The political tensions over what it means to be Turkish still resonate strongly between the AKP and its secular opponents. As previously noted, Atatürk defined a Turk as any citizen of the Turkish Republic, regardless of religion or ethnicity. He realized that the new state needed immediately to form a geographically based national identity, which could transcend the religious and ethnic divisions that had plagued the diverse groups inhabiting Anatolia and the Eastern Balkans. Otherwise, these regions risked being divided as a result of foreign military intervention following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. But beneath the surface of this official definition of Turkishness, religious and ethnic factors continued to vie for a greater role in determining the national identity.

During the past few decades, Islam has been a more significant determinant of that identity. Religious nationalism,
centered on the country’s predominant branch of Islam, Sunnism, propelled the AKP to power. Historically, religious nationalism has generated hardship for Turkey’s religious minorities (especially its largest group of non-Sunni Muslims, the Alevi, a heterodox Islamic sect that claims fifteen to twenty million adherents out of a total Turkish population of seventy-two million). Periods of secular nationalism have often generated hardship for the country’s ethnic minorities, especially its largest ethnic sub-group, the Kurds. Today’s secular nationalists are struggling to organize themselves into a viable political bloc that can oppose the AKP.

Comprehending the underlying dynamics of this current political struggle requires a deeper exploration of how the definition of Turkish identity has evolved over the course of the centuries.

Identity Vis-á-Vis the Ottoman Empire

The modern concept of Turkishness emerged in the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. Until then, the empire’s ethnically diverse inhabitants thought of their nationality as Ottoman, though they often retained sub-identities as Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Bulgars, Albanians, et al. “Turk” was in fact a derogatory word; it defined Anatolian peasants who spoke Turkish and who adhered to customs rooted in the Turkic tribes that began migrating westward from the Altai Mountains (straddling present-day Russia and Mongolia) in the sixth century. The Ottoman sultans devel-
developed a concept of Ottoman nationality to bind their ethnically and religiously diverse subjects together. Not until the mid-eighteen hundreds, as nationalist doctrines gained momentum across Europe, did the concept of a Turkish identity began to take shape.

Identity was thus a complex concept during the Ottoman reign. Its evolution can be traced back to Sultan Mehmet II’s conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The fall of the Byzantine Empire presented Mehmet II (or Mehmet the Conqueror) with the need to establish a new administrative system for his expanded empire. The system divided the empire’s ethnically diverse subjects into political groupings based on their religious affiliation. Each religious community or nation was called a millet. Separate millets were established for Muslims, Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Apostolic Christians, Syriac Orthodox Christians, and Jews. In this way, each group retained a sub-identity. All of the empire’s Muslim populations, regardless of particular ethnicity within Islam, were grouped as the Muslim millet, and ruled themselves according to sharia. Officially, the Ottoman state considered the Turkic identity of the original Turkic tribes to be subsumed under the umma.

The fusing of political, religious, and ethnic determinants of identity was also evident in Sultan Selim I’s decision—after defeating the Mamluks in Egypt in 1517—to establish Sunni Islam as the empire’s state religion. The victory transferred the title of Caliph to the Ottoman Sultan from his Mamluk counterpart and transformed the Ottoman Empire into the Caliphate, the worldwide political authority for all Sunni Mus-
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lims.\(^1\) Having acquired vast numbers of new subjects from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, Selim I needed a means to bolster the legitimacy of the ruling Ottoman family, and thereby hold his empire together. The new title of Caliph promised such legitimacy, at least among the large number of Arab Sunni Muslims, who now constituted the largest plurality among the \textit{millets}. Moreover, designating Sunni Islam, the religion of the Ottoman family, as the \textit{state} religion, differentiated the Ottoman Empire from its challenger to the east, Iran’s Shia Safavid Empire. The Safavid rulers were also ethnically Turkic, and competed with the Ottomans for the loyalties of people living in the regions intersected by the two empires. Selim I was thus trying to define a primary “national” identity for his empire, determined by twin yardsticks: a political-legal factor (being the sultan’s subject) and a religious factor (being a Sunni Muslim). In practice, establishing this new national identity proved difficult, given that the diverse populations within the empire persisted in adhering to their ethnic and religious sub-identities.

