Dersim: Genocides (1914-18 & 1937-38)

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Summary
This entry examines the 1937–38 Dersim massacres as a case of genocide, placing the events within a broader continuum of state-led exterminatory violence in late Ottoman and early Republican Turkey. Drawing on official state documents, foreign consular reports, and survivor testimonies, it details the systematic nature of the military campaign, including aerial bombardments, mass executions, forced displacements, and the destruction of villages. A central focus is the gendered aspect of the violence, highlighting the abduction, assimilation, and sexual abuse of women and girls as part of the genocidal process. The entry also offers a chronological overview of the two genocides commited in Dersim in 1915 (against the Armenian population) and in 1938 (against the Alevite population (including Alevitised Armenians). It also informs about forced Islamization and the oppression of identities. Forced child transfer appears as a specific phenomenon in the 1938 Dersim Genocide (Tertele). The entry's strength lies in its documentation of state policies and their long-term effects, offering a vital contribution for readers seeking to understand the historical roots of anti-Alevi violence and the enduring trauma experienced by the Dersim community.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide, Dersim, Dersim Genocide, Dersim Massacre, Dersim; genocide; deportation; massacres; forced Islamization; forced child transfer; identity; Armenians; Alevis; Kurds; Zazas, Forced Child Transfer, Forced Deportation

Dersim 1915

The Late Ottoman Era

Dersim was not spared the massacres under Sultan →Abdülhamit II (1895, 1896), nor the nation-wide genocide against Ottoman Armenians, carried out by the Young Turks' *Committee for Union and Progress* (Ittihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti, C.U.P.). However, it is difficult to make a consistent statement about the course of the genocide carried out by the C.U.P. regime in Dersim, as it appears to

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have been conducted under diverse power circumstances and, above all, in dependence on the local tribal leaders. As the French-Armenian scholar R. Kévorkian suggested, there is also an obvious discrepancy in terms of numbers and facts between the *de facto* deportation in Dersim and the reports submitted to Constantinople. The following is a list of the special features of the four *kazas* mainly inhabited by Armenians:

Kaza Çarsancak

The *kaza* Çarsancak had the largest Armenian population of Dersim. According to the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, 7,940 Armenians lived in 43 villages in the *kaza* on the eve of the First World War, where they maintained 51 churches, 15 monasteries and 23 schools for 1,114 children. (Kévorkian, 2011, 276)

"In 1914, 1,763 Armenians lived in Peri [Berri], the administrative center of the Çarsancak *Kaza*, and about 6,200 in 42 villages in the *Kaza*. The *Kaymakam* [district chief], Ali Rıza, was in office from March 2 to July 15, 1915. He was therefore present when the first massacres took place in Pertag/Pertak [Բերդակ – Berdak], near the ferry dock that connected Harput [Elazığ] with Dersim across the Euphrates. In this *kaza*, the official number of deportees, 6,537, seems as unlikely as the census figures cited above when one considers the number of conscripts in the *amele taburis* [forced labor battalions] and the number of people who were able to retreat to the mountainous areas of Dersim." (Kévorkian, 2011, 422)

Kaza Çemişgezek

According to the statistics of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, 4,494 Armenians lived in 22 villages of the *kaza* on the eve of the First World War, maintaining 19 churches, two monasteries and 17 schools for 729 children. (Kévorkian, 2011, 276) At the beginning of the 20th century, there were two Armenian schools in the district capital

Çemişgezek, Mamikonian and Partian, which taught around 200 students.

On 1 May 1915, raids began in Çemişgezek for weapons in the Armenian schools, the shops of the bazaar and the homes of officials; a day later, about a hundred people were arrested. The torture they were subjected to was said to be more cruel than anywhere else – some men were nailed to the wall – and lasted until 20 June, when the *Kaymakam* announced that the prisoners would be transferred to Mezere, the twin capital of the province, to be tried there.

On 1 July 1915, the town crier of Çemişgezek read out the deportation order. The following day, one thousand Armenians were forced to leave; beforehand, some children and young women had been abducted by Turkish families. The convoy took four days to reach Arapgir, and three days later it continued on to Elazığ. Although this route normally takes only a day and a half, it took three weeks this time because the deportees were forced to take huge, arbitrary detours. From Mezere, the convoy continued to Diyarbekir via Hanlı Han, where the male deportees aged 10 to 15 and 40 to 70 were taken out of the convoy and housed in a caravanserai. When the rest of the convoy reached Ergani [Argana] Maden, they saw hundreds of corpses rotting on the banks of the Euphrates. Six weeks later they reached Siverek, where the deportees from Çemişgezek were robbed and some of them massacred. In Urfa, the convoy was divided into two parts to continue to Suruc and Rakka respectively. After passing through the transit camps of Mumbuc and Bab, only 150 women from Çemişgezek reached the transit camp in Aleppo.

