

Martin van Bruinessen, 'The Kurds as objects and subjects of historiography: Turkish and Kurdish nationalists struggling over identity'

published in Fabian Richter (ed.), *Identität Ethnizität und Nationalismus in Kurdistan. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Prof. Dr. Ferhad Ibrahim Seyder*, Münster: Lit Verlag, 2016, pp. 13-61.

The Kurds as objects and subjects of historiography: Turkish and Kurdish nationalists struggling over identity¹

Martin van Bruinessen

The Kurds deconstructed?

One interesting variety of literature on the Kurds is the genre, usually produced by Turkish nationalists, that attempts to prove that they do not exist, at least not as a distinct people with their own history and culture. The genre is almost as old as the Republic of Turkey itself, and semi-official publications of this kind have accompanied the various campaigns to assimilate the Kurds and to suppress Kurdish ‘separatism.’ Their authors are typically either retired military or civil administrators who spent part of their careers in the region, or men from the region itself, often belonging to tribes or communities of ambiguous ethnic identity, who made a deliberate decision to identify themselves as Turks rather than Kurds and attempted to provide ‘scientific’ evidence for the Turkish origins of the various Kurdish tribes and Kurdish dialects. Most of the authors of works in this genre published since the 1970s were associated with the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP).²

Many of these texts contain in fact some interesting bits of local history and empirical observations on tribal organisation and custom, but they consist for the most part of rambling attempts to connect the names of Kurdish tribes or items of Kurdish vocabulary with names or words from some Turkic language or other. Often Turkishness is simply asserted without even an attempt to provide a serious argument. The authors generally take the Turkish History Thesis of the 1930s for granted, according to which all major civilisations were founded by Turkish conquerors from Central Asia. Ancient empires such as those of Urartu and the Hittites were claimed to be Turkic, and any connection that could be constructed between these empires and the Kurds currently living in the

¹ A very early version of this paper was presented under the title “The Kurds as Objects and Subjects of Their History: Between Turkish Official Historiography, Orientalist Constructions, and Kurdish Nationalists’ Re-appropriation of Their History”, at the conference ‘Between Imagination and Denial: Kurds as Subjects and Objects of Political and Social Processes’, organized by the Kurdology Working Group at the Free University, Berlin, May 19-31, 1998. An updated version was published in Turkish translation in: Martin van Bruinessen, *Kürdolojinin Bahçesinde: Kürdologlar ve Kürdoloji Üzerine Söyleşi ve Makaleler*, Istanbul: Vate, 2009; reprint Istanbul: İletişim, 2012.

² Several of these authors were active in the MHP’s education department, where they provided ideological training; some also found positions in provincial universities after the purge of progressive academics in the wake of the 1980 coup. An interesting file on the production of this type of denialist literature in Turkey, titled “Anti Kürdoloji” was published in the July-August 2015 issue of the excellent popular history journal published in Istanbul, *Kürt Tarihi*, No. 19, after I had completed the present article.

same region was seen as further proof that the Kurds were also Turkic. None of these authors were trained as academic historians or linguists; they are typically amateurs and dilettantes, who use their sources very selectively, take items they like out of context and deliberately ignore everything that does not fit their a priori ideas.

Two books that were published in 1975, by the same ultra-nationalist publishing house, added a new dimension to earlier denial of the Kurds' distinct identity: it was the Imperialists who invented them, in order to weaken the Ottoman Empire and later Republican Turkey. Mahmut Rıřvanođlu's *The Tribes of the East and Imperialism* and Mehmet Eröz's *The Turkishness of East Anatolia* both insist that all the tribes of Eastern Turkey, including those known as Kurmanç or Zaza, are authentic Turks of Central Asian origin and that it was only the Imperialists who declared them to be a people in their own right and distinct from the Turks.³ Their thesis is different from the earlier nationalist paranoia that perceived foreign hands behind every Kurdish uprising. For these authors, it was not just the Kurdish rebellions that were fomented by the Imperialists in their great games, but the very existence of the Kurds as a people is an Imperialist creation – not by military intervention but by ideological work.

Rıřvanođlu presents this thesis implicitly in his title and tries to set it out the introduction to his book, which is unfortunately rambling and incoherent, and in the generally paranoid style of Turkey's far right. The Imperialists, he asserts, spent huge sums of money to have encyclopaedias, books and journals written, which were to be used in an offensive to break the unity of the Turkish nation, separating it into Turks and Kurds, Sunnis and Alevis, so that all could be enslaved.⁴ Encyclopaedias, books and journal articles: several years before Edward Said's *Orientalism*,⁵ Rıřvanođlu pointed the finger at Orientalists as the foot soldiers of Imperialist interests.

Eröz, who at least had an academic education (in economics),⁶ presents his argument slightly more coherently. In the chapter "Is it possible to speak of a 'Kurdish' nation?", he argues that these so-called Kurdish tribes speak a large number of widely divergent and mutually unintelligible languages and dialects. The English have first produced an alphabet based on one of these

³ Mahmut Rıřvanođlu, *Dođu Ařiretleri ve Emperyalizm*, 2. baskı, İstanbul: Türk Kültür Yayını, 1975; Mehmet Eröz, *Dođu Anadolu'nun Türklüğü*, İstanbul: Türk Kültür Yayını, 1975. The cover layout of these books is, incidentally, identical with that of the 1970 reprint of a classic in the "Kurds are Turks" genre, M. řerif Fırat's *Dođu İlleri ve Varto Tarihi* [History of Varto and the Eastern Provinces], 3. baskı, Ankara: Kardeř Matbaası, 1970 (on which more below), suggesting a visual acknowledgement of intellectual debt.

⁴ Rıřvanođlu, *Dođu Ařiretleri*, p. 9.

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978.

⁶ Eröz (1930-86) was in fact a lecturer of economics at the University of Istanbul. He had written a thesis on the economic life of Yörük nomads, and later published also on the Alevi communities of Turkey – all of which he of course declared to be Turkish.

languages, Kurmanci, and then they have attempted to unite the other three language groups with the Kurmanci speakers into an artificial ethnic group (*kavim*) and turn them into a nation (*milliyet*).⁷

A generous reading of these books might find here the rudiments of an early and unsophisticated formulation of the now dominant view that identities are deliberately constructed and politically contested.⁸ Stripped of their paranoia and xenophobia, Rıřvanođlu and Eröz seem to say that many of the symbols of identity embraced by contemporary Kurdish nationalists were constructed by Imperialist agents, and that their self-perception has been profoundly shaped by the writings of foreign scholars. This is in itself a reasonable claim, although few Kurdish nationalists had sufficient knowledge of foreign languages to actually read the relevant publications (unless they were translated into Turkish).

It was two consuls of Imperial Russia who, each in close collaboration with a learned Kurdish counterpart, provided us and the Kurds themselves with the first authoritative surveys of Kurdish language and culture. Alexandre Jaba, the Russian consul at Erzurum in the 1850s, urged the knowledgeable Mela Mehmûde Bayezîdi to write overviews of Kurdish literature, folklore and society, and to produce a Kurdish translation of the Persian *Sharafnameh*, the famous 16th-century history of the Kurdish emirates.⁹ These texts constituted the major part of the corpus on the basis of which Jaba later compiled the first Kurdish dictionary and the German linguist Ferdinand Justi wrote his Kurdish grammar.¹⁰ Some sixty years later, Basile Nikitine, who was the Russian consul in Urmia in 1915-18, established a similar partnership with another Kurdish mullah, Mela Sa'id Qazi, who wrote for him a series of Kurdish texts on religion and society that constituted the basis for much of Nikitine's later scholarly writing on the Kurds.¹¹ The third great Russian Kurdologist, Vladimir Minorsky, also began his career in the diplomatic service of the Czarist government. His

⁷ Eröz, *Dođu Anadolu'nun Türklüğü*, pp. 77-8.

⁸ Authoritative statements of this view: Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991; Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994; Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. II: *The Power of Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

⁹ A. Jaba, *Recueil de notices et de récits kourdes* (St-Pétersbourg, 1860); M. Bayezîdi, *Nravy i obycai Kurdov [Adat û rusûmname-y Ekradiye]*, Moscow, 1963; M.M. Bayezîdi, *Tewarîx-i qadîm-i Kurdistan*, Moscow, 1986. On Bayezîdi see also Michiel Leezenberg's forthcoming article 'Between Islamic Learning and Philological Nationalism: Mullah Mahmûde Bayezîdi's Auto-Ethnography of the Kurds.'

¹⁰ A. Jaba, *Dictionnaire kurde-français*, St-Pétersbourg, 1879; F. Justi, *Kurdische Grammatik*, St. Petersburg: 1880.

¹¹ B.P. Nikitine & E.B. Soane, 'The tale of Suto and Tato', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 3 (1923), 69-106; B.P. Nikitine, 'Les Kurdes racontés par eux-mêmes', *L'Asie française* no. 231 (Mai 1925), 148-157; idem, 'Kurdish stories from my collection', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 4 (1926), 121-138; idem, *Les Kurdes, étude sociologique et historique*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1956, and numerous other publications.

articles in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* long constituted the most authoritative definition of the Kurds and Kurdistan.¹² Rıřvanođlu's mentioning of encyclopaedias as Imperialist tools no doubt is a reference to Minorsky's scholarly output, and he singles out Minorsky among other Orientalists as an enemy of the Turks.

The other major Imperialist power had its own political operatives who wrote authoritatively on the Kurds (and had direct dealings with Kurdish nationalists). Mark Sykes, Ely B. Soane, Edward Noel and Cecil J. Edmonds not only defined Kurdish realities, they were also actively involved in separating the Southern Kurds from Turkey.¹³ (Of these British personalities, Rıřvanođlu only mentions Major Noel, who actually travelled through Eastern Anatolia in 1919 to gauge the degree of nationalist commitment of the Kurdish tribes.)

There is no denying that the said authors, and the body of scholarship that is derived from their work, have contributed significantly not only to Western knowledge on the Kurds but to the Kurds' perception of themselves and of their culture, and thereby to Kurdish identity. However, Rıřvanođlu and Eröz do not appear willing to consider that claims of Turkish identity are at least equally constructed. As his name indicates and as he mentions several times in the book, Rıřvanođlu belongs to the large Kurmanci-speaking Rıřvan tribe and notes that his fellow Rıřvan call themselves Kurds (Kurmanc).¹⁴ He insists, however, that all Kurmanc are Turks and that Kurdish identity is attributed to them by the Imperialists – apparently unlike Turkish identity, which he presents as primordial.

One foreign scholar mentioned by both Rıřvanođlu and Eröz, whom they surprisingly cite as an authority and not as one of the evil architects of Kurdish identity, is the linguist D.N. MacKenzie and his work *Kurdish Dialect Studies*.¹⁵ They do not refer to MacKenzie's classification of dialects

¹² V. Minorsky, 'Kurdistan' and 'Kurds', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden: Brill. Surprisingly, these long articles were translated integrally in the Turkish version, *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, published by the Milli Eđitim Bakanlıđı in the 1960s. In the late 1970s, these articles were published separately as a booklet by a Kurdish nationalist publishing house.

