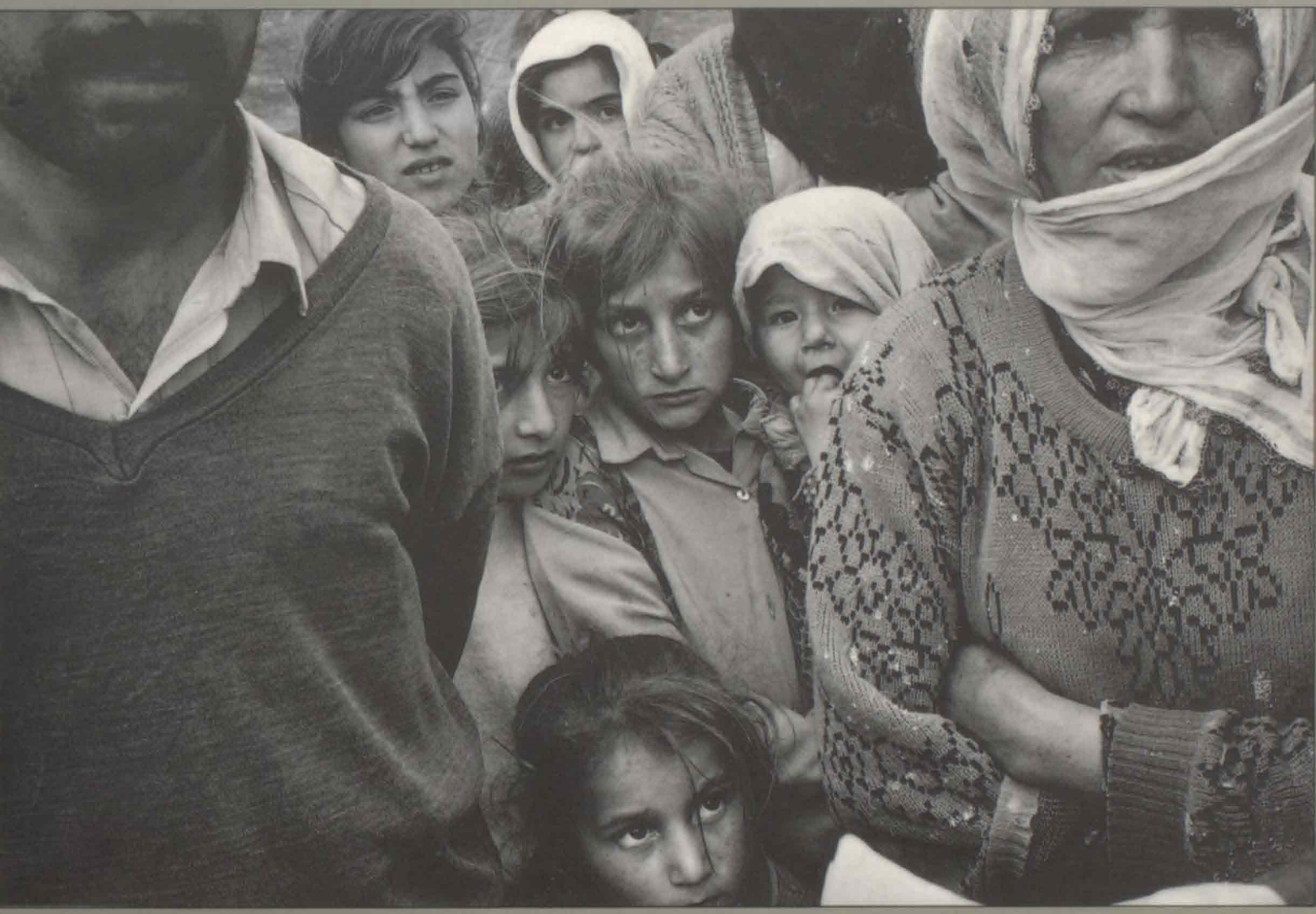
Atatürk's Children

TURKEY AND THE KURDS



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Foreword by John Simpson

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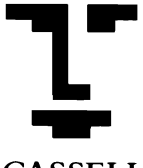

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Contents

Jonathan Rugman graduated from Cambridge with a First in English and then joined the BBC as a trainee in radio and television news and current affairs. After stints on several BBC programmes including *Panorama* and *Newsnight*, he was appointed the BBC World Service's Ankara correspondent in 1991. In 1993 he moved to Istanbul as a correspondent for the *Guardian* and *Observer*. He has reported from the Caucasus, Central Asia and Middle East and is a frequent visitor to the Kurdish area of southeast Turkey.

