A History of Soviet-Kurdish Relations: Geopolitics, Ideology, and Instrumentalization

1. Introduction

The Kurdish people, numbering tens of millions, constitute one of the largest stateless nations globally, dispersed across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.[1] Their history is marked by persistent struggles for cultural recognition, political rights, and varying degrees of autonomy or independence. Throughout the 20th century, a pivotal external actor in the complex tapestry of Kurdish political life was the Soviet Union. This report provides an expert-level analysis of the multifaceted and often contradictory relationship between the Kurds and the Soviet Union, from the early encounters under Tsarist Russia through the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

The central argument advanced here is that Soviet policy towards the Kurds, encompassing both its internal Kurdish populations and its engagement with Kurdish movements abroad, was overwhelmingly dictated by pragmatic geopolitical and strategic considerations. While often cloaked in the rhetoric of Marxist-Leninist ideology, anti-imperialism, and national liberation, Soviet actions were fundamentally shaped by the imperatives of expanding influence, countering Western powers, managing regional state-to-state relations, and ensuring internal security. This resulted in a pattern of engagement characterized by fluctuations, inconsistencies, instrumentalization, and ultimately, a prioritization of Soviet state interests over any consistent commitment to Kurdish self-determination.

This analysis will proceed chronologically and thematically. It begins by examining the roots of Russian interest in the Kurds during the Tsarist era and the early development of Russian Kurdology. It then explores the initial Soviet policies under the banner of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), including the creation of "Red Kurdistan" and the flourishing of Kurdish culture, particularly in Soviet Armenia. The report subsequently delves into the stark reversal during the Stalinist period, marked by suspicion, mass deportations, and the "special settler" regime, contrasted with the simultaneous, albeit short-lived, Soviet backing of the Republic of Mahabad in Iran. The core of the report analyzes the complex dynamics of the Cold War, detailing Soviet interactions with Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, and Kurdish groups in Iran, highlighting the strategic calculations underpinning Soviet support and its eventual limitations. The role of ideology versus realpolitik is critically assessed, followed by an examination of the brief revival of Kurdish autonomy aspirations within the USSR during the Perestroika era with the Yekbûn movement. Finally, the report concludes by summarizing the key themes and evaluating the enduring, complex legacy of this historical relationship.

Table 1: Timeline of Key Events in Soviet-Kurdish Relations

Date/Period	Event	Key Snippets
Late 18th/19th C.	Tsarist expansion into Caucasus; Early Russian Kurdology established	[2]
1920s-Early 1930s	Policy of *Korenizatsiia*; Kurdish cultural development, esp. in Armenia SSR	[3]
1923-1929	Establishment and dissolution of Kurdistan Uyezd ("Red Kurdistan") in Azerbaijan SSR	[2]
1937	First wave of deportations of Kurds from Azerbaijan/Armenia to Central Asia	[5]
1944	Second wave of deportations of Kurds from Georgia to Central Asia	[5]
1946	Establishment and collapse of Soviet-backed Republic of Mahabad (Iran)	[10]
1945/47-1958	Mustafa Barzani's exile in the Soviet Union	[13]
1958-1959	Barzani returns to Iraq; Meets Khrushchev, Soviets pledge support for autonomy	[13]
1960s-Early 1970s	Peak Soviet military/financial support for KDP in Iraq (fluctuating)	[13]
1970	Soviet mediation (Primakov) helps achieve Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement	[2]
April 1972	Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship signed; Soviet-KDP relations worsen dramatically	[13]
1975	Second Iraqi-Kurdish War ends; KDP crushed by Iraqi forces using Soviet weapons	[13]
Late 1970s onwards	Significant Soviet support (often via Syria) for the newly formed PKK against Turkey	[2]
Late 1979 onwards	Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; Subsequent political withdrawal/reduced profile in	[13]

	Middle East	
1989	Formation of Yekbûn organization by Soviet Kurds seeking restoration of autonomy	[3]
1991	Collapse of the Soviet Union; End of efforts to restore Kurdish autonomy within USSR	[3]

2. Early Encounters: Tsarist Russia and the Kurds (Late 19th Century - 1917)

The formal relationship between the Russian state and the Kurdish people predates the Soviet era, originating in the expansionist policies of the Tsarist Empire. As Russia pushed southward into the Caucasus during the 19th century, annexing territories that correspond to modern-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, it incorporated significant Kurdish populations residing in these areas.[3] Wars against the Ottoman and Persian Empires further brought Russia into contact with Kurdish communities straddling these imperial borders.[3] By the time of the 1897 Russian census, the Kurdish population within the empire numbered nearly 100,000 people.[2]

From the outset, Russian interest in the Kurds was heavily influenced by strategic calculations. Tsarist authorities viewed the Kurds as a potential instrument in their geopolitical rivalries with Istanbul and Tehran, seeking their neutrality or support in conflicts and leveraging their presence for expansionist ambitions.[2] This strategic utility was a primary driver of early engagement.

