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BORIS JOHNSON - HOW WE DID IT

Political Murder in the Ottoman Empire

Boris Johnson knew a certain amount about his diverse family background, but was intrigued by several family stories and mysteries. He was particularly keen to investigate stories associated with the relatives of his paternal grandparents.



Ali Kemal and his wife Winifred

So Boris set out on an international journey of discovery to separate fact from fiction.

GREAT-GRANDFATHER: ALI KEMAL

Boris wanted to find out the truth about what happened to his Turkish paternal great-grandfather, Ali Kemal, who was a journalist and politician in the early 1900s. He knew that Ali Kemal had been lynched by a mob in the 1920s, but didn't really know anything about the context of his life and death.

STEP 1 - PERSONAL FAMILY ARCHIVE

Our starting point for the journey was Boris's family. When investigating any family story or ancestral line, a first port of call should always be the personal family archive of documents, photographs, journals, diaries and letters that may be held by one or several family members. In most families there is usually at least one person who becomes the unofficial custodian of the family archive – in Boris's case, his father Stanley, Stanley's cousins, and Boris's 'Aunt Birdie' Johnson all held a stash of useful clues that helped to unravel both Ali's story and that of Granny Butter.

At the start of the investigation into Ali's story, **Stanley Johnson** showed Boris his grandfather Wilfred's birth certificate. Birth certificates can provide crucial information at

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- Turkey Topic Page
- The Ottoman Empire (1301-1922)
- BBC History - Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938)
- Germany Topic Page
- BBC Family History - 19th Century Immigration
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EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The British Library - Turkish and Turkic Collections
- Guide to the Turkish State Archives Ataturk.com
- Bavarian State Archives
- Genealogy Research in Stuttgart Libraries and Archives

RELATED LINKS

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- Find My Past
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- 1901 Census
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the start of a family history search. Sometimes family members may have lost original birth certificates, but indexes to English and Welsh certificates can be consulted on a variety of websites, orders for copies of original certificates can also be placed online (see Related Links).

Wilfred's birth certificate showed that he was actually born **Osman Wilfred Kemal**, and that sadly Wilfred's mother, Winifred, had died giving birth to him.

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Through examining the birth certificate we also found out that Winifred's mother, Margaret Johnson, was present at the birth. Boris' father, Stanley, was then prompted to describe how, after her daughter's death, Margaret, known as 'Granny Johnson', raised Wilfred and his older sister, Celma. Stanley was also able to provide further evidence of Granny Johnson's formidable character, and the way in which she went on to change the identity and character of the family forever.

Boris and Stanley Johnson examine Wilfred Johnson's birth certificate

STEP 2 - BUSINESS LETTERS

Once we had discovered that Boris' apparently quintessentially English grandfather had been born with such an exotic name, we wanted to know how, why and when the family name had been changed so dramatically.

A short letter from the Home Office, found amongst papers belonging to Stanley, was the key. Seemingly innocuous business letters can provide a way of working out the events and relationships that have defined a family's identity or an individual's life story. Stanley's Home Office letter responded to a query from Margaret Johnson in 1916. Margaret was told by the Home Office that no permission was needed to change Wilfred Kemal's surname to Johnson, as he was a British subject (and we had already seen on his birth certificate that Wilfred was born in Britain). Margaret had clearly been trying to work out the appropriate procedure for changing the names of her half-Turkish grandchildren.

We wondered whether Margaret might have wanted to do this because Wilfred was growing up during the First World War, when Britain was fighting Turkey as well as Germany, and at a time when a young boy with a Turkish name might have become a target at school and in society.

Whatever the reason, this is the moment when Boris's great-great-grandmother, Margaret Johnson, changed the family surname forever. Had she not, the current Mayor of London would be Boris Kemal!

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Boris and Stanley look at evidence of Wilfred Kemal's name change

STEP 3 - TRAVELLING AND MEETING RELATIVES

To find out more about Ali Kemal's life and death in Turkey, Boris would need to go to Istanbul.

Travelling to where an ancestor lived can be an obvious way of continuing an investigation into a relative's past. Boris's journey to Turkey would involve talking to relatives still living in the local area, meeting academic experts and visiting archives.

When we arrived in Istanbul, Boris met up with one of his cousins, **Sinan Kunalalp**, who is a grandson of Ali Kemal. He had more information about his background and was able to bring much more colour and detail to Boris's understanding of Ali's roots and early life.

Meeting up with relatives, especially those beyond the immediate family, is a great way to learn more about your ancestors. Some families talk much more about the experiences of parents and grandparents than others, and some may even have written down stories passed on to them about their relatives' lives.

This was the case in Boris's search. **Sinan's father, Zeki**, was Ali's youngest son from his second marriage and had stayed in Turkey. Zeki had passed on what he knew of Ali's life to Sinan, and had written a detailed pamphlet about his life.

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Sinan showed Boris the area where Ali was born and raised, described his traditional education at a **Koranic school** and told us that Ali's father was a **wealthy merchant**. Through visiting the atmospheric area where Ali grew up and studied, Boris began to appreciate his great-grandfather's traditional Islamic roots. We also discovered that despite Ali's conventional early life, he went on to travel to France and Switzerland, to study in Europe and to become a successful journalist, returning to Turkey with a wife and daughter in 1908.

Boris meets his cousin, Sinan, in the area where Ali Kemal grew up

STEP 4 - LIBRARIES

But Boris was still no nearer to understanding what had led to his great-grandfather's brutal and untimely death. Our main clues were that Ali, like Boris, had been both a journalist and a politician. More significantly though, we also knew that Ali had been active during a controversial and turbulent period in Turkey's history.

