

THE ARMY THEY MOST FEAR



A DESERTING ARMY

Iraqi deserters massacred by the UN, 1991

CLASS STRUGGLE IN IRAQ



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Part 1: 1987-91

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Reprisals and Resettlement

If an Iraqi soldier is killed in a particular area, the state orders the flattening of a number of houses, and executes 5 or 6 young people in public as a warning.

Many people from Halabja with no relatives in Baghdad or Sulaimania were sent to “empty zones” near the border with Saudi Arabia. Escape from these zones is impossible because you die of thirst before reaching the nearest town. The Iraqi government has started to rebuild Halabja. They intend to bring more people from Arab villages in the South to Halabja. These were people who also fought the state during the war.

Over the next few weeks there were rebellions in 4 or 5 other Kurdish cities. The government closed the mosques and cut off their electricity to stop them being used like they were in Halabja.

The Governor's Visit

The governor of Sulaimania (the nearest big city) came to Halabja and made a speech. He said: "Halabja is one of the cities in Iraq which has made many sacrifices throughout history. President Hussein himself has a special concern for Halabja and the people who spread rumours about Halabja being destroyed are your enemies and enemies of the state."

Someone in the crowd shouted "What did you do with those 200 people, we want them back!" The governor said, "Goodbye, see you next time."

The Build-Up

Shortly before the massacre, deserters took over Sirwan (a town about 20 km from Halabja) using weapons from the clan armies. No Kurdish nationalist organisations were involved but the CP was to some extent. Soon afterwards, the Iraqi Airforce totally destroyed the town with bombs and rockets.

Two weeks before the massacre clan leaders and army officers were secretly moved to Sulaimania. Iraqi soldiers suspected something was up and many gave away their arms to deserters in the streets before fleeing to Sulaimania.

Many poor people were trying to leave for Iran but the Peshmergas sent them back, as before they helped the rich. Shortly before the massacre Halabja was bombed for three days by Iran and then occupied by the Pasdaran. The Peshmergas helped direct the Iranian bombing (perhaps because they wanted to get rid of the Iraqi military) and after the occupation helped the Pasdaran to keep everyone in Halabja. At the same time they moved their own families to Iran.

The Massacre

On 13 March 1988 chemical bombs were dropped on Halabja. No Pasdaran or Peshmergas were killed. The Iranian soldiers had left on the day before or on the morning of the massacre. The Peshmergas continued to surround the city. Some had gas masks.

"We ran over to the basement on the opposite side of the street to take cover. Half an hour later the planes came back from all directions – there must have been at least twenty of them, believe me – and in a few minutes Halabja was in ruins. Shortly afterwards we smelt gas. It was just like the smell of garlic. Some of us ran to get some water and we gave the others wet towels and clothes to put over their faces".

At least three different gases were used: mustard gas, nerve gas and something that made people crazy (they tore off their clothes, laughed for a while and then dropped dead). Around 8000 died immediately.

Even after the massacre the Peshmergas would not let people leave. They looted homes and raped women. After a week or so, many people went blind or insane. Many just gave up the will to live.

After the Massacre: Life in the Refugee Camps in Iran

Many thousands of survivors ended up in refugee camps in Iran where they are not allowed any contact with the Iranian population. The CP still has some support amongst the refugees but when the Peshmergas came to the camps to try to recruit they were chased out with stones.

Camps are run like the military. Everything organised in such a way that people cannot have contact with each other. If you don't stay in your allocated place you run the risk of being locked up without food. Special passes are required for leaving the camps. These are very difficult to get. We are still conscripts. All those born between 1945 and 1970 join the army, the rest go to the reserve army.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the 1991 Gulf War was to reduce the Iraqi working class from a well-paid, rebellious, not particularly hard-working bunch of welfare bums into a desperate, starving, third-world underclass. The cruise missiles that rained on Baghdad from January 17 onwards imposed the most savage IMF austerity plan yet. The war was ended by the mass desertion of the Iraqi troops occupying Kuwait. They didn't just desert, they headed back to Iraq to turn their guns on Saddam's regime. However thousands of the deserters who were obviously unwilling to do any damage to the Allies were killed, while the Iraqi Republican Guard who might have fought the invasion were left largely intact to crush the insurgent proletariat. The media then and now described the post-war revolts as the work of Islamists and Kurdish nationalists. While those reactionary movements were certainly present the uprisings were overwhelmingly proletarian, anti-capitalist ones. The Kurdish nationalists ultimately sided with the Iraqi state against the revolts, handing Arab deserters from the Iraqi army back to the army for execution.