Roger Hutchings has been working as a freelance photojournalist since 1982, specializing in reportage and contributing to many international publications. He has spent three years photographing the conflict in former Yugoslavia and has made frequent visits to Turkish Kurdistan. His work has attracted wide recognition and he has won many awards including: Nikon Photo Essay 1991; Nikon News Photographer of the Year 1992; World Press, People in the News, first prize 1994; Amnesty International Photojournalism Prize 1994; Canon Photo Essay Award, runner up, 1995.

Map of Turkey showing mainly Kurdish provinces governed under emergency rule.

For Ramazan; he knows who he is.

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Where my own records have not been sufficient, I have relied on the published reports of several journalist colleagues, especially Aliza Marcus of Reuters and Hugh Pope of the *Independent*. Many of the 'Voices from the Crossfire' reproduced here began life in a BBC Radio *File on Four* documentary, broadcast in 1994.

I would especially like to thank Demet Kafesçioğlu for her painstaking translations from Turkish. Simon Tisdall at the *Guardian* and Ann Treneman at the *Observer* encouraged my exploits in the Wild East and gave me time off to write this book.

Jonathan Rugman

Foreword

The problems of a former empire are many. If Britain and France have encountered difficulties in finding their new place in the world, then Turkey, where the political structure is more precarious and the economy weaker, deserves our sympathy even more. Ever since its European ambitions were rejected with some brutality, Turkey has been obliged to think of itself as an Asian power instead. It has had to search for its Isamic, Central Asian and Middle Eastern identity once more, while keeping faith with the secular vision of Kemal Atatürk: no easy task.

Like most other powers that have laid down the imperial burden, Turkey has had great difficulty with the fundamental question any nation has to answer: who are we? In terms of ethnicity and culture Turkey is varied, complex and intermixed. Yet the myth which Atatürk bequeathed to his fellow-countrymen insists that there is a single ethnic group, the Turks. Nowadays the effects of this myth can be brutal; it can never, in the long run, be successful. While Turkey gives no legal rccognition to its large Kurdish minority, the problem that dissident Kurds pose for the Turkish state cannot be solved.

Just about every country which has tried to subsume separate ethnic identities into a single dominant nationality has failed in the long run. The Russians tried to pretend that Belorussia and the Ukraine were mere localities; the English hoped to eradicate the Welsh and Irish languages, and the Austrians Czech, Slovak and Serbian, by punishing those who spoke them; the Chinese have tried to wipe out Tibet as an identifiable entity by forcing Tibetans to intermarry with ethnic Chinese. None has succeeded and Turkey's long efforts this century to destroy Kurdish sentiment by denying that there are any such people as Kurds cannot succeed either.

This book by Jonathan Rugman and Roger Hutchings is not uncritical. No one who knows the PKK as they do could possibly be starry-eyed about the violent response to Turkish persecution. Nor is it possible to avoid becoming exasperated by the self-defeating machinations of the more legitimate Kurdish groups, as they make their deals and alliances and then promptly break them. Merely because they are persecuted and denied their proper rights does not mean that the Kurdish political leaders must necessarily be saints.

The short-termism of Kurdish politics is in the sharpest contrast to the majestic

sweep of their history. Anyone who has driven through the mountain valleys of Kurdish northern Iraq in the springtime knows how magnificently the wild wheat, oats and barley spring up across the meadows: precursers of the domesticated varieties which the entire world eats today. There are towns and cities in Kurdistan which are as old as Jericho and Jerusalem, perhaps older; and there are tumuli that represent settlements which are older still. The history of the Kurds stretches back to this period; they, it seems, built the cities and first grew the crops. The Kurds have a separate language and culture, separate costume, a separate consciousness. The vagaries of imperialism have carved lines across their territory and divided them between Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. In the great conferences which followed the First World War it was only ill chance which prevented their joining the other ethnic groupings that were awarded national independence. Now the national urges and anxieties of the four countries where they mainly find themselves bar them from nationhood; but not, it seems reasonable to assume, forever.