¹³ M. Sykes, 'The Kurdish tribes of the Ottoman Empire', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 38 (1908), 451-486; E.B. Soane, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise*, London, 1912, 1926; 'Diary of Major E. Noel, CIE, DSO, on special duty in Kurdistan' (Basra, 1919); C.J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957; T. Wahby & C.J. Edmonds, *A Kurdish-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.

¹⁴ Rıřvanođlu, *Dođu Ařiretleri*, pp 69-70, 186-8. The Rıřvan are a large tribal confederacy settled on the western fringes of Kurdistan, in the provinces of Adıyaman, Kahramanmarař and Gaziantep (see: *Ařiretler Raporu*, Istanbul: Kaynak, 1998, pp. 24-34, 145-7). Most sections are Sunni, but unlike most Sunni Kurds, they do not adhere to the Shaf'i school of law but to the Hanaf'i school, which was endorsed by the Ottoman state. This suggests that they were previously Alevi and were converted to Sunni Islam under state pressure.

¹⁵ D. N. MacKenzie, *Kurdish Dialect Studies*. 2 vols, Oxford University Press, 1961.

(though they must have been happy to see that he registers many differences between the dialects he studied), however, nor do they polemicise against any of his arguments, but they use him as an authoritative source for a ridiculous argument. The first person singular pronoun, in most dialects described by MacKenzie, is *min*. Our authors observe that in several Turkic languages the first person singular is not *ben* as in Istanbul Turkish but *men* or even *min*, very similar to the Kurdish pronoun. Hence they conclude that the Kurdish personal pronoun *min* is a survival from a past in which the Kurds spoke Turkish. Both furthermore present lists of Old Turkish words that they found being used in Kurdish dialects and in which they wish to see similar remnants of the Kurds' original Turkic language. Even the name Kurd itself (in its Turkish form of Kürt), Eröz claims, can be found in Old Turkish inscriptions as the name of a Turkic ethnic group (*kavim*) in North Central Asia, so that it would be appropriate to speak of these people as Kürt-Türk or Kurd Turks.¹⁶

Turkish nationalism and the Kurds: Ziya Gökalp

By 1975, the thesis that the Kurds are really Turks was not exactly new; it had been the official position of the Kemalist state since the early 1930s. Eröz and especially Rışvanoğlu make extensive use of earlier authors of the “Kurds are Turks” school as well as Pan-Turk scholars such as Faruk Sümer and Zeki Velidi Togan, and uncritically repeat claims of the earlier scholars as if these are established truth. They pay, however, surprisingly little attention to the writings of their most important predecessor, the ideologue of Turkish nationalism and advocate of assimilation of the Kurds, Ziya Gökalp.

Gökalp (1876-1924) was born in Diyarbakir in a Turkish-speaking family but knew Kurdish, and he had throughout his life an ambivalent relationship with the Kurdish element in his background, which most of his biographers appear to consider as a formative factor in his thought.¹⁷ He was to write that his father's family was originally from the town of Çermik, to the Northwest of Diyarbakir, which, he claimed had a Turkish population although the surrounding village

¹⁶ Eröz, *Doğu Anadolu'nun Türklüğü*, p. 13, citing the Hungarian turcologist László Rásonyi, whose works were very popular in Pan-Turkist circles. Rásonyi himself does not suggest that the Kürt mentioned in the Yenisey inscriptions have anything to do with the Kurds of Kurdistan (he considered them related to the proto-Hungarians and believed he found traces of their early presence in Hungary), but Eröz and his students have used Rásonyi's work to push the claim that the Kurds of Turkey are none other than those Turkic Kürt people from the Yenisey region. In a series of reprints of classics of the “Kurds are Turks” genre that was produced by the Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü in Ankara in the wake of the 1980 coup, the word “Kurd” was systematically replaced by “Kurd-Turk” (Kürttürk).

¹⁷ Enver Behnan Şapolyo, *Ziya Gökalp, İttihat ve Terakki ve Meşrutiyet Tarihi*, Istanbul: Güven Basımevi, 1943; Uriel Heyd, *Foundations of Turkish Nationalism: The Life and Teachings of Ziya Gökalp*, London: Luzac, 1950; Taha Parla, *The Social and Political Thought of Ziya Gökalp, 1876-1924*, Leiden: Brill, 1985; Rohat, *Ziya Gökalp'in Büyük Çilesi Kürtler* [Ziya Gökalp's Great Ordeal: The Kurds], Istanbul: Fırat Yayınları, 1992.

population is mostly Zaza-speaking). On his mother's side, however, he was related to one of the large Kurdish aristocratic families of the city, the Pirinçizade. Political opponents in Ziya's lifetime, and Kurdish nationalists in retrospect have called Ziya a Kurd (or a Zaza). In 1919, when his ideas about ethnic and national identity had matured and he was convinced that culture and not biological heredity was the determining factor, he answered a journalist who had mockingly called him a Kurd with a poem in which he affirmed that Turkish identity was a matter of choice and determination, not of descent: "Even if I were Kurd, Arab or Cherkes / Turkish nationality would be my first aim." He denied his opponent, who was an ethnic Turk, Turkishness because he took position against the interests of the Turkish nation: "I, be I Turk or not, am a friend of the Turks / you, be you Turk or not, are the Turks' enemy" and he declares his opponent, in spite of his Turkish descent, a bastard, not a real Turk because of his opposition to the nationalist cause and for "calling the servant of the Turkish nation [i.e., Gökalp] not a Turk."¹⁸

Gökalp was not the first Turkish nationalist but it was he who gave Turkish nationalism its conceptual foundations, based on his own adaptations of French sociological thought. In the form of poetry, he spread romantic notions about Central Asian Turkish social life, about Turkish tribes swarming out over the world, conquering vast regions but becoming culturally dominated by others: Chinese, Arabs and Persians. The Turks still needed to find their Promised Land : existence as a corporate nation, in harmony with Turkish culture and Turkish values. In the years before the Great War, the focus of his nationalism was Turan, the imagined homeland of Turks as well as Hungarians and Finns; in later years he narrowed his interest to the Turks of the new Turkey that the nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal was carving out. Both Kemalist nationalism and Pan-Turk ultra-nationalism owe much to the ideas of Gökalp.¹⁹

Unlike later nationalists, however, Gökalp never claimed that the Kurds were also Turks. He recognised them as a distinct, non-Turkish cultural group, in which he took an interest but with which he did not identify. Several memoirs of early Kurdish nationalists mention that in earlier years Ziya took such an interest in the Kurdish language that he began to write a grammar and perhaps also a dictionary, in collaboration with the prominent Kurdish intellectual Xelîl Xeyalî (Khalil Khayali). These notes appear to have gone lost, however.²⁰ A more substantial study of

¹⁸ "Hatta ben olsaydım Kürt Arab Çerkes / İlk gayem olurdu Türk milliyeti !" "Türk olsam olmasam ben Türk dostuyum / Türk olsan, olmasan da sen Türk düşmanı" "Türklük hadimine Türk değil diyen / Sayca Türk olsa da, piçtir, Türk değil!" The poem was directed against the poet Ali Kemal, who had taken the side of the Istanbul government against the nationalists and who had taunted Gökalp that he was not even a Turk himself but a Kurd. See Şapolyo, *Ziya Gökalp*, pp146-8 and Rohat, *Ziya Gökalp'in Büyük Çilesi*, pp. 74-5, where the entire poem is quoted.

¹⁹ This is brought out clearly by Uriel Heyd and Taha Parla in their analyses of Gökalp's work, as well as in the selection of his work in Niyazi Berkes (ed.), *Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization. Selected Essays of Ziya Gökalp*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959. See also Niyazi Berkes, 'Ziya Gökalp: His Contribution to Turkish Nationalism', *Middle East Journal* 8 (1954), 375-90.

²⁰ Mentioned by Kadri Cemil Paşa, *Doza Kurdistan (Kürdistan davası): Kürt Milletinin 60 Yıllık Esaretten Kurtuluş Savaşı Hatıraları* [The Kurdish Trial. Memories of a Sixty Years' Struggle to Liberate the Kurdish People

Kurdish tribes, however, which he wrote towards the end of his life, is extant although it remained long unpublished.²¹ In 1921 Rıza Nur, a close collaborator of Mustafa Kemal, who at that time was Minister of Health and Social Security in the Ankara government, asked Gökalp, who was living in Diyarbakir again, for a report on the Kurdish tribes of Eastern Turkey, their geographical, linguistic, ethnic and social conditions. In his memoirs Rıza Nur writes that it was concern over possible separatism that made him commission this study. He believed that many of the Kurds were simply Turks, but that these Turks were undergoing a process of Kurdicisation.²²

Ziya presents, however, a more complex picture, based on extensive empirical observations he had made and oral traditions he had collected over the years. His overview of the distribution of Kurdish tribes in geographical space, varieties of tribal and feudal organisation, and the interactions between tribal groups and non-tribal populations is very perceptive and remains valuable. He discussed the well-known case of the Karakeçi tribe, and he mentioned several other Turcoman tribes that had become Kurdicised, but he does not generalise this to other tribes. He clearly distinguishes between Kurdish, Turcoman and Arab tribes, and devotes some attention to Kurdish tribes that have Arab and Suryoye (Syriac) sections, or Muslim as well as Yezidi sections. His sociological training safeguards him from essentialist views of identity; he shows in fact a strong interest in changes of social identity, commenting on cases in which entire groups of people left one tribe and joined another, adopting a new tribal identity and being accepted as such.

His ideas on assimilation are based on his conception that social identities are shaped by social conditions and respond to changes in those conditions. He developed these ideas in a series of essays that he wrote around the same time and published in the Diyarbakir journal *Küçük Mecmua*.²³ Unlike the Arab Bedouin tribes of the Syrian and Iraqi deserts, in which hangers-on of other origins were never fully accepted as members of the tribe, he notes that Kurdish and Turkish tribes have often easily accepted and assimilated individuals and groups from one another. Turcoman tribes living in contact with Arab tribes maintain their cultural identity, but in a Kurdish environment they more easily adopt Kurdish culture. Kurdish nomads or villagers who settle in a

from Slavery], Ankara: Öz-Ge Yayınları, 1991, p. 30. The various claims about Ziya's notes on the Kurdish language are surveyed by Rohat, *Ziya Gökalp'ın Büyük Çilesi*, pp. 40-2, 124-5.

²¹ A small excerpt appeared in an obscure journal in 1943. The entire text was first published by Kurdish nationalists in 1975: Ziya Gökalp, *Kürt Aşiretleri Hakkında Sosyolojik İncelemeler* [Sociological Investigations on Kurdish Tribes], Ankara: Komal, 1975. A more satisfactory annotated edition was later produced by the Diyarbakir local historian Şevket Beysanoğlu: Ziya Gökalp, *Kürt Aşiretleri Hakkında Sosyolojik Tetkikler*, İstanbul: Sosyal Yayınlar, 1992

²² See Şevket Beysanoğlu's introduction to his edition of *Kürt Aşiretleri Hakkında Sosyolojik Tetkikler*, p. 6.