Officially, daily business in the Ottoman Empire was now conducted according to a version of \textit{sharia} based on the Arabs’ Sunnism. This interpretation of \textit{sharia} consigned women, non-Sunnis, and non-Muslims to secondary status, though Christians and other non-Muslim \textit{millets} were free to practice their own faiths, provided they paid taxes.

However, life in the Ottoman Empire did not change drastically with the adoption of Sunni Islam as the state religion. Even though \textit{sharia} officially guided marital affairs, business transactions, and criminal matters, secular law was actually
enforced at the personal discretion of the sultan, based on the Abbasid practice known as kanun, or administrative law. Although kanun was distinct from sharia, “The complex relationships between administrative law and sharia,” as the Ottoman historian Norman Itzkowitz has observed, “would become a focal point of dispute in future reigns.”²

Like their supreme rulers, who could also trace their ethnic roots to the Turkic tribes of Central Asia, Anatolian Turks did not simply abandon their traditions when Sunnism became the state religion of the Ottoman Empire. They instead maintained a sense of their own sub-identity based on the ethnocultural factor of the tribes’ traditions, mixed with those the Anatolians acquired during their migrations.

Thus, Islam did not come to dominate all aspects of life for the Anatolian Turks. According to the earliest Turkic language inscriptions found in the Orkhon River Valley of present-day Mongolia, the original Turkic tribes were mostly pagans who adhered to shamanist practices. Even after they embraced Islam as they migrated westward, the tribes also adopted the humanistic traditions of tolerant faith and scientific learning that characterized Islamic thought in Central Asia (especially in Bukhara and Samarkand), in the tenth and eleventh centuries. This spirit of Bukhara and Samarkand confined religion to the private sphere, leaving science and civic affairs to be governed by rational thought. Such a mindset provided a natural foundation for the separation of mosque and state, and reflected the observation in the archaic Turkic text, Kutadgu Bilig, that the early Turkic tribes held governance and society above religion.³
The separation of the religious and secular realms blurred under the Seljuks, who emerged as the most powerful Turkic tribe in the ninth and tenth centuries. After defeating the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071, the Seljuks established an empire centered in Anatolia and stretching to present-day Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. They had embraced Sunni Islam, which acquired powerful influence over their empire’s government, politics, and culture. But in Anatolia, the Seljuks encountered a complex mix of secular traditions and religions, which preserved some degree of separation of everyday religious and civil life.

The above discussion demonstrates that both Seljuk and Ottoman policies aimed to merge political and ethnic differences into a single “national” identity based on Sunni Islam. But political and ethno-cultural factors persisted, preventing religion from becoming the pre-eminent determinant of national identity. That in turn facilitated the emergence of the Anatolian Turks’ sub-identity. They were bound together by the ancient traditions of Central Asia and Anatolia and by the Turkish language. The latter differed from the language of the Ottoman court, where the palace elite spoke “Ottoman,” a mix of Turkish, Farsi, and Arabic.

Geography played an important role in shaping the perennial battle between religious and non-religious factors, as well as national identities, in the empire. Both the Ottoman identity and the Anatolian Turkish sub-identity were rooted in the East, in the Turkic tribes’ Central Asian and Anatolian ancestry as well as the traditions of Islam. Yet the Ottoman dynasty and its Anatolian subjects also sensed that their destinies lay
toward the West, and they made numerous forays in that direction.

For centuries, Turkic tribes had been migrating westward. They had conquered Byzantium, a center of Western civilization in both the secular and spiritual realms. Mehmet the Conqueror had relied on a Hungarian cannon designer to manufacture the artillery that breached the previously impregnable walls of Constantinople. Under Süleyman the Lawgiver (known in the West as Süleyman the Magnificent), the Ottomans had extended their European conquests to Rhodes, Belgrade, and Budapest by the mid-sixteenth century, deepening their contacts with European ideas and technology. The Ottomans also expanded trade with the Europeans; Genoa and Venice maintained the trading colonies they had established under the Byzantine Empire, just across the Golden Horn from Constantinople. The Ottoman sultans brought European slaves to work in the Topkapi Palace as counselors and new troops (or janissaries) who served as the sultans’ personal security force.

