

The logo for I.B. Tauris, featuring the publisher's name in a simple, sans-serif font inside a rectangular border.The top section of the cover is decorated with stylized floral and bird motifs. At the top center is a circular floral medallion. On either side are large, colorful bird-like shapes with green, blue, and orange patterns. Below these are smaller, more intricate floral designs.

KAYA GENÇ

A stylized green lion is the central focus of the middle section. It is depicted in a walking or leaping pose, facing right. The lion's body is a solid green color, with a dark blue outline for its legs and tail. Its tail is curved upwards. The lion's face has small white eyes and a red mouth. It is surrounded by decorative floral and bird motifs, including a large green and orange bird-like shape on the left and right, and smaller floral designs above and below it.

THE LION

AND

THE NIGHTINGALE



A JOURNEY
THROUGH
MODERN TURKEY

The Lion and the Nightingale

Praise for *Under the Shadow: Rage and Revolution in Modern Turkey*

'I finished reading *Under the Shadow* a while ago, but haven't stopped thinking about it. It's such an incisive, passionate, moving book, the best thing I've read in quite some time. For whatever it's worth I'm reasonably well informed about world events but *Under the Shadow* increased my knowledge of Turkey, from its politics to its people, by approximately ten fold. We need books like it in order to get a fuller picture, certainly fuller than the news can provide, of life and crisis, of how life and crisis co-exist, in places where we do not live ourselves' – **Michael Cunningham, author of *The Hours***

'A fascinating and informative compilation that represents both investigative and literary journalism at their finest' – ***Publishers Weekly***

'A cartographer of the battlefield ... Mr. Genç is refreshingly balanced ... a subtle guide to the wrenching changes Turkey is undergoing, and his testimony is rich in historical and cultural detail... He has announced himself here as a voice to be listened to as Turkey struggles to come to terms with itself' – ***The Economist***

'Kaya Genç is that rare beast: a freely operating Turkish writer ... who is able to give you an eye-level view of what is happening in Turkey right now' – **Christopher de Bellaigue, contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and author of *The Islamic Enlightenment***

'Provides pen portraits of young Turks across the spectrum, "divided in politics but united in their passion"... brings some historical knowledge to bear on the present day... encompassing so broad a spectrum is certainly a good idea ... Genç should be applauded for his polyphonic portrait' – ***The Times Literary Supplement***

'*Under the Shadow* serves as an excellent field guide for Turkey's emerging generation' – ***The National***

'Kaya Genç's words always touch a hidden truth in things'
– **Jenny White, author of *The Sultan's Seal***

'Kaya Genç converses across borders, while forging his own distinct voice and perspective and challenging dominant narratives'
– **Maureen Freely, author of *The Enlightenment***

'A celebration of the youth of the country ... a great read, particularly for those of us who are tired of being fed "the latest development" without having digested and categorized what has already happened ... There isn't one dull story ... Each life story is told with excellent pacing by Genç' – **Nagihan Haliloğlu, author of *Narrating from the Margins***

'Excellent book, journalistic, insightful and beautifully written, without passing judgement on the passionate people whose lives are chronicled' – **Kareem Shaheen, Istanbul correspondent for the *Guardian***

'An elegantly-written and illuminating portrait of Turkey's angry youth' – **Alex Christie-Miller, contributor to *The White Review***

'This should be required reading for all Turkey observers' – **Audrey Williams, program coordinator at Turkish Heritage**

'Illuminating, thorough, and well-written' – **Laura Turner, contributor to *The Washington Post***

'*Under the Shadow* is both complicated and absolutely necessary'
– ***Paste Magazine***

The Lion and the Nightingale

*A Journey Through
Modern Turkey*

Kaya Genç

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Preface to the Paperback Edition

I imagined writing a celebratory preface to *The Lion and the Nightingale's* paperback edition. In May 2023, as I reread my chronicle of 2017, hopes were high for the end of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's twenty-year-long reign. Pollsters and analysts agreed the presidential and parliamentary elections on May 14 would toll the bell for Turkish Islamists and their "New Turkey." Instead, by the end of May, it became clear that not only Erdoğan would continue running Turkey for at least another five years, but the autocratic system he built over the two decades was here to stay.

