The Evolving Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK

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Abstract

The political rhetoric and theory of Abdullah Öcalan (What I call *Apocular* thought, after the early name for the group which would one day become the PKK) has influenced millions of people across the middle east and the Kurdish diaspora to support his organization, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). PKK militants have conducted a guerilla war on-and-off against the Turkish republic from 1984 to present, with their Syrian branch, the PYD, controlling significant territory in northern Syria since the start of the Syrian civil war. Despite its influence, this branch of political theory remains understudied in the English-speaking world. This thesis examines available scholarship and primary sources to contribute to the understanding of the evolution of *Apocular* thought, which transformed from a Marxist-Leninist program of "national communism" which took armed struggle and separatism as the only option, into a doctrine of "Democratic confederalism" which advocates a horizontal system of self-governing, multiethnic territories coexisting with and undermining the state (both the Turkish state in particular and the state in general), rather than attempting to create a Kurdish state. This thesis argues that the transformation was more gradual than is often portrayed, and was the product of dynamics internal to the PKK and the lessons learned over the course of their war. To that end, this thesis examines the ways the relationship between the Turkish republic and its Kurdish population informed the development of concepts of nationality and statehood within both early and late *Apocular* thought, the similarities in terms of feminist content and Marxist structure between the early and late *Apocular* thought, and the ways in which Öcalan's later political thought developed out of a self-criticism of his autocratic leadership, which undermined the PKK's attempts to improve the condition of the Kurdish people.

Résumé

La rhétorique et la théorie politiques d'Abdullah Öcalan (ce que j'appelle la pensée *Apoculaire*, après un ancien nom pour le proto-PKK) ont influencé des millions de personnes à travers le Moyen-Orient et la diaspora kurde à soutenir son organisation, le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK). Les militants du PKK ont mené une guérilla intermittente contre la République turque de 1984 à nos jours, et leur branche syrienne, le PYD, contrôle un territoire important dans le nord de la Syrie depuis le début de la guerre civile syrienne. Malgré son influence, cette pensée politique demeure peu étudiée dans le monde anglophone. Cette thèse examine les sources primaires et travaux universitaires disponibles afin de contribuer à la compréhension de l'évolution de la pensée *Apoculaire*, qui est passée d'un programme marxiste-léniniste de « communisme national », lequel considérait la lutte armée et le séparatisme comme la seule option, à une doctrine de « confédéralisme démocratique », substituant à la création d'un État-nation kurde l'établissement d'un système horizontal de territoires autonomes et multiethniques coexistant avec l'État (en l'occurrence, l'État turc) tout en sapant ses fondements. Contre l'idée reçue d'un passage abrupt de la première doctrine à la seconde, cette thèse soutient que cette transformation a été graduelle, ayant été le produit de dynamiques internes au PKK et des leçons apprises au cours de la guerre. À cette fin, cette thèse examine la manière dont la relation entre la République turque et sa population kurde a influencé le développement des concepts de nationalité et d'« étaticité » dans la pensée *Apoculaire* précoce et tardive, les similitudes en matière de contenu féministe et de structure marxiste entre ces deux moments de la pensée *Apoculaire*, ainsi que la manière dont la pensée politique tardive d'Öcalan a représenté une autocritique de son leadership autocratique, qui a sapé les tentatives du PKK d'améliorer la condition du peuple kurde.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On April 7th, 1971, Turkish-Kurdish student Abdullah Öcalan was arrested in Ankara and subsequently imprisoned for seven months due to his participation in illegal protests following the March 1971 military coup.[1] This period of imprisonment began the development of the political thought which would come to define the *Apocular* group and its later incarnation, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).

Thirteen years later, Öcalan's organisation, now known as the PKK, would begin the first Kurdish rebellion since 1938. The Turkish-PKK conflict has lasted from 1984 until the present, through numerous ceasefires, failed peace attempts, and periods of armed conflict, with spillovers into Iran, Iraq, Syria and among the large Kurdish diaspora in Europe. This all despite the capture of Öcalan himself in 1999 following the most intense period of fighting.

From 1971 until today, the ideology of this group, which I term *Apocular* ideology after one of the earliest names for what would become the PKK, has undergone significant evolution, and is on the surface nearly unrecognizable from its original formulation. Despite this and despite the loss of their founder – who was and remains in large part the sole voice of PKK ideology – the PKK has maintained continuity in organizational structures, core cadres, and popular support.

The first formal manifesto of the PKK, published in 1978, was by all accounts a fairly standard Marxist-Leninist separatist manifesto. It called for a protracted people's struggle against imperialist domination, with national independence and the creation of a "Independent, united and democratic Kurdistan"[2] as the immediate goals, followed by a far-off global revolution and integration into a communist world order.

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[1] Ali Kemal Özcan. (2006) *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan.* Routledge, pp. 88-91.
[2] Özcan, pp. 100. In context this does refer to "democratic" in the sense of the "German Democratic Republic," i.e. a revolutionary socialist state patterned after the eastern bloc.

Now, the PKK has vocally renounced separatism, has officially rejected communism (although not socialism), and calls instead for the reorganization of Turkey into a democratic federal republic, with the Kurdish region granted significant autonomy. Some have concluded from this that the PKK is simply reacting to a changing situation by lessening its demands from independence to autonomy, with Ünal arguing that in addition to abandoning separatism, the PKK had scrapped their socialist ideology entirely to buy time.[3] In contrast, I will argue their aims are no less radical now than they were in the 1990s, as when taken in the context of *Apocular* terminology, a "democratic federal republic" would mean a substantive transformation of the Republic of Turkey, rather than simply regional autonomy.

This new form of *Apocular* thought, called "Democratic Confederalism," presents a thorough historical and philosophical critique of the state, of capitalism, of Marxism-Leninism, and of national liberation movements like the PKK itself. This critique is then used to build up an alternate form of social organization, which Öcalan argues has existed in some capacity around, underneath and in between the cracks of the state since Sumeria. The task of the revolutionary, for Öcalan, is to bring this mode of social organization, this "natural society," out from the shadows and into the light, formalizing and defending it while weakening and democratizing the state sufficiently until the two can coexist. At that point however, the monopolizing basis of the state and its entire mythos will have been removed out from under it, and it will – although this is not quite the term Öcalan uses – gradually wither away.

My central argument is that this seeming about-face, which some have either dismissed as purely reactive (driven by pressure from the waning strategic prospects of a PKK victory over the Turkish state) or praised as a complete transformation "from a militant, separatist movement to one that believed in dismantling hierarchy and championing

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[3] Mustafa Cosar Ünal. *Counterterrorism in Turkey: Policy choices and policy effects towards the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)*. New York: Routledge, 2012, chapter 6.

women,"[4] was in reality the result of a long process of development based on internal logics within *Apocular* ideology going back to 1992 and Öcalan's first analyses of the causes and implications of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The result is a strain of political thought which, while rejecting Marxism-Leninism and the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, is nonetheless thoroughly socialist and arguably even Marxist in its content and prescriptions.

I call this the "consistent core" hypothesis, in contrast to the "window dressing" and the "complete transformation" hypotheses, which form my null hypotheses. The window dressing hypothesis refers to the idea advanced by Ünal and the Turkish state authorities, that the PKK remains essentially unchanged in its structure, its goals, and its methods despite its changes in rhetoric.[5] The ideology is thus seen as a purely instrumental component of the praxis of an organization whose nature and interests remain more or less fixed. Indeed, in its maximalist form the window dressing hypothesis holds that this transformation was not only purely pragmatic, but also temporary, with the PKK returning to their pre-1999 ideology after 2006.[6] An alternative version of this thesis is advanced by certain Western communists in regards to the PKK's Syrian sister-organization (PYD). They hold that the PYD adopted the language of libertarianism and democratic confederalism to appeal to American sympathies during the Syrian Civil War, and that their goals remain essentially nationalistic.

The "complete transformation" hypothesis, by contrast, holds that Öcalan's capture in 1999 and his subsequent exposure to the works of Murray Bookchin created a radical shift in his thinking: that he was converted away from Marxism-Leninism and towards libertarian socialism, with very little of his old thought remaining. This hypothesis is closer to what certain anarchist and other libertarian socialists who have travelled to Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava) come away with. This is hardly surprising, as the PYD has been much more

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[4] Isaac Fornarola (2019). "How a Vermonter's radical politics laid the groundwork for revolution in Rojava." *Burlington Free Press*.
[5] Ünal, Chapter 6.
[6] ibid

successful than its Turkish sister in incorporating late *Apocular* thought into their organizational structure, methods, and training, so there are fewer remnants of the old Marxist-Leninist praxis.

Both null hypotheses have something to recommend them. The window dressing hypothesis is bolstered substantially by the fact that late *Apocular* thought began to be articulated in systematic form only when Öcalan had already been imprisoned, Soviet aid to revolutionary parties had dried up due to the former's collapse, and the PKK's fortunes were generally on a sharp decline. This suggests that it is entirely possible that the transformation in *Apocular* thought represents nothing more than an opportunistic change in rhetoric to try to preserve the organization and seek new allies. The complete transformation hypothesis can point to the transformation ideologically from a statist, nationalist group which celebrates centralized power and almost fetishizes violent struggle to one which rejects the state, nationalism, and centralized power, and has an ambiguous relationship with violence. Both can point to the immense difficulty in implementing the organizational implications of late *Apocular* thought upon the PKK structurally, which has proven highly resistant to change: the former can see that as evidence that the organization has no will to change because late *Apocular* thought is purely rhetorical, while the latter can see it as evidence that the change is too great and radical a break from the PKK's previous trajectory to be successfully implemented.

It may seem from first glance that these three hypotheses exist on a spectrum, and that any evidence against the complete transformation hypothesis is by definition evidence for the window dressing hypothesis, and vice versa. If that were the case, and the consistent core hypothesis represented nothing but a middle ground between the two, then no evidence could be brought to properly support the consistent core hypothesis: it would be purely a matter of opinion as to where on the spectrum between complete transformation and window dressing

would constitute a consistent core. Any objector to the consistent core hypothesis could state with reason that both null hypotheses represented a sort of strawman: that of course Öcalan could not be 100% adherent to Bookchin's philosophy with nothing left of his old thought and of course an organization as large and complex as the PKK could not affect such a large rhetorical shift without some members believing it and accordingly making genuine change, but that for the most part, one or the other null hypothesis is accurate and the consistent core hypothesis merely represents a lack of hypothesis, not a hypothesis in itself.

Upon closer examination, however, the consistent core hypothesis does not represent a mere refusal to affirm either of the null hypotheses, but a hypothesis in its own right. The kind of evidence needed to support this hypothesis would be that the transformation in *Apocular* thought began before 1999, that the transformation was informed by dynamics internal to the PKK (as opposed to coming from the progress of their war with the Turkish state or from the writings Öcalan personally came in contact with following his imprisonment), and that the things which remained consistent between early and late *Apocular* thought were central planks of the ideology.

One key aspect which has remained constant throughout both eras of *Apocular* thought, and which forms a key component of the consistent core thesis, is Öcalan's strong advocacy for women's role in the future society. As many feminists – Marxist and otherwise – have noted, Marxist-Leninist organizations, particularly the more nationalistic ones, usually ask women to "wait their turn," viewing women's liberation and empowerment as a consequence of the construction of communism rather than as something which has to be fought for directly. Leftist rebels may be less likely than others to commit atrocities against women and more likely to have female fighters, but it is rare to see that hold true to the dramatic extent seen in the PKK and its affiliates, where women have reached the highest

ranks of the chain of command and even formed their own army in the case of the Syrian

PYD.

By contrast, Öcalan's leadership and practice within the PKK has consistently

emphasized the feminist nature of the revolution, rejecting the notion that women have to

"wait their turn" and instead making anti-patriarchal action a core component of PKK praxis.

This theory was reflected in the organizational structure of the PKK, which created women's

branches of various internal organizations and gave them far more weight than similar groups

within other Marxist-Leninist revolutionary parties. That dynamic only became stronger in

late *Apocular* thought, which reframed the struggle against patriarchy as prior to the struggle

against capitalism: "Killing the dominant male"[7] became central to the new life the PKK

fought for, with a democratic and non-hierarchical governance framed as inextricable from

the struggle against patriarchy. Indeed, Öcalan compared, albeit in passing and while

reserving judgement as to the scope of applicability of the metaphor, the failures of Western

liberal feminism to that of Marxist-Leninist "real socialism."[8] One had, per Öcalan at least,

failed to link the struggle for women's equality to the broader struggle for democracy, while

the other had made the same mistake with regards to the class struggle.

Linked to the concept of "killing the dominant male" is the emergence of a new man,

or rather a new person, through "becoming PKK."[9] That has been the core goal and

experience of joining the PKK since its inception, and cleaves closely to the pre-PRC

Communist Party of China's cadre model. This remains the case in the modern PKK, despite

the turn away from Marxist-Leninist vanguardism. However, there are important differences

between the "New man" of Maoist revolutionary parties and the "New man" of the PKK,

both now and during their time as a Marxist-Leninist party. Indeed, Öcalan's frustration with

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[7] Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Women's Revolution.* Eds. and Trans. Anonymous. Cologne: Mesopotamian Publishers, 2013, pp. 49.
[8] Öcalan, *Liberating Life,* pp. 55.
[9] Özcan, pp. 156-159

many of his followers' using the processes of "becoming PKK" to merely create the obedient, slogan-spouting party cadre seen in the CPC was a major point of conflict between him and the PKK at least as far back as 1991,[10] a conflict which could be read as one of the origin points for late *Apocular* thought: the kind of life Öcalan envisioned PKK members living was not thriving under the Marxist-Leninist framework he had created, so he had to change tack. One thing which did not change was the kind of person the PKK was meant to create.

My core thesis is that the transformation from early to late *Apocular* thought after 1999 was not a radical break or a matter of window dressing, but rather represented the formalization of a gradual transformation which began at least as far back as 1992. In addition to this core thesis, I have three secondary theses. First, that early *Apocular* thought contained seeds of heterodoxy which would bear fruit in the transition to late *Apocular* thought, even when the official PKK line vociferously clung to a Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Second, that late *Apocular* thought can still be validly categorized as a form of Marxism due to Öcalan's continuing use of Marxist analysis, framing, and structure, even as he rejects the label itself. Third, that the fall of the Soviet Union and the systemic deficiencies within the PKK – including but not limited to a disconnect between the kind of person Öcalan envisioned as a "new socialist person" or "natural person" and the kind of person created by PKK inculcation – were in large part responsible for the beginning of the transition from early to late *Apocular* thought, thus explaining why the PKK would begin changing its tune to one of decreased nationalism and increased willingness to compromise just at the time when its power reached its apex.