In the *kaza* of Çemişgezek, the village of Garmrig [Karmrik] was particularly affected by the search for weapons that took place there on19 June 1915. On 4 July 1915, 200 men from Garmrig and the surrounding villages were arrested and executed in the following days by gendarmes and units of the special organization; at the same time, all boys under the age of ten were separated from their families. On 5 July, the

women of Garmrig were summoned to the church to register their property before being deported to Urfa. On 10 July 1915, the first convoy of women left the villages of Çemişgezek *kaza* and reached the banks of the Euphrates that same evening, where their guards showed them the blood-stained clothes of their murdered husbands. The convoys from Çemişgezek united in Arapgir. “Some villagers from the *kaza*, especially from the northern villages, managed to escape to the Kurdish areas, where they survived as best they could until spring 1916. They moved on to Erzincan when the Russian army took control of the region.” (Kévorkian, 2011, 423)

Kaza Hozat

In the 1880s, Hozat had 150 houses, 30 of which were inhabited by Armenians and the rest by Kurds and Turks. In 1915, there were already 864 houses with 8,640 Armenian inhabitants and 324 houses with 1,944 Kurdish inhabitants.[1] The data of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople differs greatly from this, almost by a factor of 25: according to this, only 2,299 Armenians lived in 16 villages of *Kaza* Hozat on the eve of the First World War, 350 of them in the administrative center Hozat with a total population of “almost 1,000” (Kévorkian, 2011, 423). They maintained 18 churches (two of them, Surb Prkich / Holy Redeemer and Surb Gevorg / Saint George in the city of Hozat), eleven monasteries and five schools for 150 children. (Kévorkian, 2011, 276) In the administrative center of the *kaza* Hozat, the town of Hozat, there was a college with 70-80 students.

Some of the Armenian population were native, the rest came from Kharberd (Harput; Elazığ), Arapgir, Akn (Eğin) and Çemişgezeg. Of the 1,835 Armenians of the *kaza* Medzkert (Mazgirt), the majority of 1,200 lived in Hozat. The Armenians of Hozat were involved in trade, crafts, agriculture and horticulture. According to an official report, 1,088 Armenians were deported from the Hozat *kaza* (Kévorkian, 2011, 422). However, R. Kévorkian doubts the official figures for the deportations from this *kaza*: “In view

of the district's geographical location, this seems unlikely. It is more likely that about half of the town's Armenians fell victim to the persecutions, while the other half was able to flee to the mountains of Dersim." (Kévorkian, 2011, 422)

Kaza Mazgirt / Mazgird / Mazkert / Մեծկերտ – Medzkert

According to the statistics of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, 1,835 Armenians lived in nine villages of the *Kaza* Mazgirt before the First World War and maintained 14 churches, 22 monasteries and two schools for 155 children (Kévorkian, 2011, 276); however, the majority of the Armenians of Mazgirt – 1,200 – lived in the *kaza* of Hozat, the rest in eight Armenian-Alevi villages: Lazvan, Dilan-Oğçe, Tamusdağ, Danaburan, Şorda, Khosengyur/Khushdun, Pakh (Pax; Trk. Pah) and Çukur. In the vicinity of these villages were the ruins of 15 medieval monasteries.

According to the official statistics, the entire Armenian population was deported, a total of 1,423 people. R. Kévorkian suspects a strong discrepancy here between reality and the deportation 'successes' feigned by the local officials: "Above all, the number seems to prove the zeal of those responsible for the deportation in this area; they were undoubtedly more concerned with proving to Istanbul how well they were doing their job than with taking an accurate census." (Kévorkian, 2011, 422)

Dersim, a safe haven for Armenians?

This question is generally answered in the affirmative. However, contemporary observers and eyewitnesses provide more nuanced accounts. Until the 1870s, Dersim was a semi-autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire, consisting of a flat area and a forested, almost 2,000-metre-high mountain range. While the plains were increasingly brought under the control of the Ottoman state in the course of the 19th century, the Dersimlis were able to defend their independence into the 20th century in their almost

inaccessible mountain stronghold.

From non-Armenian historical sources, we know that from the 17th century Armenians from Bingöl, Sebastia (Sivas), Yerznka (Erzincan), and Kharberd (Harput) fled Turkish pressure and sought refuge in Dersim, where some converted to Alevism. “Even well before the Armenian massacres, many local Armenians voluntarily assimilated, becoming Alevi Kurds (L. Molyneux-Seel, “A Journey in Dersim,” The Geographical Journal 44, no. 1 [1914]: 49-68). This has left traces both in the local Zaza dialects and in popular belief.” (Bruinessen, Excerpts, 1996, footnote 5, p. 2)

Statements about the relations between the Dersim Alevis and the Armenians, especially with regard to the behavior of the Alevis during the genocide of 1915, are contradictory. In general, their relations are considered friendly, since the majority of the Dersimis neither joined the *Hamidiye* cavalry murder squads or their successors, the *Azadi* (“Freedom”, founded 1921) militias, nor did they take part in the Kemalist war of independence against the last indigenous Christians. During World War I, between 10,000[2] and 40,000[3] Armenian deportees from Erzincan and other places probably owed their lives to the intervention of Alevi Dersimlis, even though their help, especially at the beginning of the deportation, was mostly self-serving: any Dersimis allowed themselves to be generously paid for their escape assistance, especially since the presence of so many refugees in Dersim triggered a famine.[4]

Henry R. Riggs, an American missionary working in Harput (Elazığ), wrote about the flourishing escape business in Dersim in his memoirs, which were written close to the events: “After the first secret and tentative attempts had been made, both the Kurds and the Armenians took courage and the business grew rapidly. With the intermittent vigilance of the gendarmes, traffic increased and expenses decreased. Those who had paid such high sums at first later regretted not waiting for the price to drop to five dollars per

person over time – and later some were taken for free when the Kurds were convinced that they were indeed destitute. After the occupation of Erzingian by the Russians, the Armenians of Erzingian made a kind of agreement with the Kurds, according to which all refugees from that city would be transported free of charge, with the result that practically all of them left Harpoot and returned to their hometown. (….) Throughout the period I am writing about, from the summer of 1915 to the spring of 1917, the Dersim Kurds were actively and faithfully helping to transport the Armenians to Russia." (Riggs, 1996, 113, 116)

