



# The Case of Atatürk Reforms in Early Turkish Republic Between 1923-1946 From an Educational Perspective

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Atatürk Reforms in the Early Turkish Republic, 1923-1946:  
An Educational Perspective

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A Thesis in the Field of International Relations  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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## Abstract

As of this writing (2019), many Muslim-majority countries face critical problems of authoritarianism, fundamentalism, violence, corruption, and poverty. The Jasmine Revolution of 2011, which many hoped would result in peace and democracy in the Arab world, instead brought chaos and violence, eventually dragging Syria into a still-ongoing civil war.

One of the most worrying issues centers on Muslim youth who are grappling with problems in their respective countries but they have no inspiring role models. These youth are seeking viable alternatives, a “way out” of their accumulated anger and frustration. In the absence of such alternatives, some fall prey to extremist groups like ISIS.

There was a unique period in the first half of the twentieth century during which Turkey (with a population that was 99 percent Muslim) embarked on an unprecedented modernization project under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Emerging from its heritage as part of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 by Atatürk and his associates as a secular nation-state. In the following years, many Westernizing reforms were achieved, leading to an era that is sometimes referred to as the “Turkish Renaissance.”

This thesis analyzes the Turkish Renaissance period in a new light. My goal is to answer this question: Could the early Turkish Republic under the leadership of Atatürk serve as a viable model for Muslim-majority countries today? As part of my research, I

develop a clear picture of what was planned and achieved under Atatürk's leadership. I argue that the primary rationale for the reforms undertaken by Atatürk was this: If the Turkish people were educated and empowered, they would protect their democratic institutions and, consequently, their democratic rights.

I assert that empowering, transformative education is at the heart of the reforms needed today, and I explore the momentum that such an education can provide. Contrary to generally accepted belief, I argue that teachers, not the military, were considered by Atatürk to be the real guardians of the Turkish Republic. To that end, I examine major Atatürk reforms that occurred between 1923 and 1946. I do this from an educational perspective and in light of the theory of domestic institutions as developed by Daron Acemoğlu and James Robinson (2012). There have been numerous criticisms and arguments surrounding the Atatürk reforms, which I discuss in more detail, as well as counter-arguments that have been put forward.

My aim is to show the dynamics of the Atatürk period from an educational perspective in light of the theory of domestic institutions, and to elaborate on the ensuing implications as they apply to the development of Turkey and to any Muslim-majority nation.

## Biographical Sketch

Ahmet Selçuk Akgül has worked with various universities and companies around the world as the first licensed entrepreneurial coach in Turkey. A long-time member of the Fulbright Program, he has taught business, English for business, entrepreneurship, and innovation courses and seminars in Turkey, the UK, and the US.

He has two Masters degrees from Marmara University. His thesis for the first is titled “An Artificial Neural Network Application on the Istanbul Stock Exchange,” and the second is “A Qualitative Analysis on Educational Entrepreneurship in Istanbul.”

He developed an innovative project to teach English while promoting global citizenship. It is called “Continuous Improvement Groups,” for which he received an award from TÜSİAD (the Turkish Industry and Business Association) at the Entrepreneurship Congress in 2005.

He is currently working as an educational consultant and teacher in Istanbul.

## Dedication

To my parents Hamza and Gülnaz,  
who were children of the early Turkish Republic.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Today, most Muslim-majority countries face critical problems such as authoritarianism, fundamentalism, violence, corruption, and poverty. The Jasmine Revolution of 2011, which (it was hoped) would bring peace and democracy to the Arab world, instead brought widespread chaos and violence, even dragging Syria into an still-ongoing civil war.

One of the most worrisome aspects of these problem is Muslim youth who must grapple with endemic problems in their respective countries while not having inspiring role models whose examples might give them guidance and encouragement. In fact, no country with a majority Muslim population is recognized as democratically free except Tunisia, which represents only 0.6% among those countries (Freedom House, 2018). According to the Council on Foreign Relations' Global Conflict Tracker, Islamic states or organizations are currently involved in five of six ongoing civil wars and 22 of 28 global conflicts (Gilmore, 2016). It is not surprising, then, that the youth in these countries need a viable alternative, a way out, especially given all their accumulated anger and frustration. In the absence of such alternatives, many youth have been exposed to extremist groups like Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). One might even go so far as to conclude that Samuel Huntington's theory, as outlined in his book *Clash of Civilizations* (1996), is being proven correct in a world where certain circles in the West

believe that Islamic culture doesn't allow Muslim-majority countries to develop and modernize.

Contrary to this belief, there was one unique period of time in the first half of the twentieth century during which Turkey, with its 99% Muslim population, embarked on an unprecedented modernization project under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Emerging from its heritage as part of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 by Atatürk as a secular nation-state. In the ensuing years, many Westernizing reforms were achieved under Atatürk's rule, so much so that the era is sometimes called the "Turkish Renaissance," evolving at a relentless pace until 1946 (Hanioglu, 2011, p. 153). Indeed, the early Turkish Republic squeezed a comprehensive modernization process into just a few decades, with the period between 1923 and 1946 attracting to the new republic such iconic figures as educator John Dewey and leading German scientists who sought shelter from rising fascism in Europe.

Austin Bay (2011) contends that the reforms made by Atatürk after the founding of the Turkish Republic have been ignored by both academia and political analysts. With this in mind, I analyzed the aforementioned period in a new light. I first sought an answer to this question: Could the early Turkish Republic led by Atatürk serve as a viable model for Muslim-majority countries today?

I will develop a clear picture of what was planned—and achieved—under Atatürk's leadership. The institutions implemented during the Reform period are assessed on one level, followed by analysis of the educational reforms undertaken at the same time. I contend that the primary rationale for all the reforms that took place under Atatürk's leadership was the following: if people are educated and empowered, they will

protect national democratic institutions and, consequently, their democratic rights. Figure 1 illustrates the main mechanism of Atatürk's reforms.

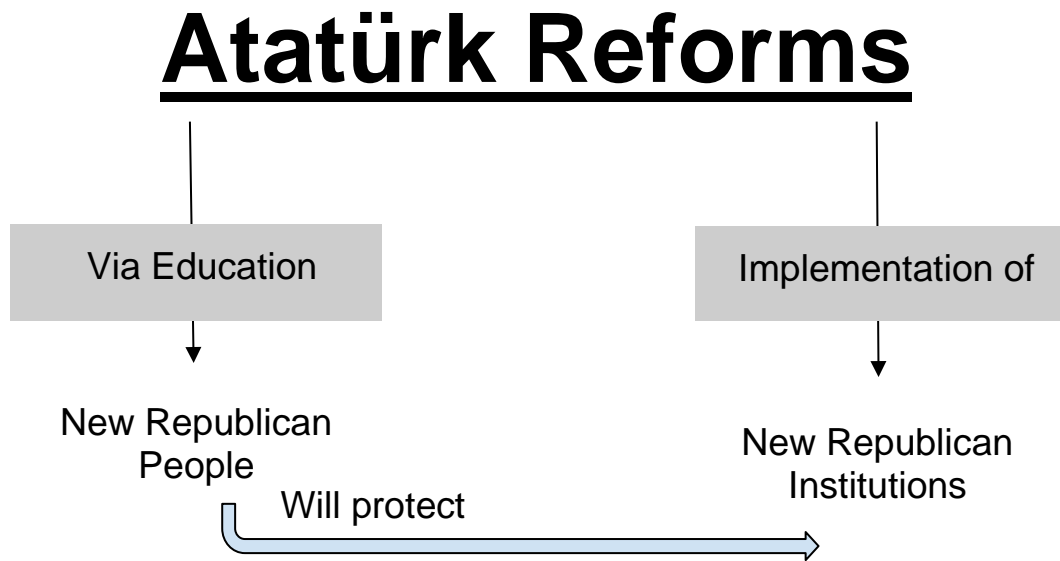


Figure 1. Structure of Atatürk's Reforms.

Source: developed by the thesis author

I also discuss whether New Republic institutions were conducive to the development of Turkish society, from the perspective of domestic institutions, basing my considerations on the theory developed by Daron Acemoğlu and James Robinson (2012).

Following the death of Atatürk in 1938, things did not continue smoothly, and the momentum for change was lost even before 1950—the year Turkey's Democratic Party came to power in a peaceful process after uninterrupted rule by Atatürk's RPP party for 27 years. İlter Turan (2015) describes the democratic progress made in the Turkish Republic as “two steps forward, one step back” in his book of the same title. The republic that had been designed to lead contemporary civilization became a partially democratic

regime under military tutelage for almost 50 years in the name of Kemalism, the ideology of Kemal Atatürk (Kuru, 2012), before giving way to authoritarianism and becoming a “not free” country.

It must be said that Turkey today is not what Atatürk envisioned when he founded the Turkish Republic. As of this writing (2019), Turkey cannot be considered a politically free country; it is ranked 157 among 180 countries in the Press Freedom Index (Freedom House, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2018). It ranks 62 in the world in terms of GDP per capita (IMF, 2018). However, on the bright side, Turkey’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), based on a population of almost 80 million, is among the top 20 countries of the world.

In my research I found that a transformative education was at the heart of the Atatürk reforms in the early Turkish Republic. I explore the momentum that pushed forward that kind of education during the entire reform period. Contrary to generally accepted belief, I hypothesize that teachers, not the military, were considered by Atatürk to be the real guardians of the Turkish Republic. That belief underlies the structure of this thesis.

In Chapter II, the transition in Turkey, from the late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, is scrutinized in order to understand the context and background of the coming reforms. I analyze Atatürk reforms from an institutional perspective in the light of inclusive or extractive domestic institutions—a dichotomy developed by Acemoğlu and Robinson (2012). As shown in Figure 1 above, implementation of New Republican Institutions occurred in parallel with education reforms, thus enabling the New



Republican People to become educated under the guidance of modern science and able to protect the New Republican Institutions and themselves.

Turkish reforms during the period 1923 to 1945 are considered in Chapter III. The Turkish Modernization Process was a radical process during which old traditional institutions were replaced with the new Western institutions. In this context, I examine the new culture shaping society, and their effects on language, religion, and the economy, looking for a pattern in the reform period that may have paved the way for inclusive institutions—and consequently prosperity—in the country.

In Chapter IV, Turkish educational reforms are analyzed as they evolved during Atatürk's reforms. To show upward trends in education and the propelling power and momentum of an educated society, I calculated rates of change in certain educational variables, finding a diminishing trend that took hold after outstanding rates of change occurred during the time of Atatürk.

Chapter V is devoted to Village Institutes (VIs), which were the culmination of Atatürk's educational reforms, a breakthrough that differentiated Atatürk's reforms from modernization efforts in the Ottoman era. Those efforts were viewed as privileges for the ruling elite, and were not available to the peasants and common people. I undertake an educational assessment of VIs and compare them with the global education standards of today, to demonstrate the quality of education provided. Both the educational assessment and the numbers and rate of change calculations give insight into this milestone in Turkish educational history.

Chapter VI provides a critique of Atatürk and the reforms. I examine the period between 1923 and 1946 from an educational perspective and in light of the theory of

domestic institutions by Acemoğlu & Robinson (2012). But there were also criticisms and arguments against the Atatürk reforms, which I discuss in some detail. Chapter VII concludes with a synopsis of my findings and my thoughts on the influence of Atatürk's reforms.

My aim in this thesis is to determine the dynamics of the Atatürk period from an educational perspective in the light of the theory of domestic institutions. I also elaborate on the implications of education and its effects on the development of Turkey—and for any Muslim-majority nation.

## Chapter II

### From Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic

The Ottoman Empire, predecessor of modern-day Turkey, ruled throughout most of the Middle East for almost 400 years, with the Ottoman sultan as caliph, the title of which is equal to the Pope in Christianity. Since the Sultan was believed to be the representative of God, he had absolute authority over all Muslims. For example, Tunisia, the only democratic Muslim-majority country today, and the other countries shaken by Jasmine Revolution were all under the rule of Ottoman caliph for centuries. For all these countries that emerged after the Ottoman rule or, if a working model could be identified for the countries with certain demographics and background, then it would be applied to other, similar countries. Young Turkey did have that potential to be a leader country in a dramatically changing world that had finished off its forefathers.

Standing on a strong heritage but being aware of the requirements of the modernity, The Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his associates, who aimed to reach “the level of contemporary civilization” while at the same time jettisoning the caliphate to achieve their new secular vision. Atatürk believed in one universal world civilization in which the young Turkish Republic would become an integral part (Mango, 1999; Lewis, 1962). Therefore, the political model that evolved under Atatürk’s leadership could provide a good role model of what the world is looking for in order to avoid (in Samuel Huntington’s words) a “clash of civilizations.”

Using the terminology of Acemoğlu and Robinson (2012), the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic was a “critical juncture,” what the two authors define as a historic turning point that disrupts the existing political and economic balance in a country. By definition, critical junctures may break the boundaries of the status quo and open the way for a new set of institutions for society. However, these new inclusive institutions do not necessarily replace the old extractive ones (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, pp. 121, 431).

