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Article

Atatürk's Reforms and Legacy Exploring a Female Novelist's Critique

David Patton

ON MAY 19, 1919, IN THE POST-WORLD WAR I OTTOMAN EMPIRE, an Ottoman military officer named Mustafa Kemal Pasha abandoned his post after he was sent to Samsun on the Black Sea coast to inspect the Ninth Army of the Ottoman Empire, taking up leadership of the Turkish Nationalist Movement against the Entente powers, Britain and France. This marked the commencement of the Turkish War of Independence, a conflict that lasted until the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which officially drove out the Western powers from Anatolia, the Turkish heartland.¹ Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the Turkish people established their own nation-state, the Republic of Turkey, with Mustafa Kemal as its first president. Expelling the West and creating a new state were such significant accomplishments that the Turkish Parliament granted Mustafa Kemal Pasha the surname Atatürk or "Father of the Turks."²

During his presidency, Atatürk implemented numerous reforms designed to secularize Turkish society, modeling it after his European rivals; however,

1. The term "West" mentioned through this paper refers to European imperialists, such as Great Britain and France.

2. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 184; Andrew Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2002), 498.

he used authoritarian measures to accomplish these objectives. As an admirer of Europe and its values of nationalism and scientism, Atatürk believed that the Turkish people should Westernize to mirror European society, including in their claims to sovereignty, advocating that Turkey should not be ruled by the West and specifically not by Britain or France. Most especially, Atatürk wanted the West to respect the Turks as a “civilized people,” earning a seat at the table of European nations. To accomplish these ambitions, Atatürk necessarily coerced the Turkish people through radical secular reforms designed to supplant a longstanding Islamic culture. This paper will argue that, in his pursuit to Westernize the Turkish society, Atatürk implemented radical reforms such as the Hat Law to replace centuries-old tradition, founded upon Islam. Although he received praises from outsiders for his achievements, educated Turkish elites such as Halide Edib criticized Atatürk’s reforms as frivolous changes that would not have a lasting impact on Turkish society.

Given Atatürk’s status as the founding father of Turkey, much has been written about his life and legacy. However, compared to the exhaustive amount of narrative works about Atatürk, there are sparsely any authoritative biographical works that demystify him. To align closely with the authoritative biographical works, this paper relies upon M. Şükrü Hanioglu’s *Ataturk: An Intellectual Biography*, Andrew Mango’s *Ataturk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey*, and Ryan Gingeras’ *Mustafa Kemal Ataturk: Heir to an Empire*. While all of these scholars supply Turkish primary source materials such as Atatürk’s speech, Mango and Gingeras’ works are surveys of Atatürk’s life, whereas Hanioglu’s work explores how Western ideas of nationalism and scientism contributed to Atatürk’s vision for the secular Turkish state. Even as this paper utilizes approaches from these above authors, its thesis focuses on critiques against Atatürk’s reforms raised by educated female elites.

The Ottoman Empire from the Tanzimat Period to World War I

To understand Atatürk’s reforms and legacy, it is necessary to survey the nineteenth century Ottoman history until its collapse in the aftermath of World War I, since this significantly influenced Atatürk’s rationale for secular reforms. At the height of its power during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire posed a significant threat to early modern Europe. However, the Ottomans began to face troubles in the seventeenth century onward as they

struggled to compete with rising European powers such as Britain and France. This is largely due to decentralization of the imperium, loss of territory, and growing dissension among ethnic groups with the rise of nationalism.³ Despite efforts at reforms aimed to mitigate these problems, the empire's difficulties persisted through the 19th century, which made the need for major reforms glaringly obvious.

To address this, an imperial decree known as the *Hatt-i Sharif of Gulhane* was read before the Sultan, Ottoman officials, and foreign diplomats on November 3, 1839.⁴ The Ottoman government promised its subjects that, while continuing to adhere to the *Qur'an* and *Shari'a*, the administration would establish new laws designed to benefit all, regardless of their nationality and religious affiliation.⁵ The inclusion of foreign diplomats in this ceremonial act served to inform European powers that the Ottoman Empire intended to become a future member of the concert of Europe through this major reform.⁶ This act launched the Tanzimat era, deriving from a Turkish word meaning "reorganization," which lasted until 1876. The results of the Tanzimat era reforms are best described as ambiguous, primarily because the new laws still directly reflected *Shari'a*, which encouraged local nationalism among non-Muslims despite the effort to produce a multicultural Ottoman identity. Since *Shari'a* derives from Islamic tradition, the system still regarded Muslims as superior to non-Muslims, which weakened the faith of non-Muslims in the prospects of equality for all Ottoman subjects, regardless of faith. Furthermore, the threat of secularization led to political fragmentation. Some groups, such as the *ulama*—religious scholars of Islamic doctrine—were little inclined toward efforts that would reduce Islamic influence. Yet despite its few successes, the Tanzimat era was essential preparation for the next generation's embrace of Western modernity.⁷

The Tanzimat era was followed by Abdul Hamid II's regime, during which the Ottomans continued to struggle to compete with European powers and to establish a national identity. Initially, the sultan showed signs of modernization with the ratification of the 1876 Constitution. However, when civil unrest

3. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6, 22, 24.

4. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Late Ottoman Empire*, 72.

5. See "The Hatt-i Sharif of Gulhane, 1839," in *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 5th edition, James E. Gelvin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 167–68.

6. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Late Ottoman Empire*, 73.

7. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Late Ottoman Empire*, 104–7.

broke out in the Balkans, he suspended the Constitution to consolidate his authority.⁸ Furthermore, he censored critics and reinstated the requirement to swear allegiance to the sultan, creating strains of opposition to the regime. The main opposition to the regime was the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), whose leaders, Enver, Talat, and Cemal Pashas—also known as the Three Pashas—led the Young Turk Revolution, overthrowing Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1909.⁹ Under the leadership of the Three Pashas, the Ottoman Empire entered World War I, allying itself with Germany. Even though the Ottomans were not militarily prepared for war, in which case the Three Pashas attempted to delay their joining, the threat of French and British imperialism forced the Ottomans to support Germany and its allies.¹⁰

At the early stages of World War I, the Ottomans claimed several victories over the Entente powers, such as the Gallipoli campaign in 1916 in which the Ottomans successfully defended their capital, Istanbul. However, despite its initial successes, the Ottoman Empire's fortune quickly ran out. When the Entente armies broke through the Bulgarian front in Macedonia in September 1918, the Ottomans knew they had lost the war.¹¹ Knowing that loss was inevitable and to prevent further casualties and destruction, the Ottomans signed the Mudros Armistice with the British on October 30, 1918. Represented by Rauf Bey, the Ottoman government agreed to an armistice treaty that withdrew them from World War I, precipitating its withdrawal of armies outside Anatolia and allowing the Entente powers to occupy forts in the Dardanelles and Bosphorus.¹²

The Mudros Armistice was only the initial act of the Entente powers against the Ottoman Empire, however. This is evident from the Sykes-Picot agreement, a secret treaty in 1916 between Britain and France in which the two powers divided the Middle East into respective spheres of influence: Great Britain would occupy Palestine as well as Mesopotamia to protect India, and France would occupy Syria and southern Anatolia. In effect, the armistice enabled the Entente powers and their allies to partition the Ottoman Empire before the official signing of the

8. Ryan Gingeras, *Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: Heir to an Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 18.

9. Hanioglu, *Late Ottoman Empire*, 123–25; 148–49.

10. Hanioglu, *Late Ottoman Empire*, 159, 175; Sean McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame, War, Revolution, and the making of the Modern Middle East 1908–1923* (New York: Penguins Press, 2015), 118, 128.

11. Sean McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame*, 417.

12. See “Mudros Agreement: Armistice with Turkey (October 30, 1918).” Ghdi- document. https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4012.

Treaty of Sevres in 1920.¹³ However, as the Entente powers began to divide Anatolia into their spheres of influence, they made a catastrophic mistake by allowing the Greeks, sworn enemies of the Ottomans, to occupy Smyrna/Izmir on May 15, 1919 with 13,000 foot soldiers.¹⁴ The Greek occupation of Smyrna/Izmir fomented Turkish national resistance against the Greek and Allied occupation of Anatolia, the Ottoman heartland, which ultimately led to the Turkish nationalist movement that Mustafa Kemal and others would lead.¹⁵

Rise to Power, Independence War, and Defeating the West

Mustafa Kemal, born in Salonika/Thessaloniki in 1881 to a secular father, who was an Ottoman official, and religious mother, rose to fame during the Great War when he successfully halted the Entente powers' advancement to Istanbul at the Gallipoli campaign in 1915. Later in the Great War, he also halted the Russian advance on the eastern front.¹⁶ Despite his successes throughout the war, however, Mustafa Kemal struggled to gain political influence because of Enver Pasha. Even though Mustafa Kemal and Enver Pasha joined the CUP, which focused on modernizing the Ottoman Empire, Atatürk was a severe critic of the CUP, especially its role in the coup d'état that overthrew Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1909. On the other hand, Enver Pasha loathed Atatürk for his perceived political ambition.¹⁷ Therefore, Atatürk had little to no chance to advance his political career so long as Enver Pasha was in power. However, losing the Great War drove Enver Pasha to flee into exile for his involvements in the war and in the Armenian Genocide. Enver Pasha's exile and the Allied occupation of the Ottoman Empire offered Atatürk the opportunity to advance his political career. As

