

# Revealing the Translator as a Political and Cultural Agent: An Archival Research on Sabahattin Ali's Translational Practices

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## Article abstract

Sabahattin Ali (1907-1948) is a prominent figure in Turkish literary history. He was not only a renowned writer and journalist but also a notable translator. He was one of the founding members of the state-sponsored Translation Bureau (1940-1966). He translated many books, short stories, and articles from German into Turkish, both within and outside the Bureau. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, his socialist and Marxist convictions came to the forefront. He was imprisoned several times for disseminating socialist and communist propaganda. The periodicals he published and the works he wrote were banned and confiscated by the government. Despite the persecution he suffered, Ali held to his belief that socialism (and in particular, Marxism) was the only path toward national development and the only solution to the social and economic problems of the country. With this motivation in mind, he aimed to disseminate leftist ideas in the Turkish culture by way of translation. Even though Ali was an effective and productive translator, his translation-related activities have not attracted adequate attention among researchers. This study, therefore, aims to reinstate Sabahattin Ali as a translator, as well as a political and cultural agent. By referring to the concepts of "culture repertoire," "resistance," and "culture planning" proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar (1997, 2002), it explores Ali's resistance to the culture planning project of the single-party era of 1923-1945 and his attempts to develop an alternative repertoire of leftist works through translation. To give a wider picture of his ideologically motivated translational activities, certain primary sources available on Sabahattin Ali are analyzed, such as his published correspondence and the memoirs of his close circle of family and friends, which testify to his translation-related practices, to his political views and endeavours, as well as to the socio-political climate of the 1930s and 1940s in Turkey.

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**Keywords:** translation and ideology, agency, resistance, Republican Turkey, Sabahattin Ali

## Résumé

Sabahattin Ali (1907-1948) est une figure éminente de l'histoire littéraire turque. Il était non seulement un écrivain et un journaliste renommé, mais aussi un traducteur remarquable. Il a été l'un des membres fondateurs du Bureau de la traduction (1940-1966), financé par l'État. Il a traduit de nombreux livres, nouvelles et articles de l'allemand vers le turc, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur du Bureau. Dans les années 1930 et 1940, cependant, ses convictions socialistes et marxistes se sont retrouvées au premier plan. Il a été emprisonné à plusieurs reprises pour avoir fait de la propagande socialiste et communiste. Les périodiques qu'il a publiés et les œuvres qu'il a écrites ont été interdits et confisqués par le gouvernement. Malgré la persécution qu'il a subie, Ali est resté fidèle à sa conviction que le socialisme (et le marxisme) était la seule solution au développement national et aux problèmes sociaux et économiques du pays. Avec cette idée en tête, il a cherché à diffuser les idées de gauche dans la culture turque au moyen de la traduction. Même si Ali était un traducteur efficace et productif, ses activités liées à la traduction n'ont pas suffisamment attiré l'attention des chercheurs. Cette étude vise donc à réhabiliter Sabahattin Ali en tant que traducteur et agent politique et culturel. En nous référant aux concepts de « répertoire culturel », de « résistance » et de « planification culturelle » proposés par Itamar Even-Zohar (1997, 2002), nous explorons la résistance d'Ali au projet de planification culturelle de l'ère du parti unique (1923-1945), et ses tentatives de développer un répertoire alternatif d'œuvres gauchistes par le biais de la traduction. Afin de donner une image complète de ses activités de traduction motivées par l'idéologie, nous nous penchons sur certaines sources primaires disponibles sur Sabahattin Ali tels que sa correspondance publiée et les mémoires de son entourage proche, qui témoignent de ses pratiques liées à la traduction, de ses opinions et engagements politiques, ainsi que du climat sociopolitique des années 1930 et 1940 en Turquie.

**Mots-clés :** traduction et idéologie, agentivité, résistance, Turquie républicaine, Sabahattin Ali

## Introduction

Sabahattin Ali (1907-1948), a Turkish writer, poet, journalist, and translator, is a prominent figure in Turkish literary history. As one of the pioneers of the socialist realist movement in Turkish literature, he portrayed the living conditions of poor village people and the economic and psychological difficulties of peasants in his novels, and more particularly his short stories. Besides his literary production, Ali was also one of the most important translators of the early Republican era in Turkey (1923-1945). He translated several books, short stories, and articles from German into Turkish. Since his socialist and Marxist leanings were at the forefront in the 1930s and 1940s, he

was imprisoned several times for spreading socialist and communist propaganda, and his works were confiscated on the grounds that they criticized the economic and social policies of the government.

In the 1930s and 1940s, anti-communism gained considerable momentum in Turkey. The Press Law of 1931 gave the government the power to ban any newspaper or journal deemed to be promoting communism.<sup>1</sup> In 1936, the government introduced Articles 141 and 142 into the Turkish Penal Code, “making it a criminal offence to carry out what was broadly defined as ‘communist propaganda’” (Ahmad, 1993, p. 99). Moreover, in the late 1940s, the influence of the United States on Turkey grew considerably stronger with the Truman Doctrine<sup>2</sup> and the Marshall Plan.<sup>3</sup> As Erik Jan Zürcher argues, Turkey was obliged to fulfill the political and economic requirements of the United States in order to benefit from American political, economic, and military support (2004, p. 209). Accordingly, the government regarded communism and other leftist ideologies as the main danger. Censorship was imposed on leftist publications, individuals who were ideologically inclined to leftist politics were regarded as traitors, and a great number of intellectuals, journalists, writers, and translators were either imprisoned or subjected to intense public harassment and forced to flee the country.

In this socio-political climate, Sabahattin Ali held to his belief that socialism (and in particular Marxism) was the only path toward national development and only solution to the social and economic problems of the country. With this motivation in mind, he aimed to disseminate leftist ideas in the Turkish culture by way of translation. Even though Ali was an effective and productive translator, his translation-related activities have not attracted adequate attention

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1. In addition, the Press Law prohibited any publication that promoted the sultanate, the caliphate, or anarchism. It also laid down that anybody who wanted to establish a printing house or publish a newspaper or journal had to inform the government. Anyone who violated the law would face a penalty of 6 months to 3 years in prison.

