Inside the Revolutionary War in Kurdestan

During a recent trip to Iran, our correspondent traveled to Kurdestan at mid-March to report on the development of the Kurdish people's struggle which has erupted into full-scale revolutionary war. This trip took him within range of the fighting with government forces around Baneh; he also had the opportunity to conduct interviews with Sheikh Ezadollah Houeini, a respected leader of the Kurdish struggle (see page 2 of this section), and with several of the political organizations that are playing a leading role in Kurdestan today.

A brilliant white light, like a gigantic star, shot into the midnight darkness, throwing a pale glow over the surrounding countryside and outlining the hills that lay directly in front of us. "Phantom! Phantom!" one of the Peshmergas whispered. The mini-bus stopped as everyone listened intently. After a moment, we continued as we had come for the last 4 hours, headlights off, down a rough dirt road. It was 1 a.m. and we were heading for the Kurdish city of Baneh, a town of some 15,000 near the Iraqi border in western Iran.

I had just come from Buchan, another Kurdish town 60 miles north and east. The fighting had not yet reached Buchan, so I hitched a ride with ten Peshmergas from the Revolutionary Organization of the Oppressed and Yezidi Masses of Kurdestan—better known as Komoleh—and set out for Baneh and the reality of the fighting in Kurdestan.

None of the Peshmergas spoke much English, and I didn't speak much Kurdish, but we managed to communicate by singing revolutionary songs and the Internationale to each other as the mini-bus lurched along. These Peshmergas—literally "those ready to die for their freedom"—were the front-line fighters in the way of liberation, and their spirits were high. Some looked young and fresh-faced, with glasses that made them look like college freshmen; others were older, in their 40s, with the rough faces and stubbled beards that are the sign of combat-hardened veterans. But no one seemed to care about such superficialities; all were in the struggle together.

As we got closer to Baneh, communication with the front line became more difficult. Another light exploded in the sky. "Bolti!" followed by "Phantom!" were the only words I could make out, and the light didn't move. How could it be a Phantom jet? Later I found out that the U.S.-built Phantoms of the Iranian air force sometimes dropped flares to confuse the enemy. But in any case it was the sound of an engine to disturb, whether they were from a Phantom or simply been shot off from the ground.

Suddenly the top of the hill in front of us was consumed in a white flash and a thunderous roar. "Aresh, aresh!" (the army), one said pointing to the right of the hill. "Khomeini!" Gunfire cluttered as 50-calibre machine gun tracer bullets—looking like little red tail lights—flitted across our path. The Peshmergas came through all the shooting. They caused the air of having been through this many times, knowing what was going on and how to deal—very scientifically—with it all. Since they didn't seem overly anxious, I just figured everything must be okay. But there was one thing I didn't need translated—were we entering the heart of the war in Kurdestan.

Within weeks after the toppling of the Shah's regime in February of last year, a series of escalating battles over the control of Kurdestan began between the central government and the Kurds. The fighting reached its height last September and October, when the government sent massive numbers of army troops and Pardaran (Islamic "revolutionary guards") to "pacify" the area, unleashing vicious attacks on the Kurdish people and their revolutionary organizations. Hundreds of Kurds were killed and dozens of revolutionary fighters executed.

This was one thing the new government was doing that the U.S. imperialism was fully agreed with. During the summer when the fighting began, the State Department publicly endorsed the Iranian government's revolutionary efforts to "unify the country," and even made a special attempt to speed up shipments of weapons for the Iranian air force that were being used to bomb the Kurds. The specter of revolutionary turmoil spreading over Iran—and then to Iraq and Turkey and possibly beyond to the whole Middle East—was rising to haunt the imperialists.

Instead of a quick victory, the Iranian army was dealt a string of severe political and military defeats. Battered by constant guerrilla attacks and surrounded by a hostile civilian population, the government had little chance but to sign a truce in November. The Kurdish revolutionaries agreed to the ceasefire and to negotiations for their demands politically, to demonstrate to the people of Iran that reactionaries in the central government were responsible for the fighting in Kurdestan, and to prepare for the next round of fighting. On the other hand, with the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4 and the storm of anti-imperialist struggle emboldened, the government had its hands full. Under these conditions it became more difficult for them to demagogically claim that the Kurds and the revolutionary Left were "imperialist agents."
Interview with Sheik Ezzedin Hosseini, A Respected Leader of the Kurdish People

"I'm looking for the sheik's bureau (office)," I asked the first person I saw on the street when I arrived in Mahabad, a city of more than 50,000 in northern Kurdistan. The man looked around as if he didn't understand. My new friend—enthusiastic about my visit to the sheik—encouraged me to ask the taxi driver, "Tell the sheik's bureau. I was told simply by the sheik, "We are always coming in and out of the sheik's office asking him things, so while he was wrapping up some business, I took the opportunity to talk with one of his friends who was about to translate for us.