Robert Michels argues that during this process, new emerging elite will utilize vicious cycles in extractive institutions because of a sociological pattern he named the “Iron Law of Oligarchy” (cited in Sluyter-Beltrão, 2017). In other words, if there was a vicious circle by which privileged people obtained benefits by maintaining the status quo, then the new ruling elite would tend to keep those privileges and benefits to themselves by using the same system (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, p. 364).

Zürcher (2005) points out that there was complete continuity between the Late Ottoman Empire (the old regime with its vicious cycles) and the Early Republic Periods (the new regime). In fact, the entirety of human capital in the Early Republic was accumulated through the schools and systems of Abdul Hamid II (r. 1876-1908). Atatürk took on this major challenge by trying to creatively destroy the old extracting institutions and replace them with new ones while leading the new generation of Ottoman people asking for a change.

### Late Ottoman Empire Dynamics

The nineteenth century was a time of change for the Ottoman Empire. Some progressive moves were initiated by Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839), named the *Gavur Padisah* (Infidel Sultan) because of the secular reforms he introduced to the education system, especially in military schools (Berkes, 1964, p. 169). The Ottoman army became the first institution modernized in the Western style, and it led the way for many other institutions in the Empire (Bakır, 2016). Lewis (1962) describes this period as having the “seeds of revolution,” a time during which educated people could see how backward their country once they realized the scientific perspectives they had gained at those schools (pp. 126-127).

Before the turn of the twentieth century, the Royal Colleges of the Ottoman Empire were especially fertile grounds for new and progressive ideas. Graduates of these schools eventually led a substantial opposition movement against the Sultan—and young Mustafa Kemal was a member of that movement (Hanioglu, 2011). Winds of change were blowing in the Empire, bringing forward such free thinkers as Namık Kemal and Ziya Gökalp. Inalcık (2007) asserts that the period between 1890 and 1914 was an era of enlightenment and a major source of Kemalist thinking (p. 34).

In the era of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (called the Hamidian era, r. 1876-1909), a new model of education with a new purpose was designed and its influence diffused throughout the country. Establishing a social discipline through modern education was the aim of the Sultan, who tried to control a vast geography. A scholarly education supported by madrasas was standard in the empire. The Sultan wanted to have religious schools along with modern schools, especially since the latter were necessary to help him stand against the growing power of the West. However, this two-fold nature of education

created dualism in society: on one side stood the secularly educated reformists, on the other side were the conservative masses who took Islam's holy Quran as their core curriculum. Unlike Atatürk, the Sultan seemed to believe modernization applied only to the ruling elite, and the rest of society should be kept under control through censorship, police power, and spies (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p. 57; Lewis, 1962; Zürcher, 2005).

Despite the fact that the burgeoning new elite had a secular education, the Ottoman Empire had a complex political hierarchy through which transmission of new ideas and change was almost impossible. Minorities of different faiths who lived in separate quarters did not usually communicate with wider Ottoman society, even though they did communicate with the rising West. Likewise, foreigners who spoke different languages and adhered to other faiths were limited in their communicative capacity to influence Ottoman society. Only Ottoman dignitaries had the will and the ability to transmit Western changes into Turkish society (Göçek, 1987, p. 136). Thus, having been to many cities both in the East and in the West, Atatürk, as a high-ranking officer, was aware of the social dynamics and drew his own conclusions regarding the problems and handicaps of Ottoman society. His notes and writings formed what would become the first draft of the foundations of the Turkish modernization process (Mango, 1999).

Modernization reforms in the Ottoman Empire started with Selim III (r. 1789-1807), and culminated in the Young Turk revolution of 1908 (İnalcık, 2007; Zürcher 2005; Lewis 1962). But there were always reactionary forces in the state and in society against reforms. Berkes (2006) argues that despite the strong anti-reform movement, the emergence of a secular nation-state in the form of a Turkish Republic was an inevitable result of the Ottoman-Turkish modernization that began in the eighteenth century with

Sultan Selim. İnalçık (2007) sees Atatürk as the end product of these Westernization efforts that had lasted for about 150 years (p. 65).

### Old Habits Die Hard

The Ottoman Empire was an arena for endless fights between progressives who believed in Western values and traditionalists who were convinced that salvation could only be found in *Şeriat*, that is, a life guided by the Quran. After the comprehensive reforms of the late eighteenth century, Sultan Selim III was killed by reactionaries who replaced him with an anti-reformist sultan, who was killed within a year by his reformist brother Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839).

In this world of high-stakes drama, the essential political actors were the Chief Mufti and Janissaries, who were opposed to changes in the system. Their intention was to preserve their privileged position and maintain the status quo. Janissaries were involved in the guilds and various trades in Istanbul, which made them economic players in Istanbul (Kafadar, 1991; Lewis, 1962, pp. 72-73). In this context, it is easy to see how difficult it would be to break old institutions and the vicious cycles in society, especially given the desire by elites to maintain the Iron Law of Oligarchy, mentioned earlier.

### Turkey Prior to Atatürk Reforms

Ahmet Haşim describes people in Anatolia at the beginning of the twentieth century as living perhaps hundreds of years behind the rest of civilization (Sengor, 2014, p. 12). During the decade between 1912 and 1922, almost one-quarter of the Anatolian population died in wars, and in some regions this figure increased to 60 percent (Lewis,

1962). Anatolia lost most of its Greek and Armenian population in the first quarter of the twentieth century, during which the non-Muslim population dropped from 20 percent to 2 percent. With the loss of professionals and artisans, most of whom were not Muslim, Turkey in 1923 was economically more backward than it had been ten years earlier (Zurcher, 2005). In other words, Atatürk took over amid the ruins of a once-great empire (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p. 320).

To make matters worse, there was also an entrenched, organized resistance against reform. Students of theology rioted against reform, which was a constant component of the Ottoman reform process. Lewis (1962) points out that there is conclusive evidence of provocation and manipulation by the ruling elite during these continuous reactionary events (p. 157). Since Atatürk himself experienced the last period of the Ottoman Empire, he undoubtedly observed that the greatest obstacles to development and reform were the traditionalists who used religion to maintain the status quo. He stated his point of view in the following words: “Read and listen our history. You’ll see that what ruins, enslaves, and ruins nations have always come from the blasphemy and evil under the cover of religion” (Atatürk, 1927). Taking into consideration not only the Iron Law of Oligarchy but also the fact that Turkey at that time was a highly uneducated country, it is clear how hard it would have been to break the privileges enjoyed by certain classes and their unwillingness to make any changes on behalf of the common people. The old system would certainly resist, and it did.



### Chapter III

#### Atatürk Reforms, 1923-1946

Along with reactionaries, there always have been freethinkers and reformists in the Islamic world—many are alive today. However, no one has ever approached the fearless determination and character of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. What are today called the Atatürk reforms began with the founding of the Turkish Republic, and continued for eight more years after Atatürk died. Feroz Ahmad (2005) contends that Atatürk promoted many more radical reforms than did the Union & Progress Party of the Ottoman Empire. The primary goal of that party had been to save the empire through pragmatic reforms, whereas Atatürk was a radical revolutionary. However, he had to build a new republic out of the heritage of the Ottoman Empire, and it is very difficult to create something new out of nothing (Ahmad, 2005, p. 7).

Atatürk embarked on Westernization and secular reforms in an effort to modernize Turkey when it was largely underdeveloped, and his efforts continued until his death in 1938. However, the projects he started and the momentum he created continued even after his death, until 1946 when progressive cadres of the RPP were replaced by conservatives. It was then that the progressive minister Hasan Ali Yücel and his colleagues at the Ministry of Education were replaced by conservative members who destroyed the new progressive education system, thus marking the end of what is often called the Turkish Renaissance (Şengör, 2001, p. 5; İnalcık, 2007, p. 125).

## The Culture That Shaped a New Society

*Culture is the foundation of the Republic of Turkey*

—M.K. Atatürk

Between 1923 and 1938, Atatürk attempted to create a new infrastructure for the Turkish people, seeking to transform them and the country in accordance with the New Culture of the Republic.. A new social regulation titled “The Women’s Suffrage, Dress Code, Abolition of Titles and Weekend Act” created a social culture to enable the “New People” to fully integrate with the Western world. However, the culture created by Atatürk was not meant to imitate the West, but was intended as a new Turkish culture that would adopt the principles of modern society and science. Put another way, Atatürk wanted to create a local Turkish culture that would become part of the world’s culture. This new Turkish culture and new society would be completely different from the earlier traditional Ottoman culture.

At the outset, Atatürk knew that the way to build a new republic was through education (Önk, 2015). The reforms needed to create the new republic and its “New People” lacked many resources. For instance, the literacy rate in Turkey was about 10 percent, and prior to the reforms most Anatolians were uneducated. Atatürk saw this as an advantage that would allow him to destroy the old and implement the new with little or no resistance from the uneducated masses. The superiority of everything purely Turkish superseded non-Turkish as the cornerstone of the new culture. The new regime suppressed followers of the old regime and silenced the media. Thereafter, a practical and functional education policy was implemented.

Social anthropologist Paul Sterling’s decades-long sociological work, which began in the 1940s, is focused on a village in central Anatolia and offers rich insights into

the transformations initiated by Atatürk, bringing about new opportunities and benefits to people who were once desperately poor (Sterling, 1965). Mango (1999) describes the process of modernization in the Early Republic as destined to become a liberal democracy by illiberal means. To understand how this concept of “liberal democracy” was perceived abroad, I analyzed news coverage of Atatürk’s reforms as covered by the *New York Times* from 1923 to 1938. The *Times* coverage revealed how the reforms were perceived in America. It also demonstrated that Turkish society was perceived to be on a revolutionary and progressive path where women rights and educational reform were among the most prominent drivers.

I should emphasize that Turkish modernization via the Atatürk reforms was structured from top to bottom, but it also was aimed at empowering sub-layers. The reforms of the Atatürk period occurred during a period of time between the Late Ottoman period and the period following Atatürk’s death. An English traveler named Lilo Linke (1938) toured throughout Turkey in the mid-1930s. Among her findings, she wrote that a significant transformation into democracy could be felt in the country. On the other hand, author G. Lewis (1962), an authority on Turkish and Middle Eastern History, argues that the transformation of Turkey modernized but did not Westernize the country following the Atatürk reforms. Georges Duhamel (1956), a French intellectual and member of the Académie Française, concluded after visiting the country in 1954 that the general mentality of the Turkish population had risen dramatically, and he predicted that the nation would raise productive and intellectual people who would find their place in the civilized world (p. 83).

Considering society from another perspective, Fortna (2011) found that it was difficult to estimate literacy rates in Turkey before World War II. Karpas (2002) put the literacy rate at 15 percent at the end of the nineteenth century, but by 1927, the literacy rate had dropped to 10.6 percent (Turksat, 2018). That drop could be explained by the departure of many non-Muslims, most of whom were literate and professionally competent. In addition to hundreds of thousands of Armenians lost in the early 20th century, with the mutual immigration agreement between Turkey and Greece in 1923, 1,221,489 Greeks left Turkey for Greece in return of 355,000 Turks living in Greece (Motta, 2013), (Zürcher, 2005).

Another cultural factor, turnout rate at elections, shows that democratic awareness eventually increased in the Early Republic despite the fact that there was only a single party in the country. Table 1 shows a steady increase in election turnout, suggesting that a democratic consciousness was becoming apparent.

Table 1. Turnout at National Elections.

Year	Percentage of Population
1927	23%
1931	45% (no RPP candidates in some districts, so independent deputies were also elected.)
1935	69% (women were allowed to vote and be voted for)
1939	77.8 %

Source: Ersel, et al., 2005, p. 240.

## New Language

*The cornerstone of education is an easy system of reading and writing.*

*The key to this is the new Turkish alphabet based on the Latin script.*

—M.K. Atatürk

The Turkish language cannot be separated from the educational vision that was at the center of the reforms of the new Turkish culture. If a people cannot have instruction in their native language, they and their society will not progress. Also I would point out that the Ottoman language at the time was full of Arabic and Persian terms combined with Turkish verbs, which students had to memorize. Even today, UNESCO strongly supports the need for education in the mother language of any student (UNESCO, 2018).

An anecdote reflects this key importance. In 1937, Atatürk visited Sivas High School, and walked into a geometry class. He saw the phrase “*Müsellesin zaviyetan-ı dahiletan mecmu’ü yüz seksen derecedir,*” a Turkish sentence written with Arabic terms, in an old geometry book. When he asked what this sentence meant, the students could not explain the meaning. So he went to the blackboard and explained the phrase and all other geometric terms in the pure Turkish language. The sentence simply meant, “The sum of angles inside a triangle is 180 degrees.” But when written in unknown Arabic words, there was no other way than memorizing for those students. According to the students, for the first time they understood a geometry fundamental. To resolve the issue further, Atatürk wrote a book on geometry (1937) using terms derived from Turkish verbs and discarding Arabic and Persian nouns and clauses that the Turkish students could not comprehend.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A student in that class, the father of computer engineering professor Cem Say, wrote this story years later on his father's behalf (Say, 2016).

Noted journalist D. Hotham argued that the transformation of the Turkish language in 40 years was equivalent to changes in English that took more than 600 years (1972, p. 18). According to Alpay, purification efforts in Turkish not only helped the nation to develop but it also revived the original roots of Turkish words. Deriving words from their original roots gives integrity to the language and improves their connotations. Further, a language often survives with its roots and integrity intact despite traumatic change (Alpay, 2018, p. 179). Alpay also pointed out that Turkish language reform brought about assimilation. The reform period saw the implementation of a single official language for the new Turkish Republic, which was a requirement for being a Nation State.