2. Through the so-called Truman Doctrine launched on 12 March 1947 by President Harry S. Truman, the United States decided to provide military and economic aid to Turkey and Greece, and by extension, to any nation facing external and internal communist threats.

3. Announced on 5 June 1947 by the US Secretary of State George C. Marshall, the Marshall Plan was designed to offer financial aid to European countries to help them restore and stabilize their economies after World War II. The Plan was also intended to prevent the spread of communism by “eliminating poverty as a breeding ground for communism” (Zürcher, 2004, p. 209).

among researchers. This study aims to reinstate Sabahattin Ali as a translator, as well as a political and cultural agent. By referring to the concepts of “culture repertoire,” “resistance,” and “culture planning” proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar (1997, 2002), it explores Ali’s resistance to the culture planning project of the single-party era of 1923-1945, and his attempts to develop an alternative repertoire of leftist works through translation. To give a wider picture of his ideologically motivated translational activities, the article delves into certain primary sources available on Sabahattin Ali, such as his published correspondence and the memoirs of his relatives and friends, which testify to his translation-related practices, to his political views and endeavours, as well as to the socio-political climate of the 1930s and 1940s in Turkey. Before proceeding to the theoretical discussion and textual analysis of these sources, however, it may be useful to provide a short biography of Sabahattin Ali, focusing on his professional life, in order to demonstrate how the socio-cultural and political context to which he belonged shaped his ideas and activity.

### **The Turbulent Career of Sabahattin Ali**

Sabahattin Ali began his career as an author at an early age, publishing his first articles and poems in various local newspapers and journals. His career as a translator, however, began after his journey to Germany. In 1928, he won a four-year government scholarship to study German language and literature in Berlin and Potsdam, “part of a larger initiative aimed at creating a new Turkish intellectual youth educated in Western European languages” (Dickinson, 2017a, p. 8). Although he stayed in Germany for only a year and a half, this experience had a great impact on his life and work. After he gained competence in German, he immersed himself in leftist literature, reading and absorbing the major works of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, as well as other German writers and philosophers. He also used German as an intermediary language to access the works of Russian authors and politicians, thus becoming further acquainted with socialism, to which he adhered throughout his life.

Returning from Germany in 1930, he was appointed as a German language teacher in Aydin, Turkey. He met Nazım Hikmet, a Turkish poet and political activist described as a “romantic communist” (Göksu and Timms, 1999), who was working as a proofreader for

the magazine *Resimli Ay* [*Monthly Illustrated*]<sup>4</sup> in which Ali's first socialist-realist story was published (Sönmez, 2017, p. 12). One year later, Ali was arrested and imprisoned in Aydın for disseminating communist propaganda among his students. After three months he was cleared of blame, released, and appointed as a German language teacher in Konya, Turkey. During his stay in Konya, he started to write and translate articles for the newspaper *Yeni Anadolu* [*New Anatolia*]. Once again, he was arrested, this time for insulting, in one of his poems, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and the first President of the Republic of Turkey, and was sentenced to 14 months in prison. During his imprisonment, he continued to write poems and short stories and began translating Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), although for some unknown reason he was unable to complete it (*ibid.*, p. 115).<sup>5</sup> Upon his release in October 1933, he was forbidden from teaching in any government school until November 1935 (Sönmez, 2017, p. 13) and was reappointed as a government employee by the Ministry of Education on the condition that he demonstrate a decisive change in his views on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He therefore wrote a poem entitled *Benim Aşkım* [*My Love*] to express his admiration for Atatürk, which was published in the literary and cultural magazine *Varlık*<sup>6</sup> in 1934.

Despite his politically critical views, he continued to hold different positions as a government official by virtue of his competence in German. In 1938, he started to work as an instructor, translator, and scriptwriter at *Ankara Devlet Konservatuarı* [Ankara State Conservatory], established in 1936 at the request of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to offer training in music and the performing arts, such as theater, opera, and ballet, with a western approach. He was also employed as a simultaneous interpreter for the famous German opera director Carl Ebert, who had been invited to Ankara by the Ministry of Education to contribute to the development of the State Conservatory, national theater, and opera and bring them up to western standards.

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4. *Resimli Ay* was founded by the journalists Sabiha and Zekeriya Sertel in 1924 to raise the cultural level of Turkish society. After 1928, the magazine shifted its focus; it became more of a leftist publication and mostly published articles and stories promoting leftist views (see Sertel, 1978).

5. Since Ali's working language was German, it is assumed that this was an indirect translation based on a German version.

6. The name of the magazine means both "wealth" and "existence" in Turkish.

Ali's translation competence and abilities did not go unnoticed by the state. He became one of the founding members of the state-sponsored Translation Bureau, which was established in 1940 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and went on to publish a total of 1,247 works, selected primarily from among western classics, until its closure in 1966 (Tahir Gürçağlar, 2003, p. 117). Hasan Âli Yücel (1897-1961), founder of the Translation Bureau and Minister of Education (1938-1946), explained its intended mission as follows:

Republican Turkey, which aspires to and is determined to become a distinguished member of Western culture and thinking, is obliged to translate into its own language the works of the old and new thinking of the modern world and thus to strengthen its own existence with their perception and thought. This obligation invites us to start a full-scale translation project. (Yücel, 1939, p. 125, cited in Aksoy, 2010, p. 444)

There is little doubt that this spearheaded a massive translation movement in Republican Turkey. As the institution that launched this movement, the Bureau was assigned the function of creating a Turkish humanism to be “closely associated with the ideas of renaissance, enlightenment and education that were considered to be among [its] major tasks” (Tahir Gürçağlar, 2003, pp. 123-124). In this sense, the Bureau was not only a translation institution, but also an integral part of the ideological vision of the state.

