

Republican Turkey

By Associate Professor Richard Pennell

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After the First World War the Ottoman Empire was divided. During the war, the British and the French governments had made all sorts of promises about its future to each other and to their minor allies. Many of these conflicted, notably in the Arab provinces, where Zionist, Arab, British and French aspirations crossed and the only thing that was clear was that Turks would not rule Arabs again.

The Turkish-speaking provinces of the empire had also been promised to various other states. At the time of the Gallipoli landings, a secret agreement had assigned the Bosphorus to Russia if the allies won the war. But, after the Revolution of 1917, Russia was no longer an ally, so the British and French imposed a joint military administration on Istanbul. There was still a sultan, Abdülhamit's younger brother, Mehmet VI, who had succeeded to the throne a few months before the armistice. Although he continued to appoint a government he had no real power, or indeed much of a territory. Anatolia was to be split between Greece and Italy in the west and new states for Armenians and Kurds were proposed in the east. Turkey would consist of the centre of Anatolia, the rump that no-one else wanted.

This was easier said than done, since the various Ottoman armies had to be stood down and disarmed. Mustafa Kemal, the most successful Turkish general of the war, was instructed to demobilise his army so that Turks could be ruled by Italians and Greeks, and by British and French, in the name of a powerless sultan in Istanbul. He was sent to Samsun on the Black Sea to begin his work, but instead he re-organised the army to fight the foreign intervention.

The War of Independence

When Kemal arrived in Samsun in June 1919, he had already made military plans to stop the dismemberment of Anatolia. But first, he had to solve a political problem. He might have thought the government of the sultan in Istanbul, which was entirely dependent on the Allies, was treacherous, but he was a general in its army and in the eyes of most Turks, the sultan was caliph and the head of the Muslim community. By an awkward irony, resistance to the Allies and the regaining of independence might easily be seen as treason to the only legitimate authority. Even so, Kemal did have a popular cause: the Greek advance, which was greatly resented. He used this immediate issue in order to get support and put off dealing with the long-term question of the sultan and his government.



From Samsun, Kemal quickly contacted other military commanders and various patriotic societies elsewhere in Anatolia to seek support, and he proposed to resist the dismemberment of Turkey. Things moved quickly. A meeting at Amasya in June 1919 decided to set up a provisional de facto government in Anatolia to lead the resistance, since the central government in Istanbul was unable to act. When the Proclamation of Amasya was issued, the British administration in Istanbul forced the Ottoman government, on pain of its own survival, to declare Mustafa Kemal an outlaw.

In July, a congress at Erzurum in the east of Anatolia elected Kemal as its chairman and drafted a National Pact. This set up an interim government, to replace not the sultan-caliph, but only his government, which was under foreign control. It was a fine distinction and one that could not be reconciled with the other provisions of the pact: the equality of all citizens whatever their religion, the supremacy of the 'will of the nation', and the formation of a national assembly to represent it. Clearly the supremacy of the 'national will' would eventually conflict with the role of the sultan as Caliph of Islam.

The rest of the country followed Erzurum's lead and organised local congresses and in September

another congress was held at Sivas to bring them all together into one big organisation, The Society for the Defence of the National Rights of Anatolia and Rumelia. It made no mention of the rest of the empire: this was specifically Turkish. Quite quickly, the past was being abandoned. Although the Sivas Declaration still emphasised loyalty to the Sultan, the delegates swore an oath of disloyalty to the Committee of Union and Progress, promising never to revive it.

It was the rump government in Istanbul that pushed Kemal another stage further. In November 1919, it held elections for a new parliament but to its horror Kemal's supporters won a majority. In January 1920 they voted for the National Pact. In March, the parliament was dissolved by the sultan and some of its members were arrested. That same month the British imposed direct control over Istanbul.

Kemal's response was to organise a new assembly in Ankara, which was then a small town in the centre of the country almost as far away from Allied control as it was possible to be. He declared that with the occupation of Istanbul the Ottoman Empire had ceased to exist and a Turkish nation had taken its place in Anatolia. In April, the Grand National Assembly had its first meeting in Ankara. The only building that was available was the former offices of the Committee of Union and Progress, which were furnished from the local teachers' training college. The delegates, in frock coats, made themselves as comfortable as they could at school desks and voted a Turkish state into existence.

