

Kemal Atatürk

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Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) was an army officer who founded an independent Republic of Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. He then served as Turkey's first president from 1923 until his death in 1938, implementing reforms that rapidly secularized and westernized the country. Under his leadership, the role of Islam in public life shrank drastically, European-style law codes came into being, the office of the sultan was abolished and new language and dress requirements were mandated. But although the country was nominally democratic, Atatürk at times stifled opposition with an authoritarian hand.

Atatürk: The Early Years

Mustafa, who became Mustafa Kemal as a teenager and then Mustafa Kemal Atatürk late in life, was born around 1881 in the city of Salonica (now Thessaloniki, Greece), which at that time was part of the [Ottoman Empire](#). His family was middle-class, Turkish-speaking and Muslim. A good student, Mustafa Kemal attended a series of military schools, including the War College in Istanbul. He was then stationed in [Syria](#) and [Palestine](#) for a few years before securing a post back in Salonica. In 1911 and 1912, the hard-drinking Mustafa Kemal fought against the Italians in Libya.

During [World War I](#) (1914-18), the Ottoman Empire allied itself with Germany and Austria-Hungary. By this time, the aging empire had lost almost all of its territory in Europe and Africa. Moreover, the so-called Young Turk Revolution of 1908 had stripped autocratic powers from the sultan and ushered in an era of parliamentary government. In 1915 Mustafa Kemal distinguished himself throughout the nearly yearlong Gallipoli Peninsula campaign, in which he helped stop a large force of British and French troops from taking Istanbul. He was soon promoted from colonel to brigadier-general and sent to fight in eastern Turkey, Syria and Palestine. An estimated 1.5 million Armenians died and others were expelled during the war and its aftermath, but Mustafa Kemal has not been linked to the perpetration of the genocide.

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Atatürk Takes Power

Under a punitive postwar peace treaty signed in August 1920, the Allied powers stripped all Arab provinces from the Ottoman Empire, provided for an independent Armenia and an autonomous Kurdistan, put the Greeks in charge of a region surrounding Smyrna (now Izmir) and asserted economic control over what little country remained. However, Mustafa Kemal had already organized an independence movement based in Ankara, the goal of which was to end foreign occupation of the Turkish-speaking areas and to stop them from being partitioned. The sultan's government in Istanbul sentenced Mustafa Kemal to death in absentia, but it failed to prevent him from building up both military and popular support. With the help of money and weapons from Soviet Russia, his troops crushed the Armenians in the east and forced the French and Italians to withdraw

from the south. He then turned his attention to the Greeks, who had wreaked havoc on the Turkish population during their march to within 50 miles of Ankara.

In August and September 1921, with Mustafa Kemal at the head of the army, the Turks stopped the Greek advance at the Battle of Sakarya. The following August, they launched an offensive that broke the Greek lines and sent them into a full-scale retreat all the way back to Smyrna on the Mediterranean Sea. A fire soon broke out in Smyrna, which, along with looting and rampaging Turkish soldiers, claimed the lives of thousands of Greek and Armenian residents. Roughly 200,000 additional Greeks and Armenians were forced to evacuate on nearby Allied warships, never to return.

Mustafa Kemal next threatened to attack Istanbul, which was being occupied by the British and other Allied powers. Rather than fight, the British agreed to negotiate a new peace treaty and sent invitations to both the sultan's government in Istanbul and Mustafa Kemal's government in Ankara. But before the peace conference could begin, the Grand National Assembly in Ankara passed a resolution declaring that the sultan's rule had already ended. Fearful for his life, the last Ottoman sultan fled his palace in a British ambulance. A new peace treaty was then signed in July 1923 that recognized an independent Turkish state. That October, the Grand National Assembly proclaimed the Republic of Turkey and elected Mustafa Kemal as its first president.

Atatürk as President

Even before he became president, Greece agreed to send some 380,000 Muslims to Turkey in exchange for over 1 million Greek Orthodox practitioners. Meanwhile, under Mustafa Kemal, the forced emigration of Armenians continued. Although Turkey was now almost homogeneously Muslim, Mustafa Kemal deposed the caliph, the theoretical successor to the prophet Muhammad and spiritual leader of the worldwide Muslim community. He also closed all religious courts and schools, prohibited the wearing of headscarves among public sector employees, abolished the ministry of canon law and pious foundations, lifted a ban on alcohol, adopted the Gregorian calendar in place of the Islamic calendar, made Sunday a day of rest instead of Friday, changed the Turkish alphabet from Arabic letters to Roman ones, mandated that the call to prayer be in Turkish rather than Arabic and even forbade the wearing of fez hats.

Mustafa Kemal's government espoused industrialization and adopted new law codes based on European models. "The civilized world is far ahead of us," he told an audience in October 1926. "We have no choice but to catch up." Eight years later, he required all Turks to choose a surname, and the Turkish Grand National Assembly gave Kemal the [surname Atatürk](#) (meaning Father Turk). By that time, Atatürk's government had joined the [League of Nations](#), improved literacy rates and given women the right to vote, though in practice he essentially imposed single-party rule. He also closed opposition newspapers, suppressed leftist workers' organizations and bottled up any attempts at Kurdish autonomy.

Turkey After Atatürk

On November 10, 1938, Atatürk, who never had any children, died in his bedroom at the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul. He was replaced by İsmet İnönü, prime minister during most of Atatürk's rule, who continued his policies of secularization and westernization. Even though Atatürk retains iconic status in Turkey today—in fact, insulting his memory is a crime—[Islam](#) has reemerged in recent years as a social and political force.