A rank outsider stumbling into the world of German human rights journalism might be excused for thinking the human rights issue is some sub-department of anthropology. The ethnicity-oriented approach, which for some critical contemporaries amounts to a ‘biologisation’ of human rights, underpins all discussion within Germany of Turkey-related issues, but most of all the so-called Kurdish problem. Remarkable in this connection is the ‘homework’ Ankara has had urged upon it—perhaps, it wishes to have any chance of gaining EU membership. Besides the Cyprus issue, the dispute with Greece over the Aegean Sea, and the economic situation, Turkey is reminded of two other items of ‘homework’ still outstanding: human rights and the ‘Kurdish problem’. Since ‘human rights abuses’ are also treated as part of the ‘Kurdish problem,’ mentioning them separately is intended to intimate that the ‘human rights problem’ relates to the ostensibly ethnic Turks, whereas the ‘Kurdish problem,’ so it seems, is to be construed as a minority problem that Ankara can best solve by granting ethnic group rights. My aim in this present essay is to pass review of this ethnically slanted treatment of human and minority rights in Turkey that so characterises German journalism.

Citing passages from academic journals, I shall not only isolate how opinion-makers in the media argue, but also touch on the strategic solutions advanced by semi-official instances.

After the end of the eighties, the universal—at least in rhetoric—human rights policies mounted by the west against its Cold War adversaries took an ethnic turn. The trend now, in an age of globalisation, is “away from human rights problems to an increased focus on minority rights.”

In recommendation 1201 (1993), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a text for an additional protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. It concerned persons belonging to national minorities. According to Article 1 of this text the expression ‘national minority’ refers to:

“a group of persons in a state who: a) resides on the territory of that state and are citizens thereof; b) maintain longstanding, firm and lasting ties with that state; c) display distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics; d) are sufficiently representative, although smaller in number than the rest of the population of that state or of a region of that state; e) are motivated by a concern to preserve together that which constitutes their common identity, including their culture, their traditions, their religion or their language.”

The Flensburg Federalist Union of European Ethnic Groups, a body that now enjoys adviser status at the Council of Europe, was responsible for this definition. Two things stand out about this
definition. First, it is tailor-made to German realities, thus forestalling the danger of a new minority emerging on German soil. Second, it tacitly impugns the existence of the nation state.

The German position, calling for ethnicity-centric minority rights made binding in international law, points to the existence of several ethno-national and religious minorities in many European states. Accordingly, it is of great significance, so the Germans suggest, for Europe’s future security that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) continues to show concern for minority rights. The OSCE is not only expected to exert itself “to indicate state forms and models that would permit several ethnic groups to live together in a single state (or even multinational state)”—including “rights of self-determination”—but also, in cases where “living together is not possible,” it must provide ways and means whereby various ethnic groups can advance to their own statehood as well as indicate “paths to non-violent secession.”

Although this definition contains, alongside the ethnic component, an array of other components (cultural, religious, linguistic, and the like) the main stress falls on the ethnic component. The ethnic approach to human rights, which appears to be aimed at tribal collective rights, ascribes the causes of conflicts solely to ethnic fault lines; it therefore lays claim to the epithet of ‘liberality,’ since it fails to allow for any collision between today’s civilisations—rather “the conflict [runs] right through the continents and even more the developing countries.” Thus the German human rights strategy, predicated as it is on the dialogue of cultures, would seek to target Samuel Huntington. In defence of its pet thesis of the clash between ethnic groups, it is not slow to invoke the so-called Kurdish conflict in Turkey. Just how this translates into practice will be shown below in terms of the German reception of the ‘Kurdish problem.’

The justifications and moral vindications levelled by German critiques of Turkey’s so-called minority policy (and these are simultaneously intended to prepare the formal legal ground for future plans of action) stress first and foremost the distinctiveness of Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin—after all, before ethnic rights can be claimed, there first has to be an ethnic minority. To demonstrate their minority status, reference is made to their linguistic, cultural and ethnic particularities, all of which mark them off from Turks. In parallel with this thesis, it is maintained that, solely because of this ethnic distinctiveness, they cannot be considered Turkish citizens enjoying full equality under the law. They are at once ethnically distinct and (therefore) persecuted. This yields a scenario of ethnic conflict waged respectively between the Turkish state and the ‘persecuted Kurds’.

