

**The Albert Nekomken Turkish Theater Collection:  
Censorship, Contentious Politics, and the Cold War Stage**

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*I dedicate this book to the prosecutor who  
confiscated the largest collection of  
books, to the expert witness who provided  
the most unfavorable reports, and to the  
politician who most frequently remarked,  
'There is freedom of thought in Turkey'...  
– Bülent Habora in *Yasak  
Kitaplar* (1969)<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract**

Turkish political theater of the 1960s-1970s was a genre that galvanized both its intellectual proponents and drew the ire of state authorities. Deeply marked by the work of Bertolt Brecht produced some half a century earlier, the stage became an important setting where the broader violence between far-left groups, far-right groups, and the government was recast in literary form. During his doctoral

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<sup>1</sup> Bülent Habora, *Yasak Kitaplar* (İstanbul: Habora Kitabevi, 1969), 5.

research on the influence of German Marxism on Turkish political theater, former U.S. Peace Corps volunteer Albert Nekimken collected plays, works of theatrical criticism, periodicals, short stories, novels, and rare recordings of performances, among other materials. The Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, primarily composed of Nekimken's research materials, began to grow as playwrights, intellectuals, and others contributed interviews or gifted materials to the young scholar in the mid-to-late 1970s. These works were acquired by Nekimken at a time of rampant political censorship and intellectual persecution—exemplified by the fact that many of the publications and performances in the collection were banned or subject to great censorship by the Turkish government. Among the works in the collection are those by well-known writers such as Orhan Asena, Engin Cezzar, Güngör Dilmen, Muhsin Ertuğrul, Nâzım Hikmet, Orhan Kemal, Aziz Nesin, and Haldun Taner. This newly described and processed collection held in the Booth Family Center for Special Collections at Georgetown University offers new directions to students and scholars of political theater, the history of Modern Turkey, Turkish-German literary exchanges, and intellectual histories of the Cold War. The collection also gives educators hoping to bring primary sources into the classroom new pedagogical tools to explore histories of censorship, erasure, and contentious politics.

### **Introduction**

A striking experience recounted by Albert Nekimken, a former Peace Corps volunteer turned researcher of 1960s and 1970s Turkish theater, is picking up the morning paper, only to read that the plays he had just purchased a few days prior from a local bookstore had been banned by the Turkish authorities.<sup>2</sup> Nekimken was not surprised by the polemical content of the plays or the government's reaction—he was researching what he termed Turkey's Brechtian political theater at the time—but was instead struck by the seemingly ad hoc nature of government censorship.

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<sup>2</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, interview by Sylvia Önder, January 2022, Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library.

To ban a text after its publication, to blacklist an author seemingly haphazardly, or to round up pamphlets from bookshops and organizations, seemed to him an unusual and arbitrary method of trying to control literary and intellectual production. But it was one that undoubtedly struck fear into playwrights, actors, activists, and intellectuals of 1970s Turkey. The zeitgeist of this period, characterized by vibrant cultural production yet also pervasive political violence between the Turkish government and militant groups on the political right and left, is in part captured in the materials Nekimken gathered during this time.

In the late 1960s, Albert Lee Nekimken (b. 1944) served as a United States Peace Corps volunteer in Tokat, Turkey.<sup>3</sup> It was there his interest in political theater first developed, after seeing a performance in Central Anatolia by the traveling troupe of the Teachers' Union of Turkey titled *Ayak Bacak Fabrikası* (*The Feet-Leg Factory*) written by Sermet Çağan (d. 1970).<sup>4</sup> The play, to Nekimken, seemed influenced by Turkish-German literary exchanges and was bolstered by intellectual interests sparked by waves of labor migration. These observations piqued Nekimken's interest in the literary bedfellows these exchanges produced: Nekimken saw "a striking similarity between the social, political, and artistic context of theater in Berlin in the 1930s and Istanbul in the 1960s."<sup>5</sup> He recounts that the play centers around the issue of coal dust pollution resulting from unregulated industrialization: the ruling elite convince those who protest against the pollution that coal dust is, in fact, good for them, and when people start losing their body parts due to contamination, the government promises them that a 'feet-leg factory', too, will be

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Sermet Çağan, *Ayak-Bacak Fabrikası: Oyun* (İstanbul: İzlem Yayınevi, 1965). For more on Sermet Çağan's life and literary output, see: Ela Gezen, "Brecht and Turkish Political Theater: Sermet Çağan's *Savaş Oyunu* (1964)," in *Back to the Future: Tradition and Innovation in German Studies*, edited by Marc Silberman (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 173-193.

<sup>5</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, "The Impact of Bertolt Brecht on Society and the Development of Political Theater in Turkey," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 4(1) (1980): 9.

built.<sup>6</sup> For Nekimken, the work, set in an unnamed country but mirroring events in Turkey detailed in a 1962 article in the socialist publication *Yön*,<sup>7</sup> was marked by the clear influence of a dramatic giant: Bertolt Brecht (d. 1956).

This Brechtian influence on Turkish drama would come to fascinate Nekimken upon his return to Turkey from 1975 to 1976 as a Fulbright fellow (working in the Turkish Ministry of Education and the American Research Institute in Ankara).<sup>8</sup> During this time, he conducted research on contemporary Turkish theater and politics, amassing plays, works of theatrical criticism, periodicals, screenplays, short stories, novels, and rare recordings of performances, among other materials. This collection, too, began taking a life of its own as playwrights, intellectuals, and others participated in interviews or gifted materials to the young scholar in the mid-to-late 1970s.

Upon returning to the United States, Nekimken completed his doctoral studies in comparative literature at the University of California, Riverside, defending his dissertation titled “The Impact of Bertolt Brecht on Society and the Development of Political Theater in Turkey” in 1978.<sup>9</sup> He produced a short article bearing the same title for the *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin*, published in March 1980,

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<sup>6</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, interview by Sylvia Önder, January 2022, Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library; See also: Sermet Çağan, *Ayak Bacak Fabrikası* (Istanbul: İzlem Yayınları, n.d.); Sermet Çağan, *Fabrique Orthopédique* (Ankara: Başnur Matbaası, 1968). Çağan’s work and its 1968 French translation are in the Collection.

