

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Speech at the National Convention of the People's Party of the Republic held in Ankara in October, 1927 (Excerpts)

In a long speech at the convention of the People's Party of the Republic of Turkey, which took place from 15 to 20 October 1927, Kemal Atatürk described his policies and actions from 1919 onward. This excerpt is from the beginning section of the speech. It is based on an English translation of the speech prepared by the Ministry of Education of Turkey in 1963. The preface to this translation stated: "With the publication of this translation of a speech delivered by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1927, the Ministry of Education of the Turkish Republic hopes to be of service to foreign students of Turkish history."

When I landed at Samsun on 19th May 1919, the situation was as follows:

The group of powers which included the Ottoman Empire had been defeated in the Great War. The Ottoman Army had been crushed on all fronts and an armistice had been signed with harsh conditions. The people were tired and poor. Those who had driven the people into the war had fled and now cared for nothing but their own safety. The Caliph was seeking some way to save his person and his throne. The Cabinet, headed by Damat Ferit Pasha, was weak and lacking in dignity and courage. It was slavishly polite and obedient to the will of the Sultan alone and was willing to agree to anything that might keep it and the Sultan in power.

The Entente Powers did not see any need to abide by the terms of the armistice. Their warships and troops remained in Istanbul. The Vilayet of Adana was occupied by the French; Urfa, Maras and Antep by the British; Konya and Antalya by the Italians. Merzifon and Samsun were occupied by British troops. Foreign officers and officials and their special agents were very active everywhere. On 15th May, the Greek Army too had landed at Izmir with the consent of the Entente Powers.

Christian elements- Greeks and Armenians-were also at work all over the country. They were trying, either openly or in secret, to realize their own particular ambitions and, in so doing, to hasten the break-up of the state. Mavri Mira, a Greek organization which had been established by the Patriarchate in Istanbul, was forming bands of irregular soldiers. It was organizing meetings and spreading propaganda in the vilayets. The Greek Red Cross and the official Emigrants Commission supported the work of Mavri Mira, and the Armenian Patriarch, Zaven Effendi, also worked with them. Preparations made by the Armenians progressed side by side with those made by the Greeks. Another society, which was called Pontus, worked openly and successfully in Trabzon and Samsun and on the Black Sea coast.

Because of the horrifying seriousness of the situation, certain well-known persons had begun to organize movements to remedy it. These included:

1. *The Trakya-Pasaeli Union, in Edirne and surrounding districts.*
2. *The Union for the Defence of the National Rights of the Eastern Provinces, in Erzurum and Elazig, with its headquarters in Istanbul.*
3. *The League for the Secession of Trabzon and District, also with its headquarters in Istanbul.*

Some young patriots in Izmir had held meetings in an attempt to resist the threat of Greek annexation.

I had already had discussions in Istanbul with some of the leaders of the Trakya-Pasaeli Union. They considered that the break-up of the Ottoman Empire was extremely likely. Their first thought was to save Eastern Thrace and later on, if possible, to form a Turco-Islamic community that would include Western Thrace. They thought that they could realize this aim with the help of Britain and France.

In addition to the organizations already mentioned, other societies began to make their appearance. For example:

4. *The League for the Advancement of the Kurds, in the Vilayets of Diyarbakir , Bitlis and Elazig. This also had its headquarters in Istanbul.*
5. *"Unity and Freedom" organizations throughout the country.*
6. *"Peace and Salvation" organizations throughout the country.*

In Istanbul there were many public and secret organizations pursuing various aims. One of the most important of these was the Society of the Friends of Britain. Its members were not in fact the friends of Britain. In my opinion, the founders of this society were people who thought, before anything else, of their own safety and their own Interests. At the head of this society were Vahdettin, the Ottoman Sultan and Caliph; Damat Ferit Pasha; Ali Kemal, the Minister of the Interior; Adil, Mehmet Ali Bey and Sait Molla. A clergyman Bey named Frew was apparently their chairman.

The society had a double face and a twofold purpose. Firstly, it sought the protection of Britain; and secondly, it tried to incite revolt by forming organizations in the interior, to paralyse the national conscience and to make it easier for foreign countries to intervene. The second aim was the real one and Sait Molla played an active role in this secret work.

Some important men and women in Istanbul were convinced that the real salvation of the country lay in securing an American protectorate over it. They maintained their point of view with great stubbornness; they tried to prove that the acceptance of their ideas was the best possible solution.

