1   Kurdistan in Twentieth-Century Turkey

The chapter will briefly outline the social, ethnic and political contours of the Kurdish people in Turkey. In light of the overall analytical interest of this book, this section will emphasise the sociocultural and historical features which are more relevant to the modern-day struggle of the PKK. It will predominantly concentrate on the Kurdish rebellions of the early Republican period and the Kurdish revival of the 1950s and 1960s, which served as the foundation for subsequent Kurdish movements. However, prior to engaging with these historical processes, it will summarise the ethno-religious and linguistic characteristics of the peoples of Kurdistan.

Following the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, the Kurds were divided between the Ottoman and Safavid empires (Akturk 2019, 62), a division that engendered new, and accentuated existing, religious and linguistic divergences among them. Notwithstanding their partition by the neighbouring powers, van Bruinessen (1994, 17) remarked that 'long before the age of nationalism there already was a sense of common identity among tribes whose cultures were "objectively" quite diverse'. A sense of Kurdish identity was reflected in a written history of the Kurds, *Sharafname*, completed by Serafettin Bitlisi in 1597 and the epic poem *Mem û Zîn* written by Ahmad-e Xhani in 1692 (Imset 1996). It was an arrangement that persisted until the nineteenth century when the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms undermined the prevailing balance of power in the region and destroyed the hitherto de facto independence of the 'area under Kurdish rule (*Kurt hukumeti*)' (Gürbey 2000, 58).[1] A Kurdish *ethnie,* as per Smith's (1989) understanding, can be seen to have existed even if it was one riven by intra-religious and intra-ethnic cleavages and tribal and non-tribal social divisions (Romano 2006, 116; van Bruinessen 2003). Kurdish tribes or *aşiretler* can be understood as 'a socio-political and generally also territorial (and therefore economic) unit based on descent and kinship, real or putative, with a characteristic internal structure' (van Bruinessen 1992, 51). However, van Bruinessen (1992, 51) notes that 'actual political allegiance to a lineage becomes more important than real kinship'. Tribal structure, although bearing

---

[1] For an extensive treatment of the Tanzimat period, see Mardin (2000).

some ascriptive characteristics, is in fact socially produced and maintained and 'the fictive and real boundaries of tribes have become harder to assess' (Yalçın-Heckmann 1989, 625). Importantly, Kurdish tribes were not simply some primordial vestiges of a less-developed past; many were rather engaged in symbiotic and often mutually beneficial relations with the centralising state in a changing socioeconomic context with the broader shift away from nomadism to land-holding and sedentary agriculture (Klein 2012, 160). Some Kurdish tribes made use of state patronage to consolidate local power at the expense of other tribal and non-tribal political adversaries (Klein 2012, 167–70), while others became drivers of resistance to the centralising efforts of the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish republic.

A combination of the experiences of resistance to the logic of state centralisation in the late Ottoman period and the early Turkish republic and the impact of competing local nationalisms, most notably that of the Young Turks and the Armenians (H. Bozarslan 2004, 25), shaped the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in its modern form. The Kurdish national awakening was a gradual and uneven process, one that was dramatically undermined by the delimitation of artificially conceived state boundaries by the Allied powers in the wake of the First World War. Although pan-Kurdish nationalism referring to the putative unity of all Kurds across state borders has been respected at the rhetorical level, in the political arena it has fallen by the wayside of the irrepressible prerogative of the nation state which has enveloped even the most ardent of Kurdish nationalists (see Bajalan 2009). It has thus disaggregated the Kurdish national struggle into a number of distinct units defined by state borders and not necessarily by the confines of the Kurdish nation.

Ethnic and Religious Heterogeneity in Kurdistan

It has been estimated that the Kurdish population within the borders of Turkey is somewhere between twelve to fifteen million or 18–23 per cent of Turkey's population (Gunter 2010). As a result of its central location, which for centuries bridged historic empires, and the fact that contemporary Kurdish lands gave rise to numerous religions which predated the monotheism of Islam and Christianity, it has always boasted an extremely mixed ethno-religious profile. There is no unanimity regarding Kurdish identity and its boundaries (van Bruinessen 1989, 613). In addition to being informed by the Turkish–Kurdish dichotomy, Kurdish identity draws upon the variety of ethnic and religious communities that have historically resided in the Kurdish region (van Bruinessen 2011). Externally formulated ethno-religious categories often fail to coincide or represent the nuanced inter-communal relations of the region, whereby communities maintained collective historic memories of having adhered to other religions. Additionally, practices such as *kirvelik* – upon

circumcision each young Yezidi or Muslim male obtains a *kirîv* or, in Christian terms, a form of godfather – which have immense social importance in terms of establishing non-familial ties of social obligation, often crossed religious and ethnic divisions wherein Christians often took on the role of *kirîv* for Yezidis or Muslims (Kudat Sertel 1971; Magnarella and Türkdoğan 1973).