Soviet Russia was the first state to give recognition, followed by Afghanistan, but to gain acceptance from the countries that really mattered Kemal had to fight. In May 1920 he defeated the French and forced them to sign an armistice. The British, though, carried on acting as though the puppet government in Istanbul still mattered. In June 1920 they forced it to accept the Treaty of Sévres which assigned part of the west coast to Greece, some of the south west coast to Italy, and the district around Adana to France. It also set up a Kurdish autonomous region and an independent Armenia, and gave Greece large parts of western Anatolia.

The Greeks duly advanced to take possession. Ismet Pasha, Kemal's most trusted commander, defeated them twice at İnönü but still they advanced. When they pushed on towards Ankara, Kemal stopped them at the Battle of Sarakya in August 1921 and heavily defeated them. Then he started to push them back. The Grand National Assembly gave Kemal the title of Gazi (victor) to commemorate his success.

The foreign occupying armies began to go home: first the French, then the Italians. Finally, Kemal expelled the Greeks. In September 1922, the last Greek troops were evacuated from Izmir (Smyrna) and the city burned behind them. It has never been established who was responsible for this: the Greek version said it was the Turkish army, trying to remove all traces of the biggest Greek population in Anatolia; the Turkish version said that the departing Greeks slashed the fire hoses and adopted a scorched earth policy.

Following the Greek withdrawal, in October 1922, the British too signed an armistice. In July 1923, all the European powers recognised the independence of Turkey with the Treaty of Lausanne. Kemal now had to rebuild his country.

[Kemal's Turkey](#)

The War of Independence was a great military achievement, but Kemal knew that it was only the start in his efforts to build a Turkish nation. In March 1923 he made a speech in which he warned:

"The successes which our army has gained up to now cannot be regarded as having achieved the real salvation of our country. These victories have only prepared the ground for our future victories. Let us not

be puffed up with military victories. Let us rather prepare for new victories in science and economics".¹

Before the economic reconstruction could begin, the country had to be given a political base and a national identity. Kemal was determined that there should be a break with the past: Turkey meant Turkey, not an attempt to restore the Ottoman Empire. That also meant it would have to be a secular state. It would speak only Turkish, which left no place for Arabic, the language of religion; and its head of state could no longer be a man who was leader of all Muslims. The sultan-caliph would have to go.

This was very radical and many devout Muslims disapproved, so Kemal moved in stages. First, in October 1922, the Grand National Assembly abolished the sultanate. The caliph would keep only religious, not political powers, and a new caliph was appointed, Abdülmecit II. The last sultan, Mehmet VI, slipped away from Istanbul in a British warship. A year later, in October 1923, Kemal announced that Turkey would be a republic, with representative institutions. Finally, on 3 March 1924, the caliphate was abolished too, and Abdülmecit was sent off to Europe, this time by train, on the Orient Express.

Once the caliph was out of the way, Kemal got the GNA to abolish Islamic law courts, take education into the hands of the state and make itself the sole source of law in the new republic.

To overcome opposition to all these changes. Kemal organised a political party, the People's Party, and called elections for G.N.A., which it won. The party was really an instrument of Kemal, who wielded enormous power as president, and although he said in theory was in favour of a multi-party system, he did not allow any real opposition party to develop. The time, he said, was not yet ripe.

The only armed opposition came from among the Kurds in 1924 and 1925. It was organised by a Sufi brotherhood and was firmly repressed. The Sufi orders were then abolished, their houses closed, their special clothing banned and their ceremonies prohibited. An exception would be made for the Mevlevi order of 'Whirling Dervishes' because of their cultural interest.

Kemal's Social Reforms

It was not just the clothing of the dervishes that Kemal sought to regulate. In a famous speech in 1927 he ridiculed one of the members of the crowd:

"I see a man in the crowd in front of me; he has a fez on his head, a green turban on the fez, a smock on his back; and on top of that a jacket like the one I am wearing. I can't see the lower half. Now what kind of outfit is that? Would a civilized man put on this preposterous garb and go out to hold himself up to universal ridicule?"

