

# The Kurdish Question in the Light of Marxism

International Communist Party (ICP)

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<https://www.international-communist-party.org/English/REPORTS/KurdishQu.htm>

*The map, prepared by the Kurdish Institute in Paris, shows the boundaries that have been proposed over time for a Kurdish State, which has never managed to establish itself ("Le monde diplomatique").*



## Introduction

Kurdistan, or the country of the Kurds, covers a vast mountainous territory stretching some 475,000-550,000 square kilometers from the Anti-Taurus Range in the west to the Iranian Plateau in the east, from Mount Ararat in the north to the Mesopotamian Plain in the south.

Kurdistan is not a State; it is a territory that stretches on the fringes of four different, and always antagonistic, ethnic, political and cultural worlds: the Turkish, the Arab, the Persian, and the Russian. Its territory is today divided among four States: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Additionally, there is a smaller Kurdish population in the Caucasus.

Northern Kurdistan comprises 20 of Turkey's 81 provinces (il); officially this territory is divided into the more heavily Kurdish "Southeast Anatolia", and the more mixed "Eastern Anatolia". Eastern Kurdistan covers 4 of Iran's 24 provinces (ostan); officially only one of these provinces is recognized as Kurdish. Southern Kurdistan includes 4 of Iraq's 18 provinces (muhafadha); 3 of these form the Kurdish autonomous region established in 1974 and also called the Northern Region. By contrast, the province of Kirkūk is not recognized as Kurdish. Western Kurdistan, the smallest of the four, is also referred to as Northern Syria, and is currently an active battlefield between the Turkish army and affiliates of the PKK.

The territory of Kurdistan is mostly rich in water: the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow in the north. Lake Van, at 1,720 meters above sea level, the largest in Turkey, covers 3,764 sq. km.; in Iran, Lake Urmia (Rezāiyed in Persian) partly borders Eastern Kurdistan: it is at an altitude of 1,250 m.; it has very high salinity and does not allow fish life. The water problem is vital for all the countries in the region.

The territory of Kurdistan, consisting of high mountains furrowed by valleys and fertile plains, has an average altitude of more than 1,000 meters.

Kurdish population is estimated to be between 35 and 45 million according to the Kurdish Institute of Paris. The number of Kurds thus exceeds the population of every single Arab State, excluding Egypt, but is a minority in each of the States into which it is incorporated. Approximately \*80% of Kurds are Sunni Muslims.

Mineral wealth is substantial: in Northern Kurdistan there are phosphates, lignite, copper, iron, chromium (one of the most significant deposits on the globe), and oil. Southern Kurdistan produces 75% of Iraq's crude oil. In the Kermānshāh region of Iran, oil is extracted, as well as in Western Kurdistan. These resources of course do not benefit the Kurdish landlords and bourgeois, but are forfeited by the States in which

those territories are incorporated. Despite the wealth of natural resources, Kurdistan is a relatively poor country although industry has developed significantly beyond oil and agriculture in the last thirty years.

Northern Kurdistan is essential for Turkey, first for its oil wealth, but also because of its function as a water tower in the Middle East. As the great Tigris and Euphrates rivers have their source there and the water is fundamental for the irrigation of Anatolia and the countries that depend on it such as Iraq and Syria. Israel is also strongly interested in a possible supply. Since 1977, Northern Kurdistan has been the subject of the GAP or Southeast Anatolian Project, which is the largest regional development project in the world, with the construction of 22 dams and 19 hydroelectric plants. Japanese, Dutch and Israeli investors are involved. These Turkish dams are a source of contention with Syria and Iraq because Turkey can modulate their flow, causing water shortages in these countries that are disastrous for agriculture.

In the first half of 1900s, some cities of Northern Kurdistan were more advanced in small and medium scale industry than many Turkish cities. Most significantly, Diyarbakır, an important center of the textile industry, was third in the number of big enterprises in the country following Istanbul and Bursa. By the 60s, Northern Kurdistan's share of the Turkish economy had dropped significantly.

There exists not only small or medium sized private capital in Kurdistan but a private sector dominated by big businesses for a long time. Kurdish nationalists from all parts of Kurdistan, including the PKK have been supportive of the Kurdish bourgeoisie. The PKK for example, as it declares in its program the aim of "setting private entrepreneurship which can aid the free development of society, helping and supporting it". The Northern Kurdish bourgeoisie, in turn, supported the PKK to such an extent that 19 Kurdish businessmen were assassinated by the Turkish State under the Çiller administration in the mid 1990s.

Despite the State borders that separate them, the Kurdish populations scattered over the four countries have very close family relations. Kurdistan, especially its Southern and Eastern parts, was the traditional refuge of all opponents of the national regimes that shared it due to the locals' negative attitude towards the regimes in question. Additionally, especially due to the chemical massacres in Southern Kurdistan

in 1988 and the destruction of the Northern Kurdish countryside in the 90s, many Kurds have emigrated out of Kurdistan and became an important part of the workforce where they went, often leading the native workers to struggle.

The first workers' strike in Kurdistan took place in 1908 when 700 copper miners in Ergani, Diyarbakır walked out. Ergani workers remained active in the trade union movement after WW1. Kurdish proletarians in the Caucasus actively participated in the revolutionary struggles in the region following the October Revolution. A weak working class continued to exist along with a large poor peasantry in the decades to follow in all parts of Kurdistan. Especially in Northern Kurdistan, the proletariat began to go on strikes in the 1960s. This trend reached its peak in 1991 with the Summer workers' resistance in Northern Kurdistan. Yet it was above all the proletarian uprising in Southern Kurdistan that marked the Kurdish workers' entry into the stage of history.

Many of the slogans of the proletarian uprising in the South as well as the workers' struggles in the North were class based but they still also included national slogans, calling for Kurdish self-determination.

The Kurdish society prior to capitalism constituted a feudal unit. In pre-capitalist Kurdish society, the surplus product of immediate producers is appropriated through tithe and other duties. The immediate producer in Kurdish society was similar to the serf of Western feudalism in terms of relations of appropriation, attachment to land and several duties.

The Kurds are undoubtedly of heterogeneous origins. Many people lived in what is now Kurdistan during the past millennia, and almost all of them have disappeared as ethnic or linguistic groups. This trend has continued in modern times as many ethnic Armenians, Bulgarians, Circassians, Chechens, Georgians, Ingushs, Ossetians have become Kurdified as a result of fleeing to Kurdistan and having subsequently assimilated into Kurds. Moreover, the same has happened to even Turks and Arabs who were settled in Kurdistan by the Ottoman and Turkish States.

In fact, like the Communist International, two of its oldest sections in the Middle East, the Communist Party of Turkey and the Communist Party of Iran, recognized Kurdish nationhood and applied the tactics of the Theses on the National and Colonial

Question to Kurdistan. As the communist perspective of dual revolution expressed in 1920 was not realized, the Kurdish national question remained unresolved for the decades to come. The Kurdish national revolutionary movement peaked during the second half of the 1920s, however by then the Comintern itself had turned into a tool of the Russian national State. In the early 1930s Kurdish nationalism suffered a historic defeat from which there would be no coming back. The Kurdish bourgeoisie soon opted towards reformist and reactionary dead end solutions, leaving the duty to end the national oppression of Kurds on the shoulders of the proletariat. Hence, we predict that the next great upheaval of the Kurdish proletarians will not include slogans of national self-determination, and have purely class slogans on its banners.

### **The Prehistory of the Kurdish Nationality**

As we wrote in “Factors of Race and Nation”, 1953: «In the ancient empires of the Asiatic Orient, whose political formations come prior to the Hellenic, we encounter fully developed forms of State power, corresponding to enormous concentrations of landed wealth hoarded by the lords, satraps and sometimes theocrats, and the subjugation of vast masses of prisoners, slaves, serfs and pariahs of the land». The Kurdish nation has its roots in a number of ancient peoples. First among these was the Gutian people, based on animal husbandry, who inhabited the Zagros mountains in the second and third millennia BC, and were known in ancient texts for raiding Sumerian lands. The Assyrians defined the Gutians with the adjective Kurti, meaning powerful and heroic. This term came to describe various peoples who inhabited the area. One such people were the Hurrians, who spread from around Lake Van to almost all parts of modern Kurdistan from 2000 BC. The Hurrians were involved in agriculture, animal husbandry and metal working. The Hurrians were notable for their sculptures and their architecture as well. Hurrians played an important role in the Mitanni Kingdom, established in 1500 BC in upper Mesopotamia. The rulers of this feudal kingdom were Indo-Europeans, however its lords came from the Hurrians who came to culturally dominate the region. Rivalries to win over the throne, as well as between the lords weakened the kingdom, however, and lead to its collapse at the hand of the Assyrians, whose mode of production was slavery.

The Medes were an Indo-European tribe who began to enter upper Mesopotamia starting from 1000 BC. The Assyrians underestimated how numerous the Medes were, and the latter took over the lands east of Assur in 700s BC, including the Zagros mountains and the Iranian plains. As the Medes advanced towards the West, numerous peoples including the Gutians, Hurrians, and Indo-Europeans faced massacres, enslavement and plague. Accordingly, the Median Kingdom was supported by all the peoples mentioned above. Eventually the Medes, led by their King Phraortes, marched on Nineveh and defeated the Assyrians. As the Medes dominated the area, they consolidated their power. The Median nobility included the younger branches of the royal family and the principal chiefs of tribes which had taken part in the conquest. It constituted a sort of council which governed with the sovereign. After the conquest each of the chief vassals was granted or received a territory proportionate to the importance of his tribe, and the same was done for each of the clans, then for the families. Thus a kind of complete hierarchy was established from the owner of a village or a group of tents up to the supreme master.

The empire belonged primarily to the Medes. They were the most numerous and the first comers. But their forces spread all the way from Parthia to the borders of Oronte. The Persians, another Indo-European people whose forces were more concentrated, snatched away their supremacy. The Persian takeover was of no consequence from the point of view of social organization. The last Median King, Astyages, married his daughter to a vassal lord of the Persians. The famous Cyrus was born as a result of this marriage. Cyrus governed as king of the Persians and Medes, while his ancestors had been ruled by the king of the Medes and Persians. The chief men of the realms kept their estates and their rank and regardless of whether they were of Persian or Median origin, they continued to compose the royal council. After Cyrus came to take the Median Kingdom over from his grandfather, he married his aunt to further consolidate his power. Cyrus continued many aspects of Median rule, from laws to clothing, and including the revolutionary war against slavery in the Middle East. Yet Cyrus' death came, according to Herodotus, at the hands of Tomrys of Massagetae, a nomadic people Cyrus tried to invade.