The army situation

After the conclusion of the armistice the regular soldiers had immediately been disarmed and demobilised. The army, which no longer had any fighting capability, consisted only of odd units.

I myself was the Chief Inspector of the Third Army when I landed at Samsun. Two army corps were directly under my command. You might ask why they sent me to Anatolia with the intention of banishing me from Istanbul. The answer is that they were not really aware of what they were doing. Their excuse for getting rid of me was that it was necessary for me to go to Samsun to give an on-the-spot report on the unsettled state of affairs in the district and to take all necessary measures to deal with it. In order to do this, I had asked for and been given special authority and special powers. They did not seem to have any objection to this.

Here I must explain a very important point: the nation and the army had no suspicion at all of the Sultan Caliph's treachery. On the contrary, because of the religious and traditional ties that had been handed down for centuries, they remained loyal to the throne and its occupant.

Now, gentlemen, I shall ask you: in such circumstances, what decision could be taken in order to save the country? Three proposals had been put forward:

- 1. The protection of Britain should be demanded.*
- 2. The United States should be accepted as mandatory power.*
- 3. The country should be saved by allowing each region to act in its own way.*

My decision

I did not think any of these three proposals worthy of being accepted. The reason was that they were based on false assumptions. The foundations of the Ottoman State had been shattered by that time and it was on its last legs. The Ottoman Empire was disintegrating; only the homeland remained. Such expressions as "The Ottoman Empire", its "Independence", "Sultan", "Caliph" and "Government" had become meaningless words.

Whose existence was it that had to be saved? How, and with whose help, might this be done?

In these circumstances only one course of action was possible: the creation of a new and completely independent Turkish state, founded on the principle of national self-determination.

Independence or death

The soundest and most logical arguments for arriving at this conclusion were as follows: The Turkish nation should live in honour and dignity. Such a condition could only be attained by complete independence. No matter how wealthy and prosperous a nation may be, if it is deprived of its independence it no longer deserves to be regarded as anything more than a slave in the eyes of the civilised world. To request the protectorate of a foreign power is to admit to a lack of all

human qualities; it is to admit to weakness and incapacity. Indeed, it is unthinkable that any group of people should ever voluntarily accept the humiliation of being ruled over by a foreign master.

But the Turk is dignified and proud; he is also capable and talented. Such a nation would prefer to die rather than subject itself to a life of slavery. Therefore independence or death!

Educating the people

If we were to carry out our resolution it was necessary that questions of which the nation had previously known nothing, should now be discussed openly. We were compelled to rebel against the Ottoman government, against the Sultan, against the Caliph of all the Muslims, and we had to bring the whole nation and army into a state of revolt. There would have been no advantage in making our final aims known to the public at the very beginning of the struggle; on the contrary, it was necessary to proceed by stages, making use of every opportunity that arose along the way to work on the nation's feelings and alter their ideas, proceeding step by step to our goal. If our actions are examined as a logical sequence, it will be seen that we have not deviated from our original intention.

As the national struggle, carried on with the sole intention of freeing the country from foreign invasion, proceeded and became successful, it was natural and inevitable that it should gradually develop of itself the principles and forms of national sovereignty. The Sultan foresaw this historical development and declared himself the enemy of the national struggle from the very beginning. I too anticipated this historical development, but I did not make my views known at first. If I had said too much about the possibilities I saw in the future, our realistic efforts would have been looked upon as dreams; and those who were discouraged by the nearness of the danger from without would have resisted us from the first, fearful of changes which went against their traditional ways of thought. The shortest and safest way to success was to deal with each problem as it arose, at the right time--and that is what I did. To sum up, I may say that it fell to me to keep within my mind, as a national secret, my perception of the great capacity for progress in the soul of the nation and in its future, and to apply this vision gradually to our whole social organization.

Contacting the army

My first aim then, gentlemen, was to get in touch with the whole of the army. In a telegram, I told the commander of the 15th Army Corps in Erzurum of my great sorrow at our general situation and said that I wanted to come to Erzurum. I asked him to keep me well informed about anything I ought to know.

The position had been worsened by attacks that had been made by bands of Greeks against the Muslims in Samsun and the surrounding district, as well as by the many difficulties that had been placed in the way of the local government by foreign interference. We enlightened the population as to the real state of affairs and told them that they need not be alarmed about the foreign troops. The formation of national organizations was immediately undertaken in this district.

