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THE LAZ STUDENTS COMMUNITY ESTABLISHED IN ISTANBUL IN 1914

Abstract

In the Ottoman Empire, where all Muslims were united in one commune, it was banned to start any kind of national association, and the formation of an ethnic union was strictly prosecuted. Even though their program pointed out that “the organization’s goal is to establish friendship and brotherhood between Laz students and the intelligentsia, increasing of knowledge, and assistance to the poor”, “together with the great sense of Ottoman majesty”, the members of the association had to work for economic and social development. In no case, the association was to deal with political affairs. There was no mention of Laz language and identity, although the title speaks for itself.

The statute is written in stilted Ottoman Turkish, includes 10 chapters and 32 articles. The notable part is that the Executive Committee has a large number of rights... In contrast, the authority of the Governing and the General Council is limited.

The Charter doesn’t contain the names of the founders. Therefore, The Laz National Development Organization, established in 1919, doesn’t provide a connection of those who seemed to be its founders.

The Charter was established in 1914 and published in 1916. Accordingly, it can be supposed that the organization worked between this period since the first article provides that “at this moment, in the name of The Laz National Charity Organization, an association was formed in Istanbul”. The words “at this moment” point to the fact that this was the continuation of the early formed The National Organization of Laz Students.

The latest period of the Ottoman Empire was the time when Laz people with other nationalities living there were in search of their national identity.

Keywords: Lazs, organization, Ottomans, students, Charter.

In 1908, the period of reforms of the second Constitution, together with the mental processes, caused the establishment of national organizations. It was the time when Laz students started thinking of forming their own statehood. Contemporary European press includes a wealth of information about this; however, the Turkish press mentioned nothing but a few statements. It could be explained by the fact that the sources of information and the data about National movements are still strictly classified in Turkey.

The available data we deal with refers to two organizations. Only one of them includes the Charter published by Zeki Sarihan (Sarihan 1994, 44-47).

The second volume of Tarik Tunaya’s book that mentions “political parties in Turkey”, “along with The National Organization of the Laz Development” states: “The Laz separatist idea came during the years of the Constitution. For example, in 1914 (1330) was established The National Organization of Laz Students, although the Laz movement wasn’t centralized on separatism” (Tunaya 1986, 456-459).

According to Tunaya’s reference about The Laz Students Organization, based upon the “organizations’ files” from the Prime Minister’s archive, “the document (statement)” approving the creation of an organization was applied in the office of Istanbul district on April 2, 1914 (1330) and afterwards verified and registered on April 10, 1914 (1330) (Tunaya 1986, 456-459).

The brochure of The National Charter of Laz Intelligentsia, consisting of 32 articles, and mentioned by Tunaya, was found in the national library. It is 11, 7 cm. wide, and 20 cm. long. There is an inscription on the front page saying “The General Charter of Laz Students National Organization,

Istanbul-Zerapethi Typography, 1332 (1916)". Along with it, it is sealed with the specific sign – the half moon and a star, inside the sign is spelled "The Organization of Laz Students", and the date 1330 (1914) can also be read. The same words are written on the first page along with the library seal and an inscription saying "The Selim Nuzhet true books sale association number A490, 1971". The registration number 1960/1144 is on the right lower corner, and, additionally, another date, 1952, can also be read on this page.

According to this data, it gets clear that the Charter had been established just before the 1934 statute about the prohibition of the undesirable press came into force. As the statute had entered into force, the journalist and the writer Selim Nuzhat Gerchek was made the head of the commission, which was focused on prohibition and taking away the banned literature. The Charter was found exactly in his personal library. After all, it went to the national library from there and after a long time, the brochure got a registration number.

The first chapter, which includes ten parts and 32 articles, provides the name of the organization and its goals. According to it, The Organization of Laz Students was established in Istanbul on April 4 in 1914. Its purpose was to strengthen friendship and brotherhood among Laz students, develop education, and provide assistance for the poor. With the "devotion to the Ottomans", the Laz society had to take care of the economy and social development but not to become involved in politics.

