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Tertele

Date Published: **July 2, 2025**

Summary

The 1937–38 Dersim massacre was not merely a regional military operation, but a systematic policy of violence by the early Turkish Republic targeting ethno-religious identities it had marked as “the other.” From the establishment of the republican regime, policies of demographic engineering, assimilation, and forced displacement laid the historical foundation for the Dersim massacre. The intervention specifically targeting Dersim aimed to eliminate the Alevi-Kurdish identity on both physical and cultural levels.

Historical-Political Background

The foundation of the Republic of Turkey was shaped by the goals of modernization, centralization, and nation-state building. These objectives brought with them a series of radical practices aimed at transforming the multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-faith structure of regions such as Anatolia, Lazistan, and Kurdistan. In this context, the ethnic and religious diversities inherited from the Ottoman Empire’s multi-national system were viewed by the new regime as a “problem,” and the concept of the “acceptable citizen” was constructed primarily around a Turkish, Sunni, and secular identity. Accordingly, non-Muslim populations—especially Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians—were pushed out of the system through measures such as the 1915 Armenian Genocide, the 1923 Turkish-Greek Population Exchange, and the 1942 Wealth Tax. Muslims who were ethnically or confessionally distinct, such as Kurds and Alevis, were targeted by policies of assimilation, forced resettlement, and repression in an attempt to homogenize the population (Bozarslan, 2009).

Within this framework, the Dersim region—home to both Kurdish and Alevi identities and historically distanced from centralized authority—became one of the primary targets of the Republican regime. Due to its geographically isolated terrain, strong tribal structures, and heterodox belief system, Dersim was classified by the state as a region that required “correction.” Following the 1925 Sheikh Said Rebellion, the Eastern Reform Plan (*Şark Islahat Planı*) was drafted, directly targeting this area and others with similar structures. The plan included policies such as the forced

resettlement of Kurds, the prohibition of the Kurdish language, the erasure of Alevism from public life, and the dismantling of local social structures (Bayrak 1993; Yayman 2004). Its central aim was to “eliminate the traces of Kurdishness and Alevism in the eastern provinces” and to incorporate these regions into the “Turkish cultural sphere.” İsmet İnönü’s statement—“Our duty is to make everyone within the Turkish homeland unquestionably Turkish” (Bayrak 1993, 526)—epitomizes the assimilationist ideology at the core of the nation-state project.

Archival records and official reports from the period clearly indicate that military and administrative planning targeting Dersim was systematically prepared and implemented over a span of years. Hamdi Bey’s 1926 report, which stated “Dersim is becoming increasingly Kurdish, ideological, and dangerous. For the Republic, Dersim is a boil. A decisive operation on this boil is a national duty,” was soon followed by a report from Şükrü Kaya. As the Minister of the Interior, Kaya proposed in his 1931 report that new schools be opened in Dersim to “civilize” its people. According to Kaya, education should bring the people of Dersim closer to Turkishness and instill in them the belief that they are ethnically Turkish. This, he argued, could be achieved through schooling.

Further state strategies for the “correction” of Dersim were outlined in assessments by Fevzi Çakmak in the 1930s, the 1935 Tunceli Law (Law No. 2884), and reports by Abidin Özmen, Inspector General in Diyarbakır (Koçgiri 2011; Göktaş 2010). The 1936 report of the Fourth General Inspectorate described the local population as “disobedient, underdeveloped, and in need of civilization,” branding them “wild,” “disloyal to the state,” and in need of “Turkification.” The recommended solutions included military force, compulsory resettlement, and the prohibition of native languages (Beşikçi 1977; Jongerden 2007). [i]

In 1937, under the pretext of suppressing the resistance led by Seyit Rıza, a military campaign was launched that, by 1938, had escalated into a full-scale annihilation operation. The “Manual on Bandit Pursuit Operations, Village Searches, and Weapons Confiscation in the Tunceli Region,” published by the Governorship and Command of Tunceli in 1938 (Elazığ, Turan Printing House), even detailed the methods for burning down homes in its section titled “Bandit Searches in Villages”: “The roofs consist of stone and earth, with only the ceiling beams and tree branches being flammable. These are difficult to burn. However, if a layer of earth is removed from the roof to expose the wood, kindling and brushwood can be burned there to set the structure on fire. The fire is then enlarged by piling wood at the entrance and igniting it.” (Göktaş, 2010)

