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PANEL TK3

The Securization of Turkey's Kurdish Question in Historical Perspective

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Internal Colonial Rule in Dersim (1927-1952)

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Keywords: Internal Colony, Civilizing Mission, Turkey, Dersim

Abstract:

A specific form of Turco-Western Civilization with a mission to colonize the interior of the country was born from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. The Internal Colonial model was conceived as a necessary step to achieve modern capitalism in a society mostly formed of peasants. It was later adopted by social scientists to analyze regional underdevelopment. It allows us to situate different cases within a transnational setting. The Inspectorate Generals are considered as an internal colonial institution created by the Republic of Turkey. While Dersim, as a heterogeneous geography was subjected to its direct rule following the events of 1937 and 1938. This article contextualizes these events and proposes an ecologic and economic explanation for the events that took place.

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The Turkish Civilizing Mission

Civilization was the fundamental ideal of the Republic. The goal was to reach the level of contemporary civilizations. The Republic not only represented the last of the tens of Turkic states that had come before, she also claimed to be in essence the successor of the historical states that created the foundations of Western Civilization. Relegating the Turco-Islamic Civilization behind, what the Republic tried to achieve was a Turco-Western Civilization, which if it had been successful, might have resembled to Hungary, where a Central Asian culture became integrated to the West in terms of society and common values. Alas the founders of the Republic failed to achieve this colossal task of switching civilizations. However, during the single party era, they gave us a glimpse of what such a civilization would've looked like at its infancy. Between the foundation of the Republic and the end of single-party rule the historian of Turkey is trying to understand this strange synthesis of French Republican ideology, contemporary fascist and communist regimes, and Central Asian tribalism. This Turco-Western Civilization had a mission, and this was to transform a geography that even Rome had difficulty controlling. Resources were slim, tolerance was low and a sense of urgency motivated rash decision-making. The Empire was lost and buried, now was the time for the Republic to lay the foundations of the New Empire. Because at this time what meant to be among peers in the West, was the possession of a colonial Empire. Before attempting to achieve a colonial empire of her own, Turkey was to do what all modern states have done; colonize the interior. Civilization means construction, as civilization is synonymous with cities. And it follows that the countryside needs to obey the rules of the city in a modern state. There is a clear hierarchy, which wills absolute obedience. Those who do not obey, or even worse rise up in protest are crushed without pity.

The Internal Colonial Model and the Inspectorates Generals

The Internal Colonial model is a methodological tool that allows transnational comparisons. The notion can be traced back to the nineteenth century and has a clearly Marxist tone. Lenin wrote in his *Development of capitalism in Russia* that the formation of a national home market, gave rise to Internal “domestic” Colonization. In Lenin’s understanding Internal colony resulted from the development of modern capitalism and the establishment of a national economy.² Bukharin in his *Imperialism and World Economy* sustained that imperialism is the reproduction of capitalist competition on the scale of the world economy. The World Economy required nations to have an imperial outlook and colonize parts of their own lands in the name of global competition. In practice, this meant that those regions that became internal colonies lost their ownership of the local economy; their means of production and subsistence. Becoming in exchange an integral part of the national economy.³ Preobrazhensky, was perhaps the most important figure for conceptualizing internal colonialism. His book *The New Economics*, first published in 1926 concerns the peasantry, which constituted nearly eighty percent of Russia’s population, Preobrazhensky was wondering if the direct involvement of peasantry with free-trade, as implemented under NEP, would end up working against the revolutionary cause. His economic theories were put to the test. Stalin began to use coercive measures for grain requisition starting from the beginning of 1928. The process of dispossession of the peasants and the collectivization of the land was completed by 1934. The cost of this instance of internal colonization was wide spread famine and the death of millions.⁴

² Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. (1977) 562-565.

³ Bukharin, *Imperialism and world economy*. (1987) 120.

⁴ Preobrazhensky, *The New Economics*. (1967) VIII-XVI.

Hence Preobrazhensky conceptualized internal colonialism as an intermediary step between primitive capitalist accumulation and modern capitalism which gave rise to colonialism proper.⁵ Another essential author for the Internal Colonial model is Antonio Gramsci, who referred to the concept of internal colony in *the Southern Question*: “The bourgeoisie of the North has subjected southern Italy and the Islands and reduced them to the status of exploited colonies”.⁶ Similarly, South American social scientists have used the Internal Colonial model in order to explain the relation of indigenous regions with the central state. From the 1960's onwards the phrase “Internal Colonialism” was mostly used in reference to zones that are both economically underperforming and culturally different from the dominant core of the state. According to the Internal Colonial model the core dominates the periphery through politics in order to “*exploit it materially*”. The model proposes that modernization spreads over the land in a disorderly manner, which in turn creates pockets of industrially advanced urban centers surrounded by a rural periphery. The unequal advancement of industrialization and modernity formulates the imbalanced allocation of supplies and influence in the periphery. The core aims to maintain its advantages through institutionalizing the prevailing system of stratification. It saves the important administrative and political seats for its own members, and bans access to these positions to members of the periphery. Such a system provides a legal basis for the formation of distinctive ethnic identities. Cultural markers aid categorization in regards to their visible differences. The Internal Colonial model anticipates that these differences will continue to gain importance, and that the culture of the periphery will react to the cultural domination of the core.

⁵ Preobrazhensky, *The New Economics*. (1967) 85-86.

⁶ Gramsci, *The Modern Prince, and Other Writings*. (1957) 28&42.

Michael Hechter proposes two distinct arguments in his book about the internal colonization of Celtic lands by England between 1536 and 1966: 1- That at the regional level a lack of power on the part of the internal colonies resulted in a dependent development. 2- While at the individual level labor is not divided following social class but on the base of ethnicity, a phenomenon called cultural division of labor. Hechter perceives the *Cromwellian Settlement* as a perfect example of the cultural division of labor, where Catholic land was confiscated for Protestant use, and members of the Church of Ireland were unable to hold public office in their homeland. Hechter himself defines the Internal Colonial model, as a system where an indigenous population is dominated by a “*different foreign conquering group*” that views itself as superior. Next to the legal use of force detained as a monopoly of the state, the core also produces discursive stereotypes in order to legitimize the superiority of metropolitan culture. Important administrative seats of these areas are usually reserved for those belonging to the dominant culture. Those belonging to the peripheral culture can’t climb up the social ladder because of the stratification system. Therefore, it is no surprise that those regions, which can be qualified as internal colonies, manifest a persistence of the local ethnic identity.⁷

The Republic of Turkey had vast territories inside her borders, which had not known direct rule for ages. Internal colonial rule was to reverse this and try to unite a divided territory into a nation-state. Inspectorate Generals or *Umumi Müfettişlikler* were institutions with plenipotentiary powers over their administrative regions, and resemble in this aspect to the Governorate Generals in European overseas colonies. They were first instituted in 1927 and dissolved in 1952.⁸

⁷ Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*. (2017) 9-10

⁸ Kocak, *Umumi mufettislikler (1927-1952)*.

Ankara imposed a strict internal colonial rule in parts of the country where central state rule was deemed relatively weak. Just like in Turkish Kurdistan, the Pontic and Eastern Thrace, However, one immediately notices a difference among these three regions. Eastern Thrace and the Pontic differ from Kurdistan, because both regions have direct access to international trade via their ports. Kurdistan is landlocked. Furthermore Kurdish territories were given priority in terms of internal colonization. This is why the First Inspectorate General centered in Diyarbakır preceded the other three. However, it was clear from the start that the Greater Dersim region needed special attention. Establishing control over Dersim was an essential part of early republican rule in the east of the Euphrates. Here a specific administration was formed in 1935. The Fourth Inspectorate General was the only internal colonial entity of the Republic that was not situated near an international border. This is why here, more than in the other instances, one perceives the most radical implementation of the Turkish *Mission Civilisatrice*.⁹ The governance of Dersim fits all the criteria of the Internal Colonial model. State policies discriminated the autochthonous population and there was taxation without representation. Traditions were criminalized, an alien culture imposed and assimilation encouraged. There was a clear class distinction between the indigenous population and the officer class. People were alienated from their land in the form of emptied and forbidden zones. There was a reconfiguration of the economy, the roads utilized by the people for ages were completely disregarded and new roads were created where none existed before. Towns were created out of nothing and older urban centers disregarded due to distrust.