In another speech he outlined a new costume:

"I shall put my explanations to you in the form of a question. Is our dress national? (cries of no) Is it civilized and international? (Cries of no, no!) I agree with you. This grotesque mixture of styles is neither national nor international . . . My friends, there is no need to seek and revive the costume of Turan. A civilized international dress is worthy and appropriate for our nation, and we will wear it. Boots or shoes on our feet, trousers on our legs, shirt and tie, jacket and waistcoat - and, of course, to complete these, a cover with a brim on our heads. I want to make this clear. This head-covering is called 'hat'".²

Kemal's reasoning mixed nationalism, modernism and membership of European civilisation. By implication it was also an attack on the Islamic identity of Turkey. The prohibition of the fez that followed removed the badge of a Muslim, since a hat with a brim was a secular hat: a Muslim cannot pray in one.

Kemal's reforms touched every part of society, from the public to the very personal. Kemal insisted that Ankara, a new town, should be the capital, not Istanbul, the headquarters of both the old regime and the old culture. Kemal loathed Istanbul and refused even to visit it until 1927. In Ankara, European urban planners were brought in to design a town with wide streets, a wooded park and an artificial lake.

The reforms rolled on. The European (i.e Christian) calendar replaced the Muslim one. Kemal demanded that everyone should be educated, and in order to make it easier imposed a new script, in Latin characters, in place of the old Ottoman script which used the Arabic characters of the Qur'án. At one stroke, this made it easier to learn to read, broke another link with the religious past, and inaugurated a national language. A law was passed that every one should adopt a surname in the European fashion and a list of possible surnames was issued to help people chose one. Many people already had family names, others took the names of their home town, or a place (Menderes, the name of a river), or a profession (Sabancı, soapmaker). Yet others chose auspicious names (Yılmaz - undaunted). The most popular choice of all was a nationalist name Öztürk (Real Turk). Ismet Pasha chose the name of his great victory at İnönü, and Kemal took Atatürk, (Father of the Turks) and no one else was allowed to use it. Since he had no male descendants the name has remained unique.

'Father of the Turks' was a justifiable claim, because the changes that Atatürk oversaw touched every part of Turkish society. In 1926, the first statue of Atatürk - indeed, the first statue of any Turk - was erected in the little park of Saray Burnu where the Bosphorus meets the Golden Horn in Istanbul. Since then his picture and his statue have been put up everywhere in Turkey, showing him in many different roles. Sometimes he is portrayed as a military officer, expelling the Greeks; sometimes as a teacher, explaining the new alphabet; sometimes as a speechmaker, enthusing his audience. But his real legacy was in areas that could not so easily be represented in graphic form. His regime introduced a new code of civil law, based on that of Switzerland. Polygamy was abolished; women were given the right to seek a divorce and were allowed to marry non-Muslims, if they wished to. Women did not necessarily rush to get divorced, but the new code showed that the state was on the side of change. Tradition, on the other hand, was subversive. But there were limits: the new Turkey was still an extremely conservative country and although women were given the right to vote, Atatürk did not impose upon them the same demands as he made upon men. Despite all the claims to the contrary he did not force women to abandon the veil.

The new Turkey was also a very poor country, and there was little capital in private hands to invest in industry. So industrial development was financed by the state, particularly in heavy industry like textiles, paper, glass, steel and chemicals. The main source of national income was exporting raw materials and manufactured commodities, and in the 1930s the main market for wool yarn, iron, steel and minerals was the booming economy of Nazi Germany. Turkish chrome was particularly valuable. As war approached, both Britain and Germany competed to turn Turkey into an ally.

Atatürk would have none of it. Alliance with Germany during the First World War had been disastrous and the president and his colleagues had no intention of repeating the experience. His foreign policy was summed up his famous dictum is still widely reproduced in Turkey: 'Peace at home, Peace in the World'. Atatürk died before the war started, in 1938, ironically in the Yildiz Palace in Istanbul when he was visiting the city. There is a legend that among the last pieces of advice that he gave to Ismet İnönü, his successor, was that war was coming. Turkey should stay out of it, he advised, but if that was impossible, it should join on the side of the British, because they would win. İnönü followed the advice to the letter.

Turkey after Atatürk

Neutrality was not the only part of Atatürk's legacy that İnönü preserved. He was careful to maintain the structure of the state, with its republican organisation and institutions. This was probably the greatest

legacy of all, for unlike the founders of other new states, Atatürk had seen to it that Turkey was not simply the property of one individual, and left space for new institutions to develop.