On 23rd May 1919 I informed the commander of the 20th Army Corps in Ankara that I had arrived in Samsun and that I would keep in close touch with him. I requested him to tell me everything he could find out concerning the district of Izmir.

I had received no information about the troops in Thrace or their commander. In a telegram I requested Cevat Pasha, Chief of the General Staff in Istanbul, to tell me who was in command of the army corps at Edirne and where Cafer Tayyar Bey was. On 17th June Cevat Pasha replied that Cafer Tayyar Bey was at Edirne, commanding the 1st Army Corps. So I sent another telegram, this time to Cafer Tayyar Bey.

You are aware of the actions of the Entente Powers, which strangle our national independence and prepare the way for the dismemberment of our country, and of the servile and impotent attitude of the Istanbul Government.

To leave the fate of the nation in the hands of such a government is to abandon it to ruin.

It has been decided to unite the national organizations of Thrace and Anatolia and to bring these together in a unified and powerful body at Sivas, a safe place for this purpose. This assembly will boldly proclaim the voice of the nation to the whole world.

I have sworn by everything I hold sacred that I shall work devotedly with the whole nation until we have achieved independence. From now on it is out of the question for me to leave Anatolia.

In order to strengthen the spirit of the people of Thrace, I added the following:

Throughout Anatolia the population is united. Decisions are made jointly by all the commanders and our comrades. Nearly all the valis and mutasarrifs are with us.. The national organization in Anatolia has spread to include every district and community. Propaganda aimed at the setting up of an independent Kurdistan under English protectorate has been successfully countered. The Kurds have united with the Turks.

I had been informed meanwhile that the districts of Manisa and Aydin had been occupied by the Greek Army. I received a telegram from Bekir Sami Bey, who was commanding the 56th Division. According to this telegram, a certain Hurrem Bey, who had previously commanded the 56th Division in Izmir, and nearly all the officers of the two regiments in Izmir who were left alive, had been taken prisoner. The Greeks had sent them to Mudanya.

After about a week in Samsun, I went via Havza to Amasya. During this time I sent circulars to all commanding officers and higher civilian officials, urging them to move forward with the formation of national organizations all over the country. The people had not been fully informed about the occupation of Izmir, Manisa and Aydin. They had not as yet reacted to this terrible blow. It was not a good thing for the people to remain silent in the face of this injustice; what was necessary, therefore, was to rouse them and spur them to action.

With this purpose in mind, on 28th May 1919, I gave these instructions to the valis, the mutasarrifs and the leaders of the army corps:

The occupation of Izmir, Manisa and Aydin proves how near the danger is. More life must be put into the national struggle for the preservation of the integrity of our territory and more continuity must be given to the people's efforts. Next week, from Monday to Wednesday, if circumstances permit, you will encourage the people to hold meetings. Strongly worded telegrams must be sent to the representatives of the Great Powers and the government in Istanbul. I am certain that you will pursue this matter to a successful conclusion. Please let me know the results of your efforts.

In obedience to these instructions, meetings were immediately organized throughout the country.

On 8th June 1919, the Minister of War ordered me to return to Istanbul. A month had passed since I had arrived in Anatolia; during this time I had got in touch with the divisions of all the army corps and the nation had been informed as much as possible about current events. The idea of national organization was growing. From now on it was not possible for me to control the whole movement and at the same time retain my position as a military commander. I refused to obey the order for my recall and continued to lead the national movement and organizations. Thus I was now in open revolt. It was not difficult to guess that the measures I intended to take would be radical and decisive; therefore, it was necessary to carry them out, not as if they were the initiative of a single individual, but in the name of a body which should unify the nation and represent it as a whole.

The time had come to carry out the plan of action I had outlined in my telegram to Thrace. This meant the bringing together of the national organizations of Anatolia and Rumelia and the calling of a general national assembly at Sivas. With this end in view, I dictated the following memorandum to my ADC, Cevat Abbas Bey, during the night of 21st June:

- 1. The territorial integrity of the country and the independence of our nation are in danger.*
- 2. The government in Istanbul is unable to carry out its responsibilities. This situation creates the impression that our nation does not exist.*
- 3. The resolute will of the nation alone will save its independence.*
- 4. It is essential that a national assembly, free from outside influence, be set up in order to review the national situation, assert the nation's rights and make these known to the whole world.*
- 5. Sivas, as the safest place in Anatolia from every point of view, has been decided upon as the venue for a national congress, to be assembled as soon as possible.*
- 6. Every liva in every vilayet must therefore send three delegates who possess the confidence of the people. These delegates must set out without delay so that they may arrive as soon as possible.*
- 7. In view of the possibility of danger, delegates should travel incognito. All this must be kept a national secret.*

8. On 10th July, a congress of the eastern vilayets will be held at Erzurum. If the delegates of the other vilayets can reach Sivas by that time, those taking part in the congress at Erzurum will also set out for Sivas in order to take part in the general assembly.

