

Ocalan's Prison Writings

Stan Newens

Abdullah Ocalan's long, solitary incarceration at the hands of the Turkish authorities continues. He has been very busy. Stan Newens reviewed the first volume of his Prison Writings in Spokesman 95. A second volume has now appeared, upholding the high standards the Kurdish leader has set himself.

Abdullah Ocalan, former leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), which conducted a guerrilla struggle in eastern Turkey for Kurdish independence from 1984 onwards, was seized by Kenyan police in Nairobi in February 1999 and handed over to the Turkish authorities. Since then he has been held on the island of Imrali in the Sea of Marmora, where he was tried and sentenced to death, although the sentence was commuted. He subsequently appealed to the European Court of Human Rights and has produced two books of *Prison Writings* in connection with his appeal.

The first book, subtitled *The Roots of Civilisation*, advances a theory of the origin and development of human civilisation which brings out the importance of ideology as a supporting structure within any society. While accepting the materialist interpretation of history developed by Marx and Engels, which relates the character of society to the mode of production, he argues that any ruling class propagates a mythology, a religion or a philosophy which sanctifies its privileges. This is inculcated into the minds of subordinate classes who then accept that their exploitation by a minority is the will of divine authority or a feature of the natural order. Ocalan's theory is basically similar to that of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who postulated the view that a ruling class does not maintain itself in power just by force of arms but establishes an ideological hegemony over society which shapes the mindset of the whole population.

Ocalan applies his theory to the ancient

Middle East, beginning with the earliest identified civilisation of Sumer, which grew up in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the fourth millennium BC.

In his second book of Prison Writings, subtitled *The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century*, Ocalan suggests that the Kurds who, alone with the Iranians, still speak an Indo-European language amidst peoples speaking tongues of Semitic, Turkish and Mongolian derivation, are descended from the original neolithic communities who inhabited the region. These proto-Kurds, whose name could mean highlanders, withdrew to the mountains when harried by urban rulers such as the Assyrians, in the second millennium BC, and retained their tribal social structures. Ocalan believes that the ancestors of the Kurds may include the Hurrites, the Gutti and the Cassites, who figure in the early history of the region, and also the Medes, who overthrew the Assyrians and captured Nineveh in 612 BC.

Although these probable ancestors of the Kurds repeatedly fell under the rule of successive conquerors – Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, etc. – and their upper echelons were often assimilated by these, the traditional tribal structures survived, particularly among the nomadic tribes. Throughout their history, down to the present, the tribes resisted subjugation; the resistance sometimes taking the form of distinctive religious movements such as Zoroastrianism, Alevism and Manichaeism. A national Kurdish movement, embracing all the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, however, never really developed. This was because the factors behind the development of nationalism in Europe – capitalist production, the need to create a national market, and a mass media – did not come into existence in the lands inhabited by the Kurds at an earlier period.

On the basis of this historical analysis of the Kurdish background, Ocalan then examines the policies pursued by the PKK since its formation in 1975, and argues that they must be radically changed. He rejects the former objective of a separate state for Kurdish people and argues against recourse to armed struggle to overthrow the system by means of a violent revolution. He refers to the fact that numerous modern states accommodate several nations and argues that it is wrong to assume that a state should contain only one nation.

He therefore comes out against the idea of Kurdish secession from existing states, and argues for the acceptance of common regional political entities, i.e. the existing states, provided they are based on freedom, equal rights, common national values and democracy. He strongly criticises

dogmatic nationalism and says that the achievement of a small national state could not justify years of bloodshed, anyway.

‘Kurdish intellectuals and politicians, in particular the leadership of the PKK’, he says, ‘will need to abandon their antiquated and dogmatic views. Instead, they will have to devise new democratic and secular projects which can exert an influence on politics and activate all available support for a democratic peace initiative.’ [p.20]

Ocalan makes much of the fact that the PKK announcement of a unilateral ceasefire in 1998 did not meet with a positive response from the Turkish authorities, who instead contrived to hunt him down. He expresses deep concern at the cost of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, which he estimates at the loss of 40,000 lives and the depopulation of 4,000 Kurdish villages. He cites the extreme violations of human rights, the use of murderous gangs, and the flagrant flouting of the law by the Turkish authorities as among the causes.

