

Turkey's bloody 1977 May Day still clouded in mystery

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1 May 2003

May 1, 1977 was a time of increasing economic and political crisis for Turkey.

The Revolutionary Confederation of Labor Unions (DISK) organized a May Day demonstration in Taksim Square in Istanbul. Demonstrators filled the square, and the crowds flowed into the surrounding area. In Besiktas, hundreds of thousands of people had gathered in the early morning hours to march to the rally. By the time DISK General Chairman Kemal Turkler delivered his his May Day speech, all the roads leading into the area were still full of people marching. It was nearly 7 p.m. before the last contingents were able to reach the Taksim area.

The DISK general chairman was about to finish his speech when three gunshots sounded. First there was stillness, and then a deadly pandemonium broke out. The crowd of 500,000 dispersed in panic.

People who had been lying in ambush inside buildings in the vicinity of the meeting area, in the Intercontinental Hotel (now The Marmara Istanbul) and in the Water Authority building, rained bullets down on the crowd with automatic weapons. As the firing spread, armored personnel carriers went into action. Noise bombs and the firing of the automatic weapons suddenly turned the meeting area into a battlefield. Thousands of people lay down where they were, while others running to escape were shoved into corners and crushed by the armored vehicles.

Automatic weapons fire from a white Renault was turned on thousands of people who were fleeing down Kazanci Yokuşu, a street that intersects Taksim square. A truck parked in the middle of the narrow street blocked the road. Those who were fleeing were squeezed together, piled up one on top of one another, and a number of them were suffocated or crushed.

Sukran Ketenci (her last name today is Soner), one of

the writers from the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, described what she saw in the aftermath: "Two armored vehicles hurriedly entered the area from the Taskisli road. They moved in a searching manner which drove the crowd, which was already squeezed together, towards the speakers platform. I saw quite clearly a woman in a light-colored dress fall under the vehicle."

The incident had tremendous repercussions in the press in Turkey and around the world. Thirty-six people died, hundreds were wounded and 453 were arrested.

While some characterized the incident as a provocation of the Nationalist Front [the right-wing government coalition] carried out under the management of the CIA, a portion of the police and bourgeois press advanced the idea that the firing was started by extreme leftists.

However, evidence presented in court opened the curtain of reality, even if only a crack. Police charged 98 people arrested at random with responsibility for the massacre. None of them were involved, and all were acquitted. While the judge called upon the authorities to renew the investigation and prosecute those genuinely responsible, successive military-dominated regimes suppressed the case.

During the trial, Oleyis [the hotel workers union] Branch Chairman Ali Kocaman had the information which he had received from hotel personnel placed in the minutes: "Three days earlier, the third, fourth and fifth floors of the Intercontinental Hotel were emptied and no one was allowed on the floors, which were under police control. Americans had come and stayed on the floors which the personnel were not allowed to enter. After the incident, these people checked out of the hotel."

In 1987, former Deputy Prime Minister Sadi Kocas answered questions put to him in an investigative

article that appeared in the *Hurriyet* newspaper on May 8. Kocas related the following:

“It was not one incident which occurred on May 1. Ever since 1968-69 and the 1970s, there were a series of at least seven to eight incidents a year.... There were those who arranged this. There were those who wanted to stir things up internally and externally.... The counter-guerillas are an organization made up of a number of people who say ‘We are counter-guerrillas against guerillas.’ These are accountable to themselves as guerillas or commandos but they get their authority from an official office. What is that office? Perhaps the president and the head of the General Staff are in command, I can’t know, but definitely it is part of the National Intelligence Agency.... I know these names and some of these high-level people who were carrying out these works were being discussed. According to what I remember, they were working for MIT [the secret service]. They were the ones who were giving the orders for the basic crimes.”

On May 7, 1977, Bulent Ecevit, later to become prime minister, attracted little attention with his statement at an Izmir meeting, “The finger of the counter-guerrillas was in the May 1 incidents.”

According to Article 102 of the Turkish Penal Code (TCK), the case expired due to the statute of limitations after 20 years had elapsed. And according to lawyer Rasim Oz, who witnessed the bloody May Day of 1977, “The case was deliberately brought to a point where it would be closed due to the statute of limitations.”

The incident has been commemorated on May 1 ever since in Turkey. Since 1977, however, no one has been able to use Taksim Square for a May Day celebration. Never could such a crowd be gathered again, and May 1 was no longer officially recognized as a holiday. After the September 12, 1980 coup, May 1 celebrations were banned for eight years.



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