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[10]Özcan, pp. 187

Chapter 2: The History of the Kurds and the Turkish State

In order to understand the emergence of the PKK and why it took the form it did, we must first trace the long and complex history of the relationship between the Kurds and the Turkish state.

Pre-Ottoman Times

The relations between Kurds and the ethnic groups surrounding them, whether those be Iranians, Arabs, or Turks, has always been an ambiguous one. Claiming descent from the ancient Medes, the Kurds were always a secondary group within empires, mixing and allying with whichever group was dominant at the time. This is in part due to geography: the Kurdish highlands are difficult to organize a cohesive, settled government in, both for the Kurds and for the imperial centres. Thus, in order to exert a modicum of control over the region, pre-modern empires would strike bargains with local Kurdish tribal leaders. This dynamic has been projected back by Kurdish intellectuals as a legacy of shame, as their "twin heritage" of "tribe and treason."[11] Kurds would often fight other Kurds both over local conflicts and as auxiliaries on each side of imperial conflicts or another. One empire expanding into the region would ally with a given tribe of Kurds as auxiliaries, guides, and local enforcers, causing a rival tribe to strike a bargain with the current ruling power in the hopes of gaining an advantage over their rivals, or at least not ending up in a subordinate position.[12] The goal for each Kurdish tribe had always been to claim a position of favour with imperial powers: a position that would assure them primacy over other Kurdish tribes, but

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[11] Özcan, Pp. 138

[12] Özcan, pp. 147-154; see also pp. 197 where Özcan describes the PKK's pessimism as a result of the history of Kurdish groups being brought down by "internal treason."

nonetheless "a position of inferiority"[13] relative to the empire of the day. This meant that while Kurdish territory was nearly impossible to *govern*, the Kurds within were easy to *rule*.

This reflects an experience similar to other peripheral peoples at the borders of empires, such as the Cossacks of the Ukrainian steppe and the Zomians caught between the borders of the classical Southeast Asian empires.[14] And much like these peoples, the Kurds have had "their moment," when a leader from their ethnicity ended up becoming the ruler of one of these core empires: the Ayyubid dynasty under Saladin, who was of Kurdish descent. Much like in the Zomian experience however, this did not translate into Kurds becoming a dominant group or forging a "Kurdish empire," as the Ayyubid dynasty adopted the pre-existing claims to monarchy just as Zomian prophet-kings did.[15]

The dynamic of "tribe and treason" presents a challenge, because it would be ahistorical to project a Kurdish national identity which one could "betray" by siding with one empire or another against fellow Kurds. At first glance therefore, Öcalan's bemoaning of the tribal-treasonous character of Kurdish identity as "degenerate-debased" or "disgraceful"[16] could be read simply as a nationalist misunderstanding of their own history: expecting nationalist behaviour from pre-national peoples and being disappointed with the reality. There is however more to this than a misreading of the past: rather, tying these two concepts together is both a pragmatic reality and a deliberate political intervention by Abdullah Öcalan to construct a unified Kurdish national identity, which was one of the key successes of early *Apocular* thought and of the PKK more broadly: to a large extent, the PKK represented the first truly "national" Kurdish revolt which could stand on its own feet, because over the course of their agitation and their war, a Kurdish national identity consolidated[17].

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[13] Özcan, pp. 150
[14] James C Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*. London: Princeton University Press, 2009, ch. 1.
[15] Scott, pp. 307-309
[16] Özcan, pp. 154
[17] Özcan, pp. 138

Still, Kurdish resistance groups before the PKK have struggled to self-organize outside of the framework of the tribe, which has been easy for imperial powers to manipulate towards their own ends via systems of reward and punishment as well as playing off tribal rivalries. That dynamic has meant that while the Kurdish regions have been difficult to govern, Kurdish rebellions in Turkey prior to the PKK have been short-lived affairs.

The Ottoman Empire

Much like previous empires which had ruled over Kurdish territory, the Ottoman Empire relied on a form of clientelism and indirect rule. This was largely in accordance with the broader patterns of Ottoman administration, which relied on a combination of bureaucratic, centralized rule in the heart of the empire with a dispersed form of patrimonialism outside of it. Prior to the 19th century, the empire largely cooperated with local elites, mainly seeking to keep commerce flowing and ensure public order. This image of Sultan-Caliph was hardly new, but it is worth noting that between the decline of the Abbasid empire in the mid-900s to the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in the early-1500s, there had been a kind of limited separation between secular and religious authority similar to that seen in the Catholic world. While the Seljuk, Ayyubid, and Mamluk dynasties ruled with the blessing of Sunni religious authorities, the old Abbasid caliphs still existed as nominal heads of religion in Baghdad and, following the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258, Cairo. This status quo came to an end in 1517, when the Ottoman emperor Selim I was named the first of the Ottoman Caliphs following the conquest of Cairo and the capture of the last Abassid Caliph, Al-Mutawakkil III.

It is here that we see at least an inkling of Öcalan's later thoughts regarding the state. Consistently, Öcalan stresses the importance of religion to maintaining state power, whether that religion be of the ancient god-king variety, more modern monotheism, or the

"quasi-religion[18]" of nationalism. Each form of religion buttresses a different form of state, with monotheistic religions like Islam and Christianity lending themselves to a feudal state under a Sultan who is framed, not as a god, but as "the shadow of God."[19]

This combination of religious rule and indirect governance allowed Kurdish tribal leaders to keep control over their tribes and act as clients and brokers with the central state. At the same time it legitimized the rule of tribal sheikhs over their kinsmen, and of those men over their wives and children: the Ottoman Empire as a whole was a macrocosm of the religious-patriarchal relations which defined the role of tribal sheikh. The Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925 sought to restore this status quo.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Ottoman Empire made multiple attempts to reform its army, administration and society to compete with European rivals. The primary legacy of this era was the implementation of a limited level of centralized governance via the *Tanzimat* reforms, which the Turkish republic would use for much of its history and which disempowered tribal leaders somewhat.

A discussion of the Armenian genocide is largely outside the scope of this analysis, but suffice to say that the genocidists were spurred on by accusations of disloyalty and separatism. This was a different understanding of separatism than had prevailed in previous times: the guilty party was the ethnicity, not the individual leaders or dynasties set up as intermediaries. In the sixteenth century, Balkan vassal-princes could simply be violently replaced if they were suspected of rebellion. In the twentieth century, at least in the case of the Armenians, that suspicion (and thus, that violence) fell on an entire people.

Despite these reforms, and despite an alliance with the central powers, it was not enough. The Ottoman Empire was carved up following defeat in the First World War, and

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[18] Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, Trans. Anonymous. Eds. Anonymous. Cologne: Mesopotamian Publishers, 2011, pp. 15.

[19] Öcalan, *Beyond State, Power and Violence.* Trans. Michael Schiffman and Havin Gunesser. PM Press, 2023. Original published 2004, pp. 227.

they very nearly lost much of Anatolia to the Treaty of Sèvres before it was renegotiated following Mustafa Kemal's resistance war and the intervention of the United States. The trauma of the empire's dismemberment at the hands of Arab rebels and imperial powers laid the groundwork for the Kemalist doctrine: the empire was lost, but Turkey would not surrender one more inch of Anatolia to external powers or internal separatists. That trauma would be reinforced generation to generation, as every schoolchild was shown what fate outsiders and separatists had wanted for Turkey, and what fate Atatürk had saved them from; Lundgren quotes a Turkish foreign minister as saying: "We all have a Sèvres obsession. All of us… from our elementary school education… have been introduced to the Sèvres map. We can never forget that map."[20]

The early Turkish Republic

The emergence of the Turkish republic following Ottoman defeat in the first world war precipitated a sea change in the relationship between the Turkish center and the Kurdish periphery of Anatolia. The relations which had attained beforehand were no longer acceptable to Mustafa Kemal's modernizing and centralizing project. This meant that alliances with Kurdish tribes could now only be temporary accommodations. In a continuation of the *Tanzimat* reforms, the Turkish republic aimed to incorporate eastern Anatolia as a directly-administered territory of the republic, in the style of Western unitary nation-states such as the French Republic.[21] Thus, the concept of the frontier, and thus the conditions of Kurdish lifestyle and the political arrangements which had perpetuated that lifestyle, fell into the crosshairs of the Kemalist state-building project.

In addition to the state-building project, the Kurds came into the crosshairs of the Turkish nation-building project. Mustafa Kemal aimed to create a unified Turkish national

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[20] Åsa Lundgren. *The Unwelcome Neighbour: Turkey's Kurdish Policy.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 21
[21] Özcan, pp. 68-72

identity separate from religion, with all citizens of the Turkish republic being by definition

Turks, but not vice versa as Turkey had renounced irredentist ambitions.[22] Theoretically this

was a form of inclusive civic nationalism, exemplified by the sayings "We have to recognize

the Turkishness of anyone who says 'I am a Turk'"[23] and "Happy is the one who calls himself

a Turk."[24] However, in practice it was often not enough to say "I am a Turk:" such sayings

must be read alongside policies such as the 1924 decree banning Kurdish schools and

religious organizations.[25] There is another saying, popularized decades later, which could be

read as a companion to the "Happy is the man" saying: "Spit in the face of he who calls you a

Kurd."[26] Mustafa Kemal's project was not merely one of promoting togetherness under a

republican political system, but of homogenizing through "forcible inclusion."[27]

      Other forms of identity and affiliation, such as tribal affiliation, were inherently seen

as divisive and anti-Turkish under this framework, and thus the Turkish state moved to break

down these sites of identity. This policy, combined with secularization policies, prompted

thirty Kurdish rebellions from 1923 to 1938.[28] However, these rebellions cannot be

characterized as "national" in character, but rather as Islamic and tribal rebellions: they were

never able to organize outside of the lines of tribal structure, and were put down through the

same strategies of playing one tribe against the other that had been used by imperial cores for

millennia, despite those strategies no longer being accepted as a permanent status quo in

official ideology. Thus, the last and longest Kurdish rebellion before the rise of the PKK – the

Dersim rebellion of 1937-1938 – lasted between six and twenty-one months, depending on

whether the end date is marked as the execution of the rebellion's leaders in 1937 or the

Dersim massacre of 1938.[29]

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[22] Michael M. Gunter. *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, pp. 7
[23] Gunter, pp. 31
[24] Özcan, pp. 72
[25] Gunter. pp . 5
[26] Gunter, pp. 6
[27] Gunter, pp. 32
[28] Gunter, pp. 42-43
[29] Gunter, pp. 44

The Dersim Rebellion forms an important case study for Turkish policy towards its Kurdish population, and of the cycle of violence which would characterize the later Turkish-PKK conflict. The Dersim rebellion was sparked, according to Lundgren, in part by attempts to "Turkicize" the region. However, this should not be seen as necessarily a sort of national conflict between two set ethnicities. Rather, the justifications given by the Turkish state in 1934 and 1935 during the leadup to the rebellion were based on the supposed backwardness of the region: local tribal leaders were reframed as criminals and bandits, and thus not to be dealt with through political negotiation but through the force of the law. The rebellion was, much like the others of the pre-PKK era, characterized by tribal leaders attempting to preserve their tribe's status, their own power, and the way of life they had practiced prior to the Turkish republic's modernizing project. Thus, despite Kurdish nationalists (PKK and otherwise) laying claim to these pre-PKK rebellions,[30] these cannot be properly characterised as Kurdish national rebellions.

Nonetheless, the Turkish state (in addition to campaigning against "backwardness" and "banditry") engaged in a Turkicization project both in the leadup to and the aftermath of the Dersim rebellion.[31] Extending state power and spreading Turkish national identity were one and the same. Thus, boarding schools were established to teach the Turkish language, thousands of ethnic Kurds were deported to Western Anatolia, and Islamic institutions were broken up.[32] All of these policies serve to demonstrate how the projects of nation-building, state-building, and the suppression of Kurdish tribal structures, language and national identity (even where it only dubiously existed) were part of one and the same project, summarized by the Kemalist slogan: "One nation, one language, one flag, one state."

The other major Kurdish rebellion of the Republican era was the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion, which was even further from the goals of the PKK. The Sheikh Said rebellion was

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[30] Paul White. *The PKK: Coming Down From the Mountains.* London: Zed Books, 2015, pp. 8-9
[31] Lundgren, pp. 43-45
[32] Lundgren, pp. 45

fought against secularism first and foremost, not against Turkishness. Rather, Islam formed the unifier between disparate tribal groups as a common loyalty: a desire to restore the Ottoman caliphate or something like it in the face of the Turkish secularist and state-building project.[33] The Sheikh Said rebellion only lasted a single month before being crushed, but it is noteworthy that in this case, the two enemies which Kemalist officers had long identified as the primary internal threats to the state – Kurdish separatism and Islamism – were close allies in that early stage. In the two major rebellions between the foundation of the Turkish republic and the rise of the PKK, this reactionary program showed itself as unable to withstand the modernizing and homogenizing force of the Kemalist army.

The Sheikh Said rebellion showed that Islam could not be counted on to unify the Kurds of Anatolia against the Turkish republic, while the Dersim rebellion showed that tribal grievances, while powerful, created alliances prone to fracturing. It is in the context of these failures that Öcalan operated: a new form of organization and a new ideology would be needed to unify any future attempt at rebellion, something which could survive repression, and which had the discipline, the organization, and the ideological commitment needed to bounce back after suffering defeat in the field, rather than disintegrating as tribal and religious rebellions had.[34] As we will see, Öcalan himself came to Kurdish separatism from the left, rather than coming to the left from Kurdish separatism, but that is not the trajectory of the average PKK guerilla: most of them were not from student or academic backgrounds, but from the rural Kurdish working class.[35] In the past, such people would have rallied to tribal or Islamic leaders, but instead Anatolian Kurdistan saw an explosion of left-wing rebel groups in the 1970s, with the PKK being the most successful. The failure of tribal and religious revolts to stand up to the Turkish state thus does not explain why Öcalan himself

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[33] Gunter, pp. 4-5.
[34] It is worth noting that the Sheikh Said rebellion did have some nationalistic overtones, but it was a far cry from the PKK. The main focus was on the religious aspect.
[35] Gunter, pp. 25

turned to national-communism, since he was a socialist before he was a separatist, but it does

help explain why national-communism caught on among the Kurdish peasantry.