Following the massacre, on November 1, 1938, Celal Bayar opened the Turkish Parliament by reading the words of Atatürk, who was gravely ill at the time: “The widespread banditry incidents in Tunceli have been consigned to history never to recur.” [ii] On November 20, 1937, Nuri Dersimi, writing in French on behalf of the Dersim tribes, sent a letter to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations (now the United Nations), declaring that what occurred in Dersim was far too brutal to be relegated to history:

“We are compelled, once again, to inform your esteemed Assembly—the highest tribunal of humanity and civilization—that the Turkish government has, for the past fifteen years, pursued a policy of annihilation throughout Kurdistan, and that over the last two years, this policy has been intensified particularly in our region known as Dersim… In its effort to eradicate the Kurdish nation, this government has not refrained from employing any means of death—from forced deportations carried out family by family, group by group, village by village, to artillery, machine gun and aerial bombardments, and even chemical gas attacks.” [iii]

Even Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, one of the prominent ideologues of Turkish-Islamic thought, could not remain indifferent to the scale of brutality. Referring to the events in Dersim as an unprecedented catastrophe in history, he devoted a section titled “Eastern Catastrophe” in his book *Martyrs of the Last Era of Religion* (*Son Devrin Din Mazlumları*) to what had taken place in Dersim: “This catastrophe, which we have broadly outlined like a map and which, in its essence and principle, we have only just begun to grasp, involved the blood and lives of no fewer than 50,000 Muslims.Two innocent children, seeking their fathers and asking to be taken to them, were bayoneted on the orders of the district governor of Hozat and thus ‘sent to their fathers’… A young man who tried to escape the flames, claiming he was a teacher and unaffiliated with the villagers, was shoved back into the fire with a beam while people watched and smoked cigarettes… An entire village population, already shot, was burned alive on bundles of wheat straw… A child, still alive after being removed from its mother’s womb with a sharp instrument, still bears the scar on its heel… Twenty innocents were slaughtered in a stream, and it was no easy task to identify the executioner responsible… And many more horrors, unspeakable horrors!”[iv]

The Impact of Tertele on the Alevi Social World

The 1937–38 massacre that the people of Dersim refer to as Tertele was not merely a military operation to suppress a rebellion, but rather a large-scale annihilation campaign implemented as the result of long-term state planning. The level of brutality reached during the massacre became particularly concrete in certain locations, the

most infamous of which is Kutu Creek (Kutu Deresi). According to eyewitness accounts, large groups composed of women, children, and the elderly were gathered there and mowed down with machine guns; their corpses were then doused in gasoline and set ablaze. Some sources also report that survivors were thrown alive into the fire. This site remains etched in collective memory as one of the most tragic symbols of the massacre for the people of Dersim (Bulut 2010).

Similarly, numerous testimonies speak of civilians being thrown off cliffs in places like Halvori Springs, Laç Creek, and the Danzik Valley, and of people who had taken refuge in caves being burned alive inside. Some children were taken to Ankara like war spoils, adopted by high-level bureaucrats, had their identities changed, and were assimilated (Bayrak 1993; Üngör 2011).

This process also led to the profound dismantling of the Alevi belief system. During the massacre, numerous ocakzade (lineal descendants of sacred lineages), pirs, mürşids, and rehbers—spiritual guides within the tradition—were targeted; sacred sites were destroyed, cem rituals were banned, and cemevis (Alevi houses of worship) were shut down. This constituted both a physical and spiritual form of genocide. In Alevism, both social and spiritual life are structured around these religious leaders and ritual centers; when that structure collapses, the collective identity of the community disintegrates as well (İlkkaracan 2012; Kaya 2009).

Tertele in the Context of Necropolitics

Tertele must be understood not merely as a military operation, but as a deliberate and systematic necropolitical campaign aimed not only at the physical destruction of a people but also at their existential, religious, cultural, and political erasure—reducing them to a state of “othered bare life.” Tertele was not only a historical rupture marked by acts of killing, but also a state project in which death, dehumanization, and the stripping of identity became direct instruments of politics. In this sense, the nature of Tertele can be deeply explained through Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics: the enactment of sovereignty through the power to decide who may live and who must die.[v]

According to Mbembe’s analysis, sovereignty is not limited to the regulation of life; it also entails the right to expose individuals to death. In Dersim, this exercise of sovereign power materialized through the burning of villages, the destruction of sacred sites, the targeting of women and children, and forced deportation policies. The massacre was not simply an act of “rebellion suppression”; it was a regime of killing—extralegal but systematic—in which the state of exception was rendered permanent. This practice of killing surpassed Michel Foucault’s notion of “biopower”

and transformed directly into “necropower”: a structure of rule based not on protecting life, but on deliberately condemning specific communities to death.