The predominantly positive role played by the tribes in Dersim before and during the First World War sometimes obscures the fact that in Dersim, too, Armenians suffered at the hands of the arbitrary semi-autonomous regional tribal leaders, without the Ottoman state intervening to protect its Christian subjects. In the *Kaza* Çarsancak (today's Akpazar, formerly Peri between Harput and Tunceli), for example, local 'Kurdish groups' frequently confiscated Armenian property. Some of the Alevi tribes, who were considered 'Kurds' of Dersim, did not take part in the massacres of Armenians.[5] But the statements are contradictory: "However, it is not superfluous to add that many cases were recorded at the time when a number of Kurdish and Zaza tribes from Dersim were collaborating with the Ottoman authorities and participating in the massacre of Armenians and the looting of their property. Testimony of treachery by the Zaza tribes of Dersim has also been preserved."[6]

In the summer of 1918, a contemporary observer, who had served in the Ottoman Empire, the German Protestant pastor and military chaplain Siegfried Graf von Lüttichau, also emphasized the ambivalent character of Dersim as a place of refuge and rescue: "It is interesting that in the area of the Dersim Kurds not only the Armenians were spared, who were already living there in a kind of serfdom, but that it was precisely this Kurdish tribe that led large groups of Armenians safely through its territory and over the Russian border, certainly not out of love for the Christians, but out of

hatred for the Turks. Unfortunately, this willingness to help has now come to an end, as the Dersimlis no longer have the Russians covering their rear and, due to the diplomatic and extremely clever actions of the last commander on the Caucasus front, Izzet Pasha, they are once again obedient to the Turkish government. Their own sense of insecurity and fear of the notorious punitive expeditions that had been carried out against them in the past led them to hand over all Armenians who were still hiding from them, on the orders of the Ottoman government. This, of course, immediately led to executions. About 500 women and children from the Dersim region are in Mezré [Mezere]. The people of Dersim are not the only ones who have remained loyal to the persecuted. In the wild mountains between Malatia and Urfa, for example, a Kurdish brigand named Bozo ruled for a long time. Whenever he had the opportunity, he stripped Turkish officers and soldiers of their clothes and in this way supported Armenian families."[7]

Tribal Society

The price for saving many Armenians from physical extermination was their subjugation to the tribal system in Dersim. In mountain areas such as Dersim that eluded the control of the central state authority, regional specifics play a significant role. In Dersim, these included, above all, tribal structures. Probably under the influence of the Kurdish tribal system, Armenian society in Dersim also saw the formation of clans and tribes, which was otherwise unusual for Armenians. In his travelogue 'Dersim', published in Tiflis in 1900[8], the Armenian author Andranik Yeritsian reported on the Armenian tribe of the **Mirakian**, who lived in harmony with the Alevis of central or mountainous Dersim. A. Yeritsian gives the number of Mirakian tribesmen as 8,000. They spoke a special dialect and are considered descendants of the Mamikonian noble family, famous in Armenian history. Together with the Alevi Kızılbash ('Redheads'), they were traditionally considered the guardians of the Halvor sanctuary. The Mirakian tribe had three thousand men under arms when they took part in the

Dersimis' battles against the Ottoman army. (Kévorkian, 2011, 421) When Reşid Pasha advanced with a force of 40,000 in 1834, the Mirakians played a prominent role in defending Dersim. "Earning their living almost exclusively from sheep-raising, as well as rugmaking and kilim-making, these mountaineers were partially liquidated in 1915, although a minority of them survived in Dersim." (Kévorkian, 2011, S. 421)

But not all the inhabitants of Dersim were tribesmen, neither among the Christian Armenians nor among the Muslim or Alevi Kurds and Zazas. "Many farmers, by no means only Armenians, but also the Kurdish villagers, lived as subordinates (*maraba*) of their landlords in a personal relationship of dependency that in many aspects came close to serfdom, but at the same time also placed them under the protection of their *beys* (tribal leaders or urban notables). The *beys*' position of power was based on the institution of tax farming. In some cases, they controlled not only individual villages, but entire regions." (Kévorkian, 2011, 421)

The ambivalent character of the Dersim tribal system is clearly expressed in the interviews conducted by Kazım Gündoğan with Alevized descendants of Armenian genocide survivors. The Dersim Armenians and those who fled to Dersim in 1915 submitted to the local landlords (Aghas, Turkish Ağa) at the expense of their social, economic and cultural bondage or dependence: Alevization or Islamization with simultaneous linguistic assimilation and services or taxes for their protectors, who, among other things, married them at their own discretion.

The protection granted to those threatened with death was, as their descendants very clearly recognized, not out of affection but out of self-interest, because Armenians were prized craftsmen and farmers, not only in Dersim. Aida (Ayten) Güneş, born in 1960, for example, states in her interview about her grandfather: "Of course the agha (landowner or landlord) did not release him, but married him

off and had him and his wife work for him as slaves… They took Armenian children under their 'protection', protected them, adopted them, but at the same time they used them as serfs; that too is a fact… Indeed, they often adopted the children of wealthy families at that time, because 'the more children of wealthy families you take in, the more prosperous you will be in the future'."[9]

Musa Teyhani (born 1954) mentions in his interview that sexual assault of Armenian women was part of this serfdom system: "First they expelled the Armenians and enslaved the rest (i. e. us)… They kept us as *marabas*, as slaves who took care of their horses, stables and work… Not because they liked us, but because they needed laborers… It is bitter to say this, but when the aghas wanted, they took the family and the wives of the *marabas*, used them, then returned them or left them… So, the Armenians had nothing…"[10]

Şengül Gündoğdu Devletli explained: "My late father used to say sadly, 'We have become serfs on our own land.' Because this land once belonged to the Armenians. They took the land that belonged to them. They bought the fields of the Armenians, that is, the land of their ancestors. There were many land struggles. In these matters, the state was on the side of the Alevis. It was not in a position to support an Armenian…"[11]

Countervailing tendencies only emerged with the pro-communist and revolutionary movements of the 1970s, when young people in Dersim in particular recognized and condemned the tribal system as backward and repressive. The 1980 coup d'état ended this development through the political persecution of the revolutionaries.

