

Projecting a Body Politic: Photographs, Time, and Immortality in the Kurdish Movement

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ABSTRACT

Many followers of the socialist Kurdish liberation movement surround themselves with photographs of fallen militants who they respect and celebrate as martyrs. These images hold considerable power: they are able to direct speech, shape bodily comportment, and command the everyday lives of their spectators. This paper asks where this potency stems from and what effects it has. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Kurdish communities in Turkey and Europe, it argues that displays of martyrs' photographs project a Kurdish body politic in the making, enrolling both those whom they depict and those who handle them into an alternative project of sovereignty that remains under acute assault. Key to this effect is how the photographs make the dead latent in the present. On the one hand, this makes the images immensely powerful media of political mobilization. Embodying the sacrifice of lifetime made by the fallen, the images become powerful vectors for feelings of indebtedness, commitment, and dedication that make distinct demands on the disposable time of those who contemplate them. On the other hand, photography's capacity to make the absent present and thereby upset linear emplotments of time also makes it a potentially unsettling medium. As a result, photographs of martyrs become crucial sites where political belonging and commitment

are fashioned, consolidated, and potentially rebelled against. [Keywords: photography, martyrdom, immortality, time, sacrifice, Kurdish movement]

“I think that they are watching us,” a young Kurdish woman whom I will call Berivan¹ said to me. In her twenties, Berivan had been actively engaged in the Kurdish political movement in Turkey before seeking political asylum in Germany. As she was telling me this, she was nodding toward the numerous framed photographs covering the wall space at the Kurdish community center in a middle-sized German town. They depicted young women and men who had participated in the nearly four-decade old armed struggle for Kurdish autonomy led by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*), more widely known by its acronym PKK. That engagement had cost them their lives. Now, in death, they were venerated as martyrs of the Kurdish liberation struggle. Tightly packed along the walls, this was a medley of faces cut out of photographic snapshots documenting militant life in the mountains of southeast Turkey or on the plains of northern Syria, of others that sternly faced studio photographers in a previous, civilian life, or yet again faces that were captured in front of a red background featuring the PKK star, hinting at the party’s own practices of standardized identification and bureaucratic administration. Despite the uniformity of the assemblage, with the framed images orderly arranged row upon row, it nonetheless betrayed a heterogeneity of individual lives. Here, the faces of young women and men from different parts of Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora mingled with those of Turkish, Arab, and European militants, indicating how the Kurdish movement has, particularly in recent years, galvanized international solidarity and fanned hopes for radical democratic transformation in the Middle East and beyond.

These photographs of the fallen gave material presence to lives that once were, yet they functioned not just as mementos of the dead. Through the curated display of these objects in both private and (semi)public spaces, fallen martyrs became an active presence in the lives of the living, capable of directing speech, shaping bodies, and commanding the everyday lives of their spectators. As Berivan explained, in front of the photos one ought not to use foul language and one should take care to sit properly, with straightened back and without crossing one’s legs, despite the temptation to lounge on one of the sofas arranged in a large U-shape in one corner of the room. Others told me that they experienced the images

as “heavy” (*giran* in Kurdish or *ağır* in Turkish) and that they felt, akin to Berivan, that the martyrs were watching them from within their frames. Reminding the living of those who had sacrificed their personal lives and futures for the Kurdish struggle, the images called forth a range of affects and emotions, including pride, adoration, and hope as well as uneasiness, sadness, and guilt. And yet, as one long-standing Kurdish activist admitted, like any photograph a martyr’s image, too, is “just a piece of paper.” What, this prompts me to ask, allows mere paper to become so extraordinarily potent? And, how are we to understand the effects of this potency?

As art historian John Tagg (1988:4) has argued, what makes a photograph more than just “a paltry piece of chemically discoloured paper” is the way in which it is placed within a history of practices, institutions, and social relations that allow it to “incite a phantasy, take on meaning, and exercise an effect.” Tagg thus suggests that photographs do something in the world because of the context in which they are placed. At the same time, photography’s affordances—the range of its possible meanings and effects—are also framed and delimited by certain characteristics inherent to the medium’s form. In what follows, I explore the potency of Kurdish martyrs’ photographs with a view to both some of their formal characteristics—particularly the way in which these relate to time—and the meanings that photographs acquire as a result of the contexts in which they are embedded. Specifically, I suggest that understanding the potency of these images requires approaching them not simply as a mode of commemoration or a means of documenting the past. Rather, I hope to show that they function as powerful claims to appearance, visibility, and political representation. By establishing revolutionary genealogies and sacrificial ancestry, Kurdish martyrs’ photographs are a potent means of projecting a body politic “not yet,” actualizing a revolutionary project in the making. This revolutionary project, it bears underlining, is currently focused on establishing a stateless political system based on the democratic and autonomous self-governance of local communities in the Middle East. As much as it is driven by a desire for Kurdish liberation from oppressive nation-state rule, this project also sees itself as a multi-ethnic and transnational movement, offering solutions to Kurdish and non-Kurdish communities alike.

As scholars of photography have made clear, questions of visual representation—questions concerning who and what becomes visible, and under what circumstances—are intimately linked to questions of political

representation. Not only do images shape discursive regimes of knowledge, truth, and power, but in the context of the modern nation-state and the idea of mass citizenship on which it is founded, visibility constitutes a central precondition for inclusion within public spheres and their decision-making mechanisms. As philosopher Ariella Azoulay (2008) has prominently argued, this means that visibility *on camera* can become a powerful means for securing political visibility *outside* the camera frame, offering the marginalized and disadvantaged important pathways for staking claims toward political belonging and participation (see also Pinney 2015). As Nicholas Mirzoeff (2017:18) emphasizes in his analysis of image mobilization in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, “to appear is to matter.” Following Karen Strassler (2020:243), this implies that “the organization of the seen and the unseen” concerns not just the substance of political struggle and contestation, but “conditions the very field on which the political as such takes shape.” Patricia Spyer (2022:8) has similarly written of how the “work of appearance,” or the way in which the visual is apprehended and perceived, delimits “the particular places and stakes where politics unfold.” Viewed from this perspective, photographic representation needs to be understood as a visual-material site where political collectivities are imagined, their boundaries staked out, and their terms of belonging negotiated (see also Bajorek 2010). While Azoulay champions photography primarily for how it can provide inclusion within spheres of civil society that exceed or upend the state form, including civil or human rights movements, I take up her proposition here to consider how photography may constitute or counter-sovereignties, even if these do not always take on state form.

