

ŞERAFETTİN TURAN, *Mustafa Kemâl Atatürk: Kendine Özgü Bir Yaşam ve Kişilik*, Ankara, Bilgi, 2004, 719 pp.

Lord Kinross ends his celebrated standard biography of Mustafa Kemâl Atatürk (*Atatürk: The Birth of a Nation*) as follows: "Turkey lost its lover." I belong to the Turkish generation which witnessed, not only the *enthusiasm* of creating a modern republic from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, but also felt the deep grief on account of his untimely loss at the age of 57 (1938) when the war clouds were gathering over Europe. As the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee had underlined in his various publications (such as *A Study of History, the World and the West, and Turkey*), Atatürk's policy was to aim at nothing short of an out-and-out conversion of the country to the Western way of life. The Turkish leader put through a programme as had never been carried out anywhere systematically in so short a span of time. Toynbee adds: "It was as if, in our western world, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the secularist scientific mental revolution... the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution had all been telescoped into a single lifetime and been made compulsory by law."

In spite of the high-handed methods used for about a decade-and-a-half, Turkey moved, with the general election of 1950, from one-party to a two-party regime by consent, without violence. Atatürk himself had twice tried to introduce a multi-party system, attempts that failed in the mid-1920s and '30s on account of the special circumstances of those decades. Although the consequences of the 1950 elections looked, at first sight, as if what Atatürk's heart was ultimately set on was occurring, Turkey's odyssey, since then, away from secularism made some commentators to reevaluate perhaps the inevitable sequels of democracy.

There is no doubt that the institution of parliamentary constitutional government, so near to the heart of Western civilization, had genuinely taken root in Turkey, where the overwhelming majority (99.9%) of the citizens are Muslims. In Atatürk's own words, "a ruined country overlooking a precipice evolved into a new society, a new state, brought to pass by incessant reforms, which had won esteem both at home and abroad." While Atatürk characteristically made no reference to himself, Lord Kinross portrayed him as "a restless mind, nurtured on those principles of Western civilization, which he adapted and adopted as his own, but always grounded in a common sense mistrustful of theory." Jorge Blanco Villalta, a writer diplomat from Argentina, was not the only commentator who described Atatürk's accomplishments "not merely as local triumphs, but the sign of deliverance of all the oppressed peoples of the East and Africa." As noted in the headline of an Indian journal, he was "more than a national leader." For the peoples of Asia and Africa, then overwhelmingly chained to colonialism, the Turkish Revolution signified the victory of the have-nots.

These observations, recorded in considerable detail by the author of the book under review here, appeared in previous scholarly works as well. A prominent Indian writer described him as "one of those great men who changed the destiny of their peoples and left an abiding impression on the process of freedom." He was the harbinger of a new awakening, the herald of freedom in Asia. A published doctoral dissertation by another Indian scholar demonstrated how M. Kemâl's ideas and deeds influenced M. Gandhi. The Urdu-language poet M. Iqbal and the Bengali muse N. Islam composed epics in praise of his emancipating role. Jomo Kenyatta surprised a group of visitors when the Kenyan leader spoke on the Turkish role in the history of

peoples' struggles for freedom. There exist several printed bibliographies encompassing works on this outstanding Turk.

Why did Şerafettin Turan, a distinguished professor of history who served at Ankara University for about four decades, felt the need to bring out another large volume on the "Life and Personality" of this statesman about whom so many studies have already been made? Professor Turan apparently holds that there is now more reason than ever to remember the teachings and the accomplishments of this secular-minded statesman emerging from the Muslim world. The right of all to organize within the multi-party system and the need to seek the votes of the religiously-inclined rural masses, some of whom presently cluster around the big urban centers, urged the vote-seeking politicians to woo, since the general election of 1950, the support of the public on anti-secular grounds. Preliminary and seemingly innocent concessions to the conservatives such as call to prayer in Arabic (instead of Turkish) or acceptance of wider influence for religious schools and their graduates eventually ushered in far-reaching anti-Kemâlist gains. The consequences entail reactionary headway from the wider endorsement of pietistic dresses for women to the dissemination of mystic centers, the systematic "Islamization" of bureaucracy, favouratism accorded to religious capitalist circles and infrequent but nevertheless disturbing attacks on synagogues. Some sectarian leaders now issue juridical decisions that contradict scientific facts, some university chancellors are penalized for upholding secular views, and even frequent train accidents, on account of technical neglect but causing much bloodshed, are interpreted by high-ranking officials as the "witchcraft of evil eyes."

It is this trend of reaction to the Kemâlist Revolution that motivates a number of Turkish intellectuals to be engrossed, once more and with greater enthusiasm, in the teachings of the early Republican period. Academic and popular volumes follow one another with special emphasis on Atatürk's beliefs on secularism. For instance, Professor İlhan Lütem's three volumes dwell on the specific values of this statesman's insistence on rationality that traditional Islamic societies lacked in most of the past. Professor Sezgin Kızılcelik's treatise goes to prove that Atatürk's regime, though high-handed, was never carried to totalitarian extremes. Attilâ İlhan, one of Turkey's popular writers, dwells on the tremendous difficulties that the Turkish leader had to face in pursuance of his objectives.

Professor Şerafettin Turan's massive compendium distinguishes itself as a most reliable presentation based almost solely on Mustafa Kemâl Atatürk's pronouncements and published works. There is much less personal interpretations in it than in any other work printed in Turkey or abroad. While some foreign biographies, such as Louis Armstrong's *The Grey Wolf*, are notorious for uttermost subjective analysis, every bit of Turan's information is supported by solid proof. Having devoted eleven years (1991-2002) of his life to the study of *The History of the Turkish Revolution* (5 vols.), Professor Turan was in the most favourable position to take up the life and the personality of the one man responsible for that revolution. His latest biography is a *vade mecum* for all readers interested in the efforts for progressive radical transformation in the Muslim societies, including Turkey.

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