Deportations of Kurds in 1916

Similar to the rule of the despotic Sultan Abdülhamit II (ruled 1876-1909), who was overthrown by them, the Young Turks treated the Kurds according to their usefulness for the regime's anti-Christian policy, their affiliation to the tribal

regiments (formerly *Hamidiye*) and their affiliation to heterodox Muslim sects. As early as July 1915, rumors were spreading in Dersim that the Ottoman government would annihilate the Kurds immediately after their anti-Armenian campaign. Home Minister “Talaat immediately ordered counter-propaganda to be disseminated. When the Dersimites were indeed deported a year later, they sang lamentations, praying to God for survival and accusing the Germans of deporting them. Talaat immediately ordered counter-propaganda to be disseminated. When the Dersimlis were indeed deported a year later, they sang lamentations, praying to God for survival and accusing the Germans of deporting them.”[12]

The historian Hilmar Kaiser summarized the first phase of the deportation of the Kurds as follows: “Some Kurdish tribes and peasants willingly joined the Ottoman troops in slaughtering the Armenians. Others, such as the Kurds in Dersim, resisted and organized the escape of the Armenians to the Russian lines. In response, the Ottoman army ordered the deportation of the Dersim Kurds to the western provinces. However, the deportation of the Dersim Kurds was not an isolated incident. Soon, entire tribal associations such as the →Hayderanli were deported to the central plateau of Asia Minor. The reason for this deportation was not the fear of the advancing Russian army. The reason was the Ottoman government’s goal of assimilating these Kurdish Muslims into the Turkish population. (…) The Kurds had to stop calling themselves Kurds. The authorities also tried to overcome religious differences, such as the fact that many Kurds belonged to a particular form of Shiism. Local authorities had to provide precise information about the available Armenian property and the ability of certain districts to ‘accommodate’ Kurds. Thus, the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior used the administrative units that had been set up to organize the extermination of the Armenians to assimilate the Kurds. Although the Kurds were not generally massacred, a large proportion of those deported died of malnutrition and disease, as they often had

to pass through the same places where the Armenians had recently been exterminated."[13]

In Dersim, however, there seems to have been a state intention to exterminate also the Alevi population as early as spring 1916, when an apparent attempt was made to deport 2,000 Alevis from Dersim, who were referred to as 'Kurds' at the time. The US-American missionary Henry H. Riggs reports: "One distressing incident which followed the uprising of the Kurds in the Dersim was the effort on the part of the Turkish government to terrorize those Kurds by treating them as they had treated the Armenians. The Turkish officials in Harpoot said, 'We are not going to leave any Kurds in this region, we will deport them just as we have deported the Armenians. It seemed incredible that the Turkish government should undertake anything so absolutely foolish, but one day, sure enough, there came the deported Kurds. A pitiable caravan of about two thousand men, women and children were winding into the city. They were the members of one of the tribes which had resisted the Turkish attacks but had been overcome, and they were being sent into exile. As they passed through the city, the scenes that had become so familiar during the deportation of the Armenians were repeated right before our eyes. Several women who had traveled for several days and at last reached Harpoot lay down on the street unable to go any further. The little baby born to one of them, before she died in the street of Harpoot, was brought to us and left in our care and so far as I know is still living in the care of a kindly Armenian exile woman who took the child as her own. Several others died with no one to care for them except the Armenian exiles." (Riggs, 1996, 183)

"Greatly to our surprise, however, the next morning we saw the same caravan returning by a different road and passing over the hill back to their native country. That was the last we ever saw of the deportation of the Kurds. The explanation which was current at the time was probably correct, that the Kurdish tribes divided by their own private feuds, having heard of this atrocious dealing of the Turkish government,

for once in their lives united and exhibited an absolutely united front to the Governor. Envoys from the Kurds were said to have come bringing the message that if those two thousand exiles were not returned immediately, the whole united population of the Dersim would fall upon Harpoot and burn the city."(Riggs, 1996, 184)

Other areas were less fortunate. From spring 1916, around 300,000 Kurds were deported from the provinces of Erzurum and Bitlis, initially to the Urfa area (northern Mesopotamia) and westwards to Ayntap and Maraş; in a second phase, the Kurdish deportees were driven to the plateau of the Konya highlands. The German-Swiss missionary Jacob Künzler (1871-1949), an eyewitness of the first phase of the deportations, came to the following conclusion in his memoirs *Im Land des Blutes und der Tränen* (In the Land of Blood and Tears, 1921): "It was the intention of the Young Turks to no longer allow these Kurdish elements to return to their ancestral homeland. They were to gradually be absorbed into Turkishness in Inner Anatolia.

The treatment of these Kurds on their deportation train was very different from that of the Armenians. They were not harmed on the way, no one was allowed to harass them. But the most terrible thing was that the deportation took place in the middle of winter. When a column of Kurds arrived in a Turkish village in the evening, the inhabitants, fearing them, quickly locked their front doors. So, the poor people had to spend the winter night outside in the rain and snow."[14]

The aim of the Kurdish population's dispersal was their assimilation in the interest of the general Turkification program. To this end, tribal leaders and spiritual leaders were separated from their followers by order of the Turkish Ministry of the Interior and settled in small numbers in purely Turkish villages. At the same time, the demographic dispersion was aimed at heterodox faiths, i. e. against Alevis and believers of the *Raa Haq*, as well as against →Yazidis.

