

## **Race, culture, nation and identity politics in Turkey: some comments**

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### 1. On nation-building and resisting ethnicities

Nation-building was a major theme in American scholarship dealing with the 'new states' of Asia and Africa in the 1960s. It was generally treated as an inevitable and beneficial process. The first discordant voice was that of Walker Connor, who in an often-quoted article, "Nation-building or nation-destroying," called attention to a blind spot in mainstream scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Not a single mainstream 'political science' text on the third world, he observed, paid attention to the existence of ethnic minorities in the new states and their resistance to assimilation into state-based 'nations.' Connor found in the political science literature failed nation-building attributed to no less than 12 factors, none of which however had anything to do with ethnic loyalties. Other disciplines were perhaps more sensitive to these realities, but in sociology and anthropology Clifford Geertz' "Integrative revolution" article of 1963 was a rare bird in its perceptiveness.<sup>2</sup> For Geertz, too, the general thrust of social development was in the direction of integration into large nations (like the Indonesian one), but he perceived ethnic loyalties as serious hindrances on this path.

In 1972, Connor could already cite a number of cases where ethnic secession movements had threatened some of the new states and shown their basic weakness. In 1997 the optimism of the 1960s appears almost incredibly naive, and the blindness of especially political scientists to ethnic diversity can hardly be understood anymore. We live in a different world, in which many grand narratives have lost their currency, in which the 'form' of the nation state is by some said to be on its way out. It is surprising how long scholarship on Turkey has allowed itself to be led by the self-view of the Kemalist elite and has managed to evade the question of ethnicity in Republican Turkey.

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<sup>1</sup> Walker Connor, "Nation-building or nation-destroying", *World politics* 24, 1972, pp. 319-55. Reprinted with eight other seminal articles by Connor in his *Ethnonationalism: the quest for understanding*, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 29-66.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, "The integrative revolution: primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states", in C. Geertz (ed), *Old societies and new states*, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963, pp. 105-57. Reprinted in Geertz' *The interpretation of cultures*, Basic Books, 1973.

## 2. Turkish citizenship, Turkish culture and non-Turkish *enasir*

At the end of his paper,<sup>3</sup> Erik-Jan Zürcher points to an ambiguity inherent in the Kemalist conception of Turkish culture and national identity which, he appears to suggest, lies at the root of the major internal problem Turkey is facing today. On the one hand, we find it repeatedly stated, in various wordings, that every person in the country who adopts Turkish culture is a Turk and thereby enjoys equal rights. *Mühacir* and regionally based non-Turkish ethnic groups were expected to give up their own and adopt Turkish culture. On the other hand, to at least to some in the Kemalist elite, a person's culture was rooted in his/her early upbringing and could not be changed at will. In other words, culture appears to be seen as almost a racial, hereditary characteristic. By implication — an implication that Zürcher indicates but that I have never seen stated explicitly in any Turkish source, however — Kurds, Laz, Çerkes or Jews would never be able to adequately adopt Turkish culture, and would therefore have to remain second-class citizens.

Unlike academic analysts, practical politicians and ideologists are not only capable of accommodating inconsistencies but are often deliberately inconsistent. Tekin Alp's culture of birth, one has to assume, was not Turkish but he appears not to have had any difficulty being accepted as a Turk. Nor did Ziya Gökalp himself, who throughout his life retained an ambivalent relationship with the Kurdish culture of his home environment. Ziya, incidentally, emphatically stated that Kurds, Arabs and Çerkes could (and should) become Turks.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas Tekin Alp can be read as conceiving of culture in almost racial terms — but I am not convinced that this reading is correct<sup>5</sup> — one might wonder whether conversely the term 'race' (*irk*) was not at times used in cultural and/or geopolitical terms (like British usage of the term 'race' until recently). There is the famous statement attributed to Mustafa Kemal by a local Diyarbakir newspaper in 1932: "*The people of Diyarbakir, Van, Erzurum, Trabzon, Istanbul, Thrace and Macedonia are all children of the same race, veins of the same precious mineral.*"<sup>6</sup> In isolation — and that is how this citation normally appears — this might be read as a recognition that the people of Turkey's four corners (including Muslim immigrants from formerly Ottoman territories) through shared history and shared elements of culture really belong together in spite of

