

# The Ends of Empire

## Imperial Collapse and the Trajectory of Kurdish Nationalism\*

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The Kurds are a people who speak a Persianate language or cluster of dialects and who comprise the dominant population in the territories where contemporary Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran meet. The name “Kurdistan” loosely denotes these lands where the Kurds live, although because an expressly Kurdish state has ever existed, the boundaries of Kurdistan have never been defined with any precision.<sup>1</sup> Scholars typically describe the Kurdish language as encompassing two major dialects, Kurmanji and Sorani, but disagreements exist about the proper classification of Kurdish dialects and sub-dialects and about the relationship of other Persianate tongues to Kurdish. Kurds today likely number somewhere around twenty-five million people and are often identified as the world’s largest ethnic group without a state. Thus their modern history is generally narrated as one of victimhood and denial of statehood. This paper represents an attempt to make the seemingly counter-intuitive argument that the collapse of imperial rule in the early twentieth century was, for the purposes of Kurdish national aspirations, premature and therefore ruinous in its consequences.

### Empire and Its Alternative

The twentieth century witnessed the demolition of multiple empires and the decisive discrediting of the legitimacy of empire as a concept, although perhaps not the disappearance of empire as a reality. Against empire, that century saw the triumph of the national idea, which had been gathering strength throughout the nineteenth century. In brief, the national idea is the belief that humanity is naturally and reductively divided into nations, each of which holds a sacred and inviolable right to self-determining statehood.<sup>2</sup> Nations, in short, constitute the proper fundamental unit of global politics, and empire, because it denies the right of nations to sovereignty, is illegitimate. So strong had the association of nation with statehood become that the (nominally) supreme organizations of global society in the twentieth century were incarnated under the names “The League of Nations” and “The United Nations.” A far more accurate name for these organizations might have been something like “The Association of States.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the historical usage of the term “Kurdistan,” see Baki Tezcan, “The Development of the Use of ‘Kurdistan’ as a Geographical Description and the Incorporation of this Region into the Ottoman Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilization*, vol. 3, ed. Kemal Çiçek (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye, 2000), 540-53.

<sup>2</sup> Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford: Blackwell, [1966] 1993), 1.

<sup>3</sup> These ideas are developed at greater length in my book *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1-21.

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mainstream historiography reflected this trend in global politics, celebrating the dissolution of empires as a part of the necessary and salutary triumph of nations in a progressive march to freedom and equality. European historiography presented the Ottoman and Russian empires as entities noxious for their repression of the national aspirations of their populations. The Ottoman was the “Terrible Turk” who terrorized the captive nations of the Balkans and Middle East. Historians and commentators on Russia, including those well outside Bolshevik circles, routinely invoked Vladimir Lenin’s description of the Russian empire as a “prison house of nations.” In order to bolster their own legitimacy, the new regimes of post-imperial nation-states regularly assailed their imperial predecessors for suppressing the nation. Historians in this period reflexively narrated the collapse of empire as the story of the birth, or reawakening, of nations. According to this ubiquitous interpretation, empires fell once their constituents recovered their national consciousness and rose against the imperial overlords.

Over the course of the past several decades, however, an alternative approach to the analysis of nationalism has gained ascendance. This school of interpretation, commonly known as “constructivism,” encompasses a multitude of theories that see nations and national identities not as timeless entities or attributes but instead as historical products of specific socio-economic processes such as industrialization, the spread of literacy, the formation of certain intellectual or economic classes, etc.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of nationalism, thus, is dependent upon the presence of a certain degree of infrastructural development. Taking this point one step further, one might observe that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was often imperial states that, wittingly or unwittingly, made possible that infrastructural development through the provision of security and economic investment. In other words, empires facilitated, or even generated, the rise of nationalism and national identities.

### **Empire as an Incubator of Nationalism?**

If the denial of statehood is one of the most fundamental transgressions one can make against a nation, few nations have been as troubled or long-suffering as the Kurds, described often as the world’s largest ethnic group without a state. Unlike their fellow Ottoman subjects like the Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Albanians, Arabs, and Turks among others who managed to acquire one or more states as the Ottoman empire disintegrated, the Kurds never received a state of their own. To the contrary, they found their lands partitioned between five states – Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Soviet Union – which at best tolerated them as a minority and circumscribed their rights and opportunities. The Kurds’ record looks only little better when compared to that of their Caucasian neighbors. The Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis of the Caucasus, albeit ultimately denied independent statehood, nonetheless attained formal recognition of their ethnic

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<sup>4</sup> As examples, see the works on nationalism of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Miroslav Hroch, and Ronald Suny.

identities and the trappings of nation and statehood.

In other words, as this paper will suggest, the collapse of empire was not a boon to the Kurds, but a calamity. The dissolution of Ottoman (and Romanov) rule was, from the perspective of Kurdish nationalism, premature. Up through the end of the Ottoman Empire, the majority of Kurds were living as tribal pastoral nomads. The lands on which they lived were among the more remote and undeveloped in the Ottoman empire. Accordingly, the Kurds possessed neither a powerful, shared consciousness that drew them together politically nor any binding institutions that might have forged such a unifying consciousness later. A small class of nationally conscious Kurdish intellectuals did exist, but they were few and lacked substantial followers. The real powerbrokers among the Kurds were the tribal chieftains and sheikhs who held, at most, a weak allegiance to an overarching Kurdish identity and who were riven by clan and personal rivalries. Religion acted as a crosscutting cleavage obstructing Kurdish unity, dividing the majority Sunni Kurds from Alevi and Shi'i Kurds while bonding Sunni Kurds to Sunni Turks. Finally, differing ways of life separated the more numerous nomadic and semi-nomadic Kurds from sedentary Kurds.

### **The Kurds under Empire: An Overview**

Although, as noted above, Kurdistan has never known any definite borders, it might be said to comprise, roughly speaking, the territory consisting of the southeastern corner of contemporary Turkey that runs from Kars westward and just south of Erzurum to Erzincan and then south between Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa, the northeastern pocket of Syria through the northern region of Iraq that encompasses Mosul, Irbil, and Kirkuk, and the westernmost strip of Iran that runs from the northern border of Iran just west of Lake Urmia southward through Mahabad to Shemdinan.

