

CHAPTER VI

KEMAL ATATURK' S LEGACY

6.1 Introduction

The lives of great men are always a source of curiosity and intrigue. Writers are wont to follow their achievements and to write about their qualities and attributes while psychologists and sociologists would want to study what motivates them to greatness. Kemal Ataturk was no exception as a subject of such scrutiny. That he was a very capable soldier and war hero, an accomplished leader and statesman, an unorthodox revolutionary and a ruthless dictator is no dispute. Whatever names his admirers or critics may call him, they would nevertheless, all agree that he was first and foremost, a nationalist and the saviour of Turkey from dismemberment by imperialistic powers.

His Kemalist revolution which aimed at transforming Turkey into a modern society is often regarded as a fine example of modernizing nationalism.³⁰¹ It began as a movement to liberate the nation from western imperialism and writers believe that in the early stages of the movement Ataturk had little notion of turning it into a westernizing process.³⁰² Because it is based on a scientific and rational approach, it

³⁰⁰ Ismet Giritli, 'Kemalism as an Ideology of Modernization' in Jacob M. Landau (ed) *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984) p. 253.

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 251.

³⁰² David Kushner, 'Ataturk's Legacy' in Jacob M. Landau (ed) *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, p. 233.

will always be contemporary and progressive and will ensure a continuing process of modernization.³⁰³ In this chapter, we will delve into what some writers think about Ataturk, the man, and summarize the legacy of his reforms in the building of modern Turkey and two institutions that will guard his legacy.

6.2 Ataturk – the Man

Biographers such as Macfie asserts that at the core of Ataturk's being was his thirst for power and that throughout his life, Ataturk 'remained totally committed to the acquisition and the use of power'.³⁰⁴ He attributed this trait as possibly derived from Ataturk's early experiences: the early loss of his father, the pressures from a grieving, doting and domineering mother on her only male child, the determination to rise above his low social position and the influence of western military training.

Writers like Lord Kinross called him a patriot and nationalist, and that it was his love for his country that motivated him to the extent to which he went to achieve his ends which he believed, were also the country's.³⁰⁵ Ataturk firmly believed in 'Turkey for the Turks'³⁰⁶ and that was what drove him in his battles against foreign occupation of his country. Underscoring his love for his country was perhaps the fact that he was by 'instinct a soldier'.³⁰⁷ As a soldier, he felt duty

³⁰³ Ismet Giritli, 'Kemalism as an Ideology of Modernization' in Jacob M. Landau (ed) *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, p. 252.

³⁰⁴ A. L. Macfie, *Ataturk* (Longman Group UK Ltd., 1994), p. 4.

³⁰⁵ Lord Kinross, *Ataturk* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1965), p. 134.

³⁰⁶ H. C. Armstrong, *Grey Wolf Mustafa Kemal. An Intimate Study of a Dictator* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1932), p. 44.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

bound to love, defend and fight for his country. He was also fearless, decisive, clear-sighted and worked and studied hard, especially the campaigns of Napoleon, to be a good soldier.³⁰⁸

He was a meticulous strategist and even kept a personal daily journal. Armstrong described him as a taciturn, self-sufficient loner, neither sentimental nor romantic but inclined to be jealous, self-opinionated and disliked being criticized.³⁰⁹ Both Kinross³¹⁰ and Mango³¹¹ seemed to agree with this description of Ataturk but Mango added that Ataturk was innately shy. He was in his element when fighting and showed an invincibility and bravery that was far beyond duty, even recklessness, much to the amazement and admiration of his troops. An incident often cited is when he was sitting outside a trench in the line of the enemy's fire. His men begged him to run for cover but he continued smoking his cigarette there while bullets and shells rained down around him until the enemy finally turned to another target.³¹²

As a leader, Feroz Ahmad wrote that Ataturk 'believed in his destiny to lead'.³¹³ He was extremely disciplined and his leadership was exemplary and unwavering. Another incident often quoted is that while his troops were resting, he observed from afar that the men from another regiment were retreating from the

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 43-45.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 21-46.

³¹⁰ Lord Kinross, *Ataturk*, p. 35

³¹¹ Mango, *Ataturk* (London: John Murray Ltd., 1999) p. 35.

³¹² H. C. Armstrong, *Grey Wolf Mustafa Kemal*, p. 27

³¹³ Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 49.

ANZAC forces towards his direction because they were running out of ammunition. He declared to them, 'You cannot run from your enemy!' Use your bayonets'. They fell to the ground to fix their bayonets. The enemy forces, thinking that it was a ploy, also fell to the ground, giving him precious time to summon his own troops. At that decisive moment, he ordered his men to attack:

'I don't order you to attack, I order you to die. In the time it takes us to die, other troops and commanders can come and take our places'.³¹⁴

The ANZAC troops were severely defeated and the victory remains an immortal moment in Turkish history till today.³¹⁵

In another incident illustrating his leadership, he continued to give orders in the line of fire after he was hit by a piece of shrapnel, silencing his officer who exclaimed, 'Sir, you have been hit',³¹⁶ because he did not want his men to be distressed or demoralized by it. He was also resolute and tirelessly determined, able to ride through the night with little or no sleep at all, giving orders to his men till the enemy was defeated.³¹⁷ In terms of discipline, no matter how late he stayed up drinking or talking with his friends the previous night he was usually among the first to be at the headquarters the next morning.³¹⁸

³¹⁴ Lord Kinross, *Ataturk*, p. 109.

