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Re-assessing the Genocide of Kurdish Alevis in Dersim, 1937-38

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Introduction

In the process of nation-state formation, many governments have engaged in homogenization policies in order to establish political, social, and cultural hegemony. The Turkish state's intensive efforts to Turkify and Islamize Anatolia represent a prime example of this phenomenon. Using census data to estimate casualties, I argue that the events of 1937-38, in the province that was then called Dersim, in Eastern Turkey, should be classified as a genocide. Although state documents of that period remain inaccessible, we know that military operations continued for more than a period of two years, employing a large number of army troops.¹ They used militaristic technology including poisonous gas and heavy bombardments,² and they destroyed the living conditions of Alevi Kurds of Dersim through the burning of forests, fields, and villages.³ Children were forcibly removed from their natal families.⁴ While the numbers of those killed still remain lost in history, I examine archival records, memoirs, and first-hand accounts to arrive at estimated figures. These make it clear that the actions of the Turkish military led to mass killings and had a devastating impact on survivors, both mentally and physically.

Dersim: The Center of Kurdish Alevis

As a strategic and unique highland characterized by deep valleys, forests, and rivers, Dersim served as a true refuge for Kurdish Alevis.⁵ Since the period of the Ottoman Empire to the present, Dersim has "stood markedly at odds with the politico-cultural landscape of 1930s Turkey,"⁶ for its non-Turkish ethnic character and, more importantly, for the predominance of the "heretic religion" of the Alevis, who represented for the Turkish state a population that "needed to be corrected and their savagery to be dispel[led]."⁷ As such, this article discusses the Dersim genocide as part of the Turkish nation state's homogenization policies and, particularly those that took place inside its borders soon after its foundation between 1920-1923. The policies implemented since 1930—especially those that followed the *İskan Kanunu*/Resettlement Law of 1934 (hereafter Resettlement Law)⁸—laid the foundations for the systematic, continual, and violent Turkification and Islamization of Anatolia. Dersim was targeted soon after by the Kemalist cadres because of its inhabitants' religion and Kurdish ethnic background.

¹ Kaynak Yayınları, *Genelkurmay Belgelerinde Kürt İsyanları II* (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2011), 109-132; Bilal N. Şimşir, *İngiliz Belgeleriyle Türkiye'de Kürt Sorunu (1924-1938): Şeyh Said, Ağrı, ve Dersim Ayaklanmaları* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1991), 301; Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey," in *People Without A Country, The Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed, 1980), 67.

² Dersim Gazetesi, "Zehirli Gazlar Nazi Almanyası'ndan Alınmış!," *Dersim Gazetesi*, May 15, 2019, accessed July 8, 2020, <http://dersimgazetesi.net/zehirli-gazlar-almanyadan-bombardiman-ucaklari-amerikadan-alinmis/>; "Dersim Katliamı İle İlgili Yeni Belgeler Ortaya Çıktı: Dersim'de Nazi Gazları," *Pirha*, May 11, 2019, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.pirha.net/dersim-katliami-ile-ilgili-yeni-belgeler-ortaya-cikti-dersimde-nazi-gazlari-171973.html/11/05/2019/>; Nuri Dersimi, *Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim* (Diyarbakır: Dilan, 1991), 301; Kendal, *Kurdistan*, 67.

³ Kaynak, *Genelkurmay Belgeleri II*, 202; Faik Bulut, *Dersim Raporları* (Istanbul: Evrensel Basım Yayım, 2009), 341; Mahmut Akyürekli, *Dersim Kürt Tedibi 1937-1938* (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2012), 159.

⁴ Nezahat Gündoğan and Kazım Gündoğan, *Dersim'in Kayıp Kızları* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2016), 17; Özgür Fındık, *Kara Vagon, Dersim-Kırım ve Sürgün* (Istanbul: Fam, 2012), 215; Hüsnü Gürbey and Mahsuni Gül, "Dersim'de Nazi Gazı," *Rojnameya Newroz*, May 16, 2019, accessed April 4, 2020, <http://rojnameyanewroz2.com/dersimde-nazi-gazi-h-gurbey-m-gul-14583.html>.

⁵ The region's altitude averages between 1,000 and 1,500 meters in inhabited areas and exceeds 3,000 meters in the high and rocky mountains.

⁶ Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Dersim Massacre, 1937-1938," *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*, July 27, 2011, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/dersim-massacre-1937-1938>.

⁷ Barış Ünlü, "Kürdistan/Türkiye ve Cezayir/Fransa: Sömürge Yöntemleri, Şiddet ve Entellektüeller," in *Türkiye'de Siyasal Şiddetin Boyutları*, ed. Güney Çeğin and İbrahim Şirin (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014), 425.

⁸ *İskan Kanunu* (Turkish Resettlement Law) of 1934 (Law No. 2510, June 21, 1934), (Rep. of Turkey), accessed July 7, 2020, <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/2733.pdf>.

Hamit Bozarşlan, however, made it clear that the official ideology of Turkey was not Kemalism but rather Turkish Islamic Synthesis (TIS), an ideology whose roots can be traced back to the ideas expressed by Ziya Gökalp between 1910 and 1920. The TIS in its current form was developed by a club of right-wing intellectuals (*Aydınlar Ocağı*/Home of Intellectuals) in the 1970s and was subsequently adopted by the generals of the 1980s coup.⁹ Henry Barkey observed that the primary objective of state policy at that time was the assimilation of the Kurds. This state assimilation policy contained both repressive and inclusionary dimensions, with the latter applicable only to those who accepted the dominant Turkish identity.¹⁰ In 1934, the state adopted the Resettlement Law to establish a juridical basis for resettling the country's population according to cultural and linguistic groupings. As such, the state referred to the regions around Dersim as East and South East Anatolia, refusing to identify it as Kurdistan. Furthermore, its residents were referred to euphemistically as the population whose mother tongue was not Turkish and who should therefore be forced to migrate for purposes of assimilation,¹¹ in accordance with the *Islahat/reforms*. To promote demographic change in Anatolia and Kurdistan in particular, the non-Turkish areas were to be repopulated through the state-sponsored resettlement of Turkish immigrants in order to trigger the subsequent assimilation of the non-Turkish population. Accordingly, the country was divided on June 14, 1934 into three zones:

Zone 1: The areas desired to increase the density of the culturally Turkish population.

Zone 2: The areas deposited for the transference and resettlement of the populations that desired to be assimilated into Turkish culture.

Zone 3: The areas that had been decided to be evacuated for the health, economic, cultural, political, military and discipline reasons and where resettlement was prohibited.¹²

Dersim was in the third zone, which meant it was to be evacuated and closed to inhabitants. For that reason, in 1936, the Fourth Inspectorate was established and lieutenant general Abdullah Alpdoğan "was granted the highest judicial and administrative powers to facilitate the implementation of the reform program"¹³ in Dersim. Through this program, non-Turks and non-Muslims would be removed from where they collectively resided and relocated to zones in which they could be assimilated.

The Resettlement Law was used in conjunction with *Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu* (the Law of the Maintenance of Order),¹⁴ another important legal tool of that period. To promote Turkification, state policies sought to rearrange the non-Turkish population such that it would not exceed ten percent of the Turkish population in any one location. Thus, from 1930s on, the state increased these operations, which reached their peak in Dersim in 1938.¹⁵

⁹ Hamit Bozarşlan, "Political Crisis and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey," in *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s, Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*, ed. Robert Olson (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 137.

¹⁰ Henri Barkey, "Under the Gun: Turkish Foreign Policy and the Kurdish Question," in *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*, ed. Robert Olson (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 66.

¹¹ Taha Baran, *1937-1938 Yılları Arasında Basında Dersim* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014), 26.

¹² *İskân Kanunu*, Art. 2 (translation by the author).

¹³ Zeynep Türkyılmaz, "Maternal Colonialism and Turkish Woman's Burden in Dersim: Educating the 'Mountain Flowers' of Dersim," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 3 (2016), 165, accessed July 7, 2020, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2016.0029>.

¹⁴ *Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu* (Law of the Maintenance of Order) of 1925 (Law No. 578, March 4, 1925), (Rep. of Turkey), accessed July 7, 2020, https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR_KARARLAR/kanuntbmmc003/kanuntbmmc003/kanuntbmmc00300578.pdf. This law was planned to be valid for two years first, then on March 2, 1927 was extended for two more years, to March 4, 1929. The law conferred extraordinary powers of authority upon the state rulers, including jurisdiction over the death penalty and the pardoning of those convicted. These powers were harshly employed against the Kurdish opposition, including what took place in Dersim (Tunceli) in 1937/8. See Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 177.

¹⁵ Serhat Aslan, "Kürdistan'da Doğa / Ekoloji Katliamı," *Toplum ve Kuram: Lêkolîn û Xebatên Kurdi Dergisi* 9, (2014), 65, accessed July 7, 2020, https://www.mezopotamyaekoloji.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kurdistanda_Doga_Ekoloji_Katliami.pdf

The Genocide in Dersim¹⁶

Shortly after Raphael Lemkin coined the term *genocide* in 1943,¹⁷ Turkey was among the countries that ratified the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (hereafter referred to as “Genocide Convention”) on July 31, 1950 as a member state of the United Nations.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Turkey has never acknowledged or accepted responsibility for the Turkish state’s part in such mass crimes, including those taking place before the convention’s ratification. On the contrary, Turkey has systematically denied the crimes and continues to do so. In addition to systematically blaming and dehumanizing the victims, the state has mobilized discourses that portray the state itself as the victim in these scenarios.

Despite the existence of strong evidence to support the classification of the militaristic operations in Dersim as genocidal acts, according to the definition set forth in the Genocide Convention, Turkey has denied and minimized these allegations and sought to portray the events of 1938 as a necessary act to civilize the region.¹⁹ In addition, given the contemporary political climate, few dare to discuss these incidents. As such, neither researchers nor politicians have examined or fully acknowledged the events that took place in Dersim in 1938 as a genocide until recently.²⁰ Among these few, Martin van Bruinessen, a Dutch anthropologist who focuses on Kurdish issues, argues that “the brutal Dersim campaign was but the culmination of a series of measures taken in order to forcibly assimilate the Kurds.”²¹ He thus offers the term of ethnocide to characterize the operations.