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<sup>3</sup> Erik-Jan Zürcher, „Race, culture, nation and identity politics in Turkey”, paper presented at Mica Erteğün Annual Turkish Studies Workshop on Continuity and Change: Shifting State Ideologies from Late Ottoman to Early Republican Turkey, 1890-1930, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, April 24-26, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> At least, that is how I interpret the poem "*Bana Türk değil diyene,*" which he wrote after the journalist Ali Kemal in 1919 had called him a Kurd: "*..hatta ben olsaydım Kürt Arab Çerkes / ilk gayem olurdu Türk milliyeti!*" (Ziya Gökalp, *Şiirler ve halk masalları, Ziya Gökalp külliyati I*, p. 277, quoted by Rohat, *Ziya Gökalp'ın büyük çilesi Kürtler*, İstanbul: Fırat yayınları 1992, pp. 74-5).

<sup>5</sup> In an earlier booklet, *Türkleştirme* (İstanbul: Resimli Ay Matbaası, 1928; reprinted in Mehmet Bayrak, *Kürtler ve ulusal-demokratik mücadeleleri*, Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1993, pp. 524-74), Tekin Alp took İsmet Paşa's "*Vazifemiz bu vatan içinde bulunanları behemehal Türk yapmaktır*" as a motto and presented the assimilation of minorities as a difficult but entirely possible task: "*Türkiye'de kalmak arzusunda olan vatandaşlar, er geç kanunen olduğu gibi hars ve akide itibarıyla da Türk olacaklardır*" (540-1).

<sup>6</sup> "*Diyarbakirli, Vanlı, Erzurumlu, Trabzonlu, İstanbullu, Trakyalı ve Makedonyalı hep bir ırkın evlatları, hep aynı cevherin damarlarıdır*" (daily newspaper *Diyarbakir*, 6 September 1932).

their ethnic variety. The context of this statement, however, shows that Kemal had by then adopted another resolution to the dilemma noted above. He told the people of Diyarbakir that they descended from the Oghuz Turks.<sup>7</sup> The implication was the all people of Turkey (excepted, one may assume, such ethnic groups as the Armenians and the Gypsies) were Turks by descent. Not much later, the Kurds were to be rebaptized 'mountain Turks.'

Another ambivalence, the one that will be most characteristic of the Kemalist attitude towards the Kurds, already shows itself in the same statement in *Diyarbakir*: on the one hand, all are said to be Turks, but on the other hand, it is the Turks who have to unite and teach the others (see the text in footnote 6). Two years earlier CHF ideologist and justice minister Mahmut Esat (Bozkurt) had delivered a speech in which he had stressed the leading role of the Turks: "*It is my firm opinion, and let friend and foe hear it, that the lords of this country are the Turks. Those who are not real Turks (öz Türk) have only one right in the Turkish fatherland, and that is the right to be servants and slaves.*"<sup>8</sup> Did the Kurds qualify as *öz Türk* for Mahmut Esat, or were they a servant race? The non-Turks of whom he thought apparently were the Christian minorities and resident foreigners, and it probably was international reaction to his speech that cost him his job (Ismet Paşa did not include him in the new cabinet he formed later in September 1930).<sup>9</sup> Soon, however, the Kurds were explicitly defined as 'real Turks' while at the same time remaining subjected to deliberate assimilation policies.

