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TURKEY Tr-National

Unaesthetic Atatürk monuments remain taboo in Turkey

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Those who visit Turkey may be surprised by the number of Atatürk monuments around the country. From village schools to state institutions and public parks, Atatürk monuments have become instruments shaping modern Turkey's landscape. Sculptor Aylin Tekiner's book 'Atatürk Sculptures' discusses what these monuments symbolize and how their construction has become an industry in itself

For those who live in and visit Turkey, Atatürk monuments appear as the most common figures in public spaces. From the famous Taksim Square monument to smaller, simpler examples in state institutions and schools, the presence of Turkey's founder is felt even in the most remote parts of the country.

On any given day, people can be found taking photos of the "Cumhuriyet" (Republic) monument that stands in the middle of Istanbul's central Taksim Square.

"I live in Kastamonu (in northwestern Turkey) and this is the first time I am visiting Istanbul with my wife," said schoolteacher İrfan Subaşı. "I think this monument is the most significant thing about this area. It is also very educational for tourists who don't know who Atatürk is."

Another passerby, Ayşen Kuleli, said she thinks the monument goes unnoticed too often. "People who walk here everyday forget about it," she said. "But still I think it is a powerful one, I wish all the Atatürk monuments looked like this. Some really look pointless. I don't know if we really need them all."

The widespread presence of Atatürk's image is exactly what interested sculptor Aylin Tekiner in writing a book on Atatürk monuments. Titled "Atatürk Sculptures: Cult, Aesthetics, Politics," which is also the subject of her doctoral thesis, Tekiner's book sheds light on how these monuments function as symbols of modern Turkish iconography.

"There are nearly 1,000 Atatürk monuments across Turkey," Tekiner told the Hürriyet Daily News & Economic Review. "As a sculptor, I was already questioning what these monuments mean, but then I realized it is a political question rather than an aesthetic one."

[HH] Cult object

Tekiner's book not only narrates how Atatürk sculptures and monuments have become instruments for expanding the state's presence, but also how the production of these monuments have turned Atatürk into a cult object.

"The idea of installing monuments of people in public spaces did not exist in the Ottoman Empire," Tekiner said. "The making of Atatürk monuments was definitely a new tool for visualizing the ideology of the modern state. Still, after a while it turned him into a cult figure."

After the first Atatürk monument was built in Istanbul's Sarayburnu district in 1926 by Austrian sculptor Heinrich Krippel, every city in Turkey started erecting Atatürk monuments. The monuments were placed in strategically important places like public squares and newly developed urban areas.

According to art historian Zerrin İren Boynudelik from Istanbul Yıldız Technical University, the use of public space in Turkey is problematic. "For us, public space is not

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really spared for people to use and freely express themselves. Instead it is space just spared for the use of the state," she told the Daily News.

Tekiner said the use of monuments in public space gained momentum even when the ruling government changed.

"In 1950, although Atatürk's CHP (Republican People's Party) lost the elections, the ruling Democrat Party, or DP, kept adding monuments. They also wanted to own the cultural heritage of Atatürk," she said.

The protection of Atatürk's image became so strict that in 1951 the DP passed a law that punished anyone who damaged, insulted or swore at Atatürk's image with three years of jail.

According to writer and art critic Hasan Bülent Kahraman, the law led to Atatürk monuments becoming untouchable objects.

"After that year, the monuments lost their value as objects of art and completely turned into cult objects," Kahraman said.

Tekiner agreed. "The law really turned Atatürk monuments into unquestionable objects and changed how people look at them. Today there are so many aesthetically unpleasant monuments that need to be removed, but people are scared to even touch them," she said.

Indeed, the removal of aesthetically unpleasant Atatürk monuments was debated a few years ago, when Culture and Tourism Minister Ertuğrul Günay said that some Atatürk monuments are not true representations of the man.

There are many opponents of removing the statues, however, and some have started a Facebook group called "Atatürk Monuments Cannot be Removed" to protest such an idea.

"However damaged they are, they are the symbol of our state," group member Şahin İnan told the Daily News. Removing them from their original place is disrespectful to the Turkish Republic," he said.

[HH] The Monument Industry

According to Tekiner's book, the rate of Atatürk monuments being erected sped up after the 1980 military coup.

"Before the coup, there were already monuments in almost every city. But after 1980, hundreds of new monuments were ordered and sent especially to eastern parts of the country."

Indeed, in 1981, which was Atatürk's 100th birthday, truckloads of Atatürk monuments were distributed across the country.

"This period also saw mass production of the monuments," Tekiner said. "With the new techniques, the monuments lost their individuality and just became copies of each other."

Necati İnci is a sculptor whose name is associated with many of the copycat monuments. İnci said he has made more than 500 Atatürk monuments so far.

"The 80s was a different time," İnci told the Daily News. "Then, we didn't even have time to respond to all the orders."

İnci said he gets about 25 orders a year. "It depends on the time of the year. If there is an election or a school opening, then there are more orders."

Still, he is critical when it comes to why there are so many Atatürk monuments.

"I don't think they are expressions of love and respect. Some officials order them to cover their mistakes or to ingratiate themselves," İnci said. "I think this is the biggest disrespect."

[BOX]

[HH] Absurd Examples

In the book "Atatürk Sculptures: Cult, Aesthetics, Politics" there are some absurd examples of how sculptures of Atatürk have figured in some parts of Turkey.

In an incident in 2001, an Atatürk monument in Mersin, Turkey's south, was caught in a flood and drifted out to sea. A few days later, the same monument was found in neighboring Antalya – but had lost its feet.

Since it is against the law to destroy an Atatürk monument, the officials did not know what to do with it so they decided to place it in a village school, mounting it at its

ankles. And thus a village school without a library or even a computer has an Atatürk monument.

In another case, a damaged Atatürk sculpture caused controversy in the town of Emirdağ, in Afyon.

The monument's arm was broken and made it unusable, so city officials offered it to the surrounding villages but no one wanted it – so they decided to bury it.

"The mayor says he wouldn't say where it is buried even if you put a gun to his face," said a news report at the time. "Because they are afraid of sabotage."

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