⁹ Toprak, “Antropolojik Irk Sorunu ve Dersim’de ‘Uygarlaştırıcı Misyon.’” (2010)
Brunschwig, *Mythes et réalités de l’impérialisme colonial Français, 1871-1914*. (1960)

Dersim was an internal colony at the time of the rise of fascism in the West and the Holodomor to the North, followed by the horrors of the Second World War. This rule came to an end when the decolonization process signaled the end of the age of empires. The process that started in the subcontinent of India then spread to South-East Asia and Africa. Turkey had to recalibrate and adapt to this new world, and in the context of the transition to multiparty rule and democracy, the internal colonial rule was abolished. What happened during these twenty-five years was consequentially important for the people of Dersim. They experienced the Turkish Civilizing Mission and the state terror that accompanied it. Terror was either physical or psychological; the people of Dersim were terrorized by the state, first in the form of genocide and forced exile, and then by the fear of such practices being repeated.¹⁰

Literature and Sources

The vast Turkish language literature on Dersim attests to the fact that the history of this region is very politicized indeed. Akin to many other issues in Turkey we find that both the literature and the public discourse are deeply divided on this topic. On one camp there are the people of Dersim influenced by radical leftist as well as Kurdish nationalist ideologies, while on the other camp there are those who blindly defend the actions of the state, including some from Tunceli. Not only do both sides completely negate and reject one another, but the polemic includes, since the early 2010's, a third party in the form of the revisionist Islamist perspective as embodied by the discourse of the current president of the Republic. Our research tends to surpass the tribalized political polemics and analyze the socioeconomic transformation of the region during the defined period.

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¹⁰ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*. (1994)

¹¹ Danık, *Dersim (Tunceli) bibliyografyası*. (1996)

Ayata and Hakyemez, "The AKP's Engagement with Turkey's Past Crimes." (2013)

Who is responsible for what happened in Dersim? The indigenous authors argue that there was no rebellion and that the state acted without provocation.¹² The Kemalist authors argue that the people willingly defied the government and were in open revolt against the state.¹³ While the Islamist position is that Dersim was an open indication of the godless secular state who massacred anyone who refused forced modernization.¹⁴ Most of the written sources that one encounters in this literature are limited to a few works. This means that the vast literature in Turkish keeps repeating the same contradicting stories over and over again, for if it isn't Nuri Dersimi that is being cited, then it's Naşit Hakkı Uluğ or the Gendarmerie reports. Although the amount of works dedicated to Dersim gives the impression that this subject has been exhausted in terms of research, this is only an illusion hiding the reality of vast disinformation. We have tried to approach the history of the region objectively, without assuming any of the above mentioned positions. The data that we have extracted from our primary sources has allowed us to bring a new perspective to the historiography of Dersim.

¹² Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*. (2012)

Burkay, *Dersim*. (2001)

Bulut, *Dersim raporları*. (2005)

Demir, *Feodalizmin devlete isyanı ve Dersim olayları*. (2009)

Pamukçu, *Dersim Zaza ayaklanmasının tarihsel kökenleri*. (1992)

¹³ Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim*. (1931)

Timuroğlu, *Dersim Tarihi*. (1991)

Yolga, Halaçoğlu, and Yılmazçelik, *Dersim (Tunceli) tarihi*. (1994)

Jandarma Umum Kumandanlığı, *Dersim*. (2010)

Akgül, *Amerikan ve İngiliz raporları ışığında Dersim*. (2000)

Gürbüz, *Kürtleşen Türkler*. (2007)

Çalışlar, *Dersim Raporu*. (2010)

Genelkurmay belgelerinde Kürt isyanları. (2011)

Perinçek, *Sovyet devlet kaynaklarında Kürt isyanları*. (2011)

Demir, *Feodalizmin devlete isyanı ve Dersim olayları*. (2011)

Doğan, *Dersim olayı ve Dersim'in Türklüğü üzerine*. (2012)

Yeşiltuna, *Devletin Dersim arşivi*. (2012)

¹⁴ <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/necip-fazil-kisakurekin-kaleminden-dersim-353079>

(accessed 10.04.2019)

<http://www.birikimdergisi.com/guncel-yazilar/575/necip-fazil-in-dersim-i#.XK13Py2B3UI>

(accessed 10.04.2019)

The originality of the sources that we have used in the writing of our dissertation and this paper coincide with our initial interest in the region due to a genealogical connection, as we happen to be one of the contemporary descendants of Necmeddin Sahir. This intriguing and eccentric character's exhaustive reports bear witness to a certain obsessive compulsive disorder that was to accompany the man until the end of his days in the early nineties. His archives that embody his obsessive interest in keeping record, were donated to the *Tarih Vakfi* (History Foundation) and classified by this association for the use of the public, which went on to publish six voluminous books.¹⁵ Which were published in the early 2010's when Dersim was at the center of the public debate surrounding the heritage of the republic. As the "Solution Process/*Çözüm Süreci*" came to an end, the books took their place in the dusty bookshelves.¹⁶ They failed to be noticed by the authors of the Dersim debate or at least none wanted to undertake what we have tried to achieve. To actually read the long, repetitive and bureaucratic reports, and understand what the deputy was actually describing. The reports reflect a humanist author; able to establish empathy with those that he encountered, listened to the people's problems, took note of their name, shared their pain, was outraged at their misery and poverty. Albeit a product of modernity, a zealous agent of the central state, a colonial officer both in shape and form. A future opposition party member and a firsthand witness to the rule of İnönü.¹⁷

¹⁵ Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (1), *Doğu Sorunu*, "Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları (1939-1953)", Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (2), *Doğu Anadolu'da Toplumsal Mühendislik*, "Dersim-Sason (4-46)" Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (3), *Kürt Sorunu ve Devlet*, "Tedip ve Tenkil Politikaları (1925-1947)", Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (4), *Dersim Harekâtı ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi*, "(1936-1950)" Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (5), *Doğu Anadolu ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi*, "(1939-1951)" Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (6), *Dersimlilerden Mektuplar*, "(1941-1953)"

¹⁶ Özpek, *The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurds*. (2018)

¹⁷ VanderLippe, *The Politics of Turkish Democracy*. (2005)