The 2003 war was also ended by the refusal of most of the Iraqi army to fight for 'their' state. This time the refusal to fight extended to the Republican Guard, in what was the first case of mass desertion by professional soldiers in the capitalist era. Unfortunately this time there was no mass proletarian uprising alongside the desertion. This is hardly surprising given the crushing of the 91 uprisings and twelve years of brutal sanctions-led austerity. However there was an upsurge in class struggle in Iraq when the regime fell and the occupation forces imposed order. There was mass looting of government premises so lamented by the media – some of it undoubtedly anti-social such as the looting of hospitals – as well as the squatting of luxury apartments belonging to the Republican Guard. There has also been a wave of strikes as well as a movement of the unemployed since the occupation. Of course as well as the occupying troops proletarians in Iraq face the various nationalist and Islamist resistance groups and a wave of violent crime. We hope to produce "Class struggle in Iraq: Part 2" dealing with the period since the occupation in the near future.

"Ten Days that Shook Iraq" is about the uprisings and was first published as a four page leaflet in the UK in 1991 and was one of the first sources of information in English about the uprisings in Southern Iraq and Kurdistan. It was later published in the now defunct communist magazine *Wildcat*. *Wildcat's* website is at http://www.againstsleepandnightmare.com/wildcat/SUBSPAGE.html#_ftn1

"Class Struggle in Iraq: An Interview with a Veteran" is about the proud history of proletarian revolt in Iraq leading up to the Gulf War. It was first published in *Workers Scud - No Patriot Can Catch Us* (London, June 1991), a collection of articles reflecting on the Gulf War. It is available at the Practical History website, <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/7672>.

"Eyewitness in Halabja" is about the revolts in the city of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan in 87 and 88 and their subsequent defeat due to Saddam's use of poison gas against them. It provides good evidence for why both the US and Saddam were so keen to massacre the proletariat in Iraq. It was first published in *Wildcat*

Some other useful texts on the 1991 uprisings in Iraq can be found at the website of the *Internationalist Communist Group*, www.geocities.com/icgcikg

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TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK IRAQ: INSIDE INFORMATION FROM AN UPRISING

The Gulf war was not ended by the military victory of America and the Allies. It was ended by the mass desertion of thousands of Iraqi soldiers. So overwhelming was the refusal to fight for the Iraqi state on the part of its conscripted army that, contrary to all predictions, not one Allied soldier was killed by hostile fire in the final ground offensive to recapture Kuwait. Indeed the sheer scale of this mutiny is perhaps unprecedented in modern military history.

But these mutinous troops did not simply flee back to Iraq. On their return many of them turned their guns against the Iraqi state, sparking a simultaneous uprising in both Southern Iraq and in Kurdistan to the North. Only the central region of Iraq surrounding Baghdad remained firmly in the state's hands in the weeks following the end of the war.

From the very start the Western media has grossly misrepresented these uprisings. The uprising in the South, centred on Basra, was portrayed as a Shia Muslim revolt. Whereas the insurrection in the North was reported as an exclusively Kurdish Nationalist uprising which demanded little more than an autonomous Kurdish region within Iraq.

The truth is that the uprisings in both the North and South of Iraq were proletarian insurrections.

Basra is one of the most secular areas in the Middle East. Almost no one goes to the mosques in Basra. The radical traditions in this area are not those of Islamic fundamentalism but rather those of Arab Nationalism and Stalinism. The Iraqi Communist Party is the only bourgeois party with any significant influence in this region. The cities of Basra, Nasriah and Hilah have long been known as the region of the Communist Party and have a long history of open rebellion against both religion and the state. The "Iraqi" working class has always been one of the most troublesome in a volatile region.

In the North, there is little sympathy for the Nationalist parties - the KDP and the PUK - and their peshmergas (guerrilla movements) due to the repeated failure of their compromises with the Iraqi state. This is particularly true in the Sulaimania area. The inhabitants of the area have been especially hostile to the Nationalists since the Halabja massacre. Following the chemical attack by the Iraqi airforce against deserters and civilians in the city of Halabja in 1988, the peshmergas initially prevented people from fleeing and then went on to pillage and rape those who survived the massacre. As a result, many villagers have long since refused to feed or shelter nationalist peshmergas. As in the South, the Communist Party and its peshmergas are more popular.