<sup>7</sup> Ela Gezen, “Brecht and Turkish Political Theater: Sermet Çağan’s *Savaş Oyunu* (1964),” in *Back to the Future: Tradition and Innovation in German Studies*, edited by Marc Silberman (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 177.

<sup>8</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, interview by Sylvia Önder, January 2022, Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library.

<sup>9</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, “The Impact of Bertolt Brecht on Society and the Development of Political Theater in Turkey,” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1978).

summarizing his key findings from the dissertation.<sup>10</sup> Nekimken argued that the introduction of Brecht's works to Turkey worked as a "great catalyst," inspiring many left-leaning artists to produce Brechtian works that were "in favor of a kind of theater which could serve the ends of Marxist revolution."<sup>11</sup>

The Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, now housed in Georgetown University's Booth Family Center for Special Collections, is composed of these primary research materials assembled by Nekimken in Turkey as he worked on his dissertation on the influence of Brecht and of German Marxist politics, more generally, on modern theater in Turkey. The collection consists of a number of Turkish literary serials, 183 volumes of published plays (some banned, many now scarce or rare), theater history and criticism written mainly from 1960 to 1975, and 29 audio cassettes containing performances and interviews with actors, playwrights and screenwriters, recorded by Nekimken in 1975 and 1976.<sup>12</sup>

Donated by Nekimken to Georgetown in 2022, the collection has now been processed and described by Georgetown University Library's Manuscripts Archivist Ted Jackson and other staff and is accompanied by an oral history interview conducted in January 2022 with Professor Sylvia Önder who facilitated the donation. In the interview, Nekimken narrates his time spent, first in Central Anatolia then Istanbul (though with travel across Turkey) and tells the story of how this collection came to be.<sup>13</sup>

The collection itself takes up seven linear feet, comprised of five short-lidded boxes, four document cases of books, and one

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<sup>10</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, "The Impact of Bertolt Brecht on Society and the Development of Political Theater in Turkey," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 4(1) (1980): 9-13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13; Albert L. Nekimken, "The Impact of Bertolt Brecht on Society and the Development of Political Theater in Turkey," (PhD dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1978), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection Finding Aid, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library.

<sup>13</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, interview by Sylvia Önder, January 2022, Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library.

document case of audio cassettes. Many of the books in the collection are fragile, have mass-market bindings, and are made from inferior glues and acidic papers. Perhaps the true gems within the broader collection are the audio cassette recordings. These recordings, for the most part, seem to be well-preserved, but some tape leaders have separated from the spools, and access to the recordings is restricted until the content can be safely transferred to digital media for preservation purposes. The Georgetown University Library plans to digitize these recordings so that their contents can be made available for use by researchers.

The content of the interviews conducted with playwrights, including several Nekimken described as fearing for their lives and fearing police surveillance and crackdowns, has not before been made public, outside of the context of Nekimken's dissertation.<sup>14</sup> Georgetown University Library and S. Berk Metin, a researcher at Simon Fraser University, are also in the process of promoting this collection to researchers in a number of fields, including political theater, the history of Modern Turkey, Turkish-German literary exchanges, and intellectual histories of the Cold War.

The recordings, both the oral history interview and Nekimken's own recordings of research interviews and theatrical performances, help illustrate other exceptional aspects of the collection. Many of the textual works have been identified through OCLC as the only or one of few copies in North American institutions. While a good portion of the monograph-length works are not unique to this collection, many of them are inscribed by the playwright or performers, and indeed even more of them were given to Nekimken by the creators themselves, which shows the exceptional provenance of the material. In some cases, the texts appear not to have been meant for commercial distribution, and Nekimken describes how on occasion, playwrights simply gave him the scripts used by actors during their performances (when there was no version of the text that was bound or for sale).<sup>15</sup>

The Nekimken Collection, thus, has much to offer scholars of Turkish literature as well as comparatists with interests in the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

multidirectional influences between Turkish and other languages' dramatic oeuvres of the time. On one level, the collection is a great window into dramatic and literary change-making, to innovations spurred on by Turkish men and women of letters. However, we believe this collection has much to offer historians and social scientists as well, reading the collection's works as primary sources, from material and sociological points of view.

### **The Rise of Brechtian Theater in Turkey and its Diasporas**

The Nekimken Collection serves as a testament to a rising interest in political theater in Turkey, and in Brechtian theater in the 1960s and 1970s in particular. This interest soon became influential. And scholars like Ela Gezen argue that the Brechtian trend in Turkish theater was propelled by waves of Turkish migrants and students in Europe, and in Germany more specifically, who participated in theatrical productions and festivals and subsequently contributed to the bolstering of the genre in Turkey itself.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the multidirectional movement, both of people and ideas, played an important role in shaping the Brechtian trend of theater in Turkey.

This trend, momentous in its heyday, has not always received proper attention from researchers. Scholars like Hülya Adak and Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay have more recently argued that it remains relatively understudied within the English-language scholarly literature (outside of the work of pioneers like Nekimken, Gezen, and a handful of others). “In part as a consequence of the Orientalist legacy,” argue Adak and Altınay, “European and North American scholars have primarily focused on the Ottoman popular performances such as the story-tellers known as *meddah*, the shadow theatre

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<sup>16</sup> Ela Gezen, *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018); Ela Gezen, “Brecht and Turkish Political Theater: Sermet Çağan’s *Savaş Oyunu* (1964),” in *Back to the Future: Tradition and Innovation in German Studies*, edited by Marc Silberman (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 173-193.

