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Kurdistan: The struggle in historical perspective

written by Sam Marcy
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On Dec. 19, 2018, President Donald Trump announced plans to withdraw U.S. ground troops from Syria by mid-January 2019. This long overdue acknowledgement of the defeat of imperialism's strategy to dismember the Syrian Arab Republic set off a firestorm in Washington, from liberal Democrats to Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis, who announced his resignation.

A longstanding U.S. tactic has been to ally itself with Kurdish forces in northern Syria and others grouped under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Trump's announcement leaves Washington's Kurdish "allies" to the mercies of their historic enemy, the government of NATO member Turkey, which also seeks the destruction of the Syrian government.

This has led to much confusion on the left, with some groups even calling for continuing the illegal U.S. occupation to "protect" Kurdish Rojava. Some joined Democrats in bemoaning Trump's "surrender" to Syria and its allies, including Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah movement.

It remains to be seen whether Trump will follow through on the promised

Pentagon withdrawal or if this is another in a long line of imperialist ploys.

Struggle-La Lucha will write more about this situation. For now, we present this article by Sam Marcy, a leading Marxist thinker and fighter of the second half of the 20th century, written shortly after the 1991 U.S. war against Iraq. At that time, some Kurdish forces had similarly aligned themselves with U.S. imperialism against the Saddam Hussein government. Marcy's article, originally published in the April 18, 1991, issue of Workers World, gives a historic perspective on the Kurdish struggle for self-determination and the imperialist role in the Middle East.



Several years ago, when I was in the Mid-Manhattan branch of the New York Public Library looking up something in the Encyclopedia Britannica, a Third World student passed by, glanced at the book and said to me rather pointedly, "This book ought to be burned." He walked on. It astonished me. Then suddenly he turned around,

smiled, and said, “Well, not really.”

The other day, when I was attempting to find the exact date of the founding of the People’s Republic of Kurdistan, I looked in the Encyclopedia Britannica, 1980 edition. To my surprise, there’s no listing for Kurdistan, or even the word Kurds.

It could have easily been sandwiched in between the Kunlun Mountains and Akira Kurosawa, the Japanese film director. But it wasn’t there.

The New York Times Encyclopedic Almanac of 1972, which claims on its jacket to be “the most complete and authoritative reference annual ever published for home, school and office,” likewise has no listing for the Kurds or Kurdistan.

Nothing so much offends the sensibilities of oppressed people as ignoring their very existence in art, literature and above all, history.

Imperialist distortion of history

This is one of the many, many examples of how historic issues of great significance are either mangled, distorted or completely omitted by imperialist historiography. This is carried to an extreme in the daily capitalist press, not to speak of the electronic media.

Moreover, the U.S. public can be ambushed by a sudden avalanche of lies and deceit whose influence the ordinary person can scarcely avoid, as for instance with the U.S. aggression in the Persian Gulf.

At the moment, it seems that all stops have been pulled out to demonstrate the humanitarianism and generosity of the Bush administration in its airlift of food to hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people in the stricken areas. Soon, a whole group of charitable organizations will be setting up events, probably with many distinguished entertainers, etc., to raise funds for the suffering Kurds. All of it is

calculated to show the despotism and cruelty of the Iraqis as against the poor, friendless, stateless Kurdish people, who have been abandoned by all the world except for a handful of imperialist powers.

What is the truth? Would the Kurdish people of Iraq have opened up military operations against the Iraqi government, provoking an onslaught against them, had it not been for the U.S. government and the CIA — as is publicly admitted today?

Is the U.S. government really concerned about the Kurdish people? Are Britain, France, Germany or Turkey?

It is impossible to consider the plight of the Kurdish people without taking into account some of the salient facts of the modern era, beginning with World War I. In the midst of the war, France, Britain and czarist Russia made a secret agreement, the Sykes-Picot treaty, which among other things included Kurdistan in its framework.

