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Forced Migration of Alevis

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Summary

This entry examines the phenomenon of forced migration experienced by Alevi communities from the foundation of the Republic of Turkey to the present, within the broader context of the state's spatial and cultural engineering policies. The Şark Islahat Planı (Reform Plan for the East, 1925) and the Settlement Law of 1934 are interpreted as instruments of the homogenizing nation-state ideology, designed to eliminate ethnic and sectarian plurality. The 1937–38 Dersim Tenkil Harekâtı (Dersim Suppression Campaign) marked a turning point in which these policies were implemented in their most violent form. The resurgence of forced migration during the 1990s under the State of Emergency regime revealed the continuity of earlier settlement strategies; village evacuations, burnings, and systematic violence became practices of "collective intimidation." In this sense, forced migration represented not only spatial displacement but also the eradication of memory, identity, and the sacred relationship that communities maintained with their places of worship and ancestral lands.

Displacement of the Alevi Community

The foundation of the Republic of Turkey was shaped by the vision of a homogeneous nation-state, which sought to radically transform the multicultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire. This transformation was carried out not only through political reforms but also through social and spatial engineering, in which ethnic, sectarian, and linguistic diversity was regarded as a threat. The state's objective was to eliminate such pluralities and construct a uniform "Turkish-Sunni" identity. In this context, forced migration functioned not merely as a demographic policy but as a multidimensional instrument aimed at erasing memory, identity, and the relationship between people and place. It also operated as a spatial practice of power, shaped by state violence, discipline, and control. For Alevi communities in particular, forced migration signified both the suppression of their belief system and the fragmentation of collective belonging. From the early republican period through the 1990s and into the European diaspora, forced migration of Alevis may be understood as a manifestation of the state's enduring "politics of displacement."

The republican regime inherited and intensified the centralizing legacy of the late Ottoman period, seeking to homogenize the territories under its control in both ethnic and religious terms. In this regard, the *Şark Islahat Planı* (Reform Plan for the East, 1925) became a key legal foundation for systematic assimilation policies directed toward Northern Kurdistan. Under the discourse of “modernizing backward eastern regions,” the plan prescribed the dispersion of Kurdish and Alevi populations, the dissolution of tribal structures, and the prohibition of the Kurdish language. In the eyes of the state, “civilization” implied not only education and development but also the transformation of language, faith, and collective memory.

The process that began with the 1915 Armenian Genocide and continued with the population exchange of the 1920s removed non-Muslim communities from Anatolia; subsequently, the turn came to Muslim but non-Turkish populations, particularly Kurds and Kurdish Alevis. The *Şark Islahat Planı* of 1925 thus constituted the first institutional framework for this policy, stipulating that “backward eastern regions” should be subjected to assimilation, the Kurdish language banned, tribal and nomadic life dismantled, and the population “civilized” through instruments such as People’s Houses (*Halkevleri*) and boarding schools.

The Dersim Suppression Campaign: Spatial and Cultural Purge

The Settlement Law of 1934 placed on a legal basis the forced migration targeted in the secret *Şark Islahat Planı* (Reform Plan for the East). This law stipulated the dispersal of populations “not compatible with Turkish culture” to the western provinces and prescribed that Kurds should be settled in such a way that they would not exceed five percent of the population. This mechanism aimed at the demographic construction of a homogeneous nation.

Article 13, paragraph 3, of the Settlement Law introduced the following obligation: “Those who are not of Turkish race must be settled in villages and in towns in a dispersed manner so that they cannot form separate neighborhoods or clusters…”

Article 11 likewise included these clauses: “A: Among those whose mother tongue is not Turkish, it is forbidden to establish new villages or neighborhoods collectively, or to form clusters of workers and craftsmen, or to monopolize a village, a neighborhood, a job, or a craft among their own kind. B: Those who are not attached to Turkish culture, or who, despite being attached, speak a language other than Turkish, shall, for cultural, military, political, social, and disciplinary reasons, be subjected to measures deemed necessary by the Council of Ministers and the Minister of the Interior. These measures include, though not necessarily collectively, transfer to other places and deprivation of citizenship. C: The number of foreigners residing in towns and cities

shall not exceed ten percent of the total population within municipal boundaries, and they may not establish separate neighborhoods.

Article 12 – In the first-category zones: A: It is forbidden to allow any tribe or nomad to enter, to settle any person who is not attached to Turkish culture, or to permit the return of any such person, even if they are former residents of those regions." [1]

Between 1937 and 1938, the *Dersim Tenkil Harekâtı* (Dersim Suppression Campaign) became the most dramatic implementation of the Settlement Law. During the military operations, thousands of people were killed, villages were burned, sacred places were destroyed, and the population was deported to the western provinces.