Although Bruinessen rightly shows that the main aim of the state was assimilation rather than extermination,²² this does not contradict the classification of the act as a genocide itself, particularly in relation to the case of Kurdish Alevis. Alevi Kurds, in general, and those in Dersim in particular, have remained a great concern for the state’s homogenization policies. The Governor of Elazığ,²³ Cemal Bey, had raised concerns in his report regarding the Kurdishness of Alevis,²⁴ while Civil Inspector Hamdi Bey had warned about the rise of Kurdish idealism and identity in Dersim and concluded that civilizing Dersim was a fantasy, in his report referring to Dersim as a boil requiring

¹⁶ In recent years, local authors started to use *tertele*, a Kurdish term in both dialects (Kurmanci and Kirmancki) for the events in Dersim between 1937-38. However, this term does not meet the meaning of genocide. *Tertele* refers to depredation, the physical destruction of the property. Old Dersimian used “*Qirkirin*” (Kurmanci), “*Qirkerdan*” (Kirmancki) for the events of 1937-38, meaning mass killings/genocide. They would say “*Milet qirkirin, malê Dêsim tertele kirin*” (Killed people and depredated the property of Dersim). Therefore, the term of *tertele* is not appropriate to use and also comes with risk, as in the future, it can be used to the refute the mass killing of people in order to deny the genocide.

¹⁷ Raphaël Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944).

¹⁸ United Nations (UN), *General Assembly Resolution 260, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (Genocide Convention), December 9, 1948 (UN Doc. A/Res/260(III)).

¹⁹ Gökçen Başaran İnce, “Zamanında Dersim Nasıl Haber Olmuştur?” December 15, 2011, *Birikim*, accessed July 30, 2020, <https://www.birikimdergisi.com/guncel/577/zamaninda-dersim-nasil-haber-olmustu>; Erdoğan Aydın, Ölüm ve Medeniyet Paradoksunda Dersim, *Dersim Gazetesi*, November 17, 2017, accessed July 31, 2020, <http://dersimgazetesi.net/olum-ve-medeniyet-paradoksunda-dersim/>; Baran, *Yılları Arasında Basında Dersim*, 92.

²⁰ İsmail Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi* (Istanbul: Belge, 1990); Barış Ünlü, “‘Turkishness contract’ and Turkish left,” *Perspectives: Political analysis and commentary from Turkey*, no. 3.13, eds. Ulrike Dufner, Özgür Gürbüz, Semahat Sevim, Yonca Verdioglu (Istanbul: Henrich Böll Stiftung, December 2012), 23, accessed July 31, 2020, https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/perspectives_turkey_3_eng.pdf; Bilgin Ayata and Serra Hakyemez, “The AKP’s engagement with Turkey’s past crimes: an analysis of PM Erdoğan’s ‘Dersim apology’,” *Dialect Anthropology* 37 (2013), 131-143, accessed July 31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-013-9304-3>.

²¹ Martin van Bruinessen, “Genocide in Kurdistan? The Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the Chemical War Against the Iraqi Kurds (1988),” in *Conceptual and Historical Dimensions of Genocide*, ed. George J. Andreopoulos (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 149, *Academia.edu*, accessed June 6, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/2521265/Genocide_in_Kurdistan_The_Suppression_of_the_Dersim_Rebellion_in_Turkey_1937-38_and_the_Chemical_War_Against_the_Iraqi_Kurds_1988.

²² *Ibid.*, 9.

²³ Presently Elazığ.

²⁴ Reşat Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde Ayaklanmalar (1924–1938)* (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1972), 375.

excision.²⁵ In accordance with those reports, The Şark Plan to promote the assimilation of the Kurds²⁶ was formulated by İbrahim Tali Öngören, one of the top architects of the state's homogenization policies.²⁷ The Commander of General of Staff Fevzi Çakmak summarize this plan for Dersim as follows: "Dersim should primarily be accepted as a colony, Kurdishness should be melted into Turkishness, and then should be subjected to particular Turkish jurisdiction."²⁸

Following a seven-year period of preparation for Dersim that began in the 1930s, the implementation of the plan began in 1937. Therefore, the militaristic operations in Dersim during the period of 1937-38 represented an attempt to exterminate the population. Although state documents mainly emphasize the Kurdish character of Dersim, it was not targeted solely because of its ethnic composition but also due to the city's central significance for Kurdish Alevi.²⁹ Therefore, the main seyid³⁰ families were among those specifically targeted for killing and exile. Seyid Rıza, one of the most respected religious and political leaders of Dersim, was one of them.

In addition, the main target of the state was the political structure of Dersim which was based upon two main institutions: the Ocax system and the tribe system. The Ocax system is a religious institution unique to Kurdish Alevi social life, functioning to address major societal issues without the need for any governmental oversight. According to the second article of the Genocide Convention, to classify an event as a genocide does not require a certain number or percentage of a particular group be killed, but, rather, hinges on the calculated intention of the act. Thus, by the definition provided in the second article, the actions of the Turkish state clearly meet the criteria to be classified as genocidal not just because of the intention to kill a number of people but because the intervention was intended to dismantle Kurdish Alevi social structures,³¹ to remove the population from the region, and assimilate those remaining, as clearly stated by Celal Bayar, the Prime Minister, in a speech to Parliament in 1938.³²

Taking a closer look at Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, genocide is defined as:

[A]ny 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

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Baskın Oran, "Ulus Devlet ve Dersim," in 1. Uluslararası Tunceli (Dersim) Sempozyumu Bildiriler, ed. Hıdır Özdemir, et al. (Tunceli: Tunceli Üniversitesi, 2010), XXVI.

²⁷ *Jandarma Umum Komutanlığı Raporu* (JUK Report) (İstanbul: Kaynak, [1932] 2010), 239. Jandarma Umum Komutanlığı hereby (JUK) will be used as the abbreviation.

²⁸ Original text as follows: "Dersim evvelâ Koloni gibi nazarı itibara alınmalı, Türk camiası içinde Kürtlük eritilmeli, ondan sonra tedricen öz Türk hukukuna mazhar kılınmalıdır," JUK Report, 242.

²⁹ Recent efforts to argue that the 1937-38 operations in Dersim were not targeting Kurdish identity but only the Alevi community are not accurate. Dersim was targeted because of its position at the intersection of two identities, both equally *non grata* within a Turkish Islamic ideological state. In addition to the sources referenced in the article, there are quite important witness statements and memoirs containing accounts from soldiers who took part in the operations. One of them writes: "[W]e have started to move on the Kurds in Dersim on July 27, 1938," see, Zeynep Türkyılmaz, "Dersim Soykırımı ve 'Kötülüğün Sıradanlığı,'" *Agos*, November 11, 2019, accessed March 8, 2020, <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/23286/dersim-soykirimi-ve-kotulugun-siradanligi>. In a documentary film on Dersim 1937-38, Özgür Fındık, "Fındık - 38 Dersim Sürgünleri," aired on May 4, 2011, YouTube video, 01:06:39, uploaded on December 6, 2018, *Can TV*, accessed March 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao-qvFXcVg>, a Turkish soldier who participated in the operations recalls and says "we came here and gathered, took the Kurds to a stream and killed them," Fındık, *Kara Vagon*, 00:21:07. The same soldier recalls that their commander stated that "there are four traitors in the world. Do you know them? One is the rat, one is the wolf, one is the pig and the other is the Kurd," Fındık, *Kara Vagon*, 00:22:09-00:22:30. A villager in a western city of Turkey that hosted those exiled from Dersim adds that "we were told that Kurds came from the caves, we went to see," Fındık, *Kara Vagon*, 00:50:19. Despite previous references, recently, state sources have joined scholarly efforts to downplay Dersim's Kurdish character. See Fındık, *Kara Vagon*, 01:06:39.

³⁰ Members of a sacred lineage/caste who have the rights and duties to perform religious services. Dilşa Deniz, "Kurdish Alevi Belief System, Rêya Heqî/Raa Heqî: Structure, Networking, Ritual, and Functions," in *Kurdish Alevi and the Case of Dersim: Historical and Contemporary Insights*, ed. Erdal Gezik & Ahmet Kerim Gültekin (Lexington, London, 2019), 53.

³¹ The political structure (*ashirets*) and the religion structure (the *seyids*) were attacked first. Leaders were executed and the societal survival mechanisms were ruined.

³² Suat Akgül, *Yakın Tarihimizde Dersim İsyanları ve Gerçekler* (İstanbul: Boğaziçi, 1992), 155.

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.³³

With the exception of part (d) – which cannot be assessed due to lack of information – all other acts referenced within the article took place. Thus, in contrast to van Bruinessan's argument calling the event 'ethnocide' due to the assimilation policy of the State targeting the Kurds, it is evident that not just Kurdish identity but most importantly Kurdish Alevi identity and the population were targeted. Nearly all state reports about Dersim from that time expressed the opinion that the *seyids* represented a danger and exerted a negative effect on the society.³⁴ *Seyids* are the members of an important institution of Kurdish Alevism. Accordingly, operations in Dersim were direct attacks on the survival of the Kurdish Alevi community and also sought to eradicate its political and societal structures, which are uniquely shaped by a combination of tribal and religious affiliation. Therefore, given that Dersim operations deliberately targeted the Kurdish Alevi society, which ultimately resulted in the mass killing of between a minimum of twenty percent and fifty percent of the Alevi Kurd population in Dersim, this article argues that the whole process should be considered a genocidal act.

According to theories of genocide, the denial stage is ranked as the last or tenth stage of most genocides.³⁵ In Dersim, this stage actually preceded the genocide when the city of Tunceli was formed officially by law 2884 in parliament in 1935 (hereafter Dersim/Tunceli Law)³⁶ one year before the city was physically established, as show below in Figure 1.³⁷ Derived from the Turkish words for iron (*tunç*) and hand (*el*), respectively, the city's name carried with its connotations of the iron hand or fist (of the Turks). This is strong evidence suggesting the genocide was already being carefully planned prior to 1937-38 and Tunceli was the name given to the region where the planned genocide would take place. Thus, Tunceli and Dersim have always been two dissenting terms and political markers: while Dersim represents the name of the past, evoking Kurdishness, religious belief, and autonomy, Tunceli continues to be reminiscent of the state's intent to Turkify and Islamize, and the culmination of these efforts in the 1938 Dersim genocide.



Figure 1. Map of Tunceli/Dersim. Part of the Dersim region was designated as Tunceli city for the military operation of 1937-38.

³³ UN, *Genocide Convention*, Art. 2.

³⁴ Ömer Kemal Açar, *Tunceli-Dersim Coğrafyası* (Istanbul: Türkiye Basımevi, 1940), 32; Akgül, *Yakın Tarihimizde Dersim İsyanları*, 162.

³⁵ Stages of genocide: 1. Classification; 2. Symbolization; 3. Discrimination; 4. Dehumanization; 5. Organization; 6. Polarization; 7. Preparation; 8. Persecution; 9. Extermination; 10. Denial. See Gregory Stanton, "The Ten Stages of Genocide," *Genocide Watch*, accessed July 6, 2020, <https://www.genocidewatch.com/ten-stages-of-genocide>.