1937/38: Tertelê – Doomsday

Motive assessment

There exist different, yet not necessarily contradictory views in research on the motives that drove the government of the Republic of Türkiye to destroy and expel a large part of the Dersim population after more than ten years of preparation.

Enforcement of state control: For centuries, the semi-autonomous Dersim had successfully resisted the central state power in Constantinople and later in Ankara, paying no taxes, performing no military service and also resisting the assimilation policy in the early years of the Republic of Türkiye.

Racism: The founding fathers of the Republic of Türkiye adhered to a volkish ideology that presented the Turkish "race" as the master race. As early as 1925, the head of government Ismet Inönü had defined the hierarchy between Turks and non-Turks: "We are openly nationalistic. Nationalism is the only thing that holds us together. No other [ethnic] element, apart from the Turkish majority, should have any influence. We will Turkify at all costs those who live in our country and destroy those who rise up against the Turks and Turkishness."[15] In September 1930, Minister of Justice Mahmut Esat threatened the non-Turks of the Republic with enslavement: "The Turks are the only masters of this country, its only owners. Those who are not of pure Turkish origin have only one right, namely to be servants and slaves. May friend and foe and even the mountains know this truth!"[16]

"Modernization" and "civilization": Since Kurdish tribalism was considered backward, pre-modern, 'feudal' and savage, it supposedly had to be fought and suppressed. Similar developments were taking place at the same time in the Soviet population policy towards the native peoples of Siberia and the Arctic Circle, who were forcibly settled because nomadism and tribalism were considered to be opposed to progress.

Continuation of the Armenian genocide: Some researchers also see the Tertelê as a continuation of the Armenian genocide. French correspondents Laure Marchand and Guillaume Perrier suspect that the 1938 campaign in Dersim was intended to complete what had failed in 1915, namely the complete extermination of Armenians in the region; at the same time, the Alevi population of Central Dersim was to be punished for having taken in and protected Armenians 25 years earlier. In 1938, Turkish soldiers searched some villages for uncircumcised children.[17] Furthermore, it did not escape the attention of Turkish authorities that many Alevi Dersimlis descended from Armenians, having in most cases female Armenian ancestors. According to survivors' testimonies, it is likely that Alevized Armenians were disproportionately affected by massacres and deportations.

Tertelê as final part of the extermination of the Kurdish nation: Despite their autonomous identity, the Dersimlis fell victim to the Kemalist policy against the Kurds: The "National Pact" (Misak-i Milli), which had once secured the alliance between the Kemalists and the Kurdish tribes during their struggles against the Allied victors and the remaining Ottoman Christians, disintegrated after the leadership of the Turkish Republican One-Party State had opted for a unitary, secular and ethno-nationalist state. The growing disadvantage and marginalization of the Kurds, as the second largest nation in this state, led to regional uprisings in 1925 and 1928 that were brutally suppressed. Although these uprisings did not threaten the existence of the Turkish state, they served as a pretext for a policy of assimilation and forced relocation.

In the Kurdish historical narrative, the Dersim genocide is regularly cited as part and proof of the persecution and suppression of the entire Kurdish national movement. In a report at the end of September 1938, the British consul in Trabzon compared the genocidal events in Dersim with the wholesale genocide against the Ottoman Armenians of 1915/16 and came to the conclusion:

“Thousands of Kurds, including women and children, were slain; others, mostly children, were thrown into the Euphrates; while thousands of others in less hostile areas, who had first been deprived of their cattle and other belongings, were deported to vilayets (provinces) in Central Anatolia. It is now stated that the Kurdish question no longer exists in Turkey.”[18]

Implementation

Between 1926 and 1934, Turkish politicians and officials discussed how the population of Dersim should be “civilized” or chastised: through “re-education” (assimilation) or extermination. In view of the Dersimites’ spirit of resistance, the Turkish MP Hamdi, an inspector from the Ministry of the Interior, dehumanized the Dersim population in his report of 2 February 1926, writing: “Dersim is a boil for the government of the Republic. It is absolutely necessary for the good of the homeland to take a final measure against this boil. (…) Attempts to make them [the inhabitants of Dersim] settle down or even to civilize them and educate them are nothing but a pipe dream” (Küpeli, 2024, 196). President Mustafa Kemal also couched the intention of extermination in a similarly pseudo-medical rhetoric to that used previously by the Young Turk ideologues of genocide: “To tackle this wound, this terrible festering at its root, we must do everything – no matter what the cost.”[19]

Other officials recommended re-education measures, i. e. assimilation, the permanent banishment of the Kurdish tribal leaders, and military operations. Minister of the Interior Şükrü Kaya, who had already headed the *Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants* (IAMM) under the Young Turks’ regime and was thus responsible for the deportation of the Armenians, summarized the measures against Dersim as follows in his report of 18 November 1931: “(A) Disarmament, (B) removal of the tribal leaders and their successors from Dersim; (C) resettlement of farmers in the region or elsewhere. This can also be done without military operation.” (Küpeli, 2024, 189)

In reaction to Kurdish uprisings since the 1920s, the National Assembly passed on 14 June 1934 a *Resettlement Law* for the assimilation or "Turkification", which came into force on 21 June 1934, banning the Kurdish language in public and issuing the settlement of Turks to the Kurdish region.[20] The *Resettlement Law* provided for the nationwide Turkification through the demographic dispersion of non-Turkish majority areas, or their complete depopulation, for "health, economic, cultural, military and security reasons". Article 1 states: "In order to prevent the population concentration of non-Turkish-speaking people and to dissolve the existing one, it is necessary to carry out a ban within the country."[21] Article 9: "Gypsies and non-Turkish nomadic tribes who have Turkish nationality will be settled in the regions where Turkish culture is very strong, but only in small groups. If the security of the country requires it, they can be expelled from Turkey."[22]

In the same year, Dersim was officially renamed Tunceli – not even a place name was to remind people of this area. The new administrative unit (7,774 square kilometers) was significantly smaller than the previous district (sancak). It was followed in 1935 by the *Tunceli Law* (Tunceli Kanunu), which increased the military presence in Dersim and imposed a military dictatorship over Central Dersim. In addition, a state of emergency was declared, which was not lifted until 1948.