The same ambiguities remain until this day. Article 66 of the 1982 Constitution asserts that "*Every person bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk.*" This is a nonracial, civil definition of Turkishness (to which many Kurds object because they experience it as a denial of their ethnic identity). In the deliberations on the draft text of the constitution, General İhsan Göksel strongly objected to the wording of this article: "*Citizen' is the general term for people living in the same fatherland. It is not possible to speak of belonging to a nation as long as there is not the combination of common language, custom and tradition, common descent and common history, the factors that give a nation its name. By accepting a person as a citizen we cannot change the blood in his veins and replace it with Turkish blood, we cannot take the values in his heart and mind and instead rebuild him physically and spiritually with Turkish culture, Turkish virtues,*

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<sup>7</sup> The journalist reporting Mustafa Kemal's words summarizes the gist of them as "*Ben (i.e., the journalist) Türk elinin kahraman bir bucağındanım, yazık ki oraya Bekir diyai diyorlar. Fakat biz Diyarımızın ne olduğunu biliriz. Bizim diyarımız Oğuz Türkün has konağıdır, biz de bu yüce konağın çocuklarıyız (...) Türk eli büyüktür ve yer yüzünde yalnız o büyüktür. Her yeri dolduran Türktür. Ve her yanı aydınlatan Türk'ün yüzüdür.*" Then follows the phrase quoted above. The piece ends with "*Bizim yeni işimiz budur: Bu karmakarışık işlerin içinden çıkıp yükselebilmek için bize DİRLİK gerektir. BİRLİK onunla beraber yürür. DİRİ yalnız Türk milletidir, BİRLİĞİ ortaya koyan da Türktür. Dirliğin ne olduğunu anlatan da TÜRK'tür, çalışalım.*" (*Diyarbakir* 6 September 1932, quoted in *Atatürk yılında Diyarbakır*, Diyarbakır, 1981, p.8).

<sup>8</sup> "Benim fikrim, kanaatım şudur ki, dost da, düşman da dinlesin ki, bu memleketin efendisi Türktür. Öz Türk olmayanların Türk vatanında bir hakkı vardır, o da hizmetçi olmaktır, köle olmaktır" (Taha Parla, *Kemalist tek-parti ideolojisi ve CHP'nin Altı Ok'u*, İstanbul: İletişim, 1992, p. 208, after *Hakimiyeti Milliye*, 19.9.1930. Tunçay, *Tek-parti yönetimi*, 301, quoting *Son Posta* of 21.9.1930 gives a slightly different version).

<sup>9</sup> Mete Tunçay, *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde tek-parti yönetimi'nin kurulması (1923-1931)*, Ankara: Yurt Yayınları, 1981, p. 301.

*the rich history of the Turks and, if you wish, the racial superiority of the Turkish race. (...) You can make a person a citizen, but you cannot make him a Turk. (...) If we wish to identify citizenship and Turkishness, we should definitely include the element of adoption of Turkish identity. The person who cannot call out from his heart the words 'happy is who calls himself a Turk' cannot be a Turk."*<sup>10</sup>

Göksel (whose objections were overruled) apparently held on to a Mahmut Esat type distinction between first-class and second-class citizens based on the acceptance of Turkish cultural and political identity. He warns against the tendency to define ethnic difference out of existence. The ambivalences and tensions Zürcher noticed in Tekin Alp are very explicit here. On the one hand, Göksel explicitly mentions the adoption of Turkish identity by outsiders as a condition for full citizenship, on the other hand he suggests that changing people's ethnic identity is almost impossible. The majority in the constitutional committee opted for a unitary Turkish nation by definition. (And as we know, there was a return to vigorous assimilation measures directly following the 1980 coup.)

In a meeting between European and Turkish politicians in which the former pleaded for a dialogue with the Kurds, one parliamentarian from one of the 'Kurdish' provinces adopted a position close to that of Göksel and gave an intimation of the ultimate consequence to which this position may yet lead. Himself of mixed descent (his mother was Kurdish) and a medical doctor by training, he spoke of the resurgence of Kurdish ethnicity in medical terms. Some cases were curable, he felt, but in the case of five to ten percent of the population we were dealing with an incurable 'syndrome.' The present 'terrorism' was the symptom of this syndrome; since it was incurable, any attempt at a negotiated settlement of the present war would be counter-productive. He declined elaborating upon the medical treatment that he thought was needed but appeared to be thinking in surgical terms.