Though the Ottomans had anchored their empire in Europe to fulfill what they viewed as an inexorable Turkic-Islamic destiny to move westward, their attitudes toward the West remained ambivalent. They regarded Europeans as uncivilized—infidels, barbarians. The Ottomans detested travel to Europe, where they believed they could not learn anything new and would return home with diseases such as syphilis. The Ottomans acquired some new technology through trade. But pride in their imperial achievements deterred them from adapting their thinking to Europe’s profound societal
advancements during the Renaissance (and later the Enlightenment); they borrowed some European technologies but failed to adopt the new thinking that underlay them.

As a result, the Ottoman Empire began to lag behind Europe technologically, especially in the military sphere. In 1571, the Ottomans suffered their first naval defeat since the fourteenth century, when Holy League of Christian states routed their fleet at the Battle of Lepanto. That finished Ottoman domination of the Mediterranean, and for the first time, the Europeans gained confidence that the previously unstoppable force could be countered.

Despite their defeat at sea, the Ottomans continued their advance into Europe on land. In 1683, they reached the gates of Vienna for the second time in one hundred fifty-plus years. (The first was Süleyman the Lawgiver’s unsuccessful siege in 1529.) In September 1683, following the Ottomans’ two-month siege, Polish King Jan Sobieski led a combined Polish-Austrian-German-Tuscan-Cossack force that defeated the Ottoman-Crimean/Tatar-Romanian force besieging the city. Though the war continued another sixteen years, the Battle of Vienna marked the end of Ottoman expansion into Europe and an iconic beginning of the empire’s decline. The Treaty of Karlowitz, in 1699, memorialized the conclusion of the war and the acceleration of the Ottomans’ decline.

That treaty, as Bernard Lewis points out, was a watershed event for the Ottomans. Previously, they looked back on a millennium of westward expansion by Turkic tribes. Now, for the first time in the history of their empire, the Ottomans ceded sizable amounts of territory back to the Europeans: Hun-
garian lands returned to Austria, Podolia to Poland, and Dalmatia and the Morea (the Peloponnesus) were granted to Venice. The military and diplomatic defeat concluded by the Treaty of Karlowitz awakened many Ottomans to the reality that they lagged behind Europe and that their empire was in decay. In a century or so, such thoughts gave birth to a vigorous reform effort to absorb new ways of thinking from the West.6

For the moment, however, as the eminent Ottoman historian Niyazi Berkes argues, the Ottoman Empire was reduced from a major power in Europe to the status of a diplomatic pawn used by major European powers.7 France, Austria, Britain, and Russia alternately allied with and opposed the Ottoman Empire as they managed their conflicts with each other. The Europeans also looked to the Ottoman Sultan and Caliph, the world leader of all Sunni Muslims, as the West’s key interlocutor with Muslims to the East. It was during this period that the empire reinvented a new strategic role for itself as a bridge between East and West, supplanting its previous status as an Eastern power anchored to the West. Thus, Islam again grew in importance as a determinant of the empire’s identity.

The Ottoman sultans of the early nineteenth century quickly checked the temptation to rely on Islam as their crutch for sustaining strategic relevance. As the doctrines of the French Revolution spread through their European holdings, the sultans recognized the vulnerability of their empire to exploitation by European powers and to disintegration under pressure from independence movements. To forestall those eventualities, Ottoman leaders realized they would need to attract Western technologies and modernize state institu-
tions by secularizing them through Westernizing reforms. Mahmut II, who assumed the throne in 1808, emerged as one of the greatest reformers in Ottoman history. He eliminated the dangerously scheming janissary corps, which had repeatedly led religious uprisings against previous sultans, and developed a Western-trained standing army. Mahmut also sought to curtail the influence of the empire’s leading Islamic authority, the Şeyhülislam, over the leadership of the Ottoman state. He began to secularize education by founding state schools specializing in technical and scientific studies, that functioned alongside the madrassas (Islamic schools) providing religious education.