The uprising in the North was not nationalist. In the early stages Ba'athist officials and secret police were executed, police files were destroyed and the prisons stormed. People were openly hostile to the bourgeois policies of the Kurdish Nationalists. In Sulaimania the Nationalist peshmergas were excluded from the city and the exiled leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Jalal Talabani, was prevented from returning to his hometown. When the Kurdish Democratic Party leader, Massoud Barzani, went to Chamchamal, near to Sulaimania, he was attacked and two of his bodyguards were killed. When the Nationalists broadcast the slogan: "Now's the time to kill the Ba'athists!" the people of Sulaimania replied with the slogan: "Now's the time for the Nationalists to loot Porsches!", meaning that the Nationalists were only interested in looting.

A revolutionary group, "Communist Perspective", played a major role in the insurrection. In their publication, "Proletariat", they advocated the setting up of workers' councils. This provoked fear and anger among the Nationalists, as well as the Communist Party and its splinter groups.

Faced with these proletarian uprisings the various bourgeois interests in the region had to suspend hostilities and unite to suppress them. It is well known that the West, led by the USA, have long backed Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. They supported him in the war against Iran.

In supporting Saddam the Western ruling class also recognised that the Ba'athist Party, as a mass

and put them under military discipline.

There was very fierce competition between the clan armies as the leaders vied for more "recruits" and thus more money from the government. This led to many gunfights on the streets, and even in cafes and shops. When people spoke about "war" in Halabja they meant the wars between the clan armies, and between the latter and the deserters, not the war between Iran and Iraq.

b) **The Home Guard.** This was by far the largest army. It was not uniformed and had very few weapons. It was the army that deserters joined purely because there was a law that everyone who had deserted had to have ID saying that they had joined an army. The Home Guard can be seen as a way of legalising desertion in the same way as the "Right to Strike" legalised the strike weapon. Saddam Hussein even spoke about a "Right to Desert".

c) **The Bounty Hunters.** This was a small force which acted with extreme viciousness on behalf of the state. Their main function was to force deserters to join the Home Guard. They were always checking people's ID and had a legal right to kill anyone who didn't have any. They were paid 1000 Dinar for bringing someone to a police station alive, and 500 Dinar for their head. They killed a lot of poor people just to get money. They might take someone's head to a police station claiming that they had killed him at the border and that he was a Pasdar (Iranian Revolutionary Guard). After the massacre most of these scum went to Iran to do the same job for the Iranian state.

There were very close links between the leaders of the clan armies, the bounty hunters, Kurdish nationalist organisations and local businessmen.

The May 87 Uprising

All the talk about stopping the government from destroying Halabja turned to action on 13 May 87 when militants occupied the mosques and used the loudspeakers to call for the organisation of an uprising. Mosques were used because they were the most suitable buildings in which to hold mass meetings. This was ironic because for weeks before the priests had been giving a special talk after each Friday prayer meeting on...the evils of communist subversion! Almost the whole working clan population of Halabja was awake that night discussing and organising.

Many people had weapons; these were mostly those who had been in the clan armies (double deserters!). All ages were involved and women as well as men. Everybody was saying "The soldiers are our brothers it is Saddam who is the enemy!" Iraqi Army troops came to Halabja. They said, more or less, "We've been sent to kill you but we won't do it. But please disperse." The crowd refused to disperse and persuaded most of the soldiers to join the rebellion.

In May the government forces were toppled. The people had taken over and the police and army had to go into hiding, only being able to move around in tanks and armoured vehicles. Helicopters circled overhead, calling for calm and care in the face of the enemies of the nation. Battles were raging near the town, and the Iranians were getting nearer. The town was bombed by Iranian artillery and there were many casualties. Everybody was aware of the danger but were in favour of neither the Iranians nor the Iraqis.

The helicopters were accompanied by tanks. Some of the rebels fired at the tanks, then the helicopter fired rockets into the crowd. People fled. Jordanian troops then invaded the town killing hundreds of people. A few days later 200 people were rounded up, some dragged from hospitals, and buried alive. Five days after the rebellion had started the government totally destroyed the area where it had happened. They also booby-trapped empty houses nearby leading to many more deaths.

Many people fled to Iran in small groups but the Peshmergas (Kurdish nationalist guerrillas) tried to stop them from leaving, saying they would 'liberate' Halabja. This didn't stop the nationalists helping rich people and mullahs to leave, in return for money. Every day helicopters came to tell people to be calm. They said Halabja would not be destroyed.

