poet. In his memoirs, Selim Sırrı explains that he saw his uncle Rıfat for the first time when he returned to Yenişehir from the Russian–Ottoman War (1877–78).²⁰

Selim Sırrı was well acquainted with army officers, war and death since his early childhood, having heard of his father's death when he was only five. During this period, he lived through the agony of migrating from his home and place of his birth when his family was forced to move to Istanbul because the Ottomans were driven out of Yenişehir, which was then incorporated into Greece. Those who did not want to stay in Greece were forced to leave Yenişehir within a month, an event that Selim Sırrı records in his memoirs as the second big disaster in his life after his father's death.

Once settled in Istanbul, Selim Sırrı's family suffered a decline in their socio-economic status. The chief of general staff sent his uncle, now the sole financial supporter of the family, into exile to the Yemen province. Through this he learned the high price of opposition to the regime. In the midst of these hard times, Selim Sırrı also experienced the tragic and sudden death of his older sister, İsmet, who was only 16 years old. To tackle their mounting financial problems his mother started sewing, and sold all that was left of her jewellery to pay the tuition of *Lycée de Galatasaray*, which, when he enrolled in 1882, cost 15 gold liras (USD 15 thousand in contemporary terms) for orphans.²¹ This high school, founded in 1481, was originally known as Galata Palace Imperial School and had a prestigious history of preparing young men for public service. The institution was transformed in 1868 to a 'modern' school based on French secondary education and was renamed *Lycée de Galatasaray* or *Lycée Impérial Ottoman de Galatasaray* after which time it continued its heritage of providing elite education to future bureaucrats of the Empire.

The *Lycée* became his second home. Selim Sırrı admits that he was never a good student but was also critical of the ‘good student’ who the authorities defined as docile, silent and idle. Selim Sırrı was considered a problematic student who could not sit still although he excelled in his physical education classes. He describes in detail his first encounter with physical education as he entered the gym and saw for the first time the wide variety of equipment. He was immediately struck by the magnificent body of his physical education instructor, Faik Ali Üstünidman (1858–1942), the first known Muslim physical education teacher in the Ottoman Empire.²² Selim Sırrı entered his first physical education class on his third day at *Lycée de Galatasaray*. And although he was only eight years old, physical education became his most passionate love until his death,²³ and his physical education teacher, Üstünidman, became a father figure to him by influencing him the most as a role model.

Selim Sırrı was forced to leave *Lycée de Galatasaray* two years before his graduation because his mother could no longer afford the tuition fees. After leaving Galatasaray, he continued his education at the Military School of Engineering (*Mühendishane-i Berri Hümayun*). Although the Military School of Engineering had stricter discipline and applied severe punishment for any violation of the established rules, Selim Sırrı remained strong willed, refusing to be turned into a docile and silent person because he was so fidgety.²⁴ Throughout his life, he made a connection between physical restlessness and political posture.

Upon graduation from the Military School of Engineering in 1896, Selim Sırrı became an army officer and was appointed to Izmir. These were important days for him since it was in Izmir that he first started writing newspaper articles and teaching physical education classes. With the help of a provincial (*vilayet*) translator, Abdülhalim Memduh, he began writing for the newspaper *Hizmet* and teaching physical education at several local schools.²⁵ After four years, he was reassigned to Istanbul where he married and began to be called ‘sports crazy’ (*spor delisi*) because of his unrelenting commitment to practicing, teaching, writing and giving conferences on physical education. It is also during these years that he became involved in politics.