²³ Reprinted as an appendix to Beysanoğlu's edition of *Kürt Aşiretleri Hakkında Sosyolojik Tetkikler*, pp. 107-39. None of the major studies of Gökalp's thought have paid attention to these essays. Rohat, *Ziya Gökalp'ın Çilesi* was the first to analyse them systematically.

town rapidly adopt Turkish culture and identity, whereas Turkish villagers in Kurdish surroundings have tended to become Kurdish themselves. Gökalp coined the term *istimlâl* for this process of assimilation, implying a voluntary or involuntary change of ethnic identity.

Tribal organisation, in Gökalp's analysis, is an adaptation to environmental factors. In the desert and high mountains, only pastoral nomadism is possible, and he appears to consider tribalism the natural form of organisation of nomads. Agricultural populations of the plains and the edge of the desert face the permanent threat of incursions by armed nomads, and they have adopted tribal organisation and tribal custom (such as the blood feud) in a defensive response to the danger posed by their nomadic neighbours. From this follow Gökalp's counsels on how to modernise and civilise the Kurds: the nomadic mountain people should be brought down from the mountains, for instance by offering them land in the plains. This will remove the threat from the other villages in the plains, which no longer will need tribal organisation and will detribalise and be settled communities obedient to the government and its laws.²⁴ Gökalp also notes that the Turks were detribalised much earlier than the Kurds and considered Turkish culture as more advanced than Kurdish culture; he implies that the process of settlement and detribalisation will change the balance between Kurdicisation and Turkicisation towards the latter. Many later policy proposals, from the 1927 settlement law to President Turgut Özal's "last will" on the Kurdish question, have echoed these counsels of Gökalp, though usually without acknowledgement.²⁵

There is one remarkable absence in his otherwise balanced description and analysis of the social dynamics of the Diyarbekir region. He speaks of Kurdish and Turkish and Keldani ("Chaldaean") village names reflecting the presence of these populations but remains silent on the Armenians, who had until recently constituted a major proportion of the rural and urban population and whose language lived on in village names. Kurdish-Armenian transactions were a crucial factor in the Kurdish tribal economy, and Ziya's former mentor, Abdullah Cevdet, had written in the years before and after the Great War on the need for (political) co-operation between Kurds and Armenians. Ziya's silence cannot be a case of innocent oversight. It is known that he considered the forced deportation of Armenians from the region as necessary, but not whether he took an active role himself in the expulsion of Armenians from Diyarbekir. His maternal relatives, the Pirinçizade family, however, appear to have played an active role in their expulsion, murder and expropriation.²⁶

²⁴ Gökalp. *Kürt Aşiretleri*, pp. 42-50 (Chapter "Aşiretler Nasıl Temdin Olunabilir?": "How Can the Tribes be Civilised?").

²⁵ The settlement law is discussed extensively in: İsmail Beşikçi, *Kürtlerin 'Mecburi İskan'ı* [The Kurds' 'Forced Settlement']. Ankara: Komal, 1977; Özal's "testament", a letter written not long before his death to then Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, in which he told how the Kurdish question could be solved ("Özal'ın Demirel'e Kürt Vasiyeti"), was published in the newspaper *Hürriyet* on November 12, 1993.

²⁶ See Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity*

The Kurds as racially Turks

In spite of his apparent desire to prove his own pure Turkish descent, Ziya Gökalp never claimed that all Kurds were Turks by origin, which soon became the dominant view in official discourse. One of the earliest formulations of this view is the famous statement attributed to Mustafa Kemal by a local Diyarbakir newspaper in 1932. During a visit to the city, he is reported to have said: “*Diyarbakirli, Vanlı, Erzurumlu, Trabzonlu, İstanbullu, Trakyalı ve Makedonyalı hep bir ırkın evlatları, hep aynı cevherin damarlarıdır*” (The people of Diyarbakir, Van, Erzurum, Trabzon, Istanbul, Thrace and Macedonia are all children of the same race, veins of the same precious mineral).²⁷ If read in isolation – and that is how these words are usually cited – one might still think that Kemal meant that the people of Turkey's East and West, including Muslim immigrants from the lost Ottoman dominions in the Balkan, belong together through their shared history and shared elements of culture, in spite of their ethnic variety. The term *ırk*, “race”, had not yet exclusively biological connotations. However, the context of this statement shows that he had by then adopted the theory that these seemingly diverse people were all descended from Central Asian Turks. He told the people of Diyarbakir that they descended from the Oghuz Turks and that their land was part of the large land of the Turks (*Türk eli*), which was populated by and enlightened by Turks.²⁸ It was, incidentally, on the same occasion that Mustafa Kemal “corrected” the name of Diyarbakir (i.e., Land of Bekir, a name associated with the Arab conquests) into Diyarbakır, replacing the Arabic personal name with the Turkish word for copper (which is in fact found in the region), *bakır*. Such creative etymologies soon became very popular among those who wished to recognise every name as Turkish.

The implication of Kemal’s words appears to be that all people of Turkey (excepted, one assumes,

and War, Leiden: Brill, 2007, pp. 247-8; Adnan Çelik & Namık Kemal Dinç, *Yüz Yıllık Ah! Toplumsal Hafızanın İzinde 1915 Diyarbakir* [A Century of Lamentation. Diyarbakir 1915 in Social Memory], Istanbul: İsmail Besikçi Vakfı Yayınları, 2015, pp. 218-29.

²⁷ Newspaper *Diyarbakir*, 6 September 1932 (quoted in *Atatürk Yılında Diyarbakır*, Diyarbakır, 1981, p.8). Immediately after the 1980 military coup, these words were posted, in huge metal character, on the Northern gate (Dağ kapı) in Diyarbakır’s city walls.

²⁸ The journalist reporting Mustafa Kemal's words summarizes the gist of them as ‘*Ben* (i.e., the journalist) *Türk elinin kahraman bir bucağındanım, yazık ki oraya Bekir diyarı diyorlar. Fakat biz Diyarımızın ne olduğunu biliriz. Bizim diyarımız Oğuz Türkün has konağıdır, biz de bu yüce konağın çocuklarıyız (...) Türk eli büyüktür ve yer yüzünde yalnız o büyüktür. Her yeri dolduran Türktür. Ve her yanı aydınlatan Türk’ün yüzüdür. Diyarbakirli, Vanlı, Erzurumlu, Trabzonlu, İstanbullu, Trakyalı ve Makedonyalı hep bir ırkın evlatları, hep aynı cevherin damarlarıdır. Bizim yeni işimiz budur: Bu karmakarışık işlerin içinden çıkıp yükselebilmek için bize DİRLİK gerektir. BİRLİK onunla beraber yürür. DİRİ yalnız Türk milletidir, BİRLİĞİ ortaya koyan da Türktür. Dirliğin ne olduğunu anlatan da TÜRK’tür, çalışalım.*’ (Diyarbakir 6 September 1932, quoted in *Atatürk Yılında Diyarbakır*, Diyarbakır, 1981, p.8).

such ethnic groups as the Armenians and the Gypsies) were not only Turks in the sense of being citizens of Turkey but were Turks by genealogical descent. This was to become a chief tenet of Kemalist orthodoxy. One of the chief tasks of the official Turkish History Institute (Türk Tarih Kurumu), which was established in 1930 at Mustafa Kemal's initiative, was to provide "scientific" proof for this thesis that all great civilisations that had existed on Turkish (or Ottoman) soil, such as the Hittite and Sumerian civilisations, were founded by Turkish conquerors from Central Asia.²⁹ The related theory that all contemporary ethnic groups of Turkey were also of pure Turkish origin was developed by a series of faithful Kemalist amateur historians, several of whom were in fact themselves Kurds.

Mustafa Kemal's words ("The people of Diyarbekir, Van, Erzurum..." etc.) were adopted as the leading motto of a book on Eastern Turkey that the journalist Kadri Kemal (Kop) published in the following year.³⁰ The main thrust of his book is to show that Turkish culture was firmly anchored in the region and that there had been a continuous Turkish presence for thousands of years. He does not make the claim that all the region's inhabitants are Turks, or of Turkish origin, although his book has later been quoted as evidence for such claims. Rather, he argues against the nationalist author Mehmet Emin, who had proclaimed a few years earlier that the Eastern provinces were still living in the age of feudalism and were in need of an injection of Turkish culture. It is true that in Ottoman times parts of this region were known as Armenia and Kurdistan, but there is a rich Turkish presence there, which he sets out to document. Kadri Kemal was born in Bitlis, a city where Turkish was spoken although its population consisted mostly of Kurds and, previously, Armenians. In the World War he fought on the Eastern as well as the Western front, and in the early 1920s he wrote for a newspaper that was published in Sarıkamış, so that he was familiar with various parts of the region. The main part of the book consists of a survey of Turkish place names, (allegedly) Turkish tribal names and Turkish personal names in use in East Anatolia, observations on folklore that he declares to be Turkish, as well as Turkish words and expressions used in the region. Kurds and other non-Turkish ethnic groups and their languages are completely absent from the book, and the author does not even make an attempt to redefine them as Turks. His Turkish elements in East Anatolia appear to exist in a vacuum.

Soon however there would be authors from the region who would attempt to prove that not only were they Turks themselves but that all Kurdish (and Zaza) tribes were of Central Asian Turkish

²⁹ On the emergence of Turkish official history and the Turkish History Thesis, see: Büşra Ersanlı Behar, *İktidar ve Tarih: Türkiye'de 'Resmî Tarih' Tezinin Oluşumu (1929-1937)* [Power and History: The Emergence of the 'Official History' Thesis in Turkey], İstanbul: AFA, 1992; on its implications for official views of and policies towards the Kurds, see: İsmail Beşikçi, *Türk-Tarih Tezi ve Kürt Sorunu* [The Turkish History Thesis and the Kurdish Question], Ankara: Komal, 1977.

³⁰ Kadri Kemal, *Anadolu'nun Doğu ve Cənupdoğusu* [Anatolia's East and Southeast]. Ankara, 1933. Reprinted as Kadri Kemal Kop (Sevengil), *Anadolu'nun Doğu ve Güneydoğusu*, Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1982).

origin. The next section deals with the most important of these authors.

Kurdish authors proclaiming the Kurds' Turkishness

The first book to assert that all Kurds were racially Turks was probably Mehmed Şükrü Sekban's *The Kurdish Question: On the Problems of Minorities*, which was published in French in 1933 and two years later in Turkish in Ottoman script.³¹ Sekban was a Kurdish medical doctor, who had previously played a prominent role in Kurdish nationalist associations and had lived in exile since the Kemalist victory. In 1923 he had written a tract titled "What do the Kurds want from the Turks", in which he demanded recognition of the Kurds as a distinct people and argued that Gökalp's project of assimilation of the Kurds was due to fail. The Kurds had not been assimilated in 400 years of Ottoman rule and would not be assimilated now.³² Ten years later, however, he publicly renounced on his earlier nationalist stand and proclaimed that the Kurds were racially closely related to the Turks and that it was in their best interest to form a single political community with the Turks and accept the wise leadership of the Ghazi Mustafa Kemal. It is true that the Kurds speak an Indo-European language, not a Turkic one, but that was a result of having been dominated by the Medes, who had made the Kurds forget their original language and imposed an Iranian one. The Kurds are not descendants of the Medes, as certain misguided scholars and nationalists claim but brothers of the Turks, from whom they are physiologically undistinguishable, Sekban asserted.³³

It has been claimed that Sekban, who was in poor health, desperately wanted to return to Turkey and wrote this book to please the authorities as a condition for his return. His Kurdish nationalist friends were dismayed by his public surrender and saw him as a turncoat and traitor. But much of what he wrote was probably close enough to his real convictions; he was disillusioned with the Kurdish national struggle and had come to believe in assimilation as the best strategy for the Kurds in Turkey to make progress and benefit from the state-driven modernisation project.³⁴ The impact of the book was limited – it existed only in French and Ottoman Turkish, which were no longer the elite languages in Turkey – and only much later, after modern Turkish translations had appeared,

³¹ Dr. Chukru Mehmed Sekban, *La question kurde. Des problèmes des minorités*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1933; *Kürd Mes'elesi Safahatından* Basra: Vatan Matba'ası, 1935.

