

ATATÜRK'S TURKEY

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(The following text is an edited transcript of a discussion on BBC Radio Scotland, the Collin Bell Programme, on 15 July 1997, at 1:03 pm)¹

Presenter:

This is Radio Scotland. I'm Collin Bell, and today we will go world-wide...

From the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, he built a new secular Turkey, tilted much more towards European models than to its long Islamic heritage. Yet in recent months, concerned by the growing Islamism of the government, his successor generals have had to use their muscles to preserve that secular approach. So let's examine the legacy of Atatürk -an honorific, incidentally, meaning 'father Turk' just as 'Kemal' means 'excellence'. In London now are His Excellency Özdem Sanberk, the Turkish Ambassador to the UK, and Dr. Andrew Mango who is currently writing a new biography of Atatürk, while in Bristol is also James Pettifer.

Ambassador, is his name still a powerful political weapon?

Ambassador Sanberk:

Well, I don't think that it is a political weapon because what Atatürk means for Turkey is more than that. He, as you mentioned, secured Turkey's independence and created a modern nation-state based on citizenship. Then he went on to strengthen and transform the country in almost every area of life: our capital, our script, our legal system, our educational system, our parliamentary democracy, our women's rights, our industry and our secularism. In one way or another, they can all be traced back to him.

Presenter:

I think yes, at this point I'd have say I admire his ability to introduce reformed legal codes. I suppose the pragmatism with which he introduced the modern European alphabet, rather than the Arabic one ... I have my reservations about choosing Ankara, however. I don't know whether you do, Ambassador?

Ambassador:

Well, I mean, as a tourist, I would of course like to see Istanbul. But, you know, Ankara has its charms. It's a very green city and less polluted, I might say. And there is a Hittite Museum-as you know, Turkey is heir to 6000 years of history and three main civilisations-so you can find many attractive things in Ankara as well.

Presenter:

Andrew, let me ask you. The Ambassador mentioned democratic reforms and the aspiration of Turkey to be recognised as a modern society, but to what extent was Atatürk himself concerned with democracy rather than efficiency?

Dr. Mango:

I think he was, but he had to lay the foundations for democracy. His main concern was, of course, to secure peace for his country, territorial integrity and to dispel what he called, over and over again, the cloud of general ignorance. With 10 million Turks then (there are 65 million Turks now) and in the intervening years, the 65 million Turks lead longer lives and more prosperous lives than

the original 10 million. So his achievement, his legacy, is not simply a change of direction, a cultural revolution, but an immense improvement in material conditions throughout Turkey.

Presenter:

Well, James, let me put to you, that my own impression of the country is that it's rather rash to make big generalisations, that, as we were saying with the Ambassador, Istanbul is one thing-a very sort of thriving and modern city. There are parts of Eastern Anatolia where you have to cross a divide of some hundreds of years to this day.

James Pettifer:

Yes, I think that's true and I think most people would accept that. I'm not too sure in a sense about the geography of it all. I mean, it used to be said roughly east of Ankara, or west of Ankara, was the dividing line. But nowadays I think, in an odd sort of way, a lot of the east has come even to Istanbul because of this enormous immigration of people, peasants, leaving the land and coming to the big city over the last ten or twenty years. Of course, it's always happened, but I think the process has accelerated a lot lately.

Presenter:

Well, it certainly is some time since I've been there, but it has to be said that my experience of places like Adana and Erzurum was that they were still, let's say, not as advanced as, well obviously, as the rest of Asia Minor. But, let me ask you, James, again the question I asked the Ambassador: do you think that you can invoke the name of Atatürk in a contemporary political argument and have it score points?

James Pettifer:

Oh yes, you certainly can. I mean, the legacy and the heritage of Atatürk is very much alive in everybody's minds and I would include the Islamic people in that. I think the big question is, of course, to try to define exactly what it is. I mean, I would agree with what His Excellency said about his achievements in the 20s and 30s. The question is, of course, how far many of those things can be carried on now. To take one example, for instance, literacy, Turkey still has quite a high percentage of illiteracy in the population. So you could say that Atatürk's campaigning there, his ideals, are as relevant now as they were in the 1930s.

Presenter:

But let me come back to you, Ambassador, if I may and say: is there any substantial body of opinion in Turkey which regrets what Atatürk did?