Simultaneously, however, this period witnessed the emergence of Russian Kurdology – the academic study of Kurdish language, history, and culture. St. Petersburg became an early center for these studies, with the Asian Affairs Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs focusing on relations with Kurds both inside and outside the empire from as early as 1797.[2] Russian diplomats, through their direct interactions, played a crucial role in collecting and preserving valuable Kurdish manuscripts, documenting folklore, and mastering the Kurdish language.[4] Figures like Auguste Jaba, who published the first Kurdish-French dictionary in 1879, and the renowned Orientalist Vladimir Minorsky, exemplify this scholarly tradition.[4] This academic interest sometimes stemmed from a genuine intellectual curiosity and even empathy, contributing significantly to the preservation of Kurdish cultural heritage, much of which found a home in Russian libraries and archives.[4] Some Kurds within the empire reportedly viewed Russia with loyalty, particularly during World War I when Russian advances were seen by some as liberation from Ottoman rule.[4]

This early history reveals a foundational duality in the Russian approach to the Kurds. On one hand, there was a clear pattern of viewing Kurdish populations primarily through the lens of strategic utility, valuing them as pawns in the great power games of the region. On the other hand, a simultaneous, genuine academic interest led to significant efforts in studying and

preserving Kurdish culture. This inherent ambivalence—the coexistence of political instrumentalization and cultural appreciation—established a complex precedent that foreshadowed the often contradictory nature of Soviet policies in the decades that followed. The seeds of treating the Kurds as both a strategic asset and an object of cultural interest were sown long before the Bolshevik Revolution.

3. Revolution, Korenizatsiia, and Red Kurdistan (1917-1930s)

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 ushered in a new era for the peoples of the former Russian Empire, including the Kurds. Initially, the Soviet government adopted the policy of *korenizatsiia* ("indigenization"), which aimed to foster the development of non-Russian nationalities within a socialist framework.[5] This policy represented a deliberate break from Tsarist assimilationism and was intended to solidify Soviet power by gaining the loyalty of minority groups. For the Kurds, *korenizatsiia* translated into tangible support for their cultural and educational institutions, particularly during the 1920s and early 1930s.[5]

The implementation and impact of *korenizatsiia* were most pronounced in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Yerevan emerged as a major center for Soviet Kurdology, building upon the foundations laid in the Tsarist era.[5] By 1921, Armenia hosted five Kurdish language schools.[5] Scholars developed a new Latin-based Kurdish alphabet (the Şemo-Marogulov alphabet, 1928-29), compiled textbooks, collected folklore, established Kurdish-language newspapers (like *Riya Teze*), and initiated radio broadcasts in Kurdish from Yerevan, which reached audiences far beyond Soviet borders.[3] Kurdish intellectuals like Erebê Şemo and academics like Kanat Kurdoyev played significant roles in these cultural endeavors.[3] This period marked a significant flourishing of Kurdish cultural life under Soviet patronage, particularly in Armenia.

In neighboring Azerbaijan SSR, the situation was more complex. Between 1923 and 1929, an administrative unit known as the Kurdistan Uyezd (district), often referred to as "Red Kurdistan" (*Kürdistana Sor*), existed in the area between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, centered around Lachin.[2] According to the 1926 census, this district had a population of over 51,000, with Kurds comprising roughly 73% and Azeris (then categorized as Turks) about 26%.[7] However, unlike autonomous regions established for other nationalities, the Kurdistan Uyezd was primarily a geographical and administrative designation, not a formal national autonomy.[5] Its creation may have been influenced by Azerbaijani leadership seeking a buffer against Armenia and an alliance with local Kurds.[3] The Uyezd was abolished in 1929 as part of broader Soviet administrative reforms.[3] Furthermore, the development of Kurdish-language education and cultural institutions in Azerbaijan appears to have been far more limited and started later than in Armenia, despite the Uyezd's existence.[5]