Going to Sivas

On 25th June I was told of certain plots that were being laid against me in Sivas. That night, I sent for my ADC and told him that we would be leaving Amasya before daybreak; I instructed him to keep the preparations for our departure as secret as possible. We were to go to Sivas via Tokat.

As soon as I arrived in Tokat, I had the Telegraph Office placed under my control and took every precaution to prevent my arrival being made known either in Sivas or elsewhere. Sivas is about six hours journey from Tokat. Before I left Tokat I arranged for a telegram to be sent to the Vali of Sivas. The telegram said that I had just left Tokat; but I had arranged for it to be sent six hours after I had actually left. Thus, while the Vali of Sivas, Resit Pasha, was planning my reception later in the day, I was actually outside the gates of the town.

When my telegram was handed to Resit Pasha, he was discussing me with a certain Ali Galip Bey, who was in Sivas on his way to Elazig, where he had been appointed vali. An order for my arrest had been issued by the Ministry of the Interior; Ali Galip Bey had begun to make preparations for my arrest if I should come to Sivas. Posters were stuck on the walls in the streets describing me as a dangerous man and a traitor.

Resit Pasha handed the telegram to Ali Galip Bey saying: "See, he is coming! Now you can arrest him." Then, looking at his watch, he said: "No, he cannot be coming, or else he would have arrived by now." Ali Galip said: "When I said I would arrest him, I mean that I would do so if he set foot in the vilayet for which I am responsible, not here." Hearing this, the people who were listening to the discussion said: "If that is so, we will go and welcome him!" And the meeting broke up.

When I arrived on the outskirts of Sivas, a dense crowd lined the sides of the road. The troops stood to attention. As I walked through them, I saluted the soldiers and the inhabitants. Then I went straight to the headquarters of the military command and got someone to bring Ali Galip Bey and his followers to me.

I explained to them what I was doing. That night, Ali Galip Bey asked for a private audience with me. He said that his real reason for accepting the post of Vali of Elazig was to join forces with me, and that he had remained in Sivas in order to receive my orders. I must admit that he succeeded in detaining me until morning.

Going to Erzurum

When I had given instructions to those responsible for the organizations in Sivas about what was to be done there, we left for Erzurum on the morning of 27th June, having spent the night without a wink of sleep.

After a tiring car journey which took a whole week, we arrived in Erzurum. We were cordially greeted by the civilian population and the military on 3rd July. I had meetings with the military commander, the Vali and the Erzurum Branch of the League for the Defence of the National Rights of the Eastern Vilayets. Then I had an important talk with the highest civilian and military officials, in which I told them about the situation in general, about the best course for us to follow and about the sacrifices this course would involve, stressing the possible dangers they would have to face if they decided to work with me publicly. I gave them time to adjourn the meeting in order to think and exchange personal opinions. When we came together again they expressed the wish that I should be the leader of the movement and promised me their whole-hearted support.

The question that occupied me during the first few days of my stay in Erzurum was that of making all the necessary arrangements for the congress to be held there. While we were assembling the delegates, we had to lose time continually replying to the misleading telegrams of Ferit Pasha, the Minister of War in Istanbul, and from the Sultan. "Come to Istanbul," the Minister of War ordered. "Go on leave for a time," Sultan suggested at first; "Stay somewhere in Anatolia but do not meddle with anything." But later they both began to shout in chorus: "Return immediately, without further delay." I replied: "I cannot return." On 8th July, I sent telegrams to the Sultan and the Minister of War in which I announced that I resigned my duties and my commission in the army. I also communicated this to the people. After that, I continued to do my duty as I saw fit, free from any official rank or restriction.

I think it is now my duty to thank the people of Erzurum for the confidence they showed in me and for the cordiality with which they treated me after my resignation from the army.

The congress at Erzurum

As you all know, gentlemen, the congress convened at Erzurum on 23rd July 1919 in a simple schoolroom. On the first day I was elected chairman.

