



OBSERVATOIRE DE LA TURQUIE ET DE SON ENVIRONNEMENT GÉOPOLITIQUE

MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATÜRK AND GENERAL CHARLES DE GAULLE: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE «GAZI» AND «THE MAN OF THE 18TH OF JUNE

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Introduction

Passengers travelling from Paris to Istanbul may not realise that their aircraft will take off from Paris Charles de Gaulle and three hours later will land in Atatürk International Airport. That is not of course the only similitude between these two heroes of the 20th century, who, by chance, disappeared almost on the same day. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk died in Istanbul on the 10th November 1938 and General Charles de Gaulle disappeared in Colombey les deux Eglises on the 9th November 1970.

A lot of avenues, places or schools in France received the name of General de Gaulle, President of the French Republic between 1958 and 1969. In Turkey also a lot of buildings bare Atatürk's name in commemoration of the first President of the Turkish Republic (1923-1938). The most famous one, *Anitkabir* in *Ankara*, was finished in 1938 and received in 1953, for the 15th anniversary of Atatürk's death, the ashes of the *Gazi*. Every year around 100 000 people visit General de Gaulle's house in a small French village called Colombey les deux Eglises. This is far less than the 4 to 5 million (expected in 2015) yearly visitors to *Anitkabir*, the museum dedicated to Atatürk in Ankara

In France, General de Gaulle is still revered by the populous. His heroic action during the Second World War and then as the head of state is taught in French schools. Every year on

the 18th of June, the famous speech he made in 1940 on BBC radio in London, is referenced in the military ceremonials. The tremendous respect the Turkish people give to Atatürk, which can be quite difficult to understand for a non-Turk, is overwhelming, even compared to the honour French people give to the memory of General de Gaulle. Indeed, Atatürk's memory is everywhere in Turkey: on the bank notes and also on the walls of public and private buildings. People who degrade the memory of Atatürk may be punished by law. Finally, every year on the 10th of November, exactly at 9 H 05, sirens sound all over Turkey to remind people to respect the two minutes silence, in memory of Atatürk.

The aim of this paper is to identify the reasons which will explain that in France and Turkey the memory of these two exceptional leaders is different. We will first emphasise similitudes between these two exceptional persons, then review the differences which are historical, political or directly linked to the leadership and finally look at the current societal differences between Turkey and France.

Atatürk and General de Gaulle are undoubtedly the 20th heroes for Turkey and France

Atatürk and General de Gaulle both had an exceptional life and played a crucial role, as soldiers, during respectively the first and the Second World War.

In 1915, during the battle of Dardanelles, Atatürk demonstrated exceptional courage and determination which gave his soldiers the strength, first to contain the English, New Zealand and French soldiers; and then to push them back to the sea. In May 1940, General de Gaulle elected to continue the fight against the Germans from England, before coming back as the liberator in Paris four years later.

They encountered exceptional situations during their respective lives.

In 1919, Atatürk has been forced to resign from his military career and to give back his rank of General. However, people continued to give him support and trust. In June 1940, General de Gaulle was only known by a minority of people. He was condemned to death by the official government in Vichy because of his refusal to capitulate with the Germans. However, he was officially recognised by Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, which gave him

international legitimacy.

The two heads of state considered the Nation's sovereignty as a guiding principle.

In 1920, the official government in Istanbul signed a treaty in Sèvres with European countries, which dismantled Turkish territory and gave some European countries the responsibility of some parts of the Turkey that remained. Atatürk rejected it and decided that Turkey had to be politically, economically, culturally and scientifically sovereign. In 1940, General de Gaulle refused the capitulation of France with Germany and Italy; he succeeded in acquiring a permanent seat in the UN Security Council in 1945; he contributed to the setup of the French nuclear force in 1964 and eventually he took the crucial decision to withdraw from NATO military structure in 1966.

Atatürk and General de Gaulle set principles which are still recognized today.

The six principles (republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, pre-eminence of state, reformism) put in place by Atatürk at the beginning of the Republic are still valid and recognised today. General de Gaulle also put in place some important principles with the 5th Republic constitution in 1958. Independence, sovereignty of the Nation and the specific responsibility of France in the world are paradigms which are still valid today.

General de Gaulle and Atatürk are undoubtedly the 20th century's heroes for France and Turkey. They both had an exceptional life and a highly uncommon life achievement. Also, they both left behind permanent principles. Beyond these similitudes, the difference of their respective memories in Turkey and France can be explained first by some historical differences and other intrinsic differences to the personages.

