

Mustafa Kemal, Atatürk (1881-1938)

The traditions that held the Turks to the past had to be broken if a modern Turkey was to rise from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal, the new republic's first president, set about changing the people's culture and attitudes as well as their political institutions. He did this through his tight control of the Republican People's Party (RPP), first formed in the early days of the resistance.



The Republican People's Party:

Kemal's forceful personality, strong sense of mission, and astute political skill enabled him to hold power until his death in 1938. While Kemal lived, only members of the RPP, which included most of the country's leading nationalists, held office. The RPP dominated the National Assembly and monopolized all important positions.

Kemal believed that without tight control he could not modernize Turkey. Like other reformers before and since, he felt that only a benevolent dictatorship could prepare the way for democracy. In the first years of his presidency, Kemal jailed his opponents, torturing some and executing others. Later, however, he no longer needed to use repression to maintain a stable government. Most Turks felt that Kemal had saved the independence of their country. As a result, his government and the RPP had widespread popular support.

The RPP program had six goals: republicanism, nationalism, **populism, statism, secularism**, and reformism. In other words Turkey was to be a republic. It was to be guided by Turkish nationalism for the benefit of the people (populism) with a state-controlled economy (statism). It was to be free from religious domination (secularism), and it was to be motivated by a spirit of reform. The RPP moved quickly to implement these goals.

Establishing a Secular State:

In 1924, the National Assembly abolished the caliphate. The break with Islam reflected Kemal's conviction that religious conservatives were the greatest obstacle to progress in Turkey. Kemal was opposed to mixing religious and non-religious affairs. He sought to "**Turkify**" the Muslim faith by ridding it of Arab influences. Use of Arabic was banned in public ceremonies, and the Loran was translated into Turkish. All public education was placed under a secular Ministry of Public Instruction in order to end the domination of education by the conservative Muslim clergy.

When the Ministry of Religious Affairs and its privileges were abolished, Islam's official status as a state religion came to an end. *Sharia* courts were closed, their jurisdiction turned over to secular courts, using legal codes adopted from the West. Muslim religious orders were outlawed.

Kemal also ordered other changes aimed at undermining Turkish ties to traditional practices. In 1925 he ordered the Assembly to pass a law forbidding men to wear the fez hat. In announcing the law, Kemal said: *We are going to adopt the civilized international mode of dress, including a headdress with a brim; this I wish to say openly. The name of this headdress is a 'hat.'*

Villagers protested that Western-style hats interfered with the performance of their religious duties. They said the brim made it impossible to touch the forehead to the ground during prayers. Kemal also attacked the veiling of women, although he did not actually ban the use of the veil.



Language Reform:

Language reform was closely related to the numerous other changes in tradition instituted by Kemal and the National Assembly. In 1928 a new alphabet replaced the traditional Arabic script in which Turkish had always been written. The replacement of this script with a Westernized alphabet struck another blow at the conservative opponents of change. But the new alphabet also promoted literacy by simplifying reading and writing. With the new alphabet, it was possible to print books more rapidly and it was easier for people to learn writing. Literacy in the new alphabet was also made a requirement for public office. Within a few months of the alphabet's introduction, books, newspapers, public documents, and all signs were printed in the

new letters. During the next decades literacy increased throughout the nation.

Economic Reform:

In an effort to reduce the influence of Europeans and other non-Muslims in the economy, Kemal introduced a system of state socialism to ensure an independent Turkish economy. *We shall create*, declared Kemal, *every industry, great or small, for which there are in our land the economic conditions necessary to its work and development*. While state banks were established to finance government-controlled enterprises, Turkish industry never reached its hoped-for importance. Government bureaucracy, red tape, and poor planning hampered efforts to make Turkey into an industrialized nation.

Reaching the People:

Village life changed little during Kemal's lifetime. Most villagers, or peasants, who made up about 75 percent of Turkey's population, remained illiterate and superstitious. They retained a deep longing for old Muslim customs and traditions. This continued despite the government's efforts during the 1930s to bring reforms to all parts of the country through the establishment of People's Houses and Village Institutes.

The main purpose of the People's Houses was to educate the villagers and to acquaint them with the best of the new Turkish culture. They were also used to strengthen the influence of the RPP. The Village Institutes were schools that trained secondary school graduates to become teachers for rural areas. Reforms proved more effective, however, in the larger cities where government supervision was more direct.

One reform that effected everyone in Turkey was contained in a law passed in 1934. This law required everyone in Turkey to adopt a surname, or last name. Kemal led the way by adopting Atatürk, which means "First and Foremost Turk" or "Father of the Turks." With the adoption of Atatürk, Kemal became known as Kemal Atatürk.

Before the law requiring the adoption of a surname, a Turkish baby received only one name. This was sufficient identification among villagers. But more precise names were needed as more people moved to cities, the cities grew, and people learned how to read and write. Many Turks found it difficult to decide on a surname, and some took as long as two years to make their decision. A few people made nicknames their official surnames. Others chose a name derived from the father's name or occupation. The majority of Turks, however, chose their names from a list provided by the government.

Ismet İnönü:

Atatürk died in 1938 at the age of 57. He was deeply mourned throughout the republic he had helped create, and his tomb was declared a national monument. Ismet İnönü—a close friend, army comrade, and political associate of Atatürk—was chosen as the new president of Turkey by unanimous vote of the National Assembly.

İnönü, who took as his surname the name of the town where he had fought in an important Turkish victory over the Greeks, governed Turkey during World War II. He kept his nation neutral in the war until 1945, when it became obvious who the winner was going to be. Then he declared war against Germany and the other Axis powers. In aligning Turkey with the Allies, İnönü avoided a repetition of the mistake made by Turkey in World War I.