'Mountain Life is Difficult but Beautiful!': The Gendered Process of Becoming 'Free' in the PKK Guerrilla

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Contents

Chapter One

"Mountain Life Is Difficult but Beautiful!"

The Gendered Process of Becoming "Free" in PKK Education

Isabel Käser[1]

"Can you defend yourself?," asks Eyrehan, the commander of the Women's Defence Force (HPJ, *Hezên Parastina Jin*). "Not really," I reply and jokingly add: "but I can run really fast!" Eyrehan shakes her head in disapproval; "women who run away are only half women, women who know how to defend themselves are real women!" We were standing outside the communal tent *(manga)* at the base camp of HPJ waiting for lunch, when Eyrehan told me about the importance of self-defense for women. At this camp on the Iranian-Iraqi border young women from across the Kurdish Middle East were training to become guerrillas, some of whom would later go and fight for the liberation of Kurds in Rojhelat, or Iranian Kurdistan.[2] I had come here at the end of my PhD fieldwork, after I had observed how *Democratic Confederalism*, the Kurdistan Liberation Movement's liberation ideology,[3] had been put into practice in Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan), Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), and Başur (Iraqi Kurdistan).[4] The mountains are different though, I had been told on numerous occasions, "mountain life is difficult but beautiful!"

Kurdish female fighters caught the media and scholarly gaze with the defense of Kobanî (Syria) and Şengal (Iraq) in 2014. Often depicting smiling and attractive young women with Kalashnikovs, the female fighters of the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ, *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*), became the antithesis to the barbaric other: the so-called Islamic State (IS, or *daesh*), the many jihadi groups fighting in Syria, the Syrian regime, and the Turkish state. However, this representation of the female fighters has often been essential-

izing, objectifying, and sexualizing, brushing over the complex history that enabled women to now stand at the many forefronts of the Kurdistan Liberation Movement's struggle for a gender-equal, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Middle East (Dirik 2015; Shahvisi 2018). My goal was to gain a more nuanced understanding of how the women "got there" and what enables them to stand these contested grounds so firmly. In order to do that, I spent two weeks in different guerrilla education camps, where apart from participant observation I conducted fifteen interviews with trainee guerrillas and their commanders, asking a simple set of questions about personal trajectories, everyday routines, and gendered visions of the future. Instead of asking why women join the movement, this chapter shifts the focus onto aspects of the everyday; the gendered process of living, learning, and transforming within the movement, looking at the tools and mechanisms that enable them in the process of becoming a female freedom fighter. I was particularly interested in how meaning and longevity are given to the continuum of violence and resistance the Kurdistan Women's Liberation Movement (KWLM) operates in across the Kurdish Middle East.[5] Conceptually, this research moves away from the binary of victimization (women as pawns in a masculine order) and emancipation (idealization of Kurdish female fighters) and instead analyzes how the movement itself defines freedom, empowerment, and the role of women within the larger quest of liberation. In order to become "free," women have to overcome the old ways of life and learn the new, a process that can be understood as "the radical remaking of the decolonized personhood in dual acts of 'unbecoming' and 'becoming'" (Duzel 2018, 3). I explore how this process of "becoming free" initially happens in party education and argue that it is crucial to analyze how this process is gendered, in order to understand what makes the female ranks of this movement so resilient.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE PROCESS OF BECOMING

Historically and cross-culturally revolutionary and post-colonial liberation movements have recruited women in large numbers, promising profound social transformation, including that of gender norms and relations (Alison 2003; Lanzona 2009; Moghadam 1994; Parashar 2014; Viterna 2013; Yuval-Davis 1997). Yet, as observed in many post-colonial settings, such as Eritrea (Hale 2001), Palestine (Hasso 2005), Sri Lanka (Alison 2003) and Algeria (Turshen 2002), women who actively participated in armed liberation movements faced varying degrees of male backlash and were often pushed back into the private sphere post-liberation (Al-Ali & Tas 2018, 2). Cynthia Enloe considers violence in war and conflict as a continuation of masculine orders: "Once the war was over, women were demobilized as quickly as possible.

Any Amazons were pushed back across the frontier of social imagination. The world was put right once more. War and peace were portrayed as distinct—war abnormal, peace normal. In 'normal' times women do not soldier" (Enloe 1988, 123). Enloe's quote sums up the master narrative about women and armed conflict: women engaged in paramilitary or guerrilla activity are seen as exceptional and temporal, despite women having historically played key roles in national liberation wars. (Sjoberg & Gentry 2015). The KWLM argues to be different not only because it claims sustainability during and "post"-war, but also because women do not fight in a men's war. Instead, they have created their own epistemology and autonomous ranks in the armed and political spheres, while building a new gender-equal system in those societies it seeks to revolutionize.