*Karagöz*, the farces known as *ortaoyunu*, and the *köçeks*, male dancers who entertained men.”<sup>17</sup>

Emphasizing the significance of Brechtian theater in Turkey, in contradistinction to the older Ottoman-influenced performance genres, Nekimken himself suggests that the sensitivity of the political climate of the 1970s was reflected in the Turkish government’s censorship efforts against Brecht’s or Brechtian works due to their potentially contentious nature. The government’s posture in this period vis-à-vis the Turkish stage raises a great number of questions that concern scholars of Turkish cultural production today just as they vexed Nekimken during his research. Chief among these lines of inquiry is the following question: Why was this “Brechtian” aspect of the works so important?

Brechtian theater employed the use of a distancing or alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), a term attributed in an essay of literary criticism authored by Brecht, titled “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” though he largely came to adopt this same method in much of his own dramatic work.<sup>18</sup> This method, Brecht argued, is designed to distance the audience from emotional engagement with the characters and the plot in order to prevent the audience from getting lost in the story.<sup>19</sup> Instead, in Brecht’s view, this method encourages them to think critically about the social and political issues presented in a dramatic work; and this central social or political stake is referred to as the *gestus* of Brechtian theater.<sup>20</sup>

While this central *gestus* could take the form of something as seemingly banal as the act of a pedestrian crossing a busy street, as we find in the writings of Necati Cumalı (d. 2001), larger questions come to flow from this simple act, such as, why are there no crosswalks in

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<sup>17</sup> Hülya Adak and Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay, “Introduction: Theatre and Politics in Turkey and Its Diasporas,” *Comparative Drama* 52(3/4) (2018): 186.

<sup>18</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91-99.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 42

Istanbul?<sup>21</sup> Or, why are the sidewalks nothing but spaces for parked automobiles? Why does the municipality spend millions on newly opened roads while neglecting the place of the individual human being?

As one can imagine, given this attention to topics of social and political intrigue, Brechtian works were produced by left-wing Turkish intellectuals who saw in these methods a route to engage with pressing issues in Turkish society. Even as the themes of these works were often abstracted from their initial context, Ela Gezen notes that it was not uncommon for leftist playwrights to collect clippings from journals and news publications, (which were) later used to inspire their works.<sup>22</sup> This documentary inclination in a great number of works, at times, appears as a direct corollary from playwrights' concurrent or prior roles as contributors to leftist publications and newspapers, as was the case for Sermet Çağan, having written for *Öncü*, *Vatan*, and *Dünya*.<sup>23</sup>

### **Theater and Political Violence: The Making of the Nekimken Collection**

The 1970s in Turkey, when Nekimken was in the country collecting the works in this collection, were marked by political instability and extensive violence between far-left and far-right militant groups. Thirteen cabinets formed the government at various stages of this decade, with many of them being unable to establish a stable government for more than a year.<sup>24</sup> Government institutions,

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<sup>21</sup> Necati Cumalı, *Senin İçin Ey Demokrasi* (İstanbul: Çağdaş Yayınları, 1976), 75-80. See also: Albert L. Nekimken, "The Impact of Bertolt Brecht on Society and the Development of Political Theater in Turkey," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 4(1) (1980): 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> Ela Gezen, "Brecht and Turkish Political Theater: Sermet Çağan's *Savaş Oyunu* (1964)," in *Back to the Future: Tradition and Innovation in German Studies*, edited by Marc Silberman (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 179.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> For a study on the impact of politics on Turkish State Theater (*Devlet Tiyatroları*), see: Emre Savut, "Türkiye'de Sanat-Siyaset İlişkisi Bağlamında

most notably the police, were also divided along ideological and factional lines. It was within this context of instability and polarization that inter-factional violence escalated, and around five thousand people are estimated to have been killed (with many more who were wounded, tortured, or ‘disappeared’).<sup>25</sup> Despite the relatively low number of deaths compared to other civil conflicts of the twentieth century, the broader impact of such indelible violence in the country has prompted some scholars to define this period as the “Turkish Civil War.”<sup>26</sup> Alp Yenen explains that this “low-intensity civil war...[took] the form of urban mob violence, clandestine political violence, rural paramilitary violence, and extra-legal state violence.”<sup>27</sup>

The ideological tensions of this period were borne in the cultural domain in various ways and were also reflected in the government’s censorship efforts. In his work, Nekimken argues that the government’s endeavors to censor works by Brecht or those influenced by his style stemmed from their potential to provoke opposition.<sup>28</sup> He also notes that while articles about Brecht could be published without trouble in the state-issued journal *Devlet Tiyatrosu* in 1955, merely mentioning Brecht’s name twenty years later in 1975 “caused the entire issue to be recalled from distribution,” a testament

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Devlet Tiyatroları Örneği” (Master’s thesis, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, 2014), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Alp Yenen, “Legitimate Means of Dying: Contentious Politics of Martyrdom in the Turkish Civil War (1968–1982),” *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilisation* 12(1) (2019): 15. For estimates of casualties, Yenen cites Sabri Sayarı, “Political Violence and Terrorism in Turkey, 1976–80: A Retrospective Analysis,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22(2) (2010): 198-215; William Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> Alp Yenen, “Legitimate Means of Dying: Contentious Politics of Martyrdom in the Turkish Civil War (1968–1982),” *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilisation* 12(1) (2019): 14-34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, “The Impact of Bertolt Brecht on Society and the Development of Political Theater in Turkey,” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1978), 11.

to just how much the literary and dramatic scene—and its propensity to spur political action—had changed in the intervening decades.<sup>29</sup>

In this context, Nekimken went on to see plays in different parts of the country and was able to interview numerous prominent playwrights and actors, who were producing their work within a left-wing artistic network, and was given a noteworthy portion of this collection by them.<sup>30</sup> Among others, he met with Haldun Taner (d. 1986)—one of the most notable playwrights of the Brechtian genre—who gave Nekimken a copy of his acclaimed play *Keşanlı Ali Destanı* (*The Ballad of Ali of Keşan*), which was first published in 1964 and became a classic of Turkish theater. *Keşanlı Ali Destanı* was so successful that it has been “acknowledged as the first Turkish epic play in a Brechtian mode, and even dubbed the Turkish *Threepenny Opera* by reviewers.”<sup>31</sup> The collection holds three copies of this play, one published in English (1970) and two in Turkish (one published in 1977 and the other one is undated).

