Dersim Massacre and Intergenerational Trauma Transmission

Filiz Çelik
fcelik77@yahoo.com

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

info@aleviansiklopedisi.com

Summary
This entry looks at the long-term emotional and psychological effects of the Dersim Massacre, which took place in eastern Turkey between 1937 and 1938. Thousands of people from the Kurdish-Zaza-Alevi community were killed, displaced, or silenced during this violent campaign. Although these events happened nearly a century ago, their impact continues to be felt today — not only by those who survived but also by their children and grandchildren. Based on a PhD study completed in 2015, this article explores how the trauma of Dersim has been passed down through generations. Using stories from families and ideas from psychology and trauma studies, it shows how silence, grief, and the lack of public recognition have affected people's sense of identity, memory, and belonging. The trauma lives on, not just in words, but in emotions, relationships, and daily life. By comparing Dersim to other historical traumas, like the Holocaust and Indigenous experiences of violence, the article shows that telling these stories — within families and in public — is a powerful way to heal and resist forgetting. This work helps us understand how past violence continues to shape communities today, especially when those experiences have been ignored or denied by society.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Collective Trauma, Dersim, Dersim Aleviliği, Dersim Genocide, Dersim Soykırımı, Esoteric Knowledge, Hatırlamak, Kollektif travma, Nature And Religion, Sacred Landscape, Toplumsal Travma, Trauma

The Dersim Massacre: Making of Psychological Trauma

Between 1937 and 1938, the people of Dersim (now called Tunceli) endured a violent and indiscriminate military campaign. These attacks targeted civilians regardless of age or gender, resulting in mass killings, forced displacements, and the separation of families. Many young girls were taken and raised by Turkish families. Even after more than 80

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years, the trauma of this period continues to impact the descendants of those affected.

Historically, Dersim was home to the Alevi community, a distinct ethno-religious group with its own language, beliefs, and customs. The Turkish Republic, seeking to enforce a singular national identity, viewed the region's diversity as a threat. Laws were enacted to assimilate or eliminate Dersim's cultural presence. The military campaign of 1937-38 was a brutal consequence of this ideology. Until recently, the Dersim Massacre remained a taboo subject in Turkey. The silence surrounding it became embedded in family and social life, passed down across generations, and contributing to the collective trauma experienced by many Dersimis today.

Trauma, Memory, and the Legacy of Human-Made Disasters

Disasters-whether natural or human-made-result in loss and devastation, but human-made disasters often carry deeper psychological wounds that reverberate across generations. As Caruth (1996) explains through Freud's concept of "latency," traumatic events may not show immediate psychological effects but can resurface in later generations as distress and unresolved pain. The intergenerational transmission of trauma (ITT) has become a recognized outcome of collective violence such as genocide, war, and ethnic cleansing (Danieli, 1998a). These events are not only of historical and political concern but also deeply psychological. Victims and their descendants continue to live with the aftermath, often in silence or confusion.

The 20th century, marked by the rise of the nation-state, saw widespread genocidal acts justified through ideologies of modernity and national unity (Mazower, 2000; Semelin, 2005). Indigenous and minority populations were often seen as obstacles to progress, resulting in mass violence and erasure. The Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, and massacres in Rwanda and Darfur are among the many

examples that continue to shape global discussions on trauma and justice. In these atrocities, trauma is not just individual but collective. Early research on the Holocaust led to the recognition that trauma could affect not only survivors but also their children and grandchildren (Rakoff, Sigal, & Epstein, 1966). This shift from clinical diagnoses to broader psychosocial understandings opened new paths for studying how violence and silence shape generational identity.

Intergenerational Trauma in the Dersim Context

The trauma caused by the Dersim Massacre mirrors that of other human-made disasters and genocides. Survivors not only suffered direct harm but also faced long-term consequences that affected their descendants-emotionally, psychologically, culturally, and politically. The mechanisms through which this trauma was passed on can be broadly categorized into two models: direct transmission and indirect transmission.

Direct Transmission

Direct transmission refers to the passing of trauma through biological and psychological pathways. Research into the children of Holocaust survivors initially shaped this model. Clinicians observed that these children exhibited symptoms such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, nightmares, and emotional numbing-symptoms consistent with what was later categorized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Niederland, 1968; Rakoff et al., 1966; APA, 2013). Some researchers have explored whether there might even be biological predispositions for trauma symptoms among the children of survivors (Yehuda et al., 1998; Bagot et al., 2014). However, this view is debated. Meta-analyses suggest that children of Holocaust survivors do not exhibit significantly higher levels of psychopathology unless they are already in distress due to other life factors (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2003; Sagi-Schwartz et al., 2008). In the case of Dersim, most second- and third-generation descendants are now several decades removed from the

original trauma. Although some signs of psychological distress may still be observed, it is unlikely that direct transmission is the sole or even primary mechanism at this stage. Instead, the trauma's legacy is more visible in cultural, emotional, and collective memory.