Existing literature on nationalism and feminism has shown that women often serve as markers of the (post-)colonial nation state, having been assigned clear roles and symbols to represent the "modern" nation (Jayawardena 1986; Kandiyoti 1991; Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989, 1997). However, nationalism as a project emerging from masculinist hope, memory, or humiliation (Enloe 1990) and feminism are not mutually exclusive per se; instead, nationalist movements simultaneously open spaces for women (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011) and women use these spaces to change the movements from within (O'Keefe 2013). To understand the potential of these spaces it is crucial to ask what kind of feminism and what kind of nationalism are being practiced, to examine at what point nationalist or liberation struggles open spaces for women and for which women, how those spaces are used, and how claims of gender-based equality and justice are articulated. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to tell the history of the KWLM that emerged alongside the wider movement and how that fraught relationship between nationalism and feminism played out in this particular context. But it is important to note that women were involved in the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, Kurdistan Workers' Party) from its founding days in 1978 and have joined the party in significant numbers since the early 1990s. While more women were fighting, many were also dying, some of them committing spectacular acts of resistance. Those who left a particularly important mark in the early years were Bêrîvan,[6] Bêrîtan,[7] and Zîlan,[8] each of them marking a new era of female mobilization. The resistance of Bêrîvan sparked the uprisings in Cizre in 1989, and Bêrîtan's death leap in 1992 pushed Abdullah Öcalan to initiate a separate women's army in 1993. This was only a promise in the beginning, but autonomous structures started to take shape with the preparation for the first women's congress in 1995. In March 1998, Öcalan published the "Ideology of Women's Liberation," which made women's importance in the larger struggle for Kurdistan's freedom official, and simultaneously laid the grounds for the first women's party within the PKK; the Kurdistan Women's Workers' Party (PJKK: Partiya Jinên Karkerên Kurdis-

tanê), which was to be formed during the party congress in 1998/1999. However, during that congress Öcalan was arrested. This not only created a grave crisis for the party but also meant that the women lost the direct support of the leadership and were left to their own devices for a few years. Women who experienced the 1990s and the years following Öcalan's arrest describe women's work as a constant struggle against "male mentality" within the party, while wanting to contribute to the struggle for the liberation of Kurdistan. In prison, Öcalan abandoned the goal to establish an independent Kurdistan and introduced *Democratic Confederalism* instead. The announcement of *Democratic Confederalism* in 2005 formalized women's centrality in the struggle for a democratic, ecological, anti-capitalist and gender-equal confederation, a bottom up system of self-government (Jongerden & Akayya 2013, 171–178).

This rich history of female involvement in the movement, which I am only very briefly sketching out here, is one of the reasons why women play such key roles in the political and armed struggles across the Kurdish Middle East today. Learning about this history is central to the party education, which will be further discussed below. But how does one become a revolutionary who then goes off to commit spectacular acts of resistance and self-defense at the many frontlines of the Kurdish Middle East? I argue that this particular women's movement demands us to steer away from the binary of structure and agency and develop a more grounded and nuanced framework of analysis that does justice to both the militarized framework these women operate in and the emancipatory power this party holds. Creating what Foucault calls "docile bodies," formed by specific modes of discipline is certainly part of it, as the Kurdistan Liberation Movement, among other things, needs subjected and practiced bodies it can mobilize and deploy (Foucault 1991, 138). However, this process entails much more than merely becoming a soldier and expands far beyond the battlefield. In party education recruits learn to obtain what is called *irade,* the will to resist, part of which is learning the art of self-control *(oto-kontrol)*. In her analysis of piety and ethical self-making, the late Saba Mahmood calls this *habitus*: "the conscious effort at reorienting desires, brought about by the concordance of inward motives, outward actions, inclinations, and emotional states through the repeated practice of virtuous deeds" (Mahmood 2001, 215). This process of disciplining the mind and the body through education leads to the subject formation and subordination to the leadership and party hierarchy. Yet rather than thinking of the women in the movement as only acted upon, it is exactly this subordination that Mahmood, building on Judith Butler's notion of *subjectivation,* calls agency: the process in which a subject becomes self-conscious agent by subordinating herself. "Such a conceptualization of power and subject formation also encourages us to understand agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific

relations of subordination create and enable" (ibid., 210). However, Lois McNay argues that the Foucauldian theory of subjectivity (which influenced Mahmood) fails to recognize generative human agency because, from its perspective, "the process of subjectification is understood as a dialectic of freedom and constraint" (McNay 2000, 2). Thus, the making of selfhood remains negative, passive, linked to discursive practices and agency, and is seen as limited. "The idea that the individual emerges from constraint does not offer a broad enough understanding of the dynamics of subjectification and, as a consequence, offers an etiolated understanding of agency" (ibid., 3). Building on McNay, among others, Sertaç Sehlikoglu urges feminist ethnographers not to limit their quest to locating agency to visible forms of "ethical self-making" within clearly defined power structures, but instead shift the scholarly gaze to unpack moments of pleasure, desire, joy and ordinary daily life (Sehlikoglu 2018; Joseph 2005). Given that the KWLM needs to operate in war and conflict and is embedded in a hierarchical military structure, this chapter is an attempt to do both: to highlight how the disciplined process of "subjectivation" unfolds in education, and how that process is filled with moments of compassion, silliness, and joy, but also with loss, pain, and hardship.