Mahmut’s reforms launched the Westernization of the Ottoman identity and—during the Tanzimat period, under his son and successor, Sultan Abdülmecit II—led to even more dramatic reforms. The new Tanzimat policies reflected an understanding that, as Greeks won their independence in 1832 and other nationalist movements gained momentum, existing religious, military, and civil institutions were no longer adequate to maintain the empire’s territorial integrity. In an attempt to reintegrate these diverse nationalities into the empire, the Ottoman government provided greater rights to the sultan’s non-Muslim subjects, who suffered second-class status under the millet system.

The Tanzimat period also produced a dramatic effort to secularize and modernize the empire’s state institutions and thereby restrain Islam’s societal role. That effort had a major impact on all aspects of life, leading to criminal and civil codes, a financial system based on that of France, the building
of railroads and canals, the launching of the first universities and academies, and, in 1876, the codification of the first Ottoman constitution, which checked the authority of the sultan. The secular schools opened in the Tanzimat period were instrumental in the rise of free thinkers who, toward the end of the nineteenth century, led a new wave of modernization that would catalyze the re-emergence of a Turkish identity. The most famous graduate of these schools was Atatürk.

European diplomatic intervention undercut the ability of the Tanzimat reforms to stem the centrifugal forces of the empire’s European minorities. At the end of the Crimean War, in the Charter of 1856, the Great Powers demanded and secured greater autonomy for ethnic communities than the Ottoman rulers had envisioned. The empire’s Muslim population became convinced that Christian minorities enjoyed special privileges allowing them to prosper at the expense of the Muslims’ economic well-being. That led to resentment culminating in a nationalist awakening of a Turkish identity and eventually to the “Young Turks” movement.

When Sultan Abdülhamit II assumed the Ottoman throne in 1876, movements for autonomy and independence were turning into tenacious insurrections in the Balkans. Abdülhamit’s fear of imperial dissolution was severely heightened by Russia’s declaration of war in April 1877 and victory over the Ottomans the following year. The Treaty of San Stefano, which ended that war, cost the Ottoman Empire its dominions in Europe, including those that later became the countries of Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, as well as Armenia.
Abdülmát II reversed the relative decline of Islam’s soci-
etal role during the reigns of his two predecessors. He be-
lieved he could hold the crumbling state together and secure
his authority by pushing a pan-Islamist ideology. By posing as
a pious caliph and mediator among Britain, Russia, and the
Muslim world, he passed as a respected leader—not only in
the eyes of his Muslim constituents but also in the Western
press. Despite the unraveling of the Tanzimat reforms in agri-
culture and economics, a meltdown of the Ottoman economy,
and the suspension of constitutional rule and the parliamen-
tary system, even the most rational and intelligent of Abdu¨lham-
it’s subjects tended to be infatuated with his image as a
powerful caliph, the “Shadow of God” on earth. He estab-
lished strong ties with shaykhs (religious leaders), ulema (Is-
lamic scholars), and other Muslim community leaders.

Returning to the fundamental ideas of Mehmet the Con-
quoror’s millet system and Selim I’s designation of Sunni Islam
as the Ottoman state religion, Abdu¨lhamit sought to unite
all Muslims—regardless of their ethnic identity—under his
caliphate. He brought the most powerful of Arab and Afghan
shaykhs to Istanbul and gave them lucrative commissions to
proselytize according to their strict interpretation of Islam,
alien though it was to the empire’s Turkic subjects. This pe-
period saw Ottoman identity particularly subsumed by its Mus-
lim counterpart.

Not surprisingly, Abdu¨lhamit’s rejection of further West-
enizing reforms accelerated both the decay of the Ottoman
state and the independence of orthodox Christian nations,
while his pan-Islamism failed to stem pan-Arabism. A reac-
tionary pan-Turkic movement—the Young Turks—arose in response at the turn of the twentieth century. Although some of the movement’s pioneers championed the Muslim component of the Turkish identity, the Young Turks’ predominant idea was to create a new nation, known as Turan, based on the ethnic concept of unifying all Turkic communities from the Balkans to Central Asia. Language was a key factor in defining this nation. Over time, Turkish, as opposed to Ottoman, had become the language overwhelmingly used in Anatolia and eventually in parts of Thrace and the Balkans. The unifying power of the Turkish language deterred many Turks in Anatolia from joining the Arab nationalist and pan-Islamist movements taking hold at the time.8

As the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the wake of World War I, a true Turkish identity was emerging for the first time. Ethnicity now prevailed over Islam as the key element of this new Turkish nationalism. The Young Turks trumpeted their ethnic credo with the slogan “Turkey for Turks.” The emerging military and political leader, Atatürk, born in 1881 in the culturally diverse city of Thessaloniki, bristled against this ethnic chauvinism. And drawing on the cosmopolitan education he received during the Tanzimat period, he proceeded to redefine what it meant to be Turkish.