³¹⁵ There is a movie, 'Gallipoli' based on this May 1915 attack in which ANZAC forces suffered great losses. It was named after the Gallipoli peninsula in the Dardanelle Sea where the battle took place.

³¹⁶ Lord Kinross, *Ataturk*, p. 109.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

³¹⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

On the personal side, Ataturk was not only influenced by western ideas but also preferred western attire and was well disposed to western social past times. He loved ballroom dancing and apparently, he danced at every opportunity. He loved reading and read to relax, and would ask for the latest list of book titles. He was also vain about his looks, taking pride in his well-shaped hands and feet, and was fastidious about his dressing.

Ataturk, like many great men, had his weaknesses. He drank heavily and excessively, whiskey as well as raki, the Turkish brew; and loved 'carousing in drinking shops'. Not surprisingly, the cause of his death was cirrhosis of the liver. He was also quite promiscuous, having begun his sexual adventures by frequenting the local brothels at an early age while in military school. He rarely had any serious relationship with a woman although he had 'several romantic attachments' and one long-term relationship with his mother's adopted niece, Fikriye, who adored him.³¹⁹ He contracted gonorrhoea and for a time, was put off women and subsequently, was not adverse towards homosexual relationships.³²⁰ His short-lived marriage to upper-class, Latife Hanım was more a marriage of convenience as he found her suitably educated, liberated, westernized and a good example for Turkish women to emulate. He admired, respected and loved her in the beginning until she tried to change his ways. His sexual weakness also extended to the relationships with the girls he 'adopted'. However, he had a close and caring relationship with both his mother and sister.

³¹⁹ H. C. Armstrong, *Grey Wolf Mustafa Kemal*, p. 254.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

6.3 Ataturk's Kemalist Legacy

Kemal Ataturk's greatest achievement was that he created a new nation state.³²¹ The Ottoman Empire had contained many nations and people of many races and religions and of many cultural identities. There was no Ottoman nation. Only a common allegiance to a dynastic sovereign. The western concept of a political and territorial nation could not be applied to the Ottoman Empire. In the 18th and 19th century ideas such as Pan-Turkism, Pan Turanism, Pan-Islamism and even Pan-Ottomanism had been proposed and discussed as the probable basis for a new political loyalty. All these had failed to take off. It was Kemal Ataturk's idea of a territorial nation-state based on the Turkish nation in Anatolia, a territory 'inhabited by an Ottoman Muslim majority, united in religion, in race and in aim'³²² that took root and called for undivided loyalty. To Ataturk, the Turks had wasted their energies and resources on endless wars and in unproductive defence of foreign lands and peoples and should now focus on defending and rebuilding their own native Anatolian homeland and avoid grandiose but useless and unrealistic visions.³²³ Ataturk succeeded in instilling in the new generations of Turks a new Turkish identity and loyalty and the pursuit of 'peace at home and abroad'.

³²¹ Takeshi Hayashi, 'The Modernization of Japan and Turkey' in Ali Kazancigil and Ergun Ozbudun (eds) *Ataturk. Founder of a Modern State* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1981) p. 228

³²² Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) p. 346.

³²³ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

Of significance is that at the core of the creation of this new nation-state was the shift in the basis of political legitimacy.³²⁴ In their early history, the nomadic Turkish tribes had been bonded by blood. This was later replaced by a new loyalty based on religion – the common acceptance of membership in the community of Islam. The political loyalty was to the lawful head of the Islamic State and during the long rule of the Ottomans, the Ottoman dynasty became entrenched and was synonymous with the state.³²⁵ Ataturk's regime succeeded in redefining this political community: society withdrew from the Islamic framework and into the newly defined Turkish nation. The ideological basis shifted from one based on religion and developed into a secular national one. It resulted in the restructure of the socio-political order comprising changes in symbols of polity and legitimacy and in the displacement of the former ruling class of sultan, elite members of the establishment and the ulama³²⁶ by a new ruling class.

With the shift in political legitimacy and symbols, the emphasis was on the centrality of the constitution in the socio-political order. The constitution became the basis of the law of the government. It was a secular constitution based on democracy, human rights, liberty and equality for all as Ataturk viewed this as the only approach that would ensure survival, progress and development of the new nation state in a modern world.³²⁷ More significantly, the constitution which

³²⁴ S. N. Eisenstadt, 'The Kemalist Regime and Modernization' in Jacob M. Landau (ed) *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, p. 9.

³²⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* p. 324.

³²⁶ S. N. Eisenstadt, 'The Kemalist Regime and Modernization' in Jacob M. Landau (ed) *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, p. 9.

