

Atatürk: Father of the Turks

Atatürk made primary education not only compulsory, but also free

ATATÜRK: FATHER OF THE TURKS

The story of the man who built his nation from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire to create the Republic of Turkey

Written by Frances White

Today one image dominates the Turkish landscape. Dazzling blue eyes stare down from the walls of hospitals, government buildings, schools and even family homes: the eyes of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The man's legacy in modern-day Turkey is undeniable, with bronze statues adorning even the most remote villages. Atatürk became a legend when he rescued Turkey from the defeated and crumbling Ottoman Empire, resisted the invading Greek forces and led his people to form a modern republic of Turkey. He was the father of modern Turkey. For many Turks today, Atatürk is a sacred figure, a being from myth and legend that his people can still rally behind. But before he was a legend, he was an ordinary man, driven by a love of his country and a determination to see it succeed. Without his journey and struggle, it is nigh-on impossible to imagine what Turkey would be today.

Atatürk was born in 1881, simply as 'Mustafa' in a time when surnames were not used in the Ottoman Empire. He was born in Salonica (now Thessaloniki), a thriving port of the empire. His father, Ali Rıza had been a lieutenant of a local militia, and his mother hailed from a farming community. The two parents seemed somewhat at odds with what they wanted for their son: while his mother would have preferred Atatürk follow the traditional religious path, his father had other plans. He hung his sword above his son's cradle, and ensured he attended a secular school, opening his son's mind and setting him down the path of modernisation which would dominate not only Atatürk's life, but also the life of every Turk of his era. Atatürk's father died when he was only seven, but the man would have a profound effect on his son's life.

Enamoured with the idea of a military career, even at a young age, Atatürk defied his mother and entered a military secondary school. While there he received the nickname of Kemal, meaning 'perfect one', due to his academic abilities. He went on to the military school in Monastir, and entered the War College in Istanbul in 1899. While undergoing studies there Atatürk became aware of political dissent against the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Atatürk became involved in a clandestine newspaper. Although his activities were uncovered he still completed the course, graduating in the top ten of his class. He then went on to the General Staff College where he graduated as a captain and one of the empire's most promising young officers.

Despite the prestige his graduation gave him, Atatürk found himself drawn to anti-empire groups. He and his friends would gather to discuss political abuses within the empire, and when the group was discovered, and its members dispersed, Atatürk watched with anger as corrupt officials abused local people. He flitted between anti-government groups - as one was disbanded he would create or join another - from the Society of Fatherland and Freedom to the Committee of Union and Progress to the Young Turk movement. In July of 1908 he was part of the Young Turk insurrection that stripped the sultan's powers and re-established a government.



Non-Turkish minorities were pressured to speak Turkish in public under Atatürk's presidency

The hero of this revolution was Ismail Enver, a man who would become one of Atatürk's greatest rivals. Enver believed in centralisation and Turkish control, but Atatürk felt that the military, after having gained what it wanted politically, should no longer interfere in politics. Atatürk encouraged all officers who wished to pursue political careers to resign from the military. However, this only served to increase the hostility of Enver and his followers towards Atatürk.

Facing a powerful backlash, Atatürk returned his attention to what he knew best - the military. He spoke out about the training of the army, and translated German training manuals into Turkish. He began to gain respect from powerful military officers, as well as the ambitious young officers rising through the ranks. All these men would later play an important part in supporting Atatürk and his plans for the Turkish nation.

Enver and his followers, known as the CUP, were not so keen on Atatürk's rising popularity and power. He was transferred out of the way on field command, and denied promotion after promotion. Enver was determined to keep his opposition out of sight and out of power. But Atatürk was not so easy to keep down. He proved his bravery fighting in the Italo-Turkish War in 1911, and again in 1912 to 1913 in the Balkan Wars. During the first Balkan War the Ottoman Empire rapidly lost most of its territory in Europe, prompting masses of refugees to pour into Istanbul, including Atatürk's own mother, sister and stepfather. The Second Balkan War saw the Ottomans regain some of their lost territory, and Atatürk was promoted to lieutenant colonel for his role in it.