³² Şükrü Mehmed, *Kürdler Türklerden Ne İstiyorlar?* Cairo, 1923, reprinted in: Mehmet Bayrak, *Açık-Gizli Resmî-Gayrresmî Kürdoloji Belgeleri* [Public and Secret, Official and Unofficial Documents of Kurdology], Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1994, pp. 26-39. Summarised and analysed in: Martin Strohmeier, *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes and Patriots, Traitors and Foes*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, pp. 77-85.

³³ Sekban, *Le problème kurde*, passim.

³⁴ The book and the various reactions to it are discussed in Strohmeier, *Crucial Images*, pp. 116-27.

did it become one of the standard references in the Turkish nationalist literature and was frequently reprinted.³⁵

Of all books in the “Kurds are Turks” genre, M. Şerif Fırat's *History of Varto and the Provinces of the East*, is probably the most famous (or notorious, depending on one's political preferences).³⁶ This is an apologetic work written in 1946 by the chieftain of a branch of the Hormek tribe, a (Zaza-speaking) Kurdish Alevi tribe that in 1925 had taken up arms against Shaikh Said's Kurdish and Sunni Muslim uprising. Fırat's book is not pure invention but relies to some extent on oral traditions, found among other Alevi tribes as well, of having come from Khorasan, the region of Northeastern Iran that was the cradle of classical Sufism, sometime during the 12th-13th centuries. Most of the mystics of Khorasan wrote in fact in Persian, and that was probably the dominant spoken language of the settled population during the centuries concerned, but Fırat was convinced that his ancestors had been Turkish-speaking and associated with the 12th-century Turkish mystic Ahmed Yesevi from Eastern Khorasan, whom Turkish nationalist scholars had earlier identified as the single most important inspiration of Anatolian Alevism.³⁷

Fırat writes that his own ancestors had gradually lost their Turkish language and learned Zaza under the influence of neighbouring tribes, and that the Alevi tribes' Turkish origins are still reflected in their Zaza vocabulary, which he claims consists for 70 per cent of Turkish words. He appears unaware of the logical difficulty in his argument: if all Kurdish tribes were originally Turkish-speaking, from whom could they have learned their Zaza or Kurmanci? Some later authors have attempted to provide an explanation, but most realised that it was wiser to evade the issue.

In spite of the obvious biases in Fırat's account, the book offers interesting glimpses of local history and tribal relations. Fırat is also one of the first, if not the very first, to summarize the contents of genealogical documents in the possession of families of *dede* (Alevi hereditary religious

³⁵ The earliest translation mentioned by Strohmeier, as *Kürt Sorunu*, appeared in 1970. The oldest version in my possession, Dr. M. Şükrü Sekban, *Kürt Meselesi*, Ankara: Kon Yayınları, 1979, is more than four times as long as Sekban's original booklet. Its anonymous editors added much material on the alleged Turanian origins of the Kurds and tried to prove that Kurdish is not an Indo-European language (as Sekban himself had argued) but a Turkic one.

³⁶ M. Şerif Fırat, *Doğu İlleri ve Varto Tarihi* (first published in 1945, numerous reprints). References are to the third edition, Ankara: Kardeş Matbaası, 1970. Fırat was later killed in a tribal conflict and is still the object of much controversy among the Kurds. His story is investigated, along with many other conflicts in Varto's history, including the Armenian massacres, in: Christopher de Bellaigue, *Rebel Land: Among Turkey's Forgotten Peoples*, London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

³⁷ It was the influential scholar M. Fuat Köprülü who had first put forward the claim that the popular mysticism of Anatolian populations was affiliated with Yesevi. Köprülü was himself a student of Gökalp and was much influenced by the latter's idealisation of the Central Asian Turks. For critical revisions of the 'Köprülü thesis', see Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, 'The Vefa'iyye, the Bektashiyye and genealogies of "heterodox" Islam in Anatolia: rethinking the Köprülü paradigm', *Turcica* 44 (2012), 263-84; Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

specialists), which were usually carefully hidden from view. Combining his first-hand knowledge with the uncritically repeated claims of Kemalist bureaucrats and administrators who declared all Alevi tribes to be Turks and with his reading on the history of Turkish peoples, Fırat develops the claim that all Kurdish tribes are genuine Turks. He calls them “Mountain Turks” (Dağlı Türkler); this may be one of the first instances in which this term was used; his book played a role in popularising this term, which in the 1950s and 1960s was the officially favoured designation for the Kurds.

Fırat’s book was reprinted for the first time in the wake of the 1960 military coup, with a praising foreword by the leader of the ruling military junta, General Cemal Gürsel. The stirrings of Kurdish national sentiment that had been possible in the relatively liberal 1950s, had been one of the reasons for the military intervention and remained a major concern for the generals who tried to undo the damage of ten years’ civilian rule. A secret report on the Kurdish question, that was prepared for the junta in 1961 and has recently come to light, notes with regret that many people in East and Southeast Anatolia continue to consider themselves as Kurds rather than Turks and lists the measures that have to be taken to alleviate this condition.³⁸ The measures include the foundation of an academic Institute of Turcology that will establish the Turkish origin of “those who think they are Kurds” and carry out research on the Turkish history of Turkey’s East,³⁹ and the dissemination of various types of publications that will persuade “those who think they are Kurds” of their Turanian origins.

The latter work was undertaken with great enthusiasm by a third author hailing from Kurdistan, though perhaps not a Kurd himself, M. Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, who was the main contributor to this genre of literature during the 1960s. Kırzioğlu was born in Kars in 1917 and claimed Daghistani ancestry. He studied Turcology at Istanbul University and was affiliated with the ultra-right wing of the Pan-Turkist movement, which was reflected in strong anti-Russian, anti-Soviet, anti-Armenian views and an obsession with conspiracies. His publications show a strong animosity towards the Russian Kurdologists Minorsky, Nikitine and Vil’chevsky, whom he considered as spies and enemies of the Turks.⁴⁰ He warned the editors of the *İslam Ansiklopedisi* that Minorsky’s articles on Kurds and Kurdistan were biased and proposed alterations that would show the Turkish

³⁸ The young politician Bülent Ecevit, who became Minister of Labour in the first civilian government after the coup, found the report on his desk, among other instructions. He kept it in his private archive without ever mentioning it. After his death, however, it was published by two journalists whom he had given access: Rıdvan Akar & Can Dünder, *Ecevit’in Gizli Arşivi* [Ecevit’s Secret Archive], Ankara: İmge, 2008, pp. 90-103.

³⁹ The Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü (Institute for Research on Turkish Culture), which later became the most prominent disseminator of such propagandistic literature, probably owes its existence to this proposed policy measure. It was established in 1961, though not at one of the universities but as a private institution.

⁴⁰ Vil’chevsky was a leading Soviet Kurdologist, who worked, among other things, on the project of a unified literary Kurdish language. See Khanna Omarkhali and Nodar Mosaki, 'A history of Russian Kurdology. With a brief literature overview', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kurdische Studien* 2 (2015), pp. 146-7.

ancestors of the various groups of Kurdish tribes, but they did not pay attention to him.⁴¹ His own publications on the subject consist mainly of his recognising names resembling the word Kurd or Kurdish tribal names in older Turkish sources and an etymology of the name Kurd from words like *kurtuk* or *kürtüm* that in various Turkish languages refer to heaps of snow. (He appeared unaware that his different etymologies contradicted one another, and he deliberately ignored all evidence pointing to non-Turkish origins).⁴² In spite of their marginality and poor academic quality, his books became part of the canon of their genre.

The Turkish thesis asserted and contested in court

Constructing Turkish pedigrees for the Kurds was always more than an innocent pastime of pseudo-academics. It served a clear political purpose, and one of its most remarkable uses became evident in the political trials against the DDKO (Revolutionary Cultural Hearths of the East), the first legal Kurdish associations in Republican Turkey. In the wake of mass mobilisation in a series of public meetings, beginning in 1967, in which the problems of ‘the East’, i.e. the Kurds and Kurdistan – economic backwardness, discrimination, cultural oppression – were discussed and social and economic demands formulated, Kurdish students and intellectuals in Ankara established the first DDKO in 1969, soon followed by similar associations with the same name in Istanbul, Diyarbakır, Silvan, Ergani, Batman, Kozluk, Beşiri and Kulp.⁴³ After the military coup of 12 March 1971, the DDKO were immediately banned and their leaders prosecuted for anti-national activities (“weakening national feelings” and “subverting the independence and unity of the nation or attempting to separate territory from the state’s sovereignty”). The indictment began with a reiteration of the thesis that the Kurds have always been Turks, indicating that asserting a distinct non-Turkish identity is an anti-national act.

The first pages of the indictment read like an essay on the lines of the literature discussed above.⁴⁴

⁴¹ He relates this frustrating experience in a conference paper: M. Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, “Kür-Aras/Aran Kürtleri“, in the Proceedings of the VI. Türk Tarih Kongresi (1961), Ankara: TTK, 1966, pp. 363-413. The 1961 secret report mentioned above also mentions Minorsky’s Encyclopaedia article, which describes the Kurds as Iranian, as dangerous literature that had to be countered.

⁴² M. Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, *Her Bakımdan Türk Olan Kürtler* [The Kurds, Turks in All Respects], Ankara: Çalışkan basımevi, 1964; Kırzioğlu M. Fahrettin, *Kürtler’in Türklüğü* [The Kurds’ Turkishness], Ankara: Atatürk Üniversitesi Ziraat Fakültesi Talebe Derneği, 1968. See also the biographical notice on Kırzioğlu in *Atatürk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi*, Sayı 28 (Erzurum, 2005), pp. 1-7.

⁴³ On these mass meetings (known as Doğu Mitingleri, “Meetings of the East”) and the DDKO, see: İsmail Beşikçi, *Doğu Mitingleri’nin Analizi (1967)*, Ankara: Yurt Kitap-Yayın, 1992; Celal Temel, *1984’ten Önceki 25 Yılda Kürtlerin Silahsız Mücadelesi* [The 25 Years of Unarmed Struggle of the Kurds Preceding 1984], Istanbul: İsmail Beşikçi Vakfı Yayınları, 2015, pp. 182-233.