Since language reflects thinking, the more a language develops, the more thought develops; language and thought feed each other and create an educational synergy. Research shows that education in a mother or familiar language is much more efficient than education in an unfamiliar language because children can more easily guess the meaning of the terms derived in their own language (Kosonen, 2005).

The people of Anatolia never really adopted the Ottoman language, which included ornate Arabic and Persian words derived from an unfamiliar language. There was always a gap between the Turkish language spoken among the general population and the language used by the Ottoman elite. Atatürk's language reform closed this gap and made Turkish a language of instruction. He also imposed the European Latin alphabet as a way to promote the Turkish people's awareness of their own nationality with letters uniquely designed for Turkish phonetics..

More importantly, the new language functioned as a language of instruction, and higher literacy rates were achieved as a result of the simpler phonetics. Even German scientists, who came to teach in Turkey after escaping Nazism, not only used Turkish in their scientific fields but also derived words and scientific terms from Turkish roots. Today's popular words like *çözelti* (solution) and *çözücü* (solvent) are two examples from that era (Reiman, 2006: 160).

### New Religion

Atatürk was continually questioned because of his secular character, and he believed that a monolithic world religion was an unattainable myth (Atatürk, 1927). However, he also believed Islam was the religion of reason, and he never uttered a word against it (İnalcık, 2007, p. 40). That said, perhaps the most controversial reform undertaken by Atatürk was religious reform. A new religion was developed within the framework of the new culture and society of the Republic. The basis of this new religion parallel to Turkish nationalism can be seen in the following poem written by Ziya Gökalp before the founding of the Republic:

A country, in the mosque of which adhan is chanted in Turkish,  
The peasant understands the meaning of begging in his prayer,  
A country in the school of which Quran is read in Turkish,  
Everybody, young and elderly, gets to know the command of Allah,  
You, young Turkish boy, this is the place you call motherland.

—Atalay Aydar, 2006, p. 55

Religion was important to traditionalists in the late Ottoman period who used it to mobilize people against reforms during the time of Selim III. Knowing this, Atatürk intentionally sought to keep religion private in order to minimize its power to provoke people against reforms. But Atatürk also wanted to help people understand the Quran. With the help of Atatürk's religious reforms, the Turkish people, who had worshipped for centuries without understanding their religion, could now worship with some understanding of the prayers and verses.

The first *adhan* (call to prayer) was chanted in Turkish in 1932, and the first Quran translated into Turkish was introduced in 1935. However, both of these innovations caused backlash and protests in religious circles as the Turkish people were accustomed to the Arabic *adhan*, which had been chanted for almost a millennium and the Turkish translation of the Quran was seen as an aberration by hard-line Islamists. Some people were even sent to prison for their protests. Thus, in the first free Turkish elections held in 1950, the promise of a return to the Arabic *adhan* probably played a significant role in the victory by the Democratic Party, which campaigned on a promise to change the Turkish *adhan* back to its original Arabic form within months after coming to power. In contrast, the Turkish Quran was adopted by the Turkish people (Aydar, 2006), and even though Turkish Adhan was never chanted in any mosque after 1950, the Turkish Quran can be found in most bookshops and almost every Turkish household today.

The most concrete example of how religion was used by the ruling elite to prevent the development and progress of Turkey was the coming of printing to the Ottoman Empire. The printing press was first used in Turkey in 1445, but Sultan Bayezid II issued



an edict banning its use by all Muslims because it was a tool made by “infidels.” It was not until 1727 that a printing press was allowed following another decree by Sultan Ahmet III. However, only 19 books were published over the next 20 years due to pressure from the ruling elite who gave religious pretexts for the prohibition against printing (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012, p. 231).

### A New Economy

Within Atatürk’s integrated reform system, Turkey’s new economy operated under the following principles:

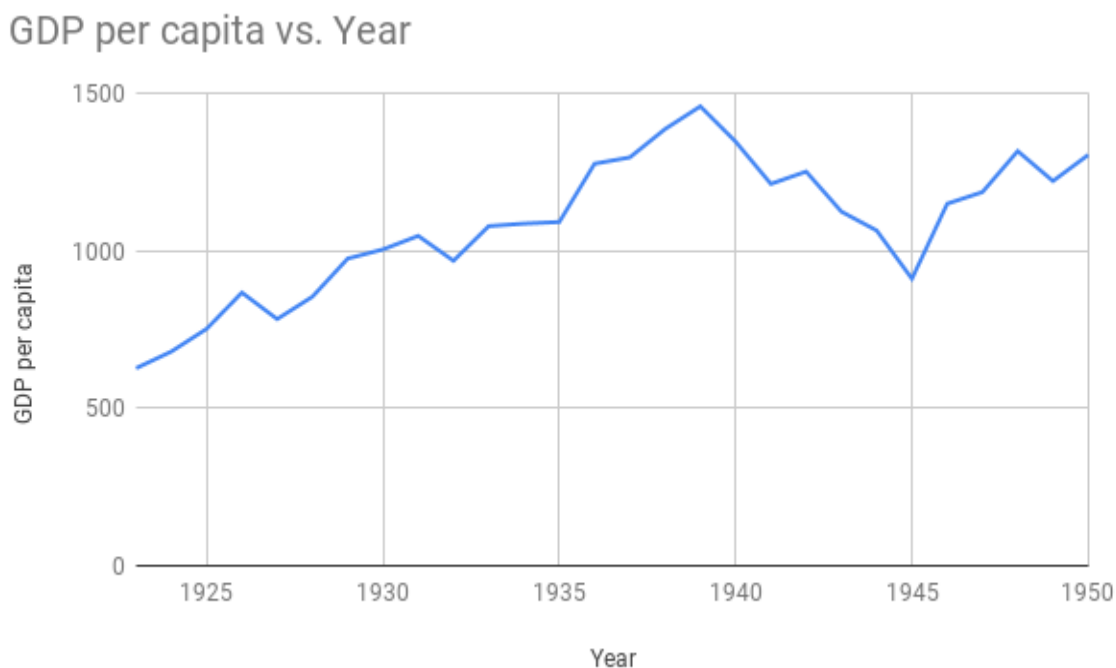
- Investment in human capital, innovation, and knowledge are crucial contributors to economic growth.
- Education in every sense is one of the fundamental factors of development.
- No country can achieve sustainable economic development without substantial investment in human capital.

Atatürk and his administration sought to implement inclusive economic institutions that would open the way for upcoming generations. For that reason, Istanbul was abandoned as an economic center, and a more balanced economic distribution was established across the country (Mango, 1999, p. 40).

During the period when Atatürk was planning and implementing new reforms, the world was struggling through the Great Depression. Nevertheless, Turkey’s GDP per capita continued to increase right up to the outbreak of World War II, as shown in Figure 2. World economies were largely protectionist during this period between two world wars, which affected the early Turkish republic (Frieden & Lake, 2014, p. 6). Given these

economic conditions, the country implemented its first five-year development plan, from 1934 to 1938. Turkey was one of the first developing countries to move forward with industrialization, as state-owned enterprises established an industrial infrastructure (Yücel, 2015, pp. 6, 125).

Figure 2. GDP per capita in Turkey, 1923-1950.



Source: Gröningen Growth and Development Center, 2018.

The worst economic problems affected peasants in the Anatolian heartland. One form of relief occurred in 1925 when *aşar* (an agricultural tax and a major burden on Turkish peasants) was lifted (Ersel, et al., 2005, p. 67). Atatürk took possession of more than 38,680 acres, divided the land into many farms, and developed them into productive farms. Some of these were Ankara Forest Farm, Nation Chopper Farms in Yalova, and Piloğlu Farm in Tarsus, all of which Atatürk later donated to the Turkish Treasury (Ersel, et al., 2005, p. 282).

As mentioned earlier, the ruling elites were always concerned that economic or technological developments might spur changes that would reduce their privileges and benefits or topple them from positions of power. For example, the Russian Tsar used his power to prevent the development of Russian railways because he thought they might be used to mobilize opposition against him (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012). Unlike the Russians, however, Atatürk invited scientists from abroad and let Turkish private enterprise develop in order to catch up with business in developed nations. During the early Republican era, economic institutions were more inclusive than political institutions, but eventually political institutions followed the policies of inclusivity espoused by economic institutions after 1950.

The army remained small throughout the Atatürk period. Defense expenditures were reduced to about one-quarter of the amount in previous budgets—unlike a military regime that would have kept expenditures high in anticipation of a possible war. This attitude of reduced expenditures captures the sentiment behind Atatürk’s famous motto: “Peace at home, peace in world.” However, a year after his death, in 1939 the army expanded rapidly, and defense expenditures rose to more than half of the national budget for the duration of World War II (Britannica, 2018).

### Reforms from the Perspective of Domestic Institutions

In their critically acclaimed book *Why Nations Fail*, Acemoğlu and Robinson (2012) provide a well-grounded explanation of economic development in countries. The authors analyze historical examples ranging from Neolithic times to the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in the Arab world. At the core of the authors’ theory are political and

economic institutions that determine a country's prosperity. In their view, a country will be rich or poor depending on the quality of its institutions.

The authors define two types of institutions that can be found in countries.

*Inclusive institutions* can only be demanded, formed, and worked by free-minded, democratic individuals who were cultivated in a conducive educational system. Inclusive institutions allow everybody to engage in the national economy in a system of fair competition under the rule of law. *Extractive institutions*, on the other hand, ensure the prosperity of the few at the expense of the many.

To cultivate an educated populace, the founding fathers of the young republic made education the central component of Turkey's reforms. The political institutions of the early Turkish republic were of the inclusive type, at least by the standards of their time. The Ottoman Empire was full of extractive institutions run by a ruling elite. Thus the founding of the republic came at a critical juncture that required moving away from the old extractive institutions.

In *Why Nations Fail*, Acemoğlu and Robinson theorized that extractive institutions have vicious cycles that resist change and innovation. According to the authors, small institutional differences play a crucial role during critical junctures, and are, by their nature, temporary (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012, p. 173). The Republican People's Party (RPP), ruling under the principle of revolutionism, created critical junctures that shook the establishment and caused "unease" in the establishment. A striking example demonstrates the strong link between economic and political institutions.

Early in the formation of the Turkish republic, a bill for land reform that could bring prosperity to poor peasants was challenged openly by landowners in the political party. Four leading members of Parliament opposed the law in a petition that came to be known as the “Petition of Four” (Turan, 2015, pp. 68-69). In the bill, the influential landowners would not let peasants take ownership of animals and land and thereby be able to participate in actively developing the country. Even though Law No. 4753 “Getting Farmers to be Landowners” was passed in 1945, the peasants were not aware of it. If they had been, or if they had political power, they might have enforced the bill to bring better economic conditions. Figure 3 illustrates the importance of enlightened education that empowers people to obtain better economic results.

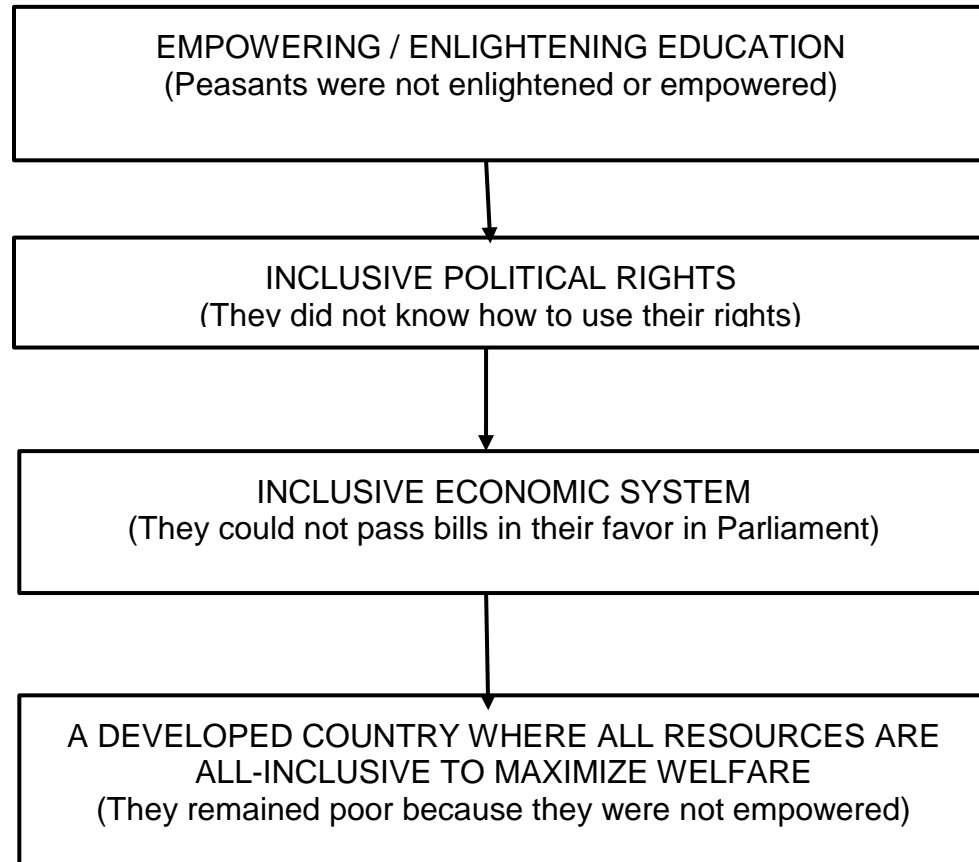
Atatürk’s authoritarian rule did not combine well with inclusivity, especially since some considered him an authoritarian leader, even a dictator (Mango, 1999; Lewis 1962; Zürcher, 2005). Hobsbawm describes this period as the “age of catastrophes,” a time when there were just 35 elected constitutional governments in the world, and by 1938 this figure had plummeted to 17. By 1944, there were only 12 democracies among 64 countries (Hobsbawm, 1994; Toprak, 2005, p. 1053).