³⁶ Tunceli Vilâyetinin İdaresi Hakkında Kanun (Law on the Administration of the City of Tunceli) of 1935, (Law No.2884), January 2, 1936, (Rep. of Turkey), *Resmi Gazete*, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/3195.pdf>.

³⁷ Derived from the Turkish words for iron (*tunç*) and hand (*el*), respectively, the city's name carried with its connotations of the iron hand or fist (of the Turks). This is strong evidence suggesting the genocide was already being carefully planned prior to 1937-38 and Tunceli was the name given to the region where the planned genocide would take place.

Assessing the Harm Inflicted

Not only did the state plan the genocide, but they also made explicit efforts to suppress knowledge of the death toll and prevent its inclusion in official documents or publications. Considering the Law on the Maintenance of Order (1925) through which the state controlled any actions that might upset the application of their plan before and after Dersim 1937-38, including the media. The British ambassador at the time, Percy Loraine, noted “the Turkish press, ... has preserved a complete silence”³⁸ with exception of “the *Son Telegraf*, which published on the 14th May an article hinting at trouble in the eastern vilayets. The newspaper was promptly suspended and did not reappear until several days later.”³⁹ The only voice raised in that period was Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, a conservative religious poet, who was in conflict with the Kemalist cadres. While Kısakürek refused to recognize the Kurdish and Alevi identity of Dersimians, and, like the Kemalist/nationalists faction, referred to the residents as “Muslim,” he claimed that the events in Dersim in 1938, “had no similar example in history and at least 50,000 Muslims were killed.”⁴⁰ Years later on February 19, 1942, the Prime Minister, İbrahim Refik Saydam, condemned the mass killings due to the use of poisonous gas in a telegram to the Chief of General Staff Fevzi Çakmak. “The gas that [has been] used against its own people has caused mass killings of civilians. As a doctor and a human, I must express that I am very ashamed of it.”⁴¹ This telegram clearly shows that a high number of people were killed, although no information is available to indicate exactly how many, as the state kept the records strictly private. As such, there are only two distinct state records, both gleaned from indirect sources, as the state never officially accepted or rejected responsibility for these mass killings.

While scholars and the public lack access to the official records, Serap Yeşiltuna, a Turkish nationalist scholar and politician⁴² is the only one who has been granted access to these documents and she estimated the casualty figure to be 13,801.⁴³ In contrast, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek suggests this figure likely exceeded 50,000, a figure four times higher than the official records. Since the state continues to prevent access to the archives, ambiguity continues to surround the number of casualties and the number of wounded and forcibly relocated individuals. As such, researchers have mainly used official census data preceding and following the period between 1937-38 to infer the approximate number of casualties. However, in an effort to prevent researchers from using this method, the state sources—most likely deliberately—from 1930 onward, have provided dramatically contrasting estimates, sometimes even provided by the same persons, as discussed below. Since the city itself was newly designed and not yet formally established, official census data remain unavailable. Thus, many individuals counted as part of the population of the towns that came to be considered Tunceli, were later added a second time to the population count to reach the exact number of casualties.

Estimating how many were killed, injured, and exiled is not only challenging due to the state’s efforts to suppress the records. Though census data could provide another means of calculating the possible death toll, reports on the regional population vary significantly. The Ministry of Interior indicated that somewhere between sixty-five and seventy thousand individuals were living in Dersim in December 1935.⁴⁴ In contrast, in the book published by Gendarmerie General Command in 1932, this figure was given to be 150,000 by the same minister.⁴⁵ This book was prepared by

³⁸ Şimşir, *İngiliz Belgeleri*, 303.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Hasan Demir, *Dersim’den Tunceli’ye 38 Katliam Tanıklıkları* (İstanbul: Belge, 2011), 55.

⁴¹ “Başbakan: Tunceli’de kendi halkına karşı kullanılan zehirli gaz düşmana bile uygulanamaz, utanç duyuyorum!,” T24, November 19, 2014, accessed September 7, 2019, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/basbakan-tuncelide-kendi-halkina-karsi-kullanilan-zehirli-gaz-dusmana-bile-uygulanamaz-utanc-duyuyorum,277596>.

⁴² She was an independent candidate for Parliament in the 2011 election in her birthplace, Balıkesir. Though independent, she was actually supported by the Ulusal Party, one of the smallest ultra-nationalist party. She used very anti-Kurdish slogans and gave hate speeches against Kurds. For instance, her billboard slogan was “Rescue Balıkesir from the Kurds.” Another said, “[w]ho should fear, Turks or the Kurds?” See *Beyazgazete*, “12 Eylül’ün acıları yetmedi mi? İrkçi afişten sonra darbe çağırısı,” *Beyazgazete*, February 2, 2012, accessed April 8, 2020, <http://beyazgazete.com/haber/2012/2/12-eyul-un-acilari-yetmedi-mi-irkci-afisten-sonra-darbe-cagrisi-1038130.html>.

⁴³ Serap Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim Arşivi* (İstanbul: İleri Yayınları, 2012), 29.

⁴⁴ İsmail Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu*, 10.

⁴⁵ JUK Report, 251; Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim Arşivi*, 1115.

Kazim Orbay, a high-ranking army officer who was later commanding the operations in Dersim⁴⁶ and only a hundred copies were distributed to particular state officials who would later play a key role in military operations in Dersim. This figure should therefore be considered the most accurate source. The same number was also cited by Naşit Uluğ, a Turkish journalist (and intelligence agent),⁴⁷ one of only a few outsiders who had the opportunity to travel to Kurdistan during that period.

Nevertheless, Martin van Bruinnesen has relied on estimates that place the population between sixty-five and seventy thousand, a calculation justified by his claim that the historical district of Dersim included parts of much larger neighboring cities such as Sivas, Erzincan, and Elazığ provinces. Therefore, contemporary authors cite the “much higher population figure of 150,000, apparently referring to larger Dersim.”⁴⁸ Baki Öz, a pro-Turkish writer, also argues that Dersim should not be understood only as the nucleus land around Tunceli, but Dersim’s tribes dispersion area should also be included.⁴⁹ As such, van Bruinnesen suggests that casualty estimates exceeding forty thousand are greatly exaggerated.

Although both authors are correct in their attempts to account for all those residing within the large geographical area historically referred to as Dersim, the given population figures do not actually contain all the areas they refer to. On the contrary, these figures are based on the actual population of the eight districts,⁵⁰ which later included Tunceli city. Therefore, van Bruinnesen’s theory is shown to be inaccurate. The population estimate of 150,000 is actually derived from the districts falling within the region of Tunceli, an area outlined for military operations, which Şükrü Kaya, the Ministry of Interior, clearly describes as “the 150,000 population of districts that contains Dersim.”⁵¹ This is clear evidence that state sources referenced two very different figures when addressing different audiences. Although state officials were provided with the 150,000 figure, the publicly shared estimates remained at 65-70,000, a figure that likely accounts for only half of the actual population, leading to the intended confusion among scholars. This also suggests that the number of people to be killed had been planned and calculated prior to the event.

Nuri Dersimi, a Kurdish politician from that period, indicates that the Turkish state surveyed Dersim’s population in 1927 and estimated the population to number approximately 270,000, excluding residents of the city of Pülümür. He also criticized Erzincan’s Governor, Ali Kemali, for exaggerating the size of the Turkish population in Erzincan while underrepresenting the Kurdish one.⁵² Ömer Kemal Açar, an important state official of the region in that period, cited the population of Dersim (excluding Pülümür) as 93,117 in 1935 and 105,911 in 1936, a figure that must also be recognized as a misrepresentation due to the large segment of the population that sought to remain unregistered to avoid compulsory military service and taxation.⁵³ To support Dersimi’s claim, Uluğ offers the following example: “*Kureyşan*’s population reaches 2000. If you ask them, this number does not exceed 700. You cannot learn the exact population of any of these tribes; they are afraid that the tax would be raised, thus we cannot hide from the government.”⁵⁴ A similar opinion has been expressed by Munzur Çem, a contemporary Dersimian writer, who argues that “Kurds are the people who tend to keep their relation with the state to a minimum—as it is seen as a foreign power- and to avoid paying tax or performing military service.”⁵⁵

Ibrahim Tali described Dersim as “very crowded and armed. To disarm Dersim is not a matter of days, weeks or months. It is a two-year job.”⁵⁶ Such a claim clearly demonstrates the length of

⁴⁶ Akgül, *Yakın Tarihimizde Dersim İsyanları*, 157-158.

⁴⁷ Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu*, 145.

⁴⁸ Bruinnesen, *Genocide in Kurdistan*, 4.

⁴⁹ Baki Öz, *Dersim Olayı* (Istanbul: Can, 2004), 8.

⁵⁰ The eight districts are as follows Pertek, Çemişgezek, Çarsancak (Pêr/Akpazar), Hozat, Ovacık, Pülümür, Nazimiye.

⁵¹ JUK Report, 251.

⁵² Dersimi, *Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim*, 57-58.

⁵³ Açar, *Tunceli-Dersim Coğrafyası*, 19.

⁵⁴ Naşit Hakki Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim* (Istanbul: Kaynak, 2009), 64.

⁵⁵ Munzur Çem, *Dersim Merkezli Kürt Aleviliği* (Istanbul: Vate, 2010), 392-393.

⁵⁶ JUK Report, 232.

time that was necessary for the state to prepare for the operations of 1938 and also accounts for the exact two-year length of time for the operations in Dersim. Both Ađar and Uluđ rely upon the state's population estimates, that exceeded one hundred thousand. The same approach has been adopted by contemporary ultra-nationalist Turkish sources, who estimate the population of Dersim in 1935 to be 107,723,⁵⁷ to quell recent discussions surrounding the suppressing of census data to mask casualty numbers in that period. Thus, to derive casualty estimates using the few available sources, one must consider: a state record dated November 11, 1939 indicating that 13,801 persons had been killed and Kısakürek's figure of 50,000.⁵⁸ Raffi Bedrosyan, an Armenian writer, noted death tolls as "rang[ing] from 13,000 according to Turkish sources—40,000 to U.S. and 80,000 to Kurdish sources."⁵⁹ Despite the lack of the reference, this is the first time the US mentioned a figure.