"Ma Miafa ("teacher," as Hosseini is affectionately known) is against all imperialism—the U.S., the USSR and Europe also," he began. "He is very religious and he is also very much a socialist economics—he believes that the means of production should be collectively owned and used for the benefit of all. I will give an example of this in materialism and ideology. You know he has read all the Marxist books on materialism, so you have to know what you're talking about with him.

He explained that the sheik believes that politics and religion to him are very important. He feels that people should be taught to follow Islam and to believe in God. He explained that the sheik believes that politics and religion are very important. He feels that people should be taught to follow Islam and to believe in God. He explained that he believes that politics and religion are very important. He feels that people should be taught to follow Islam and to believe in God.

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The sheik's position is that autonomy requires an elected provincial council with control over the political and military affairs of Kurdistan. In an interview several months ago with The Iranian magazine, Hosseini said, "There is no doubt that if military power is not in the hands of the autonomous Kurdish province itself, autonomy could be taken away. We need to complete the revolution. We need to establish real autonomy that is possible only when democracy is established throughout Iran, and a people's democratic government comes to power.

"The sheik has always been a firm believer in the idea of the autonomy of the Kurdish people. He has always been opposed to the idea of a Kurdish state. He believes that the government is saying about us; they want to keep the power in Kurdestan and in the other nations. They are the people of Iran that are anti-imperialist."

Hosseini: They started to get out but they haven't finished yet. There are some guerrillas that will stay in until the war is finished. We need to complete the revolution. We need to establish real autonomy that is possible only when democracy is established throughout Iran, and a people's democratic government comes to power.

"We know the government started this idea of two worlds—Islam and everyone else. I will tell you a story. When Hosseini went to Qum to hold talks with Khomeini about Kurdestan last year, he told Khomeini about all the problems and concerns of the Kurdish people. At the end of the day when they were about to leave the room, Hosseini told Khomeini, 'I want Kurdistan quiet, I don't want war in Kurdistan, I want to do this for us.' Then Khomeini told him, 'If you want that, then I want autonomy.' Hosseini said nothing and they left the room.

RW: Do you feel that U.S. imperialism is involved in trying to attack the Kurdish people in any way?

Hosseini: We know the government started this idea of two worlds—Islam and everyone else. I will tell you a story. When Hosseini went to Qum to hold talks with Khomeini about Kurdestan last year, he told Khomeini about all the problems and concerns of the Kurdish people. At the end of the day when they were about to leave the room, Hosseini told Khomeini, 'I want Kurdistan quiet, I don't want war in Kurdistan, I want to do this for us.' Then Khomeini told him, 'If you want that, then I want autonomy.' Hosseini said nothing and they left the room.

RW: How is the fighting going now?

Hosseini: The government thought that in 5 or 6 days they could come in, get Kurdestan and keep it. But they are mistaken. We are putting a lot of pressure on the army in many different cities, and sometimes we have pushed them out entirely. In Baneh, people have been fighting for 22 or 23 days. This time it has become a struggle involving all of the people—women, children, old men, all of the people. But we know that this war is not the demand of the Kurdish people. They don't want to fight, but if the government forces them to fight they will fight to the last person. At this time we are changing our tactics. The Peshmergas may lose the cities. They will fight against the government out of the cities. They could put more force on the government from outside.

HR: Have the Peshmergas actually left Sansandaj at this point?

Hosseini: They started to get out but they haven't finished yet. There are some guerrillas that will stay in the cities, the army won't know them, and they will cause friction once the army gets into the cities.

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During several months of negotiations, the Iranian government refused to make any meaningful agreements about Kurdish rights. (One participant in the negotiations described them as a single meeting for a couple of hours ending in postponement.) Many in Kurdistan saw that the government was simply trying to buy time and prepare for another attack.

In late April of this year, the government once again began moving large numbers of army units and Pasdaran inwards toward Kurdistan; this time supposedly to guard the border with Iraq. However the fighting between Iraq and Iran was not taking place in Kurdistan but further to the southeast in the oil-rich province of Khuzestan. When the army headed for Sanandaj, a bastion of the Kurdish struggle, the people knew the troops were there to suppress them once again.

Thousands blocked the roads from the southern city of Kermanshah to Sanandaj to prevent the army from passing. And when the troops landed at the Sanandaj airport they were blocked from entering the city. It was then that the fighting jumped off.