Even though there were certainly problems in the execution, the Turkish Republic initiated a Western style constitution in 1924 by which individual rights were given in following clause:

Public Law of the Turks, Articles 68-88: Section V defines the general rights and freedoms afforded to the Turkish people under the new government. These rights include free speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, and freedom of religion. This section also specifically defines the term “Turk” in a legal manner (not based on ethnicity or religion).

Figure 3. The Importance of Enlightenment and Empowerment.

(In parentheses, a description of unempowered peasants.)



Source: developed by thesis author.

Hobsbawm argues that the weakest aspect of the Atatürk reforms was that they were restricted to the urban elite. He sees the lack of a relationship with the masses as a handicap for the reforms (Hobsbawm, 1987). If the educational innovations that empower and enlighten masses had not been blocked, the only caveat Hobsbawm specified would be eliminated and we probably would have been talking about a Turkish success today. Education was the driving force at the heart of the reforms. Without that, the structural reforms would not make sense—and nobody knew this better than Atatürk.

## Chapter IV

### Education Reforms in Turkey

*Teachers are the one and only people who save nations.*  
—Atatürk

Education was the center and driver of all of Atatürk's reforms. He realized the country could not achieve sustainable economic development unless it made a substantial investment in its human capital. After the social infrastructure came into place in the 1920s, a program of contemporary education was initiated.

#### Atatürk: An Education Leader

In his book *The Speech* (1927), it is apparent that Atatürk had developed a scientific problem-solving methodology, and several examples were apparent throughout his lifetime. He began by diagnosing problems based on his observations, then developed hypotheses as he researched and consulted with experts. If a hypothesis failed, he tested other hypotheses until he identified a solution.

A similar pattern is apparent in his reforms: diagnose a problem in a Turkish institution, find a model already working in a developed country, then apply this model to Turkey with expert advice and certain modifications. However, it was different with education because educating the Turkish people required a more complex process. Atatürk recognized the gravity of the situation as he traveled around the country, and it was Atatürk's character traits that enabled him to carry out successful institutional reforms.

The fundamental characteristics of Atatürk's personality were already formed by the time he began the reforms. He had an inflated sense of himself, and a strong belief that he was uniquely endowed with the right to assert his will. This type of orientation often leads to a narcissistic personality disorder, but a psychobiography by Volkan and Itzkowitz (1984) concluded that Atatürk was able to draw realistic borders around his proclivities. According to Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, Atatürk had one burning ambition: that "the Turkish nation should be put ahead of all others with one blow" (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p. 318). Psychological forces were a reparative part of his nature but he could never find peace of mind for himself (p. 320), which may have triggered his ceaseless desire to modernize the country.

He was born into a house that was mourning his dead siblings, with the outcome that he became a kind of "savior" for his mother—a projection that became evident as he took on the role of national hero, to save and modernize the nation (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p. 356). Unlike destructive narcissistic leaders like Hitler and Stalin, Atatürk was a reparative narcissistic leader who devoted his energy to modernizing the country rather than invading its neighbors or waging wars (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p. 358). He was a positivist who believed in enlightenment, like that which came out of the 1789 French Revolution.

He believed in scientific counseling during the decision-making process, and was quick to implement his ideas (İnalçık, 2007, p. 42). In the reforms that he wanted to implement, he advocated radical revolutionary modernization combined with full adoption of Western values. He defined modernization as reaching a level of contemporary civilization and Westernization (İnalçık, 2007, pp. 39-40; Mango, 1999,



pp. 466-467). In the process of Education Reforms, Atatürk and his friends embraced notions of nationalism, secularism, and positivism.

#### Education Reforms, 1923-1946

As a proponent of the scientific method, in 1930 Atatürk decided to take an extensive tour of the country to observe its current situation and to explain the principles of the republic to the people (Kuyaş, 2005, p. 128). Hasan Ali Yücel went with him on this trip, and they discussed the problems and possible solutions (Yücel, 1937).

As part of the next stage of his methodology, numerous foreign consultants were invited to Turkey, including Omar Buyse (education), John Dewey (education), Alfred Jung (psychology), Edwin Walter Kemmerer (economics), and Alfred Kühne (business). İlhan Başgöz argues that little benefit was gained from these experts as they did not know much about Turkey and its issues and circumstances. An educational “roadmap” drawn by these scientists largely aligned what they saw with the older ideas of the early Turkish republic (Tanyer, 2012, p. 28; Başgöz, 2010).

Following reports provided by the foreign experts, Atatürk appointed people he deemed to be innovative to serve as ministers of education, at the same time dismissing the ministers who had not achieved earlier expected successes. During this time (1924-1938), during which the *Tevhid-i Tedrisat* (Unification of Education) Act was implemented, 14 Ministers of Education were appointed and served, including physicians, military officers, lawyers, teachers, and diplomats. A high turnover rate among the ministers occurred because of Atatürk’s results-oriented and compulsive nature. It is interesting to note, however, that while the powers of other ministries were

reduced, the powers of the Ministry of National Education were increased (Tonguç, 1970: p. 305). The 1924 Unification of Education Act connected all of the educational institutions to the Ministry of Public Education, thus eradicating the earlier dual nature of Ottoman education in society.

The second milestone in educational reform was the determination to overcome illiteracy. With the adoption of a new alphabet, the National Education Minister passed a law making literacy courses compulsory for people between the ages of 16 and 30. Working with a dedicated minister, Atatürk encouraged people with his own example of active participation, and by 1928, almost 1.5 million reading certificates were distributed in a country of about 10 million people at the time (Bozkurt, 2009). Atatürk became headmaster of the People's Schools (predecessors of People's Houses which I will discuss next). People learned how to read and write, do mathematics, and learned about health. Under Atatürk's instructions, teachers gave the *Book of Constitution* as a gift to those who learned how to read and write (Baykurt, 2000, p. 122).

### People's Houses

National philosopher Ziya Gökalp inspired the founding of People's Houses (PH) (Inalcik, 2007, p. 186), which were opened in 1932. These schools offered nine fields of activity: language and literature, fine arts, stage and performance arts, sports, social help, courses for the people, library and publications, village development, history, and museums. That same year, students were trained for theatre and sent to Anatolia to stage nationalist plays that promoted Republican values (Ersel, et al., 2005, p. 198). As a role model, Atatürk frequently visited PHs during the 1930s (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p.

325). There were many negotiations between local elites and the Turkish capital which occurred under the auspices of PHs (Zurcher, 2005).

Prior to PHs, People's Reading Rooms opened in 1930, but subsequently became PHs in the cities while remaining People's Rooms in the villages. Many intellectuals including Hasan Hüseyin, Yaşar Kemal, Onat Kutlar, and Ülkü Tamer came from these places (Baykurt, 2000, p. 122). PHs created areas for extensive intellectual activity in the early Republic despite a strict requirement to conform to party directives. PHs also promoted publishing and encouraged a vibrant local press (Karpas, 1964). Along with party documents, PHs published hundreds of books and pamphlets filled with empirical observations and opinions about everyday life in Turkish society. Some works epitomized social mobility among the lower social strata, including the rags-to-riches story of Mehmet Zirhli, village cobbler who became a wealthy landowner in Izmir. Cities as well as smaller districts published hundreds of literature reviews, most of which avoided the dry formalism of *divan*, the literature form prominent in the Ottoman Empire. Turkish writer Yasar Kemal began his writing career as a folklorist from a PH in Adana (Karpas, 1964, p. 76). Kemal, who grew up with PHs, summarized their importance this way:

We, the artists, novelists, poets, painters of the Republican Age have learned to return to our own culture. We grew up with the world classics translated by the translation office. The establishment of People's Houses helped us. (quoted in Yeşilyaprak, 2014, p. 1)

In short, PHs were the bedrock on which a new Republic Populist mentality was established.

From another perspective, PHs are viewed as an official missionary organization by Erdogan (1998a, p. 802). Insofar as the mission of the PHs empowers and enlightens

people, that statement may be true. In 1950, there were 478 PHs in Turkey, all of which were closed in 1951 under Law No. 5830 (Başaran, 2011; Çeçen, 1990).

### University Reform

Aligned with his scientific methodology, Atatürk put Albert Malche, a professor from Switzerland, in charge of assessing Turkish universities. Malche's assessment report was followed by comprehensive university reform. Further, Philip Schwartz organized a team of leading scientists from Germany into Turkey in the 1930s. As the first decade of the republic ended some of the best scientists in Europe headed for Turkey to escape the fascism that was taking over there. Atatürk opened the doors to hundreds of Jewish scientists seeking shelter from the impending war, and they were asked to set up a modern and secular Turkish university system (Reisman, 2006, pp. 10-15; Kuyas, 2005, p. 14). For example, Ernst Reuter, the mayor of Magdeburg, Germany, before Hitler took over, came to Turkey in 1935 to work as a consultant to the government and to teach urban planning at the University of Ankara. Eventually he returned to Germany and became the first mayor of West Berlin in 1946 (Reisman, 2006, pp.70-75).

Employing German scientists to develop the country was not a first for Turkey as scholars from other countries had been invited to come to the Ottoman Empire during its modernization efforts. Fritz Arndt, a modernizer in the Early Republic, was also in charge of modernization for Darulfunun, Ottoman University in 1914 (Fişek Enstitüsü, 2017). Some foreign scientists who had not been effective in their native institutions became an integral part of the Ottoman Empire's university system in the Turkish Republic (Reisman, 2006).

The Faculty of Language, History, and Geography (FLHG) was founded in an effort to modernize the New Republic and pursue a mission of enlightenment. Atatürk joined the inauguration of the FLHG, and the students of the school were considered to be very privileged (Erbaş, 2013, p. 35). Moreover, the influx of Jewish scientists was a blessing in disguise for the faculty. Ten scientists came to FLHG and became major contributors to a Humboldtian education model<sup>2</sup> deployed by the faculty (Erbaş, 2013, pp. 36, 926). A universal approach was at the center of studies conducted by the faculty. Concepts of race, ethnicity, and nation were covered in a scientific way considering the thousands of years of cultural heritage in Anatolia. However, their departure had an adverse effect on the character of the school, according to interviews with graduates at the time (Erbaş, 2013; Başgöz, 2018).

### Critique of Education Reforms

If a comparison were made between the Turkish Republic and Ottoman Empire, one would find significant differences. For example, during the Ottoman era, students did not like the public school system because it included physical punishment and required memorization of fixed texts (Somel, 2001). Somel concluded that the Hamidian educational system did not create loyal and obedient individuals, but instead accelerated ethnic and national upheavals in the Empire owing to inadequate socio-educational policies in the public school system.

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<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt developed an education model based on two ideas of the Enlightenment: the individual and the world citizen. Humboldt believed that the university (and education in general) should enable students to become autonomous individuals and world citizens by developing their own reasoning powers in an environment of academic freedom. For further information, see <https://norseforcenewsreal.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/humboldtian-model-of-higher-education.pdf>.

Going forward, Atatürk's reforms that were part of the Turkish Republic made education much more accessible, with the number of students attending primary schools increasing from 342,000 to 765,000; the number of students attending middle schools increased from around 6,000 to 74,000; and the number of students attending high schools increasing from 1,200 to 21,000 (Kapluhan, 2011).

The sciences in Turkey (the seeds of which were sown in the 1920s) flourished in the 1940s, but were short-lived. However, liberal and secular elements remained even after the reforms lost their momentum after 1946. Kışlalı (2016) mentioned that in his high school days in the early 1950s, they were able to elect representatives, and the school principal listened to and implemented some of their decisions. Kışlalı added that he enjoyed the same democratic practices at the University of Political Sciences during the same decade (p. 75).

## Chapter V

### Village Institutes

Village Institutes (VI) were the culmination of Atatürk's education reforms. Preparations for the VIs took about 15 years and the assistance of 14 Ministers of Education until the right formula was developed and implemented. I will discuss their momentum and value, but first I will explain why VIs were so important to the reform process.

During the reign of Sultan Abdül Hamid II (the Hamidian era), Ottoman society was divided into two parts: a ruling elite and the peasants. Any attempts at modernization applied only to the ruling elite, while the masses in the rest of society were kept under control by censorship, police power, and a network of spies (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p. 57; Frey, 2015, p. 209).

