

Introduction

In 1954, a young shepherd was leading his flock out to pasture in the remote village of Yukarı Gündeş in the eastern Turkish province of Ardahan. As the sun set, a shadow falling on a nearby hill seemed to trace the exact profile of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish Republic. Convinced that he had been vouchsafed a religious experience, the incredulous shepherd reported his encounter to the local authorities, who wasted no time in publicizing this rare natural phenomenon nationwide as a miracle. Local excitement did not die down with the passage of time and, in 1997, it was finally decided to launch on this spot a festival that drew enormous crowds of spectators eager to witness the phenomenon for themselves. When, at the seventh annual festival in “the footsteps and shadow of Atatürk,” a shepherd inadvertently interrupted the spectacle at the critical moment by innocently guiding his flock through the silhouette just as it was becoming visible; the crowd reacted with fury. One parliamentary deputy from among the spectators bellowed, “Grazing animals here is highly disrespectful, an act of treason. . . . Why has Karadağ where the miracle occurred not been placed under state protection?”¹ This somewhat bizarre episode captures the quasi-religious quality of the personality cult that sprang up around Mustafa Kemal Atatürk during his lifetime and has persisted in many

¹ “Ata’nın Silueti Varken Hayvan Otlamak İhanet,” *Hürriyet*, July 1, 2003.

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quarters of Turkey to this day. Obviously this was not the only way Turks regarded the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, but an attitude of veneration continues to suffuse most scholarly and popular writing on the subject.

For many years, the scholar who aspired to portray Atatürk as he really was resembled the premodern historian rash enough to attempt a depiction of the historical Jesus. Not surprisingly, the more scholarly and authoritative biographies of Atatürk have been authored by non-Turkish scholars, and even these long after his death. Today the subject can be dealt with more openly in Turkey, but demythologizing Atatürk is still difficult. For instance, many of the sayings attributed to Atatürk have become national maxims, and yet a good number of them are fabrications that were invented to serve particular interests. In recent years, some scholars have taken to exposing these fabrications with a passion reminiscent of Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī (d. 870), the great medieval critic of spurious traditions and sayings ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad. Turkish taxi and trucking associations were not particularly pleased to learn that Atatürk never uttered their organizational motto, “The Turkish driver is a man of the noblest feelings.” But broader sectors of society were affected by the revelation that the following quotations were apocryphal: “A society that does not respect its elderly is not a [real] society” (carved on the wall of the Social Security headquarters in Ankara); “The future is in the skies” (engraved on plaques in commercial airplanes); or “If an issue is related to the fatherland the rest should be considered trivial” (the motto of an ultrasecular-nationalist movement in Turkey).²

Hundreds of books have been written on different aspects of Atatürk’s life and work, their titles ranging from *Atatürk and Med-*

² Sevılay Yükselir, “O Söz Atatürk’e Ait Değil Ama Atatürk’çe Bir Söz!” February 26, 2008; accessed February 27, 2008 at http://www.gazeteport.com.tr/Yazarlar/News/Gp_162225.

ical Students and *Atatürk and Meteorology to Atatürk and Eurasia* or even *Atatürk's Love for Children*.³ Most of these are in the form of eulogies that depict the founder of modern Turkey as a sagelike dispenser of wisdom endowed with omniscience and insight in a variety of fields, or even as a philosopher-king who strove to lay down laws *de omni scibili*. Only a small number are solid monographs. Essayists have used his alleged views to prove almost any point. Thus we have both *Atatürk Was an Anti-Communist* and *The Socialist Movement, Atatürk, and the Constitution*;⁴ or *I Looked for Atatürk in the Qur'ân and Found Him* alongside *Atatürk and Science*.⁵ Meanwhile, Turkish official history tends to portray Atatürk as a leader from birth, with attempts to present his world through the prism of the person rather than vice versa. In Turkey, for instance, there are still history professors who consider Mustafa Kemal the architect of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, even though his actual role was marginal.⁶ Similarly, for many years Turkish historiography maintained that Mustafa Kemal had warned American Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur in 1932 about an imminent general war that would destroy the civilized world. On this basis, Turkish scholars have credited Atatürk with having foreseen the Second World War even before the Nazis ascended to power.⁷ Recent research, however, has revealed that