Taking such an approach allows understanding the immense investment in the curation and display of martyrs’ photographs on the part of followers² of the Kurdish movement in both domestic and (semi)public spaces as part of a broader politics of visibility that seeks political recognition for a people whose existence has been denied for decades, whose language and culture have faced systematic attempts at eradication, and whose lands remain under occupation, chiefly by the nation-states of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In the absence of a Kurdish sovereign, such visual displays become a crucial means for forging an alternative political community, projecting and enacting a body politic that the PKK and the Kurdish liberation movement associated with it have sought to establish ever since the start of the PKK’s armed insurgency against the Turkish state in 1984.

As we shall see, this struggle for a self-determined body politic is at the same time a struggle for entry into the immanent temporality of political history, and in this way firmly entwines a struggle for visibility with one for historical subjectivity. Photographs of martyrs make, in that sense, a claim to the historical subjecthood of the Kurdish people, to agency on the historical stage of temporal progression. They insist that the deaths of those whom they depict matter and, reading such death as sacrifice, invest it with the agency of driving history forward.

But if photographs function as material objects that project and actualize entry into the time of history, they also have the capacity to unsettle the parameters of that very temporality. Like other modern media of sound and image reproduction, photographs partake in the temporal structure of latency (Eisenlohr, this issue). Their effect crucially relies on how they are able to capture a moment in time, materially fix it, and then reproduce that moment at a later point in time. In this way, photographs make the past latent in the present, thereby upsetting the homogenous time of linear progress associated with secular modernity. They function as heterochronous objects (Foucault 1984) or “time-tricking” devices (Ringel 2016) that call into question strictly linear emplotments of time. This aspect of latency, I suggest, is what makes the martyrs’ photographs I consider in this paper potentially recalcitrant objects with the capacity to impinge on the temporal projects associated with revolutionary redemption. Martyrs’ photographs emerge therefore not only as powerful means for projecting a Kurdish body politic, but also as objects that insert a sense of ambivalence into that very projection. Shedding light on moments of “photographic failure” (Stein 2017) as much as success, this paper thus shows how a focus on the material temporality of photographs provides insight at once into the medium’s power and its fragility (see Pinney 2008:49, 2015).

I base my analysis on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in 2018 and 2019 with Kurdish communities in Germany, Belgium, and northern Kurdistan (southeast Turkey), which involved participant observation at community centers, festivals, demonstrations, and homes as well as interviews with both political activists and ordinary followers and sympathizers of the Kurdish movement.³ In addition, I consulted a range of primary sources produced by the movement, including martyrs’ albums, obituaries, magazines, and digital content. In what follows, I first outline how the aesthetics of martyrs’ photographs at once projects a body politic “not yet” and endows that body politic with genealogical depth. Next, I

interrogate how the temporal demands that the images encapsulate render them potent material objects where revolutionary fervor and commitment intersect with anxiety, doubt, and occasionally even refusal.

Projecting a Body Politic

In focusing on photography, this paper explores only one aspect of the vast commemorative complex that upholds martyrdom as a central aspect of the Kurdish liberation movement's political discourse and practice. In ways similar to other revolutionary and liberation movements across the world,⁴ the readiness to sacrifice one's life for the collective cause constitutes a key moral value in the movement that demands elaborate forms of commemoration. In addition to photography, the tens of thousands of young women and men who have lost their lives since the onset of the PKK's armed struggle in the 1980s⁵ are also remembered through obituaries, (auto)biographic texts, and poetry; they are paid tribute through the erection of cemeteries and memorials, and the naming of streets, neighborhoods, and institutions (this only where the PKK or affiliated movements control territory, chiefly in northern Iraq and northern Syria); they are celebrated at funerals, mourning ceremonies, and commemorative gatherings (often in spite of public prohibition); and they inspire copious music and film production.

Central to these various forms of commemoration is the imperative to keep the martyrs alive and to honor their sacrifice. While the "normal" dead are gradually let go of through a process of mourning, martyrs and the sacrifices they have made, the PKK and its affiliated movements insist, ought to be continuously remembered, contemplated, and emulated. It is thanks to these social practices in the here-and-now that the martyrs attain their liminal status as living dead, rendering them, as a key slogan of the party proclaims, immortal (*şehîd namirin*). It is important to highlight here that the Kurdish liberation movement conceptualizes martyrial immortality as resolutely this-worldly and in this way differentiates itself from political movements that would locate the immortality of their martyrs in an other-worldly, religiously inflected afterlife, such as the Syrian Arab revolutionaries Charlotte Al-Khalili (2022) writes about. Even though the local term for martyr, *şehîd*, clearly has Islamic connotations, my interlocutors were adamant that the afterlives of their martyred comrades would unfold within the immanent world of the living rather than in a transcendent

elsewhere. In some ways, this renders the imperative to honor the martyrs particularly taxing, since it squarely positions the responsibility of rendering the martyrs' sacrifices worthwhile on the shoulders of the living.

Although only one among a whole range of commemorative media, photographs are crucial objects through which this imperative of keeping the martyrs alive is accomplished, negotiated, and—as we shall see—occasionally rebelled against. These images appear not only as stand-alone objects but are routinely embedded within other media of commemoration ranging from the analogue to the digital, from the narrative to the performative. Their easy reproducibility affords them wide circulation that cuts across homeland and diaspora, online and offline worlds. Images of martyrs thus lace the pages of party magazines and print obituaries, they are carried at demonstrations and displayed during funerals, they decorate the walls of living rooms, party offices, and so-called Martyrs' Houses (*mala şehîdan*), they dot Twitter timelines as much as Instagram pages and are duly lined up on party websites.

