

Made in Germany: Erdogan's tanks & leftist resistance

by Marcel Cartier - 06/02/2018 14:35



The scene couldn't be more ironic. As light snow falls on Berlin's Kreuzberg district on a frigid February afternoon, half a dozen police officers are seen holding up a banner denouncing Germany's weapons exports to Turkey and proclaiming solidarity with the Kurdish struggle in Syria. Photographers and protesters are noticeably amused and don't hesitate to capture what is a blatantly contradictory moment. When I arrive at the scene of this internationalist demonstration for Afrin about half an hour later, I'm perplexed to see one of these photos on the mobile phone of someone who captured the bizarre occasion.

Unfortunately, my initial perception of what had taken place was far too good to be true. No, this wasn't a renegade unit of the Berliner Polizei who decided to join the cause of the thousands of demonstrators who turned out to express their solidarity with Afrin's resistance to Turkish occupation and aggression. The police officers were instead tasked with going through each banner, flag and sign brought to the

demonstration by the organizers in order to make sure there were no illegal logos or slogans on them. As the crowd of Kurds and their German supporters began to swell and chants of 'Terrorist Erdogan!' shook the concrete, a quick announcement was made by organizers to remind the demonstrators that any flags or slogans related to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or its leader Abdullah Ocalan were prohibited. A bit of confusion soon came over many in attendance about whether the flags of the People's and Women's Protection Units (YPG and YPJ) were allowed, as a nationwide ban had previously been enforced. After some conversations between myself and a few people more knowledgeable about the issue, it was made clear to me that the ban was no longer in effect in Berlin, but still stands in other German cities.

The militant, spirited and lively protest soon made its way through the streets of Kreuzberg, an area known as being 'Turkish', though a considerable amount of those counted as such are actually Kurds. While a few Turkish nationalists engaged in shouting matches from the sidelines and several hung flags of the Republic out of their windows from several stories up, the demonstration largely avoided major confrontations. Around midway through the march, fireworks and flares were set off from atop a residential building. An enormous PKK flag flew from the windows of a flat, boldly defying the ban on images from what the German government views a 'terrorist organization'. Police officers soon flocked in huge numbers to the front door of the building in what looked like an attempt to arrest those responsible for the illegal action.

German Weapons Supplied for Erdogan's Criminal Aggression

As Germany's cities are covered in not only snowfall but the colours of the Kurds' national identity – green, gold and red – tanks supplied to the Turkish military by the German state take part in the offensive against the YPG/J in Afrin. The illegal incursion into Syrian territory by Erdogan's AKP government has been made possible due to the support of his regime's NATO allies. Despite the heightened tensions between Turkey and its closest partners such as the United States and Germany, this hasn't prevented both Washington and Berlin from not only looking the other way in Afrin, but in many cases playing an active role in tacitly supporting the aggression.

ANF English recently reported on a program that aired on German public broadcaster ARD entitled "War against Kurds: Made in Germany" saying that the "licensing rights to the rifles the Turkish soldiers and their gangs attacking Afrin are held by Germany's prominent weapons manufacturer Heckler & Koch, and that the firm has received approval from Germany to have the rifles manufactured in Turkey. The

program also stated that the military vehicles that transported the Turkish army tanks to the Afrin border were manufactured by German automotive giant Mercedes. It was also pointed out that the vehicles transporting Turkish soldiers for the Afrin attack are Mercedes' Unimog model. The program stated that the German-made vehicles are not only these, and in addition to the Leopard II tanks, the M60 tanks the Turkish army uses are also running on motors manufactured by German automotive giants MTU and Renk, and that the artilleries used in the bombing of Afrin also have MTU motors installed.”

Last week, members of the German Bundestag from Die Linke, the country's democratic socialist party, participated in an act of defiance in Parliament by wearing Kurdish scarves in solidarity with the people of Afrin. This act was a call to the members of the other parties in the Bundestag, particularly the dominant Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Chancellor Angela Merkel and their former coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), to not only reconsider arms shipments to the Turkish state; to not only mutter a few half-hearted and weak phrases about being 'concerned' for an escalation of hostilities in Afrin, but to vehemently stand against Erdogan's attempted colonization of part of Syria with the use of German weaponry. However, no such statement has come forward from the likes of Merkel or the SPD's leaders.

At the moment, Germany is still without a government in the aftermath of September's election in which Merkel lost a considerable degree of votes (although she still came out ahead of the other Parliamentary parties). The SPD, its reputation as a viable left-leaning opposition party tarnished by years of neo-liberal policies and acquiescence to Merkel's agenda, declared ahead of the election that it wouldn't enter another left-right coalition. However, with the entry of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) into Parliament and collapse of talks for a 'grand coalition', the SPD has gone back on this promise. There is something deeply ironic about the Social Democrats framing their argument for entering a possible new coalition with the conservatives in terms of 'internationalism'. They juxtapose their position of being pro-European Union and 'open' as opposed to the xenophobia and 'closed' anti-EU line of the AfD. It seems like a rather cruel joke to speak of the SPD's 'internationalism' considering that as part of the 'grand coalition' the party helped to oversee major weapons deals with Erdogan. There is as much blood on the hands of the SPD's leadership as there is on those of Chancellor Merkel.

In light of Erdogan's aggression that began over two weeks ago, foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel has responded to public criticism of German tanks aiding rebels ideologically linked to al-Qaeda and other Salafist groups against Afrin's multi-ethnic,

grassroots democratic experiment by proclaiming a weapons freeze until a new government is formed. However, as Andrew Feinstein, an expert on the global arms trade, told the Washington Post, “even if Germany decided to stop selling weapons to Turkey now, they've got decades worth of German weaponry to use in these sorts of assaults against the Kurds.”

