

European Communist Initiative  
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## **"TKP and the national liberation movement in 1920"**

### **The development of capitalism, and communism in Turkey**

The Communist Party of Turkey was founded on September 10, 1920, in Baku in the Soviet Azerbaijan.

A European-style social democracy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had not been experienced in the history of Turkey-Ottoman Empire. A range of industrial areas such as İstanbul, Thessaloniki, İzmir, Adana emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Ottoman Empire where capitalism had emerged very lately. However, the prevalence of workers' trade unions, and their merger with political parties as in the case of social democracy essentially started in 1908.

1908 was a significant turning point for the bourgeois revolutionary period in Turkey. The bourgeois revolutionary Party of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki*) came to power at that time, the parliament was established, and the ideals of liberty and the struggle for rights also spread among the working class. Oppression was imposed upon the workers' movement, and the ban on strikes was enacted at that time that continued until the First World War.

The Thessaloniki-based Socialist Workers' Federation played a major role in the development of the communist movement in the Balkans in this period. Nevertheless, the relation of the workers' organisations and movements around Macedonia with Turkey broke down as the northern parts of Greece, following its southern parts, became independent from the Ottoman Empire.

The workers' movement in İstanbul had Armenian-Greek characteristics. This movement continued in various formations until the 1920s; however, the Christian population was minimized due to the Armenian Genocide of 1915<sup>1</sup>, and the exchange of population between Greece and Turkey after the war. Hence, Turkey lost an important part of its working class that had been shaped until that time. The rise of the workers' movement in 1908 was followed by the foundation of the Ottoman Socialist Party in 1910. Not the representatives of this

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<sup>1</sup> The Ottoman government's decision for the deportation of Armenian citizens in 1915 was turned into mass murders in practice. Technically, this case can be defined with the term of genocide. On the other hand, the imperialist centres attribute a specific meaning to the word of genocide. The inhumane attack to which the Armenian people were exposed is used today not only as an international political instrument, but also as to discredit Turkey's Independence War of 1919-1922 and the Republic of 1923, and furthermore, to portray the Republic of Turkey as an illegitimate entity. The Communist Party of Turkey thinks that the propertied hegemonic classes of the time were historically responsible for the massacre, that what took place had a class basis, and that a huge transfer of wealth was carried out through the massacre and immigration, and this wealth was transferred to the bourgeoisie's primitive capital accumulation; rejects the search for a solution from bourgeois nationalist conflicts; and thinks that a real solution can be achieved only on the basis of the principles of internationalism and socialism. Therefore, our Party pays attention not to use the term of "genocide" in ordinary political language.

party, but that of the Armenian socialist, revolutionary and democratic parties had seats in the Ottoman parliament.

From 1913 to 1922, the war uninterruptedly continued for nearly ten years for Turkey. Having achieved its independence in the road to the Republican era, Turkey fell behind the economic and social conditions of the previous decade. The TKP was not founded thanks to the politicization and transformation of the workers' movements as the spontaneous products of the development of capitalism in the Ottoman Empire. The social development in such direction was interrupted during the building of nation-state in Turkey.

### **The influence of Russian Revolution, and the question of national liberation in Turkey**

The October Revolution extremely influenced Turkey. Historical tensions had always existed between the Ottomans and Russia. The Russian revolutionary period was considered as a saviour, a development that would put an end to the war in Turkey, where was being "colonized" as it was being integrated into the capitalist-imperialist system, a country of which economy went bankrupt, where its political entity as a state was called into question, a country that was face to face the plots of separatism. The call for peace released by the Russian revolutionary movement since 1905 had an influence particularly over the intellectuals in Turkey. Therefore, Turkey became open to the Russia-based impacts.

Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals consecutively adhered to the protection of the Ottoman union, pan-Islamism, and Turkish nationalism when they were looking for a way out for the country that lost power as it took the road of capitalism. Socialism was added into these three alternatives as of 1917.