In 1938, the Tunceli Governorship and Command published *A Guide on Bandit Pursuit Operations, Village Searches and the Collection of Weapons in the Tunceli Region* (Elazığ: Turan Printing House). In the section titled "Village Bandit Search," even the method of burning houses was described: "Roofs are made of stone and earth, with only beams, posts, and tree branches. These are difficult to burn. However, some of the earth on the roof is removed so that the wood is exposed. The gathered wood and bushes are then burned on the spot, setting the building on fire. This is intensified by piling wood at the doorway and igniting it from there." [2]

This process has been evaluated not only as physical destruction but also as a form of cultural genocide. The state's aim was to eradicate the Alevi belief system and Kurdish identity and to replace them with a new identity based on Turkishness and Sunni Islam. Nuri Dersimi's 1937 letter to the League of Nations was one of the rare attempts to bring this process to the attention of the international public. However, the appeal remained unanswered; the destruction experienced by the people of Dersim was inscribed into social memory as *Tertele* (massacre). In collective memory, this event has been transmitted as both a physical and a spiritual displacement.

Pierre Nora's concept of the "site of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) is illuminating in this context: a site of memory is a place where the lost identity, culture, and belonging are symbolically reconstructed (Nora 1989, 7). Forced migration thus meant not only spatial displacement but also the separation of individuals and communities from their memories, their sense of belonging, and their sacred places and social relations.

The Second Wave of Forced Migration in the 1990s

Although the policy of forced migration appeared to have been interrupted after 1938, it was revived toward the end of the 1980s under the *Olağanüstü Hal* (State of Emergency, OHAL) regime. In the 1990s, under the pretext of the ongoing conflict with

the PKK, forced migration became systematic. The State of Emergency laws enacted in 1987 granted governors extraordinary powers that extended far beyond constitutional limits.

In July 1987, a decree law established a regional governorship (*Bölge Valiliği*) with the authority to manage events in the region, including the power to evacuate villages. The regional governor was granted exceptional administrative and financial powers exempt from constitutional oversight. In practice, these governors were endowed with what amounted to the constitutional right to violate the constitution itself. Consequently, the region was governed not by the constitution but by decrees, and reports of human rights violations increasingly dominated public debate.

The first regional governor appointed to this position was Hayri Kozakçıoğlu, then the governor of Diyarbakır. Retired General and DYP Member of Parliament for Kars, Musa Öğün, criticized this appointment by stating that Kozakçıoğlu had been given more authority than even the President of the Republic. Kozakçıoğlu's jurisdiction extended over the provinces of Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Siirt, Dersim (Tunceli), and Van.

Dersim (officially renamed Tunceli) was once again designated as a "special security zone" in the mid-1990s. In 1994 alone, 248 villages were forcibly evacuated, and tens of thousands of people were displaced. The 1994 report of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (*Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı*, TİHV) documented that in the Ovacık district alone, 218 houses were burned by state forces and 248 villages were completely emptied.

In another example from the same period, Kazım Demirtaş, who was killed near the Mazgirt district of Dersim, was declared a "terrorist." Three years later, in 1998, the State Security Court (*Devlet Güvenlik Mahkemesi*, DGM) ruled that Demirtaş had not been a terrorist. This incident exemplified the arbitrary violence and lack of accountability that characterized the forced migration policies of the 1990s.

State Minister Azimet Köylüoğlu confirmed the reports that around twenty villages in the Dersim region had recently been evacuated and some burned, stating: "We have determined that 218 houses were burned in the Ovacık district of Tunceli. In Tunceli, it is the state that is evacuating and burning the villages." (*Human Rights Foundation of Turkey Report*, 1994). Köylüoğlu's admission that "it is the state that is evacuating and burning the villages in Tunceli" stands as one of the rare acknowledgements breaking the official discourse of denial (TİHV 1994, 52).

In 1994, when the village burnings and evacuations reached their peak, one of the

regions most heavily targeted for displacement was again Dersim. A delegation set out to Ankara to report the situation. Alongside Minister of State for Human Rights Azimet Köylüoğlu and Tunceli MP Sinan Yerlikaya, several village headmen from Dersim planned to meet with Prime Minister Tansu Çiller to describe the pressures they were facing. When one headman said, “Our villages were burned by the soldiers; even military helicopters participated in these operations,” Çiller replied: “Even if I saw the state burning villages with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe it. Not every helicopter you see belongs to us. It could be a PKK helicopter. It could also be Russian, Afghan, or Armenian, because sometimes they violate the border and enter.” (*Cumhuriyet*, 28 October 1994). Her response vividly illustrates the state’s strategy of denial and manipulation.