EYE WITNESS IN HALABJA

On March 13 1988 the city of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan was almost completely destroyed by the Iraqi armed forces using chemical weapons. Around 8000 people were killed at the time and many thousands more died from their injuries over the next few weeks. Halabja was not chosen arbitrarily as the site for such a massacre. It had been a major site of proletarian struggle against the Iran-Iraq war. There was at least one deserter in every house, and sometimes four or five. The following is a summary of translations of letters and articles we have seen, written by comrades living in Halabja before and during the massacre. As the account speaks for itself, we see no need to elaborate.

Social Conditions

During 1987 the Iraqi government destroyed 45 villages around Halabja, using explosives to completely demolish all the houses. The inhabitants poured into Halabja, swelling the population to around 110,000. Almost all the young men in these villages had been deserters from the army. They were not just dropping out of the war but were always discussing ways of doing something against it.

The influx of people led to a severe housing shortage and there were no jobs for most people. Shops were selling virtually nothing apart from maybe rice and bread – fruit, vegetables and meat were far too expensive for most. All the time there was talk amongst the unemployed about what to do about the war. Only the rich wanted to fight for their country. Many people were selling their possessions because of the insecure conditions. This enabled the rich to get richer by buying people's TV sets, fridges, etc. and selling them in other cities.

Political Organisations

The only sizeable bourgeois political organisation taken seriously by the deserters was the Iraqi Communist Party. All the other organisations and parties, in particular the Kurdish nationalists (the largest of which was the Kurdish Democratic Party), were totally discredited because of their open collaboration with the state. Both the KDP and the CP tended to tail end everything the deserters did. The CP, however, had greater credibility because it gave more support to the deserters than anyone else and was the only organisation to say that sooner or later the government would attack Halabja and that people had to prepare for this. The CP needed to wipe out the bad reputation it gained by joining the Ba'athist government in 1974.

There were also dozens of small organisations, many claiming to be communist, with names like "the Marxist Leninist Workers Party", "the Leninist Marxist Group" etc. They produced lots of leaflets and graffiti on walls.

Someone living in Halabja produced a pamphlet about the condition of the deserters which was very critical of the Kurdish nationalists. A week later he was killed. The place was in chaos. The "traitors" and "troublemakers" were all going around legitimately within the structure of pro-government organisations. "H. had a gun, as well as valid documents. Can you believe it?"

Armed Forces

Since the end of 1986/beginning of 1987, three types of army had existed in Halabja in addition to the Iraqi army proper. These were:

a) **Clan Armies.** Around Halabja there had traditionally been five main family/tribal groupings and many more small ones. During the war the feeling of belonging to one clan or another had become much stronger amongst the population. The government set about trying to integrate deserters back into the armed forces of the state by paying clan leaders (big land owners who had become capitalists) 50 000 Dinar per month plus lots of weapons, flash cars etc. to round up deserters from their own clan

based fascist party, was the only force in Iraq capable and ruthless enough to repress the oil producing proletariat.

However, Saddam's ultimate strategy for maintaining social peace in Iraq was for a permanent war drive and militarisation of society. But such a strategy could only lead to further economic ruin and the intensification of class antagonisms. In the spring of 1990 this contradiction was becoming blatant. The Iraqi economy was shattered after eight years of war with Iran. Oil production, the main source of hard currency, was restructured while oil prices were relatively low. The only options for redeeming wartime promises of prosperity in peace were a rise in the price of oil or more war. The former choice was blocked by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Saddam's bold leap to resolve this impasse was to annex Kuwait and its rich oil fields.

This gave America the opportunity to reassert its political hegemony, not only in the Middle East, but also in the world as a whole. With the hope of exorcising the spectre of Vietnam, the Bush regime prepared for all-out war. The Bush administration hoped for a quick and decisive victory that would evict Iraq from Kuwait but at the same time leave the Iraqi regime intact. However, to mobilise the home front for war, Bush had to equate Saddam with Hitler and so became increasingly committed publicly to toppling the Iraqi leader.

With this commitment the American government now sought to impose such a military defeat on Iraq the Ba'athist Party would be obliged to replace Saddam with someone else. Indeed the Bush regime openly invited the ruling circles in Iraq to replace Saddam Hussein with the approach of the ground war in March. However, the mass desertion of Iraqi conscripts and the subsequent uprisings in Iraq robbed the American government of such a convenient victory. Instead they faced the prospect of the uprising turning into a full-scale proletarian revolution, with all the dire consequences this would have for the accumulation of capital in the Middle East.