The collection includes other plays by Taner: *Devekuşu'na Mektuplar* (*Letters to the Ostrich*) and *Sancho'nun Sabah Yürüyüşü* (*Sancho's Morning Walk*), the former having markings and the latter being in pristine condition. The 1977 edition of *Keşanlı Ali Destanı* includes a second play titled *Sersem Kocanın Kurnaz Karısı* (*The Cunning Wife of the Goofy Husband*), another Turkish theater classic, originally written in 1969. Nekimken recounts that Taner gave him a

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Another challenge was the technical difficulty of contacting people he desired to interview, as phone books and other directories were largely unavailable at the time. As a result, the success of his project largely depended on his network. See: Albert L. Nekimken, interview by Sylvia Önder, January 2022, Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library.

<sup>31</sup> Ela Gezen, *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), 27. Gezen also writes that “Haldun Taner studied drama in Vienna in the mid-1950s, during which time he encountered Brecht’s work at the Kammerspiele in Munich for the first time,” see: Ela Gezen, *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), 17.

bundle of plays; we might assume that the aforementioned plays were given to him by Taner, too. Crucially, the collection includes two recordings of Nekimken's interview with Taner on Bertolt Brecht in audiocassette form, both recorded on October 27, 1975.

It was also during this time that Nekimken met with theater actor and director Genco Erkal (d. 2024), who had directed Taner's *Keşanlı Ali Destanı* in 1963-64. Erkal, too, had been at the forefront of Brechtian theater in Turkey in the 1960s. Like many authors of the works present in the Nekimken Collection, Erkal had been targeted by right-wing factions as well as the Turkish government due to the critical and "alleged[ly] communist" message of Brechtian plays he directed or played in.<sup>32</sup> Although he had not published any works by the time he met Nekimken, Erkal was an innate part of the aforementioned artistic network as an actor and director, and we will return to him on the issue of censorship and persecution when discussing the difficulties Nekimken faced in collecting his material.

Nekimken also met with Güngör Dilmen (d. 2012), another acclaimed left-wing playwright, who, in typical Brechtian fashion, leveraged theater as a medium to convey social and political criticism. There are three plays written by Dilmen in the collection: *The Ears of Midas*, in English (1967); and *Les Orteils*, in French (1974); *Ak Tanrılar*, in Turkish (1976); as well as an edited volume that includes plays by him (1969). *The Ears of Midas* was Dilmen's first play and was written as an allegorical mockery of politicians. Dilmen's inaugural work served as the first part of his Midas Trilogy, a compendium of theatrical pieces about the Phrygian King Midas that critiqued politicians' hubris and corruption. In addition to these works, Dilmen gave Nekimken copies of unpublished plays.

In *Ak Tanrılar (White Gods)*, Dilmen criticized blind adherence to religion and contended that societies that rely overly on religious dogma, rather than embracing rationalism, risk being overpowered by technologically advanced enemies. The play is about the Spaniards triumphing over the Aztecs, whose obsession with dogma and superstition prevents them from noticing and combatting

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<sup>32</sup> Ela Gezen, *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), 23.

an impending imperialist invasion. This thinly veiled allegory of contemporary events in Turkey suggested that unless Turkish society moves away from superstitious adherence to religion and embraces secularism, it faces the peril of annihilation at the hands of Western imperialists.

In addition to Taner, Erkal, and Dilmen, Nekimken met with Metin And (d. 2008) and Engin Cezzar (d. 2017), both of whom had been extremely influential in the introduction of Brechtian theater to Turkish audiences in the sixties.<sup>33</sup> The theater troupe led by Cezzar and Gülriz Sururi (d. 2018) performed Taner's *Keşanlı Ali Destanı* in 1964, directed in this iteration by Genco Erkal.<sup>34</sup> The collection holds thirteen books by And (published between 1960-70) and one book by Cezzar (published in 1973). In addition, the recording of Nekimken's interview with Cezzar (dated April 26, 1976) is included in the collection.

Notable works from the 1970s in the Nekimken Collection include works by Muhsin Ertuğrul, (d. 1979), one of the pioneers of modern Turkish theater who also played a central role in the discussions and censorship surrounding Brechtian plays.<sup>35</sup> Under his management, the Istanbul Municipal Theater (*Şehir Tiyatrosu*) performed a play by Brecht in 1964, and Ertuğrul's position was threatened by right-wing groups and the government who were worried that he was overly lenient with regard to Brechtian plays, which they interpreted to be dangerous.<sup>36</sup> In his capacity as the head of the Municipal Theater, which he had managed since its opening in 1914, Ertuğrul employed left-wing actors and playwrights such as Haşmet Zeybek (d. 2013) whose plays *Irgat (Peasant)*, published in 1975, and *Düğün ya da Davul (Wedding or Drum)*, published in 1976,

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<sup>33</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, "The Impact of Bertolt Brecht on Society and the Development of Political Theater in Turkey," (PhD dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1978), vii-viii.

<sup>34</sup> Ela Gezen, *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-26.

are included in the collection. Nekimken recounts that the *Şehir Tiyatrosu* gave him a number of items as well.<sup>37</sup>

Orhan Asena's (d. 2001) acclaimed plays were banned in 1971 under the repressive political climate intensified by the 1971 military coup. Indeed, after the coup, Asena had to flee to Germany, where he lived until his return to Turkey eight years later.<sup>38</sup> His award-winning play *Şili'de Av (The Hunt in Chile)*, which criticized the right-wing military coup that toppled Salvador Allende (d. 1973) in Chile, was directed by Genco Erkal in the *Dostlar Tiyatrosu* in 1973, and its 1975 edition is in the Nekimken Collection, among a total of six works authored by Asena.