Selim Sırrı first learned of the Young Turk movement when he attended the Military School of Engineering. He and his friends secretly read the writings of Abdülhak Hamit, Ziya Pasha and Namık Kemal, the ideologues of the movement.²⁶ He wrote to the headquarter of the movement in Paris to become a Young Turk, and subscribed under the pseudonym A. Ali to *Meşveret*, the journal of the Young Turks in exile.²⁷ He enlisted in the secret CUP in 1907 and worked actively to recruit as many people as possible to the organisation. Following the Young Turk revolution in 1908, Selim Sırrı and Rıza Tevfik, who also was very interested in physical education, became important figures in Istanbul. İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu explains their role in those days:

Year 1908! The Constitution has just been declared. On the streets there were floods of people and the cries ‘Long live liberty!’ were reaching the sky. Some passionate public speakers were giving speeches on despotism and liberty and they were displaying unrestrained behaviour just like actors in a melodrama. In those days two people were giving the first examples of the first Turkish discourses with their natural gestures and their good usage of the Turkish language. One of them was the philosopher Rıza Tevfik Bey and the other one was the gymnastics and fencing instructor at Military School of Engineering, Selim Sırrı Bey.²⁸

However, Selim Sırrı would pay a price for his involvement in the CUP, which in 1908 forced concessions from the Sultan, among them, the promise to the masses that he would be loyal to the Constitution. Selim Sırrı soon sensed that he was no longer welcome in certain political circles close to the Sultan, and he returned to his old love, establishing a career and giving lectures in physical education.²⁹

Influenced by the writings of Dr Philippe Tissié, Selim Sırrı sought to go to Sweden to learn about Swedish gymnastics, but he did not have the means to do so. An opportunity arose, however, when Chief of Staff, İzzet Pasha invited him to the Ministry of War. Selim Sırrı cites his talk with İzzet Pasha as confirmation that he was not wanted in Istanbul and he was officially ordered to go abroad. He refused to go to Paris, choosing instead to go to Sweden. This decision changed his whole conception of both physical education and gymnastics.³⁰ Selim Sırrı was 35 years old when he arrived in Stockholm on June 3, 1909, and started his education at the Royal Institute for Physical Education. He explains in interviews and in his books that in Stockholm he passed from 'the empirical stage' to 'the scientific stage,' meaning that, his love and capacity for physical education and gymnastics turned into a scientific study of the body. Swedish gymnastics differed significantly from the German gymnastics with which he was familiar. Giving up his old habits, he began to prefer Swedish to the German style of gymnastics. This was mostly due to the non-competitive nature of the Swedish gymnastics, which intentionally included disabled, elderly, and weaker people in contrast to the emphasis on the 'survival of the fittest' in the German sports. On the basis of the works of Per Hendrik Ling and his colleagues from the early nineteenth century, Swedish (or Scandinavian) gymnastics aimed at developing the body harmoniously by strengthening each part of the body one by one rather than training the best athletes, or competitors.³¹

Selim Sırrı also became very interested in Swedish and Scandinavian culture and he wrote about the time he spent in those countries. In his account he relates how he met the king of Sweden, Gustav V, on several occasions, and even played tennis with him.³² He also became interested in Swedish folk music, and brought several folk songs with him back to Istanbul. His growing acquaintance with Swedish folk music gave him the tools that he would later use to understand and interpret Western Anatolian folk dance, especially the one known as Zeybek.³³ Like Fuad Köprülü, the well-known professor of Turkish history and society, he considered folklore studies as a 'national duty' rather than a field of academic interest.³⁴ He observed people dancing various versions of Zeybek in different parts of the country including Eskişehir, Konya, Afyonkarahisar, Uşak and Manisa. He developed a standard form of the dance to pass on the cultural heritage more easily to younger generations. The new dance was named after one of his favourite songs, Sarı Zeybek, and today the dance is also known as Tarcan Zeybeği in his honour. During the early years of the Republic, Selim Sırrı introduced women to the dance in a manner similar to Western-style dances. In his memoirs, Selim Sırrı relates how he had the opportunity of dancing Zeybek in front of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1925 in Izmir, an unforgettable event of his life, and that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was delighted to see this 'national' folk dance with both men and women.³⁵

Upon returning to Istanbul in 1911 he soon learned from the principal of Military School of Engineering at Halıcıoğlu that, because of his involvement in the revolution of 1908, he was no longer eligible for a teaching post.³⁶ Instead, he was forced to wait for the Ministry of War to appoint him to another post. However disappointed he was, Selim Sırrı would not wait, and resigned. This marked the end of his career as an army officer.