“The British envisaged a series of autonomous Kurdish states to be advised by British political officers, which the French were to be asked to concede in the Wilsonian spirit of self-determination for the Kurdish people.” (From “A Peace to End All Peace” by David Fromkin, Avon Books, New York, 1990.)

The war of 1914-1918 was an imperialist war to redivide the world to correspond to the new relationships among the great capitalist powers. It ended not only in the defeat of Germany but in the liquidation of the Ottoman Empire. That gave U.S. President Woodrow Wilson an opportunity, according to U.S. historians, to plead for self-determination, especially for non-Turkish nationalities in the empire. That’s how the Kurdish question was brought to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, on the initiative of the Kurds.

Wilson is often depicted as an idealist who sought to bring about a new progressive

world order, in which the oppressed nationalities would be able to gain their independence. But this is pure bourgeois bunk. The basic idea was to break up the Turkish state in such a way as to make it unviable as a leading power, either in Europe or in the Middle East.

The terms imposed upon Germany, which were harsh enough, nevertheless enabled German imperialism to revive industrially and technologically. Turkey, however, remains to this day mired as a compradore bourgeois state and vassal of the Western imperialist powers.

The Paris Peace Conference was followed by the Sevres Treaty of 1921, which actually liquidated the Ottoman Empire and did in words call for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state. The Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, however, made no mention of Kurdistan. Bourgeois historians dwell at length on these diplomatic developments, their viewpoint corresponding to the interests of the particular imperialist power they speak for.

None of this would alter the plight of the masses of Kurdistan in any real measure. However, there was one truly great and momentous event which changed the face of all Asia and gave the Kurds, like other peoples, an impetus to rise from abject poverty and semi-slavery and seek real freedom. That was the Bolshevik Revolution.

Bolshevik Revolution and Asia

The Bolshevik Revolution stirred the Western proletariat to the point of insurrection in Germany and Hungary. It also aroused the latent energy of millions and millions of oppressed people living under the yoke of imperialism and feudal despotism.

After the war, all the predatory imperialist powers, adopting Wilsonian rhetoric, were given to endless platitudes about self-determination and protection of national minorities. But in fact none were really for self-determination of oppressed peoples

anywhere in the world. The First World War in and of itself did not change the conditions of exploitation and national oppression by the imperialist powers or eliminate enslavement by feudal despotism.

Had the Russian Revolution remained at the level of February 1917, had it become even the best of bourgeois democratic states, it would not have had any real historic significance in Asia. But the February Revolution was superseded by another kind of revolution in October, a revolution of the working class in alliance with the peasantry, a proletarian revolution. It was the sparks of that revolution that began to burn in Asia.

Self-determination was not a platitude of the Leninist government. It was for real. Notwithstanding all the lies and slanders of the imperialist bourgeoisie, it reached down to the masses and inspired them by the millions.

By that alone, the Bolshevik Revolution would have been a momentous development in history. But the Bolsheviks did not just promote self-determination. They were the carriers of irreconcilable class warfare. This is the sine qua non that fundamentally changed class relations in Asia, contributing to the great Chinese Revolution and the heroic revolutions in Vietnam, Korea and elsewhere.

It is in this connection that we should consider the situation of the people of Kurdistan. The Bolshevik Revolution sparked the ultimate rise of the Tudeh Party in Iran. And while the most immediate and fundamental concern of the oppressed peoples in the Middle East was self-determination, the Bolshevik Revolution opened the war of the oppressed against their age-old native oppressors.

Communism and a Kurdish state

It would have been a monumental development had the Kurdish communists been able to carry out a determined revolutionary struggle of the oppressed people, of the

peasants against the landlords, in the same way that it was carried out in China and later in Vietnam.

One difficulty was that the Kurdish people were spread out in parts of east Turkey, northeast Iraq and northwest Iran, with smaller groupings in Syria and what is now Soviet Armenia. But more important was the retreat in the Soviet Union from its revolutionary internationalist position in the global class struggle.