LEARNING TO BE FREE IN EDUCATION: BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

We arrived at the *Academiya Şehid Şirin Elemholî* in the Asos mountains on a hot August afternoon. Around twenty young guerrillas were undergoing the four-month training at this academy, which was located on a mountain slope; the *mangas* were well camouflaged with branches or hidden under trees. As we arrived, the guerrillas were just coming back from their daily endurance training on the nearby plateau. After I greeted everyone, I was led to the commander *manga* where the two female commanders of the Academy and I discussed politics over dinner and tea. Both commanders had previously been working in Bakur and were tasked with running this Academy for a few months. A guerrilla's day ends when the sun goes down and starts at 4.30 a.m. with the morning ritual and an hour of morning exercise. Some of the recruits running and stretching in the morning light were young girls with barely any body awareness at all, while others had battle experience and already were strong and disciplined. "A part of what we are trying to teach them here is to get to know and like their bodies. Many of them have never done sports in their life, and see their bodies as shameful," Commander Eyrehan told me later. We ate breakfast at 6 a.m., bread, cream cheese mixed with oil and dried herbs, and natural chewing gum they had cooked the night before, which helps the digestive system. Shortly after breakfast (eating is a

quick affair here; "we are soldiers" after all), we packed the weapons and the teapot, and off we hiked to the training ground. Here they put down their ammunition and stood in line for their exercises, set up the radio station to communicate (in code) and listened in on inter-party radio, and prepared the sniper training spot. For the next three hours the guerrillas repeated different positions with their Kalashnikovs, including pulling the trigger, over and over again. The more experienced ones, who were training on the big weapons to become snipers or rocket launchers, were called one by one to practice on the other side of the slope. I sat on a stone, observing the training, and after a while I started my interviews a few meters away. The commanders left it to the trainees themselves as to whether they wanted to talk to me; those who did come over told me their age, where they came from, what brought them there, how they saw their roles as revolutionaries, and what they wanted to do for Rojhelat.

Most fighters I spoke to were in their late teens and came from a strictly patriarchal family or violent political context. Many of those coming from Rojhelat had been married off to an older man at a young age, one bearing scars of self-immolation all over her body. More than one had left her child with her family to join the struggle. One fighter had been a university student in Iran and worked as a chemist before she realized that the "system life" was not for her. Two others stated that they were poor villagers before but having seen how Iranian soldiers treated the bodies of HPJ martyrs (they brought a mutilated corpse to the village), they learned about the work of the party and joined. Two came from Rojava and had previously fought in the ranks of the YPJ, two others hailed from Bakur, one from Maxmur, and one from Erbil.

Instead of a common pattern as to why women joined the party, I recorded as many different traumatic and violent stories of state and family oppression as women I talked to. People in the Kurdish Middle East (and others in the region) are embedded in a continuum of violence (Cockburn 2004) that fluctuates in scale and location depending on time and space; from massacres to domestic violence, and political repression to genocide. I found that it was rather the rupture points in this continuum, such as heightened (state) violence against the Kurds, and the accumulation of these rupture points that eventually led my interviewees to join the party. The rupture points differ from generation to generation. Witnessing the attack of the so-called Islamic State *(daesh)* on Şengal and Kobanî in 2014, and seeing female fighters resisting in both those places were important rupture points for the younger fighters. For the older generation it was the uprisings in the early 1990s (*Serhildan*), and the resistance of famous martyrs such as Berîtan and Zîlan. Across the decades it was the accumulation of witnessing state brutality, losing loved ones in the struggle, the treatment of martyrs, or personal experiences of police brutality and racism against Kurds that motivated many to join. There are also many different stories of how the young recruits heard

and learned about the Kurdistan Liberation Movement. Some grew up in a sympathizer family, some got hold of one of Öcalan's books or tapes, others heard about the struggle from party members who were recruiting in the villages, others again watched Öcalan's arrest or the Kobanî resistance on television. For many, joining the party was an option at the back of their mind for a while before they actually did. What I found is that deciding to join this armed struggle, leaving your life behind and living the harsh life of a guerrilla in the mountains can be a snap decision, a gradual process, or what feels to some women as the most natural trajectory.

While some studies suggest that women's motivations to join an armed movement are specific to their gender (Gonzales-Perez 2006; Kampwirth 2002; Viterna 2006) others have argued that women participate in armed groups for similar reasons as men: nationalist desires, economic and political suffering and injustice, and desires for revenge (Flach 2007; Mazurana 2013, 148). Dara Kay Cohen argues that women not only join armed groups for similar reasons as men but also have similar experiences during the conflict and commit the same violent acts as men do. She refutes the notion of the peace-loving women and the fighting men, showing that women are just as capable of committing spectacular acts of violence during times of conflict (Cohen 2013, 388). My data suggest that women join the PKK, or its sister parties across the region for a multitude of reasons, some similar to those motivating men and others unique to women. Similar reasons include nationalist fervor, an adherence to Öcalan's liberation ideology, and the need to defend and protect their land and family and wanting to avenge (state) violence inflicted on their community. Female specific reasons are fear of or anger about sexual or state violence and repression, and the struggle for the emancipation of women such as equal opportunities, education, or escaping the sphere of patriarchal control (Alison 2003; Enloe 1988; Flach 2007; Mazurana 2013).