13. The Entente powers, specifically Great Britain and France, already established a plan to partition the Ottoman Empire and occupy territories in the Levant and Mesopotamia regions. This evidence is clear from the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, in which these two countries established necessary boundaries between their soon-to-be holdings in the Middle East. See "The Sykes-Picot Agreement: 1916," from the holdings of the Avalon Project, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp.

14. McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame*, 446, 449.

15. McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame*, 451; Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 96; Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography*, 222.

16. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 78–80; Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography*, 156.

17. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 46.

Turkish nationalist resistance against Allied occupation grew in Anatolia, Atatürk sought to join their efforts. Although he continued his service in the Ottoman military, he waited for the right moment to join with the nationalists. The opportunity arrived when he was appointed as the Ninth Army inspector and was sent to Samsun to reorganize the army. Upon his arrival in Samsun on May 19, 1919, Atatürk abandoned his position and joined the nationalist movement, where he self-assumed leadership of the resistance.¹⁸

Under the leadership of Atatürk, the Turkish nationalist movement grew throughout the later part of 1919, basing its power in Ankara. Even though the movement existed before Atatürk joined, Atatürk's fame as a war hero helped the Turkish nationalist movement grow exponentially.¹⁹ In his leadership capacity, Atatürk's primary objective was to establish a new Turkish nation-state. This is evident from the *Nutuk*, a speech Atatürk delivered in October 1927 over a six-day span, in which he recollects the situation in Anatolia after World War I and proposes that he and his associates respond accordingly:

“1. To demand protection from England; 2. To accept the United States of America as a mandatory Power. . . . 3. The third proposal was to deliver the country by allowing each district to act independently and according to its capability.”²⁰

After laying out the propositions, Atatürk continued, “All the Ottoman districts were practically dismembered. Only the fatherland, affording protection to a mere handful of Turks, still remained and it was now suggested also to divide this.”²¹ Providing what seemed to be the only solution in that dire situation, he stated that “one solution was possible, namely, to create a New Turkish State, the sovereignty and independence of which would be unreservedly recognized by the whole world.”²² Independence in this sense meant autonomy from Western occupation requiring the Turkish nationalists to drive Western powers out of Anatolia.

Atatürk and the Turkish national army mobilized when the Ottoman Empire signed the Treaty of Sevres in early 1920 in an effort to regain their eastern

18. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 97.

19. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 97.

20. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, *The Speech (Nutuk) English Edition*, trans. Kurt Kohler (Ataturk Research Center CT, 2020), 54.

21. Ataturk, *The Speech*, 54.

22. Ataturk, *The Speech*, 55.

Anatolia territories. While they mobilized, they also negotiated with France and Italy to withdraw from Turkey. However, the Greek threat remained, who received support from the British Empire. Unlike France and Italy, Greece had advanced its troops from a foothold in Smyrna/Izmir in hopes of destroying the Turkish national army and establishing a new Greek super-state.²³ Once Atatürk had regained the territories in eastern Anatolia, he redirected the nationalist army towards western Anatolia. It took the Turkish national army two years of bloody conflict to drive the Greeks out of Smyrna/Izmir by September 1922.²⁴ Upon Greece's defeat at the hands of the Turkish nationalist government, the Allied powers sued for peace. Members of the Allied powers and the new Turkish government signed the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, officially recognizing Turkey as an independent and autonomous state.²⁵ Ending European occupation in Anatolia not only made Mustafa Kemal a symbol of anti-imperial resistance, but it also gave him significant political power, which he wielded towards westernizing Turkish government and society under his authoritative aegis.²⁶

The End of the Ottoman Empire and Birth of the Republic of Turkey

The first step towards Atatürk's ambition to modernize Turkish society was to legitimize the Turkish provisional government in Ankara, also known as the Turkish Grand National Assembly, so as to consolidate his authority. The opportunity to legitimize the new Ankara government arrived with the Lausanne conference, to which the Allied powers invited both the nascent Turkish government in Ankara and weakened Ottoman government in Istanbul. When the Ottoman government expressed its desire to act in concert with the Ankara government at the Lausanne conference, Mustafa Kemal replied that the Turkish Grand National Assembly was the only legitimate government.²⁷ Even though the Ottoman government no longer wielded significant political power, its longevity and continued existence still posed a significant obstacle for Mustafa Kemal Pasha and the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The dissolution of

23. McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame*, 468.

24. McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame*, 498.

25. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 141.

