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The Kurdish Question in Turkey: On the violent enforcement of nation-statehood

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The initial hypothesis of this case study was that the Kurdish population in Turkey posed the main obstacle to the creation of a unified Turkish nation. An analysis of the events studied in the 1920s and 1930s confirmed this thesis. To this end, the ideas and drafts of a Turkish nation state, which the Kemalist state leadership pushed for from 1923 onwards, as well as the strategies and measures derived from those against the Kurdish population were presented and critically discussed. It became apparent that the phase between the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the extermination operations in the Dersim region in 1937/1938 was decisively shaped by the so-called Kurdish question. An outlook on further developments after 1938 also showed that the relevance of this question remains unabated to this day. The discursive reactions of current state historiography in Turkey are also in continuity with official state statements from the 1920s and 1930s (see Değerli 2008 for an example).

The Kemalist talk of the founding of the state in 1923 as a supposed zero hour denies the discursive and non-discursive continuities between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. Quite conversely, the analyses of the policies of the imperial leadership in the late phase of the Ottoman Empire as well as of the later Young Turkish government were able to show that the ideas of a homogeneous Turkish nation as well as a uniform Turkish nation-state are clearly of older origin. In this context, however, it must be noted self-critically that the history of the Ottoman Empire has partly been transfigured into a "prehistory of the nation-form" (Balibar 1990: 109). In this context, the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey can by no means be seen as an inevitable or even natural development. Rather, it is the result of a cross-generational nationalist movement that lasted

almost an entire century (cf. Dabag 1998).

The Ottoman Empire is often described as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. This often fails to include a critical examination of its system of rule and order. However, an analysis of the political and social structures of the Ottoman Empire reveals a very different picture. In the ruling system of the empire, the rules were determined by the imperial leadership. The Muslims were considered the ruling nation. The non-Muslims living in the empire were clearly inferior to them in political, legal and social matters (cf. Dabag/Platt 2015: 279). In this system of order, the Kurds were part of the ruling nation as Muslims. Local Kurdish elites were able to rule their respective territories in Eastern Anatolia relatively independently, as long as they fulfilled their obligations to the imperial leadership. The leadership of the Ottoman Empire, in turn, encouraged the loyal attitude of the Kurdish elites, for example through measures such as the establishment of the Hamidiye regiments (cf. Ağuıçenođlu 1997: 188-190). This kind of integration of Kurdish elites into the state apparatus of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the Kurds' affiliation to the ruling nation, are two essential factors for the fact that Kurdish actors - including Kurdish proto-nationalists - tended to focus on the preservation of a common state for all Muslims rather than on a Kurdish nation-state, even after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

It was not until the Young Turks came to power in 1908 and began to implement their Turkish nationalist programme a short time later that relations between the Kurdish elites and the Ottoman Empire deteriorated. In 1909, the Young Turk government issued a ban on all non-Turkish organisations and associations. As a result, the Kurdish proto-nationalists in particular joined the opposition. At the same time, however, the Hamidiye regiments continued under a different name. In this way, the government wanted to secure the support of the traditional Kurdish elites (cf. Bajalan 2009: 75-76). Thus, the Young Turk government had to walk a tightrope between cooperation and repression, between courting traditional Kurdish elites and fighting against the Kurdish proto-nationalists. In a way, the Kurdish elites remained relevant to the system. Even the genocide of the Armenians in 1915 was only made possible by the collaboration of the Young Turk government with the local Kurdish elites. But already during the First World War, the Young Turks increasingly saw the Kurds as an obstacle on the way to a homogeneous Turkish nation state. As early as 1916, the

Young Turk government aimed to disperse and assimilate the Kurdish population with a resettlement programme (cf. Dündar 2002: 140-144). At the same time, the Christian population groups were destroyed or expelled. The Young Turks thus warranted an approach to the non-Turkish population groups that the Kemalist leadership later adopted: The non-Muslims were declared unassimilable and therefore eliminated. Non-Turkish, Muslim population groups - such as the Kurds - became the object of an assimilation policy. The aim was to create a homogenous Turkish nation.