At the Bureau, Ali was in charge of the selection of western classics to be translated and the translation strategies to be employed. In addition, he himself translated various literary works and short stories from German into Turkish, including Sophocles' *Antigone* (circa 442 B.C.), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Minna Von Barnhelm* (1767), Friedrich Hebbel's *Gyges und Sein Ring* [*Gyges and His Ring*] (1854), Alexander Pushkin's *Kapitanskaya dochka* [*The Captain's Daughter*] (1836), Heinrich von Kleist's novella *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* [*The Betrothal in Santo Domingo*] (1811), Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* [*Peter Schlemihl's Miraculous Story*] (1813), and E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Doge und Dogaresse* [*The Doge and the Dogaresse*] (1818).

Looking at his translations, published between 1940 and 1944 by *Maarif Vekillîği* [The Ministry of Education] and in *Tercüme* [*Translation*], a translation journal affiliated with the Bureau, it would not be wrong to suggest that while working for the Bureau, Ali preferred to translate literary works and avoided involvement in any

translation projects related to his political stance. This is borne out by the fact that the politically critical articles and books that he translated, which were very few in number, were published by private publishers and periodicals both before and after the period he was involved in the Bureau. For example, Ali's translation of Fritz Sternberg's *Marxismus und Verdrängung* [*Marxism and Repression*] (1932) was published in the political newspaper *Yeni Anadolu* [*New Anatolia*] in 1932, and his translation of Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara*<sup>7</sup> (1933), a powerful anti-fascist novel, was published by Akba Publishing House after he was dismissed from his job at the Bureau (Togar, 1979, p. 63).<sup>8</sup> In this respect, it can safely be argued that the state-funded Translation Bureau did not provide a convenient setting in which to elaborate and publish his own views given the government's attitude towards leftist politics at that time, as discussed above.

Under the ministerial order of 11 December 1945, Ali was relieved of his duties in the Ministry of Education because of his involvement in political journalism (Sönmez, 2008, p. 424). The periodicals<sup>9</sup> he published and the literary works he wrote were banned and confiscated by the government because they heavily criticized the government's domestic and foreign policies while defending socialism as the ideal path for attaining a high level of civilization. None of his works would be published again in Turkey until October 1965 (Ali Laslo, 1979, p. 57). In 1947, a year before his death, Sabahattin Ali was imprisoned once again because of his critical articles published in *Markopaşa* [*Marco Pasha*], a weekly satirical political newspaper. No longer able to stand this persecution, he decided to flee the country. However, while attempting to cross the border into Bulgaria, he was murdered. His body was never found, and his death remains a mystery.<sup>10</sup>

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7. The translation was also based on the novel's German translation published in Switzerland in 1933 (Sönmez, 2017, p. 173).

8. For a full list of Ali's translated works, see Sönmez (2017, pp. 115-117).

9. Between 1945 and 1947, Ali published various political newspapers and magazines such as *Yeni Dünya* [*New World*], *Markopaşa* [*Marco Pasha*], *Merhumpasha* [*The Late Pasha*], *Malumpasha* [*The Undeniable Pasha*] and *Kırk Haramilere Karşı: Alibaba* [*Against the Forty Thieves: Ali Baba*].

10. In one of her interviews, Filiz Ali, the daughter of Sabahattin Ali, states that she believes Ali was murdered by the Turkish secret police (see Battersby, 2017, n.p.).



## **Agents of Resistance and Archival Materials as a Means of Revealing Agency**

Over the past two decades, the field of Translation Studies has witnessed a significant shift in focus from the translated text to the translator as a social and cultural agent. Andrew Chesterman regards this shift as the birth of a new branch of Translation Studies that he names “Translator Studies” and which comprises research focusing “primarily and explicitly on the agents involved in translation, for instance on their activities or attitudes, their interaction with their social and technical environment, or their history and influence” (2009, p. 20). Studies exploring agents in the field of translation and culture have primarily focused on translators as active agents. Anthony Pym, for instance, has drawn attention to translators’ active role in translation history by identifying them as a professional group having their own identity and agenda (1998, pp. 157-160). In a similar vein, Daniel Simeoni put a strong emphasis on the role of the agent of translation with reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” which he defines as “the elaborate result of a personalized social and cultural history” (1998, p. 32). He therefore invited researchers to approach translators as agents of cultural production by drawing attention to the need for a “sociological eye” in Translation Studies (2007, p. 13).

It should be noted, however, that the concept of agency in Translation Studies is not limited to the translator as the agent of cultural production. Other translational and cultural agents may also have a major impact on “the selection, production and reception of translations through their cultural practices” (Tahir Gürçağlar, 2009, p. 163). They may overtly or covertly engage in “culture planning,” which denotes “a deliberate act of intervention, either by power holders or by ‘free agents,’ into an extant or a crystallizing repertoire” (Even-Zohar, 2002, p. 45). This involves creating new or alternative options for the “culture repertoire,” defined by Even-Zohar as “the aggregate of options utilized by a group of people, and by the individual members of the group, for the organization of life” (1997, p. 355). Culture planning can therefore be undertaken not only by state actors and official institutions, but also by free agents in society. These agents usually possess a certain amount of “symbolic capital,” which refers to “a degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7). Gideon Toury describes these individuals as

“agents of change” because they act as producers on the level of the cultural repertoire (2002, p. 151). The “agents of change,” or “cultural agents” as Tahir Gürçağlar (2009, p. 164) calls them, are people who maintain high positions in the political, cultural, and social realms. By being actively involved both within and outside the scene of textual production, they can initiate or promote certain translational activities through the exclusive assets and competencies they possess within the culture to which they belong.

