

## The Formation of a Leader Mustafa Kemal in His Lifetime

Clélia DELBARRE, Erdal KAYNAR, Marc AYMES

**Can historians create a critical portrait of Mustafa Kemal, the first President of the Turkish Republic? This is no easy task, even with historical distance, because a personality cult and research theories borrowed from Kemalist ideology have had a strong impact on this field of study. Nevertheless, Şükrü Hanioglu has undertaken to do so.**

**Reviewed:** M. Sükrü Hanioglu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*. Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2011, 273 p.

The first President of the Republic of Turkey and the man acknowledged as the ‘founder of modern Turkey’, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk today is the subject of a personality cult. This explains why many books about him swing between historiography and hagiography. Recently, more critical works have surfaced, accompanied by the gradual publication of his writings and speeches. *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography*, by Şükrü Hanioglu, a professor of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Princeton and a historian better known for his works of reference on the final decades of the Ottoman Empire, is part of that trend<sup>1</sup>. The book’s central theme focuses on the idea that Mustafa Kemal was neither a genius nor a solitary intellectual, uniquely individual, but rather a herald of the ideas of his time and milieu. This position breaks down into three main aims: “to place the founder of the modern Turkish republic in his historical context”; “to trace Atatürk’s intellectual development, which is the least well-researched aspect of his life and work”; and “to explore the uneasy transition from the Late Ottoman imperial order to the modern Turkish nation-state” (p.6-7).

The originality of this intellectual biography lies in the fact that Hanioglu sets out to retrace not Mustafa Kemal’s life itself but rather his intellectual development. It aims to fill a gap in the historiography that, up to now, had analysed his ideas but failed to shed enough light on their genealogy. In this biography, Hanioglu also puts forward the idea of a continuity between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Up until the 1980s, the end of the Empire was little studied and somewhat neglected, and the idea of a sharp break with the transition to the republican era – an idea that was actively promoted by the nationalist elite centred around Mustafa Kemal – characterised related historiography. Hanioglu has supported the idea of a continuity between the two regimes since the 1980s, and

---

<sup>1</sup> By the same author, see *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008.

he highlights the extent to which the permanence of such an assumption correlates with the nature of studies on Mustafa Kemal, in that they tend to push the historicity of his ideological journey into the background. As such, although Hanioglu's book makes due reference to previous major biographical undertakings<sup>2</sup>, it differs significantly. As a specialist of the Young Turks movement and the Committee of Union and Progress (the organisation which, from Paris, drove the revolution of 23-24 July 1908 in the Ottoman Empire), Hanioglu's biographical enterprise brings new clarity to the way Mustafa Kemal is perceived.

### **From Young Turk to Father-Turk**

The book's overall structure, which follows the chronological order of events<sup>3</sup>, reflects those issues and the approach taken by Hanioglu in confronting them. The first three chapters do not focus on Mustafa Kemal. On the contrary, he remains somewhat in the background of the account. The attention centres on the three main environments in which Mustafa Kemal grew up, situating him at the heart of an Ottoman, Muslim elite where he benefited from a Western-style education thanks to the reforms (*Tanzîmât*) undertaken in the Ottoman Empire during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fin-de-siècle Salonican society is presented through a portrait of the cosmopolitan, dynamic city that was conducive to the spreading of new ideas and ideologies, and the setting for a confrontation between diverse forms of burgeoning nationalisms at the time. In chapter 2, the author turns to the milieu of young officers, trained according to the idea of the nation-at-arms led by a military elite. He then focuses his study on the scientist ideology of the Young Turks and their passion for "Vulgärmaterialismus", an ideology inspired by popular German materialists (such as Carl Vogt and Ludwig Büchner) who held science up to be a quasi-religion (chapter 3).

The next two chapters show how Mustafa Kemal, as a distinguished officer, gradually acquired legitimacy and achieved glory through his military victories in the wars that shook the Ottoman Empire in the 1910s: the war in Libya with Italy (1911), the two Balkan wars (1912-13) and, finally, the First World War. Hanioglu reveals how, in doing so, this man gradually but resolutely took power.

