# Memory and Dersim

**Zana Kibar**
zanakibar@gmail.com

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**Address:** Alevi Ansiklopedisi Körnebachstr. 49-51, 44143 Dortmund

info@aleviansiklopedisi.com

**Summary**
This entry examines Dersim, which occupies a central place in the collective memory of Alevi communities, as both a site of memory and a field of resistance. The 1937–38 Dersim Massacre is addressed not merely as an episode of state violence, but as an epistemic and necropolitical intervention that directly targeted Alevi belief, identity, and spatial belonging. Drawing on Pierre Nora's concept of "sites of memory," Maurice Halbwachs's notion of "collective memory," and Jan Assmann's theory of "cultural memory," the entry discusses how Dersim is constituted as a mnemonic node. It analyses the processes through which individual testimonies are transformed into collective memory and examines the bodily, ritual, and spatial forms through which this memory is articulated. Particular emphasis is placed on sacred sites and pilgrimage places (ziyaretgâhs), which are shown to constitute a line of mnemonic resistance against state violence. The entry further explores how memory is transmitted to future generations through silence, lament, narrative practices, and digital platforms. Remembering is thus framed not only as an engagement with the past, but as an ongoing demand for justice in the present and the future.

**Keywords:** Dersim, Hafıza Mekanı, Hatırlamak, Radikal Hafıza

Dersim occupies a central place in the historical memory of Alevi communities not merely as a geographical region, but as a nodal site in which trauma, mourning, resistance, and belonging converge. Alevism, as a belief system and way of life transmitted primarily through oral culture, has historically sought ways to preserve and transmit memory in the face of repression, marginalisation, and attempts at annihilation. This memory has often been inscribed in space, speech, silence, and the body. In 1937-38, Dersim was subjected to a military, cultural, and ideological assault by the state-an assault that targeted not only physical

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existence, but also a memory, a world, and an entire system of meaning. For this reason, Dersim constitutes a threshold in the collective memory of Alevism, where loss and remembrance collide.

According to the French historian Pierre Nora's conceptualisation of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), symbolic places emerge when a society's historical continuity is ruptured and when there is a need to re-establish a relationship with the past. In this sense, Dersim stands out as a mnemonic presence erected against physical erasure. Maurice Halbwachs, one of the founders of collective memory theory, emphasises that memory is not individual but social; communities construct their own frameworks of remembering. Within this framework, Dersim represents more than a site of destruction-it constitutes a historical axis through which Alevi identity has been shaped. Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory further demonstrates that remembering does not reside solely in individual recollections, but lives on in rituals, narratives, places, symbols, and bodies. The form that Dersim takes within Alevi memory is precisely the outcome of this multilayered cultural memory.

**Testimonies: The Fracture and Continuity of Memory**

What occurred in Dersim in 1937-38 is remembered not only through state violence itself, but also through the silencing effect of that violence-an effect that did not merely kill, but rendered survivors mute, leaving enduring traces in bodies and narratives. Testimonies conveyed in documentaries such as *Domane 38* and in oral history studies should be understood not simply as individual traumas, but as deep mnemonic records silently inscribed within collective consciousness.

Narratives such as Sabriye Arslan's account-beginning with "I saw that bayonet" and ending with "my mother was killed in my arms; I survived beneath the corpses"-or Davut Tekin's statement that "they were throwing children, stabbing them

with bayonets," and Bedri Polat's testimony that "my sister's head exploded in my hands," are not merely descriptions of brutality. They also demonstrate how remembering becomes possible. As Francesca Cappelletto has argued, traumatic events, when narrated orally, move beyond individual autobiography to become part of historical memory. Dersim testimonies function in precisely this way: they are narratives spoken not by the individual alone, but by the community.

The frequent interruption of these testimonies by silence-by an inability to speak, by remembering through silence-reveals that memory is inscribed not only in words, but also in muteness. Accounts by children who recall that "they never spoke about it, said nothing, but I heard them cry every night" reveal the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the communication of memory through silence. Subsequent generations, who did not directly witness the events, grow up within these silences and traumatic ruptures, inheriting a memory shaped more by absence and unspeakability than by narrative. Motifs such as the red-haired woman, the white horse, or the severed head carried in a shirt transcend individual testimony and become symbolic memory figures. The bloodstained shirt, for example, functions simultaneously as the memory of the dead and as the burden carried by the living.

These narratives also point to a bodily memory. Broken bones, burn marks, and the traces of prolonged hunger carry not only physical but also symbolic weight. The body becomes a carrier of place itself. Children who were displaced carry within their bodies the marks of both their place of origin and their losses. The abduction of girls, their forced adoption, or the erasure of their identities represent not merely physical separation, but the fragmentation of memory itself.

**Dersim as a Site of Memory and a Field of Resistance**

"This place was never forgotten." This sentence

encapsulates the most succinct and powerful expression of mnemonic resistance in Dersim. The state sought not only to eliminate people, but also to destroy, rename, and de-mnemonise the geography itself. Yet for the people of Dersim, every stream, every mountain, every shrine constitutes a space of remembrance. In this sense, sites of memory are not only places of recollection, but also spaces of resistance.