When WWI broke out and the Ottomans allied with the Central powers, Atatürk saw it as a chance to assume a military command, which Enver reluctantly gave him with the 19th Division in the Gallipoli Peninsula. His bravery and military prowess here contributed to thwarting the Allied invasion of the Dardanelles. Atatürk was also almost seriously injured by a piece of shrapnel, which lodged in the watch in his breast pocket. His success at Gallipoli thrust Atatürk into legendary status, dubbing him the 'Saviour of Istanbul'. Even Enver couldn't deny his abilities now, and Atatürk received promotion after promotion, even receiving the honorific title of 'pasha'.

Despite his success, Atatürk began to become disillusioned with the Ottoman army when he was placed in command of the Seventh Army in Syria. He was so appalled by the state of the army he resigned and returned to Istanbul, where he fell ill. During this time Sultan Mehmed V died and was replaced by Mehmed VI. Enver conspired to get Atatürk assigned in Syria again, and when Atatürk returned he found the situation even worse than he had left

“ATATÜRK'S FATHER WOULD HAVE A PROFOUND EFFECT ON HIS SON'S LIFE”



Atatürk's famous expression was "Peace at home, peace in the world"



Atatürk met with King Edward VIII in Istanbul on 4 September 1936

it, withdrawing his forces to save as many lives in the collapsing army as he could. Fighting came to a halt by the Armistice of Mudros in 1918, and Enver and his friends in the CUP fled to Germany, leaving the sultan in charge. The sultan agreed to cooperate with the allies, who took control of the government, as well as a lot of Ottoman territory. The allied forces swiftly began claiming whatever territory they could, in a worryingly imperialistic fashion.

Atatürk meanwhile, watched as Istanbul was occupied by British, French and Italian troops. Greatly affected by the scene, he became determined to oust them from the city he loved. He met with trusted allies to formulate a plan to save Turkey. The Turks had already begun to take matters into their own hands, with armed conflicts happening throughout the city. The allies wanted this squashed, and the sultan recommended Atatürk be sent as a trusted inspector general. Atatürk used this to his advantage, swaying his pull with the sultan to get him to bestow him with extensive powers. Atatürk had bided his time, playing the good soldier, but now it was time to act.

On 19 May 1919 Atatürk landed at Samsun, on the coast of Anatolia. Although he had been sent to

restore order, he abandoned this, heading straight for Amasya. There he proclaimed to a rapturous crowd that the sultan was a prisoner of the allies, and he, Atatürk, had come for one purpose - to stop the nation from slipping from the hands of its own people. It was an incredibly bold move from Atatürk; the man had built up a reputation as a good, loyal soldier. But he played all his hands in one brutal swoop. The Allies demanded the sultan recall him, but Atatürk ignored all orders. The sultan called for his arrest, and ordered all governors to ignore him.

Atatürk responded by resigning from the army. Now a civilian with no official status or military support, he appealed to General Kâzım Karabekir, commander of an army corps of 18,000 men. Kâzım was convinced by Atatürk, and the battle for independence truly began. Elected as head of a provisional government and constantly resisting arrest, Atatürk and his new government directly went up against the sultan's own government. When the Treaty of Sévres was signed on 10 August 1920, the Ottoman state was massively reduced in size, but Atatürk demanded complete independence for Turkey. The new Turkish parliament, known as the Great National Assembly,



Atatürk was featured on the cover of Time magazine in 1923

continued to engage in conflict with the occupying Greek and Armenian forces. Finally, after three years of struggle, on 24 July 1923 Atatürk signed the treaty of Lausanne, which established the Republic of Turkey with Atatürk as its first president. Through sheer grit, determination and lust for freedom, Atatürk had finally given Turkey control of its own territory and sovereignty.

Atatürk had big plans for his country beyond its independence. He wanted to bring it into the 20th century, and immediately embarked on a journey of dramatic reform. The Turkey Atatürk envisioned was a self-sufficient, industrialised state, a country in a constant state of revolution, constantly changing, constantly improving, never remaining static. Atatürk went about doing this by carefully studying Western governments and adapting their structure. He established state secularism, separating the government from religion, and the religious schools and courts were