Notwithstanding the epistemological caveats of communal categorisation and its pitfalls in the region, it can be argued that the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'ite *madhhab*,[2] in contrast to the neighbouring Sunni Turks and Arabs who adhere to the Hanafi tradition (Kreyenbroek 1996, 93). The Kurds' regional singularity in adhering to the Shafi'ite madhhab is a 'testimony, presumably to the independence their emirs enjoyed vis-à-vis the sultan' (McDowall 2004, 11); thus, even if of limited everyday importance, it attests to a period of historic Kurdish autonomy. There are also a number of strongly rooted Sufi confraternities, most prominently the Naqshbandiyya (Leezenberg 2017) that continue to exert political and cultural influence despite the heavy repression they endured in the early period of the Turkish Republic.

A large Kurdish Alevi community numbering in the millions can be found on the western margins of the Kurdish region (Olsson, Ozdalga and Raudvere 2005; Shankland 2003; P. J. White and Jongerden 2003). The Alevi are widely understood to be Shia Muslims; however, their practices differ greatly from orthodox understandings of Shia Islam, and they are considered by some Islamic scholars as 'an extremist split from Shia Islam, which is heretical in its attribution of divine powers to certain humans' (P. J. White 2000, 41). A small number of Alevi do not identify as Muslim at all (Interview 34, 2013). As van Bruinessen pointed out in 1994, Alevi Kurds 'are only a minority among the Alevis of Turkey, and they often feel closer to their Turkish-speaking co-religionists than to the Sunni Kurds' (1994, 18). However, the mid to late 1990s marked an Alevi revival across Turkey, provoked by the Turkish–Islamic synthesis advanced by the state[3] and two massacres of Alevis in Sivas in 1993 and in Gaziosmanpaşa in Istanbul in 1995 (Jongerden 2003). Alevi alienation from the state was compounded by the army's brutality in its counter-insurgency in the largely Alevi, Dersim region; developments which have led to the strengthening of Alevi Kurds' Kurdish identity (Leezenberg 2003; Nigogosian 1996; van Bruinessen 1999b).

There are also a number of Syriac Christian communities in Kurdistan, divided into a range of different denominations (Galletti 2003, 35–58).

---

[2] A *madhhab* is an Islamic school of jurisprudence or *fiqh*. There are four principal Sunni *madhhab*: Hanafi, Shafi'ite, Hanbali and Maliki.

[3] The Turkish–Islamic synthesis has been described by van Bruinessen as 'a confused doctrine combining fervent Turkish Nationalism and Muslim sentiment that was first formulated by a small group of right-wing intellectuals as an answer to socialism' (1996, 4).

Although 'they speak non-Kurdish tongues as their first language and generally would not call themselves Kurds, most speak Kurdish as a second language and Christian and Kurdish communities have lived together in symbiotic relationships for centuries' (Kreyenbroek 1996, 91–92). Although the Yezidi community is much larger in southern Kurdistan, in the mountainous areas close to the Iraqi and Syrian border, there has traditionally been a small community of Yezidis that practises a syncretic religion that draws heavily from the pre-Islamic religions that were once dominant in the region (Andrews and Benninghaus 1989, 119; Guest 1987; Kreyenbroek 1996; van Bruinessen 1994). The historical coexistence between the dominant Kurdish Sunni population and autochthonous religious minorities has been scarred by communal tensions and at times genocidal violence. Some Kurdish tribes played a significant role in the Armenian genocide, which in practice also extended to local non-Armenian Christian communities; the mass violence of 1915 is commemorated by the surviving Syriac Christians as the 'Sayfo genocide' (Atto 2017; Gaunt 2015). The violence led many Christian survivors to flee south into Syria before eventually settling in Europe and the United States, resulting in the mass depopulation of Christian communities in Kurdistan (Galletti 2003, 181), with the exception of some small settlements in Tur Abdin (van Bruinessen 2011). Yezidi Kurds also suffered regular violence and efforts at forced conversion throughout history (Six-Hohenbalken 2019). However, the Kurdish movement has actively sought to win the support of Kurdish minorities. The PKK invited representatives of Christians from Kurdistan to sit in the short-lived Kurdish parliament in exile in 1993 (Galletti 2003, 185) and obtained some support from Christians in the Mardin/Tur Abdin region, and it is known that some Syriac Christians actively participated in the PKK in the 1990s (Kurt 2017, 31).