In my opening speech I informed the delegates as to the current situation and, to a certain extent, the aims we had in view. I told them that history will never fail to recognize the existence and the rights of a nation, and that therefore the unfavourable judgments that had been made about our nation would surely be proved wrong. I said that the will of the Turkish nation to be the master of her own destiny could only spring from Anatolia. As a first step, I suggested the formation of a National Assembly which should derive its authority from the will of the people and the formation of a government which should derive its authority from this same will.

The congress at Erzurum lasted for a fortnight. The result of its work was the drawing up of a manifesto containing the following principles and resolutions:

- 1. All parts of the homeland which lie within the national frontiers form an undivided whole.*
- 2. In the event of invasion of our territory or interference in our affairs by foreigners, or in the event of the dissolution of the Ottoman Government, the nation shall act unanimously to defend itself and resist all such threats, of whatever kind.*

3. If the Istanbul Government should be incapable of preserving the independence of the country and maintaining its security, a provisional government shall be set up in order to safeguard these objectives. This government shall be elected by the National Congress. If the Congress is not in session at the time, the government shall be elected by the Representative Committee.

4. The chief objective is to unite the resources of the nation into a ruling force and to establish the will of the nation as the sovereign power.

5. No privileges which might impair our political sovereignty or upset our social equilibrium shall be granted to the Christian minorities.

6. No foreign mandate or protectorate shall be accepted.

7. Everything possible shall be done to secure an immediate convening of the National Assembly and to establish its control over the proceedings of the government.

While we were working in the congress to lay down these principles and draw up these resolutions, Ferit Pasha, the Grand Vizier, sent out certain proclamations. On 23rd July 1919, he announced:

Unrest has broken out in Anatolia. Without any regard for the Constitution, assemblies have been held under the pretence that they are parliamentary sittings. It is the duty of the civil and military authorities to prevent such activities.

We took the necessary steps to counteract this order from the Grand Vizier.

As the congress was coming to an end, on 7th August I declared to the Assembly. "We have passed important resolutions, and proved to the whole world the existence and unity of our nation. History," I added, "will recognize the work we have done at this Congress as an achievement which has seldom been equalled."

I am convinced, gentlemen, that time will show this to have been no exaggeration.

In accordance with the resolutions drawn up at the Erzurum Congress, a Representative Committee was formed. . . . There were some who showed hesitation in electing me chairman. Although some of these people were acting in good faith, there were others who were not, as in the case of Omer Fevzi Bey and his companions. The treachery of this man, who had come to the congress as a spy of the enemy, was discovered later.

Two or three days before the congress came to an end, another question was discussed. Some of my close friends expressed the opinion that I should not be a member of the Representative Committee and that it should consist only of delegates elected by the various provinces. They suggested that my presence on the committee might give rise to the impression that our movement was not the expression of the national initiative, but the instrument of my own particular aims. However, I justified my attitude on the following grounds: I should take part in the congress and be its leader because of the necessity of translating the national will into action

without delay and of urging it to take up arms in its struggle. I considered it imperative that I should occupy an executive position within the congress in order to inform and enlighten the representatives, and guide them towards these objectives.

I admit that I had no confidence in the ability of any body of representatives to carry out the resolutions drawn up by the Erzurum Congress. I did not frankly believe that we would be able to hold the congress at Sivas which I had announced, nor did I believe that this body would be capable of actually representing the nation as a whole, and then of working to find a way of liberating not only the eastern provinces, but the entire country.

If I had thought all this possible, I would not have needed to rebel against the Istanbul Government and the Sultan-Caliph. Just like some two-faced persons who fought in both camps, I might have retained my positions as Army Inspector and ADC to His Majesty , both of which gave me such great prestige.

There was, of course, a risk involved in my coming out into the open and placing myself at the head of the national and military movement. But was this risk any more than that I, more than anyone else, would incur the severest penalties if I failed?

If I had allowed myself to be influenced by the fears of my comrades, I would have been admitting that my judgments and decisions were mistaken, and admitting also to weakness of character. History shows that in all great enterprises the sine qua non of success is the presence of a leader of never-failing resourcefulness and untiring energy. At a time when all the statesmen are despairing and impotent, when the nation is plunged into darkness with no-one to lead them, when a thousand and one people calling themselves 'patriots' are thinking, and acting in as many different ways, is it possible for anyone to proceed with decisiveness if he believes himself obliged to accept advice from this or that "important person "? Can history show us a single group which has succeeded under these circumstances?

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