

FATHERING THE NATION FROM MUSTAFA KEMAL TO ATATÜRK

MELTEM TÜRKÖZ

This article provides an overview of the critical scholarship on the emergence and various stages of the veneration of Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk over the decades, demonstrating how specific political environments have played a role.

Keywords: *Nationalism, Secularism, Atatürk, Turkey,*

Razprava podaja kritičen pregled nastanka in različnih stopenj čaščenja ustanovitelja Turčije Mustafa Kemala Atatürka v preteklih desetletjih. Pri temer avtorica pokaže, kako vloga so imela posebne politične okoliščine

Ključne besede: *nacionalizem, sekularizem, Atatürk, Turčija*

In an interview with a national newspaper in Turkey, a nationally recognized actor recently declared that Turkey was still an adolescent nation and that its father had not died, referring to the literary theme of characters coming of age when their fathers die. "We have been idolizing power for ninety-one years. We love power. We idolize everyone who shows himself to be powerful . . . I like the saying that men grow up when their fathers die." When it became clear that he was referring to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, the interviewer asked, "So do you mean that we must kill the Atatürk inside of us?"

The actor replied: "We are not going to kill Atatürk. We will be able to analyze him better when we understand him as he is. We will be able to understand him like a human being. We must understand him as a person, not as an icon. For ninety years [all we have done] is worship him. . . . We always need a father. We can't do without a father. We have not been able to kill off our fathers."¹

As anyone that has been to Turkey can attest, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's images, statuary, and words permeate public and private spaces. His portraits hang in the smallest of businesses, and his figure and busts adorn city squares, schools, and government buildings. His words, inscribed on marble slabs and walls, laud the importance of science, progress, agriculture and farmers, and children and youth. These days, it is common to see his profile replicated as graffiti,

¹ <http://t24.com.tr/haber/bilginer-babalarimizi-olduremedik-91-yildir-aturke-tapinmaktan-vazgece-medik,261244>

and his iconic signature pasted as a sticker on the back of cars, or tattooed on arms and chests. In a more unusual manner, recent events have seen his wax figure emerging from a large cake,² and his gold bust perched on the bouffant hairdo of a young woman.

This essay provides an overview of critical scholarship on the emergence and various stages of Atatürk veneration over the decades and demonstrates how representations and styles of his veneration have been shaped by particular political environments. The figure of Atatürk comes with a narrative of defensive nationalism that has been mobilized over the decades to forge various incarnations of a rescued nation. The multiplicity of Atatürk imagery and the elaboration of the genres through which he has been symbolized highlight the paradoxical relationship between the sacred and profane, between secularism and religion, and between iconization and defamation.

Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the Atatürk years were enshrined as the founding era, and subsequent historiography and enculturation were built on an official narrative that was closed to further scrutiny. Since the late 1980s, historiography of the Atatürk years have taken a more critical turn³, and scholars from humanities and social science disciplines have turned to economic, social and cultural history for alternative readings informed by class, ethnic identity and gender. The first scholarly biography of Atatürk was published in 1999⁴.

For Turkish citizens, the entry of Turkey's founding father into consciousness begins early in schooling and continues in institutional settings during the calendar cycle, with ceremonies, plays, and stadium shows. April 23rd is Children's Day, marking the anniversary of the establishment of the Turkish Grand National Assembly; May 19th is National Atatürk Commemoration and Youth Day, marking the day Mustafa Kemal set out from Samsun to liberate the nation; August 30th is Victory Day (the day the Turkish forces defeated Greek forces in Dumlupınar in 1922); October 29th is Republic Day, when Mustafa Kemal declared Turkey a Republic; and finally November 10 is the day of his death. These national ceremonies, carried out through state rules, have been instrumental in constructing body practices and creating citizenry⁵.

Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) is known for saving Turkey from Allied plans to divide what remained of the Ottoman Empire. He was born in 1881 to a Muslim Turkish-speaking family in Salonica. His parents gave him the name *Mustafa*, and *Kemal* was given by his schoolteacher,

² A wax figure of Atatürk emerged from a 6 meter high and 4 meter wide cake at a reception given by Istanbul Governor Muammer Güler in October, 2009 to mark the eighty-sixth anniversary of the Republic of Turkey. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/12812762.asp>

³ See Keyder, 1987, Meeker. 2002; Turkoz, 2007; Georgeon, 2009; Brockett, 2011; Yılmaz. 2013.