It was crucial for Boris to understand the historical context of the time, and to find out exactly what Ali had been writing and doing. Firstly we had to investigate how controversial Boris' great-grandfather had been as a journalist, and we set out to find copies of Ali's newspaper columns.

Libraries, whether local or national, are a fantastic source of newspaper articles and historical documents. Searching for articles or documents abroad can take some time and effort, particularly when navigating language differences. The website Libdex provides an index to 18,000 international libraries. The British Library website also lists a selection of the library catalogues around the world which are freely available online (see Related Links).

Our search for Ali's articles was particularly difficult, because at that time Ali was writing in the Old Ottoman script (later eradicated by the new republican government). Very few people in Turkey are still able to read Old Ottoman, so we had to find help.

STEP 5 - LOCAL RESEARCH

We had already begun the process of making contact with academics and researchers both in the UK and Turkey who might help us to understand the historical context for Ali Kemal's story.

Finding local researchers or translators can be a tricky, time consuming and potentially expensive process. Alongside searching online, it's worth contacting local universities and libraries for recommendations of freelance researchers or students who could take on private research or translation work.

For Boris's search we used a combination of researchers and academics based in the UK and in Istanbul. Their research and translation on the ground was invaluable.

STEP 6 - EXPERTS

Once we had tracked down original examples of Ali's articles, we sought advice from a historical expert to help us understand their significance.

Boris met with Dr Benjamin Fortna from London's School of Oriental and African Studies, who spends time in Istanbul researching the late Ottoman Empire and modern Middle Eastern history. Finding experts concerned with a particular period or aspect of history can help to shed light on the context of an individual's life. This can be done through research online or in libraries, or by contacting local universities, history societies and institutes.

Ben took Boris to the Beyazid Library in Istanbul to see some of the original articles that Ali Kemal wrote in a newspaper called *Ikdam*, and used his translation skills to decipher them. Ben was also able to explain the controversial times during which Ali was writing. It became clear that Ali was speaking out against the violent methods of the new popular nationalist government in Turkey, therefore placing himself in great danger. In fact, at that time, another opposition journalist with a similar political

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position to Ali was assassinated by the nationalists.

Ben Fortna and Boris look at the Ikdam article, and realise its implications

STEP 7 - PERSONAL TESTIMONY

But how much risk was Ali himself really taking? Boris understood the need to be forthright and provocative as a journalist, but he wanted to get a sense of the specific danger faced by Ali, and the effect that his views were having on the life of his family.

Before his trip to Turkey, Boris had been given a bundle of personal documents and letters relating to his grandfather's side of the family. Amongst these papers Boris found an amazing account written by Ali's eldest child, **Celma**, of a dramatic night when Ali had to flee for his life on a boat.

Reading or hearing personal testimony in the place where events took place is a powerful way of bringing to life the experience of relatives. Boris read Celma's account in the riverside suburb of Bebek, where Ali and his young family were living at the time. Overlooking the river, Boris learned that Ali was forced to flee suddenly in disguise having read an article in a newspaper. The article stated that because of their views eight people, including Ali himself, had been named as targets for public hanging. As he continued to read, Boris was shocked to learn that a few days after Ali's escape, the other seven men were duly hanged.

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When we compared the account with other documents like Wilfred's birth certificate, we realised that Ali had escaped death just before Boris' grandfather, Wilfred, was born.

Boris reads the account of Ali Kemal's dramatic escape

STEP 8 - FOREIGN ACADEMICS

We now had evidence of Ali's controversial writing and understood the danger in which his articles placed him. But we still wanted to find out about Ali's later political role, his subsequent death, and the context of Turkey's dramatic regime changes.

Boris went to meet historian Dr Ahmet Kuyas at Galatasaray University who was able to shed light on Ali's sudden and short-lived ministerial role in Turkey's government, and also explained one of the key political decisions that led to his death.

Meeting or contacting local experts and academics abroad can help to clarify the context and details of an ancestor's life. In Boris's case, we had a difficult job finding an academic who would speak openly about Ali Kemal, since his role is still regarded as highly controversial in modern Turkey.

Dr Kuyas explained how world events enabled Ali to return to politics. After the Turkish nationalists were defeated in the First World War, **Ali Kemal was made Minister of the Interior in a brand new government**. Dr Kuyas showed Boris a government circular issued by Ali which later proved to be a serious political mistake. Ali ordered everyone to ignore the extremely popular nationalist Mustafa Kemal, in effect publicly denouncing the man who would later become Turkey's reforming hero, Ataturk

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Dr Ahmet Kuyas reveals the political decision that ultimately led to Ali's death

STEP 9 - SEARCHING FOR PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

From Dr Kuyas and others, Boris learned that Ali's actions led to his forced resignation from government. He returned to writing opinionated articles challenging the tactics of the nationalists. But when another regime change occurred and the nationalists regained power, Ali's fate was sealed.

We knew that Ali's arrest and death had been fairly high profile, especially as the authorities had sanctioned his arrest but not his killing. We had also been told that there would undoubtedly be some account of what had happened.

Searching for personal accounts of a well-known political, historical or criminal event involving a family member can uncover poignant and dramatic testimonies. Local researchers and libraries are invaluable, but the process can take some time, and may be costly, particularly abroad.

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With some local research assistance, Boris's cousin Sinan found an astonishing first-hand account of the arrest, interrogation and mob killing of Ali Kemal.

Sinan reads the witness account of Ali Kemal's arrest, interrogation and murder

Next: European Aristocracy

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