Ambassador Sanberk:

Well, I think the devotion to Atatürk's vision in Turkey is a popular movement. People do feel very grateful to Atatürk for what he has achieved and the difference he makes even today to people's lives. And he symbolises the values of modernity, secularism, democracy and economic progress. Well, I believe-of course, Dr. Mango is there to comment on this-that Atatürk's greatest achievement is to combine nationalism with universal civilisation and make it outward-looking. Of course, Atatürk was nationalist, a Turkish nationalist, he was not a cosmopolitan. But his nationalism was inspired by the conviction that there is only one universal civilisation, defined in enlightenment terms. Therefore, since he believed that there was only one universal civilisation, and he set out to implement radical reforms to enable the Turkish nation to become a natural member of this universal community of civilisation and cultures, in his thinking, every nation demonstrates its worth by its contribution to that common civilisation. This is the essence of Atatürk's thinking, and it enabled him to transcend the question-much discussed in his time, of

course-whether Turkey should choose the West, Islam or Central Asian past. His answer was that it should choose the universal civilisation. This is the reason why Atatürk's message is relevant today.

Dr. Mango:

But if I may butt in here, Collin, this is why Turkish liberals are always to be found in the camp of Atatürk's quarters. And the people who are against Atatürk tend to be xenophobic nationalists: the Turkish equivalent of the National Front. Because Atatürk, for most Turks, stands for the outer world, the big world: it stands for whatever is new and modern, and in a way, whatever makes people's lives more varied, more interesting, more modern. Young people who like Western music are also attached to Atatürk's memory because he was somebody who liked Western music. There is a story because Atatürk believed the culture and civilisation were one-and this is an interesting story: Just before the First World War, he was military attaché in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. He went to the Opera, liked it very much, and asked at the end of the performance: "Are all the performers, the artists, the singers and the musicians, are they all Bulgarians?" He was assured that were. "That is why," he said, "Now I understand why the Bulgarians beat us in the Balkan war." It's rather a strange story, but it shows how he thought of culture, music, literature and material civilisation as an indivisible whole.

Presenter:

Well yes, but Andrew, what intrigues me is how did he come to these conclusions, these principles. He was himself, I believe, the child of what might be described as a lower middle class bureaucratic family-in the late 19th century, the great slumbering 'Sick Man of Europe' and yet somehow mysteriously he comes to these very decisive views.

Dr. Mango:

No, but these were the views of the enlightenment, as the Ambassador said. He read French widely; most of the schools where he went taught universal history, based very largely on French text books. And also the ideas of Western liberalism were beginning to permeate the Ottoman officer class, Ottoman bureaucracy generally. And the idea of civilisation was the moving idea of 19th century-early 20th century Europe: that the world was divided into civilised nations and backward nations. And he believed right from the start, as a boy almost, that Turkey had to be part of this civilised world marching forward towards a radiant future. It was an optimistic view, which one has lost now, and finds it rather hard to recapture, but it was the general philosophy of Europe.

Presenter:

Well, I'm not quite sure it was at that stage of the 19th century. Let me ask you, James. It sounds to me the more we hear about this, that we are being told that Atatürk's ideas were really those of the French Revolution-the encyclopaedia, rather than the Scottish Enlightenment-and he sounds to me more and more like a Robespierre or even a Saint Juste than one of the more, shall we say, 'indulgent' members of the French Revolution.

James Pettifer:

Well, I think he was a reformist or, in some respects, a revolutionary from above. And this has always been part of the problem. His origins were perhaps not very glamorous, but he nevertheless rose very high, very quickly in the army on the basis of his ability. And when, of course, he took power, it was very much as part of a wider military élite at the core of it, after his successful defence of the country and its borders and getting rid of the results of the Treaty of Sèvres. And what I think is worrying for some people in Turkey is how far now this heritage can be carried on, because I think the contemporary world doesn't have an awful lot of time for the kind of directing aspects of life. There was an awful lot of centralism and planning in the Atatürk project, and this is what I think is in question now: how far this aspect of his achievement is valid in modern Turkey.

Presenter:

Well, that just takes us back in one obvious example: the plonking-down of grid-system, Ankara, in the middle of nowhere. I don't want to go on about it, because the Ambassador will get embarrassed about his country

Ambassador Sanberk:

No, no I am very pleased to be given this chance and ...

Presenter:

It's no nastier than Canberra or Washington ...