In the last three chapters, Mustafa Kemal finally makes an appearance as the main character in the story of the origins of the republic. Chapters 6 and 7 address his relationship with religion by presenting the radical secularism in which Mustafa Kemal undertook his entire reform programme in order to secularise Turkish society, and then by showing that he ultimately replaced Islam with a civic religion, Kemalism, which was driven by various cults: nation, State, the party, and his personality. The final chapter of the biography deals with the relationship between Kemalist Turkey and the West. Hanioglu shows that Mustafa Kemal's whole reform project was based on his conception of European civilisation as the only viable model for modernity.

### **The difficulty with historicising the life of ideas**

During a discussion about his book<sup>4</sup>, Şükrü Hanioglu admitted that *Atatürk: An*

---

<sup>2</sup> MANGO Andrew, *Atatürk*, London, John Murray, 1999; TURAN Şerafettin, *Kendine Özgü bir Yaşam ve Kişilik : Mustafa Kemal Atatürk* [A life and personality like none other]: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk], Istanbul, Bilgi Yayınevi, 2004; KREISER Klaus, *Atatürk: eine Biographie*, Munich, C.H. Beck, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. FERRO Marc, *Pétain*, Paris, Fayard, 1987 – to make a different choice, Marc Ferro opts to begin his biography with Vichy's Pétain.

<sup>4</sup> Meeting held at the Centre for Turkish, Ottoman, Balkan and Central Asian Studies (CETOBAC, EHESS) on 2 February 2012, at which the author presented his book.

*Intellectual Biography* had originally been commissioned by his publishers. He also revealed that a title such as *Historical Atatürk* would have better conveyed the main issue at stake in his undertaking. For this was not an attempt to produce a comprehensive biography of Mustafa Kemal (p. 6) but to contextualise and historicise him. This intellectual biography is not, therefore, a *bio*-graphy, with the aim of producing a full history of Turkey during the first 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the prism of one character, but rather an *idea*-graphy, in the sense that it aims to reconstruct Mustafa Kemal's intellectual and ideological development.

To that end, Hanioglu plunges ambitiously into Mustafa Kemal's writings, speeches and reading material. Using the catalogue of his personal library as a reference, Hanioglu pays particular attention to the notes Mustafa Kemal scribbled in the margins of books and in notebooks – since, like many officers at the time, Mustafa Kemal kept diaries throughout his life in notebooks that are currently in the process of being published; of the twelve volumes planned, nine had been published by 2008 (p. 4). These sources have not yet been widely exploited by historians, no doubt because some documents are difficult to access. From that point of view, Hanioglu's book makes a considerable contribution to historiography on Mustafa Kemal.

However, it is regrettable that the book's format should have forced Hanioglu to shorten his presentation of those sources. His direct quotes from speeches, writings and correspondence are few and far between. When Hanioglu makes reference to them, he does not provide his reader with direct access to the source, limiting himself to statements such as “We know that he read [...] with unflagging interest” or “[he] seemed particularly struck” (p. 52) by an idea expressed by Ludwig Büchner in *Kraft und Stoff*. Readers would have appreciated being able to account for Mustafa Kemal's interest by themselves, or find a reproduction of a page of a book he annotated, or a letter he wrote.

More generally, the author's processing of these sources and the choice of method he uses are barely discussed, no doubt due to constraints imposed on him by the publisher. It would seem that the book relies on two main theories. Firstly, that it is possible to know which ideas Mustafa Kemal retained from his readings by examining the notes he scribbled in the margins and by comparing that reading material with the content of his speeches. And yet, how can we know what he read for certain, and what he read carefully? What he retained of that? And how he interpreted it? How can Mustafa Kemal's reading be dated? What is more, it cannot be summarized by the catalogue of his library, which only lists the books he owned. It is known that Mustafa Kemal also borrowed books from the library of the University of Istanbul. He also most certainly read journals, the production of which grew considerably from 1880 to 1930: they, however, were not part of his library either.

The second theory presupposes the possibility of recreating the progression that led from ideas, taken from books, to political action, as if the idea led inevitably to action or the action was sure to have come from the idea. Hanioglu thus reconstructs the cause-effect relationship, which, when reading this book, may seem lacking in justification. For example, Hanioglu explains Mustafa Kemal's determination to consolidate Turkey's territorial rights to Anatolia by his sadness over the loss of his native land, the city of Salonica: “[...] One day I heard that Salonica, the land of my father had been ceded to the enemy together with my mother, sister, and all my relatives [...]” (p. 27). Nostalgia for the lost territories is therefore put forward as an immediate explanation for a campaign claiming to be scientific with the

aim of proving the Sumerian and Hittite origin of the Turks, so as to establish them as the descendents of the first people of Anatolia. Hanioglu notes that:

“They [the events that led to the end of Ottoman rule in the Balkans] also underscored the importance of military strength, and provided a sharp lesson in the importance of history as a legitimizing force [...]. These lessons played a significant role in Mustafa Kemal’s later attempts, as founder of the Turkish republic, to consolidate indisputable Turkish rule over Anatolia.” (p. 28)

And later: “They explain why he did not stop at victory on the battlefield in the ferocious war to destroy Greek irredentism [...].” (p. 28).