⁴ Andrew Mango. 1999. *Atatürk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey*. John Murray: London.

⁵ For a historicized perspective on national holidays, see Öztürkmen, 2001; for an ethnography that deconstructs the ideology of militarism in education, see Altınay. 2004.

a practice that was not uncommon. He also earned the nickname *Gazi*, which means ‘fighter for the Islamic faith’ or ‘veteran’.

Despite his mother’s wishes, young Mustafa Kemal enrolled in military school and continued a military career. He assumed leadership of the national struggle in 1919 against the Allies and was the commander-in-chief of the War of Independence. After the First World War, “territories of the Ottoman Empire were colonized or fell under the occupation of French, British, Italian or Greek forces” (Kasaba 2010: 303). What remained was central Anatolia, where the powers of the Ottomans were restricted. Mustafa Kemal left the Ottoman army to lead the War of Independence. In November 1922, the group he led abolished the Sultanate, and in 1922 and 1923 the Peace Conference of Lausanne recognized the territory they had gained. In 1924 a year after the establishment of the Republic Turkey, the new state abolished the caliphate and the office of Şeyhülislam and sent members of the Ottoman dynasty into exile. He became the first president of the Turkey in 1923 ruling until his death in 1938. Each year November 10th is marked by sirens at 9:05 a.m., the moment of his dying.

The attribution of fatherhood, sacredness, and divine procreation to founding leaders of nations, social movements, and academic disciplines, and the invocation of paternalism in ruling power is clearly not limited to Turkey and Atatürk, and the creation of a sacred cultural domain around national founders is not new. In formulating a working definition of a nation, Benedict Anderson has said that one of the issues has been that nationalism’s classification of an ideology has been problematic and that “‘kinship’ and ‘religion’” might be more appropriate than “fascism,” for instance (1983: 49). Carol Delaney points out how the language of procreation is often used in describing nations coming into being, yet the universal natural basis of procreation and birth does not mean that the meaning of “nature” is the same everywhere. She argues that the idea of nature is bound by cosmological/religious systems (1995: 182). The crucial point she makes is that, although it is considered natural for women to perform, the male contribution to procreation is considered *divine*.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Atatürk has been the father of Turkey’s official origin story, or the representations of its origins as a nation. The emergence of the Turkish nation is a story of defensive nationalism, great crisis, and the rescue of the nation’s unity from the threat of partition. It is this social drama that feeds the official narrative and the cultural domain. When Mustafa Kemal rallied the peasants to back him in the War of Independence, he appealed to their sense of honor to protect the motherland that “had been prostituted under the capitulations and was about to be mutilated by the partition” (Delaney 1995: 186). The reality and then the representation of this defensive creation of the nation might be the social drama that permeates the political style in Turkey. In some ways, one could say that this story has been used by various politicians, “giving them style, direction, and sometimes compelling them subliminally to follow in major public crises a certain course of action, thus emplotting their lives” (Turner 1980: 149).

VENERATION IN HIS LIFETIME AND SOON AFTER HIS DEATH

The commemoration of Atatürk or his “transformation into a cult hero personifying the nation had already begun in his lifetime” (Küçükcan 2010: 966).⁶ Although statuary was an important way in which this occurred, the six-day speech known as the *Nutuk* laid the narrative groundwork for the plotment of official history.

On October 15th, 1927, Mustafa Kemal started to deliver his speech, the *Nutuk*, which would last 36 hours over six consecutive days (October 15th–20th, 1927). In this speech he laid out the official version of Turkish history that would subsequently be the narrative furnished in schoolbooks, and also placed himself as the key figure—or hero—of the War of Independence. As Hülya Adak points out, he foregrounded himself “at the expense of defaming or ignoring the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph, the roles of the leading figures in the nationalist struggle and the establishment of the republic” (2003: 509). In this speech, Mustafa Kemal attaches himself to the birth of Turkey as sole founder and hero, and also denigrates all of the Ottoman Sultans as a “bunch of madmen,” or “moronic and ignorant” animals (Adak 2003: 516). The text of the *Nutuk*, a type of holy book, became the foundation on which all subsequent historiography would be formed; the story of the emergence of the Turkish nation in the speech became the basis for schoolbooks, statuary, and historiography (Gür 2013). Atatürk drew on Carlyle’s ideas about great men directing the course of history and considered himself a hero (Ünder 2002, cited in Alaranta 2008: 118).