My chronicle of 2017—a novelist friend called it "your *Journal of the Plague Year*"—is riddled with dread, fear, and anxiety. Erdoğan had put his authoritarian "Turkish Style Presidential System" to vote in 2017; much to my chagrin, 51% of the electorate supported his strongman model. Five years later, as presidential elections loomed, the failings of that system seemed blindingly obvious.

The one-person regime destroyed trust in Turkey's judiciary and financial system and depleted the country's coffers. The government imprisoned tens of thousands on bogus charges. Board meetings of institutions, including the Central Bank, The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, the Anatolian Agency, and the Red Crescent,

resembled school reunions: a small clique of Erdoğan loyalists who studied at Kartal Imam Hatip, around the same time the president's son attended that vocational high school for preachers, now ran Turkey's top institutions.

Not successfully, though. With the Central Bank refusing to raise interest rates (which Erdoğan decreed was unacceptable in Islam) Turkish economy had all but tanked, and the lira lost 44 percent of its value against the dollar in 2021. The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, and its English language edition, TRT World, operated as Turkish *Pravdas*, propagating Erdoğan talking points around the clock. Anatolian Agency refused to report the election results where Erdoğan's party lost, leaving the country about who won in the dark. The Red Crescent was no longer seen as the savior of natural catastrophe survivors. Instead, it excelled at outsourcing and profit-making behind an Islamic veneer—a composite of piety and capitalism typical of the AKP's twenty-one-year rule.

Sadly, as we absorb May 2023's election results, *The Lion and the Nightingale's* attempt to canvass the birth pangs of the “Turkish Style Presidential System” continues to concern the present. Just as hopes to stop Erdoğan in his tracks were diminished in the constitutional referendum on April 17, 2017—a disillusionment I detail in this book's second chapter—the optimism for change in 2023's elections faltered with a frustratingly wide margin. When I chronicled the “Justice March” instigated by the leader of Turkey's opposition Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for this book, I had little idea that the “Turkish Gandhi” would increasingly resort to Civil Rights tactics to steal Erdoğan's fire and organize Turkey's dissidents under a rainbow coalition. The May 2023 elections were meant to be the apogee of this leftist strategy which communed together various ‘nightingales’ of Turkey: political and sexual minorities, artists, intellectuals, and freethinkers othured in the name of nationalism. By receiving just 47 percent

against Erdoğan's 52 in the second round of the presidential race, Kılıçdaroğlu's name is now synonymous with defeat, losing, romanticism, values contrasted in newspapers with Erdoğan's image as the everyman's candidate, a realist—a winner.

Even natural catastrophes that exposed New Turkey's rotten state failed to diminish enthusiasm for the 'Lion,' which, in this book's title, represents Erdoğan and his one-man regime. Turkey is a land of earthquakes, and the story of the 6.5 Mw Bodrum earthquake, on July 20, 2017, which I tell in this book's third chapter, led to a passing realization of the importance of building regulations. Turks pondered the cost of insouciance about rules and standards for a few days before putting them on the back burner. The response to devastating 7.8 Mw and 7.7 Mw earthquakes in southern Turkey on February 6, 2023, followed a similar pattern. The quakes left eleven cities in ruins, with more than 40,000 dead. People watched, from the ground floors of their demolished buildings or the safety of their homes, as Turkey's 'Lion' proved inadequate to tackle the humanitarian crisis. In his efforts to rescue the wounded and take care of the people at a time when that was most needed, the president seemed ill-prepared, weak, and clueless. Would this realization among his supporters lead to change? It did not. Seeing the emperor without his clothes was insufficient to convince voters to end his autocratic regime.