The medical metaphor is not new in the history of Turkey's dealing with the Kurds, nor is the surgical treatment. In a report to the Ministry of the Interior on conditions in Dersim in 1926, the inspector (*mülkiye müfettişi*) Hamdi Bey called this district "an abscess [that] the Republican government [...] would have to operate upon in order to prevent worse pain."<sup>11</sup> A decade later, Interior Minister Şükrü Kaya used the same metaphor to explain why Dersim was made into a separate province under special military administration;<sup>12</sup> the surgical treatment ultimately took the form of the heavy-handed military campaigns of 1937-38 that may arguably have amounted to genocide.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Gerekçeli ve Açıklamalı Anayasa*, İstanbul, 1983, appendix 16.

<sup>11</sup> "Dersim, Cumhuriyet Hükümeti için bir çibandır. Bu çiban üzerinde kesin bir ameliye yapmak ve elim ihtimalleri önlemek, memleket selâmeti bakımından mutlaka lâzımdır". Cited in Resat Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar (1924-1938)*, Ankara: T.C. Genelkurmay Başkanlığı Harp Tarihi Dairesi, 1972, pp. 375-6.

<sup>12</sup> "Cumhuriyet devrinin şiarı, memleketin esaslı ihtiyaçlarını esasından tedavi etmek ve *asıl hastalığı tedavi eylemek* olduğu için burada da medeni usullerle bir tedbir düşündü..." (Kaya's speech before the Grand National Assembly, 25 December 1935, quoted in İsmail Beşikçi, *Tunceli kanunu (1935) ve Dersim jenosidi*, İstanbul: Belge, 1990, p. 10. Emphasis by me).

<sup>13</sup> The available evidence is examined in my "Genocide in Kurdistan?: The suppression of the Dersim rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the chemical war against the Iraqi Kurds", in George J. Andreopoulos (ed), *Genocide: conceptual and historical dimensions*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, pp. 141-70.

### 3. The tools of nation-building

The dominant view among Turkish policymakers has been, however, that it was possible for the non-Turkish ethnic groups to adopt Turkish culture and that forced assimilation therefore was feasible. Important though assimilation policies have been for Turkish national identity, they have received scant attention in the standard histories of Turkey and there are have hardly been serious detailed studies. Foreign scholars have until recently tended to look admiringly at Turkey's military-led modernization and to overlook the less pleasant practical methods by which *medeniyet* was at times brought to the uncivilized masses. For Turkish historians it has for obvious reasons been unattractive to dig into this aspect of the recent past. It is not possible now to write about Kemalism and the Kurds without referring to Ismail Beşikçi, who has long been virtually the only one in Turkey to deconstruct the Kemalist narrative, and who as we know paid a high price for his courage.<sup>14</sup> In spite of their increasingly polemical tone, Ismail Besikçi's works constitute an important contribution to a revision of the history of the Republic.

The idea of assimilating the non-Turkish minorities was a major theme addressed in the congresses of the Türk Ocakları in the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> As Georgeon has observed, the Türk Ocakları received increasing government support after the Shaikh Said rebellion, and the number of *ocak* opened in the eastern provinces increased rapidly. This in itself represented an effort at assimilation. The Türk Ocakları's inspector for the eastern provinces, Hasan Reşit (Tankut), was a tireless advocate of the Turkification of the region, proposing concrete measures based on existing divisions among the population. He proposed first concentrating on the Alevis, who used the Turkish language in their rituals and who might therefore be more easily assimilated, especially if their differences with the Sunni Kurds were judiciously made use of. At one stage, late in his life, he proposed literally driving a wedge between the speakers of Zaza and Kurmanji Kurdish by evacuating a 30 miles wide corridor and resettling Turkish peasants in the evacuated villages.<sup>16</sup>

Tekin Alp, addressing the subject of assimilating Turkey's Jews in his 1928 brochure *Türkleştirmek*,

