

PAUL WHITE

**Primitive Rebels or
Revolutionary Modernizers?**

The Kurdish
National
Movement
in Turkey

Turkish state. They rebelled many times in the pursuit of ethnic demands from the 1920s up to the late 1930s. There were literally dozens of Kızılbaş uprisings in the 1920s and 1930s, led by Seyt Rıza. For their part, the Zazas rebelled once, led by Sheikh Said in 1925. Both the Kızılbaş and (to a lesser degree) the Zazas have become increasingly re-energized over their national demands since the mid-1980s. Specifically, these questions were first seriously and clearly raised by Seyfi Cengiz, when Kurdish nationalists attempted to deny that the Kırmanç and the Zaza were distinct from Turkish Kurds. Due in large part to Cengiz's pioneering work, the Kırmanç and Zaza questions have had a noticeable effect on politics throughout Anatolia of the past few years (Seyfi Cengiz, personal communication, London, 19 May 1992).

Cengiz heads a movement today known as the Kürdistan Komünist Hareketi/Dersim Komünist Hareketi, which was formally established in January 1990 as the result of a split in a Kurdish organization called Têkoşîn (variously translated as 'Struggle' and 'Armed Struggle'). Têkoşîn had led the Kurdish guerrilla warfare against the Turkish military administration, until 1983. A split from Têkoşîn occurred in 1984, however, led by its general secretary, Seyfi Cengiz. All those leaving Têkoşîn to found the new tendency had previously been the leaders of Têkoşîn. Seyfi Cengiz is today the leader of the newer tendency, known as the Kurdistan Communist Movement (KCM). The KCM has published a magazine in Turkish, *Kürdistanlı Marksist*, and, since late 1991, a magazine called *Desmala Sure* (Red Flag). This is the journal of the Zaza and Kırmanç or Kızılbaş section of the same political tendency, which goes under the simple umbrella name of the Komünist Hareketi (Communist Movement) (Seyfi Cengiz, personal communication, London, 19 May 1992).

Like the Kurdish national movement, the Kızılbaş and Zaza ethno-political movements have been the result of the conjuncture between a number of forces, especially the radical political upsurge of the late 1960s, the rise of working-class militancy and a reborn sense of ethnic differentiation. Kızılbaş activism in recent decades has also been the consequence of a dynamic interaction with combative Alevi religio-political traditions.³⁶

Kurds, Kızılbaş and Zazas

The over-use of the term 'Kurd' has already been noted. A further caution should also be made, at this point: 'Ethnic terms generally tend to be applied imprecisely in Turkey; people often combine elements of religious and linguistic identification in assessments of ethnic identity' (Nyrop et al. 1973: 99).

The Kızılbaş are not to be confused with ethnically Turkic Alevi sects,

like the Bektashi [*Bektaşî*] and Taktaji [*Tahtacı*]. Likewise, many Zazas regard themselves not as Kurds, but ethnically distinct, related to the Kızılbaş. Kurdish nationalists generally regard the Kızılbaş and Zazas as part of the Kurdish nation. As has already been indicated above, however, they may well have had a common ancestor in the Dailamites.³⁷ For reasons unknown, however – but possibly connected to their differing religious beliefs – it seems that the Dailamites divided in two, some time after moving to Anatolia. The Kızılbaş are adherents of the Alevi religion, while the Zazas are mostly orthodox Sunni Muslims, of the Shafi'i school of Islamic law.³⁸

The heartland of the Kızılbaş is the Dersim region, north-west of Lake Van – which covers the main city of the region, Tunceli (formerly also known as Dersim), Mazkirt and Nazmiye. In other words, they live primarily in the area between two rivers, the Murat and the Karasu, which are the main branches of the Fırat (Euphrates) river. The Zaza call their dialect Zazaki. They live mainly north of Diyarbakır and Urfa, as far as Elazığ – in and around towns like Dicle, Çermik and Siverek.³⁹

People from Dersim with a sense of distinct Kızılbaş ethnicity generally describe themselves as Kırmanç, or by their language. Both peoples speak dialects of the same language, Dimili (literally 'of Dailam') (Mann and Hadank 1930: 18–19). The Kızılbaş dialect of Dimili is known as Kırmancki or Kırmanci (not Kurmançî, which is the main Kurdish dialect) (Seyfi Cengiz, personal communication, London, 19 May 1992).

Seyfi Cengiz, a former Kurdish guerrilla leader, relates an interesting personal experience while trying to convince villagers in this region that they were Kurds. According to him, he was repeatedly told by them: 'We are Kırmanç. You are saying we are Kurdish. We are not Kurdish' (Seyfi Cengiz, personal communication, London, 19 May 1992).

In stark contrast to this attitude, it was stated above that the Kurmançî-Kurdish-dominated PKK has steadily softened its attitude towards Kurdish Sunni Islamists. Thus, the PKK issued the *Program* of a new front group, the Hereketa İslamiya Kurdistanê (Islamic Movement of Kurdistan), in December 1993. It had earlier made much of its warm links with a ninety-nine-year-old Sunni cleric, Mele (Mullah) Abdurrahman.

