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# Birth of a Nation

For months, the fighting raged throughout the country. Quickly, foreign forces took advantage of the chaos to move in and make their own claims for territory. The Greeks moved in from their base in Smyrna (encouraged, the Turks believed, by the British prime minister David Lloyd George). The French seized land in the south. The Kurds revolted in the east.

And then came the San Remo Conference. From April 19 to 26, 1920, representatives from the Allied forces gathered together to determine how they would divide up the Ottoman Empire. The result was the Treaty of Sèvres, a document designed by the victorious Allies supposedly to formalize the peace terms agreed upon for the region, but which actually divided the empire among its conquerors into series of tiny states managed by Europeans. The lost territories would include the Arabian regions to be given to the British and French; Thrace and eight Turkish islands in the Aegean to the Greeks; and the Dodecanese Islands to Italy. Most of Anatolia would be divided into French and Italian territories. Much of Armenia would be granted its independence. The Kurds would be granted autonomy in their eastern portion of the empire. The waterways—the keys to Turkey's trade and financial survival—would be placed under Allied control. The Turkish army would be reduced to a small force overseen by the Allies, and the Turkish police would be placed under foreign control.

The response from the people was immediate—this document would mean the end of their nation, and they rejected it. The small pockets of rebels who had supported Kemal in his calls for independence quickly swelled in numbers as more and

more outraged citizens joined them. The Allies decided that the nationalist forces must be wiped out, and authorized the Greek armies to march east and north to stamp out any Ottoman troops resisting the planned partition. Of all the European forces, the Greeks were the ones most hated by the Turkish people, a hatred based in history, politics, and religion. The Allies could not have made a more unfortunate choice to police their new agreement, as the sight of Greek soldiers marching into their towns would virtually guarantee that the Turkish people would rise up in protest.

At first the Greek invaders, backed by the Allies and superior to the Turkish nationalists in numbers and weaponry, advanced rapidly and widely. But then Kemal turned for help to an unlikely source—Russia. The Turks and Russians had fought each other at least once a generation for centuries, most recently during World War I. But the Russians viewed the revolutionary movement in Turkey as an extension of their own recent revolution, and they publicly supported the efforts of Kemal and his fellow nationalists. Kemal sent a delegation to this new government, requesting Russian support and supplies. The request was granted.

Aided by fresh supplies, the Turk forces gained in strength just at a point when the Greeks were weakened by the loss of support of a public grown weary of wars. By late 1922, the tide had turned and the Turkish armies were pushing Greek forces back across the territory they had seized a short time before. Only the British were left and finally they, too, agreed to restore independence in Istanbul.

On November 1, 1922, the National Assembly passed a resolution stating that the system of government based on rule by a member of the royal family had ended on March 16, 1920 (two and a half years earlier). The resolution also stated that the role of caliph (the spiritual head of Islam) should belong to a member of the royal Ottoman family, but that the Assembly would choose which member of that sovereign family had the necessary "learning and character" to best qualify him for the position.

Turkish crowds celebrate the victory of Smyrna (modern Izmir) in 1923. Smyrna came under the custody of Greece after World War I by the Treaty of Sèvres and was reclaimed and seized by the Turks, who were given its custody by the Treaty of Lausanne.

Sultan Mehmet VI did not wait for the Assembly to decide whether or not his learning and character qualified him to serve as caliph. Fearing for his life, a mere 11 days after the resolution passed, the sultan fled his palace and boarded a British warship bound for Malta. His cousin, Abdul Mejid, was named as the new caliph. Never again would a member of the Ottoman royal family rule over Turkey, and the family would not perform the function of caliph for much longer, either.

After long and often difficult negotiations between the British and the Turks, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed on July 24, 1923. It restored nearly all of the lands that make up modern Turkey to this day. It removed the hated "peace" terms that had sparked the revolution. More important, it officially agreed to the demands Kemal and his fellow nationalists had made, both military and political. It was a victory for Kemal, and yet there was one final matter to be settled before he could set to work rebuilding the nation: The Allies had invited two official groups from Turkey to participate in the official signing of the Treaty of Lausanne—the nationalists and the government of the sultan.