Mountains and hills dominate this region, and it has been said that the Kurds have no friends but the mountains. Mountains provide their inhabitants refuge from the control of centralizing states and make it possible for those inhabitants to preserve a degree of independence. In regions around the world, peoples determined to escape state control have taken to living in the mountains.<sup>5</sup> Yet highland living extracts a price. Mountains offer protection from centralizing states not only because they physically obstruct and hamper the projection of state power, but also because they generally have little wealth to offer and what wealth they do have is not easily extracted. Mountainous regions generally host comparatively primitive economies. Since mountains offer limited arable land and soil of generally low quality, they are unable to sustain extensive agriculture and thereby impede the accumulation of surplus capital necessary for economic development. Mountains, of course, when they do not block outright the movement of goods and people, impose costs on their transport, further taxing economic activity.

Mountains stymie cultural homogenization and foster ethnic and linguistic variation for similar reasons. They hamper state-imposed programs of cultural homogenization as well as more

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<sup>5</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 30, 39, and passim.

spontaneous and autonomous processes of linguistic and cultural homogenization. The existence of multiple, and often mutually unintelligible, dialects both reflects and reinforces social fractures among the Kurds. The absence in mountainous regions of central institutions that can enforce law typically favors the emergence of small social group or clan formations through which individuals gain security for their lives and property in exchange for loyalty. In short, mountainous regions offer poor soil not just for agricultural and economic activity but also for the emergence of cohesive national identities. Kurdistan's mountainous geography has impeded the development of Kurdish unity and nationalism as much as it has obstructed the attempts of outside states to impose their will upon the Kurds.

Further augmenting the inhospitality of Kurdistan to the formation of a unifying identity is the region's remote location. Thus, not only is Kurdistan a mountainous land, it is also one that is distant from major waterways aside from the Tigris and Euphrates. Moreover, those two rivers are themselves of limited utility. They are not large and they flow from Kurdistan for roughly one thousand kilometers before reaching the Persian Gulf. Holding little intrinsic economic value and distant from major trade routes, Kurdistan was a comparatively isolated region prior to the Ottoman conquest.

Historians conventionally date the Ottoman conquest of Kurdistan to 1514, when Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) defeated his Persian rival, Shah Ismail I, the founder of the Shi'i Safavid dynasty. Selim I triumphed in part because he managed to win the backing of the Sunni Kurdish tribes in the region by playing upon their shared tie of faith and guaranteeing the tribes significant autonomy. Remote and economically inconsequential, Kurdistan had been a backwater, and Istanbul was content to let it remain relatively undisturbed. That situation changed in the middle of the nineteenth century when Istanbul, responding to seemingly relentless defeats at the hands of the European powers, embarked on a comprehensive campaign of centralization to maximize its ability to extract resources. By mid-century, the Ottoman army had completed what has been called the "second conquest" of Kurdistan, crushing the last of the semi-independent Kurdish emirs, Mîr Bedirhan Bey of Cezire-Bohtan, in 1846.

This attempt to impose centralized rule, however, resulted in a region that was more unruly, not less. The emirs had served as centers of authority in the region and their removal fractured Ottoman Kurdistan, leaving hundreds of tribes and their sub-divisions to squabble and contest each other. The Ottoman center revealed itself incapable of taking the next step toward centralization: building local state institutions that could command authority.<sup>6</sup> It could offer little but taxation and conscription, alienating most Kurds from its rule. Moreover, and paradoxically, the introduction of the Ottoman land code to Eastern Anatolia only worsened matters. Kurdish tribal landowners, the aghas, exploited the law by using it to register under their personal names not just their own land but also the land of their dependent peasants. Thus at a stroke the new land code reinforced the wealth and power of the aghas vis-à-vis both Kurdish society and the Ottoman

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<sup>6</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 176-82; Mark Sykes, "The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 38 (1908): 451-486.

state.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas the tribes were unable to directly challenge Istanbul's hold on the region, Russia could. In the War of 1877-1878, the Russian army penetrated deep into Anatolia to Erzurum, and Russia's annexation after the war of the provinces of Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi placed Russia's border on the Anatolian plateau. Significantly, the Russian Army had deployed Kurdish units, illustrating that not only might Kurds refrain from actively supporting the Ottoman state, but that they even be moved to join ranks with Russia.<sup>8</sup> The waxing Russian Empire stood right on the edge of an Ottoman region that was in turmoil and unstable.

### First Stirrings

In 1880, a prominent Kurd named Sheikh Ubeydullah rallied some twenty thousand Ottoman and Iranian Kurds to his side with a sudden call for revolt. Demonstrating his awareness of the increasing strength and presence of the Great Powers in the region and his familiarity with the normative European idea of the nation, he explained to British officials that he was rebelling in the name of the "Kurdish nation." Ubeydullah's revolt, however, collapsed almost as quickly as it erupted, and Ottoman authorities exiled him first to Istanbul and later to the Hijaz.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, despite Ubeydullah's initial success in mobilizing armed support and his appeal to outside powers on behalf of the Kurds as a collectivity, the Porte was not unduly worried because the sheikh's real ire was directed at Anatolia's Christians, particularly the Armenians.

Armenians, like the Kurds, had inhabited Eastern Anatolia for millennia. Unlike the Kurds, however, the Armenians were sedentary and mostly peasants. Rivalry between settled peoples and nomadic shepherds is as old as Cain and Abel, and thus some degree of tension between the two groups was inevitable. Separate religious identities overlaid and reinforced the sociological gulf between the largely Sunni Muslim Kurds and the Christian Armenians. Kurds and Armenians had co-existed for centuries, bound together in a form of symbiosis by the different but complementary economic niches they occupied. That complementarity, however, was unraveling at the end of the nineteenth century. The vastly more literate Armenians were better positioned than the Kurds to advance themselves economically and tap into global markets. The Christian Armenians could easily engage with European merchants, missionaries, and schoolteachers whereas Muslim Kurds hesitated to become too closely involved with the Europeans. Meanwhile, the cash-strapped and faltering Ottoman state could offer no comparable infrastructure or opportunities to the Kurds. The result was that in eastern Anatolia's newly emerging semi-industrial and merchant classes the

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<sup>7</sup> Othman Ali, "Southern Kurdistan during the Last Phase of Ottoman Control, 1839-1914," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 2 (1997): 286-87; van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 182-84.