In 1936, Dersim was placed under military administration in order to "civilize" it. When telephone lines were cut and a wooden bridge was burned down in March 1937, this served as a trivial pretext for a massive military punitive expedition. A secret decision of the Council of Ministers on 4 May 1937 stated that the aim was to achieve a "final solution", because the army should "disable on the spot once and for all those who had used or use weapons, should completely destroy their villages and remove their families." Since practically every man in Dersim carried a weapon, this wording amounted to a general order to kill, even though only five of a total of about one hundred tribes offered any resistance at

all to the military punitive expedition.

On 4 May 1937, the Turkish Council of Ministers decided to carry out *Operation Punishment and Deportation of Dersim*, which was initiated on the same day and conducted in four phases until September 1938. It was of no avail that the tribal leader and →Pir → Sey(it; Seyid) Rıza (*1862 in Derê Arí, district Lirtik/Ovacık; †1937) voluntarily surrendered to the Erzincan gendarmerie on 10 September 1937 to end the military operations. He and six other alleged rebels were sentenced to death on 15 November 1937 and hanged in Elazığ that same night, including Rıza's underage son Resik Hüseyin. İhsan Sabri Çağlayangi, who as a young official had organized the fast-track trial against Sey Rıza and his co-defendants and who later became Turkey's foreign minister, recorded the last words of Sey Rıza before he put the noose around his own neck: "We are children of →Karbala [Kerbela]. We have done nothing wrong. It is a disgrace. It is cruel. It is murder."[23] The statement proves that Sey Rıza saw himself in the tradition of the Alevi martyrs.

At the end of March 1938, the government decided to continue the military operation in Dersim with the aim of "persecuting the remaining opponents from 1937, pursuing deserters, continuing to confiscate weapons and deporting 2,000 to 5,000 suspicious people from Tunceli. (…) The new military operation began in June 1938." (Küpeli, 2024, 196)

The military operation of annihilation consisted of aerial bombardments that incinerated numerous villages and destroyed residential areas. Military personnel brutally and indiscriminately wiped out entire villages, killing men, women and children. Many of the unarmed women and children died in a regular holocaust[24]: burned alive in caves or barns. To destroy the livelihood of the already poor region, the cattle were slaughtered and the property of many Dersimlis was confiscated.

The veterinarian, activist of the Kurdish national movement and advisor of Sey Rıza, Dr. Mehmet Nurî Dersimî (*1893 in

Axzonike; †22 August 1973 in Aleppo), who came from Dersim, had already witnessed the massacres of Armenians in the Kemah Gorge near Erzincan in 1915 and lost numerous relatives in the Dersim genocide of 1937/38. Dersimî reported that the women and children of those tribes whose men fought against the army hid in caves:

"Thousands of these women and children perished because the army walled up the cave entrances. These caves are marked with numbers on the military maps of the region. At the entrances to other caves, the military started fires to suffocate those inside. Anyone who tried to flee from the caves was cut down with bayonets. A large proportion of the women and children of the Kureyşan and Bakhtiyar tribes leapt from the high cliffs into the gorges of the Munzur and Parchik rather than fall into the hands of the Turks. (…) Because the Kirgans trusted the Turks, they were wiped out. Their chiefs were tortured and then shot. All those who tried to flee or sought refuge with the army were rounded up. The men were shot on the spot and the women and children were locked in barns and set on fire."[25]

The Karabal, Ferhad (Ferhat) and Pilwank (Pilvenk) tribes, who had surrendered, were nevertheless destroyed. The women and children of these tribes were also burned alive in barns. Even members of tribes that had always remained loyal to the government, such as the Pilwank and Asagı Abbas, were shot. In the village of Irgan (Ergen, Erğan), women and girls were rounded up, doused with gasoline and set on fire.

Khech, the main village of the tribe of Sheikh Mehmet, who had likewise surrendered, was attacked at night and all the inhabitants were killed with machine guns and artillery fire. The inhabitants of the small town of Hozat and all members of the Karaca tribe were machine-gunned near a military camp outside Hozat. Towards the end of the summer of 1938, the Hormekan, Kureyşan and Alan of the district of Nazımiye and parts of the Bamasuran of Mazgirt [Armenian: Medzkert – "Great Fortress"] were annihilated and their

corpses were burned. Even young recruits from Dersim who were doing their military service in the Turkish army were shot.

Deportation and Banishment

As in the period before the First World War, the Ministry of the Interior organized the forced resettlement of the Dersim population in 1937/38, insofar as they had survived the military's extermination operations. As was already the case in 1915, particularly in the province of Adana, the deportation was carried out by train, in freight and cattle wagons. "During the train journeys, which lasted several days, the wagons remained locked, so that the people had no access to sanitary facilities. It is not known how many people fell ill or died under these unsanitary conditions during the deportations." (Küpeli, 2024, 207)

The places of exile were in the western provinces, where the deportees were dispersed across the villages so that they could have as little contact as possible within their communities. Deportees of Armenian descent who had not yet been Islamized or Alevitized were forced to adopt Islamic first names and Turkish family names, attend Koran classes and be circumcised. It was not until 1947 that the exile was lifted and the return to Dersim or other places was allowed. The deported Kurdish and Armenian children were not allowed to speak their mother tongues – Kırmancki or Zazaki, Armenian – let alone learn them, in schools. The Armenians or Armenian-born Alevis from Dersim gave up their Armenian mother tongue in favor of Turkish, which meant that one of the main goals of the assimilation policy had been achieved.