My data supports Pinar Tank's argument, that women's reasons to join the PKK or its regional branches can be divided into roughly five categories; social (e.g., urban migration, poverty), personal (e.g., forced marriage, domestic violence), ideological (e.g., national liberation, women's emancipation), key event (e.g., experience of state violence, racism) and revenge (Tank 2017, 418). However, my findings suggest that it is rarely just one of these factors that push a woman to join the party but a culmination thereof. In contrast to existing work on women in guerrilla war, I argue that while analyzing the different forms of violence that impact women's lives in all parts of Kurdistan and understanding patterns of mobilization are important, it is just as analytically fruitful to pay attention to what happens to women once they join the party, what they do in the party structures in the everyday and what keeps them engaged in the many armed, socio-political, and intellectual struggles the party is fighting. What became obvious to me is that the

PKK, or in this instance the East Kurdistan Free Women's Society (KJAR, *Komelgaya Jinên Azad ên Rojhilatê Kurdistanê*) and its armed wing HPJ, offers an alternative for women. Not only as a physical or geographical escape, but also an ideological, political, and intellectual alternative to narratives, realities, and systems lived in all parts of Kurdistan. This alternative and its appeal cuts across gender, class, religion, rural/urban, and other power structures. Rather than trying to determine exact patterns of mobilization, I will discuss and unpack this alternative. While stories of life before the party, and journeys to the mountains are rich and telling about the respective context, I found it more revealing to ask what women find in Abdullah Öcalan's liberation ideology that keeps them there and gives them the will and strength to resist. It is important to note that even though everyone has to learn and internalize the liberation ideology, not all fighters are equally militant, nor do they all become the "same." All members carry personal histories and specific characteristics into the party, but after joining and going through education they learn to perform and live by the parameters set out by the "militant personality" (Flach 2007, 86). "Militant" *(militan)* has a specific meaning in the party and describes part of the identity that every member obtains through education and practice. This gender-neutral concept is a signifier for those who follow the party leader Abdullah Öcalan and his ideology, and through the internalizing of his teachings become "PKK'cized" *(PKK'leşme)*. In party literature militants are further described with adjectives such as honest, dedicated, steadfast, principled, abstinent, communal, sincere, self-critical, loyal, and prepared to dedicate their lives and deaths to the struggle, freedom, humanity, people, and the leadership (Öcalan n.d., Serxwebûn 2015).

Upon joining the PKK, the party members leave behind their old societal ties and cut all contact with their family. Instead, all mothers of Kurdistan are their mothers, and they gain thousands of new brothers and sisters in the party comrades (Interview Berîtan Rojhelat and Zemyan, 1.8.2016). From now on, they are subjects of the party, which decides who trains and works where and for how long, who is sent to war and who works behind the front lines. Most of the party cadres I spoke to did not know for how much longer they would be working in their current position or where they would go after, "The party knows" they simply said. The PKK sees itself as an educational party, which transforms each member into a militant who then has the capacity to fight for revolutionary change (Özcan 2006; Westrheim 2010). Kariane Westrheim quotes a cadre who described the process as follows:

> The life of a guerrilla is like a re-birth. You have to give up everything for the love of the struggle. Attending [PKK] means forgetting the past, struggle means struggling with yourself. You have to change your personality totally. It is impossible to describe this process when you don't live there, when you are

> not a part of it. The guerrillas have a different life than others and it affects you deeply. All these difficulties change your life and you become a new person. (A. quoted in Westrheim 2010, 115)

This process of being reborn, of obtaining a "militant personality" is a long and ongoing process that starts off with an initial three-months of "new fighter" *(şervanê nu)* training, where the recruits cover basic weapons and physical training, receive the first ideological lessons and learn about the importance of friendship (*hevaltî*) and communal life. Most young women came to *Academiya Şehid Şirin Elemholî* after having finished that first training. Others came from Rojava where they only had one-month training before being sent to the frontline. Apart from being physically disciplined during this first education period, the recruits learn about Abdullah Öcalan's concept of freedom and how struggling for that vision of freedom makes you free. This educational process is gendered insofar as that the female recruits learn that in order to fight, they first have to learn to believe in themselves, in their strength as women, and in a better world, according to Apoism.[9] There is a clearly laid-out curriculum for the four months at the Academy, which structures education in ideological, theoretical and practical lessons. The ideological lessons cover topics such as the history of Kurdistan, the history of women and *jineolojî*,[10] and how to build a democratic nation. The theoretical lessons discuss the history and experience of war in Kurdistan, the PKK as a revolutionary force, and the role of female commanders and guerrillas in the PKK. The practical lessons include discussions on methods and tactics of the enemy, as well as the methods and principles of guerrilla warfare (curriculum Academiya Şehid Şirin Elemholî 2016).

This curriculum shows that the female fighters are trained as revolutionaries, as guerrillas; they are soldiers first and foremost. Women's positions are part of every lesson, but this education does not go into intellectual depth. However, the key aspects of the party's self-understanding as a women's liberation movement are covered. Analyzing this curriculum, the building blocks of a guerrilla's identity become apparent: knowing one's history of oppression but also the tools of resistance; gaining a voice to talk about this oppression; a belief in yourself; and self-confidence in your practice through education. Another aspect of this identity construct was added in my interview with Eyrehan: "We are people first and foremost. To build a new society we have to strengthen each person's good side and weaken their bad side, one person is never just one or the other." This strengthening and weakening is achieved through adhering to strict rules of communal living, close observation of each other and the regular criticism and self-criticism sessions (Duzel 2018; Flach 2007; Grojean 2014). All these methods are tools to create the desired subjects who adhere to the specific ideal of the "militant personality." I concur with Westrheim who observed that the party

encourages a respectful and kind behavior and personality that can inspire social change and potentially encourages others to join (Westrheim 2010, 118).