<sup>8</sup> P.I. Aver'ianov, *Kurdy v voynakh Rossii s Persiei i Turtsiei v techenie XIX stoletia: sovremennoe politicheskoe polozenie turetskikh, persidskikh i russkikh kurdov. Istoricheskii ocherk* (Tiflis: Izd. Otdela General'nogo shtaba pri Shtabe Kavkazskogo voennogo okruga, 1900). In 1828 the Russians had noted the strategic implications of the Kurdish chiefs' dissatisfaction with Istanbul. W.E.D. Allen, *Caucasian Battlefields, 1828-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 29, 39-40.

<sup>9</sup> David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, [1996] 2004), 53-9.

Armenians were growing dominant.<sup>10</sup>

The emergence of a new and vigorous, if undefined, collective political ambition among Armenians also fed Kurdish unease. Just across the border inside Russia, a sophisticated, and violent, revolutionary political movement was taking shape. Higher education inside Russia and abroad had broadened the vistas of a new generation of that empire's youth. Conscious of the tremendous economic and intellectual transformations unfolding in Europe, they nurtured visions of forging a vastly different world inside Russia. Confronted with an autocratic political system that could not accommodate such ambition and energy, they resolved to destroy it and turned their energies toward that end. Russian Armenians were among those active in this revolutionary movement. Soon, those Armenians were crossing the border to agitate among their Ottoman co-ethnics and mobilize them in trans-imperial revolutionary organizations. While it would be incorrect to argue that the Ottoman Armenian national movement was the by-product of Russia's internal turmoil, the ideologies and methods that Russia's Armenians exported had a profound effect on Eastern Anatolia and indeed politics in the empire more generally.<sup>11</sup>

Just as the settlement patterns of Kurds and Armenians were intertwined, so, too, did their claims to territory overlap. The revolutionaries' talk of Armenian rights to land and their assassinations of Kurdish overlords and Ottoman officials judged as especially loathsome ratcheted up tensions between the two communities.<sup>12</sup> As one Kurdish poet lamented, "It is heartbreaking to see the land of Jazira and Butan [Bohtan], I mean the fatherland of the Kurds, being turned into a home for the Armenians" and "Should there be an Armenistan, no Kurd would be left."<sup>13</sup> To be sure, figures among both the Kurds and Armenians – understanding the impossibility for either community to realize its full aspirations without engaging in an apocalyptic struggle – talked of the importance of mutual co-existence. But the linking of territorial sovereignty to ethnicity generated a polarizing current that, in the context of the existing political volatility, was virtually impossible to overcome.

The Treaty of Berlin in 1878 had stripped from the Ottoman state territories in the Balkans and awarded them to Christians on the basis of ethnicity. In addition, the treaty obliged the Porte to carry out reforms to provide for the security of Ottoman Armenians from raiding and pillaging Kurds and Circassians. The treaty further assigned the Great Powers the prerogative to intervene on the Armenians' behalf if such reforms were not forthcoming. The future of Eastern Anatolia, it

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<sup>10</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 51-52.

<sup>11</sup> The Committee of Union and Progress saw the Dashnaktsutun as a model worth studying and emulating. Sâî [Talât Bey] to [Bahaeddin Şakir], 19 October 1907, in "Osmanlı-İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti: Vesâik-i Tarihiyeden," *Haftalık Şûra-yı Ümmet*, no. 204, 2-3, 7 Kanun-i Sâni 1325. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 217.

<sup>12</sup> On the Armenian revolutionary movement, see Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: the Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963). On the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in the last years of the Ottoman empire, see Dikran Mesrop Kaligian, *Armenian organization and ideology under Ottoman rule, 1908-1914* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War* (London: Saqi Books, 1994), 159; Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 55.

seemed, was clear: just as the Great Powers had intervened in the Balkans to strip from Muslims their centuries-old lands and hand them to Christians in the name of ethnicity, so would they intervene in eastern Anatolia to create an Armenian state.

Initially, a small number of Kurdish reformist intellectuals directed their ire at the regime of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909). They were all too aware that in a globalizing world at the turn of the century, their co-ethnics' way of life, customs, and comparative ignorance were condemning them to a future of continued impoverishment and, eventually, domination under others, be they Ottomans in Istanbul, European imperialists, Armenians, or some combination thereof. These concerns about the negative consequences of illiteracy and scientific ignorance were in no way unique to the Kurds. To the contrary, they preoccupied Muslim intellectuals from Bulgaria to Central Asia at this time.<sup>14</sup> The Kurds' situation appeared, however, especially dire given the near total absence of modern schools and similar institutions in their lands.

In response to the internal turmoil that was gathering force inside Eastern Anatolia, Abdülhamid II abandoned the effort to bring the region under Istanbul's direct control. Instead, he chose to revert to a strategy of indirect rule and co-opt the Kurds. In 1891 he authorized those tribal chiefs who pledged loyalty to him to form mounted militia units, the eponymous "Hamidiye" regiments. He distributed to those chiefs arms, money, titles, and decorations, and granted them wide autonomy to use their new weapons and authority as they pleased. By striking a partnership of sorts with the tribal leaders, Istanbul in the short term sought to keep the region within its orbit. In the longer term, the hope was that it would establish a new local elite that would be more closely bound to the sultan.<sup>15</sup> The Hamidiye regiments acquired international notoriety when, in response to Armenian demonstrations and acts of terror in protest of Kurdish landlords' extortion, they joined in repeated pogroms against Armenians in the years 1894-1896, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of Armenians.<sup>16</sup> Although fear of Armenian claims to their territory motivated many Kurds in their attacks,<sup>17</sup> Hamidiye commanders, acting with Abdülhamid II's assent, used the opportunity to expropriate still more Armenian property.

The substitution of direct rule for indirect rule by a centralizing state has been a common stimulus of nationalism. Discontent with the center's infringement on local freedoms and privileges spurs those in the periphery to mobilize collectively and resist.<sup>18</sup> The dilemma of the early Kurdish nationalists under Abdülhamid II, however, was in some sense the opposite: the center was not endeavoring to displace local power brokers but rather buttressing them. The

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<sup>14</sup> Adeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Milena Bogoilova Methodieva, "Reform, Politics, and Culture among the Muslims in Bulgaria, 1878-1908," (PhD dissertation, Princeton University 2010).