Today, dramatic equestrian statues, and especially busts, of Atatürk can be found everywhere in Turkey. In his comprehensive study of Atatürk statuary, Faik Gür documents the way in which figurative statuary entered into modern Turkey through representations of Atatürk. Until the erection of Atatürk statuary, public spaces were not marked by any figurative sculpture. War memorials paved the way for there to be public statues. Statuary was an important way that the new government sought to visualize nationalism and statues, “allegorical representations, became scripts for the masses” (Gür 2013: 350). Like the *Nutuk*, these early statues were also very focused on the dissemination of the official version of the War of Independence.

Mustafa Kemal’s role as procreator and father of the nation was sacralized further in November 1934 with the passage of a law giving him the surname of Atatürk⁷ ‘Father of the Turks’. This followed the Surname Law of June, 1934, which made Turkish surnames mandatory for all citizens. Another law passed that month, law no. 2622, made it unlawful for anyone else to adopt the same name as a personal name or as a surname.

⁶ The first banknotes with Mustafa Kemal’s image were commissioned from the English printing firm Thomas de La Rue in 1927. Although his image was removed from banknotes during the rule of İsmet İnönü, the image was reinstated in 1951 and has decorated coins and banknotes ever since.

⁷ Republic of Turkey, Law No. 2587, 17.12.1934, *Kemal öz adlı Cumhuriyet Reisimize verilen soyadı hakkında kanun* (Law on the Surname given to our President named Kemal)). The law also restricted the use of the surname Atatürk to the leader making the use of it by anyone, even in modified form, illegal.

POSTHUMOUS DEIFICATION AND PROTECTIVE LEGACY BUILDING

During Atatürk's lifetime, the construction of his legacy was focused on creating the narrative of the emergence of the nation, and his singular role as the creator of this nation. His death brought mourning and collective lamentation.

Atatürk died on November 10th, 1938 in a bedroom in Dolmabahçe Palace, which was the former seat of the Ottoman government. A German modernist architect, Bruno Taut, was commissioned to build the catafalque to house his coffin. Christopher S. Wilson's study of this event details the process by which the coffin was first exhibited in Istanbul, paraded in the streets, and then moved to Ankara, where an official state funeral was held on November 21st, 1938. Each year the day of his death, November 10th, begins with the sound of sirens at 9:05 a.m., the time of death. In many parts of Turkey, traffic comes to a standstill and people in the street stand at attention for a moment of remembrance. The solemn day is marked by ceremonies in schools and educational institutions.

There is much evidence to suggest that the process of deifying the leader in a state-approved manner began while Atatürk was alive. In a study of ideologically informed theater texts in the Atatürk years, Firidinoğlu (2011) describes the construction of heroism in the play, *Kabraman* (Hero). The author, Faruk Nafiz Çamlıbel, was a writer who had previously been commissioned by Atatürk to narrate the Kemalist history thesis in his play *Akim*, and published this epic play on the 10th anniversary of the nation. The play is set during the War of Independence and is the story of two brothers whose lives play out differently because of the way in which they make decisions between the personal and the national (Firidinoğlu 2011).

References to Atatürk, never by name, are telling of the manner in which the leader was already being mentally sculpted.

Hüseyin: How much do you love him?

Aziz: This is not [mere] love.

This is something that leaves idolizing in its shadow.

He is a sun . . .

He is of two powers, a scorcher and a creator.

Hüseyin: Is he beautiful?

Aziz: No deity is more beautiful than he.