Other elements of the early-republican conflicts cast a light on PKK ideology and

strategy. The Kemalist concept of a unitary, indivisible nation-state where ethnic identity,

tribal affiliation, language and religion were by definition to be subordinated and

incorporated as elements of statehood would return in *Apocular* definitions of the state as a

monopolizing and entity, indeed as "the most developed and complete… unity of monopolies

[including] trade, industrial, finance and power… [with] ideological monopoly as an

indivisible part of the power monopoly."[36] It would also form a component of the late

Apocular critique of the "revolutionary state" in general and the state-socialist experiments of

the eastern bloc in particular.[37]

The Dersim rebellion was the last Kurdish rebellion before the emergence of the

PKK, but the relationship between Turkey and its Kurdish minority underwent important

developments in the decades prior to the emergence of the PKK. The policy of relocating

Kurds into Western Anatolia in order to Turkicize them – both through deportations and

economic incentives – continued throughout the pre-PKK period, resulting in ties forming

between Kurdish and Turkish students and dissidents which would form the soil out of which

the leadership cadres of the PKK and similar groups would emerge.

This was accompanied by the periodic banning and unbanning of the Kurdish

language, as well as a consistent policy whereby any assertion of Kurdish national identity or

of Kurds as a group separate from Turks, even if not accompanied by a call to action, was

branded as inciting separatism and criminalized. Lundgren argues that this was because the

mere existence of Kurdish national identity "relativizes [the official] ideology and deprives it

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[36] Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*.Trans. Anonymous. Eds. Anonymous. Cologne: Mesopotamian Publishers, 2011, pp. 10.
[37] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 37

of its status off being beyond question."[38] Thus, it can be concluded that the "One nation, one language, one flag, one state" policy continued in the era from 1938-1970, with official textbooks identifying Kurds as "Mountain Turks" and pursuing a consistent policy of assimilation.

Kurdistan remained (and remains) an underdeveloped region, both in terms of economic and human development. Since Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran are considered an underdeveloped periphery and all four powers have largely left their Kurdish regions in a semi-tribal state (with varying attempts to forcibly modernize, as discussed above), this has led to some scholars such as Paul White and Majeed Jafar to refer to Kurdistan as an "Under-underdeveloped region."[39] The mechanization of agriculture in the 1950s combined with a complete lack of industrial development in Turkish Kurdistan led to a mass exodus from the region. Those who stayed found themselves caught in a "horrendous poverty trap"[40] and largely reduced to either homelessness, underemployment in the slumlike neighbourhoods in Diyarbakir, or sharecropping. This represents a case of partial proletarianization: the consolidation of agriculture and the firing of excess labourers led to the immiseration of both the remaining agricultural labourers and of those who left for the cities, while the lack of industrialization in Kurdistan meant that many had to leave their homeland entirely. The resemblance to Marx's famous case study on Ireland, which formed the basis for much of the Marxist understanding of colonialism and its evils, is striking[41].

Early *Apocular* ideology would pick up on this dynamic and frame Kurdistan as an "internal colony," placing the Kurdish struggle for self-determination as an anti-imperialist struggle while still framing the Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian states as victims of global systems of imperialism. This allowed the PKK to make the same kind of argument which

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[38] Lundgren, pp. 40.
[39] White, pp. 7
[40] White, pp. 7
[41] Karl Marx. *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Friederich Engels (ed.) New York: International Publishers, 1972. pp. 709-712

Marx made regarding Ireland and which Lenin made regarding Poland and Ukraine:[42] that the Turks could only truly achieve self-determination and an anti-imperialist liberation struggle (themselves necessary for the ultimate transition to communism) once they abandoned their internal colony of Kurdistan. That became a point of contention between Öcalan and his Turkish comrades when he was part of the Turkish left, which was one of the causes for his leaving the Turkish left in favour of the creation of a guerilla Kurdish left.[43]

Education in Kurdish regions is poor and, although the Turkish republic has pursued a policy of unitary governance, its ability to effectively provide services in the Kurdish regions of Anatolia is limited. Thus, to a certain extent, the systems of tribal-imperial cooperation were revived as tribal-state cooperation, with the Turkish state acting through intermediaries, albeit more reluctantly than previous powers in Anatolia. One example of this is the village guard system, which would form a key dynamic in the Turkish-PKK war.

The village guard system consists of employing local civilians – paid or unpaid – as part-time watchmen to report on, deter, and in some cases to fight directly against PKK militants. The term dates back to 1923, but the system as it stands in Kurdistan was established in 1985 via an amendment to the 1923 village guards act. The rationale was that the regular army could not patrol an area as large and disparate as the Kurdish highlands, and thus required local assistance, as is often the case in guerilla conflicts. This is because any uniformed Turkish army units would have to be properly concentrated so as to avoid being picked off by guerillas. However, despite the modern name and origins of the practice, this is seen (especially by the PKK) as a continuation of millennia-old imperial-tribal policies. Hence, village guards are denounced not only as traitors, but as backwards, tribal, or feudal. Unlike previous generations of Kurdish auxiliaries, the village guards do not provide their own command echelon. They also don't control territory outside their home villages, and are

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[42] Vladimir Lenin. *Critical Remarks on the National Question: The Right of Nations to Self-Determination.* Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971. Original published 1916. pp. 108
[43] White, pp. 16

not useful for offensive operations. This is a consequence of the Turkish government's – and the PKK's – efforts to tear down the tribal/feudal structures of Kurdish society, thereby hampering their own ability to control the region when things got out of hand.

Pre-PKK developments on the Left

The far-Left experienced a period of ascendency in the years leading up to the 1971 coup. Indeed, their activities and the inability of the civilian government to contain them was the main justification given for that coup. The Turkish Left was divided along ideological lines, with the status of Kurdistan being one of the more divisive issues. Interestingly, the legacy of Mustafa Kemal was another topic of division, with some being a kind of "Left-Kemalists[44]" while others – including Mahir Cayan, a major influence on Öcalan – rejecting Atatürk's legacy entirely as nationalistic, chauvanistic, and fundamentally incompatible with socialism.[45]

There is some history to back a reinterpretation of Mustafa Kemal as a sort of socialist revolutionary, or at least of reconciling Kemalism with socialism. His practice was secularizing, and after 1960 the Kemalist officers did make a *de facto* alliance with left-wing forces, albeit a temporary one, including enshrining the right to strike and allowing left-wing (but never pro-Kurdish) publications and parties to work openly. Indeed, in an address to the CHP, Mustafa Kemal said that "If communism is needed for this country, *we* [the military] will bring it."[46] This quote is quite illuminating as, in context, it refers more to Atatürk's commitment to the principle that revolution must come from above than to his commitment to revolution itself or to its specific content. The idea latent within Atatürk's political practice is that monarchies and republics, capitalism and socialism, liberalism and conservatism, reform and revolution, and so on come and go, but what matters is that the change is brought

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[44] White, pp. 13
[45] Gunter, pp. 29
[46] Özcan, pp. 86

in by a strong military elite such that this elite maintains its preeminence within the state.[47] Özcan emphasizes how little Atatürk actually changed over the course of his "revolution": while the old "head" (the sultan) was replaced with a new one (the president), the army remained as the "backbone" of the state, and the institutions of governance brought from the *Tanzimat* period remained essentially unchanged, despite the restructuring of the Turkish state into a secular republic.[48] Late *Apocular* thought would pick this up as a point of resounding criticism against the state as such: that whether under capitalism, communism, a monarchy, a republic, or any other system, the "warrior ruling clique" would maintain its power and the state would exist, first and foremost, for its own benefit and its own perpetuation, and not, as Lenin would have it, for the interest of one class or another.

The largest groups included the Turkish communist party - Marxist Leninist (TKP/ML), the Popular Liberation Army of Turkey (THKO), and the Popular Liberation Party of Turkey (the THKP), which is of particular note because its successor, the AYOD, counted Öcalan among its members after the 1971 military coup and subsequent crackdown.[49] The THKP sought inspiration from the Cuban revolution and guerillas in Latin America, particularly the famous Che Guevara.[50] This meant, among other things, a synthesis of the Maoist doctrine of a protracted people's war with the emphasis on the urban intelligentsia and proletariat within classical Marxism-Leninism. Hence, the "Urban Guerilla," which while primarily a tactical term was also a moral and a psychological one: in one of the more well-known formulations of the concept, Carlos Marighella states that "From the moral point of view, the urban guerrilla has an undeniable superiority. This moral superiority is what sustains the urban guerrilla,"[51] and outlines seven "sins of the urban

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[47] Özcan, pp. 64-71
[48] ibid
[49] Özcan, pp. 89-90
[50] White, pp. 10
[51] Marighella, Carlos. (2016), ed.Christophe Kistler. *Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla*, Foreign language press (original published 1969), pp. 7.

guerilla," including inexperience, boastfulness, vanity, overconfidence, rashness, inopportune attacks, and lack of planning.[52] While several of these are tactical flaws, we can see the roots of the PKK's ideas of "becoming PKK" and of the necessity of personal and psychological transformation for party cadres within such Guevarist and Maoist writings. At that time, Öcalan's main focus was on a socialist transformation in Turkey, not on forming a socialist Kurdish state; such separatist ambitions would only come after his first imprisonment.

Öcalan's seven months in prison in 1971 were the start of a political awakening. He had already been involved in socialist politics, but only peripherally. He was not the committed revolutionary who would emerge from his stint in prison.

The Early PKK

From the very beginning of the proto-PKK in 1974, Abdullah Öcalan was an overwhelming figure. In the earliest days, before a permanent name was settled on, it was known as the *Apocular* group, meaning the followers of *Apo* (a nickname for Öcalan). Perhaps taking his cues from Lenin, Öcalan and the early PKK cut themselves off from both the rest of the Turkish Left and the rest of the Kurdish national movement.

While their relations with the broader Turkish Left were fraught, their relationship with other Kurdish separatists in Turkey was outright violent: the other Kurdish groups were either too fainthearted or were actively reactionary, per the PKK, and among their earliest targets were rival Kurdish groups.[53] The reasons for this were manifold, incorporating both basic strategic thinking and the history of Kurdistan. While Turkish Leftists had some overlap in terms of recruitment (Öcalan, most notably, had gotten his start there), they had little presence in Kurdistan itself and did not directly compete with the PKK for recruits and resources. The same cannot be said of other Kurdish groups, whether traditional-nationalist,

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[52] Ibid, pp. 87-88
[53] Gunter, pp. 46-47

tribal, or the increasingly prominent national communists (of which the PKK was only one group). Thus, there could be few accommodations with such competing groups.

The less concrete reason for this conflict was the history of Kurdish-state relations. Historically, as we have seen, divisions among the Kurds – primarily tribal ones – were exploited to create collaborators, and to nip rebellion in the bud: tribal leaders would choose to support or oppose one ruler over another, to comply, or to rebel, based on the interests of their individual tribe:[54] they would not take up arms for greater units than the tribe, and would not question their leaders' orders to join or abandon one side or another.[55] Indeed, the PKK rebellion was the first time, according to former vice chairman of the CIA national intelligence council G.E. Fuller, that Kurdish groups had been able to sustain themselves without the backing of "regional parties" (i.e., states).[56] This history puts Öcalan's stressing of unity and the PKK's violent actions against other Kurdish separatist groups into context.

By 1984, the PKK had emerged as virtually the sole face of Kurdish opposition in Turkey. This was due not only to their violent suppression of rival groups, but also to their uncompromising commitment to violence against the Turkish state. Given the situation faced by those Kurds who still lived in Kurdistan at the time, it should come as no surprise that violence would seem an attractive option: institutional avenues for advocacy were closed off, as the response to attempts through political action or appeals in the newspapers was largely the same as responses to violence: arrests, censorship, and being tried on charges of treason, promoting separatism, and/or promoting terrorism. Thus, the cost of committing violence was not significantly higher than that of civil disobedience.

While that did not mean that every Kurdish nationalist became a PKK militant (as we will see, the PKK expected much of its followers), it did mean there was little incentive, if one was already involved in Kurdish nationalist agitation, to avoid association with terrorist

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[54] Özcan, pp. 138-153
[55] Özcan, pp. 144
[56] Özcan, pp. 138

groups. Thus, the PKK and its front organizations managed to pick up the lion's share of the Kurdish separatist movement, eclipsing their competitors.

Another factor leading to the PKK's dominance was their ability to escape the crackdowns of 1980 by setting up training bases and training camps in Syria. The Assad government had a fraught relationship with its own Kurdish population,[57] but recognized that the PKK's main fight was with Syria's Turkish rivals, and a PKK branch would divert some local Kurdish discontent towards another target, and function as a bargaining chip Syria used in negotiations with Turkey. The Syrian bases became a staple of PKK training and military strategy, providing a refuge from pursuing Turkish forces and a spot to isolate new militants from both enemy action and their own communities during the process of PKK inculcation.[58]

The Turkish-PKK war

In 1984, the PKK formally declared war on the Turkish state. The first major operations, a series of attacks on military and police targets in Siirt and Hakkari provinces, were met with unexpected success. Unexpected both by the Turkish authorities, and by the PKK itself. Özcan describes the mood on the eve of the attacks as one of fatalism and even defeatism. PKK leadership expected to make an attack, to make a statement, but ultimately to be defeated and captured either through the direct force of the Turkish army or through treason from within. There was little hope that their attacks – the culmination of years of preparations – would be anything more than symbolic.[59] When they did find success, modest though it was (a stormed police station and a dozen dead soldiers is hardly a catastrophic blow to the Turkish state), it buoyed morale within the PKK for some time.[60] Despite these

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[57] Anja Flach, Michael Knapp and Ercan Ayboga. *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan.* Pluto, Press, 2016, pp. 24-26. The history of collaboration and conflict between Kurds and the Syrian Arab Republic is equally complex to that within Turkey. In brief, the Syrian policy was more focused on expropriating Kurdish land and moving Arab settlers into Kurdistan to Arabize the region along a so-called "Arab Belt," rather than attempting to displace and assimilate Kurds as is the Turkish case.

[58] Gunter, pp. 27

[59] Özcan, pp. 197

[60] Özcan, pp. 198

and the successes to come over the following decade, the PKK leadership never shook the feeling that they were always on the knife's edge, one false move from catastrophe. This was realistic, given Turkey's status as a heavily armed NATO country with a proven track record of suppressing Kurdish revolts and communist movements alike. Nonetheless, this attitude would come back to haunt them in the 1990s, when strategic thinking would become ossified and a focus on preventing defeat over achieving victory would lead the PKK old guard to become suspicious – often to the point of murder – of the intentions of the young guard.