Coincidentally, Selim Sırrı then met his friend, Emrullah Efendi, the Minister of Education (*Maarif Nazırı*), who appointed him to the post of Inspector of Physical Education (*Terbiyei Bedeniye Müfettişliği*). Apart from Galatasaray, physical education courses were not offered in civilian schools or in any *sultani* (high school), and the terms 'gymnastics' and 'physical education' were unheard of in girls' schools. Selim Sırrı's task was daunting: he was expected to create and inspect physical education courses for all these schools. As part of the transformation of the curriculum, he introduced physical

education in the Male Teachers' Schools (*Erkek Muallim Mektepleri*), where most of his students wore turbans (*sarık*). Beyond these schools, he also started giving conferences at *Darülfünun*, which became Istanbul University with the university reform law of 1932.

Selim Sırrı's life entered yet a new phase with the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. He continued his task of developing 'modern physical education' with ever-greater intensity. He became a mass educator, an instructor, a theorist and a reformer who wrote dozens of books and prepared numerous radio programs. In these radio programs, he promoted his ideas on health, physical education and everyday life during 1933–1935.³⁷ He held important positions during the Republican era, working as the chief inspector of physical education (*Beden Terbiyesi Başmüfettişi*) at the Ministry of Education, retiring from this post in 1935. In 1924, he founded the Turkish National Olympic Committee and remained president of the organisation until 1930. In 1935, he entered the Parliament as a deputy from Ordu and served this constituency until his retirement in 1946. He died in March 1956 in Istanbul. Turkey honoured him by naming one of the biggest sport centres in Ankara the *Selim Sırrı Tarcan Spor Salonu* in 1964.

Selim Sırrı's Contribution to Developing Healthy Citizens Through Physical Education

Physical education emerged in Turkey in the modern sense only after the 1876 Constitution was restored in 1908,³⁸ a process to which Selim Sırrı contributed enormously. Niyazi Berkes notes this contribution as follows:

Until 1908, sitting was regarded not only as the most natural, but also the most respectable posture of man. To stand and to stand erect was a sign of disrespect, arrogance, or rebellion – son bowed before father, wife before husband, peasant before urbanite, the people before the *effendi* (master), the entire nation before the Padişah. The ex-army officer Selim Sırrı fought against this custom. He brought to education the habit of teaching people to stand up and walk erect. Although few understood the relevance of bodily movement to education or modernization, none ever hissed or attacked its prophet. Selim Sırrı not only made his gospel properly acceptable, but also succeeded in introducing it into the school programs. More amazing, he had gymnastics introduced into the curricula of the *medreses* – those institutions in which sitting was the only remaining vestige of scholastic life. Selim Sırrı waged tireless war against physical immobility for more than forty years, and if the Turkish youth today run, swim, and jump, they owe that freedom to this magician of the Meşrutiyet.³⁹

With the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, physical education and sports became a major factor in constructing the image of the enlightened citizen.⁴⁰ In fact, the Republic, which wanted to get rid of its Ottoman image as the 'sick man of Europe,' gave high priority to the construction of healthy citizens through physical education. Arzu Öztürkmen notes that the daily French sports newspaper, *L'Auto*, attributes Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as being the first leader in the world to make physical education obligatory.⁴¹ This was the period in which Selim Sırrı was engaged with the expansion of physical education. His contributions go beyond the introduction of physical education to the national curriculum, and include today's well-accepted practices of physical education as a tool for general education.

