

The Kurdish National Question

A Historical Perspective

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After the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917, the Russian army began to withdraw from the Kurdish and Armenian regions of the Ottoman empire.

On November 7, 1917, Vladimir Lenin led the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in a revolt against the ineffective provisional government (Russia was still using the Julian calendar at the time, so period reference shows an October 25 date).

The October revolution ended the phase of the revolution instigated in February, replacing Russia's short-lived provisional parliamentary government with government by the Soviets, local councils elected by bodies of workers and peasants.

Liberal and monarchist forces with the help of the capitalist countries of Europe loosely organized into the White Army, and immediately went to war against the Bolsheviks' Red Army.

All these crucial historical and political developments took place where Bolsheviks toppled the last Czar of Russia, and most importantly it seems that no one at the time had thought of its implication on the Kurdish national question in the years to come. Just a year before, the Russian imperial army had occupied the Kurdish regions of the Ottoman Empire, and they were just about to witness the dismemberment of the last, greatest empire of modern history. A secret agreement between major colonial powers was concluded to redraw the geopolitical map of the Middle East.

Indeed, the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 was a secret agreement between the government of Britain and France, with the assent of Russia, defining their respective spheres of influence and control in West Asia after the expected downfall of the Ottoman Empire once the First World War had ended. Under this agreement, it was envisioned that most parts of the northern Kurdistan, when freed from Ottoman control, would become part of the Russian Empire, which would fulfill their several-centuries-old dream of reaching further south. To achieve this goal, Russia also needed Kurdish cooperation. Russia, for its part, gave rosy promises to Kurdish tribes that helped her during the war. By securing the cooperation of Armenians and Northern Kurdish tribes, Russia aimed at annexing Armenia and Kurdistan as part of its colonizing policies. Russia's European allies had similar aims for different areas of the Ottoman Empire.

The First World War ended, and the Ottoman Empire, once called "the Sick Man of Europe," was going to be removed completely from the Middle East's map.

But something had gone wrong because the Kurdish regions did not end up in Russian hands. Indeed, the Bolshevik Revolution had changed all geopolitical calculations in the region, and at the same time it was a great opportunity for the other two colonial powers to divide the Kurdish regions among themselves. The revolutionary government, under the leadership of Lenin, abandoned all previous Tsarist policies. This also meant that for the time being Communist Russia was not interested in the colonizing policies of its predecessor of which Kurdistan was an essential part, in accord with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916.

After the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917, the Russian claims in the Ottoman Empire were denied, and the Russian army began to withdraw from the Kurdish and Armenian regions of the Ottoman Empire.

The new Socialist state also cut off all its ties with the Entente Powers, and signed the humiliating peace treaty of Brest Litovsk with Germany.

At the same time, the new Soviet Russian government declared that they had no territorial claims and all previous colonial agreements had no legal effect for them anymore. When the Bolsheviks found a copy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in the Russian government's archives, they did not hesitate to make that public. They revealed full texts in Izvestia and Pravda on November 23, 1917; subsequently, the Manchester Guardian printed the texts on November 26, 1917.

In fact, withdrawal of Russia from the Kurdish regions of the Ottoman following the Bolshevik Revolution changed the course of modern history of the Kurds. In line with this argument, Dr. Azad Aslan, in his unpublished Ph.D. thesis, "Clashes of Agencies: Formation and Failure of Early Kurdish Nationalism 1918-1922," pointed out:

"The withdrawal of Russia from the war and post-war settlement provided ample opportunities for the Turkish nationalists to launch their struggle from the east, which Britain and France had neither the manpower nor the financial resources to occupy during the post-war period. It was not coincidental that the initial phase of the Turkish nationalist struggle had begun in those areas where the Great Powers had no presence. It is a hypothetical question to ask what would have happened had Russia occupied those areas left to her. It can be assumed that had such developments occurred, the Turkish nationalists' chances to consolidate their power in Anatolia and Kurdistan would have then been considerably diminished."

Before the end of 1918, the Ottoman Empire surrendered and signed the peace treaty called the Mudros Armistic, which eventually resulted in the abolishment of the Caliphate system.

The fall of the Ottoman Empire brought a historic opportunity for the Kurdish national movement because the whole country was in a total state of anarchy and chaos. During these critical years, the new Turkey was experiencing a potentially volatile political and military vacuum. However, the Kurds were lacking unity and collective force. As in the past, the Kurds failed to build a united front, let alone an independent Kurdistan. While almost all of these new Middle Eastern states during this period and afterward were either British or French mandates, the Kurds wrongfully chose the partition of their homeland and for the years to come to remain under the yoke of Turk and Arab.

The rise of Mustafa Kemal, the leader of the so-called Young Turks on Anatolia, and factional division among the Kurds themselves shattered the independence of Kurdistan. The failure

to form a united front and accumulate the Kurds gave the Young Turks' leader opportunity to strengthen his political and military position. Indeed, at the beginning, Mustafa Kemal was careful not to mention the Turkish state. Instead, he stressed either the fraternity between Kurds and Turks, or the Ottoman nation in conflict with a foreign occupation force. Once he accomplished all of his plans, there was no need to keep his promises and he moved to offensive against the Kurds. Mustafa Kemal furiously fought the Kurdish national movement because he saw in them a real threat to the new Turkish republic. He aimed to do whatever necessary to crush the Kurdish resistance from now on.

The modern Turkish republic formed when the Treaty of Sevres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. With the entry into force of this treaty on August 6, 1924, the international consideration of the Kurdish question, growing out of the First World War, was terminated. Already, it was painfully obvious not only that the nationalists themselves were not accepted in international circles. There was no Kurdish representative at the Lausanne Conference, and the Kurds played no role in the presence of non-Muslim minorities-Armenians, Greeks, and Jews-within Turkey.

Mustafa Kemal, who by this time had established the Turkish nation-state, immediately broke his promises of Kurdish autonomy and dissolved the Kurdish National Assembly. He abolished Kurdish schools, use of Kurdish language was outlawed, and Kurds officially were labeled "Mountain Turks" and their land called "Eastern Anatolia." Mustafa Kemal's regime also forced the abolition of the Muslim caliphate through a protesting assembly.

It has been argued that the major Western powers had no choice but to agree with Ataturk's demands in order to gain him as an ally rather than an enemy who was certain to fall into the lap of the Bolshevik Regime in Russia. But it seems that it was too little too late because he was already receiving military and financial help from Moscow. Though the Turkish nationalists and Bolsheviks' alliance went back as far as early 1919, it became official in March 1921 in a treaty between Ankara and Moscow. This strengthened the Kemalists by providing them both with diplomatic support for their cause as well as arms, ammunition, and money-the things most needed to aid the Turkish nationalists in their fight against the Greek army in the west and the Armenians in the east."

Indeed, both the Kurds and Armenians were the first victims of the Bolshevik policies in the early stages of their partnership with the Kemalists. This Bolshevik-Kemalist pact also was becoming a major source of anxiety and uneasiness among the colonial powers. The major European powers, especially Great Britain, were fearful of spreading Communism in the Middle East. Mustafa Kemal had all the cards in his hands and was playing expertly, and his position was becoming favorable. No doubt, he used both the Islamic religion at his early stage to rally Kurds around the idea of a republic of brotherhood, then military and political alliance with the Bolsheviks to break up his enormous enemies. Therefore, the internal developments (failure of the Kurds to form a united front and weakness of Kurdish nationalism) and external developments (complexity of the region following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and fall of the Ottoman Empire) shaped the modern history of the Kurds. As an immediate result, the Ottoman Kurdistan, which was a united entity for almost 400 years, was about to be divided among three new national states.

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