Differences intrinsic to the personages and their history

Atatürk was the first President of the Turkish Republic from 1923 to 1938 and he died in post. General de Gaulle had to leave his post in 1969 after the French people voted against the referendum he proposed. The Turkish population never rejected their leader and he would have continued in post had he not passed.

Atatürk created the *CHP*¹ in 1923, the only existing party in Turkey at that time. He decided later to create another party in opposition to the *CHP* but it was not successful. In the 60's when General de Gaulle was assuming responsibilities, multi parties was the norm in France. This situation may explain why the authority of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk may have been reinforced all along his presidency.

Atatürk became President of the Republic of Turkey just after the Ottoman Empire's declined. He had the opportunity to put in place huge reforms in domains like the Turkish language, the infrastructure, the culture, the place of women in society, the economy and relations with other countries. Probably the biggest transformation was the separation between the sultanate and the caliph, which was the preliminary step to the disappearance of both of them. General Charles de Gaulle gave an important heritage to France, firstly with the 5th Constitution that is still in force today. He developed a special relationship between France and NATO following the decision in 1966 to withdraw France from NATO's military structure. At the end of his presidency, he had to deal with negative experiences like the Algeria war or the events of May 1968.

Besides his heroic role during the First World War and during the independence war (1918-1922), Atatürk developed a special relationship with the people in Turkey, enhanced by his modest social origins. For example, in 1928, when he decided to reform the Turkish language, he invested heavily in teaching Turks the new alphabet. Born into a rich family from the North of France, General de Gaulle developed, on the contrary, a kind of distance between himself and the people, through his attitude and posture.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and General de Gaulle have been assuming responsibilities at different periods in the history. They developed a different relationship with their respective population. They both achieved huge reforms in their respective countries and some of these reforms are still tangible nowadays in the political or economic sphere. Atatürk, who died in 1938 as the President of Turkey, has never been rejected by the Turkish people. It is also

1 - Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican Party of the People).

important to look carefully at the intrinsic societal differences to find additional and complementary answers to the question.

Current societal differences between France and Turkey

The traditionalism of Turkish society and the huge coherence in this society, probably linked to the religion's homogeneity, makes it easier to keep alive the memory of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the Turkish society than General de Gaulle's memory in French society.

The Turkish society, in the half eastern part of the country, is traditionalist. Some remaining traditions are slowing down Turkey's development. This traditionalism is not good for the economy of Turkey and there are economic differences between the western part and the eastern part of the country. However, it seems that this traditionalism works in favour of a kind of status quo regarding the image of Atatürk in the Turkish society. This argument has to be mitigated by the fact that the image of Atatürk is still high in the modern cities of the west part like Izmir and Istanbul. On the contrary, occidental societies like France are used to forgetting the past instead of building the future from it.

Religion plays a different role in France and Turkey. First of all Christianity, the major religion in France, does not play an important role in building a federated society. On the contrary, Islam, which is the major religion in Turkey, works as a kind of cement for the Turkish society. We can say that Islam in Turkey, even if this country is a laic Republic according to Atatürk's willingness, represents a factor of coherence for the society. This coherence is in favour of keeping intact the memory of the founder of the Republic.

The concept of nationalism is stronger in Turkey than in France. Nationalism has been created by Atatürk as a guiding principle for the country and is not discussed today by the Turks. Nationalism is defined by the fact that every Turk, disregarding his religion or language, loves and respects his Nation. On the contrary, this concept is quite ambivalent for France, probably because in France nationalism is replaced by patriotism. There are still references regarding the period of the Second World War and the existing division in French

society following Vichy's capitulation with the Germans. It seems that a stronger concept of nationalism in Turkey than in France is also an element in favour of the status quo.

Conclusion

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and General de Gaulle achieved for Turkey and France something that was almost impossible to accomplish! That is the reason why both of them are still considered in their respective country as 20th century heroes. However, the memory of Atatürk in Turkey is far beyond General de Gaulle's one in France.

We have identified some reasons of this difference which are intrinsic to the personages and the historical period. We have also emphasized actual differences between our two societies. As we are preparing to remember, in France, the 45th birthday of General de Gaulle's decease, and, in Turkey, to commemorate the 77th anniversary of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's loss, in a couple of weeks, it is important to remember what these leaders left behind: the possibility for people to leave peacefully in independent and sovereign Nations. ■

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