One of the significant tasks of Selim Sırrı was to introduce physical education in girls' schools. He first submitted a project to the Ministry of Education, which involved physical education of nearly a hundred young women at the new gymnasium of the Cağaloğlu Teachers' School. This project, however, was not welcome by *Şeyhülislam*, the religious authority of the Empire, for whom it was inappropriate for a man in his thirties to teach in a physical education class for women in chadors (*çarşaf*). Despite the opposition of

Şeyhülislam, the Minister of Education Emrullah Bey insisted on approving the project. He convinced the *Şeyhülislam* by providing his personal guarantee and appointing himself as the inspector of the classes. This is indeed how physical education for young women started in the Ottoman Empire. Selim Sırrı asked the women students to wear black *yeldirme* (i.e. a religious traditional dress with long skirt and sleeves, and cloak) together with black socks and headscarves to prevent any kind of rumours. Despite several drawbacks such as lack of proper changing rooms, equipment and clothes, by the end of the year Selim Sırrı was able to get his first group of women students appointed to the teachers' schools for women (*Kız Muallim Mektepleri*) and high schools for girls, which played a multiplier role in the physical education of women in Turkey.⁴²

With the proclamation of the Republic, Selim Sırrı found better opportunities to extend physical education to women. There was now a more convenient environment to bring up a new generation to transform the society in general. The attitude of the new regime towards the physical education of women was twofold: on the one hand, Kemalist nationalists wanted to emancipate women from the patriarchal nature of the old regime. On the other hand, they perceived physical education as a way of instrumentalising women and their reproductive capacity for the state. It was Selim Sırrı who started this process during the late Ottoman Empire and consolidated it in early Republican Period. To further advance this process, he wrote to Einar Nerman, Director of the Institute in Sweden, and requested that the Institute send him a female instructor to teach other instructors and to introduce more Turkish women to physical education. Nerman responded by sending his own daughter, Inge. During the four years Inge spent in Turkey, she taught the first female physical education instructors of the Republic and she also introduced her students to Swedish folk dances.⁴³

We also observe that the presence of women in gymnastics festivals, which later were celebrated as Youth Day, was important for the ideals of the Republic. In his speech at the first gymnastics festival of the Republic in 1928 Selim Sırrı underlined the importance of the 'duty' of young women:

Women's need for physical education is greater than that of men. Strong women would give birth to strong children. Ghazi [Kemal Atatürk] indicated the path that we should pursue for the empowerment of Turkish women: 'Turkish women should be the most enlightened, virtuous, and dignified women in the world. It is Turkish women's duty to raise a generation that is capable of defending the fatherland.' Following him we are preparing Turkish women to give birth to generations capable of national defence.⁴⁴

Inspired by Swedish gymnastics, Selim Sırrı gave highest priority to 'harmony' or *ahenk*, which was the key to a healthy body and a happy person. In one of his books he gives advice to young people about how to succeed and be happy in life. In his article entitled 'Humans create their own destiny! (*İnsan Talihini Kendi Yapar!*)', Selim Sırrı argues that the thing to look for in life is harmony: harmony in the body, in the family and in the society.⁴⁵ This idea of harmony and solidarity between different organs of the body, different members of the family and different segments of the society is also in line with Kemalist populism, which perceived the people as an imaginary unity and declined to see the differences among them. On the basis of the thoughts of Ziya Gökalp,⁴⁶ who was influenced by the sociology of Emile Durkheim, Kemalist populism wanted to promote some kind of solidarity (*tesanüt*) and harmony among the people by ignoring classes and class conflict.⁴⁷ Through a spirit of solidarity, different social segments or 'organs' of Turkish people were expected to work harmoniously for the greater good of the society under the newly established Republican regime. Within this context, Swedish gymnastics seemed to be more compatible with idea of social harmony and solidarity than the German

notion of competitive self-will and power as formulated by such philosophers as Schopenhauer or Nietzsche.

However, against the wishes of Selim Sırrı, German influence on Turkish sports and gymnastics began to be felt throughout the 1930s with the increased popularity of eugenics, or Rassenhygiene (*ırk hıfzısıhhası*), among the policy-makers and state intellectuals in Turkey.⁴⁸ In this manner of thinking, those with the physical and mental qualities desired by the state should be encouraged to increase in number through marriage and reproduction and become the source of the next, healthy and strong generation. Similarly, the ‘dysgenic or cacogenic’ people with mental and physical disabilities, or diseases should be discouraged from marrying and procreating to avoid producing ‘degenerate’ infants.⁴⁹ Moreover, the young generation should be well taken care of to keep the quality of the society and for that matter, the race at the highest level possible.

