Review of Kürt Tarihi (Kurdish History) magazine’s first issue (June-July 2012)

By Ahmet Akturk

Turkey is a good place to observe how true is the proverb “Happy is the country which has no history.” Many individuals and groups do not agree with the official government account of – or silence on – the country’s troubled past as presented in Turkish school textbooks. Thus, the official history, originally designed to provide a common base of identity and national unity, has often lead to disagreements. From time to time, even the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s speeches in his ruling party’s weekly meetings appear to turn into history lessons. Quoting documents from Turkish state archives or old newspaper headlines, Erdoğan criticizes unpopular policies of the Republican People’s Party of the 1930s and 1940s. National newspapers frequently include articles by historians who challenge the official narratives of the country’s past. People stay up at night to watch TV programs that deal with the hot topics hard to find addressed in their government-approved textbooks. The publication of numerous books on history and the proliferation of popular history magazines are other indicators of the public obsession with history and their efforts to find out “the truth” about the past. The first history magazine on the Kurds published in Turkish, Kürt Tarihi (Kurdish History) has developed in such a context.

Kürt Tarihi is a bimonthly magazine that first appeared in June-July 2012. It is a full-color 10”X12” magazine published on quality glossy paper with many illustrations. The magazine is available across Turkey through bookstores and newspaper distributors. National and
international subscriptions to the magazine are also available. A testament perhaps to its popularity, the first issue of the magazine sold out in only a few weeks. Mesut Yeğen, a professor of sociology at Istanbul Şehir University, is the editor-in-chief of the magazine. Yeğen is an internationally renowned scholar with numerous publications on the Kurds in Turkey and, especially, on the official Turkish view of Kurds and the Kurdish Question. In addition to students of the Kurdish studies field like myself, the editorial board of the magazine includes well-known academicians such as Hamit Bozarslan, Martin van Bruinessen, Janet Klein, Hakan Özoğlu, Abbas Vali, and Nicole Watts as well as independent scholars such as Rohat Alakom, Mehmet Bayrak, İsmail Beşikçi, Ahmet Kardam, Naci Kutlay and Müfit Yüksel. The editor-in-chief summarizes the magazine’s goal as increasing “knowledge on the history of the Kurds and Kurdistan in Turkish” and sharing it with the public. He also adds that while the magazine does intend to carry out this goal, it will keep “a distance from academic elitism and [Kurdish] nationalist pride.” In other words, the magazine wants to make the latest academic scholarship on the Kurds non-partisan, comprehensible to non-academic audiences, and easily accessible. Though the language of the magazine's publication is Turkish, it accepts articles in English on Kurdish history that, if approved, will be published in Turkish.

The first issue of Kürt Tarihi (June-July 2012) is a promising start and full of rich content. After the editorial introduction, there is a “these two months in history” section that explains important recent events in Kurdish history emphasizing the two months of the published issue. This is followed by a news section informing readers of recent activities relevant to students and scholars of Kurdish history and culture all over the world. The magazine also has an interview section introducing a scholar and his or her works dealing with Kurdish history. Finally, in the book review section a new book on Kurdish history or culture is introduced to the readers. This first issue includes eight articles that vary in length from two to eight pages. The articles are very informative, well-researched, footnoted, and highly readable, accompanied by images and historical documents. The articles cover a variety of topics, including culture (as with the article on the development of Newroz as a Kurdish holiday); political history (exemplified in the studies of Mullah Mustafa Barzani in CIA documents, and the Shamsadinov Kurds’ relations with the Russian Empire); language (including a piece on the development of Kurmanji Kurdish language in Syria under the French Mandate and in Soviet Armenia); literature (with a focus on a Kurdish poet’s view of Sultan Abdulhamid II, and the first anthology of Kurdish poetry); press (such as the study of Kurdish periodicals in the late Ottoman period) and photography (with analysis of Ottoman postcards portraying Kurdish and Qizilbash figures).

*Kürt Tarihi* as a popular history magazine will fill an important gap in Turkey. It will not only make new studies on Kurdish history available to Turkish-language readers but also help academic scholars and independent researchers share their work with a wider audience. Overall, the magazine is a timely and welcome project in Turkey that will expand public interest in historical events on which it has been hard to agree.

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