Istanbul, Western Anatolia, and Southern Anatolia were occupied after the Great War. The Ottoman Sultan, the liberal and Islamist movements in general tended to collaboration with British imperialism, while the nationalist bourgeoisie leant to an anti-imperialist line, and the Kemalist movement began to arise from the dissolving Party of Union and Progress. The popular movements and guerrilla groups of 1919 were followed by the foundation of the Ankara parliament in spring 1920, and the transition to a regular army. The Kemalist movement aimed at an alliance with revolutionary Moscow at that time. Doubtlessly, this bourgeois revolutionary movement always aimed at mending its relations with the worldwide imperialist-capitalist system by nature of its class characteristics.

Having been far from achieving its central organisation yet, the communist movement was born into a popular sympathy for socialism. As this dynamic was also reflected on the parliament in Ankara, a heterogeneous *Popular Front* group emanated. A communist lawmaker<sup>2</sup> from this group won a voting for the Interior

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<sup>2</sup> This person was Nazım Resmor (1867-1935) who would also assume the general secretariat of the communist organisation in Ankara. Nazım Resmor was dismissed from the parliament in 1921.

Ministry as the candidate of the group in September 1920, yet he was forced to resign by Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk], the head of the parliament and the government.

The parliament had a fragmented structure, which was not proper for a strong leadership that Mustafa Kemal sought for. The Kemalist centre was strengthened in 1921 when the parliamentary groups were dissolved and reorganised. The *Popular Front* groups, including some communist and various opposition elements, were also inactivated at the time.

The organisations of Marxist intellectuals and workers in İstanbul tended to Bolshevism. Marxism lived through the publications of such organisations. Şefik Hüsnü<sup>3</sup>, a Marxist intellectual who had founded a legal party in 1919 in İstanbul, was elected as the Secretary-General of TKP in 1924.

On the other hand, a group of Turkish revolutionary intellectuals, who had participated in the Bolshevik revolution, were ready to attract the Muslim people in Russia to communism, and to get organised among the thousands of Ottoman war prisoners in Russia. Mustafa Suphi<sup>4</sup> was from this circle, and was elected as the Chairperson of the Party at the Baku congress on September 10, 1920.

### **The characteristic features during the foundation of TKP**

Following its second Congress, the Comintern held the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku in September 1920. The founding congress of TKP was held just after this meeting. The abovementioned dynamics were directed towards a single revolutionary programme and central organisation with the foundation of TKP. The first programme of TKP advocated that national liberation could be successful and permanent only if it were completed with social liberation, formulating that the Party, as part of the struggle for liberation, would protect the independent identity of workers and poor peasants within the anti-imperialist front and their orientation towards socialist revolution.

Based on this characteristic, the founding line of TKP went beyond the October Revolution's convergence with the oppressed peoples of the East, and the aimed

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<sup>3</sup> Şefik Hüsnü Değmer (1887-1959) founded the Turkish Workers and Peasants Socialist Party in 1919. Two people from the leadership of this party participated in the Baku Congress, were elected as the Central Committee members of TKP, and were murdered along with Mustafa Suphi. Şefik Hüsnü became the Secretary-General of TKP at the Congress of 1924. Şefik Hüsnü remained as the leader of TKP until his death although some other comrades of him carried out his post when he was abroad or worked in the Comintern.

<sup>4</sup> Like many others from the first generation of communists, Mustafa Suphi (1883-1921) entered the political struggle amidst the bourgeois revolution. He was imprisoned in 1915 because of his opposition to the bourgeois rule. He escaped from prison and went to Russia, there he participated in the revolutionary movement, he participated in the Bolshevik Party, he actively attended the civil war, and he assumed some tasks for attracting the Muslim people of Russia to the October Revolution. He was in the executive board of the Congress of the Peoples of the East. He was elected as the Chairperson at the founding congress of the Communist Party of Turkey. He and his comrades were murdered as a result of a provocation during their journey to carry the Party centre to Ankara.

alliance between the working class and the oppressed peoples. TKP did not define this alliance on the basis of democratic revolution and national liberation, nor did it not confine it into democratic revolution but connected it with socialist revolution.