The aesthetics of this visual regime is dominated by images that focus on the face of their protagonists. Early PKK publications dedicated to fallen Kurdish revolutionaries from the 1980s would often place personal ID-style photographs next to written obituaries. In all likelihood, shot in local photo studios, these images depict their subjects either frontally or slightly turned side-ways, set against a monochrome background, gazing into the camera either directly or somewhat askew. Some show young men sporting large moustaches and voluminous dark locks tamed with pomade, exuding youthful optimism, while drooping shoulders and worn clothes speak of poverty and exhaustion in other images. But identity photographs were not the only visual means to commemorate the fallen. Up until the early 1990s, such publications also included images of blood-stained, slain bodies, presented as accusatory evidence for state violence and atrocity. In addition, some publications also featured drawings of martyr figures: sparingly illustrated depictions of stern-looking revolutionaries in guerrilla outfits that echo the graphic style of socialist realism, relying on minimalist ornamentation and the contrasting effect of black-on-white surfaces.

Over the course of the 1990s, however, as the number of martyrs surged with the escalation of the war in Turkey's Kurdish regions, this aesthetic repertoire stabilized in favor of photographic headshots that would come to dominate visual displays of martyrs by the end of the decade. Notably,

this stabilization coincided with the regular appearance of women among the ranks of photographed martyrs, mirroring not only the rise in female participation in the guerrilla forces at the time, but also indicating new gendered imaginations of the body politic and the sacrificial practices underpinning it. Compilations of martyrs' obituaries throughout the 1990s featured a mix of identity photographs, portraits that appear cut out from larger photographs, as well as snapshots and group photographs. Many a martyr was also commemorated without a photograph altogether, the individual picture replaced by a generic drawing of a head covered up with a checkered scarf. These absences of photographic identification attest to the difficulty of establishing bureaucratic procedures under the circumstances of a brutal war in mountainous territory and in the face of a rapidly expanding guerrilla army experiencing high death tolls.

From the early 2000s onwards, we can observe the increasing prevalence of identity photographs produced by the PKK itself, portraying guerrilla fighters in a frontal posture from the chest up, gazing straight into the camera, set against a generic red or green background featuring the party's emblem. These images are taken upon enrolment with the party and released to the public—today primarily through party-affiliated websites—when a guerrilla is confirmed to have fallen, sometimes alongside a short video clip. The images are thus produced for use after the death of their protagonists, establishing an archive of death foretold, one that always already looks upon the subjects it represents from the perspective of what Zeynep Gürsel calls the “futurepast” (2016:22-23). Notably, while the images emulate the style of official identity photographs, they do not function as a means of identification while militants are still alive. Only once a militant has fallen are the images put to public use, in this way inaugurating their new subject status as martyr. As they rehearse the familiar visual regime of national citizenship, these images can be said to visually enroll those whom they depict into a body politic in the making, proving their membership and signaling their belonging. And yet, given that they only come to circulate upon the death of their protagonists, they also signal a notion of subjecthood that grounds historical agency in sacrificial death.⁶

Since the early 2000s, the austere aesthetic of identity headshots has been supplemented by a more diverse register of martyrial display. This roughly coincided with the ideological shift of the party following the arrest of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999, which saw the PKK abandon



PHOTO BY AUTHOR

Figure 1. Display of Kurdish martyrs' photographs, Germany 2017.

some of its Marxist-Leninist precepts, including the objective of establishing an independent nation-state, and instead, adopt a program of radical democratic autonomy based on principles of feminism, political ecology, and multi-ethnic diversity. This period also saw the rise of digital photography, making visual documentation cheap and abundant. In the wake of these developments, the aesthetics of Kurdish martyrdom has notably expanded. While headshots of stern-looking young women and men remain integral to party bureaucracy and documentation, they have come to be supplemented by an abundance of photographs depicting smiling, joyful guerrilla fighters engaged in militant mountain life, preparing food and making fire, posing with wild animals, crossing rivers and admiring waterfalls. In addition, nowadays, martyrs are also commemorated through street art, including graffiti and stencils that insert their portraits into everyday urban life (this particularly in European cities with large Kurdish communities), they make an appearance in video games, and their drawings decorate objects ranging from banners and posters to brochures and stickers.

If martyrs' photographs constitute a means to substantiate belonging in an emerging Kurdish body politic, this contrasts sharply with how fallen fighters become visible in Turkish publics. These publics command a visual regime that, on the one hand, denies visibility to Kurdish insurgents through the systematic disappearance of their bodies, the destruction of their cemeteries, and the prohibition of funerary and mourning rituals (Ozsoy

2010). On the other hand, visibility is also weaponized when images of mutilated guerrilla bodies, sometimes denuded, come to circulate through digital cyberspace as trophies of Turkish sovereign warfare (compare Protner 2018). As Nazan Üstündağ (2013) has argued, such imagery violently exposes the intimacy of those depicted, objectifying their bodies in an attempt of domination through a pornographic gaze. Against this backdrop, identity photographs depicting unblemished, smiling guerrilla faces need to be understood as insisting on dignified appearance and self-determined visibility for those who are routinely rendered invisible and ungrievable within Turkish publics (compare Longoni 2010). Given how these images effectively enroll their protagonists—who are often Turkish citizens—in an alternative body politic, these images also constitute potent provocations toward claims of sovereignty by the Turkish state over its Kurdish citizens.

The use of photographic portraits for purposes of commemoration and mobilization is, of course, not unique to the Kurdish movement. Within the Turkish context, for instance, headshots of fallen Kurdish guerrilla fighters recall the mobilization of photographs by the so-called Saturday Mothers (*Cumartesi Anneleri*), a group of women who have staged sit-ins and public vigils at a central Istanbul site since the mid-1990s, bearing large photographic portraits of their missing relatives, to protest the enforced disappearances perpetuated by state authorities following the 1980 military coup (Ahiska 2019). Since 2009, the Kurdish Saturday Mothers (*Dayikên Şemiyê*) have organized similar public gatherings in major Kurdish cities, equally displaying portraits of their forcibly disappeared kin during protests that are sometimes referred to by the participating women simply as “holding up the photograph” (Bozkurt and Kaya 2014:62). Comparable mobilizations of photography to confront state-orchestrated killings and disappearances occur across a range of global sites, including in Argentina (Longoni 2010), Kashmir (Zia 2019), and Sri Lanka (Buthpitiya 2022), to name just a few examples. Martyrdom commemoration across a variety of different contexts, too, draws on similar aesthetics, whether such commemoration concerns the national martyrs of established states or those of resistance and revolutionary movements harboring their own projects of sovereignty.⁷

While I do not want to downplay the differences in meaning and affect between images of disappeared dissidents and those of celebrated national heroes, the ubiquity with which identity photographs come

to be mobilized in the public spectacles of modern politics attests to the particular potency of this visual form as a key aesthetic of modern citizenship. As Karen Strassler (2010:127-129) has pointed out, identity photographs articulate some of the core principles of modern mass politics, not only because of how they are practically associated with state practices of bureaucracy and identification, but also because of how they highlight at once individual singularity through the focus on the face and repeatable seriality through the ever same posture and framing. This makes them powerful objects capable of shoring up belonging where this seems under threat or demanding inclusion where a social contract fails to live up to its promises. What the display of martyrs' photographs in Kurdish contexts shows is that the same visual register also allows projecting alternative political communities altogether, enrolling both the subjects that photographs depict and those who contemplate them into new forms of belonging and their attendant temporalities.