Turkish Identity under Atatürk

This new and charismatic leader mistrusted the nineteenth-century nationalism based on ethnicity and religion, which he
saw as having prompted the Balkan wars of liberation that led to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Atatürk understood that the Kurds in the East would be tempted to break away from the Ottoman territory to pursue their own sovereign state. At the same time, he worried that Abdülhamit’s anti-Westernism and pan-Islamism were keeping the empire from the modernization required for survival.

Atatürk believed that Turkey’s destiny was shaped by a constant pull toward the West. Ingrained with Western ideas from an early age, he received Prussian training as a soldier in the Ottoman army. His experience in both Western and Arab parts of the empire convinced him that Westernization was essential for Turkey to “take its rightful place among civilized nations.” Atatürk concluded that, to modernize, Turkey would have to evolve from an Islamic state into a secular democracy, which protected individual rights through the rule of law.

Atatürk thus recognized the need for a national identity that could establish, unify, and preserve a new Turkish state. In 1920, the Ottoman monarchy accepted the humiliating Treaty of Sèvres with Greece, France, Italy, and Britain. The treaty preserved the Ottoman sultan’s claims to the caliphate and Istanbul, but divided Ottoman lands among the Europeans, leaving only central Anatolia as “Turkey.” Atatürk opposed the Ottoman government’s readiness to partition the empire to save itself. He co-founded the National Movement to organize opposition to the government. In response to the Treaty of Sèvres, he convened the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara as a new parliament and alternative politi-
Turkish Identity—from the Ottomans to Atatürk

cal authority. And he took matters into his own hands by launching the Turkish War of Liberation.

Atatürk would engage Greek forces, which had invaded Anatolia with British support, and also confront the Italians and French, who had taken over parts of Anatolia. His defeat of those combined forces allowed Turkey to renegotiate the Treaty of Sèvres and avoid a Western land grab; the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 established the borders of the Turkish Republic that remain today. Atatürk’s victory also led the Turkish Grand National Assembly to abolish the Ottoman Sultanate in November 1922.

Atatürk sensed that in order to survive, this fledgling republic would need to unify its citizens through a new national identity. He advocated a Turkish identity embracing all ethnicities and religions found among the citizens of the republic. Thus, a geographically based political and legal factor—citizenship—supplanted religion as the primary determinant of Turkish identity. In stating that a Turk was a citizen of the Turkish Republic, rather than a member of the Muslim millet and the global umma, Atatürk was placing Muslims, Jews, and Christians on an equal footing, and thereby confining religion to the private sphere. In his mind, that would clear the way for his countrymen to adopt not just technology but also new ways of thinking from the West, which he believed were crucial to the Turkish Republic’s survival and prosperity.

Atatürk, it should be pointed out, did not deny Islam’s important role in determining the Turkish sense of self; nor did he deny the modern Turks’ ethnic connection with their
Turkic ancestors. Instead, he tried to draw on the historical, cultural, geographical, and linguistic roots of the Turkish identity to create a Turkish or Anatolian Islam. By claiming that ancient Anatolian civilizations such as the Hittites and Sumerians were Turkish in essence, he tried to forge links between all the peoples of Anatolia. Among Atatürk’s greatest supporters were the Alevi, Anatolian Muslims who embraced a form of Shia Islam that incorporates elements of humanism and universalism and who had suffered under Sunni oppression for centuries. The leader’s goal was to relegate Islam to the private domain as a source of moral and ethical behavior and teachings.

Atatürk established the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) within the Turkish government to develop Turkish Islam and prevent the return of the Islamic mindset he believed had led the Ottoman Empire to disaster under Sultan Abdülhamit II. The Diyanet oversaw (and still oversees) all religious officials—as state employees—to prevent religious authorities from politicizing Islam. In an effort to connect Islam with Anatolia rather than Arabia, Atatürk changed the call to prayer to Turkish from Arabic. He abolished the caliphate in 1924 and eliminated Islam as the state religion of the Turkish Republic in 1937, a year before his death.