One should bear in mind, however, that these agents might not agree with the culture planning efforts of state actors or institutions, and they may display resistance to the planned repertoire. Here I use the concept of “resistance” as elaborated by Even-Zohar in his article entitled *Culture Planning and Cultural Resistance in the Making and Maintaining of Entities* (2002). Even-Zohar explains resistance as “a form of unwillingness towards the advocated, or inculcated, repertoire” (*ibid.*, p. 48). He identifies two types of resistance: active and passive. In passive resistance, the new options are simply ignored by the targeted group. Active resistance, on the other hand, occurs when people “engage themselves in a more or less overt and straightforward struggle against the planned repertoire” (*ibid.*). Agents involved in active resistance may attempt to develop an alternative repertoire through the different options they offer rather than promoting and supporting the dominant discourse of the planners. Planning attempts can therefore be carried out “individually or collectively at diverse locations, both within and outside of the centre of political power” (Tahir Gürçağlar, 2008, p. 38).

As I argue below, primary sources such as archives, manuscripts, and personal papers (Munday, 2014, p. 71) stand out as efficient sources of information in exploring the individual attempts of translational and cultural agents such as authors, translators, journalists, and publishers, since they offer direct access to the identity and working practices of these agents, and to the socio-cultural conditions in which they lived and worked. By presenting “a unique vantage point for studying individual translators’ experience” (Paloposki, 2017, p. 31), archival documents also shed light on the translator’s agency and collaboration with other agents who participate in the translation process. Materials pertaining to management of the translation project, such as correspondence between the agents, allow us to better understand the role of actors involved in the making of the text (Buzelin, 2007, pp. 139-141). María Constanza Guzmán, who posits

“the notion of the ‘translator’s archive’ as a conceptual space” (2013, p. 172), suggests that the analysis of archival materials, both published and unpublished, thus serves as an important tool in understanding translators’ approach to their task, their characterizations of their own image as cultural agents, as well as their social situatedness and agency at large (*ibid.*, p. 173). In this way, they enhance our understanding of the role and position of translation and translators in a given culture at a particular moment in history. In what follows, I address this issue by examining Sabahattin Ali’s published correspondence and the memoirs of his relatives and friends to investigate his agency, his approach to translation, and his translation-related activities.

As one of the founding members of the state-sponsored Translation Bureau, Sabahattin Ali eagerly supported the culture planning project of the single-party era, which aimed to westernize and modernize Turkey and to build a new and secular Turkish identity. Throughout the early Republican period, therefore, translation served as a significant political instrument for importing modern ideas into Turkish culture.<sup>11</sup> Like many intellectuals, writers, and translators of the era, Sabahattin Ali actively participated in the nation-building project through his translational and editorial practices. Sabri Gürses places Ali among the intellectuals who aimed to construct a national culture by way of translation, something which they considered to be a form of cultural transfer (2013, p. 424).

As Kristin Dickinson maintains, however, despite his enthusiasm in being involved in the westernization project of the young Republic, his writings and translations offer “a more ambivalent view of the ‘West’ than dominant translation discourse of the time” (2017b, p. 47). By analyzing Ali’s translation of Heinrich von Kleist’s novella *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* together with Ali’s final novel *Kürk Mantolu Madonna* [*Madonna in a Fur Coat*] (1943), Dickinson argues that Ali resisted “the Republican premise of smooth translatability, and thus also the stable category of the ‘West’ it presumes” (2017b, p. 46). Rather, he used his authorial and translatorial prestige to “subtly assert disagreement with the modernization project at large” (*ibid.*, p. 49). In a similar vein, Zeynep Seviner, by describing Sabahattin Ali as an individual “who critically engaged with the shortcomings

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11. For detailed information about the Republican translation and culture planning efforts carried out as part of the cultural modernization and nation-building project of the single-party era, see Tahir Gürçağlar (2008) and Berk (2004).

of modernity, and the conception of modernity as a monolithic or Western discourse,” argues that his works provide a “countervoice to the kind of Europhilia endorsed at the time” (2017, p. 86). Approaching this issue from a different angle, İlker Hepkaner, who examines the intertextual relationship between Ali’s *Kürk Mantolu Madonna* and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus im Pelz* [*Venus in Furs*] (1870), suggests that Ali made use of intertextuality to take a political stand and criticize his contemporaries, as well as the context in which he lived (2017, p. 64). Hepkaner thus argues that Ali’s use of intertextuality “effectively blurred the lines between the Turkish and European cultures and literatures that preoccupied intellectuals of the time” (*ibid.*, p. 73).

Building on these arguments, I would suggest that due to the increasingly repressive and authoritarian tendencies of the government, Ali’s stance towards the Republican cultural enlightenment project changed decisively. By reason of his experiences in Germany, both intellectual and political, which had enabled him to enhance his “symbolic capital” and gain prestige as a socialist and Marxist intellectual, Ali aimed to develop an alternative repertoire of leftist works through translation in the early Republican period. Not surprisingly, the state-sponsored planning project left out radical literature because of the government’s stance towards leftist politics. In this sense, it might be suggested that Sabahattin Ali, like the majority of Turkish leftist intellectuals of the time, displayed resistance to the options offered by the planners associated with the single-party government. Sabahattin Ali was thus involved in “active resistance” and acted as a self-appointed political and cultural agent. He probably knew that if he were to realize his objective, he would need to make use of translation as a means of importing socialist and Marxist tones into the nation-building project of the state. However, since he was imprisoned many times for his political ideas, he was only marginally involved in the translations of overtly political works. As a result, he attempted to disseminate leftist ideas in the Turkish culture through indirect means, notably via the agency of his close friends. This will be put forward in the following sections through the analysis of the documents in the Sabahattin Ali collection compiled and published in various volumes.