Furthermore, the critical analysis of state historiography in Turkey and the deconstruction of common historical narratives refer to the phase between the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I in 1918 and the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. This phase is referred to in historiography not only in Turkey but also in many Western countries as the so-called Turkish War of Liberation or Turkish War of Independence. These terms convey an image of Turkey as a country that was occupied by the victorious powers of the First World War, but then managed to liberate itself and finally became independent. However, an historical analysis reveals a completely different picture here as well. The armistice agreement of 1918 and the peace treaty of Sèvres in 1920 foresaw a continuation of the Ottoman Empire, but mainly in Anatolia on a significantly reduced territory. The Treaty of Sèvres was never implemented, however, because the Muslim elites rejected it and the imperial leadership had neither the will nor the power to implement it. The Entente, above all Great Britain and France, also failed to implement the treaty (e.g. through military measures). The so-called Turkish War of Liberation was therefore primarily directed against the non-Muslim population groups in Anatolia - for example, against the supposed Greeks in western Anatolia and against the Armenians in eastern Anatolia. At that time, the Kurdish elites still saw themselves as part of the Muslim ruling nation and accordingly opposed the non-Muslims as well (cf. Bruinessen 1989: 570). Meanwhile, the Muslim resistance movement, led by officers such as Mustafa Kemal, developed more and more into a Turkish national movement. Although this movement pretended to continue to represent the interests of the entire Muslim ruling nation, it became clear at the latest with the foundation of the state that the new state was to be a Turkish nation-state and no longer a common state for all Muslims. With the continued support of non-Turkish Muslims, the Turkish national

movement gradually established a Turkish nation state. Thereby, it continued to drive forward the expulsion and extermination of non-Muslim population groups in Anatolia (cf. Naimark 2008: 54-55, 66-70). Turkey's victories over Armenia in Eastern Anatolia and over Greece in Western Anatolia, as well as the unwillingness of Britain and France to enforce the Peace Treaty of Sèvres through military action, led to the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. This treaty largely confirmed the territorial demands of the Turkish national movement. In contrast to the Treaty of Sèvres, however, it no longer included political rights for the non-Turkish population groups.

The new Turkish nation state, which was internationally recognised after the Treaty of Lausanne, was an autocratic state in which political opposition was just as undesirable as social dissidence (cf. Tunçay 1989: 46-56). The Treason Act of 1923 and the re-establishment of the independence courts made it possible to enforce repressions against political opponents without the restrictions of constitutional procedures. The Sheikh Said uprising of 1925 served as a welcome occasion for the Kemalist leadership to further intensify its autocratic course. With the Law for the Protection of Public Tranquillity, any voice or organisation independent of the government was simply banned or crushed (cf. Aybars 2014: 305). The independence courts were used intensively. With the help of death sentences and other draconian punishments, various political and social forces were dissolved. Martial law was imposed on the Kurdish provinces. More than 15,000 people were killed and tens of thousands displaced in the course of the military operation, which continued even after the suppression of the uprising and the arrest of Sheikh Said. Later, martial law was replaced by states of emergency and other forms of special administration. The Kurdish provinces became the object of state enforced demographic policies. These measures aimed at destroying the Kurds as an independent population group through forced resettlement in western areas of Turkey and the settlement of Turkish immigrants in formerly Kurdish areas.

With the autocratic transformation of state and society and the elimination of any political opposition, the Kemalist leadership was able to push through its concept of the Turkish nation and the Turkish nation-state. The Turkish History Theory and the accompanying Sun Language Theory also served this purpose. This said that the supposed Turkish race had existed for many thousands of years. It had founded the first civilisations, was responsible

for progress in world history and had raised numerous other peoples to a higher level of development (cf. İnan/Akçura/Galip 1930: 38-39). Turkey's national territory was thereby declared to be the homeland of the Turkish nation. The postulate of a homogeneous and unchanging Turkish language, culture and history went hand in hand with the equation of race and nation. This made it possible to draw an insurmountable line between the self and the other. The Other, in this case non-Turkish Muslim populations such as the Kurds, could only become part of the Turkish nation if they proved worthy of assimilation on the one hand and were willing to completely give up their own cultural and linguistic identity on the other. While members of non-Muslim population groups were per se considered unassimilable and thus fundamentally excluded from the nation, non-Turkish Muslims such as the Kurds became objects of the assimilation policy. The prerequisite for successful assimilation and thus the right to become part of the legitimate state population was the complete abandonment of the own identity as well as unconditional loyalty to the state and its political leadership (cf. Bayrak 1994: 245). In the case of smaller non-Turkish Muslim population groups, such as the Circassians, Lazs or Pomaks, this succeeded to such an extent that these groups largely lost their respective identities and the individual members of these groups were assimilated into the Turkish nation.