With the founding of the Turkish Republic and the accompanying inclusive institutions whereby each citizen would be equal, every citizen had to be educated according to the new system. Thus the villagers, who had been left mostly uneducated during the years of the Ottoman Empire, could now begin to enjoy an empowering and enlightening education program implemented under a leader with a burning desire to modernize Turkey, thus making the newly educated masses the guardians of republican institutions.

### A Brief History of Village Institutes

The founding of VIs goes back to 1908 during the Constitutional period.

Immediately following the Young Turks revolution that year, Mustafa Şekip, an educator from Salonica, published an article entitled “Teacher Farmers and Farmer Teachers.” His ideas were revolutionary but they did not become a feasible project and eventually faded (Başgöz, 2010; Kirby, 2000). During the Early Republic, Halil Fikret Kanad, Turkey's first educator with a Ph.D. in Pedagogy, supported the idea of a system of volunteer teachers in villages. He argued that vocational education should be provided at village schools in addition to primary education (Akbulut, 2003, p. 35) .

Preparations, legislation, and the subsequent proliferation of VIs were initiated Atatürk's time. Two people in particular are considered the “fathers” of this educational innovation: Ismail Hakki Tonguc, Director of Elementary Schools under the Ministry of Education between 1935 and 1938, and Hasan Ali Yucel, General Manager of Gazi Educational Institution (the only educational institute at the time), who then became general manager of secondary education and a deputy of Izmir at the time of Atatürk's death. Both of these educators were humanists who supported Atatürk's reforms. Yucel represented the Ministry of National Education at the time of the three-month cross-country trip taken by Atatürk in 1930 during which reconstruction of the country was discussed (Başaran, 2011, pp. 42-43; Karaömerlioğlu, 1998, p. 37; Kirby, 2000; Tonguç, E., 1970).

Three waves of VIs were opened under the guidance of Tonguc before Atatürk's death, and Yücel wrote an article strongly supporting this educational movement (Yücel, 1937). Yücel prioritized VIs after becoming minister of education after Atatürk's death in



1938. After the first graduates, Yücel confidently described this unique educational innovation in these words: “These institutes are not imitation but our creativity based on the facts of our society and our homeland. This is ours, not taken from anybody else. Let the others learn it from us” (Başaran, 2011, p. 6).

The legislative bill mandating the creation of VIs became law on April 17, 1940 in Law No. 3803 after discussions at the first educational council a year earlier (Kirby, 2000; Başaran, 2011). Despite opposition from the conservative wing of RPP, 25 VIs were opened across the country between 1939 and 1948 (Kirby, 2000; Karaömerlioğlu, 1998; Tonguç, E, 1970).

During Yücel’s ministry, not only VIs but advancements such as translations of world classics, reading hours, playing instruments, theatre activities, publishing books and periodicals accelerated education and enlightenment in the early Turkish Republic (Başaran, 2011, p. 26) (Kirby, 2000, p. 145). Yücel confidently described the period this way: “We are in the era of the Renaissance. We recognize no authority after centuries. We do not think about what others say. We want to design a new life of our own considering our needs with our own minds” (Başaran, 2011, p. 51). Even though he became minister after Atatürk’s death, Yücel was a staunch follower of Atatürk as can be seen in the lines of his poem below:

*Do not say he is dead, leads us still Atatürk  
Not only his name, but everything about him Turk  
We can only pay him back if we work hard  
Being ungrateful means the day will be marred  
I have been loyal to him since my early times  
This will never change until I close my eyes.*

(Yücel, 1959, translated by the author)

If Yücel is considered the father of the Turkish Renaissance, then I. H. Tonguç would be the father of Village Institutes. He initiated this educational innovation even before Yücel became minister. However, once Yücel became minister, the spread of VIs accelerated, with 25 VIs situated across the country (see Figure 4). Tonguç, nicknamed “educated peasant,” dedicated himself to the VI project, traveling all over Turkey, sometimes with his son, Engin Tonguç, who wrote insightful research about the VIs in later decades (E. Tonguç, 1970)



Figure 4. Distribution of Village Institutes in Turkey, 1946.

Source: courtesy of Erdoğan Aslan.

### A Unique Blend of Education

The VI approach embodied the ideas of Swiss educator Johan Pestalozzi, American educator John Dewey, and others who advocated for integrating theory and practice with a systemic approach to build a stronger society. Classical education was combined with practical learning and then applied to local needs (Kirby, 2000). Thus VIs offered a combination of local and universal education. For example, famous Turkish poet and singer Aşık Veysel was a regular teacher at VIs, teaching students about folk culture and how to play authentic Turkish instruments (Dündar, 2005). Synthesizing local with universal, VI students read famous plays such as “Our City” by Thornton Wilder

and adapted it to their village as “Our Village” (Baykurt, 2000, p. 131). Co-education was also supported in the institutes. Prior to VIs, people were reluctant to send girls to school. To solve this problem, Tonguç established the policy that any male student who came to school bringing a female who also wished to be a student could join the VI without taking an entrance examination. This rule was later removed when demand of girls for institutes increased (Angı, 2017, p. 52). In fact, the differences between the two

As part of their routine, students were allowed to read whatever they found in their Institute’s library collection. Furthermore, there was no penalty for criticizing or suggesting changes to the VI administration or curriculum (Kirby, 2000, p. 56). When designing the curriculum, Tonguç and Yücel created an original Turkish model after scrutinizing the best examples in other countries including the US, Germany, Switzerland, and Soviet Union (Tonguç, 1970; Kirby, 2000; Karaömerlioğlu, 1998).

### Critics of Village Institutes

There were critics, however. Erdogan (1998b) argues that VIs were simply an ideological state apparatus designed to keep the peasant masses under control, an offshoot of the Ottoman *Devshirme* system (Erdogan, 1998b, p. 1051). But in fact, the differences between the two systems are much greater than the similarities. In the *Devshirme* system, non-Muslim boys were taken forcefully from their families and given to Muslim families. In the VI system, students of both sexes can apply freely to a VI and be accepted if they meet certain criteria. In *Devshirme*, boys were converted to Islam to serve the Sultan as a *kul* (slave); VI students freely chose to be educated and to serve their country as independent teachers (Başgöz & Wilson, 1989; Kirby, 2000).

Another critic, novelist Kemal Tahir, criticized VIs as being fascist institutions established by the Single Party regime with the aim of spreading the party's ideology. Tahir posited that graduates of VIs would become militants who defended a Nazi-like regime (Dündar, 2005, pp. 29-55). However, by all accounts the routines and procedures that underpinned education at VIs were totally removed from educating a generation that might support a fascist regime (Tonguç, 1970).

Tahir also argued that the students who came from peasant families worked harder, like adult workers, at VIs and those students might have felt additional responsibility to their villages (Dündar, 2005, p. 29.55). One graduate, Talip Apaydın, responded saying that he and his classmates had never felt like servants because they were working for themselves. He emphasized that they ate the fruits from the trees they planted and happily lived in the houses they built (Dündar, 2005, p. 30.35; Apaydın, 2009).

### Empowerment and Enlightenment

The antonym of “empower” is “enslave,” (Google, 2018), so one could infer that people who are not empowered are more likely to become enslaved. Further, many people in developing countries have little power against a minority ruling elite. The price of not being empowered is difficult to bear for people in developing countries. Carney (2011) writes about the misery of people in Third World countries who sometimes resort to selling their body organs out of sheer desperation. A 2018 newspaper headline in Turkey said farmers were only getting 10% of the market price for produce they grew because middlemen took 90% of the price (*Tarlada 10 kuruş markette 1 lira* [Tr: “10

kuruş at the farm, 1TL lira at the market”] 100 kuruş = 1 TL). As I showed in Figure 3 earlier (p. 26), when the peasant farmers have no political rights, or they cannot claim their rights, they will be unable to change the economic system, which leads to a system in which intermediaries siphon off 90% of farmers’ revenue. Add to that the fact that farmers have to pay significant taxes on the 10% they receive. Not surprisingly, Turkish farmers today are statistically the most desperate farmers in the world, according to *Agri-Evolution Alliance* (2018).

Kevin Bales argues that government corruption and impoverishment of its citizens are leading causes of enslavement. Dipietro (2016) found that higher levels of economic development reduces slavery, but higher population growth and unemployment can lead to what he terms “modern-day slavery.” It can be concluded that higher economic development is inversely proportional to slavery. In other words, there are almost no slaves among citizens of wealthy/developed countries. Thus, the key need is to identify the factor(s) that take a country to a higher level of economic development. Strong evidence of one answer already exists: quality education (e.g., Hanushek & Jamison, et al., 2008; World Bank, 2007; Wössmann, 2015).

Figure 5 illustrates the chain reaction that begins with Quality Education and results in Empowered People and Developed Economy. I would argue that VIs are excellent examples of a mechanism that provides just such quality education, thereby enabling people to move out of the vicious cycle of poverty and slavery.

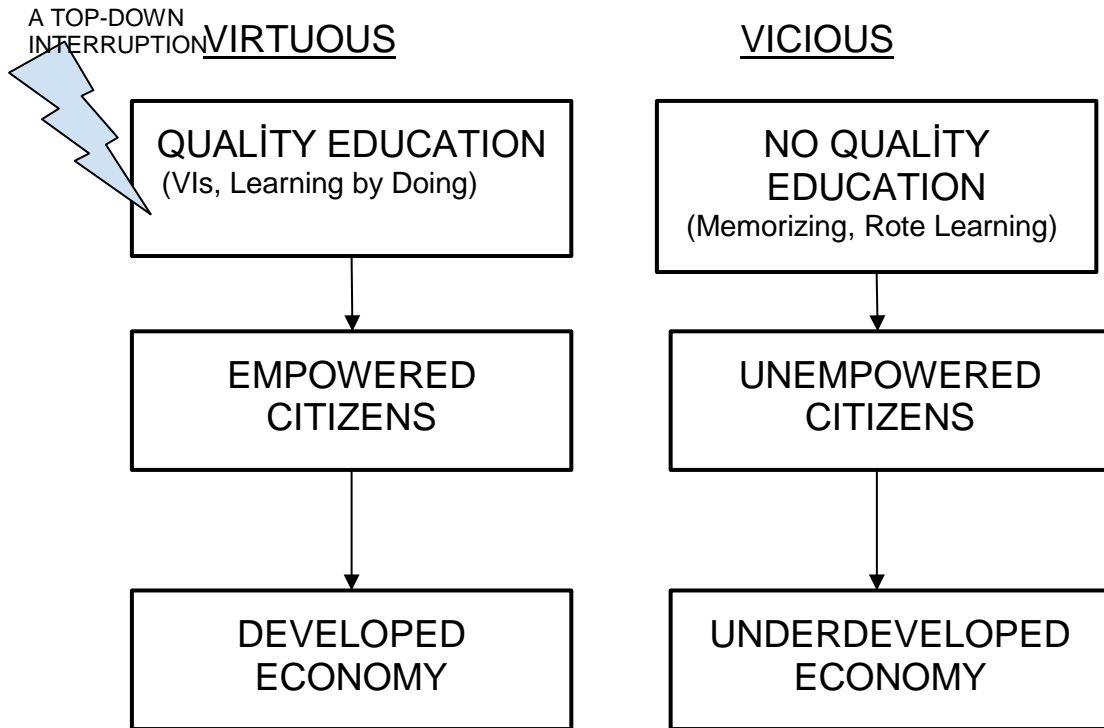


Figure 5. Chain Reaction Starting With Quality Education to Generate a Developed Economy Through Empowered Citizens

Source: adapted from Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012, designed by thesis author.

Are there reforms that will educate, enlighten, and empower the uneducated masses? History shows that exploiters never want those they exploit to be educated and/or empowered. For example, slaves were kept illiterate in the US throughout the 19th century (Stearns, et al., 1996). In Turkey during the Anatolian and Ottoman eras, where literacy was barely 10% and the printing press arrived some 300 years later than Europe, a top-down interruption that instigated an empowering movement might have been the most appropriate thing to do. Precisely for these reasons, VIs were created to empower peasants who had been poor and uneducated for centuries. Tonguç, the founder of VIs,

wanted to – in his own term – “vitalize” peasants so they would never be exploited again (E. Tonguç, 1972).

One of the most empowering activities at VIs occurred when students and school administrators gathered every Saturday to discuss school issues in an open forum moderated by a student (Kirby, 2000). However, this sense of empowerment sometimes resulted in negative perceptions. For example, occasionally when VI students interacted with people, they argued with authorities because they had learned to take the initiative, oppose injustice, and stand against elitism (Tonguç, 2012; Kirby, 2000). In one notable incident, VI students criticized the favoritism shown to President İnönü who visited the Institute for a democratic forum (Dündar, 2005, m. 22:40). When the students objected because better food was served to the president, the Institute manager, Rauf İnan, suggested that the president had diabetes, and this was the reason for his perceived unfair treatment (Dündar, 2005 : 22.53).

In a YouTube interview, Mahmut Makal pointed out that students could criticize school officials and managers under the umbrella of a system that was completely democratic (Makal, 2018, m. 23:00). Makal, one of the first graduates of a Village Institute said: “The institutes opened up the world for people. Unlike other schools, they didn’t teach us by rote or by memorizing. We learned by doing—it was very original in that way” (Armstrong, 2016).