The Medes, referred to as Kardakes in Greek sources, continued to enjoy a distinguished position in the Achaemenid as well as the Parthian Empires, and

continued to have their autonomous principalities under the Sassanids despite the latter's tendency towards centralization.

At the time Islam emerged, Kurds were divided between Sassanid and Eastern Roman Empires. Kurdish tribes initially gave strong support to the Sassanids who tried to withstand the Muslim armies. Yet soon it was clear that the Sassanids would fall and the Kurdish lords one by one submitted to the Arab armies and their new religion. Kurds continued to play an important role in the Islamic civilization. They came to prominence with the rise of the Ayyubids, a Kurdish dynasty who led the defense of the Middle East against the Crusaders. Under, Saladin, the founder of the dynasty, the Ayyubids ruled over Western Armenia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Eastern Tunisia, Northwestern Sudan, Yemen and Arabia, aside from Kurdistan. Although the State language of the Ayyubids was Arabic as they were technically vassals of the Abbasid Caliphate, the dynasty spoke Kurdish. Saladin implemented an educational reform, allowing many branches of science other than Islamic theology, including astronomy, mathematics, medicine and philosophy to be taught at madrasas and sources were translated into Kurdish for Kurdish students.

This being said, although hailed as a hero of the Kurdish nation by many modern Kurdish nationalists, Saladin and his dynasty clearly represented Islam, albeit a version of it very tolerant and respectful of other religions, rather than Kurdish identity, as they existed in a period that preceded the formation of nations. There were numerous other Kurdish principalities of varying sizes throughout the region during the Islamic Middle Ages.

The term Kurdistan itself emerged near the 12<sup>th</sup> century, although at this point it was used in a narrow administrative sense rather than a wide national sense.

The period following the time when the Kurds were divided between the Sassanid and Eastern Roman Empires gave Kurdish feudal lords the chance to continue their power. The Seljuks did not make any changes in the tax system and land ownership they encountered in Iran either. The period when the Kurds were divided between the Safavid and Ottoman Empires, which came to dominate the Middle East, and bordered each other in Kurdistan, for much of the second half of the last millennium, however, did not give Kurdish lords many opportunities for advancement.

In the past, it was the Christian Byzantines who forcefully displaced the Muslim Kurds in their borders as they were considered to be allied with the Sassanids. Now it was the Shite Safavids who forcefully displaced the Sunni Kurds in their borders, considering, not wrongly, that they would tend to be more loyal to the Ottomans who were also Sunnis. Consequently, with the help of Kurdish lords, the Ottomans ended up capturing most of Kurdistan, and generously installed their allies as local hereditary governors.

Kurdish lords rebelled twice against the Ottoman Empire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and in both cases were suppressed brutally. It is no coincidence that these revolts took place in this century, which saw the beginning of the Empire's unavoidable descent, as it started losing land and its income from tributes declined. Nevertheless, for most of its existence as a domain of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan preserved its autonomous cultural identity and particular feudal structure. The Ottoman term *ocaklık* refers to the land tenure and transferring the right to use the land in return for service to a certain family. *Ocaklık sanjaks* are the places left to the local lords. Ottoman Kurdish provinces with *ocaklık sanjaks* were Diyarbakir and Van in Northern Kurdistan, Urfa in Northern and Western Kurdistan and Şehrîzor in Southern Kurdistan. Additionally, the vassaldom of Ardalán ruled Eastern Kurdistan on behalf of Persia.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the feudal lords who collected agricultural taxes in Kurdistan, and the Empire's share from these taxes was quite small. As we quoted Prussian military officer Helmut von Moltke (the Elder) who was sent to serve the Ottomans in *The Kurds: Tribal Society in the Grip of Imperialism*:

«The Ottoman Empire embraces large territories where the Porte exercises no de facto authority, and it is certain that the Sultan has many conquests to make in the periphery of his own States. Among these is the mountainous country between the Persian frontier and the Tigris (...) It has never succeeded for the Porte to bring down in these mountains the hereditary power of the families. The Kurdish princes have a great deal of power over their subjects; they war among themselves, defy the authority of the Porte, deny taxes, do not allow the draft, and seek a last refuge in the strongholds they have raised on the high peaks».

Having lost a great degree of its land, and trying to endure deep social and economic problems, the Ottomans revised their policy of nonintervention towards Kurdish feudal autonomy. In doing so, the Ottoman Empire, in the large cities of which capitalism was beginning to develop, was supported by the advanced foreign capitalist powers. Von Moltke underlined the need to subjugate the Kurdish lords resisting the empire to preserve their autonomous status in order to fix the budget. Thus, the Ottomans, backed by the advanced capitalist powers, moved against Kurdish feudal autonomy. The internal conquest of Kurdistan was without a doubt an inevitable episode of the advance of capitalism in the Ottoman Empire, however it also served to create a deep national problem which to our day has not found a solution within the framework of capitalism.

The two main classes of Kurdish feudalism were the warrior and landowning nobles along with their armed squires; and peasants who had been degraded into semi-slavery. These peasants were called *raeya* or *rayet*, after their Ottoman and Persian counterparts, a term that comes from flock. The Kurdish warrior and landowning nobles and their armed squires mentioned above constituted kinship based social units called *aşirets*.

Kurds who were not part of such organizations constituted the serf class. *Aşiret* has been confusingly translated as tribe, however it is clearly a feudal entity. The *aşiret* lord, the eldest son of the previous lord, had unlimited authority. He could confiscate everyone's property as he pleased. He could have individuals beaten and if he wished he could get any one of his people killed. In times of peace, the agreement between lords against the escape of criminals prevents a bondsman from fleeing the authority of the lord. The government offered no help against the corruption of the lord either. Kurdish serfs were subject to a complicated system of feudal tolls and taxes which benefited their lords. These tolls and taxes were either collected by the feudal himself or by the elder or administrator representing the community. When feudal dues were levied (labour dues as well as exactions in kind), it was from the village as a whole. This last detail shows that despite the fact that Kurdish feudalism enjoyed considerable autonomy, it lacked a kingdom of its own and was thus not an advanced form of feudalism, still carrying the influence of the patriarchal production relations.

As the Ottoman Empire moved towards crushing feudalism and autonomy in Kurdistan, feudal lords one by one began to rebel. In 1806, Babanzade Abdurrahman Pasha revolted against the new tax policy, followed by his nephew's rebellion to avenge him in 1812, and the Rewanduz Rebellion led by Mir Muhammad in 1818.

The most influential lord in the region, however, was Bedir Khan of Botan, who ruled from the Iranian border to central Mesopotamia, from Diyarbakır to Mosul. He minted his own coins, the Friday sermons were dedicated to his name, and his wealth was extraordinary. Lord Bedir Khan's forces massacred 50,000 Assyrians in an attempt to Islamize the region.

Bedir Khan rebelled against the Ottomans in 1840. Yet his principality was crushed by the Ottoman army following the directives of von Moltke in 1847; he was betrayed by his nephew Êzdîñşêr.

Êzdîñşêr, appointed lord of Cizre, later revolted against the Ottomans too, considering his rights insufficient, and was defeated in 1855. Lord Bedir Khan, like the rebel lords before and after him, was not a national revolutionary. His was a revolt to defend the privileges of the Kurdish feudal aristocracy against the centralizing efforts of the Ottoman Empire and Western capitalist powers, above all Prussia. As we wrote earlier: "During the 19th century there were about fifty uprisings in Ottoman Kurdistan, all of them suppressed in blood, even with the help of France and Britain, whose economic penetration into the Empire was already considerable. By the end of the century all independent Kurdish principalities had disappeared" (1991).

Aside from struggling to overthrow slavery in the region along with its Persian counterpart, Kurdish feudalism dissolved the gentile community, gave birth to an economy based on property of land and above all animals, protected the settled serfs from the invasion of nomadic aşirets, kept Kurdistan an autonomous unit against the occupying nomadic empires that destroyed neighboring countries, and sharing the fate of feudalism elsewhere, itself became a powerful obstacle to the later development of productive forces. Like all feudal units, the role played by aşirets in history eventually began to decline. As it went through one military defeat after another, the aşiret slowly dissolved through the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as the social and economical structure of Kurdish society was transformed.

In any case, the proletariat of course would never sympathize with the oppression of the reactionary Ottoman Empire and its various European patrons, yet it owed the desperate and doomed uprisings of feudal Kurdish lords no support either.

### **Kurdish Rebellions from Sheikh Ubeydullah (1879) to Sheikh Said (1925)**

With the collapse of Kurdish principalities in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman State redistributed their lands to rich traders, local bureaucrats and sheikhs, or religious scholars with political authority. The latter soon became the richest landlords as donations of their followers were added to the lands they were given. Thus, they became very powerful political leaders in Kurdistan, and some of them went on to use their influence to spearhead actually nationalist ideas as opposed to the aristocratic rebels before them.

Sheikh Ubeydullah Nehrri was the most important of these leaders. Holding Botan, Behdinan, Hakkari and Ardalan which used to belong to the principalities, he believed that Iranian and Ottoman governments were leeches that prevented the development of Kurds. Sheikh Ubeydullah believed the only way forward for the Kurds was the establishment of a united Kurdistan, made out of the merger of Kurdish lands in Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Despite being a sheikh, Ubeydullah had no intention of Islamizing Kurdistan, and he formed good relations with the Christians, who supported his rebellion. Ubeydullah's forces fought Iran and the Ottoman Empire at the same time, and were defeated although the sheikh was exiled rather than executed, testimony of his influence. Of course, it was not a Kurdish bourgeoisie that headed Ubeydullah's movement as capitalism had not properly expanded into Kurdistan yet. However, since the rebellion did not envisage a return to the feudal order but the formation of an independent nation which could only follow a capitalist path, Sheikh Ubeydullah and his followers can well be described as national revolutionaries.