In the case of the Kurds, however, this assimilation policy largely failed. The Turkish state was only able to bring the Kurdish provinces under its control by military force. The Kurdish population remained distant from the state or even hostile to it. However, during the period under study, i.e. between 1925 and 1938, there were only two actual rebellions against the Turkish state. These were the Sheikh Said uprising in 1925 and the Ararat uprising in 1930, both organised by a coalition of traditional Kurdish elites and Kurdish nationalists. The Ararat Uprising was put down as quickly as the Sheikh Said Uprising, but the suppression then turned into an extermination operation. All the other events studied were not uprisings, but must rather be described as military operations. Either insignificant, localised incidents (such as a cattle rustling) or supposed disloyal behaviour of the local population (such as non-payment of taxes or draft evasion) were taken as the reason for the state's military action. The military operations were planned either as so-called education operations (Tedip) or as extermination operations (Tenkil). In the process, tedip operations

repeatedly escalated into tenkil operations (cf. Genelkurmay Harp Tarihi Başkanlığı 2012a: 174). Such escalation was often prompted by individual incidents such as the killing of Turkish officers or the desertion of Turkish soldiers. In the course of the Tedip and Tenkil operations, countless villages were destroyed or burned down. Their inhabitants were partially or completely exterminated, survivors were forcibly deported. The military operations aimed at preventing the local population from fleeing the area of military action. Therefore, places of refuge such as caves were systematically destroyed and the people inside killed. The military did not distinguish between armed combatants and unarmed civilians in the killings and destruction.

The military operations in the Dersim region in 1937/1938 cannot be described as counterinsurgency. They were clearly planned extermination operations. Early on, the Dersim region was called a "problem", a "boil" or a "sore" and thus became the target of the state's homogenisation policy. Unlike the other extermination operations, concrete planning began years before (cf. Jandarma Umum Kumandanlığı 1932: 218-219). Moreover, the operations in the Dersim region in 1937/1938 can also be considered special case because a special legal framework was created with the Tunceli Law in 1935. Especially in 1938, the extermination operations were directed against the entire population of Dersim. Since the Zaza Alevis are a religiously and linguistically special group, a deliberate extermination of a significant part of this population could certainly be described as (attempted) genocide (cf. Boztas 2014: 182). However, the scholarly reappraisal of the events in Dersim in 1937/1938 has not yet progressed far enough to identify it as genocide without further doubt. Therefore, for the time being, the events are subsequently referred to using the term extermination operations.

The lack of a critical reappraisal of the military operations between 1925 and 1938 also makes it difficult to draw up an overall balance of the destruction and devastation. Henceforth, estimates and speculations must be used here. Based on previous literature, an analysis of the reports of the General Staff as well as other sources, it can be estimated that about 60,000 people were killed and over 180,000 people displaced in the course of the military operations between 1925 and 1938. As part of the attempt to impose state rule on the Kurdish provinces, the military operations contributed to the political and military control of these areas by the

Turkish state. However, the latter failed in its attempt to completely penetrate Kurdish society and fundamentally transform it, according to the terms of the Turkish regime. The purely repressive assimilation policy offered no positive incentives to most parts of the Kurdish population. On the contrary, state violence ensured that many Kurds developed an attitude distant from or even hostile to the state. This made it easier for Kurdish nationalists to win over parts of the Kurdish population in the following decades.

Turkey as a Gardening State and the Limits of Conflict Research

This study does not only contribute to the reappraisal of a historical phase which was decisive for the Republic of Turkey. It also examines numerous previously largely neglected measures of state violence. In addition, the work reveals gaps and omissions in previous theoretical approaches to the nation-state and nation-state population policy. It shows the limitations of relevant concepts from the field of conflict research. Even if no new theoretical approaches could be generated within the framework of this historical individual case study, adequate and less adequate tendencies were nevertheless described.