The idea is convincing, but makes a somewhat mechanistic interpretation of the links between Mustafa Kemal’s experiences, the lessons he learned from them and his political decisions. Similarly, Hanioglu makes a connection between the familial and sociological context in which Mustafa Kemal grew up – marked by the sense of injustice that Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire felt at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with regard to the way they were treated in comparison with non-Muslims – and the protectionist stance that Mustafa Kemal adopted later in the context of the Republic, taking a stand against the economic penetration of Turkey by external powers (p. 29 and 30). Furthermore, the fact that Mustafa Kemal grew up in Salonica and was educated in secularised institutions “undoubtedly” (p. 52) made him more receptive to criticisms aimed at religion. However, one should consider that some of his contemporaries, with similar origins and experiences, developed entirely different political and religious views from those of Mustafa Kemal. There is a risk of imposing a rather rigid pattern of logical continuity between the formation of ideas, their development and their application for political purposes.

### **Toppling the Great Man?**

As deterministic as it might seem, and as already mentioned above, this framework enables the author to move away from the historiography of the split between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic by establishing Mustafa Kemal as part of the transition. By carrying forward ideas theorised at the end of the Empire towards their realisation through the major reforms he carried out during the early years of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal represents that tradition. The book highlights the political and intellectual continuities between the imperial order and the national order, an exercise at which Hanioglu excels. However, this tendency leads into a pitfall – a contradiction between the objectives initially stated by the author and the effect created by the book’s organisation. Indeed, his decision to follow a chronological, linear and progressive order leads him to reproduce the traditional framework used for biographies on Mustafa Kemal, which consists in representing the process by which the Great Man consolidated power. Furthermore, the figure of Mustafa Kemal, first peripheral and contextualised in the first chapters, gradually becomes central later on.

What emerges from this is a paradoxical image of Mustafa Kemal who appears both as a mere product of Ottoman society, set in his ideas after his years of education – thus highlighting the imperial heritage of modern Turkey – and a man of action who alone created history and left his imprint on a whole period. This is particularly the impression given when reading the chapters on the War of Independence and the early years of the Republic (chapters 4 to 7). Hanioglu skilfully reconstructs the circumstances that governed the creation of a nation-state in Anatolia out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, but does not show the

uncertainties that hung over the developments of the post-war period. The hesitations and ambiguities of the nationalist elite at the time disappeared behind the idea of an organised seizing of power orchestrated by the future Atatürk. Having made the choice to present the history of the transition between the end of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the Republic of Turkey through Mustafa Kemal's ideas, Hanioglu also decides not to mention the parts of the story that the character himself ignored or hid. For Mustafa Kemal's perspective was particularly elitist. The pre-Republican history that is brilliantly described in the early chapters of the biography only relate to the European part of the empire and the tiny, educated section of the population to which Mustafa Kemal belonged. Hanioglu makes little reference to the huge social, economic and demographic upheavals that the country was experiencing in the 1910s: a succession of bloody wars, the Armenian genocide, population exchange and the homogenisation of society, all of which nevertheless defined the terrain for every political project in the post-war period.

These gaps can also be explained by the decision to present the controversy surrounding Islam as the primary social conflict in Turkey, and therefore to focus on Mustafa Kemal's relationship with religion. Similarly, the author gives a precise analysis of the process by which the Turkish Grand National Assembly abolished the sultanate (1 November 1922) and the caliphate (3 March 1924), which put an end to an empire that had spanned more than 600 years and to the pan-Islamic mobilisation that had left its mark on the Muslim world in the post-war period (p. 135-152) (chapter 6). The primacy given to religion provides too uniform an image of Anatolian society and brushes aside other political issues such as the great Kurdish uprisings of the 1920s and 1930s, certainly more bloody than the "War of Independence", or the population exchange between Greece and Turkey, which caused the displacement of several million people. It must therefore be noted that Hanioglu, in his presentation of the radical reforms undertaken in the 1920s and 1930s, reproduces the image of the great leader imposing his ideas and policies on Turkish society – an image that forms the basis for the worship of the "Father of the Turks".

