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'Muttersprache Kurdisch' ('Mother Tongue Kurdish')

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Summary:

In the early 1960s, Kurds from Turkey began migrating to postwar Western European countries. Many went to West Germany. Some were students, many of whom self-identified as Kurds, while the great majority was so-called Gastarbeiter (guest workers), most of who then identified as Turks. They formed part of a broader movement dating to 1955, when the West German government signed the first bilateral labor migration treaty, with Italy.

Gastarbeiter were supposed to eventually return to their home country. Most did not. Moreover, some self-organized. First was the Italian Unione Emigrati in Germania, in 1964, and in 1966 there were 60 Turkish workers associations counting 20,000 members, as shown in "Wir sind alle Fremdarbeiter!" Gewerkschaften, migrantische Kämpfe und soziale Bewegungen in Westdeutschland 1960-1980 (2020) by Simon Goeke—who also details the complex relationship between foreign workers and the powerful German labor unions, including the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB). The DGB's core concern was to protect the rights of German workers and improve their professional and financial positioning. Whenever it believed that a specific foreign workers' issue or demand seriously undermined this so-called Inländerprimat, it took an oppositional stance.

At the same time, by the 1960s the DGB understood that most Ausländer (foreigners) would not leave, indeed were a considerable part of the work force, and could hurt unions if they were not integrated in some way—which unions started to do. These steps, however, were insufficient to many Gastarbeiter. Hence, their self-organized social, professional, and municipal-political demands expanded from the late 1960s. They did so despite and against the 1965 Ausländergesetz (Aliens Act), which limited foreigners' political activity. In some cases, foreign workers worked (and lived) together with German and foreign students, influencing each other. This influence was distinct in the case of Kurdish Turkish laborers.

By the 1970s, their political and cultural identity became more squarely Kurdish. Kurdish students in West Germany and elsewhere played a role in this process; so did developments in Turkey, including the foundation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)

in 1978. The PKK is one of the most powerful Kurdish organizations that has sought to address and right the issue of the Kurds lacking a state of their own—the issue for modern Kurds, as discussed by David McDowall's *A History of the Modern Kurds* (2004). In this process, countries other than Turkey, including Western European countries like Sweden and West Germany, became key transnational diaspora arenas for the Kurdish struggle for statehood. And as Omar Sheikhmous' *Crystallization of a New Diaspora: Migration and Political Culture among the Kurds in Europe* (2000) shows, they saw struggles for greater cultural and political rights in Europe, too. The latter questions mattered greatly to Kurdish organizations in West Germany, of which there were about 30 by 1979. One was the *Föderation der Arbeitervereine Kurdistans in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, the Federation of the Workers Associations of Kurdistan in the Federal Republic of Germany (KOMKAR). Founded in Frankfurt am Main in 1979, it sought to coordinate and unite Kurdish organizations. Although it had limited success and although the PKK sometimes violently fought it, it played a role in making Kurds more visible, linking them to (also German) leftists, and improving their cultural and professional situation.

The text printed here, an English translation from the German original, is an excerpt from an article in its organ, KOMKAR Publikation.

Original Language:

German

Contents:

Translation - English

HOW WE JUGDE OUR WORK, AND HOW OTHERS LIKE TO SEE US

The two thematic focuses of our work are the situation of the Kurds in their home country, the different parts of Kurdistan, and our situation here, as foreign workers in the German Federal Republic and in West Berlin.

Many of our publications as well as publications for instance by the known and recognized organization Amnesty International prove definitely that the Kurdish people is subject to manifold forms of human rights violations in its homeland. These range from the denial of cultural rights, e.g. the prohibition of the Kurdish language, to social and economic discrimination and to torture and genocide (*Völkermord*). Especially for the Kurds from Turkey, who constitute the large majority of the circa 250,000 Kurds living in the Federal Republic [of Germany], it is often here that they have, for the first time, the opportunity to learn and use their language and culture without fear of punishment, to get to know their own history, and to profess to stand up for their people. Hence, it is very important for us to create and expand respective facilities.

To date, among foreign workers in the Federal Republic, the Kurds have not been recognized and treated as a separate nation. Although we are numerically among the largest nations here, there is no counselling and guidance in Kurdish and for instance for our children no lessons in our mother tongue. To date, no institution or organization has recognized, and made public, the resulting special difficulties that the Kurds face to settle in this society. Hence, we, who are directly touched by this situation, have taken it upon us to create a consciousness for these problems, to show solutions, and to actively participate in their execution. The existing wall of lack of knowledge, ignorance and rejection needs to be broken!

As we do this work, we became part of the front of various organizations of foreign workers, which advocate legal and social equality with domestic [i.e. German] workers and which introduce these demands into the trade unions, where they try to be better heard. We stand up for the real integration of foreigners in this society, that is for a **mutual** process of adaptation, for an active exchange that includes the ability for us to preserve our cultural identity.

Just like other persons and organizations, we herewith claim the right to self-determination and free political activity.

However, we time and again experience attempts to defame and criminalize us and our work. Turkey accuses us of "dividing the Turkish nation;" "Kurds," they say, exist only in our fantasy. Thus, it protested when German TV began featuring Kurdish folklore, and objected harshly to attempts by "treacherous" Kurds to be granted political asylum in the Federal Republic. And although the German press has for a long time now established that it is the Turkish fascists who are responsible for the professional narcotics traffic, some try to make us responsible.

Moreover, the BND [West German Intelligence Service] report of October 1979 on the activities of foreigners' organization has created a situation in which we are being painted as terrorists—and this although the BND [here: *Verfassungsschutz*] itself emphatically recognized that KOMKAR until now has worked exclusively with democratic means, though it expressed worries that the outbreak of war in Iranian Kurdistan may result in the use of violence, too.

KOMKAR emphatically distances itself from all illegal and undemocratic methods. We have nothing to do with narcotics traffic and the use of violence. Also the continuous attacks by the fascist Turkish "gray wolves," which recently have been increasing and go almost entirely unchecked, and the German authorities' attempt to make the victims responsible for the attacks on them, cannot seduce us to conduct "retaliatory actions." We are aware that a democratic organization can remain credible only when it employs democratic methods. Only this way can it be and remain an alternative, for the population and especially for workers, to the violent fascist or fanatically religious groups. This of course also means that we use all democratic means at our disposal to fight against the afore-noted organizations of the "gray wolves" and the so-called "Koranic schools."

As the first umbrella organization of Kurdish workers abroad, KOMKAR sees itself as the most important representative of their interests. We are aware that our work is dedicated to implementation and realization of internationally guaranteed basic

rights and freedoms, and will employ all powers standing at our disposal to this end.

OUR MOST IMPORTANT DEMANDS

Recognition of the Kurdish nation's independent particularity (*Eigenständigkeit*) in the Federal Republic and all resulting consequences, e.g.

- counselling and guidance in Kurdish
- education for Kurdish children also in their mother tongue
- radio and TV programs, by the *ARD* and *ZDF* [Germany's two public radio and TV channels], in Kurdish.

Legal and social equality for foreign workers and their families, e.g.

- protections regarding residency permits and labor law;
- more help in integration, e.g. in school;
- foreigners' right to vote at least in municipal elections.
- Prohibition of the cover organizations of the fascist "gray wolves" and of the fanatically religious Koranic schools.
- Expulsion of their activists.
- No asylum for Turkish fascists.