

# İbrahim Kaypakkaya's writings on Marxists and the Kurdish National Question – 50 years after his death

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His photograph will be familiar to many people who do not know his name. İbrahim Kaypakkaya, who was murdered by the Turkish state 50 years ago today, continues to inspire Marxists in Turkey, and the iconic image of his young face under a cloth cap can be seen on flags at every demonstration and protest. In April 1972, aged only 22 or 23, Kaypakkaya and his comrades founded the Turkish Communist Party Marxist-Leninist to pursue a People's War inspired by Mao's China. Within a year he had been wounded and captured by the Turkish state, which described him as the most dangerous revolutionary in Turkey. After three months in Diyarbakır Prison, he was dead. He is remembered for his resistance under torture – where he remained true to his own insistence that as a revolutionary you “give your life, but don't give your secrets”; for his criticism of compromise with Kemalism and his rejection of approaches that cut across class struggle; and for his recognition of the Kurds' right to self-determination. Kaypakkaya's dangerousness lay not just in his activities as a guerrilla fighter, but also in his political analysis, which could not be silenced by state torturers.



When many on the Turkish left showed no more sympathy for the Kurdish struggle against cultural oppression than was shown by Turkish nationalists, Kaypakkaya looked at his country through the Bolshevik debates on the National Question to build a more understanding and tactically [sophisticated approach](#). He constructed his argument around quotes from Lenin and from Stalin – ignoring Stalin’s own later compromises with nationalism in favour of his classic text, *Marxism and the National Question*, which was written in 1913 under Lenin’s guiding hand.

Kaypakkaya argued that the Kurdish people, by which he meant the workers, peasants, and petit bourgeoisie, suffered class oppression, while, in addition, the Kurdish nation, meaning all Kurds, suffered national oppression. This national oppression was avoided only by a tiny elite that was able to ally itself to the Turkish ruling class. The Kurdish people suffered both class and national oppression. When they blocked with the Kurdish middle class and small landowners for the struggle against national oppression, then they were unable to pursue the class struggle. At the same time, Kaypakkaya argued

that the Turkish left should not ignore the national oppression faced by Kurdish workers. It was the left's duty to fight against all oppression. Furthermore, the Communist Party's historic failure to support the Kurds against national oppression had actually damaged the class struggle by encouraging Kurdish resentment towards Turkish workers. He explained, "We support the struggle of the Kurdish bourgeoisie and small landlords to eliminate national oppression; but on the other hand we have to struggle against them also in order to eliminate class oppression."

Kaypakkaya wrote, "We [communists] defend and continue to defend the right of the Kurdish nation to form a state with all our might. We will respect this right to the end; we do not support the privileged position of Turks over the Kurds (and over other nationalities)." He quoted Lenin on the right to secession; on the fundamental difference between the nationalism of an oppressed nation and that of an oppressor nation and between the nationalism of a small nation and that of a big nation; and also on the need to look at any individual secessionist movement in the light of the bigger political picture. Defending the right to secede is not the same as actively supporting all secessionist movements and Kaypakkaya argued that support for any particular movement should depend on whether it would contribute to progressive revolutionary change.

These debates are as relevant today as they were half a century ago. Turkish nationalism has now had 100 years to embed itself in Turkish society and politics, and the election has highlighted the tenacity of anti-Kurdish oppression and the use of racism to distract from class inequality.

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