Jonathan Rugman is a friend and former colleague of mine. He and Roger Hutchings, who has taken these haunting pictures of one of the most beautiful regions on earth, have together produced the best definition for an English-speaking readership of what it is to be a Kurd.

John Simpson
BBC Television Centre
London
December 1995

Introduction
A landscape of burnt villages

Smoke was rising from the village of Çelebi as we walked towards it. A thin layer of snow was hardening on the surrounding fields, and the sky was bleeding red from a winter sunset. As we drew nearer we could see that all the houses had been destroyed by fire. They were still smouldering. One man, sifting with a spade through the ashes of his smoking home, said everyone else had fled. 'The Turks beat us and kicked us, then they burned the houses down,' the man said in Kurdish before returning, almost robotically, to his digging.

Once they could see that we had not been followed by Turkish soldiers or police, several other Kurds who witnessed the destruction of Çelebi trudged over the hills from a neighbouring village to join us. 'We'll tell you what happened but don't use our names,' said one. 'If the Turks know our names, they will take us to prison or kill us here.'

Around three hundred Turkish soldiers dressed in green woollen balaclava face-masks had arrived in Çelebi, five days before the photographer Roger Hutchings and I got there in February 1994. The soldiers were angry because the residents had refused to become village guards – local Kurds paid to combat rebels of the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK, which is fighting for a Kurdish state in southeast Turkey.

After burning down Çelebi's houses, the soldiers set the village's tobacco ware-house alight. The mud and straw building poured with smoke until it was reduced to a giant open-air ashtray, scorching the earth black. Then the soldiers killed all the poultry and cooked up a barbecue, before leaving the Kurds searching in the dark for the charred remnants of their livelihood.

Kurds in Çelebi told us that they supported what they called the 'outside people' or PKK. Sixteen people had joined the rebels since 1988, another eight were in prison on charges of helping them. The villagers were staying with friends nearby, but said they would soon take their families and surviving possessions to Diyarbakır, the biggest town in southeast Turkey. 'The choice is simple,' said one man. 'Either we fight for the government or we leave. Otherwise the Turks will burn our houses down again.'

A child clings to a wall in Çelebi, a village burned down by Turkish soldiers.

We paid several clandestine visits to the muddy shanty towns and construction sites which form an ugly ring around Diyarbakır, where tens of thousands of refugees from the fighting have been forced to set up home. While women baked bread in makeshift, scrap-metal ovens and their barefoot children played nearby, men crowded round with stories of how Turkish soldiers razed their villages.

'We were accused of giving food to the outside people, but we never saw them,' said Naim Abdullah, a walnut farmer from Alacıköy near the town of Kulp. In October 1993, Turkish soldiers took away eleven male villagers from Alacıköy by helicopter. Their friends and relatives in Diyarbakır told us the detained men had not been seen since.

'They beat everybody, they blindfolded us and when we opened our eyes we could see our houses burning,' said another farmer, who fled from his village in

November 1993. The majority of the refugee villagers we met said they were terrified of Turkish soldiers and the PKK in equal measure. 'We just want the terrorists and the security forces to leave us alone,' said one man, 'we just want to lead a decent life.'

We set off on a clandestine journey across the southeast, travelling early in the morning, using backroads in an attempt to avoid police and army roadblocks. We came to Babahakı, a Kurdish village which at first glance seemed a model of tranquillity. Women sat talking together outside doorways, as they picked cotton from harvested buds. Racks of tobacco leaves lay drying in the winter sun, but several buildings on the interior were blackened by fire. Half Babahakı's population of one hundred Kurds had fled three months earlier, after the village's Turkish teacher and his wife were found murdered.

The PKK is notorious for having killed more than eighty Turkish teachers, but a local woman who knew the teachers well said that in this case the security forces were responsible. Numan Konakçı had been teaching in Babahakı for five years and was immensely popular: he had even learned the Kurdish language. A week before the Konakçıs were shot by masked gunmen, Turkish soldiers came to the village and questioned the couple. They were told to spend more time at home and not to mix so much with 'Armenians' – a term of abuse for Kurds.

Making bread in the shanty town on the edge of Diyarbakır.