The Kurdish Tragedy

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a review of

Thomas J. Miley and Federico Venturini, eds., *Your Freedom and Mine: Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurdish Question in Turkey*. Black Rose Books, 2018, 424 pp., $26.99 paper.

As I write, Turkish forces have invaded Syria at the Trump administration's invitation, forcing the Kurdish YPG and their allies to cut a deal inviting the murderous Syrian regime to take control of much of their territory—hoping to negotiate some sort of subordinated "autonomy" from Assad while preventing the massacre the Turkish regime was planning. It is a difficult moment to criticize a project in which so many placed their hopes (not only Kurds, but millions around the world who looked to Rojava as a model for a new kind of politics).

This book is not about Rojava, however, but about the Kurdish struggle in Turkey. Or at least the title suggests that; most chapters actually focus on the efforts of Europe-based human rights campaigners to draw attention to the Turkish regime's repression and to secure the release of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan (and presumably thousands of other political prisoners) from Turkish prisons. After a Foreword, two Prefaces and a publisher's introduction, the book is divided into six sections. First there is an overview of a century of Turkish suppression of the Kurds, placed in the context of the post-World War I partition of Kurdistan between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Part II reports on recent European solidarity campaigns; Part III excerpts reports from European Union Turkey Civic Commission delegations; Part IV reflects on those delegations' visits to Turkey and the Kurdish regions. Part V presents Abdullah Ocalan's political vision (democratic confederalism), mostly through the voices of observers, and Part VI seeks to set the conflict in its geopolitical context.

Many years ago, I was in Europe and witnessed a demonstration where a large contingent marched carrying giant portraits of someone I now know was Abdullah Ocalan. (I think it was May Day in Paris, but it might have been an anti-war march in London.) A similar sort of hero worship suffuses much of this volume, and frankly seems quite inconsistent with the politics Ocalan now espouses. The Foreword (by a Kurdish activist) briefly recounts Ocalan's heroic revival of the long-dormant Kurdish struggle, his unflagging commitment to the liberation of women, and the hope he has given to the oppressed masses around the world. She concludes:

"Through Ocalan's thought and practice…a legacy of resistance sprouted…Alive and magnificent, this tree is ready to bring fresh political life to the entire world.

"May this book explode the walls of the military-carceral complex of Imrali Island with the metaphysical power of the human imagination. As long as we awaken our love for freedom and bring it to life through action, this imprisoned philosopher will remain the freest among us. Freedom for Abdullah Ocalan!" (ix)

The Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) was formed in 1978 (though the "Followers of Apo," a nickname for Ocalan, had waged small-scale guerilla attacks since the mid-1970s) during a period of intense repression of labor and other popular struggles across Turkey. Inspired by the concept of "prolonged people's war," Ocalan and his comrades sought to free Kurdistan from Turkish rule through guerilla warfare organized along Stalinist lines. The PKK claimed to organize on a class basis, attacking landlords as well as government collaborators and soldiers. The result was an escalation of violence and repression, interrupted by brief ceasefires and negotiations. After the breakdown of the 1993 ceasefire, the PKK launched attacks on tourist sites and on Turkish offices in Western Europe. This resulted in the PKK being declared a terrorist organization, and a determined campaign to crush the organization and the broader movement for Kurdish autonomy of which it was a part. The Turkish army brought overwhelming force to bear; while Kurdish resistance continues to this day, the PKK's armed struggle became untenable and Ocalan was forced to flee (captured in Kenya; he has been imprisoned since 1998).

It was in prison that Ocalan began to reconsider the PKK's approach. He abandoned his Stalinism and drew upon Murray Bookchin's writings (among others) to articulate a "democratic confederalist" vision through which Kurds could realize autonomy and self-governance on a local level while allowing the state to maintain a sense of intact Turkish nationhood. At least in theory, this new vision extended to democratizing the movement internally, though there have been many reported instances of reprisals in both Syria and Turkey against rival political tendencies. (The PKK's embrace of women's rights predates this turn, back to the early days of its armed struggle.)

I accept Ocalan's repudiation of violence and his commitment to participatory democracy as genuine, even if I am troubled by the way his followers promptly swung into line behind this radically new (though much improved) approach. It must have been clear to him, and to many of his followers, that the PKK on its own would never be able to defeat the Turkish military (supplied, as it is, by both NATO and Russia). Moreover, as Ocalan has conceded, in many ways the PKK's nationalism was a mirror image of Turkey's totalitarian ideology, subordinating a whole range of vital issues to an imagined national unity that could be sustained only through force. As Ocalan put it, the State has nothing to do with socialism—it is…nothing but maximal societal rule that has been legitimised by capitalism…Unfortunately, socialists were not only unable to transcend the concept of the Nation-State but also considered it fundamental to modernity…We thought a nation had to possess a state: if the Kurds were to be a nation, then they must have a state! But as I pondered the question, I grasped that the Nation-State is one of the most sinister realities of the last couple of centuries…it is nothing more than an iron cage for societies. (312–13)

He sees the Turkish Republic as a particularly dangerous Leviathan, because of the state's need (given that it was only recently imposed upon its subjects) to eliminate alternative identities and centralize power, and so counterposes "democratic local solutions" to the absolutist Kemalist regime. (314) This eight-page excerpt from one of Ocalan's many books is the only place where he speaks for himself, aside from in quotations, though it is followed by 51 pages summarizing and in one case gently critiquing his writings. I do not criticize the editors, however; if this chapter

is representative of his writings (and it is not only translated, but the translation has been edited "for clarity") then he is an exceptionally turgid writer.

The 159-page introductory chapters on the history of the suppression of the Kurdish population across Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey and the rise of the PKK insurgency are helpful, though they could be more authoritatively sourced (the notes range from newspaper articles to scholarly books to Wikipedia articles and PKK-linked organizations).