The nationalists had a clear plan for the future of their country—one that involved economic and scientific efforts to ensure Turkey's place as an equal in the community of nations. It was a time for strong leadership, under a single leader with a clear vision. Kemal was determined to be that leader.

The solution seemed clear. The sultan had traditionally played two key roles: He had served as both the political leader of his nation and as caliph, the religious leader of the Muslim faith, thought to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Kemal wanted the national leadership for himself. The sultan could, however, retain the role of caliph and carry on as spiritual leader for his people.

Less than two years after assuming the office of caliph, Abdul Mejid was awakened by frightened servants who informed him that Istanbul's governor and chief of police had come to his palace. He was told that the Grand National Assembly had met only a few hours earlier and had voted to put an end to his position as Turkey's religious leader and ordered all members of the Ottoman royal family out of the country. From now on, there would no longer be a caliph. Mejid was told to leave the palace immediately.

A furious Mejid refused to go quietly. He ordered the governor to leave the palace at once. The police chief then informed the caliph that the palace was surrounded, the phone lines had

been cut off, and the police had been given the authority to remove him by force, if necessary.

Mejid had little choice but to obey. He was told that he and his family would be taken to the main train station in Istanbul and put on the Orient Express, a train bound for Europe. Mejid pleaded to be allowed to gather a few belongings, a request that was finally granted. Then, with two of his four wives, his son and daughter, and three staff members, he left the palace under police guard. Fearing that there might be trouble if the caliph was paraded through the streets of the densely populated city of Istanbul, the police decided to take Mejid and his family instead to Çatalca, a smaller train station outside the city. There, the heavily guarded group waited all day and into the night until at last, near midnight, the Orient Express pulled into the station. A private coach had been attached to the train. After boarding the coach, Mejid was given an envelope containing £2,000 in British currency as well as temporary papers entitling him to travel to Switzerland. In return, he agreed to sign a statement indicating that he was resigning as caliph to comply with the people's wishes, and would spend his remaining years studying art.

Mejid's resignation lasted for as long as it took the train to cross over the border into Bulgaria. He then immediately issued a new statement, explaining that he had resigned only under pressure, and that he considered the Assembly's decision to be invalid. But he would learn, to his astonishment, that very few people cared. It had been widely believed that almost all Muslims revered the Ottoman family and assumed that it was entitled to the caliphate, but now the world learned otherwise. The caliph endured one final indignity in his hasty flight from the country his family had ruled for centuries. When the train reached the Swiss border, Mejid was held at the frontier. A Swiss law prevented immigrants with more than one wife from entering the country. It was only after a delay that he was permitted to enter his new homeland.

The remaining members of the Ottoman royal family quickly followed Mejid into exile. Only a few days later, 116 members of the dynasty were forced to leave their homes. The majority of them would never return.

## A MODERN WOMAN

In the spring of 1923, Mustafa Kemal was beginning to take the steps that would transform Turkey into a modern nation. In the Western countries he had visited, he had been impressed by the freedom women enjoyed and by the contributions they in turn made to their nations. He resolved that in a modern Turkey women would enjoy many of the same freedoms as men, no longer being segregated in their homes and in the streets. One young woman named Latife Hanim, who was working as his secretary, had made a particularly strong impression on the new leader. She came from a prosperous merchant family, spoke French fluently, and had studied law in Europe.

Kemal proposed to Latife, and she quickly accepted. The wedding symbolized the kind of modern relationship Kemal hoped for. In traditional Muslim weddings, the bride and groom do not see each other until after the ceremony, which is performed by representatives for each side. At their wedding, Kemal and Latife were married at her father's home, seated side by side at a table as they spoke their vows. In another break with tradition, Latife's face was not veiled.