<sup>15</sup> On the Hamidiye, see Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Fuat Dunder, *Crime of Numbers: The Role of Statistics in the Armenian Question (1878-1918)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 144-145.

<sup>17</sup> Selim Deringil, "'The Armenian Question is Finally Closed?': Mass Conversions of Armenians in Anatolia During the Hamidian Massacres of 1895-1897," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 2 (2009): 344-71.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

establishment of the Hamidiye strengthened the tribal chieftains, the most powerful constituency among the Ottoman Kurds, and linked them to the center. They were committed primarily to furthering their own immediate interests, not the long-term interests of a still abstract Kurdish collective. Thus although the Hamidiye commanders would later reveal themselves to have become actors with both their own power bases and an acute sense of their own interests independent of the sultan, their immediate impact was to bolster the Hamidian regime's grip on the region and divert resources into petty, internecine, and unproductive competitions for local dominance. The formation of the Hamidiye regiments thereby introduced yet another fracture line to Kurdish society.<sup>19</sup> Early Kurdish intellectual activists opposed this new class of Kurdish leader, regarding it as a blight on their people. Marginalized in their own community, they found themselves standing alongside the Young Turk Committee of Progress and Union (later known as the Committee of Union and Progress or CUP) and even the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in opposition to the Abdülhamid II and his regime.<sup>20</sup>

Prominent among Kurdish opponents of Abdülhamid II were descendants of the last independent emir, Mîr Bedirhan. Their critique of the autocratic Hamidian regime grew beyond its perpetuation of their family dispossession to embrace the argument that it was impeding the progress and wellbeing of the Kurds as a collective. A key part of the solution, they contended, was to introduce contemporary forms of schooling, education, and communication to Kurds. So long as Abdülhamid II was in power, however, they saw little prospect that this could be done. While it was true that the sultan had in 1892 established a school for select Kurds who might serve as Hamidiye commanders, it was only one school. Moreover, its main purpose was not to reform Kurdish society but to strengthen the ties between the Ottoman state and the tribes.<sup>21</sup> Abdülhamid II brooked no opposition, forcing his opponents to go underground or move abroad. Hence the grandchildren of Bedirhan began publishing the newspaper *Kurdistan* in Cairo and Geneva.<sup>22</sup>

This sense of educational crisis extended throughout Kurdish society to include even religious circles. The well-known Naqshbandi Sheikh Bediüzzaman Said-i Kurdi, a Kurd from the town of Nurs near Bitlis, was acutely sensitive to the need for education. Thus, in 1907 he traveled to Istanbul and obtained an audience with Abdülhamid II in order to propose the establishment of a university in Eastern Anatolia that would include western sciences alongside Islamic studies. After WWI, Sheikh Bediüzzaman, a staunch critic of ethno-nationalism of all forms, would abjure the name "Kurdi" in favor of "Nursi" and would become the most influential religious thinker in

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<sup>19</sup> For an interesting analysis that contends that an urban Kurdish elite was developing a Turkish, not Kurdish, nationalism in opposition to the Hamidiye, see Joost Jongerden, "Urban Nationalists and Rural Ottomanists: Ziya Gökalp, Millî İbrahim Paşa and the Political Struggle over Diyarbekir," in Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verjeij, eds., *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870-1915* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 55-84.

<sup>20</sup> On these alliances, see M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and *Preparation for a Revolution*.

<sup>21</sup> Eugene L. Rogan, "Aşiret Mektebi: Abdülhamid II's School for Tribes (1892-1907)," *International Journal for Middle Eastern Studies* 28 (1996): 83-107.

<sup>22</sup> Malmısaniç, *İlk Kürt gazetesi Kurdistan'ı yayımlayan Abdurrahman Bedirhan, 1868-1936* (İstanbul: Vate Yayınevi, 2009); Dzhaliile Dzhaliil, *Iz istorii obshchestvenno-politicheskoi zhizni kurdov v kontse XIX - nachale XX vv.* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1997), 20-48.

Turkey in the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

### **Aspiring to Empire**

Meanwhile, another grandson of Bedirhan named Abdurrezzak was imagining a different, more direct solution to the Kurds' condition.<sup>24</sup> Forbidden from going to France to further his higher education, Abdurrezzak entered the Ottoman Foreign Ministry and was subsequently posted to St. Petersburg in the 1890s. There he learned Russian and came to admire Russian society, managing to impress his hosts sufficiently to earn the Order of St. Stanislav. Back in Istanbul, he was in 1906 implicated in the murder of the prefect of Istanbul. Abdülhamid II, perpetually paranoid about the Bedirhans, suspected a plot and had Abdurrezzak and his extended family exiled to Tripoli in Barbary.

Abdurrezzak was freed in 1910 and returned to Istanbul. He quickly departed the city, however, and made his way across Eastern Anatolia to Russia and began working closely with Russian officials to unite the Kurdish tribes of Ottoman Anatolia in rebellion against Istanbul. He was not alone in his decision to take up arms against Istanbul. Following their Constitutional Revolution of 1908 and the deposition of Abdülhamid II in 1909, the Young Turk Committee of Union and Progress had resumed the drive for centralization. Among the new government's first initiatives was to disband the Hamidiye, arrest and punish Kurdish brigands, and back the efforts of centrally appointed provincial governors to enforce laws, including taxation and conscription. Many Hamidiye commanders responded to the new policies by crossing the border with their regiments and aligning with Russia. Along with Abdurrezzak, they proceeded with Russian backing to carry out raids and revolts against the Ottomans for the next four years.