The testimonies of survivors vividly expose how this necropower operated. Many Dersimlis, now in their nineties, recount how their mothers or siblings were murdered before their eyes, and how those who took refuge in caves were burned alive. The events at Kutu Creek (Kutu Deresi) represent the apex of this death regime: according to eyewitnesses, hundreds of people were lined up and killed with machine guns, after which their corpses were doused in gasoline and set on fire. Women were stripped to prevent them from fleeing; children were bayoneted in their mothers’ arms; deep caves where people had hidden were set ablaze.

“They were setting up the heavy machine guns. Some ran this way, others ran that way. Screams, cries. Women’s hair got caught on tree branches; their breasts were torn off. Arms were severed from bodies. Heavy machine gun fire. May God never bring back those years. You didn’t see it, and may you never see it.”[vi]

One witness said: “They told us not to make a sound. Because to speak was to cry, and to cry was to be killed.”

Such accounts reveal that necropolitics involves not only physical annihilation but also ontological silencing—the erasure of the very possibility of voice, grief, and memory.

Mourning, Memory, Resistance

Those killed in Dersim were not only individuals—their deaths also targeted memory, ritual, the cem ceremony, the ocak system, language, and belief structures as a whole. As Mbembe suggests, the state’s strategy here can be described as a form of “spatial engineering”: by destroying the physical spaces that harbored mourning, memory, and resistance, the geography of remembrance was deliberately dismantled. In this sense, Tertele was not only an attempt to destroy bodies, but also to obliterate collective identity. Individuals were not only killed—they were stripped of their rights to speak, to mourn, to remember, and to narrate. This echoes Hannah Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism: the deactivation of the human being as a “political” subject.

This imposed silence emerges with deep sorrow in the laments and folktales passed down among exiled Dersimlis. One lament says: “We went back, but not even the stones were left… not even my mother’s grave…” In the aftermath of Tertele, survivors tried to stay alive by hiding their names, languages, and beliefs. Some mothers refrained from teaching their children their own language. The fear that “if

they speak, they will be killed” was passed from one generation to the next. This fear embodies Mbembe’s notion of the “bare life” left completely exposed: a person reduced not to a bearer of rights, but to someone condemned to silence just to survive.

An important point in Mbembe’s analysis is the question of how sovereignty legitimizes its authority to decide between life and death. In the case of Dersim, instruments of this legitimization included the Eastern Reform Plan, the Tunceli Law, emergency governorships, and military directives. These documents described the population as “rebellious,” “wild,” “bandit-like,” and “in need of civilization”—categorizing them as outside the realm of the human, and therefore killable. This directly echoes Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the homo sacer, or “bare life”: a life unprotected by law, whose killing carries no legal consequence. As Mbembe argues, necropolitics involves not only physical killing, but also the seizure of meaning, the right to representation, and the capacity to exist as a subject.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 1937–38 Dersim massacre represents the most brutal stage of a multilayered policy of violence aimed at eradicating ethnic and sectarian difference during the Turkish Republic’s nation-building process. It was not merely a military intervention, but an act of annihilation carried out at ideological, cultural, and demographic levels. This event remains vivid in the memory of Alevi-Kurdish communities and continues to stand as one of the darkest, and still unreckoned with, traumas of the Republican era. To this day, the people of Dersim describe Tertele not only as a massacre, but as an experience of erasure, of being rendered nonexistent, of having no grave. That trauma has transformed into forms of resistance through rituals, sacred chants (nefes), commemorations, and laments. The imposed silence of Tertele is now breaking, louder than ever. Every story told, every name recalled, every lament voiced constitutes a claim to life against the politics of death. In this way, Tertele is not only about remembering the dead—it is also a space where the living reclaim their subjecthood. To remember Tertele is not only to recall the past, but also to confront the costs of sovereignty and consider how it can be questioned anew.

Endnotes

[i] Necmi Günel, Dersim İsyanı (1937), p. 144.
[ii] Nimet Arsan (ed.), Atatürk’ün Söylev ve Demeçleri, p. 406.
[iii] Mehmet Bayrak, Kürdoloji Belgeleri, pp. 177–178.
[iv] Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, Son Devrin Din Mazlumları, pp. 167–171.
[v] Achille Mbembe, “Nekro-Siyaset,” Ayrıntı Dergi,

https://ayrintidergi.com.tr/nekro-siyaset/
[vi] “Kutu Deresi Tanıklığı,” Rûdaw Türkçe,
https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/kurdistan/1511202112

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