
Mustafa Kemal Ataturk – Commander and an effective leader

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A ruined land on the edge of a precipice ...bloody battles with various enemies ... years of struggle and then, respected at home and abroad, a new country, a new society, a new state, and to achieve these, ceaseless reforms – this is, in a word, the Turkish Revolution.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk

Introduction

1. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk,¹ the commander of the Turkish War of Independence, is still considered by many Turks as their national hero and a great leader. Even after 65 years since his death, Ataturk's statues are found in each town centre in Turkey and his framed portraits are hung in every government building including schools, banks and hospitals. Turkish school children still pledge allegiance to him at the beginning of each school day. On the anniversary of his death (10 Nov 1938) Turkish newspapers still border their front pages with black, and at 9.05 am (the time of his death) the whole country still shows its respect for this immortal leader with one minute of silence.
2. Today Ataturk is mostly remembered as a nation builder and a reformer. However his military leadership before and during the Turkish War of Independence initially granted him the 'leader' status. During that time, he was known as Mustafa Kemal.
3. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which Mustafa Kemal was an effective military leader. In so doing, I will first explore the definition of leadership. Secondly, I will identify the common characteristics of an effective military leader and thirdly I will examine Mustafa Kemal's qualities against those characteristics.

MILITARY LEADERSHIP

Definition

4. There is no single agreed definition for leadership. The evolution of leadership theories portrays a variety of approaches. The Great Man approach, based on the concept developed by Thomas Carlyle (1901), argues that leadership is hereditary. Leaders are born, not made, and that history can only be explained in terms of great leaders who brought about changes in the course of mankind. In the Trait approach (1950s), leadership is a characteristic embodied in the personality of the leader. In the Group Dynamics approach (1960s), leadership is conferred by the follower on the individual perceived as most capable of providing the needs of the group. In the Contingency (also referred to as situational) approach (1967), leadership is a function of the skills of the leader to deal with specific environmental situations.²
5. In Hollander's Transactional approach (1978), leadership is the result of a complex set of interactions among the leader, the followers and the situation. Burns argues that transactional leadership occurs when leaders and followers are in some type of exchange relationship to meet

mutual needs. This type of leadership does not result in organisational or societal change. Instead it tends to perpetuate and legitimise the status quo.³

6. The Transformational approach (1985) acknowledges the ‘leader-follower-situation’ interaction however it proposes that the transformational leadership serves to change the status quo by appealing to followers’ values and their sense of higher purpose. Transformational leaders are charismatic in that they are able to articulate a compelling vision of the future representing organisational or social change. Through their vision they appeal to their followers’ values and help the followers to get their needs met.⁴ Transformational leaders succeed because of their personal characteristics.

7. All of the approaches above acknowledge that leadership is about influencing others to achieve outcomes. Military commanders have the lawful authority over subordinates by virtue of rank and assignment however, unless they can influence and inspire others to join them on a transformational journey, they cannot be considered as effective leaders. The nature of leadership exhibited by a military commander therefore depends on the ability and the behaviour of the individual.

8. Considering Mustafa Kemal’s transformational influence on Turkish history, particularly during the War of Independence, the transformational leadership definition provided by Bass is selected as the suitable basis for examining Mustafa Kemal’s leadership ability. According to Bass, transformational leadership is about ‘transforming followers, creating vision of the goals that may be attained, and articulating for the followers the ways to attain those goals’.

Critical characteristics of a transformational military leader

9. The leader’s personal qualities are considered as the key to transformational leadership by various scholars. For example, Tucker argues that effective transformational leaders possess five critical characteristics: extraordinary powers of vision, rhetorical skills to communicate this vision, a sense of mission, high self confidence and intelligence, and high expectations for followers.⁵

10. In *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*, it is argued that personal qualities are not the sole key to transformational leadership as characteristics of the followers and the situation play a significant role in the effectiveness of a transformational leader. The authors agree however that transformational leaders can be distinguished by their vision and values, their rhetorical skills, their ability to build a particular image in the hearts and minds of their followers, and their personalised style of leadership.⁶

11. Jomini, a strategic thinker on military matters in the late 1880s, already identified most of these traits as critical military leadership characteristics. Handel, in his book *Masters of War – Classical Strategic Thought*, points out that according to Jomini, bravery, the ability to inspire troops, a sense of fairness or generosity of spirit, equanimity under the most trying conditions and firmness are the most critical characteristics for a military leader.⁷

12. According to Viscount Slim, courage, willpower, flexibility of mind, knowledge and integrity are the essential characteristics of leadership and these have similar effects in both military and civilian environments.