Beyond religious differences, considerable ethno-linguistic division also exists in Kurdistan, most notably in the form of the Zaza community, historically resident in the area west of Diyarbakir from Elâzığ in the north to Urfa in the south. The Zaza speak variations of a Kudo–Iranian dialect, Zazaki, which is largely mutually unintelligible to Kurmanji speakers (Andrews and Benninghaus 1989, 122). There is no firm consensus as to whether the Zaza should be considered an ethnic group distinct from Kurds. In the 1930s, the Turkish state attempted to racially differentiate the Zaza, with reports emphasising their reputed physical distinctiveness from Kurds and similarity to Turkmen (Göner and Rebello 2016, 42). More recently, Paul White (2000, 43–46) has claimed that 'there can be no doubt we are speaking about an ethnically distinct people'. He further argues that the two Zaza dialects, Zazaki and Kirmanc, correlate to a Sunni–Alevi cleavage (P. J. White 1995). These ethno-religious and linguistic distinctions have led him to conclude that no self-perception of the Zaza as Kurds exists (P. J. White 2000, 48). However, White's

position is rather singular amongst Kurdish experts. Van Bruinessen (1989, 613) has stated that 'virtually all Zaza speakers consider themselves … as Kurds'. An interviewee in his fifties from the Bingöl area pointedly rejected any religious correlation between Kirmanc and Zazaki speakers and attributed the diffusion of the dialects to geographical reasons. He referred to his native language as Dimili (referring to Zazaki) and claimed that it has a corresponding dialect he named as Kirmanc which is mostly spoken in the Dersim region (Interview 14, 2012). Furthermore, White's position has been convincingly criticised as essentialist because it conceptualises Kurdishness in purely linguistic and religious terms (Gunes 2009, 261–62). My own fieldwork amongst Sunni Zaza Kurds also clearly confounds White's contention. Interviews with Zaza activists of KOMCIWAN clearly showed that their primary identity was Kurdish (Interview 5, 2011). Notwithstanding, the unclear boundaries dividing or uniting Kurds and Zazas and compounded by homogenising tendencies within Kurdish nationalism, a Zaza revival of sorts has occurred since the 1980s which included a short-lived anti-Turkish and anti-Kurdish journal (van Bruinessen 1994). However, aside from raising the profile of certain individuals such as the veteran activist Seyfi Cengiz,[4] it has been of marginal importance and failed to resonate with its target community. It is widely believed by Kurds that the Zaza revival has been the work of the Turkish security services as a means to foster Kurdish disunity (Leezenberg 2003, 201; Neyzi 2003). This book follows van Bruinessen's lead by using the term Zaza to collectively refer to the groups White distinguishes as Kirmanc/Kizilbaş and Zaza.

This section is a simplified summary of the extremely complex, dynamic and contested composition of the Kurds and the other peoples of Kurdistan. It is intended to serve as a rough empirical guide to the often-confusing array of ethnic, linguistic and religious populations in the area. It also confirms the constructivist and emergent nature of modern Kurdish identity, drawing on an overlapping, but occasionally mutually exclusive, smorgasbord of ethno-religious and linguistic identities, in a state context characterised by Turkish nationalism.

Kurds in the War of Independence and the Early Turkish Republic

The notorious Sykes-Picot agreement reached by France and Britain in 1916 proposed to divide the remains of the Ottoman Empire (including parts of modern-day Turkey) into zones of their control. However, such plans were

---

[4] Cengiz was a member of a number of radical Communist groups in the 1970s; he set up the Kurdish Communist Movement while in exile in 1983 and most recently founded the party *Serbestiya Dersimi* – The Dersim Liberation Party (Mosokofian 2011). He, therefore, has quite specific political views on the distinct identity of the Dersim region, the Zaza and Alevi peoples.

undermined by Turkish resistance led by Mustafa Kemal. He set about rallying the forces necessary to repel the French, British, Italian, Greek and Armenian forces from what became Turkish state territory. All the while, the Kurdish position was incoherent and ambiguous, weakened by the lack of any acknowledged leadership and internal rivalries (McDowall 2004, 132). Furthermore, during the First World War, the Kurdish region suffered multiple foreign occupations, while Kurds experienced 300,000 deaths in battle and 700,000 were forced from their homes. (P. J. White 2000, 128). Even though the Ottoman Sultanate had been politically marginalised by the Kemalist forces and the establishment of the Grand National Assembly based in Ankara, it signed the Treaty of Sévres with the victorious Allied powers in 1920. Article 62 of the Treaty granted autonomy to the Kurdish region in the south east with the subsequent possibility of full independence (Akturk 2019, 68). The Treaty was divorced from realities on the ground and Kemal ignored its provisions and successfully mobilised a significant proportion of the Kurdish population in opposition to it.