### Confronting Censorship

It is important to note that while the 1971 amendments to the 1961 constitution (which were introduced after the military coup of 1971) might have intensified censorship,<sup>39</sup> it is hardly the case that

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<sup>37</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, interview by Sylvia Önder, January 2022, Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library.

<sup>38</sup> Asmin N. Singez, "Diyarbakır Devlet Tiyatrosu Orhan Asena Yerli Oyunlar Festivali İçin Bir Öneri," *Tiyatro Dünyası*, May 10, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Zoeteweyj-Turhan describes the 1971 changes to press freedom in Turkey as catastrophic, while designating Turkey as a "totalitarian" country. See: Margarite Helena Zoeteweyj-Turhan, "Freedom of Speech in Turkey's Social Media: Democracy 'alla turca'," *Biblioteca della libertà* XLIX (2014): 113. However, this kind of sweeping generalization overlooks the arbitrary and disordered nature of censorship as well as the artists' attempts at contesting and subverting them. This is not to deny the negative impact of the 1971 amendments, but to highlight that censorship was not exclusive to that period. Perhaps more importantly, the term 'totalitarian' suggests that the government managed to silence the artists, which was not the case. Zoeteweyj-Turhan's study is otherwise a very useful overview of the history of censorship in Turkey from a political and legal perspective. For a general study concerning this issue, see: Kemal Karpaz, "Military Interventions: Army-Civilian Relation in Turkey before and after 1980," in *State*,

left-wing works became the recipients of governmental fury for the first time in the seventies. Indeed, Emin Karaca (d. 2021), in his study of censorship of books in Turkey, writes that the situation in the sixties was already dire: “...the [1961] Constitution says so [about censorship], but as seen in numerous examples, the practices lean heavily against the Constitution.”<sup>40</sup> Brechtian works had been banned in the sixties and Muhsin Ertuğrul’s position as the head of the *Şehir Tiyatrosu* had become precarious because of such plays that were performed under his management.<sup>41</sup> The ideological divide was also already reflected in publications dealing with cultural debates: In 1967, the right-wing periodical *Millî Hareket* (National Movement), which was affiliated with the Grey Wolves, featured analyses critiquing leftist dominance in culture and advocated for its repossession from the left’s pernicious influence.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, the application of censorship was highly arbitrary already in the sixties. Indeed, one could unknowingly possess incriminating material: In 1967, the house of the Turkish author, playwright, and social critic Aziz Nesin (d. 1995) was raided by the police, prompted by the discovery of several books in his possession which, the police claimed, had been banned. In an article he penned for the periodical *Türk Solu* after the incident, Nesin asked his readership if they were aware of the list of books that were banned by the government. After all, Nesin sarcastically reminded, one must refrain from accidentally committing a crime by possessing such publications. He explained the absurd bureaucracy of censorship which renders it impossible to know which books were banned or “the ridiculousness of our [Turkey’s] banning of books”, as follows:

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*Democracy and the Military: Turkey in the 1980s*, edited by Metin Heper and Ahmet Evin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988).

<sup>40</sup> Emin Karaca, *Vaaay Kitabın Basına Gelenler!..* (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları), 179.

<sup>41</sup> Ela Gezen, *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), 25.

<sup>42</sup> A. Ceng Bahadıroğlu, “Solcu Basın ve Memleketimizdeki Durum,” *Millî Hareket*, March 10, 1967, 14-15.

Books are banned by the order of the cabinet. Then, the banning decisions are published in the Official Gazette. Therefore, there should be no confidentiality regarding...which publications are banned. On the contrary, these [banned publications] should then be known. Perchance, a book that includes [the list of] all the banned publications was kept confidential ...What a book! It lists banned publications, yet it remains a mystery itself!<sup>43</sup>

Nesin went on to recount the tale of how he inadvertently found out that his own works had been banned, how he went in and out of prison as a result, and lamented the arbitrariness inherent in censorship. Controversial for his outspoken atheism, Nesin would narrowly escape death during the Madimak Massacre of 1993 when a mob set fire to a hotel housing left-wing and/or Alevi intellectuals during a cultural festival.<sup>44</sup> In other words, dissenting voices had to endure repression beyond the 1970s.

In his works, Nesin used humor as a didactic device to prompt his audience to critically reflect on contemporary social and political issues. The Nekimken Collection holds nineteen works by Nesin, published between 1965 and 1983. While it is not easy to determine which books were banned due to the arbitrary application of censorship, his book *Azizname* was officially banned by the order of the cabinet due to its lampooning of authorities.<sup>45</sup> *Azizname*'s 1973

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<sup>43</sup> Aziz Nesin, "Anayasa Mahkemesine Verilmesi Gereken Utanç Belgesi: Yasak Kitaplar," *Türk Solu* (November 1967), 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> Genco Erkal would write a play about the massacre of 1993 titled *Sivas 93*. For a study of the play and the developments leading up to the massacre, including the deliberate targeting of Aziz Nesin, see: Merve Atasoy, "Commemorative Hospitality in Documentary Theatre: Revisiting the Collective Memory in Genco Erkal's *Sivas 93*," *Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi* 33 (2021): 21-41.

<sup>45</sup> The ban remained in place as late as 2001, when, ironically, Aziz Nesin's son Ali Nesin (b. 1956) also accidentally found out that the book was still banned after attempting to send it via mail to Germany, since the shipping of banned books to foreign countries was prohibited. See: Ali Nesin, [Letter to Supporters], *Nesin Vakfı*, July 2001. Also, see: "Kitaplar Hala Yasak,"

edition is in the Collection (in good condition with markings). The Collection also includes a rare recording of *Azizname*'s performance at *Dostlar Tiyatrosu* (20 April 1976), the theater founded by Genco Erkal in 1969.