The Kurdish national movement was born with the Sheikh Ubeydullah revolt but it took a modern form only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The center of the new movement was to be Istanbul rather than Kurdistan, and its leaders would spend the years of Sultan Abdul Hamid II's oppressive reign united with the bourgeois revolutionaries and reformers of the Young Turks. Following the 1908 revolution when

a constitutional monarchy was declared and Society of Union and Progress came to power, Kurdish nationalists moved on to form numerous organizations: Kurdish Advancement and Progress Society, Society to Spread Kurdish Culture and as a student organ, Kurdish Hope Society were set up in 1908, followed by the Kurdish Independence Society founded in 1910 and to which all the Kurdish leaders belonged to. The new wave of Kurdish nationalism, explicitly rather than implicitly politicized, then set out to expand to Kurdistan. Kurdish clubs were established in cities such as Diyarbakır, Mosul and Baghdad. After years of propaganda, signature campaigns involving tens of thousands of Kurds as well as spreading arms, the Kurdish nationalists attempted a rebellion in Bitlis, in Eastern Anatolia, among the leaders of which was a young Simko Shikak. An important segment of the leaders of this new generation of Kurdish nationalist leaders came from the Kurdish middle class made up of the children of impoverished lords. They were thus as much influenced by the French Revolution as they were of the Kurdish resistances of the previous century.

Sultan Abdul Hamid II had organized a significant number of Kurds, along with Turks, Circassians and Arabs in the Hamidian cavalry regiments in 1890, roughly a decade after the suppression of the Sheikh Ubeydullah revolt. This regiment was particularly instrumental in the massacres of Armenians and other Christians during Abdul Hamid II's reign as well as World War 1, and served to create powerful bonds between the State and a section of the Kurdish, and other Muslim populations. Following World War 1, various parts of Anatolia were occupied by the Entente and the Ottoman Empire was reduced to a puppet government in Istanbul headed by the liberal Freedom and Accord Party, opposed by Mustafa Kemal's national revolutionary government in Ankara.

Mustafa Kemal had initially distanced himself from the actions of the Union and Progress Government during the war, defining the Armenian genocide as "a shameful act". Moreover, like the Istanbul government, he had promised autonomy with the 1921 Constitution, and commented that it would in particular apply to the Kurds. These policies would be quickly revised after the victory of the Turkish nationalist movement, as the 1924 Constitution declared that «in Turkey, everyone is called "Turk" in terms of citizenship regardless of religion and race». Nevertheless, for a while, Kurdish leaders were divided between the Istanbul and Ankara governments.

The Treaty of Sèvres promised the Kurds a State. As we wrote earlier (“Comunismo”, 1991):

«England seemed inclined to keep its promise made a few years earlier, unlike what it had done with the Arabs. The main reason that had led the great powers to prospect Kurdistan’s independence was the desire to impose a “safety belt” between the USSR and Turkey. The European powers wanted to prevent the widening of the socialist revolution and intended to create a feudal, backward buffer State that they could use against the USSR and other peoples, a potential strategic point in the vicinity of Soviet oil wells in the Caucasus.

«The Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920) provided in two articles for the establishment of a Kurdish State, but reduced to only a few territories within the borders of present-day Turkey and with limited sovereignty, for the benefit of the victorious colonial powers. This was the lousy generosity of British imperialism, which wanted to keep the most fertile and especially oil-rich Kurdish territories under control. In fact, the ancient vilayet of Mosul, although it was undoubtedly part of Kurdish territory, despite being clamored for by Kemalist Turkey, was in 1925 definitively assigned by the League of Nations to Iraq, i.e., England (...)

«The treaty of Sèvres, however, was never implemented. The Ottoman government, one of the signatories, had lost its authority, and the National Assembly in Ankara did not ratify the agreement, which would have reduced Turkey to a colony of the Western powers (...)

This division of the Kurdish people among various States, in each of which they were going to constitute a national minority, had extremely negative consequences in the following years. The nationalist movements began to follow different, and often opposing, paths, to the point of opposing each other in arms. Yet, many Kurdish nationalists, especially the reactionary variety, were happy to play the role envisaged for them by the imperialist powers.

Near the end of WW1, a number of Kurdish nationalists reorganized under the leadership of Abulkadir Ubeydullah, son of Sheikh Ubeydullah and former member of the Kurdish Advancement and Progress Society, calling themselves the Society for the

Advancement of Kurdistan (SAK). The newly established organization was quick to reach an agreement with the Freedom and Accord Party for Kurdish autonomy near the end of 1918. In 1920 the organization would make the following call: «Do not be fooled by the National Forces! They are drifters without a fatherland carrying the head of the Bolsheviks. Do not renounce allegiance to the Caliphate and the Monarchy». As such, the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan took a fully pro-Entente, that is the imperialist front that emerged victorious from the war, position.

SAK dominated the political line of the Koçgiri rebellion of 1921, where the Kurdish leaders of the multi-ethnic Erzincan workers' and peasants' shura, or council, also participated. The demands of the Koçgiri rebels did not go beyond the recognition of the autonomous status promised to the Kurds by the Western powers in the Treaty of Sèvres and agreed upon by SAK and the Freedom and Accord Party. The rebellion ended in a massacre at the hands of the Kemalist forces, led by Nureddin Pasha, who famously said «we have exterminated the people who say “zo” (Armenians), I’m going to exterminate the people who say “lo” (Kurds)». Following the suppression of the Koçgiri Rebellion, SAK declined and would never rise to prominence again as an organization.

In 1918, after murdering a few thousand Assyrians in order to establish his power in Eastern Kurdistan, Simko Shikak launched a rebellion against Persia. By 1922, it was claimed that the rebellion was supported by Mustafa Kemal and Shikak had declared the formation of independent Kurdistan, although his rebellion did not live long afterwards and was suppressed by Persian forces. Shikak would later support Mahmud Barzanji who had first rebelled against the British who ruled Southern Kurdistan in 1919, was exiled, and upon his return declared himself King of Kurdistan in 1922. Barzanji's kingdom lasted until 1924, when it was finally defeated by the British. Soon afterward, Simko Shikak attempted another rebellion in Eastern Kurdistan and failed once again. Shikak would flee to Southern Kurdistan, was offered a pardon by the Persian government and was murdered soon after he returned to Iran. Despite their ideological backwardness, rebellions in Eastern and Southern Kurdistan from this period can be tentatively considered national revolutionary for pursuing independence rather than autonomy and for positioning themselves against the major imperialist powers rather than on their side.

As SAK declined, a new organization arose in Northern Kurdistan: The Society for Kurdish Freedom, or Azadî for short. Founded by Xalîd Cibranî, a Kurdish soldier who supported Mustafa Kemal until the Koçgiri Rebellion, Azadî soon had sections in Erzurum, Istanbul, Diyarbakır, Dersim, Van Siirt, Bitlis, Kars, Muş, Malazgirt, Hınıs and Harpu. Azadî too was interested in developing relations with Western powers, above all the British. In 1924, Azadî led the Beytussebab rebellion in opposition to the prohibition of public use and teaching of Kurdish, resettling of Kurdish landowners in the West of the country and opposition to the abolition of the Caliphate in 1923. The rebellion was defeated and Xalîd Cibranî was killed. Abdulkadir Ubeydullah would replace him as the head of the organization. This setback did not stop Azadî from planning another rebellion, which started in 1925 and was led by Shiekh Said, an influential Islamic leader who had no military experience. Sheikh Said was no Sheikh Ubeydullah, however, and the rebellion thus assumed the form of religious reaction to secular reforms than national revolt. Almost 20,000 people were killed by the Turkish State following the suppression of the rebellion, among them Abdulkadir Ubeydullah and Sheikh Said. Azadî never recovered from the defeat.

### **The New Secular Nationalism of the Republic of Agiri (1926-30) and the Dersim Massacre (1937-38)**

Following the eruption of a spontaneous revolt in Norther Kurdistan near Mount Ararat in 1926, a new Kurdish nationalist organization called Xoybûn (Self-Rule) Committee - Kurdish Independence Organization came into being in 1927, formed by former members of various other Kurdish nationalist groups. The notable difference of Xoybûn from the previous Kurdish nationalist organizations in Northern Kurdistan was that there was not a trace of religious rhetoric in its propaganda. It was a purely Kurdish nationalist organization, progressive and secular. From the start, it had close relations with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, or the Dashnaks, Among its members were the trade bourgeoisie, soldiers, bureaucrats and landowners. so much so that the two organizations came to form an alliance pact although Dashnaks' motivation was to trigger an armed conflict between their Muslim enemies.

Soon after its formation, Xoybûn sent the most prominent soldier in its ranks, Ihsan Nuri Pasha, a former member of the Kurdish Hope Society, to establish the

Kurdish Republic in the city of Agri. Members of Xoybûn appealed to both the Soviet Union and the Western powers for support – to no avail, although the British, the French and Stalinist Russia all blamed each other for supporting the wretched rebellion of the Kurds in their press. The Kurds were on their own. The only support for the rebellion came from Soviet Armenia and whether this aid was officially ordered is not known. In any case, the new republic was supported by rebellions in Van, Bitlis, Igdir, Mount Tendurek and Mount Suphan and thanks to them lasted until near the end of 1930, when it was defeated. At its height, the Kurdish national army consisted of 60,000 soldiers. It has been claimed that nearly 50,000 people were massacred as the rebellion was suppressed. Nevertheless, the Republic of Ararat inspired the Ahmed Barzani revolt of 1931 in Southern Kurdistan where Xoybûn supporters seeking refuge were welcomed. The Republic of Agiri is historically significant for being the first national revolutionary effort in Kurdistan which was based on the Kurdish bourgeoisie. It represents the high point of the Kurdish national movement and its defeat was of historic consequences for the Kurdish bourgeoisie. Xoybûn existed mainly as group of exiles in Western Kurdistan until 1946 when it dissolved, unable to ever take the stage of history again.

The Zaza population of Dersim in Northern Kurdistan had not participated in most of the rebellions mentioned above, the notable exceptions being the Erzincan shura and the Koçgiri rebellion. Yet the province was targeted with a new legislation in 1935 which changed its name to Tunceli and essentially declared martial law in it and gave its military governor dictatorial powers. The aim of this legislation was the still intact feudal autonomy of the region, which was, in the words of Prime Minister Celal Bayar, a State within the State. Following public meetings in early 1937, a letter of protest against the legislation was written to be sent to the governor. The emissaries of the letter were executed, afterwards a group of local people ambushed a police convoy. The Turkish military responded by occupying the province. 25,000 soldiers were deployed into the area. In turn, Seyid Riza, an Alevi religious elder, tried to organize a resistance. Soon, however, he was called to a peace meeting in Erzincan, and was hanged by the Turkish military upon arrival. Kurdish sources claim that about 70,000 were massacred in Dersim. In fact, the events that occurred in Dersim in 1937-38 cannot really be defined as a rebellion as it generally has been. Rather, it was an organized ethnic massacre with a particular aim, set in motion through a number of blatant provocations.