Forcible Child Transfer

The United Nations Genocide Convention defines five criminal acts as genocide:

"Article II

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." [26]

With the exception of birth prevention, all the other four genocidal crimes were committed against the population of Dersim. The legal expert H. Celik argues that birth control was also practised in Dersim in that traumatized rape victims were no longer able to reproduce.[27]

Since 2005, →Nezahat and →Kazım Gündoğan, who come from Alevi families in Dersim, have been searching for Dersim girls who were abducted and went missing from their homeland. In a lecture in the series *Gender, Violence, Genocide: Women in Genocide* [28] in Berlin in November 2019, director Nezahat Gündoğan reported: "We started conducting interviews with eyewitnesses to the Dersim massacres in 2005. We heard from these eyewitnesses and their children that thousands of women, children and old people fled to forests and caves to escape the military operations. We were told so many stories: about those who were murdered, about women and girls who committed suicide to escape rape, about families who were unable to protect their children while fleeing and had to leave them behind, about women who had to suffocate or drown their children so that their hiding place would not be discovered. It seemed very plausible that children were lost or children whose families had been killed came into state care under such circumstances. However, the more we looked into the experiences of the women and children, the clearer it became to us that the removal of the girls by the Turkish military was an integral part of the ruthless policy of Turkization and Islamization. We looked at examples of

political, ideological and ethnic assimilation policies that were applied to children in various regions of the world at the beginning of the 20th century and found that children in Australia, South America and Germany were subjected to similar measures to those imposed on Armenian and Greek children in the Ottoman Empire.

As part of our research for the project ‘Dersim’s Lost Daughters’, we conducted interviews with witnesses or their relatives in about 30 provinces in Turkey between 2007 and 2010 and recorded the stories of 72 victims. Of these, 42 women have found their families again, while 30 women are still being sought by their families or are searching for their families themselves. We spoke personally with 10 of the 42 women who had found their families again, 14 of them rejected our interview request directly or indirectly, and 18 women were no longer alive. The parents of 20 of the 72 women were killed during the military operations, while the parents of the remaining 52 women were still alive at the time. Although we cannot provide exact figures, we can assume that hundreds of girls were taken away from their families.

The age of these girls was between 3 and 14 years, most of them were between 5 and 10 years old. What they all have in common is that they were in a developmental phase in which they were still discovering themselves, their environment, their culture and their language and had not yet internalized the collective memory of their community. In short, their identity was emerging and still fragile. Thus, they were at an age where they could be taken from their families and their home and assimilated without much difficulty.

Another point that struck us was the social position of the families to whom the girls were handed over. These were families that belonged to the middle or upper classes of Turkish society. This was certainly no coincidence, because both the good relationship of the middle and upper classes with the political cadres of the regime and their support for the modernization project made these families appear

trustworthy and reliable to the state authorities.

In the course of our research, we found that not only adults but also children, i. e. boys and girls alike, were killed during the massacres. However, the surviving boys and girls were treated differently. Some of the girls were put in collection camps in Erzincan and Elazığ, where the ‘healthy and beautiful’ were selected by officers. The girls who were considered ‘sick and ugly’ were put on trains and distributed to dignitaries and state officials at every station along the route. The female body was thus the subject of a selection, with signs of fertility and femininity playing a decisive role in the ‘selection’. The orphan boys, however, were sent to orphanages. Our efforts to find the missing girls and document their life stories continue.”

Victim Numbers

According to official figures, 13,806 of a total population of 65,000 to 100,000 died. However, Kurdish and independent estimates put the number of deaths at between 50,000 and 70,000 [29]. At the end of 1938, the Ministry of the Interior announced that 11,683 people had already been deported from Dersim and that the deportation of a further 2,000 people was planned. (Küpeli, 2024, 208) In her lecture (Berlin, November 2019), N. Gündoğan stated the following results of her research: “The exact number of people killed and deported from Dersim is not known. However, in 2011, the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that according to official documents, 13,806 people were killed and 11,683 people were forcibly resettled in western Turkey in the years 1937-1938. According to our research, the number of people killed is two to three times higher than officially stated and the number of deportees is around 20,000.” [30]

A statistically exact calculation is hardly possible, due to the unreliable population statistics for the Dersim region as a whole and in particular for the inconsistent count of the number of victims during the extermination operations in

1937 and 1938.

Historical Continuity of the Annihilation Measures

The state crimes committed during the First World War and in 1937/38 are interrelated, presumably because the legal processing of the crimes committed by the C.U.P. was only partially successful. This must have reinforced the view that deportations and massacres were appropriate means of solving real or alleged domestic policy problems. The methods, which were repeated in the Dersim genocide against Kurdish-speaking Alevis and people of Armenian descent, were in detail:

– Eliticide (arrest and killing of the intellectual and spiritual leadership at the beginning of the genocide)

– Massacre

– Deportation

– Forced Labor

– Banishment

– Forcible Child Transfer

– Forced Islamization

– Neglect and targeted destruction of the architectural, especially sacred, cultural heritage.

But there were also significant differences. In Dersim, for the first time, bombs were dropped from aircraft on the hideouts of resistance fighters – officially named ‘bandits’ – and on civilians.