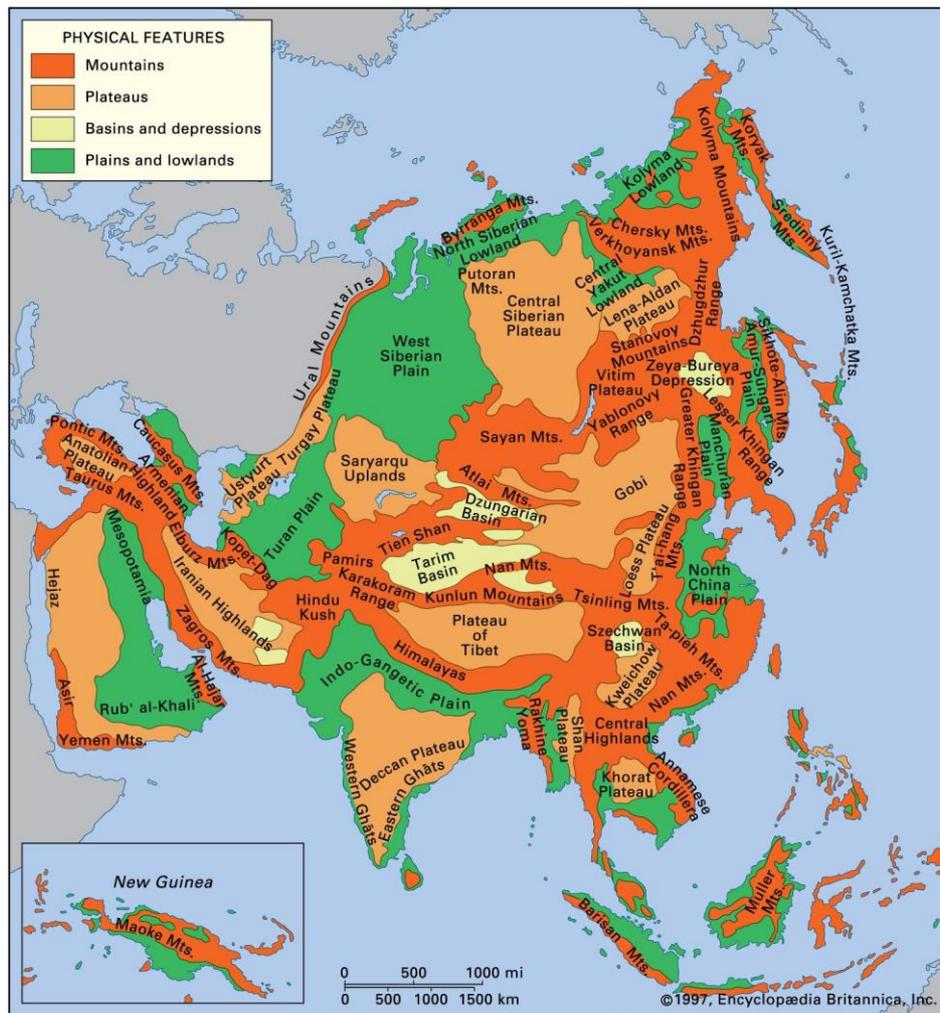
A People's History of Dersim

Necmeddin Sahir Silan's reports offer a proto-revisionist picture of the late internal colonial period of Bingöl and Tunceli¹⁸ These sources allowed us to give to the reader tens of names of actual individuals that lived at this time, their complaints, their pain and misery. They allowed us to understand that not unlike the Holodomor, central planning caused a clear subsistence crisis in Dersim. They allowed allowed a subaltern history to be written aiming to tell a people's history of Dersim.

The Republic of Turkey born from the ashes of the multi-continental empire had to contend with the borders of Eastern Thrace and Anatolia, defined to its south principally by the line of the Berlin-Baghdad railroad and to its east by deals struck with the Soviets and Persia. The newly born state with undeniably Balkanic roots now saw Asia Minor as the defining feature of its national geography. The ancient Greek word meaning "*the land from where the sun rises*" was Turkified to *Anadolu*, which in a way erased the Hellenic past. The land was divided up into seven geographical regions; three of which carry Anatolia in their names. In this national geography, Dersim, renamed Tunceli in 1935, is situated in the westernmost part of the region of Eastern Anatolia. For the Armenian nationalists the same region is called 'Western Armenia', and for the competing Kurdish nationalists Dersim is 'North-Western Kurdistan'. These three conflicting nationalisms have unfortunately clashed from the last quarter of the nineteenth century until nearly the end of the first half of the twentieth century. This resulted first in a de-Christianization or de-Armenization, and then a tentative of de-Kurdification and de-Alevization, which were accompanied with efforts of Turkification and Sunnification.¹⁹

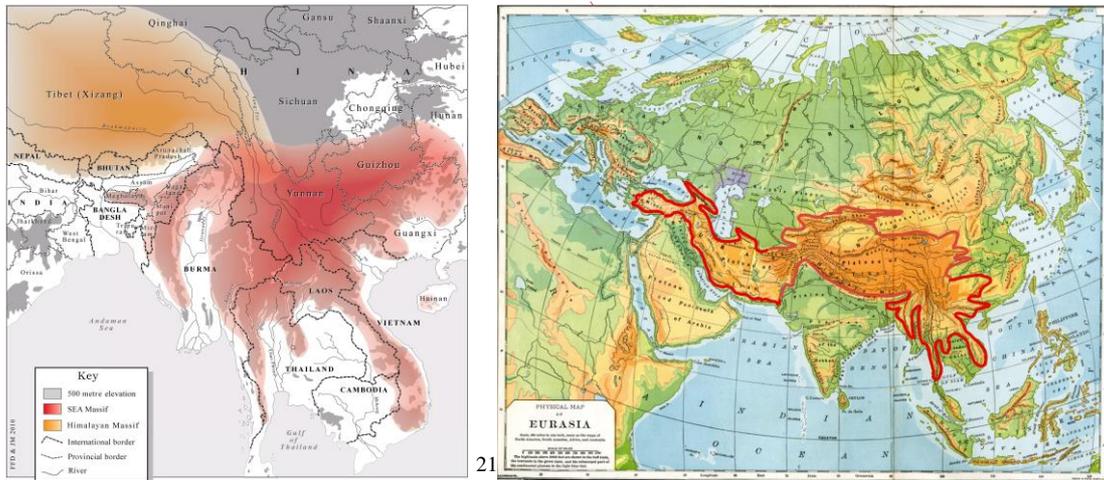
¹⁸ Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*. (2017), Guha, Arnold, and Hardiman, *Subaltern Studies*. (1994)

¹⁹ Avyarov and Varlı, *Osmanlı-Rus ve İran savaşları'nda Kürtler, 1801-1900*. (1995) VIII.



In order to rid ourselves of this geography of competing nationalisms. We will now aim to contextualize Dersim within a geographical perspective. This physiographic map of Asia proper clearly shows the distinctions between the various regions of the continent. In Western Asia we remark from West to East: the Pontic Mountains, Taurus Mountains, the Armenian Highland, the Caucasus Mountains, Elburz Mountains, the Zagros Mountains and Hindu Kush Mountains which join the Himalayas through the Karakoram Range. There are two plateaus amongst these mountain ranges, the Anatolian Plateau and the Iranian Highlands. The average height of this South Western Asian Massif is around 1200 meters. It is comparable in this respect with the South Eastern Asian Massif.²⁰

²⁰ *Physiographic regions of Asia* (digital Encyclopedia Britannica accessed 14.02.2018)



The left map is a representation of Zomia a term coined by Willem van Schendel of the University of Amsterdam in 2002 in reference to the region of the South Eastern Asian Massif. This scientific term refers to a region above 300 meters covering 2,5 million square kilometers, home to around a hundred million people. Schendel borrowed the Tibeto-Burmese languages common term of *Zomi* meaning highlanders and used Zomia to describe a common elevated rugged terrain full of ethnic minorities that have remained far from state control.²²