These are the only figures available. The nationalist scholar Yeşiltuna argues that even the figure of 13,801 is high and does not fit the order of the documentation of 155 folders, a series of reports documenting the years between 1935 and 1938, beginning from August 13, 1935 and ending on September 12, 1939. She argues that the casualty figures should be accepted as 2,000-3,000 at most,⁶⁰ suggesting that the currently accepted figure is nearly three to four times higher than the actual figures and argues for the replacement of the documents.⁶¹ However, she fails to explain why and how the documents on Dersim 1937-38 in the folder were replaced in the General Chief Staff's archive, the most secure building in Turkey. If there was a switch, as she suggests, then it must have taken place with the complicity of state officials. In that case, it is the state that changed the figures, meaning they either reduced or increased the numbers. If, on the one hand, the figure was reduced, that means the actual number is higher by more than two or three times. On the other, if the state increased the numbers, it implies that they did not correctly document the actual number of casualties in 1938 and thus gradually increased this figure as they became aware of more accurate estimates. In both cases, it is clear that the state, alone, has the power to alter the figures and any change taking place has the necessity to be in congruence with the interests of the state. The second of the two scenarios is the more probable. As discussed below, the death reports were completed mostly after the 1940s, between five and ten years after the events of 1938, and thus it is important to compare these numbers with the yearly census to determine the most accurate casualty figures.

Year	Population
1940	94,639
1945	90,446
1950	105,759
1955	121,743 (Firat Development Agency 2013). ⁶²

As evident above, the rate of population growth between 1940 and 1945 reveals a negative trend with the overall population decreasing by 4,193. Between 1945 and 1950, the population increased by 15,313 (seventeen percent)—a figure which represents the most dramatic increase—while during the period between 1950 and 1955 an increase of 15,984 (fifteen percent took place).

⁵⁷ Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim Arşivi*, 13.

⁵⁸ Demir, *Dersim'den Tunceli'ye*, 55.

⁵⁹ Raffi Bedrosyan, "Dersim: A First Step in Facing the Past in Turkey," *The Armenian Weekly*, December 1, 2011, accessed April 4, 2020, <https://armenianweekly.com/2011/12/01/dersim-a-first-step-in-facing-the-past-in-turkey/>.

⁶⁰ In a documentary about the events in Dersim in 1938, Haydar Yıldırım, a Turkish soldier in that period indicates that the army had tied 500-600 people to each other, fired upon them with machine guns, and threw their bodies into the river. See Fındık, *Kara Vagon*, 00:25:54-00:26:08.

⁶¹ Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim Arşivi*, 28-29.

⁶² Firat Development Agency, *Tunceli*, December 31, 2003, accessed June 13, 2019, <http://investintunceli.gov.tr/tr/files/rakamlarla-tunceli.pdf>.

Şükrü Aslan, who interestingly refers to the 1935 census as the last census before *the great exile*,⁶³ a term by which he avoids any reference to the violence and mass killings that took place⁶⁴ explains this increase in the 1950 census as partially emanating from the return of those exiled.⁶⁵ If we take the average of the two to be 16% growth, that means the population in 1945 (94,639 plus 15,144 (%16)) should be 109,781, revealing the unexpected absence of 19,335 individuals. If we combine the estimate of 13,810 casualties with the figure of 19,335, the total number of individuals missing from Dersim during this period is roughly 33,145. Moreover, if we include the missing population between 1935 and 1940 using the same methods of calculation as employed above, 107,723 minus 94,639 is 13,084. Thus, combining these figures, (33,145 plus 13,084, which represents the normal growth of the population) suggests that 46,229 people were killed at minimum.

In another calculation, if one considers the population of 150,000 in contrast with the 1945 figure, it appears that 59,554 individuals are missing (150,000 – 90,446; 59,554 – 11,818- the forcibly moved population - equals 47,736). If we were to add at least 15,000 to account for normal population growth, the figure of the missing population would reach 62,736. Thus, it is clear that according to two different calculations based on the state sources regarding the census in 1937-38 in Dersim, minimum between 46,000-63,000 people were killed and over one and a half thousand people, mostly children, are missing.

Even the figures calculated above, since they are based on the registered population, do not account for all children. Young children in that period were not usually registered in the census and therefore were not included in figures employed in both calculations. As Dersimians mostly sought to avoid encounters with the state, the registration of young children in particular was irregular and infrequent. Since the penetration of the state was not total, the state mainly put pressure on *muhtars*⁶⁶ to register the population. *Muhtars* registered people on an irregular basis to balance the competing demands of the state and the community. Ağar and Uluğ both argue that “a large number of the population is not registered,”⁶⁷ a fact supported by the document below. The document belongs to the family of Bertal Axa, as shown in Figure 2, who was a merchant. The document was provided at the behest of his grandson, upon the condition that it be used only for cadastral and inheritance purposes. Subsequently, such documents were rarely furnished given their potential to be used as evidence of crimes.⁶⁸

⁶³ I have italicized the term *the great exile* for emphasis. In the original, Şükrü Aslan refers to “Büyük sürgün” (the great exile). See Şükrü Aslan, “Genel Nüfus Sayımı Verilerine Göre Dersim’de Kayıp Nüfus,” in *Herkesin Bildiği Sır: Dersim*, ed. Şükrü Aslan (Istanbul: İletişim, 2010), 404.

⁶⁴ Several sentences later, he cites a figure which estimates the death toll to be 13,100.

⁶⁵ Aslan, *Genel Nüfus Sayımı Verilerine*, 404.

⁶⁶ These elected village and neighborhood representatives act on behalf of state officials. See International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Elections in Turkey: 2019 Local Elections: Frequently Asked Questions* (Washington DC: Middle East and North Africa: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, March 25, 2019), 1, accessed July 31, 2020, https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/2019_ifes_turkey_local_elections_faqs_final.pdf

⁶⁷ Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim*, 64; Ağar, *Tunceli-Dersim Coğrafyası*, 18.

⁶⁸ Baskin Oran, “1938 Dersim: Bir belge de Nazimiye Nüfus Müdürlüğü’nden!,” *Radikal*, August 28, 2014, accessed July 29, 2019, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/baskin-oran/1938-dersim-bir-belge-de-nazimiye-nufus-mudurlugunden-1209663/>.

Belgenin birinci sayfası

NÜFUS KAYIT ÖRNEĞİ					İL		İLÇESİ		MAHALLESİ / KÖYÜ		CİLT NO	HANE NO
					TUNCELİ		NAZİMYE (1541)		SARIYAYLA KÖYÜ		33	1
SIRA	BSN	C	YAKINLIK DERECESESİ	T.C. KİMLİK NO	ADI	SOYADI	BABA ADI	ANA ADI	DOĞUM YERİ VE TARİHİ	MED. HALİ VE DİNİ	TESCİL TARİHİ	OLAYLAR VE TARİHLERİ
1	1	E	Kendisi	71527024794	BERTAL	YURTSEVER	MEHMET	ZARİFE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1882	Evli İslam	---	Ölüm: 00/1938 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
2	2	K	Eşi	71524024858	FADİLE	YURTSEVER	KAMER	ŞAHHANIM	NAZİMYE 01.07.1884	Dul İslam	---	Ölüm: 00/1938 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
3	3	K	Kızı	62605322130	BELGÖZAR	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1909	Evli İslam	---	Ölüm: KAPALI KAYIT Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
4	4	E	Oğlu	71521024912	ALI	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1911	Dul İslam	---	Ölüm: 00/1940 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
5	5	K	Kızı	71518025076	AĞCI	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1912	Bekar İslam	00.00.0041	Ölüm: KAPALI KAYIT Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
6	6	K	Kızı	10218068488	ZÖHRE	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1913	Bekar İslam	00.00.0041	Ölüm: 15/07/1995 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
7	7	K	Kızı	71512025294	AZİME	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1914	Bekar İslam	00.00.1941	Ölüm: SAĞ Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
8	8	E	Oğlu	71509025368	AZİZ	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1922	Bekar İslam	00.00.1925	Ölüm: 00/1938 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
9	10	E	Oğlu	71500025588	ŞÖKRÜ	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.03.1926	Bekar İslam	00.00.1926	Ölüm: 00/1938 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
10	12	K	Kızı	71487025748	ADİLE	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 22.12.1931	Bekar İslam	00.00.1931	Ölüm: 00/1938 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
11	18	E	Oğlu	71479026310	KAZİM	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1932	Bekar İslam	15.04.1937	Ölüm: 00/1938 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---
12	19	K	Kızı	10118072020	FATMA	YURTSEVER	BERTAL	FADİLE	NAZİMYE 01.07.1933	Bekar İslam	15.04.1937	Ölüm: 00/1938 Evlendirme: --- Boşanma: ---

DÜŞÜNCELER		
1	BERTAL	DOĞUM : 07.08.2006 TARİHİ İLADİYE ÇEVİRİLMİŞTİR. 5490 SAYILI KANUNUN 39. MADDESİ VE NÜF.VAT.İŞL.GN.MD.10.GÜMRÜK İLE 07.08.2006 TARİHİ OLURUNA DAYANILARAK DOĞUM TARİHİ TAMAMLAMA İŞLEMİ YAPILMIŞTIR.
2	FADİLE	EVLENME (00.00.0000) : EVLENEREK GELDİĞİ YER : BİLİNMEYEN İLÇESİ
2	FADİLE	DOĞUM : 07.08.2006 TARİHİ İLADİYE ÇEVİRİLMİŞTİR. 5490 SAYILI KANUNUN 39. MADDESİ VE NÜF.VAT.İŞL.GN.MD.10.GÜMRÜK İLE 07.08.2006 TARİHİ OLURUNA DAYANILARAK DOĞUM TARİHİ TAMAMLAMA İŞLEMİ YAPILMIŞTIR.
3	BELGÖZAR	EVLENME (00.00.0000) : EVLENEREK GİTTİĞİ YER : BİLİNMEYEN İLÇESİ

Figure 2. Document belonging to family of Bertal Axa. See Radikal, 29/08/2014.⁶⁹

Based on the above document, Ağci (1912), Zöhre (1913), and Azime (1914)⁷⁰ were registered on the same date of 1941, while the first four people have not been registered at all, indicating that approximately seven people out of twelve may not have been registered before 1936,⁷¹ which would amount to nearly half the population. This, in turn, supports the previous estimates of the unregistered population and the state's estimate that 150,000 individuals resided in Dersim before the genocide. The fact that so many people were registered after 1941, three years after the genocide, explains why it was not possible to count the casualties from bombings, poisonous gas, burning of forests, stabbing, and the use of machine guns in indiscriminate mass killing at that time. It is clear from the document that, particularly in 1938, no exact count of the casualties had been attempted. The state then began its efforts to determine the approximate death toll, as potential victims would have been registered a few years later. According to the document above, only three out of twelve people were registered in the 1935 census. Therefore, neither the population figures below a 100 thousand are correct, nor the given casualty figure of 13,810. In another report, the Third Army Inspectorate indicated that "in two searches and a total of seventeen days, 7,954 persons have been taken out of the searched region, dead or alive."⁷² If we compare these seventeen days with the larger two-year timeframe, it is not hard to imagine that the true number of casualties must have

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ The correct Kurdish spelling is Axcê, Zöra, and Ezime.

