The Kurdish Tragedy—PKK activists on trial for murdering a Kurdish couple in Bremen

Justus Leicht, Ute Reissner
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Some weeks ago a trial began in Bremen, Germany against four activists from the nationalist "Workers Party of Kurdistan" (PKK). They are accused of the savage killing of a young couple, Ayse Dizim and Serif Alpsoman, who contravened Kurdish traditions and the will of the PKK by marrying and living together.

This case not only illuminates the bankruptcy of the Kurdish nationalist movement. It is also a bitter indictment of German foreign policy which supports the repressive Turkish regime and shares a large responsibility for the desperate situation of the Kurdish people which ultimately led to this bloody deed.

So far the German press has taken little notice of the trial. The defendants, who initially confessed, are remaining silent during the trial. The magazine "*Der Spiegel*" (21/2000) has now published an article, based on the files from the investigation, which throws some light on the circumstances of the case.

Not only the suspects but also the victims were either members or associated with the PKK. Three years before she was killed, the 18 year old Ayse had come to Germany after her village had been burnt down by the Turkish army. The five years older Serif had been severely wounded during combat between the Turkish army and the PKK—his feet were lacerated and his spine injured. In Germany the party bought him a cheap wheelchair and took him on many demonstrations using him for propaganda purposes.

On one of these demonstrations the couple met and fell in love. Ayse's father, however, rejected Serif's proposal of marriage. His handicap flew in the face of Kurdish tradition, whereby the man has to provide for his wife, beget children and preside over the family. The father then consulted the PKK. His daughter was to marry someone else, a strong and healthy activist, whom her father and the party were to select for her. Ayse refused, the pair moved in together and married secretly, virtually barricading themselves in their small rented flat. The young woman was repudiated by her father and the couple put under massive pressure by the PKK. For their "crime" they both were both due to face disciplinary proceedings and a "trial" by the PKK. They refused to co-operate.

Following apparent consultations between regional and local leaders of the PKK, Ayse and Serif were eventually taken to an old abandoned submarine bunker on the night of August 23 1999. Ayse was throttled and suffocated in the mud of the shore while Serif was forced to look on. Then he was repeatedly run over by a car. Finally his face was smashed with a spanner. As a result of his injuries he died only hours later, when he was found the next morning by a local resident.

It is not clear if initially the plan was to kill them or if they were "only" to be taught a lesson. In any case the PKK has distanced itself from the incident and has stressed that the two responsible functionaries acted on their "own" authority.

Such an horrendous crime as the one in Bremen is only conceivable on the basis of extreme fanaticism on the part of many PKK members—a fanaticism which has been nourished by desperation and helplessness over the past years. This has also been expressed in the actions of dozens of PKK members who have burnt themselves to death—such acts of "martyrdom" continue up to this day. But now these moods have been driven to the extreme.

The PKK finds itself in a hopeless situation. On the one hand the organisation has lost considerable support in the Kurdish population, on the other hand its appeals to the ruling Turkish elite and the European Community have been curtly rejected.

The whole policy of the PKK was orientated at establishing its entry into the existing oppressive state structure of the region as a token representation of the repressed minority—either by means of creating its own nation state or by integration into the Turkish state. Both

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the armed struggle, as well as PKK advances towards the European Community and the Turkish state, were directed to realising these aims.

As a result of this policy, which provided no solution for the concerns of the Kurdish population, the PKK leadership under Abdullah Öcalan became increasingly isolated from the people it claimed to represent. Any progress in terms of social conditions and democratic rights can only be achieved with a programme based on uniting the oppressed, both Turks and Kurds. By contrast the perspective of creating a separate state or an autonomous region was geared to the requirements of the Kurdish elite. The growing social isolation of the PKK resulted in repeated violent disagreements and purges within the leadership of the party.

In addition to the situation inside Turkey itself, Germany foreign policy and the stance of the European Community played a considerable role. 10 years ago Öcalan had already demanded that the German government lend support to the PKK's demand for negotiations with the Turkish government. Instead Germany supplied the Turkish army with weapons and military equipment worth several billion Marks. In 1993 the PKK declared a unilateral cease-fire, gave up its claim for a separate Kurdish state and tried to get the European Community to act as a mediator.

Although, in contrast to the Turkish government, the PKK increasingly dropped its demands and eagerly obeyed European demands for “restraint” and “a willingness for dialogue”, in the end the organisation was invariably ditched by Europe when Turkey, the bridgehead to the resources and markets of Central Asia and the Middle East, threatened to break off relationships. The fact that Social Democratic parties took power in a number of European countries over this period did nothing to change the situation.

The role played by the countries of the European Union, when Öcalan was abducted by the Turkish secret service in February 1999, left no room for doubt. They had refused to grant Öcalan political asylum as he sought refuge in Italy and didn't lift a finger against the anti-Kurdish terror which intensified after he was kidnapped and taken to Turkey.

The more the PKK was driven into a corner over the past years, the more it has moved to the right. For the PKK, the emphasis on the Islamic religion and the propagation of outmoded Kurdish feudal traditions, accompanied by an orientation towards Islamic priests and tribal leaders, has increasingly taken the place of its former pseudo-Marxist rhetoric. Every form of criticism from its own rank and file is stifled by the promotion of a bizarre cult of personality and martyrdom on one side and violent attacks against opposition within the party on the other. These characteristics already existed as the PKK was founded. Initially members had been known as “Apocular” (Apo's disciples). But the more the organisation unsuccessfully tried to snuggle up to the Turkish regime the more prominently these characteristics have emerged.

It is now possible to imagine the sort of atmosphere inside the PKK, when Öcalan (who in line with PKK propaganda was bestowed with godlike characteristics) was kidnapped and then during his own show trial renounced his former politics and called upon Kurds to obey precisely those who were executing and torturing them in the name of “democracy”—an offer which, moreover, the Turkish state treated with contempt and turned down.

This was the situation in which the party faced the harmless “challenge” of the marriage of Ayse and Serif. In August 1999 the PKK were desperately trying to maintain their authority amongst the Kurds. The PKK and its sympathising publications hounded all those who criticised the organisation, condemning them as “traitors” and “provocateurs serving the war-profiteers”. The author and journalist Selahattin Celik, a long time Kurdish nationalist and supporter of the PKK, was beaten up in his own flat August last year, because he had made some critical remarks.

Whether the murder was the intended “punishment” or whether it resulted from an escalation of “disciplinary action”, the PKK is responsible for the policies which have failed so dismally and created the prerequisites for this crime. But the chain of cause and effect doesn't end there. The failed politics of the PKK were a reaction to a situation of oppression and discrimination for which the Turkish regime and the men behind it, in the governments of the USA and the European Community, are responsible.

The German state is one of the main sources for the oppression in Turkey, the consequences of which now include the tragic murder case in Bremen.

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