



Atatürk and the Kemalist Revolution

At the turn of the 19th/20th century, the 500-year old Ottoman Empire was widely derided as the 'sick man of Europe'. Its emergence from the First World War on the losing side signalled the final demise of the empire, whose lands now faced occupation and appropriation by the victorious European Allies. The vast landmass of Anatolia, which constitutes the majority of modern-day Turkey, was to be divided up between the French, the British and the Italians, leaving only a small stretch of land along the Black Sea coast for the new nation of Turkey.

Mustafa Kemal was an Ottoman army officer and member of the Young Turks, a progressive political reform movement that had agitated for a constitutional government in place of absolute monarchy. Kemal rose to national prominence in the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922) when, under his leadership, the occupying forces were defeated and driven out of Anatolia. Kemal declared the establishment of the Republic of Turkey on 29th October 1923, and subsequently adopted the honorific surname Atatürk (father of the Turks).

In the following years, the new country's founding leader instigated some of the most ambitious and furthest reaching social reforms in modern world history. He began by abolishing the institution of the Sultanate (1922), followed soon after by the Caliphate (1924), and replaced them with a model of governance based on modern, secular ideals for which he found inspiration in the West. Some examples of these changes included:

- Declaring universal suffrage, for both men and women
- Replacing the traditional madrasa system of education with a secular system based on western science
- Reforming the Turkish language by replacing Arabic with Roman script, and purging it of many of its Arabic and Persian borrowings
- Replacing the Islamic courts with a penal code based on the Swiss Civil Code
- Outlawing the Sufi brotherhoods

Atatürk's relationship with Islam was complex. As an astute politician, he was aware of the power of religion to serve an important social function. While he identified Islam as in many ways antithetical to progress and modernity, the primary ideological drivers behind his reforms, he was nonetheless willing to incorporate Islam as a key motif in his nation-building project. Thus, to be a citizen of the new nation required identification first as Turkish, and second as Muslim.

While Atatürk's reforms represented a radical rupture with the Ottoman past, it is important to note that they actually emerged in the context of a much older reformist movement. Between 1839-1876 the Ottoman Empire underwent a period of internal reorganization and modernization, which is known as Tanzimat (reorganization). These reforms ultimately failed to save the Empire from collapse, but their legacy underpinned the secularist revolution that would come later.



Further sources:

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/aturk_kemal.shtml

Turkish War of Independence: 3 Minute History:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CH42eJZhBDk>

Tanzimat:

<https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/faq/tanzimat-reforms>

Questions:

1. To what extent should Atatürk be understood as a leader of his time?
2. Why does nationalism hold such strong appeal in some countries?
3. Why do you think the secular system that Atatürk established went on to be challenged and contested?
4. Why do you think Atatürk was able to instigate such wide-ranging reforms?