Indirect Transmission

Indirect transmission operates through silence, fragmented memory, and disrupted emotional communication. Survivors may avoid speaking about their trauma due to fear, shame, or unresolved grief. Danieli (1984) referred to this as a "conspiracy of silence." This silence often leaves children with a deep but unclear sense of unease and inherited sorrow (Weingarten, 2004; Felsen, 1998). In the case of Dersim, many participants in the 2009-2014 study described growing up in families where no one spoke openly about the Massacre. However, the silence itself became a source of tension-filled with suspicion, fear, and an unspoken understanding that something tragic had occurred. Some families, by contrast, overexposed their children to traumatic narratives, music, or imagery. These stories were sometimes shared in vivid detail-accounts of executions, orphaned children, or mass graves. While more informative than silence, this form of transmission also burdened children with overwhelming emotional weight and few tools to process it. Over time, trauma becomes part of the collective identity. It is not transmitted as a fixed memory but evolves through family dynamics, cultural expression, and political context. The indirect effects of trauma are shaped by the ongoing marginalization and political denial surrounding the original events. As Madariaga (2002) notes, trauma can become a structural feature of social life, experienced as continuous threat or unresolved loss. In the Dersim case, the trauma's legacy includes broken family bonds, disrupted language transmission, cultural suppression, and continued social exclusion.

Generational Experiences of the Dersim Massacre

Survivor Generation

This research primarily focused on the second and third generations, excluding direct survivors for ethical reasons. Many of the few remaining survivors had already shared their stories through oral history projects, documentaries, and testimonies. Their narratives provide vivid and harrowing insights into the violence, displacement, and enduring uncertainty they experienced. Despite the trauma, many survivors showed remarkable resilience. They rebuilt their lives, raised families, and encouraged their children to succeed. As noted by Brown and Kulig (1996), resilience in the face of mass trauma is a common finding across many historically persecuted communities.

Second Generation

The second generation, born in the post-Massacre period, had mixed experiences. Some were raised in silence, completely unaware of what had happened to their families. Others were exposed to painful memories through stories or indirect emotional expressions. Many second-generation participants in the study recalled living with a pervasive sense of fear, shame, and otherness. Unlike their parents, many in this generation were educated in Turkish state schools-institutions that were part of assimilation policies. This generation often left Dersim in search of work, education, or safety. Their migration allowed for a wider worldview but also deepened their feelings of dislocation and marginalization. A number of second-generation participants became politically active. They were more vocal about the Massacre, engaging in documentation efforts, publishing oral histories, and creating cultural projects that preserved the Dersimi heritage.

Third Generation

The third generation also showed a strong emotional and political connection to the Dersim Massacre. Though two generations removed, they expressed feelings of grief,

anger, and loss. Many were active in producing films, books, music, and campaigns about Dersim. Their narratives often revealed a deep desire to recover what was lost-language, rituals, beliefs, and communal identity. Members of this generation were more likely to frame the Massacre within broader discourses of human rights, genocide recognition, and collective trauma. They also faced challenges due to cultural disconnection-especially those raised in urban areas or outside Turkey-where language loss and assimilation made it harder to access traditional forms of memory and mourning. Despite these challenges, the third generation has been instrumental in sustaining the memory of Dersim. They actively work toward “unsilencing” their family histories and advocating for justice and recognition.

Patterns of Communication: Silence and Storytelling

Human-made disasters often disrupt communication across generations. In the case of Dersim, two contrasting patterns emerged:

Silence

Some families avoided speaking of the Massacre altogether. The silence created emotional distance and confusion but also served as a form of psychological defence. Herman (1992) notes that silence and dissociation are common coping strategies when trauma cannot be processed or shared safely.

Overexposure

Other families recounted stories of the Massacre in vivid detail. Children were exposed to painful narratives at an early age-through music, poetry, conversations, or political events. While this broke the silence, it often left children feeling emotionally overwhelmed and powerless. Auerhahn and Laub (1998) suggest that survivors sometimes cannot share their trauma due to the lack of validation or fear of disbelief. As a result, memory is passed on in fragmented, symbolic, or embodied forms. In this study, participants

often described feeling that something was “wrong,” even if they had no clear narrative of the events. Laub (1992) describes this condition as a form of exile-a psychological state in which the traumatized and their descendants live apart from their histories, unable to articulate or reconcile their experiences. This exile is not just emotional but political, as institutional denial further enforces silence.

Healing from Collective Trauma

The Ongoing Presence of Loss

The research revealed a powerful and persistent sense of loss shared by both survivors and subsequent generations. For survivors, this loss was often linked to the brutal violence they witnessed-the destruction of families, homes, and communities. For later generations, it manifested as the loss of identity, culture, language, and connection to their ancestral homeland. Even those born decades later described feeling as though they had inherited grief. This inherited sense of mourning was often complicated by ongoing experiences of marginalization, cultural suppression, and political denial. Such “post-memory” (Hirsch, 2008) shapes not only how the past is remembered but also how descendants imagine their futures.