The last thing the American government wanted was to be drawn into a prolonged military occupation of Iraq in order to suppress the uprisings. It was far more efficient to back the existing state. But there was no time to insist on the removal of Saddam Hussein. They could ill afford the disruption this would cause. Hence, almost overnight, Bush's hostility to the butcher of Baghdad evaporated. The two rival butchers went into partnership.

Their first task was to crush the uprising in the South, which was being swelled by the huge columns of deserters streaming north from Kuwait. Even though these fleeing Iraqi conscripts posed no military threat to Allied troops, or to the objective of "liberating" Kuwait, the war was prolonged long enough for them to be carpet bombed on the road to Basra by the RAF and the USAF. This cold-blooded massacre served no other purpose than to preserve the Iraqi state from mutinous armed deserters.

Following this massacre the Allied ground forces, having swept through southern Iraq to encircle Kuwait, stopped short of Basra and gave free rein to the Republican Guards - the elite troops loyal to the Iraqi regime - to crush the insurgents. All proposals to inflict a decisive defeat on the Republican Guards or to proceed towards Baghdad to topple Saddam were quickly forgotten. In the ceasefire negotiations the Allied forces insisted on the grounding of all fixed wing aircraft but the use of helicopters vital for counter-insurgency was permitted for "administrative purposes". This "concession" proved important once the uprising in the South was put down and the Iraqi state's attention turned to the advancing insurrection in the North.

Whereas the uprising in the Basra region was crushed almost as it began, the Northern uprising had more time to develop. It began in Raniah and spread to Sulaimania and Kut and at its height threatened to spread beyond Kurdistan to the capital. The original aim of the uprising was expressed in the slogan: "We will celebrate our New Year with the Arabs in Baghdad!" The defeat of this rebellion owed as much to the Kurdish Nationalists as to the Western powers and the Iraqi state.

Like all nationalist movements the Kurdish Nationalists defend the interests of the propertied classes against the working class. Most Kurdish Nationalist leaders come from very rich families. For example, Talabani comes from a dynasty originally set up by the British and his parents own luxury

hotels in England. The KDP was set up by rich exiles driven out of Kurdistan by the mass working class uprisings of 1958 when hundreds of landowners and capitalist were strung up. As a result of these disturbing events a meeting of exiled bourgeois in Razaia, Iran, organised nationalist death squads to kill class struggle militants in Iraqi Kurdistan. Later they carried out racist murders of Arabs. During the Iraq-Iran war very few deserters joined the nationalists and the PUK received an amnesty from the Iraqi state in return for repressing deserters.

These Kurdish Nationalists, like the international bourgeoisie, recognised the importance of a strong Iraqi state in order to maintain capital accumulation against a militant working class. So much so, in fact, that they merely demanded that Iraqi Kurdistan be granted the status of an autonomous region within a united Iraq.

In the uprising they did their best to defend the Iraqi state. They actively intervened to prevent the destruction of police files and state property, including military bases. The Nationalists stopped Arab deserters from joining the “Kurdish” uprising, disarmed them, and sent them back to Baghdad to be arrested. They did all they could to prevent the uprising from spreading beyond the “borders” of Kurdistan that was its only hope of success. When the Iraqi state began to turn its attention to the uprising in Kurdistan the Kurdish Nationalists’ radio broadcasts did not encourage or co-ordinate resistance but instead exaggerated the threat posed by the demoralised Iraqi troops still loyal to the government and advised people to flee to the mountains. Which they eventually did. None of this is any surprise if we examine their history.

Although, as we have seen, there was much hostility towards the Kurdish Nationalists, they were able to gain control and bring to a halt the insurrection in Kurdistan because of their organisation and greater material resources. Having been long backed by the West - the KDP by the USA and the PUK by Britain - it was the Kurdish Nationalist parties that were able to control the supply of food and information. This was vital, since after years of deprivation, exacerbated by the war, the search for food was an overriding concern. Many individuals were mainly content with looting food, rather than with maintaining revolutionary organisation and the development of the insurrection. This weakness allowed the Nationalist organisations to step in with their ample supplies of food and well established radio stations.

The War in the Gulf was brought to an end by the refusal of the Iraqi working class to fight and by the subsequent uprisings in Iraq. But such proletarian actions were crushed by the combined efforts of the various international and national bourgeois forces. Once again, nationalism has served as the stumbling block for proletarian insurrection. While it is important to stress that Middle East politics is not dominated by Islamic fundamentalism and Arab Nationalism, as it is usually portrayed in the bourgeois press, but rests on class conflict, it must be said that the immediate prospects for the development of working class struggle in Iraq are now bleak.