There are several other authors of significant national and trans-regional renown whose works are in the collection. Famous communist poet Nâzım Hikmet (d. 1963), who infused his verses with social critique and revolutionary ideals and challenged the state discourse directly, faced multiple imprisonments, and ultimately died in the Soviet Union. In the collection are Hikmet's *Ferhat ile Şirin* (*Ferhat and Şirin*) published in 1965, *Kafatası* (*The Skull*) published in 1966, and *Bir Ölü Evi ya da Merhumun Hikayesi* (*A House of the Dead or the Story of the Departed*), published in 1966. Additionally, *Demoklesin Kılıcı* (*The Sword of Democles*), published in 1974, is in the collection in paperback format, in reasonably good form. Works by Hikmet, too, were among those banned by the authorities.<sup>46</sup>

Orhan Kemal (d. 1970), a famous left-wing novelist, and Yılmaz Güney (d. 1984), a leftist militant and acclaimed Kurdish filmmaker, faced similar reprisals: Kemal had been imprisoned in 1966 for spreading communist propaganda, whereas Güney was imprisoned in 1972 and 1974 for similar reasons. Orhan Kemal's *72. Koğuş* (*Cell Number Seventy-Two*) is a story of a prison inmate, most probably inspired by his personal history (the book was later adapted as a theater play). A signed paperback edition of *72. Koğuş*, published in 1958, is in the collection. Yılmaz Güney was imprisoned again on murder charges for shooting and killing a state prosecutor then escaped from prison in 1981 and died in France in 1984. Güney claimed that he was innocent until his death. Four screenplays of three movies directed and starred by Güney, *Umut* (*Hope*) produced in

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*Düşünce Özgürlüğü Bülteni, Sabit Fikir*, September 14, 2012; Emin Karaca, *Vaaay Kitabın Basına Gelenler!..* (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları), 363.

<sup>46</sup> Emin Karaca, *Vaaay Kitabın Basına Gelenler!..* (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları), 13-14; 54-66.

1975, and *Endişe (Anxiety)*, and two screenplays of *Arkadaş (Friend)*, all produced in 1976, are in the collection.<sup>47</sup>

It is, thus, possible to regard the Nekomken Collection as a valuable resource for understanding this particular epoch and the left-wing intellectuals' contributions to political theater. This epoch finds its roots in the 1960s with the inception of Brechtian influences in Turkey, and Nekomken's research and the collection that came out of it carries the marks of this period.<sup>48</sup> Adding to the collection's significance, these texts were acquired by Nekomken at a time of rampant political censorship and intellectual persecution—exemplified by the fact that many of the publications and performances in the collection were banned or subject to great censorship by the Turkish government.

The criticisms of social and political structures, born from these works, were seen as threats by the Turkish government as they often confronted the status quo, and as a result, the government was engaged in a campaign to censor material that it deemed to be politically contentious. These bans, not the top-down edicts that the popular imagination of censorship often conjures, at times seem arbitrary, discretionary, or impromptu, and other times, more spelled out or explicit. As a result, decisively distinguishing 'banned' works in this collection remains a difficult task, but we can easily say that almost all of them, due to their Brechtian nature, were deemed to be dangerous material.

Still, some writers in this period made efforts to document such bans, seeing this work of documenting as a political act in itself.

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<sup>47</sup> For a more comprehensive list of Güney's banned works and relevant court orders, see Emin Karaca, *Vaaay Kitabın Basına Gelenler!..* (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları), 427.

<sup>48</sup> Ela Gezen notes, "In support of the formation of a socialist Turkish theater, *Oyun* showed a particular interest in the works of Nazım Hikmet, Aziz Nesin, and Haldun Taner. Moreover, until its discontinuation in 1966, *Oyun*, in addition to promoting Turkish playwrights, was a leading force in introducing Brecht's plays and theories on theater to Turkish readers." See: Ela Gezen, *Brecht, Turkish Theater, and Turkish-German Literature: Reception, Adaptation, and Innovation after 1960* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), 20.

For example, Bülent Habora's (d. 2014) *Yasak Kitaplar (Banned Books)*, published in 1969 and distributed by his own publishing house, Habora Kitabevi, is an annotated list of banned books and is included in the Nekimken Collection.<sup>49</sup> Habora, in the book's opening, writes, "I dedicate this book to the prosecutor who confiscated the largest collection of books, to the expert witness who provided the most unfavorable reports, and to the politician who most frequently remarked, 'There is freedom of thought in Turkey'..."<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere in the collection, too, we see the audacious efforts of publishers, writers, and producers to bring attention to government efforts to blacklist their work. In the case of one item, the screenplay of *Umut* (1975), legal proceedings that took place against the creators of the work are included alongside the text. Another item included in the collection, *Poliste* (1967), is a bound anthology of articles by various authors about the legal problems faced by Aziz Nesin as a result of political opposition to his writing. Indeed, although he was able to meet with a great number of leftist literary and theatrical figures, Nekimken had to conduct his research and meet his interlocutors in a highly precarious setting. For example, he recounts that some of the playwrights and authors whom he met were afraid to speak to him. When Nekimken recounts his meeting with Genco Erkal, he relates that Erkal was visibly fearful of the police and of getting shot by ideological opponents.<sup>51</sup> Nekimken also recounts an incident during one notable performance where actors dressed as police officers came to the stage, leaving the audience terrified that it was a genuine police bust.<sup>52</sup>

The decade of inter-factional violence abruptly ended in 1980 when the Turkish Armed Forces took over the country's administration and brutally suppressed both factions, essentially monopolizing violence.<sup>53</sup> Scholarly estimates of the repressive impact