Kemal used calculated Islamic rhetoric, for example, that the Muslims of Turkey, the Kurds, Circassians, Laz and the Turks 'are genuine brothers who would respect each other's ethnic, local and other rights' (in Yegen 2009, 68). This gained traction amongst the Kurdish Sunni tribes that were worried that a future Armenian state would encompass territory they perceived as Kurdish particularly in the Van region (Akturk 2019, 67; Bajalan 2009). In a 1921 missive to some Kurdish tribal leaders, Kemal wrote that the 'the Kurds have always been a valuable help to the Turks. One can say that the two peoples form one' (in McDowall 2004, 188). As late as 1923, Kemal asserted in an interview that 'certainly a kind of regional autonomy is possible. . . . in whatever province there are Kurds they can administer themselves autonomously' (in Olson 1991b, 22). Kemal's discourse emphasised pan-Islamic solidarity, as was clear in the ten-point resolution of the 1919 Erzurum Congress. The Congress delegates, twenty-two of the fifty-six of whom were Kurdish, 'focused on the need to resist Allied efforts to create Armenian and Greek states in Anatolia. Islam and Ottoman patriotism constituted an important bond between the Kurds and the other delegates' (Kirişci and Winrow 1997, 79). In short, this alliance was militarily and politically successful and managed to repel the occupying forces. Kemal signed the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 which overrode the provisions of the Treaty of Sévres (Mango 2011, 387). The new Treaty drew on the Ottoman religiously defined *millet*[5] system and, at the insistence of the Western powers, recognised and guaranteed protection for non-Islamic minorities such as Greek and Armenian Christians[6] and Jews, but made no such provision for largely Islamic national minorities like the Kurds.

---

[5] The Ottoman *millet* system permitted the various confessional minorities to adhere, in terms of personal law, to their own judicial systems.
[6] Curiously, this formal acknowledgement with attendant rights was not extended to the Syriac congregations (Pacal 1996).

Following the abolition of the sultanate in 1922, the Turkish republic was established in 1923 with its capital in Ankara. Its founding, however, quickly ruptured the 'multicultural sense of solidarity [that had] fuelled the national liberation movement and carried it to victory' (Ergil 2000b, 124). It became readily apparent that the envisaged Turkish state was to be modelled on an ethno-culturally defined nationalism, heavily influenced by thinkers like Ziya Gokalp,[7] Nihal Astiz and the wider Turanist movement; and it was to be one which did not concede space to any contending expressions of ethno-cultural identity.

Nascent sentiments of Kurdish nationalism had gradually emerged in the latter stages of the Ottoman decline but were largely confined to the notable Kurdish class and were divided on questions of autonomy or full independence (Bajalan 2016). However, once the exclusively Turkish and secular nature of the newly founded Kemalist state began to become apparent, Kurdish nationalism started to take root in Kurdistan itself. It 'gained a separatist character, gradually, as a reaction to Turkish nationalism and the nationalist, secular and severe assimilationist policies of the new Turkish state' (R. Aras 2014, 44). The first portents of the massive Kurdish resistance to the state emerged in 1920 when an Alevi tribe of Western Dersim, the Koçgiri, rose against Kemal's troops demanding the implementation of Kurdish autonomy as stipulated in the Treaty of Sevres. Its demands were thus nationalist in character (Mango 2011, 330; McDowall 2004, 184; Olson 1991b, 28–29), but the rebellion proceeded to sunder along tribal and religious fractures. It was not supported by the wider population of Sunni Kurds, reflecting their suspicions and hostility to the Alevi community. It was not even backed by most of the Koçgiris' Alevi brethren; many cautiously refrained from moving against the Kemalists until the balance of military forces became clearer (P. J. White 2000, 71).

Subsequently, a nationalist organisation, *Azadi*, set about launching the first major uprising against the Turkish state. The movement gained rapid support through the disillusioned Sufi orders, former *Hamidiye*[8] regiments and even within the ranks of Kurdish battalions in the army (Olson 2000, 76–81). In order to consolidate its support base, it appointed a prominent *Naqshbandiyya*, Sheikh Said as its leader; thus it was a modern nationalist movement headed by an unmistakeably traditional leader. The rebellion spread widely in the spring of 1925, before it was eventually quelled by the deployment of aerial bombardment and the hanging of Sheikh Said.[9] The rebellion foundered once again on

---

[7] Gokalp's origins have never been clarified but it is widely believed he was a Zaza. Olson (1991a, 398) unambiguously describes him as a Kurd from Diyarbakir.

[8] The *Hamidiye* were Kurdish cavalry units formed by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in the 1890s to defend the border area from Czarist Russia (Klein 2011; 2012).