Genealogical Depth

If images of Kurdish martyrs may be understood as projecting a body politic in the making, these images also play the crucial role of providing a sense of genealogical depth to the community imagined. Take, for instance, the case of Fatoş, a Kurdish woman in her early 40s, who lived with her husband and five children in a middle-sized German town. Fatoş and her husband had fled Turkey after her father and three other close family members were shot and killed while walking down the street in their hometown in the southeast of the country in the early 1990s. They count among the thousands of Kurds assassinated extrajudicially by Turkish paramilitary forces, whose photographs are regularly displayed at protests by civil resistance groups like the Saturday Mothers mentioned above. Many consider these victims of state terror to have sacrificed their lives for the Kurdish cause and thus refer to them as martyrs.

In the living room of their German apartment, the portrait of Fatoş's father was positioned prominently above the sofa, high on an otherwise empty wall, in the privileged space that typically accommodates the images of elderly and deceased relatives in Kurdish households (Grabolle-Çeliker 2013:34-35). Like the images of grandmothers and fathers in many a Kurdish living room, this, too, was an enlarged passport-style photograph, in all likelihood shot in a local photo studio in Turkey, placed behind

glass inside a thick black frame. The photo depicted the face of a man with a carefully groomed moustache, his black hair thinned out at the temples despite his young age. Formally dressed in a checkered shirt and striped tie and positioned against a light blue background, his gaze was directed towards a distant horizon. Thus, Fatoş's father kept watch over the ever-busy living room, accompanied by various family members whose photographs Fatoş would tuck into the sides of the frame, including snapshots of her grandson, school photographs of her own children, and photographs of older family members back in Turkey. In the process, she curated forms of domestic "togetherness" not unlike those Gillian Rose (2004) observes in arrangements of family photographs in British homes (see also Hirsch 1997). Yet, within the gathering of kin that Fatoş's visual displays performed, sacrificial status and political commitment, were able to replace conventional hierarchies of seniority. By placing the portrait of a young man in the privileged position that is ordinarily reserved for senior family members,⁸ sacrificial logics sustaining the Kurdish political struggle came to be inserted into the fabric of domestic kinship, blurring the boundaries between official regimes of political belonging and personal spheres of memory and affection (compare Strassler 2010:145-148).

When assembled in the (semi)public sphere of the local community center, martyrs' photographs similarly projected ideas of ancestry, though here communal rather than familial. Throughout the diaspora, community centers serve as gathering spaces for followers and sympathizers of the movement, Kurdish and otherwise, where political organizing, everyday socializing, and regular commemoration takes place. Remarkably, these centers function almost as self-contained spaces, their ever-same outline and aesthetics creating a recurring experience of immersion independently of the local context where these centers are situated. The display of martyrs' images, row upon row along the walls, is one key element that creates this experience. The images also play a major role in knitting private and public, domestic, and political spheres together, as both print and digital copies travel between private homes and local community centers when families contribute images of their relatives to the display of martyrs at the latter. In the German town where Fatoş lived, the martyrs' gallery at the community center expanded across all of the center's three rooms with picture after picture, face after face densely lining the walls. The display included both fallen relatives of local families and more widely known martyr figures whose personal stories resonated with the center's

elderly caretaker, who would have their images printed and framed, and who took great time to periodically rearrange the images to give equal exposure to all.

Even though the images of the young women and men displayed in this way were not uniform, aligned one after the other, their uniqueness easily faded into an overall impression of massified sacrifice. On the walls of the center, formal, passport-style headshots intermingled with shots that captured guerrillas against the backdrop of lush green foliage or rocky mountain fronts, often cropped such that they would avoid depicting comrades or other diverting details. What the images shared was a focus on the face and the expressivity of the eyes, which were in most shots gazing directly into the camera. Many of the images indicated the names of those whom they depicted and occasionally their date of martyrdom, while a few images of internationalist martyrs⁹ betrayed the increasingly transnational nature of the struggle. At their helm, on the wall facing the entrance of the center and featuring a large television screen, towered a portrait of Abdullah Öcalan, revered leader of the struggle. Cascading down on either side of his portrait were the images of the party's foundational martyrs, hovering above the uniform lines of the others as shining examples for all to see.

Arranged in this way, the photographs oscillated between marking individual destinies and pointing toward collective practices of political commitment and sacrifice. Many visitors at the community center were able to recognize individual faces among the many dozens covering the walls and would recount their personal stories to me in minute detail. And yet, no matter how unique each photo appeared, they also resembled each other in their display and arrangement, echoing countless similar photographs lining the walls of Kurdish homes, associations, and political offices across Europe and the Middle East. In their repetitive sameness, the martyrs easily appeared homogeneous and interchangeable, attesting to the "aesthetics of the same" (Poole 1997) that makes photography so uniquely suited to the political economy of the modern state, where technologies of mechanical reproduction allow devolving rank and hierarchy into the uniformity of modern citizenship (Pinney 2008:46-47). Importantly, here this promise of equality also extended to gender, allowing female guerrillas to enter the sacrificial bargain of the struggle on the same footing as their male comrades, thereby becoming equally constituent forces of

an emergent Kurdish body politic. The images, in turn, provided that body politic with an ancestral legacy. They suggested the temporal depth that comes with the reckoning of generational time (Munn 2013), but replaced hierarchies of familial seniority with those of personal sacrifice to the political cause. Thanks to their circulation cutting across private and public spaces, national borders, and virtual worlds, moreover, they enabled the spatial expansion of this deterritorialized body politic.