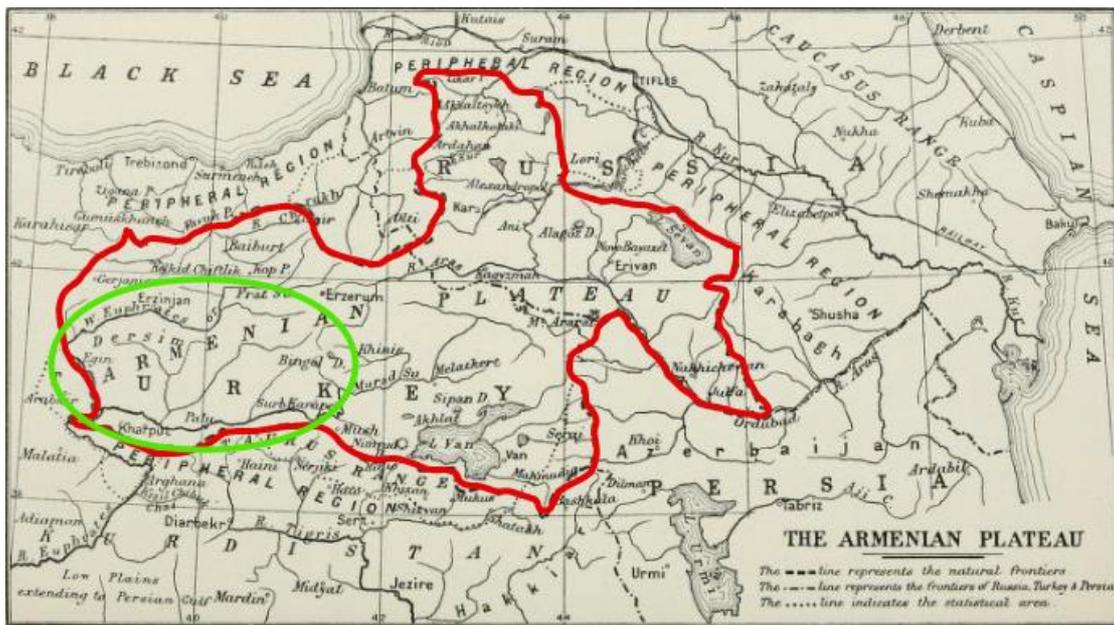
The map above to the right proposes that this land of highlanders has a relative, beginning to the South West of the Tibetan Massif. This relative of Zomia includes the modern states of Afghanistan, Iran, Armenia, Azerbaidjan, Georgia and Turkey and is a region above 500 meters that can perhaps be called the South West Asian Massif, home to around two hundred million people. The Iranian languages form the most spoken language family in this region, and the Zazaki, indigenous language of Dersim, word for highlander is *Kovi*, with the persian root of *Ko(h)* or mountain as in the *Kohistan* district of Pakistan. Hence we can approach this area as Kovia, which will allow us to further our transnational understanding of the region's history.

²¹ Zomia (alchetron.com accessed 14.2.2018)

²² Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia." (2005)



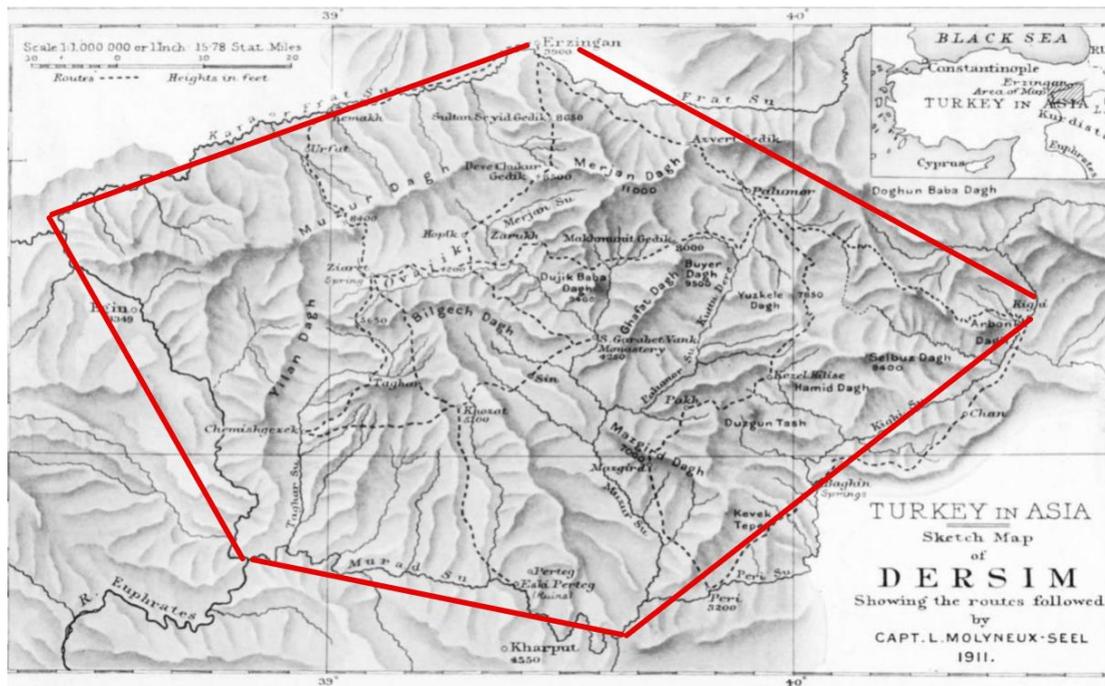
The white lines roughly follow the boundaries of Koria and caught in between the Pontic and Taurus mountains is the Western-most region of the Armenian Highlands, called Dersim, encircled in red.²³



In the former map we see the boundaries of the Armenian Plateau in red and Dersim is situated inside the green ellipse visible right beneath the Western Euphrates. Note its isolation from major maritime trade routes.²⁴

²³ Top Image was created using the Google Earth Pro Application [19.02.2018].

²⁴ Lynch, *Armenia, Travels and Studies*. (1901) 452.

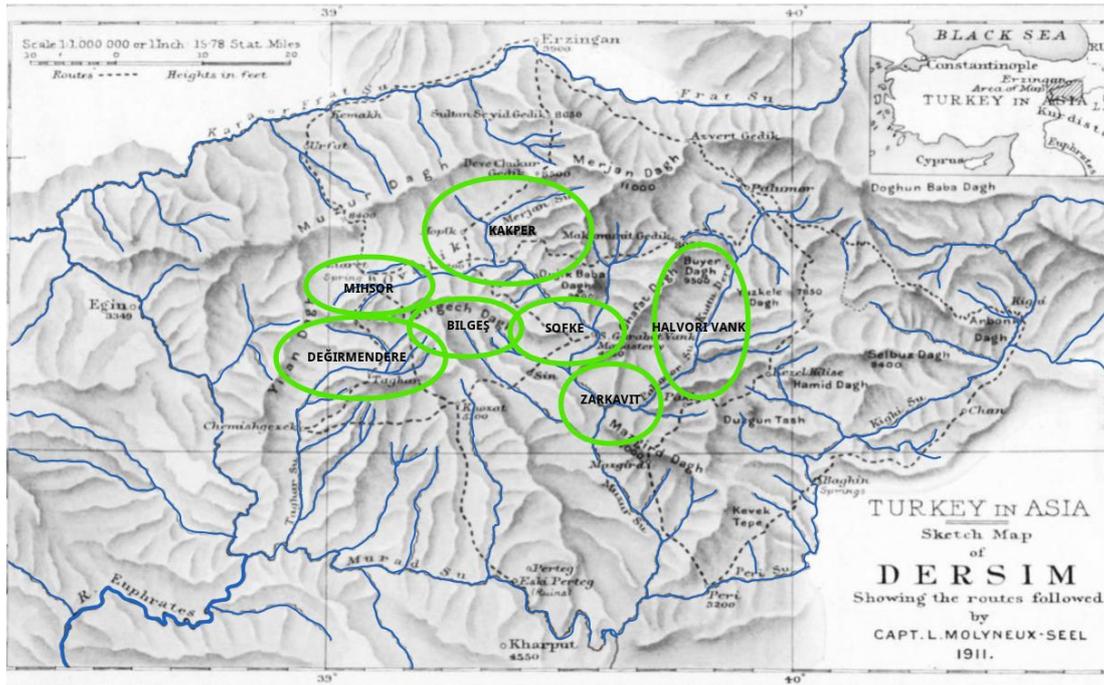


The above map belongs to Captain Louis Edmund Harington Molyneux-Seel (1857-1915). He defined Dersim in the following manner: "*The country known as Dersim is geographically clearly defined. It lies in the angle formed by two large branches of the Euphrates, called Frat Su and the Murad Su, and a line drawn through Kighi, Palumor, and Erzincan would form the northeastern boundary.*"²⁵

Stretched between the two branches of the Euphrates, Dersim is a rough plateau of more than 6000 km². Mountains dominate the region and the most important mountain chain are the Munzur to the west. Here lies the source of the Munzur River, which flows through Dersim before joining the Murat River. In the mountainous area referred to, as *İç Dersim* (Inner Dersim) agriculture is impossible. The forests are the bounty of this region abundant with streams and rivers. With a rich oak forest ecosystem, and compared to its arid surroundings Dersim is geographically an isolated green island rising above the surrounding plains.²⁶

²⁵ L. Molyneux-Seel, "A Journey in Dersim." (1914) 49. [Map: 51]

²⁶ Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*. (2014) 6.