In keeping with his birth and educational grounding in the West, Atatürk recognized that to be strong and modern, Turkey must become a democracy. But democratic norms would come only with time, after the new Turkish state launched a dramatic reform program to establish a secular state, a modern society, and a Turkish identity in line with Atatürk’s phi-
Turkish Identity—from the Ottomans to Atatürk

...osophy. After all, he was a military officer who did not believe in gradual and incremental changes; he pursued a top-down revolution of Turkish culture and institutions, capitalizing on the enormous political legitimacy he had earned as the savior of the nation. After replacing the sultanate with the Turkish Republic in 1923 and abolishing the caliphate the following year, Atatürk replaced sharia with the rule of secular law through the adoption of a civil code modeled on that of Switzerland. He banned madrassas and established a state system of secular schools focused on scientific learning to prepare students for modern life.10

Atatürk’s approach to education reflected his conviction that “the most genuine guide in life is science.” He changed Turkey’s official language from Ottoman to modern Turkish and replaced the Arabic alphabet with its Latin counterpart; that tremendous modification quickly helped increase the literacy rate and moved people closer to the modern world, although it weakened their ties to their past. Turkey would now also adopt the Gregorian rather than the Islamic calendar.

Gender equality benefited significantly from the replacement of sharia with a civil code. Atatürk believed modernization required equal rights for women. He staunchly held that the oppression of women under sharia constituted a serious impediment to a nation’s development. Atatürk asked, rhetorically, “How can a nation soar if half of the people are chained to the ground?”

Turkish women played an enormous role in the War of Independence; moreover, in traditional Turkic culture, they

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had enjoyed equal standing with men. In supplanting *sharia*, Turkey’s new civil code banned polygamy and ensured women equal rights in divorce, inheritance, and child custody. Atatürk pushed for women to be educated, eligible for elected public office, and allowed to enter any profession. Turkish women gained the right to vote in 1930 and to hold elected office in 1934, sooner than in many Western countries. Atatürk forbade the Islamic headscarf for women (along with the fez for men) in favor of Western headgear, though the traditional Anatolian headscarf continued to be used, mostly by peasants.

Atatürk’s reforms marked perhaps the most thoroughgoing restructuring of Turkish life since the Turkic tribes first departed the Altai Mountains. Implementing such a radical program required centralized authority with an efficient and powerful bureaucracy. To that end, Atatürk banned the Islamic Sufi orders. (He viewed the Sufi followers’ strong allegiance to their *shaykhs* as a threat to the state’s authority, and he regarded the Sufi orders’ communitarian mentality as undermining individual liberty.) He founded and relied on the Republican People’s Party to secure and execute political power in the Grand National Assembly.

As a soldier, Atatürk relied not just on civilians but on a military bureaucracy as well. In the preceding decades, the Turkish military had evolved into one of the country’s most Westernized institutions, thanks in large part to its Prussian training. In subsequent decades, the military would gain the strong support of many Turks as a custodian of Kemalist ideology and the secular democracy Atatürk established.
Yet the military’s later role in ousting four democratically elected governments underscores the peculiar nature of the democratic system Atatürk launched. A strong societal role for the military was perhaps inevitable in 1923, given the precarious circumstances under which the Turkish Republic was born. But nowadays the proper role of the military in the nation’s political life is being debated as intensely as the proper role of Islam in society at large. In any case, Atatürk used his severe methods to lay the foundation for a modern state and a new Turkish identity based on separation of mosque and state, ethnic and religious tolerance, and respect for both religious and secular Turkic traditions.

Opponents of the monopoly of power Atatürk’s ruling party enjoyed arose on the political left and right. Meanwhile, center-right politicians tapped into many conservative Turks’ desire to restore Islam’s former role in society. When Atatürk died in 1938, the foundation was laid for a resurgence of Islam in Turkish society, which played out in the Turkish Republic’s first fully democratic elections in 1946 and, more decisively, in 1950.