The exact details of the conduct of guerilla war are largely outside the scope of this examination. Suffice to say that, due to the conditions present in Kurdistan in the 1980s and their own ruthless tactics, the PKK achieved remarkable success. They were able to frame the deaths of their militants as martyrdoms, spurring recruitment. The Turkish state had created a discursive environment which left the PKK able to control the narrative completely within Turkish Kurdistan. Because anything short of renouncing Kurdishness entirely was grounds for denunciation as a separatist even before the PKK war, there was little room for compromise in the discursive space. Every Kurd had to either collaborate with the village guards and risk targeting by the PKK, or refuse and risk targeting by the Turkish security forces. Since neither side recognized the legitimacy of traditional Kurdish tribal leaders (some of the first PKK assassinations targeted such "traitorous landlords" and attacks against "feudal elements" often spilled over into violence against uninvolved civilians),[61] there was no-one who could credibly negotiate on behalf of communities. The choice of which side to support was therefore an atomized one, especially once the PKK began appealing directly to women who were not historically thought of as people who made such choices.[62]

It is worth mentioning here that, while the PKK is rightly known for its violence, Ünal's estimates show that in the period from 1984-2008, Turkish forces initiated over twice

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[61] Özcan,pp. 198-199
[62] Özcan, pp. 145 mentions that in Kurdish tribes, women have traditionally lacked "The right of words," ie. the right to participate in decision-making.

as many "violent incidents" as PKK militants.[63] Ünal, in the process of arguing that the Turkish "rural evacuation" policy was effective in the medium term, demonstrated that there was little to no connection between the level of PKK violence and the level of state violence, and cited statistics from the US government suggesting that between 370,000 and a million Kurds had been displaced over three years by this single policy of "rural evacuation."[64]

White, on the other hand, estimates that "some 3,500 Kurdish villages have been destroyed, rendering some 4 million people homeless."[65] Douek's thesis regarding the effect of violence upon perceived insurgent legitimacy is highly relevant here: the state inflicting the lion's share of civilian deaths in South Africa, especially when compared to the highly restrained ANC armed wing, played a crucial role in building up the ANC's legitimacy.[66] The PKK, while it did target civilians perceived as collaborators or suspected of treachery, did not directly displace over a third of a million people in a span of three years. Even when resorting to suicide bombings in 1996, the targets were first and foremost military, with the first suicide bombing "reportedly kill[ing] ten Turkish soldiers and… seriously wounding a further fourty-four."[67] Like the MK in South Africa, their comparative focus on Turkish military targets compared to the indiscriminate use of violence employed by the Turkish state meant that, when neutrality was taken off the table, far fewer Kurds had been directly attacked by the PKK than by the state.[68] This, combined with a highly effective propaganda apparatus, allowed the PKK to vastly swell its numbers despite combat losses in the 1990s.

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[63] Ünal, pp. 60-6. This includes the period during the unilateral ceasefire of 1993, when the Turkish state accelerated deportations. It is noteworthy that, per Ünal, 1992 saw approximately 200 violent incidents initiated by the PKK out of 1200 total, while 1993 saw less than 100 initiated by the PKK out of 1500 total.

[64] ibid

[65] White, pp. 7

[66] Daniel Douek. *Counterinsurgency's Impact on Transitions from Authoritarianism: The Case of South Africa.* Montreal: McGill University, 2011. pp. 12-17. The case of the PKK provides a potential counter-example to the ANC: what the ANC might have looked like without the ideological factors Douek identifies as responsible for their restraint, given the extreme levels of repression employed by both the South African and Turkish states.

[67] White, pp. 138

[68] The South African comparison should not be taken too far: the ANC's armed wing, unlike the PKK, did not target other anti-Apartheid militias, eclipsing them largely through a more appealing ideology and less discriminatory recruitment practices. In addition, as Douek establishes on pp. 117, avoiding civilian casualties and collateral damage was a key part of MK training, while no such parallel exists in PKK inculcation.

The first of a series of unilateral ceasefires was declared by the PKK in 1993, when they were rising in power.[69] This provides evidence against the window-dressing thesis, and suggests an evolution of the ideology may have been taking place even at that early time. A classical doctrine of Maoist people's war, on which early *Apocular* thought was heavily based, left little room for unilateral ceasefires. Throughout its early history, the PKK had used the willingness of other Kurdish opposition groups to compromise with the Turkish state as a bludgeon, denouncing them as traitors and positioning itself as the most hardline Kurdish separatists in Turkey. The timing of the 1993 ceasefire suggests that changes were brewing within the PKK and within Öcalan's mind well before the tide turned against the PKK.

Until 1992, the PKK maintained extensive training camps in Northern Syria. As previously mentioned, these formed a lynchpin of early PKK survival strategies, but by the time the Turkish state had formed the agreement to close down the training camps with the Assad government, in 1992, the PKK were sufficiently well established that they could set up camps in Iraqi Kurdistan. This move led to conflict with the Barzanis, who have little interest in antagonizing Turkey and view the PKK as rivals. The Barzanis meanwhile have been characterized by the PKK as feudalistic, bourgeois nationalist, and various other adjectives similar to their characterizations of rival movements in Turkish Kurdistan in the 1980s. In this aspect, the PKK has changed little since its inception: PKK attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan occurred as late as 2012, in the period of escalating violence of 2011-2012 prior to Ocalan negotiating a 2013 ceasefire with Turkish president Erdogan[70]. The Barzanis as a whole are largely outside the scope of this study, as their goals, organizational structure, relationship to the Iraqi state, as well as the Iraqi state itself, differ in almost every way from that of the PKK and the Turkish state. They are nonetheless worth mentioning as they do demonstrate that

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[69] White, pp. 127
[70] White, pp. 84-87, 100-101

while national communism was effective at forging a unified Kurdish identity in Turkish

Kurdistan, its success was not inevitable across Kurdistan more broadly.

The war escalated considerably in 1996, after a series of attacks by the Turkish army

in late 1995 left millions of people homeless. Possibly in response to the destruction of so

many homes and villages, the PKK launched its first suicide bombing. The bomber, named

Zilan, blew herself up at a Turkish military parade in Dersim, killing ten soldiers and

wounding forty-four. While suicide bombing did not become a major part of PKK operations

as it did for Jihadi gorups, this nonetheless represented a turning point in an already bloody

conflict which became all the bloodier as the PKK lionized and justified Zilan's actions as a

heroic martyrdom against a genocidal state.[71] Over the next three years, fifteen suicide

bombings were conducted. Although they were directed at military targets (once again in

contrast to Jihadi groups),[72] the effect was nonetheless to sow terror and chaos in their wake.

After Öcalan's capture

Following a period of exile and several unsuccessful attempts, Turkish intelligence

captured Öcalan in Nairobi, Kenya in February 1999, and he was subsequently imprisoned.

He remains in prison to this day. During his time in prison, Öcalan read and wrote

voraciously, using the time to study thinkers such as Ernst Gellner and Murray Bookchin,

with whom he maintained a correspondence. He produced significant writings, some of

which formed part of a court defence. These prison writings form the basis of late *Apocular*

thought. He continued to be in contact with his supporters, remaining as a sort of spiritual and

to a large extent temporal head of the PKK: from prison, Ocalan brokers, enforces and ends

various ceasefires and deals with the Turkish state[73], and attempting to reorganize the party

around a new political philosophy. His success in this last regard has been limited.

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[71] White, pp. 138-139
[72] ibid
[73] See for instance White, pp. 124

Despite Öcalan's near total monopoly on PKK discourse and political authority, his capture did not "decapitate" the organization. While initially sentenced to death following his trial in 1999, Öcalan's sentence was commuted to life in prison on Imrali island, both so as not to create a martyr and because Öcalan had emerged as a relatively conciliatory voice among the PKK. While there have been times when Öcalan was made to tell his followers to lay down their arms – including one famous incident where he appeared on television heavily drugged – such attempts by the Turkish state to use him as a blunt instrument have been unsuccessful. I hold that Öcalan has brokered – and cancelled – the various Turkish-PKK ceasefires since his capture fully under his own power.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Rojava

Arguably the most important development in the PKK's history since Öcalan's capture was the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and the establishment of Rojava in the ensuing power vacuum in northern Syria by its Syrian branch, the PYD (Democratic Union Party). While the PYD denies official connections with the PKK in order to maintain relations with the United States, which designates the PKK as a terrorist group but had a strategic interest in allying with the PYD as a proxy against the Islamic State, the reverence for Ocalan[74] and the continued institutional and individual ties with the PKK make this claim clearly a matter of diplomatic fiction, rather than a genuine split. The PYD had long existed primarily as a sort of reserve force for the PKK, as their main goal was not to try and take over the Syrian state, but to maintain the Syrian training bases which were so important to PKK strategy. They, unlike the PKK, had a relationship with the Syrian state similar to the traditional relationship between Kurds and central governments: sometimes acting as intermediaries, sometimes at odds, sometimes in an uneasy peace. This strategic function is

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[74] See for instance: Anonymous, "Black Day; thousands in Rojava deny the international plot." *pydrojava.org.* Published February 16, 2020. Note how this article refers to Ocalan as the "Kurdish people's leader" and features statements directly tying actions against Ocalan to attacks on Rojava and their ideological foundations.

one of the reasons why the PYD's claims to be unaffiliated with the PKK are so implausible: the Syrian bases formed a cornerstone of the PKK's strategy, and simply giving them up to an unaffiliated organization would be foolish. When the Syrian state ordered the PKK bases closed down in 1992,[75] it is hardly a surprise that the PKK would opt to create a sister-organization to reopen that door. Thus, while they may not be under the direct command of PKK leadership, they can be considered a regional branch or at least an affiliate of the PKK.

With all of that said, there are several ways in which the PYD more successfully embodies the principles of late *Apocular* thought than does its Turkish counterpart. This is in part because, unlike the PKK, the PYD has not been fighting a guerilla war for the past 40 years. More importantly perhaps, after the Syrian Civil War, the PYD experienced the same kind of explosive growth as the PKK did in the 1990s – growing from a small group of militants to a mass movement controlling large territories – but under the auspices of the new philosophy. Thus, the majority of PYD cadres have never been inculcated into the early *Apocular* thinking, and the leadership lacks the experience of conducting mass purges, obsessing over traitors, or advancing the all-or-nothing maximalism of the old PKK. Giving up on separatism was also never something the PYD had to grapple with, as they had never been tasked with creating an independent Kurdistan. All this has meant that the new cadres have been integrated far more successfully into the PYD than they ever were into the PKK, with many new members not even coming from Kurdish communities, but being displaced Arabs, Yezidis, and Assyrians thrown together by the chaos of civil war.

Despite more-closely cleaving to late *Apocular* ideals than their Turkish counterparts, the PYD has nonetheless been implicated in human rights abuses. While in some cases these accusations are spurious (one author cites a negotiated restorative justice settlement being

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[75] Gunter, pp. 27

cast as a human rights abuse because the perpetrator was made to negotiate an agreement with the victims rather than being tried and incarcerated),[76] others – such as allegations of kidnapping and assassinations of anti-PYD agitators and politically-active figures within opposition parties – are not.[77] While evaluating each of these is largely outside the scope of the current study, it is important to remember in all cases that the PKK and their affiliates are armed insurgencies, whatever else they may be (Marxist-Leninist vanguard party, democratic confederation, or whatever else), and that violence is part-and-parcel of such an organization.

During the PYD's heyday, they attained international acclaim as being among the first forces to successfully blunt the advance of the Islamic State, and established a de facto administration over northern Syria they termed Rojava. Supported by US aid and weapons stolen from the Islamic State and the retreating Syrian army, they became one a major contender in the Syrian Civil War. However, they have faced attacks from Turkey since the US withdrew support in 2019. Although they were prepared for these attacks, they have weakened their position and significantly reduced their territory. Time will tell whether they are able to negotiate a settlement with the Syrian state and establish a parallel democratic confederal structure, whether they will content themselves with a little regional autonomy, whether they will evolve into a more traditional liberal opposition, or whether they will ultimately be crushed by one power or another, relegated to a footnote in history as a doomed *cause celebre* of the libertarian Left alongside Makhnovia and Revolutionary Catalonia.

For the purpose of studying the transition from early to late *Apocular* thought, the PYD is instructive in two ways. First, it provides, if not a perfect control case, then at least a glimpse of what the PKK might look like had it adopted late *Apocular* thought more consistently in its organizational structure. In contrasting the insular and oligarchic nature of the PKK to the more open structure of the PYD – which has allowed new supporters and

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[76] Revolution in Rojava, pp. xx
[77] Human Rights Watch. *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria.* June 18, 2014. Accessed Feb. 2023., section 6.

non-Kurds to rise high in its ranks– we can also see the limitations of the effect a change in ideology has on the praxis of an organization. Even with Öcalan's prophet-like role within the PKK, his exhortations have accomplished little in the face of organizational inertia and a stagnant external status quo. Indeed, the invocation of Öcalan's charisma has largely served to maintain the rigid power of entrenched "trunk" cadres.[78] Meanwhile, the smaller, less-stagnant PYD and the rapidly changing on-the-ground situation in Syria provided far more fertile ground for an ideological shift to become embedded in organizational culture.

None of this is to dismiss the PKK as incapable of change or growth. As White pointed out, the share of women in the leadership cadres of the PKK has grown steadily since the 1995 Congress, particularly following Öcalan's capture and the transition to late *Apocular* thought. Most notably, the party aims for at least 40 percent female membership and elected a female co-leader in 2013.[79] The PKK's main success since Öcalan's capture at adopting the new ideology has been in the strengthening of its parliamentary wing(s) and their integration into the party's overall strategy. Such groups, while being a poor substitute for the PKK membership expansion which was squandered in the 1990s, nonetheless represent a step forward for the PKK and a valuable asset in their attempts to negotiate with the Turkish state.

Despite these steps and other smaller organizational evolutions, the core of the PKK is still a highly centralized apparatus where the leader, Cemil Bayik, is unquestionable save by Öcalan.[80] In the 1990s, this centralized model made it difficult to govern the territories they won and lost them many supporters to internal purges and factionalism.[81] By contrast, the PYD has been highly successful in absorbing new recruits, administering territory via a four-tiered council system,[82] and co-opting other groups into their orbit, rarely having to

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[78] Özcan, pp. 222-227
[79] White, pp. 144
[80] White, pp. 23-28. Bayik, much like Stalin, holds what is nominally a "first among equals" role in the PKK's collective "high authority," but is effectively in charge, and the high authority can only be vetoed by Öcalan.
[81] Özcan, pp. 206-222
[82] Flach, Knapp and Ayboga, pp. 87-91

completely destroy them as the PKK did. A combination of military success, promises of nondiscrimination and political representation, their jihadist enemies' brutality and the Kurdish success at providing infrastructure, services, and relatively high degrees of law and order in Kurdish-controlled territories has resulted in many Arabs siding with Rojava.[83] In the majority-Arab canton of Cizire, the executive council is co-chaired by an Arab sheikh, and many Arab women have even signed up with the YPJ (Rojava's women's defence units).[84]

None of this is to say that had the PKK been a democratic confederalist organization from day one, they would have overthrown the Turkish state or achieved some other grand goal. The circumstances in Syria in the 2010s and 2020s are dramatically different from those in Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s: the Syrian state left a power vacuum during its disorderly retreat from Syrian Kurdistan, meaning that the PYD could take the time to consolidate itself and fill that vacuum, rather than having to first drive out the security forces of a far better-equipped state as the PKK did. More importantly to this analysis, late *Apocular* thought grew out of the challenges and, indeed, the failures of the PKK and Öcalan's leadership. Without the failures and shortcomings of early *Apocular* thought and practice, there would be no late *Apocular* thought, even had Öcalan pciked up *The Ecology of Freedom* in 1984.