At the camp, every day after lunch there was an educational activity, in the library-classroom tent. The first day the female commander read out a statement written by KJAR, the women's umbrella structure working on Rojhelat. The statement was an eight-page-long summary about a meeting held recently, assessing the current local, regional, and international situation, positioning the work of the party within that, and condemning Öcalan's solitary confinement. The title of that particular document read: "In line with the free women's resistance we are leading a radical fight, to realize a meeting with our leader Apo in freedom." As always, women's work and demands were tied to the freedom of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader who helped enshrine women's centrality in the movement's ideology. During another afternoon session, one cadre translated three letters from Turkish to Kurdish, written by new martyrs, who had sacrificed themselves in the fight against the Turkish state a few weeks earlier, as part of the PKK's intensified struggle against the Turkish army after the attempted coup on July 15, 2016. Those who plan and carry out these attacks and know that they are very likely going to die, write down their life story, motivations, convictions, and hopes for the future before they undertake the operation. These statements are then distributed among the camps and serve as an ideological and educational tool, to talk through shared notions of commitment and sacrifice. Everything ends with "*Bijî Serok Apo!*," long live the leader Apo!

During both afternoon sessions, the trainee guerrillas were sitting in the boiling mid-day heat, listening to what felt like hours of lectures. The classroom procedures are an organized and hierarchal affair: when the commander, as teacher, enters the tent, all students spring up and stand at attention. There is a certain sequence of slogans they shout before and after studying, those who want to say something stand up before speaking and they only speak if spoken to. During this particular session, we were all suffering from the extreme summer heat. I tried to learn from their discipline and not pant too much or look too weak. Instead I sat there and observed how some of the trainees completely switched off while pretending to listen, doodling in their notebooks during these extended lessons. However, as soon as the lesson was over, they were back to their ritualized standing at attention and shouting the slogans. I was struck by how they switched between normal bored teenagers and always at the ready soldiers. At one point I crossed my legs and was instantly scolded by a young guerrilla: "We guerrillas, we never sit like that!" she hissed.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Once the new guerrillas have that will to resist *(irade)*, officially they can do anything: control their body *(oto-kontrol)*; go on dangerous operations; kill the enemy; and endure pain, loss, physical strain, and the cold harsh winters or the excruciatingly hot summers. I say "officially" because unofficially, of course, the reality is different, and the fighters suffer greatly from losing their friends, witnessing violence, or leaving behind their families and children. Many young recruits cannot sleep, have bad dreams, miss their mothers and children, and show sudden outbursts of emotions. One of the trainees at the camp developed a stutter after her brother was martyred. Shedding the "system life" and becoming a subject of the party can be both liberating and painful, especially for those who struggle to live up to the expectations of women as goddesses, which part of the subject becoming foresees (Cağlayan 2012; Duzel 2018).[11] The difficulties and contradictions that emerge in this process of becoming a revolutionary are dealt with during the regular criticism and self-criticism platforms, where the progress of achieving the militant personality is discussed, and eventual faults (e.g., bourgeoisie behavior, capitalist mindsets) are critiqued (*Licht am Horizont*, n.d.; Herausgeberinnkolletiv 2012, 322–328).

Upon completing training and obtaining these physical, mental, and social skills (after six to twelve months of education),[12] the female commanders decide where their recruits will be sent to next: either to one of the many frontlines in the Kurdish Middle East, or in the case of Rojhelat, some of them go back to society and organize their fellow citizens. The party has cadres in certain cities and villages in Rojhelat, who under great danger go to people's houses and hold education courses, for women, men, adolescents, and children. Education is gendered in the sense that they try to organize women in particular but not exclusively. Refusing to work with "Western feminist" organizational tools as they call it, meaning only focusing on women, everyone is addressed. Meetings are held for everyone but always with a "women's perspective." This means making people aware that women are those most oppressed by the state and patriarchy as a whole, but also the bearers of the old knowledge and culture, the backbone of society. Freeing them means freeing everyone (Interview Eyrehan, 2.8.2016). The goal is to mobilize as many people to join the party as possible, to go for education in the mountains and then return again to organize. Not everyone working for the party does so as a guerrilla in uniform; just as many people are needed in the civilian sphere to build the political base, so that when the political opportunity arises, the party would have a social base to activate, similar to what happened in Rojava in 2012. The Eastern Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Movement (KODAR, *Komalgeya Demokratîk û Azad a Rojhilatê Kurdistanê*), the umbrella organization for all political and armed branches

working in Rojhelat, currently wants to find a diplomatic solution for the problems in Iran and is not interested in a fully fledged confrontation with the Iranian regime. If attacked in this process, or to take revenge for previously fallen guerrillas, the YRK and HPJ fighters will engage in "legitimate self-defense" as the movement calls it. There are reoccurring clashes between them and the Iranian regime, and many guerrillas fall, but at this stage a mutually agreed ceasefire is still in place. The protests that took place across Iran in December 2017 and January 2018, suggest that the time for activating that base has not yet come. Despite repeated calls for a widespread uprising,[13] protests in Rojhelat remained small. During the renewed wave of protests during the summer of 2018, KODAR positioned itself as the only opposition force with the necessary military power and a feasible political plan to stabilize and democratize Iran. In a declaration published in August 2018, they proposed *Democratic Confederalism* as a viable alternative for the whole of Iran, highlighting the importance of women's liberation in the democratization process.[14]

Rojhelat is different from other parts of the Kurdish Middle East, such as Bakur, Rojava or Başur, but the movement's ideology remains the same and so does its strategy to mobilize and educate people. Convinced that the women's liberation ideology can also work for women in Rojhelat, Leyla, the commander of KJAR, the women's umbrella uniting the political and armed branches of Rojhelat told me:

> For me it doesn't matter where I work. Today I am working on Rojhelat, tomorrow Başur, the day after tomorrow Rojava, and after Bakur, it is unclear. What is important for me is that wherever we are we can develop women's work, we can advance our revolutionary work. I have been in the organisation for twenty-four years and women's work is my first priority (Interview Leyla, 25.8.2015).