⁷¹ In the news given about the document, it was indicated this document was only provided for purposes of cadastre and family hereditary transmission. Later, when the state realized that it could reveal the number of casualties, it was not permitted to be given to individuals. This is further evidence for the exact number of casualties. See Oran, 1938 *Dersim*.

⁷² Kaynak, *Genelkurmay Belgeleri II*, 203, 205.

been significantly higher. Because of the massive number of causalities, the state, perhaps either reluctant or unable to provide the exact number of causalities, has chosen to employ a definition that relies upon the distinction of dead or alive.

Regarding the 11,818 people forcibly removed, which was a figure common to all reports,⁷³ particularly that by Öngören, it is clear that the state had initially planned the removal of 2,000 people, then went on to add an additional 5,000,⁷⁴ and subsequently, once again doubled this figure, further evidence that mass extermination was the state's ultimate intention. These figures could indeed be at least partially accurate, as the process of removal had to be more carefully planned and carried out.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, this figure cannot represent the entirety of affected persons because it does not account for the thousands of young children who were removed from their families⁷⁶ and forcibly adopted by Turkish military officials for Turkification and Islamization. In the document above, two children were killed in 1938, while two were declared as a *closed record*, meaning they are lost persons. Since both of them were young women, this effectively means that they were either abducted and likely engaged in compulsory sex work, committing suicide to avoid this end,⁷⁷ or were killed but were not found. Thus, excluding Ali and Zöhre, ten members of a family of twelve⁷⁸ were killed or lost in the years 1937 or 1938. If we carefully study these records, we note that there were five children under the age of sixteen, and five adults between twenty-four and twenty-nine, so there were only two males that could have potentially been involved in the fighting from that family: the father and Ali. As we know, the father was a merchant and his son worked with him, indicating that none of these family members could be considered a "rebel" in any sense of the word, and so were unlikely to be targeted for removal. Moreover, the father Bertal was actually a tradesman and collaborating with the state by providing feed for their horses.⁷⁹ As such, this document clearly reveals that this family was likely subject to a planned but indiscriminate killing of whomever the state could access and target effectively. As indicated above, newborn babies and the unborn population (not knowing how many women were pregnant) have also not been added to the figures. There are many eyewitness testimonies recalling the killing of pregnant women with bayonets by the soldiers and their unborn children as well as the killing of young infants.⁸⁰

According to a careful study of the Dersim/Tunçeli Law (1935), article 34 allows for any person associated with the "crimes" committed by any other individual either from Dersim who has traveled to the provinces of Elazığ, Malatya, Sivas, Erzincan, Erzurum, Gümüşhane, Bingöl, or persons from there who committed such related crimes in Dersim, to be included under the jurisdiction of the special courts located in Tunceli.⁸¹ This provision made it possible for the state to target specific, particular individuals even those residing outside of Tunceli's borders. Furthermore, these cities used to be largely populated by Kurdish Alevis, suggesting that—although the operation was portrayed as applying chiefly to the area renamed Tunceli—in fact, the jurisdiction of Tunceli Law and associated operations included nearly the whole Kurdish-Alevi region. This suggest that figures accounting only for the Tunceli population would not include the population killed in these additional cities nor the Dersimians killed in other parts of Turkey. For instance, a majority of the young males taken for military service in that period never returned.⁸² To date there has been no research on this matter.

⁷³ JUK Report, 13-17.

⁷⁴ Hüseyin Aygün, *Dersim 38 Resmîyet ve Hakikat* (Ankara: Dipnot, 2010), 99.

⁷⁵ Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim Arşivi*, 300-301.

⁷⁶ Rose Polat Agum, *Bego-Dersim 1938 ve Sonrası* (Istanbul: Belge, 2018), 70.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁸ *Oran, 1938 Dersim*. Actually, fifty-four members of the family were killed and the grandmother committed suicide when she heard that the family had been massacred, making a total of fifty-five lives lost. The document is based on the account of only one of the nucleus family members from within the broader family. See *Oran, 1938 Dersim*.

⁷⁹ Munzur Çem, *Qurzeli Usio'ın 70 Yılı* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014), 68-69.

⁸⁰ Demir, *Dersim'den Tunceli'ye* 38, 179.

⁸¹ Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu*, 18.

⁸² Agum, *Bego*, 85.

Apart from the killed or forcibly removed populations, the remaining residents must also be considered a population deeply and negatively affected by the events of 1938, a matter which is included in the definition of genocide. Thus, the studies focused only on the final death toll, a partial acknowledgement of the true impact of a genocide or mass killing. In the case of Dersim, all the leaders and the nearly half of the population of the community were killed and/or forcibly displaced from their community. In her memoir, *Ane Xatun*, the surviving granddaughter of a former member of parliament *Diyap Axa*, describes how she suffered from insomnia as she tried to answer researchers' questions about the events of 1938.⁸³

There is additional evidence that more killings were planned following the initial operations. A message from the Ministry of Interior to the Prime Ministry office dated May 18, 1937 indicates that, "instead of settling our troops in the heartland of Dersim to struggle until they give up, it was better to undermine their living conditions by destroying villages, herds and crops."⁸⁴ As such, to increase the ultimate number of long-term casualties, they sought to destroy the material bases of the population's survival and livelihood such as livestock by burning crops,⁸⁵ bombing the natural environment, and looting and burning houses, leaving many survivors to suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and at risk of infectious disease. Moreover, state operators were also actively engaged in the deliberate killing of the wounded.⁸⁶ The lack of medical care and accommodation during the exceptionally long and harsh winter conditions that characterized mountain life caused more suffering and indirect casualties⁸⁷ than are able to be accounted for in the overall death figures.

There are various testimonies addressing the trauma of genocide⁸⁸ and its effects on mental health including suicidal tendencies, crying to the point of blindness and eye damage, complete silence, as well as psychosomatic consequences that appear in various oral history studies, deep interviews,⁸⁹ and more recently published literature on the Dersim genocide and forced displacement.⁹⁰ All of this speaks clearly to the heavy trauma inflicted upon Dersimian society.⁹¹ Moreover, the problems resulting from widespread sexual violence against women⁹² and potential pregnancies, suicides, and the killing of babies⁹³ is not accounted for and there is total silence from both Dersimians and the Turkish state on the matter. While the state has kept silent to hide its crimes, larger society also remains silent because of the shame and trauma surrounding sexual crimes.

Prior to the Nazis, Gas was Used for Mass Killing in Dersim

The first documented use of poisonous gas in Dersim is described by Nuri Dersimi, where "the region was covered by a thick veil of mist due to the poisonous gas bombs from planes, where no living creature was left, and the scene was of houses and the forests set on fire, which looked like a state of hell."⁹⁴ Because of his books, in which he gives very important and detailed information

⁸³ Fatma Betül Günday, "Adm Perihan Olsun" *Diyap Ağa'nın Torunu Ane Hatun'un Hikayesi* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2016), 152.

⁸⁴ Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim Arşivi*, 511.

⁸⁵ Demir, *Dersim'den Tunceli'ye*, 192; Agum, *Bego*, 32.

⁸⁶ Akyürekli, *Dersim Kürt Tedibi 1937-1938*, 187.

⁸⁷ Agum, *Bego*, 68.

⁸⁸ Aygün, *Dersim 38*, 100; Günday, *Adm Perihan Olsun*; Agum, *Bego*, 72.

⁸⁹ İhami Algör, *Ma Sekerdo Kardaş? "Dersim 38" Tanıklıkları* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2010); Cemal Taş, *Dağların Kayıp Anahtarı-Dersim 1938 Anlatıları* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2011); Fındık, *Kara Vagon, Dersim- Kırım ve Sürgün*, 43-219; Celal Yıldız, *Dersim Dile Geldi-Dersim Otuz Sekiz'in Çocukları Konuştu* (Ankara: Nika, 2012); Gündoğan and Gündoğan, *Dersim'in Kayıp Kızları*, 2016.

⁹⁰ Emirali Yağan, *Dersim Defterleri – Beyaz Dağ'da Bir Gün* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2013); Hasan Sağlam, *Yasak Mıntıkanın Çocukları* (Istanbul: Totem, 2015); Hasan Sağlam, *Toprağına Tutunanlar-Yasak Mıntıkanın Çocukları II* (Istanbul: Totem, 2018); Günday, *Adm Perihan olsun*, 2016; Agum, *Bego*.

⁹¹ Mustafa Erdoğan, "Dersim 38," interview by Dilşa Deniz and Hasan Kaplan (September 2009), in Mazgirt, Dersim, unpublished audio-visual recording.

⁹² Agum, *Bego*, 60.

⁹³ Agum, *Bego*, 42, 43, 58.

⁹⁴ Dersimi, *Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim*, 291.

in relation to Dersim and other Kurdish massacres, Dersimi himself has been targeted in an effort to discredit him. As such, for nearly seventy years, the role of poisonous gas in mass killings was not taken into consideration seriously until it was officially referenced by a former Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then Police Chief, Ihsan Sabri Çağlayangil, in 1986. In an interview, Ihsan Sabri Çağlayangil stated that “through the entrance of the caves they poisoned them like rats.”⁹⁵ In a news report by Tan Gazette dated August 3, 1937, it is indicated that there was a training course in Elazığ for that same purpose.⁹⁶ Thus, rumors still circulate that this gas was actually tested in Dersim⁹⁷ prior to its use in Nazi Germany.⁹⁸ Furthermore, in a telegram from the general inspectorate and commander of the operation in Dersim, Abdullah Alpdoğan, to Ankara a request for supplies of gas was formally made, as shown below in Figure 3.