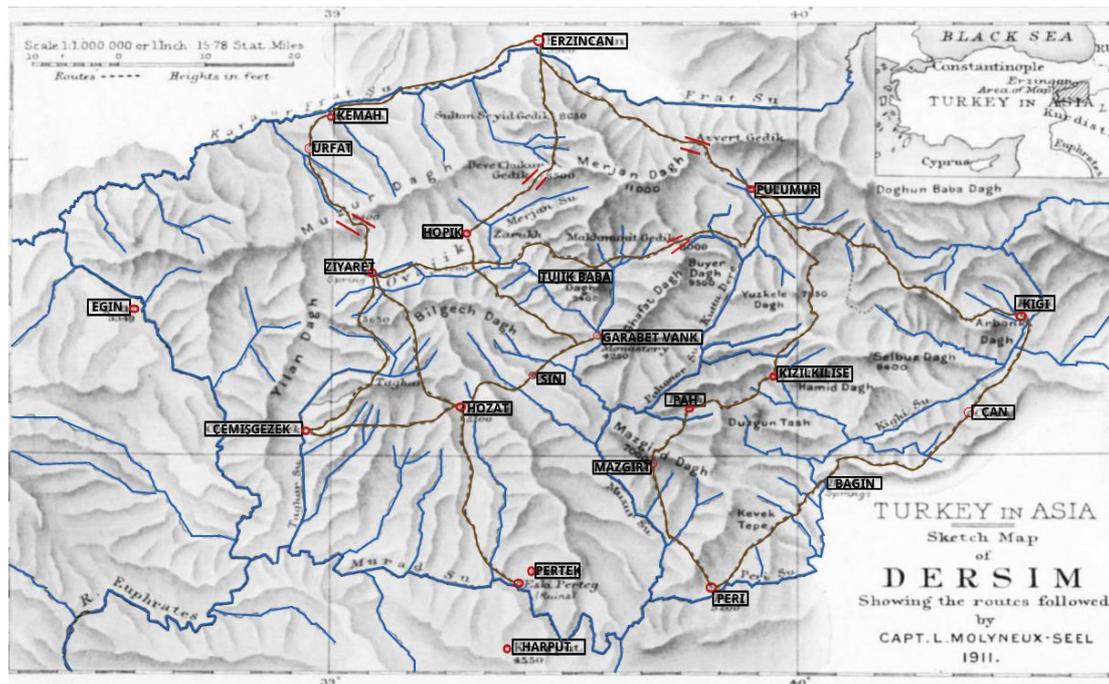


The forests of Dersim are found in the middle of the region and until the turn of the nineteenth century most of these mountainous forestlands were virtually untouched. The dominant species of trees in these forests is the resilient oak. While there is more than six hundred species of oak in the world, Turkey contains eighteen and the Dersim region in its greatest geographical consideration contains seven of these species [*Quercus libani*, *Q. brantii*, *subsp. boissieri*, *subsp. pinnatiloba*, *Q. macianthera subsp. sypirensii*, *subsp. pedunculiflora* and *Q. hartwissiana*].²⁷

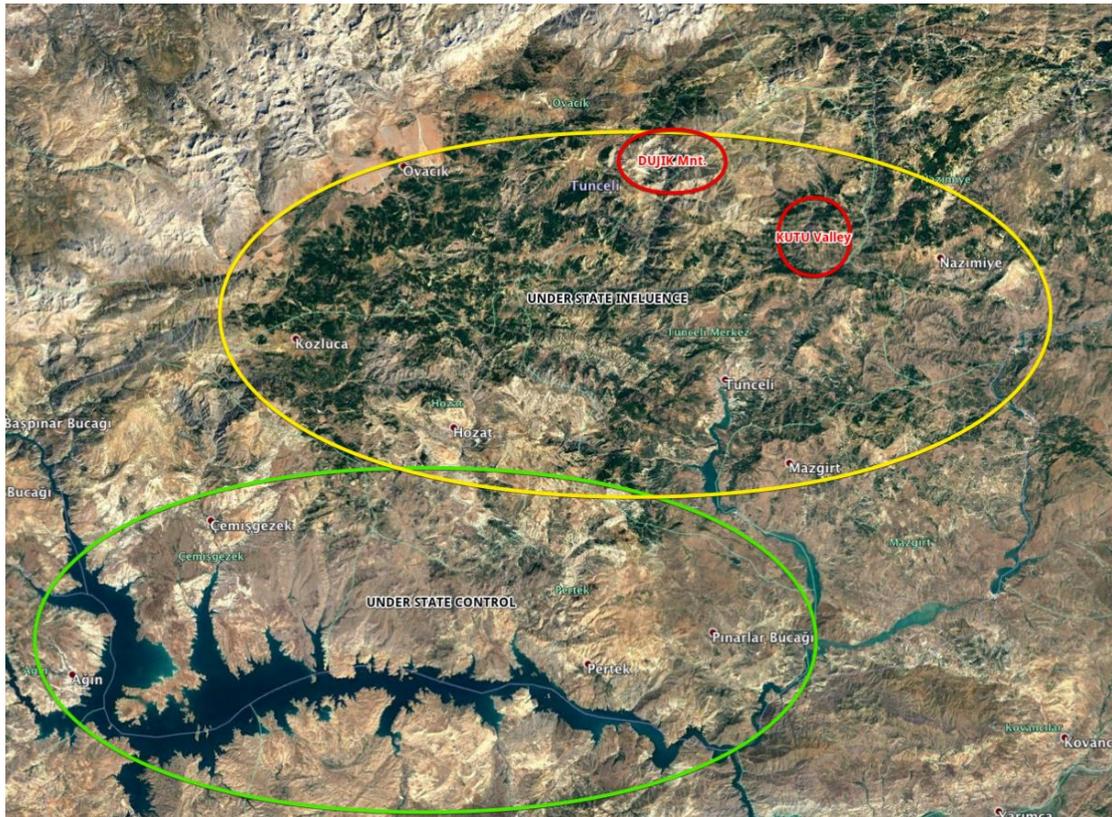
The continental climate of Dersim results in six-month long winters that halts nearly all transportation and communication in the region with the outside world.²⁸ A mountainous terrain, torrential rivers, wild forests and long cold winters, gave rise to a specific social geography.

²⁷ Yaltrık, *Türkiye meşeleri*. (1984).

²⁸ Andranik, *Dersim*. (2012) 85-88



The map presented above shows the hydrography of the region of Dersim in blue, and important localities are shown in black (the brown lines represent the roads travelled by Molyneux-Seel). Note that nearly all towns are either placed near a waterway or on mountainous terrain. We see that: Erzincan, Kemah, Urfat, Egin, Çemişgezek, Pertek, Peri, Bagin, Kiğı, Pülümür, Ziyaret, Hozat are all situated close to rivers. While Çan, Harput, Sin, Pah, Hopik, Kızılkilise, Garabet Vank monastery as well as the refuge of Dujik Baba are all situated on mountainous terrain. This marked geographical difference in Dersim has its reflection in the social geography of the region in regards to state control. At the turn of the twentieth century and arguably until 1938 there were parts of Dersim that were administratively subdued to the central state and other parts that were almost subdued to the state and parts which were autonomous. Armenian nationalist Andranik wrote in the beginning of the twentieth century that naturally the plain regions were submissive to the state, meanwhile between the valleys, high mountains and dark forests of the heart of Dersim was the domain of the rebels and freemen.



The green ellipse, represents the areas described by Andranik as being under state control. If one takes a closer inspection it will be clear that while the Mountains constitute a horizontal (East-West) barrier clearly separating Dersim from the North, the southern mountains are vertical (North-South) allowing easier access. Therefore the south of Dersim had both an agricultural and a commercial economy with a multiethnic population under police supervision. This region constituted a zone of exchange this in turn allowed the state to have greater control.