For their honeymoon, Kemal took Latife on a tour of southern Anatolia. It was more a political tour than a romantic interlude. They traveled through major cities, and Latife appeared in public at Kemal's side (rather than in the harem—the part of the house set aside for women—as tradition would have dictated). She gradually began appearing without the veil, at first sparking shock, particularly in rural regions, but gradually inspiring many other Turkish women to follow her example.

Kemal emphasized, on this political campaign, not only his wife's equal status with him, but his equal status with his

people. He mixed with the people, avoiding wherever possible any elaborate and formal ceremonies. In one instance, golden thrones were provided for Kemal and Latife to observe a fireworks display. He sent them away, requesting ordinary chairs placed within the crowd of people who had gathered.

Kemal's plans called for a complete break with the Ottoman Empire, with its elaborate ceremonies and strict separation of elite classes and everyday citizens. Kemal's vision for his country was of a republic whose government belonged to the people and whose national assembly would serve as the people's representatives (although political rivals soon learned that this was more talk than action when they tried to form an opposition party). It was a radical idea for a nation that had known centuries of royal rule. No more would the people's fate be left in the hands of a sultan or caliph. They would govern themselves through that national assembly and through a president elected by the assembly.

The first step toward this new national identity required a new base for the government, removed geographically and symbolically from the old capital of the sultan. On October 13, 1923, the constitution was amended to establish the capital of the Turkish state at Ankara, not Istanbul. Ankara was located in the very heart of Turkey, with none of the links to the sultans of centuries past that marked the streets of Istanbul, and was a far more primitive place than the glittering capital had been.

But a more radical change would come only a few days later, for based in the new capital city would be a brand-new form of government. On October 29, 1923, the news was proclaimed, following approval by the Assembly, that Turkey would become a republic. Its new president, elected unanimously by 158 votes in the Assembly, was Mustafa Kemal.

## NEW LAWS FOR A NEW REPUBLIC

During the next few years, Mustafa Kemal began a series of radical reforms that would sweep away the vestiges of Ottoman

tradition and replace them with modern planning. The first involved removing the last trace of the Ottoman royal family by abolishing the need for a caliph. No more would there be confusion about whose policies would dictate life in Turkey. Next, the separate religious schools and colleges were closed, followed by the closure of the courts in which judges trained in Islamic law (or *Sheriat*, Turkish for Sharia law) had ruled on legal matters based on their interpretations of the Koran.

Kemal had become expert in the art of revolution, first carrying out a military revolution and then a political one. But now, as president, he began a series of symbolic revolutions designed to transform Turkey into a contemporary society. Kemal believed in outward symbols as well as internal ones and so he turned to transforming his people into a modern society. Not only did he work at instilling new thoughts and beliefs, but at changing people's looks externally, through their clothing. Specifically, he changed their hats.

For 100 years, Muslim men in Turkey were identified by the *fez*, a tall, red, cylinder-shaped hat adorned with a black tassel. The shape and design was important, since it allowed Muslims to touch their foreheads to the ground in prayer, as required by their faith. It also told the knowledgeable observer something about the rank and profession of the wearer (fez wearers were normally government officials or army officers).

The fez was outlawed on November 25, 1925. Men were required to wear Western-style hats; anyone wearing a fez could be arrested. Shortly thereafter, women were discouraged from wearing the veil. Women in cities soon stopped covering their faces, although in more remote regions they continued to wear the veil. Public employees were required to wear suits made by local merchants from local cloth, and school uniforms in Western style were also regulated.

From clothing, the reforms moved on to the way Turks measured time. In a radical step for a Muslim country, the Gregorian calendar was introduced, using dates based on the Christian system of measuring time before and after Christ's death using

B.C. and A.D., as well as the 24-hour measurement of daily time popular in Europe, which starts at midnight, as opposed to the Muslim system of measuring time from the sunset. Kemal also championed a sweeping set of educational reforms, bringing in the noted educational pioneer John Dewey as a consultant.

The speed of these transformations was truly remarkable. The modern society that Kemal envisioned rapidly became a reality—it is difficult to imagine how quickly life changed for the Turkish people. Pulling a nation back from the threat of political extinction is a brilliant feat; changing the way its people think about themselves and their culture is almost impossible. And yet Kemal was able to achieve both.