A growing army of outcasts, who have languished in prison on false charges since 2016, knows firsthand about Turkish autocracy's resilience. On a dark October day in 2017, Osman Kavala, an arts patron, and philanthropist, was forcefully carried off an airplane in Istanbul, thrown into a cell, and charged with trying to topple the Turkish government. In *The Lion and the Nightingale*, Kavala's arrest is part of an expanding malaise, a tiny tile on a massive mosaic whose elements, I wrote, were beginning to "converge into one large

darkness.” Kavala had been jailed for about five months while I wrote the book. He recently finished his 2000th day in prison; November 2023 will mark the start of his seventh year. Opposition leaders pledged to free him in case they unseated Erdoğan. Implementing the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, something a local court has refused to do would suffice.

There are countless other jailed nightingales. The Kurdish human rights lawyer Selahattin Demirtaş has been kept as a political prisoner since 2016. Recently, a public prosecutor demanded that he be sentenced to seven consecutive life sentences. Demirtaş said he felt sorry when, during his victory speech on May 28, 2023, Erdoğan’s extremist supporters shouted “Execute Selo!” in unison before their leader reassured the crowd that ‘Selo’ would never see the light of day as long as he ruled Turkey. In jail, the former leader of the leftist HDP wrote four fine books: two novels and two story collections. He learned how to play the violin. Kavala, meanwhile, has looked after a snail in his cell, sharing his isolation with them, for two years. He has been publishing essays on the rise of National Socialism in Weimar Germany. Each day, in New Turkey, an infectious mood of cynicism prevails against such determined acts to learn, explore, and lead an ethical life.

As the violence and absurdity of the Turkish Style Presidential System peak, its effects on people are increasingly invisible. Shutting down Twitter after the deadliest earthquake of the century—when people under the rubble were tweeting their locations—because of anti-Erdoğan posts no longer shocks. Singers and actresses who make political statements are swiftly detained in dawn raids and placed behind bars. Such outcomes are considered unavoidable, like thunderstorms or old age. Students waving rainbow flags on campuses are quickly handed notices that their studentships are terminated. Of course, what did they expect? In *The Lion and the Nightingale*, I

described how the pace of autocratic developments was beginning to surpass our ability to process them in Erdoğan's ruthless regime. Five years later, the government's totalitarian grip on the country is complete. New Turkey's wheels keep spinning with such speed that it feels challenging to recall our lives in the past.

Yet I do remember, as do scores of others. We had Pride marches before 2014 when Erdoğan became president and announced banning all LGBTQI-related activities. A Turkish Pride event in May 2023, had it been miraculously allowed, would be violently attacked in minutes. In the early 2010s, Turkish columnists could discuss the Armenian Genocide and the trampling of Kurdish rights. Can anyone conceive such a prospect in 2023? Most Turkish newspapers had been confiscated, bankrupted, or closed by the government. In the remaining few, only Erdoğan hagiographies are allowed to be printed.

Somehow we live on. But at what cost? In this book's finale, I characterize the success of Erdoğan's New Turkey regime as turning the nation into a *Homo economicus*. Turks know to look after themselves. Increasingly self-interest trumps all other interests. Facing institutional racism or public discrimination of others brings little profit to Turkish purses. Progressive causes are, therefore, not good for business. Erdoğan's reign, for those focusing on self-preservation, has become an amalgam of the worst angels of Turkey: its fears about the Other, its anxieties about Change, and its prejudices that would need altering after a process of Self-Reckoning.

Some characters sketched in this book live abroad now. Others still reside in Turkey, albeit grudgingly, while espousing values that global populists scold as "woke." A few are content with New Turkey's direction. As progressive politics, from trans rights to reparations, continue to challenge administrations and citizens worldwide, this country perched on Europe's border with Asia remains a heartland of autocracy and dissensus. People disagree, grumble, chafe at, and

yet feel constrained. Streets remain closed for protest. Freedom of expression is a non-entity. Exiled to their hearts and minds, Turks and Kurds continue finding ways to exist in this failed democratic experiment. They spend their days dreaming, rebelling, deciding, and dying, as a new generation of lions and nightingales, perhaps with little memory of what Turkey once was, prepare to take their place.