13. While there is no definitive list of characteristics for a transformational leader, the characteristics listed above have some common threads, albeit worded differently. For example, rhetorical skills and courage assist leaders in inspiring their followers; integrity makes followers trust the leader. Considering these common threads, in this paper, Mustafa Kemal’s leadership ability will be assessed against the five transformational leadership characteristics: vision, courage, rhetorical skills, determination, and integrity.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

14. Mustafa Kemal joined the Ottoman Army in 1893 as a 12-year-old student in a military high school. In 1902 he graduated from the military academy in the eight placing of over 400 students. Due to his academic achievements, Mustafa Kemal quickly moved on as a lieutenant to the Staff College. He graduated from the college in 1905 as the fifth of 57 students, and became a member of the select and prestigious General Staff with the rank of a Captain.⁸

15. Between 1905 and 1912 Mustafa Kemal gained a vast amount of combat experience at various levels of command. During this period, he conducted ‘counter insurgency’ operations against tribal and other irregular forces in Syria and Albania. He also carried on a campaign against the Italian Army in Libya by using Arab tribesman in guerilla tactics.⁹

16. In the Balkan wars and the First World War, he experienced large-scale conventional warfare both as a staff officer and field commander, and served under German generals in a number of campaigns. In 1915, Mustafa Kemal, as the lieutenant colonel, took command of the 19th Infantry Division. His critical role in the Dardanelles Campaign resulted in a Turkish victory and granted him a promotion.

17. A year later Mustafa Kemal assumed a command at Diyarbakir, with the rank of general and he recovered two cities in south-east Turkey in the campaign against the Russians. During 1917, Mustafa Kemal commanded troops under German General Falkenhayn in Syria and later in succession to General Limon von Sanders in Palestine.

18. In 1918, two weeks before the defeat of Germany, the Ottoman Empire (The Istanbul Government) signed the Mondoros Armistice, agreeing to allied occupation throughout the Empire and the demobilisation of the Ottoman Army. Soon after Mustafa Kemal was discharged from the Ottoman Army due to his call for a sovereign Turkish State. From 1919 to 1922, Mustafa Kemal engaged in a politico-military campaign to mobilise the Turkish nation in a defensive war in order to remove all foreign troops from Turkish soil.¹⁰ On the 24 August 1922, under the personal command of Mustafa Kemal, the Commander-in-Chief, Turkish forces of approximately 200,000 won a decisive victory against the invading Greeks.

19. The effects of this victory were considerable. Allied forces, including Greek, French and Italian, started to withdraw from Anatolia. Although the British forces remained around the Dardanelles for a short period, finally Britain gave way to Mustafa Kemal’s demands and on 11 October 1922, an armistice was signed in Mudanya. Allied governments agreed to the restoration of Turkish sovereignty in Istanbul, the Straits and eastern Thrace. Eight months later the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne provided for the re-establishment of a complete and undivided Turkish sovereignty in almost all the territory included in the present-day Turkish Republic.¹¹

20. In the following paragraphs, I will examine Mustafa Kemal’s leadership ability against the five main characteristics of transformational leadership.

Vision

21. Mustafa Kemal had a clear vision. His vision was to change the Ottoman Turkey, which was seen as the ‘sick man of Europe’ at the time, to a sovereign, democratic, self-reliant, secular and a modern Turkish State. This vision was a call for a total revolution encompassing political, social, and technological changes. Mustafa Kemal knew that war of independence was the first step towards the achievement of this vision.