26. Gingeras, *Heir to an Empire*, 114.

27. Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography*, 355.

the Ottoman Empire was paramount for Atatürk to legitimate his power and successfully establish a new state, a sentiment he evinces in his *Nutuk*, stating that “as long as [the sultan] exists, the present regime is only provisional.”²⁸ With this recognition came the existential injunction to dissolve the Ottoman Empire.

However, the evidence also suggests that Mustafa Kemal had other reasons to dissolve the Ottoman Empire, stemming in part from his upbringing and his education at the Ottoman military academy—the best education an Ottoman man could receive at the time. Atatürk was born and raised in the cosmopolitan city of Salonica/Thessaloniki in 1881 in the post-Tanzimat Ottoman Empire. Because of its geographical closeness to Europe and the influence of the Tanzimat reforms, Salonica resembled a modern European city.²⁹ Growing up in a westernized city significantly impacted young Atatürk, drawing his mind and his values Westward.

The effects of such values had made Atatürk an ardent nationalist while he was still young. As was previously mentioned, during the Tanzimat period was marked by its attempt at reforms designed to overcome ethno-religious conflict and to construct a supranational Ottoman identity. However, these reforms as well as the concomitant Ottoman Constitution of 1876 yielded meager results because of burgeoning nationalism that continued to divide different religions and nationalities.³⁰ Atatürk likewise witnessed continual ethnic tension at both the local and national levels, despite the Tanzimat reforms. These childhood experiences would shape Atatürk’s perspective of the Ottoman Empire and his belief that it was no longer viable.

Mustafa Kemal Pasha’s admiration for the West deepened when he attended the Ottoman military academy, an educational institution that was established during the Tanzimat era and based upon German military education following its victory in the Franco-Prussian war. The Ottoman administration recruited Colmar von der Goltz to design the curriculum of the Ottoman Royal Military Academy. As Goltz implemented a new curriculum, he also disseminated new ideas about the role of the military.³¹ He believed that it is important for

28. Atatürk, *The Speech*, 714.

29. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 25; Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography*, 30; Gingeras, *Heir to an Empire*, 7–9.

30. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 26.

31. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 32.

military officers to go beyond their traditional roles through political leadership, since Goltz held that ideal military leaders should be the ruling class of both military and civil societies. Goltz's philosophy was contrary to the preexisting Ottoman beliefs that had clearly separated military and civil leadership. According to Hanioglu, the old-school view had such a profound impact on the Ottoman Royal Military Academy that, by the time of the Young Turk Revolution, all senior Ottoman officers, including Atatürk, held it in common.³²

While Goltz's philosophy was questioned by the Ottoman officers who believed that it would be too difficult to implement in an polyethnic empire, Atatürk became a staunch believer of Goltz, which influenced his view that it was vital to dissolve the Ottoman Empire and to create in its wake a new Turkish state.³³ Moreover, he believed that this nation-state would be led by military officers, just as Goltz professed. He believed that the outmoded Ottoman Empire was a hindrance to Turkish modernization, including the establishment of a new Turkish state that could compete with the European powers.

Furthermore, as Atatürk embraced Goltz's idea about the role of the military, he also embraced the European philosophical concept of materialism. During his time at the Ottoman Royal Military Academy, Atatürk was exposed alongside his classmates to the German philosophy of *Vulgärmaterialismus*, which combined materialism, scientism, and Darwinism. Ottoman officers generally adopted this philosophy as rejection of religion for scientific empiricism.³⁴ This philosophy profoundly influenced young Ottoman military officers, especially Mustafa Kemal, as it developed his negative attitude towards Islamic institutions. Moreover, Mustafa Kemal held that the inferiority of the Ottoman Empire stemmed from the fact that, unlike in the West, where European states adhered to science, the Ottoman Empire adhered to Islam, which had been embedded in Ottoman culture for centuries.³⁵ Mustafa Kemal, convinced that Western superiority stemmed from its secularism and that Ottoman inferiority stemmed from its adherence to Islam, became a staunch advocate for a secular Turkey.³⁶

32. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 34.

33. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 37.

34. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 49.

35. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 56–57.

