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Kemal Ataturk



Turks Like Poker-Loving Ataturk

Kemal Ataturk, the blond, blue-eyed ruler of 13,000,000 dusky-skinned Turks, is probably the most brutal, the most unorthodox and the most successful of modern dictators.

Born at Turkish Salonika (now in Greece) in 1881, he spent a childhood much like Mussolini's—he was aloof, sullen and astonishingly unfriendly. His father was a minor government clerk. His mother, a strong-minded woman who married twice and lived to be more than 70, spoiled Kemal while she let his sister, Makboula, go about in tatters.

Mustapha† was sent to military school at an early age because tuition was free. Later he learned to divide his time between the Constantinople brothels, wine taverns and class rooms so well that he finally earned from unwitting teachers the soubriquet of Kemal (meaning "Perfection"). At 24 he graduated from the highest military school in Turkey with the rank of captain. He was already marked by his superiors for great things.

Less than a year after his first commission, however, Kemal joined the Vatan (Fatherland) society, writing revolutionary pamphlets and impassioned poetry against Sultanate oppression. Thrown in jail, then released and sent to out-of-the-way Damascus, the unregenerate Kemal started revolutionary activities once more. But because he was strange and uncouth, and because he sneered at their plans, Fatherland leaders never let Kemal get very far in their ranks.

While a triumvirate of Vatan leaders wormed their way to power as advisers of the Sultan, Kemal withdrew to study the careers of Napoleon and the Prussian von Moltke. His military advance and the growth of his reputation were rapid. He won a commission as major in the short-lived Italo-Turkish war over Libya in 1911. Following that he served with great distinction in the Turkish-Balkan war of 1912.

† Like all Mohammedans, Kemal received only one name at birth. From Mustapha, he became Mustapha Kemal; Mustapha Kemal Pasha (General) during the World war; Ghazi (Conqueror) Mustapha Kemal Pasha after the Greek campaigns of 1921-22; and finally, in 1934, when he ordered every Turk to take a last name, he dropped the name Mustapha to become Kemal Ataturk (Father of the Turks).

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After two defeats, Turkey entered the World war on the side of Germany. Kemal, notoriously anti-German, found himself assigned to the Gallipoli peninsula under the German General Liman von Sanders.

Nevertheless, he fought brilliantly. A crucial surprise attack by a heavy Australian force found Kemal, through a blend of luck and intuition, already on the scene. After a spring, summer and fall of fighting in 1915, the Australians withdrew. The hard-drinking Kemal had saved Gallipoli, and Russia was still bottled up in the Black Sea.

In 1918, Kemal went with the Turkish crown prince Vehedden on a trip to Germany. He sneered at Prussian military shows, and once got drunk enough to accuse the great (and astonished) von Hindenburg of incompetency and ignorance. On a side trip to Carlsbad, Kemal was warned by an Austrian specialist that his drinking would kill him within two years.

Racked with pain from a kidney ailment and ridden with influenza, Kemal went home and drank harder than ever. Veheddin succeeded to the Sultanate in July, but Kemal was too weak and besotted to take advantage of his influence over the prince.

When Turkey concluded a humiliating peace with the Allies, national indignation drove the Vatan triumvirate from Constantinople, and another group of three, this time from the military, came into power. Like the previous group, they chose to ignore the able but churlish Kemal.

A year later, there was an uprising of the peasantry in central Turkey. Sent to quell the revolt, the disgruntled Kemal became its leader instead. Gathering about him officers from the old Turkish army, he sent out a call for representatives of the Turkish people. By 1920 the so-called "Grand National Assembly" had settled in Angora, safely distant from the Sultan, and had proclaimed Kemal President of an insurgent republic.

In 1921 the Greeks, flushed with profits from the post-war treaties which had given them a sizeable amount of Turkish territory, attempted an invasion of Turkey. Ataturk gathered his mongrel band about him, and in a year had driven the foreigners in an inglorious retreat to the sea.

Kemal's puppet Assembly ousted emperor-pope Mohammed VI (the Sultan) in November, 1922. Mohammed's religious title of Caliph was allowed to pass to his cousin, Abdul Medjid. Kemal himself was elected first President of the Turkish Republic 11 months later.

Then Kemal turned Turkey upside down. The old Ottoman empire had been carved to pieces in a series of disastrous wars. What was left of it was Turkey, yards deep in the rot of archaic tradition and governmental corruption.

With a program supplied by his more intellectual followers, Kemal threw the ancient relics of Mohammedanism out the Turkish window one by one. Almost his first act was to separate church from state and abolish the Caliphate in 1923. Since then, spurts of reform have made Turkey into a fair counterfeit of western civilizations.

Ataturk

Old law codes were torn up. Fezzes were thrown away and replaced by felt hats. Women were allowed to vote and hold public office. Compulsory wearing of veils by women was abolished. The old Mohammedan calendar was turned up more than 600 years to correspond with the Gregorian time system.

Most interesting of Kemal's innovations was the complete change of the Turkish alphabet into a simple A, B, C. In 1928, education was made compulsory for those under 40, and Ataturk himself, chalk and pointer in hand, played school teacher to small groups of his subjects. Weird Arabic pot-hooks and dots became translated into words like Foks Film Corporeysen (Fox Film Corporation) and Waytaus (White House). Similarly, all Turkish words were spelled the way they sounded.

Kemal has few worlds left to conquer. Parliament has unanimously elected him President four successive times. He has completely undone the disastrous post-war Treaty of Sevres by later concluding the favorable Lausanne pact, which eliminated foreign concessions and guaranteed Turkish equality among nations. Turkish westernization is well under way.

Ataturk leads a strange life in his chosen capital of Angora. He lives in a modest pink two-story residence in the city, and has a model farm not far away. He has a fair claim to being the best poker player and hardest drinker in Turkey. He still visits the brothels of his capital. His only friends are a motley collection of army underlings and judges as tough as he. Darkly silent and loquacious by turns, the "Turkish colossus" once gave a 5-day, 400,000-word speech. Like his tongue, his health varies. His kidney ailment spots his otherwise supremely good health with periods of great pain.

He married his only wife, Latife Hanum, daughter of a rich Smyrna merchant, simply because he had failed to seduce her. After three years he divorced her in 1926 because she started to meddle in politics. A previous mistress had already shot herself when Ataturk discarded her for Latife. Naively dutiful after his divorce, Kemal adopted six orphan girls as his daughters to provide a model family for the nation.

But three attempts on his life resulted in the slaughter of hundreds, conspirators and innocent alike. When, in the early days, one Ali Shikri made a speech against Kemal in Parliament, he was thrown over a cliff and killed.

Turks like Kemal. Cruel, vicious, vigorous, strong and decided, he is such a ruler as they have not had since the greatly admired and equally high-handed Suleiman the Great. For mass killings, for disregard of social amenities, Ataturk has a simple and complete explanation: "We Turks are like that."

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