

Ore & building
materials extraction

Keywords

- > Gold mining
- > Cyanide leaching
- > Risk politics
- > Peasant social movement
- > Turkey

Introduction

For much of the 1990s, the tourist town of Bergama was the epicentre of Turkey's most effective and visible environmental social movement against a multinational mining corporation aiming to establish the first modern gold mine in the country. Bringing relatively prosperous peasants together with a small group of ambitious policy entrepreneurs, the movement marked a turning point in environmental politics in Turkey. Motivated primarily by the environmental and public health risks posed by cyanide leaching, the peasant activists waged an unprecedented campaign that acted as a forceful reminder of the potential of social mobilization to impart lasting change both at the local and national level. While the peasant activists failed at the end to stop the operation of the mine, their campaign sparked a national discussion over the environmental costs of rapid economic growth in Turkey.

Background

Strictly speaking, the gold mine in question is not in the city of Bergama but located 12km west in the village of Ovacık. Despite the strong presence of peasant activists in the movement from surrounding villages, the movement has come to be identified with Bergama, a city with a population of approximately 50000 in the province of İzmir. Home to the ancient Greek settlement of Pergamon, Bergama is dotted with numerous sites of historical significance such as the Acropolis which attract tens of thousands of tourists every year. Some of the most important remnants, notably the Great Altar of Pergamon (also referred to, especially in Turkey, as the Altar of Zeus), were moved to Berlin at the end of the 19th century and are now on display in the Pergamon museum. Beyond tourism, Bergama is surrounded by some of the most fertile lands in the country renowned for high quality agricultural produce.

In many ways, the Bergama Resistance responded to not just to a particular case of mining development but to broad and



Symbol protest: shirtless villagers

Source: NTV

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far-reaching political economic changes that have been implemented in Turkey since the early 1980s. These changes began at the end of Turkey's last military government (1980-83) and brought with them a spate of political, economic and social transformations that can be summarized as 'neoliberalization'. The mining law of 1985 was a clear example: whereas previously extraction of national underground resources could only be carried out by state-owned enterprises, the new law enabled and encouraged the involvement of foreign corporations. The goal was to massively increase foreign direct investment which would help in the structural transformation of the economy from its agrarian base into an export-oriented industrial character.

The Project

At the start of the project, the corporation behind the mine was Normandy Mining from Australia, though the complicated ownership structure also tied together several other partners including La Source from France and Inmet from Canada. As per the requirements of the Mining Law of 1985, Normandy established a company in Turkey in order to be able to operate. Established in 1989, it was named 'Eurogold' – an evocative choice given Turkey's long standing and frustrated ambition to join the European Union – and during the course of the resistance movement, Eurogold became synonymous with the mining operation even though at a later stage the company was renamed. Its plan was to operate for 8 years, extracting 24 tons of gold and 24 tons of silver using a combination of open-pit





One of the symbols for the resistance: Granpa Obélix

Source: NTV

<http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/93991.asp>



Villagers versus Gendarmes

Source: NTV

<http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/134353.asp>



Reconstructed Temple of Trajan at Pergamon – Ancient Greek City (Pergamon Museum)

Source: Wikipedia

<http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pergamon>

and underground mining techniques. Processing was also going to take place on site through cyanide leaching and a tailings pond would be constructed. For its operations, the company acquired land from local peasants, primarily from those based in Ovacık, as well as receiving permits to operate on state-owned land from relevant authorities. In 2002, Normandy was acquired by Newmont from the United States. In 2004, having failed to secure a permanent permit for extraction, Newmont decided to give up on the Ovacık mine and sold it to Frontier Pacific, a 'junior' from Canada. At the end of another year of failed attempts to overcome legal and bureaucratic hurdles, Frontier Pacific too pulled out of Turkey by selling the mine to Koza Gold, a subsidiary of the Koza-Ipek holding corporation from Turkey which used the Ovacık mine to add the mining sector to its large and varied portfolio of operations.