When asked about the specifics of the Rojhelat context, compared to other Kurdish regions, the women I interviewed emphasized its rich and longstanding culture, but also the acute pressure to assimilate to the dominant Persian culture. I was told that Rojhelat is kept impoverished and drugs to the area flow freely, in order to diminish people's aspirations to organize and demand rights of self-determination. The state targets women especially, including Persian women, being worried about their potential to challenge the Islamic Republic. In return, the regime is especially wary of this movement's ability to give women and therefore wider society hope, when it is trying to create a sense of hopelessness in Rojhelat. Each guerrilla I spoke to about why they are fighting for Rojhelat also emphasized the disproportionally high numbers of child marriages and self-immolation. Commander Viyan stressed that Öcalan's ideology is applicable to all four parts of Kurdistan, but that women in Rojhelat are especially oppressed due to the nature of the Islamic Repub-

lic, putting great pressure on both women and Kurds. "They have this ideology that women cannot do anything, that they should just stay in the house. We teach them about their history and their power" (Interview Viyan, 1.8.2016).

LIFE AND DEATH, OR HOW DEATH CONSTITUTES LIFE

Life in the camps was hard work and tough training but also a lot of laughter and genuine fun. The fine line between life and death, however, between sadness and laughter, destruction and beauty were omnipresent in encounters, stories, or activities. One afternoon, the guerrillas trained with balloons as targets. Dozens of colorful balloons were inflated and hung in the trees. This brought much joy and laughter to the training, especially when later on the balloons were arranged as a *parcours*: they had to shoot from afar, then run and roll to the next target, shoot sitting down, crawl onward, and shoot the last one standing up. The group cheered every time someone hit a target and ran on. The rest of the group sat under a tree, playing with the remaining balloons, or writing Öcalan's name with gunpowder and lighting it on fire. At the end of the day, the tally of who hit how many targets was read out, and the feedback session *(tekmîl)* was held. In the evening the group held a *moral session*, in this instance an hour of singing and dancing. As the sun went down behind the mountains, the guerrillas sang their sad songs of far away and brave friends, of loved ones who will never return. At the end, they danced a battle dance, of horses and eagles, with music blasting from a small portable radio.

Another day, during a tea break under a tree, Zemyan, a young cadre, was invited to share the story of her first operation in Rojhelat with the new trainees. She was telling it like an adventure story and we were hanging on her every word, laughing as she insulted the Iranian soldiers for their cowardliness. Suddenly though, as she started talking about her friends dying (four of them went, two survived) and her getting lost for many days, she started crying, jumped to her feet, and disappeared for a few minutes to regain her composure. One of her friends ran to console her, and when they came back a while later she finished her story. These two episodes demonstrate two things: first, daily guerrilla life entails much joy and consideration for one another. Second, the heroic packaging of a guerrilla life also includes many layers of suffering and hardship. Emotions and controlling or redirecting them are very much part of a young fighter's education. "Losing your friends never gets easier," an older commander told me, "but you learn to deal with it."

One key aspect of a guerrilla's identity, lust for life, and indifference toward their own death is the martyr *(şehîd)* culture. I was told many adventurous battle stories, recounting the heroic deeds of the guerrillas or the martyrs. About how six guerrillas could stop an army of Iranian soldiers for hours, how the Iranian soldiers are cowardly and dirty, how many enemy soldiers were taken out by Şehid Zîlan, who bravely sacrificed herself using her and her friends' hand grenades, after being fatally wounded. These battle stories are used as educational tools but also as a form of oral history to remember fallen friends. "My heart hurts every time I lose a friend. But remembering their bravery and strength helps me to be a better person, also for them" (Interview Zemyan, 2.8.2016). What struck me most about the martyr culture is its position between life and death and its meaning-giving power. From the moment they entered the party these young women became revolutionaries *(şoreşker)* and therewith agreed to live, fight, and die for the movement. Death becomes a permanent possibility and presence in a guerrilla's life, which manifests itself in many different physical and metaphysical ways, most strikingly so in people's behavior toward themselves and each other. If a good friend falls in battle, they mourn them but only within a set time-frame. A mechanism is immediately switched on of diverting the sadness into strength. Of course, the sadness comes back over the months and years, but the same mechanisms apply: remember what they stood for, remember what they died for, and promise to continue their struggle. Loss and hardship are made bearable through ritualization: the preserving of photos, the telling of stories, the taking on of their best abilities, and the annual remembrance ceremonies. These memories are written in journals kept by most guerrillas and are shared around the fire, over tea, or during the *moral* sessions, when songs remind everyone of their comrades. Guerrillas also carried with them, among their sparse personal belongings, some laminated martyr photos, usually in their uniform chest pocket or in the back of a notebook. Sometimes they pulled them out and told their story, "Did you know *şehîd* so and so? We were there and there together!" Or over tea they would share anecdotes: "Do you remember how much sugar Şehid Zîlan put in her tea? With every sip she took a sugar cube!" Zemyan showed me a small note she kept from the famous Zîlan, a hand-written change of night guard itinerary. "The possibility of death is great for us, we never know what will happen tomorrow, so we try to be the best version of ourselves today, and our *şehîd* help us with this," she told me. This is a party slogan, just like many things they told me. However, ideology gives meaning to the continuum of violence these women find themselves on and the ideology offers some of the main tools of resistance.