As befits a populist nationalist organization, of course, the PKK has a record of trying to be all things to all people. When interviewed by this author in mid-1992, for instance, the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan asserted that his party was open equally to Kurds from any religious or cultural background:

There are also Yezidis, Christians, Alevis, Sunnis, Zazas and also Kurmançî speakers and Sorani speakers who are minorities. We don't depend on a

special religion, or a special dialect, or something like that. On this subject there is a wide equality and freedom. Nobody sees his religious or dialectal background as either an advantage or a disadvantage; it's all very normal, people have [mutual] respect.

When asked about the increase of political and cultural activity by Alevi and Zaza in Turkey-Kurdistan and Turkey, however, Öcalan was not so magnanimous, asserting: 'The MİT [Turkish political police] is behind this. They are doing this to stop the development of Kurdish national consciousness.'⁴⁰

The same view was carried in PKK publications as well, until late 1993, when even the PKK felt compelled to bow to the weight of the growing particularist national feeling among 'Alevi Kurds'. Beginning in April 1994, therefore, the PKK began publishing a new glossy colour magazine, *Zülfikar* (named after Imam 'Ali's sword), which attempts to recuperate the Alevi movement among Kurds for itself. In a daring historical forgery, the PKK even went to the extent of painting a headband in Kurdish national colours on the portrait of the Kızılbaş insurrectionary leader Seyt Rıza adorning the front cover of the first issue of this publication! (*Zülfikar*, April 1994).⁴¹

A glossy pamphlet issued by the PKK-inspired and -dominated 'Parliament in Exile' to celebrate the first meeting of that body, has explicitly stated that not only the victims of the March 1995 Gazi Osman Paşa (Istanbul) massacre of 'Alevi Kurds', and all 'Alevi Kurds' in Turkey were Kurds, but also that the Kurdish nationalist movement included the Assyro-Chaldeans and the Armenians – both of whom are clearly racially, culturally and ethnically distinct from the Kurmancî Kurds. All these peoples, the parliament decreed in its 'Statute Number 1', share the same 'common homeland' – Kurdistan! (Kurdistan Parliament in Exile 1995: 5, 16).⁴²

It is unlikely that the PKK – or any other non-Kızılbaş or non-Zaza force – can ever win over the 'Alevi Kurds' or the 'Zaza Kurds' with such attempts to square circles. For, as this book shows, the whole history of ethnic differentiation among peoples generally classified as Turkey's Kurds demonstrates that they are sufficiently aware of their own history – and the many wrongs inflicted on them in the course of it – to resist such crude attempts at incorporation.

That same history also shows, however, that collaboration by the Kızılbaş and Zaza minorities in eastern Anatolia with Kurmancî Kurdish nationalists such as the PKK cannot be completely ruled out. For that to occur, however, the PKK would have to overcome the image that it has obtained in the eyes of many 'Alevi Kurds' that it is a Sunni Kurdish movement, if not a base for anti-Kızılbaş pogroms. And Zazas would need to be certain that their own specific identity would not be swallowed up by an

all-pervasive Kurmancî nationalist culture. In any event, the distinctions between Kurds, Kızılbâş and Zazas will continue to be of extreme importance in contemporary Turkey, as they were in the past.

As we shall see repeatedly in later chapters of this book, the distinction between Kurds, Kızılbâş and Zazas is vital to the clear understanding of the nature of the contemporary Kurdish national movement. For the present, the obvious comment can be made that the existence of clear religious and ethnic divisions and periodic tensions among peoples generally regarded as Kurds in Turkey is an evident obstacle towards the fashioning of the single, simple national cultural-political identity (national myth) much sought by Kurdish nationalists.

The modern Turkish state's inability to absorb or mollify the purely ethnic and religious aspects of these tensions – at least, to prevent the periodic outbursts of anti-Alevi violence – arguably leaves it open to accusations of preferring to allow them to simmer, in order to benefit from the political divisions they might cause between Kurmancî-Kurdish nationalists and Dersimli (Kızılbâş) particularists. It is perhaps indicative that a late 1998 National Intelligence Agency (MİT) report on the activities of extremist groups in Turkey concluded baldly that Alevis in general wanted to 'destabilize the country and endanger the Turkish state'.⁴³ No mention was apparently made of the severe provocations suffered by this group.

Notes

1. According to Algar (in Bosworth et al, 1992: 936–7), however, Xalid was no partisan of Kurdishness, being 'hostile to the local amirs in Kurdistan', acting 'as an advocate of Ottoman power' there.

2. For an account of the fall of the semi-independent emirates, see Chapter 4 of this book.

3. Emphases in original. Van Bruinessen (1978: 290–93) gives historical evidence to prove this hypothesis that the emergence of the sheikhs as powerful political leaders was bound up with the destruction of the Kurdish emirates.

4. For a description of Qadiri and Nakşibendi rituals, consult van Bruinessen (1978: 296–305, 305–12, 315–18).

5. George E. White (1919: 16–17), a turn-of-the-century Christian missionary in Anatolia, also noted:

Every dervish claims that the 'proofs' which he offers of his acceptance with God and so of his freedom from ordinary laws, such as chewing live coals, lapping red hot iron, thrusting skewers through the flesh, whirling, sword-play, and all without pain to himself, are due to the power of the 'Pir', or Founder of his Order. The Pir lived many generations ago, but his virtue has been transmitted through succeeding superiors down the years, and from the higher to the humbler ranks of Dervish membership, until the last performer is reached.

6. For a discussion of the millenarian or messianistic features of the Sheikh Ubay-

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