Life, Time, and Immortality

When asked about the importance of this visual display, my interlocutors would often refer to photographs as a means of remembering the martyrs and acknowledging their sacrifice. As leaders of the Kurdish movement do not hesitate to point out, “forgetting is treason” (*unutmak ihanettir*) and photographs were one crucial medium of averting potential disloyalty.¹⁰ Leaders, activists, and followers of the movement would also often emphasize the need to “make live” (*yaşatmak* in Turkish) the martyrs and their sacrifices through commitment to the political struggle in the present. This emphasis on the obligation to remember gestures at how the revolutionary temporality underpinning the Kurdish liberation struggle constructs the afterlives of its martyrs as resolutely this-worldly. If the martyrs are immortal, this immortality takes shape in the historical progression that ensues after their death.

Historical progression is grounded here in a secular-socialist temporality that understands history moving toward a future of revolutionary liberation, but where that future is made in the here and now, thanks to the actions of individuals in the present. Where class struggle used to be the central driving force toward revolutionary redemption in socialist cosmologies, in the PKK’s worldview—not unlike other radical leftist movements—sacrifice has to a considerable degree replaced or usurped this function (compare Bargu 2016:238). Official PKK discourse holds that until the foundation of the party in 1978 and the martyrdom of its first cadres, the Kurdish people was condemned to a life outside the bounds of history, living in a state that resembled death more than life. Following this view, it is only thanks to individual revolutionaries committing themselves to the armed struggle and offering up their lives, that the Kurdish people acquired a forward expanding temporality, rendering the people (and the party) capable of writing its own history. In this narrative, the forfeiting

of life on the part of the party's founding cadres become acts of sacrificial beginning (Lambek 2007:30), setting the PKK on a path where historical progression comes to be driven by a continuous series of sacrifice. History is made by the resulting "chain" (*zincir*) or "caravan" (*kervan*) of martyrs, punctuated by the "milestones" (*kilometre taşı*) of particularly important acts of self-sacrifice that are said to have ushered the movement from one historical stage to the next (e.g., initiating the transformation from party to armed movement, or leading to a phase of prison resistance) and will eventually lead to revolutionary victory. The Kurdish struggle is in that sense crucially a struggle for a self-determined temporality and the possibility of historical subjectivity that this implies. It follows that the utopia that it envisions is not one that seeks an exit from historical time altogether (as in certain messianic movements, compare Blanes 2014), but one that remains firmly grounded in secular understandings of immanent history. Revolution is here a decisive moment of social emancipation, a central, utopian aspiration—what Ernst Bloch might refer to as the "not yet"—that can only be made and experienced through collective action in the present (Abensour 2012).

What kind of afterlives does the temporal order of this sacrificial economy bestow on its martyrs? As anthropologist Abou Farman (2020) has argued, proclamations of immortality constitute a provocation to modern sensibilities because secular understandings of time and history posit that life ends with biological death, that there is no soul that survives, that no afterlife ensues. Jean Langford (2009:685), too, has written of how contemporary biopolitics institutionalize "a particular afterlife imaginary," one that is unable to conceive of the dead as active social beings because it sees death as an absolute endpoint where an animated body transforms into inanimate matter. Interactions with the dead remain therefore largely confined to the sphere of the symbolic, focusing on testimonial memory, monuments, or eulogy. When declaring its martyrs immortal, the Kurdish movement largely adheres to such secular scripts, highlighting that the proclaimed immortality is to be understood as strictly this-worldly. The martyrs, leaders and followers regularly emphasize, become immortal thanks to acts of commemoration and emulation in the here and now, as the living follow their path and continue their struggle. Life is in this context understood as a temporally limited span of vitality that does not necessarily open up to a transcendent hereafter; it is immanent lifetime. Yet, different from the biopolitical regimes of modern nation-states in which

lifetime becomes a calculative logic to assess the temporal expansion of biological life at the level of the population through statistical measures like longevity or mortality rates (Farman 2020:243-247), for the Kurdish movement life is fundamentally a question of politically meaningful existence. As we have seen, it is the martyrs who are considered to have propelled the entire Kurdish people from leading bare, biological lives into the politically meaningful state of historical subjectivity thanks to their sacrifice. The martyrs' act of forfeiting their biological lives—including the future in which those lives were going to unfold—becomes here a condition for truly political life to flourish. What matters is thus less the quantifiable expansion of life in time (*how long* one lives), but how a given lifetime contributes to the collective cause (*how* one lives). While those who join the guerrilla forces take the immediate risk of having their lives prematurely cut short, perhaps more important than this quantitative reduction of lifetime is that they devote their time to enacting, promoting, and defending revolutionary ideals, thereby transcending mere biological existence and leading politically fulfilled lives.

Even though civilian followers of the movement are not expected to sacrifice their biological lives, they are certainly expected to turn the lifetime given to them into politically meaningful life, through a series of “smaller” sacrifices involving the personal time at their disposal. Choosing to attend a rally, participate in a committee meeting, or organize a commemorative event rather than engaging in private pursuits all contribute to this end. Although these smaller sacrifices can never weigh up to the gravity of the martyr's ultimate gift of life to the revolution—an inherently incommensurable gift, in Derrida's (1992) sense—they are nonetheless key to the forward momentum envisaged and exercised by the party. One consequence is that the everyday life of followers and sympathizers “thickens with ethical problems” (Bear 2014:6). As the past gains weight because of how it is permeated by the sacrificial acts of militants offering up their lives, it induces a distinct sense of indebtedness toward the martyrs on the part of the living (Neyzi and Darıcı 2015). As Yıldız, the sister of a well-known commander who had fallen during the early years of the struggle told me, “we are here because of the values they [the martyrs] created. This life of ours, we owe it to them.” The photographs, she explained, are a symbolic (*sembolik*) means to acknowledge this debt. “Our [the movement's] television, our newspapers, many of our institutions, they were all built on those deaths.” This sense of indebtedness mandated not only particular

forms of remembering the past, but also extended moral imperatives with regard to how ordinary Kurdish women and men should employ their time in the present. For many of my interlocutors, that present was a space at once pregnant with possibility and heavy with responsibility, demanding constant mobilization, exertion, and effort. As such, it also created its own distinct affective landscape, shaped not only by hope, fervor, and commitment but also by anxiety and occasionally even guilt about how to live up to the debt imparted by the martyrs.