[9] The continuing symbolic importance of the rebellions of this period is evident in Öcalan's contention that the date of his arrest had been selected to coincide with the starting of Sheikh Said's uprising, as an additional humiliation for the Kurdish people (Öcalan 2013, 163).

ethno-linguistic and religious divisions. Sheikh Said was Sunni but significantly Zaza, and, as a consequence, the Alevi tribes (mindful of distrust which existed between the two communities and, in particular, with the *Naqshbandiyya*) did not mobilise in support; neither, for the most part, did the Kurmanji-speaking Sunni tribes. The historic tensions between the tribal confederations and the non-tribal urban dwellers also led the latter to not participate, thereby highlighting the social, ethnic and religious disunity of the Kurds in the early stages of the Turkish republic (R. Aras 2014, 54–55; van Bruinessen 2003). In spite of its lack of internal cohesion and ultimately its failure, the Shaikh Said rebellion has become a symbolic reference point in the Kurdish national struggle and, contrary to the Turkish governments' efforts to portray it as an atavistic tribal rebellion, it was 'the outcome of both nationalistic and religious causes' (Jwaideh 2006, 209).

Official state ideology underwent a dramatic reconfiguration after the stabilisation of the country's external frontiers: 'it switched rapidly from a cultural nationalism toward a social-Darwinist one that explained the relations between Turkishness and Kurdishness as an eternal fight between a positive, progressive, and civilised culture and a negative, reactionary and barbarian atavism' (H. Bozarslan 2004, 29). A vast array of government legislation was enacted with the objective of first militarily pacifying the region and then turkifying it. Article 88 of the 1924 Turkish Constitution stated that the 'inhabitants of Turkey shall be deemed to be Turkish irrespective of their religion and race' (in Özcan 2006, 86). The Turkish political leadership's volte-face was clearly exemplified by Minister for Justice Mahmud Esad Bozkurt's declaration in September 1930, that 'both friends and enemies must know that the masters of this country are the Turks! People who do not have pure Turkish blood in their veins and are living in this country only have one right: the right of slavery and service' (in Beşikçi 2004, 35). The term Kurd vanished from public discourse and 'the Kurdish question became in the eyes of the Republic, no longer an ethno-political question, but a question of reactionary politics, tribal resistance, and regional backwardness' (Yegen 2009, 599). In order to extend the remit of state control over the Kurds, the Settlement Act No. 2150 was passed in 1934, which entailed mass deportation of Kurds to the West, their exchange with Turkish peasants from central Anatolia, and the settlement of Turks in the vacant properties of the former Armenian population. The Kurdish language was banned in public (Zeydanlıoğlu 2013), positions in the civil service were reserved for Turks, and the Kurdish region remained closed to foreigners and under military rule (Yegen 2009, 605). It should be noted though, that the repression of the Kurdish people was implemented at the collective level, many individual Kurds chose to renounce their Kurdish heritage and identity and were permitted to assimilate into Turkish society. Indeed, some of the founding members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the kernel from

which this brand of Turkish nationalist politics emerged, were Kurds (Bajalan 2016, 8) and İsmet İnönü, Kemal's right-hand man and his successor as president of the Republic was himself of Kurdish descent (Mango 1994, 986).

The last great Kurdish revolt was amongst the Alevi, Zaza speakers in the Dersim region from 1936–8. After the crushing of the 1930 Xoybûn rebellion, Dersim was the final remaining outpost resisting state authority. In a 1936 speech, Atatürk[10] declared that 'our most important interior problem is the problem of Dersim. We have to remove and cleanse this wound, this terrifying abscess from its roots. In order to remove it from its roots everything should be provided whatever it will cost' (in R. Aras 2014, 58). Dersim's ethno-linguistic particularism proved to be its undoing as none of the (admittedly at that point) militarily enfeebled Sunni Kurds rose in solidarity with the rebels and the Kemalist forces crushed them with massive brutality (P. J. White 2000, 88). The women of the Kureysan and Bahtiyar tribes reportedly threw themselves from cliffs into the Munzur and Parcik ravines to avoid being raped by the Turkish army (R. Aras 2014, 60). The extent and intensity of the violence is clear from the statistic that, in 1938, in the course of only seventeen days, 7,954 Dersimlis were massacred (Besikçi in P. J. White 1995, 82). The unwarranted nature of this brutality is reinforced by the fact that the rebel forces numbered only around 4,200 fighters and that the phase of active resistance had been quelled by November 1937 with the hanging of the revolt's leader Seyt Riza (Watts 2000, 18–23). The final death toll is estimated at up to 40,000 deaths (P. J. White 2000, 88).

