

75 years of the Turkish Republic

A balance sheet of Kemalism

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Weeklong celebrations accompanied the anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic 75 years ago. On October 29 1923, Mustafa Kemal Pasha became president of the newly founded state. Since 1934 he was known as Atatürk--Father of the Turks. This year also saw the ninetieth anniversary of the revolution of the "Young Turks", the precursor of the Kemalists, and the sixtieth anniversary of Atatürk's death.

The founder of modern Turkey has become a somewhat of cult figure in the country. There has been hardly any critical appraisal of his role and that of "Kemalism", nor of the principles on which the state was founded.

The essence of Kemalism was the unity and independence of the country, secularism and republican principles (i.e., the separation of state and religion), modernisation and the creation of a society without classes and privileges. It is obvious that none of this has been realised.

Mass demonstrations on the seventy-fifth anniversary took place mainly in cities where the mayor is a member of the Islamic Refah (Welfare) Party of Necmettin Erbakan. A week after the festivities it was revealed that an attack by Islamic fanatics on the Atatürk mausoleum had only narrowly failed.

Nothing remains either of Atatürk's principle of "Halkçılık", which means a policy in the interests of the people and the denial of class contradictions. Unemployment and poverty have exploded over the last years, especially following the customs union with the EU (European Union) and as a consequence of the Asian crisis. In the cities, a large part of the population live in slums. Many of these slum-dwellers are refugees from the Kurdish areas of south-east Turkey, where a murderous war has "preserved national unity" at a cost of tens of thousands of lives. At the same time, it has become clear that the state, the mafia and extreme right-wing death squads are closely linked.

In place of national independence has come complete dependence on the investments and credits of international capital. The only issue today is whether it is America that will continue to use Turkey as a bridgehead to the sources of raw materials and markets of the Middle East and the Turkish-speaking countries of the Caucasus, or whether Europe will achieve dominance. Nearly all of these countries sent their head of state to the festivities where, under the eyes of the American Minister of Energy, they signed a declaration of intent with Turkey to build an oil pipeline.

Not a single pledge or ideal of Kemalism has been realised. The question is posed: was this ever a real possibility? A short look back at Turkish history is necessary.

The Young Turks

The decay of the Ottoman Empire was already quite advanced in the nineteenth century. There had been a limited capitalist development since the beginning of the century, but industry was hardly established. On the

one hand, the Sultans feared the growth of a working class, on the other, they relied on high tariff restrictions to prevent English and French industry from conquering the markets of the Ottoman Empire and ruining domestic craft production.

The exploitation of the peasantry by the feudal lords and the moneylenders (not infrequently one and the same person) rose enormously. An 1858 law permitting private ownership of land meant they were able to acquire large land holdings and to strengthen their position against the Sultan. The money they squeezed out of the peasants was often "invested" in buying posts in the state apparatus, the army or clergy.

There was practically no significant productive bourgeois layer opposed to the old feudal system. For this reason, the leadership of the first revolution in 1908 was composed of army officers, the so-called Young Turks--"Yeni Osmanlılar".

Leon Trotsky explained this as follows: "The most highly educated elements of the Turkish intelligentsia, such as teachers, engineers, and so on, being able to find little scope for their talents in schools or factories, have become army officers. Many of them have studied in West European countries and become familiar with the regime that exists there--only, on their return home, to come up against the ignorance and poverty of the Turkish soldier and the debased conditions of the state.... Thus the state had bred within its own bosom the combative vanguard of the aspiring bourgeois nation: a thinking, critical and discontent intelligentsia" (Leon Trotsky, *The Balkan Wars*).

Trotsky warned, "The strength of the Turkish officers and the secret of their success lie ... in the active sympathy shown them by the advanced classes: the merchants, the craftsmen, the workers, sections of the officials and the clergy, and, finally, the countryside as embodied in the peasant army. But all these classes bring with them, besides their 'sympathy', also their interests, demands, and hopes. All their long-suppressed social aspirations are coming out into the open now, when a parliament has provided them with a centre for their strivings. Bitter disappointment awaits those who think that the Turkish revolution is already over. Among the disappointed will be not only Abdul Hamid [the Sultan] but also, it seems, the Young Turk Party itself" (Ibid).