The disparity in the application of *korenizatsiia* between Armenia and Azerbaijan suggests that central Soviet policy was mediated by local factors. The Armenian SSR provided a more conducive environment for Kurdish cultural development, possibly due to different attitudes of

the respective republic leaderships towards their Kurdish minorities [9] or perhaps the concentration of Yezidi Kurds in Armenia, who may have been seen as more distinct or receptive to Soviet initiatives initially.[6] This unevenness demonstrates that the benefits of early Soviet nationality policy were not uniformly distributed among the Kurdish population. Moreover, even the period of cultural promotion was underpinned by broader Soviet objectives. The fostering of Kurdish literacy, media, and institutions served not only to integrate the Kurds into the Soviet system but also aligned with the early Bolshevik goal of "revolutionising the East".[6] By developing Kurdish national consciousness within a socialist framework and creating cultural infrastructure, Moscow likely hoped to exert influence on Kurdish populations beyond its borders in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Thus, the support offered during the *korenizatsiia* era, while genuinely beneficial in cultural terms, was also intrinsically linked to the strategic goals of consolidating internal control and projecting Soviet power externally. It was an early example of how Kurdish culture could be instrumentalized for Soviet state purposes.

4. Stalinism, War, and Shifting Fortunes (Mid-1930s - 1953)

The relatively favorable conditions for Soviet Kurds experienced under *korenizatsiia* underwent a dramatic and brutal reversal beginning in the mid-1930s, coinciding with Stalin's consolidation of power and the onset of the Great Terror. Like many other diaspora minorities within the USSR, Kurds increasingly fell under suspicion.[5] Their transnational ethnic ties to communities in Turkey and Iran, states viewed with hostility or suspicion by Moscow, rendered them "unreliable elements" in the eyes of the regime.[5] The suppression of Comintern activities and the pervasive paranoia of the era further fueled distrust.[5] Consequently, many Kurdish cultural institutions established earlier were liquidated, and numerous Kurdish communists and intellectuals faced persecution and arrest.[5]

This shift culminated in waves of forced deportations. In 1937, thousands of Kurds, alongside other groups, were forcibly resettled from the border regions of Armenia and Azerbaijan to Kazakhstan and Central Asia.[5] NKVD reports indicate over 3,100 Kurds were deported in this wave, accused of vague crimes like "counterrevolution," "contraband," or "banditry".[5] A second, larger deportation occurred in November 1944, targeting Kurds residing in Georgia near the Turkish border. Approximately 8,700 Kurds were deported alongside Meskhetian Turks and Hemshins, again justified by perceived wartime unreliability and links to Turkey.[3]

The deported Kurds were subjected to the NKVD's "special settlement" regime, effectively becoming second-class citizens under direct police surveillance.[5] Their freedom of movement was severely restricted, confining them to designated areas in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Access to education and employment was limited, and they endured harsh material deprivations that resulted in significant loss of life.[5] This status, codified in 1945 and later declared permanent for deported nationalities in 1948 (though lifted for Kurds in April 1956), left a deep scar on the affected communities.[5] Even after the restrictions were formally

removed, the deported Kurds were generally prohibited from returning to their original homes in the Caucasus for decades.[5]

Paradoxically, amidst this internal repression, the Soviet Union briefly engaged in supporting Kurdish aspirations abroad. In 1946, during the post-World War II Iran crisis and while Soviet troops occupied northwestern Iran, Moscow facilitated the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad, a short-lived Kurdish state.[6] Led by President Qazi Muhammad, a respected religious and political figure [10], and with Iraqi Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani serving as its Minister of Defense and commander of its army [10], the republic represented a significant moment in modern Kurdish history. It established Kurdish as the official language, promoted education, and became a symbol of Kurdish self-determination.[10] However, Soviet support proved ephemeral. Under pressure from the United States and the Iranian government, Soviet forces withdrew from Iran in late 1946.[10] Deprived of its external protector, the Republic of Mahabad quickly collapsed, overrun by Iranian forces in December 1946. Qazi Muhammad and other leaders were executed in March 1947.[10]