36. Ali Yigit, "Lessening Impact of Religion on Turkish Muslim Identity in Westernizing and Modernizing Turkey," *US-China Foreign Language* 10, no. 1 (January 2012): 901. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287647032_Lessening_Impact_of_Religion_on_Turkish_Muslim_Identity_in_Westernizing_and_Modernizing_Turkey.

Memories from his childhood and his secular education at the Ottoman Royal Military Academy drove Mustafa Kemal to dissolve the Ottoman Empire starting in late 1922. However, removing the seat of the Ottoman Empire, the sultan himself, was a complex issue because the sultan was also the caliph of Sunni Islam. Thus, if Mustafa Kemal's government were to remove the Sultan without any caution, they would incur severe opposition from Sunni Muslims in Turkey.³⁷ Therefore, Mustafa Kemal sought to formally separate the caliphate from the sultanate through a legislative act passed in November 1922. He subsequently abolished the sultanate immediately after they separated the two institutions in an act of political bravado both stemming from and strengthening the legitimacy of his then-provisional government in Ankara.³⁸

It was after abolishing the sultanate that the provisional government signed the Treaty of Lausanne, which formally acknowledged the Republic of Turkey.³⁹ In 1924, the new Turkish government dissolved the lingering Ottoman Empire by abolishing the caliphate.⁴⁰ Thus the Ottoman Empire was dissolved by the hands of its former military and political leaders after 600 years, and from its ashes a new Turkish nation-state was born.

Atatürk's Reforms and Subsequent Decline of Islamic Influence

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the new Turkish state was only the first step for Mustafa Kemal to Westernize Turkish society. The next step required secularization, and Atatürk was prepared to sacrifice Islam for the cause. Soon after abolishing the Caliphate in early 1924, the new Turkish government also abolished the *Shari'a*, the Islamic legal system that has been part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries.⁴¹ Atatürk thought that the removal of the traditional religious institutions would enable Turkish society to adopt

37. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 135.

38. Ataturk, *The Speech*, 848.

39. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 141, 143.

40. Birol Başkan, "What Made Ataturk's Reforms Possible?" *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21, no. 2 (March 2010): 145, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596411003619798>; Andrew Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2002): 412.

41. Başkan, "What Made Ataturk's Reforms Possible?," 145; Gingeras, *Heir to an Empire*, 133.

European materialism and scientism, a crucial step towards his definition of progress. Moreover, he was also likely aware that the *ulama* opposed past efforts at modernization, which would hinder his political vision for Turkish progress.⁴²

The ratification of the new Turkish Constitution of 1924 also reflects Atatürk's ambition to transform Turkish society into European society, moving away from Islamic tradition. This is evident in its differences from the Ottoman Constitution of 1876. For example, Article 87 of the Ottoman Constitution states that "Affairs concerning the [*Shari'a*] shall be judged by the tribunals of the *Shari'a*."⁴³ However, *Shari'a* law and courts have no power in the 1924 Turkish Constitution.⁴⁴ Moreover, according to Korkut, while the Ottoman Empire based its laws on the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* and the Ottoman Constitution was coherent with the *Qur'an*,⁴⁵ the preamble of the Turkish Constitution abolishes Islamic jurisprudence in favor of a secular government.⁴⁶ The assembly later amended the Constitution in 1928, in which they removed all references to Islam. This included the removal of the phrase, "The religion of the Turkish state is Islam," to reflect Atatürk's philosophy. While Islamic religious institutions persisted at the local, including Mosques, Atatürk fundamentally transformed the role of Islam at the national level.

Mustafa Kemal continued to diminish Islamic influence by implementing radical reforms, one of them being the Hat Law of 1925. The intent of the Hat Law was to abolish the wearing of the fez and turban, Islamic vestments. Atatürk explained his rationale for replacing the fez and turban with a European hat:

"Gentlemen! It was necessary to abolish the fez, which sat on our heads as a sign of ignorance, of fanaticism, of hatred to progress and [civilization], and to adopt in its place the hat, the customary headdress of the whole [civilized] world, thus showing, among other things, that no difference existed in the manner of thought between the Turkish nation and the whole family of [civilized] mankind."⁴⁷

42. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 52; Gingeras, *Heir to an Empire*, 134–35.

43. "The Ottoman Constitution, Promulgated the 7th Zilbridie, 1293 (11/23 December 1876)," *The American Journal of International Law* 2, no. 4 (1908): 381. doi:10.2307/2212668.

44. Edward Meade Earle, "The New Constitution of Turkey," *Political Science Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (March 1925): 95. doi:10.2307/2142408.