Istanbul

June 2023

Introduction

Months before it began, 2017 promised to be a sorrowful year for Turkey. Most of us drew little hope from the New Year. In the preceding months, the country had turned into a land of calamity, and we were used to living in a state of anxiety. Bombs, repression and political instability had become everyday news. We had gone through a season of disappointment, humiliation and tragedy, both public and private. Why would 2017 be any different? Turkey could make pessimists of us all, but rarely on this scale. Never before had the country appeared this precarious, its political future hanging so strongly in the balance. The year was yet a blank page, but a glance at it filled one with angst.

In the first week of December 2016, the BBC asked me to come over to their Istanbul studios to record an interview concerning my predictions for the upcoming year. The offices of the broadcaster had moved, from the city's elite Nişantaşı neighbourhood to Gümüşsuyu, the urban district in the northern, 'European' side of Istanbul where the writer James Baldwin had lived in the 1960s. The new BBC offices were located on the top floor of a building named after Mithat, an Ottoman pasha responsible for modernizing the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, who was assassinated in a prison cell after being charged with the murder of Sultan Abdülaziz.

On the day of the interview I woke up at 6.30 am. A London journalist, on his nightshift, would conduct the talk. There is a three-hour difference between British and Turkish time zones. It would be the day's last assignment for him, and its first for me.

A young staffer opened the door. He looked sleepy. A cold wind blew outside. The rain had an icy quality. The sidewalks were frozen. In a building nearby, the curator duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset were announcing the conceptual framework for the 2017 Biennial ('A Good Neighbour') to a group of journalists, whose tweets I read while waiting. The staffer offered to brew coffee. As he did that, I walked to the other end of the BBC office. I entered a room that offered commanding views of Dolmabahçe, the most exquisite of Ottoman palaces, as well as Vodafone Arena, the recently opened stadium of Beşiktaş, a major Istanbul football club. Thick black curtains hung on the walls. I realized this was a fully equipped television studio. Walking past large cameras that waited in a state of hibernation, I imagined BBC correspondents filling the room in the upcoming months. From there, they would report on Turkey, a country that represents, for many British people, a holiday destination before anything else. Would this new studio bring cheerful news to the British taxpayer? To their eyes, did Turkey still seem like a safe country where they could take refuge during rainy London days? In the following months, I would meet many of them, in England, during book tours, and I would remember this moment.

There was one constant about 2017: the constitutional referendum in April. People would be asked if they agreed to change Turkey from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential system, an alarming prospect for liberals concerned with Turkish democracy. During the interview, I talked about the legal deliberations that awaited the nation. The new system was pushed by the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The majority of the Turkish political leaders opposed it. I told

the interviewer about my fears for a new wave of terror attacks. In the recent months, both the so-called Islamic State (ISIL) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) had vowed to destroy Erdoğan's Turkey.

On 10 December 2016, a week after the BBC interview, in a western Istanbul neighbourhood called Bağcılar, a suicide bomber put on an explosive vest. He was assisted by a headscarved woman who drove a Chevrolet Aveo car loaded with 400 kilograms of TNT explosives. They headed to Vodafone Arena, the stadium seen from the BBC offices. The double suicide attack resulted in the deaths of forty-four. One hundred and sixty-six people were injured. Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, an offshoot of the PKK, claimed responsibility for the attacks. On the night of the violence, I watched the news alongside a journalist friend. He wondered if the government should declare martial law.

Since the week of the attempted coup on 15 July 2016, we had been living under a state of emergency. There were frequent power blackouts. A few days every week, we dined by candlelight.