## Delving into the Archive of Sabahattin Ali

The archive of Sabahattin Ali comprises a wide range of personal materials most of which were collected into several volumes long after his death. The private letters he wrote to his close friend, Ayşe Sıtkı İlhan, were compiled and published by Doğan Akin in 1991 and, in an extended edition, in 1997, under the title of *Sabahattin Ali'nin Özel Mektupları: "İki Gözüm Ayşe [The Private Letters of Sabahattin Ali: "Ayşe, The Apple of My Eye"]*. Additionally, a large collection of his correspondence with his wife, friends, students, and colleagues entitled *Hep Genç Kalacağım/Sabahattin Ali [I Will Always Stay Young At Heart/Sabahattin Ali]* was edited and published by Sevengül Sönmez in 2008. The documents in the Sabahattin Ali collection also include the memoirs reported by Ali's close circle of family and associates which were collected into a volume entitled *Sabahattin Ali* and published by Filiz Ali Laslo and Atilla Özkırmılı in 1979. The updated edition was edited and published by Sevengül Sönmez in 2014 and retitled as *Sabahattin Ali—Anılar, İncelemeler, Eleştiriler [Sabahattin Ali—Memoirs, Reviews, Criticisms]*.

Before proceeding to the analysis, I would like to first dwell upon the status of the sources examined in this study. As stated above, the documents in the archive of Sabahattin Ali were collected and published in various volumes, which means that they went through a selection and editing process, and are thus no longer the "raw materials" that they used to be. Concerning the structure and content of these materials, Sevengül Sönmez, editor of the collection of Ali's letters entitled *Hep Genç Kalacağım/Sabahattin Ali*, claims that the letters were published without the slightest change (2008, p. 8). In a similar vein, Atilla Özkırmılı, co-editor of the book entitled *Sabahattin Ali*, which includes memoirs, letters, and reviews, states that he did not remove a single word about Sabahattin Ali, even the parts that could be considered private and that would be inconvenient to disclose (Ali Laslo and Özkırmılı, 1979, p. 8). Since these documents were brought together and reviewed by the editors for internal consistency, it can still be argued that some choices may have been made before and during the editorial process. We also know from the preface written by Sevengül Sönmez for the collection of Ali's correspondence that these letters were just part of Ali's personal papers kept by his wife Aliye Ali (1913-1999) and handed over to Sönmez by his daughter Filiz Ali (2008, pp. 7-8). Here it should therefore be noted that the

materials constituting the corpus of this study do not cover all his personal papers.

Another important point that needs to be highlighted is the problematic nature of memoirs as historical sources. As retrospective personal narratives, memoirs, by their very nature, reflect their authors' own views and interpretation of past events. For this reason, they should be treated with caution and should not be considered as straightforward accounts of historical events. By pointing out the factor of mediation in these writings, Jeremy Munday refers to them as "overtly mediated testimonies"; however, he also adds that first-hand accounts such as memoirs and interviews offer "a potentially rich source for both the historian and the translation studies scholar" (2014, p. 68). Utilizing the information provided by such materials, including archives and personal papers, Munday maintains that one can build up a picture "of the specific interaction between a translator and other individuals, groups, institutions and power structures, and of the exchange and operation of beliefs and the motivation of behaviour" (*ibid.*, p. 77). Therefore, acknowledging the self-reflective nature of memoirs as historical sources, I have examined the memoirs of Ali's close circle of family and friends, treating them as complementary to his correspondence. I argue that they offer valuable insight into the views and somewhat hidden activities of Sabahattin Ali, crucial information that would otherwise be unobtainable.

Lastly, I would like to address the social and cultural implications of publishing these documents in the Sabahattin Ali collection, which I argue suggests a particular agenda. As mentioned earlier, Ali had a tumultuous life and a career of highs and lows. On the one hand, his intellectual background and talents were highly regarded within literary circles and even by the state, while on the other hand his literary practices were viewed as extremely harmful to the regime, which led to all his works being banned by the government until 1965. For this reason, he has been considered by some Turkish literary and cultural circles to be an intellectual who could not be fully understood and appreciated by a Turkish audience. In line with this belief, they attempted to (re-)introduce Sabahattin Ali to the Turkish public by publishing most of the material from his personal archive and the memoirs of his family and contemporaries.<sup>12</sup> Through

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12. In addition to these publications, a large number of initiatives have been undertaken over the last two decades in an effort to commemorate and appreciate

the hitherto unknown information revealed in these documents, Özkırımlı suggests that Ali's artistic personality can be assessed multidimensionally, including his social and personal situation (Ali Laslo and Özkırımlı, 1979, p. 6). Similarly, Sönmez states that the collection of his correspondence fills the gap in Ali's personal history by shedding light on the different sides of his personality, as well as on the formation of his literary identity (2008, p. 8).

I would like to argue that recent efforts at (re-)introducing Sabahattin Ali to the Turkish public also suggest a significant improvement over the years in terms of his perception by the Turkish public and the authorities. He was once seen by the state as a threat, and his works considered subversive and even dangerous to the social order, whereas he is now acknowledged as one of the most highly esteemed authors of Turkish literature. Indeed, ironically enough, he has been viewed as a "romantic" figure in recent years in Turkey since his final novel, *Kürk Mantolu Madonna*, which is usually read as a love story, became a national bestseller almost 70 years after it was first published. It seems that popularity has brought Ali a new prestige and recognition and given rise to enormous interest in him, which in turn has resulted in an increase in the number of new and reprinted publications dealing with Ali's personal life and views. Since the biographical and archival collections, including those examined in this study, reflect both his artistic and political commitments, highlighting his position not only as a prominent literary figure but also as a political dissident, they can be considered as sources that reveal Ali's personal story against the backdrop of Turkish cultural and political history, as well as demonstrating the radical change, over the last 70 years, in his status in Turkish literary history.

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Sabahattin Ali. Various events and projects have been held across the country to honour his memory. For instance, the panel titled *100. Doğum Yılında Sabahattin Ali* [*Sabahattin Ali in His Centennial*] was organized by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey in 2007, and *Sabahattin Ali Edebiyat Okulu* [Sabahattin Ali Literature School] was established by Yapı Kredi Publications in 2015 within the scope of the project *Yazarlar Okullarda* [Writers in Schools] launched by the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of National Education. Moreover, documentaries have been produced to draw attention to his troubled life and tragic death. Exhibitions have been organized to keep his memory alive. Several memorial volumes were published by various private publishers and by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey. All these initiatives, including those not mentioned here, seem to have served only one purpose: to give Sabahattin Ali the respect and esteem he deserved.