The region under state influence is shown by the yellow ellipse. As it is clearly seen on the image, this region is comprised of the mountainous forestland of "Inner Dersim". Ergo the reference to "influence" rather than "control", for the geography did not allow the state to veritably penetrate this region. Hence instead of choosing the more accessible and prosperous Pertek or Çemişgezek as the center of their operations, the state implanted itself on a hilltop in this region, the town of Hozat.

There were two particular places within Dersim where the state had no authority whatsoever, indicated in red: The Dujik Mountain has been a place of refuge since time immemorial. Nearly each time that the state made incursions into Inner Dersim the people of the region have climbed this mountain to prepare their resistance and the state forces were unable to conquer it until the rise of modern warfare and aviation. Andranik defined Dujik Mountain as the biggest independent region in Dersim, estimating that seventy thousand “*Kurdish-Kızılbaş*” were living here. The biggest tribe was the *Kureyşanlı* (as in *Quraysh*), led by seyids who had religious authority over most tribes in Dersim. Their chief was Seyid İbrahim the father of Seyid Rıza the infamous leader of the Dersim resistance of 1937. This influential tribal leader was at the head of an armed force of around forty thousand people. The other stateless zone in Dersim, the Kuti stream is found east of Dujik Mountain, and flows through a tightly closed valley following a north-south direction. The mountainous left and right banks of the valley are dense with forests. At the time Andranik observed that right in the middle of the valley was the Haydaran village with nearly eight hundred houses of independent Kurds with a chief named Mamo Beg. Haydaran was the name of the dominant tribe in the region that coexisted in the valley with other tribes that found refuge in this valley away from Ottoman rule and taxes. In other words, stateless zones are dominated by tribal society. There seems to be an inversely proportional relation between state and tribal authority. Seyid İbrahim and Mamo Beg are the rulers of these stateless regions, not Abdulhamid II.²⁹

²⁹ Andranik, *Dersim*. (2012) 113-116.

Tribe and State relations in Dersim

Tribes are groups that are united through kinship and exercise their control over a given territory by its physical occupation by their members. There are long periods in Middle Eastern history when vast regions were effectively out of the rule of imperial states. Even though tribes did have an essential role in the formation of important empires such as the Abbasid, Fatimid, Qajar, Safavid, Ottoman and Umayyad states, some tribes lived and asserted their dominance in parts of the region that did not come under state control; such as the plateaus of Anatolia and Iran, the deserts of Syria, Arabia and Sahara as well as remote mountainous regions such as Dersim. It is only since the middle of the nineteenth century that tribes living in these regions came into increasing contact with the state. Modern states did not erase the tribes but rather tribalism shaped how modern states functioned. The state would negotiate with tribes, accommodate them and even create new tribes to reach a desired outcome.³⁰

Tribal identity remains important in Dersim. In fact, tribes were maintained, under one crucial condition; absolute loyalty to the state and the acceptance of a supra-tribal Turkish national identity. The internal colonial era was mainly centered on assuring that not one particular tribe, but the state was the principal authority in the region. In fact, the state acted with and not against tribal ideology. In other words, the tribe and state relations was a power struggle. The Republic could not just wish away tribalism, especially in the East of the Euphrates. Instead the nation-state developed a form of tribal democracy. This new ideology was both Western and Turkic. The founders of the new state attempted to unite the disparate elements of post imperial Asia Minor with the unifying concept of Turk.

³⁰ Khoury et al., *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*. (1990) 1-4.

In fact it is well known that "*throughout much of the Middle East the term nation-state is only a nominal cover for a mélange of ethnic groups and tribes with different kin-based, regional and linguistic and cultural identities*". Furthermore "governments clearly have attempted to integrate these groups [through] new means of transportation and communications (...) and by applying a uniform law and religious doctrine to establish general norms of public behaviour".³¹

The new Turkey was supposed to be a supra-tribal nation, headed by the sacrosanct veteran chief of the people. There could be no challenge to the chief or his policies, no opposing his justice. All other tribes had to submit. Well, the tribes of Inner Dersim that had the unifying characteristic of never having submitted to a khan, naturally refused the central authority of the Republic. As a result, they experienced the terror of the Republic firsthand, just as the Vendée following the French Revolution.³² In both cases revolution that had claimed to overthrow tyranny, ended up terrorizing the people. It is evident that the Republic was not a child of consensus, nor was the abolition of the sultanate and caliphate. The Republic was founded and administered by a minority, as idealized by Plato. However, the administrators were not philosophers, but military men. The people were swift to rise up. The consequences of disobedience to republican rule first became apparent as thousands were killed and villages set ablaze during the repressions of the Shaikh Said and Ararat rebellions.³³ However, Dersim was not directly affected by these repressions, because the Dersimi tribes did not participate in the revolts of 1925 and 1930. What then happened in Dersim that caused the military operations against the tribes in 1937 and 1938?

³¹ Khoury et al., *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*. (1990) 16.

³² Brégeon and Guicheteau, *Nouvelle histoire des guerres de Vendée*. (2017)

³³ Olson and Tucker, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*. (1991)

1937-1938

The Republic was founded upon a social contract that recognized the existence of tribes and utilized its relations with the tribes to assure its own hegemony. The tribes that resisted the new regime were eliminated, while the tribes that recognized the state became more hierarchized, as accumulation of wealth at the top of the segmentary lineage created a wealth gap. A sort of tribal bourgeoisie emerged while the masses were pauperized.

In this line of thought the events of 1937 and 1938 can be understood as the attempted elimination of the undesired tribal entities that refused allegiance to the state. Although one must remember that even members of the "loyal" tribes were hurt during these events. The fact of the matter is that the state was trying to win over every single tribe including "the rebels", and when it could not convince the tribes of Inner Dersim where the people naturally preferred to live without a state, it proceeded to the alienation of the people from the forests with a law early in 1937. It was only after this, that the people whose subsistence depended on their free use of the forests, took up arms against the state.

In other words, the *Tertele* (Catastrophe) of 1937 was caused by a rebellion provoked by the state following the forest law, which in practice created a subsistence crisis for the people.³⁴ 1937 happened because the stateless tribes of Inner Dersim refused that the state could claim ownership of the forests. While 1938 happened because the 1937 operation was not exactly a success. After all not only had the main leader Seyid Rıza surrendered himself to the authorities, but according to eyewitness accounts might have even knocked off his own chair at the stake, thereby in effect killing himself.³⁵

³⁴ Çağlar, *Türkiye ormanlık tarihi*. (2012)

³⁵ Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*. (2012)

In 1938 the remaining rebels were killed and a profound recalibration of the tribal society occurred, as new pro-government tribal chiefs gained more authority, the rest were forced into exile. Could 1937 have happened without the rebellion? Could the rebellion had happened without provocation? The state committed selective genocide against the free people of Dersim and this gave way to an ecocide of Dersim itself that is continuing well into the twenty-first century.

The Social Transformation of Dersim

Who owns the land? This question lies at the foundation of internal colonial rule in Dersim and at the root of the social transformation that took place during this period. Because the events of 1937 and 1938 resulted in land alienation simultaneously as the enclosure movement took place in Dersim.

We understand that throughout the regional history certain tribes controlled certain areas of the region collectively. This meant that the land within tribal frontiers could be used by all members of the tribe. This tribal ownership was especially important in matters of farmland and pastures, but it seems that water sources, forests and salt mines were used by multiple tribes at a time. This collective heterarchical ownership of land was violently replaced with a clearly individual hierarchical ownership. As the old mode of land ownership was destroyed, collaborationist tribal leaders claimed ownership over previously collectively owned land, which increased the dependency of the peasantry upon the local notables through the calcification of sharecropping.³⁶

Land used to belong to the many, now it belonged to the few. Increased division of land tenure amplified hierarchical behavior, which reinforced class division among the tribes, who had a tradition of relative egalitarianism.