Covering this historical background has several purposes. We have established why and how the PKK rose to such prominence among the Kurds of Turkey and, eventually, beyond. We have a grasp of what historical understandings of nationality and statehood have informed *Apocular* thought, particularly late *Apocular* thought. Finally, we have a grasp on the material circumstances and military exigencies which informed Öcalan's reevaluation of Marxism-Leninism in the mid-1990s. With historical influences covered, we will turn to the

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[83] Flach, Knapp and Ayboga, pp. 23-26
[84] Flach, Knapp and Ayboga, pp. 25

chief philosophical influences on Öcalan, namely the works of Vladimir Lenin and a brief

discussion of Murray Bookchin.

Chapter 3: Influences on Öcalan

Vladimir Lenin

Vladimir Lenin was a major influence on Öcalan's thought and practice, especially early on. Presenting himself as nothing more than a faithful student of Marx and never explicitly creating an ideology called "Leninism," he is nonetheless a major point of evolution within Marxism, particularly in terms of his prescription for what Marxists should be doing in order to bring about the communist revolution. The main works of Lenin which I have drawn upon are *State and Revolution* and *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, the latter of which especially helps shine some light on early *Apocular* thought and practice.

While reading *National Question*, it struck me how similar the situations in Ukraine under the Russian Empire were to those in Kurdistan under the Turkish republic: A people erased as merely a debased or variant form of the dominant culture ("Mountain Turks" or "Little Russia"), while simultaneously being treated legally as foreigners. Thus, they are marked out as distinct by the restrictions placed on them, despite the regime's insistence that they are the same, or they would be the same if only they were to speak a little different. In addition, expressions of Kurdish and Ukrainian cultures were hedged-in by accusations of promoting separatism[85], with the Ukrainian language discriminated against[86] and the Kurdish language outright banned[87]. Thus, since Ukraine is Lenin's main case study, it should hardly come as a surprise that his words, criteria and analysis resonated deeply with Öcalan[88].

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[85] Gunter, pp. 18 details a darkly-humorous incident in 1995 when a Turkish journalist named Ahmet Atlan imagined a world where a "Republic of Kurdey" did everything to the Turks which the Turkish Republic had done to the Kurds - banning common Turkish names like Osman, only allowing Kurdish to be spoken on television and in the newspaper, and throwing Turks in jail for saying "We are Turks, we have a language and a history." He was subsequently arrested and convicted of "promoting hatred by displaying racism or regionalism."

[86] Lenin, *National Question,* pp. 59

[87] Per Gunter, pp. 19, between 1983-1995 the Kurdish language was even banned in the context of casual conversation and folk music.

[88] Gunter, pp. 29

It is also notable that, in both cases, the reality was a little more complicated than unilateral oppression. Ukrainians (before 1918) were and Kurds (after 1918) are split between multiple countries which adopt different tactics and often take them up as clients, proxies or allies. In Lenin's day, the central powers courted Ukrainian nationalists against their Russian enemies and were able to set up a short lived pro-German government in Ukraine towards the end of the First World War. Similarly, the Syrian government -while maintaining their own aforementioned Arabization and expropriation policies- allowed the PKK to use Syrian territory in the hopes of weakening their Turkish rivals[89]. Another point of commonality is that the local leaders who traditionally led rebellions – whether Kurdish tribal leaders[90] or Ukrainian Cossack *hetmen*[91] – were historically also the same people who would be the first points of contact between the state and the Kurdish or Ukrainian periphery, and were responsible for maintaining the state's grip on those regions. It is worth noting that Abdullah Öcalan is "the only contemporary Kurdish national leader who did not come from the traditional elite classes,"[92] and that similarly, the membership of the PKK itself was from the very beginning comprised of the lowest of the lower classes, in contrast to both other Kurdish nationalist groups and to other Leftist groups in Turkey.[93] Thus, Ukrainian and Kurdish national consciousness were always compromised and complicated by legacies of resistance and collaboration. Again, these similarities help explain why Öcalan found Lenin's work so applicable to his own situation.

In terms of how he used Lenin's work, the first echo of *On the National Question* can be found in Öcalan's split with the Turkish left. Lenin denounced the non-socialist Ukrainian

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[89] Gunter, pp. 27
[90] Lundgren, pp. 43-45
[91] For an example we can look at the famous Mazepa: his rebellion, so celebrated by Ukrainian nationalists and so reviled by Russian nationalists today, was sparked by Peter the Great's decision to remove him from his hetmanate in favour of Alexander Menshikov, having gained his position by accusing his predecessor of disloyalty to that same tsar. It is also noteworthy that much like Kurdish rebellions, Mazepa's rebellion had the assistance of Russia's regional rival, the Swedish Empire.
[92] Gunter, pp. 25
[93] Gunter, pp. 25

and Polish nationalists,[94] but he denounced also the "opportunist" socialists among the Great

Russians who denied the right of secession to Ukrainians, Poles and other subaltern

nationalities, citing their indifference towards the struggles of the oppressed nations as a

major point of weakness in their socialism as a whole,[95] For Lenin, such insistence on the

unity of the Russian Empire undermined the liberatory aspirations of those socialists who

insisted on it, as (quoting Marx on Ireland): "What a misfortune it is for a nation to have

subjugated another." Thus, such insistence materially and objectively supported the interests

of the Russian-chauvanist aristocracy and bourgeoisie."[96]

Here we can see the basis for Öcalan's split with the Turkish Left, as well as for his

fight against other, less-radical Kurdish groups who sought Kurdish autonomy without

separation or a Kurdistan without communism. Given the emphasis on the right of separation

and the derision Lenin throws at the concept of "national-cultural autonomy," it may seem

that Öcalan abandoning separation as a goal in favour of a "democratic federal republic"

represents a fundamental break with Lenin. Öcalan walks a fine line in his late writings: he is

always quick to say that nations have a right to separation and to forming their own state, but

that actually doing so is not in the Kurds' best interests as it doesn't result in greater freedom

in practice,[97] and that it tends to lead to reintegration into a capitalist, imperialist international

order regardless of the socialist aspirations of the new state.[98] This is something Lenin was

acutely aware of: he never placed national separation as a good in itself, but merely affirmed

the right of subaltern nations to separate if they so desired, as for him the "right of

self-determination" was synonymous with the right of secession.[99]

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[94] Lenin, *National Question,* pp. 25-27
[95] Lenin, *National Question,* pp. 78
[96] Lenin, *National Question,* pp. 81-85
[97] Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism,* pp. 33
[98] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 161
[99] Lenin, *National Question,* pp. 64

But what of cultural-national autonomy? Lenin was quite firm that such a thing was impracticable and that it was a hallmark of bourgeois nationalism and was in no way related to self-determination. Again, the devil is in the details. The autonomy late *Apocular* thought seeks may be articulated to the state in terms of language rights and an end to national oppression, in a fashion which White compares to the "national-cultural autonomy" advocated by Lenin's Austrian interlocutors[100]. However, it also includes autonomous governance structures and self-defense units not just for minority nations, but for "society" and "the people" as a whole *as directly opposed to* the power of the state. It means an end to Weberian statehood by enshrining what Lenin described as "dual power[101]". Unlike in Lenin, this dual power is not understood as a temporary situation that represents a golden opportunity to consolidate power around one or the other. Rather, it represents a formalization of the dialectic between state and society which has always existed and always will.[102]

Another major work of Lenininsm which is relevant to both early and late *Apocular* thought is *State and Revolution.* Here, Lenin argues for the dictatorship of the proletariat and sketches, based on the experience of the Paris Commune, what that would look like. He opposes himself to those who seek to merely take control of the state as well as those who merely seek to destroy it and not build up a new state in its place. At several points, Öcalan mirrors Lenin's own arguments in *State and Revolution* back at him. While *Beyond State* is full of praise for the "great revolutionary," Öcalan nonetheless accuses him – alongside social democrats and national liberation movements – of "taking a shortcut"[103] by promising to the people that "First we will conquer the state, and then everyone will have their due."[104]

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[100] White, pp. 127-128
[101] Vladimir Lenin. "The Dual Power." *Pravda* No. 28, April 9, 1917. Trans. Isaacs Bernard. In Marxists internet archive, accessed June 2023.
[102] Öcalan, *Beyond State*, pp. 177
[103] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 179
[104] Ibid., pp. 178

With that said, his picture of what the PKK should look like as well as how a democratic confederation should organize itself looks somewhat similar to the picture Lenin paints of the dictatorship of the proletariat, just with the understanding that parallel to this structure there will be an steadily-weakening bourgeois state. Namely, both argue for all bureaucrats to be annually elected and recallable at any time, putting them at the beck and call of the people.[105] Both authors directly contrast their delegates to the bureaucrats of the bourgeois state, arguing that with bureaucracy no longer a permanent profession, the administrators will truly serve the people rather than ruling over them. The main difference is that Öcalan does not think this was achieved under "real socialism," but rather that in practice Lenin took a shortcut and created a "rapacious… totalitarian and undemocratic form of capitalism."[106] It is worth mentioning here that, after years of merely criticizing the Gorbachev government as a momentary "right-deviationism[107]" and advocating a return to hardline Brezhnev-style policies, Öcalan began characterizing "real socialism" in the Soviet form (including the Brezhnev era he had once been nostalgic for) as a new, and indeed a worse, form of capitalism as early as late 1992.[108]

Finally, *What is to be done?* formed the basis of much of the PKK's agitational praxis during the early days, particularly in the period between the formation of the *Apocular* group and the formal founding of the PKK. Rather than confining themselves to one class or another, PKK agitators went out among all strata of the Kurdish people, talking to "any Kurds who would give them a hearing" and attempting to get them on board.[109] What is particularly Leninist about this practice is the insistence upon a single root cause: while all forms of

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[105] Vladimir Lenin. *State and Revolution.* London: Penguin books, 1992. Original published 1917*., pp. 90–93; Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 180

[106] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 157

[107] Özcan, pp. 108

[108] Özcan, pp. 108. 1992 as a whole was a period of vacillation for Öcalan regarding real socialism, ranging from desperate and in his own words "pretentious" optimism to disillusionment. It would take some time for his views to settle.

[109] White, pp. 29

oppression, exploitation, destitution and neglect were to be politicized,[110] the PKK agitator had to have absolute conviction in what the cause of those outrages were, which Öcalan summed up as the internal colonization of Kurdistan: "The terms 'Kurdistan,' 'colony' came to my mind… I began with two words."[111] Just as the Bolshevik was not to give one inch to reformism, nor consider any solution but the overthrow of the monarchy and the capitalist system as a whole,[112] the PKK cadre was not to accept anything less than an "independent, united and democratic Kurdistan."[113]

It is worth noting that all of these more complex interactions with Lenin come from late *Apocular* thought. Early *Apocular* thought cited Lenin extensively and uncritically as a foundational author[114] and truly believed that Stalin's USSR represented a successful implementation of his ideas.[115] Therefore, we can understand Öcalan's understanding and critiques of Lenin as a retrospective on his own earlier thought and practice: an exercise in introspection and self-critique as much as an exercise in post-Leninist theorization.

Murray Bookchin

Murray Bookchin was an American political philosopher and social ecologist who maintained a correspondence with Öcalan from the former's imprisonment until the latter's death. His magnum opus, *The Ecology of Freedom,* provided much of the framework and terminology for late *Apocular* thought. Some claim, in line with the radical change hypothesis, that it was Bookchin's writings first and foremost which allowed Öcalan to transform the PKK from "unabashed Maoists" into "libertarian municipalists," in other words that exposure Bookchin's writings formed the driving force behind the move from early to

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[110] Lenin, Vladimir I. *What is to be done? Burning Questions of Our Movement.* Trans. Chris Russel and Tim Delaney. Marxists internet archive, accessed Feb. 2023. Original published 1902, pp. 60.
[111] Özcan, pp. 92-93
[112] Lenin, *What is to be done?,* pp. 37; see also pp. 51 where Lenin argues that the agitator must never conceal their socialist convictions.
[113] Özcan, pp. 100
[114] Özcan, pp. 104
[115] Özcan, pp. 106

late *Apocular* thought.[116] As I will argue in chapter 4, I do not think this is an accurate picture

of the development of late *Apocular* thought, but there are several points in favour of this

interpretation.

First, *The Ecology of Freedom* has a very similar historiography to that employed in

late *Apocular* thought. Rather than a single form of social organization flowing out of each

given mode of production (which follow one another temporally in a necessary progression),

Bookchin pays at least as much attention to what he calls the "legacy of freedom." This, as

opposed to the "legacy of tyranny," is the horizontal social order which forms and evolves

among the people, in parallel to the vertical hierarchical social order imposed by the

emerging state via patriarchal power. Öcalan adopts this two-sided historiography, in addition

to terminology such as "legacy of freedom," "natural society," and several other key terms.

One of the main differences between the two is that Öcalan, as will be shown in

chapter 4, retains a significant Marxist element to his historiography and analysis, as well as

being far more prone to romanticization. While Bookchin dismisses goddess-worship and the

return to "natural society" as essentially silly ideas[117], Öcalan and the PKK regularly invoke

figures such as Astarte or Ishtar[118], and indeed did so in the later phases of early *Apocular*

thought as well as now. There is more of a mystical and spiritual element to Öcalan's writings

and attitude, both in style and substance, compared to Bookchin's. At the same time,

Bookchin makes a very strong distinction between the "natural society" of prehistory, the

"legacy of freedom" which has persisted under the surface from the Bronze age till now, and

the "ecological society" to come[119]. Öcalan is not nearly as consistent in his terminology, with

"natural society" or "organic society" in many instances pulling the weight of all three of

these concepts. Öcalan commits more fully to the gynocentric implications of Bookchin's

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[116] For an example, see Fornarola's article.
[117] Bookchin, pp. 17 (This section is not present in the first edition, but is from the 1991 preface)
[118] White, pp. 145
[119] Bookchin, pp. 414

framing, and maintains a far more complex, nuanced, and at times frustratingly-ambiguous understanding of nationality and ethnicity than the dismissive Bookchin.