45. Huseyin Korkut, "Critical Analysis of the Ottoman Constitution (1876)," *Epiphany: Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): 116, 121. <http://epiphany.ius.edu.ba/index.php/epiphany/article/viewFile/219/162>.

46. Earle, "The New Constitution of Turkey," 88.

47. Atatürk, *The Speech*, 1071.

Atatürk's statement here suggests that traditional Muslim dress codes subverted secularization and his views of what constituted modern civilization. Atatürk argued that for the Turkish people to display their modernity, it was necessary for them to conscientiously to change cultural practices that were amalgamated into their identity. With the replacement of the fez and turban with a European-style hat, Atatürk intended to create a new Turkish cultural identity that rejected old customs considered "backwards" in favor of European customs that would demonstrate the Turkish propensity for cultural progress and modernization.

After implementing the Hat Law, the Atatürk's regime also carried out a set of reforms in which they closed madrassas, religious seminaries, and even banned Sufi orders, a mystic Islamic tradition that had existed for several centuries in Anatolia. In 1926, Atatürk's regime adopted European civil and penal codes. Furthermore, in 1928, they also created a new Turkish alphabet modeled after the Latin alphabet to replace the Arabic alphabet. In 1934, Mustafa Kemal's regime issued the Surname law as another form of Westernization,⁴⁸ since Muslim Turks traditionally did not have surnames but were known by other forms of appellations.⁴⁹ With the passage of the Surname Law, Mustafa Kemal himself adopted the surname of Atatürk. Besides these reforms, Atatürk promoted women's rights with the adoption of the European civil codes, which replaced the veil with western clothing and granted extensive rights to women including the right to vote and to stand for both municipal and national elections.⁵⁰ All these secular reforms in aggregate demonstrate Mustafa Kemal's attempts to radically transform the social fabric of Muslim Turkish society and to reduce the cultural role of Islam.

48. Başkan, "What Made Atatürk's Reforms Possible?," 145; Hanioglu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*, 213; Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography*, 498.

49. Hanioglu provides the following explanation: "by their personal names, by a combination of their birth names and personal names, by a combination of an adjective indicating place of birth and a personal name, by a combination of birth name and father's birth name, or by a combination of a patronymic indicating family genealogy and a persona name." See Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 213.

50. Hanioglu, *Atatürk*, 208; Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography*, 437–38.

Atatürk's Authoritarianism and Its Discontents

Even given the radical extents of Atatürk's secular reforms from 1925 to 1934, Atatürk's regime ostensibly faced little resistance or opposition. According to Başkan, however, Atatürk had faced opposition from his opponents since arriving in Samsun in 1919. Başkan moreover argues that Atatürk and his party faced criticism from the opposing party, the Progressive Republican Party, after the war of independence and birth of the Republic of Turkey.⁵¹ Despite this opposition, Atatürk's regime was substantially bolstered in its legitimacy by the Kurdish Rebellion of Sheikh Said in February 1925.⁵² Although the Kurdish Rebellion was quickly subdued, Atatürk's regime capitalized on the moment to suppress political opposition through the Maintenance of Order Law, a draconian measure that greatly strengthened presidential powers.⁵³ This law empowered Atatürk and his followers to suppress the media and to dissolve the Progressive Republican Party, making Turkey a one-party system.⁵⁴

Interestingly, Atatürk's suppression of Islam faced little to no resistance from the religious community. According to Başkan, this fact was predicated upon the decline of Islamic institutions during the secular reforms of the Tanzimat era.⁵⁵ Religious institutions already diminished over the course of a century could not resist Atatürk's further efforts at secularization.

Atatürk's regime not only benefited from the long-term waning influence of religion, but also from population decline precipitated by a decade of war. From the Balkan wars in 1912 to the end of the Turkish war of independence in 1922, Turkey lost significant numbers of working-age males, who could have posed the greatest threat to Atatürk's regime.⁵⁶ Economic ties between the government and corporations also prevented opposition from the business community whose wealth could have easily been curtailed by the state. In order to protect their assets and lucrative government relations, the business community opted by and large to remain silent in regard to Atatürk's style of governance.⁵⁷

51. Başkan, "What Made Atatürk's Reforms Possible?" 148.

52. Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography*, 422.

53. Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography*, 423.