These former commanders saw the formation of an autonomous Kurdistan under Russian suzerainty as a way for them to regain their former privileges. Abdurrezzak's ambitions, however, were bigger. Abdurrezzak saw Russian culture as a "gateway to enlightenment" and was convinced that the Kurds' path to salvation went through it. Before a Kurdish nation could be saved, however, it had to be created. The difficulties Abdurrezzak experienced in his attempts to coordinate the rebel leaders underscored to him the need for a new generation of Kurds with a unifying national consciousness. He saw no prospect that such a generation might emerge under Ottoman rule, which he blamed for preserving the Kurds in a state of perpetual underdevelopment. Russia, however, possessed the culture and institutions, particularly schools, which could mold an elite of Kurds that was both technically proficient and nationally conscious. Working together with Russian officials, in 1914 he established a school for Kurds in Russian-occupied Iran. It was to be the first of several. The school had a Russian curriculum and was to send its best

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<sup>23</sup> Carter Vaughn Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity: A History, 1789-2007* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 286; Şükran Vahide, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (İstanbul: Sözlük Publications, 1992), 25-26, 28-29, 36, 41-47.

<sup>24</sup> On Abdurrezzak, see the author's "Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 2 (2011): 411-450. See also Dzhali, *İz istorii*.

students to Russia for higher education. During trips to St. Petersburg, in addition to meeting with diplomats and military officials, he enlisted Russia's leading Kurdologist in projects to translate Russian literature into Kurdish and to create a Cyrillic alphabet for Kurdish. Abdurrezzak had grasped that the crisis confronting the Kurds was greater than merely the inefficiency and maladministration of the Ottoman state. Socio-economic stagnation was, in the long-term, the real danger facing the Kurds. In order to overcome that "backwardness" and transform the Kurds from a collection of tribes into a politically cohesive and economically prosperous social unit the Kurds needed an affiliation with an imperial power that could raise their cultural "level."

Indeed, as Abdurrezzak and other Kurds such as Ismail Simko, were aware, this was precisely what was happening among the Kurds' neighbors in the Caucasus. Inside Imperial Russia, informal or underground national political institutions were beginning to emerge. As noted earlier, Armenians had formed several political parties, the most important of which was the trans-imperial Dashnaktsutiun.<sup>25</sup> In Georgia, a native gentry intelligentsia that was educated largely in Russian schools and displaced by a growing economy began to formulate a defense of their collective, national interests using, paradoxically, the socialist ideas prevalent among the Russian empire's intellectuals.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike the Armenians and Georgians, whose hoary and distinctive linguistic and religious traditions offered comparatively unambiguous bases for the formation of a national identity in the modern sense, the Muslims of the South Caucasus, or Caucasian Turks, were disadvantaged by low levels of literacy and a religious identity that worked against, rather than reinforced, a distinctive national identity. In this way their condition bore some resemblance to that of the Kurds. The cumulative regional effects of the oil boom of Baku, a developing infrastructure, Russian education (even if limited), and the emergence of a collective challenge from the better organized Armenians, were sufficient to spur the Caucasian Turks to begin to form political parties with a national perspective and to coalesce around the identity of "Azerbaijani."<sup>27</sup> Before the end of WWI, the Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis would all take possession of nation-states. Even in the North Caucasus, where conditions of ethno-linguistic diversity and development were markedly less favorable than in the south, local movements of some political sophistication took shape following the implosion of tsarism. The greater development fostered by Russian imperial rule facilitated the national mobilization of the various Caucasian peoples in a way the Kurds could never have matched.

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<sup>25</sup> For an overview of the parties, see Razmik Panossian, *From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 188-228. On the Dashnaktsutiun, see Kaligian, *Armenian organization and ideology under Ottoman rule, 1908-1914*.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Audrey Alstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1992); Iorg Baberovski [Jörg Baberowski], *Vrag est' vezde: Stalinizm na Kavkaze* Tr. V.T. Altukhova (Moscow: Rosspen, 2010), 1-81.

## World War I: A Kurdish Calamity

The outbreak of World War I cut short Abdurrezzak's project. He and his men took up arms to fight alongside the Russians, but unlike Russia's consuls and military ethnographers, the high command of the Russian Caucasus Army had limited sympathy for the Kurds, regarding them as an auxiliary force of dubious loyalty. Despite operating in support of the Russian army and rendering useful services, Abdurrezzak in 1915 found himself sidelined and even briefly imprisoned by the Russians. He and his brother in 1917 would attain posts in the Russian administration of Eastern Anatolia as governors of Bitlis and Erzurum respectively, but the disintegration of the Imperial Russian Army following the tsar's abdication in the February Revolution cut short their terms.<sup>28</sup> The following year, Ottoman forces captured Abdurrezzak in Georgia and executed him.

The war, far from concluding in the liberation of the Kurds that Abdurrezzak had hoped for, led to the greatest calamity the Kurds had suffered in their history. Although the Russian army never adopted a wholesale anti-Kurdish policy, and indeed elements within the army and the Russian occupational authority understood the utility of maintaining Kurdish goodwill, some units, in particular the Cossacks and the Armenian voluntary regiments, tended to regard the Kurds as enemies by definition and regularly inflicted indiscriminate violence upon them. Predictably, such treatment alienated most Kurds and drove them – literally – from the Russians. The advance of the Russian Caucasus Army into Anatolia in 1915 and 1916 sent hundreds of thousands of Kurds fleeing westward.<sup>29</sup>

The flight of so many in wartime inevitably led to immense suffering and significant loss of life. Several other factors exacerbated the suffering and rate of mortality. One of the most important was, paradoxically, the Ottoman deportation from Eastern Anatolia of virtually the entire Christian Armenian and Assyrian populations of Eastern Anatolia. Kurdish tribes took part in massacres that accompanied the deportations. This should not surprise. Tensions between the two communities had been rising sharply just before the war due in part to the adoption by the Ottomans in February 1914 of a Russian-backed reform plan, a plan that many observers, Europeans as well as Ottomans, interpreted as the final step before Russian annexation. Although some Kurds welcomed the prospect of Russian administration, others dreaded it for fear that the Russians would favor the Armenians.

The uprooting and expulsion of the Armenians had enormous short and long-term consequences for their Kurdish neighbors. The Armenians, and especially the peasantry, had constituted a critical component of the region's economy. Their elimination caused that economy to collapse and contributed to subsequent famine. Already before the war observers routinely noted the markedly poor health of the nomadic Kurds. Wartime hunger and illness inevitably

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<sup>28</sup> Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origin and Development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 128; McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 112 fn. 38.