However, even in the most difficult days of the Soviet Union's struggle for existence during World War II, the communist movement as such in the Middle East, and particularly in Iran, was not disintegrated. This explains the existence of what is scornfully referred to by bourgeois, pro-imperialist historians as the "Soviet-backed Kurdish `Republic.'" (New Columbia Encyclopedia, 1975 edition.)

The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad existed from December 1945 to December 1946 in the northern part of Iran. Its proclaimed program included, among other demands: "The Kurdish people in Iran should have freedom and self-government in the administration of their local affairs and obtain autonomy within the limits of the Iranian state. The Kurdish language should be used in education and be the official language in administrative affairs" (Manifesto by Qazi Mohammad and 105 leading Kurds).

The program was modest enough. It didn't go beyond autonomy within the limits of the Iranian state.

Its real significance lies in the fact that the republic was established and constituted the nucleus of a future state of Kurdistan. It was the first and only state that the Kurdish people have ever had. Its establishment opened a new era for the Kurds. It opened the possibility of obtaining real independence.

It showed great promise of uniting the Kurds, or at least becoming a cultural center

for Kurdish people in other parts of the Middle East and Asia. One can scorn it, revile it, lie about it, diminish its significance, but in all the centuries since the Kurds as a people have existed, it was the first time that they established a state of their own.

Overthrow of Kurdish republic

What happened to it? Was there an internal counterrevolution? Or did the Iranian government on its own under the Shah, then a puppet of British imperialism, overthrow it? No, neither of these things.

What happened was that the Truman administration, in collaboration with the British, gave notice to the Soviet Union that its troops had to evacuate Iran. It was one of the first salvos of the Cold War. After their withdrawal, the Shah, armed by U.S. imperialism, opened a military struggle to destroy the Kurdish republic.

There are very few English-language accounts of what happened. The most detailed one is by Archie Roosevelt, Jr., who served the U.S. government as assistant military attache in Teheran from March 1946 to February 1947. In the *Middle East Journal* of July 1947 (vol. 1, no. 3) he wrote, "The dream of Kurdish nationalists, an independent Kurdistan, was realized on a miniature scale in Iran from December 1945 to December 1946. The origin of the little Kurdish republic, its brief and stormy history and its sudden collapse is one of the more illuminating stories of the contemporary Middle East."

Unfortunately, he does little to throw light on the driving forces behind the establishment of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad. He dwells on intertribal struggles and paints the role of the communists in the most lurid colors as nothing but Soviet secret agents.

Whatever one may think of the Kurdish republic of Mahabad as a form of self-

determination, it cannot be denied that it became the center of gravity, the pole of attraction for the people of Kurdistan.

No one could have predicted the future of this republic in the light of the international situation. It was wartime. British soldiers were at one end and Soviet forces at the other. Had the Allied powers agreed to a policy whereby both their forces and those of the USSR would withdraw from the area, there would have been a historic opportunity to test whether the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad was the appropriate form of self-determination for the Kurdish people. There may conceivably have been other variants. But no opportunity was afforded.

It is impossible to assess the current political position of the Kurdish people in Iraq and its relation to Iran, Syria and Turkey without understanding the background of the struggle, particularly as it began to emerge immediately after the Bolshevik revolution.

Ba'athism and the socialist perspective

It is the socialist perspective, the perspective of the overthrow of imperialism and capitalism, that has to be borne in mind as the aggression and plundering of the Middle East by the imperialists continues.

Not a day goes by without some new maneuver, some new stance by this or that imperialist power or group. But while the U.S. military machine, in alliance with its imperialist partners, was able to crush Iraq militarily by inflicting vast and incalculable destruction, it has by no means vanquished the people, nor has the regime itself been overthrown.

Whether it was for propagandistic or strategic ends, this was one of the main stated objectives of the Bush administration. It was Bush himself who in early February publicly called for the Iraqi military and Iraqi people to “take matters into their own

hands and force Saddam Hussein to step aside.” That hasn’t happened.