To equip this thesis with added plausibility, the Turkish state’s notion of citizenship is represented as Turkish-ethnic, leaving no room for Kurds. To blame here are not only Ankara’s ‘racist’ policies. For such “minority situations only became a problem with the emergence of the idea of the nation state as implying an exact overlap between state territory and the area of settlement of a people, of a nation.” Minority problems arise, according to this theory, whenever the state borders and the land settled by these ethnic groups and nations do not coincide. But such a proposition only follows ineluctably given a blood-based definition of nationality, one wedded to an ethnic myth that is “based on a common language, reconstructed and refined by linguistic scholarship, on a national history distilled out of European history, and on a construct of a common biological origin, all of which can be intensified to the point of racism.” The important thing is that ‘nation’, so construed, is identical with an ‘ethnic collectivity’; in other words, it is a community grounded in language, custom, blood, and political awareness.”
The fact of the matter is that German thinking about ethno-national groups, which is then projected onto Turkish realities, subscribes to a blood-based idea of nationhood. According to one of the definitions listed by FUEV, besides religious, linguistic, and national minorities, there are also minorities that differ from the bulk of the population in biological factors. By racial minority the FUEV means a “group having [its] own language and whose members differ from the population in respect of biological factors.”

Worthy of note is the flexibility permitted to prevail in this matter. For “the question of what, in a concrete case, counts as an ethnic, linguistic, racial, religious minority or group has to be judged from case to case, whereby the concrete demands of the minority must be taken into account.”

That such a blood-based definition of minorities is enough to undermine any nation state committed to a political definition of citizenship, goes without saying. Advocates of the ethnic minority convention—whose own thinking on minorities is intimately tied to blood-based notions of nationhood—charge France, for example, with conservatism, since “it [recognises] no minorities, only citizens” and has “even cemented [this] per decree of the constitutional court.” A German European parliamentarian notes in this connection: “Several EU members fear that such a convention might also motivate minorities inside their borders to push for their own language and more cultural rights.”

Apart from the fact that Germany regards itself as ethnically homogeneous, and can even point to fully integrated minorities in symbolic amounts, it comes as no surprise to find the ethnic-German minority convention playing out as a disintegrating influence on nation states that have a political notion of citizenship (not excepting the former Communist countries of eastern Europe). What is remarkable is that this tribal ethno-nationalism, which in 1943 proved such an irritant to the US Department of State, should consider itself in the vanguard of modernity and the idea of the politically defined nation state as outmoded. Those nation states, however, that do not reckon their citizenry along racial lines, are—in the German philosophy—problem cases. “When peoples are lucky, they part peaceably like the Czech Republic and Slovakia. If they are not so lucky, you get a scenario like Canada, with an unstable coexistence between Quebec and the rest. But the defining reality is Bosnia, Chechnia, Kashmir, Sri Lanka … .”

But, if we agree now to return to the human rights critique of Turkey over the so-called Kurdish problem, we find the following points being urged: first, Turkey is not a homogeneous country; second, Turkey possesses, along with ethnic Turks, an array of ethnic and religious minorities; third, these minorities are not recognised in their separate ethnic or religious distinctiveness and are persecuted; fourth, the Turkish idea of the nation is ethnically and religiously slanted, in that it counts only citizens of Turkish ethnic background, and who are Sunni Muslims to boot, among its citizenry of state—as a result of which it is not able to integrate ethnic and religious minorities.

In order to assign a historical context to this putative problem, the so-called Turkish-Islamic synthesis is traced back to Kemalism, whose persistence is then proclaimed the greatest stumbling-block to a resolution of the crisis. But in the process, not only is the political idea of the nation so central to Kemalism utterly distorted, but a tribalistic idea of an ethno-nation is proposed to replace what is asserted to be an ethno-national-cum-religious idea of citizenship. To clarify this point, let us review the strategic solutions envisaged by Germany’s governing parties.

The most comprehensive strategy for solving the ‘Kurdish problem’ has been advanced, in the form
of a brief, by Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens). Since this party is now part of the
governing coalition, and, in addition the foreign minister has been drawn from its ranks, its thinking
in this matter is not unimportant. The people this ‘research task-force’ obtained its ideas from, who
stood by it in all its deliberations with advice and support, is quite a mixed bunch. The key advisers
behind the brief are members of the German Oriental Institute (Hamburg), the Society for
Endangered Peoples (Göttingen), Amnesty International (Bonn) and Medico International. If, to this,
we add that the adviser pool includes a member of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, plus a member of
the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, then there is no doubt that the brief, in terms of agenda and goals,
enunciates a ideology-transcending consensus widespread within Germany.