The movement to resist the plans of Eurogold began as a number of urban intellectuals and activists entered into a dialogue with peasants from the villages surrounding the mine. During the heyday of the movement, 17 villages in total came together to speak as one, though later the population of Ovacık largely moved to the side of the mine. By and large, these villages depend on irrigated agriculture for their livelihoods and due to the nature of their crops (particularly but not limited to cotton) also attracted large numbers of seasonal workers both from the immediate area and farther out from Anatolia. Some of the villages were distinguished by a number of social, geographic and historical characteristics. For instance, Ovacık had a large concentration of residents who had migrated from the Turkic communities of the Balkans and were resettled in the region on land that was considered by many to be relatively poor in quality. Several of the most important villages in the movement – for instance, Narlıca and Pınarköy – were predominantly populated by peasants from the Alevis faith – a sect within the Shi'ite tradition that has historically suffered discrimination both during the Ottoman

times and the modern Republic of Turkey. The Alevis are also renowned for their collective social democratic posture that lends itself well to political mobilization.

The peasants' initial response to Eurogold was very much positive, shaped by lucrative land sales and hopes for well-paying jobs resulting from mine development. A number of key events gradually soured this relationship. Explosions at the mine site used for exploration damaged several nearby. A local woman blamed her miscarriage on the explosions. Some peasants complained that their water supply was contaminated by chemicals used in exploratory drilling. Most importantly, however, word spread in the villages that the cyanide leaching process would pose grave and lasting danger if it were to contaminate the local water supply.

While it was not legally required, Eurogold had commissioned an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report that suggested that the proposed operation would conform the highest standards and pose no environmental risks to the surrounding communities. However, the peasants feared that the tailings pond that was built to contain the discharge coming from the processing of the ore would pose a permanent risk since the region is characterized as a major earthquake zone. Indeed, the region was devastated by a strong earthquake in 1939. There were several key actors in Bergama and İzmir who were instrumental in channelling scientific knowledge on cyanide leaching and assisting the creation of a coherent and sustained resistance movement. Chief amongst these was Sefa Taşkın, who was during much of the 1990s the mayor of the city of Bergama. Taşkın had cut his teeth in activism when he launched an international campaign to repatriate the Great Altar back to Bergama. While this campaign failed, it did endow Taşkın with extensive contacts within German civil society and gave him valuable experience in transnational activism which would prove to be useful for the Bergama resistance. Taşkın was also able to build a national



1985	New mining law liberalizes extractives sector
1989	Normandy from Australia establishes <i>Eurogold</i>
1989-1991	Peasants sell their lands, permits are secured
1992-1995	Minor but strongly felt environmental impacts from exploration
1992-1995	Peasants and local activist begin to mobilize
1995-1997	Local and national demonstrations calling for <i>Eurogold</i> to quit
1997	Council of State victory for peasants
1998	TUBITAK report commissioned by Prime Minister
1998-2004	Legal deadlock, mine in experimental production only
2002	Newmont from the US takes over <i>Normandy</i>
2004	Newmont sells the Ovacik mine to <i>Frontier Pacific</i> from Canada
2005	Frontier Pacific sells the mine to <i>Koza</i> from Turkey
2005-today	Mine is operational

Chronology of Major Events

profile as a young, ambitious and patriotic political figure with a bright future. Following the gradual collapse of the Altar campaign, Taşkın's attention then turned to the simmering discontent in the villages surrounding the Eurogold mine and it was not long before he took a leadership role in the movement.

There were a number of others who provided other important skills and assets to assist the peasants. Birsal Lemke, who went on to win the prestigious Right Livelihood Award in 2000 was instrumental in the formation of a coalition of actors especially during the early phases of mobilization. Her extensive connections in Germany helped bring significant support from international networks, for instance from Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN). Senih Özay, a lawyer based in İzmir, and his colleagues from the İzmir Bar Association, provided massively important and sustained legal support to the peasants in both enacting effective acts of civil disobedience that stayed on the right side of the law and launching legal challenges against the operation of the mine. Oktay Konyar, a vocal political activist and real estate broker, was key in the organization of numerous colourful, high-impact demonstrations. Konyar also performed the role of spokesperson for the peasant activists. It is also important to mention the role of Friedhelm Korte, a German professor of ecological chemistry, who played a highly influential role in shaping the movement's focus on cyanide leaching as the key reason for opposing Eurogold.