The Mahabad episode had profound consequences. For Mustafa Barzani and his followers, who had fought for the republic, its demise led them to seek refuge across the border in the Soviet Union, beginning Barzani's long exile in 1947.[12] They were initially interned in Azerbaijan before being resettled, under often difficult conditions, in Uzbekistan.[15] More broadly, the swift Soviet abandonment of Mahabad served as a stark and early lesson for the Kurds regarding the instrumental nature of great power patronage. The experience fostered a lasting sense of distrust, demonstrating that Soviet support was contingent on Moscow's broader geopolitical interests and could be withdrawn when those interests shifted, regardless of the consequences for the Kurds themselves.[26]

The Stalinist era thus encapsulates the profound contradictions inherent in Soviet policy towards the Kurds. While remnants of cultural support persisted, particularly in Armenia, the dominant trend for significant segments of the Soviet Kurdish population was one of suspicion, repression, and brutal deportation driven by perceived security threats. Simultaneously, the brief, calculated support and subsequent abandonment of the Mahabad Republic highlighted the primacy of Soviet strategic interests over Kurdish national aspirations on the international stage. This period laid bare the harsh realities of Soviet realpolitik, where ideological pronouncements of national liberation could be readily sacrificed for perceived state security or geopolitical advantage.

5. The Cold War Chessboard: Soviet Engagement with Kurdish Movements Abroad (1953-1980s)

The death of Stalin in 1953 and the subsequent Thaw under Khrushchev marked a shift in Soviet domestic and foreign policy, including renewed, albeit complex and often contradictory, engagement with Kurdish nationalist movements operating outside the USSR's borders. Driven primarily by Cold War rivalries and the desire to counter Western influence in the Middle East, Moscow selectively supported Kurdish groups in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, viewing them as potential levers against pro-Western regimes or as tools to bolster Soviet allies.

5.1 Mustafa Barzani, the KDP, and the Iraqi Kurds

Mustafa Barzani's long exile provided the Soviet Union with a unique asset. After Stalin's death, Barzani's situation improved significantly. He was moved from Uzbekistan to Moscow in 1953, met with high-level Soviet leaders including Georgy Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev, and was enrolled in the prestigious Higher Party School of the CPSU Central Committee.[15] While this enrollment conferred status, archival evidence confirms he did not graduate or receive extensive formal education there, contrary to some myths.[16] Similarly, the persistent myth of Barzani being appointed a Soviet general is unfounded, though he did acquire and pose for a photo in a general's uniform.[16] Throughout his exile, Barzani and his followers received military and political training, and Barzani himself established close ties with the Soviet military and intelligence apparatus (KGB), leading to American suspicions that he was a Soviet agent.[12] Despite this lengthy sojourn and Soviet hospitality, Barzani remained focused on his nationalist goals and eventual return to Kurdistan.[16]

The 1958 revolution in Iraq, which overthrew the pro-Western monarchy, created an opportunity for Barzani's return. Encouraged by the new Iraqi regime under Abd al-Karim Qasim and facilitated by the Soviets, Barzani returned to Iraq in late 1958.[13] A year later, he traveled back to Moscow for talks with First Secretary Khrushchev, who reportedly pledged Soviet military and financial support for Kurdish autonomy within Iraq.[13] The Soviets had also encouraged the formation of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) back in 1946, which Barzani led.[15] Following his return from Moscow, Barzani consolidated his power in Iraqi Kurdistan, and KDP forces grew significantly.[13]

However, the Soviet-KDP relationship quickly became entangled in the complex web of Iraqi politics and Cold War maneuvering. As Qasim's regime tilted towards the Soviet bloc, Moscow had to balance its support for the Kurds against its desire to maintain influence in Baghdad and prevent Iraq from shifting towards the United States.[13] Subsequent Ba'athist coups further complicated the situation. Soviet support for the KDP during the 1960s and early 1970s was therefore often ambiguous and fluctuated based on the prevailing political climate in Baghdad and Moscow's broader strategic interests.[13] A declassified CIA assessment from 1960 noted Kurdish distrust stemming from the Mahabad experience and speculated that while Soviet support could unify Kurdish factions, the external control might become intolerable to nationalist leaders.[26]

A high point in Soviet involvement came with the mediation of the March 1970 Autonomy Agreement between the KDP and the Iraqi government. Yevgeny Primakov, a Soviet journalist and intelligence officer who later became Prime Minister of Russia, played a crucial role as a trusted intermediary, holding extensive discussions with both Barzani (with whom he developed a personal rapport) and Iraqi leaders, including Saddam Hussein.[12] The resulting agreement granted significant concessions to the Kurds, including recognition of Kurdish nationality, language rights, and promises of self-rule, marking a landmark achievement in the Kurdish struggle.[2]