What is described as the “deification” of Atatürk occurred with the construction of Anıtkabir, the mausoleum on a hill in Ankara. Michael Meeker has called this “a shrine of Kemalism” and Sibel Bozdoğan describes it as “nationalist substitute for a space of religious ritual, prayer, and spirituality and claims that this is still one of the holiest sites in modern Turkey (cited in Küçükcan 2010: 968). Millions of people visit the site each year. A colleague of mine told me that she used to walk up to the tomb to pray. It remains a place that newlyweds will visit to have their union blessed, and where many Turkish citizens flock to pay their respects

and to show their solidarity in the face of what they perceive as threats to the Kemalist project. Citing Adam Lerner's observations, Haldun Gülalp argues that "a political system based on nationality as arose in Western Europe, already presupposed the disappearance of religious universalism" (2005: 356). He maintains that the role of religion in public and political life had not diminished and "hence nationalism could only be imposed by directly trying to displace religion" (2005: 356). As a national holy place, visiting Anıtkabir to pay respects is part of national protocol rules for visiting foreign heads of state.⁸ When a foreign ambassador takes his post, he must pay a mandatory visit to Anıtkabir and sign the visitor's book on the same day or within a day of submitting his letter to the president.⁹



Newlyweds in front of Mausoleum (<http://blog.gelinfotografcisi.com/?p=383>)

In 1951, law no. 5816 was passed to protect Atatürk's legacy, triggered by attacks on his statues. The law states that anybody that insults the memory of Atatürk verbally can be jailed for one to three years. Anybody that damages, breaks, or soils a statue or monument representing Atatürk can be jailed up to five years.

The veneration of Atatürk finds comparison with Lenin (Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov), whose following was consciously cultivated as he lay dying, through the establishment of Lenin

⁸ An exception to his rule is Iran, whose government says it is against their protocol rules.

⁹ http://hbogm.meb.gov.tr/modulerprogramlar/kursprogramlari/halkla_iliskiler/moduller/protokolvegorgu_kurallari.pdf

corners and written poems about him. In her research, Tumarkin finds that much of the style in which Lenin was venerated drew from the rural, naive monarchic attitude towards a leader and also traditional Orthodox practices. She also argues that the people that were in charge of preparing his body for display drew on their religious background to organize the event, with one member of the team actually also believing in immortality. Similar adulation practices were found in the practices of visitors to the birthplace of Marshal Tito (Josip Broz), whose statue became a pilgrimage site (Belaj 2006; 2007).

THE 1980S AND BEYOND

“A regime that derives its legitimacy from a single ruler risks instability after his death. But if after death that ruler becomes the object of a cult predicated on his continuing living power, then the cult can serve as a stabilizing force” (Tumarkin 1997: 165, cited in Belaj 2006: 76).

Kemalism, the ideology of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk that was based on secularism, statism, populism, and nationalism, was the road to the future for Turkey’s ruling elite, and anything that got in its way was perceived as an attempt to make the modern Turkish nation stray from the right path.

Political commentators describe representations of Atatürk in the 1980s as the junta period, and the late 1990s as the period when a segment of the left introduced the Bolshevik Atatürk.¹⁰ The writer of this newspaper article claims that a portion of the Turkish left took an extreme, authoritarian stance towards the growing success of Islamist politics, and the defense of secularism, rather than being a public politics of a recognized political party, became part of an underground and deep state mechanism.

Meanwhile, as Ersra Özyürek demonstrates in her study, the liberalized economy meant that a new market for the production, dissemination, and consumption of Atatürk imagery was born. In the 1980s and 1990s, another trend emerged in the representation of Atatürk imagery, when a post-1980 zealotry to protect his principles was combined with a liberalized economy, making it possible for non-state actors to be creators and disseminators of busts, images, and other paraphernalia.

In her article on the privatization of state imagery and ideology in Turkey, Özyürek finds that the commodified pictures of Atatürk that decorate homes and businesses today depict the leader more of an “urban bourgeois who enjoyed simple but marked pleasures, such as wearing European-designed outfits, eating food at a table rather than seated on the floor, drinking alcohol and being in the company of unveiled, stylish women” (Özyürek 2004: 375).

