Mehmet Yıldırım (Dêsimli Memed)

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Published Date:
2 July 2025

Downloaded Date:
05.11.2026

Suggested Citation: Gültekin, Ahmet Kerim (2025). Mehmet Yıldırım (Dêsimli Memed). Alevi Encyclopedia — ISIL: DE-4607. https://doi.org/10.68413/alevian siklopedisi.c8h2x (Access Date: 05.11.2026)

The Alevi Encyclopedia is registered under the code **ISIL: DE-4607** within the scope of the **International Standard Identifier for Libraries and Related Organizations**.

ISSN 3055-9928

ISIL URI /isil/DE-4607

LOBID
lobid.org/organisations/DE-4607

Permalink id.zdb-services.de/resource/organisations/DE-4607

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Summary
Dr Mehmet Yıldırım (1974–2023), known also by his pen name Dêsimli Memed, was a scholar whose academic and archival research sought to reinterpret the historical and social structure of Dersim in light of Ottoman documentation and local collective memory. Bridging the fields of history, literature, and ethnography, Yıldırım made significant contributions to research on Dersim. One of his most original interventions was his thesis on the name "Dêsim," through which he approached the etymological and geographical debates surrounding Dersim from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Keywords: Dersim, Desim, Mehmet Yıldırım

Roots and Academic Background

Born in 1974 in the village of Gömemiş near Tunceli, Mehmet Yıldırım grew up in a farming and pastoralist family. Confronted with rural hardship early in life, he moved to Istanbul due to economic constraints and worked under harsh conditions for five years. These experiences shaped his intellectual awareness and led him to pursue higher education.

He entered the Faculty of Economics at Cumhuriyet University in Sivas in 1999 and completed his master's

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degree at Mustafa Kemal University in Hatay in 2007 with a thesis on the structural transformation of Turkey's foreign trade after the 1990s crisis. That same year, he began his academic career as a research assistant. He earned his PhD from Istanbul University with a dissertation titled "From Workshops to Factories in the Ottoman Iron and Steel Industry (1830-1870)," a pioneering work based on seven years of archival research in the Ottoman Archives. What distinguished Yıldırım's work was his ability to combine his methodical approach to economic history and proficiency in Ottoman Turkish with an ethnographic sensitivity to Dersim's oral and cultural memory.

Over time, his interests expanded beyond Ottoman economic history. His strong emotional and intellectual attachment to his homeland led him to oral history, ethnographic observation, and micro-historical analysis rooted in local narratives. He produced writings that combined archival documents with collective memory, challenging official historiography and favouring a bottom-up, vernacular approach. His work appeared both in academic journals and public-facing platforms. Between 2010 and 2015, he regularly published articles on the website he founded, gomemis.com.tr, and contributed to *Munzur* magazine as a founding writer. He also collaborated on *Dersim Ağıtları I-II*, edited by Mesut Özcan.

His writings were featured in publications such as *Alet İşler Kitabı* (Kanca), İKSAD Publishing, Istanbul Municipality's Kültür AŞ, and the *Journal of Politics, Economy and Management*. He participated in national and international academic events, including the TEK International Conference on Economics (2006), Turkologentag (2016), and the 1st and 2nd International Tunceli (Dersim) Symposiums.

As an Assistant Professor in the Department of Economics at Mustafa Kemal University, he stood out for bridging economic history and local memory. At the time of his sudden death during the February 6, 2023 earthquake in Pazarcık (Kahramanmaraş), he was preparing a

comprehensive book on the history of Dersim. His untimely loss marked not only the silencing of a dedicated local historian but a serious blow to the formation of alternative historiographies.

The Archival Historian: Looking at Dersim through Ottoman Documents

Yıldırım treated archives not merely as depositories of official documents but as sources that must be read dialogically with oral history. His seven-year archival research in Istanbul focused on Dersim during the post-Tanzimat period. He produced original essays on taxation, banditry, World War I power dynamics, and tribal governance in the region.

His essay "A Study on the Socioeconomic Structure of Pre-Republican Dersim" combined Ottoman documents with Armenian and missionary archives and oral sources. He emphasized the need to move beyond narratives of rebellion and see Dersim through the lens of daily life. His work shed light on local property relations, customary law, migration patterns, and power structures. In "Reform Efforts in Dersim in Ottoman Archives (1870-1913)," he critically examined central state attempts to control Dersim after the Tanzimat, analysing reports by Şakir Paşa and Zeki Paşa on infrastructure projects, military deployments, and legal centralisation. In "The Occupation of Pülümür during WWI," he examined the region's strategic importance, local militias, and the complex interactions between tribes and the Ottoman state.

The "Dêsim" Thesis: Language, Identity, and Geography

One of Yıldırım's most influential ideas was the "Dêsim thesis," which challenged the bureaucratic origin of the name "Dersim." He argued that the historical and vernacular name was "Dêsim," citing archival sources, oral testimony, and geographical indicators. In Ottoman documents from

1846, the term “Desim karyesi” appears, and regions like Pertek and Kuziçan are shown as outside Dêsim’s boundaries. Yıldırım identified “Ducik Ekradı,” “Şeyh Hasanlu,” and “Desimlu” as descriptors for the population, concluding that “Dêsim” was historically rooted and communally internalised-while “Dersim” was an externally imposed name by both the Ottoman and Republican states. This argument was not merely etymological; it represented a political gesture towards restoring a suppressed local identity and reclaiming historical continuity.

Memory and Method: Oral History, Poetry, and Local Testimonies

An ethnographically grounded oral history methodology complemented Yıldırım’s archival work. In interviews with elderly villagers, he collected data not only on historical events but also on religious rituals, spatial narratives, and interpersonal dynamics.He treated oral histories as legitimate sources, analysing them with the same care as documents. He interpreted healing rituals, sunrise prayers, and intra-tribal conflicts. Women’s testimonies were particularly important for him-not just as nostalgic accounts but as carriers of memory, grief, and resilience.

He also turned to poetic memory, analysing laments and love stories as cultural texts. His readings of Sey Qaji’s verses or the laments of Zegeriye and Şevdin offered insight into communal trauma, moral imagination, and local aesthetics. For Yıldırım, oral poetry was both a memory device and a political resource.

A Legacy Interrupted: Unfinished Work, Lasting Impact

Dr Mehmet Yıldırım’s contribution to Dersim historiography was not limited to what he published but extended to what he initiated and left unfinished. His approach-bridging oral memory with archival depth-offers a model for historically grounded, culturally rooted scholarship. His “Dêsim” thesis

stands as an emblem of his ethical and intellectual commitment to making suppressed names and forgotten narratives speak again. His legacy continues to shape current and future studies of Dersim.

References & Further Reading

Yıldırım, Mehmet. 2024. *Dersim / Dêsim: Tarih, Edebiyat, Etnografya*. Ankara: Ütopya Yayınları.

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