The second chapter provides the terms of membership. It was possible to become an actual member and the honorary member. Every Laz, a student, or a graduate, being the bearer of legal rights, can become a member if the individual undertakes to pay 5 Kurushs per month, provided that the membership would be approved with the recommendation by two members of the organization and a Governing Council. The members would be given registration cards. Those whose activities harmed the interests of the organization would be excluded by the decision of two-thirds of the members of the organization. The excluded members still had the right to appeal against the decision in the General Council. Those who were providing physical and mental support for society could become honorary members.

The third chapter refers to general meetings. It stipulated that General Assemblies and extraordinary sessions had to be held two times a year (in April and October). The fourth part with a single paragraph sets the authority and obligations of the General Council. Then it considers the management, control, the rights and duties of the Executive Council (Governing Board). According to the chapter, the Executive Council, which consists of ten members, should be elected in the first Congress. Half of the members of the Governing Board had to remain the members of this Council for two years. The Board of Control and the four Executive Councils consisted of eight members. The authority of the members lasted for a period of two sessions. The member of the Board, who didn't attend the session four times and the Head of the Board, who didn't attend it three times, would lose their position. The Governing Board could exclude the member, who took a misstep, or who had been corrupt. After the listing income sources for the program, the Charter determines amendment rules. The amendments can be made by the absolute majority of votes of the Board and the General Council. The majority of the General Council was also authorized to render amendments, and the General Assembly was entitled to comment and control the management.

The main feature of the Charter is that an Executive Council had a broad range of rights. In contrast, the members of both the Governing and the General Board had limited authority. The paragraphs that show devotion to Ottomans and an absolute indifference towards politics makes us think that the founders were trying to take measures to eliminate the separatism (Tunaya 1986, 457). The names of the founders were not included. Therefore, there is no evidence that the founders of The Society of National Development of Lazs, established on March 30, 1919, Buyuk Hasan Pashazade Akhmet Bay, Hasan Pikhri Bay, Mekhmet Kadri Bay, Husnu Efendi, and Pahri Efendi had any connection to the organization (Tunaya 1986, 456). But after the conquest of Izmir by the individuals mentioned above, the connection with this organization had been revealed. The new "creation" of the organization was declared on June 2, 1919 (Özel 1991, 68). These statements said that "compatriots, who wanted to express their opinion, could visit the organization's center from 1 to 6 pm in the Kundakchi Street № 30". The 1919 statement also provided that "all the compatriots had to attend the elections of the Governing Council and the Board