The war not only resulted in the defeat of the Iraqi working class but also revealed the state of defeat of the working class in the USA, and, to a lesser degree, Europe. The western anti-war movement never developed into a mass working class opposition to the war. It remained dominated by a pacifist orientation that “opposed” the war in terms of an alternative national interest: “Peace is Patriotic”. While it expressed abhorrence of the Allies’ holocaust it opposed doing anything to stop it that might bring it into confrontation with the state. Instead it concentrated on futile symbolic protest that simply fostered the sense of helplessness in the face of the state’s war machine.

Following the defeat of the insurrection, the Western media’s misrepresentation continued. The proletariat was represented as helpless victims, ripe for patronizing by the charities, grateful for the spectacles of pop stars flogging the Live Aid horse once more. For those that remembered the uprising a “Let It Be... Kurdistan” t-shirt was the obvious answer. Whilst the uprising was defeated we cannot allow its aims and the manner of its defeat to be distorted without challenge, hence this text.

The failure of the working class to recognize its own class interests as distinct from the “national interest” and sabotage the war effort can only serve to deepen the divisions amongst our international

Iraqi generals would deliberately send young, inexperienced soldiers into Kurdish areas, knowing full well they were cannon-fodder for the peshmerga. The next day, a Kurdish village would be destroyed by the regular Iraqi army in revenge. All these tactics helped to divide the proletariat.

But despite everything, nationalism hasn’t managed to create unbridgeable obstacles. Proof of this is the latest uprising. When Iraqis in the south rose up against Saddam after the war, their efforts were supported by northerners. Arab soldiers in the north, voluntarily gave up their arms to the Kurds.

Q: Finally let us talk about the future of the class struggle in Iraq. I think the Americans are still banking on a Romanian scenario, i.e a popular uprising from below followed by a preplanned coup d’ etat from above to oust Saddam. Do you agree?

A : Yes, probably. But the Iraqi situation is more complicated than Romania, and the divisions between Kurds and Arabs, Arab and Turks, and Sunni and Shi’ite muslims could easily lead to a prolonged civil war situation. And the next regime will probably be more religiously orientated. So there are differences with Romania.

The strongest party seems to be the *Al-Dawa* (Shi’ite) which receives backing from Iran. The *Radical Ba’ths* are not very popular and has connections with Syria. The I.C.P hasn’t got the power it once used to have but mustn’t be underestimated. Its base, however, seems to be amongst the elder generations and not the young.

As for the *Patriotic Union of Kurds* (PUK) and the *Democratic Party of Kurdistan* (DPK), they used to have about 5000 armed peshmergas before the recent events and are not as significant a force as the media makes out. The Kurdish towns are being taken not by the political parties but the people. *Akhvan al-muslimin* is the last powerful Sunni organisation being supported by both Egypt and at times US.

All in all it must be said that the future of autonomous proletarian activity in Iraq is not very bright.

guerrilla activity.

I made two visits to Iran during the revolution and brought back new ideas. We became acquainted with Trotsky's critique of Stalin and later on we were introduced to anarchist ideas by comrades from Baghdad. There was a Lebanese journal, called *Darajat al-arabie*, which was critical of both Leninism and Marxism. We didn't always agree with them, but they influenced us greatly.

Q: Did these revolutionaries develop their own independent critique of Leninism or did they borrow it from the west?

A: Unfortunately us 'eastern' communists have always been awe-struck by our 'western' comrades, and looked in their direction for divine inspiration as muslims look at *Kiblah* (Direction towards which muslims turn in praying). Consequently we have always relied on them for an understanding of capitalism.

But gradually we came to realise that the previous parties we were involved in were like cages for our minds, stifling our independence. Consequently we rejected 'Third worldism' and 'Socialist' revolution and understood that the only worthwhile path is a *Communist* revolution (the abolition of wage slavery, money and the state). We began criticising Lenin here and there but a complete critique of Leninism came later.

At this stage we decided to form a new organisation called *Fasileh* (later renamed *Kar*). Our programme was very eclectic. It contained good and also bad things. With the help of some Anarchists we started publishing a magazine in Arabic and Kurdish. The level of class struggle inside Iraq was very low, but the regime's repression was fierce. The state tried very hard to find us but we were careful. *Mokhaberat* (security service) would offer reward for our arrest and finally they raided us.