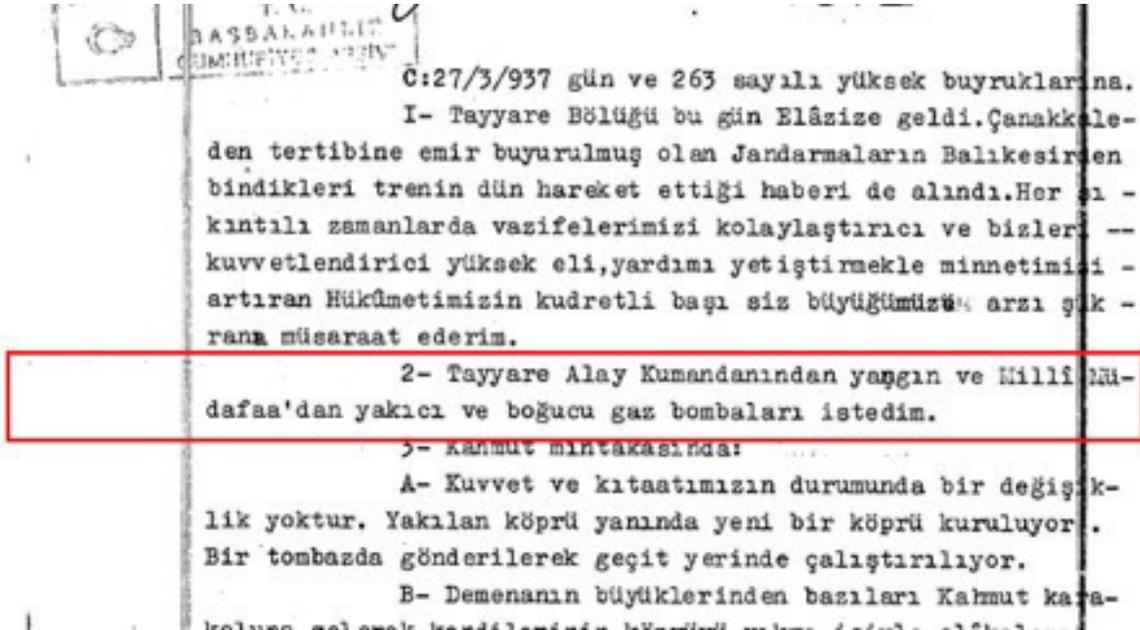


Figure 3. Request for gas supplies. Source: Dersim Gazetesi⁹⁹

In the communication, twenty tons of “Chloracetophenon, Iperit and so on” were ordered, and the request was signed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on August 7, 1937.¹⁰⁰ This request makes it clear that a formal plan was made in 1937 after the initial series of operations in Dersim, and was implemented in 1938, which resulted in the planned mass killings. Another document from the Second Directorate Undersecretaries of Air Force to the Prime Ministry office, dated October 20, 1937, indicates that the final parts required for the construction of the latest air force fleet had arrived from the United States and the necessary annual equipment—worth \$200,000 —would be

⁹⁵ “Çağlayangil: Ordu Dersim Kürtlerini kesti, fare gibi zehirledi!” T24, November 19, 2011, accessed July 9, 2020, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/caglayangil-ordu-dersim-kurtlerini-kesti-fare-gibi-zehirledi.182465>.

⁹⁶ Murat Aydın, “Dersim”de kimyasal izi ortaya çıktı,” CNNTürk, December 4, 2013, accessed June 8, 2019, <https://www.cnnturk.com/guncel/dersimde-kimyasal-izi-ortaya-cikti>.

⁹⁷ Nesimi Aday, “Karga Bülbül Olmaz,” *Dersim Gazetesi*, June 27, 2017, accessed April 4, 2020, <http://nesimiaday.com/index.php/2017/06/27/karga-bulbul-olmaz/>.

⁹⁸ For a detailed discussion, see Gürdal Aksoy, “Gas at ‘Home,’ Gas in the World, On the Use of Poison Gas by the Turkish State in Dersim,” *Academia.edu*, March 7, 2020, accessed March 18, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/42159488/Yurtta_Gaz_Cihanda_Gaz_Tc_Devletinin_Dersimde_Zehirli_Gaz_Kullanmas%C4%B1_%C3%9Czerine_Gas_at_Home_Gas_in_the_World_On_the_Use_of_Poison_Gas_by_the_Turkish_State_in_Dersim.

⁹⁹ Pirha, *Dersim Katliamı*; *Dersim Gazetesi*, *Zehirli Gazlar Almanya’dan*.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

purchased by the Turkish Embassy in Washington, DC.¹⁰¹ All these preparations were made in the same year in which the Prime Minister İnönü had stated that the government already exercised full control over Dersim, as evident in the headlines of *Son Haber* on June 15 and *Haber* on June 18, 1937.¹⁰²

Denial Process, Methods and Results

The hyperbolic rhetoric of a threatened uprising in an uncontrolled area was used to rally popular support for the destruction of Kurdish Alevi in Dersim. Until recent years, documents providing evidence of the use of poisonous gas received little public attention. In addition, many Dersimians were successfully convinced that neither M. Kemal, nor İsmet İnönü, had been involved in these events. Diyap Axa, one of the six first Dersim Members of Parliament (MP) in the first parliament (1920-1923), was invited by Mustafa Kemal to be representative of Dersim. Six years after his death, his family was massacred in 1938 too. His granddaughter Ane Xatun was the only family member who survived. Ane Xatun, in her memoir, expresses her strong opinion—common among Dersimians—that the Chief Commander of General Staff, Fevzi Çakmak, who was particularly hostile to the Kurds and Alevi, ultimately acted to rescue the surviving population in their final hour. Without mentioning his name, Ane Xatun recalls her meeting with a minister in which she expressed her support of a person connected to Fevzi Çakmak's family for election. This surprised the minister greatly, leading him to inquire about the underlying reason. In response, she noted that, "we owe him if a few of us have survived." He subsequently asked: "Do they really know that it happened just like this?" When she responded affirmatively, the minister recounts the following story:

I am a minister now but I was a lieutenant in '38 and was responsible for the telexes. It was not Fevzi Çakmak, it was Iran's Shah who rescued you...When the army was transferred to Elaziğ Uluova, they prohibited any press members' entrance. An Iranian journalist reports to Iran that he has heard that Alevi have been massacred in Dersim. In that evening at 6 pm there was a note from Iran in which they asked for a stop to the massacre of Alevi. This note was discussed among the General Staff personnel for a while but later nobody paid any attention. The second note arrived at 4 am in the morning in which Iran said they were going to call back all their embassies and stop all relations with Turkey due to the massacre of Alevi in Dersim.¹⁰³ In that period Turkey was heavily dependent on Iran's petrol, gas, even sugar and tea—all were imported from Iran. Fevzi Çakmak was in the General Staff office in Ankara that time, and after that second note he flew to Elaziğ and stopped the massacre.¹⁰⁴

These remarks illustrate that the perpetrators were personalities such as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, İsmet İnönü, and Fevzi Çakmak¹⁰⁵ despite widespread opinion to the contrary. These remarks also demonstrate the prevalence of narratives denying the nature of the Dersim events as a planned genocide. More importantly, it suggests that, if not for the intervention by the Shah of Iran, the state would have continued these indiscriminate massacres. Given Çakmak's role, as the planner and commander of the Dersim genocide, his widespread last-minute depiction as the savior is in contrast to the actual, devastating consequences of his actions. Such portrayals make sense in the context provided by Ane Xatun's memoir, although we lack additional supporting sources. Iran's connection must also be considered carefully here given their historical connection to Alevi in the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Baran, *Basında Dersim*, 206, 213; Dersimi, *Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim*, 277.

¹⁰³ Due to the Alevi's support of the Prophet Muhammed's son-in-law Ali, and thus the Safadi, Alevi have long represented a fault line between the Safadi and Ottoman periods. In particular, after the defeat of Seljuk by the Safadi, Ottomans became suspicious of Alevi and their connection with Safadi. Thus, during the Yavuz period (1512-1520), more than 40,000 Alevi were massacred. Although Safadi were successful in forming the 12 Imam Shia sect of Islam, they became somewhat distanced from the Alevi. However, Iran continued to disseminate propaganda among the [mostly Turkish] Alevi. In contrast, Kurdish Alevi kept their distance.

¹⁰⁴ Günday, *Adım Perihan Olsun*, 134-135.

¹⁰⁵ I personally heard the story of Fevzi Çakmak's "rescuing" recounted by many people during my childhood, including my father and mother. It struck me as quite strange indeed and it only began to make sense in the larger context provided by Ane Xatun's memoirs.

past, which could have been a resource to attract international attention. The Turkish state must have been aware of this potential and likely intervened to prevent such actions, at least to some degree.

“Fighting Feudalism” as Denial of Genocide: The Leftist Movement and State Policy in Dersim

Although the air bombardments were mostly focused in areas where some tribes resisted the operations—referred to as the *prohibited zone*—in the majority of Dersim no resistance to speak of was present. Death squads went into towns, villages, and hamlets to seek out local leaders—both religious and otherwise—as well as individuals whose names appeared in official records, such as in the gendarmery, police, or in court records.¹⁰⁶ These individuals were rounded up and killed in certain locations used as execution centers. Several testimonies provide eyewitness accounts of this process. These accounts, as well those of survivors, report that machine guns and rifles were used in the executions. Moreover, many were executed with bayonets to save bullets, indicating the enormous number of executions. Machine guns were used to ensure there were no accidental survivals.

While executions continued to take place, the media coverage sought to dehumanize the victims, invoking the ultra-nationalist Turkish ideological approach which has persisted to this day.¹⁰⁷ The local population/victims were portrayed as bandits and savages who robbed people, refused to pay their taxes and complete military service, and believed in a “primitive” religion and who were, in essence, themselves primitive.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, they were portrayed as being manipulated by the *axas*¹⁰⁹ and *seyids* who resisted the reforms and civilization¹¹⁰ promoted by the Turkish state for their own benefit. This dehumanization process succeeded in disseminating perceptions of Dersim as an area of savagery and banditry,¹¹¹ metaphorically represented as an open sore, a medical problem to be cured or excised.¹¹² All of these factors support the classification of the events as a genocide.

All media outlets, including those considered progressive, such as the *Tan Gazete*,¹¹³ expressed support for the Kemalist policies against Kurds and Dersim in 1937-38. In various news reports, *Tan* employed a language of dehumanization to describe Dersim and its inhabitants. For instance, in a news segment by Latif Erenel, Dersimians were referred to as “the people who are slaves and stripped of any rights. They spend their life in darkness, benightedness and fear like something more animal than human.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, a *Tan* headline dated June 24, 1937, read “The Head Plunderer, Brigand *Seyid Rıza*¹¹⁵ Pleaded for Mercy.”¹¹⁶ *Cumhuriyet*, which was also considered a progressive daily newspaper, had become one of the most nationalist and thus supportive of ultra-nationalist ideology in Turkey and of the Dersim genocide. On June 27, 1937, *Cumhuriyet*'s headline read: “Tunceli’s scoundrels have been exterminated.”¹¹⁷

After 1938, the phrase “*Dersim hadisesi* (Dersim incident)” was widely used to deny the genocidal nature of the events and downplay the atrocities that took place. While the terms genocide or mass killing simultaneously encompass the ethnic, religious, and political aspect of the killings, the term *incident* does not suggest such connection or imply the existence of any perpetrators. On

¹⁰⁶ Fadime Deniz, *Dersim* 38, personal communication with author, Istanbul (October 2009).

¹⁰⁷ See the hate speech in Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim*, 49; *Beyazgazete*, 12 Eylül’ün acıları yetmedi.