⁴⁴ The indictment, along with transcripts of the trial hearings and the defence of the DDKO members, were later

The prosecutor adopts an almost academic tone, explaining that there are different theories about the origins of the Kurds: one makes them the descendants of ancient people living in the region, others consider them of Iranian or Arab origin, and the fourth claims they are a Turanian people (*kavim*) who came from Central Asia. The first three theories are summarily dismissed, and a selection of the arguments connecting the Kurds with Central Asian ancestors is presented. Şükrü Mehmed Sekban is praised for, after many years of Kurdish activism, having discovered and publicly asserted that the Kurds are a Turanian people. Sekban and reliable foreign scholars have shown that the Kurds do not descend from the Medes, as many Kurds and others erroneously believe.⁴⁵ The prosecutor goes on to make statements about the various Kurdish languages and dialects. The Kurmanci dialect spoken by “our Mountain Turks” consists for 60 per cent of old Asian or Central Anatolian Turkish words, and for 40 per cent of Arabic and Persian; there is no doubt that Kurdish is a Turkic language, just like Yakut or Chuvash. It is not immediately recognisable as such because “our racial brothers” have for centuries been in contact with Arabs, Persians and Armenians, which has destroyed the purity of their language. Kurdish dictionaries show that most of the words originate from Turkish and other languages; only a handful of words are unique to Kurdish.

Only after having established the Kurds’ Turkishness does the prosecutor turn to the topic of separatism, the history of Kurdish uprisings, and the danger of the current Kurdish activism. According to the Turkish Constitution, he proclaims, all Turks are equal before the law, and the state does not discriminate. The Turkish state was founded by the Turkish nation; nationalism and loyalty to the state are everyone’s duty. The DDKO activists have, however, spoken badly against the Armed Forces which are always ready to serve the nation. They have organised meetings and attempted to shatter people’s trust in the state and incited them to rebellion. In pursuit of the dream of Kurdistan, they have sown enmity between brothers. They have not hesitated to work together with the radical left student movement Dev-Genç and the Workers’ Party of Turkey (TİP). Violent incidents and separatist activities were the reason for the Armed Forces to intervene and declare Martial Law in 11 provinces. This trial against separatists takes place under Martial Law.⁴⁶

In their response to the indictment, the defendants focussed on the prosecutor’s ideological

published in a book: *Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları Dava Dosyası – I*. Ankara: Komal, 1975, pp. 15-72.

⁴⁵ The most reliable of those foreign studies, the “most logical and most correct” in the prosecutor’s mind, is a book titled “A Brief History of the Kurds and Kurdistan” that was completed in Germany in 1931. No author is mentioned, but the reference can only be to Mihemed Emîn Zekî’s *Xulaseyêkî Tarîxî Kurd u Kurdistan* (discussed briefly below), which was published in Kurdish in Baghdad in 1931, and in Arabic translation in 1937. He had obviously not read it, for neither was the book written in German or in Germany, nor does it endorse the Turanian thesis.

⁴⁶ “İddianame” (Indictment), in *Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları Dava Dosyası*, pp. 15-25. The remainder of the indictment consists of a detailed description of the DDKO’s activities.

statements, leaving the technical defence to their lawyer. They tore his arguments apart, showing the inconsistencies and countering the “Turanian” claims with proper historical arguments, based on Arabic, Persian and Ottoman sources, studies by Turkish historians and an occasional Western reference. (Minorsky’s *İslam Ansiklopedisi* articles were in fact their only Western reference; nothing else had at that point yet been translated into Turkish.) The prosecutor’s arguments against the Kurdish language were ridiculed by submitting the heading of the indictment to a similar word count and showing that except for the words “Turkey”, “Martial law”, “prosecution” and “province”, which were Turkish, all other words were either Persian or Arabic. They gave a list of Kurdish words that had entered Turkish vocabulary, and presented a clear summary of Kurdish syntax, contrasting the declination of verbs and other main features in Kurdish with those in Turkish. The defendants also used this opportunity to present an overview of Kurdish history in Ottoman and Republican times, a history of Kurdish literature, and an inventory of Kurdish complaints at the treatment of their people by the Turkish state.

It was the first time that a direct confrontation took place between the Turkish official view of the Kurds and the Kurds’ own self-assertion. Never before had Kurds attempted to systematically present their history, their culture and their language and to take issue with the ideology that denied their existence. In this respect, the DDKO trials represent a watershed in the history of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. At the time, martial law conditions did not allow the Kurdish defendants’ words to be heard in public. Major excerpts of the defence pleas were first published abroad, by Kurdish activists in European exile, under the significant title *Listen Well, You Fascist Prosecutor: There are Kurds in the World!*.⁴⁷ Only after the return of civilian rule and an amnesty for all prisoners could the defence pleas also be published in Turkey. They marked the beginning of a wave of publications on Kurdish history and society by Kurds themselves – interrupted by yet another coup d’état and period of military rule, but continuing with renewed vigour in the diaspora and then in Turkey again from the late 1980s onwards.

A few words are in order here about the work of the Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi, whose studies of Kurdish society brought him into close contact with Kurdish activists and who played a significant role in stimulating young Kurds to engage in relevant research on their society and history. His landmark study of the sociology and political economy of East Anatolia, first published in 1969, contained in fact the first systematic critique of the denial of the Kurds’ ethnicity as well as the first systematic overview of the Turkish Republic’s policies towards the Kurds and Kurdish responses.⁴⁸ He lost his job as an assistant professor over the book, was denounced by his superior, was tried and sentenced to 13 years imprisonment. The documents of his trial were also published, immediately after those of his DDKO friends, and the same publishing house began publishing a

⁴⁷ *Sen Faşist Savcı İyi Dinle: Dünyada Kürt Vardır! DDKO'nun Savunması*, Uppsala: Bahoz, 1973.

⁴⁸ İsmail Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu'nun Düzeni. Sosyo-ekonomik ve Etnik Temeller*, İstanbul: E Yayınları, 1969.

series of works by Beşikçi on the policies of the Kemalist state towards the Kurds.⁴⁹

Predecessors

The DDKO leaders were not the first Kurds who felt that they had to prove that they existed and spoke a language. As early as 1918, before the establishment of the Republic, Kurdish intellectuals writing in the journal *Jîn* had to adopt a similar position, arguing against unnamed opponents who had denied the existence of the Kurds as a distinct ethnic group.⁵⁰ A contributor writing under the pen-name of Kurdiyê Bitlîsî (probably Xelîl Xeyalî), later endorsed by Süleymanyeli Tevfik (who later became famous under the pen-name of Pîremêrd) presented a series of arguments purporting to show not only that the Kurds existed but that they had a long history in the region.

They did not have to do much inventing, since abundant authentic documentation was available. Learned Kurds were aware of such works by Kurdish authors as Sharaf Khan Bidlisi's *Sharafnameh* (completed in 1597) and Ahmad-i Khani's *Mem û Zîn* (1695) and of the references to the Kurds in the works of Arabic historians and geographers. Salahuddin Ayyubi, better known in the West as Saladin, the valiant opponent the Crusaders and the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty in Syria and Egypt, was remembered as the earliest Kurd to have played a leading role on the world stage. And at least one legendary hero of the Iranian epic of kings, *Shahnameh*, was widely recognized to have been a Kurd: Kawe the Blacksmith, the only commoner in the cycle who slew a king, the tyrant Zahhak.⁵¹

Those members of the modernized elite who learned French or even other foreign languages also became aware of European scholarship on Kurdish language, culture and history. The first Kurdish journals, from *Kürdistan* (1898-1902) down, printed excerpts from *Mem û Zîn* and the *Sharafnameh* and frequently referred to Salahuddin in order to strengthen their readers' sense of history. In the journals published by a younger generation, in the mid- and late 1910s, we may also

⁴⁹ For a more extensive treatment see Martin van Bruinessen, 'Ismail Beşikçi: Turkish Sociologist, Critic of Kemalism, and Kurdologist', *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* 5 (2003-2004 [2005]), 19-34; Barış Ünlü & Ozan Değer (eds), *İsmail Beşikçi*, Istanbul: İletişim, 2011.

⁵⁰ See Janet Klein, *Claiming the Nation: The Origins and Nature of Kurdish Nationalist Discourse*, M.A. thesis, Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, 1996, pp. 63-5. The journal was reprinted, in the original Arabic script, with transcription in Latin script and a Turkish translation of the Kurdish articles, by Mehmed Emin Bozarlan: *Jîn. Kovara Kurdî – Tirkî / Kürdçe – Türkçe Dergi 1918-1919*. 5 vols. Uppsala: Deng, 1985-8.

⁵¹ There is yet another legend connecting the Kurds with this Zahhak (to be found, inter alia, in the *Sharafnameh*). The two snakes growing out of Zahhak's shoulders had to be fed with a children's brains, and Zahhak each day demanded two boys to be slaughtered. The butcher killed only one boy each day and a goat instead of the other, mixing the two brains. The boys whose lives were thus saved were sent into the mountains and from them the present Kurds were said to descend.

discern the to some extent the impact of European scholarship (much like earlier French, German and Russian scholarship on Central Asian history had given rise to Turkish nationalism and pan-Turkism).

The authors of *Jîn* did their best to inspire a sense of national awareness and pride in their fellow Kurds, and therefore it was necessary for the Kurds to know and cultivate their own history and culture. In the March-April 1919 issue, Memduh Selim wrote that it was the Kurds' national obligation to honour their traditional holidays, just as other nations honour theirs. It is interesting to see which holidays he mentions as the Kurdish national ones. He first lists the Islamic holidays, and continues with the more specifically Kurdish ones: *sersal* (New Year, celebrated on the 9th of March according to the Mali calendar, or March 22 by ours), the day of Salahuddin's birth and the day that he became king, and finally the day on which Kawe defeated Zakhak. In a later issue of the same journal, Memduh Bey wrote a longer piece on the day of Kawe, which he dates 31st August. In fact, the holiday had then just been celebrated by the Ta'mim-i Ma'arif ve Neşriyat Cemiyeti, probably for the first (and last) time.⁵²

The Kawe holiday was new to the Kurds of the Ottoman Empire, and Memduh Bey must have read either James Morier's *Second Journey* or a later scholarly work depending on it for this holiday. Morier spent the summer of 1815 in Damavand and describes the local holiday celebrated there on the 31st August to commemorate Kawe's victory over Zakhak, whom he chained to the mountain Damavand. He noted that the festival was known as *Id-i Kurdi* — probably a reference to the origin myth that makes the Kurds the descendants of the boys destined for consumption by Zakhak's shoulder snakes who had been saved by a ruse replacing their brains with goats' brains.⁵³

It is interesting to note that Memduh Selim did not yet know the Kurdish New Year by the name of Newroz, and that the figure of Kawe was not, in his mind and that of his contemporaries, associated with this spring festival. We shall see below how this association (which in fact already exists in the Vedic and Pahlavi legends on dragon-slayers from which the Kawe legend derives) was made again in the course of the twentieth century, and how both the spring festival and the blacksmith have recently come to be claimed not only by Kurdish nationalists but also by a competing pan-Turk nationalism.

Historiography of the Kurds and the search for origins

⁵² Memduh Selim Begî, “Eyyam-ı mahsusamızı tesbit mes’alesi” [“The Problem of Determining Our Special Days”], *Jîn* 16, 10 Nisan 1335, 5-8 (Vol. IV, pp. 716-8 in Bozarslan’s edition).