54. Başkan, "What Made Atatürk's Reforms Possible?" 149.

55. Başkan, "What Made Atatürk's Reforms Possible?" 150.

56. Başkan, "What Made Atatürk's Reforms Possible?" 151.

57. Başkan, "What Made Atatürk's Reforms Possible?" 152.

Although the above conditions allowed Atatürk's government to push reforms without much resistance, some critics nevertheless spoke out. This is highlighted in the writings of Halide Edib, who had initially supported Atatürk but later asserted that Atatürk's means for implementing reform was tyrannical. Her criticism of Atatürk began when he proposed the Maintenance of Order Law. In response to this, Halide Edib stated, "The dictatorship thus created never called itself by that name in Turkey. . . the long tradition of oppression and spies became at once a part of the new regime. The press was terrorized by the arrest of leading journalists who had criticized the government before the passing of the Maintenance of Order Act."⁵⁸ Halide Edib's views were also shared by a contemporary journalist, Sabiha Sertel, who remarks how "as soon as the Law on the Maintenance of Order was passed, the police shut down the papers . . . [and] many writers and publishers were taken into custody and packed off."⁵⁹

Halide Edib further criticized the actions of Atatürk's dictatorship throughout the late 1920s, especially during his secular reforms. Concerning the Hat law, Halide Edib stated that:

"It was . . . the most futile and superficial . . . the *only one* which accomplished a change overnight even in outside appearances. In a week it made [the Turks] look like Westerners, although the manner in which it was accomplished was utterly un-Western. . . . To tell the Turks to put on a certain headdress and 'get civilized' or be hanged, or imprisoned, is absurd, to say at the least."⁶⁰

Halide Edib argues that Atatürk's reforms brought the threat and use of coercion, since the regime oppressed the people at will by insisting upon westernization and threatening dissenters with cruel punishment. Atatürk's approach to implementation was to compel his people to root out their tradition, with violent consequences to those who object—a system that subverts law and order. In this vein, Halide Edib criticized Atatürk's reforms in general:

[The] process of reform has been going on for merely a century, but within the last twenty years it has moved with tremendous rapidity. The story in

58. Halide Edib, "Dictatorship and Reforms in Turkey," *Yale Review* 19, no. 1 (1929): 27–28.

59. Sabiha Sertel, *The Struggle for Modern Turkey: Justice, Activism and a Revolutionary Female Journalist*, trans. David Selim Sayers and Evrim Emir-Sayers (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 60.

60. Edib, "Dictatorship," 30.

the Western press, unusually the outcome of the most superficial . . . is that Turkey was changed overnight from an Eastern into a Western country. This view is more than superficial; it is false. . . . Naturally, one includes among those which were sure to come only the fundamental reforms that will last.⁶¹

She criticized Atatürk's regime for claiming to have reformed the country themselves, when in fact, the majority of reforms had actually been carried out in the last century of the Ottoman Empire. Using women's rights as an example, Halide Edib argued:

All Turkish men of the progressive type, regardless of the political party to which they belonged, especially from 1908 on, have been in favor of the progress of women and have helped to give them rights and opportunities—educational, economic, and social. From the moment Turkish women entered the economic field there has been no discrimination whatever of the kind which European feminists complain of.⁶²

Halide Edib held that reforms had been taking place in Turkey since the Ottoman Empire, which meant that the reforms for which Atatürk took credit were not only superficial, but that they were an invalid justification for his dictatorial politikas he repressed any and all resistance. She also thought that Atatürk's reforms would not have a long lasting impact since they dealt with non-fundamental issues.

When examining Halide Edib's severe criticism against Atatürk, it is most likely that her critique against him stems from the fact that he was lustfully ambitious and determined to demonstrate to the West that the Turkish people were capable of becoming civilized. This is evident from Halide Edib's memoir, *The Turkish Ordeal*, in which she recollects her experiences working with Atatürk during the Turkish War of Independence. Halide Edib recalls Atatürk's lustful ambition by stating that "Throughout his whole career Mustafa Kemal Pasha has shown untiring persistence. . . . He has one of the intensest ambitions known in history, the sort of ambition that is sure to prevail."⁶³ She also recalls a meeting:

61. Edib, "Dictatorship," 29.

62. Edib, "Dictatorship," 32.

63. Halide Edib, *The Turkish Ordeal: Being the further memoirs of Halide Edib* (New York: The Century Co., 1928), 141.

[Mustafa Kemal Pasha] flew into one of the most violent rages I have ever seen him in. . . . His low voice became loud and hoarse as he spoke out his indignation at the long old-fashioned sentences which on other occasions had such weight influence. "They shall know that we are as good as they are! They shall treat us as their equal! Never will we bow our heads to them! To our last man we will stand against them till we break their civilization on their heads!"⁶⁴

The combination of Atatürk's characteristics and his reaction to the Western description of the Turkish people as "no longer the empire builders" destined to be inferior to European states demonstrates Atatürk's internal motives. It was apparent to his contemporary critics as well that he was willing to resort to any means to achieve his ends of establishing his political power and demonstrating to European states that the Turkish people are civilized, capable of acting as an equal member of the European concert.

