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AGAINST ALL ODDS: ATATURK'S LEGACY AND ITS IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY TURKEY



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The very fact that we are assembled here today to examine and discuss the import of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, a military man who became the first president of the Republic of Turkey and who died 85 years ago on 11-10-1938, bears witness to how remarkable he was. After all, how is it that a man, who did not live in one of the grand and powerful metropolises of the early 20th century, such as London, Paris or Berlin, who did not conquer vast swaths of terrain, and did not overthrow an empire such as Russia or China, came to be the object of so much study and reverence not only among the citizens of the modern Turkish Republic but among many peoples in the region surrounding Turkey and beyond? Ataturk's legacy, unlike that of Mao or Stalin continues to command the attention of tens millions of people within and beyond the boundaries of the Turkish Republic. Part of the answer to this question is that while Ataturk recognized the urgency of political and economic reform in the fledgling Turkish nation, he centered it primarily on something even more enduring, what we now consider to be core human rights values, namely universal education, womens' rights, including suffrage, and democratic elections.

Clearly, there was something extraordinary about the man who was born and raised in what was the Ottoman Empire and is today in the eastern part of modern Greece. One need only spend twenty minutes in Turkey in order to encounter portraits of Ataturk on walls, billboards, the national currency and a host of other items. For some visitors, the ubiquitous and steely countenance of Ataturk can leave a feeling of being constantly watched and, for the uninitiated, an Orwellian sense of being constantly monitored. Among Turks themselves, claiming the mantle of Ataturk has long been the source of a heated and sometimes lethal struggle among various groups across the Turkish political spectrum.

This talk will briefly examine the history of the contestations for the legacy of Ataturk or, put differently, the Mantle of the Ghazi, or warrior, in an attempt to explain why Turks today, as well as many foreigners, myself included, view the meaning of Ataturk in such different ways. In order to do so, I would like to propose a brief trip back to the 19th century, one that then meanders its way into the 20th century and through the carnage of the First World War. Following this, I propose to follow the

man as he organizes the successful national resistance against the victorious Western Powers after WWI, a group which, influenced by a toxic mixture of racism, religious bigotry and almost unsurpassed cynicism aimed to achieve a "final solution" with regard to the Turks at the time of the Treaty of Sevres, a treaty that would have left the Turkish Republic as a rump state in north-eastern Anatolia.

I then propose to examine the Ghazi's enormous efforts to modernize Turkey and the Turkish people, largely through a process of top down reform, organized and led by Ataturk. Taken as a whole, the series of reforms enacted by Ataturk represent one of the broadest and most enduring social transformations ever. It is the humanity of Ataturk, both in his genius and in his foibles that truly establishes him as perhaps the singular great leader of the twentieth century. He was human, not a god. However, he also had the misfortune not to have had, in his immediate circle, men or women, who could or would truly challenge him and the formulation of his vision, something that might have served to prolong his life.

In order to better understand the man, let us turn back to the second to the last decade of the 19th century when on May 19, 1881 a boy Mustafa was born in today's Greek city of Salonica to a minor Turkish official, Ali Riza and a very strong willed mother Zubeyda. Sukru Hanioglu, one of the foremost authorities on late Ottoman history as well as a biographer of Ataturk, points out that Salonika and the Rumelian lands of the empire were the most important parts of the Empire at the time of Ataturk's birth. Until 1878, the northern border of the Empire has been the Danube itself. As for Salonika, it was the premier trading center, eclipsing Istanbul and Izmir in importance and volume of trade. It was also a city in which the divisive seeds of nationalism were to be found among many of the diverse ethnic populations of the time.

Ataturk's early years have been exhaustively researched and yielded little other than the fact that his mother understood the value of education and that the son was a very bright young man. As Zubeyda was widowed at an early age, she realized that her son, as well as her daughter had to obtain an education if they were to be successful. Young Mustafa's intellectual strength earned him the name Mustafa

Kemal of "perfect Mustafa", something that distinguished him from the other Mustafas! His excellence placed him on the fast track leading from primary, then secondary and then a military education. His continued brilliance enabled to rapid rise in rank in what was becoming an increasingly meritocratic officer corps of the Ottoman Army. I say "increasingly" because, despite the changes, there were still nepotistic barriers placed in front of striving young men such as Mustafa Kemal. His frustrations with this were obvious and he was not one to hide them nor use flattery or fawning towards those who might aid him.