The problem in the Middle East from the viewpoint of socialism is that in all the political overturns, all the struggles to rid the region of imperialism, none went beyond the level of the February Revolution in Russia. The most profound revolution, that in Egypt led by Nasser, shows the limits of what can be achieved if the revolution stops at the bourgeois-democratic level. The Iraqi Revolution of 1958 is another example.

These progressive, anti-imperialist revolutions were unable to achieve a transition to a socialist revolution, one that overturns the basic relations of property between the working class and peasants on the one side, and the bourgeoisie on the other, between oppressors and oppressed. What emerged instead was the phenomenon of Ba’athism, which is an eclectic form combining some progressive, or, if you will, socialist measures with the retention of the bourgeoisie as a class.

Mere nationalization of industry, even of oil, does not in and of itself lay the basis for socialism. The nationalization retains within itself the growth of the bourgeoisie. While the level of economic well being can be on a much higher level than in a non-oil-producing country, the retention of the bourgeoisie leads to gross social inequality. In the light of the bourgeoisie’s international connections with imperialism, the country ultimately succumbs to its domination.

Bonapartism in Syria and Iraq

Ba’athism has produced Bonapartist regimes in Syria and, more pertinently, in Iraq. The present ruling group in Iraq is avowedly Ba’athist in its social program. A characteristic feature of such a regime is that it straddles the fence between the working class and peasants on the one hand, and the bourgeoisie. The severe pressure of imperialism has produced the phenomenon of military rule and a number of coups d’etat.

In the struggle against imperialism, it leans heavily on the workers and peasants as its fundamental social support. At the same time, the pressure of bourgeois social forces continually pushes it in an adverse direction.

The oppression of national minorities is a product of this pressure. Oppression of national minorities is consistent with bourgeois interests; it is alien to the socialist objectives of the working class. Therein lies the contradiction of Ba'athism.

On the other hand, oppressed people such as the Kurds, in the conditions of imperialist attack upon Iraq, have the absolute duty to support the Iraqi regime against imperialism or see their standing in the community of oppressed nations completely nullified and themselves reduced to the status of a tool of imperialism. Here again, the adage which applies to Iraq applies also to the Kurds: No nation can itself be free if it helps imperialism oppress another nation.

Wherever Ba'athism has prevailed, it has of course been of a progressive character in relation to outright bourgeois or feudal political domination. But it is a barrier to socialist revolution. It retains the fundamentals of bourgeois rule. The mere existence of a proletariat and a bourgeoisie proves this.

Politically, it makes it enormously difficult for a communist party to function, even where it is legally possible for it to exist and organize in its own name. But more often than not, the party has succumbed to the wiles of Ba'athism. This has meant either being a cooperating element within the political structure, often retaining a program that does not in effect differ from that of the governing Ba'athist party, or, should it seek an independent revolutionary road, being suppressed by force and violence.

The pressure of imperialism on a continuing and more intensive level has created all sorts of phenomena that hinder the development of the class struggle. No nation can be free if it oppresses others. Turkey can never be free as long as it oppresses the

Kurds or other peoples. The same applies to Iran and also to Iraq.

This generalization is not limited to the Kurds. It's a worldwide phenomenon. Sri Lanka was oppressed by India, which itself was long oppressed and continues to be dependent to some extent on Anglo-U.S. imperialism. But Sri Lanka has been unable to grant self-determination and freedom to the Tamils, for instance. All this is a product of the irreconcilable class contradictions which prevail in contemporary imperialist global relations.

No substitute for proletarian solidarity

Only a worldwide socialist federation, based on the abolition of class rule and exploitation, can put an end to national oppression. Self-determination alone, independence alone, without touching the foundations of class rule, is absolutely inadequate to deal with the monstrous growth of the imperialist economic colossus.

Only the reconstruction of society into a socialist commonwealth, free of the violent paroxysms of competition which lead to armed warfare and imperil all humanity, will put an end to racial, national and class oppression.

There is no substitute for proletarian, socialist solidarity in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. It is the only hope for humanity as a whole.