<sup>29</sup> Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 146, 156-63; Ahmad, *Kurdistan during the First World War*, 93-94, 99-101, 124, 136.

exacted a tremendous toll upon the Kurds, whose poor health and susceptibility to disease European travelers had routinely noted even prior to the war. Indeed, so miserable were Kurdish refugees that observers, including Armenians, found them indistinguishable in their physical condition and appearance from Armenian deportees.

The fates of an estimated 700,000 Kurds resembled that of the Armenians in another aspect: they, too, found their movements determined by an Ottoman government intent on remaking the ethnographic face of Anatolia. The Ottoman Minister of the Interior Mehmed Talat Pasha recognized that Ottoman sovereignty over a poly-ethnic Anatolia would always be vulnerable in a world order that increasingly endorsed ethnic homogeneity as a criterion for statehood. He identified in the war an opportunity to facilitate the Turkification of Anatolia and initiated an effort to implement this. The expulsion of Anatolia's Christian communities was one part of this effort. The shuffling and resettlement of Ottoman Muslims was another. Hence, Talat directed that Kurdish refugees from Eastern Anatolia be relocated to Western Anatolia where Turks predominated so as to facilitate their assimilation over time. In general, the idea was to distribute non-Turks (Muslim and Christians alike) among Turks in such a way that in any given locale the ratio of the former to the latter would not exceed one to ten. Likewise, Turkish refugees were to be resettled in Eastern Anatolia to strengthen the Turkish presence and dilute the Kurdish.<sup>30</sup> The challenge posed by the Kurds' tribal social structures did not escape the Unionists' attention. Talat ordered that aghas and sheikhs be removed to locations separate from those of their tribes in the hope that this would lead to the withering of tribal structures and ties.<sup>31</sup> Although specifying precise numbers for the numbers of Kurds who perished in the first world war is an impossibility, it can be stated with some confidence that the mortality rate for Kurds between the years of 1914 and 1923 was extraordinary, even as great as over thirty percent.<sup>32</sup>

World War I thus represented a calamity for the Kurds as a whole. Tsar Nicholas II's abdication triggered the collapse of Russian power and the dissolution of the Russian empire. That collapse, of course, meant the evaporation of Abdurrezzak's vision of building a Kurdish nation under Russian tutelage. His project managed to outlive him briefly. In 1919-20 Kurds in Bitlis were experimenting with a Cyrillic alphabet for Kurdish.<sup>33</sup> Yet the war's outcome, when evaluated according to its consequences for the prospects of Kurdish nationalism, was not a total loss. It had all but eliminated the Armenians as rival claimants to the territory of Kurdistan. The Kurds would no longer need the Turks to back them.<sup>34</sup> This, in turn, set the stage for competition between Turks and Kurds for control over most of the same territory. That clash did not begin immediately. Indeed, in the initial post-Great War period, most Kurds put themselves on the

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<sup>30</sup> On the vision of Anatolia as a Turkish land, see Erik Jan Zürcher, "How Europeans Adopted Anatolia and Created Turkey," *Turkology Update Leiden Project Working Papers Archive* (June 2005). On the resettlement policies of the Unionists, see Fuat Dündar, *İttihat ve Terakki'nin Müslümanları İskan Politikası* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2001) and *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi: İttihat ve Terakki'nin Etnik Mühendisliği* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Dündar, *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi*, 410-19.

<sup>32</sup> Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995), 243; Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*, 234.

<sup>33</sup> Dzhaliil, *İz istorii*, 110.

<sup>34</sup> Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*, 250.

same side as the Turks.

### **The Post-War Scramble for Kurdish Lands**

With the signing of the Mudros Armistice on 30 October 1918, the Ottoman Empire surrendered and put itself at the mercy of the victorious Entente powers. Those powers had arrived at a general plan for the final partition of the Ottoman Empire during the war. That plan, sometimes dubbed the Sykes-Picot-Sazonov plan after the leading British, French, and Russian figures who had negotiated it, reduced the Ottoman empire to a truncated rump Sultanate in the interior of Anatolia. The plan made no provision for Armenian or Kurdish nationalist claims, and parceled out the lands inhabited by Kurds to Russian, British, and French control.

Russia's withdrawal from the war nullified the Sykes-Picot-Sazonov agreement, but Britain and France did not forego their intent to divvy up the last Ottoman lands. They and several other powers finalized their plans in August of 1920 in the French town of Sèvres. They now awarded to the recently born Armenian Republic the chunk of Eastern Anatolia previously assigned to Russia. The award more than doubled Armenia's size. Armenia, however, had barely strength enough to hold its current territory and the notion that it could absorb much more was folly. The treaty was not so generous to the Kurds, but it did demarcate an autonomous Kurdistan in southeastern Anatolia. The proposed Kurdish entity may not have encompassed all the lands where Kurds predominated – in particular, it left out those lands that the French and British coveted – but it did encompass a substantial chunk of them. The treaty further stipulated that should the majority of the “Kurdish peoples” of this territory desire full independence, they would have the right to address that request to the Council of the League of Nations one year after the treaty had come into force.

The Treaty of Sèvres would have appeared to represent a modest victory for Kurdish nationalism. Yet the reality was that most Kurds in Eastern Anatolia opposed the treaty and especially its creation of an expansive Armenia. Just as fear of Greek rule spurred Muslims in Western Anatolia to rally behind the “National Forces” or *Kuva-yı Milli* of Mustafa Kemal,<sup>35</sup> so too did the prospect of Armenian rule drive many Kurds to join them. Mustafa Kemal deliberately downplayed his Turkish nationalist proclivities in favor instead of emphasizing the bond of religion. Thus his National Forces represented an array of Anatolian Muslims, including most Sunni Kurds.<sup>36</sup> Once again, the crosscutting cleavage of Sunni Islam caused most Kurds to join with their Turkish co-religionists. The Alevi Kurds of Dersim, by contrast, rose in rebellion against

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<sup>35</sup> There were important exceptions to this pattern of Muslims rallying to Mustafa Kemal. See Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores: Violence, Ethnicity, and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1912-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor: The Role of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish National Movement, 1905-1926* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984). For a more comprehensive account of the Turkish struggle, see Stanford Shaw, *From Empire to Republic: The Turkish War of National Liberation, 1918-1923: A Documentary Study* 5 vols. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2000).

the National Forces in the fall of 1920. Isolated, they could hold out only six months.<sup>37</sup>

Kurds were initially a key component of Mustafa Kemal's movement, and when that movement formalized its aims in the "National Pact" or *Misak-ı Milli*, it included in its territorial claims not only the predominantly Kurdish provinces of Eastern Anatolia but also the province of Mosul in Mesopotamia. Since British military planners regarded Mosul as essential for the security of Iraq, however, Britain insisted on retaining Mosul inside the mandate of Iraq.<sup>38</sup> Assured of Kurdish support, Mustafa Kemal and his forces focused first on beating back the Armenians and linking up with the Bolsheviks advancing southward from Russia and westward across the Caucasus. Then, with their rear secured, they turned to push the invading Greek army out of Anatolia, and ultimately compelled the now war-weary Great Powers in 1923 to relinquish their plans to partition Anatolia and recognize the borders of the Republic of Turkey in the Treaty of Lausanne.