Mourning and Its Absence

In psychoanalytic theory, mourning is a crucial process for healing trauma. Freud argued that unresolved mourning can turn into melancholia-a state of persistent, unconscious grief (Freud, 1917/1957). Later scholars such as LaCapra (2001) extended this idea to collective trauma, emphasizing the need for historical acknowledgment and symbolic redress in enabling communities to heal. In the Dersim context, mourning was largely absent. The official silence and denial of the Massacre made it impossible to grieve publicly or safely. Participants described how the absence of acknowledgment left them with unresolved feelings-what Frosh (2013) calls “haunted grief.” As Young (1998) notes,

mourning a disaster requires both an internal process of grief and external recognition. Without this, trauma remains frozen in time. In Dersim, the Massacre became a rupture in the timeline of memory-spoken of as “before” and “after,” without a sense of closure.

Acknowledgment, Justice, and Commemoration

The Need for Acknowledgment

Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for public acknowledgment of the Dersim Massacre. Many described how the absence of recognition deepened their sense of otherness and injustice. They reported feeling silenced in national conversations, misunderstood by peers, and dismissed by state institutions. Trauma that is denied or ignored often festers. Danieli (1998a) argues that unacknowledged trauma disrupts both individual and collective healing. In the case of Dersim, participants expressed that acknowledgment must include open access to archives, truth-telling, and an apology from the state.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice focuses not on punishment but on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships. This approach has been used in post-conflict societies such as South Africa, Rwanda, and Chile. It involves truth-telling, reparations, and community healing (Hamber & Lewis, 1997; Govier & Prager, 2003). Participants in this study supported the idea of restorative justice as a pathway to reconciliation. Even though many perpetrators and victims have passed away, symbolic acts such as revealing the names of the exiled and orphaned, returning ancestral lands, or recognizing historical truths would help rebuild trust.

Commemoration and Collective Mourning

Commemoration allows societies to collectively remember and mourn traumatic events. Memorials, rituals, and anniversaries offer spaces to acknowledge suffering and

affirm shared values (Alexander et al., 2004; Olick, 2007). For the Dersimi community, commemoration has often taken place in diaspora contexts-through music, poetry, panels, and community gatherings. Participants described how these events have helped them maintain a connection to their heritage and process inherited trauma. However, such efforts remain largely invisible in Turkish public life. Without broader national recognition, these acts of remembrance remain partial and politically fragile. Schwab (2010) argues that true healing requires mourning to cross the boundaries between victims and perpetrators, private and public memory.

Cultural Resilience and the Role of Local Knowledge

The history of Dersim is marked by centuries of marginalization, but the 1937-38 Massacre created a profound rupture that continues to define collective memory. Participants in this study consistently spoke of the Massacre as a turning point that divided time into “before” and “after.” It not only erased lives and communities but also fractured intergenerational continuity. Despite this, the community has shown remarkable resilience. Second and third-generation descendants have turned to education, art, music, and activism as ways to process their inherited trauma and preserve cultural identity. Many described striving for academic and professional excellence as a way to resist marginalization and assert dignity. Notably, Dersim continues to have one of the highest literacy rates in Turkey (Akin, 2010), despite ongoing socio-economic challenges.

Oral Tradition and Cultural Transmission

In the absence of formal recognition and mourning, the Dersimi people have relied on oral traditions to carry their history forward. Music, poetry, storytelling, and ritual have served as living archives-conveying not only facts but feelings, worldviews, and ethical codes. Many participants recalled hearing laments and elegies about the Massacre during funerals or community events, where past losses

were mourned alongside present ones. This oral tradition is deeply tied to the Alevi faith, which emphasizes non-violence, spiritual humility, and communal justice. Some participants even described the Massacre as a spiritual warning-a punishment for internal betrayal or a sign of having strayed from "the Path." Such interpretations reflect a powerful ethical framework within which trauma is given meaning and resilience is nurtured.

Toward Culturally Informed Justice

Participants expressed that any process of healing or reconciliation must be grounded in their own cultural values. Western models of transitional justice, while useful, may not fully align with Dersimi worldviews. For example, the concept of justice in Alevi belief is not based on retribution but on restoration and spiritual accountability. As Archbishop Tutu's work in South Africa demonstrated, even truth and reconciliation processes can risk imposing external religious or cultural frameworks (Prager, 2003). In contrast, a Dersim-specific approach would draw from local spiritual traditions, community norms, and collective memory to initiate healing.

Conclusion

The Dersim Massacre continues to shape the lives of its descendants-not as a distant historical event but as a lived reality that affects identity, belonging, and emotional well-being. The trauma was transmitted not only through silence and storytelling but also through language loss, exile, political repression, and cultural suppression. Yet, out of this trauma has emerged a strong current of resilience. Dersimis continue to speak, sing, write, and organize-not only to remember but also to reclaim. Their demand for acknowledgment, justice, and healing is not only a response to the past but a vision for a different future. In this light, the story of Dersim is not just one of tragedy. It is also a story of survival, dignity, and the enduring power of cultural memory.

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