¹⁰⁸ Baran, *Basında Dersim*, 109.

¹⁰⁹ Bulut, *Dersim Raporları*, 269. *Axa* refers to someone who is a tribal leader. It can also refer to someone who owns large amounts of land. In the Dersim case, *axa*, refers mostly to the name of the tribal leader.

¹¹⁰ Baran, *Basında Dersim*, 92.

¹¹¹ Bulut, *Dersim Raporları*, 211, 267.

¹¹² JUK Report, 224.

¹¹³ Baran, *Basında Dersim*, 113.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹⁵ The Kurdish leader of Dersim.

¹¹⁶ Baran, *Basında Dersim*, 224.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

the contrary, it remains a neutral term and implicitly represents all parties as equals. In the case of Dersim, this term was particularly useful in concealing the state's role as the perpetrator of genocidal acts against Kurdish Alevi. Rather, the dominant narratives sought to represent these acts as a relatively minor event to manage a small faction of rebels. Thus, the term suggests the victims, as instigators, were to blame, while suggesting that the state was compelled to act in favor of societal order, despite the resulting casualties. As such, the contradictions and discrepancies between the credible sources and Turkish archival sources, and Turkish nationalist narratives¹¹⁸ need to be taken into account, and thus especially in the case of the Dersim genocide and in the contemporary climate of Turkish academia, where the available sources remain heavily censored.

To buttress the denial process, the term *incident* always accompanied narratives describing the "uprising" in Dersim, not just in the language used by the state but also by the Turkish leftist movement in the only region where progressive politics dominate. Although there was some resistance to the heavy military operations, there was, in fact, no real uprising.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, the rhetoric of an uprising was widely employed by the media. This idea was employed ironically alongside narratives claiming the tribes of the region were disarmed,¹²⁰ almost all leaders were arrested¹²¹ and seven of them hanged in 1937, including *Seyid* Rıza and his son.¹²² These narratives also emphasized that the state was in full control of the region, a conviction that is also clearly apparent in Prime Minister İsmet İnönü's speech in Parliament in 1937¹²³ and also in Prime Minister, Celal Bayar's speech, in 1938,¹²⁴ and still used effectively for mass killings in 1938.

The uprising discourse was also the prominent discourse invoked by the leftist movement following the genocidal process from the 1970s until the 1980 coup, though it has become less prominent today. During the Dersim genocide, the leader of the Turkish Communist Party (TKP), İsmail Bilen, and a political refugee in the Soviet Union, published *Yeni bir Kürt Ayaklanması* (A New Kurdish Uprising), using the pseudonym Rasim Davaz, in which he clearly defends the military operations in Dersim.

It has been more than two months that the Ankara Government fights against a backward uprising by the Kurdish tribes in Dersim region. The feudal components, despite the reforms by the Kemalist Party, succeeded in surviving in this far-off region of the country. This region was renamed Tunceli last year. Dersim's dominant classes have succeeded in securing their privileges despite the laws in force.¹²⁵

Like all the Alevi regions, Dersim suffered from extreme poverty and possessed little land suitable for agriculture, being largely comprised of a rough highland where Alevi took refuge to avoid attacks from the Ottoman and later Turkish state and attempts to forcibly convert Alevi to (Sunni) Islam. Given the limitations inherent to a region with insufficient arable land, inhabitants resorted to some plundering in Dersim as well as in the neighboring towns.¹²⁶ In Halis Paşa's report it is clearly indicated that, in these acts, they avoided killing¹²⁷ and never committed sexual attacks, prohibited as these were by their religion and culture. The raids were thus restricted mostly to food-based plundering to secure livestock, wheat, and other subsistence items and were ultimately driven by the poverty resulting from the Turkish-Islamic pressure on the region.

Despite conditions of acute poverty and starvation, there were no capitalist-style classes, and thus communists were ideally situated to defending a better life for the suppressed population.

¹¹⁸ Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019), 8.

¹¹⁹ Baran, *Basında Dersim*, 213.

¹²⁰ In a state document, it is indicated that before the genocide the state had intelligence on approximately 5,000 firearms in Dersim, and thus was forced into obtaining a certain number of arms. See Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim*, 56-68; Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim Arşivi*, 13.

¹²¹ Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim Arşivi*, 526.

¹²² Akyürekli, *Dersim Kürt Tedbiri 1937-1938*, 140.

¹²³ Baran, *Basında Dersim*, 206.

¹²⁴ Akgül, *Yakın Tarihimizde Dersim İsyanları*, 155.

¹²⁵ Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu*, 141.

¹²⁶ Dilşa Deniz, "Dersim'in Ekonomi Politikliği İçinde Talanın Yeri: Antropolojik Bir Yaklaşım," in *Dört Dağa Sığmayan Kent, Dersim Üzerine Ekonomi-Politik Yazılar*, ed. Şerif Gürçağ Tuna and Gözde Orhan (Istanbul: Patika, 2013), 87, 90, 103.

¹²⁷ JUK Report, 250.

Despite this fact, Ismail Bilen, chair of the TKP, justified the mass killings that involved tens of thousands of people in one defenseless region as necessary for the sake of Turkish modernism. The Turkish leftist movement's Kemalist/nationalist character becomes apparent in this particular example and has been criticized by a relatively small number of leftist intellectuals and organizations. Ismail Beşikçi, a Turkish academic who served seventeen years in prison due to his research on Kurdish issues in Turkey, has criticized the leftist movement "as the partner of Turkish State's colonialist massacres over the Kurdistan," remarking that:

They [leftists] are against the Kurdish nation who have struggled against conquests, and colonialism, those who have struggled for the right to self-determination. The Kurdish national movement was discredited in every sentence of their reports. Accordingly, they designed reports in which they praised it's [Kemalist secular nationalism] acts and evaluated them as 'progressive' and 'revolutionary.'¹²⁸

Both the Kemalist state and various leftist groups suppressed Kurdish political organizations operating in Dersim. In that period, the only Turkish leftist group supportive of the thesis of Kurdistan's status as a colony¹²⁹ and critical of the leftist movement for its Kemalist characteristics was the *Kurtuluş*¹³⁰ movement.¹³¹ As such, it gained support and Dersim become its stronghold for a short period of time between the 1970s and 1980s. Interestingly, this group was targeted and nearly all its cadres were assassinated between 1976-1980, including the first and the only assassinated woman, an engineering student from Dersim (Aynur Sertkaya), and the first high school student executed by hanging (Necdet Adalı).¹³² Some of the deaths were suspicious "accidents." Most of the perpetrators were never found and so the deaths remain labeled as *unknown killings*, like hundreds of other political killings inculcating the deep state. Gradually, *Kurtuluş*'s members were eradicated from the city, alongside other Kurdish political organizations such as *Kawa* and *Tekoşin*.¹³³ Another Kurdish leftist organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), was blamed for being *ilkel milliyetçi* (primitive nationalist) and thus heavily attacked by some of these leftist organizations as well as the state. While the organizations sensitive to the Kurdish and Alevi identity have left Dersim, even those who had engaged in Kurdish politics on a legal basis were hunted by the state. Other groups resistant to these identities have for the most part been left to freely engage in their activities. It should be further noted that the most effective persons among the leftist organizations in favor of Kurdish identity or themselves in Kurdish national were all brutally killed by the state, such as Huseyin Cevahir (in Istanbul 1971), Ibrahim Kaypakkaya (in Diyarbakır 1973), and also an Armenian, Orhan Bakır (Armenak Bakırcıyan, in Karakoçan/Elazığ 1980).

In Dersim, the great majority of the political ideology was shared between the most leftist organizations' policies and the state's official TIS ideology. The Kemalist tone within the leftist movement provides additional evidence of the state's homogenization policies and its efforts to influence and manipulate the leftist movement as well as its associated discourses. As Beşikçi points out, "the success of the Kemalists' is to make itself be defended by the socialists,"¹³⁴ while Ahmet

¹²⁸ Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu*, 145.

¹²⁹ Ünlü, *Kürdistan/Türkiye*, 429.

¹³⁰ Known as the Emancipation movement in English.

¹³¹ Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "The Kurdistan Workers Party and a New Left in Turkey: Analysis of the revolutionary movement in Turkey through the PKK's memorial text on Haki Karer," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012), accessed July 31, 2020, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4613>.

¹³² Dilşa Deniz, "1978 yılında sevdiğimiz elimizden alındı: Seyfettin Deniz, Kurtuluş Hareketi ve diğer cinayetler," *Dersim Gazetesi*, December 30, 2017, accessed July 8, 2020, <http://dersimgazetesi.net/tag/seyfettin-deniz/>.

¹³³ Both Kawa and Tekoşin's leaders and members were killed by the state despite Kawa being located in Syria, near the Turkish border. See Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akaya, "Kürdistan Devrimcilerinin İlk Yılları-PKK: Grup Oluşumu, Türkiye Solu ve Kürt Siyasal Partileri ile İlişkiler," *academia.edu* ([2013] 2015), 479-507, 488-489, accessed July 31, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/13163085/Kurdistan_Devrimcilerinin_ilk_yillari_-_PKK_Grup_Olusu_mu_Turkiye_Solu_ve_Kurt_Siyasal_Partileri_ile_iliskiler.

¹³⁴ Müjgan Halis, "Bir kitap yazdı, 17 yıl yattı," *Sabah*, March 6, 2011, accessed June 20, 2019, https://www.sabah.com.tr/pazar/2011/03/06/bir_kitap_yazdi_17_yil_yatti.