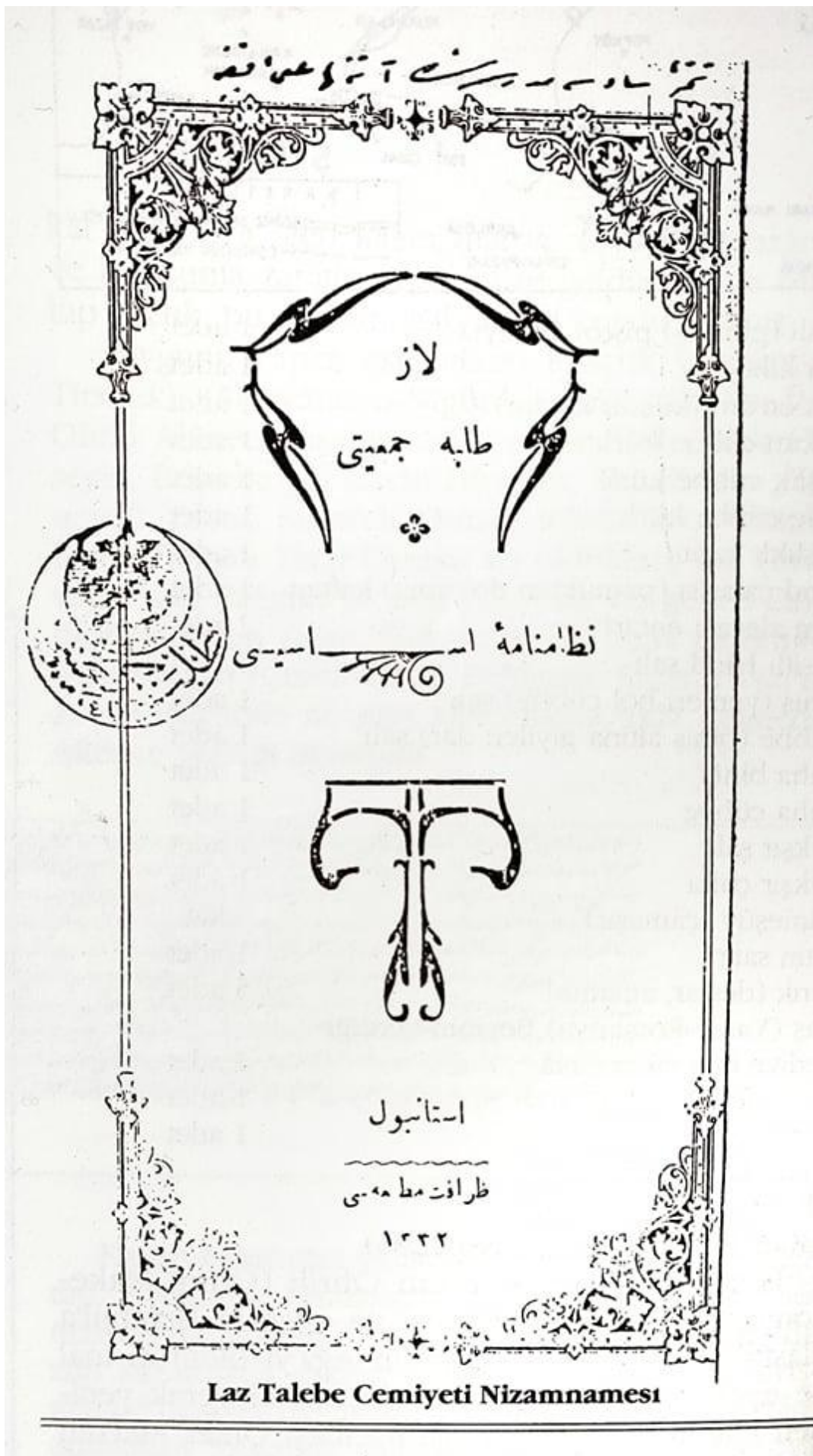
of Control to achieve their goals, after the midday at 2 pm, in Sarachhanebashi, the Numune-i Irfan Mektebi” (Özel 1991, 68). But, in fact, afterwards, it gets clear that the establishment of the organization for the second time gave no results (Özel 1991, 68). At least we have no other data left. The only one evidence proving its activity is that during the period of Erzurum Congress, the founders of the organization – Akhmet Tevpiki and Ali Riza Pashazade Jelil Bay, along with the governor of Trabzon – Mekhmet Galif Bay had visited the districts of the region (Goloğlu 1968, 117) and perhaps had participated in the Congress.

But let’s go back to The Laz Students Organization. Its Charter was adopted in 1914 and published in 1916. Therefore, it can be assumed that the organization existed between these two dates. The first article of The Organization of Laz National Development provides, that “currently, in Istanbul, a new society was formed on behalf of The Laz National Charity Organization”. The word “currently” points to The Laz Students National Organization formed before and now again reformed. The main Charter, mentioned by Tunaya, highlights that it only served assistance to its compatriots (Tunaya 1986, 457-459). As it turned out later, the organization was closed down after some time.

The last period of the Ottoman Empire, together with other nationalities living there, “was the period when the Lazs were also in search of self-awareness. This is confirmed by the fact that 80 years ago, the Laz intelligentsia, living in Istanbul, formed The Organization of Laz Students. The fact that the attitude towards Ottoman idea was highlighted, and there was not a word mentioned about the Laz language, indicates that these people, living in Turkey, were tightly integrated into the Muslim society and traditions” – concludes Sarihan (Sarihan 1994, 45). But, in fact, that didn’t reflect the reality. The Lazs were always rebelling against the Ottomans and lived in their own traditions (Batsashi 2007, 11-16). As regards the beginning of the 20th century, it was the period when Lazs were intensively searching for their national origin – this is mentioned by Niko Marr, Zakaria Chichinadze, and others.

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Laz Talebe Cemiyeti Nizamnamesi