There are no surprises in the brief’s opening thesis: “Turkey is not a homogeneous country, but
inhabited by different population groups.” The brief then goes on to talk of ethnic, linguistic, and
religious minorities, whose differences Turkey denies, disputes and suppresses. As to the ‘Kurdish
problem’, this is something played out, it would seem, between the Turkish state and the ‘Kurdish
movements’. In the brief’s historical excursion, Turkey is charged with having “regarded all
nations and ethnic groups on its state territory as non-existent” and with having “designated them
Turks.” “Broad sections of the Kurdish population [have] again regarded armed resistance as
inescapable, since their ethnic identity is being denied”25. Even secularism and reforms to this end
are dismissed as so many “denials of Kurdish identity”26. As for the PKK, this is the response by the
“Kurdish population” to a decision on the part of the “Kemalist elites running the state … to press
for a military solution to the Kurdish problem”27. After thus sketching the run up to the conflict, the
brief goes on to describe, citing various criteria, the “demographic situation of the Kurds in Turkey,”
whereby the population figures given is interestingly precise. Twenty-two provinces are listed as
“traditional areas of settlement by the Kurds in Turkey” that are also inhabited by Turks28. As far as
other regions are concerned, “a Kurd is someone who either speaks Kurdish,” or “upholds Kurdish
traditions,” or practices a “Kurdish way of life,” or “feels part of his or her traditional tribe”29. Thus,
the brief puts the number of Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent living in Turkey as eighteen
million30. It opposes the ruling “Turks” to the “oppressed Kurds,” adding the proviso that both sides
have their various camps. The brief is ready to credit the PKK, which it tacitly regards “as sole
representative of the Kurds,” with “greater flexibility,” a stance, unfortunately, not reciprocated by
“the rigid attitude of the generals” 31. Following this introductory chapter we encounter a four-step
“solution package,” comprising four planks: democratisation32, decentralisation 33, preserving
linguistic identity34 and social reconciliation35. We will examine these one by one.

Democratisation: what the brief primarily has in mind is the abolition of legal articles outlawing
the setting up of parties on ethnic or racial lines. It further demands, citing a study by Bülent Tanör,
the abolition of the National Security Council, the toleration of separatist propaganda, and the
‘re-kurdification’ of place names and the like. Democratisation is not, however, an “adequate base
for solving the Kurdish problem”—hence the three other planks.

Decentralisation: this would help Turkey provide “an effective administration in all parts of the
country”38. The brief proposes “devolving decision-making powers to the lowest possible level,”
which should “apply expressly to pivotal social spaces like school, health care and police”39. Then
too: “The governor should either be replaced by an elected executive at the provincial level or
merely play a go-between role between Ankara and the province.” This decentralisation plank
foresees the same plan for other provinces in Turkey which are inhabited by other “ethnic groups”.
Turkey, the brief further enjoins, should be redivided into approximately 25-30 provinces whereby
“the criteria in such a re-division should be the ethnic, religious, tribal and economic realities”40.

Preserving linguistic identity: the brief calls not only for “legal restrictions and proscriptions to be rescinded on the use of the Kurdish language,” but also for “teaching in one’s native tongue to be introduced for all, ie. not just Kurdish, pupils in Turkey.” What is needed, the brief opines, “is for pupils to be taught in their native tongues, whether Kurdish, Arabic or Aramaic,” with the Turkish language being inculcated “using methods appropriate for the teaching of a foreign language”41.

Social reconciliation: this the brief would keep back for the final stage of conflict resolution. Its authors speak of “a high degree of embitterment and hatred–not just between Kurds and Turks, but also among Kurds”42.

Although the Social Democrats (SPD) have not, as yet, stated their own official position on the ‘Kurdish problem’, we may regard its working paper, sent to us at our request by their head office, as an unofficial SPD brief. Though this 8-page SPD position paper43 makes no mention of who its authors were, it could just as well, to go by its contents, stem from those same ‘Turkey experts’ involved so prominently in piecing together the Greens’ own strategy for solving the ‘Kurdish problem.’

The SPD paper begins by pointing to the Iranian origins of the Kurdish language and laments the “lack of unity shown by Kurds in the Middle East, which has complicated all efforts to found their own state.” According to the SPD paper, “the Kurds were left empty-handed by the Treaty of Lausanne”. Also “In a newly constituted Turkey in which, under Atatürk, earlier Ottoman multiculturalism yielded to strict Turkish nationalism, the Kurds were not accorded minority status.” In addition, Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent were “exposed to multifarious disadvantages extending all the way to open oppression”44. The SPD paper regards the PKK as one conflict partner among others, and speaks of “fateful circumstances for the minorities of Assyrian Christians, Jezids and Alevites”45. The paper admits, however, that the bulk of Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent are fully integrated and identify with their state, but dismisses this as “assimilation” with “far-reaching loss of Kurdish identity.” It stresses, at the same time, that “peaceable Kurds living in western Turkey are not only molested, but discriminated against already”46.