Advocates of eugenics considered physical education a significant instrument for the improvement of the breed. Among them was Professor Sadi Irmak, a physiologist, who wrote a report for the government illustrating the relation between eugenics and physical education.⁵⁰ Subsequent to this report, the Grand National Assembly passed a law on June 29, 1938 establishing the General Directorate for Physical Education (*Beden Terbiyesi Genel Müdürlüğü*), and making physical exercises compulsory for the general public. This requirement was then defined in a regulation, which stated that it is obligatory to exercise four hours a week for young men between the ages of 12 and 45 and women between the ages 12 and 30.⁵¹ Selim Sırrı was a member of parliament (1935–1946) when these decisions were taken. During these sessions he remained silent and did not take any position on this issue of his particular expertise, nor was his advice sought. Yiğit Akın, who wrote extensively on this subject, interviewed one of Selim Sırrı’s students, Cem Atabeyoğlu, to find an explanation for his silence:

[T]he interviewee argued that Selim Sırrı liked to talk about sports and physical education until the end of his life but the prerequisite for that was the people’s knowledge on sport and physical education. If they lacked a certain level of knowledge he preferred not to speak about it. According to the interviewee, the situation of the parliament was well below this level. Other members seemed to speak about sports, but actually they did not know anything about sports. They were attracted by the para-military education of the youth.⁵²

The decision about making physical education compulsory was taken in the parliament in 1938, a few months before the Anschluss. One can argue that the Turkish government passed this law as a measure to prepare for war. Besides that, this new understanding of physical education was a result of rising German influence among some policy-makers and intellectual circles, who are widely known as racist-Turanist in Turkey’s political life.⁵³ Before and during the War, this group was influential enough to convince the governmental circles in Ankara to accept this form of racist social engineering for Turks. They sought to indoctrinate for nationalist purposes, and capture the heart and body as part of the Turkish supremacy parallel to the idea of Aryan supremacy in Hitler’s youth and sports movement. Not surprisingly, this group lost their influence when the defeat of Germany became apparent after Stalingrad.⁵⁴ In fact, the mandate over physical education was not implemented following Turkey’s transition to multiparty politics after the World War II.

In addition to promoting Swedish gymnastics, Selim Sırrı developed another tool for demonstrating the harmony and cohesion of society: the organisation of gymnastic festivals. The First Gymnastics Festivals organised in 1916 were continued into the Republican era with the first gymnastics festival of the Republic being organised in 1928. In his speech, Selim Sırrı explains the function of these festivals as follows:

The Republic of Turkey, in order to demonstrate the level of importance that she has assigned to the ideas as well as the bodies of the offspring of the fatherland, decided to organize gymnastic festivals every year. In the first of these festivals, 12,000 young boys and girls participated at various cities. Today at this hour this spectacular army of education is displaying their physical education. Gentlemen! You know that the schools of the Republic are centres of enlightenment preparing the nationalists for the life struggle. Our purpose is to gradually get them used to liberty, to teach them their duties, both towards their own consciousness and towards society, and to show them how to fulfil their duties while preserving their free will and independence. Gymnastics is not a talent nor a merit nor an art for the strong ones to benefit from. It is a rational tool of education. [...] Everyone, women, children and the elderly can perform gymnastics. The objective of the physical education that we give at our schools is the health and harmony of organs.⁵⁵

The festivals would continue throughout the Republic as the Youth and Sports Day on every May 19, symbolising the date when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk arrived at Samsun and launched the War of Independence. The Republic demonstrated that it had chosen youth as its symbol through this festival. Besides that, the festival turned out to be a base for young people to show their loyalty to the principles of the Republic via physical exercises, which indicated the unity, harmony and cohesion of society, which, while not explicitly unique to Turkish society, is a characteristic of the Republican ideology.⁵⁶ The objective of the festivals was not to amuse the masses but to integrate 'young generations to the citizens' delightfulness'.⁵⁷

Thus, we may see that Selim Sırrı made significant contributions to several areas, including the origins of modern physical education, gymnastic festivals and standardisation and preservation of folk dances. Not to be overlooked is his foundational role in establishing a public place for women in the areas of physical education and gymnastics.