Potencies and Failures

Photographs of the fallen, I suggest, act as material sites where these sacrificial conversions and the structures of feeling accompanying them are played out. As scholars of photography have amply noted, as a medium, photography seems to have a privileged relation with death. Photographs appear capable of “resurrecting” the dead, as Roland Barthes (1981:82) famously wrote; an effect that is crucially linked to what I have described here as photography’s latency, that is, the medium’s capacity of rendering present that which is past, lost, or absent. One effect of this “time-axis manipulation” (Eisenlohr, this issue) is that photographs routinely breach the border between inanimate object status and magical animation, figuring, as media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell (1996:81) has remarked, “as ‘animated’ beings, quasi agents, mock persons” in our social worlds. As they simultaneously mark the passage of time and preserve it, photographs easily exude a sense of “uncanny personhood” (1996:73), thereby upsetting secular sensibilities that would posit neat boundaries between animate and inanimate, life and death, past and present (see also Benjamin 1999). If this allows photographs to function as powerful “technologies of immortality” (Ghannam 2015), it also makes them particularly suited for the commemoration of martyrs; those liminal figures, dead yet immortal, who retain a stubborn agency even when framed within the confines of this-worldly commemoration. Fatoş seemed to indicate as much when she explained with reference to her father’s portrait in the family’s living room, that whether she displayed his photograph would not actually make a difference to her ability to remember him. No matter what, she would never be able to forget him and his sacrifice. Putting up the photograph, she explained, was therefore “not about not forgetting (*unutmamak*), but more about keeping alive (*yaşatmak*).”

This capacity of photography to “keep alive” played a key role in rendering martyrs’ images extraordinarily potent, capable of motivating followers to do their part for the struggle. As Baran, a Kurdish young man from northern Syria living in Germany, told me, the photos “remind you of the reason why these people gave their lives and empower you to take their path.” To him, they represented history, yet with a distinctly forward momentum. As he noted, “history is not about the past. History is now and it is in the future.” Materializing a history of sacrifice, the images acted as continuous reminders of the responsibilities the living held toward the martyrs. What is more, they imbued such remembrance with a sense of animation, expressed most forcefully by the feeling experienced by many of my interlocutors that the martyrs were watching them. It is for this reason, as well, that one had to sit and speak properly in front of the images. These were behavioral conventions typically expected when interacting with senior family or community members, and as such, they carried distinct gendered meanings. Yıldız, for instance, told me how she once spontaneously took a female friend to the community center. When the friend suddenly found herself facing the martyrs’ photographs, she was immensely embarrassed because she felt she was dressed in a way that was too revealing. Yıldız herself did not think these things mattered much and told her friend not to worry. After all, to her, the images were primarily symbols that represented a history of sacrifice and the debt that arose from it for the living. Why should one’s dress matter to those inanimate objects? Yet these were symbols that did their work of representation rather unquietly, always on the verge of turning abstract representation into animate presence. As Yıldız admitted, with its rows and rows of martyrs’ images, the community center exuded a particularly heavy (*ağır*) atmosphere, which made even her refrain from smoking in front of the photographs and pay attention to how she dressed—“just in case (*ne olursa olsun*).”

As this begins to indicate, if photographs have the capacity to keep alive the martyrs and their sacrifice, this may also have unsettling consequences. Once loss is no longer safely consigned to the past but becomes latent in the present, it may unfold a whole range of forces, including but not limited to dutiful revolutionary commitment. The temporalities that photographs encapsulate make it, in that sense, not only an extraordinarily productive but also a potentially fragile, even unruly medium. Christopher Pinney (2015:22) suggests as much when he writes of the “unpredictability” of photography, which allows the medium to oscillate between

emancipatory promises of representation and dystopian possibilities for surveillance. In a similar vein, Rebecca Stein (2017:S57) has highlighted the need to approach the photographic medium through an “analytics of lapse” in order to capture how photographic technologies so often fail to deliver the promises attached to them. In what follows, I want to take up these interventions to explore the limits of the temporal exchanges into which martyrs’ photographs enroll their viewers; exchanges which demand investments of disposable time on the part of followers with a view to living up to the debt imparted by the martyrs’ ultimate sacrifice of lifetime. Importantly, moments of what Stein (2017) terms “photographic failure” were often ambivalent, in the sense that images could oscillate between giving rise to commitment and devotion to the struggle, while at the same time provoking feelings of sadness, regret, or doubt. Like the “about-to-die” photographs in news reporting Barbie Zelizer (2010) writes about—scenes of impending death which avoid depicting its finality—these images allowed for a wide range of emotions, affects, and reactions, nourished less by photography’s documentary function than by its subjunctive mode: its capacity to incite fantasy and stir the imagination.

The conversation I had with three young members of a Kurdish student organization in Germany begins to illustrate this. On a sunny afternoon in early spring 2018, I had coffee with Aylin, a university student with Kurdish background who had grown up in Germany, Baran from northern Syria, and a German student active in the movement. Chatting in English, I asked the three how they felt about the ubiquitous presence of martyrs’ photographs in Kurdish private and political spaces. While Baran immediately described the photographs as empowering, Aylin, more hesitant, noted that to her, they rather evoked pain and perhaps even regret. She said that the photos made her feel very sad, because “you see all these great, young people, and you see that these people are now lost.” Where for Baran martyrs’ photographs thickened the presence with ethical responsibility to take forward the revolutionary struggle, for Aylin the photographs pointed to a regrettable past. In the words of Susan Sontag (1977:70), all she could see in the photographs were young men and women “heading toward their own destruction.” If the political potency of martyrs’ photographs emerges from how they are squarely positioned between animate and inanimate, presence and absence, here that slippery liminality of the photographic medium appeared counterproductive. While for Baran the images spoke of a future pregnant with the possibilities of revolutionary

redemption, for Aylin, the photographs rather maintained “the memory of the dead as *being dead*” (Metz 1985:84, original emphasis).

