Left-Wing Monster: Abdullah Ocalan

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Jan 6, 2006

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Articles & Testimony

How did Abdullah Ocalan, a simple peasant from Turkey's southeastern Sanliurfa province, turn into a mass killer?

Before al-Qaeda's fanatics were blowing themselves up in Iraq, members of Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) were terrorizing Turkey in the 1990s. According to Yoram Schweitzer from the Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya, Israel, between 1996 and 1999, the PKK carried out sixteen suicide bomb attacks (plus five failed attacks), "killing twenty people and wounding scores." Schweitzer adds that "PKK suicide attacks were inspired and carried out on the orders of the organization's charismatic leader Ocalan, who was perceived by the members of his organization as a "Light to the Nations." Ocalan, also known as Apo, sees himself as a model to be emulated. "Everyone should take note of the way I live and what I don't do," he told the Turkish Daily News in 1998. "The way I eat, the way I drink, my orders and even my inactivity should be carefully studied. There will be lessons to be learned from several generations because Apo (Ocalan) is a great teacher." Like a teacher, Ocalan enjoyed lessons, except he favored bloody ones: in the 1980s, the PKK slaughtered the inhabitants of Kurdish villages in southeastern Turkey who were unsympathetic to its cause in order to coerce other nearby villages into submission. On August 20, 1987, the PKK killed twenty-four inhabitants of the Kilickaya village of Turkey's Siirt province, including fourteen children. The lesson to the villages around Kilickaya was clear: "either you join Apo or you are dead."

Beginnings: From Peasant Kid to Peasant Killer

How did Abdullah Ocalan, a simple peasant from Turkey's southeastern Sanliurfa province, turn into a mass killer? The answer to this question lies in Turkey's leftist movement in the 1970s. At the time, Ocalan was studying in Ankara, at the capital's prestigious School of Political Science, Mulkiye, where most of the country's diplomats were trained. A poor Kurd from rural Turkey attending Mulkiye would have been the best proof to

Turkey's integrative powers across class and ethnic lines. This would also have demonstrated the means of upwards mobility available to anyone in Turkey. Yet Ocalan hardly developed a regard for such integrative mechanisms. Instead, under the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology popular at Mulkiye and other Ankara universities, he became persuaded that nothing around him was good enough because it was capitalist and imperialist. Ocalan aimed for a revolution to fix the perceived problems resulting from capitalism, and years later was quoted telling the PKK cadres, "You must believe before everything else that the revolution must come, that there is no other choice."

Even though the burgeoning Marxist-Leninist movement in Ankara did promote revolution through violence, as a committed Maoist the peasant kid from southeastern Turkey did not quite feel at home in Ankara. The capital's leftist literati appeared too soft for Ocalan, whose weltanschauung was shaped by his patriarchal upbringing and the orthodox ways of Shafii Islam in Turkey's Kurdish southeast. Rural feudal values and a Maoist obsession with the peasantry determined Ocalan's politics, causing him to drop out of Mulkiye in 1978. He deserted Ankara for southeastern Turkey where he established the PKK with a number of confidantes, including Cemil Bayik, Mazlum Dogan and Kesire Yildirim, the woman in the group, who later wed Ocalan through a "revolutionary vow." The group "condemned the repressive exploitation of the Kurds," and called for a revolution to overthrow the system in Turkey. They wanted to set up a "democratic and united Kurdistan" in southeastern Turkey to be governed along Marxist-Leninist lines. "The fundamental force of the revolution would be a worker-peasant alliance," in which the proletariat would provide the "ideological, political and organizations leadership." Because there was no working class in southeastern Turkey at the time, the area's population split among majority peasants, minority landowners, and a small urban middle class. Their statement provided Ocalan the role of the missing proletarian vanguard of the revolution, and under his leadership, the peasantry would be the "main force" of the "popular army," providing the PKK with an exhaustible manpower supply. Over 30,000 Kurdish peasants would die as a result of this vision. . . .

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