

Director of the Russian House of Culture, Historian
Assoc. Prof. Dr Aleksandr Sotnichenko

"The Atatürk model: An inspirational achievement in independence and development"



Born on February 1, 1977. In 1998, he graduated from the Eastern Faculty of Saint Petersburg State University, and in 2002, he defended his doctoral thesis, "The Development of the Geopolitical Space of the Ottoman Empire, 1839–1908." From 2000 to 2017, he was a lecturer at the Faculty of International Relations at Saint Petersburg State University. He has published many articles on Turkish history, Russian-Turkish relations, and Middle Eastern politics. Between 2017 and 2021, he worked as an undersecretary at the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Ankara. Since 2021, he has been the President of the Russian Cultural and Scientific Center (Rus Evi Ankara).

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Director of the Russian House in Ankara, historian Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aleksandr Sotnichenko, answered Işıkgün Akfırat’s questions.

What impact did the War of Independence and the Republican Revolution achieved under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal have on world history?

Aleksandr Sotnichenko: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s strong personality, outstanding leadership qualities and the indelible mark he left in world history can never be forgotten. As a leader, he achieved the impossible, creating a powerful nation-state at a time when almost no one in the world believed in the future of the Turks. The state founded by Mustafa Kemal set an example for all oppressed states and peoples who would struggle against Western Imperialism. In addition, Mustafa Kemal Pasha set enormous goals for his country, which he ruled with superior success without a doubt. He put forward achieving the contemporary civilization mission as a national cause.

Throughout the 20th century, many leaders in Eastern and Latin American countries tried to follow his path and imitate him. However, in practice, none of them even came close to Atatürk’s achievements. The War of Independence waged by the Turkish People against the occupying forces after the First World War resulted in the tremendous victory of the Turkish Nation, which the Western states tried to erase from history. This is such a great victory that it is rarely seen in history. In the War of Independence, Mustafa Kemal showed his strategic genius and attempted to cooperate with Russia, which was labelled as Türkiye’s traditional enemy. Soviet Russia, which at that time was ruled by completely renewed cadres in political terms, also aided Türkiye, which had shown its determination and had the potential to defeat the forces of the occupying Western states that were many times superior to itself.



Taksim Republic Monument, 1936. At the Republic Monument in Taksim Square, we see that Semyon Aralov, the first ambassador of Soviet Russia to Türkiye, , right next to Atatürk. This monument was built by the order of Gazi Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Eski İstanbul Fotoğrafları Arşivi, 2023).

Türkiye and Russia: A Cooperation Model Coming from History

In the 1930s, we saw that Türkiye succeeded in developing close cooperation with the Soviets. Are there any lessons to be learned from this cooperation model today?

Aleksandr Sotnichenko: Yes, indeed, especially during the Mustafa Kemal period, the cooperation between Soviet Russia and the Republic of Türkiye was very high. During this time, the two friendly and neighboring countries continuously tried implementing joint projects based on mutual benefit. Therefore, huge investments were made.

By the way, I believe that it is necessary to men-

tion a very important detail: Soviet Russia, while helping independent Türkiye, never tried to make it dependent on itself and did not try to exploit Türkiye's human and natural resources as some Western countries did later. The projects that Russia is currently carrying out in Türkiye are being realized on the same principled basis. Therefore, we can say that the model in question has become a traditional approach for our joint work. The main thing for us is to share our technology and knowledge with the friendly and brotherly Turkish People. This is why we invited 350 Turkish students to study in Russia with scholarships this year. In turn, we are learning many new things from our Turkish partners who are operating in Russia.

What does Mustafa Kemal mean for Turkish-Russian friendship and the developing world countries from past to present?

Aleksandr Sotnichenko: Let's look at the explanations and statements made by Mustafa Kemal throughout his life. We can say that some of his theses positively and negatively affected the developing Russian-Turkish relations. But a very important detail should never be forgotten: In the Republic Monument in Taksim Square, right next to Atatürk, we see that Semyon Aralov, the first ambassador of Soviet Russia to Türkiye, is located. The order of Gazi Mustafa Kemal Pasha himself erected this monument. For this reason, we can state that Atatürk left a legacy to the Turkish people not to forget the close friendship and brotherhood established with Russia.