THE TWO LEADERS

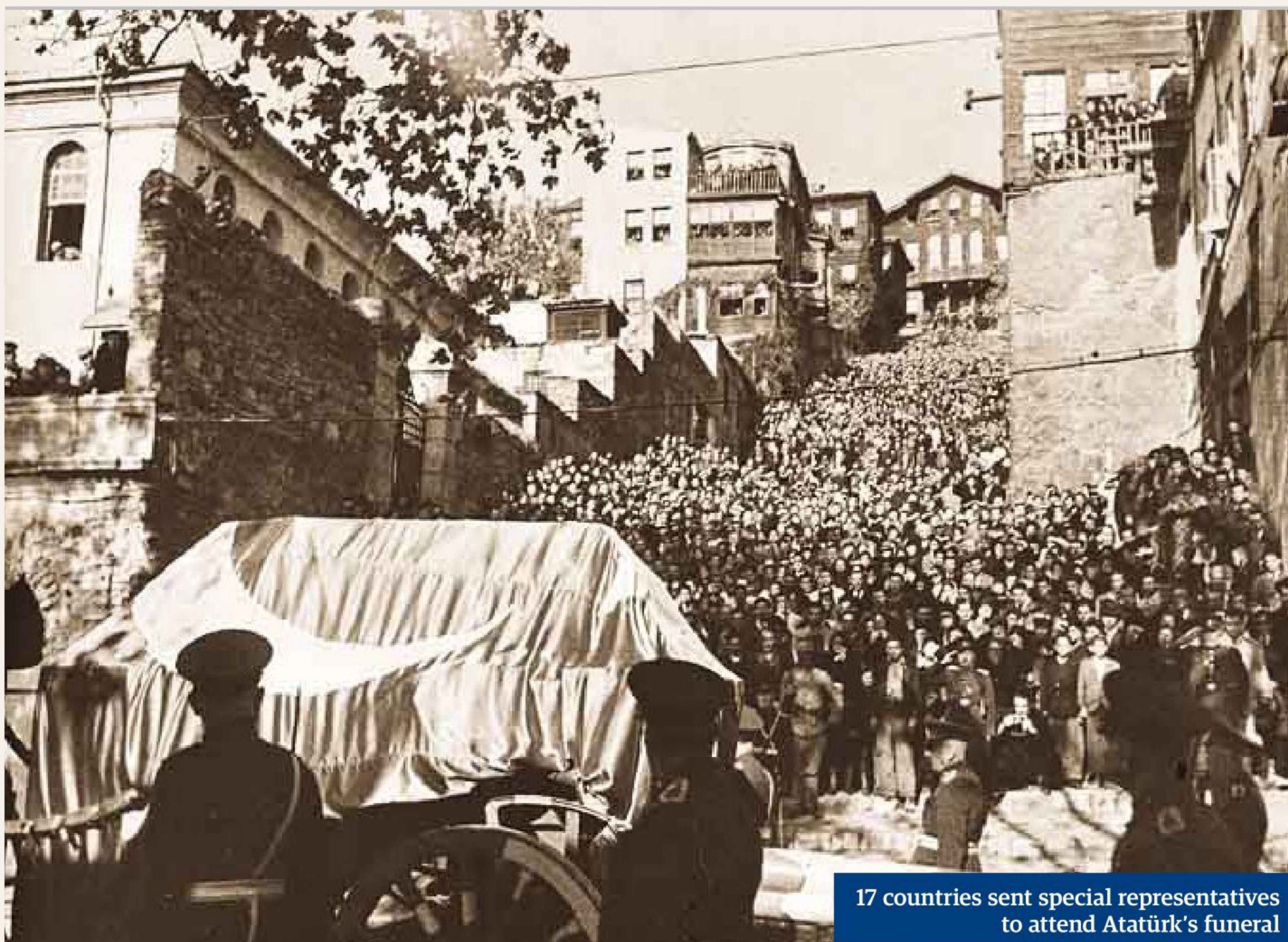
The friendship that unified two enemy nations

Both Atatürk and the Greek post-war leader, Eleftherios Venizelos, were eager to reconcile the severely fractured relationship between their two countries. It was an incredibly tricky situation. The tension between the two nations was historic and, some believed, impossible to overcome. Both men faced extreme opposition to their desire to establish normal relations from their own people. Atatürk in particular was quick to erase any illusion to their past animosity, demanding a painting showing a Turkish soldier killing a Greek one be taken down and calling it a 'revolting scene.'