When Atatürk encountered criticism from people such as Halide Edib, he justified his actions by explaining his rationale to the public. This is evident again in the *Nutuk*, in which he states that the Turkish state has "never used the exceptional measures, which all the same were legal," but that "on the contrary, we applied them to restore peace and tranquility in the country."⁶⁵ Regardless of criticisms levied against Atatürk's regime, his reforms were successfully implemented throughout Turkey. As the nation Westernized both culturally and politically, Atatürk was lauded by president Franklin Roosevelt, who expressed in a letter to the Turkish leader, "I would like to express to you all the enthusiasm I felt on seeing the numerous and marvelous things you have accomplished in a space of time so relatively brief."⁶⁶ Even though Roosevelt's high praise for Atatürk was based on a film made by an American, this still demonstrates the extent to which Atatürk had accomplished his objective of changing how Westerners saw the Turkish people. As leaders of the West praised Atatürk for his accomplishments, his own people, such as Sabiha Sertel, praised Atatürk's legacy and justified likewise his authoritarian measures:

64. Edib, *The Turkish Ordeal*, 151.

65. Atatürk, *The Speech*, 1070.

66. "Roosevelt Lauds Atatürk's Regime: Turkish President, in reply, expresses admiration for Administration here—early meeting hoped for invitation to visit in Ankara is extended—countries said to share same ideals," *New York Times*, August 1, 1937, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/102352061/A81C41D800EC40C1PQ1?accountid=448>.

“Atatürk built the new Turkey out of the rubble of an empire that had utterly collapsed . . . fought a national war of independence against imperialist states . . . liberated Turkey, tied down by religious law and obsolete doctrines. . . . He tried to apply democracy . . . [but] circumstances forced him to shift to an oppressive system.”⁶⁷

Although Sabiha Sertel includes in her eulogy that Atatürk’s regime had failed to implement reforms in other aspects of Turkish society and had severely oppressed the Turkish people, her statement nevertheless suggests that it is still essential that Atatürk be given credit for his efforts to secularize Turkey and ensure its autonomy as a modern nation-state.

Conclusion

Born in the late period of the declining Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was deeply influenced by his interpretation of western ideals. He was further molded by the West during his years at the westernized Ottoman Royal Military Academy. As the first president of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk served as president from 1923 until his death in late 1938 at the age of 57. According to Sabiha Sertel, upon his death “the whole country went into mourning. For three days and three nights, statesmen, youths, unionists, and representatives of other organizations stood at attention before his catafalque in the palace.”⁶⁸

Although extremely ambitious, Atatürk held to his commitment to modernize Turkey according to normative European customs of his day, enabling his government to bring Turkey into the twentieth century. When the opportunity arrived, Atatürk acted swiftly by dismantling the Ottoman Empire and establishing a new regime equipped to carry out his objectives. While he was praised by the West for his accomplishments in modernizing Turkish society, he was criticized by the educated Turkish elites such as Halide Edib who believed that Atatürk’s reforms would not prove to be a long term and permanent change. This is evident in modern-day Turkey under the administration of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose policies threaten women’s rights. Persistent rates of domestic violence against Turkish women and Erdogan’s withdrawal from

67. Sertel, *The Struggle for Modern Turkey*, 119.

68. Sertel, *The Struggle for Modern Turkey*, 119.

the international stage demonstrates that Atatürk's reforms were indeed surface level, subject to change by the ideological whims of his successors.⁶⁹ Just as Atatürk held his own convictions about the imperative for progress, Erdogan's conservative misogynism represents an uncertain future for women's rights in Turkey.⁷⁰

Atatürk's legacy lives on to this day in both popular memory and in the academy. While his feats are commendable and worthy of praise, his use of authoritarian methods to achieve his ambitions ought not to be forgotten as the Turkish government still wrestles with the multivalent possibilities of its geopolitical future.

69. "Turkish women losing faith in government determination to effectively tackle gender based violence," Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), March 22, 2022, <https://stockholmcf.org/turkish-women-losing-faith-in-government-determination-to-effectively-tackle-gender-based-violence/>.

70. "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: 'women not equal to men,'" *The Guardian*, November 24, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/24/turkeys-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-women-not-equal-men>.