

Turkey's Kurds: Guests at a Bitter Feast

They're Little-Known Victims of Poverty, Violence, Oppression, Exploitation

By T. D. ALLMAN

SIVEREK, Turkey—It is 8:35 a.m. in this medieval Kurdish town, and the stark morning light makes the unsheathed bayonets of the Turkish soldiers glint like Ottoman swords. There seems to be a soldier in the doorway of every shop. Three Kurds already have been shot dead on the main street today.

"Yes, yes, three are dead, and it's not even 9 a.m." The local leader of Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's Republican People's Party roars with laughter, and walks with a limp. "You see," he said, "that's only breakfast here in Siverek."

The problems of the 4 million Kurds in Iran, and the 2 million in Iraq, have received far more attention. But Turkey's 6 million Kurds also find themselves unwilling guests at a bitter feast—of poverty and violence, foreign oppression and feudal exploitation by their own kind.

"You Americans condemn Khomeini because he stands Kurds up against the wall in Iran and shoots them," complains Ali R., a 19-year-old Kurdish youth who learned his fluent German while he was a guest worker in Europe. "But of course Turkey is too democratic, too Western, too progressive, too much your precious NATO ally for you to notice what goes on here."

Like almost all Kurds whom one meets in Turkey, Ali is eager to talk, and afraid to give his full name. His bitterness is understandable. This town is only 375 miles southeast of the Turkish capital of Ankara, but in terms of social justice it might be a million miles. The contrast between Turkish Kurdistan and the rest of Turkey is shocking, as shocking as the gap between Park Avenue and Selma, Ala., once was.

For 50 years Turkey has been a nation of ambitious, Western-style reforms: mass education, universal suffrage, separation of church and state, equal rights for women, free speech, trade-union rights and sweeping land reform that, in most parts of Turkey, means those who till the land also own it. But not for the Kurds.

Here in Siverek it is as though those two generations of reform never happened at all. Women cower behind the veil. Unschooling children run the streets. On the farms and in the villages there are none of the tractors, insecticides, television sets and electric lights that one sees in other rural areas of Turkey.

The young children, illiterate women and embittered men seen scratching the rocky soil are not Turkish farmers. They are Kurdish serfs—landless peasants, in constant debt to the handful of Kurdish "agas," or feudal lords, who own almost all the land and act as if the Dark Ages had never come to an end.

Why have the reforms that have changed the face of the rest of Turkey gone unimplemented here? Aside from Turkish chauvinism and neglect, the explanation goes to the heart of Turkey's ultrademocratic form of government.

tion with groups that would make right-wing Republicans seem advocates of radical reform. The right-wingers' price for supporting Ecevit? Hands off the privileges that their main financial backers—mostly big landowners here in eastern Turkey—are anxious to retain.

The result is that the democratic system that Turkey's Western friends so often admire actively supports what even Turkish officials here concede is a grossly unjust social system.

While elsewhere in Turkey the state serves as a force for development and a court of last resort for the poor, here Turkey's code of civil law protects the agas' property rights as successfully as its Swiss model protects a numbered bank account in Zurich. One sees Turkish gendarmes patrolling fields—to protect the landlords' men from outraged peasants.

The de facto alliance between the local landlords and the government in Ankara is as old as the principle of divide-and-rule. Like the Turks, the Iranians and Iraqis also have preferred policies of neglect, and of indirect rule through conservative Kurdish elites, of any real attempt to solve the social and economic problems that beset the Kurds no matter under what flag they live.

The result in Turkey is that if the Kurdish provinces were allowed to vote on their future, rather than just elect deputies to parliament, it is doubtful whether anyone under 40 would vote to remain a part of the Turkish state. "We're not like the Kurds in Iran," a member of the national teachers' organization said. "We want total independence."

So far the Turks remain unwilling even to concede officially that the Kurds are Kurds. They are called "mountain Turks" in government parlance. Kurds are forbidden to speak Kurdish in government offices, schools and other public places.

With Turkey's Kurds in many ways worse off than those in Iran and Iraq—where oil wealth, at least, serves to raise the living

standards of all—is Kurdish Turkey likely to explode into a major crisis, as have Kurdish areas of Iran and Iraq?

It seems unlikely for several reasons. For all its economic, social and political problems, the Turkish state is probably the strongest and most cohesive in the Middle East. And it also seems likely that the Kurds' own internal divisions will continue to exploit them even more cruelly than outsiders do.

But there is one new element in the age-old Kurdish history of internal division and foreign conquest and cooption. For the first time in history, a whole generation of young Kurds is learning to read and write, and is seeing the outside world for itself.

"I worked in a cafeteria for two years in Munster," explained Mehmet Polat, a former guest worker, "until the Germans sent me back. I've not just seen Istanbul, I've seen Munich and Berlin." He went on: "It's all very clear how the world is connected, even here in Siverek. Because the agas had all the land and my family had none, my parents were never educated. And, because they were ignorant teen-agers when they married, today we are 12 brothers and sisters with no money, no jobs and no hope."

Periodically the world develops a little sympathy for the Kurds—especially when their oppressors are people whom one does not like. But, in the end, more important factors—leases on bases, supplies of oil, strategic stability—always outweigh an obscure if romantic case of human rights. The Turks—like the Iraqis and Iranians—will always be left, once the headlines fade, to do with their Kurds what they will. But the time is long gone when the Kurds could be deceived as to the nature of their fate. □

T. D. Allman is a contributing editor of Harper's magazine. His article was supplied by Pacific News Service.