The sudden German interest in the ‘Kurdish problem’ is explained by claiming that “the Kurds on the whole belong to those groups of foreigners long overlooked because of wide-reaching adaptation”47. Like the whole paper, this assertion could well stem from the German Oriental Institute, whose director once made the following statement: “The Kurds are Indo-Europeans (ie. Aryans) and they are, in terms of language and culture, closer to us Germans than the Turks.”48 And when it comes to solving this problem, the SPD paper has a word of advice for Turkey: “The Kurds [should be given] local self-administration and cultural autonomy, as part of their rights of self-determination” and adopt the “autonomy model operating in the free zone of Iraq”49.

CONCLUSION

The universally formulated human rights policies of the Cold War years have given way, in Germany, to a minority critique directed at various countries including Turkey. This tribalistic minority rhetoric, linguistically revamped but otherwise in the best German tradition, is being touted, in the post Cold War phase, as a modern strategy for resolving minority conflicts. The nation, in the philosophy of those responsible for concocting this minority rhetoric, is a collectivity based on bonds
of blood—hence, to project such rhetoric onto a nation state espousing a political definition of citizenship is tantamount to asking it to abandon its central self-understanding. Whether intended or unintended, no less is at stake when ‘strategic solutions’, enounced by governing parties like Germany’s Greens, call for Turkey to be re-divided along ethnic, religious, and tribal lines. Since, on the one hand, Turkey does not operate out of a tribalistic understanding of citizenship and since, on the other, the overwhelming majority of its citizens of Kurdish origin feel at home in the Turkish nation. When Germans peddle their ‘strategic solutions’ to Ankara, what this boils down to is proposing to alleviate alleged ethnic conflicts by installing a blood-based, ethno-national model; a step that would only open the door wide to secession on ethnic and religious grounds.

Whether such ‘strategic solutions’ earmarked for Ankara’s attention actually intend this outcome is a moot point. What is certain, however, is that the elements of racial biology, slumbering on in Germany (not least in Green and SPD heads) but instantly available for extrapolation onto Anatolian realities, are quite alien to Turkish national understandings. “The people of Turkey, who founded the Turkish Republic, is called the Turkish nation.” That was how Kemal Atatürk defined the Turkish nation.50 For him religious homogeneity had no part to play in national formation.51 Other than what the German orientalists and the press are so keen to insinuate, Kemalism attaches no importance to racial elements. The program of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), which Atatürk founded, defines the nation as a social and political entity formed by people bound by language, by cultural and political will.52 At a time when German Fascism had its hands full annihilating a host of racially alien peoples, the founder of the Turkish state knew to stress: “Citizens who consider themselves Kurds, Cherkessians, Lasians, or Pomakians are, as we are convinced, a part of the Turkish nation. We also consider to be Turks our Jewish and Christian citizens who speak the same language and share the same will.”53 In the words of <sмет> <нәңү: “To be a Turk it is enough to want to be one.”54 Tekin Alp, one of Kemalism’s leading interpreters, wrote in 1936: “A racial or religious communality, in the new Turkey’s perspective, has nothing to do with a national community. Belonging to a nation does not necessarily imply belonging to the same race or religion. One becomes a member of the nation by speaking the same language, by having the same culture, by evincing the same political will.”55

That the Turkish national idea has not the slightest common ground with racial thinking, even the Third Reich was compelled to admit. Here, writing in 1941, is Gotthardt Jäschke: “Straddling Asia and Europe as it does, Anatolia is nothing if not a thoroughfare. To the extent wandering tribes settled down, they mingled with the population already present. Right down to the present, streams of ‘returning emigrants’ [muhacir] pour into Turkey. In such a country, all racial research runs into sheer insuperable obstacles. Even by early Ottoman times, genuine Turkish blood was thin indeed. … But Atatürk’s nation state also deliberately put aside all thoughts of racial purity. To cite a maxim of <смет> <нәңү, anyone can be Turkish who wants to, based on language and culture—no matter whether Mongolian, Semitic, or Aryan blood flows in his veins! … Let learned Europeans study skull shapes; let them, exercising all (here particularly called for) due care, come to certain rudimentary findings—Turkish law does not encourage, tribal and racial awareness. As the Ottoman State Constitution of 1876 only recognised ‘Ottomans’ (Article 8), so all citizens of the Turkish Republic, according to the Constitution of 1924 (Article 88), are considered ‘Turks’, irrespective of religion or race.”56

