

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# TALÂT PASHA (1943)

HUSEYİN CAHİT YALCIN

## Synopsis

Talât Pasha is one of the prominent figures of the Second Constitutional Period. His father, Ahmet Vasif Efendi, is an examiner. He studies at Alliance Israelite School for two years and continues in law school until the second year. He works in both the Postal and Telegraph Corporation as a clerk and Alliance School as a Turkish language instructor. He is sentenced to three years because of his political tendencies. After two years, in 1898, he is pardoned and then works as a chief clerk in the Postal and Telegraph Corporation. Yet, in 1907, he is dismissed because of his relationship with the Committee of Union and Progress. Later, he becomes a deputy, the minister of internal affairs, and the last grand vizier of the Party of Union and Progress. In 1918, when the armistice is accepted, he has to flee to Europe and is shot dead on the street in 1921.

Although the name of the book is Talât Pasha, Huseyin Cahit Yalcin shares his reflections on the Second Constitutional Period and a few memories highlighting Talât Pasha's some character traits.

## Events

### *Understanding the Period*

Huseyin Cahit Yalcin says that he feels compelled to explain about the revolution of the Committee of Union and Progress because anyone intending to understand Talât Pasha should first consider his social and political environment.

The committee attempts to document its history but cannot achieve it. At Mehmet Cavit's insistence, Talât Pasha, too, begins to write his life story, but cannot finish it because of the wars. Huseyin Cahit prepares his unfinished work for publication in 1946. However, he specifies that there is still not enough material to enlighten the period. For the press, the first destination to understand any modern era is full of articles against the committee. It is blamed for cruelty and oppressiveness, and committee members cannot have a chance to endear themselves to people amidst political turmoil and war.

### *The Spirit of the Committee of Union and Progress*

Huseyin Cahit exalts the committee. He even mystifies the relationship between the first members of the committee. For him, there are original committee members who experience the committee like a religion; as they take an oath by placing their hand on Quran and weapon, an invisible entity inspires them the love of country. They are linked to each other by a bond of fraternity. They call each other "brother," and whenever a committee member comes across another committee member, he embraces him as his brother. In this manner, Huseyin Cahit distinguishes a political party from a committee. He argues that a political party is to represent the interests of a defined group. However, a committee is composed of people who are ready to sacrifice their lives in honor of their country. Since the committee is active under an oppressive regime, a small mistake can cause someone's death. Thus, committee members are not allowed to blunder. This constant danger nurtures a feeling of brotherhood among them.

### *After the Constitution*

Huseyin Cahit says that when the constitution is restored, it is told that now freedom is in the country. However, some people even do not know what it means. Some describe it as a foreign nun. There is a lack of authority in the country. People demand that the elites of the old regime be punished. Yet as they see that law enforcement does not take into consideration their demand, they take the former ministers, detectives, and pashas to the jail. Some unmilitary and military young men control the streets. However, there is no anarchy, thanks to the committee.

The committee is a secret organization. But when the constitution is restored, the center and members become visible. Many opportunists join it for personal gain. Some of them pretend to be the leader of the branch in their city, although it does not have a leader. Yet Huseyin Cahit states that Talât Pasha comes forward with his devotion, ingenuity, and strong belief.

However, the old elite still hold the most important positions. The committee restores the constitution but does not exercise power. Some military members join the committee, but it is problematic because a committee member soldier can go against his superior. Thus, the committee prohibits soldiers from engaging in politics and turns the committee into a political party. However, some soldiers do not break their ties with the committee. Thus, in time, the first impression fades. People who cannot benefit from committee membership, or are offended by the committee, or lose their advantages because of the committee begin to attack it through the press. They call committee members "invisible hands" and "evil spirits" governing people in charge. Huseyin Cahit says that these opponents benefit from freedom the committee provides them.

#### *A Disintegrating Empire and the Committee*

Huseyin Cahit maintains that although the committee is in power between the years of 1908 and 1918, it is active only for six years. The years from 1914 to 1918 deserve a different analysis because of the war. During the revolutionary six-year-period, the committee has to deal with many internal and external problems since the Ottoman Empire is in the final stages of its downfall.

He mentions two problems that the committee has to face. First, ethnic elements conflict with each other, creating a security problem. In Rumelia, the gendarmerie is under the control of the Western powers. So, any case of Christian villagers is put forward as proof of the Turkish oppression. Ambassadors intervene in internal affairs for their political aims in the Ottoman Empire. Huseyin Cahit says that despite the re-enactment of the constitution, Western countries do not give up on their dream; a collapsed empire ready to be divided. In this manner, the international press always accuses the committee of oppressing the minorities.

However, the ethnic problems are not confined to the Christian elements. He argues that although Arabs or Albanians are proud of their ancestry, Turkish people cannot even say that they are Turks. The empire treats each Muslim community the same, hence the dominance of Arabs, Albanians, and other ethnic elements in the administration and the military. Yet Turkish villagers are under a heavy tax burden.

Second, the committee aims to ensure the dominance of the Turks throughout the empire. However, some Turks are in favor of decentralization. Huseyin Cahit expresses that decentralization means to tear the country with their own hands since the government has neither prestige nor power.