With careful negotiations the two sides reached an agreement on 30 April 1930, with Greece renouncing all claims over Turkish territory. Later that year in October a treaty of friendship was signed, something unthinkable only a few years prior. This undoubtedly had a lot to do with the friendship and mutual respect between the two men. Venizelos even put Atatürk's name forward for the Nobel Peace Prize. The German chancellor described the new alliance as "the greatest achievement seen in Europe since the end of the Great War".



Here, Atatürk (centre) hosted Venizelos (left) in 1932 once an agreement had been reached and relations improved



17 countries sent special representatives to attend Atatürk's funeral

dismantled. More traditional Turkish dress, such as wearing the fez, was prohibited, and Atatürk himself wore a European-style hat as an example for his people. Religious brotherhoods, which had traditionally been strongholds of conservatism, were also outlawed.

Atatürk encouraged the emancipation of women. As well as marrying a Western-educated woman himself, in 1934 women were also given the vote for parliamentary members and became eligible to hold seats in parliament for the first time. He also removed women's veiling laws and a multitude of other laws, encouraging equality between the sexes. This led to the entire system of Islamic law, which had dominated the nation for centuries, being discarded in favour of the models set by the Swiss civil code, Italian penal code and German commercial code. Polygamy became illegal, marriage became a civil contract and divorce a civil action, leading to much more freedom for women in Turkey.

Another massive reform was the replacement of the Arabic script by the Latin alphabet in November of 1928. As it fit the Turkish language better and made it easier to read, this led to Turkey achieving one of the highest literacy rates in the entire Middle East. Atatürk himself visited the countryside with a chalk and blackboard to show the Turkish people the new alphabet. Education across the country boomed, with the youth given unprecedented access to Western scientific teachings. Another reform that changed the lives of all the Turks was the formal adoption of surnames in 1934. This is actually what

gave Atatürk the name we all know him by now, meaning 'Father of the Turks'.

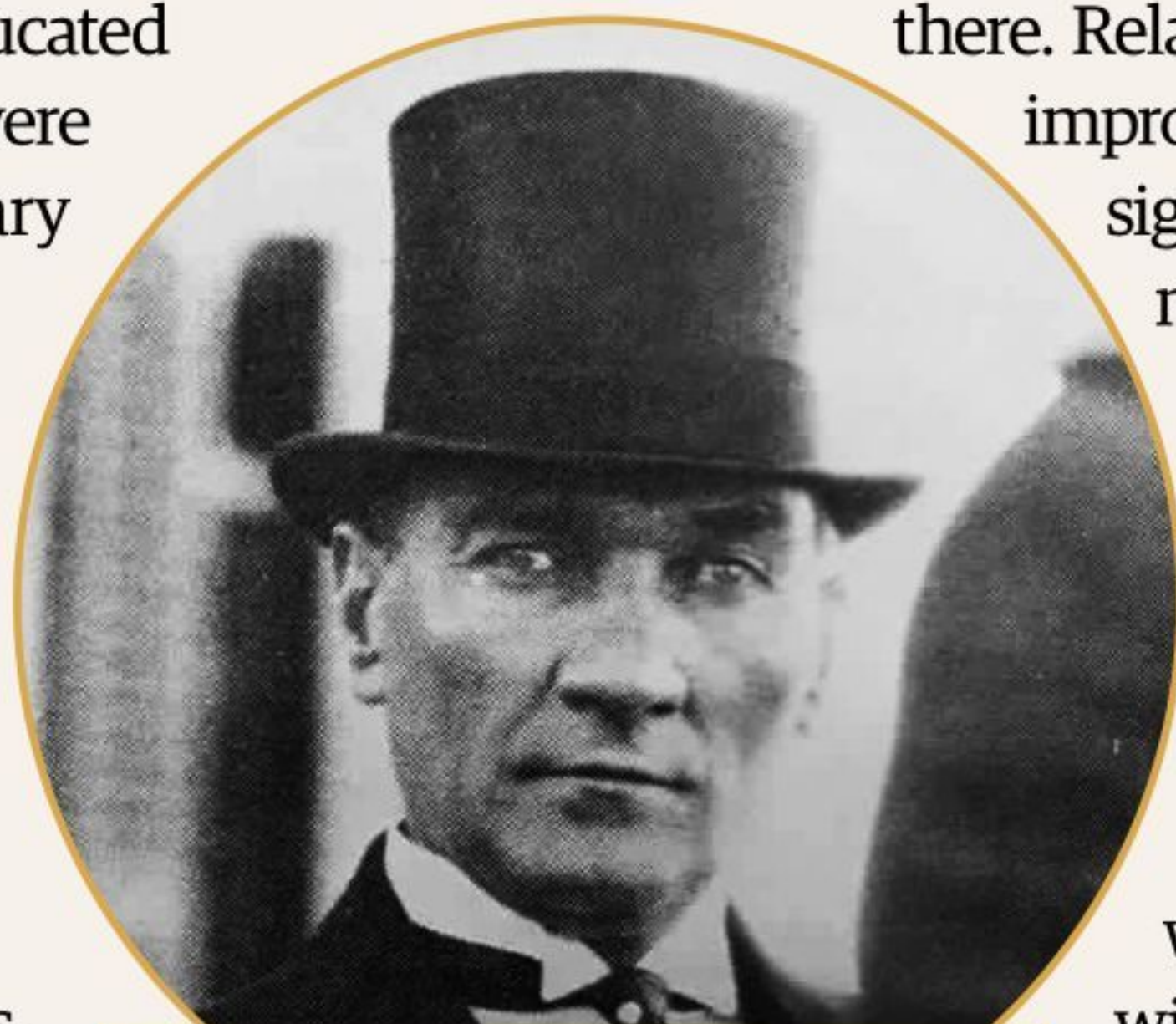
With domestic reforms steaming ahead, Atatürk then focused on Turkey's foreign policy. He reached an agreement with Great Britain in a treaty which agreed Turkey would renounce claims to Mosul in exchange for 10 per cent interest of the oil produced there. Relations with Greece were also improved by a treaty of friendship signed on 25 October 1930, where minority populations were exchanged between the two nations, existing military issues resolved and borders established.