No radical reform of the land question followed. The position of the clergy and the sultanate remained intact as a breeding ground for reactionary intrigues, because the bourgeois officers feared a revolutionary mobilisation of the working class and poor peasants far more than they feared the Sultan or the imperialist powers. In a coup by the Sultan's camarilla in the summer of 1912, the Young Turks allowed their government to fall without resistance.

Due to the complete incapacity and corruption of the feudal forces, which soon emerged in the Balkan Wars, the Young Turks were able to win back government power just six months later, on the eve of the First World War. Their fear of a social revolution remained. Instead of mobilising the people against imperialism, they surrendered to Prussian

militarism, and entered the First World War on the side of the German Empire.

A solution to the national question through the voluntary unification of all nationalities and religions--unthinkable without a federal structure and democracy and above all a serious appeal to the bonded peasant masses--soon gave way to the ideology of Pan-Islamism, and then racist Pan-Turkism, or Turanianism. In 1915 the government of the Young Turks, supported by German officers and the Kurdish tribal chiefs, organised a violent pogrom of the Armenians, that led to hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians being slain.

At the end of the First World War, the defeat of Germany at the hands of the Entente Powers (Britain, France) sealed the fate of the Ottoman Empire and that of the discredited Young Turks. The occupying Entente forces dissolved parliament and deposed the Young Turks. This was followed by the rise of General Mustafa Kemal.

Mustafa Kemal

Originally sent by the pro-British government of the Sultan to defeat opposition to the Great Powers' occupation of Anatolia, Kemal instead took the leadership of the movement. He proclaimed a counter-government to the Sultan in Istanbul and waged a three-year war of liberation.

His movement, like that of the Young Turks, was marked by the same contradictions that Trotsky analysed in the Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-shek. "The question of the nature and the policy of the bourgeoisie is settled by the entire internal class structure of a nation waging the revolutionary struggle: by the historical epoch in which that struggle develops; by the degree of economic, political, and military dependence of the national bourgeoisie upon world imperialism as a whole or a particular section of it; and finally, and this is most important, by the degree of class activity of the native proletariat, and by the state of its connections with the international revolutionary movement. A democratic or national liberation movement may offer the bourgeoisie an opportunity to deepen and broaden its possibilities for exploitation. Independent intervention of the proletariat on the revolutionary arena threatens to deprive the bourgeoisie of the possibility to exploit it altogether" (Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin*, New Park, 1974, p. 131).

As with the Young Turks, in Kemal's 1920 "Grand National Assembly" and government, corresponding to the weakness of the Turkish bourgeoisie, it was the big landowners and officers who set the tone. Kemal appealed to Islam, and declared the "person of the Caliph and Sultan is sacred and inviolable" (Quoted in *Baku, Congress of the Peoples of the East, Stenographic Report*, London 1977, p. 32). He spoke of the "fraternity of the Turks and Kurds" in the struggle against the "unbelievers" (Greeks, Britons, Armenians). He appealed also, with almost communist-sounding rhetoric, to the workers and peasants. He promised the peasants land, to grant the workers their rights and the Kurds autonomy.

At the same time, since the Entente Powers were not prepared to compromise at this point and Germany lay defeated, he sought and received generous military and diplomatic aid from the young Soviet Union. In a telegram to the Soviet government at the end of November 1920, he employed the following demagoguery: "I am deeply convinced, and my conviction is shared by all my compatriots, that, on the day when the workers of the west on the one hand, and the enslaved people of Asia and Africa on the other, understand that at the present time international capital is using them to annihilate and enslave one another for the exclusive benefit of their masters, and on the day when consciousness of

the wickedness of a colonial policy penetrates the hearts of the toiling masses of the world, the power of the bourgeoisie will end" (Quoted in E.H. Carr's *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 3, Penguin, 1973, p. 296).