With the Dersim massacre, the defeat of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey was complete for the time being.

As we wrote earlier, by then «the imperialist powers had thus mapped out the tragic fate of the Kurdish people. Whereas before the war it was divided by the only ancient border separating the Ottoman and Persian Empires, after the war it found itself divided among five States: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the USSR. This quite different situation has had and continues to have dramatic consequences for this people, who had suddenly become a “national minority”, and especially for the dispossessed masses for whom national oppression was added to class oppression». The Kurds were not the only nation who suffered in the region either. As we wrote earlier (1991): «It is the thesis of our movement that the revolutionary bourgeoisie, as soon as it comes to power immediately becomes reactionary, not only toward the proletariat, which also constituted the shock mass that enabled it to seize power, but also toward national minorities. The Turkish bourgeoisie is no exception to the rule. The Armenians, who had even been able to establish their own State on the border with the USSR, had to suffer vicious massacres that forced them to emigrate en masse; the substantial Greek minorities living in Pontus suffered a similar fate».

### **The Autonomous Republic of Mahabad (1941-45) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party**

In 1941, during WW2, the Soviet Union and Britain invaded Iran. The former, occupying the northwestern part of the country, found it profitable to support Kurdish nationalist aspirations. Thus, a Kurdish administration was formed in Mahabad which initially aimed for autonomy within the boundaries of the Iranian State. The new administration was spearheaded by the newly formed Society for the Revival of Kurdistan, a secret organization lead by Qazi Muhammad, son of a supporter of Simko Shikak and a judge. The committee predominantly consisted of the Kurdish middle class, but was backed by the landlords as well as the bourgeoisie. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was founded in Mahabad in the summer of 1945 as a public ruling party. Soon afterward, in 1946, after ruling Eastern Kurdistan for five years, Qazi Muhammad declared the foundation of the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad, which nevertheless still aimed for autonomy within Iran rather than independence.

Mustafa Barzani of Southern Kurdistan, younger brother of Ahmed Barzani, who led his military forces in the rebellion of 1931, was appointed as the Minister of Defense and commander of the Kurdish army. Barzani also organized the KDP in Southern Kurdistan, managed to get the backing of a considerable segment of the Kurdish section of the Iraqi Communist Party and was elected its leader in exile in mid-1946. The Russians soon ceased their support of the Republic of Mahabad, and near the end of 1946 the Iranian army took the city without a fight since Qazi Muhammad wanted to avoid a massacre. The Iranian forces closed down the Kurdish printing press, banned the teaching of Kurdish language, burned all Kurdish books that they could find, and Qazi Muhammad, along with many other KDP leaders, were hanged for treason, while Mustafa Barzani went into exile in the Soviet Union. The KDP program was not specific about any social or economic content for fear of alienating the highly conservative landlords who had agreed to support it. It was a bourgeois nationalist party which was reformist rather than revolutionary by the necessity of the historical conditions.

After the 1958 military coup led by Abdul Karim Qasim in Iraq, Mustafa Barzani was invited to return from exile. As part of a deal arranged by Qasim and Barzani, the Iraqi government promised to give the Kurds regional autonomy in return for Barzani's political support. Meanwhile KDP was granted legal status in 1960. Soon, however, it became apparent that Qasim would not follow through with his promise of regional autonomy. Consequently, KDP intensified its propaganda. Qasim responded by inciting other Kurdish chiefs to fight against Barzani's, however by 1961, KDP had emerged victorious from these conflicts and Barzani had consolidated his position as the leader of Southern Kurds. KDP then attempted to expel government officials from Kurdish territories. Qasim ordered the Iraqi army to retake Southern Kurdistan, and the Iraqi Air Force began to bomb Kurdish villages indiscriminately, which only lead to popularizing Barzani's cause even further among the Kurdish population. The insurrection could not be defeated, which was a factor in the success of the Ba'athist coup against Qasim in 1963.

The new Ba'athist government relied on American and British assistance against Barzani's rebellion, incinerating entire Kurdish villages with napalm bombs supplied by Western powers. In addition, Syria began targeting Kurds in Western Kurdistan and

aiding Iraq against the insurgency. In turn, Barzani's forces received aid from Iran and Israel both of whom wanted to weaken Iraq.

Near the end of 1963, it was the Ba'athists turn to be overthrown in a coup. The new government of Abdul Salam Arif initially tried to suppress the Kurdish rebellion one more time, only to declare a ceasefire in 1964. Barzani agreed, and expelled the more radical opponents of the ceasefire from KDP. Yet, Abdul Salam Arif died in a plane crash in 1966, and replaced by his brother Abdul Rahman Arif, who also initially tried his hand to defeat KDP militarily, only to fail and return to the negotiation table. The new leader declared a peace program, only to be overthrown by the Ba'athists in 1968. The following year, the Ba'athists attacked the Kurds and lost once again, and the war finally ended, leaving 100,000 casualties, with the Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement of 1970 which was not to last very long.

When the rapprochement between Qasim and Barzani collapsed and the Kurdish-Iraqi war started, KDP in Iran supported Barzani and his KDP in Iraq. In the process, the leadership and subsequent social orientation of both KDP in the South as well as the East revealed their true colors. By 1965, Barzani turned against KDP in Iran and came to an agreement with the Shah that called for him to restrain activities against the Iranian government. Moreover, he openly called for subordinating the struggle in Iran to that in Iraq and warned that KDP militants from Iran would not be tolerated in Southern Kurdistan. As a result, the leadership of KDP in Iran was ousted and a new leadership, mostly made up former Tudeh Party cadres took over.

Members of the KDP in Iran formed a Revolutionary Committee and declared their support for peasant uprisings against the National Police around Mahabad and Urumiya. Although KDP in Iran managed to inflict serious losses on the Iranian army, they were eventually defeated. Within months, eight of the eleven members of the Revolutionary Committee had been murdered by Iranian soldiers, and the movement lasted less than eighteen months. KDP in Iraq murdered over 40 members of the KDP in Iran and handed their bodies to the Iranian authorities.

From its emergence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the split between the Iraqi and Iranian branches of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Kurdish movement had maintained a degree of solidarity that had contained clan rivalries. The various Kurdish

parties and organizations formed after 1908 and World War 1 had different approaches but were not opposed to one another – in fact their cadres often moved from one organization to another to try and see how a different approach would do. Eventually a single bourgeois nationalist organization for all parts of Kurdistan belonging to the former Ottoman Empire, Xoybûn was formed, which was supported by prominent Kurdish national movements in all parts of the country. This organization willingly dissolved after World War 2 because, as Kurdish nationalists were establishing close ties with the USSR, it was considered obsolete. Until the split mentioned above, however, the Kurdistan Democratic Party served the same purpose, expressing the interests of the Kurdish bourgeoisie as a whole, that is across borders.

In 1974, the Iraqi government began a new offensive against the Kurdish rebels, pushing them close to the border with Iran. As the fighting progressed, Iraq informed Tehran that it was willing to satisfy Iranian demands in return for an end to its aid to the Kurds. In 1975, with mediation by Algerian President Houari Boumédiène, Iraq and Iran signed the Algiers Accord. Accordingly, Iran would quit supplying the Iraqi Kurds in return for the transfer of Iraqi territory to Iran.

The Second-Iraqi Kurdish war was an attempt at symmetric warfare against the Iraqi Army rather than guerrilla warfare like the first, and without Iranian support, it led to the quick collapse of the Kurds, who were lacking advanced and heavy weaponry. Following the defeat, Barzani escaped to Iran with many of his supporters. Others surrendered and soon the rebellion was over.

Following the defeat of Barzani's rebellion, leftist dissidents in KDP in Iraq led by Jalal Talabani finally decided to leave the old party and formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in mid-1975. PUK received grassroots support from the urban intellectual classes of Southern Kurdistan upon its establishment, partly due to five of its seven founding members being PhD holders and academics. PUK forces began engaging with Iraqi military in late 1975, right in the aftermath of the Second Iraqi-Kurdish War, and continued through 1976. Those raids by the PUK against Iraqi government were not favorably considered by Barzani and KDP groups ambushed and killed PUK fighters on several occasions. The first intense KDP-PUK fighting occurred in Baradust area in 1978. The PUK, in which the urban bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie component was significant, flaunted more radical outward forms than its

parent organization. In the PUK's program was a demand for political independence rather than autonomy. Soon, however, it would turn out that the PUK could be no less conciliatory than the KDP towards the various States oppressing the Kurds.

### **Kurdish Nationalism in Iran after 1979**

Two months after the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, an intense Kurdish rebellion began against the newly established regime. The uprising was born in early 1979 when protesting Kurds took control of police headquarters, army bases, and parts of army barracks in Sanandaj, after army troops failed to disperse them. Unrest then spread to other Kurdish regions as the Kurds took over towns and army garrisons trying to keep out the Iranian army in Divan Darreh, Saqqez and Mahabad. The movement was led by the KDP in Iran and the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala) which had been founded in 1969 as a Maoist organization although it has been claimed that it received Soviet aid after 1979 when it renounced Maoism and assumed outwardly leftist attitudes.

Although ethnic conflict between the Kurds and the Azeris in the region significantly weakened the movement, it worried Ayatollah Khomeini enough to declare jihad against it. It took Islamic Revolutionary Guards until late 1980 to reconquer Eastern Kurdistan completely, killing perhaps more than 10,000 Kurds in the process, as groups of KDP soldiers continued to engage in low-level campaigns against Iranian forces until 1983.

In the meanwhile, a war between Khomeini's Iran and Saddam Hussain's Iraq had broken. KDP in Iran was supported by the Iraqi government until 1988 while KDP in Iraq and PUK struck a deal with the Iranian government. With the backing of Iranian forces, the rebels managed to gain control of several parts of Southern Kurdsitan.

The imperialist war between Iran and Iraq was further proof of the Kurds' inability to act as a unified nation, and each of the national components, divided on a State basis, once again became pawns of the neighboring country, which meanwhile did not give up oppressing the Kurds at home.