Filiz, a political refugee from Turkey, single mother, and taxi driver, shared Aylin’s perception that photographs of martyrs were vectors of regrettable histories. “They wound my soul,” she said. Here, she was referring not just to the visual culture of martyrdom within the PKK, but to that of Turkey’s radical left more broadly. As a result of close historical and ideological ties (Casier and Jongerden 2012), both share an aesthetics of revolutionary sacrifice in which martyrs’ photographs play a major role. Filiz had been active within a radical leftist group before she came to Germany, and many of her comrades had given their lives for the revolutionary cause. Yet Filiz’s apartment, unlike that of her close friend Fatoş, bore not a single trace of her former comrades. “I just cannot bear it,” she told us during a long conversation one evening. Filiz’s discomfort with depictions of her lost friends was partly related to the fact that she had become estranged from the political movement she was once a part of. Keeping the photos of dead comrades out of her home was a way of performing a break with this political culture. At the same time, it was also an acknowledgment that these photographs were more than just quiet symbols of political affiliation or personal remembrance. Animating those whose lives had been violently lost, these material objects had the capacity to wound and unsettle. As they made the dead latent in the present, these objects easily became recalcitrant, capable of unsettling secular intuitions that would deny the dead an afterlife and reduce life to the linear expansion of biological lifetime.

One might ascribe the unease that Filiz and Aylin experienced vis-à-vis martyrs’ photographs to their respective newness to and estrangement from the sacrificial politics of the Kurdish and related leftist movements. It might also be read as a consequence of diaspora life, where a lack of proximity to the political violence permeating Kurdish everyday lives makes it hard to cultivate commitment to the revolutionary struggle, particularly amongst younger generations (Rudi 2019:347-373). But even staunch followers of the movement could be haunted by the uncanny powers of martyrial imagery. Yıldız, for instance, didn’t have any formal martyr photos of her fallen brother displayed at home either. The photos were too heavy, she told me. “Even at the community center, my eyes constantly get caught by the photos (*gözüm hep gidiyor oraya takılıyor*),” she explained. “Sometimes you just feel so sad (*o kadar üzülüyorsun ki*). [...]”

They [the martyrs] are now gone. And you say, how smart, how beautiful they were, if only they were still alive.” Even though she was sometimes reproached by her comrades for not displaying her brother’s iconic images at home, the complicated feelings those photos induced were one reason she refused to do so. All she was able to bear were her brother’s childhood photographs; images not yet imbued with the heaviness of sacrifice and the connotations of debt and return that more formal headshots invoked.

Esra, a dedicated activist whose husband had fallen martyr, similarly experienced contradictory feelings vis-à-vis martyr imagery. In her late forties, she had come to Germany after her husband died while in a Turkish prison. He had joined the PKK as a guerrilla fighter not even two years into their marriage, but was captured and imprisoned for life. In prison, Esra told me, he was tortured and developed a chronic sickness, which eventually took his life eleven years later. Celebrated as a martyr, his body was laid to rest in his hometown in southeast Turkey amidst a huge funeral cortege. Not long after her husband’s death, Esra was sentenced to prison by the Turkish judiciary because of her involvement with the Kurdish movement, at which point she fled and sought asylum in Germany. There, she has continued to be active with the movement, taking over responsibility for organizing the regular martyrs’ commemorations at the local cultural association.

Like Berivan, who we encountered in the beginning, Esra, too, believed that the martyrs were watching the living. Suffering from several chronic illnesses, sometimes she felt too exhausted to attend the numerous rallies and meetings organized by the association. When that happens, she said, “I feel like they [the martyrs] are upset with me.” She joked that perhaps she was not quite alright in her head anymore, with all those illnesses; her irony here referencing secular sensibilities that regard any attribution of agency to the dead as beyond the realm of rational conduct. And yet Esra persisted, reiterating now in a more serious tone of voice: “All I believe is that the martyrs see us.” Clearly, their gaze was a compelling one. Ultimately, it made Esra overcome the exhaustion and physical pain of her reluctant body and attend commemoration after commemoration, meeting after meeting at the association. Her commitment arose from what she described as a distinct sense of indebtedness toward the thousands who had sacrificed their lives for the struggle. This debt arose from the awareness that the martyrs had forfeited the temporal expansion of their lives, sacrificing the time given to them by joining the struggle and falling

in armed conflict. For Esra, returning at least some of that debt hinged on how she would choose to employ her own lifetime in the present, dedicating it to the struggle rather than to personal care or recreation. She had no illusions that the sacrifices she was making could never pay back the debt she felt she had incurred toward the martyrs and that “ultimate” sacrifice they had made; a sacrifice that stood beyond calculative logics of direct return (see Üstündağ 2013). Nevertheless, she saw her own investments—her trials in exile, her passionate commitment to party organizing—as contributing to the struggle’s overall moral economy, alleviating some of the collective debts accrued.

Yet despite her determined investment in the political cause, Esra struggled with the relentless gaze extended by the martyrs. On the white walls of her living room, above the sofa, there were only three frames. One held an image of Öcalan, while the other two were of her deceased husband: one a snapshot of him with their son, a toddler at the time, the second a more formal headshot with his portrait superimposed on the PKK’s red-yellow star. Private and political, personal, and party spheres merged in this assemblage. The encounter between the stern and solemn gaze of the formal party photograph and a scene of paternal affection situated Esra’s husband at once within private kinship relations and within the collective ancestry of the revolutionary struggle. While the family snapshot pointed to the father figure the family had lost, the party photograph hinted at how that loss might become productive within a larger political frame. And yet this encounter was a fragile one. As Esra told me, “Sometimes I want to take down all these photos, break them and throw them away. Sometimes I feel very troubled. Then I say [as if addressing her husband], ‘you left us too early, you went away. You have left us alone, incomplete.’” In those intimate moments when Esra rebelled against her husband’s absence, it seemed as if the formal gaze of the party photograph was no longer able to uphold the series of sacrificial conversions on which the moral economy of the Kurdish revolutionary project relied. Rather than convert the sacrifice of personal life into an inherently productive investment in a revolutionary future, all that the images on Esra’s living room wall could indicate was how a life had been cut short, its time prematurely upended. In those instances, the images seemed to demand mourning rather than hopeful exertion, sadness rather than committed devotion. Ultimately, however, Esra did not take down and break the photographs. She never succumbed to those private moments of rebellion and instead continued

to pay her debts to the martyrs, offering up her own time for the collective cause, one ordinary sacrifice at a time.

