



HFM 013 – Ataturk's Legacy: If One Person Were as Influential as Jefferson, Washington, and Franklin Combined

Michael Rank: This is the History in Five Minutes Podcast, the #1 podcast for learning about anything in history in no time at all! I'm your host, Michael Rank.

Today's topic is Ataturk and his legacy. If you ever got the chance to go to Turkey which I highly recommend – it's a great place, I've lived here for five years because it's so awesome – there's something that will immediately strike you. And that is that everywhere you go you'll encounter pictures and hear the name Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. He was the first president of the country who, even though he died in 1938, it's as if he is still alive today. You fly in to Ataturk International Airport when you come to the country. You'll see his picture in the entryway of every single government building that you come across. And if there's any type of political protest happening, whether it's an extreme communist group or a right wing Islamist group, most likely protestors will show up with pictures of him in order to show up legitimacy of whatever it is they're protesting.

Who is this man and why does he exist in living memory of 70 million people today? It's easy to understand if you know his impact on the nation of modern Turkey. We don't have anyone in American history that compares to him. But he formed the military legal and cultural bases of the entire nation. It will be like if you rolled up Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin into one person.

How did he rise to power and what did he do to form this country? Ataturk was a military officer in the early 20th century Ottoman army at a time when the empire which used to stretch all the way from Hungary down into Arabia and up into Iran was shrinking rapidly and European colonial powers had its eye on it and wanted to basically conquer it and take whatever parts they could for themselves.

He showed his military and tactical brilliance at the 1915 Battle of Gallipoli in which he prevented the allied forces from obtaining control of the waterways that would have given them access to the Black Sea which were the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. Hundreds of thousands of people died in both sides of this battle, but it was one of the few victories of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. When he decided to abolish the sultanate which was considered the leader of the Islamic world at the time and form his own government in the early 20's, many people flocked to his side. He was able to push back the British Greek forces that wanted to take control of Western Anatolia and push them into retreat. He forced international groups to sign peace treaties that form the boundaries of modern day Turkey.

Once he became president, he immediately went on an enormous reform program. He threw out the Ottoman legal system which was a hybrid of Islamic Law and a French Civil Code and he replaced it with a fiercely secular alternative based completely on European civil and criminal law. He outlawed religious universities. Mosques became state property, and Imams were all state employees. Even today, it's kind of shocking how much religion is controlled by the state in modern day Turkey. All Imams are civil employees. Their sermons are all the same things that are written by the ministry of religion, and because mosques are state property, oftentimes they lease out minarets as cellular phone towers at the same time.



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Culturally, he took an empire that waver between Europe and the Middle East and he pushed it aggressively westward. The alphabet of the Turkish language was changed from Arab characters to Latin characters. This meant that everyone in the country effectively became illiterate. Although at the time, 90% of the people were illiterate anyway so it wasn't as big as it sounds. He also required people to take on surnames, which at the time, people did not have. So as a result, the Turkish Grand National Assembly bestowed upon him the last name, Ataturk, which means the father of all Turks.

There are countless other reforms he did but as a means of example, another thing was to outlaw the fez, the red religious headgear that you see people wearing in Indiana Jones. It seems kind of silly to us because the only other people that you see wear it are Shriners driving their little cars in parades. But you have to understand that this headgear at the time had enormous religious significance. It would be like if Michael Bloomberg today decided that all yarmulkes worn by Orthodox Jews in New York were made illegal.

Like any major reformer, Ataturk doesn't have an unblemished legacy. He quashed any type of rebellion that grows up against him with an iron fist, for example the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion in which a Kurdish religious leader opposed his reforms and he saw the homeland for the Kurdish people in Southeastern Turkey. He also had a single party government and his colleagues he appointed to other administrative positions that would rubberstamp whatever he brought along. So essentially he was a benevolent dictator until his death in 1938. Turkey didn't see multi-party elections until 1945. Turkey would not be unquestionably what it is today without him.

So if you happen to find yourself in Turkey next week on May 19th, make sure to tip your hat to the handsome man watching over you in the countless pictures that are scattered all over the country. Because without him, it probably wouldn't be there.

For more history like this that is offbeat, obscure, but most of all not boring, come check out my website at www.michaelrank.net. There, you can find podcasts and blog posts like this. I'll even throw in a free history Ebook that you can grab right now at www.michaelrank.net/freebook. Have a good day!