Still, if these were the only differences between the two thinkers, it would not be inaccurate to simply refer to late *Apocular* thought as a variant of "Bookchinism." The same philosophy expressed by a less rigorous, more spiritualist voice. I do not consider late *Apocular* thought to be an evolution of Bookchin. It is foremost a progression from early *Apocular* thought which would have been possible without Bookchin, but impossible without the experience of early *Apocular* thought and the first 15 years of the Turkish-PKK war. This cannot be shown with an evaluation of Bookchin: we must turn at last to unravelling *Apocular* thought on its own terms.

Chapter 4: Apocular thought

This chapter will examine *Apocular* thought in its early and late forms, as well as offering an analysis of how the transformation took place. It will combine elements from the previous chapters, and examine their ramifications for the political theory itself.

One key aspect of the transition from early to late *Apocular* thought which came through over the course of researching the history of the PKK was how unevenly that transition occurred in the PKK itself, compared to how it occurred within the writings of Abdullah Öcalan. This contrast, and the way early *Apocular* thought and the organisational structure and modes of praxis it developed linger in the PKK, can be seen most clearly when examining the gulf between the organisation and activities of the PKK and of their Syrian sister-organisations (The PYD, the SDF, the YPG, the YPJ, and so on and so forth).

This chapter will evaluate and refute the two null hypotheses of this examination: first, that the transition from early to late *Apocular* thought represented a strategic capitulation and a new set of "window-dressing" in light of Öcalan's capture and/or the drying up of Soviet aid and the international appeal of authoritarian communism; second, that the transition from early to late *Apocular* thought represented a radical and clean break with early *Apocular* thought; one variation of this null hypothesis is that late *Apocular* thought represents nothing more or less than an importation of the social ecology philosophy of Murray Bookchin. Of the two, the second null hypothesis has more to recommend it. Still, the commonalities between early and late *Apocular* thought are robust, particularly on the deeper level of their desired state for the human being under PKK rule, the deep commitment to women's liberation and a sort of gynocentric feminism, and the lingering Marxist *structure* of Öcalan's thought even as Marxism itself is nominally discarded and Marxist-Leninist states are subjected to intense critique.

Early Apocular Thought

To a large extent, early *Apocular* thought must be reconstructed inductively from non-Öcalan sources. Very little of it is available in English, and what is available is not as systematically formulated as his manifesto-style writings written since his imprisonment. Rather, they have been for the most part transcribed from lectures and speeches made on the radio and in PKK training camps.[120]

Although we have the PKK party platforms and official manifestos, these must be considered as sources of secondary value compared to works like *Jineology* or *Democratic Confederalism*, as they are more timebound and context-specific, are aimed at a more "layperson" audience, and are the product of compromise and party politics as much as of philosophical thought. With that said, Öcalan's overwhelming influence on the PKK's ideology – so strong that Özcan described as him being "the only source of party education"[121] – does mean that, especially prior to his imprisonment, official PKK discourse can be to a certain extent taken as a stand-in for Öcalan's own thought.

Much of chapter 2 was spent extracting that inductive understanding of early *Apocular* thought, mapping major decisions and elements of PKK discourse onto key concepts and evaluations given by Marx, Stalin, Mao, and especially Lenin.

To summarize what was concluded in chapter 2, we see from Öcalan's split with the Turkish Left and his early grappling with the question of independence and what kind of ties to maintain with the Turkish left after his split that he took Lenin's formulation of the scope and proper place of nationalism within the communist revolutionary cause very seriously. He viewed the right of separation as the only meaningful form of "national self-determination," but understood that it might not always be the best idea to seek it out, and that the decision to do so or not to do so had to be arrived at concretely by the specific situations. He deemed that

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[120] Özcan, pp. pp. 174-180
[121] Özcan, pp. 167

independence was the right option for Kurdistan and then in 1984, denounced as reactionary any who would take half-measures and fight for "cultural and national autonomy" or other concessions short of independence.[122]

The PKK was similarly maximalist in what it expected from its followers. Starting with the Marxist-Leninist concept of the "professional revolutionary," the PKK took the concept a step further. The PKK regards "professional revolutionaries" as insufficient, as a "professional" only spends one-third of their day at work, and goes home to a regular family. For the PKK militant, this is unacceptable: PKK militants are expected to be "all day" revolutionaries, leaving their families and living exclusively with their fellow militants. Often, couples will join the PKK together, but their marital life is "put on hold" while they are in the PKK, with their children raised collectively by the party.[123] They are not meant to address one another as husband and wife but as comrades, and to avoid sexual contact. All of this is in the service of both ideological and pragmatic ends, and has possibly unintended knock-on effects as well. Ideologically, Öcalan saw it as the only way to cleanse his followers of the tribalistic, patriarchal, and semi-feudal norms they grew up with in rural Kurdistan.[124] Pragmatically, it makes PKK militants harder to target and makes them closer to being a professional military force. Given the village guard system and the history of "tribes and treason" discussed in Özcan, it is hardly a surprise that the PKK were suspicious of relying upon broader Kurdish communities for shelter.

This process of creating a "new mankind"[125] contributed to the cultish devotion the PKK has exhibited towards Öcalan which so frustrated him. This "new mankind" is closely correlated, and given Öcalan's history as a former member of the Guevarist THKP was likely derived directly from, the Guevarist ideal of the new socialist man as exemplified by the

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[122] Özcan, pp. 104
[123] Özcan, pp. 158
[124] Özcan, pp. 210-211
[125] Özcan, pp. 165-168

urban and rural guerillas. Even as far back as 1978 however, we can see that the PKK emphasizes the personal and moral aspect of the new man more so than the *minimanual*: while the *minimanual* does somewhat concern itself with personal virtues, the majority of the traits ascribed to the ideal guerilla are pragmatic,[126] in keeping with a materialist worldview. In contrast, the PKK constitutions of 1978, 1995 and 2000 outline the following traits for party militants:[127]

He or she:

A. Bears a great love for the country and its humans,

B. Is in favour of a democratic regime,

C. Fights for socialism and is internationalist,

D. Bears love and respect towards his/her comrades and people,

E. Is the representative [the model/example] of the new socialist ethic,

F. Is not a coward or selfish but brave and self-sacrificing,

G. Should keep a good balance between firmness and flexibility,

H. Is careful, sensitive and measured,

I. Is, in educating oneself, investigative and exploratory,

J. Should not be dogmatic but creative,

K. Does not work haphazardly but in a planned way.

It is notable here that five out of the seven sins outlined in the *minimanual* are contained in just the final point of the PKK's traits of the party militant. The priority is flipped on its head: whereas in the *minimanual*, moral superiority is attained by the cause of fighting for the people and against oppression,[128] in the PKK formulation, moral superiority is

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[126] See my discussion in chapter 3, section 4: moralizing elements were latent within such classical Guevarist literature, but are of secondary importance. Meanwhile, PKK discourse puts them front-and-centre.
[127] Özcan, pp. 172
[128] Carlos, pp. 7

articulated primarily in terms of the personal virtues of the PKK militant, and only

secondarily in terms of the cause they fight for.

Whatever Öcalan's intentions, and however much he emphasized creativity over

dogmatism and flexibility alongside firmness, the process of inculcation set the stage for the

"slavish repetition" and blind loyalty which Öcalan came to despise.[129] Isolating party

members from family and community, having a single figure providing both the orders of the

day and the overall philosophical-ethical framework for living, having his live or recorded

voice be the primary source of inculcation into the ideology and into a way of life utterly

divorced from the militant's previous experiences breeds a cultish mentality. Having to

completely reorient one's personhood around his words in a process described as "analyzing

oneself," "undoing oneself," and "reshaping oneself,"[130] whatever specific ideals one aspires

to, can create (and in the case of the PKK did create) a highly dogmatic culture entirely at

odds with the hope Öcalan held for his "new mankind."

In addition to its negative effects however, this demand for absolute commitment had

a profound effect particularly on the women's branches of the PKK. Joining the PKK was

(and is) seen as a way to escape not only the oppression of the Turkish state, but the daily

oppression of a patriarchal society where one is at the mercy of brothers, husbands, and

fathers. Accordingly, the PKK's maximalist model helps to enable the practical

implementation of one of the main sources of both ideological heterodoxy between early

Apocular thought and other forms of Marxism-Leninism, and one of the main points of

continuity between early and late *Apocular* thought: its radical commitment to women's

liberation.

One PKK militant, a woman named Rengin who joined at the age of fourteen in 1990

and was a battalion commander at the time of the interview, opined that at the time of her

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[129] Özcan, pp. 187
[130] Özcan, pp. 165-168

enlistment, she "wanted a natural life, a society that revolves around women - one where men and women are equal, a society without pressure, without inequality, where all differences between people are eliminated."[131]

While the interview was taken in 2008, Rengin was speaking of her motives in 1990, and although it is easy to project one's motives at thirty-two back onto oneself at fourteen, there is reason to think that is not what's happening. Perhaps she is expressing her perspective more eloquently than she would at the age of fourteen, but the personal desire to escape patriarchal domination and a life of subjection is as good a motive as any for a teenage girl to join a guerilla camp, and more likely than a national-communist desire to see a people's revolution. And there is reason to suspect that, even at this early stage, the PKK was actively recruiting under women in a society where, to use Rengin's words, "You grow up enslaved by society. The minute you are born as a girl, society inhibits you."[132] This call to rebel against patriarchy which female fighters like Rengin responded to was elaborated upon and solidified into core party program in the PKK's 1995 manifesto.

The 1995 PKK manifesto argued for women's liberation on a Marxist basis, stating that Kurdish women were "doubly oppressed" by both Turkish-imperial rule and by Kurdish patriarchal society.[133] In addition, it broke with Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy by arguing that the socialist revolution would not result in the liberation of women unless they did the work here and now if women were told simply to "wait their turn" and prioritize the class and national struggle over the struggle for their own emancipation.[134] Therefore, the 1995 manifesto called for proactive dismantlement of patriarchal institutions in the here and now, as well as for the creation of autonomous institutions within the PKK to hold the men accountable, to shake the patriarchal "slave mentalities" of Kurdish society well in advance

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[131] White, pp. 140.
[132] ibid
[133] White, pp. 135-136
[134] White, pp. 140-141

of the revolution,[135] and to create a sort of New Socialist Woman.[136] Nor was the struggle for

women's liberation confined to women: theoretically at least, men too were meant to learn

from the women in the movement and to take active part in the struggle against patriarchy

both within Kurdish society and within themselves.

This turn to actively recruit women and to create women's organizations within the

umbrella of the PKK had a profound effect upon PKK recruitment: by 1997, some 5,000

women served in the Women's Guerilla Army, with 11,000 serving in mixed units, and by

1999 the PKK's membership was 30 percent female.[137] This extended to the upper echelons

as well.[138] White's analysis also contains numerous quotes from other, less-high-ranked

female PKK fighters who joined in the 1990s, and suggests that the PKK's "Feminist

transformation" starting in 1993 (when Öcalan first stated the intention to create a women's

army)[139] presaged its "radical transformation" towards democratic confederalism.

This is where I differ from White:[140] I hold that the PKK did not undergo a radical

feminist transformation, but merely began putting feminist ideas and currents which had

already been "rattling around inside Öcalan's head," so to speak, into practice within the

organizational structure of the PKK. Therefore I consider this feminist element a key part of

early Apocular thought, although like White I see it also as a presage of late *Apocular*

thought, as it has only become more central to Öcalan's philosophy since his imprisonment

and transition towards democratic confederalism.

Why then, did the PKK break with mainstream Marxist-Leninism on the issue of

women's liberation within the tasks of the revolution? While there was no single instance

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[135] White, pp. 140-141

[136] Note that this is my term, not Öcalan's; I use this term to highlight the fact that this is coming from a similar place to the ideals of the New Socialist Man which are employed so thoroughly by the PKK, then and now.

[137] White, pp. 139-142

[138] ibid

[139] White, pp. 148-149

[140] Although this is mainly due to my focus being on *Apocular* political thought, while White's focus is on the PKK as an organization.

which drove the PKK towards their heterodox conclusion, there are a number of contextual factors to consider.

First, a bit about Abdullah Öcalan's biography. His father was by all accounts a weak man,[141] a mediocrity, who lorded himself over his children and especially his wife to compensate for his own inadequacies. Meanwhile his mother was a strong and stoic woman who, in his words, was "the last remnant of the millennium-old goddess culture that was going extinct."[142] Despite her strength of character, she was constrained by the patriarchal family structure and made to serve the whims of someone who Öcalan saw as her inferior. Hence, Öcalan had firsthand experience of how patriarchy rewards mediocrity and violence in men while stifling potential in women.

But how does this personal experience translate into organizational praxis? We see in Fanon that the mainstream anticolonial nationalist narrative is that colonialism itself produces these stunted men, and that the act of violently resisting oppression is the key to reclaiming the manhood that was lost to that oppression,[143] Öcalan could have easily reconciled his experience under his father with that picture of emasculation, were it not for the specific context of the Kurds and his analysis of their situation as a whole.

As Özcan argues, the PKK have always been critical of pre-Turkish Republic Kurdish culture and existence, with Öcalan describing the Kurdish people as "debased" and stating that "no people exist in the world who have become the soldiers of others in such a disgraceful way [as the Kurds]."[144] Tribalism has long been framed as a backwards and "feudal" or even "pre-feudal" form of existence, and thus traditional Kurdish culture – including Islam, patriarchy, and so on – have seldom been romanticised in PKK discourse. Instead, they focus on the language issue, the issues of underdevelopment, how the Kurdish

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[141] Gunter, pp. 27-28
[142] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. xix
[143] White, pp. 146. Jumping ahead slightly, we find almost the complete antithesis of this in late *Apocular* thought's slogan "Killing the dominant male".
[144] Özcan, pp. 154

potential to improve themselves is stifled under Turkish rule. When they do need something to romanticize, they (like many other Kurdish nationalist groups) turn to the ancient Medes,[145] who are a far cry from modern Kurds and provide enough ambiguity to frame as whatever the PKK want them to be.

Thus, *Apocular* thought's radically modernist stance, its emphasis on creating a new Kurd rather than trying to recapture an old Kurd, led the PKK towards feminist conclusions once inflected by Öcalan's personal experience. While there were also strategic pressures in terms of recruitment,[146] these can be seen more as an accelerant, pushing the PKK to put parts of *Apocular* thought into the forefront which were already present in the logic of the system.

During the 1990s, women mostly operated in the rank-and-file of the PKK. There was much institutional inertia to overcome, of course, and although the propaganda began celebrating the liberated Kurdish woman as the movement's apex (either the modern concrete examples such as the suicide bomber Zilan or the mythological references to the Medo-Persian goddess Ishtar),[147] there was the issue of the *Serok* to contend with.