## **Al Anfal Campaign (1988) and Proletarian Revolt in Southern Kurdistan (1991)**

Before moving to suppress the Kurdish rebellions of the 1980s, Saddam Hussain had desperately negotiated a deal promising the Kurds autonomy with PUK. Yet in 1986, Iran brokered a deal between KDP in Iraq and PUK, and the Ba'athist government begun the infamous Al Anfal Campaign to annihilate Kurdish settlements with bombs, explosives and chemical gas. There was an uprising in Halabja in 1987, which had become a stronghold of deserters from the Iran-Iraq war. Iraqi army troops sent to kill the revolting masses were convinced to join them instead. Over the next few weeks there were uprisings in several other Kurdish cities. The government could only prevent them from turning into other Halabjas but cutting off their electricity and closing down mosques which were used as gathering places. Deserters took over the nearby town of Sirwan with no help from the Kurdish nationalists, only to be bombed by the government. Halabja had become an immense threat against the war itself. First, Halabja was bombed and occupied by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Saddam Hussein announced that «all those who do not defend their nation, their land, are considered to be traitors and we will not hesitate to annihilate them by any means available to us».

Soldiers started leaving the town, many giving their weapons to the deserters as they left. Yet PUK forces, aided by Iranian Revolutionary Guard, both with their gas masks ready, surrounded the city and prevented Halabja's proletarians from leaving while allowing their own families, supporters and the rich safe passage outside. After massacre, they looted homes and raped women. The gas attack on Halabja left 15,000 dead on the medium term, while the Al Anfal Campaign it was a part of claimed 180,000 lives according to Kurdish sources and between 50,000 and 100,000 according to Human Rights Watch.

Following the brutal campaign of annihilation in Halabja and the rest of Southern Kurdistan, PUK and KDP were discredited so much that they decided to form the Kurdistan Front together.

When the new spontaneous wave of uprisings begun in Southern Kurdistan in early 1991, these parties moved to take charge of the money in the banks and control

government buildings, State institutions and the arms trade in order to ensure their power.

The uprising quickly acquired a class content. In Silêmanî and Hewlêr alone, almost a hundred spontaneous, self-organized workers' *shuras* were formed in popular quarters, squares, small factories to discuss practical issues. This experienced mirrored that of Iran 1979, where workers' and peasants' *shuras* were formed throughout the country, including Eastern Kurdistan. The movement was decidedly against Kurdish nationalist parties, Barzani and Talabani were not allowed near Silêmanî, and internationalist slogans such as "We will celebrate our new year with the Arabs in Baghdad" were chanted. The *shuras* organized a militia throughout Southern Kurdistan which was not recognized by the Kurdistan Front. Silêmanî was the first city to be taken by the rebels and the last city to be retaken by the Iraqi army. After the uprising was defeated, KDP and PUK mobilized their forces and took Silêmanî and other Southern Kurdish cities back from the Iraqi army, and finally signed a deal with Saddam Hussein that recognized their existence as an autonomous Kurdish region within Iraqi borders.

The weakness of the brave revolt of the young Southern Kurdish proletariat was only that, although numerous radical groups claiming to be communists were present, there was no true world communist party to lead it and tie it to proletarian struggles in the rest of the planet.

The proletarians and deserter soldiers on both fronts found against them the solidarity of all parties and armed forces in the field who declared themselves to be at national war, while they were now only pawns of the imperialist States and powers, constituting the final verification of their now hopelessly counter-revolutionary character, both vis-à-vis the working class and communism and the very national goals they claim to pursue.

### **The PKK: From its Foundation (1978) to its Capitulation (1999)**

Although a section of Barzani's KDP in Turkey was founded in 1965, contemporary Kurdish nationalism in Northern Kurdistan has its roots in the Stalinist movements of various sorts that rose to prominence after 1968. By the 1970s, there

were numerous “leftist” Kurdish nationalist organizations operating in Northern Kurdistan. These bourgeois organizations, like various Turkish leftist organizations, were armed and at war not only with the fascist Grey Wolves but with each other.

Under these conditions, the loose group that called itself Revolutionaries of Kurdistan emerged in Ankara from the student movement in 1975, its most important leaders being Abdullah Öcalan, Haki Karer, Kemal Pir, Mazlum Doğan and Hayri Durmuş. The group argued that Kurdistan was a colony of four countries, where occupiers and local collaborators cooperated. Accordingly, they aimed to wage a national liberation struggle against these forces, for which an illegal organization that launch armed struggle was needed. The purpose of the armed struggle was to encourage the masses and thus organize increasingly regular armies, and through popular war found independent, democratic and united Kurdistan. Initially the group continued to organize among students, teachers and the educated middle classes. In 1976, the group decided to start shifting its center of activities from Ankara to Northern Kurdistan. Abdullah Öcalan was elected chairman and Haki Karer deputy chairman. Unbeknownst to the leadership of Revolutionaries of Kurdistan, however, Öcalan had contacts with the Turkish National Intelligence Agency. He was later to explain this saying «the National Intelligence Organization wanted to use me but I used them instead».

This swarming of opportunist and Kurdish nationalist groups did not benefit the development of the working-class struggles of Turkey’s proletariat, which were very lively in the 1970s. Beyond any consideration of the good or bad loyalty of the leaders, the Kurdish nationalist movement was a hindrance to the development of working class struggles in Turkey.

In 1977, Haki Karer was murdered in Gaziantep where he had moved to do political work. According to his younger brother Baki, Haki Karer had announced his decisions to investigate Öcalan’s relations with a suspected Turkish intelligence agent the day before he was murdered. The investigation never happened, instead Karer’s murder became influential in the decision to launch a political party for the liberation of Kurdistan.

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was formed in a village near Diyarbakır in late 1978. Its program claiming that “Turkish capitalism” rather than “Kurdish

capitalism” existed in Kurdistan, the PKK to a large extent denied the existence of a Kurdish bourgeoisie while encouraging its development. Thus, they envisaged what can be described as a “bloc of three classes”, the urban petty-bourgeoisie, the peasantry and the proletariat would conduct the national revolution against Turkish, Arab or Persian colonial occupiers and their “feudal” collaborators. All who denied independence as the path of the Kurdish national movement were condemned.

Until Haki Karer’s death, the PKK had defended armed struggle ideologically but had not actually attempted to organize it. Since then, they started participating in armed clashes against other Kurdish and Turkish leftists. Judging by its program as well as its actions, we can describe the PKK of this period as a typical Stalinist national movement, already anti-proletarian.

In early 1978, a Revolutionaries of Kurdistan militant named Halil Çavgun was shot dead in the Kurdish town of Hilvan. His murderer was a member of the landowning Süleymanlar aşiret. The Revolutionaries of Kurdistan struck back two months later, killing the tribe’s leader Mehmet Baysal. In the battles that raged over the next few months between the two groups, the Kurdish nationalists gradually gained wide support in the town. In mid 1979, the PKK staged a daring assassination attempt against a Kurdish parliamentarian and head of the powerful Bucak tribe.

Disappointed at the parliamentary parties’ inability to contain the armed clashes between various political groups and the increasing intensification of the class struggle, the Turkish Armed Forces organized a coup supported by the United States in 1980. Soon mostly leftists but also some fascists were imprisoned throughout the country and several of their militants were executed. All prisoners of this period faced torture, but the overwhelmingly Kurdish inmates in Diyarbakır Military Prison got the worst of it. The PKK led the resistance in Diyarbakır Prison, notably through acts such as suicides, hunger strikes and self immolations in protest of the horrendous conditions imposed by the military administration of the prison.

Under such circumstances, many Kurds escaped to Europe. As we wrote in “Kurdish Nationalisms: Counter-Revolutionary Instruments in the Middle East Powder Keg” (2017): «Kurdish cultural identity and nationalism outside Kurdistan are largely maintained by communities abroad and by the governments that have hosted them.

Kurdish cultural centers in Sweden and other European countries, as well as websites, freely perpetuate Kurdish nationalism. In Europe, the Kurds have obtained since the 1970s-80s the recognition of a cultural autonomy». The "democratic" regimes of Europe and America have used Kurdish nationalist organizations for their economic, diplomatic and military interests, hypocritically speculating of the accounts of Kurdish refugees in Europe about the systematic torture they or their comrades experienced in Diyarbakır Military Prison.

A considerable amount of PKK militants escaped through Turkey's loose border with Syria. The PKK made an agreement with the Maoist and Palestinian nationalist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine for its volunteers to be trained. When the PKK volunteers became too many for the DFLP to handle, similar agreements were made with Al Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Palestinian Popular Struggle Front and the Lebanese Communist Party, Öcalan playing an important role in diplomatic relations with all these organizations.

As we wrote in "The Kurds in the Quagmire of the Middle East" (2016): «At the beginning of the seventies the Syrian government thought they could Arabize the territories along its border with Iran and Iraq, inhabited mainly by Kurdish and Christian minorities. This region, which is highly fertile and rich in oil, had known independence movements during the French mandate as well. But when Hafez al Assad assumed power in 1971 he put an end to the forced Arabization and sought an alliance with the Kurds against the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Kurds accepted to the extent that in 1982 they took part in the bloody repression of the revolts organized by the latter. Hafez's bodyguard was often composed of Kurds, and of Christians, towards whom he extended the same policy of protection. The Kurds of Syria didn't enjoy any political or cultural rights but they weren't officially persecuted, at least as long as they refrained from advancing any political demands».

Syria's support for Kurdish groups was, at least initially, more tacit than overt. In practice this meant that Damascus did not block the flow of illegal refugees from Turkey, did not make trouble for Kurdish militants setting up house in Syria, and did not impede traffic back and forth to Lebanon. It was not, however, that Syria was uninterested in the new arrivals. First of all, Syria had its own Kurdish population to worry about and wanted to ensure that Syrian Kurds were not encouraged to stand

against the State. While this reliance to Syrian goodwill did not yet cause the PKK to change its official program that foresaw an independent Kurdistan stretching over part of Syria, it limited its ability to openly oppose the Syrian regime in Western Kurdistan.

By 1984, the PKK was ready for war against Turkey. Its survey teams returned safely from Turkey, bringing information about troop locations and nationalist sentiments. Dozens of militants were firmly ensconced inside Northern Kurdistan, where they worked to set up a civilian militia. A handful of attacks on alleged Kurdish collaborators had gained the PKK sympathy in the region. The PKK's attacks caught Ankara by surprise. Martial law, with which the country had been ruled since the 1980 military coup, was in the process of being lifted. Even after the attacks, the newly installed civilian government did not initially take this new threat seriously. Eventually Ankara made its move and begun to pressure Barzani to kick out the rebels from his territory. Barzani was concerned about a possible Turkish retaliation and asked the PKK to relocate their bases and not stage attacks near the border. The PKK refused Barzani's request, arguing it needed its bases near where it crossed into Turkey.