In addition, last month Die Spiegel reported that a ‘dirty deal’ was being discussed that would see the release of German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yucel in exchange for allowing a weapons deal to be approved between Rheinmetall and Turkey’s government. Yucel proclaimed his vehement opposition to being made part of any such deal, saying “I don’t want my freedom to be tainted by German tanks and arms. Neither do I want my freedom to be tainted by the return of those who have previously been co-conspirators with the government (and should be tried) but are currently seeking refuge in Germany. I will not be a part of any dirty deal.”

Ankara & Rojava: All Sides Matter?

Although at this stage, members of both of Germany’s mainstream parties express ‘concern’ about the Turkish offensive and talk about the prospect of making sure that weapons upgrades aren’t provided to Ankara for the time being, the fact of the matter remains that Germany has been resolutely firm in its support for Turkey’s war against the Kurdish Freedom Movement for decades.

Long before the YPG and YPJ captured the attention of the world for their heroism in their battle against the fascism of the Islamic State in Kobane, it was U.S., German, British and Israeli weaponry that was slaughtering not only fighters of the PKK within the borders of Turkey, but Kurdish civilians in the thousands of villages which have been destroyed since the start of the armed struggle in 1984. In Afrin canton today, more than 5,000 people have already been displaced due to the Turkey-Free Syrian Army aggression, as ethnic cleansing is openly said to be an aim of the operation by Erdogan’s troops and proxies. This same drive for displacement and attempts at assimilation have been a common part of the landscape in southeast Turkey for as long as history can recall.

Germany and the other western powers have never been neutral in this ‘conflict’. The recent protest in Berlin showed firsthand the way in which criminalization of Kurdish resistance is handled by the German state in the streets. Talking about the heroism of the YPG and YPG in the fight against Daesh – as some members of the German military have done -- is meaningless when its movement’s symbols are banned, and when the state looks the other way when its weapons massacre Kurdish civilians.

In some ways, the rhetoric of the western governments today in which they plead for Turkey and the YPG/J to both 'avoid escalation' isn't far removed from U.S. President Donald Trump's response last year to the Charlottesville attack by a white nationalist that left an anti-fascist protestor dead. Instead of clearly condemning the aggression perpetrated by the 'alt-right', he questioned if anyone was taking note of the 'violence' that the 'alt-left' had allegedly carried out. His comments were quickly denounced by many in the U.S. political mainstream, including members of Trump's own Republican Party. Many radical activists who have supported the Black Lives Matter movement, who saw Trump's comments as the equivalent of the 'All Lives Matter' line of thinking that refuses to stand with the oppressed, noted that a considerable number of these politicians have never stood with the movement for black lives in the U.S. and that their comments were the epitome of hypocrisy. When it comes to Turkey's aggression – or U.S. aggressions abroad for that matter – the double standards are even more blatant.

Hawzhin Azeez, a Kurdish academic and activist, has pointed out the absurdity of equating the violence of Erdogan's goons with the YPG/J, saying "the natural response of the Kurds with self-defense is being treated by this system as if the two sides are equal. As if the stateless is on the same playing field as a despotic state known for its history of genocides. As if the colonized has the equal measure of power as the colonizer. As if self-defence and self-preservation is a matter of academic debate and intellectual discussion rather than a natural right. Expect no loyalty, no consideration, no justice or expressions of outrage or concern over human rights from this system. It is committed to your silence, your oppression."

The German Left's History of Internationalism in Kurdistan

Despite the position of Germany's government (or currently lack thereof) toward the genocidal policies of the Turkish state, the militancy of protests such as the one that took over Berlin's streets last weekend shows that there is a tradition of solidarity between elements of the country's left and the Kurdish Freedom Movement that persists.

One of the main slogans that was repeated at the demonstration was 'Hoch die Internationaler Solidaritat!' (Long live international solidarity!). There have been a considerable amount of Germans who have volunteered to fight in Rojava within the ranks of the YPG, YPJ and communist formations such as the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP). Examples of those who gave their lives to this cause – which they saw as not only a Kurdish cause but an international struggle – are Kevin Jochim (Dilsoz Bahar) and Avashin Tekoshin (Ivana Hoffmann).

Before the Rojava project carved out a new free territory in West Asia, German leftists had long been travelling to Kurdistan to join the ranks of the guerrilla fighters who were taking on the brutality of the chauvinist Turkish regime. Many of these have been inspired by Huseyin Çelebî, who although Kurdish was born in Hamburg and organized on behalf of the PKK in Europe, becoming a pioneer in the Kurdistan Students' Union (YXK). For his political activities, he was sentenced to two years in prison in 1988. Four years later, he became a martyr in the Kurdish mountains. His activism and example led many German socialists to join the ranks of the guerrilla, including Andrea Wolf, who found the women's liberation ideology of the PKK particularly inspiring. In 1998, she was murdered by Turkish troops in a massacre in Andiçen along with 40 of her comrades. An eyewitness to her execution told ANF in 2012, "It was her internationalist view that made comrade Ronahi join the ranks of PKK. Her determination to be a true PKK guerrilla as a whole made her comrades respect her".

Today, that spirit of dedication to a collective cause much larger than that of the rampant individualism so prevalent in the west lives on in the countless German socialists, communists and anarchists who are fighting for a new society within the borders of Turkey and Syria. Despite the German government's support for Turkey's reactionary policies, these comrades are defying the imperialist position of their own ruling class to demand not only an end of weapons deals with Erdogan, but solidarity with the just struggle of the oppressed and downtrodden Kurdish masses.