Dersim is among the regions where the culture of pilgrimage (*ziyaret*) within Alevism is most intensely practiced. The Munzur Springs, Düzgün Baba, Kureyş Baba, and stones bearing the trace of Xızır function not only as religious centres, but also as mnemonic barricades against state violence. In response to colonial strategies aimed at either destroying or controlling sacred sites, Alevi communities sustain these places through rituals, narratives, and visits. Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, which examines the modern state's power to decide not only who may die but which lives are deemed livable, is instructive here: the Dersim case demonstrates that this power seeks to dominate not only bodies, but also space, time, and memory. Against this, Alevi communities resist through memories embedded in the landscape.

Following forced displacement, Dersimlis were scattered across Istanbul, Adana, Germany, and beyond. Although physically severed from place, their mnemonic bond remained intact. The continued presence of Dersim through stories, laments, photographs, and pilgrimages in sites of exile marks the transformation of remembrance into resistance. Annual visits, days of mourning, commemorative events, lament nights, documentaries, novels, theatre, and cinema all function as practices through which Dersim is spatially reconstituted.

Films such as Kazım Öz's *Dem*, *Fotoğraf*, and *Zer*; Haydar Karataş's novel *Gece Kelebeği*; Murathan Mungan's *Şairin Romanı*; the documentary *Domane 38*; as well as musical and visual works by various artists, function not merely as

aesthetic productions, but as carriers of memory and builders of place. Through these works, generations born in exile establish ties to a place they may never have seen, yet to which they deeply belong.

**Memory Platforms and Transmission to the Future**

Remembering is not merely an individual mnemonic act, but also a political stance, an ethical responsibility, and a social demand. To remember Dersim is not only to refuse forgetting, but to generate awareness that prevents repetition, to demand justice, and to issue a warning for the future. Remembering thus constitutes a continuous act that shapes the present and constructs the future. It is a mode of asserting existence against erasure, assimilation, silencing, and the denial of belief.

In this context, memory platforms are not merely repositories of information or archives of documents. They are spaces in which a community defines itself, delineates its boundaries, recalls its losses, and sustains its resistance. For Alevi communities, these platforms include not only narratives shared during *cem* rituals, oral transmissions by religious authorities, and offerings at sacred sites, but also oral history projects, archival initiatives, documentary cinema, literature, laments, digital memory archives, community-based museums, and social media movements. Particularly within the European Alevi diaspora, commemorations, symposia, film screenings, and digital memory projects related to Dersim 1938 demonstrate that this memory is constructed in a multilingual, intergenerational, and transnational form.

At the same time, this mnemonic construction constitutes a field of resistance against epistemic violence. Official historical narratives that legitimise massacre policies through notions such as “suppressing rebellion,” “bringing civilisation,” or “restoring state authority” are challenged, fragmented, and transformed through Dersimli testimonies and cultural productions. Memory thus functions as a

counter-narrative to hegemonic history. To narrate what was silenced, to give voice to the muted, and to record what was undocumented is to defend not only the weight of the past, but also the rights of the future.

Alevi collective memory is defined not only by what is remembered, but by how it is remembered. The *semah* performed during *cem*, names repeated in laments, traces preserved in garments, and prayers inscribed on stones demonstrate that memory is constructed not only verbally, but also bodily and ritually. Remembering thus becomes a cultural performance. In this sense, remembering is as sacred as holding a *cem;* not forgetting constitutes a form of worship.

Remembering is also the persistence of a demand for justice. When witnesses speak, documents surface, and laments are sung anew, a community begins to emerge from historical darkness and reclaim its own history. Remembering is therefore not a state of mourning, but a movement. To remember Dersim is to engage not only with 1938, but also with ongoing injustices in places such as Sivas, Maraş, Sur, Roboski, and beyond, and to take a stance against them.

**Conclusion**

Dersim represents, within the historical and cultural memory of Alevi communities, not merely a geography of trauma, but a multilayered mnemonic field in which meanings, forms of resistance, and processes of identity formation converge. The 1937-38 Massacre was not only an annihilation in which thousands were physically eliminated, but a systematic policy aimed at erasing a community’s memory, belief system, and spatial belonging. To understand Dersim, therefore, is not simply to know the past, but to grasp how that past resonates in the present and is transmitted into the future.

The oscillation of testimonies between silence and narration reveals how memory lives not only in words, but also in

bodies, places, and rituals. Shrines, sacred mountains, laments, and silences are transformed into practices of resistance that ensure mnemonic continuity. In response to the state's necropolitical strategies, Alevi communities construct memory itself as a terrain of resistance. This memory does not merely record the past; it forms the foundation of contemporary struggles, identity negotiations, and demands for justice.

In this sense, Dersim functions as a site of memory that both commemorates loss and sustains collective vigilance for the future. Through oral culture, rituals, digital platforms, and testimonial practices, Dersim memory resists the erosive effects of time and is reconstructed anew in each generation. This reconstruction serves not only to remember, but also to remind, to assign responsibility, and to demand justice. Remembering, in this context, constitutes a form of worship, a mode of existence, and a political stance within Alevism.

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