This positive trajectory was short-lived. The signing of the Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship

and Cooperation in April 1972 signaled a decisive shift in Moscow's priorities.[13] Seeking to solidify its strategic alliance with Baghdad, the Soviet Union drastically curtailed its support for the KDP. Public mentions of the Kurds ceased in Soviet media, replaced by mutual smear campaigns between Kurdish and Soviet outlets.[13] Moscow intensified pressure on Barzani to join the Iraqi government's National Front, a move he resisted.[30] Facing increasing Soviet and Iraqi pressure, Barzani turned to the West, particularly the United States and Iran (then under the Shah), requesting financial and military assistance to counter what he perceived as Soviet expansionism.[30]

The ultimate tragedy unfolded during the Second Iraqi-Kurdish War (1974-1975). The KDP's Peshmerga forces, despite their numbers, were severely outgunned by the Iraqi army, which had been massively re-equipped with Soviet tanks, artillery, and aircraft.[18] The Kurdish uprising was brutally crushed in 1975, largely with Soviet weaponry wielded by Baghdad.[13] While some sources, like the Mitrokhin archive, suggest covert Soviet aid to Kurdish elements continued even after this defeat into the early 1980s [13], the open alignment with Baghdad was clear. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 further diminished Moscow's political standing and engagement in the broader Middle East due to regional backlash.[13]

The saga of Barzani and the KDP exemplifies the inherent paradoxes of the Soviet-Kurdish relationship. Barzani's personal history was deeply intertwined with the USSR, and he genuinely believed Soviet support was essential.[13] Yet, despite this connection and shared opposition to Western influence at various points, fundamental ideological differences persisted (Barzani's nationalism versus Soviet communism).[13] Ultimately, the strategic value of the state-to-state relationship with Iraq outweighed any commitment to Barzani or the Kurdish cause, demonstrating the limits of Soviet patronage when core geopolitical interests were at stake.

5.2 The PKK and the Turkish Kurds

The emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey in the late 1970s presented the Soviet Union with another opportunity to exert influence against a key NATO member. The PKK's original ideology, a fusion of Kurdish nationalism with revolutionary Marxism-Leninism [19], resonated with Soviet anti-imperialist narratives and provided a common ground based on opposition to the West and the Turkish state. PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan reportedly held Lenin and Stalin in high regard, using their works for ideological indoctrination [20], and emphasized the importance of ideology for the movement.[34]

Soviet support for the PKK, which began in the 1980s, was significant but often indirect, primarily channeled through regional proxies.[19] Hafez al-Assad's Syria, which had its own grievances with Turkey, became the main conduit, hosting Öcalan and the PKK headquarters in Damascus and allowing the establishment of training camps in Syrian territory and the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.[2] Reports indicate that instructors in these camps included personnel from the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries like Bulgaria and Cuba.[35]

Beyond material and training support facilitated by proxies, the Soviet Union also offered

direct political backing. Moscow consistently refused to designate the PKK as a terrorist organization, a stance maintained by post-Soviet Russia as well.[19] Public statements often expressed sympathy for the Kurdish cause in Turkey.[19] This political relationship continued even after the collapse of the USSR, evidenced by the PKK holding its 3rd Congress in Moscow in 1996.[19] Abdullah Öcalan himself sought refuge, albeit briefly and unsuccessfully, in Russia after being forced out of Syria in 1998.[20] While the available sources detail the existence of Soviet support, they do not provide specific figures regarding financial grants or subsidies provided directly by Moscow to the PKK.[35]

5.3 Kurds in Iran and Syria (Soviet Era)

Soviet engagement with Iranian Kurds centered primarily around the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI). The most prominent instance was the backing of the Mahabad Republic in 1946.[10] Even after Mahabad's fall, the Soviet Union provided varying degrees of support to the KDPI and other leftist Kurdish groups like Komala in their struggles against the Shah's regime and, later, the Islamic Republic.[11] This support often aligned with periods of tension between Moscow and Tehran or coincided with support from other regional actors like Iraq (during the Iran-Iraq War).[11] However, Soviet policy towards Iran remained complex, balancing support for Kurdish groups with the need to maintain state-to-state relations with the central government in Tehran.