Conclusion

In this article, we analysed the modernisation project of Turkey by focusing on the life of Selim Sırrı Tarcan and his contributions to physical education during the late Ottoman Empire and into the early Republican period. This generation, first to be educated in the modern schools, witnessed the agonies of living at the collapse of the Empire, but shared in the enthusiasm and devotion for transforming the society from 1908 and thereafter, especially with the education reforms following the proclamation of the Republic in 1923.

For a better understanding of the late Ottoman Empire and the early Republic, it is important to introduce the key figures of the modernisation process. Selim Sırrı Tarcan is one of these important actors as the most important figure in the history of physical education in Turkey. He is thus an ideal type for the analysis of this generation, which was united by the *Zeitgeist* that promised something new. Despite their ideological differences, the elites of this generation felt a devotion and enthusiasm for the newly founded Republic and therefore passionately defended their ideals and visions. They felt duty-bound to be role models for the entire society, even though their actions were sometimes rejected by the masses. As we saw in the life of Selim Sırrı, with his sports clothes and love for physical education, the borderline between eccentricity and respectability was very thin indeed. Yet the whole generation longed for change in society.

The life story of Selim Sırrı demonstrates that the modernisation process of Turkey had also a sentimental and subjective aspect. The elites of the society were certainly the main actors who promoted this subjective aspect of the modernisation process through their own lives. Physical education was a passion for Selim Sırrı and he wanted to share this passion with the entire society, hoping to develop enlightened, healthy citizens through physical

education. In an interview on his 75th birthday, Selim Sırrı was asked if he still exercises regularly. He replied that he exercised each morning for 15 minutes as if it were a sort of prayer.⁵⁸ By relating physical exercise to a sort of prayer, he demonstrated the subjective aspect of his contribution to nation building through physical education. Everything is linked to the nation, the motherland and being an ideal citizen.

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Notes

1. For an historical account of the CUP, see Ahmad, *Young Turks*.
2. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.
3. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 181.
4. Lüküslü, “L’Invention de la jeunesse par l’Etat otoman et turc”, 229–49. See also Lüküslü, *Türkiye’de Gençlik Miti*.
5. Georgeon, “Les Jeunes Turcs étaient-ils jeunes?”, 146–73.
6. Neyzi, “The Construction of ‘Youth’ in Public Discourse in Turkey: A Generational Approach”, 109. On the problems of generations see also Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations”, 276–319.
7. Neyzi, “The Construction of ‘Youth’ in Public Discourse in Turkey: A Generational Approach”, 109.
8. Kıyıcı and Konca, “History of Physical Education in Turkey”, 275.
9. See Sakaoğlu, *Osmanlı’dan Günümüze Eğitim Tarihi*, 55–6.
10. See Akşin, *Kısa Türkiye Tarihi*, 27–8.
11. Unat, *Türk Eğitim Sisteminin Gelişmesine Tarihi Bir Bakış*, 50.
12. Başaran, “Türkiye’de Eğitim Sisteminin Evrimi”, 92.
13. Sakaoğlu, *Osmanlı’dan Günümüze Eğitim Tarihi*, 57.
14. Başaran, “Türkiye’de Eğitim Sisteminin Evrimi”, 79–86.
15. Somel, *Modernization of Public Education*; Akın, *Gürbüz ve Yavuz Evlatlar*, 50.
16. See Yücekök, *Türkiye’de Örgütlenmiş Dinin Sosyo-Ekonomik Tabanı*.
17. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 57.
18. Berkes, *Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 401.
19. Tarcan, *Hatıralarım*, 5.
20. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
21. One gold lira was 7 grams of gold, which is 2.5 times more valuable in today’s economy. See Öztuna, “Osmanlı Türkiyesi’nde Enflasyon”.
22. Faik Ali Üstünidman (1858–1942) taught in *Lycée de Galatasaray* for 45 years. He was granted the title of ‘*Fahri Muallim* (emeritus teacher)’ upon his retirement. In 1923, the Turkish Union of Sports Clubs also rewarded him with the title of *Şeyhülidman* (head of trainers). For more details on Üstünidman, see Koloğlu, ‘Çağdaş Spor Anlayışını Benimseten Adam’, 57–60.
23. Tarcan, *Hatıralarım*, 8–9.