Mustafa Kemal’s adopted daughter →Sabiha Gökçen, the first female fighter pilot in the Turkish Air Force and an orphan from the years of the World War Genocide, distinguished herself during the bombings. “As a prominent bomber pilot, Sabiha Gökçen was involved in the

indiscriminate annihilation of the population in the state-sponsored crimes in Dersim in 1938. For her alleged services, she was subsequently celebrated as a national hero, with her actual activities and the reasons and goals of the military operation being kept secret."[31]

There is a bitter cynicism in the fact that a woman of Armenian descent, of all people, shot up a region to which so many of her compatriots owed their lives. In contrast to the Armenian genocide, which was mainly committed by irregular armed forces (Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa – "Special Organization") and broad sections of the Muslim civilian population, the circle of perpetrators in Dersim in 1938 was limited to the national armed forces. In this respect, the Dersim genocide is a clear and exclusive State crime, which at the same time has a religious dimension: the centuries-old conflict between Shia or Alevism and Sunni Islam.

Places of the Crime

1. Ağveran
2. Akreg
3. Ali Boğaz
4. Arê Ali Begu
5. Arê Çê Ziyay
6. Aveşi
7. Awge
8. Axpar – Akpınar
9. Baleşer
10. Bırdo Çelemuriye
11. Bırrê Bızeke
12. Bozan
13. Cırnunê Beski
14. Çala Heru
15. Çala Nizamu
16. Çala Qıçkeku (Kırmela Qırğu)
17. Çala Sure
18. Çatê Khalmemi
19. Çayıra (Qerece)
20. Çayırê Khali

21. Çetê Çırrıke (Kilise)
22. Çêwresçıme (Mığara Qopi)
23. Degirmen Bendi
24. Derê Are Ali Begu
25. Derê Arê Çê Derguli
26. Derê Çayıra (Sırtıka)
27. Derê Çırri (Yêrısk)
28. Derê Fınd ıqu (Oba Ağaê Qıci)
29. Derê Ğezani (Serkemer)
30. Derê Harami
31. Derê İne
32. Derê Khalmemi
33. Derê Khunduji
34. Derê Laçi
35. Derê Meyita (Kilise)
36. Derê Meyitu (Yinê Dızdu)
37. Derê Pulemuriye
38. Derê Qeremuxe
39. Derê Qıci (Ağzonige)
40. Derê Qıli
41. Derê Remedani
42. Derê Roji
43. Derê Sandalu
44. Derê Tağari (Ali Boğaz)
45. Derê Thırsıke
46. Derê Varani (Tosniye)
47. Derê Xori (Thojinge)
48. Derê Xozati
49. Derê Zağgey
50. Derê Zuğuri
51. Desiman
52. Deste
53. Eğniğe
54. Elamqaşi (Dere Nahiyesi)
55. Ergane
56. Gedigê Zêyne (Zini Gediği)
57. Gema Besk
58. Gola Çetu
59. Gola Lerji

60. Golanê Sole
61. Gomê Doy
62. Gomêgari
63. Gozereke (Pilav Dağı)
64. Harşiye
65. Hegao Pil
66. Hırnik (Dere Nah.)
67. Hopıke (Kemerê Çile)
68. Hopıke (Koo Sıpe)
69. Jiara Paçkıne
70. Karvan
71. Katır Çukuru
72. Kemerê Arey (Halvoriye)
73. Kemerê Çilê
74. Kemero Phan (Kilise)
75. Kevırkan
76. Kewlê Kımsori
77. Khaniya Derıke
78. Kırniga Khali
79. Koo Sur
80. Korta Heru
81. Kosoğlu Deresi
82. Koo Sıpe – Beyaz Dağ /Ko
83. Koo Sıpe-Çayıra Phıti
84. Koo Sıpe-Çala pey
85. Lazvan
86. Marçık
87. Masumo Pak (Dewa Pile)
88. Mazgirt Merkez
89. Merga Çeqere
90. Merga Kemi
91. Mergê Kesisu
92. Merxo
93. Mezra Çê Ağay
94. Mezra Sure
95. Muxewndi
96. Pıskeğ
97. Pulê Fate
98. Qelxeru

99. Qereğlan
100. Qereqol (Yêrısk)
101. Qurçu
102. Raa Thonjige (Pardiye)
103. Roşnage
104. Saldağ
105. Samoşiye (Qerğac)
106. Serkêsur (Bargini)
107. Sinan
108. Sorpiyan
109. Soxariye
110. Şine
111. Şorda
112. Taçkirege
113. Tanerê Lolu
114. Tanero Corên
115. Tasniye
116. Tevnasi
117. Textxel
118. Varseliye
119. Vıroz
120. Viyaleke (Tornoba)
121. Vonkê Qerebaşi
122. Warê Xurxuriki (Mırcan)
123. Welağanê İne
124. Xotara Çê Abaşi
125. Xuxtaru
126. Zankirege
127. Zêrza Axpano
128. Zini Gediği

*Source: https://dersim-fdg.org/tertele

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[9] This refers to the fact that when an Armenian girl or woman was 'adopted' or married, her Muslim stepparents or husband became the legal owners of the inheritance or possessions of the child or wife. It did not matter whether the person in question had consented to the adoption or marriage. - Gündoğan, Kazım: Alevileş(tiril)miş Ermeniler: Dersimli Ermeniler-2; "Biz İsa'ya Tabiyiz, Ali'ye Mecburuz". Istanbul: Arıntı, 2022, p. 52f.

[10] Gündoğan, op. cit., p. 364f.

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[16] Minister of Justice Mahmut Esat, according to the daily newspaper Milliyet on September 19, 1930; quoted from Bruinessen, 1994, p. 170

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Entry into force: 12 January 1951, in accordance with article XIII.
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