Atatürk’s military significance

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Also known as: Mustafa, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Principal wars: World War I, Turkish War of Independence, Greco-Turkish War

Principal battles: Gallipoli (1915–1916), Sakarya (1921)

Military significance: A hero of World War I, Atatürk mobilized Turkish nationalism and founded the modern Republic of Turkey.

Mustafa Kemal (he would not adopt the name Atatürk until 1934) received a military education, graduating from the Staff College in the Ottoman Empire in 1905. By the eve of World War I, he had fought in Libya and the Balkans against outside powers encroaching on the Ottoman Empire. He had also entered the political currents of his time by joining a secret opposition movement, the Committee of Union and Progress, which in 1908 was the primary force behind the Young Turk Revolution. The Committee of Union and Progress exercised near-dictatorial policies through World War I, though Kemal was not part of its top leadership. During the war, he rallied Ottoman defenses against Britain’s Gallipoli Campaign (1915–1916). Subsequently, he served on the Caucasus front against Russia and on the Syrian front against Britain and its Arab allies. His historical distinction rests primarily on his role following World War I, when he mobilized Turkish resistance to Allied plans to turn over the Ottoman Empire’s Arab provinces to Britain and France and to give most of Anatolia to France, Italy, Greece, and a proposed Armenian state.
In early November, 1918, Enver Pasha and the other CUP leaders slipped out of the country; the government of Sultan Muhammad VI, faced with Allied occupation, felt it had no choice but to collaborate with Allied plans. In May, 1919, Kemal was posted to the Black Sea region of Anatolia, ostensibly to suppress violence there between ethnic Turks and Greeks. Once beyond the reach of both the sultan’s government and the Allies, he and a small number of associates began to organize nationalist defiance. When the Allies imposed the Treaty of Sévres (1919) on the government in Istanbul, the Grand National Assembly, which had convened in Ankara in 1920, rejected it and instead advocated a state that would consist of all Anatolia as well as Istanbul and eastern Thrace.

Over the next several years, Kemal succeeded in establishing just such a state. Faced with the stubborn opposition of the Ankara government and busy with their own demobilization, both France and Italy relinquished their claims in Anatolia. Dealing with the very substantial Greek incursion into west-central Anatolia required tough-minded military action. Kemal commanded the Turkish forces, which halted the Greek advance at the Battle of the Sakarya in August and September, 1921. A year later, he mounted a major offensive that drove the Greek forces from Anatolia. In the process, the Grand National Assembly resolved the ambiguity of power in November, 1922, by abolishing the sultanate, bringing an end to six hundred years of the Ottoman Dynasty. To reflect the new realities, the Treaty of Lausanne, in which the Allies recognized the new Republic of Turkey, was signed in July, 1923.

From the establishment of the republic until his death in 1938, Atatürk was its president. The years of his presidency were marked by sweeping programs of internal change rather than by military
adventures. The political institutions of a republic took root, even though there were no credible opposition parties during Atatürk's presidency. The new regime pursued an explicitly secular policy. The office of caliph, which implied headship over the entire world of Islam, was abolished. Islamic courts were replaced by a secular judiciary, and education was substantially secularized. This “assault on culture” extended to language: Atatürk ordered that Turkish be romanized rather than written in the Arabic alphabet.

These and other policies disrupted long-established social patterns and values, and Atatürk was careful to associate the Turkish army closely with his policies. He was strikingly successful in convincing the army that it was the ultimate bastion of nationalism, republicanism, reformism, and especially secularism—that is, of the ideology that came to be known as "Kemalism." It would be in the name of Kemalism that the army would intervene in Turkish politics several times during the decades after Atatürk, when individual politicians, parties, or social movements seemed to stray from the principles of Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Bibliography


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