Earlier debates between a primordial and a constructivist understanding of nationalism are now largely settled - in favour of the latter. However, the question of whether the relationship between a state and its citizens is to be understood as one of contract and exchange remains to be debated. Following Weber or Jellinek, for example, it is hegemonic to assert such a relationship and consequently to regard the state's monopoly on the use of force as fundamentally legitimate. This position is challenged in the here presented thesis by another perspective, drawing in particular from the arguments of Zygmunt Bauman (cf. Bauman 1995: 35, 54-55). According to this perspective, the state is not so much a contractual partner of its population or an actor that restrains violence. Rather, Bauman saw the state as a gardening state that regards its own population as a resource for the implementation of its designs and strategies and attempts to create a pre-planned state nation by means of a violent population policy. In such a gardening state, the rights of the citizens are always subordinated to the interests of the state. This also includes the right of the inhabitants to physical integrity. The analysis of the Turkish military operations between 1925 and 1938

could show that the Turkish state systematically disregarded the right to physical integrity of a group of its citizens. It killed or injured people in the respective (military?) operation areas largely without restriction. Which violent measures were used, which groups of people were attacked in which areas; who was killed and who was not - all these decisions resulted from state guidelines that pursued an overriding goal: the creation of a homogenous Turkish nation and a uniform Turkish nation state. In this sense, the Republic of Turkey is a gardening state in Bauman's understanding.

Furthermore, an analysis of military operations has shown that the terminology which for a long time has been predominantly used in nation-state oriented conflict research does not lead to the desired results. This is especially true for the definition of a conflict as a dispute between two organised and identifiable actors over an distinguishable object of conflict. Here, further concepts are needed to develop specific concepts of violent national population policies of gardening states and the accompanying planned mass killings of entire population groups. Instead of conflict, one could speak of extermination (cf. Häussler 2018: 112-117) and genocide - the latter in the sense of a planned extermination with the aim of violently enforcing political designs such as the idea of a homogeneous nation (cf. Platt 2005: 33). The beginnings of such planned extermination can be seen, for example, in the military operations in Dersim in 1937/1938.

However, the fact that the critical reappraisal of the military operations between 1925 and 1938 has not even really begun makes it difficult to make more precise statements about the character of these operations. Nevertheless, these operations, which in previous historiography have been described as either counterinsurgency or military action against armed rebels, can largely be described as extermination operations. Such an adequate description of the military operations between 1925 and 1938 is what makes a historical reappraisal possible in the first place. So far, this has been prevented by Turkish state historiography. This is by no means an oversight or a mistake. Rather, up until today the portrayal of the events under investigation serves to legitimise the violent policies of the time and thus validates the idea of a homogeneous Turkish nation or a homogeneous Turkish nation-state and of the Kurds as the Others.

The present study draws attention to a hitherto little-noticed case of decades of state violence

or, to put it differently, to the attempt of a gardening state to create a state nation by means of extermination and expulsion. The individual extermination operations between 1925 and 1938 can and should be further investigated in separate studies. Beyond the individual case studies, however, the present study suggest that research need to take a fundamentally more critical attitude towards the notions of nation, nation-state and state legitimacy that are still hegemonic today, and not only in Turkey, as well as towards the relations between state and population. This attitude must not be limited to academic reappraisal, but should also be decisive for historical-political education inspired by critical nationalism research. Critical academic research and political education can contribute to pushing back nationalist identities and thus make conflicts within the post-migrant society in Germany negotiable in a democratic and pluralistic framework. Such educational and negotiation processes can in turn be models for social peace and reconciliation processes in Turkey. In this way, the insights gained from the case study can contribute to countering nationalist identities and reducing the associated lines of conflict. This is by no means only relevant in the context of the so-called Kurdish question in Turkey. Rather, it can be assumed that there are also more cases in other countries where there has been talk of counterinsurgency or anti-guerrilla warfare, but which were in fact extermination operations. In these cases, too, there is a need for critical historical reappraisal, scientific research beyond previous hegemonic historical narratives, as well as historical-political educational work that can draw on relevant findings and thus contribute to the creation and strengthening of democratic and pluralistic societies.

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