Many had become used to the state of emergency. In private conversations, friends were telling me they supported it, for in those dark times it appeared to them to make the city safer. But the state of emergency curtailed individual freedoms, and martial law was an even harsher measure. 'They will need to announce curfews,' my friend predicted ominously. 'Kurds are attacking them. The jihadists are attacking them. People like us, the young Turks, are silent, but that can also change. At the moment, the government can't rule the country.' Listening to him, I realized how much I dreaded the coming of the New Year.

* * *

That sense of dread was new to me. I had been living in Istanbul for thirty-five years. During that time, I had not seriously considered

whether I should keep on living in this city. But that December evening, it was this question I was pondering. Maybe it was time to leave.

In 2016, I felt I was midway upon the journey of life. I hoped to spend the rest of it in a country whose future I could, more or less, predict. I was not married; there were no kids in the house; no job at an office. I felt rootless and free, but also increasingly precarious.

Since the first years of the 2000s, I had been a Nightingale in Istanbul. Here I experienced many of the pleasures of youth. I met my first love here. I published my first story here. I had established myself, in the eyes of family and acquaintances, as a writer. Most friends got married in their late twenties; I attended their weddings with different partners; now, in 2016, they were preparing to send their children to school. It was not easy for them to live elsewhere, because of their roots. I felt different. I was single. I could leave whenever I wanted. I did not need to live in Turkey to see what 2017 would bring. But despite the dangers and the common feeling of pessimism, I chose to stay. Writing became an excuse for this decision. It soon turned into a moral responsibility.

But I knew too that in the past few years, writers and other Nightingales of the city had been silenced. Most of my journalist friends had lost their jobs. I watched quality newspapers, like *Radikal* where I had been the book critic, going out of business. The only papers left to Turks to read were the establishment newspapers who supported the government. The city's arts scene had once been handsomely funded by the Turkish state; money poured in during 2010, when Istanbul became a European Capital of Culture. All that was now gone. Stage and film actors I knew, who voiced their political views during the protests of 2013, fared poorly. Some felt they had to flee the country. Others struggled to get parts in series commissioned by television channels which were all owned by government allies.

Turkish cities changed. Istanbul became a stage of horrors. Its main international airport, Atatürk, was attacked by ISIL militants in the summer. Its main shopping avenue, Istiklal, was hit by a suicide bomber. The image of Istanbul was that of a city in flames. In 2015, we had watched the birth of ISIL and the turmoil in the Middle East from a passive distance. A year later, jihadists had set their sights on Istanbul. This city, this ancient and grand city, had once served as the seat of a global Islamic caliphate; they knew about its significance. Armed Kurdish groups were seeking their own revenge. They wanted to avenge the Turkish military's attacks against their militants. Wherever you turned in Istanbul, there was anger, frustration and danger.

In the capital, Ankara, a modern city in Central Anatolia, the change was more constitutional. There, the Turkish political system was undergoing an overhaul. The Republic had long been a parliamentary democracy. Now it was being transformed into a presidential system. With this, the power centre in Turkish politics would shift from Ankara's buildings of Parliament, grey and stolid, to the grand and kitsch presidential palace. Çankaya Mansion in Ankara, formerly a vineyard that belonged to Armenian jeweller Ohannes Kasabian, confiscated by the Bulgurluzâde family in the aftermath of the extermination of Ottoman Armenians in 1915, and made the Turkish presidential complex in 1921, would be repurposed as a public park. Not everyone was happy with this shift. Elderly statesmen anticipated a political apocalypse. Bureaucrats were not sure if they would keep their jobs. Intellectuals felt depressed.

Public buildings still carried memories of a violent year. They had fresh wounds from 15 July, the date of the attempted coup. That night, F-16 fighter jets had bombed the parliament during a late session. Mid-debate, the parliament's walls crumbled; the roof cracked; debris started falling on parliamentarians. They live-streamed the chaos with their iPhones. Meanwhile, jets fired missiles towards the gates