I got away but a comrade was later arrested, and most probably executed. We decided to send some comrades abroad to learn from the experience of the world proletariat and establish internationalist contacts. But when we got here, we found the level of class struggle was even lower! This coupled with the usual refugee problems led to petty personal quibblings which made us forget the purpose of coming abroad. But now that things are beginning to pick up again, we have once again started to organise ourselves and meet regularly.

Q: The media here is explicitly giving encouragement to Kurdish nationalism. Can you tell us a little about the origins of Kurdish nationalism?

A: In the mid 50's there was no such thing as a Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq. Sometimes at times of crisis, capitalism would financially induce a Kurdish feudal landlord to organise something, that they would name a 'nationalist movement'. In order to give these leaders credibility, the central government would move 'against' them.

At these times, there was no real Kurdish patriotic identity, it had to be artificially fostered. Arabs and Kurds viewed their struggle as one. Kurdish nationalist leaders who shared power with the central government, broke with them once they received support from the west and the Shah. But they lacked a popular base and had to escape to the mountains. They organised a militia but were defeated severely at first because their soldiers were *not* volunteers. Learning from their mistakes, they organised the Peshmerga - a guerrilla outfit - and looked for better weapons. They began to engage in sectarian murder. For example, they would get hold of an Arab driver and execute him for *being* an Arab.

Q: Sounds a bit like Irish nationalists over here?

A: Yes, very similar, Innocent Arab workers and students were murdered, and the government in turn would make capital out of this by publicising 'Kurdish' atrocities, whipping up anti-Kurdish sentiments.

class along national lines. Our rulers will now be that much more confident of conducting murderous wars unopposed elsewhere in the world, a confidence they have lacked since the working class ended the Vietnam war by mutinies, desertion, strikes and riots.

Opposition to the War in Iraq

There has been a long tradition of class struggle in Iraq, particularly since the revolution in 1958. With Saddam's strategy of a permanent war drive to maintain social peace this struggle has often taken the form of mass desertion from the army. During the Iraq-Iran war tens of thousands of soldiers deserted the army. This swelled the mass working class opposition to the war. With the unreliability of the army it became increasingly difficult for the Iraqi state to put down such working class rebellions. It was for this reason that Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against the town of Halabja in 1988.

Following the invasion of Kuwait there were many demonstrations against its continued occupation. Even the ruling Ba'athist Party was obliged to organize such demonstrations under the slogan: "No to Kuwait: We only want Saddam and Iraq!" in order to head off anti-war feeling. With the dramatic rise in the price of necessities - food prices alone rising to twenty times their pre-invasion levels - there was little enthusiasm for war. The common attitude throughout Iraq was one of defeatism.

Despite a 200% pay rise desertion from the army became common. In the city of Sulaimania alone there were an estimated 30,000 deserters. In Kut there were 20,000. So overwhelming was the desertion that it became relatively easy for soldiers to bribe their way out of the army by giving money to their officers. But these working class conscripts did not merely desert, they organised. In Kut thousands marched on the local police station and forced the police to concede an end to the harassment of deserters.

Two days after the beginning of the war anti-war riots broke out in Raniah and later in Sulaimania.

This leaflet was produced by revolutionaries from Iraq and Britain.

TO BE A PATRIOT IS TO BE AN ASSASSIN!



THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN IRAQ: AN INTERVIEW WITH A VETERAN

Q: Can you briefly tell us about the class struggle in Iraq before the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958?

A: In the 1940's and early 1950's the class struggle was mainly situated in the rural areas. Peasant uprisings (eg. in *Aali-azarchi* which lasted about 3 years before being violently suppressed) were a constant headache for the semi-feudal landowners and the state.

Urban struggles intensified with the nine-day strike of Kirkuk oil workers in 1946 (put down with loss of 10 lives). Unemployment and homelessness were rampant. There were thousands of *sarifas* (shacks made of palm branches) around and inside Baghdad.

1956 (Suez Crisis) had a massive impact on Iraq, with demonstrations against the Iraqi regime who were seen as British stooges. The Palestinian issue also helped radicalisation. I still wonder why there wasn't a revolution in 1956! These internal and external events led to the formation of the *Free Officers* (nationalist/Nasserist) who had links with the Iraqi 'Communist' Party (ICP) but not so much with the Ba'ths.

Q: The way I see it there were two main contradictions in the Iraqi society at this time (1946- 58). One between the emerging proletarian movement and capitalism and one, left over from the past, between capitalism and the feudalist landlords. Do you agree?