### Learning by Doing

The daily routine for VI students included morning gymnastics, reading hours, and farming. Each student had to read 25 books each year and learn to play a musical

instrument. They also had weekly meetings in which students could freely criticize teachers and school administrators. Further, as part of the vocational side of their education, the students built some of the VI buildings under the supervision of their teachers and expert workers. The VIs were good examples of learning by doing.

In addition to education based on books, students were taught by learning and practicing skills. Thus all the schools had their own fields, farms, workshops, and animals. The fields were useful for learning about agriculture and result was increased production in the fields. Many new warehouses, roads, and buildings were built by people educated at VIs. Until 1954 when they were closed, 1,308 women and 15,943 men—a total of 17,251 people—were educated as teachers (Kirby, 2000; Tonguç, 1970). Yaşar Kemal, who was a peasant before becoming one of the leading figures in Turkish literature, said “ Village institutions helped us. The Village Institutes were the only educational system that brought our world into the real humanity of the future” (Apaydın, 2009, p. 56). The value of VIs is evident because they delivered the intended outcome, producing graduates who were enlightened teachers, with Republican values, dedicated to the progress of Turkey (Kirby, 2000).

### Closing Village Institutes

It was clear that the new generation of innovative teachers would not be satisfied with the status quo, nor would they be subservient to the privileged elite in Turkey. The turning point came in 1945 when Stalin exerted pressure to expand Soviet power in the postwar years. This exposed Turkey to Soviet demands for control over the Straits of Dardanelles and Bosphorus connecting the Black Sea with the Aegean Sea coupled with



control over the territory in eastern Anatolia. In self-defense, Turkey entered into an alliance with the U.S. (Hotham, 1972, p. 113; Zürcher, 2005).

Further, with the imminent Soviet threat, the right wing had strengthened, with the result that most of Atatürk's revolutionary improvements were abandoned (E. Tonguç, 1972, pp. 134-136; Kirby, 2000, pp. 70-73). For VI cadres, their secular lifestyle, patriotic ideals, and collective skills had been easy targets for Communist "witch hunts," and wealthy landowners continued to pressure the government about what they called "the wayward graduates" of these schools (Başaran, 2011).

In 1945, the conservative wing of the RPP and the newly founded DP openly began to attack the VIs, accusing them of fostering a subversive, anti-traditional generation and being hotbeds of Marxist indoctrination. These attacks were waged primarily by the large and wealthy landowners many of whom held office in and outside of Parliament, as well as their mouthpieces in the press (Karaömerlioğlu, 1998; Dündar, 2000; Kirby, 2000). Soon all movements associated with left-wing activists and parties were perceived as a threat. During this time, a newspaper raid and the arrest of FLHG teachers may have been arranged to create an atmosphere of a Communist threat in Turkey, to encourage the U.S. to render assistance. In reality, the threats were largely baseless as the number of VI students convicted of extreme political views was just 0.02% (Karaömerlioğlu, 1998, p. 67). Neither Tonguç nor Yücel held extreme political views, and they had no substantial connections to any extreme leftist organization. The accusations from conservative intellectuals who argued that the VI system brought degeneration and moral decay among male/female students, there were statistically almost no significant events that would indicate a problem (Kirby, 2000; Karaömerlioğlu,

1998). VI graduate Pakize Türkoğlu defended co-education in the schools stating that in her own Turkish village young boys and girls used to work and play together (Dündar, 2005).

In some instances, a few regional governors were reluctant to have schools built in their area. Therefore, Tonguç empowered VI students and sent them to Konya with full authority and the Ministry's endorsement. The students constructed 28 schools in three months and then returned to their own schools—a definite victory against the bureaucracy. However, the bureaucrats did not like the fact that VIs and free-thinking students could pose a serious challenge to their authority. Engin Tonguç asserts that because of the humble and workaholic lifestyle of his father, bureaucrats turned against his father who had been totally committed to the VIs (Pera Müzesi, 2012; Angı, 2017).

Erdal İnönü, son of then-president İnönü, claims his father saw negative reaction in society against the VIs and acted accordingly. President İnönü suggested that “with a single party you could do what you wanted, but you might hit a wall because you could not see around the corner to the broader perspective. With democracy, progress would be slow, but strong” (Dündar, 2012).

After considering the efforts of İ. H. Tonguç and H. A. Yücel, and reading their memoirs, it is easy to conclude that the insidious tactics of the Turkish bureaucracy were the primary reasons behind the closure of VIs. In a book written by his daughter, Yücel wrote a letter to a village teacher that his political colleagues and his own successors began to dismantle the VIs (Eronat, 2018, p. 10), whether for reasons of entrenched establishment or the bureaucracy (E. Tonguç, 1970, 2012; Apaydın, 2009). As I discussed in Chapter II, breaking up the status quo, taking away the privileges of the elite

classes, and opening the way for the majority of middle-class and poor people, is never an easy task. The bureaucracy would resist, as the “Iron Law of Oligarchy” requires, and they did.

Village Institutes continued until the departure of Yücel from the Ministry of National Education in 1946. That same year, Tonguc was also removed from his position. After a period of transition under conservative ministers, VIs were completely closed in 1954. Tonguç had warned about the dangers of multi-party elections before reaching almost full literacy in the country. Ironically, he and Yücel were discharged from their posts by their own party after first multi-party elections were allowed in 1945. Tonguç ended up painting the interior decor of a high school, and Yücel was never again given an opportunity for policy making in education. After removal of Yücel from office, many translated books were collected and burned (Berk, 2004, p. 115). Makal, a writer and graduate of VI, bitterly depicts the closure of these schools: “If you ask me, when they closed the Village Institutes, they actually closed down Turkey” (Istanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, 2017).

Against difficult odds, the graduates of VIs returned to their villages and began to work as teachers in their villages. Makal published his observations of his teaching years in 1950 in a book called *Our Village*, which had a strong impact. However, because of his book, which is viewed as describing the beginning of the Village Literature movement, Makal was arrested and held in prison for some time (Wikipedia, 2018). He explains the situation in his own words: “The government didn’t like the fact that I wrote about the reality of the village. So, they threw me in prison on charges of being a Communist ” (quoted in Armstrong, 2016). It is no secret that landowners and landlords

did not want these new teachers with their “free opinion, free conscience, and free wisdom” (Armstrong, 2016). However, the interests of politicians in the RPP and DP parties, as well as pressure from the Turkish bureaucracy, brought an end to this important educational innovation.

After Village Institutes and People’s Houses were closed, Turkish society reverted to what it had been at the end of the Ottoman Empire. Enlightened teachers who were supposed to be guardians of the Republic were left on their own. The momentum that had grown from 1923 to 1946 was lost. By 1935, literacy rates were beginning to decline (see Table 2), along with a general decline in the education movement. People’s Houses, which had been re-opened as non-profit organizations after their closure in 1954, were closed again at the time of the military coup in 1980, only to be opened once again after generals went back to their barracks. (Çeçen, 1990, p. 300). The military began taking on guardianship after the *coup d’état* in 1960. Since that time, Turkey has taken "two steps forward, one step back."

Table 2. Changes in Literacy Rates in Turkey, 1927-1960.

Years	Change in Literacy Rate	Rate of Change
1927-1935	From 10.6% to 20.4 %	11.5% increase per year
1935-1945	From 20.4% to 30.2%	4.80 % increase per year
1945-1950	From 30.2% to 34.6%	2.91% increase per year
1950-1955	From 34.6% to 40%	3.12% increase per year
1955-1960	From 40% to 40%	0 % increase per year

Source: Rustow, 2015.

Hobsbawm asserts that the Atatürk Reforms were adopted only by an urban elite (Hobsbawm, 1987). While this statement was true, the entire reform process was the means by which all segments of society were supposed to be educated and empowered. The Village Institutes served this purpose, and when they were closed, a link in the education chain had been lost.

### The Value and Momentum Created by Village Institutes

It is interesting and insightful to look at the value created by Village Institutes as a way to understand their momentum and transformation. To aid in this understanding, I looked at several rates of change over a 10-year period. Strong momentum of this type has been achieved in only a few countries, namely Japan, South Korea and Singapore.

The first factor I considered was how the number of VI teachers increased during the period when VIs existed. Figure 6 shows that the number peaks in 1950, four years prior to the closure of all VIs, which can be explained by the momentum that began building in the early 1940s.

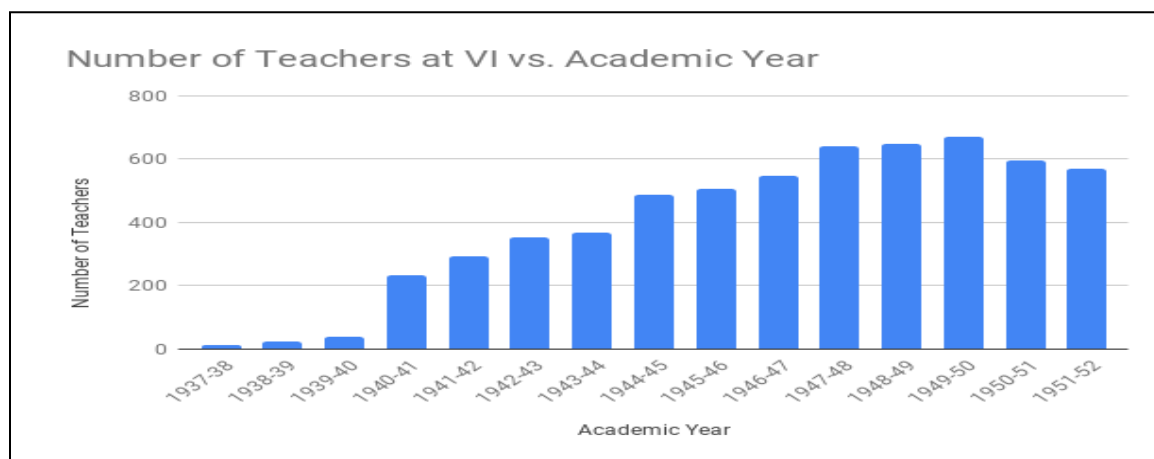


Figure 6. Number of Teachers at VIs (by academic year).

Source: adapted from Başgöz, 1995; calculations and figure by thesis author.

Figure 7 shows the number of VI students, indicating the exponential increase that peaked in 1946. The number fluctuated around 13,000 VI students per year, which was a good figure considering that at the time Turkey had a population of about 20 million.

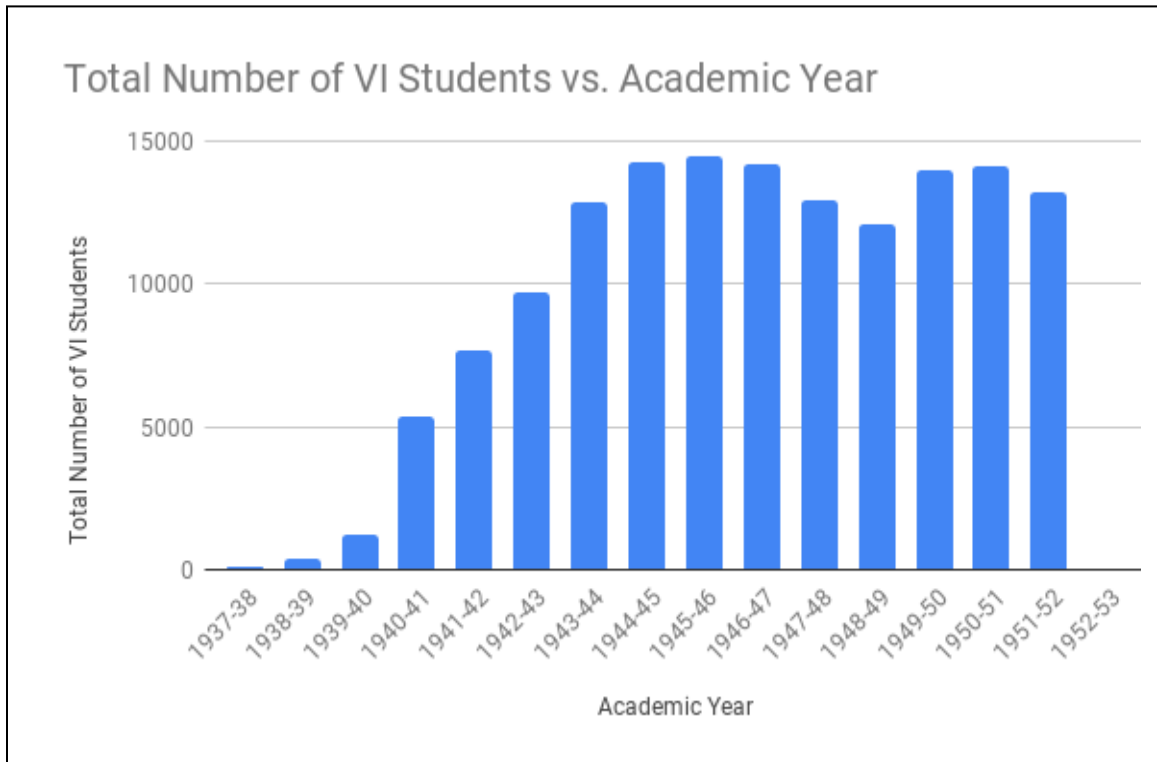


Figure 7. Number of Village Institute Students.