⁵³ James Morier, *A Second Journey Through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, Between the Years 1810 and 1816*, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1818, p. 357.

In the following decades several Kurdish nationalists begin writing Kurdish history, using a variety of different sources and adding their own Kurdocentric perspective. Some authors, usually of *medrese* background, continued exclusively using Oriental sources, like most of the contributors to Jîn had done. The most impressive work of this kind probably is the *History of Kurdistan and its Dependencies* by the Islamic scholar Muhammad Mardukh of Sanandaj.⁵⁴ Most of the modern nationalists, however, made extensive use of Orientalist studies in Western languages. An important and influential milestone was the book that Mihemed Emîn Zekî, a Kurdish officer in the Iraqi army, published in 1931.⁵⁵ Zeki used many British studies, notably Le Strange's *Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* and Longrigg's *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*.⁵⁶

Although most of Zeki's book deals with the Islamic period (with hardly any attention given to Salahuddin), he introduces it with a long section on the pre-Islamic history of the region and the origins of the Kurds. The following generations of nationalist historians have, perhaps in a wish to dissociate their people from the Arabs and Turks, tended to concentrate on the pre-Islamic period. One gets the impression that their intention no longer is to show that the Kurds have a long history in the region but rather to discover a respectable set of ancestors.

In this respect a standard was set by İhsan Nuri Paşa, the former Ottoman army officer who had led the rebellion on mount Ararat (1929-30) and had after its suppression taken asylum in Iran. His *History of the Racial Origins of the Kurds* dealt exclusively with pre-Islamic history and found the Guti as well as the Medes at the root of the present Kurds.⁵⁷ In this respect İhsan Nuri follows an earlier but less influential Iranian Kurdish author, Rashid Yasemi.⁵⁸ His other sources are mostly Persian, but they also include observations by such Orientalist authors as Speiser and Von Luschan (whom he probably had found quoted in Persian or Turkish works). The list of Kurdish authors who continued in this vein is long; it includes Cigerxwîn and numerous younger authors who

⁵⁴ Sheykh Mohammad Mardukh-i Kordestani, *Tarikh-e Kordestan wa Tawabe`, ya Tarikh-e Mardukh*, reprint, Sanandaj, 1974. This book is heavily dependent on the Persian *Shahnameh* and works on Islamic history.

⁵⁵ Mihemed Emîn Zekî, *Kurd û Kurdistan* (in Kurdish), Baghdad, 1931. Turkish translation: M. Emin Zeki, *Kürdistan Tarihi*, Istanbul: Komal, 1977.

⁵⁶ G. Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate: Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia from the Moslem Conquest to the Time of Timur*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905; Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925.

⁵⁷ İhsan Nuri, *Tarikh-e Rishe-ye Nezhadi-ye Kord* [History of the Racial Origins of the Kurds], Tehran: Chapkhane-ye Sepehr, 1333/1955. An annotated Turkish translation by M. (Malmîsanij) Tayfun was published in 1977: *Kürtlerin Kökeni*, Istanbul: Yöntem, 1977; reprint: Doz Yayınları, 1991.

⁵⁸ Rashîd Yâsamî, *Kord wa Peywastegi-ye Nezhadi wa Tarikhi-ye O* [The Kurds and Their Racial and Historical Connections], Tehran, no date. Another similar book is: Mozaffar Zangana, *Dûdmân-e âryâ'î (Kord wa Kordestân)*, no place [Tehran?], 1347/1968.

studied history in Europe.⁵⁹

The Medes became the Kurdish nationalists' preferred ancestors, and the thesis that the Kurds are the present-day descendants of the Medes also came to be adopted by none less than the great Vladimir Minorsky, who in one academic paper claimed that the cultural unity of the Kurds (which he did not further define) could only be explained by their common descent from the Medes.⁶⁰ Two decades later, the linguist MacKenzie fiercely attacked Minorsky's and the nationalists' views, denying that there was any cultural unity and arguing that Kurdish belonged to another branch of Iranian languages than Median. Moreover he insisted that Zaza and Kurdish proper were not closely related, the former belonging to, or sharing many traits with, another branch of the Iranian family of languages.⁶¹ One would expect that Kurdish nationalist authors would quote Minorsky more often than MacKenzie, but in fact neither of these two papers ever attracted their attention. (As seen above, both Eröz and Rıřvanođlu quote MacKenzie as an authority but fail to make proper use of his analysis of dialect variation for their claim that Kurdish is not a real language.)

Contested symbols, rival realities

The books by Rıřvanođlu and Eröz with which this article began represented the culmination of their genre. Although neither author mentions the DDKO or Beřikçi and their defence pleas – their books and the trial documents were published in the same year, 1975 – both appeared aware that the Kurdish movement had developed from poorly organised uprisings to an ideological counter-offensive and self-assertion based on documented history. Hence their insistence that the Imperialists had not only attempted to incite the Kurds against the Turks in armed uprisings but had provided the dangerous idea that the Kurds are a nation distinct from the Turks.

Once the Kurds had started researching and writing on their history, the Turanian thesis was

⁵⁹ Cigerxwin, *Tarix a Kurdistan* [History of Kurdistan]. Two volumes published (Stockholm: Roja Nû, 1986, 1987), of which the first deals exclusively with pre-Islamic history. In Iran, fascination with pre-Islamic history was widespread and, until the Islamic revolution, politically expedient. M. Awrang is a typical representative, see e.g. his *Kordshenasî* [Kurdology], Tehran, 1346/1967. The younger authors include: Jamal Rashid Ahmed & Fawzi Rashid, *Ta'rikh al-kurd al-qadîm* [Ancient Kurdish History], Erbil: Jami'at Salahaddin, 1990; Salahaddin Mihotulî, *Arya Uygarlıklarından Kürtlere* [From the Aryan Civilisations to the Kurds], İstanbul: Koral, 1992; J. Kurdo, *Kürt Kültürünün Kaynakları ve Uygarlıklar Beřiđi Kürdistan* [The Sources of Kurdish Culture and Kurdistan as a Cradle of Civilisations], Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1993; Torî, *Kürtlerin İlkçađ Tarihi ve Kültürü* [History and Culture of the Kurds in Antiquity], İstanbul: Berfin, 1997; Mehrdad R. Izady, *The Kurds, a Concise Handbook*, Washington: Crane Russack, 1992.

⁶⁰ V. Minorsky, 'Les origines des Kurdes', *Actes du XXe congrès international des orientalistes*, Louvain, 1940, pp. 143-152.

⁶¹ D.N. MacKenzie, 'The Origins of Kurdish', *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1961, 68-86.

gradually marginalised and survived only on the far right of the political spectrum. It received a new lease of life in the wake of the 1980 coup: most of the earlier books of the “Kurds are Turks”, along with some new ones, were reprinted in cheap editions that were widely distributed for free.⁶² By the end of the decade, however, the armed Kurdish movement and its civilian support had gained so much strength that public intellectuals and politicians gradually began accepting the existence of what some called “the Kurdish reality.”

Henceforth, the main contestation has not been over the existence of the Kurds and their distinct identity but rather over specific symbols and who was entitled to claiming them. Who could, for instance, claim the Hittites, one of the great civilisations of Anatolia, as their ancestors? The Turkish History thesis had, of course, declared the Hittites and the Sumerians to be Turks, and both civilisations were adopted by the Republic as its most illustrious predecessors (reflected, *inter alia*, in the names of the banks in charge of state-led industrialisation, Eti Bank and Sümer Bank). The Republic’s capital Ankara adopted a Hittite religious symbol, the sun disk with three deer, as its own. But there is a scholarly consensus that Hittite was an Indo-European language, strengthening the claims of some Kurdish amateur historians that the Hittites were among the various ancestors of the Kurds rather than the Turks, who were latecomers in Anatolia.⁶³ When Melih Gökçek, the Islamist mayor of Ankara since 1994, wished to replace the Hittite sun disk by a more Islamic symbol for the capital, he ran into strong and emotional opposition. One reason was, allegedly, fears that the Kurdish movement might appropriate the sun disk and score a major symbolic victory.

One Kurdish symbol that was lost by the Kurds — as well as rejected by them — was Salahuddin. To an earlier generation of Kurds, Salahuddin had been a great Kurdish warrior and ruler, and as said above, Memduh Selim suggested in 1919 that the day of his accession to the throne should be celebrated as a national holiday. But others also claimed the great warrior. In Kemalist Turkey Salahuddin became a Turkish hero, in Iraq an Iraqi nationalist. In the 1970s, the Kurds who collaborated with the Iraqi government against the nationalist movement were named the Salahuddin brigades (*fursan Salahaddin*), and in 1990 Saddam Hussein (born, like Salahuddin, in Tikrit) attempted to present himself as a contemporary Salahuddin and compare his confronting the Americans and their allies with Salahuddin’s confronting the Crusaders. In post-revolutionary Iran, of course, Salahuddin is primarily seen as a Muslim leader, and he is one of the few historical Kurdish leaders who represent an acceptable Kurdishness. (It is not a coincidence that the major Kurdish publishing house, in Urumiye, is named Entesharat-e Salahuddin.) For many nationalist

⁶² The Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü in Ankara, a private institute of unclear affiliation (see note 39 above), published dozens of books in this genre in the early 1980s and sent them to persons and institutions around the world.

⁶³ On the Kurdish appropriation of ancient civilisations as ancestors and Kurdish nationalist historiography in this period in general (which was often almost a mirror image of Turkish official historiography), see: Konrad Hirschler, ‘Defining the nation: Kurdish historiography in Turkey in the 1990s’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (2001), 145-66.

Kurds, on the other hand, Salahuddin no longer is a symbol of their own nation but to the contrary of those Kurds who have no national awareness; I have heard him called the first *jash* – using the term of abuse for the Kurdish militias armed and paid by the state to fight the Kurdish nationalist movement.

Two symbolic complexes over which there has been significant struggle in the 1990s and 2000s between Kurdish and Turkish nationalists are Alevism and Newroz, with which the following sections deal.

Alevism: A Turkish or a Kurdish religion?

The most intensive identity struggles of the past decades, in which not only Turkish and Kurdish nationalists took part but also spokespersons for narrower group identities such as those of the Zaza or of Dersim, have concerned the Alevi and Alevism.⁶⁴ Turkish nationalist scholars such as Köprülü and his followers have perceived Alevism as the Turkish form of Islam par excellence, and have wished to discern in its beliefs and rituals those of pre-Islamic Turkish religion, commonly described as “shamanism”.⁶⁵ The language of Alevi ritual and most religious poetry is Turkish, although many Alevi village communities have Kurmanci or Zaza as their first language and some prayers and sacred songs are in those languages. Oral traditions, secular as well as religious, appear to connect Kurdish Alevi tribes with their Turkish co-religionists, and families of religious specialists believe their ancestors came from Khorasan and may therefore have been Turkish. The arguments of M. Şerif Fırat concerning the Turkish origin of his own and other tribes found a willing ear among many of the Alevi tribes. Young Turk and early Republican ideologues were aware of the stronger presence of Turkish elements in the culture of Alevi tribes compared to the Şafî`î Sunni Kurdish tribes. In fact, Kemalist proponents of ethnic engineering have proposed using the Turkish dimension of Alevism in order to assimilate the Alevi Kurds more quickly.⁶⁶

Kurdish authors have since the late 1980s put forward arguments that there is a great difference between the Alevism of Turkoman groups and Kurdish Alevism, and have pointed at numerous Iranian elements in the latter’s religion, and at the similarities with two other religions that emerged among the Kurds, Yezidism and Ahl-i Haqq. The Kurdish-American writer Mehrdad Izady

⁶⁴ See my “‘Aslını İnkâr Eden Haramzadedir!': The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevi”, in: K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele & A. Otter-Beaujean (eds), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, Leiden: Brill, 1997, pp. 1-23.