### **The Kurds and Their Post-War Woes**

The Turkish Republic saw its purpose to be the radical transformation of Turkish society from a state of "backwardness" and weakness to one of "modernity" and strength. Fundamental components of Mustafa Kemal's "Turkish Revolution" (*Türk İnkılabı*) were an aggressive secularism that subordinated religion to the interests of the state and a vehement Turkish nationalism that insisted that all Muslim citizens of the republic embrace Turkishness as their own identity. That Kurds would object to the imposition of Turkism is self-evident, but the secularizing reforms were no less alienating. Although the sultan's status as Caliph or head of the global Sunni community may have had little tangible importance, it had served as a symbolic tie that bonded Kurds to Turks. Mustafa Kemal's abolition of the caliphate in March 1925 signaled a rupture in that relationship. That act, coupled with other secularizing reforms adopted that month, prompted a Kurd known as Sheikh Said of Palu to revolt in the name of restoring caliphal rule. A prominent Naqshbandi sheikh, Sheikh Said commanded considerable authority as a religious figure and held ties by marriage to neighboring Kurdish chiefs. His call to rebellion was heard, and he and his followers managed to seize the town of Elazığ. Yet again, however, Kurdish tribal and religious fissures revealed themselves. Whereas virtually all of the Zaza tribes as well as two large Kurmanji tribes heeded Sheikh Said's call, Alevi Kurds scared by the Sunni overtones of the uprising, took up arms in support of the state and helped rout the insurgents. Republican authorities tried and executed Said and placed Eastern Anatolia under military rule.<sup>39</sup>

Scholarship differs on whether the Sheikh Said Rebellion should be understood as an expression of Kurdish nationalism or of Islamic resistance to secularism. What is more significant

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<sup>37</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 184-87.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Townshend, *When God Made Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia and the Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 493-513.

<sup>39</sup> Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*, 250-51; Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 178.

than the precise nature of the motives of the rebels is that by suppressing the rebellion Ankara demonstrated it possessed a formidable coercive capacity, one greater than that of its imperial predecessor. This is not to say that the new regime pacified the Kurdish regions. To the contrary, well armed Kurdish “bandits” and “brigands” abounded.<sup>40</sup> These, however, lacked a political program and unity.

Kurdish activists recognized the imperative of unification to maximize Kurdish power and in 1927 established the “pan-Kurdist” organization “Khoybun.” Khoybun spearheaded the so-called Ağrı Dağı (Mt. Ararat) rebellion, but in 1930 the Turkish army, granted permission to ride Soviet railways through Armenia, surrounded the rebels and put down this revolt, too.<sup>41</sup> The Turkish state’s decisive military superiority allowed it now to choose the time and place for the next major confrontation. In 1937 the Turkish armed forces conducted a series of offensive operations in the historically rebellious province of Dersim (later renamed Tunceli). By 1938, the army had thoroughly subdued the region. Ankara had asserted centralized control over Eastern Anatolia in a way that Istanbul had never been able to.

### **Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and the Soviet Union**

Kurds in the states surrounding Turkey failed little better. Five states – Turkey, Iraq, Syria, the Soviet Union, and Iran – partitioned Kurdistan. Along with new boundaries came enhanced border controls as the new states all jealously strove to assert domination over their territories. The consequences for Kurdish life were devastating, as the new borders choked off local economies and divided tribal confederations, tribes, and families. In Iraq and Syria, Kurds found themselves living under governments that espoused Arab nationalism and classified the Kurds as minorities, regarding Kurds almost as interlopers. Although Iran did officially acknowledge Kurdish and other non-Persian identities, the country’s new leader, Reza Shah, pursued centralizing nationalist policies that privileged the privileged Persian ethnicity to the detriment of Kurdish. The Iranian state may not have actively repressed the Kurds, but it kept them marginalized and did little to foster their development or integration.

Only a small number of Kurds remained in the territories that became part of the Soviet Union, at most 300,000 but perhaps far less.<sup>42</sup> Their experience under Soviet rule differed from that of their co-ethnics elsewhere, at least for a limited time. The Soviet state formally recognized Kurdish identity and in 1923 the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan even included among its counties one called “Kurdistan,” (*Kurdistsanskii uezd*), also known as “Red Kurdistan” (*Krasnyi Kurdistan*),

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<sup>40</sup> Uğur Ümit Üngör, “Rethinking the Violence of Pacification: State Formation and Bandits in Turkey, 1914-1937,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 4 (2012): 755-757.

<sup>41</sup> M.S. Lazarev, *Istoriia Kurdistana* (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniia, 1999), 255; *Kurdistan i Kurdsii vopros* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2005), 104-155; Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics, and Society* Tr. Emily and Jane Welle (London: Routledge, 2009), 18-19.