Inönü was an austere and autocratic man, and for the first few years of his presidency, the structure of government remained hierarchical and authoritarian, with power concentrated in the hands of the president. The only party in the G.N.A. was the Republican People's Party that Atatürk had founded. During the war Inönü kept a very tight rein on events. Following Atatürk's advice, he kept Turkey out of the war until February 1945, when he declared war on Germany in order to join the United Nations, and line up on the winning side. Once the war was over, though, the winning side itself split. The post-war division of Europe deeply worried Inönü because Soviet satellites virtually surrounded Turkey to the north. That drew him into a close alliance with the western bloc. The United States supplied military and economic aid, and Turkey became a close ally. Turkish troops were sent to Korea in 1950, and Turkey joined NATO in 1952.

Since the western bloc was an alliance of democracies, people in Turkey began to ask why Turkey was not one too. A new political party, the Democratic Party, was formed in 1946. Although it did badly in the first elections, it built up strength in the countryside, where it had support from more conservative and religious people who opposed the radical secularism of the RPP, and among the middle class who wanted more liberal economic policies. It won the elections of 1950 with a huge majority, on just over 50% of the vote. This began a political division of Turkey into two main and roughly equal camps that lasted in various forms right through until the 1990s. It helped to cause the political instability that marked Turkey through the whole period. Between 1950 and 1980 there were three coup d'états, each roughly following the same pattern of gradual economic breakdown and the army stepping in to restore order and then handing back power to a civilian government. The army commanders considered themselves to be the guardians of Atatürk's tradition when it came under threat.

The first coup came in May 1960 after inflation brought economic disorder and bigger and bigger government deficits. The government cracked down on dissent but disorder spiralled out of control. When the army had taken over, they blamed the government, banned the Democratic Party, put its leaders on trial and hanged three of them, including President Menderes. It then revised the electoral system hoping that proportional representation would force the parties to be less authoritarian. It simply made it impossible to govern at all, because no party had a stable majority.

During the 1960s, a new moderate right-wing party replaced the Democratic Party. It was called the Justice Party, and its leader was Süleyman Demirel, a technocrat who worked well with the army. The moderate left was led by the Republican People's Party. But neither party was able to form a majority in parliament, and weak governments were unable to tackle the economic crisis that was developing. For want of work, many Turkish workers migrated to western Europe, particularly to Germany. Others moved into illegal and supposedly temporary settlements (gecekondu) on the edges of cities like Istanbul. While these were nowhere near as bad as the bidonvilles or squatter settlements that surrounded many cities in Africa and Asia, they were foci for discontent. Extremist groups on the right and left became more violent. The neo-fascist National Action Party, led by a Cypriot-born Colonel, Alparslan Türkeş, was very small but it had a violent thuggish youth group, the Bözkürtler (Grey Wolves). On the left, several extreme Marxist groups mainly led by students that did badly in elections were reorganised as urban guerrillas in the early 1970s. As economic conditions deteriorated, political violence on both the left and the right became more extreme. The violence was stopped by a second military intervention in 1971. Power was handed back to elected civilians in 1973.

The third attempt at democracy was as unsuccessful as the others had been. Under Bülent Ecevit the RPP moved to the left and was forced into an unstable coalition with the small National Religious Party. In

August 1974, Ecevit sent Turkish troops into Cyprus following a neo-fascist Greek coup. His nationalist solidarity did not save him, and in 1975, Demirel became Prime Minister with the support of the National Action Party. The government see-sawed through coalitions. As the economy got worse, partly because of the rising price of oil, inflation soared. It topped 100% a year in 1980. Terrorist violence on both the right and the left killed more than 4,500 people between 1976 and 1980. The most infamous right-wing terrorist was Mehmet Ali Ağca, who murdered a prominent journalist in 1979, and after escaping from prison, tried to assassinate the Pope. Ethnic violence, particularly by Kurds, increased too. In September 1980 the army, led by General Kenan Evren, intervened again and overthrew the government.