Ambassador Sanberk:

Well, I advise you to visit Ankara. Have you been to Ankara?

Presenter:

Yes, I have.

Ambassador Sanberk:

Oh, right. Well, one thing I would like to ..., if I may, I would like to make a remark. Atatürk was given power by a freely-elected National Assembly, because he was needed as a leader at a time of foreign invasion. Atatürk retains his place in Turkey's national life because what he achieved, and what he stands for, are still relevant to millions and millions of ordinary people. And, of course, today you mention for instance-to use the jargon of the European Union-that means the lack of economic and social cohesion: some parts of Turkey are, let's say, less developed than others-this is normal, of course, and this is true. But let's not forget that in recent years, at least for a two-or three-year period, we have now what we call 'Tiger Cities'; cities like Gaziantep, Kahramanmara_, Urfa, Denizli, Çorum. These are booming cities and there is an awful lot of investment there. And let's not forget that Turkey became the first and largest trading partner of the Russia Federation, with 10-12 billion dollars of commerce. And as far as Turkish-British commerce is concerned, we are your first and largest partner in the Middle East with 2.5 billion pounds of two-way trading volume: that means, of course, jobs and employment in this country. But it also shows the dimensions, and also the progress, which is based again on the structural and very radical reforms that Turkey realised early this century.

Presenter:

Let me move into slightly more delicate territory ... I don't know, James, whether you have a view on this, but in any sense can Atatürk be blamed for, or held responsible for, the difficulty of relationships between Turks and their Kurdish citizens?

James Pettifer:

No, in a word. I mean, this is a terribly complex question and I think Andrew Mango is actually much better qualified to answer it in some ways than I am. But I think even a glance at history shows that there were conflicts involving the Kurds in this region long before Atatürk. You could say, right back ... I mean, I think the earliest mention in literature of the Kurds is in Xenophon, the ancient Greek military historian, and even then the Kurds were seen as raiders and as merchant people who represented a sort of threat to, in this case, a passing army ... The question is very complex. The Kurds now occupy territory which, a hundred years ago, some of it was occupied by Armenians and other people. I don't think there is anything specific in Atatürk's heritage, with one exception, which is particularly relevant. I think the exception is simply the powerful role in Turkish society of the army. And the army, I think, generally-speaking, determines policy on what is done on the Kurdish issue, and the government, and this government that has just departed of Mr. Erdogan, is

not significantly different from its predecessors in seeking really a purely military solution to the Kurdish problem. And I suppose you could say that military emphasis is perhaps something that is very derived from Atatürk.

Presenter:

But then, you could also say, of course, that soldiers tend to take that view of politics, wherever they may be. Don't they?

James Pettifer:

Yes, certainly. Yes, I think that's true. But I think there is a particular dimension to this war which is very, very traditional in the way it's being fought. Particularly, emphasis on things like control of the roads and so on, which I think goes back to long before, well even modern Turkish society.

Presenter:

Andrew, do you want to come in on that?

Dr. Mango:

Yes, I think one must not forget the historical context. Because in the 1920s and the 1930s, centralised nation-states were the norm throughout Europe, particularly France. France was always the model. And the French nation-state was built of Bretons and Alsations, Catalan-speaking southerners and Italians. And they all became French because of a unifying French culture. Atatürk, at the beginning of his career, did not deny the existence of Kurds. But then when he started building up the Turkish nation, he developed a particular policy which was expressed in his slogan: 'Happy is the man who calls himself a Turk'. Not 'who is a Turk', but 'who calls himself a Turk'. It was a subjective decision, and he thought that most citizens of his country, of the country he had saved, would want to assume the Turkish identity. Most of them did, but gradually the Kurds, some Kurds, decided that they wanted to keep part of their Kurdish identity. One must not forget, multi-culturalism is a totally new concept. It did not exist in the 20s or 30s. The French considered it to be a sign of backwardness. To be retrograde. Now it is the fashion. And Turkey has to adapt to this new fashion, or is being asked to adapt to a newfangled idea.

Presenter:

Well, yes, but I'm not entirely sure that you can say that it's a newfangled idea because in some respects, it is one that has survived a great deal of repression. There were always, as there are now, Bretons who didn't like Paris: there are Catalans who don't like Madrid: there are even Scots who don't like London!...

Dr. Mango:

Yes, but official policy was based on the premise that every nation-state had to be homogenised. That was the policy which Atatürk saw practised all around him in what was considered to be 'civilised Europe'.