Many witnesses of forced migration testified that their villages were set on fire before dawn, that soldiers deliberately burned their houses, and that they were subjected to torture and detention. One testimony recalls: “Twenty days later, they burned everything – even the empty houses. They detained me, blindfolded me, stripped off my clothes, and gave me electric shocks…” Such testimonies demonstrate that the forced migration policies of the 1990s involved not only displacement but also systematic violence and torture. The experience of this witness reveals that the so-called “village evacuations” justified on security grounds were, in reality, conducted as operations of *collective intimidation*. The burning of homes, the prohibition against salvaging belongings, the torture, and the detentions were not consequences of forced migration – they were its very method of implementation.

Although the number of village evacuations decreased slightly in 1995, the practice continued. In particular, the operations that had intensified in Dersim toward the end of 1995 began to spread to the Sivas region. Throughout the 1990s, the forced migration policies involved not only physical but also psychological and cultural repression. Many people were compelled to conceal their Alevi-Kurdish identities, facing social exclusion, unemployment, and housing difficulties in their new places of settlement. The experience of migration was surrounded by a collective silence. Those subjected to forced migration often suffered deep trauma and struggled to adapt to urban life, encountering serious obstacles in accessing education and healthcare. For women, the burden was even heavier: the combined effects of displacement and poverty deepened gender-based inequalities. Among the post-migration generations, the transmission of identity weakened, as many families refrained from sharing memories of the past with their children. In this way, a continuum of suppressed memory was established between 1938 and the 1990s.

Diaspora, Memory, and Reidentification

The mass displacement that began with the forced migrations of the 1990s led, from the 2000s onward, to a new wave of migration toward Europe. Alevi institutions established in countries such as Germany, France, and Switzerland became the political and cultural arenas representing this migration. Within the diaspora, Alevis founded commemorative ceremonies, cultural events, and digital memory platforms to make their traumatic experiences visible in the public sphere. The commemorations of the Sivas Massacre, the “Dersim ’38” marches, and online archives have become the most powerful carriers of diaspora memory.

As Jan Assmann’s concept of *cultural memory* suggests, diaspora communities reproduce rituals, symbols, and narratives in order to maintain a connection with the past (Assmann 1995, 132). In this sense, the diaspora functions not merely as the outcome of migration but as a *counter-space* where collective memory is reorganized. Alevi organizations in Europe have created a “counter-public sphere” in which the repressed identity of Turkey’s Alevis has been redefined. The active participation of women and youth in these spaces has made diaspora identity increasingly multilayered. The diaspora thus embodies both the enduring traces of forced migration and a space of collective resistance and reidentification.

The Memory of Forced Migration and Forms of Resistance

The traces left by forced migration in collective memory have been carried into the present through laments, oral narratives, and commemorative rituals. The *Tertele* of 1938 and the forced migrations of the 1990s are remembered within Alevi communities as interconnected links in a continuous chain of trauma. Yet this memory also functions as an archive of resistance.

Narratives about sacred places-mountains, rivers, and *ocaks* (spiritual lineages or hearths)-have developed symbolic strategies of reclaiming space in the face of its destruction. In this sense, memory is not merely a record of the past but a constitutive element of the future. Rather than forgetting the trauma, Alevi communities have reconstituted it in the form of counter-memory, transforming the traces that the state sought to erase into a medium of cultural resistance.

Forced Alevi migration represents one of the invisible yet formative undercurrents of Turkey’s modern history. The homogenizing policies of the Republic-from the *Şark Islahat Planı* to the State of Emergency regime-aimed to spatially and culturally eliminate Alevi-Kurdish identity. Paradoxically, however, these attempts at eradication have strengthened the collective memory, identity, and solidarity of Alevi communities. In this sense, forced migration endures in Alevi history not only as a trauma but also as a form of resistance. The identities reconstituted in diaspora have

extended the boundaries of Alevism beyond the nation-state, spreading collective memory into a transnational and global sphere.

Conclusion

The forced migration of Alevis can be understood as a historically continuous practice of displacement situated at the center of the nation-state's homogenizing projects within Turkey's modernization process. From the foundation of the Republic onward, state policies sought to transform both the spatial and cultural existence of Alevi-Kurdish communities. This process reached a critical rupture during the *Dersim Tenkil Harekâtı* (Suppression Campaign) of 1937-1938 and re-emerged in the 1990s under the State of Emergency regime as a renewed state practice. The text interprets these forced migrations not merely as movements of population but as the erasure of memory, identity, and the relationship with sacred space. At the same time, it emphasizes that migration, while deeply traumatic, also bears a dimension of resistance for Alevi communities. The diaspora has become the primary locus of this resistance, functioning as a space where suppressed memory is reorganized through commemorations, rituals, and cultural production. In this way, the text situates the forced migration of Alevis not solely as a historical event but as an ongoing process of memory and resistance through which Alevi identity is reconstructed in the modern era.

Endnotes

[1] https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/2733.pdf

[2] Hıdır Göktaş: Kürtler-İsyan-Tenkil, 141.

References & Further Readings