In reality, the longer the liberation struggle lasted and the nearer victory approached, the more right wing became Kemal's policies, since he feared the independent actions of the workers and peasants above all.

At the beginning of 1921 he had the entire leadership of the recently founded Turkish Communist Party killed. With increasing military success he murdered socialists, left-wingers and radical peasant leaders. Following the founding of the republic he acted against strikes and persecuted the establishment of trade unions. He banned the Kurds from using their own language.

Kemal's government also abolished the sultanate (the dynastic office of supreme ruler), and he drove out the members of the Ottoman dynasty, founding the republic in 1923. It broke the power of the clergy, in so far as they supported the feudal sultanate. The last Sultan, Vahidettin, was little more than a puppet of the British. On their initiative he formed a religious "Caliphate Army", which the Sheik-ul-Islam (the spiritual leader of the Muslims) called on to struggle against the Kemalists in a *fatwa* (religious decree).

When the institution of the caliphate was abolished in 1924, this became a worldwide sensation. The Ottoman Sultan had always been also the Caliph, "ruler of all believers", possessing a similar significance as the Pope does for Catholics - although enjoying far greater powers. A little later, western legal forms were adopted and the *sharia* (Islamic law) abolished. All Islamic religious orders were banned; which had always been the darkest stronghold of religious and political reaction.

Kemalism and its consequences

The economic development of Turkey required the resolution of the agrarian question and the surmounting of the religious and national divisions that had characterised the Ottoman Empire. The Great Powers had continuously utilised these divisions in their alliances with various nationalists or tribal chiefs. The Kemalists officers "resolved" this question in their own way, and according to their own social position, not democratically but chauvinistically and conservatively.

The only feudal lords against whom the new government proceeded harshly were the once privileged Ağas and the Kurdish tribal chiefs. Apart from those that collaborated with Ankara, they were forcibly deported to predominantly Turkish regions, like hundreds of thousands of Kurdish peasants. Together with those from the Islamic orders and other formerly privileged layers, they led many uprisings against Ankara's brutal policy of enforced assimilation. These uprisings were bloodily defeated and were used to justify even greater political repression.

Kemalism was never as consistent regarding secularism as is usually presented in the West. Atatürk was not seeking to overcome religion, but the inclusion of a modernised Islam into Turkish nationalism. The state and the clergy were not completely separated. Rather the priesthood was placed under state supervision and paid by the state. Atatürk's successors have since pushed Islamisation even further.

Ideologically, Ziya Gökalp, one of Kemal's most important theoreticians, formulated this symbiosis of religion and nation. Amongst other things, he sought the translation of the Koran into Turkish, "cleansed" of its Arabic and Persian influences. Today, sections of the "secular" army leadership and Kemalists politicians such as Mesut Yılmaz are resurrecting Gökalp's ideas.

In order to overcome Turkey's economic backwardness, Atatürk relied on protectionism, import substitution and state intervention. In 1934, the

first five-year plan was implemented, probably influenced by the successes of Soviet industrialisation.

This nationalist economic policy initially produced certain improvements. Production rose rapidly, an infrastructure and the foundations of heavy industry were established, though this was in no small part due to close economic relations with Germany.

Inevitably, along with this economic development, dependence on the world economy also increased. Although after the Second World War, and right up to the 1970s, there were attempts to return to the policy of import substitution, they all failed. Those who had profited most from economic development were the big corporations, the banks and large landowners who were little interested in a policy of economic autarky and state intervention. They needed the investments and credits of the United States and Europe more than anything else.

Political and military dependence followed that of the economy. After the Second World War Turkey became a NATO bridgehead to the Middle East. The first bilateral military agreements were concluded with the US in 1947, and in 1953 Turkey joined NATO. Since then, Turkey has received large-scale financial and military aid, above all from America and Germany. Not only was the regular army built up into a powerful force with Western aid, the same was the case with the feared paramilitary units. Whenever political and social unrest was met by a military putsch, this occurred with the support, or at least the toleration, of NATO.