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<sup>14</sup> Besikçi began his analysis of republican Turkey's Kurdish policies in his *Doğu Anadolu'nun düzeni* (Istanbul: e yayınları, 1969) and followed this up with *Kürtlerin 'mecburi iskân'i* (Ankara: Komal, 1977), *Türk-tarih tezi' ve Kürt sorunu* (Ankara: Komal, 1977), *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası'nun tüzüğü (1927) ve Kürt sorunu* (Ankara: Komal, 1978). He completed three more books in this series in the late 1970's but these could not be published then and appeared with a delay of twelve years: *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim jenosidi* (Istanbul: Belge, 1990), *Orgeneral Muğlalı olayı: otuzüç kurşun* (Istanbul: Belge, 1991), and *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası'nun programı (1931) ve Kürt sorunu* (Istanbul: Belge, 1991). All these books were banned briefly after appearance.

<sup>15</sup> See Frank Tachau, "The search for national identity among the Turks", *Die Welt des Islams*, N.S. vol.8, 1963, 165-76; François Georgeon, "Les foyers turcs à l'époque kémaliste", *Turcica* XIV, 1982, esp. 192-7.

<sup>16</sup> In the 1930s Tankut became a teacher at the Türk Dil Kurumu and one of the major propounders of the 'Sun-language theory,' while remaining an enthusiastic theoretician of 'ethnopolitics.' A number of his previously unpublished reports and papers were acquired by Mehmet Bayrak, who published them in his *Kürtler ve ulusal-demokratik mücadeleleri* (Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1993) and *Açık-gizli /resmi-gayiresmi kürdoloji belgeleri* (Ankara: Öz-Ge, 1994).

formulated the following Ten Commandments ("which have to be respected as much as those of the Old Testament") for his fellow Jews: 1- Turkify your names; 2- Speak Turkish; 3- Recite at least part of your prayers in the synagogues in Turkish; 4- Turkify your schools; 5- Send your children to state schools; 6- Get involved in the affairs of the country; 7- Live together with Turks; 8- Break up your communal spirit; 9- Fulfill your specific tasks in the national economy; 10- Know your rights.<sup>17</sup> We may assume, though he does not state so explicitly, that he would have similar prescriptions apply to Kurds, Çerkes, Arabs, or the Christian minorities.

Actual practice in fact conformed closely to these ideas, and in some respects predated them. The closing of the medreses in 1924 effectively banned education in non-Turkish vernaculars for the Muslims (because of the Lausanne Treaty a similar ban for non-Muslims was formally not possible). The only formal education that was henceforth available was in Turkish, even though this meant that communication between the teachers and students was minimal. For several decades, this meant that the level of education in the Kurdish countryside remained very low compared to western Turkey. The very inadequacy of education there prevented the village schools from functioning as effective means of assimilation. A remedy was thought up relatively late, in the late 1960s, with the establishment of the *bölge yatılı ilkokullari*, virtually all of which were established in Kurdish districts.<sup>18</sup> Many graduates of these schools retain painful memories of the rude methods of indoctrination in these schools and of the physical and mental pressures to conform. (These schools, incidentally, also had the effect of bringing children from relatively wide regions together and, at least in some, strengthening their awareness of a common Kurdish identity. Though to a lesser extent than the universities in the large cities, these boarding schools also became breeding grounds for Kurdish nationalism.)

The compulsory adoption of surnames in 1934 turned numerous Kurdish families into Türks, Öztürks, Tatars, or Özbeks; their villages also had to give up their Armenian or Kurdish names for Turkish ones. Speaking Turkish became obligatory for all villagers coming to town; in the years of high Kemalism villagers had to pay a fine for each Kurdish word that they uttered. These policies were an irritant, that further alienated the village population from the government, but they did not contribute much to assimilation.