We arrived in Baneh about 1:30 a.m. and I awoke the next morning after a night of intermittent bombings and explosions. When we ventured out into the town it became obvious what kind of fighting had been going on. The streets were deserted, the alleys empty. We passed a bombed-out flour mill, a theatre with its roof destroyed and even a mosque that had been shelled. As I looked in a row of abandoned small shops, meat was still hanging on hooks, there was cloth in a sewing machine ready to be mended, books on desks ready to be totaled. Perhaps the owners had had time to padlock the front door as the bombs and shells began to fall. But that was all. Nothing in Baneh had been spared from attack.

The rattling of twisted metal pull-down doors hanging over the shops along the streets, the tapping of broken wires against phone poles, and the occasional shatter of falling glass were the only interruptions to the sounds of the wind, whistling through the empty side-streets. We saw about 20 people in the town, most too old to leave. Baneh was virtually a ghost town.

We walked, single file and spread out to avoid drawing fire from the nearby army base, ducking and sprinting whenever we were out in the open. "This is where I used to live," one of the Peshmergas said as he pointed to a bombed-out house. The rubble and the littered streets told us that this was not simply a clash between "anti-revolutionary" leftist groups and the government, as Tehran had been claiming. This was all-out war against the Kurdish people, even more desperate than last fall's fighting.

The Kurds showed me bomb fragments and shells that were made in the USA and other NATO countries.

In other Kurdish towns—Saquez, Marivan, Paveh, Nosaud, Rabat—the story was the same. Thousands had been made refugees—over 100,000 in all of Kurdistan. In Sanandaj between 1,000-2,000 had been killed; the exact number was uncertain because the government's shelling had prevented even the burial of the bodies. In Baneh, 62 had been killed, 120 wounded.

The destruction was massive. But did it speak to the strength or the weakness of the reactionaries in the central government that they considered the whole of the Kurdish population their enemies? Who was in the long run stronger, the government troops holed up in their base, lobbing mortars and shelling the city—or the Peshmergas who were fighting in the lead of the Kurdish people and had the support of the whole town and the surrounding area?

From the moment I had arrived, Kurdistan was like a breath of fresh air. "This is liberated territory," one man told me happily as I crossed into Kurdistan proper. "They kill Pasdaran on sight here!" he said gleefully as he put his finger across his throat.

For three days the only evidence of a police force I saw were the revolutionary Peshmergas who boarded and checked our bus, and were patrolling the streets of Kurdish cities and towns. Even the mood in the streets was freer and more relaxed, without the tension and foreboding that is present in Tehran. The women were dressed in a plethora of color: a couple of brightly colored scarves, an equally spectacular blouse and vest—often with golden spangles or shiny beads embroidered into the cloth—and several layers of mixed...
The Kurds: A History of Oppression and Revolutionary Struggle

Iraq's 5-6 million Kurds are a distinct minority whose history has been shaped by the turbulent events of the past 100 years. Their homeland, known as Kurdistan, is situated in a region that today encompasses parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The Kurds are a nomadic people who have historically lived in the mountainous regions of the region, adapting to the harsh conditions of the area. They are known for their resilience and their long history of resistance against various regimes and powers.

The Ottoman Empire, which ruled much of the region until the early 20th century, subjected the Kurds to oppressive policies, including forced assimilation and land confiscation. After World War I, the creation of new nation-states in the region led to increased tensions and conflicts. The Kurdish nationalist movement gained momentum, with the establishment of the Kurdish People's Congress in 1937 and the Kurdistan Democratic Party in 1946.

The rise of the Ba'ath Party in Syria and Iraq and the Shah of Iran in Iran, which began to take power in the 1950s, led to increased repression of Kurdish nationalistic movements. The Kurds were subjected to forced-labor camps, cultural suppression, and military campaigns. The Kurdish region was divided into three parts: the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, the autonomous region of Syrian Kurdistan, and the autonomous region of Iranian Kurdistan.

The Kurdish People's Congress and its successors, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), have been the main Kurdish political parties, working to achieve Kurdish autonomy and self-determination. The PKK, in particular, has been engaged in a long-standing armed struggle against the Turkish government since the 1980s. The struggle has resulted in thousands of deaths and displacements, and continues to this day.

As a result of their revolutionary fight for autonomy within Iran, the Kurdish people are demanding control over all of Kurdistan (shown by the gray in the map). The new Islamic government, like the Shah's regime before it, has kept the oppressed Kurdish nation split up into three provinces marked by broken lines on the map.