Direct Soviet engagement with *Syrian* Kurdish groups *during the Soviet era* appears limited based on the provided materials.[5] While Syria served as a crucial base and proxy for Soviet support *to the PKK* targeting Turkey [2], there is little evidence presented here of Moscow cultivating distinct Syrian Kurdish organizations as independent assets during the Cold War itself. Post-Soviet Russia later engaged more directly with Syrian Kurdish entities like the PYD, particularly after the start of the Syrian Civil War [2], but this falls outside the primary timeframe of Soviet policy.

The pattern of Soviet engagement across Iraq, Turkey, and Iran reveals a consistent strategic logic. Support was most forthcoming for Kurdish groups operating against states firmly aligned with the West (Turkey, Iran under the Shah, Iraq before 1958). When these states shifted towards neutrality or alignment with Moscow (Iraq after 1958, and particularly after 1972), support for Kurdish movements within those states became ambivalent, contradictory, or was withdrawn altogether in favor of the state relationship. This underscores the instrumental nature of Soviet policy, where Kurdish aspirations were subordinated to the larger geopolitical contest of the Cold War.

Table 2: Comparative Overview of Soviet Support for Kurdish Groups (Cold War Era)

Kurdish Group/Region	Key Period(s) of Soviet Engagement	Type of Support Provided	Key Soviet Motivations	Major Contradictions/Limitations
Internal USSR Kurds	1920s-early 30s; Post-1956	Cultural (esp. Armenia: language,	*Korenizatsiia*, Internal control, Integration into	Stark contrast with 1937/1944 deportations &

		education, media), Administrative (Red Kurdistan), Limited political rehabilitation post-Stalin	Soviet system, Potential external influence	"special settler" regime; Uneven application (Armenia vs. Azerbaijan); Red Kurdistan dissolved; No national autonomy granted; Return forbidden.
KDP (Iraq)	1946 (formation); 1958-1972 (peak); Lingering covert aid post-1975	Political (recognition, mediation), Military (training, arms - fluctuating), Financial (pledged/provided - fluctuating), Diplomatic (Barzani exile, meetings)	Counter Western influence (pre-1958), Regional leverage, Proxy against rivals, Maintain Iraqi ties	Support fluctuated based on Baghdad's alignment; Ideological differences (nationalism); Prioritized Iraqi state ties post-1972 treaty; Soviet arms used to crush Kurds (1975).
KDPI (Iran)	1946 (Mahabad); Sporadic later support	Political (Mahabad recognition), Military (Mahabad support; later periods unclear extent), Diplomatic (hosting leaders)	Counter Western influence (Shah's era), Destabilize rival, Regional leverage	Abandonment of Mahabad (1946); Balanced against state relations with Tehran; Support levels often unclear/covert.
PKK (Turkey)	Late 1970s onwards	Political (non-designation as terrorist, public sympathy), Military (training, arms - often via proxies), Logistical (safe haven via Syria), Diplomatic	Counter NATO member Turkey, Anti-imperialist ideology, Regional leverage, Proxy warfare	Primarily indirect support via Syria; Limited direct financial data; Post-Soviet continuation suggests pragmatic interests persisted beyond ideology.

6. Ideology vs. Realpolitik: Deconstructing Soviet Motivations

Throughout its decades-long engagement with the Kurds, the Soviet Union consistently framed its actions within the prevailing ideological narratives of Marxism-Leninism, anti-imperialism, and the support for national liberation movements.[6] This rhetoric aligned with the broader Soviet foreign policy project of challenging Western dominance and cultivating allies and sympathetic movements across the globe, particularly in the post-colonial world.[24] The establishment of Red Kurdistan, the initial support for Mahabad, the backing of Barzani against the Iraqi monarchy, and the later aid to the Marxist-oriented PKK were all presented, to varying degrees, through this ideological lens.