The most spectacular method of forced assimilation practiced by the Republican authorities was that of mass deportations. Deportations (*sürgün*) are, of course, part of the Ottoman heritage but it is only in the republican period that we find them used as a tool of nation-building. The text of the 1934 *Iskan Kanunu* makes unambiguously clear that by then the primary aim of the planned population transfers was the assimilation of non-Turkish elements to Turkish culture. Art. 2 of this law divides the country in three settlement zones: those where the population of Turkish culture had to be increased, those where the groups to be assimilated could be resettled, and those which for various reasons (health, security, etc.) had to be evacuated.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Tekin Alp in Bayrak (ed), *Kürtler ve ulusal-demokratik mücadeleleri*, p. 559-61.

<sup>18</sup> See Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu'nun düzeni*, pp. 400-4.

<sup>19</sup> "1 numaralı mıntıklar: Türk kültürlü nüfusun tekasüfü istenilen yerlerdir. 2 numaralı mıntıklar: Türk kültürüne temsili istenilen nüfusun nakil ve iskânına ayrılan yerlerdir. 3 numaralı mıntıklar: yer, sıhhat, iktisat, kültür, siyaset,

In the years preceding this law, deportations of Kurds had taken place for security reasons or in retaliation of Kurdish rebellions, but as a secondary objective the thought of assimilation may already have played a part as well. In the aftermath of World War I, Kurdish tribes who either had fled from their region for the advancing Russian armies or had been deported by the Ottoman military authorities for security reasons were not allowed to return to their regions of origin. The tribal groups were moreover broken up into groups not exceeding 300 persons and dispersed so that at no place they would constitute more than 5 percent of the population. By 1924, Kurdish spokesmen described this to British intelligence officers as part of a deliberate policy to Turkify the Kurds.<sup>20</sup>

The Resettlement Law was applied in its most stringent form in Dersim, following the repression of the 1937 rebellion. Dersim is also exemplary for both the successes and failures of the assimilation policies in general. Once the least integrated district of the Republic, it has contributed a disproportionate share of intellectuals and politicians to the country, persons well integrated in the political and cultural life of the country — be it generally on the left and dissident side of the spectrum.

#### 4. Kurdish apologists of assimilation

Ziya Gökalp — I do not wish to engage here the discussion as to whether he 'really' was a Kurd or a Turk, or a Zaza — developed explicit ideas about the assimilation (*istimlal*, as he called it, a term that never caught on) of the Kurds in a series of articles in the Diyarbekir journal *Küçük Mecmua* (1922-3).<sup>21</sup> He gave examples of Turkish tribes Kurdicizing and of Kurds Turkicizing, and noted that the former process generally took place in the countryside, where Kurdish culture was stronger, and the reverse process in the city where Turkish culture was superior. He never formulated a program of guided assimilation of the Kurds, but made unambiguously clear with which culture his sympathies lay.

A more interesting case perhaps is that of Şükrü Mehmet Sekban, a former Kurdish nationalist who in 1933 wrote a brochure in which he proposed full assimilation to Turkish culture as the solution of the Kurdish problem.<sup>22</sup> Ten years earlier, in a brochure titled *Kürtler Türklerden ne istiyorlar?*, Sekban still had protested Turkey's policy of 'forced assimilation and annihilation' (*cebren temsil ve imha politikası*) and demanded the Kurds' rights of speaking their own language and controlling the natural resources of their

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askerlik ve inzibat sebepleri ile boşaltılması istenilen ve iskân ve ikame yasak edilen yerlerdir" (cited in Beşikçi, *Kürtlerin 'mecburi iskân'*, p. 132).

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Abdulaziz Yamulki, *Kürdistan ve Kürt ihtilalleri*, Baghdad, 1946, pp. 70-1 and the references quoted in Bruinessen, "Genocide in Kurdistan?", note 30.