Reformism in order to gain power for themselves in an "autonomous" Kurdistan. Casting off centuries of feudal enslavement, the Kurdish people were taking the road of fighting for their liberation, revolutionary and Marxist-Leninist organizations were increasingly leading the struggle. This could not be tolerated by Iran's new rulers. A revolutionary, autonomous Kurdistan by itself would be a mortal threat to their plans to bring to a halt the revolutionary struggle of the Iranian people as a whole and consolidate their power. More than that, an example like this could inspire the other oppressed nationalities of Iran (making up nearly one-half the total population) to demand similar forms of autonomy and political power; workers and peasants throughout the country could also be emboldened to take matters into their own hands; in short, a revolutionary Kurdistan could be a key base area for pushing the Iranian revolution forward.

Beginning in the spring of last year, the central government set out to crush the Kurdish struggles—only to suffer one defeat after another at the hands of a conscious and determined people.

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The women’s society of Baneh led by Komoleh.

Our main purpose is to organize women into our committees, give them political education, and help them join the overall struggle for the liberation of the toiling masses of Iran, and all of Iran. We link the struggle of women to the class struggle and fight them together. But before getting to the stage of liberation we will have to struggle against all the old feudal customs—especially old-fashioned family relations—which hinder us from fully participating in the struggle. Most of our families have left the city during the war, but we have stayed here together independently; and since we are more independent we have gotten more involved in the resistance movement. You can see we are here!

“The Kurdish women didn’t participate much in the fighting last year, because most of it was done by the Peshmergas in the mountains. But even this beautiful area had become a battleground between the Kurdish masses and the forces of reaction in Iran, and the harsh realities of revolutionary war were not far off.

The refugee camp had been converted from an army barracks and now housed about 1200 people, all from Baneh. All that remained of their homes were in short supply. “We have the dressings from the wounded there,” the doctor explained, “so we have to wash the dressings right back to the village. It’s a-a—very stirring to cry out that his mother was still living and were in short supply. “We have the dressings from the wounded there.”

But even so many of the wounded had to be transferred to the outlying villages, where they could rest, but where there was no medical care. Medical supplies had also been blocked and were in short supply. “We have no running water, except the river,” the doctor explained, “so we have to wash the dressings right back to the wounded there.”

One doctor in the camp explained that their hospital had only 3 beds, so they had to convert a meeting hall to make more space. But even so much of the wounded had to be transferred to the outlying villages, where they could rest, but where there was no medical care. Medical supplies had also been blocked and were in short supply. “We have no running water, except the river,” the doctor explained, “so we have to wash the dressings right back to the wounded there.”

But we know that sooner or later the vicious circle from the wounded to the dressing will infect the water and it will come right back to the village. It’s a vicious circle from the wounded to the river back to the wounded there.”

“My brother was 19,” one young man told me. “They arrested him one day and brought us his body the next. Now we’ve had to leave our homes and everything we had to come to this place. Is this a place human beings can live in?”

Others told of a young child who remained sucking at the breast of his dead mother during the fighting, stopping only to cry out that his mother was still alive.

No one had remained untouched by the war. The Kurdish lives had been dramatically transformed: in their home town one day, and thrown together in the refugee camp the next. But then their conditions should take heed of something far more moving than any suffering they might have endured.

When one member of our group tried to express sorrow for the suffering the Kurdish people had endured, a Peshmerga immediately replied, “Don’t say you’re sorry. This is revolution. There’s nothing to be sorry about.” A doctor told us a story of a boy who was killed in Baneh. As his sister began to weep for him, her father slapped her. “Why are you crying?” he demanded. “We are fighting for our freedom. This is our sacrifice!” In Sanandaj one man saw his 12 year old son. “He’s already a revolutionary,” the older man explained proudly. “He comes everywhere with me.”

Political consciousness was exploding. There were 10 study classes a day of between 20-50 people each. Hundreds of men and women were studying Marxist politics, history, economics and philosophy. The only times the classes stopped were when those who could read had to travel to the surrounding villages to read the peasant the latest news. They too wanted to be politically educated and well informed of developments in the fighting and the revolutionary struggle.

Young children no more than 10 or 11 years old loudly declared their allegiance to one revolutionary group or another. “I am a Komoleh supporter,” one shouted. “Down with the Democrats (the compromising, revisionist leaders of the KDP).” “We want a revolution led by the working class for the benefit of the toiling masses of Iran,” another added. We met a 40 year old Peshmerga and his 12 year old son. “He’s already a Peshmerga,” the older man explained proudly. “He comes everywhere with me.”

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The Kurdish people demonstrate their feelings toward the revisionist pro-Soviet Tudeh Party—torn up copies of the Tudeh newspaper litter the streets of Baneh after their literature booth was destroyed.