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<sup>49</sup> Bülent Habora, *Yasak Kitaplar* (İstanbul: Habora Kitabevi, 1969), 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Albert L. Nekimken, interview by Sylvia Önder, January 2022, Albert Nekimken Turkish Theater Collection, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> For more on the violence following the 1980 coup, see Alp Yenen, "Legitimate Means of Dying: Contentious Politics of Martyrdom in the

of rule by military junta in this period are striking, with estimates detailing “650,000 people were arrested, 1,683,000 were blacklisted, 230,000 were tried in 210,000 lawsuits, 388,000 were denied a passport, 30,000 left Turkey seeking political asylum, and 23,677 groups and organizations had their activities terminated.”<sup>54</sup> Following the coup, the military administration sought to appear as the sober and neutral representative of the Turkish state ethos, symbolized by General Kenan Evren’s austere remark, “[we hanged] one from the right, one from the left.”<sup>55</sup>

The repression that followed, affecting all aspects of social and political life in Turkey, also dealt a major blow to the cultural sector. Writers, playwrights, and actors of leftist persuasions were purged from positions, with major figures like Haşmet Zeybek summarily fired by the decision of the military government.<sup>56</sup> It was

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Turkish Civil War (1968–1982),” *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilisation* 12(1) (2019): 29-30. Yenen considers 1982, when a new constitution was adopted, and not 1980, as the end of the “Turkish Civil War.”

<sup>54</sup> Hülya Adak and Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay, “Introduction: Theatre and Politics in Turkey and Its Diasporas,” *Comparative Drama* 52(3/4) (2018): 199. Adak and Altınay, in turn, cite: *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, Ülkemizde Demokrasiye Müdahale Eden Tüm Darbe ve Muhtıralar ile Demokrasiyi İşlevsiz Kılan Diğer Bütün Girişim ve Süreçlerin Tüm Boyutları ile Araştırılarak Alınması Gereken Önlemlerin Belirlenmesi Amacıyla Kurulan Meclis Araştırması Komisyonu Raporu, vol. 1* (Ankara: Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2012), xiv-xv.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Kenan Evren, 97, Dies; After Coup, Led Turkey With Iron Hand,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2015; *12 Eylül*, directed by Mustafa Ünlü (1998; İstanbul: Gala, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> One of Zeybek’s friends and a fellow writer, Tuncer Cücenoglu, described the dismissal in an article, see: Tuncer Cücenoglu “Haşmet Zeybek’in Ardından,” *Aydinlik*, November 9, 2013. For the dismissals ordered after the 1980 coup (Law No. 1402) and their impact on theater, see Zerrin Akdenizli-Çelenk, “1980-1990 Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türk Tiyatrosunda Oyun Yazarlığında Görülen Eğilimler ve Kaynakları,” (PhD dissertation, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, 1999). For an interview with theater actor Cüneyt Türel (d. 2012) on Law No. 1402 and the dismissals, see: Lale Ulutepe, Sevilay

alleged that the coup of 1980 and the army's brutal repression, especially of the left, were welcomed by the United States government so much so that CIA's Turkey chief at the time, Paul B. Henze, gave the news of the coup to Jimmy Carter, while the latter was watching the play *Fiddler on the Roof*, by telling the president that "our boys have done it."<sup>57</sup>

Although the coup of 1980 put increased pressure on the publication of left-wing works, the Nekimken Collection includes three that were published in the 1980s, including: Osman Şengezer's (d. 2015) *Dekor, Kostüm (Decor, Costume)*, published in 1989, which is a study of the subjects mentioned in its title and includes several photographs and production notes for plays staged between 1960 and 1989. Aziz Nesin's *Bir Koltuk Nasıl Devrilir (How to Topple a Seat of Power)*, published in 1983, as well as a 1980 edition of his 1976 work *Surname (Book of Festivities)*; its print run occurring before the coup of the same year, potentially explaining why it was allowed to be published in the first place.

### **The Nekimken Collection in the Classroom**

Taking stock of the items in the Nekimken Collection and the tumultuous decades that serve as the context for their publication, it is difficult not to see the value such materials might bring to the university classroom. Should one compare the items in the collection with the Brechtian works that inspired them to teach about the circulation of ideas and how they get culturally translated or mediated? Is it worth focusing on the fragile mass-market bindings or pamphlet-like nature of some of the texts to ask students to imagine how their

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Saral, Ömer F. Kurhan and Celal Mordeniz, "Cüneyt Türel ile Söyleşi" *MIMESIS Tiyatro / Çeviri – Araştırma Dergisi* 6 (1996).

<sup>57</sup> This was put forward by journalist Melih Aşık. See: Melih Aşık, "Açık Pencere", *Milliyet*, September 12, 1990, 10; *12 Eylül*, directed by Mustafa Ünlü (1998; İstanbul: Gala, 1998). For U.S. government reactions in the wake of the Turkish military intervention, see: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Turkey, September 20, 1980, United States National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy File, P870143–1398, *Foreign Relations of the United States*.

physical characteristics and structure might mirror their possible uses? Should students explore the aesthetics or symbolism in the works' imagery, comparing them with images from other literary cultures or social movements? The list can go on and on.

However, we think it is worth dwelling on what we see as a particular pedagogical opportunity brought about by the Nekimken Collection's accession by Georgetown's Booth Family Center for Special Collections. Like in many centers for special collections, classes held in the Booth Family Center allow students to engage materially with the works they are studying and to get to know the social and political contours of a particular period of focus. Pairing the items with Nekimken's oral history interview about his work, however, adds a unique dimension to the collection and provides an affordance not always given to researchers working within archives or library special collections. That is, Nekimken's own words serve as a guide, of sorts, to the period: the challenges of research, reading, and writing and the resilience and vibrancy of Turkish political culture.

As Nekimken's own words suggest, among the most pressing questions one might raise looking at the items, are those about censorship, surveillance, and freedom of expression and their relationship to the theatrical works in the collection. We are at a juncture in time where libraries increasingly seek to shed light on the renewed rise of draconian book bans and their own potential role to play in promoting both freedom of expression and the freedom to read.<sup>58</sup> With that said, even as banned books are promoted by libraries and educational institutions and the importance of these freedoms are valorized, it is less common that we examine the historical mechanisms by which works were censored or banned in specific contexts.