Özyürek argues that this privatized and also miniaturized imagery made it possible for citizens to engage with the leader in a less hierarchical relationship (2004: 376). Furthermore, she argues that the commodified imagery of the leader was also a reaction to the Islamic paraphernalia that was appearing in the market at the same time. In her research she notes how smaller images

¹⁰ <http://blog.milliyet.com.tr/cuntanin-ataturk-unden-bolsevik-ataturk-e-uzanan-yol/Blog/?BlogNo=141989>

of Atatürk began to appear in private spaces. Whereas the state was the primary producer of Atatürk imagery until the 1980s, the privatization of this production meant that it became more elaborate and varied. Atatürk pins on lapels began to make an appearance, for example. As a reactive figure against Islamism, in particular, but also against what was perceived as national decline, the discourse and image of the leader took a less flexible, more dogmatic turn at the hands of the military and individual citizens.

THE MYRIAD MANIFESTATIONS OF WORSHIP AND REVERENCE

The late 1990s and early 2000s marks the years when Turkey's founder's images and signature became material for embodied ornamentation. Tattoos of Atatürk's signature became common after an incident in Izmir in which a tattoo artist refused to remove an Atatürk signature tattoo from a man that said he was fired from his job because of it. Although Islam is against tattoos, in a similar way to Judaism, tattoo art has seen great popularity since the late 1990s and early 2000s, perhaps influenced by global popular culture. An excellent ethnographic study was done on Kemalist tattooing by Ezgican Özdemir, based on ethnographic fieldwork among tattoo artists and tattoo bearers primarily in İzmir. In the thesis, she explores the multiple meanings of the *K. Atatürk* signature and other Kemalist tattoos for the people who have made the choice to be so inked. She begins her research at the well-known store of the artist Doktor, the originator of these tattoos. Doktor tells Özdemir that Kemalist tattoos are a reaction against the national and foreign policy of the current government, and that bearing the tattoo corresponds to an inner awareness, or belief about oneself (Özdemir 2013: 22).

Indeed, on websites with advertising or articles about Atatürk signature tattoos, there are debates between users about the choice to make one's belief manifest on the skin. A female user responding to feed on November 12th, 2006 states:

I wouldn't do it. Why? 1. I believe that a tattoo is more personal and maybe it will be strange to you, but more mysterious. 2. Of course, it's a choice to express your Atatürkist side through the symbol of a tattoo. However, I prefer to express my beliefs and systems of thought through my behavior and experience them internally, rather than express them.

One of the questions about the tattoos is whether the bearers of the tattoo are also knowledgeable bearers, or how aware they are about it. One acquaintance, a male in his thirties, told me that he felt that a signature was such a marker of an individual and that wearing it on the skin made him uncomfortable. Online discussions also included comments about whether the person that might want to get a tattoo was deserving, or had reached a stage in his evolution, to deserve the tattoo.



K. Atatürk signature. (<http://www.tattoodonkey.com/ataturk-imzasi-tattoo/tattootoprak.com/assets/Uploads/ataturk-tattoo-toprak-ferit-.jpg>)

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION: ATATÜRK AS SACRED CULTURAL DOMAIN

In the end, Atatürk's immense legacy is formative of the social and political axes around which Turkish society revolves—in particular, the separation of religion from politics and the ethnic unification of Turkey under the banner of Turkishness. The pushing away of religion from the public, political sphere into the private domain has resulted in the long term in the dominance of an Islamist ruling party.

Hilal Kaplan, an Islamist and feminist journalist and writer, claims that the symbol of Atatürk is an “empty signified” in Turkish politics, so that, whether they claim to be Atatürkist or not, anyone that wants some form of legitimacy in Turkish politics must in some way attach himself or herself to him. In the end, Atatürk remains iconic, ever-present as a leader, absent but immortal, and the multiple representations of him during his life offer a version for each group in Turkey. As a political scientist colleague told me, the Islamists might have a portrait of him as a warrior, with facial hair, whereas a secularist will prefer a portrait of him without facial hair and wearing a tuxedo¹¹.