However, a closer examination of the patterns of Soviet behavior reveals that these ideological justifications often served as a convenient veneer for underlying strategic imperatives driven by realpolitik. The primary motivators appear consistently rooted in the desire to advance Soviet geopolitical interests:

1. **Countering Western Influence:** A dominant theme was the effort to undermine American and Western power in the strategically vital Middle East. Supporting Kurdish groups against US allies like Turkey (NATO member), Iran under the Shah, and pre-1958 Iraq fit squarely within this objective.[2]
2. **Securing Regional Allies and Proxies:** The Kurds were often utilized as proxies to exert pressure on regional states or to bolster Soviet allies. Syria's role in facilitating support for the PKK is a prime example.[2] Maintaining a strong relationship with states like Iraq (post-1958) became a higher priority than supporting Kurdish aspirations within those states.[13]
3. **Destabilizing Rivals:** Kurdish insurgencies provided a means to destabilize and preoccupy unfriendly neighboring states, diverting their resources and limiting their capacity to act against Soviet interests.[2]
4. **Border Security and Internal Control:** Policies towards internal Soviet Kurds, especially the deportations, were driven by perceived threats to border security and the desire to control potentially "unreliable" populations.[5]
5. **Economic Interests:** While less emphasized in the sources provided, access to or influence over regional resources, particularly oil (much of which lies in Kurdish areas of Iraq and Iran), likely played a role in Soviet calculations.[24]

The inconsistency of Soviet policy further underscores the primacy of realpolitik. Support waxed and waned dramatically based on shifts in regional alignments, not on the steadfastness of Kurdish ideological commitment or the legitimacy of their national cause. The abandonment of Mahabad [10], the reversal of policy towards the KDP after the 1972 treaty with Iraq [13], and the simultaneous promotion and repression of internal Kurds [5] all point to strategic calculations overriding ideological pronouncements. The Soviets readily supported the nationalist Barzani when it served their interests, despite the ideological dissonance.[13]

From the Kurdish perspective, this created a complex and often fraught relationship. Kurdish leaders like Barzani recognized the potential necessity of Soviet support to achieve their goals, particularly during the Cold War when options for external patronage were limited.[13] However, experiences like Mahabad and the post-1972 betrayal fostered deep-seated distrust and an awareness of being pawns in a larger game.[26] Barzani's eventual appeal for Western aid against Soviet-backed Iraq exemplifies this duality – seeking support where available while remaining wary of manipulation.[30]

The role of Soviet Kurdology and academic experts also fits within this framework. While institutions and scholars produced valuable knowledge about Kurdish history, language, and culture [4], their work was inevitably conducted within the constraints and priorities set by the state. During the Cold War, Kurdology became increasingly politicized, tasked with supporting Soviet foreign policy objectives and analyzing Kurdish movements through a strategic lens.[24] Expertise was thus harnessed to serve state interests, further illustrating the instrumental approach.

Therefore, while ideology provided the language and framework for Soviet engagement with the Kurds, it was ultimately a tool wielded in service of pragmatic geopolitical objectives. The historical record strongly suggests that Soviet actions were driven by calculations of power, influence, and security, with ideological solidarity often proving conditional and easily discarded when strategic interests dictated otherwise.

7. The Late Soviet Era: Perestroika and Yekbûn (1980s-1991)

The final years of the Soviet Union, marked by Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Perestroika (economic restructuring) and Glasnost (openness), witnessed a brief resurgence of political activity and national aspirations among the Kurds residing within the USSR.[3] After decades of relative silence following the Stalinist repressions and the constraints of the special settlement regime (which ended in 1956 but without the right of return for many), the changing political climate allowed Soviet Kurds to voice their concerns and organize more openly.[22]

This culminated in the formation of the socio-political organization Yekbûn ("Unity") in May 1989.[22] Yekbûn brought together Kurdish activists and communities from across various Soviet republics (delegates from nine republics attended the founding meeting) with a shared platform.[22] Its primary objectives were to promote Kurdish cultural autonomy, combat assimilation, establish local Kurdish councils (Soviets) in populated areas, and, most significantly, to campaign for the re-establishment of the Kurdistan Uyezd ("Red Kurdistan") that had been abolished in 1929.[22] Led by figures like Mehmet Babayev, Yekbûn represented a concerted effort by Soviet Kurds to reclaim a measure of national recognition and administrative autonomy within the Soviet system.[22]

Yekbûn actively engaged with the Soviet authorities. The Kurdish question was brought to the agenda of the CPSU Central Committee in September 1989.[22] An international conference titled "USSR Kurds: History and Today's Realities" was convened in Moscow in September

