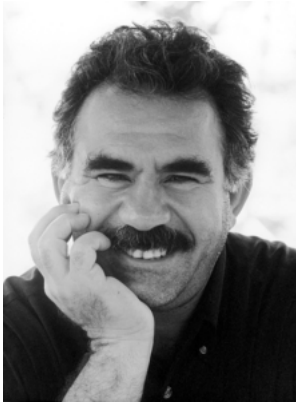


Understanding Öcalan

written by Hank Kennedy | February 7, 2025



An old proverb says that “The Kurds have no friends but the mountains.” There’s a great deal of truth there. The Kurdish people, split between Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, have been used and abused by a murderer’s row of stronger nations, including Turkey and the United States. With the publication of *Freedom Shall Prevail: The Struggle of Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish People* (PM Press, 2024), the Kurds can also count on comics creators Sean Michael Wilson and Keko, a Kurdish artist.

Wilson has worked on many left-leaning comics before, including *Parecomic: The Story of Michael Albert and Participatory Economics*; *Fight the Power! A Visual History of Protest Among the English Speaking Peoples*; and an adaptation of George Orwell’s autobiographical essay “Such, Such Were the Joys.” Wilson has also worked on comics in other genres and his *The Faceless Ghost*, an anthology of Japanese folklore, was nominated for the prestigious Eisner Award. This is Keko’s first book but he shows promise and should have a bright future in the medium.

The two present the biography of Abdullah Öcalan, known to supporters as “Apo” (Kurdish for “uncle”). *Freedom Shall Prevail* would make a good companion to *Their Blood Was Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War On ISIS*, also from PM Press (2022), as the two cover similar topics. Öcalan is considered a terrorist by Turkey and its allies, including the United States. Wilson and Keko present a different side to Apo, currently in solitary confinement in a Turkish island prison. Their Öcalan is a courageous freedom fighter, who bristled at injustice even in childhood. His influence can be seen in Rojava, the Kurdish region in northern Syria whose YPG and YPJ units, the latter composed entirely of women, fought off the Islamic fundamentalists of ISIS.

Freedom Shall Prevail is framed by an interview. A young woman named Louise asks Estella, a veteran of the Kurdish freedom struggle, about the life of Öcalan. Estella obliges, beginning with the leader’s childhood in a rural village in Turkey. The childhood segments actually make for the most difficult reading. Wilson’s writing can be overwrought and it never sounds like dialogue an actual child would say. Sample: “The story of retaliation of Cimo and Miho, who had thrown stones at me, became as important to me as the first uprising against the tyrannical state.” It reads like a Stalinist’s retelling of Lenin’s childhood, where every incident serves some didactic purpose. The art in this section does it no favors. Keko recreates the environment of a Kurdish village in a few lines, but for some reason, he gives his child characters a splotch of white at the crown of their heads. It makes his child characters look like they’re prematurely balding.

Things pick up once Öcalan leaves his village and moves to the city of Nzip. He never loses his sense of outrage at the injustices he witnesses. Civil servants get fat off bribes, Kurdish language and culture are repressed, girls are married off to rich old men. All of this radicalizes him to the point

that he founds a revolutionary movement to overthrow Turkish oppression. The most moving scene comes when Öcalan tries his hand at recruiting people from his old village. One old man holds up a stick. "Young man," he tells Apo, "we are like dry wood. Will you ever make this grow again? We cannot rise again. The dead in the grave are more alive than we are." At this, he drops the stick at Öcalan's feet. It's powerful stuff, ably illustrated by Keko, and shows how determined those early Kurdish freedom fighters were to continue after that reception.

Part I of *Freedom Shall Prevail* focuses on Öcalan's life and struggles before he was imprisoned, Part II showcases how the Kurdish movement changed afterwards. For one, the old Marxist-Leninist (i.e., Stalinist) ideology that had guided Öcalan and the movement was dropped. It was replaced with something new: democratic confederalism. Simply put, this is a form of libertarian anti-capitalism built around bottom-up democracy. The thinking of eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin is a key influence, but not the only one. The discussions around this ideological shift within the movement could have made for interesting reading yet this is mostly glossed over. The movement's new emphasis on women's liberation Jineology (Kurdish for "the science of women and life") is given more attention.

The short length (approximately 160 pages) of *Freedom Shall Prevail* presents problems. Readers are briskly taken on a tour of vast amounts of history, with a plethora of unfamiliar names and dates thrown at them. Anyone not deeply immersed in Turkish and Kurdish history could find themselves lost. There are a few ways to fix this pacing problem. One would be to make the book longer. Barring that, the framing device could be excised as it doesn't add anything (especially since most of Part I is narrated from Öcalan, not Estella's point of view) but takes away space that could have been used for clarification of events or topics.

What makes this lack of depth more frustrating is the lack of a section that should be mandatory for any nonfiction comic: a suggested reading list. A full bibliography would be even better, but I understand that would take up even more page space. As it stands, I have no idea which sources Wilson and Keko are pulling from or where I could go to learn more about Öcalan or the Kurdish freedom movement. This hampers *Freedom Shall Prevail's* ability to work as an introductory text for the topic, thereby undermining the text's ability to educate.

This comic was published with the backing of two groups worthy of support—the Peace in Kurdistan Campaign and the International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan—Peace in Kurdistan"—so it is work in service of a good cause. Keko's work dramatizes the brutality of Turkish oppression in a way only images are capable of. Comics historian Paul Buhle blurbs on the back cover that this is a "fine and revealing" book. Very true, although the writer and artist could have done a better job at pacing out their narrative and giving their audiences resources to educate themselves. Therefore, it only partly succeeds at being a jumpstart for readers interesting in Öcalan and the Kurdish movement.