Concluding Remarks

Rebecca Stein writes of lapse as marking a temporal interval, a gap or pause, in the photographic operation (2017:S57). This article has illustrated how the possibility of such lapse is ever present within the circuits of contemplation and display in which Kurdish martyrs' photographs circulate. As we saw in the case of Esra, lapse may appear as a temporary halt, a momentary interruption to the ongoing series of sacrificial conversions that uphold and sustain a provisional Kurdish body politic. Yet, it may also lead to a breakdown or refusal of these moral-temporal exchanges. One family, for instance, declined to send an image of their son, who had joined the PKK in its early years and fallen before he could even be formally registered, to the community center in the German town where they lived and where the image was to be integrated in the local martyrs' gallery. "We have forgotten," the elderly father told me, in this way insisting on closing the debt that the restless immortality of the martyrs would otherwise keep open and rejecting his son's ascension into the realm of sacrificial ancestors sustaining the revolutionary collective.

One way in which to read these forms of lapse is to view them as evidence of photography's fragility as a medium of political mobilization. Following Pinney (2008:48-49), this fragility is the effect of photography always showing, in a sense, "too much," creating an excess that opens the medium up to alternative or counterinterpretations, to (mis)appropriation and plays of the imagination. This fragility of photography, I have suggested here, crucially has to do with the medium's temporal structure of latency. As it bestows potent afterlives upon the dead, these afterlives may not always be successfully harnessed for the purposes for which they were initially summoned. Rendering the martyrs immortal also means inviting—rendering latent—their unquiet force into Kurdish everyday lives. In a context such as the Kurdish one, where sovereignty remains an aspiration rather than a fact, this fragility of photography as a medium of political mobilization comes with specific risks. As martyrs' photographs are called upon to project and sustain the political collective in the face of continuous repressive onslaught, criminalization, and violence, the medium bears a heavy weight. As a result, these images become crucial material sites

where belonging and commitment to the movement and its revolutionary temporality are fashioned and consolidated, but also potentially refused.

At the same time, the emergence of new, varied repertoires of martyr representation also point to novel imaginaries regarding sacrifice, sovereignty, and the temporalities they imply. As formal identity photographs come to intermingle with an unprecedented abundance of photographic snapshots and animated videos, Instagram stories and video games, graffiti art and stencils, martyrdom is taking on new forms and exerting different demands. These novel forms of representation might be understood as testifying to the search for new models of political belonging and community, ever more urgent at a moment when the state form as the apex of sovereignty is being increasingly questioned, both from within the Kurdish movement and without. ■

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Endnotes:

¹To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors I use pseudonyms throughout and have changed certain details about their personal identities.

²I use the term follower loosely to describe civilian members and supporters of the Kurdish movement who display a strong degree of commitment to its goals and are engaged in its activities. My interlocutors would often describe themselves as being *welatparêz* (Krd.) or *yurtsever* (Trk.), sometimes translated as patriotic but understood in this context as indexing an attachment to the political principles of the PKK-led Kurdish movement. While levels of engagement will vary depending on personal conviction and circumstance, I understand followers to be involved to such a degree that they feel interpellated by the movement's expectations of moral-political commitment.

³I carried out fieldwork primarily in Turkish and Kurdish (Kurmanji), and occasionally in German and English.

⁴Martyrdom is a broad term that finds application in a vast variety of religious and political movements. Key to martyrdom is arguably a notion of self-sacrifice for a this or other-worldly cause. In terms of discourse, practice, and aesthetics, martyrdom in the Kurdish movement shows numerous parallels with revolutionary and socialist practices of martyrdom elsewhere, including those practiced by Turkish leftist movements (Bargu 2016) as well as liberation movements in Palestine (Khalili 2007), Sri Lanka (Klem and Maunaguru 2017), or the Naxalites in India (Suykens 2010).

⁵In 2013, the PKK estimated its total number of fallen fighters at around 20,000. The majority of these martyrs are extremely young: a typical militant joins the PKK as a teenager and dies before the age of 24 (Tezcür 2016).

⁶In their study of Kurdish youth subjectivity in Amed (Diyarbakır), Leyla Neyzi and Haydar Darıcı (2015: 63) similarly note that in the context of the Kurdish insurgency “one becomes an agent largely through sacrifice.”

⁷See, for instance, Abu Hashhash (2006) on martyrs’ photographs in the Palestinian context and Talebi (2012) on Iran.

⁸Similar shifts in family seniority have also been observed in other contexts where sacrificial martyrdom is celebrated. See, for instance, Fromanger (2012) on how martyrs’ photographs occupy the position normally reserved for photographs of older family members in post-revolutionary Iran.

⁹Ethnically non-Kurdish individuals who decide to join the Kurdish struggle are commonly referred to as internationalists in this context.

¹⁰The observations in this section are based primarily on my in-depth reading of special commemorative editions of the PKK’s own newspaper *Serxwebûn* (Independence), so-called *şehitler albümleri* (martyrs’ albums), published since 1982 in intervals of one to four years.

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Foreign Language Translations:

Projecting a Body Politic: Photographs, Time, and Immortality in the Kurdish Movement

[**Keywords:** photography; martyrdom; immortality; time; sacrifice; Kurdish movement]

Projekirina Hebûneke Siyasî: Wêne, Dem, û Nemirî di nav Tevgera Kurd de

[**Peyven serekê:** fotografî; şehîdbûn; nemirî; dem; fîda; tevgera kurd]

Siyasal bir Varlığın Tasavvuru: Kürt Hareketinde Fotoğraf, Zaman, ve Ölümsüzlük

[**Anahtar kelimeleri:** fotoğraf; şehitlik; ölümsüzlük; zaman; feda; Kürt hareketi]

Projectando o Corpo Político: Fotografias, Tempo, e Imortalidade no Movimento Curdo

[**Palavras-chave:** fotografia, martírio, imortalidade, tempo, sacrifício, movimento curdo]

Проекция политического тела: Фотографии, время и бессмертность в курдском движении

[**Ключевые слова:** фотография, мученичество, бессмертность, время, пожертвование, курдское движение]

投射身体政治: 论库尔德族运动中的照片, 时间, 与永生

[**关键词:** 摄影, 殉难, 不朽, 时间, 牺牲, 库尔德族运动]

الإبراز السياسي للجسم: الصور والوقت والخلود في الحركة الكردية
كلمات البحث: التصوير; الاستشهاد; الخلود; الوقت; التضحية; الحركة الكردية