Hosseini

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The latest news of the fighting. Revolutionary leaflets were stapled up, and people congregated eagerly around the sound trucks that passed up and down the streets.

There was growing awareness of just who are the compromising forces within Kurdistan. These are the organizations that talk as though they are "friends of the people" only to sell out the struggle from within. They pose one of the biggest dangers to the Kurdish movement. In Baneh we witnessed a spontaneous demonstration of 2,000 people against the Tudeh Party (the pro-Soviet revisionist party in Iran which has shamelessly supported every reactionary attack on the masses of Kurds by the Iranian government). Shouting "Morgana (Death to) Tudeh!" the people burned the Tudeh literature booth and filleted the streets with the scraps of the Tudeh paper (Marxists). Just that morning, Ezzeddin Hosseini, a widely loved and respected revolutionary democrat and religious leader in Kurdistan, had been meeting with some of the Shah's generals. When Hosseini saw the paper, he commented, "Now the Kurdish people have two enemies: the Islamic government and the Tudeh Party." It seems the people of Baneh felt the same way.

But a more serious threat to the liberation struggle is the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). Though the KDP claims to be a revolutionary nationalist group, it is actually a bourgeois organization (even its landlords in it) with close ties to the Tudeh Party. As the oldest and best-known group in Kurdistan, the KDP still has a significant mass base, which they cynically use as a bargaining chip with the government to capitulate themselves into positions of power.

Over the last year people have begun to see through them. During the fighting in Sanandaj in April, there was demonstration of over 2,000 people, against the KDP's attempts to withdraw from the battle. While I was in Kurdistan in mid-May, the KDP, along with the Fedayeen, had pulled out of the intense fighting that had continued to rage in and around Sanandaj, leaving the revolutionary fighters of Komolhe and Taskhilot (the Peshmergas of the Oppressed and Filing Masses, which is politically close to the Union of Iranian Communists) on their own. Since then, the bulk of the revolutionary forces have moved out of Sanandaj to continue the struggle in other ways. As was shown in the fighting before this, it is a very shaky "victory" for the government.

For the Kurdish people, talking about politics and revolution is like breathing in and out. Everywhere I went, I soon found myself swep up in a whirlwind of non-stop political discussion. When Kurdish revolutionaries asked me about the U.S., they didn't want to know about the 1980 presidential elections or the new Secretary of State—they wanted to know when the American people were going to make revolution. "There's a group in the U.S.," one Komolhe Peshmerga began tentatively, "called the RCP. Have you heard of it? I've read some of their literature." (He had seen a recent copy of Revolution magazine in Baneh, hundreds of miles away from the nearest big city in Iran.)

From then on there was no rest. "What is the political line of the RCP?" "What is your line on Mao?" "What is the relationship between the struggle in Kurdistan and the overall revolutionary movement in Iran?" "What is the relationship between the struggle in Kurdistan and the overall revolutionary movement in Iran?" "What is the relationship between the struggle in Kurdistan and the overall revolutionary movement in Iran?" "How is a new vanguard communist party going to be formed?"

Throughout Kurdistan revolutionary posters line the walls and are attentively studied by thousands for the latest developments in the struggle.

Hosseini

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RW: Are you confident of victory in the war with the government?

Hosseini: We can not say confident or victory in the war with the government. We can only say that the Kurdish people's struggle is indeed a mighty barrier in the path of the reactionary plans of the government in Tehran. But more than that, I could not help but think that at this very moment—in the White House and the Pentagon, as well—Cartier and Brzezinski were receiving alarming reports on the spread of the revolution in Kurdistan. They must have been saying, "What the hell is going on here? This revolution won't stop—and desperately making plans to suppress it."

They have good reason to be alarmed. Right in the midst of the imperialists' criminal war preparations, which are bringing them eyeball to eyeball in this old strategic area of the world, here are the Kurdish people waging a revolutionary war, independent of both superpowers. And while the struggle over which political line and which organizations will lead the struggle in Kurdistan and in all of Iran is continuing to rage, it was clear to me that the Kurdish people are more than ever seeing through compromising forces, and demanding without hesitation genuine revolutionary leadership.

The Kurdish revolutionaries I met were intensely concerned with the world-wide struggle against imperialism. When I was in Mahabad, Sheikh Hosseini had told me that "the governments of all countries of the world should be in the hands of the people." And when we turned to the possibility of revolution in the U.S. (off), one comrade said simply, "That is a dream of oppressed people all over the world." As I was leaving Iran, I heard BBC announce the latest news on the fighting in Kurdistan. "Baneh has fallen to the army. Soon all of Kurdistan will be liberated by government forces." I could only laugh.