When, therefore, German journalism of the more serious kind—despite what has been rehearsed here—represents the Turkish nation state as wedded to an ideology of “sanctified Turkishness”,57 it is seeking not only to lump the Turkish idea of citizenship together with the traditional blood-based
‘fellow German’, but also to derive therefrom–now comes the paradoxical bit–the moral right to elucidate Turkey on a better alternative, namely a re-division along tribal lines. To bolster their secessionist scenarios, liberal German critics of Turkey and minority theorists alike point to the “linguistic and cultural disparity between Turks and Kurds.”\textsuperscript{58} Since–according to this scenario–culturally and racially distinct peoples live in Turkey side by side, an explosive situation is as good as guaranteed. Nazi writings had laboured to spell out this point: “Whenever different races meet, a psychological state of tension necessarily grows between them, which we will call racial tension. In racial mixing racial tension appears as confrontation, while in those so mixed it appears as inter-nationalisation. In the psychology of nations, both are almost unlimited in scope.”\textsuperscript{59} German thinking on minorities, drawn in substance from blood-and-soil ideology, cannot, it seems, overcome its penchant for racial constructs, whereby social conflicts are traced back to ‘racial tensions’.

And strangest of all is this: those clamouring for the break-up of Turkey along blood-based lines are the same people who denounce the Turkish idea of the nation as racist, on grounds that it refuses to acknowledge ethnic, religious and tribal criteria in defining its citizenry. When an area like human rights, so vital to human well-being and ultimately so intact in its aspiration, becomes distorted and then harnessed to political ends, this is disquieting for it reflects ill on any cultured nation, as even Germany takes itself to be.

1 ‘Journalism’ is here a broad church, taken to include the mass media like television and newspapers but also academic or research journals.


4 Proposal for an additional protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms concerning persons belonging to national minorities; Article 1.

5 Flensburger Föderalistische Union Europäischer Volksgruppen (FUEV)

6 Bindig, op. cit., p. 67.


8 Ibid.


10 Karl Mitteldorfer, ‘Die Autonomierechte der Volksgruppen in Europa–Aufgaben und Inhalte europäischer Regelung’ (‘Rights of Autonomy of Ethno-national Groups in Europe–Tasks and


14 Föderalistische Union Europäischer Volksgruppen (Federal Union of European Ethno-nations).


16 Felix Ermacora, op. cit., p. 45.


19 “The Volk … is an obscure, compelling, natural entity, bound together by blood and common culture. It is entirely different from our notion of ‘people’ … .”, Raymond Murphy, et al., National Socialism. Basic Principles, Their Application by the Nazi Party’s Foreign Organisation, and the Use of Germans Abroad for Nazi Aims, p. 67, Washington 1943.


23 Amke-Dietert Scheuer, Möglichkeiten der Konfliktlösung in der Türkischen Republik. Politisches Konzept einer wissenschaftlichen Arbeitsgruppe (Possible Pathways to Conflict Resolution in Turkey: a Brief Compiled by a Research Taskforce).
24 Ibid., p. 10f.
25 Ibid., p. 21.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 24.
28 Ibid., pp. 26-29.
29 Ibid., p. 29f.
30 Ibid., p. 32.
31 Ibid., p. 39.
32 Ibid., pp. 81-84.
33 Ibid., pp. 85-87.
34 Ibid., pp. 88-90.
35 Ibid., pp. 91-94.
36 Ibid., p. 81.
37 Ibid., pp. 82-83.
38 Ibid., p. 85.
39 Ibid., p. 86.
40 Ibid., p. 86.
41 Ibid., p. 88.
42 Ibid., p. 92.
43 Die verschiedenen Aspekte der Kurden-Problematik (The Various Aspects of the Turkish Problematic), distributed by the SPD fraction in the German parliament, February 1994.
44 Ibid., p.1.
46 Ibid., p. 4.
47 Ibid., p. 5.
48 Udo Steinbach, speaking on SAT-1 in a program about Kurds (20 March 1995).
49 Ibid., p. 6f.

50 Çetinkaya Apatay and Yalçın (Elyaz)yla ve Yazdırdı Fikirleri ile Atatürk (Atatürk in His Thoughts, Both Written and Dictated), p. 6, Istanbul.

51 Ibid., p. 29.

52 Tekin Alp, Kemalizm (Kemalism), p. 301, Istanbul 1936.

53 Ibid., p. 304.

54 Ibid., p. 305.

55 Ibid.


59 Willy Hellpach, Einführung in die Völkerpsychologie (Introduction to the Psychology of Nations), p. 29, Stuttgart 1944.