There were a total of twenty-seven Kurdish rebellions in the first two decades of the Republic (Kiliç 1998, 97). Throughout this period, one can clearly observe the progressive consolidation of a sense of shared Kurdish consciousness and identity provoked by alienation from the state (Donmez 2007, 51). It was also in this period that the structural weakness of the formerly dominant ethno-religious and tribal formations in respect of the state was confirmed. The Dersim revolt was 'a prime example of a Kurdish identity being assumed by these non Kurmanji (Kizilbaş and Zaza) minorities' (P. J. White 2000, 81) and is thus perhaps evidence of the slow consolidation of a Kurdish national identity. In the case of Dersim, 'a familial and collective memory of this central event in the history of the province was passed down; a narrative distinct from (and opposed to) the national narrative' (Neyzi 1999, 9); thereby the lived collective memory of Dersimlis contradicts the state narrative. Furthermore, although two decades of political quiescence ensued from 1938 until the 1960s, state brutality had led to 'armed struggle' becoming 'an ingrained part of individual and collective memories' and 'the very high casualties . . . linked this memory of rebellion to the duty for revenge'

---

[10] In 1934, Mustapha Kemal took the honorific name Atatürk, which meant 'Father of the Turks'.

(H. Bozarslan 2004, 32). It was these experiences of political failure that inspired the next generation of Kurdish nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s to avoid the errors of their forefathers and stress the necessity of unity – a unity rendered easier by marginalising the importance of religious and tribal affiliations and by endorsing an egalitarian leftist ideology.

Kurdish Political and Cultural Revival

The Kurdish revival was brought about by a number of Turkey-wide structural developments. Turkish society underwent extensive industrialisation and concomitant mass migration from rural areas to the rapidly expanding urban centres (Landau 1974, 20). Rural–urban migration was more pronounced in the predominantly rural Kurdish region where a series of land reforms led to a rupture of the moral economy which had bound Kurdish aghas to the small holders and agricultural labourers together in a nexus of mutual dependence for centuries (Natali 2005, 100). This rupture was facilitated by the mechanisation of agriculture and particularly the spread of labour-saving tractors, compelling hundreds of thousands of Kurds to abandon the land (Natali 2005, 94; Zürcher 2004, 224). Compulsory military service and the presence of boarding schools which proliferated in the Kurdish region as a means of assimilating promising young Kurdish scholars led to the consolidation of a semi-urbanised class with the linguistic and intellectual resources to question the prevailing social hierarchies and the official denial of Kurdish identity (Alış 2009).

The second major development was the abolition of one-party Kemalist rule and the introduction of multiparty politics in 1946. A proposed land reform in 1945 dismayed the landed element within the Republican People's party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) and it was these dissenters who went on to form the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti, DP). They 'represented the interests of rural Turkey and the provincial elite' (Kirişci 2008, 189). They considered the Kurdish aghas and tribal leaders as crucial 'bulk vote generators' (Henri J Barkey and Fuller 1998, 77). The Kurdish peasantry, which was completely subservient to local landlords, represented hundreds of thousands of votes (Romano 2006, 40). However, other Kurds actively supported the DP as a form of rejection of the CHP. As Musa Anter explained 'our opposition to the CHP was not an ordinary opposition, but an antagonistic one. Since it was the responsibility of all the easterners [Kurds] to oppose the CHP, I lent all my support to the DP' (in Özen 2015, 64). Kurdish elites also opposed much of the secular reforms by 'openly advocat[ing] religious freedom' and making use of the *Qadiriyya* and *Naqshbandiyya* confraternities to consolidate their vote (McDowall 2004, 398). Tribally organised Kurds became an electoral resource for the principal political parties and were crucial to the DP victory in 1950, thus re-empowering the tribe as a politically important social category.

The late 1950s marked the return of Kurdish political agitation. Musa Anter, an exemplary case of the unintended consequences of mass education, and others of a similar ilk, founded the journal *Illeri Yurt* in 1958, which quickly 'turned into something that everyone regarded as a tool of insurrection' (Anter in Özen 2015, 69). The journal was promptly shut down and Anter and his colleagues were imprisoned. The military coup d'état of 1960 and the new constitution of 1961 greatly enhanced political rights and freedoms (Taspinar 2005, 89). It ushered in a political environment which permitted the first stirrings of Kurdish self-awareness and nationalism. However, the broader institutional openings also coincided with periodic state brutality toward the Kurdish people: demonstrations in May 1961, organised in response to President Gursel's denial of the Kurds' existence in the foreword of a book were viciously suppressed.[11] Gursel had declared that 'there are no Kurds in this country. Whoever says he is a Kurd, I will spit in his face' (in Kiliç 1998, 97). He further threatened in November 1960 that 'if the Mountain Turks [Kurds] give us no peace, the army will not hesitate to bombard and destroy their cities and villages. There will be a bloodbath of such dimensions that they and their country will no longer exist' (in Jongerden 2007, 58), exemplifying the continuing hostility to any deviation from the prevailing Turkish Nationalist discourse.