Abdullah Öcalan's singular power both enabled and hampered the PKK's move to institutionalise its feminist ideology. Although suicide attacks like Zilan's (indeed, fourteen of the other fifteen PKK suicide bombers in the 1990s were women) served to consolidate the symbolic centrality of the woman-fighter, Öcalan's own influence was overwhelming. As the upper echelons of the PKK were effectively serving at his whim and his beck-and-call, and introducing women into that group would not really create an autonomous powerbase for the PKK's women. While Öcalan himself railed against the bureaucratic inertia he faced, he himself formed part of that barrier. As some analysts have pointed out, there is a contradiction when an all-powerful male leader orders women to liberate themselves, which puts a sort of asterisk in that liberation and how durable it is should the leader change his

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[145] White, pp. 144
[146] White, pp. 142
[147] White, pp 139, pp. 145

tune, or decide that his female subordinates have gone too far. Indeed, while he was still in command of the PKK, he vetoed a resolution by the women's congress of the PKK to lift the ban on fighters being married, denouncing the resolution as "liquidationism,"[148] a term derived from Lenin approximately meaning someone whose policies are intended or will have the effect of weakening or liquidating the communist party as an organization in favour of one or another legal, collaborationist entity.[149]

Late Apocular Thought

Late *Apocular* thought emerged in its mature form following Öcalan's capture in 1999, via his prison writings, court defences, statements, and edited pamphlets produced out of those primary texts by his followers. Late *Apocular* thought abandoned the Marxist label as well as the goal of separation from Turkey (although Öcalan had flirted with accepting a reorganization of the Turkish republic along federalist lines as an alternative to separatism as early as 1991[150], this had not made it into the party program and they remained adamantly separatist), opting instead for a strong stance in favour of a sort of radical democracy and an ambiguous relationship with the concept of national liberation.

Late *Apocular* thought has several subdivisions, but these are more a question of what is being looked at at the time than a question of disagreements within the political movement, which tend to be over more practical and organizational questions. We can think of late *Apocular* thought as a confluence of several different branches of political and social philosophy. In historiography, it embraces a non-materialist dialectic of a sometimes self-governing, sometimes oppressed "people" and a domineering "warrior ruling power" centered around the state. In social relations, he argues for a form of what Young terms

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[148] White, pp. 135

[149] Lenin, *National Question,* pp. 152, endnote 14. Note that this explanation is provided by the editor, but nonetheless corresponds to the kind of Marxist-Leninist thinking Öcalan was drawing upon at the time and thus can be understood as an accurate summation of the analogy he is drawing when comparing the demands of the PKK women's Congress to liquidationism.

[150] Lundgren, pp. 49

gynocentric feminism[151] which he calls *Jineology,* derived from *Jin,* the Kurdish word for woman and meaning the science of women, although this is framed more as the contribution women make to knowledge and self-knowledge than as a sort of paternalistic framework of men studying women. That this position is being advocated by a domineering, all-powerful male figure does not seem to trouble the PKK. On the political front, Öcalan advances "Democratic Confederalism," an anticapitalist and antistatist prescription for self-governing confederations of communities across state borders, combining vertical and horizontal participatory mechanisms in a sort of radical democracy, with the goal being not to take over the state, but to render it irrelevant in the long-term.

All of these divisions are ultimately artificial, as Öcalan's writing style in his late *Apocular magnum opus* does not proceed from one philosophical subheader to another linearly, but rather forms a sort of spiral: a chapter on "Democratic and ecological society" deals also with the ways that society was brought to heel by religion, economics and military might, while a chapter on "The feudal statist society" deals also with the role of patriarchy and the enslavement of women. His writing style veers from sublimely poetic to frustratingly vague or repetitive, orbiting the particular point he set out to make while bringing along every other component of his philosophy. While his followers have managed to subdivide late *Apocular* thought into subject-based pamphlets such as *Liberating Life* and *Democratic Confederalism*, even these pamphlets bleed into one another.

Nonetheless, it makes sense to start with the late *Apocular* reading of history, which posits a fairly straightforward dialectic. The modes of social organization of the subaltern "people" form a dialectical relationship with the dominant modes of social organization of the state (particularly military) elite. The former forms a "legacy of freedom" which can be

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[151] Young, Iris M. "Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1985), pp. 176-180

traced from the earliest matricentric communities and the latter forming a "legacy of slavery"

best exemplified in the ziggurat structure of ancient Sumeria.

Invoking the ancient Sumerian god-kings as the first form of the state, as a sort of stem cell,

Öcalan argues that their traits have been passed on to this day:

> In absolutist and totalitarian regimes, the subjects are also considered to be parts of the body of the monarch or the sovereign… They are denied any independent life. Though it might take milder forms, this is the "golden rule" that all states expect their subjects to embrace.[152]

As I have argued, this conception of the state as a fundamentally monopolizing entity

comes as much from a reaction to Kemalism and Marxism-Leninism as from his study of

ancient Sumeria. However, this and similar passages ground the PKK's current struggles in a

historical and spiritual struggle which goes well beyond the war with the Turkish state. If we

understand the state as an entity which, at its zenith, denies the individual existence of its

subjects, then the continuity between the PKK's war against the Turkish state, its efforts to

create a Kurdish national identity, and the process of character-formation in "becoming PKK"

becomes clear.

Further, he argues that the first form of the state grew out of patriarchy, which was the

germ not only of the state but of all forms of slavery and hierarchy more broadly.[153] In other

words, the struggle against patriarchy is the war against the tyranny of the state, and is also

the process of individual and group self-recognition and self-actualization, since the state,

which is patriarchy immortalized, is based on the annihilation of such subgroups and of

individual agency and life apart from the state.

There is, as in so much late *Apocular* thought, an element of self-criticism in this

conception of the state. It is a major step to go from fighting for an "independent, united and

democratic Kurdistan"[154] to denying any possibility of imparting revolutionary character to

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[152] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 227
[153] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 194
[154] Özcan, pp. 100

any state, as a "revolutionary state" would merely create a new form of totalizing control.[155]

Further, we can see echo of Öcalan himself in his descriptions of the Sumerian god-kings and

the monopolistic germ of statehood they engendered: Öcalan represented a single voice,

speaking for the whole of the PKK and providing the sole basis for party inculcation. Per his

statements years before the full development of late *Apocular* thought, nineteen out of twenty

PKK militants were "servile repeaters" did not think independently of him, could not imagine

criticizing him, repeated his words by rote and used empty slogans like "loyalty to

leadership" to shut down any independent thought. In other words, they had no existence

apart from Abdullah Öcalan.[156] Öcalan was aware of this, aware that he had become, if not a

god-king in the Sumerian tradition, then certainly a sort of prophet figure who stood in for the

voice of God – and of a state not yet formed – in the minds of his followers.

Much of late *Apocular* thought formed not out of Öcalan's readings of Murray

Bookchin or a changing strategic situation, but out of the disconnect between the desired ends

of "becoming PKK" and the realities of the character PKK inculcation produced. If the

average PKK militant had a slavish mentality, then, according to late *Apocular* analysis, the

PKK was still operating using the kind of myth which generates patriarchal and hierarchical

power groups,[157] which themselves were responsible for the creation of states and the

subsequent creation of class society (not the other way around as in classical Marxism),

slavery, and so on.[158] Thus, Kurdish statelessness represented an opportunity to create

something entirely new, rather than to create a Kurdish state. To accomplish that, the PKK

itself would have to transform, moulding itself around the new ideology to free the minds of

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[155] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 157
[156] Özcan, pp. 207-209
[157] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 224 likens the mythology of the ancient Sumerian world to the nationalism and liberalism of the capitalist world, each of which played a direct role in the creation of their respective state-forms. Meanwhile, pp. 178 identifies the key promise of social democracy, national liberation and real socialism -the three faces of adapting global capitalism- as a sort of myth: "First we will get control of the state, and then everyone will get their due." Hence I argue that late *Apocular* thought would consider the PKK to be engaging in the same creation and weaponization of myth which gives birth to oppressive and, inevitably, patriarchal state structures.
[158] Öcalan, *Beyond State*, pp. 223

its militants from Öcalan's own cult of personality: the necessity of "a revolution in mentality"[159] applies not just to the outside world, but to the PKK itself.

Democratic confederalism is the main political program of late *Apocular* thought, and indeed late *Apocular* thought is sometimes referred to collectively as Democratic Confederalism. Democratic Confederalism is argued for in various manners at various points throughout Öcalan's writing, but given the appeal of the concept some of his followers anonymously compiled his writings together in a pamphlet of the same name, which argues for Democratic Confederalism in a succinct manner.

In its theoretical formulation, Democratic Confederalism argues for a radically pluralistic society – politically, ethnically, religiously, and so on. This society self-organizes via a structure of overlapping and horizontal organizations of communities including communes, village elders and presidents, "intercity municipal organizations," community cultural centres, and at the highest level, a "General people's congress" at which all these sub-organizations are represented.[160]

Democratic confederalism is not about seizing control of the state, but neither is it about ignoring the state. It demands that the state transform itself into something which is tolerable to the democracy, but does not hold that the state itself can be democratic. The two are framed as opposite: democracy based on plurality, the state on monopoly. How, then, can the PKK propose a "democratic federal republic within the borders of Turkey" as their solution?

The answer lies in dialectics. Öcalan – who does operate under the thesis-antithesis-synthesis framing of dialectics – argues that the current system of state and capital is in a long, rolling crisis which it will not be able to get out of without transforming itself in one way or another. This may not necessarily be a transformation for the better, but

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[159] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 170
[160] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 187

Öcalan's aim is to try and make it so. For this, a pair of quotes from *Beyond State* will help

illuminate his way of thinking:

> Excessive repetition of social contradictions and the disintegration of some
> institutions are… proof of the permanence of the crisis and that we have entered a
> state of chaos… there is a moment when the chain can be broken, and that moment is
> now.[161]

However:

> It is not always possible for this chaotic interval to lead to linear progress. The
> interaction of numerous factors at that particular interval can lead to multiple and
> multifaceted developments. In human societies, these intervals are called "times of
> crisis." The social conditions that emerge from a crisis depend on the struggle of the
> forces involved. Many different systems can develop, with both progressive and
> regressive developments possible.[162]

As may be apparent, the "However" is not present in the original text. These

statements each represent particularly clear examples of a pair of themes which get repeated

again and again throughout *Beyond State*, and indeed throughout late *Apocular* thought as a

whole. Adding that connector and reading the two quotes in light of each other illustrates the

logical structure, and the mode of construction, of that theme. The first could have been

written by any Marxist.[163] Any world order, any mode of production and the class system and

superstructure which sustains it, is prone to crisis as its contradictions heighten. The

difference here is that such contradictions only bring the system to the point of crisis: they are

not the way of the future reaching back into the past to like a midwife's hands to deliver

itself. The system's contradictions create a crisis, but out of that, anything can emerge.

One way out of this crisis – the one which Öcalan wants the system to take – is to

relinquish the state's monopoly by coming to an accord with the people and with the

democratic forces.

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[161] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 148
[162] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 148
[163] See, for example, Marx's discussion of the increase of productivity necessitating the increase in exploitation of the labourer on pp. 638 of *Capital,* or his description of the immanence of the coming revolution within the tendencies of capital towards ever greater expropriation on pp. 763.

In contrast to classic dialectics, there is no sense in which this compromise will create a sort of new unipolar union where both state and democracy are entirely synthesized and subsumed, only existing implicitly in the underlying structure of some new system. In that case, the goal would indeed be a democratic state. The idea seems to be that in the coexistence of a state with democratic confederations, the resultant arrangement would be a kind of democratic system, whereby the state – a downsized, federalized entity – would no longer be able to quash the democratic self-governance of the people.

While Öcalan operates on a dialectical reading of history, there is little sense that his current efforts can or should bring about the end of history. The state which he envisions is still one rife with tensions, both dialectical tensions, as the state and democracy are still antithetical, and – to use Nunes' term – "tensions among forces[164]," as the state and the self-organizing people compete for limited political space.

All of this puts Öcalan outside of Lenin's triptych in *State and Revolution* between those who wish to take over a ready-made state (Lenin in practice), those who wish to smash the state completely and make a new one from its ashes (Lenin in *State and Revolution*), and those who wish to smash the state and not create a new one (Anarchists). Indeed, the radical pluralism imagined here is in contrast to even Lenin's most idealistic depictions of the dictatorship of the proletariat in *State and Revolution.* While insisting that the new state will be highly democratic, Lenin still argues that the revolutionary state will be a unipolar, all-encompassing entity which submits all to the total control of (via total participation in) the administration of production.[165] To transform the state from outside into something which can share power – which, arguably, is not a state at all – while creating parallel structures to it to fill the vacuum created by its retreat: this is (at least theoretically) democratic confederalism's goal, not the takeover of the state or the creation of a new state.

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[164] Rodrigo Nunes, *Neither Vertical Nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization.* New York: Verso Books, 2021. ch. 1, section 5, para. 9
[165] Lenin, *State and Revolution,* pp. 90-93

Öcalan draws no distinction between his program of gender relations and his political program. They are mutually-dependent, as "the women's freedom movement must play a leading role in the creation of political structures that are anti-hierarchical and outside the state."[166] This quote is particularly instructive, because its syntax is ambiguous: it does not say whether it is the women's movement that needs the democratic movement or vice versa, because the two are mutually dependent. Only through participation in the democratic movement can women escape their millennia of enslavement, and only through the leadership of women can the democratic movement succeed. This reflects a continuation of policies already adopted during the 1990s under early *Apocular* ideology. What is new is the central role women's liberation plays within the philosophy. The emergence of violent patriarchal power via the enslavement of women is stated to be the "most fundamental source of property"[167] and the basis for all other forms of slavery.[168] One quote is particularly instructive as to how closely tied the class and democratic struggle are to the struggle for women's liberation: "The ruling class character is formed concurrent with the dominant male character."[169]

If Democratic Confederalism is hostile to the state, it is equally hostile to capitalism. It must be, given the above quote. It may no longer be the root of all evil, but it is framed as anti-natural, as deceptive, as alienating, as hierarchical,[170] and so on. Öcalan argues that the emergence of capital rather represented a "distortion" or usurpation of Renaissance and enlightenment ideals, resting fundamentally on the denial of humanity, of natural society, and of human equality.