Kahraman, a Kurdish intellectual, argues that the Kemalist cadres of the Turkish state founded the Turkish Communist Party (TKP) to obtain financial aid from the Soviet Union. After succeeding, they killed the communists on their way back to the Black Sea.¹³⁵

The state and leftist organizations used rhetoric to mobilize Dersimian youth against their own society that resembled the discourses used during the Dersim military attacks, such as mobilizing around the fight against feudalism. In this fight against feudalism, the state attacked *derebeyis*,¹³⁶ meaning the *aşîret* leaders and *seyids*, before and during the period between 1937 and 1938. The various leftist organizations in the 1970s attacked the very same institutions, the *aşîrets* (*axa*) and *Ocax/seyidship*, and similarly defined their struggle as one against the *patron-ağa state*. *Axaship* of the tribe system was crucial for Kurdish ethnic survival, while the *Ocax* system (*seyids*) was important for the survival of Alevism. Thus, both together were central to the functioning of the governing body of Kurdish Alevi society in Dersim. While the *axaship* in Dersim does give the *axa* some authority in the representation of the tribe, they do not own the land of the tribe, though they do maintain ownership of some personal land. Designated tribal land cannot be sold to anyone outside of the tribe. As such, this system of land ownership does not entail the kind of feudal lordship¹³⁷ that both the Turkish state in the 1930s and leftist organizations in the 70s used in their rhetoric to delegitimize and support attacks on social organization in Dersim.¹³⁸

In addition to attacking the *axaship*, the *seyids*, members of a sacred genealogy within the tribes who solved internal disputes, were also portrayed as backward institutions that were inherently opposed to a modern Turkish state. In line with this argument, both leftists and the state were simultaneously pointing out the inferiority of Kurds, who they claimed could not progress and were thus exploited by the *axas* and *seyids*, the representatives of “primitive/heretic” religion. This discourse was further invoked by the state to portray the 1938 genocide as an effort to bring civilization to Dersim. Interestingly, this was also the Ottoman’s motto: to fight against backwardness and bring civilization to Dersim, as is underlined in the words of Kazım Ateş who pointed out “the continuation between the Abdülhamid period’s modernizing concept (in general, 19th Century Ottoman modernism concept) and Kemalist modernism.”¹³⁹

The socialist project was also a project of modernism by the leftist movement and justified itself as necessary to bring socialism and rescue Dersimian from *patron-axas’* exploitations.¹⁴⁰ The situation in Dersim was, in fact, better characterized as one of land scarcity, in which no such feudal land ownership system existed to exploit others. In other Sunni regions, where feudal land ownership and exploitation was, in fact, severe, such as in Çukurova, Urfa, Antep, there was no such fight against feudalism by the state, nor did leftist organizations engage in comparable activities. This suggests that these activities were not principally an effort to bring socialism to a region suffering under feudalism, otherwise leftist organizations and the state would have targeted these other regions as well and, perhaps, more aggressively, rather than focusing solely on Dersim and other Kurdish Alevi sites.

In the Dersim case, by contrast, the majority of internationalist leftist movements and the nationalist Turkish state surprisingly shared the same ideas and the same strategy, outlining the *seyids* and *axas* as exploiters, and the ones to be fought against. A Turkish sub-lieutenant, Hüseyin Özalp, in memoirs recounting his military service in Dersim, expressed that “the institution of *dedeship*¹⁴¹ which Alevism depended on, was collapsing...[t]he effect of Partizan’s¹⁴² propaganda

¹³⁵ Ahmet Kahraman, “Şu dünyanın kulpuna bakın siz!,” *Yeni ÖzgürPolitika*, July 2, 2019, accessed July 2, 2019, <http://yeniozgurpolitika.net/su-dunyanin-kulpuna-bakin-siz/>.

¹³⁶ *Derebeyis* refers to feudal lords. Baran, *Yılları Arasında Basında Dersim*, 209; Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim*, 9-10.

¹³⁷ Dilşa Deniz, *Yol/Ré: Dersim İnanç Sembolizmi, Antropolojik Bir Yaklaşım* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2012), 46-47.

¹³⁸ Ünlü, *Turkishness contract*, 24.

¹³⁹ Kazım Ateş, “Necip Fazıl’ın Dersim’i,” *Birikim*, December 11, 2011, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.birikimdergisi.com/guncel-yazilar/575/necip-fazil-in-dersim-i#.XWgYsJNKgnU>.

¹⁴⁰ Doğan Munzuroğlu, *Toplumsal Yapı ve İnanç Bağlamında Dersim Aleviliği* (Ankara: Kalan, 2004), 55.

¹⁴¹ Another name used for the *Seyids*.

¹⁴² Partizan was and still is one of the strong leftist organizations in Dersim.

of the years cannot be denied on that matter."¹⁴³ As it is clear, while the leftist aspired towards a socialist revolution, in which neither ethnic nor religious difference existed,¹⁴⁴ the Turkish state promised to bring civilization exclusively to Dersim, where no feudal exploiters such as the —*axas* and *seyids*— would no longer exist. While the leftists promised a socialist country with no ethnic or religious differentiation—in effect rendering Turkishness hegemonic—the state was promising equality after civilization and a process of homogenization that would eventually assimilate the entirety of the population as Muslim Turks.

As argued above, while many leftists and the communist party were supportive of the genocide, later on, many leftist organizations played a significant role in denying the genocide by preventing any connection with ethnicity and religion and glorifying the genocide as an “uprising against the system.” As such, Kurdish Alevi youth were successfully led by these organizations to target their own societal structures instead of the nationalist State. Represented as an uprising against the system, without any mention whatsoever of the number of people massacred, the Kemalist/nationalist cadres were successfully cleared of culpability. Subsequently, leader cadres of the CHP¹⁴⁵ such as Mustafa Kemal (the president, the planner), İsmet İnönü (the Prime Minister) and Fevzi Çakmak (the Chief of General Staff) were not only cleared of their responsibilities in the genocide, but also (and more importantly) were rendered heroes, even saviors of the surviving population.¹⁴⁶ CHP was subsequently labelled a progressive party in Turkey and Dersim itself. Mustafa Kemal’s portrait hung in Dersimian homes and to this day remain in all Alevi institutions and cemevis.¹⁴⁷ Streets, schools, hospitals, bridges and neighborhoods were named after the perpetrators: Atatürk, İnönü, and Çakmak. Until the 2000s, when the Kurdish movement was strengthened and allowed to participate in the elections, nearly all of the MPs and mayors of Dersim were elected from the CHP. As such, all of the MPs and mayors further served to absolve and exculpate the perpetrators of their roles in the crimes committed against the people of the city. Genocide thus remains the worst kept secret, while the CHP continues to be labelled a progressive party that many leftists, Alevis, Alevi organizations, and NGOs in Turkey and Dersim have affiliated themselves with. No mention is made of the crimes CHP leaders committed in Dersim or of their involvement in other crimes against non-Turkish and non-Muslim communities. By suppressing their Kurdish and Alevi identity, the Alevi Kurds were able to become members of the party. Thus, many Alevi and Dersim NGOs remain heavily controlled by CHP, which effectively means the support of the TIS ideology.

Conclusion

The evidence discussed here suggests that the 1937-38 military operations in Dersim clearly meet the criteria to be classified as a genocide according to the 2nd Article of the Genocide Convention. This evidence includes: the long *durée* (duration) of the preparations and planning that began in the 1930s, the significant military action as represented in the number of soldiers involved and the military equipment employed,¹⁴⁸ the two-year duration of these events, and, finally the ultimate military directive “to hit anything live.”¹⁴⁹ In addition, the assertion of genocide is further supported by estimates that place the number of casualties in the tens of thousands, the number of Dersimian residents subject to forced displacement to the Western cities of Turkey, the thousands of female

¹⁴³ Hüseyin Özalp, *Desim Günlükleri* (Ankara: Tanyeri Kitap, 2012), 20.

¹⁴⁴ Munzuroğlu, *Toplumsal Yapı*, 55.

¹⁴⁵ Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People’s Party) was founded by M. Kemal and Kemalist cadres in 1923 and was the single ruling party until 1945.

¹⁴⁶ Günday, *Adm Perihan Olsun*, 134.

¹⁴⁷ Cemevis are Alevis’ sites of worship following urbanization.

¹⁴⁸ This equipment included the most advanced technology of the time period such as military aircraft and poison gas.

¹⁴⁹ Sabiha Gökçen, the first women pilot in Turkey who was an Armenian orphan and the god daughter of Mustafa Kemal, in an interview by Halit Kıvanç published in *Milliyet* on November 25, 1956, noted that they were commanded to hit anything live. Thus, they even hit the goats, which were perceived to be the food of the rebels. Şerif Karataş, “İnsanları Fare Zehirler Gibi Öldürdüler,” *Evrensel Gazetesi*, May 4, 2012, accessed July 31, 2020, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/28393/insanlari-fare-zehirler-gibi-oldurduler>.

children taken from their families and raised by army personnel¹⁵⁰ to encourage their assimilation, the damage to the city of Dersim and the calculated destruction of her social structures to prevent the survival of the remaining population, the lack of any adequate medical and/or psychological support for orphaned children, the wounded, and all others affected by these devastating events.

It is also clear from both official reports and other documents based on academic writings, news, witnesses' statements, memoirs, and exile literature that the military operations in Dersim between 1937-38 were primarily launched to enact policies of Turkification and Islamization. The UN definition stresses the intention of the crime above its quantitative impact upon the population or its duration. The main aim of these operations is apparent in the legal process that preceded the genocide, such as the Law of Maintaining Order (1925), Resettlement Law (1934), Dersim/Tunçeli Law (1935), and the related official documents, interviews, official statements made by high-ranking officials.

Due to state-sponsored policies of homogenization, it is clear that at least between forty-six and sixty-three thousand people, including the remaining Armenian population, were killed and more than thirteen thousand Dersimians were forcibly evacuated and resettled in the Western cities of Turkey for the purpose of assimilation. In attempts to justify or deny the large number of casualties and population displacement, media outlets have systematically produced dehumanizing portrayals of residents of the region as bandits and savages participating in an uprising against civilization and state reforms.

The degree of overlapping policies and discourses through which Kurdish ethnicity and Alevi religion were targeted and denied, reveals that the Turkish state exerted significant control over the policies of the leftist movement in Turkey and, particularly in Dersim. Both sides relied upon almost the same discourse, attacked the same structures, and justified their actions as a fight against feudalism only in the Kurdish Alevi regions, where, in fact, no western-type feudalism exists.

Using this same argument, a rhetoric of uprising served as the basis for the denial of the mass killings of unarmed civilians. The state as well as various leftist organizations were hostile to Kurdish leftist organizations that focused on Kurdish identity, forcing them out of Dersim, while others were permitted to remain and co-opted into the state's efforts to suppress Kurdish identity demands and deny the genocide.

Thus, while expunging organizations and persons in favor of Kurdish identity from the region, other organizations, and their discourses were permitted to survive in order to suppress the Kurdish identity. As such, until 1980, the rallying cry in Dersim remained: "[w]e are socialist who are internationalist and atheist [not Kurdish or Alevi]," while, between 1990 and 2000, this slogan became "[w]e are Alevis, and Alevis are not Kurdish," and then between 2000 and 2020, the slogan widely echoed throughout Dersim has been "[w]e are Zaza and Zazas are not Kurdish." Efforts to clear Dersim of Kurdish and Alevi identity through the genocide in 1937-38 have been successfully enacted with devastating consequences but not yet completed. Such efforts continue in the form of ethnocide, culturicide, and ecocide, alongside a denial of the 1937-38 genocide.

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Dedication

This article is dedicated to Nuri Dersimi, a Dersimian Kurdish intellectual and politician, who spent his life struggling for Dersim and, as a result, died in exile. Today, he is still helping us understand what took place in Dersim.

¹⁵⁰ Gürbey and Gül, *Dersim'de Nazi gazi*.

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