In the early 1960s, Turkey experienced unprecedented political activity with the establishment of eleven new political parties (Giritli 1969; Landau 1974, 14–21; Zürcher 2004, 245). The most important development from a Kurdish perspective was the founding of the Workers Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi, TIP) in 1961, led from 1962 by the veteran Marxist, Ali Mehmet Aybar (Alış 2009; Karpat 1967; Lipovsky 1992). It fared reasonably well in the 1965 elections winning fifteen seats in parliament and over 300,000 votes (Harris 1980, 25), four of which were won by Kurds[12] (H. Bozarslan 2012, 3), but its vote declined in the 1969 election. TIP was remarkably open by the standards of the time; while it did not endorse the Kurdish struggle, it at least acknowledged that a Kurdish issue existed. Its cautious recognition of the problems specific to the south east were evidenced in its 1964 party program which argued:

Parallel to the region's economic backwardness is the backwards social and cultural circumstances faced by our citizens of this region. Particularly those of our citizens who speak Kurdish and Arabic, and those from the Alevi mezhep [denomination], encounter discrimination because of these circumstances (in Watts 2007)

TIP was not the only prominent leftist actor at that time. Trade Union membership had rocketed from around 250,000 members in 1960 to

---

[11] The book was M. Sherif Firat's *Doğu Illeri ve Varto Tarihi* (McDowall 2004, 406).
[12] In the provinces of Diyarbakır, Kars, Şanlıurfa and Malatya (Ercan 2010, 101).

2,000,000 in 1970 (Samim 1981, 69). An influential Marxist journal *Yön*, founded in 1961, embraced leftist Kemalists and noted Kurdish activists such as Sait Kırmızıtoprak wrote for it (H. Bozarslan 2012, 3; Landau 1974, 50). The Turkish Communist party (Türkiye Komünist Partisi, TKP), although still illegal, also commanded support in certain circles. In addition to these groups, socialist students formed the Federation of Debating Societies (Fikir Kulüpleri Federasyonu) (see Szyliowicz 1970). As clashes with the police and opposing fascist opposition movements intensified, the student left gradually fell under the influence of a broad tendency centred on a former TKP member Mihri Belli and *Yön*, which called for a National Democratic Revolution (*Milli Demokratik Devrim*, NDR) (Alper 2014, 270; Samim 1981, 70). A majority of students in the debating societies broke away from TIP's gradualist approach, aligned themselves with the NDR tendency and formed Dev-Genç (Revolutionary Youth) in 1969, a 'hybrid organisation, which was part student movement, part revolutionary association' (Samim 1981, 71). The logic of NDR was to trigger sufficient popular unrest to force presumed revolutionary allies within the military to seize power and establish a Marxist regime. It was in direct opposition to the policy of incremental mass participation and parliamentary politics endorsed by TIP (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012, 4). TIP was banned in 1970 because of a declaration it made recognising the Kurdish people at its Fourth Party Congress in 1970[13] (Olson 1973, 202; Romano 2006, 43; Yegen 2016a, 164). The naivety of any putative student–military alliance was exposed by the violent repression of a 1970 trade-union demonstration by the military and the imposition of martial law in April 1970 in a number of urban centres and Kurdish provinces. The brutal clampdown on leftist activists after the 1971 coup extinguished any hope of the realisation of the NDR strategy. Dev Genç splintered in 1970, with the foundation of two clandestine militant groups; the People's Liberation Army of Turkey (Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu, THKO) led by Deniz Gezmiş and the Turkish People's Liberation Front (Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi – Cephesi, THKP-C) headed by Mahir Çayan. They were inspired by urban guerrilla groups like the Tupamaros in Uruguay and the various Palestinian movements and many of their members had undergone military training in Palestinian camps in Jordan and Lebanon (Candar 2000; Olson 1973, 198).

The Kurdish movement – in the loosest sense of the term – was not, however, simply a product of the Turkish left (Bozarslan, 2012, 2). In 1959, around fifty young Kurds, subsequently known as the '49ers' including Musa Anter were imprisoned, accused of Communism and 'Kurdist' activities (Gunes and Zeydanlıoğlu 2013, 10; Özen 2015, 69; Zana 1997, 6), and many more Kurds were deported from Kurdistan to Western Turkey after the 1960 coup. Efforts

---

[13] The full declaration is cited in Alış (2009, 141–42).

by Kurdish intellectuals led to the spread of an array of journals dealing with the Kurdish issue, including *Dicle-Firat*, *Deng*, and Anter's *Doğu* amongst others (Alış 2009, 76). Mustafa Barzani's 1959 rebellion in Southern Kurdistan in Iraq also led to an awakening of Kurdish consciousness (Gündoğan 2011, 391; Özen 2015, 67) and many Kurds within the borders of the Turkish state were firm supporters of it. An underground political party, the Turkey Kurdistan Democratic Party (Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi, TKDP), was founded in 1965 and it was directly modelled on Mustafa Barzani's conservative Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistanê, KDP) in Southern Kurdistan in Iraq (Gunes 2012, 57; Jongerden and Akkaya 2019, 273–74).

