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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography

M. Şükrü Hanioglu

Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2011, 279 pp., \$19.95 / £13.95, Paperback
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Professor Şükrü Hanioglu has developed a well-informed and in-depth theoretical account, perhaps the most successful so far, of the ideological elements that shaped the ideas and mindset of Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk). Although readers may be tempted to pass over yet another Atatürk biography, I would urge them to read this one. Hanioglu, doing justice to the title of the book – *An Intellectual Biography* – avoids delving into the details of Atatürk's personal life, which lies beyond the scope of the study. Instead, his emphasis lies in "historicizing his [Atatürk's] experience and contextualizing his ideas" (p. 7), something he has achieved with some aplomb.

"Only when the evidence is studied within its whole historical context – the rules and expectations of inheritance, the role of influence and interest, the norms and expectations not of 'society' but of different social groups – can it bring fruitful results".¹ Similarly, Hanioglu never fails to place Atatürk within the appropriate historical context, or to take into account the specific social milieu from which he emerged. The author notes that:

"[...] despite the radical changes that it brought about, the Turkish transformation led by Atatürk was not a rupture with the Late Ottoman past but, in important respects, its continuation" (p. 227).

Thus, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is presented not as the "historical Jesus" (p. 2) as Turkish historiography almost exclusively presented him for decades. On the contrary, the author attempts to "demythologize" the image of the "natural born hero" and present him as he really was: a product of his time.

The author begins his narrative by reconstructing the environment from which Atatürk emerged and which shaped his mind in the first place. Mustafa Kemal was born and raised in one of the most cosmopolitan cities of the Ottoman Empire, Salonica, and at the same time, in a region that provided "a fertile ground for the nationalist movements" (p. 10). In addition, his choice to pursue a Western education, despite the objections of his mother Zübeyde, influenced the young Mustafa Kemal. The author links Atatürk's later notions of Social Darwinism with his tutelage at military academy by German theorist Colmar von der Goltz, whose book *Das Volk in Waffen* (The Nation in Arms) sowed the seeds in the mind of the young Kemal about the military's leading role in society (p. 34). Thus, in embracing Goltz's ideas, Atatürk believed that the Ottoman Empire should "voluntarily dissolve" in order to "give rise to the Turkish state" (p. 37). Goltz's theories had also resonated with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the Young Turks, such that much of the youth, Mustafa Kemal included, were disciples of the German philosophy of *Vulgärmaterialismus*,

¹ E.P. Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context", *Midland History* 1 (1972), pp. 41-55, here p. 45.

an intellectual influence that was most apparent in their rejection of religion and commitment to an extreme form of secularism (pp. 48-49).

Hanioğlu goes on to deal with Mustafa Kemal's achievements as an officer during the First World War, and perhaps most importantly, during the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922). The author convincingly shows how the staunch Westernist Mustafa Kemal managed to manipulate the people by integrating into his rhetoric elements of Islam and pan-Islamism, as well as socialism, to create a nationalist opposition to imperialism (p. 105). In particular, Atatürk's "Muslim communist" rhetoric and his close relations with the Soviet Union would, over the following decades, have a profound effect on the Turkish left-wing movements, which had mistakenly associated Mustafa Kemal and his ideas with communism; an association that would be questioned only in the 1970s.

The final three chapters of the book handle Atatürk's biggest ideas after his consolidation of power as the undisputed leader of the Turkish state. Mustafa Kemal established the Turkish Republic, following Niccolò Machiavelli's motto "a true republic should pursue national strength even at the expense of individual freedom" (p. 134). Thus, after the Republic was established, personal freedoms and beliefs (p. 137) were suppressed for the sake of Westernization and modernization, and many reforms, such as the language reform, described by Geoffrey Lewis as a "catastrophic success" (p. 180), were introduced.

As Hanioğlu makes clear in this eloquent study, three intellectual movements were influential in shaping Kemalism, the official ideology of the new Turkish state: scientism, Westernism, and Turkish unitary nationalism. The author categorically debunks efforts by Mustafa Kemal and his elite circle to show that the Turkish Republic and the *Homo Kemalicus* they strove to create shared no common elements with the Ottoman past. Rather, Hanioğlu demonstrates that Mustafa Kemal tried to associate Turkey with the West, the effects of which are still evident, even today, in the popular identity. Thus, the author argues that "while Mustafa Kemal succeeded in his prime objective of creating a new sense of belonging to Europe [...] he failed to persuade the Europeans to embrace Turkey as a society sharing their culture and values" (p. 225).

Rather than relying on the vast amount of secondary sources on Atatürk, Hanioğlu makes extensive use of the latter's personal papers and speeches in their original script, while he also consulted numerous studies written variously in English, German, French, Turkish, Bulgarian and Russian, offering, at the same time, the reader a good bibliography. The author's deep knowledge of the specific intellectual history of the nineteenth and early twentieth century help him escape the discrepancies that emerge from primary sources, providing a highly critical but well-documented and balanced narrative.

The originality of the present study lies in that rather than replicating other more comprehensive biographies of Atatürk, it offers an intellectual biography. While other works put emphasis on the ways Mustafa Kemal came to dominate Turkish history, Hanioğlu's concern is limited to and focused on presenting an analysis of the intellectual currents that shaped Mustafa Kemal's personality and ideas. In addition, what renders the present study valuable is that Hanioğlu takes into account not only the intellectual debates taking place within the Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic, such as westernization and nationalism, but also in Europe, associating and incorporating them to his account in a thought-provoking way. However, a full account of Atatürk today requires a combined reading of this text alongside fuller biographies and studies on Atatürk, such as Erik-Jan Zürcher's *The Unionist Factor* (1984), Klaus Kreiser's *Atatürk: eine Biographie* (2008), and the excellent study by Andrew Mango *Atatürk* (1999), all of which Hanioğlu uses to place his study in a larger context.

Overall, the present study will undoubtedly become an indispensable tool to historians of modern Turkey. It will be widely consulted by anyone seeking to understand not only the

historical roots of modern Turkey, but also the present conditions in that society. Professor Hanioglu's essential biography places Atatürk firmly within his historical and intellectual contexts, offering to the public a solid, well-written and comprehensive study.