At the same time, Mustafa Kemal was deeply influenced by European materialist philosophy or as Sukru Hanioglu has noted, "he viewed everything from nationalism to modernism through the lens of scientism". P.67 While he was no democrat, Ataturk realized that military power rested increasingly on industrialization and that the future belonged to those who were.

As the storm clouds of the second decade of the 20th century began to gather, beginning with the attack by Italy on the Ottoman lands in Libya in 1911, Ataturk had his first shot at standing out. Perhaps this is the wrong phrase because, in order to get to Libya, he needed to disguise himself so as not to be arrested in British controlled Egypt. He also found himself on the short end of the first conflict in the history of warfare that involved use of aircraft.

Following this campaign, Ataturk watched with enormous frustration as the incompetent Ottoman Generals during the two Balkan Wars, which followed in 1912 and 1913. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Ataturk had his first real chance to shine. During the Gallipoli campaign, Ataturk's leadership and courage laid the foundation for immortal fame. My colleague, Prof. Edward Erickson, a military historian of considerable renown, has studied Ataturk's military campaigns and strategies and made a convincing case for viewing Ataturk as the greatest commander of all time based not only on his victories but his tactical retreats, attention to supply lines, opportunistic advances and, most importantly, the husbanding of men and material in order to continue the fight.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish War of National liberation came the transformation of the ghazi, from front line commander to commander in chief, or Field Marshall. While others, such as General Ismet, later known as Inonu, took active roles on the front, Ataturk focused not only on the war but balancing the myriad hostile powers surrounding what was left of the Ottoman Empire. With the defeat of the Greeks, Ataturk and his new Government, abolished the centuries old Ottoman Empire and in 1923, declared the Turkish Republic. For the Ghazi, the proclamation of the Republic marked the first sustained peace in twelve years. Instead of resting on his laurels, he went straight back to work, this time with an eye to modernization, sometimes modernization with a vengeance.

For the Republic of Turkey in 1923, there were many dangers and few opportunities. Soviet Russia was the same old wolf disguised in cheaper cloth. Greece, the Balkan States and the whole of Western Europe were either hostile or indifferent. The WWI allies of Turkey were utterly defeated and destitute. Worse, the land and people of the new Turkish Republic was poor, illiterate, lacking significant infrastructure and contained many "citizens" who looked to separate themselves from Turkey. In short, this was the land of a people who had undergone a social deracination on a scale that was hardly imaginable in the West for another twenty years. The great Turkish author Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu described the confusion in his book *Yaban, the Stranger* in which the terrified inhabitants of Western Anatolia beseech a wounded Ottoman officer placed on leave in a village in western Anatolia where the advancing Greek Army so frightens the Muslim inhabitants that they ask the protagonist if they should appeal to the Pope in Rome for help.

This was the economic and political state of the Republic at its founding. As noted above, the map showing the new boundaries of a Turkish State as envisioned by the victorious allies would have permanently rendered the Turkish Republic an attenuated and marginal power. Ataturk however would have none of this. Once the Greeks had been defeated, the new Republic was proclaimed on October 29th 1923. Most observers at the time gave it little chance for survival, but survive it did. Ataturk wasted no time in turning the view of the fledgling Republic towards the future. These reforms, what we

now call the core of Kemalism began even before the proclamation of the Republic with the 1922 abolition of the Sultanate of the House of Osman, the Ottoman Empire. In 1923, he abolished the Caliphate, in essence transforming both the temporal and religious power of the Sultan, two institutions that had survived over six hundred years. The boldness and genius of this is stunning and almost without historical parallel.

A process of reform by proclamation continued at a breakneck pace, the creation of a Parliamentary system, universal suffrage, the banning of religious costume such as the Fez, mandating surnames. Legal reforms were put in place, largely based on the Swiss legal code. In short order, Ataturk was able to not only relocate the capital from Istanbul to Ankara, located in central Anatolia, but was able to orient Turkey within a thoroughly Western framework. In doing so, he ended Istanbul's 1600 years as the center of power in the region, no small feat! In doing so he also made it clear that the new Turkish nation, the Republic of Turkey, was centered in Anatolia and was to be a modern nation state that was forward looking and not bound by the past. This is not to say that Turkey was at this stage a true democracy, it was not. Instead, it was a Republic that allowed freedoms to adopt a modern, secular society but at the same time brooked little sympathy for those who desired a less dramatic break from the past. I should note here that, the reforms implemented by Ataturk were ideas that had been circulating in parts of Ottoman Society for over half a century. The difference here was that Ataturk had the vision and the will to implement his program to advance universal rights within the new Republic.