With the exception of the TKDP, emerging popular Kurdish nationalism was of a very red hue. Turkish leftist organisations, ranging from TIP to the trade unions and student groups, had attracted large numbers of Kurdish supporters (Zürcher 2004, 246). TIP included a number of Kurds such as Kemal Burkay and Mehdi Zana, who were at the forefront of the Kurdish mobilisation of the late 1960s, known as the Eastern Meetings (Watts 2007), a series of mass rallies organised between 1967 and 1969 in a number of Kurdish cities to 'protest the backwardness of Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia' (Gündoğan 2011, 390) and in response to articles in two right wing journals, *Milli Yol* and *Ötüken,* threatening Kurds with deportation like the Greeks and the Armenians (Gündoğan 2011, 409–10). McDowall (2004, 410) reported attendances of 10,000 in Silwan and 25,000 in Diyarbakir. Importantly, the rallies also introduced innovative mobilisation strategies such as public rallies, poster campaigns, radio broadcasts and pamphleteering (Ercan 2010, 100). In 1969, taking advantage of the momentum generated by the Eastern Meetings, Kurdish activists established the Revolutionary Cultural Hearths of the East (Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları, DDKO) as a legal organisation following the coup until it was banned in 1971. It was a loosely bound network of students and youths which sought 'to raise Kurdish consciousness' (Yavuz 2001, 10) and offered a class-based analysis of the problems of the day, in seminars and discussions (Gunes 2012, 252). The DDKO was 'profoundly pacifist' and 'extremely reformist' and membership and participation overlapped with other groups like Dev Genç and TIP (H. Bozarslan 2012, 6). The establishment of the DDKO was an important turning point in the emergent Kurdish movement as it marked the beginning of its detachment from the Turkish left (Gunes 2012, 43). These rumblings of Kurdish assertiveness triggered a harsh response from the state. Leading organisers of the Eastern meetings were imprisoned in 1968 in relation to a pamphlet they had published (Zana 1997, 6), and the discovery of a cache of weapons along the border with Iraq was used as a pretext to deploy troops in rural Kurdish areas. The weapons had, however, not been intended for use in Turkey but across the border in Iraq by Barzani's forces (Olson 1973, 202). Army Commando units were sent to the Kurdish region in 1970 and engaged in mass

violence that involved the torture, sexual humiliation and rape of Kurdish villagers (Jongerden 2017, 139).

Repeated efforts to quell the state-wide contestation were unsuccessful and, as a consequence, the military launched another coup d'état on 12 March 1971 (Zürcher 2004, 257–58). Martial law was declared and hitherto-legal leftist and Kurdish movements such as the DDKO and Dev-Genç were outlawed and trade unions were heavily restricted. The Demirel government was deposed and legislation limiting civil liberties and granting further powers to the military was enacted (Zürcher 2004, 261). In practise, 'the restoration of law and order was equated with the repression of any group viewed as leftist' (F. Ahmad 1993, 148); hundreds of leftist activists were imprisoned and tortured. Furthermore, the regime turned a blind eye to the activities of right-wing militants in their harassment of people identified with the left, notably school-teachers and TIP members (F. Ahmad 1993, 149). In the short term, the coup succeeded in restoring a semblance of order, especially following the capture and killing of Çayan and Gezmiş in 1972. The period of martial law and military rule – admittedly by civilian proxy – (Erim 1972; Narli 2000, 113) effectively 'marked the temporary end of an organized left' (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012, 5). However, in the long term it served only to confirm the illegitimacy of the state amongst many leftists and Kurds.

This section provides a degree of background information and historical context for the emergence of the Kurdish movement in the 1960 and 1970s, which subsequently begat the generation of radical Kurds and the PKK in the mid 1970s. The modern Kurdish movement which emerged in this period, in contradistinction to earlier examples of tribal and religious vertical leadership patterns, came about as a direct consequence of broader structural developments such as the diffusion of education, the mechanisation of agriculture and urbanisation. The political openings of the 1960s and the willingness of some on the Turkish left to remain open to considering Kurdish issues and not a priori dismissing them, provided a pioneering generation of Kurdish activists and intellectuals the platform from which the Kurdish movement emerged. However, the Turkish state's unwillingness to tolerate the claim-making practices of institutional political parties such as TIP and moderate organisations like the DDKO ensured that subsequent Kurdish movements would be of a much more radical and violent disposition.