Martyrdom is deemed a necessity by those who resist oppression in the cause of the nation; it is seen as the only route to a meaningful life. Laleh Khalili shows in the context of Palestine that this link of loving life, wanting

to live a worthy life and thus being prepared to sacrifice one's life has been evoked by many post-colonial liberation movements such as the Palestinians, Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Cuban Revolution, and the Black Panthers in the United States (Khalili 2007, 19–20). Both Hisyar Ozsoy (2010) and Khalili write about "hyper-masculine heroism" that is being celebrated at martyr memorials, valuing virtues considered masculine: courage, violence, self-sacrifice. However, based on my observations at the many martyr funerals and memorials I attended across the Kurdish Middle East, men and women get equal celebratory rituals and because women have such a long history of contributing to and dying for the party and its liberatory quest, these supposedly male characteristics have become gender-neutral. However, every time a woman falls in the struggle, it is emphasized that she was fighting not only for the liberation of Kurdistan and a democratic and confederal future but also for the liberation of women in Kurdistan, the whole region, and potentially the whole world. Dead bodies carry a high political value (Weiss 2014) and are treated and remembered "as powerful, affective, and symbolic forces that shape power, identities and struggles" (Ozsoy 2010, 30). As such, the martyr culture is a key location where a sense of victimhood and sacrifice but also of belonging, resistance, and a vision for a future democratic confederation are imagined and negotiated.

CONCLUSION

The Kurdistan Liberation Movement, or in this instance KJAR and its armed wing HPJ, offers an alternative for women, not only as a physical or geographical escape but also an ideological, political, and intellectual alternative to dominant narratives, realities, and systems lived in all parts of Kurdistan, the wider region, as well as globally. I have argued that while stories of life before the party and journeys to the mountains are rich and telling about the respective contexts, it is more revealing to ask what women find in Abdullah Öcalan's liberation ideology and life in the party that gives them the will and strength to resist. I have demonstrated that once women go through education, it is the recognition and meaning-giving that keeps them there. They learn how to defend themselves against *Capitalist Modernity* and its many tools of oppression and obtain an identity built on the rediscovery of women's history, power, and knowledge. In education, the recruits learn to be self-controlled and determined revolutionaries. This process of becoming also entails much disciplining of each individual body: learning *oto-kontrol* and how to curb physical urges such as hunger, tiredness, and sexual desires is a key prerequisite in a revolutionary's life. Certain individual character traits, especially artistic or practical skills, are valued and appreciated. Unwanted or unsuitable behavior, traumatizing experiences of violence, or the

lack of physical strength are shaped into one form of militancy, using the tools of education, practice, communal living, and criticism and self-criticism. As such the framework of liberation sets clear parameters of who the militants are or ought to be. If successfully learned, performed, and internalized it also lays out the path ahead: to go and fight, and through fighting being free, liberating others, and making sure the female structures endure.

It is too early to speak about post-liberation in Kurdistan, as the project of *Democratic Confederalism* is under sustained attack from all sides. However, the separate women's structures and the ideology that promises a long road to freedom are indicators that this liberation movement does have a different approach. Yet despite the KWLM's claim of difference from previous revolutionary struggles and sustainability in terms of women's centrality, the liberation ideology remains deeply gendered, with the "free women" being a progressive but disciplined, policed, and essentialised marker of the aspired "non-state nation." Together with Abdullah Öcalan, over the past forty years the women of the KWLM have created and are living and implementing a hegemonic femininity: a clearly set-out blueprint of how women have to become and what they have to do in order to liberate themselves and others. The learning and living of this femininity are tightly linked to party education, where women learn of their oppression, how to overcome it and contribute to the new non-state nation, either as armed fighters, or politicians and activists. This is not to say that the women of the Kurdistan Liberation Movement are used and abused by a masculinist invention. Much rather, the women have used the spaces provided by the movement, over the course of their struggle have transformed it from within by establishing autonomous female structures in all spheres of party activity, and are in fact the driving force behind the Kurdistan Liberation Movement as a whole. The movement would not be where it is today were it not for its women who have simultaneously been struggling for the liberation of the land and of women, I was often assured. Party education marks the starting point where the new recruits learn to follow in the footsteps of the leader, the martyrs, and the revolutionary women who came before them.

NOTES

1. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewer as well as Nadje Al-Ali, Haje Keli, Neslihan Yilmaz, and Kamran Matin for their comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. This research is part of the author's PhD project and was funded by the Janggen-Pöhn Foundation and the Swiss National Science Foundation.