As the movement became more vocal and its impact reached beyond Bergama, it drew a variety of actors into the conflict. It was able to forge links with a number of NGOs and other emerging campaigns in Turkey, particularly the movement against the proposed Akkuyu nuclear power plant. It also established mutually supportive relationships with other left-leaning and nationalist movements such as the one against the privatization of the Turkish Airlines. The movement's initial legal challenges were mainly against Eurogold or its operational permits. At this stage, the movement was challenging the bureaucratic mechanisms of the Turkish state and to the extent that the state was involved, this was limited to more technical branches of government.

As the legal process matured, however, through various stages of appeals, the Eurogold issue became deeply politicized. During the late 1990s the case travelled up to the The Council of the State, the highest administrative court in the country. At that point, even Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit became involved, supporting the cause of Eurogold at the behest of the Australian Prime Minister John Howard who visited Turkey in 2000. Essentially, by the time it reached its apex, the Bergama Resistance had moved on from being a small peasant movement against locally unwanted land use to a national case which, by highlighting the tension between environment and development in a rapidly developing and globalizing Turkey, involved a vast array of stakeholders.

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A view of the mine (Source: <http://kozaaltin.com.tr/operasyon-ve-projeler/isletme-sahalari>)



A view of the mine

Source:
<http://kozaaltin.com.tr/operasyon-ve-projeler/isletme-sahalari>



A view of the mine

Source:
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Mobilization

The peasants' mobilization was a long process that ebbed and flowed in response to the actions of Eurogold and decisions of the courts. By early 2000s, following the devastating earthquake of 1999 which helped push Turkey into a deep economic recession that made campaigning against foreign direct investment especially difficult, active protests had dwindled down with only the core members of the movement taking part. But, especially between 1995-1998, peasant activists staged numerous high profile demonstrations that attracted much national and international attention.

The activist utilized an impressively varied and creative repertoire of action in their demonstrations. In a particularly memorable episode, they travelled to Istanbul to the picturesque bridge connecting the city's European and Asian sides, chaining themselves on the railings while shouting slogans such as 'No to cyanide leaching'. At a different occasion, the peasants demonstrated outside the building in which the modern Turkish parliament was established. When asked about their decision to hold their protest at that spot rather than the current parliament building, they responded that they were because the 'new' parliament was now serving the interest of the IMF and the World Bank.

Yet another performative event saw tens of men strip down to their underwear and march through the streets of Bergama. They claimed that their desire to rid Bergama of Eurogold was so strong that the act of parading around naked – an act that would in normal circumstances be associated with a loss of dignity – was acceptable.

Not all acts demonstrations were as peaceful or male-dominated. In fact, women played a strong role in the movement, helping in consciousness raising, mobilization and planning of activities. A number of other episodes saw the peasants come in direct tension with the security forces – usually the *jandarma* forces who are responsible for maintaining public order in rural areas – who, especially in 1990s Turkey would not be shy of using blunt force against groups protesting against the state. Two key incidents stand out from this period. In one, more than two thousand peasants – many travelling on their tractors – entered the mine, occupying the site for ten hours. In another episode, another large group blockaded the busy road between Bergama and Dikili. That such demonstrations did not turn violent was largely due to peasant women who formed the front ranks of the demonstrators that came into direct contact with the security forces who would be much more reluctant to beat up (elderly) women activists. Nevertheless,



Villagers protesting with torches
Source: NTV
<http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/134353.asp>



Villagers in the Farm
Photo: M. Arsel

numerous activists were arrested in such demonstrations, some being charged in the State Security Courts (*Devlet Guvenlik Mahkemesi*), notorious for its heavy handed treatment of dissent.