<sup>21</sup> Reprinted in vol VII of *Makaleler*, which unfortunately was not available to me. I depend on the summaries and analysis by Rohat in *Ziya Gökalp'in büyük çilesi Kürtler*, Istanbul: Fırat, 1992, pp. 90-111.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Chukru Mehmed Sekban, *La question kurde: des problèmes des minorités*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1933. The Turkish translations of this brochure, published for obvious political reasons, are not faithful to the original but constitute interesting material for a history of attempts to recuperate the Kurds as a Turkic people.

region.<sup>23</sup> In his 1933 brochure he denied that the Kurdish associations of which he had been an active member (the Kürt Te`avün ve Terakki Cemiyeti of 1908, Hêvî of 1912, and the Kürdistan Te`ali Cemiyeti of 1918-20) had ever had separatist intentions, he affirmed the narrow historical bond between Kurds and Turks, going back to the Central Asian past of both (sic!), and asserted that Kurdish education such as then existed in Iraq led to nothing since there was no good-quality reading material. It was in the best interests of the Kurds, his thesis was, to give up their own culture for the richer Turkish one, like many other peoples had adopted other cultures without physically disappearing. (He mentioned specifically the Germanization of the Celtic population of the Rhine basin, who had to all purposes become Germans and as such were part of a strong nation.) Sekban may have had personal reasons for this conversion — he lived in exile and wished to return to Turkey — but to his former friends, who were understandably irritated by this brochure, he gave another explanation. He felt that the oppression suffered by the Kurds in Turkey would only be alleviated if their cultural alienness disappeared, and thought that the loss of Kurdish culture would be a price worth paying.<sup>24</sup>

A more complicated case is that of M. Şerif Fırat, whose *Doğu illeri ve Varto tarihi* has also been much used by official propaganda.<sup>25</sup> Fırat belonged to the leading family of a Zaza-speaking Alevi tribe, the Hormek, who in 1925 had fought against Shaikh Sa`id. Like other Alevi tribes living amidst a Sunni majority, they had a long history of suffering at the hands of Sunni Kurdish tribes and experienced the republican regime as a liberation. Fırat appears to have convinced himself that his and the other Alevi tribes really had Turkish origin; in his book he produced a pseudo-history purporting to show all Kurdish tribes to be Turks. The book is one of the classics of its kind and had long a considerable influence on the self-perceptions of Alevi Kurds.

##### 5. How successful was assimilation, and how irreversible was it?

There is a remarkable difference in the response of the Çerkes and that of the Kurds to Turkey's assimilation policies. Among the Çerkes, too, there was a brief period of Çerkes nationalism in the wake of the First World War, fanned no doubt by President Wilson's promises.<sup>26</sup> Until recently, however, the Çerkes appeared to have willingly adopted Turkish identity and to be fiercely loyal to the Turkish state — an attitude that one finds only among a small minority of the Kurds.

The number of persons of Kurdish extraction who have reached high positions in Turkey's cultural, political and economic life (one may think of such different personalities as Yaşar Kemal, Kamran İnan, Yalim Erez, or Mehmet Ağar) shows that there were quite a few cases of successful assimilation. There

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<sup>23</sup> S ükrü Mehmet Sekban, *Kürtler Türklerden ne istiyorlar?* Cairo, 1923. Reprinted in Mehmet Bayrak (ed), *Kürdoloji belgeleri*, pp. 26-39.

<sup>24</sup> Musa Anter presents in his memoirs an amusing vignette of Sekban and a summary of his explanation: *Hatıralarım*, İstanbul: Doz Yayınları, 1990, pp. 74-6.

<sup>25</sup> First published in 1945 or 1946, reprinted in 1960 (with a foreword by Cemal Gürsel), 1970, and several later years.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Cemal Sener, *Çerkes Ethem olayı*, İstanbul: Okan, 1984, pp. 21-6.



obviously are no reliable statistical data, but my own interviews with numerous Kurds suggest that by 1960 assimilation of the urbanized Kurd had succeeded to a significant degree. Since the late 1960s, however, a gradual resurgence of Kurdish ethnicity has taken place. Significantly, this process did not begin among the rural Kurds who had been relatively little assimilated, but precisely among the most assimilated and integrated of the Kurds, the most highly educated. Ironically, it may have been their Turkish nationalist education that turned them into Kurdish nationalists.