

# 1991: The South Iraq and Kurdistan uprisings



The history of the uprisings in Southern Iraq and Kurdistan in 1990-91 which involved large numbers of mutinous troops who had deserted during the Kuwait Gulf War.

**Crushed by Saddam Hussein's regime, the article covers the roles of the Allied forces and the Kurdish nationalist parties.**

## **Ten Days that shook Iraq**

The [Gulf War](#) was not ended by the military victory of America and the Allies. It was ended by the [mass desertion and mutiny 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. 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 working class 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 of 1988](#). Following the chemical attack by the Iraqi air force 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 ruling Ba'ath Party 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 home town. 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", apparently 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 workers' uprisings the various capitalist 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-based quasi-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 restricted 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 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 (see mass graves of Shiite rebels, right). 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 capitalist class, 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 which 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 capitalist forces. Once again, nationalism has served as the stumbling block for working class 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 mainstream 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' mass murder 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 patronising 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 recognise 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 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](#).

*Edited by libcom from an article [Ten Days that shook Iraq - inside information from an uprising](#), by [Wildcat \(UK\)](#). Taken from [prole.info](#)*