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Atatürk's Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World

How would you evaluate the importance of Mustafa Kemal in terms of the construction of a multipolar world?

Aleksandr Sotnichenko: First, it is necessary to note that a multipolar world

order is potentially more unstable than a unipolar or bipolar world order. However, multipolarity is much more beneficial for countries called "semi-periphery states" in the terminology put forward by Immanuel Wallerstein, the famous theorist of the world systems approach. Among the countries mentioned are Russia and Türkiye. In a multipolar world order, these countries can choose their own free will with whom to cooperate, regardless of the views of a few hegemon. Yes, it's very difficult. Yes, it requires serious mental effort, political effort, and diplomatic skills, but humanity can only advance this way.

Now, if you like, let's take Türkiye under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as an example: Türkiye, which Atatürk personally directed and managed, played the whole game by its own rules, although it was included in the international system that prevailed in the first half of the 20th century. Yes, Türkiye had a very difficult road. However, despite this, it did not bow to any external power and achieved the goals set by Mustafa Kemal Pasha for that period.

Pursuing a resourceful and independent foreign policy, Türkiye succeeded in gaining new allies such as Soviet Russia and reconciling with its old enemies, Britain and France. This interaction has become a driving force for the economic development that the country has recorded in the following years. Mustafa Kemal himself laid the foundation of the multi-vector foreign policy that Türkiye is currently embracing.

Exhibition on Atatürk in the Russian House in Ankara

As the Russian House of Ankara, have you ever held any activities related to Mustafa Kemal? For what purpose did you do it?

Aleksandr Sotnichenko: Of course! We have organized several activities related to Mustafa Kemal and continue to do so. For example, artists from Russia participate in a large exhibition organized by our friend Ahmet Şahin every year on October 29, Republic Day, at the Ankara Orange Blossom Art Gallery. In addition, the world-famous Russian painter Konstantin Miroshnik also made great portraits of Mustafa Kemal Pasha. The works in question are currently on display in our Russian House.

This year, as you know, we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye. For the 100th anniversary, we designed and printed a wonderful agenda compiled from Semyon Aralov's memories of Türkiye-Russia friendship and Mustafa Kemal. This agenda also includes sketches by the famous Russian painter Yevgeny Lansere, who accompanied Aralov during his mission to Türkiye in 1922. Among them, there is a very unusual portrait of Mustafa Kemal.

Recently, the employees of the Russian House made a great video for Instagram. The content, which was prepared in Turkish and addressed to young people, explains that almost all the paintings and graphic works in the Anıtkabir Museum Complex, Mustafa Kemal's eternal resting place, were made by artists from Russia. This post of ours was liked and watched a lot.

Finally, could you briefly introduce yourself and the Russian House to our readers?

Aleksandr Sotnichenko: I am a doctor of historical sciences and an associate professor at St. Petersburg State University. I have taught various courses in Oriental Sciences and International Relations at the Faculty of International Relations of St. Petersburg State University, of which I have been a member for many years. But five years ago, limiting my theory-based work, I switched to practical application and started working at the Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Türkiye. For the last two and a half years, I have been the president of the Russian Culture and Science Center, also known as the Russian House of Ankara.

Our corporate activities are similar to Yunus Emre Institute's in many ways. We strive to establish strong relations between two great countries with a common historical and cultural past, especially in the humanitarian field. For this purpose, we organize exhibitions of the works of Russian artists, organize cinema days where Russian films are shown, send successful Turkish students to our country's best universities with scholarships and support our compatriots residing in Türkiye. Our business is not about politics; it is completely culture and art-oriented. That is, we concentrate on interpersonal-human relationships because we believe that a strong bridge of mutual understanding and solidarity between the two peoples can be established through direct open communication channels between both ordinary citizens and state elders. 🌸

References

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