Kurds in all four countries have long resisted efforts to obliterate their language and culture and sought independence or autonomy. In Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein opened the way for an autonomous regional government controlled by parties closely linked to the United States. In Syria and Turkey, the more radical PKK and its allies are the dominant force (though there are competing Kurdish parties), securing a wide swathe of territory in Syria (Rojava) with the assistance of a U.S. military needing allies to fight ISIS; in Turkey, the U.S. has always supported the government's brutal suppression of the Kurds. There is also a tradition of Kurdish resistance in Iran, but while it seems clear that Iranian Kurds see the government as their enemy, the regime has thus far maintained firm control.

The movement has thus taken different forms, in part in response to the political and military spaces opened up or foreclosed by the warfare endemic to the region. But it has largely seen this struggle through an ethnic lens. In Syria, Kurds did not play a major role in the mass movement that sought to topple the Assad regime before the situation collapsed into civil war. Rather than try to build a democratic Iraq (a struggle that has erupted once again as I write), Kurdish parties there have focused on consolidating control over their territories. And in Turkey, Ocalan's followers reached out to build a broader, trans-ethnic movement only after the PKK's guerilla campaign had been crushed and the new line adopted.

The brutality of the Turkish repression is made clear in this book, as is the futility of past PKK attempts to force the resumption of negotiations and better conditions for Ocalan through blockades, trenches and bombings—measures that killed some Turkish troops but left civilians subject to harsh reprisals. More recent efforts to break the stalemate have been more in a civil disobedience vein, but the repression has been equally brutal. And one cannot help but be struck by the hunger strikes and demonstrations and armed attacks that demand not an end to the repression or the freeing of the thousands of Kurdish activists swept up in the repression, but rather freeing Ocalan or improving his conditions and his access to his attorneys and to Kurdish activists. (The book suggests that Ocalan's isolation prevents a genuine peace process, largely because he is "their undisputed leader…whose words are treated by many Kurds as something close to sacred" [199] and hence the only one with the credibility to reach a settlement, but also because it prevents him from maintaining discipline in the movement.)

Some of the accounts of the various EUTCC delegations yield valuable insights, even if this might not be the most effective way to convey them. Ogmunder Jonasson (a former Icelandic health, justice and interior minister) tells us of Ferhat Encu, a Kurdish member of parliament arrested and held for years despite having not been convicted of any crime, who entered politics after the Turkish army massacred 34 people in Roboski, many members of his family—allegedly because it believed they were involved in smuggling goods across the Iraqi border. Others report on their observations of repression and the arbitrary arrests of people they met with. While repetitive, no one can come away from these accounts believing that Turkey is a democracy.

The book argues that Ocalan's democratic confederalism offers a solution not only to the Kurdish question, but for the entire Middle East and the world. This, he says, would be a return to the

region's history of co-existing ethnic communities, in a struggle not against any particular group but rather "against repression, ignorance and injustice, against enforced underdevelopment as well as against all forms of oppression." (81) This is surely a worthy objective.

Co-editor Miley says Ocalan offers a striking re-interpretation of the principle of self-determination… "His model combines (a) an expansion of outlets in local and participatory democratic decision-making, with (b) institutional guarantees for accommodating local ethnic and religious diversities, (c) an emphasis on gender equality, and (d) respect for existing state boundaries…" (199)

While there may be a practical reason for respecting state boundaries given the reality of military defeat, it hardly seems a foundational principle. And many observers have questioned the YPG's and PKK's tolerance of political opponents in actual practice (though they seem to have not only respected ethnic and religious differences in the territory they governed but actively intervened to protect other communities under assault), though their record on gender equality seems quite strong, and not only for the region.

PKK-aligned activists are now active in Turkey's People's Democratic Party (HDP), an alliance of leftists, Kurds and other minority groups. Its chair, Selahattin Demirtas, insists,

We are the party of all religions, and we are the party of women. We are the party of the real Turkey, and we stand for self-governance and self-management for all the peoples of Turkey. Turkey is our country, our motherland. What is happening to the Kurds is a disaster. The strengthening of democracy is the only way to save us from this disaster. (201) He goes on to urge delegates to reaffirm their commitment to a peace process, despite the intense state violence they are suffering.

But Miley cites several activists warning that a return to guerilla warfare may be inevitable if the repression continues.

Dimitrios Roussopoulos' publisher's note refers to the Kurds as "the world's largest stateless population," and exults at their efforts at "building a new society beyond State and nationalism, a new economy beyond capitalism" in Syria (Rojava), before turning to the impact of Bookchin's writings on Ocalan's thinking, quoting a PKK statement on the occasion of Bookchin's death. (xiv)

"The Kurdish struggle is important for all of us as their destiny is intimately bound up with our own…The terrifying rise of patriarchal authoritarianism with a venomous cult of violence…Caught in the crossfire of such Apocalyptic political forces are the humble Kurds aspiring to change the world and overturn 5,000 years of patriarchy and domination, though they face the threat of genocidal extinction." (xv)

Whatever one's criticisms of Bookchin's confederalist politics, it did attempt to articulate a practice consistent with (and building toward) its ultimate goal, looking to local efforts at self-governance both to improve present conditions and prefigure future social relations. If this was reflected in the PKK's practice in Turkey, it is not reflected in this volume (Rojava might be more illustrative in this respect). Nor is it clear that the Kurdish struggle has transcended its nationalist roots. As anarchists we support regional autonomy and local control, but not nation-statism. An effort to organize across ethnic and religious lines, to build a class-based movement to overthrow the corrupt, authoritarian regimes ruling all four countries where Kurds live would have offered far richer possibilities for success.

Transcending the iron cage of the state requires nothing less.

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