³²⁷ Vakur Versan, 'The Kemalist Reform of Turkish Law' in Jacob M. Landau (ed) *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, p. 248.

provided for legislative and executive powers to be placed in the Grand National Assembly, forever removed the possibility of a similar dictatorship from ever being formed again. This centrality of the constitution was in fact a legacy of the Young Turks which Ataturk was able to successfully enshrine in modern Turkey.³²⁸

Of greater importance and significance arising from the creation of a new nation and the restructure of the Turkish socio-polity is perhaps the manifestation of a new worldview. Kemalism is based on rationalism. By implication, it is forward-looking and 'open' to new ideas. Ataturk's secularization and westernization of society imposed a break from the past: a past that was controlled by rigid doctrines and an exclusive view of the outside world which tended to impede rather than promote progress and development. The worldview that emerged was a modern, secular, rationalistic and nationalistic one.

6.4 Guardians of Ataturk's Secularist Legacy

At this juncture, two institutions that almost guarantee the inviolability of the secular nature of Turkey must be noted. In this respect, any individual or group opposed to the spirit of secularism in Turkey must contend with two protagonists: the military and the constitution. The role of the military continues to be a major force in social and political life. The Kemalist revolution was undertaken by military officers who had emerged from a modern secular education and training

³²⁸ Rachel Simon, 'Prelude to Reforms' in Jacob M. Landau (ed) *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, p. 18.

with strong ideological and intellectual tendencies. As part of their professional training and their Kemalist tradition, the military is loyal to Ataturk's reforms and his secular ideals. It is singularly committed to a secular state. Mainly, as we have seen earlier, from its historical role in the overthrow of the Ottoman rulers and its hand in the formation of the Republic. In almost regular intervals of ten years - in 1960, 1971 and 1980 - the military has stepped in to take over the government when it perceived that the ruling government was incapable of running the country or had betrayed the ideals of the revolution. It is likely that it will continue to remain in the 'wings' as watchdog and always ready to reprise its 'takeover' role whenever it perceives that the affairs of state are in disarray or that the secular nature of the nation is threatened, as we shall see later.

In Turkey, the principles of secularism is embodied in the nation's constitution. Any individual or party seeking to challenge or change it can only do so through constitutional means. This means winning a substantial number of seats, which going by the examples of past coalition governments in the last four decades, may be quite a difficult task. In 1950, the newly formed Democrat Party (DP) was able to politicize the religious issue effectively to form the new government. The DP had a more relaxed attitude towards Islam, not least because it had helped them win. After a long prohibition, the Azan, the Muslim call to prayer, was allowed in Arabic, Koran reading was allowed over state radio, more pilgrimages to Mecca were permitted, and religious shrines were re-opened. Apparently, between 1950-60, more than 15,000 mosques were opened, i.e. an average of 1,500 a year.

However, the military coup in 1960 changed what appeared to be an Islamic comeback in the social and political life of Turkey. In 1961, true to Kemalist ideals, constitutional amendments banned the use of religion for political ends, preventing any individual or group from using religion to further any personal or political ends.

Likewise with the Nation Order Party (NOP) which was founded by Necmettin Erbakan, a university professor, who became disillusioned and left the Grand National Assembly to set up a rightist theocratic organization. The party was banned in 1971 when it was found to have contravened the constitutional provision on using religion for political advancement. Later in 1973, he established the National Salvation Party (NSP) or Milli Selamet Partisi in Turkish, as an explicit religious party. Although it based its programmes on other issues as well, it established for itself an image as a party for the 'silent Muslim majority'. In the 1973 and 1978 elections, the NSP emerged the third strongest party, enabling it to be a 'king-maker' partner in three coalition governments.

However, the military coup of 1980 put an end to any possibility of an Islamic resurgence. The constitution was suspended, parliament dissolved and all political parties were closed down until the next election in 1984 which saw the rise of new political parties, albeit proxies for the previously banned ones. The Islamist Welfare Party (WP) under Erbakan won convincingly enough to form the next coalition government which he led briefly as Prime Minister in 1996-97. But in

1997, his Welfare Party was once again accused of undermining the principles of secularism and was banned by the Constitutional Court on charges of contravening the nation's secularist principles. The above are some examples that illustrate how closely Ataturk's secularist legacy is guarded.

6.5 Conclusion

Finally, it must be reiterated here that Ataturk's reforms were really an extension and acceleration of pre-existing reforms that began during the reigns of Selim III in the 18th century and continued through by Mahmud II and his son, Abdulmecit. In Turkey, like in Japan, modernization was not enforced from outside. Modernization of Turkey began with Selim III's Nizam-I Cedid or New Order under which he hoped to modernize the army and navy with western military equipment and technology. During the Tanzimat, new European-styled legal and social institutions coexisted alongside age-old systems that were entirely based on Islamic law and social practices. The Tanzimat was the preparatory stage for modernization. Ataturk realized that the dichotomy of dual systems would not work and was bold enough to decide on a complete secularization, albeit in the guise of westernization.