2. The pro-PKK parties working in Rojhelat are organised under the East Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Society (KODAR, *Komalgeya Demokratîk û Azad a Rojhilatê Kurdistanê*), which has a parallel women's structure called East Kurdistan Free Women's Society (KJAR: *Komelgeya Jinên Azad ên Rojhilatê Kurdistanê*). PJAK is the ideological party (Kurdistan Free Life Party: *Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê)*, and there are two armed wings: the Women's Defence Forces (HPJ, *Hezên Parastina Jin),* and the mixed East Kurdistan Defence

Units (YRK, *Yekîneyên Parastina Rojhilatê Kurdistanê*). All parties are working toward implementing Democratic Confederalism in Rojhelat and are under the direct control of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK, *Koma Civakên Kurdistan*), to which I more broadly refer to as the Kurdistan Liberation Movement, the movement, the PKK, or the party.

3. *Democratic Confederalism*, *Democratic Autonomy*, and *Democratic Nation* are three interrelated political concepts coined by Abdullah Öcalan. *Democratic Confederalism* is the council-political form, based on radical democracy, sustainable ecological, gender-equality and self-defense. It foresees a collaboration between different regional assembly and self-governance structures, the smallest entity being the commune. *Democratic Autonomy* is the political principle of self-determination. It refers to the practices in which people produce the necessary conditions for collaboration with one another. *Democratic Nation* (instead of states) can accommodate ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences. Ideally, *Democratic Nations* organized along the parameters of *Democratic Autonomy* would form *Democratic Confederations*, surpassing ethnic, religious, linguistic, and state boundaries. In practice these concepts are still new and are often conflated or used interchangeably (Jongerden & Akayya 2013, 171; Ayboğa 2018; Guneser 2018; Öcalan 2016).

4. I use the terms Bakur, Rojhelat, Başur, and Rojava to refer to the four parts of Kurdistan. In Kurdish language they refer to north, east, south, and west and are usually used with "Kurdistan" e.g., Bakurê Kurdistanê.

5. I chose to translate *Tevgera Azadiya Jinên Kurdistanê* as Kurdistan Women's Liberation Movement. *Azadî* means both freedom and liberation, but liberation better signifies the process toward freedom the women find themselves in. Similarly, I decided to translate the name of whole movement *(Tevgera Azadiya Kurdistanê)* as the Kurdistan Liberation Movement. Furthermore, terms like the "Middle East" need to be problematized because there are no set boundaries to that imagined and diverse entity. The questions whether countries like Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are part of the Middle East and how analytically fruitful it is to refer to this geography as the Middle East remain open (Bozarslan 2015, 15–17). I therefore refer to the "Kurdish Middle East," which includes Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, whereas many Kurds live in the Balkan countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and the European diaspora.

6. Bêrîvan was active as a "city cadre" in Cizre; organizing and educating women, building women's committees and militias. In January 1989, Turkish police forces surrounded her house, and legend has it that she answered calls to surrender with slogans of resistance and fought to the last bullet in order to free her trapped comrades, before being murdered. Her heroic death, its commemoration a year later, and the brutal state response, were factors that sparked the uprisings *(Serhildan)* that continued and spread across eastern Turkey until 1993, mobilizing large numbers of women to join the guerrilla force (Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 19, 533).

7. Bêrîtan fought during the *Southern War* against an alliance of Turkish government and KDP/PUK allies. While fighting, she was trapped on a mountain cliff by *peşmerga* forces. To escape capture, Bêrîtan jumped off the cliff and became the symbol of the women's army that was initiated in 1993 (ibid., 535).

8. Zîlan died on July 30, 1996, when she detonated a bomb in the middle of a military parade in Dersim (ibid., 541). These three women were all seen as the pinnacle of female steadfastness and devotion to the cause.

9. Apoism is how the movement calls its ideology, the paradigm laid out by their leader Abdullah Öcalan. His ideas are collected in over a hundred books, many of which he wrote since his capture in 1999. His *Democratic Civilization Manifesto*, which consists of five books and was written between 2008–2012, is the core pillar of education both in the mountains and the cities.

10. *Jineolojî* translates to women's science, a form of dominance proposed by Öcalan in 2008, which seeks to challenge male dominance in all aspects of life. Since 2010 the KWLM is increasingly developing *jineolojî* in all parts of Kurdistan and Europe, by offering *jineolojî* education courses, publishing books and magazines on *jineolojî*, and holding conferences on the topic.

11. Zîlan died on July 30, 1996, when she detonated a bomb in the middle of a military parade in Dersim. Her act became a symbol of female strength and determination and Öcalan

named her the modern day Îştar (Mesopotamian deity of war, love and power), linking the power of female revolutionaries to a forgotten heritage of sacred female power. Today, all female recruits are tasked with rediscovering their inner goddess and becoming like Zîlan: fearless, dedicated, and full of love for the people and the struggle (Garzan 2015, 122).

12. The amount of education each person undergoes varies. The basic training lasts three months, then follows another four to six months of consolidation training. Every few years the cadres are called back to do more education.

13. "KJAR calls upon women to join protests in Iran" (ANF 2018).

14. "KJAR proposal for women in Iran and Eastern Kurdistan" (ANF 2018), see also "The Developments in Iran and the Importance of the PJAK Project" (ANF 2018).

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