<sup>42</sup> McDowall writes that the number of Kurds incorporated into the Soviet Union was “probably in the order of 200,000-300,000” (McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 491). Daniel Müller’s research (see below) would suggest, however, that the real number was probably far less

which had the town of Lachin as its administrative center. Soviet authorities authorized the publication of one or more Kurdish newspapers, schools that taught in Kurdish, and a Kurdish-language theater. In the Soviet context there was nothing unusual about the endorsement of Kurdish ethnic identity. To the contrary, the Soviet authorities, gripped with what has been described as “ethnophilia,” required all Soviet subjects to be classified according to nationality, understood as ethnicity. Moreover, every “nation” was to be endowed with the markers of nationhood, e.g. a distinct territory, national literature, traditional costume, a native language press, etc.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Soviet support for Kurdish culture should not be exaggerated. The numbers of Kurds affected were limited and the Kurdistan County lasted only about ten years.<sup>44</sup>

Alas, for the Kurds of the Soviet Union, 1930 marked the highpoint of their political standing. That year Moscow abolished the Kurdistan County and in the following years it deported the Kurds from the Caucasus into Central Asia. Whereas the original hope of the Soviet leadership had been to use Red Kurdistan as an example of the benefits of Soviet development to cultivate influence among the Kurds of the Middle East, in 1930 Stalin had recalculated the geopolitical equation. Red Kurdistan’s existence was harming relations with Turkey and Iran. More importantly, Stalin feared it might serve as a conduit for the subversion of the Soviet Union instead of its neighbors.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

Paradoxical though it might seem, the fact is that the end of empire both as reality and a legitimate form of statehood circa 1918 proved to be a catastrophe for the Kurds. Most obviously, war and the process of imperial collapse war exacted a terrible human toll, involving the dislocation of over a million Kurds and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of others. Less obviously, empire’s demise was, from the standpoint of Kurdish national aspiration, premature, arriving as it did at a moment that found the Kurds still fragmented politically, socially, and conceptually. Predominantly illiterate and poor and lacking both institutions that united them and a nationally conscious elite that might have mobilized them, the Kurds were unprepared to comprehend, let alone assert and defend, a collective ethno-national interest in the age of national self-determination. At the turn of the century a nationally conscious Kurdish intellectual class was just coming into existence and in Ottoman Anatolia a new class of Kurdish powerbrokers was very slowly attaining political savvy. Well before the former could acquire significant power and the latter could assimilate an ethno-national program, World War I broke out. Amidst that war and the ensuing struggles for Anatolia, the Caucasus, and Mesopotamia those structures were simply

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<sup>43</sup> On Soviet “ethnophilia,” see Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (summer 1994): 414-452. On Soviet nationality policy in this period, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Müller, “The Kurds of Soviet Azerbaijan 1920-1991,” *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 19 no. 1 (2000): 46-65.

<sup>45</sup> This was part of a much broader pattern. Terry Martin, “The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” *The Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 4 (December 1998): 813-861.

overwhelmed.

As result, the Kurds found themselves not merely without a state or autonomous entity of their own, but instead divided and under the control of several regimes indifferent or even hostile to Kurdish ethnic identity. In this way, their fate stands in contrast to those of their neighbors, the Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Georgians, and Azerbaijanis. Although the fall of empire traumatized virtually all of these populations, they all nonetheless managed to secure political recognition of their ethnicity. The small number of Kurds under Soviet rule briefly had an exceptional experience in so far as they received formal recognition of their ethnic identity, albeit with severe restrictions on how they might express that identity. Even so, the Kurdistan County lasted barely a decade.

That physical division and political suppression in the years following 1920 would impede Kurdish nationalism is obvious. Sometimes overlooked is that the end of empire further retarded the development of Kurdish nationalism by setting the Kurds back economically. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Eastern Anatolia and adjoining lands were beginning to undergo economic growth and integration into broader markets. The Kurds collectively were falling behind and in danger of seeing their traditional social dominance upended. Yet the end of empire only worsened their economic prospects. Empires traditionally fostered economic growth through the unification of large spaces and populations and by enabling ethnic groups to specialize and fill economic niches.<sup>46</sup> Anatolian Armenian peasants, skilled craftsmen, and merchants were vital to the regional economy and could not be easily replaced. Their destruction inevitably wrecked that economy.

The partitioning of Kurdistan by multiple new state borders obstructed regional trade and impaired economic recovery for decades. None of the states had abundant capital or vibrant economies that could drive the development and growth in their Kurdish region. Indeed, Turkey in the early decades of the republic deliberately decided not to develop the region's infrastructure lest paved roads and rail lines assist a possible Soviet invasion. The self-consciously modernizing regime of Kemalist Turkey had little development to offer southeast Anatolia.

For long, many Turks, and even Kurds, believed that Turkey's Kurdish problem was really a "Southeastern problem." In other words, they held that the fundamental problem in the region was not the ethnic identity of its population so much as its socio-economic underdevelopment, a state of affairs caused in no small measure by the Kurds' atavistic tribal structures.<sup>47</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, however, infrastructural development and economic growth began to change Eastern Anatolian society fundamentally. The result was not the melioration of the Kurdish Question, however, but the setting aflame of the minds of Kurdish youth.<sup>48</sup> Exposed through Turkish higher education to the ideas of Turkish nationalism and social revolution, young Kurds became

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<sup>46</sup> William Hardy McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, İsmail Beşikçi's famous *Doğu Anadolu'nun Düzeni: Sosyo-Ekonomik ve Etnik Temeller* (Istanbul: E. Yayınları, 1969). Beşikçi later disowned his argument in favor of the Kemalist struggle against the feudal aspects of Kurdish society

<sup>48</sup> On "minds aflame," see Valerii Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame* (London: Sage, 1997).

politically radicalized. The best known of these is Abdullah Öcalan, who in 1978 founded the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* or PKK). Since 1984, the PKK has been waging a violent campaign against the Turkish Republic in the name of Kurdish nationalism, and it shows no sign of giving up. In Iraq, the Kurds have achieved autonomy. Meanwhile, in Iran Kurdish nationalists continue to fight and in Syria Kurdish nationalist sentiment abides.

Yet even as Kurdish national sentiment now matures, nearly one century after the end of formal empire in the Near East, policy-makers and intellectuals alike have grown more skeptical of nationalism in general and of the nation-state in particular. The dispersion of Kurds across the cities of western and central Anatolia and the accelerating economic integration of the region suggest the obsolescence and impracticality of a Kurdish state. In addition, the consolidation of Kurdish political structures in multiple countries means that a unitary Kurdish state would likely be possible only after an intense, and violent, internal struggle. Whether or not delayed development will cause the Kurds to insist on statehood, and whether it will leave them ahead as the world moves back to the future and away from the nation-state as the preferred model of political sovereignty remain to be seen.