YOUNG TURK REVOLUTION

The Young Turk Revolution refers to the events that occurred in 1908 under the initiative of the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) and carried out in Macedonia by young Ottoman army officers, who restored the constitution shelved in 1878 by the sultan Abdülhamit II. (There remains some disagreement about describing these events as a “revolution.”) The uprising led to elections and a reconvening of the parliament, which the committee hoped would enable the survival of the Ottoman Empire against rival imperial powers (Britain, France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and Russia). The CUP, initially a secret society that became a political organization, did not overthrow the sultan at first, preferring to rule behind the scenes. The uprising can be considered a continuation of the constitutionalist movements of the nineteenth century, but it also heralded changes to socio-political life, such as the rise of a new elite, the increasing involvement of the army in government, and the emergence of party politics. The revolution was enthusiastically received for a time, and a vibrant socio-political life emerged with the dismantling of many of Abdülhamit’s authoritarian policies. However, the Committee’s increasingly authoritarian and later nationalist stance spurred opposition, resulting in new rebellions and a restoration of sharia-oriented Ottoman authority.

But among those who participated in the Young Turk revolt was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a member of the CUP, and while he criticized the party leadership, his later role as a Turkish nationalist and secularist was formed by his experience in the 1908 uprising. After World War I, Atatürk led a far more successful social transformation, finally ending Ottoman rule after it has been decisively damaged by losses in the war. Atatürk’s rise to power represented both the first real secularist revolution among Middle Eastern powers in the twentieth century and a model of sorts for later revolutions in the region. For what both the Young Turks and Atatürk demonstrated was the viability of “top-down” secularism. This was a secularism imposed not from an upwelling of discontent among the educated but because of the need to effect military reform in an attempt to match the technological advances of Western armies, a need that WWI highlighted. The pros and cons of this model of secularization are with us still, in the successive military coups of Abdel Nasser, Hosni Mubarak, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt; in the rule of the Ba’ath party of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad in Syria; and in the rise and fall of “Colonel” Muammar al-Gaddafiin Libya.

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