Source: adapted from Başgöz, 1995; calculations and figure by thesis author .

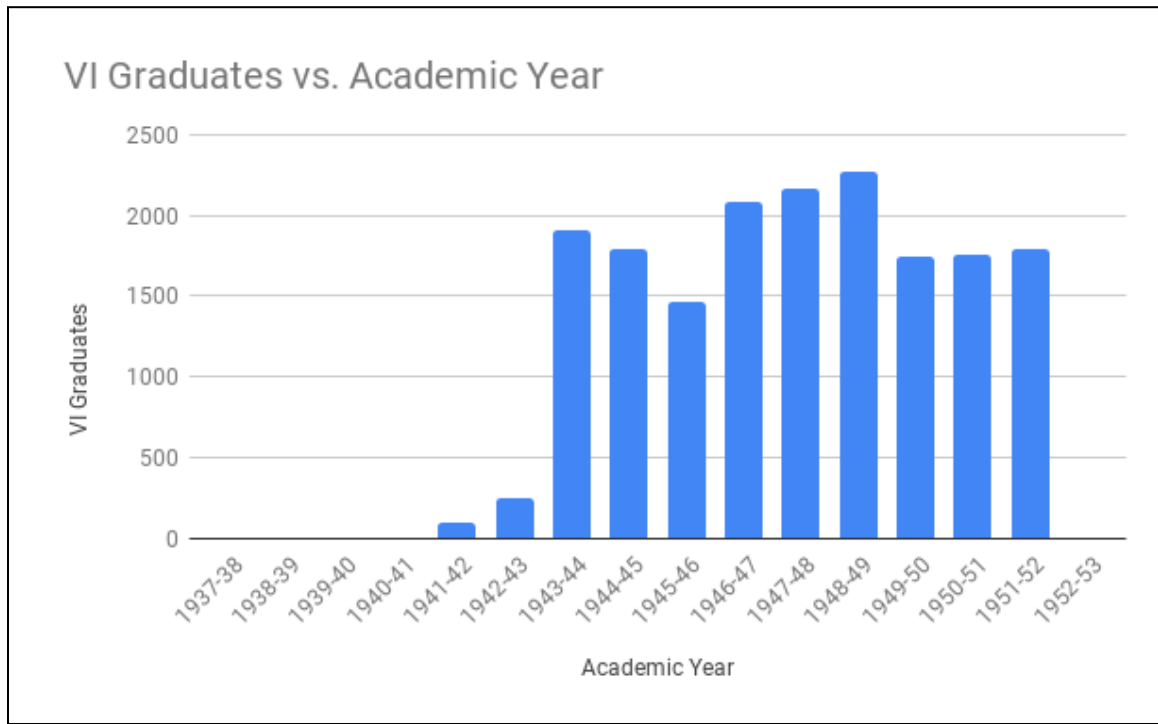


Figure 8. Village Institute Graduates, 1942-1952

(Data: Başgöz, 1995, 1995 calculations and figure made by the author)

Figure 8 shows that there were about 1,800 new teachers graduating from VIs, ready to teach in the villages, beginning in 1944.

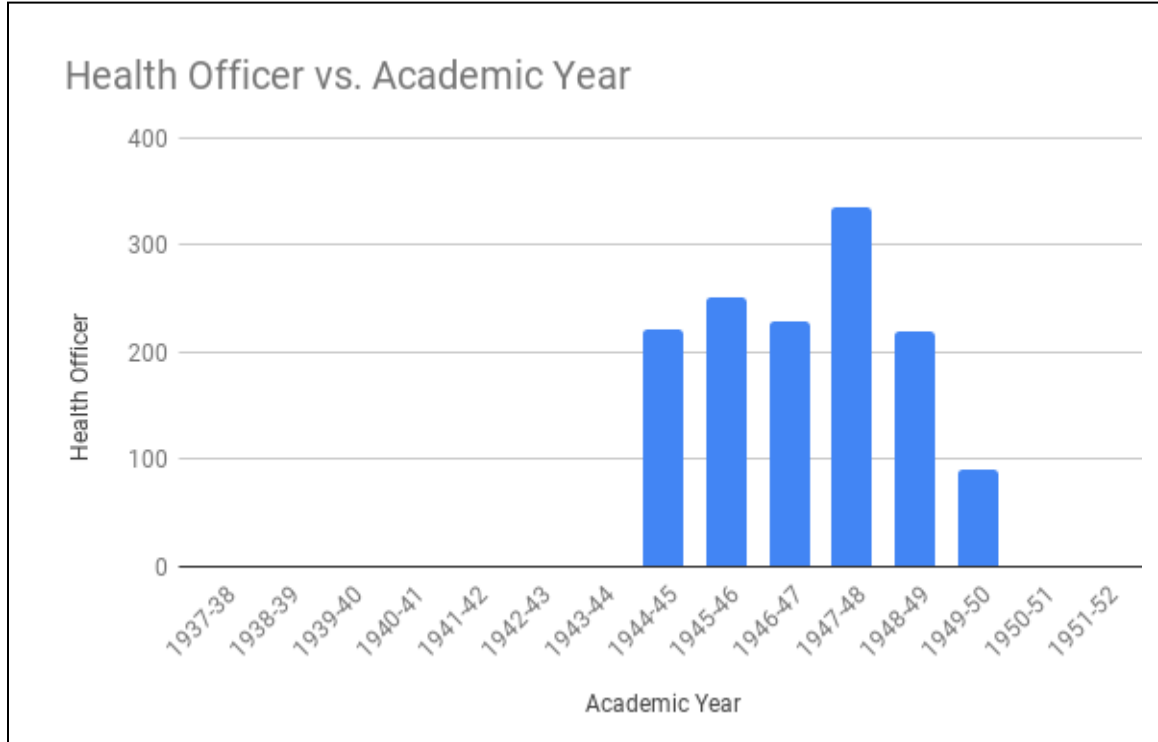


Figure 9. Number of Graduate Health Officers.

Source: adapted from Başgöz, 1995; calculations and figures by thesis author

Based on suggestions by educator John Dewey, VIs also graduated about 250 health officers each year. Unfortunately, this number dropped dramatically after 1948 because of new administration in the VIs.



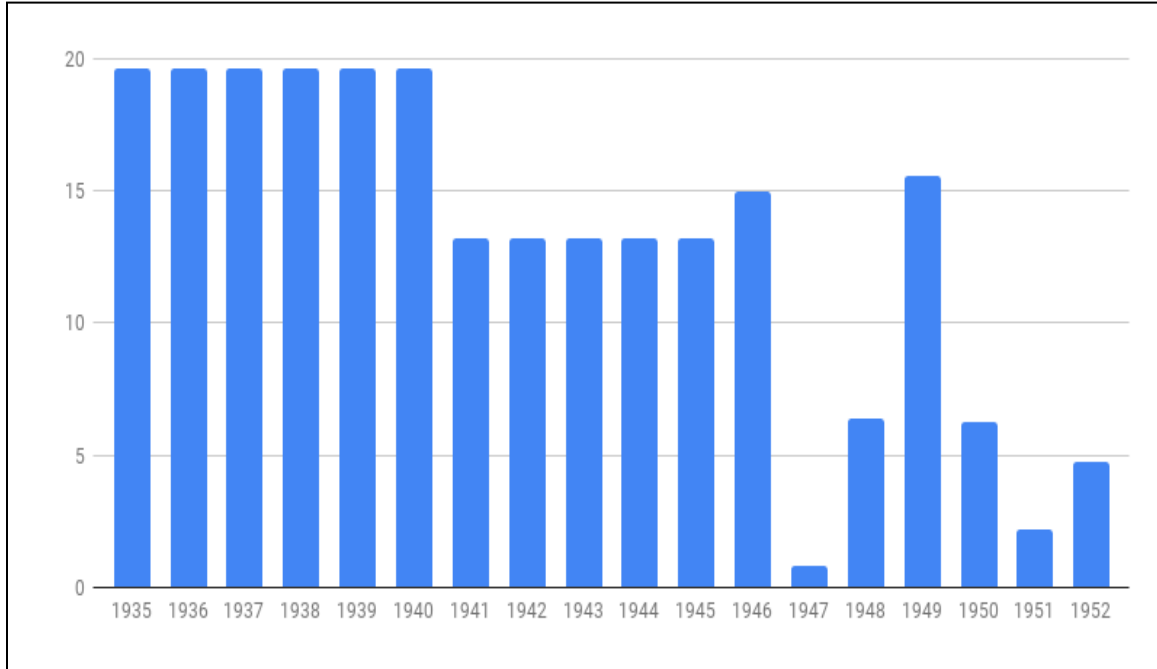


Figure 10. Rate of Change in Number of Primary School Graduates

Source: adapted from Başgöz, 1995; calculations and figure by thesis author.

Figure 10 shows key data, especially when the momentum among primary school graduates fell steadily after the death of Atatürk, and continued until the closing of VIs.

These figures show clearly that the VIs created considerable value for Turkish society considering that village children were not only students but also builders and workers in their schools.

### The Importance of Village Institutes in Atatürk's Reforms

Although short-lived, education reforms, particularly VIs, cultivated a generation of young teachers who were open to universal values and liberal democracy. Considering the fact that those students were the children of peasants who had almost no intellectual background, the success of VI students—playing instruments, reading classics, building

libraries and printing houses from scratch—had been outstanding. As a natural consequence, students of that generation would never let themselves be exploited. The long-lasting effects of VIs can be seen in the many books written by VI graduates—a plethora of memoirs in which they delighted in sharing those “wonderful years” from their perspectives and telling readers how the VIs dramatically changed their lives.

Certain themes are common in these books: praise for Atatürk, and/or the dismal life conditions endured at that time in Turkey. For example, Şimşek (2017) described how people lived in unsanitary conditions in the 1920s and how things began to change with the appearance of reforms in the Republic (p. 7). He told of being resigned to their destiny as peasants in Anatolian villages, living a primitive life filled with prayers for rain and obedience to feudal landlords (p. 33).

According to Hüsrev (1934), in the First Republic period, the majority of the money earned by peasants from selling the products in their fields went directly into the pockets of intermediaries. Thus one of the first things Atatürk did was to reduce the tax burden on peasants, which amounted to some 20% of state revenues. That tax was abolished in 1925. By 1929, during the world economic crisis, Turkish villagers were given supports and incentives—but not farmers. Only the middle men and intermediaries were able to take advantage of this (Mümtaz Peker, 2010, p. 301). In November 1936 at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Atatürk stated: “In any case, every Turkish farmer family must work on land that they own” (İnalçık, 2007, p. 50). Soon after, a far-reaching land redistribution measure was passed in 1945, although little was done to implement it before 1950. An enlightened and empowered generation was needed to “vitalize” the peasants—in terminology used by İ. H. Tonguç (Tonguç, E., 1970).

A paradigm shift between traditionalists and reformers on the subject of VIs could have settled the battle that had been ongoing since the late Ottoman era, but that did not happen. Nevertheless, VI graduates did their best, sometimes even defending the education of village children at the cost of their lives. Parents who did not send their children to school could be given a prison sentence even under the Village Schools Law. When a young teacher, Ahmet Kara, attempted to apply this law to one of the parents who was in the village council, he fell into a trap and was tragically beaten to death with sticks (Şimşek, 2017, p. 127). This teacher's example shows the dedication of the workers and graduates of the VI schools.

Enlightenment and empowerment of the peasant children could have stopped the exploitation and vulnerability of people in rural Turkey, considering the achievements made during the progressive education era. However, landlords and other political forces felt threatened by an enlightened and empowered generation. Today, girls younger than 14 are sold to older men by their families, peasants are exploited by landlords, and honor killings occur routinely in rural areas of Turkey. In 2018, Turkish state authorities announced that girls age 9 and older can marry (Ahval News, 2018).

But there is always hope. A son of a poor peasant family, Aziz Sancar, won a Nobel Prize in 2015—but he had already immigrated to the US and no longer lived in Turkey. Still, he dedicated his Nobel Prize to Atatürk, as the person who—more than 60 years earlier—had led the short-lived Turkish Renaissance.

## Chapter VI

### An Assessment of Atatürk's Reforms

For some, the Atatürk reforms are viewed as a top-down imposition on the Turkish people, with limited penetration downward to the masses (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1982, p. 159). Kır, for example, argues that the New Republic seemed to work only for the elites and the oligarchic class, who maintained their domination with a cliché: “Only we know what is best for you” (Kır, 1998, p. 1093). Some critics suggest that Turkey will never prosper because the wrong policies were put in place by the founding fathers.

Mustafa Erdogan (1998) points out that the state tried to create a new type of citizen through “social engineering” in a top-down and authoritarian way (Erdogan, 1998a, p. 802). There may be some truth in this argument. However, Ottoman modernization was designed and implemented by a top-down approach with little contribution from civil society (Somel, 2001). Atatürk was chosen as head of the Turkish Independence Movement by the people around him because of his charisma, his extraordinary military achievements, and his interpersonal skills. Later, he was elected as president by the deputies of the Turkish Parliament (İnalcık, 2007). In comparison, when the U.S. was founded, its institutions also were not politically inclusive. George Washington, like Atatürk, was elected unopposed as president, but only for two terms.