In late 1984, the Turkish foreign minister, accompanied by a large number of military officials, came to Baghdad to discuss the situation. Both Turkey and Iraq being opposed to Kurdish independence in any part of Kurdistan, Turkey had little difficulty negotiating an agreement that allowed its military to conduct raids on PKK encampments in Southern Kurdistan. No doubt Iraq hoped any Turkish cross-border operations would also target the PKK's Southern partner with which Baghdad was at war. Nonetheless, Iraq remained sufficiently wary of Turkey that it refused to allow Turkish troops to push further than five kilometers into Iraqi territory. Barzani's fears that he would be targeted in any Turkish raid soon were realized. In mid 1986, the second anniversary of the start of the PKK's fight, the Turkish air force bombed Southern Kurdistan, killing an estimated 100 Iraqi Kurdish civilians and KDP fighters. The Turkish military continued smaller operations in the next year. Barzani held out for a year and finally formally abandoned the protocol he signed with the PKK in mid 1987. Yet the alliance had allowed the PKK to establish itself militarily inside Southern Kurdistan, and now they were so well entrenched that it was impossible to dislodge them without an all-out armed assault.

At the same time the Turkish State often almost randomly arrested people of Kurdish descent after a guerrilla attack. Villagers whose only contact to the PKK might have been involuntarily providing them with food were imprisoned with experienced and committed Kurdish nationalists. Thus prisons, above all the Diyarbakır Military Prison, became some of the most important recruitment grounds of the PKK.

Eventually, a popular uprising broke out in early 1990. The spark was the killing of thirteen guerrillas in their cave hide-out a few days after they had secretly crossed from Western Kurdistan into the North. Clashes which started during the funeral of one of the fallen quickly spread to the rest of Northern Kurdistan. The timing, right around the Kurdish Newroz, helped boost tensions. The military sought to tighten its control over the region in the face of the protests. More curfews were imposed and armored vehicles flooded in. The demonstrations broke out without any involvement of the PKK. The PKK was as surprised as the State by their strength. Turkish State were now faced with a full-scale insurgency. On the one hand the protests showed that oppressed people were no longer willing to remain passive, on the other, that the bourgeoisie made the proletariat fall into the trap of the clash of nationalisms, an endless war on an ethnic basis that functions as a factor of distraction and social preservation for the bourgeoisies of all ethnic groups.

Although Öcalan's leadership in the PKK had been challenged by certain leaders of the organization in Europe such as Çetin Güngör, who was murdered by the PKK in 1985, and his comrade Baki Karer, who narrowly avoided a similar fate, politically these dissidents had been quick to renounce the armed struggle and evolve into a national reformist line.

The most ambitious and significant challenge to the PKK's leadership started at the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress of the PKK held near the end of 1990. Armed PKK units were criticized for failed raids against Turkish military targets and for focusing on wrong or unimportant targets, including unarmed peasants. The raid of villages in Mardin was described as the darkest stain on the party's history, and policies such as forced conscription were rejected.

The man leading the charges was Mehmet Cahit Şener. Şener had joined the guerrillas in Syria's Bekaa valley in 1989 where the PKK was headquartered following

his release from Diyarbakır Prison where he was one of the prison resistance leaders. Şener called for investigations of the internal executions that occurred in the Bekaa training camp, and in the PKK's camps near the Iranian border. He also insisted that the central committee be responsible for the PKK's finances, which until then were controlled solely by Öcalan.

Ten days after the end of the congress, Öcalan issued a warrant for Şener's arrest, implying that he might be a Turkish agent. Şener escaped after months, and soon declared the formation of PKK-Vejin (Resurrection). Şener famously exposed the countless rapes committed by the leadership of the PKK among its women members and opposed its collaboration with Saddam's government in Iraq during the uprising of 1991. Şener and his comrades were loyal to the program of the early PKK as opposed to the increasing tendency of collaborationist on the part of its leadership. However the program of the early PKK was also written in a period where a national revolution could no longer be on the agenda in Kurdistan, so PKK-Vejin was no less a lost cause. Mehmet Cahit Şener and two of his comrades were murdered in Qamishlo, Western Kurdistan in late 1991 in a joint operation by the PKK and Syrian intelligence and soon afterward PKK-Vejin, the last armed nationalist organization in the history of Kurdistan which aimed for independence was annihilated.

Since 1990, parliamentary efforts played an important role in the PKK's strategy, whose human rights activist supporters united with Kurdish social democrats split from the Social Democratic People's Party to form the People's Labor Party. Though this legal party was banned after its deputies were arrested by tanks after adding a Kurdish sentence to their parliamentary oath, it was replaced by a number of parties that succeeded each other such as the Democracy Party, People's Democracy Party and the Democratic People's Party through the decade.

In 1993, Öcalan agreed to a ceasefire with Turkey. Accompanied by Talabani at a press conference in Barelias, Lebanon, Öcalan stated that the PKK no longer sought a separate State, but peace, dialogue, and free political action for Kurds in Turkey within the framework of a democratic State. With the PKK's ceasefire declaration in hand, Turgut Özal, the neoliberal president of the time, was planning to propose a major reform package at the next meeting of the Turkish National Security Council however

he died under mysterious circumstances and the plans were never realized and soon fighting begun again.

The Turkish State resorted to destroy over 4,000 villages, forcing 3,000,000 Kurds to become refugees, as well as burning the forests of Northern Kurdistan. Moreover, about 20,000 mostly Kurdish civilians were killed by so-called "unknown assailants" even though it is common knowledge that black ops and State-sponsored gangs were responsible these deaths. In turn, the PKK often killed peasants who didn't support them, and at one point launched a campaign which led to the murder of hundreds of teachers to fight Turkish cultural influence in Kurdistan. In the meanwhile, the PKK participated in the Southern Kurdish civil war which lasted from 1994 to 1997 between KDP in Iraq and PUK on the side of the latter, and supported by Iran since 1995. The war caused almost ten thousand deaths and ended up with the United States facilitating a deal with KDP and PUK after a couple of Turkish military intervention into Southern Kurdistan against the PKK. As for the war between Turkey and the PKK, it cost the lives of tens of thousands of guerillas and conscripts.

In 1997, the PKK was designated a terrorist organization by the United States. In late 1998, Syria finally gave in to Turkish threats of an invasion and Öcalan had to leave the country. After spending several months trying to find political asylum in Europe, he ended up in Nairobi, Kenya and was captured by members of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization there. According to footage taken on the plane he was taken to after being captured, Öcalan was recorded saying "I love Turkey. And I love the Turkish people. I believe I'll serve them well. I'll do it if I get the chance".

Of course, for us Marxists, there are no heroes just as there are no monsters. Rather than Öcalan's individual conduct, either when he was at the head of the PKK or when he was captured, is the social and political reality that not only allowed but made vastly acceptable such conduct. This conduct may have to be attributed to the weakness and divisions of the bourgeoisie in Kurdistan's backwardness, ready to coexist and compromise with surviving feudal and patriarchal elements. It is certainly not because of Öcalan that the PKK was never ceased to be a reactionary nationalist organization by serving, at various times, every State which is involved in oppressing the Kurds, or by abandoning the goal of Kurdish independence. "The heroic armed struggle waged by the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, certainly the most radical in the landscape of

Kurdish nationalism” (1991) we spoke of in the past, was powerless in the face of changing historical conditions and thus they were bound to be defeated.

### **KRG (2005), AANES (2013) and The Kurdish Question Today**

Following Öcalan’s capture, the PKK experienced an ideological shift from Stalinism to “democratic confederalism”. Accordingly, sister parties for the PKK were formed in all parts of Kurdistan. In Southern Kurdistan, it was called Democratic Solution Party of Kurdistan (2002), in Western Kurdistan, it was called Democratic Union Party (2003) and in Eastern Kurdistan, it was called Kurdistan Free Life Party (2004). Even the PKK itself changed its name to Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (2002), though briefly, only to be renamed the People’s Congress of Kurdistan (2003), and the PKK again (2005).

In the meanwhile, the unilateral ceasefire the PKK had declared was ended in mid-2004. These sister parties were soon united under the umbrella of Kurdistan Communities Union (2005), essentially a proto-State with the People’s Congress as its parliament. The PKK itself remained the guiding force of the umbrella organization and the other parties. As the new names made clear, the PKK’s ideological and organizational changes had the aim of making it appear sympathetic as well as useful to the Americans who, after the 9/11 attacks seemed determined to play a more important role in the Middle East.

The greatest winners from the increased American involvement in the Middle East were the Southern Kurdish bourgeois nationalist parties. As the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, both KDP, by now a typical conservative party, and PUK, by now a typical social democratic party, were quick to present themselves as the greatest supporters of the “democratic transition” from Saddam Hussein’s bloody regime. They were rewarded handsomely. KDP was given the presidency of the Kurdistan Regional Government, established in 2005 which would be governed in partnership with PUK, whereas PUK was entrusted with the ceremonial though prestigious presidency of Iraq. Under these two parties, soon the Kurdistan Regional Government was to become one of the most corrupt administrations in the world, often unable to pay public workers their salaries.

A split from PUK in 2009 called Movement for Change (Gorran), a centrist “anti-corruption” party, briefly threatened KDP and PUK’s hold on power, only to be exposed soon as no different, and lose all its support. Riots and to a lesser but still significant degree strikes have become common occurrences in Southern Kurdistan, where the protestors have more than once burned the offices of every single political party operating in this or that city. Also common is the murder and arrests of protestors. Although Massoud Barzani’s ill-fated 2017 independence referendum was widely supported by the population of Southern Kurdistan, electoral participation remains extremely low in general.