24. Ibid., 17.
25. Ibid., 25.
26. See Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*.
27. Tarcan, *Hatıralarım*, 23.
28. Baltacıoğlu, “Selim Sırrı Tarcan”, 20.
29. Tarcan, *Hatıralarım*, 43.
30. Ibid., 44.
31. Akın, “Not Just a Game”, 159.
32. Tarcan, *Şimalin Üç İrfan Diyarı*, 50–7.
33. The Zeybeks, after whom the dance is named, were of Turkmen and Yörük (nomadic Turkish people) origins in the Aegean region, who acted as irregular militia and guerrilla fighters, protectors of villagers against landlords, bandits and tax collectors of the Ottoman Empire from the late 17th to early 20th centuries. They also fought against the Greek invasion of western Anatolia during the Turkish national struggle between 1919 and 1922.
34. Öztürkmen, *Türkiye’de Folklor ve Milliyetçilik*, 33. See also Öztürkmen, “I Dance Folklore”, 128–46.
35. Tarcan, *Hatıralarım*, 59.
36. Ibid, 46.
37. For his radio programs, see Tarcan, *Radyo Konferanslarım*.
38. Okay, “Sport and Nation Building”, 152.
39. Berkes, *Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 402.
40. See Lüküslü and Dinçşahin, “Selim Sırrı Tarcan ve Beden Eğitimi”.
41. Öztürkmen, “Mehmet Fetgeri Şuenu ve Kadında Terbiye-i Bedeniye”, 9.
42. Tarcan, *Hatıralarım*, 51–2.
43. Atabeyoğlu, *Kurucumuz Selim Sırrı Tarcan*, 24–5. We should note that Inge Nerman was not the only Swede who came to Turkey upon Selim Sırrı’s invitation. Selim Sırrı also recruited Ragner Johnsson, a physical education instructor, and Sven Aleksanderssen, an expert on massage, at the Male Teachers’ College.
44. Tarcan, *Beden Terbiyesi, Oyun-Cimnastik*, 430–2.
45. Tarcan, *Gençlerle Başbaşa. Nasıl Mes’ut Olabiliriz?* 21.
46. Gökalp, *Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization*.
47. Parla, *Social and Political Thought of Ziya Gökalp*, 1876–1924.
48. See Alemdaroğlu, “Politics of the Body and Eugenic Discourse”, 61–76.
49. Salgırlı, “Eugenics for the Doctors”, 281–312; Özalpay and Ertin, “Türk Tıbbında İrk Hıfzısıhhası”, 66.
50. Akın, “Not Just A Game”, 90–1.
51. İnanç, “Bir Memleket Davası: Beden Terbiyesi”, 60–2.
52. Akın, “Not Just A Game”, 65.
53. Özdoğan, *Turan’dan ‘Bozkurt’a*.
54. Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*, 98.
55. Tarcan, *Beden Terbiyesi*, 430–2.
56. Arnaud, *Les Athlètes de la République*, 162.
57. Ihl, *La fête républicaine*, 279.
58. Kandemir, “Selim Sırrı ve Spor”, 28.

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