22. Robinson argues that Mustafa Kemal’s reasoning may have started from the point of military defence because Turkey occupied an area long coveted by Great Powers. He realised that a modern military establishment was impossible without a vastly revamped political and social system, which would permit the human potential of Turkey to be utilised to its maximum. Mustafa Kemal’s following words reflect his view on this matter: ‘Illiteracy, debilitating disease, religious dogma, fatalism, and the inferior position of woman—all of these things must go, and go fast’.¹²

Courage

23. Mustafa Kemal’s courage in the battlefield is renowned. Gawrych refers to the following incident during the Dardanelles Campaign. ‘Mustafa Kemal, when commanding the 19th Infantry Division, moved his division to Conkbayiri without awaiting approval from higher headquarters, in anticipation of the main attack occurring in that area. Yet, success resulted from this bold and very risky move, but not without Mustafa Kemal inserting himself into the battle to rally his men, who had lost courage, with the words: “There is no flight from the enemy. There is only fighting with the enemy. If you have no ammunition, then you still have your bayonets.” Such courageous words sparked his troops into regaining their confidence and holding to their position under attack’.¹³

24. Mustafa Kemal demonstrated courage throughout the Gallipoli Campaign. Robinson explains that during the battle of Anafarta Ridge Mustafa Kemal was constantly at the extreme front, helping to wheel guns into position, getting up on the skyline among the bullets, and sending his men into attacks in which they had very little hope of survival. One of his orders was worded: ‘I do not order you to attack. I order you to die. In the time which passes until we die other troops and commanders can take our places to fight the invaders’. The soldiers got up from the ground and ran into the machine guns’ fire.’¹⁴

25. During the War of Independence Mustafa Kemal fought side by side with his troops to achieve, in his words, ‘Either Victory or Death’. Lord Kirnos acknowledges Mustafa Kemal’s courage in the battlefield and observes that ‘Mustafa Kemal’s own evident readiness to die for the defence of his country made others ready to die at his orders’.

Rhetorical skills

26. Although silent and of a reserved disposition in private, Mustafa Kemal was an eloquent and fluent public speaker. Throughout his nation-building journey, he articulated his vision and his strategy to his supporters with clarity and passion. He also had the gift of being able to tailor his messages to the situation and the audiences. He used this ability to inspire his troops in the battlefield to fight the enemy at all costs.

27. Kirnos points out that ‘Mustafa Kemal knew the psychology of the Turk, and the dogged fanatical fighting spirit of which he was capable once he had faith in his leaders and his blood was roused. Mustafa Kemal knew how to arouse Turk’s blood. This is how Mustafa Kemal and the Turkish soldiers saved the Gallipoli peninsula’.¹⁵

28. Mustafa Kemal’s rhetorical skills also played an important role in preparing the ground for Turkey’s war of independence, mobilising the whole nation for this war and later on rebuilding Turkey as a republic. He frequently used the National Assembly as a platform to share his vision with Turkish people and to motivate them to participate in the big struggle towards liberation.

Determination

29. Mustafa Kemal was determined to succeed. During a speech in the city of Konya on the anniversary of the victory in the Inonu Campaign, he described his guiding principle in any battlefield, be it military or political, in these words, ‘Victory is won by the man who says “Victory is mine”, success belongs to him who starts by saying I will be successful and can then say “I have succeeded.”’¹⁶

30. Mustafa Kemal demonstrated his determination for success during the Turkish War of Independence, which lasted over three years. In 1919, after being discharged from the Ottoman Army due to his call for a sovereign Turkish State, Mustafa Kemal developed a war strategy that judiciously balanced political and military spheres as warranted by changing circumstances. He established a National Assembly through which he gained support from the nation for his independence campaign. This Assembly also granted Mustafa Kemal the authority to act as the Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish Army in the battle against the invading allied forces.

31. Despite the enormous size of these challenges, he pursued his plan for independence decisively, without being disheartened by resource limitations and political obstacles.