Within this context, the correspondence and memoirs, despite their mediated quality, hold a significant place in the overall appraisal of Sabahattin Ali because they have unveiled many previously unknown details about his personal and professional life. They contain a great deal of data that testify to his literary practices such as writing, editing, and translating, to his time in prison, to his political views and commitments, as well as to the socio-political climate of the 1930s and 1940s in Turkey. These documents reveal, in particular, Ali's view of socialism and Marxism as the only hope for the future of the country, along with his efforts to introduce these political ideologies to the Turkish culture through translation.

### **Personal Papers: Private Correspondence**

The published correspondence of Sabahattin Ali includes material from February 1922 to July 1948 and consists of numerous letters written by and to him. The letters addressed to his wife, friends, and colleagues bring to light in particular the difficulties he faced because of his political views from the 1930s until his death in 1948. What seems striking in his correspondence in terms of the present study, however, is his belief in translation as a powerful tool for importing certain political discourses into the given culture. Ali seems to have regarded translation as a means for informing the Turkish intelligentsia and the public at large about what exactly socialism and Marxism were. His correspondence, especially with his close friends, unveils the fact that Ali, in line with this objective, endeavored to promote the translation into Turkish of classic works of socialism and Marxism in order for these books to reach as many Turkish readers as possible. For instance, in his letter of 12 November 1934, addressed to his close friend, Ayşe Sıtkı İlhan (1912-2008), Ali wrote the following:

Ben, bugünkü mimli vaziyetimde, ancak en legal vasıtalarından istifade edebilir, sana yalnız kitap yollar, tavsiye ederim. Mesela Haydar Rifat'ın tercüme ettiği kitaplardan "Devlet ve İhtilal, İşçi Sınıfı İhtilali" isimli olanları ve Sabiha ve Zekeriya'nın tercüme ettiği "Kautski'ye Göre Sosyalizm"i herhalde oku. Sonra oradaki Fransız Kütüphanesi'ne müracaat et ve şu mecmuayı getir: La litterature Internationale. [...] Yalnız edebî mahiyettedir. Dünyanın en meşhur muharrirleri tahrir heyetine dahildir. Moskova'da tab ediliyor. Yalnız Marksist edebiyata yer veriyor. Ben Almancasını getiriyorum. İngilizce ve Rusçası da ayrıca inışar ediyor. Haydar Rifat'ın tercüme ettiği Sermaye gayet berbattır:



Herifin akli ermemiş, kitabı perişan etmiş. Bunu Fransızcasından okumalısın. (Ali, 1934, cited in İlhan and Akın, 1997a, p. 253)

[In my current situation as a marked man, I can only make use of legal instruments, and I can only recommend and send you books. For instance, you must read the books titled *The State and Revolution* and *The Proletarian Revolution* translated by Haydar Rifat, and Sabiha and Zekeriya's translation of *Socialism According to Kautsky*. Then, go to the French Library there [in Izmir] and order the journal called *La littérature Internationale*. [...] It is a literary magazine printed in Moscow. The most celebrated authors in the world serve on its editorial board. It only includes Marxist literature. I always order its German-language edition. It is also published in English and Russian. Haydar Rifat's translation of *Capital* is terrible. He could not understand its essence and ruined the book. You should read it in French.] (my trans.)

Since Sabahattin Ali had been marked out as a communist, as stated by himself in this letter, and imprisoned twice for his political views by the time he wrote this letter in 1934, it is clear that he refrained from overtly engaging in any "illegal" political activity that could be used against him. In these circumstances, therefore, he attempted to present leftist ideas to his circle of friends by encouraging them to read the major works of Marxism and socialism in Turkish translations or in other languages.

Ali's attempts in this regard were not only devoted to promoting leftist political works among his social circle. His correspondence reveals that he was also involved in the selection of certain books to be translated into Turkish, which were, not surprisingly, mainly socialist and Marxist texts, as can be seen in his letter of 29 November 1934 to Ayşe Sıtkı İlhan, which reads:

Ayşe. Üç kitap gönderiyorum. Okur okumaz bir tanesini derhal bana iade edeceksin (Manifest'i). Diğerlerini, yani Buharin ile Stalin'in kitaplarını, bilhassa birinciyi muhakkak tercüme etmen lazımdır. En faydalı çalışmak yolu şimdilik budur. (Ali, 1934, cited in İlhan and Akın, 1997b, p. 257)

[Ayşe, I'm sending you three books. Once you finish reading one of them (the *Manifesto*), return it to me immediately. You have to translate the others, namely Bukharin's and Stalin's books, especially the first one. This is the most effective way of working for now.] (my trans.)

Even though Ali tried to abstain from being involved in any political activity, as he declared in his previous letter quoted above, this letter

testifies to the fact that he maintained his commitment to introducing leftist ideas to the Turkish context via the medium of his friends. As he indicated himself, translation was the most effective way of achieving such an objective within the socio-political climate of the 1930s. It should be noted, however, that Ayşe Sıtkı İlhan did not translate these books into Turkish, probably because she did not want to jeopardize her own position at the government-operated school where she was working as a history teacher at the time.