Once again the military had acted to 'protect the republic' but it took much longer than before to hand power back to civilians. When they did, the old parties, including the Republican People's Party, were banned permanently and their leaders, including Demirel and Ecevit, were forbidden to take part in politics for several years. Universities were taken under tight central control, and study of Atatürk's thought was required of all university students. It was three years before elections were held.

They were won by a modernising right-wing party, the Motherland Party, led by Turgüt Özal. Eventually a number of other new parties emerged including one on the centre-left led by Erdal İnönü (the old man's son), a centre-right party called True Path led by a stand-in for Demirel and a left wing party led by a stand-in for Ecevit (his wife). There was also a small Islamic party called the Welfare Party, headed by Necmettin Erbakan. Eventually the surrogates were replaced by the real leaders.

Özal imposed a free economy on Turkey, and privatised many state enterprises. Big companies blossomed. Koç Holdings, the biggest of them all, even went on to underwrite a new private university in Istanbul, private money was moving into areas that had previously been the preserve of the state. Özal also brought technocrats into the government - men like the Mayor of Istanbul, Bedrettin Dalan, who attempted a whole-scale reconstruction of the city and cleaned up the surrounds of the Golden Horn. Özal's biggest project was to build a series of 22 dams on the Tigris and Euphrates river systems in the far southeast of Turkey. The Atatürk Dam, the fifth biggest in the world, would irrigate an area (30,000 square miles) larger than Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg combined. It would be used to grow food for export and electrical power. But countries downstream complained that it would deprive them of water, and archeologists said it would drown unexplored ancient cities. Because of these objections, the Turkish government was forced to build the dam without the help of the World Bank. The Özal government also built two huge bridges across the Bosphorus, linking Europe and Asia. They symbolised Turkey's links with Europe, which Özal emphasised when he tried to take Turkey into the EEC. The application was refused, partly because of Turkey's very poor human rights record, and partly to protect European labour and agricultural markets.

When economic conditions deteriorated in the late 1980s, Özal shifted to the presidency and the Motherland Party began to break up, until it was taken in hand by a young technocrat, Mesut Yılmaz. He lost the elections in 1991, but the party did not collapse. Even so the winner, Süleyman Demirel's True Path, Party had to form a coalition with the Social Democrats. No government during this period was strong enough to deal with the greatest political problem of all: the growing violence of the Kurdish nationalist movement in the eastern part of Turkey. Since 1984, there has been a virtual civil war between the Turkish government and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), which has undertaken a guerrilla campaign of great ferocity. The government in Ankara refuses to negotiate saying that the PKK threatens the unity of the Turkish state. During the period of military rule a heavy-handed effort was made to bring about the assimilation of the Kurds into the Turkish nation, even the use of Kurdish "in the expression and dissemination of thought" was prohibited.

Turgüt Özal died in office in 1993 and another realignment of Turkish politics took place. Demirel became

President and was succeeded at the head of True Path by Turkey's first woman prime minister, Tansu Çiller, an economist from Bosphorus University. From 1994 onward, the Islamicist Welfare Party won more and more support. Elections at the end of 1995 led to a hung parliament, in which Welfare was the largest party but was unable to form a majority government on its own. It later formed a coalition with the True Path in which Çiller and Eberkan were supposed to alternate in power. That collapsed amidst allegations of corruption, in particular on the part of Çiller's husband. The military and the Turkish establishment viewed the popularity of Welfare with extreme distaste and in January 1998, the Supreme Court declared that the party had violated the secular constitution and banned it.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Salahi Sonyel, *Atatürk, the Founder of Modern Turkey*, Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 1981, p. 102.
2. Quoted in Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, London 1961, pp 263-264.

Images

1. The Turkish War of Independence. The Turkish Army's entry into Izmir (known as the Liberation of Smyrna) on September 9, 1922, following the successful Great Smyrna Offensive, effectively sealed the Turkish victory and ended the war. Izmir was the location where Turkish civilian armed resistance against the occupation of Anatolia by the Allies first began on May 15, 1919.
2. Mustafa Kemal October 29, 1923 the day of the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey.

Further Reading

In addition to the items mentioned in the previous chapter, the most readable short biography of Atatürk is that by Alan Palmer, *Kemal Atatürk*, London, 1991. For Turkey since Atatürk, by far the best analysis is in chapters 6-10 of Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, London, 1991.

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