Next, Kemal began his transformation of the role of women in Turkish society. For centuries, women had enjoyed little freedom in the Ottoman world. In Istanbul, a woman was forbidden from walking in the street or driving in a carriage with a man, even if he was her husband. If husband and wife went outside together, the husband had to walk several steps ahead of his wife, ignoring her. Nor did men and women go out together socially. On boats and trains there were separate sections for men and women, divided by a curtain. In the theater, Muslim women were forbidden to act in plays—the female parts were played by men. Women could only attend the theater on special "ladies' days" when the audience was reserved solely for them.

By early 1926, Kemal had overseen a further step in his platform of increased rights for women. Divorces would no longer be granted simply because the husband wished to end the marriage. Polygamy (marriage to more than one woman) was outlawed. New inheritance laws ensured that women would receive as much as men, changing the old Muslim law that dictated that female heirs could receive only half as much as their brothers did. In the past, women could only teach in all-girls schools; now they were allowed to teach in all elementary and middle schools. Women could now pursue careers in medicine and law. And, in a controversial challenge to the religious establishment and to Islamic law, Muslim women were now legally allowed to

This 1979 painting called *A Man of Action* illustrates the Turkish society's reaction to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's laws calling for the westernizing of Turkish culture. Atatürk *(inset)* prohibited men from wearing the traditional Turkish fez and required government employees to wear suits to work. Later considered surprisingly successful, his reforms have made Turkey into one of the most progressive Muslim countries in the world.

marry non-Muslim men, and all adults were legally granted the right to change their religion if they wished to do so.

These laws represented a significant break with the past. They were a remarkable set of changes, and these swift ends to long-established customs were not always popular. But as Kemal

himself said, "The civilized world is far ahead of us. We have no choice but to catch up."

It is ironic that Kemal, recognized as a champion of rights for women in Turkey, was less successful at his own efforts to maintain the modern marriage that had been an early symbol of the new society he planned. His marriage with Latife lasted only three years. Although both Kemal and Latife seemed to be models of the new roles for men and women in a modern Turkey, they were caught in the same struggles that would grip Turkey as it adapted to a changed society. Latife viewed herself as a partner, an equal, yet was unhappy and jealous when Kemal's social and political gatherings expanded to include women as well as men. Kemal, in turn, as leader of the new republic, also wanted to be leader in his own home. The clash was inevitable. Kemal ended the marriage before the new laws benefiting women went into effect. Their wedding ceremony had been done in the Western manner, but their divorce followed the Muslim tradition. Kemal simply said, "Leave the house. I do not wish to see you any more," and the marriage was legally ended.

## REFLECTION AND REFORM

By 1927, Turkey's transformation was firmly underway, and a new round of elections in August and September of that year brought victory for Kemal's Republican People's Party (which he had founded in 1923). He was reelected president, and shortly after the election delivered a momentous speech that has become an important document of modern Turkish history. Known simply as the *nutuk* ("speech" in Turkish), it is a history—Kemal's history—of the birth of modern Turkey. Step-by-step, it is a retelling of Kemal's story from the moment when he landed at Samsun on May 19, 1919, to start his War of Independence. The speech took 36 hours to deliver, stretched over six separate gatherings from October 15 to 20. It ended with a stirring call to the young people of Turkey, urging them

to defend the Republic and its independence, no matter what. This portion of the speech, to this day, must be memorized by all Turkish schoolchildren.

The role of religion was further diminished in Turkey with an amendment to the constitution. In the first Ottoman constitution of 1876, the words "The religion of the Turkish state is Islam" had underscored the critical importance of Muslim thought and laws, but on April 10, 1928, a law was passed which removed that phrase. The act didn't guarantee freedom of religion but defined Turkey's laws and government as secular rather than religious.