Although the PKK affiliate formed in Southern Kurdistan has not been much of a success, the same cannot be said of the parties in Eastern and Western Kurdistan. In the former, Kurdistan Free Life Party has launched a low scale insurgency against the Iranian State. Around 1,500 people are thought to have died during the conflict so far. The PKK affiliate was supported by the United States under the Bush administration, however this policy was revised under the Obama administration and designated the party a terrorist organization. The greatest success, however, was the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Western Kurdistan. Though due to the PKK’s historic ties with the Syrian government, the PYD has not attacked it the same way its Eastern affiliate has been attacking Iran, they did get involved with the Kurdish opposition to it when faced with the opportunity. In 2004, a football match in Qamishlo between a local Kurdish team and an Arab team sparked violent clashes between fans of the opposing sides which spilled into the streets of the city. The fans of the Arab team rode about town in a bus, insulting Barzani and Talabani, and brandishing portraits of Saddam Hussein. In response, Kurdish fans proclaimed “We will sacrifice our lives for Bush”. Tensions between the groups came to a head, and the Arab fans attacked the Kurdish fans with sticks, stones, and knives. Security forces brought in to calm the riot fired into the crowd, killing six Kurds, three of whom being children. The Kurds briefly took over Qamishlo, the Ba’ath Party office was burned down by the demonstrators, and a statue of Hafez al-Assad toppled. In response, the Syrian army mobilized and took the city back. Several dozen Kurds were killed by the security forces and thousands fled to Southern Kurdistan. Hailing the uprising as “a historical turn towards freedom”, the PYD took active part in the events, which strengthened their position among Syrian Kurds.

In 2012, Islamist Turkish prime minister Erdoğan announced that his government was negotiating with Öcalan to end the conflict between the Turkish State and the PKK. After months of negotiations with the Turkish Government, Öcalan's message to the people was read both in Turkish and Kurdish during the 2013 Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır. The letter called for a unilateral cease-fire that included disarmament and withdrawal from Turkish soil, declaring the end of the armed struggle. The PKK announced that they would obey. Erdoğan welcomed the letter stating that concrete steps will follow the PKK's withdrawal. Soon, the PKK announced that it would withdraw all its forces within Turkey to Southern Kurdistan.

Yet, while the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government was negotiating with Öcalan, it was also rooting for the Islamic State which had besieged the PYD held Kobanê in Western Kurdistan in 2014. Erdoğan, who had been elected president in the meanwhile, declared that the city was "about to fall". Deputy Prime Minister Arınç mocked the defenders of the town, saying that «They are not able to put up a serious fight there... It is easy to kidnap people but they are not able to fight».

In Northern Kurdistan and beyond Kurdish nationalists called people to the streets. There were demonstrations and riots in many parts of Turkey, where 43 people were killed according to official figures, most whom supportive of Kurdish nationalism. As we wrote at the time, «demonstrations in numerous cities, some very violent, have been harshly repressed... Curfews have been imposed by the Erdoğan government in six of the country's provinces where Kurds are in the majority. From prison Öcalan has called on his followers to prepare for war. The PKK has announced that if the Kurds in Kobanê are massacred it would end the ceasefire declared in March 2013, after decades of guerrilla warfare, and resume the armed struggle. On 13 October, after three days of attacks by the PKK on the security forces in the south-east of Turkey, Turkish planes bombed their positions. Once again the Kurdish people are being used as cannon fodder in a covert war between the regional and global bourgeoisies».

Yet the lives claimed by this incident did not prevent the continuation of the negotiations. In early 2015, PKK's parliamentary wing Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the Turkish government declared they had reached a consensus. Following a largely successful ceasefire period, the Turkish general election of 2015 resulted in a

major gain for HDP (13% of votes, +7.5%), a notable decrease for AKP (41% of votes, -9%) and a hung parliament.

Soon, two policemen were murdered in Northern Kurdistan and the Turkish government launched police operations in the cities and military operations in the countryside against the PKK, ending the ceasefire and the peace process. The operations would continue in the coming years, leading to the destruction of numerous Northern Kurdish towns. All PKK suspects in the 2015 killing of two Turkish policemen were acquitted by the Turkey Court in 2018 as no substantial evidence was provided. The peace process between Turkey and the PKK once again showed that under capitalism, peace is when preparations for the next war are being made.

In 2011, a civil uprising erupted in Syria. As we wrote earlier, “the Kurdish parties in Syria, with the exception of the PYD-PKK, founded the Syrian Kurdish National Council, which aligned itself with the part of the Arab population opposed to Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile the militants of the PYD-PKK didn’t participate in the demonstrations against Syrian government and in certain cases tried to prevent them. In March 2011 Bashar al-Assad, seeking reconciliation with the Kurds, published a decree which granted identity cards to 300,000 stateless Kurds, freed some Kurdish political prisoners, agreed to a possible return of exiles” (2015). In course of the next months, the crisis in Syria escalated into a civil war. The armed opposition seized control of several regions, while security forces were overstretched. In mid-2012, Syria withdrew its military from the majority of Western Kurdistan, leaving power to the militias created by the PYD. Militias affiliated with the PYD repaid the favor by focusing most of their energy in fighting against organizations such as the Free Syrian Army, Al-Nusra Front, and eventually the Islamic State. As we wrote earlier: “In July 2012, at Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani of the KDP reconciled and reunited the various Syrian Kurdish parties, including the PYD-PKK. The latter agreed to participate in the joint management of the cities and of the population of the Syrian Kurdish areas, but refused to merge their military wing with the Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga, who wanted to join forces with the Free Syrian Army (FSA)” Until 2013, PYD worked with the Kurdish National Council, mostly made up of KDP supporters, but later abandoned this alliance. By 2015, the PYD was the closest ally of the United States in Syria, and under

American influence, established an armed front organization with militias of certain Arab and other organization under the name Syrian Democratic Forces.

After the SDF defeated the Islamic State, Turkish army invaded the city of Afrin and some other parts of Western Kurdistan. Lacking the American military support, they enjoyed against the Islamic State when facing the Turkish military, the SDF was helped by the National Defense Forces, the largest pro-government militia in Syria. Despite suffering losses, thanks to American political support, the SDF maintained much of its territory. In 2018, the SDF announced the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Despite portraying itself as supportive of minority rights and friendship between peoples, the PYD has never abandoned nationalism. PYD leader Salih Muslim remarked "Syrian government policy has brought many Arabs to the Kurdish areas. All the villages where they live now belong to the Kurds. One day those Arabs who have been brought to the Kurdish areas will have to be expelled". Assyrian Christians have complained about forced evacuations and the Kurdified history education and Apoist indoctrination given in schools. Protestors have been shot at, dissidents jailed and tortured. In short, there is nothing out of the ordinary about the AANES. As we wrote earlier: "The Kurdish proletariat has nothing to expect from the Kurdish governments and parties, who are bourgeois and collaborationist; nothing but terror, attacks against their working conditions and a general lack of humanity in the methods they use" (2005).

## **Conclusion**

The Kurds are a nationality who were late to develop capitalism. Kurdish nationalism developed relatively late in a region already subjected to the greed of imperialism and did not have the strength to emancipate itself from the influence of different States to form a single bourgeois national State or, ultimately, even a single bourgeois national movement movement.

The national revolutionary currents in Kurdistan have been extinct for almost a century. In a region so overwhelmed by various imperialisms and their national reactionary allies, there is no chance for them to reappear.

The proletariat in Kurdistan, like everywhere else, must organize as an independent class, expressing this through its own economic class organizations and constituting the first vanguard groups, as they appear in various contexts, into one global structure, the International Communist Party.

After the revolution, the communist power in much of Kurdistan will be faced with an economic situation characterized by a poor industrial fabric and backward agriculture. “It is important to keep in mind that «the revolutionary industrial working class will embrace without restrictions the agricultural worker of the large enterprises and in this way prevent the regression of the rural laborer to the condition of the small peasant. It could consider the semi-proletarian sharecroppers and leaseholders as allies; tolerating their aspiration to the free use of their land, something that only the revolution can achieve. Only with great caution and as a temporary measure could it expect any positive support from the small peasant landowners who have not yet been ruined and proletarianized by capitalism». In some areas of particular backwardness in Kurdistan, for the party to use propaganda of a radical agrarian reform to push the peasants to ally themselves with the urban proletariat, and after the revolution it will carry out this agrarian reform that will provide better living conditions for the peasantry and allow more effective use of agricultural resources.

Kurdish enclaves does not in any way mean an independent bourgeois nation-State freely developing capitalism. Their existence is merely tolerated by the Iraqi and Syrian bourgeoisies and ensured only to the extent that they are supported by greater imperialist powers.

In today’s Kurdistan, all Kurdish nationalist formations are national reactionaries who depend on the support of this or that imperialist power.

The rivalry between the enclaves and various Kurdish nationalist parties divides even the most combative sectors of the Kurdish proletariat from each other. We know that the proletariat will only find a new enemy with its own imperialist aspirations and oppression against minorities if Kurdistan is united under the rule of whichever Kurdish nationalist force.

The Kurdish proletariat, like the Palestinian, Chechen, and Tuareg, has nothing to expect from the increasingly unlikely creation of a Kurdish State. The Kurdish bourgeoisie is now incapable of even the slightest progressive action. Once in power, supported by other States or imperialist powers, it will oppress the proletariat of Kurdistan, whether it is Kurdish, Arab, or Turkmen, as is already the case in Iraqi Kurdistan, which enjoys almost complete autonomy from the Baghdad government, to the point that as early as 1991 it completely escaped the control of Saddam's regime following the establishment of the no-fly zone. It can be said that Iraqi Kurdistan has already constituted a de facto State for three decades.

At the same time, an overwhelming majority of the Turkish, Iranian and Arab working classes continue to support the imperialist aspirations of their own bourgeoisies, which in itself involves a renunciation of their own struggle to free themselves. Thus, the communist party still has to call upon the proletarians of the four countries to fight for the defeat of the imperialisms of their own bourgeoisies. The proletariat's seizure of power will necessarily imply the end of all national oppression against the ethnic minorities in the area and thus also the Kurds.

This being said, the communist solution, that is the establishment of a communist dictatorship with the temporary formation of a proletarian federation of States, can only be achieved by the united struggle of proletarians of all national backgrounds not only of Kurdistan but the whole Middle East. As we wrote earlier in 1953: «Radical Marxists have rightly combated the social-democratic thesis of simple linguistic “cultural” autonomy within a unitary State in multi-national countries, supporting total autonomy for minority nationalities, not as a bourgeois outcome or facilitated by the bourgeoisie but as a result of the overthrow of the central State power with the participation of proletarians of its own dominant nationality».

Consequently, «Communism is not “the night in which all cows are grey”. For a long time, alongside one or more common languages shared by the human species (languages that will evolve and change with a tendency to merge), all of the different peoples will continue to speak their own languages and, along with a propensity towards international brotherhood, there will continue to be a great diversity of cultures, costumes and sensibilities» (2015).