Integrity

32. Mustafa Kemal was strictly loyal to his values and his declared vision. According to Robinson, Mustafa Kemal was motivated by great ideals and not merely by a desire of personal power. His ideals were: the creation of a national state in full possession of its sovereign powers; the development of national power and international status for Turkey; a steady advance to a Western standard of living by marshalling the physical and human resources of the country; and a slow but continued movement toward more liberal political and economic institutions.¹⁷ Throughout his military career Mustafa Kemal remained loyal to these ideals and therefore gained the trust of the Turkish people.

33. Lewis points out that following his victory in the War of Independence there were many distractions, which at that time might have enticed Mustafa Kemal, a warrior-hero.¹⁸ These included the lost Ottoman provinces in Europe and Asia and some provinces of the fallen Russian Empire where around 20 million Turkish-speaking Muslims lived. Mustafa Kemal was not distracted by those possibilities. He had the integrity to stick to his declared vision and ideals. In 1923, he reconfirmed his intentions in a speech to the public: ‘the successes which our army has gained up to now cannot be regarded as having achieved the real salvation of our country. These victories have only prepared the ground for our future victories. Let us not be puffed up with military victories. Let us rather prepare new victories in science and economics’.¹⁹ Following this speech Mustafa Kemal officially left his military uniform and pursued a political career as a civilian until his death in 1938.

Other personality traits

34. Despite having the qualities of an effective transformational leader, Mustafa Kemal was not without his faults. He was a man of swift and decisive action. He was ambitious and believed that he was always right. He had a temperamental character laced with a sarcastic wit. He was also a hard drinker and relished and responded openly to the admiration of women. However these characteristics did not affect his respect for decency and legality and his compliance with human and political standards.

Conclusion

35. Military commanders are required to lead their troops both in war and in peace. While commanders have lawful authority over their subordinates, effective military leadership requires the ability to inspire others to willingly participate in the achievement of a shared vision set out by the leader and to assist them throughout that transformational journey.

36. Mustafa Kemal possessed all five main characteristics of transformational leadership: vision, courage, rhetorical skills, determination and integrity. These characteristics have been apparent in his military achievements during the Gallipoli Campaign, and later during the Turkish War of Independence.

37. Mustafa Kemal transformed a dying empire to a new nation and on this path he carved his name in the nation's history as the Commander-in-Chief who led the Turkish troops to victory and to liberty.

Endnotes

1. The term 'Ataturk' means the father of the Turks. It was a name conferred on Mustafa Kemal by the newly formed Turkish nation. In this paper the names 'Ataturk' and 'Mustafa Kemal' are used synonymously.
2. S Hays, ed. and W Thomas, jt.ed., 1967, *Taking Command: The Art and Science of Military Leadership*, Stockpole Books, p. 27.
3. R Hughes, R Ginnett and G Curphy, 1999, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*, Irwin McGraw-Hill, Singapore, p. 290.
4. *ibid.*, p. 291.
5. *ibid.*, p. 289.
6. *ibid.*, p. 296.
7. M Handel, 1996, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, Frank Cass, London, p. 162.
8. G Gawrych, 1988, 'Kemal Ataturk's Politico-military strategy in the Turkish War of Independence 1919–1923: From Guerilla Warfare to the Decisive Battle', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Sep 88, p. 322.
9. *ibid.*, p. 323.
10. *ibid.*, p. 318.
11. B Lewis, 1967, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford University Press, Second Edition, London, p. 254.
12. R Robinson, 1963, *The First Turkish Republic: A Case Study in National Development*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, p. 244.
13. G Gawrych, 1988, *op. cit.*, p. 323.
14. R Robinson, 1963, *op. cit.*, p. 22
15. L Kirnos, 1965, *Ataturk: The Rebirth of a Nation*, Morison and Gibb Limited, London, p. 94.
16. A Mango, 1999, *Ataturk*, John Murray Publishers Limited, London, p. 420.
17. R Robinson, 1963, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
18. B Lewis, 1967, *op. cit.*, p. 255–56.
19. *ibid.*, p. 255.

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