The Bergama Resistance also made extensive use of the courts – both national and international – to prevent the operation of the mine. Two decisions characterize both the unprecedented success the peasant activist had in the courts and the difficulty in translating these decisions into concrete outcomes outside the courtroom. The first case had started in local courts and travelled upwards all the way to Council of State (Danıştay) which had the final say in the matter. In 1997, invoking for the first time Article 56 of the Turkish constitution which states that “Everyone has the right to live in a healthy, balanced environment”, the court ruled in favour of the peasants. The decision stated that the environmental and public health risks of cyanide leaching amounted to a breach of peasants’ constitutional rights. The jubilation of the activists, however, did not last long. Prime Minister Ecevit, in a move clearly designed to find a legal opening to overcome the verdict of the highest administrative court of the nation, instructed The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) to prepare an assessment of the risks of cyanide leaching. TÜBİTAK came back with a report that ruled that cyanide leaching posed “zero risks”. The government argued that the TÜBİTAK report essentially neutralized the decision of the court and gave Eurogold the green light to operate.

This set off another round of legal challenges, which saw the mine operating on a trial basis in fits and starts. Failing to score a decisive legal victory in Turkey, the movement also took its case to the European Court of Human Rights. In its 2004 decision, the court found that the state of Turkey had indeed violated the activists’ procedural rights and awarded EUR 3000 each to the 315 individuals taking part in the lawsuit. However, the ECHR refused to back the activists in their calls to order

Turkey to shut down the mine. The legal battle has continued and there have been occasional but much less visible attempts at holding protest meetings and demonstrations. However, Koza has been far more effective than its multinational counterparts in navigating the vagaries of the Turkish political and economic processes and has started to produce gold at the mine.

Outcome

Putting aside the relatively minor impacts observed at the exploratory phase and the transformation of the local landscape through the establishment of the mine, the worst environmental fears of the activists did not come to pass. Tourism in the region has also not been affected, though whether the mine has helped the region economically – especially the villages surrounding the mine – remains to be seen. The main negative impact has been in the sociocultural domain – after more than a decade of activism, many villages have become highly polarized. Stories of family feuds over the mine are not uncommon and there have been a number of violent incidents. The worst example came in 2002 following the decision of the family of a local religious leader from the Alevi community to support the mining company. The ensuing friction in the village gave way to a gun battle that lasted through the night and claimed the life of one the peasants.

At the national level, the Bergama Resistance sparked up several important and still on-going debates.

Unsurprisingly, the role of mining in contemporary Turkey has been at the heart of these debates with numerous new sites being made available for mining interests. Some of these have been met with relatively strong resistance as it has been in the case of Mount Ida. But many have gone unchallenged and no other attempt at resistance has matched the high profile or popularity of Bergama. A related discussion has focused on the two modifications – in 2004 and 2010 - of the 1985 law on mining which had started

the process of liberalization. While a degree of clarity has been brought to the way in which permits would be granted, one of the main aims of the government seems to have been to prevent the type of obstruction achieved by the Bergama Resistance. Another, more complex, line of discussion has concerned not the role of multinational corporations but transnational activists. Conspiracy theories alleging that the activists in Bergama were being 'used' (knowingly or otherwise) by foreign interests aiming to undermine a rapidly developing Turkey had been simmering even during the early days of the resistance movement. These rumours reached national news when Necati Hablemitoğlu, an academic based in Ankara, published a book arguing that Germany had been using covert operations to prevent the expansion of Turkey's gold production. Such allegations have since been shown to be baseless. However, they have proven to be persistent and the assassination of Hablemitoğlu in 2002 has ensured that conspiracy theorists continue to have ample material to work with.

Outlook

The Bergama Resistance demonstrated the power of effective and highly motivated social action to alter the course of national debates over environment and development. That the peasants mobilized over the risk of environmental damage rather than its actual experience has further shown the political purchase of environmental risk, which is further amplified in the absence of a deliberative planning processes and a democratic scientific culture that responds to genuine environmental fears moulded by broad, historical and sociocultural processes.

Overall, the Bergama Resistance was a turning point for environmental politics in Turkey. It is remembered as the largest and most effective civil society mobilization for environmental protection in Turkey. Moreover, it has influenced national environmental policies, informed and inspired numerous other mobilizations that followed and

popularized environmental politics at the national scale. Conversely, it has fallen short of its ultimate aim of preventing the operation of the gold mine against which the movement developed. Nevertheless, given its impact at the national scale, it can be considered as a success story.

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