There was one additional reform Kemal needed to make to ensure that Turkey would be more closely connected to its neighbors in Western Europe than those in the east. Turkey's alphabet was Arabic with 28 letters, quite different from the Latin alphabet with 26 letters that is used in Western languages. By August of 1928, a new alphabet had been created, based on Latin rather than Arabic letters. Kemal then set out on a tour of the country, meeting people in schoolrooms, town halls, and cafes, to stress the importance of learning to read and write using this modified alphabet. On November 3, a law was passed making it illegal to use the Arabic alphabet after the end of the year.

This is another remarkable example of the changes Turkey experienced under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal. Imagine what it would have been like to live during that time, when so much of what was familiar was disappearing. The way you dressed, the alphabet you used to read and write, even the clocks and calendars used to measure time, all changed. With his vision, his political power, and his will, Kemal had shaped a brand-new world from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

## A NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

In October 1929, the Great Depression struck, setting off an international set of economic crises. Turkey suffered, as foreign

demand for its agricultural exports declined. While the economies of the West—based on capitalist principles—struggled, the state-supported industries of Russia seemed to be thriving. It is not surprising, then, that Turkey decided to experiment with some government-sponsored industries and businesses. Kemal determined that the government would not interfere in agriculture but would test a five-year plan (another first for the Middle East) in which the state would develop certain industries, such as textiles, paper, glass, iron, steel, and chemicals. Although much-needed funding (from both Turkish and foreign governments) guaranteed the development of certain important businesses, the experiment was largely unsuccessful, in part because Turkey's greatest resource—its agriculture—was excluded from the experiment and in fact suffered as workers drifted from farms to cities in search of better-paying work.

The year 1933 marked a 10-year anniversary for the Turkish Republic and Kemal was re-elected for a third presidential term. Still, as Turkey pressed ahead on the path carved out by its leader, the world was changing. Adolph Hitler had risen to power in Germany, and the global community struggled to maintain peace through the efforts of the League of Nations. Meanwhile, Kemal introduced more reforms.

A new legal, weekly holiday from 1:00 P.M. on Saturday to Monday morning was established in 1935. The concept of a holy day of rest was not a Muslim custom, as it is in Christianity and Judaism. Moreover, the traditional Muslim day devoted to worship is Friday, not Sunday, which is a day not for rest but rather for bustling trade, particularly in the markets located around the mosque, and for public prayer. But the new law changed the day of rest to Sunday, bringing Turkey into line with other Western countries.

That same year brought an even greater change for the people. By January 1, 1935, all Turkish citizens were legally required to take last names. Prior to this date, the Turks, like many Muslims, did not use surnames. Children would be given a first name by which they would be known, plus their father's first name to

indicate their family. Military cadets were generally identified by their first name and their place of birth. People of status often had honorary titles added to their names. But the new law changed all that. While military titles were kept, all other honorary or royal titles were eliminated.

This decision resulted in some short-term chaos, as citizens each chose a last name, some reflecting a special place or name that had significance for them. Soldiers frequently chose as their last name a place where an important battle had been fought. Others chose names that reflected their trade or business. Some chose adjectives that appealed to them, and names like Rock, Steel, and Iron were particularly popular. It was not unusual for members of the same family to choose different last names.

Kemal himself thought long and hard about the name he should take, a name befitting the leader of the Republic. At last, he settled on *Atatürk*, which means Father Turk, reflecting his view of himself as the Father of all Turks. From that point on, he would be known as Kemal Atatürk.

## THE STORM CLOUDS OF WAR

While Turkish society was being reshaped in radical ways, the signs of international trouble were sweeping across Europe. The first disturbing event was the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935, in response to which Turkey supported the League of Nations' sanctions against Italy, motivated at least in part by the evidence that Italy was moving troops into the Dodecanese Islands off the Turkish coast. (Under the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923, Italy ruled the Dodecanese Islands; they are now part of Greece.) Then, in March 1936, Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland. Following a meeting with the nations that had signed the Treaty of Lausanne (apart, of course, from Italy), Turkey was granted the right to reintroduce troops into the straits and police the waterways to ensure that commercial ships could pass through safely. As the world braced for war, Turkey was aligning itself with Great Britain, its old enemy.