Modern Turkey

The modernisation of Turkey inevitably created the very thing both the Sultans and Caliphs feared most: the significance of agriculture decreased, the mass of the peasantry became increasingly impoverished, and in the cities a working class arose which has been increasingly militant since the 1970s.

At approximately the same time, the malignant forces were growing which play such a fatal role in the Turkish state today. The journalist Serdar Çelik writes: "Along with the social divisions and social movement of the 1970s in Turkey, there began a concentration of drug and black market weapons dealers into a form of mafia. They usually enjoyed close relations with the MIT [secret service], the police, the ÖHD [Office of Special War Operations, the Turkish arm of the NATO secret organisation *Gladio*], and above all the MHP [the fascist party also known as the "Grey Wolves"]. These Turkish drugs and weapons gangs financed many MHP militants. Following a military coup, almost all the gang chiefs were interrogated, some were killed. Those remaining were under the ÖHD-controlled mafia. With this development, the MHP militants became, over time, the most effective mafia grouping throughout Europe" (Fikrit Aslan and others, *The Special War of the Turkish State in Kurdistan and the Role of the MHP*, in *The Grey Wolves Howl Once More*, Münster 1997, p. 115).

Following the 1980 putsch, at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, the military government completely opened up the Turkish economy. The economic nationalism of the 1970s had clearly ended in a cul-de-sac, but the "medicine" which the international banks prescribed could not be imposed by democratic means.

Through systematic state terror, the military destroyed the resistance of the workers organisations. The Islamist Turgut Özal, economics minister and later "civilian" prime minister and president, introduced one of the most infamous IMF "structural reform programmes". This involved privatisation, the ending of subsidies, cutting real wages, the liberalisation of foreign trade, lifting the controls on prices, interest rates and capital movements.

To counter the increasing social polarisation that ensued, Turkish governments, military and civilian, relied to a lesser or greater extent on nationalism, state repression or the right-wing extremist murder gangs, and also on a further systematic Islamisation. The military again made religion a compulsory subject in all schools and even built prayer rooms in schools and universities. State-run Islamic schools were granted equal status with high schools.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism follows the very logic of Kemalism. Incapable of resolving the social and national problems, it utilises Islam as a weapon against the movements of the impoverished and oppressed masses.

The central points of many of the demands from organisations like the Welfare Party and the MHP, which call for a return to Islam, or the resurrection of the Ottoman Empire, resemble those which the Kemalists used to propagate but never realised: national unity and independence, economic development, public welfare, the symbiosis of Turkish nationalism and Islam.

To present Erbakan and the MHP-mafia as the "heirs" of Atatürk is one of history's baneful ironies.

Today, Kemalism confronts the ruins of its own policies. The question remains, however, why Kemalism remains a force to the present day despite its weaknesses and shortcomings in resolving the problems of Turkey?

It would go beyond the bounds of this article to deal extensively with the role of Stalinism. It is clear, however, that it played an important role in defending bourgeois rule in Turkey through preventing the independent intervention of the working class in political events and drove significant layers of the population into the arms of reactionary forces.

Since the mid-1920s, the Stalinists maintained that "at the moment" the struggle was merely for democracy and national independence (of Turkey or Kurdistan, or both). According to them, a socialist programme was only on the agenda in the dim and distant future. Therefore, they argued, it was possible to collaborate with all manner of "progressive" bourgeois forces, which at times even included the Kemalist officers. They were never concerned that historical experience, both in Turkey and elsewhere, has always proved the contrary.

Some Stalinist organisations remain pillars of the reactionary trade union bureaucracy. Other groups, mainly those oriented to Mao Zedong or Che Guevara, took over the function of isolating the most militant and self-sacrificing layers, especially peasant and student youth, driving them into hopeless "armed struggles" against the state.

In one form or another, most of the Stalinist organisations either support Turkish or Kurdish nationalism. Despite their occasional phrases about "international solidarity", they participate in the division of the working class along national lines.

The failure of all ideologies based on the bourgeois nation-state makes clear that the workers and poor peasants of all nationalities and religions need a new internationalist and socialist perspective. This means building a section of the Fourth International in Turkey and throughout the Middle East.



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