⁶⁵ See note 37 above.

⁶⁶ See especially the articles by Hasan Reşit Tankut collected by Mehmet Bayrak in his *Açık-Gizli Resmî-Gayriresmî Kürdoloji Belgeleri* [Public and Secret, Official and Unofficial Documents of Kurdology], Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1994.

postulated a common Kurdish origin for these religions, for which he invented the term “Cult of Angels”.⁶⁷ Other Kurdish writers have pointed at Zoroastrianism, the best known and most prestigious form of Iranian religion, as the most likely origin of the most distinctive features of Kurdish Alevism, Yezidism and Ahl-i Haqq.

The group around the Kurdish nationalist journal *Hawar* in the 1930s were probably the first to cultivate a sympathy with Zoroastrianism but gradually renounced upon this when they became aware of most Kurds’ strong attachment to Islam. The revival of interest in this religion appears to be a phenomenon of the past quarter century. Two authors who have recently much stressed the ‘Zoroastrian’ component in Kurdish culture (without, however, neglecting other religions, notably those of ancient Mesopotamia) are Cemşid Bender and Ethem Xemgin.⁶⁸ M. Sıraç Bilgin, whose earlier publications were political in nature, published two books explaining “orthodox” Zoroastrianism to a Kurdish audience: a translation of the Gathas and an account of Aryan mythology, and he followed this up by a book on Zoroaster as a “proto-Kurd.”⁶⁹ All these works depend heavily on (selectively used) Orientalist studies.

A Turkish and a Kurdish thesis on the nature of Alevism are in competition. The Turkish thesis is bolstered by a growing number of research institutes at state universities, but the PKK, which is a significant force in the rural districts and urban wards with large Alevi populations, has thrown its weight behind the theory that Alevism, and Kurdish culture in general, owe much to Zoroastrianism. The dominance of the Turkish thesis appears to be approaching its end.

Newroz, Kawe and Ergenekon

The most noticeable battle has been fought over the festival of Newroz and its associated symbols. It was observed above, that both Kawe and the Kurdish New Year were listed as important *national* symbols in 1919 although they were then separated from one another. Among the Kurds of Iran they may long have been associated with one another, but neither the name of Newroz nor the figure of Kawe were widely known among the Kurds of Turkey in the early 20th century, or even

⁶⁷ Mehrdad Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, Washington, Philadelphia and London: Crane Russak, 1992, pp. 145-57.

⁶⁸ Cemşid Bender, *Kürt Tarihi ve Uygarlığı* [Kurdish History and Civilisation], İstanbul: Kaynak, 1991; Cemşid Bender, *Kürt Uygarlığında Alevilik* [Alevism in Kurdish Civilisation], İstanbul: Kaynak, 1991; Ethem Xemgin, *Kürdistan'da Dini İnançlar ve Etkileri (İslamiyet Öncesi)* [(Pre-Islamic) Religious Beliefs in Kurdistan and Their Impact], İstanbul: Melsa, 1992.

⁶⁹ M. Sıraç Bilgin, *Zarathustra: Gathalar*, İstanbul: Doz, 1996; idem, *Yazatalar ve Homa: Aryan mitolojisi* [The Yazatas and Homa: Arian Mythology], İstanbul: Doz, 1996; idem, *Proto-Kürt bir Peygamber Zerdüşt (Zarathustra)* [Zarathustra, A Proto-Kurdish Prophet], İstanbul: Weşanên Instîtûya Kurdî, 1997.

as late as the 1970s, when I carried out my field research. Surprisingly, perhaps, Newroz was a well-known festival in other circles in Turkey, among the Bektashi dervishes and several Turkish Alevi communities (notably the Tahtacı), as well as in the Shi'i Azeri enclave of Iğdır near Kars.⁷⁰

As the New Year feast at the arrival of spring, Newroz / Noruz has been celebrated for thousands of years by Iranian and Iranicised populations. It was the Kurdish movement in Iraq, and in its wake that in Turkey, that actively adopted Newroz and Kawe as important *national* symbols. The first expression of Newroz as specifically Kurdish and a symbol of Kurdish national struggle was probably in a poem that the celebrated Pîremêrd wrote in 1948 and that, set to music, became one of the most popular songs among the Iraqi Kurds. The sun rising over the mountains stands in this poem for the resurrection of the martyrs. Their blood, not shed in vain, is reflected in the red colour of dawn. As fires are lit on the mountains to welcome Newroz, a fire is also lit in the hearts of Kurdish youth, making them unafraid of death. The nation's martyrs have become immortal and live on in the Kurds' hearts.⁷¹ The poem became part and parcel of the Iraqi Kurds' love for their land and desire for self-rule.

In the struggle of the Iraqi Kurds for autonomy and cultural rights during the 1960s, recognition of Newroz as their national holiday was one of the demands. This recognition was finally granted as part of the peace agreement the Kurdish movement concluded with the Baghdad regime in March 1970. The poet Şêrko Bêkes wrote a play for the occasion, with Kawe the Blacksmith as a champion of national and class liberation. The play was performed to great success that year.⁷²

Kurdish activists in Turkey were aware of the great symbolic value of Newroz and the figure of Kawe for the Kurdish struggle in Iraq. The first Kurdish Newroz celebration in Turkey probably took place in the district of Silvan, in 1965 or 1966, at the initiative of Mehdi Zana and friends.⁷³ Silvan was then the main centre of Kurdish activism in Turkey, before Diyarbakır took over that role. Mehdi Zana and his friends had applied for a permit for a celebration under the innocent name of Silvan festival, but the authorities, gathering their real intent, refused permission. They then

⁷⁰ Several communities where Newroz / Nevruz was traditionally celebrated are mentioned in: Pertev Naili Boratav, *100 Soruda Türk Folkloru (İnanışlar, Töre ve Törenler, Oyunlar)* [Turkish Folklore in 100 Questions: Beliefs, Traditions and Ceremonies, Games], Istanbul: Gerçek Yayınevi, 1973.

⁷¹ A recording of the song Newroz, by the singer Dilan, can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jApEYZYmyEA>. Pîremêrd (1867-1950) had lived, studied and worked in all parts of Kurdistan and constitutes a connection between the Kurdish associations in Istanbul in pre-Republican days and the later Iraqi Kurdish movement.

⁷² The text was printed the following year: Şêrko Bêkes, *Kawey Asinger, Dastanêki Hunraweyî ser Shanoye le No Tablo da* [Kawe the Blacksmith. A Tale Adapted for the Theatre in Nine Scenes]. Sulaimani, 1971.

⁷³ Ahmet Zeki Okçuoğlu, personal communication, July 13, 2015. Selahattin Ali Arık adds that Kurdish students in Ankara and Istanbul had organised picnic on the day of Newroz as early as 1958.

decided to have a clandestine celebration, lighting huge bonfires on six hilltops around the town. As Zana wrote later in his memoirs: “The fires burned for hours. The one in Silvan was the first Newroz fire. We all watched with pride the Newroz fire that was once again kindled. We had once again commemorated Kawe with love and respect. It was as if the mountains were speaking, had given us a voice...”⁷⁴ More clandestine celebrations followed, but these remained isolated events until in the 1980s the PKK deliberately adopted Newroz for mass mobilisation.

The 1970s saw a proliferation of (clandestine) Kurdish parties and associations and a sharp rise in Kurdish publishing. Several groups adopted the figure of Kawe as a symbol of the Kurdish struggle, especially those that believed the proletariat should lead this struggle. There was a publishing house of this name, with a muscular blacksmith in socialist realist style as its logo, and a Maoist faction that broke away from the large association DDKD in 1976 chose to name itself Kawa, later extending the name to Kawa – Yekîtiya Proletaryayê Kurdistan (Kawa – Proletarian Union of Kurdistan).⁷⁵ Kemal Burkay, the leader of the Özgürlük Yolu group, wrote a play on the slaying of the tyrant Zahhak by the Blacksmith Kawe, which was published in 1978 in the group’s monthly journal.⁷⁶

The glorification of Kawe culminated after the violent death of PKK leader Mazlum Doğan in Diyarbakır prison in 1982. According to one necrology, Mazlum delivered a speech to his fellow prisoners on March 21 of that year, explaining to them the meaning of Newroz as a symbol of rebirth after death and of liberation, and lighting a Newroz fire — a candle, or three matches, or in some later versions even himself — after which he was killed by “the colonial powers.”⁷⁷ Since then, the PKK has celebrated Mazlum Doğan as the Kawe of our days. In the early 1990s, this modern Kawe was immortalised in a theatre play performed at Newroz parties in the diaspora.⁷⁸

Newroz celebrations had been banned in Turkey for as long a people could remember. As the

⁷⁴ Mehdi Zana, *Bekle Diyarbakır* [Wait, Diyarbakır], Istanbul: Doz Yayınları, 1991, pp. 130-1.

⁷⁵ On this organisation, see Rafet Ballı, *Kürt dosyası* [The Kurdish File], Istanbul: Cem, 1991, pp. 146-62. In the same book, on pp. 48-9, there is an informative diagram showing the relations between the numerous Kurdish associations of the 1970s.

⁷⁶ Kemal Burkay, "Dehak'ın Sonu" [The End of Dehak], *Özgürlük Yolu*, nos. 37 and 38. Reprinted, with Kurdish translation, as a book: *Dehak'ın Sonu – Dawiya Dehaq*. Istanbul: Deng, 1991.

⁷⁷ Anonim, *1976-1984 PKK Direniş Şehitleri Albümü* [Album of Martyrs of the PKK Uprising, 1976-1984] (No place of publication, 1984), pp. 267-71; Yusuf Cacım, ‘Milli Uyanış ve Newroz’ [National Awakening and Newroz], *Özgür Politika*, 21-23 Mart 1996; .

⁷⁸ This play was written by another famous inmate of Diyarbakır prison, upon his release after 11 years in jail: Selim Çürükkaya, *Demirci Kawa ve Çağdaş Kawa Destanı* [The Blacksmith Kawa and the Tale of the Contemporary Kawe]. Ankara: Yurt Kitap-Yayın, 1991. Çürükkaya also was a founding member of the PKK. He later fell out with Öcalan, after which the play was no longer performed.

Kurdish movement gained in strength, they were nevertheless held semi-openly, challenging the authorities. Among the Kurds in Europe, Newroz parties, which were initially organised by students and refugees from Iraqi Kurdistan from the late 1970s onwards, became occasions for mass mobilisation among the immigrant workers from Turkish Kurdistan. In the course of the 1980s, the PKK came to play an ever more prominent role in the Newroz celebrations in the diaspora; by the end of the decade, it had turned Newroz into an occasion to mobilize sympathizers in the main cities of Turkish Kurdistan as well.