This process was also not without opposition. Resistance to the reforms was encountered among a broad range of Ottoman, now Turkish, society. There were Kurdish revolts, there was resistance among conservative, Islamic elements of Society and there was opposition among the traditional elites. Again, what distinguishes Ataturk from other would be reformer was his able to maintain focus in his implementation of those universal reforms and to stay the course. If this were easy, many more political and business leaders of the past century would be remembered today. Most are not. To appreciate the enormity of these reforms, I will only list a small but significant few:
Abolition of Dervish lodges and oversight of religion 1925

Equality of Women in Law and Education 1926

Alphabet reform 7/28---more below!

Womens' municipal enfranchisement 1933 National 1934

The outcome of these reforms was a leveling of access to opportunity to all members of Turkish society. While there was tremendous resistance to this process, it began the unprecedented process of modernization and democratization in this traditionally non-Western, non-Muslim new nation.

Beyond this vast program of social transformation, Ataturk embarked on other, significant programs to modernize and reorient the Republic towards a more Western orientation. He adopted a modified Roman script, something that allows Turks to read and write in an entirely phonetic system, unlike our own. He served as promoter and cheerleader in the mechanization of agriculture, something of great significance in a largely agrarian society. He mandated minimum levels of education with the aim not only of obtaining universal literacy, but of socialization of the people into citizens. He also showcased and promoted the advancement of women in society and the professions at a time when this was only just beginning in the "modern" West. Most important of all, he served as national cheerleader to a nation demoralized by centuries of losses as well as slander by the West. As any Turk today can say, he put the meaning in the phrase "*Ne Mutlu Turkum Diyene*"!

There was an enormous cost however, that Ataturk was forced to endure, namely the cost to his personal life. Apart from his mother and , perhaps, his Bulgarian love, the daughter of General Stilyan Kovachev in 1913, Ataturk had no close human contacts other than his wife of two years, Latife. During the 1920s and 1930s Ataturk devoted his enormous energy to reforming the Republic and its citizens, something that came at great cost. He did however, showcase women through his "adoption" of a series of young orphaned girls. Some of these, most notably Sabiha Gokcen and Ayse Afet Inan broke barriers in their respective roles of Turkey's first woman combat pilot and the author of a history of Turkey.

By the middle of the 1930s, with yet another great European War looming on the horizon and the process of reform in the Republic on a more firm footing, Atatürk found himself less actively engaged in the process of social transformation and more in the role founding father of the Republic. The truth is that his will to advance the modern republic and its peoples, coupled with a very few individuals of his discipline and intellectual caliber, left him alone and isolated in his home in Cankaya. For a human being who had braved the physical dangers that he had, coupled with the enormous pressure to serve as the physical and intellectual leader of an emerging Republic, the pressures must have been unendurable. But endure he did. For anyone in this room who has endured the glacial movement of traffic while standing or sitting on a bus going from Besiktas to Ortakoy in Istanbul, the series of pictures of Atatürk, spanning his early days to weeks before his death are both moving and inspiring. There is Atatürk as a young officer, here is Atatürk at Cannakale, next is Atatürk during the War of Independence followed by speaking to politicians and citizens in the new Republic. There is Atatürk driving a tractor on the model state farm he founded in Anatolia. Then there is Atatürk demonstrating the alphabet reform from Arabic script to a Latin script. There is Atatürk with his mother and then there he is resting, by himself, not long before his death.

The take-away is twofold. One is the father of the Republic, the first among non-equals, as he truly towered above his peers. Second, there is Mustafa the perfect, disciplined, brave, decent and entirely alone. This is the genius of the man, the ability to have the vision coupled with the discipline to bring the vision into a reality. I am sure that Atatürk would have agreed with the young American, Nathan Hale whose last words were, "I only regret that I have only one life to lose for my country".

I will close with a return to my original premise, that being the study of Atatürk needs to focus less on uncritical praise of someone perceived as a demi-god and more on the man himself. If one appreciates more deeply the flesh and blood Mustafa Kemal, I believe that his accomplishments look all the better. A more human Atatürk, as opposed to the ubiquitous busts, pictures and quotations to be found in every public space in Turkey, should become a subject more thoughtfully examined as it yields a

treasure trove of materials. That Mustafa Kemal was a man, made of flesh and bone serves as a great inspiration to everyone, not just Turkish nationalists. The fact that one of the greatest egotists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, David Lloyd George, would remark, "The centuries rarely produce a genius. Look at this bad luck of ours, that great genius of our era was granted to the Turkish nation."

Flesh and blood are much more informative than stone!

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