All these changes did not happen without opposition. The process of state secularism was particularly controversial, with some believing all the reforms were destroying pillars of culture and traditions that had survived for centuries. In 1925 there was a revolt

by the Kurds in southwestern Anatolia in the name of Islam. Not only did it take months to quell, but the leader was hanged. Also executed were 13 ringleaders of a political plot to assassinate Atatürk.

However, on the whole the country was behind Atatürk and his goals for their society. As more aims were achieved there was a call for the regime to become more democratic, an idea that Atatürk encouraged until the opposition party created became overwhelmingly popular and he had to swiftly squash it or risk losing his grip on power.

Over time Atatürk grew more distant and, having always been a heavy drinker and light eater, his health began to rapidly decline. He was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver too late to recover from,



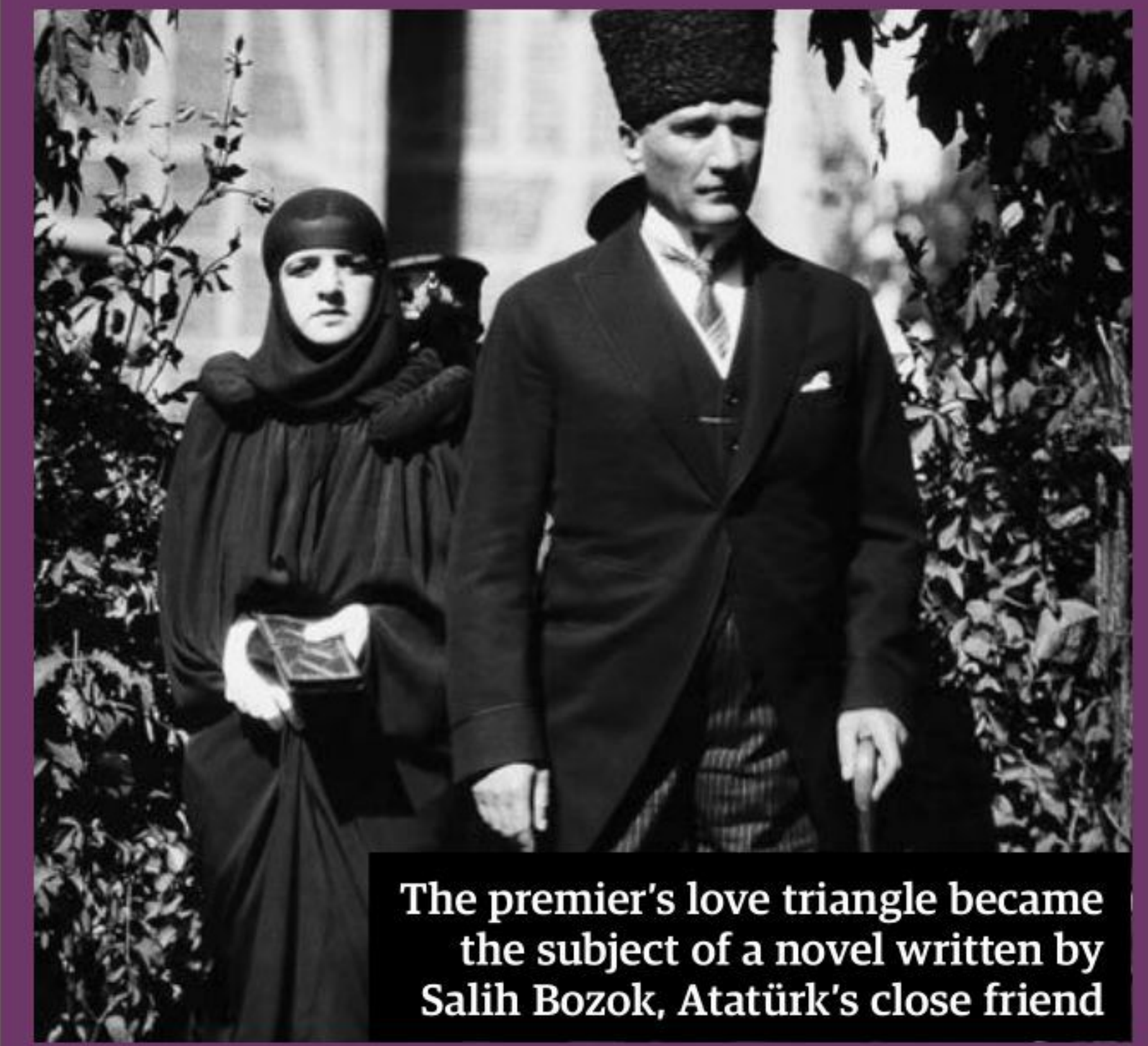
Atatürk made Western-style hats compulsory for civil servants

MAN BEHIND THE MYTH

Atatürk's personal life was just as dramatic as his professional one

Atatürk's magnetic draw seemed to extend not only to his colleagues and allies, but also to the women in his life. His first love was the Greek Eleni Karinte, who fell in love with him while he was still a student. Little is known of the relationship, but it still inspired a play. Fikriye Hanım was the next woman in his life, and was actually his cousin, though not related by blood. Fikriye was head-over-heels in love with Atatürk, even divorcing her husband and moving in with him as his personal