In 2000, while I was doing my dissertation research¹², one of my interviewees told me

¹¹ Assoc. Professor Ödül Celep, personal communication, September, 2014

¹² Meltem Türköz. 2004. *The Social Life of the State's Fantasy: Memories and Documents on the Surname Law of 1934*. University of Pennsylvania.

that the decades of his rule were the *Asr-ı Saadet* ‘age of happiness’, comparing it to the years when the Prophet Mohammed was alive. Another interviewee, who had met Turkey’s founder, told a group that Atatürk had touched the top of his head, and told us that touching his head would be like touching Atatürk. No doubt, the perceived sacred aura of Turkey’s founder was cultivated and transmitted to younger generations. As a young child in Ankara, I was taken to Atatürk’s mausoleum and used to believe that my own father was Atatürk. I would look up at my father and nudge him, “You *are* him, aren’t you?” He would shake his head No, but I would insist, believing that secretly the founder of our nation was *my* father.

As a founding father, a progenitor of the nation, Atatürk has been a sacred cultural domain, “sealed off from readings emanating from other cultural domains” (Yanagisako & Delaney 1995: 13). In Turkey, historicizing the years of the one-party rule is ongoing, but the historicizing of Atatürk’s life, humanizing him, means opening up his life to diverse cultural narratives. It also points to a semiotic crossroads for a sustained leader’s image in Turkey: whereas idolization has always been part of keeping his memory, humanizing him risks being perceived as defamation, an issue for other controversial aspects of Turkish history. Along with these paradoxes, representations of the leader, and their mode of display and dissemination has multiplied so that everyone has their own Atatürk, an exemplar for many, though still a singular semiotic exemplar for all those that would claim to be progenitors of a Turkish nation.

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BITI OČE NARODU OD MUSTAFA KEMALA DO ATATÜRKA

Podobe, fotografije, kipi in besede ustanovitelja republike Turčije Mustafa Kemala Atatürka so v vseh javnih in zasebnih prostorih. Njegovi portreti visijo v najmanjših podjetjih, njegove slike in doprsni kipi krasijo mestne trge, šole in vladne stavbe. Njegove besede, napisane na marmornatih ploščah in stenah, poudarjajo pomen znanosti, napredka, kmetijstva in kmetov, otrok in mladostnikov.

V teh dneh ni nič nenavadnega videti podobo njegovega profila v obliki grafitu, njegov ikonični podpis kot nalepko na zadnji strani avtomobila, ali tetovažo na rokah in prsih. Razprava podaja kritičen pregled nastanka in različnih stopenj čaščenja ustanovitelja Turčije Mustafa Kemala Atatürka, pri čemer dokazuje, kako so imela gospodarska in politična okolja posebno vlogo pri oblikovanju in razširjanju njegovih upodobitev. Pripisovanje očetovstva, svetosti in božanskega nastanka ustanoviteljev narodov, družbenih gibanj in akademskih disciplin, in sklicevanje na paternalizem vladajočih oblasti ni omejeno na Turčijo in Atatürka.

V Atatürkovem času je bilo oblikovanje njegove zapuščine osredotočena na ustvarjanje pripovedi o nastanku naroda in njegovo vlogo kreatorja turškega naroda. V času njegovega življenja in po njegovi smrti 10. novembra 1934 so postavili kipe voditelja v osrednjih lokacijah v večjih mestih in trgih.

»Deifikacija« Atatürka se je pojavila z izgradnjo Anıtkabirja, mavzoleja na hribu v Ankari, ki ga Michael Meeker imenuje tudi "svetišče kemalizma." V osemdesetih in devetdesetih letih 20. stoletja se je pojavil še en trend pri upodabljanju Atatürka; povezan je z intenzivno zaščito njegovih načel, ki jih kombinira z liberaliziranim gospodarstvom, pri čemer lahko tudi nedržavni akterji ustvarjajo in razširjajo kipe, slike in druge artefakte. Po letu 2000 se je podoba Atatürk še bolj "privatizirala," s tetovažami na ramenih in hrbtih, njegov ikonični podpis je na avto nalepkah in tetovažah.

Danes različne Atatürkove upodobitve v številnih zvrsteh simbolizirajo in poudarjajo paradoksalno razmerje med svetim in profanim, sekularizmom in vero; med ikonizacijo in obrekovanjem. A ob vseh teh paradoksih so se njegove upodobitve in podobe lokacije tako namnožile, da ima vsakdo svojega lastnega Atatürka.

Assist. Prof. Meltem Türköz, Işık University, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Istanbul, Turkey, fmturkoz@gmail.com