1990, bringing together Soviet Kurds and representatives from diaspora communities.[22] At this conference, Babayev forcefully argued for the necessity of restoring autonomy, warning that without it, Soviet Kurds faced potential extinction as a distinct people within the USSR.[22] Responding to Yekbûn's persistent lobbying, the Soviet government established a special parliamentary commission "On the Problems of the Kurdish People" in November 1990, tasked with examining archival materials and assessing the feasibility and necessity of restoring Kurdish autonomy.[22] By May 1991, Gorbachev's deputy reportedly expressed optimism that a decision on establishing the autonomous region would be made within months.[22]

Despite these promising steps, the movement ultimately failed. Several factors contributed to this outcome. Internal divisions emerged within Yekbûn itself, splitting the movement between "autonomists" who insisted on territorial autonomy as the only solution, and "culturalists" who favored focusing on cultural rights without a specific territory.[22] More critically, the Yekbûn initiative unfolded against the backdrop of the rapidly escalating Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the very region where the restored autonomy was envisioned.[3] This conflict made the creation of a new administrative entity in the contested area politically untenable. Concerns and potential interventions from neighboring Turkey also played a role.[22] Ultimately, the overarching factor was the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself. The central state structures that might have implemented the restoration of autonomy were collapsing, overtaken by the tide of events leading to the USSR's dissolution in December 1991.[3]

The Yekbûn episode represents a poignant "too little, too late" moment in Soviet-Kurdish relations. After decades marked by repression, neglect, or the instrumentalization of Kurdish issues for external purposes, the Soviet state only began to seriously entertain the possibility of restoring a form of national autonomy for its own Kurdish population when the USSR was already in its terminal decline. The political will and institutional capacity to address the historical grievances related to the abolition of Red Kurdistan and the subsequent deportations emerged only when the state itself lacked the stability and authority to implement such a complex undertaking amidst escalating ethnic conflicts and its own impending collapse. The window of opportunity opened by Perestroika closed before the aspirations of Yekbûn could be realized.

8. Conclusion: Legacy and Continuity

The relationship between the Soviet Union and the Kurdish people was a complex, decades-long engagement characterized by profound contradictions and driven primarily by the shifting strategic interests of Moscow. Soviet policy, whether directed towards its internal Kurdish population or external Kurdish movements, consistently prioritized geopolitical advantage, regional power balances, and internal security over any unwavering commitment to Kurdish self-determination or ideological solidarity. The narrative of supporting national liberation often masked a pragmatic, instrumental approach where Kurdish aspirations were alternately fostered, manipulated, repressed, or abandoned based on the calculations of Soviet realpolitik.

The legacy of this relationship is multifaceted and endures in contemporary Kurdish politics

and regional dynamics. Soviet support, particularly during the Cold War, undeniably played a role in sustaining Kurdish nationalist movements like the KDP and PKK, providing crucial military, political, and logistical assistance at various times.[2] Milestones such as the 1970 Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement were achieved with significant Soviet diplomatic involvement.[2] However, the inconsistency and ultimate unreliability of this support, exemplified by the abandonment of Mahabad and the betrayal of the KDP in the 1970s, instilled in Kurdish political consciousness a deep awareness of the conditional nature of great power patronage and the dangers of over-reliance on external actors.[26]

On the cultural front, Soviet policies yielded mixed results. The *korenizatsiia* period, especially in the Armenian SSR, fostered a significant flourishing of Kurdish language, literature, and scholarship, contributing vitally to the preservation and modernization of Kurdish culture.[4] Yerevan Radio's Kurdish broadcasts and the academic work produced in Soviet institutions had a lasting impact.[3] Conversely, the brutal deportations under Stalin inflicted lasting trauma, dispersed communities, and created enduring Kurdish diasporas in Central Asia.[5]

The historical ties forged during the Soviet era, particularly the long relationship with Mustafa Barzani and the KDP, continue to echo in the post-Soviet relationship between Russia and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[2] Russia maintains a degree of sympathy and engagement, particularly in the energy sector, but its policies remain characterized by a degree of ambivalence, balancing Kurdish interests with relations with Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran.[2] Similarly, the legacy of Soviet support for the PKK informs ongoing interactions between Russia and Kurdish groups in Turkey and Syria.[2]

In conclusion, the Soviet Union stands as a significant, powerful, yet ultimately self-interested and unreliable actor in the turbulent currents of modern Kurdish history. Its engagement was marked by strategic opportunism and profound contradictions, leaving behind a complex inheritance of political sustenance, cultural preservation, deep-seated distrust, and unresolved historical grievances that continue to shape the Kurdish quest for recognition and rights in the 21st century.

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