assistant. However, Atatürk met Latife Uşaklıgil, who also fell in love with him, so they were married. Latife became furiously jealous of Fikriye and demanded she leave the house, devastating Fikriye. Official accounts state that Fikriye then shot herself with a pistol Atatürk gave her as a gift, but there are suspicions it was actually murder. The marriage between Atatürk and Latife did not last long, and they were divorced less than three years after marrying.

Atatürk, it seems, had a difficult relationship with women his whole life. He, however, appeared to adore children. He did not have any children of his own, but he adopted several children: one boy and anywhere from six to 12 girls. One of these girls, Sabiha Gökçen, went on to become the world's first female fighter pilot.



The premier's love triangle became the subject of a novel written by Salih Bozok, Atatürk's close friend

and on 10 November 1938 he passed away. His state funeral was a huge affair, with an overwhelming outpouring of grief from his people. A mausoleum in Ankara was created to house his remains, alongside a museum dedicated to his achievements.

Today Atatürk remains just as much a powerful presence in Turkey as in his own lifetime. His portrait hangs in almost every home and place of business, as well as adorning bank notes, while his words are immortalised on buildings. His name holds so much weight that politicians, regardless of their political leanings, claim to be a modern-day Atatürk, continuing his work today. Even 80 years after his death, Atatürk remains the poster boy for Turkish politics, a man who became the 'cement of the Turkish nation' at a time when everything threatened to crumble around them.