Ocalan does, however, admit that not only were the aims of the PKK incorrect, but also that its conduct of operations, its internal administration and the behaviour of individual PKK leaders were often as devoid of respect for human rights and innocent lives as the forces pitted against it. He cites ‘a group that we called the “gang of four” which killed women and children who disagreed with us politically’ and killed ‘other party members in cold blood’. [p.138] His references to inner party ‘executions’ and the activities of gangs within the PKK organisation are sufficient to give rise to feelings of repugnance among even the most committed supporters of the Kurdish cause. The PKK must accept that it shares responsibility for the high death toll.

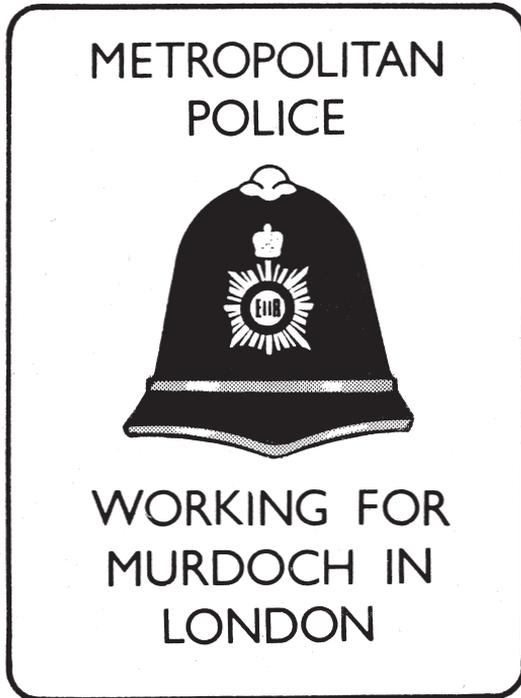
This book, like the first volume of Ocalan's *Prison Writings*, is a great intellectual triumph. It reflects the thoughts of an outstanding expert on the history of the Middle East and on the Kurdish problem. Ocalan is also one of the most prominent political leaders of the Kurds in our times. He is wholly committed to the achievement of full Kurdish cultural, linguistic and civil rights. The fact that he now recognises that armed struggle and secession do not represent the path to emancipation for the Kurdish peoples is to be applauded. The struggle to achieve Kurdish rights, however, goes on, but by peaceful means. Side by side, the struggle for democracy, full human rights, the emancipation of women, recognition of the rights of all nationalities and ethnic minorities, and democratic socialism, must continue in Turkey and all the other countries of the Middle East.

This second book of *Prison Writings* is a key text for all sympathisers with the Kurdish cause and for all serious students of Middle Eastern

history and politics back to the first civilisations. It is to be hoped that it will be widely read and that, in due course, there will be a permanent settlement which will include an amnesty for all who renounce the armed struggle and are prepared to return to civil society.

* *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*, by Abdullah Ocalan, translated by Klaus Happel, Pluto Press, 336 pages, hardback ISBN 9780745326160, £25

** *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century* by Abdullah Ocalan, Transmedia Publishing, 320 pages, Paperback ISBN 9780956751409, £19.99



*A sticker widely seen around London during the long strike of 1986, when Rupert Murdoch's News International sacked 5,500 newspaper workers and transferred production to 'Fortress' Wapping. It is one of many reproduced in a new book to mark the 25th anniversary, **Bad News: The Wapping Dispute** by John Lang and Graham Dodkins (£15 www.spokesmanbooks.com), who were themselves very active in the strike. An exhibition about the News International dispute, '25 Years On', continues at TUC Congress House in London until 12 August.*