Another important document in this respect could be Ali's letter of 14 December 1945, addressed to Hasan Âli Yücel, after the printing house of the newspapers *La Turquie* [Turkey] and *Yeni Dünya* [New World] had been shut down on the grounds of spreading communist propaganda. The political newspaper *Yeni Dünya*, established on 1 December 1945 by Sabahattin Ali and Cami Baykurt (1877-1958), a Turkish politician and diplomat, was only able to publish four issues before being banned. Sabahattin Ali then wrote a letter to Hasan Âli Yücel in which he explained his reasons for publishing the newspaper, which is undoubtedly the most prominent aspect of this letter:

[D]ünyanın dev adımlarıyla sosyalist bir iktisadi nizama gittiği inkar edilemezdi. Hele bizim gibi istihsal seviyesi pek düşük olan bir memleketi yüksek medeniyet seviyesine ancak sosyalizm çıkarabilirdi. Fakat yurdumuzun birçok bölgeleri ekonomik ve sosyal bakımdan henüz pek iptidai bir vaziyette bulunduğu, halkımızın kültür seviyesi sosyalizmi kavramasına müsait olmadığı için, kanaatimce bizde bu yolda yapılacak iş, sosyalist cemiyete geçiş için gereken şartların hazırlanmasına hizmet etmek olabilirdi. (Ali, 1945, cited in Sönmez, 2008, p. 425)

[[I]t has become an undeniable fact that the world has been moving forward with giant steps to a socialist economic system. In particular, a country like ours, where the level of production was too low, could reach a high level of civilization only through socialism. However, considering the primitive situation of many regions of our country in an economic and social sense, and the cultural level of our people, which was not suitable for comprehending socialism, our part, in my opinion, was to serve to restore the conditions required for building a socialist society.] (my trans.)

*Yeni Dünya* covered political, economic, and social events of the day in Turkey and in the world as a whole; it included both translations and indigenous material, the vast majority of which focused on socialist movements and the Soviet Union's activities in the 1940s.

Since the newspaper was political in tone, the literary texts that it serialized, or planned to serialize, were selected accordingly. In its short publishing life, it began to serialize, for instance, Pierre Van Paassen's *Days of Our Years* (1939) and John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936). It also announced in its first issue that the Soviet author Mikhail Sholokhov's *They Fought for Their Country* (1942) would be serialized, although this turned out not to be the case as the newspaper was banned. Ali stated at the beginning of his letter that he had just found out about his dismissal from his position in the Ministry of Education and that he had decided to personally engage in a political struggle to achieve a full democracy that would protect and cherish the rights of all citizens (see Ali, 1945, cited in Sönmez, 2008, pp. 424-425). I would argue, then, that Ali considered *Yeni Dünya* as an organ of struggle and an instrument for enlightening the Turkish public about what socialism was, and what it was not. Since the newspaper relied on translations during its short publishing life, I would further argue that Ali regarded translation not only as a means of building a socialist society in Turkey, but as a way to develop an alternative repertoire of leftist texts in the early Republican period.

### **First-hand Accounts: Memoirs**

The memoirs of Sabahattin Ali's close circle of family and friends also unveil significant details about his turbulent life and career, and largely deal with the same issues as the correspondence: Ali's strong commitment to leftist ideals and his efforts to spread these political ideologies in Turkey. For instance, the memoirs of his wife Aliye Ali provide rich information regarding how he adopted leftist views and why he aimed to introduce such political ideologies to the Turkish culture. In one of her memoirs, Aliye Ali stated the following:

O Almanya'da iken daha Hitler işbaşına gelmemişti. Sanırım solculuk hareketli idi. [...] Lenin'in Kapitalizmin Son Aşaması: Emperyalizm, Marx'ın, Engels'in, Kautsky'nin, Bernstein'in eserlerini ve diğer solcu birçok eser almış okumuş, vatanın sola kayarsa ona göre daha dengeli bir memleket olacağına inanmıştı. (Ali, 2014, p. 38)

[When he was in Germany, Hitler had not come to power yet. I think leftism was dominant. [...] He read Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, and the works of Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Bernstein, and many other leftist books. He believed that Turkey would have been a more equal country if it had adopted leftist policies.] (my trans.)

Sabahattin evlendiğimiz sıralar Lenin ve Stalin hayranıydı. Kitaplarını koyduğu küçük odayı Alman ve Rus ihtilalcilerinin resimleriyle süslemişti. Kapital'i ve öteki Marksist kitapları bundan kırk beş yıl önce okumuş, sindirmişti. Anladığıma göre Marksist'ti. İnsanların çoğunun oportünist olduğundan yakınırdı. Solcuların ve insanların çoğunun korkaklığına üzülürdü. 1946-1947 sıralarında böyle nitelediği insanlardan intikam alırcasına hareket etmeye başladı. (Ali, 2014, pp. 52-53)

[Sabahattin had held Lenin and Stalin in high esteem when we got married. He had hung the posters of German and Russian revolutionaries on the wall of the small room where he kept his books. He had read and absorbed *Capital* and other Marxist books 45 years ago. As far as I understood, he was a Marxist. He was complaining that most people were opportunistic in nature. He was troubled about the cowardice of leftists and most people in general. Between the years 1946 and 1947, he started to act in a way as if he had been taking revenge on the people he described like this.] (my trans.)

It seems clear that Ali was influenced in a major way by the political climate of the late 1920s in Germany, where he had acquired a thorough knowledge of Marxism-Leninism from his reading of the essential works of German and Russian revolutionaries. He became a firm advocate for Marxism, and for a socialist system, as the solution for Turkey's socioeconomic problems at the given time. It is obvious that he was closely interested in the economic, social, and political matters of Turkey, and he aimed to contribute to the utmost benefit of the country. Since he was, after all, not a politician, but an author and translator, he decided to serve his country by familiarizing the Turkish public with socialism and Marxism through translation.

Moreover, we can infer from the memoirs of Melahat Togar (1909-1998), who worked as a German language teacher and translator for the Translation Bureau, that Ali had, in fact, begun to implement this decision while he was still in Germany:

Daha Almanca'yı adamakıllı sökmeden, Alman edebiyatı ve dolaylı yoldan – Almanca üzerinden – Rus edebiyatına dalmıştı. Durmadan okuyordu. [...] Beni de okumaya teşvik ediyordu. "Utaniyor musun? Şunu kesinlikle okuman gerek," diye beni durmadan uyarırdı. (Togar, 1979, p. 61)

[Even before acquiring a thorough competence in German, he delved into German literature and also Russian literature through German translations. He was constantly reading. [...] He also encouraged me

to read. He was always warning me by saying, “Are you ashamed of reading those books? You should definitely read that one.”] (my trans.)

