Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison
On the Death of Professor Emeritus Kemal Karpat

Professor Emeritus Kemal Karpat passed away in Madison, Wisconsin on February 20th, 2019 at the age of 96. He received a state funeral from Turkey, and now lays to rest in Istanbul in the Fatih Mosque graveyard, the burial site of sultans and select Ottoman and Turkish dignitaries.

Kemal Karpat was born in Armutlu, Romania in 1923. He left Romania during World War II and went to Istanbul, where he studied law at Istanbul University. He graduated from law school in 1947. Professor Karpat then moved to Seattle, Washington and completed an MA in Political Science at the University of Washington, Seattle. He then moved to New York, in order to complete a Ph.D. in History at New York University. While in New York, he also worked as a staff researcher for Turkey's delegation to the United Nations Economic and Social Council. He completed his Ph.D. in 1957 and took his first academic job at Montana State University. In 1962, he returned to New York, where he joined the History Department at New York University. In 1967, Karpat joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin, Madison where he spent the remainder of his career. For his immense contributions to Turkish and Ottoman history, he was awarded several honorary doctorates, as well as the Presidential Medal of Honor from the Republic of Turkey and the Medal of Freedom from his native Romania.

A giant in his field, Professor Karpat was a pioneer in the study of late Ottoman and modern Turkish history. It is difficult to think of a topic in these fields that has not been shaped by one of his dozens of books and hundreds of articles. In the middle of the Cold War, when the notion of an essentially static "Islamic civilization" still pervaded most writing on the Middle East, Professor Karpat was a leader in a generation of scholars who shifted attention toward a socioeconomic understanding of the region. His research helped define our understanding of topics ranging from the emergence of ethnic nationalism in the Balkans, to the rise of political Islam. Several of Professor Karpat’s monographs, including Turkey’s Politics: The Transition to a Multi-Party System; Ottoman Population: 1830-1914; and The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State, remain standard references for graduate students entering the field today. Professor Karpat also organized and contributed to numerous influential edited volumes, including The Ottoman State and Its Place in World History, and The Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey. Professor Karpat’s publications bridged the artificial gap between Ottoman and Turkish Republican history, helping scholars understand the roots of modern Turkish politics in the social upheavals of the late Ottoman years.

In addition to his field-defining research, Professor Karpat was a leading figure in the establishment of professional Middle East Studies in North America. In 1966, he was one of 50 founding members of the Middle East Studies Association, of which he later served a term as president. In 1971, he was elected the founding president of the Turkish Studies Association, incorporated in Madison. The Association’s Bulletin, now the Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association, is the leading journal in its field. Outside of academia, Professor Karpat was a policy advisor to both the Carter and Reagan administrations.

Until his retirement in 2004, Professor Karpat was known as an engaging and erudite lecturer. He taught generations of undergraduate students at UW-Madison. He also made enduring contributions to his field and profession by training graduate students. He directed dozens of doctoral students in his career, and many now hold important positions in Ottoman History in the United States, Turkey, and in other countries around the world. Additionally, he endowed a faculty position in Ottoman history at UW-Madison. Even in retirement, Professor Karpat remained active in his field, researching, publishing, delivering lectures, and editing the International Journal of Turkish Studies.

The History Department was fortunate to have had Professor Karpat as a colleague for four decades. He will be missed.