³⁶ Chaliand and Pallis, *A People without a Country*. (1993) 42-43

Through the redefinition of land ownership in Dersim, the local tribal system itself experienced a change that manifested itself through an increase in class distinction inside the tribe itself. The land no longer belonged to the people, now it belonged to the state, and those who respected its authority. This is why the name change is so symbolic; Dersim belonged to the people, Tunceli to the state. This symbolic change in toponymy actually has a reflection in the administration of the region. During the stateless history of Dersim, for centuries and possibly millennia, the people, who found refuge in the region developed a suitable administration for themselves, which was embodied by the tribal ideology and economy. This autochthonous stateless administration was in tune with the bioregional realities of the terrain and allowed human existence in Dersim for generations. In its place the Republic established a radically new administrative map as the land was divided up into artificial units, such as the provinces of Bingöl and Tunceli. Both were drawn up in Ankara without taking into account the history and culture of the land. They reflect this artificiality both in their name and borders. For instance, Pertek and Çemişgezek are worlds apart from Ovacık and would have benefited from being integrated into Elazığ with which they had greater synchronicity. Meanwhile in Bingöl there was a clear division where, Kiğı and Karlıova were the mountainous part while Genç, Solhan and Çapakçur were the lowlands. It made no sense from a logical standpoint.

Again and again the reports bear witness to a profound mismanagement in the administration of Dersim. This is not only due to the artificiality of the boundaries as discussed above. The administration imposed by the Republic also failed the people because of its foreign and colonial nature. Instead of allowing the people to represent themselves, the Republic chose to nominate outsiders to key positions in the local administration.

Almost all of the interaction between the indigenous population and the instances of the central state, be it social, economic, financial, military or legal, took place within a culturally foreign setting wherein outsiders were in key positions. The clerk at the land registry or the bank, the forest or monopoly officers, the conscription officer and the judge, all were foreigners to the region. Hence the artificiality of the administration was not only physical in terms of boundaries, but also psychological in terms of agency. The result has been decades of sustained underdevelopment, cultural degradation and a certain loss of identity. Even worse is that the administrative mismanagement of Dersim actually caused a proportion of the population to starve in 1942. Not to mention the rampant corruption that became systemized. This leads us to ask the obvious following question: If the artificial administration worked in disservice to the people of Dersim, then who benefited from it?

In local terms only the state agents that abused their position seemed to have reaped the benefits of artificial administration. If one takes a look at the bigger picture, from a teleological standpoint, the central state achieved an obvious victory in the form of cultural assimilation and internal colonization. But is it that obvious, and was it a victory? Did the state truly achieve what it had set out to do?

Why the Mission was a failure

Internal colonization was created with a specific mission,. In its main lines the Turkish civilizing mission in Dersim had the goal of making Turks out of tribesmen.³⁷ This meant in practice that the Republic was aiming to bring its civilization to a people that itself had just recently terrorized. This profound disconnect between the reality on the terrain and the agenda of the central state condemned the mission to fail. What did the Republic aim to bring Dersim during the internal colonial period?

³⁷ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*. (1976)

Health and Education facilities tend to be perceived as proofs of the state working for the welfare of the population. Buildings such as hospitals and schools are concrete evidence that the taxes are being utilized for the good of the taxpayer. Number of teachers, students, graduates, doctors, nurses, in-door and out-door patient numbers, all of these serve the modern state to quantify and measure progress, which is in turn used for political rhetoric. This is why the reports of Necmeddin Sahir contain such numbers. As an agent of the state he sought to understand progress through the quantification of data. If the numbers were increasing, then how could one qualify the civilizing mission as being a failure? Because the diseases that were treated by the few health officers in Tunceli and Bingöl were caused by novel habitation practices that were not in tune with the region's ecology. Increasing the concentration of the population near the rivers created an increase in malaria and eye diseases. Furthermore, state education tended to encourage urbanization, as it was organized in such a manner that the studious pupils ended up being dislocated, first from the village, then the province and finally the region.³⁸

Civilization was idealized as social progress and economic development. Instead internal colonial rule in Dersim concentrated populations in wet lowlands, which although fertile, presented considerable health risks to the people. The hospitals were situated here where most of the diseased were living. So were the schools. In a land where dispersed habitation of the land had long been established, going to school meant travelling great distances on foot every day. Can we then conclude that health and education policies of internal colonial rule were actually just forms of maintaining the constant flow of human capital from the hinterland, to the core of the economy?

³⁸ *Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (1) Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları (1939-1953)*. (2010) 19.

Because cities did not exist for the people but for the capital, hence the selection of the provincial centers was not effectuated on the basis of the health and welfare of the people, but for the maximization of profit and the accumulation of capital. Meanwhile the schools were tools for dislocating young people destined for labor or bureaucratic proletarianization. The Turkish Civilizing Mission was a failure because it conceived of people as a primary resource and used health and education as means to achieve a desired effect that benefited the few. It is difficult to assert in hindsight that the state had the best interest of the people at heart. Sufficient to take a look at the judicial situation, for there we have a glimpse of what life was like for people living in Dersim during internal colonial rule.

A citizen of a modern state is limited in one's own liberty by the rule of law. The expression of "*état de droit*" and its Turkish counterpart "*hukuk devleti*" refers to this concept of justifying the legitimacy of the state through the objective implementation of a legal code. Citizens not only do not play a direct role in the configuration of the legal system, but they are also expected to abide by it without any protest or challenge. This tyranny of the legal therefore reinforces the position of the state while disregarding the freedom of the individual. The rule of law is perceived to be elementary to the life of the city. However, the profound disconnect between the legal system imposed by the state and the liberty of individuals becomes ever more clear in the countryside. For instance, the rule of law created nothing but disruptions for the traditional way of life in the Greater Dersim region. Children born out of wedlock were considered illegal at birth, and by this fact were not considered as citizens of the Republic.³⁹

³⁹ *Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (1) Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları (1939-1953)*. (2010) 230-231.

Imposing civil marriages did not change the tradition of kidnapping one's bride; it only created a situation in which the people had to live avoiding the state as much as possible in fear of being caught for doing what their ancestors had done for generations. Instead of eradicating violence, the rule of law in Dersim mainly achieved the goal of alienating the local people from each other. While a minority adopted to the modern judicial system to their own benefit, others were undermined by the same system just for living as their ancestors did.

Illegal marriages, illegal births, this is how the rule of law affected life in the region. The legal system reinforced division instead of eliminating it. This was perhaps due to a complete negation of tribal justice. Because there was a rule of law in Dersim preceding the internal colonial conquest. This was a tribal form of justice that was much more complicated than its common simplification to honor killings. This pre-modern system of justice depended on councils where the problems were discussed and a majority sought to find a solution, which sometimes included the ancient code of an eye for an eye. In other words the Republic aimed to achieve the destruction of this tribal justice system with its own "superior" legal system. The problem of course was that there was resistance. This manifested itself through common everyday forms of resistance.

Ethnic engineering was one of the most problematic concepts that were developed following social Darwinism. Combined with the positivistic nationalist ideology embraced by most of Western Civilization it gave way to catastrophe after catastrophe. The group of people that made their way into the echelons of power believed that they were able to create the rational scientific basis that would inaugurate the road to progress. They were disillusioned with power to such a degree that they conceived of certain populations living within the boundaries of the state as undesirable elements

that deserved to be done away with, in order to achieve national harmony. This disenchantment with the real resulted in genocide. Many modern and powerful states have genocide in their history; the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, China, Australia and Turkey. Only an infinitesimal portion of these states officially recognize the crimes they have committed against the people of the world. Our role as historians is to study their acts in order to understand when and why they occurred in what circumstances, in order to perhaps help prevent their reoccurrence. Dersim is directly related to the project of homogenization of Turkey as a Hanafi-Sunni Turkish majority nation-state. This historical land of refuge experienced the Armenian Genocide first hand. For instance, the urban center of Peri was simply erased from the maps by the time of the internal colonial era.⁴⁰ The events of 1937 and 1938 are related to this history of genocide. Some Dersimis choose to refer to the first and second *terteles*, just as Beşikçi has no hesitation when he uses the term genocide.⁴¹ Although Inner Dersim had been a place of refuge for the Armenians escaping genocide, the state brought terror even to this corner of the land twenty odd years later. Aside from the ethnic reconfiguration of the population in the form of eliminating the Christians and settling Muslims, the Republic also tried to assimilate the Alevis and the Kurds, the first by attempted Sunnification and the latter through Turkification, by means of sedentarization and urbanization.⁴² The peculiarity of the people of Dersim was that although they identified themselves according to tribal references, they were both considered to be Alevi and Kurdish. Whereas the Republic seems to have been convinced that their Turkification could be more easily achieved if the tribal chiefs were somehow persuaded to collaborate with the state.

