

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 Ovacik. 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

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

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 Alevi 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 Alevi 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 channeling 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.

1985	New mining law liberalizes extractives sector
1989	Normandy from Australia establishes Eurogold
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 Eurogold 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 Normandy
2004	Newmont sells the Ovacik mine to Frontier Pacific from Canada
2005	Frontier Pacific sells the mine to Koza from Turkey
2005-today	Mine is operational

Chronology of Major Events

Taşkın was also able to build a national 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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