The way in which Hanioglu discusses the ambiguous relationship between Kemalist Turkey and the West in the final chapter reveals the problematic relationship between the historian and his subject. Hanioglu writes that the general traits of the Kemalist conception of modernity, which focused on its shared identity with the West, differed radically from the nationalist Muslim speeches based on claims that Turkey was different from the European model. To illustrate his point, he quotes Mahathir bin Muhammad (p. 203), prime minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003, who saw the capitalist development of his country in terms of promoting a culture seen to oppose that of the West. One might question the relevance of this comparison with a character so removed in time from Mustafa Kemal, when the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not lacking in leaders who emerged from nationalist Muslim movements, like another "Father of the Nation", Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948), president of the Muslim League and founder of another state with an ambiguous relationship with religion – Pakistan. In Mustafa Kemal's time, however, the leaders of Muslim countries seem to have been close enough to the general concepts of Kemalism; the promotion of nationalist projects did not stop radical Westernisation programmes from being carried out<sup>5</sup>. This biographical account thus portrays Mustafa Kemal as an exception, although that is arguable.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Touraj Atabaki and Erik J. Zürcher (ed.), *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah*, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2004.

One could also question the relevance of giving this biography the title *Atatürk*. Mustafa Kemal only carried this “patronym” after November 1934, that is, for four years of his life. For this name is of far greater significance than a simple surname, on account of its meaning (The Father Turk), its legal status (Law 2587 of 24 November 1934, which became Law 2622 under the 1982 Constitution, forbade the use of this patronym by any other person), and because this title is the very expression of the personality cult that surrounds him. In the body of his biography, Hanioglu only uses “Mustafa Kemal” to refer to the character, with one exception (p. 221). The name “Atatürk”, however, appears in the introduction, when Hanioglu begins by using his full name “Mustafa Kemal Atatürk” (p. 1), then repeats “Atatürk” in its strict patronymic usage, without hesitating between “Atatürk” and “Mustafa Kemal”, with two exceptions (p. 3 and p. 4). It is particularly in the conclusion that the name poses a problem. On a number of occasions, it seems as if Hanioglu is unsure which name to use, continually alternating between “Mustafa Kemal”, “Mustafa Kemal Atatürk” and “Atatürk” (p. 226). And yet, when he uses “Mustafa Kemal” as a sufficient means of identifying the figure, “Atatürk” loses its strict patronymic meaning and resumes its cultural significance. In a single page (p. 226 or p. 228, for example) one finds the three different names side by side, leading to a certain amount of confusion, because Mustafa Kemal is also referred to by periphrases generally used in hagiographic biographies, such as “the founder of the modern Turkish republic” (p. 6, p. 228), or “the founder of the republic” (p.227). Generally speaking, the tone of the conclusion clashes with the rest of the book. Hanioglu seems to treat the figure with a great deal more caution than a simple historical figure.

This book is aimed less at historians of the Ottoman Empire or of Turkey than at a wider public. It is a fine work of synthesis, fully accessible to non-specialists, which takes account of the complexity of the transitional period between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. Hanioglu’s line of argument is perfectly clear and his account is easy to follow. Although dependent on the traditional framework of biographies on Mustafa Kemal, which present the golden destiny of an exceptional man, this intellectual biography makes a contribution to the historiographical desecration of Mustafa Kemal. Hanioglu shows that the ideas defended by Mustafa Kemal were continuously fuelled and influenced by what he read and debated; he also highlights the fact that the man was capable of making mistakes, and demonstrates how his great strength lay in his capacity to skilfully seize any occasion that might serve his cause.

The interest of this book goes beyond Mustafa Kemal, however. Through him Hanioglu provides a clear account of Ottoman and Turkish political history of the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and presents one of the best summaries on that period. Given the current political situation in the Middle East, a greater understanding of the era will enable people to better appreciate, within the historical context of the transition from the imperial order to the national order, a political tradition marked by militarism, parliamentary government, the worshipping of the authoritarian party and an ambiguous relationship with religion and the West. *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* lends itself marvellously to that.

Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 19<sup>th</sup> October 2012

©[booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net)