As this approach was also in accordance with the basic line of the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, its realism is disputable considering the conditions of Turkey in 1920. It would be a big surprise for the mentioned strength of the communist movement and the working class to triumph a revolutionary upheaval. The sympathy for Bolshevism in the country was meaningful in terms of the common interests against the imperialist West, yet it could not be integrated with the political organisation of the working class and the toiling people and the struggle for power. The class and mass organisations were still being determined by bourgeois revolutionary movements.

Apart from this test of realism, however, the said foundation phase played a major role in forming the identity of TKP. TKP was born into an anti-imperialist agenda, and adopted patriotism as its basic characteristic. From this point, it should not be thought that communism in Turkey was shaped as a "pro-Eastern" movement. Starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the modernisation movements were generally pro-West and pro-Enlightenment although they were able to lead to revolutionary upheavals only during the moments of 1908 and 1919-23. Communism in Turkey was born out of this progressive movement by surpassing it.

As an intrinsically modern, pro-Enlightenment, progressive movement, communism highly emphasized its secular characteristic because both the hegemonic forces of the ancient regime and the Islamist and liberal party opted for a pro-Western and collaborationist tendency particularly during the war and occupation.

Against the above-mentioned devastating war, these policies were based on the existence of the working class and its vanguard role. Finally, TKP was founded as organic part of the Comintern. TKP was born as a patriotic, secular and internationalist working class party. These characteristics have been confirmed several times throughout our history of nearly 100 years. Such interpreters who attempt to soften anti-imperialism and anti-reactionism in Turkey are always considered as deviations within the Left. It is no coincidence that such inputs became apparent in all the attempts of liquidation within the Left. Calling the role of the working class into question and anti-Sovietism were among the tendencies that were called for account even during the founding phase of the Party.

### **The defeat of TKP during the struggle for national liberation**

Having been founded on September 10, 1920, TKP decided to move its centre to Ankara. It is known that the Bolshevik leadership was sceptical about this decision. The priority of protecting the Soviet power was leading Lenin to form an alliance with Ankara. TKP was a risk factor for the health of this alliance.

The young TKP leadership was massacred with a huge provocation during their journey to Ankara in January 1921. The TKP administrators were forced to board a boat in Trabzon after they were told that it was impossible to continue their journey, then they were attacked and murdered at sea.

The Ankara government synchronically completed the transition to the regular army. It dissolved the left-leaning elements within the guerrilla movement, the left-wing parliamentary opposition, the pro-TKP legal party, and even the pro-Kemalist leftist organisations. Although it is still unknown how the massacre was carried out, it is obvious that the left arm of the national liberation was cut, and the hegemony of the leadership was established at the same time.

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In the following process, TKP supported the war of national liberation and the establishment of a secular republic out of the ashes of the ancient regime; however, it always remained under pressure and was removed from the open political field until the 1960s. The Party could not accomplish a strong political rise even though it maintained its influence over the working class organisation and the intellectuals at that time. Only in the 1960s the Left could reach broad masses, and legal socialist parties and movements could emerge again.

The inborn identical characteristics of TKP, the emphasis of class, patriotism, secularism and internationalism were not smooth elements. The ability of establishing a harmonised integrity among these elements could be possible with giving consistent answers to theoretical and practical questions, such as how to outline the working class' goal of socialist power while supporting Kemalism's case of secular republic and its friendship with the Soviets in foreign policy on the one hand, and how to accord the Soviet Union's sensitivity in order not to escalate the tension with Turkey and the struggle for power again, on the other. In this respect, it is apparent that the history of TKP is not smooth. Today, TKP places its historically identical characteristics into a systematic in which the goal of socialist revolution occupies the central position.