Melahat Togar was one of the five intellectuals sent to Germany in 1928 to study language, literature, and philosophy on a four-year government scholarship, during which time she met Sabahattin Ali. When they were both in Germany, Togar closely witnessed Ali’s emerging interest in Marxism and Leninism. As she indicated in her memoirs, he also encouraged her to read those works and to become acquainted with leftist ideas. In this respect, it might be assumed that Ali started to promote the ideas he had acquired through the (translated) works of German and Russian authors and philosophers among his close circle during his time in Germany.

Furthermore, his competence in German made him the ideal individual to undertake such translational activities on his own initiative. For instance, Niyazi Ağırnaslı (1910-1987), a Turkish attorney and a senator for the Workers’ Party of Turkey, emphasized in his memoirs how Ali’s advanced knowledge of German became an asset in the early Republican period: “*Marksist literatürün Türkçeye aktarılmadığı o günlerde yabancı dile egemen arkadaşlar bir ölçüde yararlı oluyordu* [In those days when Marxist literature was not translated into Turkish, our friends, being fluent in foreign languages, served the country to a certain extent] (Ağırnaslı, 2014, p. 102; my trans.). In a similar vein, Sevgi Sanlı (1925-2019), a Turkish playwright and translator, stated the following in her memoirs about Sabahattin Ali:

Bir başka ayrıcalık da, bugün köşebaşlarında satılan ama o gün benim kuşağımın adını bile duymadığı bazı kitapların elime geçmesidir. August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, Max Weber gibi yazarları, Sabahattin Ali’nin yardımıyla Türkçe ve İngilizce çevirilerinden okudum. Bebel’in ‘Kadın ve Sosyalizm’i gençliğimin nirengi noktalarından biri oldu. Anna Seghers de bana Sabahattin Ali’nin sevdiği bir yazardır. ‘Yedinci Salıp’ adlı romanını unutamam. (Sanlı, 1979, p. 119).

[Another privilege for me was to be able to get certain books that can be found in any bookstore today, but which most people in my generation had never heard of back then. I read authors such as August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, and Max Weber in Turkish and English translations with the help of Sabahattin Ali. Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism* became one of the reference points of my adolescence. Sabahattin Ali also endeared Anna Seghers to me. Her novel *The Seventh Cross* is still in my mind.] (my trans.)

As we have seen, leftist publications were kept under state control over the decade between 1930 and 1940 in Turkey. Some Marxist and socialist works translated into Turkish were banned<sup>13</sup> while the majority of them were never translated at all. Under such oppressive circumstances, it seems clear that Sabahattin Ali as a well-educated individual engaged in intellectual pursuits acted as a self-appointed political and cultural agent by preaching the ideals he held dear and promoting the works of Marxist and socialist authors that could not be circulated freely among his social circle during the early Republican period.<sup>14</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

The primary sources available on Sabahattin Ali, such as his published correspondence and the memoirs of his relatives and friends, confirm how Ali's determined commitment to socialism and Marxism shaped his intellectual and political agenda and practices in the early Republican era in Turkey. As a member of the state-funded Translation Bureau, he was actively involved in the westernization project of the single-party era through his translational and editorial activities. Since the government was becoming increasingly repressive, however, his approach towards the Republican culture planning project changed dramatically. He believed in socialism, rather than western ideas, as the ideal path towards achieving a high level of civilization. As such, the Bureau operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Education did not offer a convenient setting in which to articulate and publish his own views. He therefore, through "active resistance," personally attempted to develop an alternative repertoire of leftist works by way of translation.

It seems obvious that Ali regarded translation as a powerful apparatus for introducing alternative political discourses to the Turkish culture during this period. Since he was marked out as a communist and suffered imprisonment several times in the early 1930s, he later tried to abstain from political activities that could

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13. In 1938, for instance, all Turkish translations of *Das Kapital* [*Capital*] and all other socialist publications were banned by the one-party regime (Konca, 2019, p. 88).

14. Turkey, of course, is not the only case where censorship was imposed upon a wide variety of (translated) works, and where individuals, performing resistance to a repressive regime, exercise agency on their own terms. During the Soviet era, for instance, elite Soviet readers, in order to avoid official censorship, "produced and circulated censored works as *samizdat*, type-written manuscripts passed among friends" (Baer and Olshanskaya, 2013, p. x).

be used against him. The correspondence and memoirs brought together and published in various volumes provide a wide picture of his ideologically motivated translational practices and reveal that he endeavoured to disseminate leftist ideas in the Turkish culture via the agency of his close friends. Using his “symbolic capital” and his reputation as a socialist and Marxist intellectual, he sought to promote and circulate the major works of socialism and Marxism among his social circle. In this respect, Ali can be described as an individual who acted as a self-appointed political and cultural agent by attempting to import socialist and Marxist tones into the nation-building project of the state.

Ali’s published correspondence and the memoirs of his family and contemporaries are also of great importance in terms of highlighting the sharp improvement, over the years, in the way he was perceived by the Turkish public and the authorities, because they illustrate, in addition to his literary and artistic activities, his turbulent history as a political dissident, including his several incarcerations, his ban from teaching in government schools, his dismissal from the Translation Bureau, and his mysterious death. Considering Ali’s present reputation as mostly a literary and even a “romantic” figure, these published materials can be considered as sources that attempt to (re-)introduce Sabahattin Ali to the Turkish public, which, in turn, manifests the dramatic change, over the last 70 years, in his status in Turkish literary and cultural history.

Lastly, this study has shown that primary material on translators such as their correspondence can serve as invaluable tools for examining the personal and intellectual pursuits of translational agents by providing access to previously unknown aspects of their individual histories. They can offer crucial insight into their approach to translation and their individual commitments, as well as into the socio-cultural and political context in which they lived and worked.

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