³ Metin Özata, *Atatürk ve Tıbbiyeliler* (İzmir: Umay Yayınları, 2007); Mithat Atabay, *Atatürk ve Meteoroloji* (Ankara: DMİ Yayınları, 2002); Anıl Çeçen, *Atatürk ve Avrasya* (İstanbul: Cumhuriyet Kitapları, 1999); Cemil Sönmez, *Atatürk'te Çocuk Sevğisi* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 2004).

⁴ Hasan Fahri, *Atatürk Bir Anti-Komünistti* (İstanbul: Su Yayınları, 1978); Remzi Çaybaşı, *Sosyalist Akım, Atatürk ve Anayasa* (İstanbul: Barut Matbaası, 1967).

⁵ Haydar Seçkin, *Atatürk'ü Kur'anda Aradım ve Buldum* (İzmit: H. Seçkin Yayınları, 1995); Güneş Kazdağlı, *Atatürk ve Bilim* (İstanbul: Beyaz Yayınları, 1998).

⁶ Zeki Arıkan, "1908 Jön Türk Devrimi ve Mustafa Kemal," *Cumhuriyet*, September 11, 2008.

⁷ See "Dünyanın Siyasî Durumu, 27/29. IX. 1932," in *Atatürk'ün Söylev ve*

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Atatürk told MacArthur exactly the opposite. The minutes of the meeting read, “When the possible dangers of war were discussed, His Excellency the Gazi said that the occurrence of a world war in the next ten years was virtually impossible.”⁸

Thus, any scholar seeking to grapple with the historical Atatürk must engage primarily in demythologizing, historicizing, and contextualizing through the use of primary source material. This is no easy task. While many relevant documents have been published, both during his lifetime and afterward, only recently has a publishing house attempted to bring together all his accessible writings, speeches, and correspondence. The resulting collection, whose publication began in 1998, has currently reached volume 26, thus covering the years 1903–34.⁹ As for his personal notes, Mustafa Kemal, like many other contemporary Ottoman/Turkish officers, scribbled them in a number of notebooks; some of these are in diary form, and range from 1904 to 1933. His adopted daughter, Âfet İnan, produced a sanitized version of one of these diaries extending over six notebooks.¹⁰ An additional thirty-two are located in the Military Archives, the Presidential Archives, and the Anıtkabir Archives in Ankara, and a decision was taken to publish them in twelve volumes. So far nine have been issued, with the latest appearing in 2008.¹¹ The rich collection of materials pertaining to Atatürk located in the Presidential Archives at Çankaya is off

Demeçleri, vol. 3, ed. Nimet Unan (Ankara: Türk İnkılâp Tarihi Enstitüsü Yayınları, 1954), 92–94; and Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, *İkinci Adam*, vol. 2, 1938–1950 (İstanbul: Remzi Yayınları, 1979), 83–87.

⁸ Cemil Koçak, “Atatürk Hakkında Bazı Belgeler: Ali Rıza Bey, Anıtkabir, MacArthur ile Mülakat,” *Toplumsal Tarih* 10/119 (2003): 25–26.

⁹ *Atatürk ’ün Bütün Eserleri*, vols. 1–26 (İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1998–2009).

¹⁰ *M. Kemal Atatürk ’ün Karlsbad Hatıraları*, ed. Ayşe Afetinan (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1983), 29–61.

¹¹ *Atatürk ’ün Not Defterleri*, vols. 1–9 (Ankara: Genelkurmay ATASE Yayınları, 2004–2008).

limits to bona fide scholars without special permission. Likewise, all hopes for access to his divorced wife's personal papers, which had been classified for twenty-five years after her death in 1975, were dashed in 2005 when they were placed under lock and key indefinitely at the Archives of the Turkish Historical Association.