Other researchers of the Atatürk reforms, such as Zurcher (2017), believe the reforms did not occur in a strictly top-down manner, but in some cases in a bottom-up

approach. Local professionals and organizations were the engine driving the reforms at a later point in the process.

Finally, it has to be emphasized that a top-down approach does not necessarily mean a corrupt regime. Rather than giving privilege to certain contractors as a rent-seeking economy requires, all construction was planned by experts. For example, Prof. Jensen was in charge of the Istanbul city plan as the sole authority in the process (Ersel, et al., 2005, p. 202).

From another perspective, Kinzer (2001) argues that a real Kemalist model, rather than the dogmatic artificial model that had been applied in the name of Atatürk, could certainly have democratized and modernized the country, which was, in fact, the target Atatürk put before the republic.

#### Atatürk: An Authoritarian Leader

Atatürk is often regarded as an authoritarian leader—some would say even a dictator. H. C. Armstrong (1932), who wrote one of the first biographies of Atatürk, described him as very talented dictator who was also stubborn, merciless, temperamental, and undaunted. Şengör described him as a genius dictator who put forward a roadmap for modernization and democracy. Mustafa Erdoğan (1998) argues that the state became the property of one person during the Early Republic, trying to create a new type of citizenship through “social engineering.” The media was silenced, foundations were nationalized, civil associations were closed, old university tradition was eliminated and opposition parties were banned (Erdoğan, 1998a, p. 802).

In the 1920s and 1930s, one-party regimes were common in Europe. However, there were crucial differences among Turkey, Germany, Russia, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. All the other regimes were totalitarian coming from the multi-party systems before them, whereas Turkey moved to single-party republic from monarchy on its way to a multi-party democracy. Atatürk set his goal clearly in his speeches, aiming to become the contemporary civilization in the West. Even though it was influenced by the totalitarian regimes of Europe in the 1930s, Atatürk's republic was not a full-fledged totalitarian state (Mango, 1999; Kışlalı, 2016). Even Atatürk was not completely comfortable with the extraordinary power he held as president (İnalcık, 2007). However, there was also a paradox in the modernization process, as diagnosed by Özdalga (2005): the contradictory principles of authoritarianism and westernization had gone hand in hand in Turkey continually since the founding of the Republic.

### The Personality Cult Surrounding Atatürk

As a traveler in Turkey in the 1930s, Linke wrote about the transformation to democracy and Atatürk's extraordinary power and charisma (1938, p. 215). Kinzer viewed Atatürk as a virtual deity and central to Kemalism, the "official religion" of Turkey (Kinzer, 2001, p. 35). To another observer, Atatürk was seen as "The One" of an almost monotheistic cult, and his mausoleum was regarded as a secular Mecca (Hotham, 1972, p. 21). Such descriptions feed into the claim that regard for Atatürk is the "world's longest-running personality cult," even though Atatürk did not leave any dogma or doctrine for his followers so they would not compromise the reform spirit (Aydemir,

2003, p. 498; Christie-Miller, 2013). Dole (2012) says it is incomprehensible to establish a cult around a leader who rejected the sanctity and sacredness of the state.

Interestingly enough, a political foundation of this personality cult was laid by not his party but by the opposing Democratic Party (DP). Prime Minister Adnan Menderes of the DP passed Turkish Law 5816, "The Law Concerning Crimes Committed Against Atatürk," in 1951 while (in a bit of irony) at the same time closing down the Village Institutes and Public Houses (Seibert, 2011)—two major pillars of Atatürk's education reforms.

According to Louis Dumont, a French historian who spent his childhood in Turkey, repression in the Atatürk era was generally tolerated by looking at matters from a larger perspective—a suggestion from Atatürk himself which he wrote for the French press. *Le Temps* highlighted his thought on modernization: "He modernised the country with his sword in its sheath having an unconstrained power and with toughness when necessary." *L'Humanite* summarized his biggest achievements in a long article mentioning at the end that "he violently repressed Socialist and Communist movement." *La Republique* asserted:

Remembering such very ferocious Frenchmen as Louis XI and Richelieu, highlighting the violence of Atatürk is taking the problems from a narrow perspective. Has Atatürk saved the state? Any Turk with integrity would say "yes." And that is enough.

Right-wing papers like *Le Matin*, *Populaire* and *L'Illustration* seemed to be perplexed by his monarchical powers, equating his authority to that of a czar or to the fascist leaders of his time. For example, *Je Suis Partout* highlighted his charisma, describing him as "the greatest dictator of the time," an apparent compliment (Dumont, 2003). According to

İnalcık, Atatürk sought to prevent the emergence of anyone else with the same powers prior to his untimely death at the age of 58 (İnalcık, 2007, p. 45).

In their psychobiography of Atatürk, Volkan and Itzkowitz concluded that Atatürk was able to contain his excessive impulses despite narcissistic tendencies (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p.322). His peaceful rhetoric in the 1930s contrasted sharply with fascist trends in Europe during the same time (Gawrych, 2013, p. 216). Atatürk was much more humane and peaceful than other autocrats who lived in the same age. He was distinctively pro-peace, expressing his famous motto “Peace at home, peace in the world” despite the war-leaning world of the 1930s (Hotham, 1972, p. 23).

Pleased with what she was seeing of the progress in Turkey in the 1930s, Linke (1938) wrote that while touring Turkey she did not want to go back to Europe where fascism was growing. Reisman (2006) felt the same, claiming that Turkey in the 1930s was a liberal haven for Jewish scientists, where they could take shelter from the rising fascism in Europe.

### The Military as Guardians

Atatürk did not found the Turkish Republic as a military state. In fact, he legislated against military officers in the Parliament just months after declaring the Republic in 1923 (Ersel, et al., 2005, p. 23). There were no legal grounds for military interference of any kind in the politics of the Turkish Republic. That did not occur until it first became legalized as part of the 1961 Constitution (Zürcher, 2005, p. 5). Since transition to a multi-party regime, the military has overthrown a democratically elected



Turkish government three times: 1960, 1971, and 1980, not to mention a soft coup in 1997 and failed attempts, including a failed coup in 2016.

Prior to the 1960s, the Turkish Republic was seen as a country where the military safeguarded secularism and democracy. The fact that the Turkish military was viewed as the guardian of Turkish democracy (rather than the teachers) illustrates how Atatürk's original path became derailed after his death. For the duration of the reform period, he strove to pave the way for "New Citizens of Turkish Republic," while also minimizing and investment in the military—even though he was a military general by profession. Atatürk inherited a ruined empire, but Volkan and Itzkowitz reason that even if he had been given (or took) military power, it was unlikely he would have waged war against his neighbors (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1986, p. 320).

Atatürk's priority was teachers, not soldiers. In a speech he gave after proclaiming the new republic, he evidently put himself at the disposal of teachers:

Teachers! Our armies have won the victory to prepare the basis for your victory. You will win the real victory. Me and all my friends will follow you with an unshakable faith. And we will break every obstacle you encounter. (Atatürk, Bursa Speech, 1923)

### Repression of Traditional Culture

Change brings resistance, and the Atatürk reforms were no exception. Atatürk had always been questioned because of his secular and authoritarian attributes. However, almost all of the humanistic and democratic movements in Europe were anti-clerical in nature (Berkes, 2006, p. 169; Mango, 1999). Atatürk was never against religion but he did want to keep religion under control in order to continue his plans for Westernization in Turkey.

Some people thought the pace of change under Atatürk was too rapid. For example, in his quest to modernize Turkey, he effectively abolished centuries-old traditions. Atatürk's language policy functioned as an adjunct to the manipulation of younger generations by loosening and severing their cultural ties with the Ottoman past (Akural, 1984). He aimed to break Turkey's ties with the Islamic East while simultaneously facilitating communication with the Western world by pushing the nation toward the West (Davison, 1998; Katoğlu, 2007; Lewis, 1999; Şavkay, 2002). For Atatürk, the desire to modernize the country was so powerful that, traditional or religious values must have been perceived as stumbling blocks in the way of progress.

#### Imitating the West

Arnold Toynbee pointed out two major criticisms of the Atatürk Reforms: one was their superficiality, the other was that the reforms were accepted by only a small number of urban elites (quoted in Inalcik, 2007, p.117). The Tanzimat period in the Ottoman Empire was a good example of superficial Westernization (Inalcik, 2007, p.122). However, Inalcik did argue that Atatürk's reforms were less superficial because they utilized the Western attributes of reason and willpower in dealing with the forces around them (2007, p. 123). On the other hand, Kır (1998) argues that Westernization in Turkey was superficial in terms of clothing, concerts, and cocktails that focused on the cult of Atatürk, even as the elite and their oligarchic leaders ruled the country without regard to any checks and balances. Erdogan (1998b) asserts that the Turkish Republic focused its efforts on an imaginary Turkish citizen, not real Turkish people. He adds that

inclusivity in the Republic was a myth because religious people were excluded along with people from different ethnic origins.

According to Cemil Meriç, Turkish modernization is a process of alienating the political elite and intellectuals from the common people. Elisabeth Ozdalga (2005, p. 25-26) cites another paradox in the modernization of Turkey: authoritarianism and Westernization are contradictory principles that have gone hand in hand in Turkey since the founding of the Republic. However, as I discussed earlier, the Atatürk reform process is actually an institutional infrastructure revolution within the framework of education.

## Chapter VII

### Conclusion

*I leave no verses, no dogma, no frozen and stereotyped rule as my spiritual heritage. My spiritual heritage is science and reason.*

—Atatürk

Assessing the Turkish Reform period with reforms not yet completed could be likened to assessing an incomplete meal not yet ready for guests. The biggest goal of the Republic was to cultivate empowered and Westernized citizens who would be prepared to catch up and then outperform equally with the developed world in the years to come. However, insufficient human capital, an extractive old establishment, and the inability to consistently maintain progressive reforms—in the end, these factors constrained that vision.

Transition from a monarchy to a liberal democracy is difficult at any stage of history, and it is necessary to consider Atatürk's reforms in light of this phenomenon. In this case, however, the transition was from a theocratic monarchy to a secular republic—a positive move from the perspective of inclusive institutions. This thesis has suggested that the momentum gained by the Atatürk reforms—had they continued—might have modernized Turkey if the Village Institutes and Peoples Houses had not been closed. Nevertheless, as I explored the momentum and the core changes during the period from 1923 to 1946, I reached some highly persuasive findings.

I explained how reform in Turkey lost momentum after Atatürk's death. During the time of Atatürk, literacy increased by some 11.4 % every year. Unfortunately, that number began to decline after 1935, eventually reaching zero percent growth by 1950. The drive for literacy remained steady until 1946 when the progressive Minister of Education was removed from his position. Table 3 illustrates that with just a 10% growth in the literacy rate, literacy would have become 99% by 1951. Instead, the actual literacy rate that year was about 50%. While it might have been difficult to achieve, committed leaders can lead a country to accomplish such things.

Table 3. Projected Literacy Rates

Year	1935 (actual)	1935-1951 With an annual rate of change = 10%	1951 Hypothetical	1951 Actual
Literacy Rate	20.4 % (annual rate of change = 11.4%)	=====➔	99% literacy	50% literacy

Source: thesis author

After 1946, new political dynamics became apparent, causing a shift in the policies of the party Atatürk founded, the Republican People's Party. After 1950, many of the main reforms were repealed by the Democratic Party, and Turkey became a kind of "hybrid" country in which some aspects of Atatürk's trends were maintained while others were abandoned or outlawed.

One important mistake could be made when evaluating the Atatürk reforms: if the reforms process were considered to be complete and successful. But with important reforms and institutions like the People's Houses and the Village Institutes now closed, one cannot pretend that today's Turkey fulfills what Atatürk had hoped it would become.

As a charismatic and enlightened ruler, Atatürk boosted an earlier war-torn nation to greater success while providing his increasingly literate people with a system of world-class education. Under his 15-year rule (and ensuing influence that actually extended to 23 years), Atatürk achieved extraordinary rates of change. Had his leadership continued without being interrupted by his untimely death, it is quite possible that the world would have seen spectacular changes in Turkey.

The Village Institutes succeeded in bringing Atatürk's reforms to the peasants in the country before they were closed after graduating tens of thousands of enlightened teachers. Looking at the books written by VI graduates who wrote their memories at the request of Tonguç, one sees the rational, secular, Westernized, and patriotic characteristics of the graduates. It is clear that they had been educated and prepared to be the guardians of the new Turkish republic. It was an ironic twist of fate that the military took on that role in the military coup of 1960.

For Atatürk, Westernization was crucial, as is apparent in his commitment and the momentum he achieved. As I showed, from 1923 to 1946 Turkey's characteristics and progress were being propelled by strong momentum—very different from Turkey after 1946. Democracy as brought forward by Atatürk would have embraced all religious and ethnic differences in time had the same momentum continued.

Even though the Atatürk reforms were actually a top-down “revolution,” it was propagated from a bottom-up social structure. With the closure of the main pillars of Atatürk’s reforms, Turkish society moved away from his vision. Nevertheless, there are many lessons to be learned from this period, especially for leaders who seek to enlighten and empower their people and modernize their country.

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