In 1991, the law banning publications in Kurdish and other non-state languages, a remnant of the military intervention of 1980, was repealed. The ban on Newroz, as another expression of Kurdish culture, was also lifted. From 1992 onwards, Newroz could be freely celebrated – at least in theory. The Newroz celebrations in Cizre, Şırnak and Nusaybin, three towns where nationalist feeling was known to be high and support for the PKK massive, were turned into a bloodbath when the police and armed forces fired into the crowd. Although officially legal, in the following years too Newroz celebrations repeatedly turned into confrontations between the state apparatus and the Kurdish movement. Newroz gained an unprecedented political significance.

Meanwhile, there were other efforts to take the symbol of Newroz, which had just been allowed, out of the Kurds' hands again by claiming it to be an authentic Turkish festival, associated with a popular legend ("Ergenekon") about the origins of the Turks. These efforts originated with the far right Pan-Turk movement and the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) of Alpaslan Türkeş. Writers affiliated with the party had in the preceding years attempted to show that there was a connection between this Turco-Mongolian origin myth and the festival of spring as the rebirth of life, Nevruz (deliberately using the Turkish spelling rather than the Kurdish one). on March 21, 1993, Alpaslan Türkeş led a Nevruz celebration in Antalya, hammering a piece of red-hot iron on an anvil, enacting the Turkish blacksmith who is the hero of the Ergenekon myth.

The Ergenekon myth was well-known in Turkish nationalist circles; it was the theme of one of Ziya Gökalp's most celebrated poems and was recounted in numerous books and articles.⁷⁹ In Gökalp's version, the ancestors of the Oghuz Turks were captive in Ergenekon, a fertile valley surrounded by steep, impassable mountains, from which there seemed to be no escape. They were liberated by a blacksmith, who discovered that part of the mountains consisted of iron and had his people build a huge fire to smelt the iron. This opened a narrow passage in the mountains, through which the tribe, led by their chieftain Börte Çine (Mongolian for "Grey Wolf") could escape and set out to conquer the world. (In some versions of the story, Börte Çine was the name of the blacksmith, in others that of the chieftain, and in yet other ones he was a wolf who pointed the Turks the way and became their totem.)

⁷⁹ Gökalp wrote his poem Ergenekon in the wake of the Balkan war, in 1913, and made it the first poem in his celebrated collection *Kızıl Elma* ("The Red Apple"), first published in 1914.

Early Turkish nationalists were aware of this myth because it occurs in a history of the Mongols and Turks, the *Genealogy of the Turks*, written in Chaghatay Turkish in the late 17th century by a descendant of Chengiz Khan, Abulghazi Bahadur Khan. An Ottoman Turkish translation of this work had been published as early as 1864; a scholarly edition, with a French translation, published by the Russian Academy of Sciences, was also well-known in Istanbul and formed the basis for a new Turkish translation in 1925, that was warmly embraced by Pan-Turk circles in the Republic.⁸⁰ Bahadur Khan writes that the Mongols – in his account it was the Mongols who had been enclosed in Ergenekon and who, after finding their way out of the enclosure, had been able to subdue all Turkish tribes – had the habit of commemorating their liberation: the khan (supreme chieftain) would beat a piece of red-hot iron with a hammer on an anvil, and after him all the lesser chieftains would do the same. There is no indication in Bahadur Khan's account that this commemoration is associated with the spring festival.⁸¹

When Newroz became an important symbol of the Kurdish movement in the 1980s, one of the intellectuals of the Nationalist Action Party, Abdülhalûk Çay, attempted to prove that the Ergenekon commemoration had always been a spring festival and head spread throughout the Turkic world as *Nevruz* (in the Turkish spelling, avoiding the Kurdish spelling Newroz).⁸² It was claimed that the nationalist association, Türk Ocağı, had in the 1920s revived the old Ergenekon festival, hammering iron on an anvil, on the date of Nevruz, March 21-22.⁸³ This set the stage for Türkeş' hammering iron in Antalya in 1993. The Turks as well as the Kurds now had their national spring festival, with a blacksmith as the hero of liberation and with memories of the life-giving force of fire.

Newroz / Nevruz was known to have been celebrated, without any specific political connotation, by a number of small Turkish communities such as the Tahtacı, a small Turcoman Alevi ethnic group living dispersed in South and West Anatolia, some other Turcoman groups in the Toros mountains

⁸⁰ Ebu'l-gazi Bahadır Han, *Türk Şeceresi (Şecere-i Türk)*, ed. & trl. Rıza Nur. Istanbul, 1925. Nur depended for his edition heavily on the French translation by Petr I. Desmaisons, *Histoire des Mongols et des Tatares par Aboul-Ghâzi Béhâdour Khân*, St.Pétersbourg, 1872. The first Ottoman translation had been done by Ahmed Vefik Pasha. On the impact of this work on Pan-Turk circles, see: David Kushner, *The Rise of Turkish Nationalism 1876-1908*, London: Frank Cass, 1977.

⁸¹ Desmaisons, *Histoire des Mongols et des Tatares*, p. 33.

⁸² M. Abdülhalûk Çay, *Türk Ergenekon Bayramı Nevruz*. 2nd ed., Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1988. Similar arguments were given by another author of the „Kurds are Turks” school: Hayri Başbuğ, 'Kürt Türkleri'nin Doğu Destanı ile Ergenekon Destanı Üzerine Düşünceler' [Thoughts on the Story of the Origin of the Kurd Turks and the Story of Ergenekon], *Türk Kültürü* 248 (1983), 42-52; idem, 'Nevruz', *Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları* 34 (1985), 74-102. Both authors refer to earlier authors associating Nevruz and Ergenekon.

⁸³ Ahmet Turan, *Türk Kültürü Araştırmaları: Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu -1* [Research in Turkish Culture: East and Southeast Anatolia – 1], Ankara: Milli Folklor Yayınları, 1991, p. 36.

(not far from Antalya), and the Azeri-speaking Shi`i enclave of Iğdır in Kars. Türkeş' choice of Antalya for his first iconic Nevruz performance no doubt was meant to suggest a connection with a living tradition in that region.

The government, without appealing to the Ergenekon myth, also made efforts to show that Nevruz was a genuinely Turkish festival. Year after year, cabinet ministers travelled to Iğdır to join in the festivities there. The state television TRT gave during the first years extensive coverage of the Nevruz celebrations in Iğdır, and many a minister showed their national loyalties by jumping over a fire there – apparently hoping that this would make the Newroz fires lit by Kurdish activists invisible. Folklore groups from the Turkic Central Asian republics were invited to Turkey to show that brother peoples like to Uzbeks and Kirghiz also celebrate Nevruz. Radio and television continued for years bombarding their audiences with messages stressing the Turkishness of the Nevruz festival and avoiding coverage of the Kurdish celebrations. Scholars, including respected Turkish academics, were made to take part in this symbolic offensive in the state-controlled media and even in academic settings.⁸⁴

Turkish nationalists made a similar attempt to appropriate the colour symbolism that the Kurds had adopted. The colours green, yellow and red of the Kurdish flag had become popular as the national colours of the Kurds, and women would wear clothes and shawls in these colours on the occasion of Newroz and other events of political significance. Even after the ban of Newroz had been lifted, the wearing of these colours continued to be considered as a provocative political statement, and people could be arrested for wearing a green, red and yellow scarf. (There were even jokes about local government in certain cities changing the colours of traffic lights, replacing green by blue so as to avoid any possible association with Kurdish nationalism.) And then, just like had happened to Newroz, there emerged a Turkish nationalist claim that these colours in fact belonged to the Turks. In a TRT television show on the day of Newroz / Nevruz 1996, the woman who presented the program was wearing a conspicuous scarf in shades of blue, yellow and red and declared that “we Turks have these lovely traditional colours, and what a pity it is that we respect them so little!” In the same year, a ‘scholarly’ book was published by a semi-official publishing house to support the Turkish appropriation of these colours and their association with Newroz.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ The Ministry of Culture organized an international conference on Nevruz among the various Turkish ethnic groups throughout the world. The proceedings do not give an indication that this is originally an Iranian festival, let alone that Kurds celebrate it: *Ululararası Nevruz Sempozyumu Bildirileri* [Papers Presented at the International Nevruz Symposium], Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 2000.

⁸⁵ Prof.Dr. Sadik Tural & Elmas Kılıç, *Nevruz ve Renkler* [Nevruz and Colours], Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 1996. This was soon followed by another book in the same vein: Prof Dr Resat Genç, *Türk İnanışları ile Millî Geleneklerinde Renkler ve Sarı Kırmızı Yeşil* [Colours and Yellow-Red-and-Green in Turkish Beliefs and National Traditions], Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, 1997.

Conclusion

Every nation needs its symbols, to unite its members and give them a sense of common identity. National history is perhaps the most powerful national symbol. It tells people where they came from, gives them heroes to be proud of, and explains why they are different from others. And just like there are competing claims to the national identity of the Kurds – some claim that they are ‘real’ Turks, others want to see them primarily as Muslims; Kurdish nationalists want them to be one undivided nation, yet others say the Zazas are a separate people – there are also competing histories. Turkey’s official history was once hegemonic and almost held a monopoly of defining historical truth, but few people nowadays take its claims seriously. Kurdish nationalist historiography, because it wanted to prove that the Kurds have long existed as a separate people, has often made similar but opposite claims to those of official Turkish history, denying the Turkish (and Arabic) influences on Kurdish culture.

Writing nationalist history is part of a political struggle, and the Kurds’ effort to write their own history and cultivate their own national symbols is a necessary part of their emancipation. Although there is no Kurdish state that could sponsor such historiographical work, Kurdish intellectuals have produced a nationalist historiography that has more or less successfully contested the claims of Turkey’s official history – but in the process became almost like its mirror image. Both schools of nationalist historiography have made exaggerated and one-sided claims, and in doing so have relied strongly on selective reading of Orientalist studies.

But a more academic and nuanced style of writing Kurdish history has also been developing and is gradually taking the place of the earlier nationalist work. Some Iraqi Kurds studied in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s and returned to Iraq to establish a tradition of academic historical research – most famously Kamal Mazhar Ahmad, who still is the doyen of Iraqi Kurdish historians. Political refugees from Turkey based in Sweden, such as Rohat Alakom, Malmisanij (M. Tayfun) and Mehmed Uzun, developed themselves in the 1990s as serious contributors to the historiography of the Kurds -- the last-named writing historical novels). A decade later, many young Kurds, second generation immigrants in Europe, had entered university and several of them became professional historians. At the same time, universities in Turkey gradually relaxed their fear of Kurdish subjects and allowed students to write papers and theses on aspects of Kurdish history. The number of academically trained Kurdish historians, in the diaspora as well as in Turkey (and to a lesser extent in Iraq), has reached and perhaps even exceeded the critical mass necessary for self-sustained continuation. Dogmatic nationalist historiography, Turkish as well as Kurdish, has lost its once influential position and will probably only persist in the political margins.