⁴⁰ Kaloosdian, *Tadem, My Father's Village*. (2015)

⁴¹ Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi*. (1990)

⁴² Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey Who Is a Turk?* (2006)

This is why the population reconfiguration that took place in Dersim during the internal colonial period aimed to destroy the upper strata of the segmentary lineages of the Dersimi tribes. As a consequence, the dispersion of the population in Dersim was reconfigured where towns were flooded by dispossessed and broken families. The land redistribution mainly achieved this through the killing or relocation of non-collaborationist tribal chiefs. All these constitute the demographic background and consequence of the events of 1937 and 1938. Therefore, we can propose a semantic reconfiguration of terminology as well. Although the systematic killings by the state perpetrated in Dersim were indeed directed against a specific group of people bound by a common culture, the genocide had a specifically political nature in terms of reconfiguring tribal society to fit with the central state agenda, thus we might propose a neologism in the form of "fylicide" from the Greek root of φυλι meaning tribe. This is what we have observed in the internal colonial era in Dersim; the destruction of the preexisting tribal way of life, a veritable fylicide. Suffice it to look at the economy, and the historically quintessential sector for the region; Animal husbandry.

The reconfiguration of the local economy

The oak covered mountains were an ideal fit for the domestic goat, just as it is for the endemic mountain goats. In fact, the domestication of the goat most probably occurred in a very similar bioregion during the Neolithic.⁴³ But the central state did not encourage goat-herding, instead sheep were the civilizational animal of choice. Simply because while there was significant demand in the international markets for wool, goatshair could not even compete.⁴⁴

⁴³ Zeder and Hesse, "The Initial Domestication of Goats (*Capra Hircus*) in the Zagros Mountains 10,000 Years Ago." (2000)

⁴⁴ Balsan, *The Sheep and the Chevrolet, a Journey through Kurdistan*. (1947)

Agriculture tells a similar story. The tribal economy had long since relied on millet as an essential cereal.⁴⁵ Containing a higher proportion of protein than the common wheat and able to grow at much higher altitudes with greater returns, millet was an important part of the local diet. But the central state encouraged and even imposed the cultivation of wheat.⁴⁶ This time it was related to the needs of the national market. Especially during the time of the Second World War, this civilizational preference of wheat over millet even created a significant subsistence crisis in 1942.⁴⁷

In all the battles in the economic history of Dersim during internal colonial rule; state policies were victorious. The traditional economy was shattered and the people suffered the consequences. All served the interests of the state.

In much of the Dersim literature produced in the thirties, roads and bridges are presented as the most important achievements of the Turkish Civilizing Mission.⁴⁸ But did they correspond to the needs of the people? In fact the roads and bridges were built for the state by the people and not vice versa. The barracks, housing facilities and even the schools and sanitary facilities were all primarily destined for agents and officers of the state. The central state acted as if in virgin territory and treated the local infrastructure as inexistent. The mountain paths adapted for goat-herds and mules were perfectly suited to the tribal economy and seasonal transhumance. Instead of improving on these, the state created new roads, most of them initially serving military strategy and later on facilitating the integration of the region into the national economy.

⁴⁵ *Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (1)*. (2010) 262-263.

⁴⁶ *Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (1)*. (2010) 291.

⁴⁷ Kısakürek, "Büyük Doğu Dergisi", no 17, 3 Şubat 1950 in *Vesikalar Konuşuyor* (2013)

⁴⁸ Uluğ, *Tunceli medeniyete açılıyor*. (2007)

In a similar fashion to what happened in Medieval Europe, Turkey colonized the forests during her own process of internal colonization.⁴⁹ The alienation of the people from the forests had of course an economic motivation, simultaneously related to the goat-herds and the timber industry. The oak was central for internal colonization, because oak timber was ideal for railway sleepers needed both in the north and south of Dersim.⁵⁰ The trees that fed the goats each winter with their fallen leaves, now were being cut for the railway. The railroad too was built with primarily militaristic concerns.

The consequences of internal colonization

The French intellectuals questioning the governance of Algeria were trying to explain that the state was actually losing money, and that colonial rule was even a budgetary failure.⁵¹ The internal colonization of Dersim too was a budgetary failure. Furthermore, many of the most expensive infrastructure projects of the internal colonial era were simply flooded by the construction of dams, the most important being the Keban Dam inaugurated in 1974.⁵²

Initially we had set out to research the physiocratic ideal of the Turkish Civilizing Mission and understand the governance of Dersim as an internal colony through this perspective. However, our research has revealed that the physiocratic ideal, especially present in the administration of the First Inspector General İbrahim Tali Öngören was largely abandoned following the Ararat Rebellion and that the Fourth Inspectorate General's mission was almost entirely militaristic.⁵³

⁴⁹ Fernández-Armesto and Muldoon, *Internal Colonization in Medieval Europe*. (2017)

⁵⁰ Yıldırım and Atatürk Kültür, *Cumhuriyet döneminde demiryolları, 1923-1950*. (2001)

⁵¹ Fanon and Chevalier, *A dying Colonialism*. (1970)

⁵² Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi, *Doomed by the Dam*. (1967)

⁵³ Ottoman Archives, 69-454-25, 1. Um. Müf. Bölgesindeki illerin zirai ... rapor (no 97/406).

Quesnay, *Francois Quesnay et La Physiocratie*. (1958)

Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*. (2016)

Initially internal colonial rule in Dersim was imposed with Terror, furthermore the period that followed terror showed clear signs of administrative mismanagement and corruption, which in turn lead to a subsistence crisis during the Second World War. After Terror came disregard as in the response of a minister to Necmeddin Sahir's pleas for immediate action in the region: "*Your Kurds? Let them die!*".⁵⁴ Naturally internal colonial rule came to an end in 1952 as the Democratic Party set out to bring change and hope to all the malcontents of the single-party period.

The mission did not achieve its goals and Turkey continued to have a great divide between, mostly; the urban cores of the coasts, the Anatolian Plateau, and the Highlands East of the Euphrates. Furthermore, the history of Dersim has not been one of tranquility during the last sixty-odd years. Suffice to read about the socialist martyr İbrahim Kaypakkaya, or the emptying of villages during the nineties.⁵⁵

In fact some would argue that a second era of internal colonial rule began in Dersim in 1987 and lasted until 2002, under the form of the *Olağanüstü Hâl Bölge Valiliği*/ (Emergency rule Regional Governorate), a successor institution to the Inspectorate General. This neo-internal colonial institution included eight provinces, three of which were formerly part of the Fourth Inspectorate General. Why did this happen? Because the Turkish Civilizing Mission in Dersim was a failure that attempted to achieve its goals through terror. As a result the people never forgot the violence inflicted on them by the state and with them some amongst them started to organize themselves accordingly. In other words terror begot terror. The conflict between the Turkish Military and the PKK was what caused internal colonial rule to return. But that is the subject of another study.

⁵⁴ *Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi (1) Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları (1939-1953)* 388-389.

⁵⁵ İbrahim Kaypakkaya kitabı: seçme yazılar ve üzerine yazılar, Ankara, Dipnot Yayınları, 2015.

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