#### *The Committee in Power*

Huseyin Cahit underlines that the Committee of Union and Progress is not in power from July 1912 to January 1913. The committee restores the constitution and stays in power until July 1912. During the interval, the Balkan Wars erupt, and the committee comes to power again just a few months before the defeat. Thus, Huseyin Cahit insists that the reason for the defeat is the removal of the committee from management. As an example of incompetence in the war process, he quotes that when Ismail Hakkı Pasha, the quartermaster, is in charge he finds documents including a plan to be used in the case of mobilization untouched in the safe. So, it is unfair to attribute the defeat to the committee members.

However, he claims that the committee cannot dominate the empire because its members are not aware that they are entitled to govern. Furthermore, if they attempt to replace the old elite immediately after the re-enactment of the constitution, people strongly resist them. Thus, the first grand vizier is Sait Pasha. As the sultan still retains the authority to appoint interior and defense ministers, Sait Pasha's cabinet cannot stand the righteous criticisms and then collapses. Kâmil Pasha, Huseyin Hilmi Pasha, and Hakkı Pasha follow him. They are important figures of the old regime. Then Mahmut Sevket Pasha, who is the leader of the Action Army, becomes the grand vizier. Since he is a person who prefers to act independently, Huseyin Cahit does not count his administration as part of the committee program. He states that only after the raid on the Sublime Porte, Sait Halim Pasha establishes his cabinet, can the committee seize power in 1913, but it does not last long because the war erupts in 1914.

### *The Place of Talât Pasha in the Committee*

Huseyin Cahit appreciates Talât Pasha's life experiences rather than his educational background. After the constitution is reinstated, conservative, liberal, and radical groups emerge within the committee. Talât Pasha is a quick-witted person and manages to supervise these different groups on his own.

Some believe that everything would be settled violently. Some are fanatically religious and adamantly aim to control each aspect of social life. Huseyin Cahit states that they are the real enemies and Talât Pasha deal with them the most.

Another group of people is more ambitious and reformist. While the religious wing blames the committee of being irreligious, these reformists blame it for possessing oppressive features. These separatist groups leave the committee in time, but the committee continues to oscillate between the conservatives and reformists. It pursues a conservative and opportunist policy because these are Talât Pasha's character traits. For Huseyin Cahit, Talât Pasha is ready to die for his country, but he does not have a daring personality. For example, he can raid on the Sublime Porte but cannot support women's emancipation or the replacement of the Arabic letters with the Latin alphabet. Since parliament is mostly composed of people who cannot comprehend the necessity of separating religion from the state, Talât Pasha oscillates between conservative and reformist groups to keep the committee intact.

### *Talât Pasha's Character*

Huseyin Cahit shares a few stories to highlight Talât Pasha's character traits.

#### *On His Intelligence*

While working as an instructor at the Alliance Israelite School, he is arrested. The officers question him about a letter found at the house of one of his friends. In the letter, it is written, "Things are going well." However, he tricks the officers into thinking that he wrote the letter to a friend of him, and the sentence was to describe his affair with the daughter of the school principal. Then, the officers interrogate the girl, and the girl confirms what Talât said to protect him.

#### *On His Playfulness*

Talât's old friend Faik is the chief clerk of Grand Vizier Mehmet Ferit Pasha, and Talât secretly works for the committee in Adrianople. One day, the vizier sends Faik to Rumelia, and Faik cannot resist his desire to see his old friend, Talât. Talât welcomes Faik with great joy and takes him to the secret gathering place of the committee. As they come in, Talât introduces Faik to his friends, and his friends are shocked as the grand vizier's chief clerk stands in front of them. Then, Talât explains his friendship with Faik, and everybody feels relieved.

#### *On His Attitude toward Privileges*

During World War, the state rations bread. When Ismail Hakkı Pasha visits Talât at home, he sees Talât and his family eat rationed bread. The next day, he summons Talât's driver out and gives him white bread in a bag. Talât's family happily receives the bag. But after he comes home, he sends the bag back to Ismail Hakkı Pasha.

Similarly, when he becomes grand vizier, he does not move the grand vizier's mansion, thinking it would be hard to leave when they get used to living in it. He prefers to stay at his old house.

#### *On His Authoritarian Personality*

Huseyin Cahit mentions a note written about Talât Pasha by Suleyman Nazif, a writer, and bureaucrat. It reads that the real authority was Talât Pasha for ten years; he commanded as he wished, reduced anything he did not like to ashes. His violence scared even the sultan in such a way that Sultan Resat thought of himself as Talât Pasha's shadow.

## **Themes**

**Contextuality** Although the name of the book is Talât Pasha, Huseyin Cahit gives a great deal of importance to the Committee of Union and Progress. He states that since Talât Pasha is a political personality, he cannot be understood without his social and political environment. In that regard, he considers anything related to the committee something decisive in Talât Pasha's life. He tries to demonstrate that long-lasting socio-economic and political problems in the country, international media pressure, and different groups within the committee are decisive factors for Talât Pasha's persona. Talât Pasha, as an MP, the minister of internal affairs, and the grand vizier, embraces some features that he expects to work the best for his position while facing these problems. Thus, Huseyin Cahit invites his readers to evaluate Talât Pasha within this context.

## **Bibliography**

Yalcin, Huseyin Cahit. *Talât Pasa [Talât Pasha]*. Istanbul: Otuken, 2018 [1943]