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[166] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 198
[167] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 194
[168] Öcalan, *Liberating Life,* pp. 26-27
[169] Öcalan, *Liberating Life,* pp. 49. The section which this quote is drawn from is titled "killing the dominant male," which has become a PKK slogan in the 2000s.
[170] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 203-204

This affects not just his reading of the present crisis of capitalism, but also his analysis of the two other classical Marxist epoch changes: the transition from slavery to feudalism, and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Öcalan presents the crisis of classical slavery as caused by twin threats: the barbarians and the prophets. The barbarians -the tribal *Asirets*, ethnicities, and other peripheral groups- are framed as a kind of almost democratic communal society, part of a Bookchinite "legacy of freedom."[171] There is a strong contradiction between such a depiction and the reality of tribes' function within the mechanisms of empire, especially in Kurdistan. Equally, there is a contradiction between this image of the barbarian as a semi-conscious revolutionary and the fact that those same barbarians directly became the feudal aristocracy of the middle ages. These contradictions, particularly the latter, are not satisfactorily resolved within Öcalan's narrative: I find Öcalan's explanation that their leaders betrayed their tribal communitarian values by "emulat[ing] the slaveholders"[172] after their victories to be unpersuasive. Scott provided a more satisfactory account when he argued that petty chieftains on the borders of empire had more or less always sought to appropriate the discourses of mightier empires and kingdoms, which casts doubt on whether there was any "revolutionary" character to tribal invasions.[173] The prophets, on the other hand, undermined the notion of god-kings (pharaohs, Sumerian god-kings, and to a lesser extent the Roman Emperors) but ultimately left the door open for sultans, kings and caliphs to take the role of "Shadow of God"[174]

In a similar vein, Öcalan decouples the Renaissance revolts against feudalism from the capitalist system which replaced it. He traces their roots back to the monastic scholars, and draws a strong distinction between "Renaissance Individuality,"[175] which he identifies

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[171] Öcalan, *Beyond State*, pp. 53
[172] Ibid, pp. 53
[173] Scott, pp. 307-309. While I have presented Scott here as a more persuasive account than Öcalan's regarding this specific historical issue, I do not mean to offer him up as an antithesis to Öcalan. The two have far more similarities than differences in their explorations of the ambiguities of the "hill people's" situation.
[174] Öcalan, *Beyond State*, pp. 227
[175] Ibid, pp. 137-141

with the philosophy of Spinoza and which posited fully-realized individuals with an active spiritual life rooted in the kind of (relatively) non-hierarchical communities seen in republican city-states and monasteries; and "Capitalist Individualism," which seeks to eliminate spirituality, morality, ethical life, and community in favour of unlimited domination of individuals by individuals. Here, he directly criticizes Marxists for their determinism, and for their handing over of the Renaissance to capitalists: "The road to the renaissance does not pass through the palaces of the kings and the church but through the communal schools of ordinary people. Neither the class of feudal lords or the bourgeoisie 'showed the way.'"[176] He criticizes Marx and Engels as "bewildered" for ascribing a revolutionary role to capital and for painting its triumph as inevitable, even while praising them for exposing its destructiveness and the need to fight it.[177]

This is an important point: late *Apocular* thought is still much indebted to Marxism, so he consistently uses carefully crafted sentences such as "No capitalist ideologue has served this system as well as the vulgar materialists of Marxist origin."[178] Note the difference between "Marxists" and "Vulgar materialists of Marxist origin." Öcalan is being careful here not to throw out the whole Marxist framework, even though he centres patriarchy and military domination over class and economic exploitation. Öcalan is not repudiating Marxism in its entirety: he is repudiating the way a younger Öcalan and other authoritarian communists like him have used Marxism. A continued use of Marxian structures and framing in his thought remains a key aspect of the "consistent core."

Returning to his reappropriation of Renaissance humanism, this does form a distinct characteristic of late *Apocular* thought compared to traditional Marxism. Late *Apocular* thought has little concept that the intellectual forms coming out of a given social order must reinforce the dominant social order, merely that it usually does thanks to the overwhelming

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[176] Öcalan, *Beyond State*, pp. 134
[177] Ibid, pp. 140
[178] Ibid, pp. 139

ability of the state to propagate itself through religious, artistic and scientific institutions and

to stifle other discourses, forming what he terms a "power-knowledge complex."[179] Nor does

it hold that anticapitalist thought can *only* come about after the consolidation of capitalism;

capitalism has no progressive content, and transcending capitalism requires a reformulation

of life according to supposedly naturalistic values which did not require capitalism. Attempts

to give a progressive, liberatory character to capitalism, developmentalism, and the state have

lead to "real socialism" inadvertently making a huge contribution to the capitalist system, per

Öcalan, and class and statist domination must not be framed as fated or inevitable lest

attempted anti-capitalists end up "becom[ing] nothing but an unintended tool for class

ideologists."[180] The goal now must be to inculcate socialist-ecological values which are

entirely opposed to capitalism.[181] Harkening to his own experience as a national communist

and the methods they used, he declares:

> Ecology stands for an awakened consciousness and a renewed integration into natural
> organic society… Just as we once organized intense class and national consciousness,
> we must now initiate impassioned campaigns to create a democratic and
> environmental consciousness.[182]

To understand this passage, we have to finally turn to Murray Bookchin. It is here that

we can best understand the relationship between Bookchin and Öcalan. Murray Bookchin

was, undoubtedly, vital in bringing late *Apocular* thought into its most mature form. However

I would dispute the notion that late *Apocular* thought is a result of the application of

Bookchin's ideas to the Middle East. In this passage we can clearly see the continuity

between Öcalan's practice as a national-communist revolutionary and his theory as a

democratic confederalist. To inculcate consciousness via institutions such as "a women's

freedom party,"[183] and indeed through the guerilla army itself, this is all the hallmark of the

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[179] Öcalan, *Beyond State*, pp. 49.
[180] Öcalan, *Liberating Life,* pp. 23-24
[181] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 202-206
[182] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 206
[183] Öcalan, *Beyond State,* pp. 200

same "New Man" thinking which Öcalan had previously employed. Recall Özcan's descriptions of the immense sacrifices needed to "Become PKK," how it is framed as a new state of being, a way of life which creates a kind of natural person to serve as an example to others.[184] How that party should be organized, what its ends are, what kind of consciousness is being developed: all of that is changed, often repudiating the mistakes of early *Apocular* thought and practice as counterproductive. But the creation of a new kind of human through a vanguard organization – albeit one working with the other societal institutions, not above them – that remains the same. And it is there that the difference between Öcalan and Bookchin becomes most apparent, outside of Öcalan's mystical and matriarchal trappings.[185]

What Bookchin did provide was a set of vocabularies and a set of end-states for Öcalan to aspire to: terms like "natural society," "social ecology," "legacies of freedom," these are all taken directly from Bookchin and – perhaps with the exception of "natural society" and "natural existence," which are simple appeals to nature – don't have much parallel in his pre-imprisonment writings. It is in this systematizing and this adoption of new terminology that the transition from early to late *Apocular* thought becomes formalized, leading some to see the transformation as having started here, rather than seeing it as a relatively late step in the process.

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[184] Özcan, pp. 156-159

[185] The closest thing in *The Ecology of Freedom* is his discussions from pp. 421 to pp. 440 of the historical Utopians and his calls for a "new culture" built around new institutions which respect the competence of ordinary people to govern, but this bares little resemblance to a vanguardist organization.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Null Hypotheses

Returning to our null hypotheses with the benefit of historical and ideological context, it becomes clear that neither the window dressing hypothesis nor the radical change hypothesis stand up to close scrutiny.

The window dressing hypothesis is the easier of the two to dismiss. The PKK began its transformation in the early 1990s, with the first inklings of the change coming as early as 1992, when they were gaining in power and membership. The first unilateral ceasefire happened the very next year, and while it was unsuccessful at deterring the Turkish state, the PKK largely honoured it. Nothing had changed within broader Kurdish society to make them more friendly towards the Turkish state by that point.

The transformation happened at the level of internal philosophy first, followed by external state-facing rhetoric: the PKK embraced feminism, it felt the negative effects of its centralized leadership, it began searching for something outside of Marxism-Leninism to guide itself, and only then did it reject separatism as a war aim. The window dressing hypothesis would require the opposite. Given that the Turkish state brands as separatism any assertion of Kurdish national identity, that Öcalan's rejection of the desirability of a Kurdish state follow directly from his later conception of statehood, and that he had been flirting with federalism as an alternative to separatism as early as 1991 (although both were opposed to Kemalist unitarianism), we also cannot assume that this abandonment of separatism was primarily caused by an attempt to appeal to his Turkish captors, or an act of self-censorship in order to continue writing and getting his work published from prison.

Nor is the drying up of Soviet aid following the collapse of the eastern bloc a reasonable explanation for the transformation. First, the Soviet Union was not a significant

benefactor to the PKK. Second, up until the moment of its collapse, the PKK had been adhering to an anti-revisionist line (despite, as explored in chapter 4, having several "revisionist" elements itself) which tended to praise earlier, more hardline Soviet leaders over the "rightist" Gorbachev government. We can infer that it was the fact of the Soviet Union's collapse, the manner of it, and the flood of information about Soviet oppression and economic dysfunction which caused Öcalan and the PKK to revise their stance on it, not an opportunistic concern for where their international support would come from. Similarly, we can dismiss the idea that the PYD adopted democratic confederalism to appeal to the US, as there would be no way to predict the shape of the Syrian civil war decades in advance: by the time it started the PYD had been following late *Apocular* thought for some time, and were far more successful in implementing it than their PKK counterparts.

The radical transformation hypothesis can also be considered disproven. While it is true that early and late *Apocular* thought do not much resemble each other on the surface, we have seen that it was a gradual process from around 1992 until 2000 which resulted in the formation of late *Apocular* thought. Late *Apocular* thought, particularly the central emphasis it placed on feminism, was spurred in part by the reality of women joining and rising through the ranks of the PKK due to practices introduced in the early *Apocular* era, both policies intended to bring women in such as the creation of PKK women's organizations and policies which could never have existed under an orthodox Bookchinite organization (if such a thing is possible), such as the "New Socialist Woman" and "All-day revolutionary" concepts.

We have also shown how the process of the emergence of late *Apocular* thought was intimately tied to Öcalan's own experience of the failures of autocratic leadership and violent struggle. In addition, there was the tension between Marxism-Leninism and concepts which well-predated his encounter with Bookchin's writings, such as the understanding derived from Kemalism that states were fundamentally elitist, monopolizing entities which tended to

serve the military before all other groups. We could see Öcalan struggling with Marxism-Leninism and its failures from as early as 1992, albeit in a contradictory and confused way. Öcalan's imprisonment and exposure to Bookchin did not create the transformation: they merely gave him the tools to formalize it and render it relatively consistent. We can also see many remnants of early *Apocular* thought in late *Apocular* thought: the "New Socialist Person" doctrine is still there albeit in muted form, Öcalan does not directly condemn Marxism and instead condemns the way it has been used, and he still asserts the right, but not the desirability, of the Kurdish people to form their own nation-state.

The Consistent Core

As stated in the introduction, disproving my null hypotheses does not automatically equate to proving my main hypothesis. To conclude, let us summarize what has stayed the same from early to late *Apocular* thought, and the ways in which late *Apocular* thought directly and gradually built upon the successes and failures of early *Apocular* thought.

First, we can see a thread running through Öcalan's writings on leadership, and particularly his engagement with Lenin. He consistently criticizes Lenin's misunderstanding of statehood: perhaps Lenin's descriptions of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the abolition of the "special repressive force[186]" in favour of the "general force[187]" of the armed people and so on are similar to democratic confederalism, but they are not a state, and they are not what the USSR looked like. He extols Lenin's brilliance, his leadership, and his intentions, but ultimately leaves him and the "real socialism" which followed on his heels. We can see reflected in this grappling with Lenin, a grappling with Öcalan himself, and with the PKK as it was. This nuanced and tension-laden understanding of Lenin, and indeed of Marxism, materialism, and class analysis more broadly, represents an aspect of late *Apocular* thought

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[186] Lenin, *State and Revolution*, pp. 17-18
[187] Ibid, pp. 39

which only emerged due to the experience of early *Apocular* thought and, more importantly, early *Apocular* practice and the kind of unquestioning person PKK inculcation produced.

Second, we can see a continuing use of Marxist frameworks throughout late *Apocular* thought. His reading of history, mystical any myth-laden though it often sounds, is fundamentally a dialectical reading between an oppressed (albeit unlike in Marxism, resisting and sometimes self-governing) people and an oppressing elite, although one no longer defined strictly in terms of class. The concept of an ongoing, global scale social crisis caused by the accumulation of contradictions, although shorn of Marxist optimism and inevitability, is still a key component of his diagnosis of the middle east and global capitalism. He still articulates a pyramidal structure of social analysis, replacing the base of social relations of production and class domination with patriarchal enslavement of women and the rule of the warrior elite. The eras of history remain largely the same, although they are shorn of their inevitability and their progressive character.

Third, we can see an increasingly central role of feminism, starting with a push from the top to involve women and to have them create their own organizations. While Öcalan himself sometimes acted as a barrier to the PKK women's push, he could not or at least would not reverse the process he had started, as the liberation of Kurdish women became more and more central to the PKK's rhetoric and praxis as more and more women reached higher ranks in the PKK and formed parallel organizations under the PKK umbrella. Late *Apocular* thought finally embraced this change, making the cause of women's liberation, articulated in the form of a unique, gynocentric form of feminism, into arguably the primary task of the PKK. The centering of patriarchal oppression within the Marxist structure was a consequence of this process.

Finally, the last thing the PKK has retained as a consistent core is the "New socialist person" doctrine. From the start, the PKK had a more moralized version than presented in

Guevarist writings: the PKK militant was not just to be a good guerilla and a selfless comrade, but a well-rounded and inquisitive person who thought for themselves. The process of PKK inculcation intended to produce this new person instead created the opposite personality. PKK militants mouthed slogans, engaged in performative self-critique, turned on each other over the slightest suspicion of treachery, and were more focused on not losing the war than winning it. All of this resulted in the squandering of the PKK's growth and their military opportunities in the mid-90s. The ideal of "Becoming PKK" has not changed: *Apocular* thought still aims to free "natural humanity" from the psychically mutilating effects of hierarchical, patriarchal civilization. What has changed is the method: Öcalan's own leadership, the bureaucratization of the party, the incessant militarism, these have resulted in the opposite personality to what Öcalan dreamed of his followers being.

Thus, the PKK adapted. Bit by bit, keeping a consistent core while jettisoning peripheral elements of ideology and praxis. They were propelled by changing global circumstances, but also by the internal logic of their own system and its contradictions: the inherent and indeed, dialectical tension within a system of autocracy established for liberatory purposes. The PKK's transformation was neither a momentary act of rhetorical window-dressing nor a sudden almost-religious revelation occurring after Öcalan's capture: it was the product of a long process of evolution, trial-and-error, and dialectical resolution occurring over many years and, indeed, continuing to this day. What forms *Apocular* thought will take in the aftermath of the Syrian Civil War, whether it ends with Rojava independent, autonomous, or crushed, remains to be seen.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union
THKP	Popular Liberation Party of Turkey
CHP	Republican People's Party (Turkish)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Syrian-Kurdish/Rojavan)
ANC	African National Congress