Nevertheless, there is no shortage of accessible material with which to work, and the serious historian's task consists mainly of separating strands of fact from the considerable body of fiction that has accumulated since Atatürk's death. I have found Atatürk's own writings, speeches, and correspondence to be immensely helpful. Unfortunately, the editors of his collected writings have rendered the original Ottoman into modern Turkish, sacrificing the subtle nuances of the original text in the process. I have therefore felt it necessary to go back to the original published source whenever possible. In addition, I have relied heavily upon the notes that Atatürk used to scribble in the margins of books that he read. Finally, I have scoured major Turkish journals and dailies for the period 1919–38 in order to collect supplementary information.

Although Atatürk's own speeches and writings are by far the most important source for this essay, I have consulted a vast selection of secondary literature as well. In particular, I have used three well-written, authoritative biographies to place my subject in a larger context. These are the studies of Klaus Kreiser,¹² Andrew Mango,¹³ and Şerafettin Turan, all of which provide a wealth of detail concerning various aspects of Atatürk's life. While the first two are written as scholarly biographies, Turan's superbly researched study, the title of which may be rendered into English as *A Sui Generis Life and Personality: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk*, smacks of hagiogra-

¹² Klaus Kreiser, *Atatürk: eine Biographie* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2008).

¹³ Andrew Mango, *Atatürk* (London: John Murray, 1999).

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phy.¹⁴ In general, however, given the constraints of writing a brief essay in search of the historical Atatürk, I have avoided taking substantial information from the secondary literature.

Obviously this brief essay does not claim to offer a thorough analysis even of Atatürk's major ideas and policies, let alone a comprehensive biography. It has three major objectives. First, it seeks to place the founder of the modern Turkish republic in his historical context. This approach shows Atatürk to be an intellectual and social product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The fact that he led an immense endeavor to create a modern nation-state founded on radically new tenets should not force upon us the conclusion that he changed the course of history by thinking the unthinkable or realizing a vision in an otherwise unimaginable manner. Much Turkish historiography tends to view him as a maker of history who was unaffected by the world around him and who singlehandedly wrought a miracle in the form of modern Turkey. But contrary to this approach of mainstream Turkish historiography, Atatürk should not be viewed as a solitary genius impervious to his upbringing, early socialization, education, institutional membership, social milieu, and intellectual environment. While the enormous impact of his leadership on the shape of the republic that sprang from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire is undeniable, it does not diminish Atatürk's contribution to Turkish history to recognize that his ideas and actions were molded by the intellectual, social, and political realities of his time. The fact that he sided with avant-garde approaches that had previously received only limited support in Ottoman and Turkish society should not mislead us into believing that he originated novel ideas.

The second objective of this book is to trace Atatürk's intellectual development, which is the least well-researched aspect of his life and work. Clearly, he was not an intellectual in the strict sense

¹⁴ Şerafettin Turan, *Kendine Özgü Bir Yaşam ve Kişilik: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk* (Istanbul: Bilgi Yayınevi, 2004).

of the word, but the evolution of his ideas strongly influenced his policies. I have felt it appropriate to treat Atatürk's ideas about religion in general and Islam in particular at some length. The role of religion in human society and in his own country was one of Atatürk's major areas of interest, and he presided over the emergence of the first secular republic in a Muslim country.

Third, through analyzing Atatürk's life, ideas, and work, I have tried to explore the uneasy transition from the Late Ottoman imperial order to the modern Turkish nation-state. In so doing I posit an essential continuity as opposed to the sudden rupture often depicted in the historiography on this subject. A by-product of this investigation is a new assessment of the impact of Atatürk's legacy on modern Turkey.

An incidental feature of this quest for the historical Atatürk, with its emphasis on historicizing his experience and contextualizing his ideas, is that I have largely avoided delving into the details of his personal life, which lie beyond the scope of this study.