Teaching with the Nekimken Collection offers a way to engage on a granular level with political conflict in a particular moment, showing how it is reflected in the cultural record (through

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<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth A. Harris and Alexandra Alter, "Book Bans Are Rising Sharply in Public Libraries," *New York Times*, September 21, 2023; Laura Winnick, "Book Ban Battles & Reading Wars: When Politics Come for Literacy, How Do Libraries Ensure It's the Kids Who Win?" *Library Journal* 149(2) (2024): 24.

opposing articles in print serials, legal proceedings, and stories of hasty or ad hoc decisions to ban works). In short, through this collection and the accompanying materials mentioned, one gets a sense of what censorship and cultural repression looked like “in real-time.”

Among the advantages of teaching with the collection in this way is that it helps nuance popular conjuring of the idea of censorship as an entirely legalistic enterprise, instead pushing us to examine the aspects of censorship that may sit outside of formal legal institutions or frameworks. Encouraging her readers to look beyond “institutionalized public censorship” alone when it comes to modern Turkey, Neslihan Kansu-Yetkiner writes:

“Censorship practices can be defined and classified in various different ways. An institutionalized public censorship is carried out by public authorities through enforcing explicit laws, and building a censorial macrostructure to shield the whole nation from dissident voices. Structural censorship, as a concept coined by Bourdieu, constitutes censorship in the form of a naturalized control of a desirable discourse imposed by a set of unwritten rules rather than explicit laws.”<sup>59</sup>

As evidenced by the examples of Aziz Nesin in his article in *Türk Solu* and others featured in the collection, oftentimes authors and actors themselves only became aware of these “unwritten rules” once the authorities came knocking at their doors or barreling onto their stages.

In this same vein, in his work on book bans in Fascist Italy, historian Guido Bonsaver emphasizes the importance of “tak[ing] into account other forms of censorship that fell outside the realm of ‘legal

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<sup>59</sup> Neslihan Kansu-Yetkiner, “Banned, Bagged, Bowdlerized: A Diachronic Analysis of Censorship Practices in Children’s Literature of Turkey,” *History of Education & Children’s Literature* 11(2) (2016): 102. See also: Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Italy.”<sup>60</sup> He continues, “Bookshop owners could be threatened into withdrawing a certain publication from their shop windows. Theater performances could be stopped through violent protests. Newspaper editors could be strongly ‘advised’ to ignore a certain author. As we will see, censorship implied much more than just deleting sentences in red ink.”<sup>61</sup> Several of the above forms of censorship were employed in 1960s and 1970s Turkey, as previously discussed, and Nekimken’s own words draw attention to a good number of these instances. It was common in this period in Turkey for the government to prevent certain works from publication in accordance with martial law or to shutter publishing houses.<sup>62</sup> Yet, we also find that much of the censorship that took place in this period *ex post facto* once works had already been published, even some well into their third or fourth runs of printing.

Kansu-Yetkiner writes, too, of book confiscations, with “books written by prominent leftist writers...removed from the school curricula and libraries by the Ministry of Education,” even without their formal prohibition.<sup>63</sup> She details, “In a circular letter sent by the Ministry of Education to all schools [during the 1970s], certain books were named as sources of disruption of national civility, morals, social and familial values. Although they were not officially banned, these books which were not considered to accord with Turkish National Education Policy, were not allowed in school and class libraries, and those already present in schools were confiscated.”<sup>64</sup> Several of the specific authors Kansu-Yetkiner mentions as having been blacklisted during this decade, unsurprisingly, can be found among the works assembled by Nekimken.

Looking at the works in the Nekimken Collection, we might also ask questions raised by scholars about censorship in other

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<sup>60</sup> Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Neslihan Kansu-Yetkiner, “Banned, Bagged, Bowdlerized: A Diachronic Analysis of Censorship Practices in Children’s Literature of Turkey,” *History of Education & Children’s Literature* 11(2) (2016): 108.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*; See also: Semiha Şentürk, “Türkiye’de Kitabın Yargı Serüveni,” *Milliyet*, June 26, 2009.

contexts. For example, in his pioneering work on censorship of literature in post-revolutionary Iran, Alireza Abiz looks not only at the punishment of authors for writing works seen as unacceptable by the regime but also at how writers promoting ideas seen as favorable by the authorities are rewarded.<sup>65</sup> Reward and punishment, he writes, are “different tools for the same end,” further nuancing our thinking around the notion of censorship.<sup>66</sup>

Alongside the banned works in the Nekimken Collection, it is worth examining what state-funded publications from the period were lauded and officially valorized. From here, students and scholars might ask another crucial question underscored by Abiz: How does censorship affect a nation’s literature?<sup>67</sup> Among the most disastrous effects, he notes, is the rise of self-censorship, which he notes is “the absolute victory for the censor.”<sup>68</sup>

Further, with a severe decline of those speaking truth to power “literature cannot function as a true mirror [for society] anymore.”<sup>69</sup> “Censorship thus distorts the image of the society,” he writes.<sup>70</sup> Abiz’s lamentation in the case of Iran would have likely found echoes among leftist literary critics--especially Brechtian-inclined ones in 1960s and 1970s Turkey for whom literature’s ability to speak to social and political issues facing society remained paramount.

Engaging with students on such questions, certainly applicable far beyond the reach of the works in the Nekimken Collection, can be a powerful exercise. Through these materials, we can see both the challenges playwrights faced in negotiating bans and censorship and the true impact their work had. The Nekimken collection stands as a testament both to the evergreenness of these broader questions as well as to the burgeoning interest in political theater during the 1970s in Turkey, particularly in the realm of Brechtian theater, and the contentious landscape surrounding its

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<sup>65</sup> Alireza Abiz, *Censorship Of Literature In Post-Revolutionary Iran: Politics and Culture Since 1979* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 105-122.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-144.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-144.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

production, dissemination, and reception. We hope this essay serves as an invitation to newcomers and experts alike to think critically about the Turkish stage in this particular period.