

# in memoriam



## About Şirin Tekeli

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Şirin Tekeli made a decisive contribution to the scholarly literature on women's history in Turkey. She did so as a prominent feminist scholar in the fields of political science and history and as a leading activist of the "second-wave" feminist movement in the 1980s, a historical epoch in terms of the revival of feminism in Turkey. Tekeli's contributions can be classified under two main themes: her earlier works on women's political participation in Turkey were the first that incorporated a gender perspective in the scholarship; second, for the Kemalist modernization project and reforms of the early republican period, she proposed to use the term "state feminism."<sup>1</sup> Trained as a political scientist, Tekeli submitted her habilitation on women's participation in politics in 1978, when she was an assistant professor at the University of Istanbul.<sup>2</sup> In her own words, this was "a comparative study about women's history (the evaluation of education, participation in the work force, and exclusion from politics) in several Western democracies, in Soviet Russia, Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe (Czechoslovakia and Hungary), and Turkey."<sup>3</sup> Although Tekeli characterized her position in this study as "undemonstratively feminist," it can be considered one of the first contributions to the development of feminist scholarship in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The authoritarian regime in the aftermath of the 1980 coup d'état established the Yükseköğretim Kurulu (Council of Higher Education, YÖK), which targeted the academic freedom and the institutional autonomy of universities. Along with dozens of her colleagues, Şirin Tekeli resigned from her university position to protest the regime's attempt to control academia in Turkey. Following this, she continued her active involvement in the feminist knowledge production as an independent researcher and translator, and as an institution builder: among other things, she was one of the founders of the Women's Library and Information Center in Istanbul. She also worked as an editor of *Toplum ve bilim* (Society and science). In 2010, Tekeli also founded the Şirin-Ahmet Tekeli Kadın Hukukçuları Destekleme Vakfı (Foundation for Supporting Women Lawyers, KAHUDEV), a foundation in her and husband's name that supports female undergraduate and graduate law students or women with law professions in their academic and occupational lives by offering scholarships and funding. In the academic year 2016–2017, for example, KAHUDEV provided scholarship for ninety law undergraduates.<sup>5</sup>



Şirin Tekeli's work initiated one of the central debates within the feminist historical scholarship, namely, about the relationship between the Kemalist modernization project and republican reforms and the patriarchal system. In her pioneering, critical work on the Kemalist gender regime, Tekeli offered the term "state feminism" for the regime's reforms and the use of the idea of women's emancipation as a political instrument during the single-party period, contrasting this "state feminism" with women's independent political organizing.<sup>6</sup> In that regard, Tekeli argued that after the dissolution of the Türk Kadınlar Birliği (Turkish Women's Union, TKB) in 1935, women's independent political organizing in Turkey entered a period that she called the "barren years," lasting roughly until the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Tekeli challenged the conventional and official Kemalist discourse that emphasized that the early republican regime had granted women suffrage and civil rights, while omitting women's own role and their struggle for their rights in the late Ottoman and early republican era. Tekeli's critique had a significant impact on the development of feminist historiography in Turkey, especially regarding the discovery of Ottoman and early republican feminisms.<sup>8</sup>

Şirin Tekeli was an *Aspasia* Editorial Board member from volume 5 (2011) to volume 11 (2017), and as such she formed an important link between feminist (historical) scholarship in Turkey and the international women's and gender history community that *Aspasia* represents, which includes those working on the European Ottoman past. Tekeli published an overview of women's and gender history in Turkey in *Aspasia* 6 (2012), in which she outlined the various phases in the developing scholarship in their political contexts. Her scholarly and political voice will be missed.

## ◆ Notes

1. Şirin Tekeli, "Europe, European Feminism, and Women in Turkey," in "A Continent in Transition: Issues for Women in Europe in the 1990s," special issue, *Women's Studies International Forum* 15, no. 1 (1992): 139–145, here 140.

2. Her habilitation came out as a book in 1982: Şirin Tekeli, *Kadınlar ve siyasal-toplumsal hayat* [Women and sociopolitical life] (Istanbul: Birikim Yayınları, 1982).

3. Şirin Tekeli, "Women's and Gender History in Turkey: Beginning, Early Influences, Pioneers, Institutionalization, and Its Present State," *Aspasia* 6 (2012): 165–171.

4. "Şirin Tekeli ile Söyleşi: Karı Kuvvetlerinden Feminist Harekete" [An interview with Şirin Tekeli: From women's forces to the feminist movement], *5Harfliler.com*, 30 June 2016, <http://www.5harfliler.com/sirin-tekeli-ile-soylesi-kari-kuvvetlerinden-feminist-harekete/>.

5. "KAHUDEV," <http://www.kahudev.com/sayfalar/kunye.php>, accessed September 12, 2017.

6. Tekeli, *Kadınlar ve siyasal-toplumsal hayat*.

7. Şirin Tekeli, "Birinci ve ikinci dalga kadın hareketlerinin karşılaştırmalı incelemesi üzerine bir deneme" [Essay on the comparative examination of first- and second-wave women's movements], in *75 yılda kadınlar ve erkekler* [Women and men in 75 years], ed. Ayşe Berktaş (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1998), 337–347, here 337.

8. Serpil Çakır, "Feminism and Feminist History-Writing in Turkey: The Discovery of Ottoman Feminism," *Aspasia* 1 (2007): 61–83, here 63.