Presenter:

May I ask the Ambassador a question that does interest me a lot. It seems that one of the most remarkably modernist elements in the Atatürk approach was his attitude towards women. He appeared to have had a more emancipated view of, or was prepared to emancipate women, than was current amongst relatively authoritarian political leaders at the time.

Ambassador Sanberk:

Definitely. But let me just have two words on the first question. I think one of the most remarkable achievements of Atatürk is to create this modern nation-state based on citizenship which transcends, if I may say so, ethnic, religious and linguistic particularisms. As you know, political identities, political communities in the Middle East, in modern times or in the past, have always been religious. Not ethnic, nor linguistic. And today, when you look at Lebanon, you see that we talk about Maronites, we talk about Shi'ites or Druz, etc. Therefore, Turks and Kurds, during the Ottoman Empire, formed one millet system. Therefore, when Atatürk fought the Independence War, he fought with alongside all the Muslim millet-that means the Turks and Kurds together. But of course today, when you talk about Kurds, who do you mean? The Turkish citizens who happen to be of Kurdish background, or terrorists fighting against a democratic system. Turkey has MPs, prime ministers, commanders, judges of Kurdish origin.

I have made a digression, of course, but to come to your question on the emancipation of women ... therefore it was thanks to him that Turkish women got to vote in the early 1930s or before. Long before most of their sisters in the rest of Europe. He ensured that coeducation in schools and equal opportunity were normal in Turkey before they were achieved in some other countries, including the United Kingdom, I believe. That's why you will find that in the movements that have sprung up in recent years to defend Atatürk and his legacy, there are always a lot of women.

Presenter:

Well, let me ask you Andrew (interruptions ...) a deliberate question, because of what the Ambassador has just said. If we have this ideal, the Atatürk ideal, of a civic nation with which citizenship is in a sense an act of common consent, and that ethnicity and religion don't matter, is it not rather odd that Turks to this day appear to have an ethnic affinity for and sympathy for the Turkic speaking peoples of former Soviet Central Asia, and that on a religious basis they are particularly sympathetic towards Bosnians or Chechens?

Dr. Mango:

Well, people have several identities. They can't have a single identity. And the civic link is the strongest local link. But the fact that the Turkish Constitution defines the Turk, a Turk, as anyone who is bound to the state with a link of citizenship, does not dispel the fact that people feel themselves to be Turks, Turkic-speaking, and therefore that they have an affinity with people who speak the same language outside the borders. But they know they are Muslims, they practise Islam and therefore feel a degree of brotherhood with other Muslims outside the borders of the state. These are personal decisions and personal affinities which, of course, the state has to take into consideration which would not necessarily determine the policy of the state.

Presenter:

Well, one last question for James, I think there. I'm sorry about this, Ambassador, but I'm going to ask James nevertheless. Do you suppose that Atatürk would have filed an application for membership of the European Union?

James Pettifer:

That's a very interesting question (hesitation ...). I think if one had to give a pat answer, the answer would be 'no'. Because part of his economic ideas, I think, and in this he was not untypical of many other leaders of his time, were very deeply nationalistic and it was a very strong theme, I think, in Turkey in the 20s and 30s to get control of national resources, and there were quite serious barriers put in the way of foreign ownership of significant industrial economic assets which have remained, some of them, virtually 'till the last, say, 10 years. And I don't think he would, because the kind of trans-national Europe I think, ultimately, was not something which he could live with. But, of course, we're talking about very different times.

Presenter:

Oh indeed, yes. And the more we go on, the more I realise that in fact people say that General de Gaulle was also the heir to the French Revolution but, Atatürk occurs in Turkish ...

Dr. Mango:

Well, my answer would be, Collin, resoundingly yes! Without a shadow of doubt! He never issued alliances. He always liked to co-operate with other civilised states. And he had set his sights in Europe.

Ambassador Sanberk:

And I would perhaps add that Turkey's application to the European Union is a confirmation of Turkey's traditional foreign policy to bring Turkey closer to a Europe, politically pluralist, economically market-oriented, but with a social ethic, culturally rich in its diversity, but secular and of course strategically situated within the Atlantic partnership.

Presenter:

Ambassador, thank you very much for what I can only describe as almost a sort of advertisement ... that I hope we've been able to grant you for a moment