Accordingly, the key to the solution of the Kurdish national question remains at the hands of the revolutionary proletariat, the only class whose interests require the abolition of national oppression today, and its International Communist Party.

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## **Appendix 1: Communism and the Kurds**

The first communists of Kurdish origin were Bolsheviks originating from the region of Kars, today within the boundaries of Turkey though then a part of the Tsarist Empire and they operated among the Caucasia's Kurdish population. Fêrikê Polatbêkov is known to be the first Kurdish Bolshevik and was active in various parts of Russia, taking part in the Bolshevik government in Siberia at the age of 21. Polatbêkov was murdered by White counter revolutionaries in 1918. Erebe Şemo, originally a shepard from Kars, was a railway worker when he encountered the Bolsheviks in 1916, spread their anti-war leaflets and gave revolutionary speeches. Şemo formally joined the party in 1918 and participated in the Civil War as a Red Guard soldier, returning to work among Caucaian Kurds in 1924.

In his autobiography titled Kurdish Shepherd, written in 1930, Şemo transmits the thoughts of Kurdish workers and peasants about the revolutionary struggle against the Dashnaks in Armenia and their Kurdish feudal allies. "Who were the ones who caused conflicts among our aşirets and made us turn against each other? Why should we shed the blood of our brothers. We were workers and they were workers too. The lords and the Dashnaks made us fight and massacre one another. But now, no one discriminates against some because they are Kurdish, Armenian, Russian or Persian". Şemo himself recalls saying in a meeting with Kurdish proletarians: "Who benefits from you workers killing each other? Why do you want to exterminate each other? In fact, you need to exterminate not each other but the lords, the rich, the sheikhs and the preachers. We the party of the Bolsheviks do not divide people into Turks, Kurds, Armenians".

Three modern Kurdish alphabets were developed in the Caucasus following the victory of the revolution, one of them by Şemo himself. In July 1923, the Kurdistan Uezd, known as Red Kurdistan, was established within Soviet Azerbaijan with its capital in Lachin. Eventually a group of younger Kurdish Bolsheviks begun to form around Şemo. As Kurds lacked a modern written literature, Kurdish Bolsheviks hoped

to reach them using literature and poetry. The Kurdish Bolshevik group lacked experience, and fell for Stalinism, which showed an interest in the Kurdish question following the fall of the Agiri rebellion, publishing Kurdish newspapers until the mid 30s. Then, associating even with Kurds in the party ceased to be profitable for Stalin. Şemo was sent into exile in Siberia in 1937 where he stayed for 20 years until Stalin's death, building railroads. Other members of the group were arrested and imprisoned for a year and released afterward, having made more useful and servile by the Stalinist counter-revolutionary apparatus.

From the start, the Communist Party of Turkey paid interest on the Kurdish question. A speaker at the first congress of the Communist Party of Turkey (Baku, September 1920) declared: "Like every nation, Arabs, Kurds and Bulgarians will decide and determine in what way they will live themselves. As Russia accepts federation, so too must we. Not only us, but all nations must accept this principle. Only through this principle will humanity be able to become a vast family". The remark was met with unanimously agreement. The report on the congress would conclude: "Just as the Communist Party of Turkey will attempt to save Turkish workers and peasants from the influence of the Unionists (Committee of Union and Progress) and the treacherous socialists, it is obliged to separate the oppressed classes of the Greek, Armenian and Kurdish nations from the Dashnak or Bedir Khan organizations, uniting them in the name of the same interests and purposes as one class and directing them to fight against both internal parasites and external forces".

The leaders of the Aydınlık faction, the party's right wing, never defended this perspective and officially abandoned it as soon as they could. In a resolution written by Şefik Hüsnü for the 1925 Party Congress, among the party's duties was to show the Kurds and other national minorities that it was madness to want to separate from Turkey. When the Sheikh Said rebellion erupted in 1925, with full support from the Stalinist Comintern, the party leadership loyally supported the bloody repression of the Kurdish rebellion at the hands of the Kemalist government, justifying their position with the feudal nature of the revolt which was undeniable and the supposed progressive nature of Kemalism. In a report, Şefik Hüsnü wrote that "Communist publications were preaching the merciless repression of the Kurdish rebellion and promising the government communist support in all its efforts to liquidate feudalism". As we have

expressed, the Sheikh Said rebellion was indeed reactionary and not worth the support of genuine communists. Aydınlık's position of siding with the oppressor nation was blatant chauvinism.

The Stalinist Comintern and their Aydınlık henchmen paid little attention to the differences between The Sheikh Said rebellion and the Republic of Agiri. Şefik Hüsnü repeated the false Kemalist propaganda that the rebellion was organized by foreign powers who in reality did not even give it any support justify supporting the repression and massacre of Kurds once again by the Turkish government. Şefik Hüsnü also warned the government that it was losing the poor Kurdish masses, who were participating in one rebellion after another in great excitement. Although Şefik Hüsnü was softer on the Agiri Rebellion than he was on the Sheikh Said rebellion, this was rather due to the Russian State's current relations with the Turkish government, corresponding to the pseudo-radical "Third Period" of the Comintern. In any case, the Stalinist Communist Party of Turkey critically supported the Kemalists against the Agiri rebellion, once again taking a chauvinist position.

The official Communist Party of Turkey no longer existed in 1937 as it had been liquidated by the Comintern, however certain Turkish Stalinists still played an important role in it. A report prepared by İsmail Bilen for the Comintern on the so-called Dersim rebellion shows that the tendency to see any Kurdish armed action as reactionary by default had not changed among Turkish Stalinists. Bilen expresses support not just for the massacre of the people of Dersim but for the forced deportation of the population and the cleansing of the province. All this demonstrate the determined chauvinism of Stalinism on the Kurdish question.

Communism in Kurdistan has a history cut tragically short. While Kurdistan has accumulated a history of remarkable proletarian struggles, it never had a long enduring communist tradition. Now, this can only change through the strengthening of the International Communist Party to which the future generations of communists in Kurdistan will belong.

## **Appendix 2: The Kurdish National Movement**

*V. Surto ("Moscow", Organ of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress of the Communist International, No.7, June 1, 1921)*

Kurdistan is once again in the grip of insurrection. This is not the first time that the Kurds have risen up to shake off the yoke of the pashas and the beys; they have long since had enough of the domination of the Khalifs.

It is already forty years since this movement took precise contours and since 1903 it has even its organ "Kurdistan", written by Bedir Khan Bey, who has not ceased to lead an energetic campaign for the emancipation of the Kurdish people. The centers of these "dreamers" were Silêmanî, Sakkyä and Senneh. The sultans had to fight against the Kurds, but all the expeditions they undertook came to nothing, and the ruthless repressions perpetrated by the janissaries had most of the time the opposite results to those expected. Sultan Abdul-Hamid was the first to try to "estimate" the Kurds at their true value. He wanted to buy them. He distributed land to the beys and sheikhs, who are the temporal and spiritual leaders of the Kurds, he granted them benefits, titles of nobility, dignities. The Hamāvand tribe, among others, received as a token of gratitude, for services rendered to the Porte during the Russo-Turkish war, vast pastures. The Sultan made a special effort to use the Kurds to subjugate the Armenians, whom he had always considered to be a dangerous element for the security of the Turkish State; for this purpose he gave the Kurds full power over the Armenians: they could levy taxes as long as they pleased and sack Armenian villages with impunity; for a time they were the blind instruments of Turkish atrocities: they were responsible for massacres and pogroms. By such a policy the Sultan succeeded in sowing division among the Kurds, but the Kurdish intellectuals were aware of the harm caused by these pernicious practices and fought hard against the current of corruption emanating from the Turkish authorities. The propaganda of the Kurdish youth agitators was not without effect: the Kurds increasingly refused to submit to the orders of the pashas and beys, and it is interesting to record that during the last war, thousands of Armenian families pursued by the Turkish massacres found shelter and valuable support in the Kurdish villages.

The Kurdish national movement is of great interest. The Kurds are a partly sedentary and partly nomadic people; it seems, however, that they are tending to become distinctly sedentary; they are mainly engaged in animal husbandry. The tribes are still very much alive, and the Kurdish nation as we would understand it, is only just

beginning to take shape, but this does not prevent national feeling from being very lively and the insurrections which spring up on this terrain carry a character of extreme fierceness. This fact, which seems paradoxical at first sight, is easily explained when one thinks of the regime of bloody terror which has reigned for so long in the region. But this is not yet the root cause of the Kurdish national revolutionary movement. The main cause lies in the economic regime of the country. It is presented under the aspect of a mountainous country hardly accessible, with vast pastures and a numerous livestock; it could be almost self-sufficient, and the rare products of importation, it receives them from Persia, Armenia and Mesopotamia; as for the metropolis, it is connected to it only by administrative and political relations, without more. As far as intellectual culture is concerned, the Kurds owe everything to the Arabs of Mesopotamia, whose influence has been decisive.

During the war this influence was not without success put to good use by the English who tried, by means of a propaganda led by the Arabs, to raise the Kurds against the Turks. If the goal was not reached, the neutrality of a certain number of Kurdish tribes was assured.

After the war, the British gave up all hope of using the Kurdish national movement for their imperialist interests. However, there is every reason to believe that the British continue to subsidize the Kurdish nationalists to this day.

This is not to say, moreover, that the Kurdish national movement has nothing but artificiality and is aroused only by the interested maneuvers of the imperialists. On the contrary, it has a marked character of spontaneity. It is directed by the Kurdish youth organized in a Mutual Aid Society which has its center in Constantinople and branches in all the cities of Eastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia. The organ of the nationalists is "Djinn", which is published in Constantinople. A large number of propagandists of this society, spread in all the cities of Kurdistan, lead a tireless agitation for the autonomy of Kurdistan. The enormous influence of this propaganda on the Kurdish masses is such that the Minister of the Porte, Ferid Pasha, could not, himself, not recognize it. Kemal Pasha, having come to power, hastened to promise them autonomy, but appreciating these kinds of promises at their true value since they have seen Armenia duped by the same Kemal, the Kurds do not disarm.

In 1919, Kemal had succeeded in ruthlessly crushing the Kurdish insurgents, but at the present time such a repression will be much more difficult to carry out because the realization of the "Great Turkey" dreamed of by the Kemalists, will come up against a multiple hostility, as much among the inhabitants of the countryside as among the various nationalities that populate Asia Minor.