A: No, I don't agree with this neat and simple text book analysis, because even prior to '58 the feudals owned not only the rural areas but also a huge portion of the urban areas. Hotels, factories, and residential areas belonged to them as well as the village. The majority of peasants' were therefore proletarians, but with a far worse living standard than their urban counterparts.

Q: In 1958 Qasim and the Free Officers seized power and ousted the Monarchy, but some of the gains were recuperated.

A : That's true but the significant thing was the level of class struggle. The Monarch and some of his ministers were killed by those they called prostitutes. For one year or so no one could control the workers. Even the ICP which unfortunately had a massive base within the population (despite its attacks on the working class) could not control the angry proletariat, basically because workers were armed. People took food from the shops without paying for them. For them money was obsolete.

Q: I hear that even the Koran was desecrated by the workers.

A : Yes that's absolutely right. They understood the reactionary nature of Islam. Also in Kirkuk about 90 generals, capitalists and landlords were taken to the road, had a rope put round their necks and dragged around by car until they were killed. ICP denounced the actions and tried to distance themselves from workers' "excesses".

But gradually with land reforms, the rising price of oil and loans from USSR, the government managed to stabilise the situation in the South. Kurdistan was more resistant. Armed peasants groups (eg. in Halabja) were not intimidated by either the state or the ICP and took over the land that the escapee owners had left (mostly fleeing to neighbouring Iran). The absentee landowners would send assassins to Iraq and with the connivance of the military kill a revolutionary and then flee to the safety of Iran.

Q: Why was there so much support for the ICP. and Kurdish nationalists despite their reactionary policies?

A: That is a difficult question. The people were not happy with either group and especially felt let down by the ICP , but there was no real revolutionary alternative so people tended to give the I.C.P. the benefit of the doubt and apologise for their 'shortcomings'. They would say naively: "The Iraqi Communist Party is young and is bound to make mistakes, but soon they would mature like their Russian and Chinese counterparts" (!!) I suppose there just wasn't the necessary consciousness to see these parties for what they are.

In 1963 Qasim was overthrown by the Ba'thists and a period of intense violence resulted in the death of thousands of activists. The Ba'ths were supplied a list of known 'trouble makers' probably by the CIA. During Qasim's last days the people demanded weapons from him for protection against the National Guards, but he refused to arm them. Even then the military were so unpopular that they had to trick the people in order to get into the cities. They put photographs of Qasim at the front of their tanks, the people thought they intended to defend them from the Ba'thists, so they were not opposed, until it was too late.

Q: The Ba'ths first experiment In dictatorship was unsuccessful but they got Into power again In 1968. Can you tell us about Saddam Hussein's personal path towards power?

A: Saddam was a cut throat petty gangster, which is probably why no one took him too seriously at first. His role in the attempted assassination of Qasim was exaggerated later. Gradually he made himself a power base with the help of his *Takriti* tribe and important landlords.

During the 60s there was a critical re-assessment of the ICP policies of United Front with the Iraqi bosses which eventually led to a split by 'Aziz al-Hajj who was influenced by Mao and Che Guevara. His guerrilla actions were unsuccessful and the group was defeated, but his ideas remained very popular. He is now Ba'thist ambassador to France!

Q: Unlike neighbouring Iran where guerrilla activity by leftists never threatened the regime.

A: Yes, in Iraq armed struggle was far more widespread. Assassinations of individual capitalists led to wide-scale armed confrontations, and it must be said these actions were extremely popular amongst the population. But the truth is that our security measures were inadequate. We temporarily controlled the streets because we had guns but when the '68 coup d' etat succeeded, we became very exposed. Even our leaders made horrendous mistakes, and a lot of comrades were arrested and executed.

I don't want to give the impression that the regime only used repression in dealing with the class struggle. No, they used the usual carrot and stick tactics and it worked. Between 1968 and 1974 the state became far more powerful. Again in 1972 the I.C.P. entered into a pact with Ba'ths. It is incredible how completely degenerate these Stalinists are. In 1975 the Algiers Agreement between Saddam and the Shah, meant that both leaders could turn their attention towards their internal problems. The Kurdish uprising collapsed very fast and Saddam became even more powerful.

Q: Can you now talk about your own break first from Stalinism and then from Leninism in general?

A: We knew some comrades in Baghdad, Basra and Kurdistan who were also dissatisfied with the prevalent ideologies. At that time, we thought armed guerrilla struggle was the be all and end all of the revolution, but gradually and under the influence of the Iranian revolution we became very critical of